

Women of the Wall: A Religious Campaign Inspired by Secular Values

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Inception

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On the morning of the first of December, 1988, a group of approximately seventy Jewish women gathered at the *Kotel*, Jerusalem's Western Wall, to conduct a communal prayer service. The women were involved in an international conference discussing women's issues, and, at the suggestion of American Orthodox Rivka Haut, they visited the Wall to pray.¹ While this may seem like a benign initiative to the impartial observer, it was in fact an audacious move, one replete with religious and political overtones. According to certain schools of Jewish thought, women are not considered bound by the same laws as Jewish men to read the Torah, and "as a result cannot perform religious obligations on behalf of men."² Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel regards the public religious role as a man's responsibility alone.

¹ Pnina Lahav, *The Woes of WoW: The Women of the Wall as a Religious Social Movement and as Metaphor* (research report no. 13-2, Boston: Boston University School of Law, 2013), 7.

² Mendel Shapiro, "Qeri'at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis," *Edah Journal* 1, no. 2 (2001):http://www.edah.org/backend/journalarticle/1_2_shapiro.pdf.

This public display of female-led prayer enraged the Orthodox worshippers at the Wall, and within minutes chaos erupted. One of the women present recalls: "From the moment we were identified as an autonomous group of women praying and in possession of a Torah scroll, a commotion began."³ Orthodox men and women began to scream curses and threats at the group. In response to this hostility, Jewish feminists formed a group known as "Women of the Wall." The group has been fighting to allow women the right to pray publicly at the *Kotel* since 1988.

The violent encounter between Jewish feminists and Orthodox worshippers at the Wall on that December morning in 1988, and the subsequent legal debate it inspired, reflect the myriad schools of thought, both secular and religious, that shape Israeli-Jewish ideology. Women of the Wall (WoW) is composed of a variety of women, including Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Jews; some of these women are Israelites, some are not. Their organization directly defies the Orthodox religious authority of the Wall, which is appointed by the Israeli government. WoW seeks the support of secular (or culturally Jewish) feminists, a group that strives for equality but cannot fully sympathize with WoW's religious worldview, and tends to avoid involvement in religious discourse altogether. All of this occurs in a politically volatile environment: Israeli history is characterized by religious persecution, exile, war, and conquest. In order to understand the passionate and sometimes ferocious debate concerning WoW, it is essential to place the debate in the context of Israeli and diasporic Jewish history.

³ Bonna Devora Haberman, "Women Beyond the Wall: From Text to Praxis," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 1 (1997): 14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002296>.

American Feminist Influence and WoW

The first communal prayer service at the *Kotel* was initiated in response to the suggestion of an American Jewish feminist, Rivka Haut. Feminist discourse within Israel is heavily influenced by American ideals of liberal democracy. American Jewish women in the 1960s were immersed in the second-wave feminist movement, which shaped theological discourses about gender equality and sparked the development of Jewish feminism.⁴ According to Nurit Zaidman, American Jewish women have taken leadership roles in the synagogue since the 1960s.⁵ Religious Israeli feminism is largely based upon ideas imported by visiting North American women, and “much of [the] support [for WoW] among the Israeli public comes from Israelites of North American origin.”⁶ The ideological basis for WoW’s actions is largely imported into Israel, and their ideas are incongruous with traditional Orthodox Jewish thought.

WoW is a composite blend of feminist voices that use secular-influenced philosophies in an attempt to challenge dogmatic religious traditions. The diversity of thought among group members can be problematic as it hinders the group’s ability to act. This was evident in 1998 when the Neeman’s Commission, which was organized to solve the WoW problem, suggested prayer at Robinson’s Arch. Instead of allowing women to pray communally at the Western Wall, the nearby archaeological site known as Robinson’s Arch was proposed as a compromise location.⁷ Robinson’s Arch, according to the proposal,

⁴ Leah Shakdiel, “Women of the Wall: Radical Feminism as an Opportunity for a New Discourse in Israel,” *The Journal of Israeli History* 21, no. 1 (2002): 127.

⁵ Nurit Zaidman, “Variations of Jewish Feminism: The Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Approaches,” *Modern Judaism* 16, no. 1 (February 1996): 50, doi:10.1093/mj/16.1.47.

⁶ Haberman, “Women Beyond the Wall,” 16.

⁷ Lahav, *The Woes of WoW*, 25.

would facilitate female-only and mixed-gender services. Some women in the group were satisfied with this idea. However, a number of other women rejected it, regarding the compromise as insulting.⁸ Robinson's Arch, though technically a part of the Wall, is less accessible than the *Kotel* and is not associated with the same important religious history. For these reasons, the women representing Reform Judaism did not support the suggestion of the Commission.

Matters are further complicated by an unstable WoW membership. A substantial portion of the original prayer group was made up of American Jewish women who were visiting Israel for the conference. Furthermore, many of WoW's members do not live in Israel. WoW represents "a growing and substantial body of Jewish women in the Diaspora"⁹ who can sympathize from a distance but are not immersed in everyday Israeli culture. The group's activities "attract mostly Jewish feminists who are only temporarily in Jerusalem."¹⁰ These inconsistencies inhibit progress, as WoW must be aware of and accommodate multiple ideologies that are influenced by a variety of geographic and cultural subjectivities. The lack of concrete social cohesion within an advocacy group weakens the group from the inside out and may damage their public image or hinder them from achieving their goals, as we see with Women of the Wall.

Historical Analysis

WoW's struggle to access the Western Wall is one of the most recent episodes in a multi-millennial effort to reclaim Jewish holy land. Orthodox authorities at the Wall, who have themselves been victims of

⁸ Stuart L. Charme, "The Political Transformation of Gender Traditions at the Western Wall in Jerusalem," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 1 (2005): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002514>.

⁹ Lahav, *The Woes of WoW*, 5.

¹⁰ Shakdiel, "Women of the Wall," 130.

religious oppression, frustrate their efforts. This oppression started with the involuntary exile of Jewish people in the wake of Babylonian conquest during the seventh century CE. For centuries, Jewish people living in the Diaspora dreamed of returning to the Holy Land. Karen Armstrong suggests that Jewish perceptions of Israel were romanticized during their exile: "Jerusalem has become more precious to Jews ... after they have lost it and been forcibly separated from [its] holiness."¹¹ Returning to Israel is highly significant for many Jewish people, both religiously and culturally, as it symbolizes the reclamation of the original Jewish kingdom and a safe haven for a culture that has been oppressed for centuries. The Western Wall is all that remains of the famous Second Temple, which was the religious centre of Jerusalem for over 400 years, from 349 BCE to 70 AD. In the first century AD, the Roman Empire was occupying Jerusalem and destroyed most of the Second Temple, of which only the Western Wall remains. The *Kotel* is therefore extremely sacred to modern Jewish people, as it is the only remnant of their most famous Temple.

In 1967 Israel successfully captured the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria in the Six-Day War. When they regained control of this traditional land, the event was "nothing short of messianic redemption."¹² Immediate legal measures were taken to ensure that the people would never again be prevented from worshipping at the Wall. That year, Israel passed the Protection of Holy Places Law, which ensured that worshippers would be protected from "anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the

¹¹ Karen Armstrong, "Jerusalem: The Problems and Responsibilities of Sacred Space," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 13, no. 2 (2002): 190.

¹² Charme, "The Political Transformation of Gender," 20.

places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places.”¹³ After centuries of exile, the Wall became a symbol of Jewish triumph and redemption, a standing testament to the strength of the nation of Israel. According to Stuart Charme, “for a people who had internalized the stereotype of their Diasporic existence as weak and effeminate, Jewish nationalism had to rehabilitate Jewish masculinity and manhood.” The control of the Wall became an expression of male dominance and power, leaving no room for female religiosity at the *Kotel*.¹⁴

The Orthodox Perspective

The authoritative entities at the *Kotel* are Orthodox and/or *haredi* rabbis that subscribe to a highly traditional worldview. They regard men and women as having entirely separate religious duties, and do not see female-led public prayer as an appropriate expression of faith. They see exhibitionist behaviour as antithetical to the act of worship, and, according to Leah Shakdiel, some of the Orthodoxy believe that “WoW members are not sincerely motivated by the urge to worship God, but rather to engage in a kind of weird provocation, a nuisance that disturbs the public peace.”¹⁵ For the Orthodox, ideal religious expression is non-confrontational, a belief that is arguably shared by many non-religious persons hailing from “secular” societies.¹⁶

From this point of view, female-led public prayer is not only a blatant disregard of the authority and traditions of the *Kotel* but it also

¹³ Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter, and Leonard Hammer, eds. *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-Existence* (London: Routledge, 2009), 30.

¹⁴ Charme, “The Political Transformation of Gender,” 20-21.

¹⁵ Shakdiel, “Women of the Wall,” 135-136.

¹⁶ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 14.

compromises the integrity of Jewish worship. Adherence to tradition is an integral part of Jewish religiosity, and violating these norms “interferes with creation itself.”¹⁷ Struggles for gender equality are a secular matter in the opinion of the Orthodoxy, and should not take precedence over, or attempt to alter, ancient tradition. During a sermon, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef denounced WoW members as “‘stupid’ women who do not act ‘for Heaven’s sake,’ but merely because ‘they want equality.’”¹⁸ Many members of the Orthodoxy, such as Rabbi Yosef, see WoW’s motivations as inherently selfish, sparking unnecessary disturbances and causing outrage at a holy site. Adherence to Jewish law is especially emphasized at a holy site like the *Kotel*, and worshippers “care with extreme (and sometimes violent) fervor”¹⁹ about the integrity of Torah Law.

The essential difference between WoW and the Orthodox authority that it rebels against is their understanding of Jewish doctrine. Feminist theologian Rachel Adler notes the radically differing priorities of the two: “the lamenter’s theme is the heartbreaking fragility of nerves and flesh ... [and] the theologian’s concern is to uphold the perfect justice of the Eternal.”²⁰ The feminists in WoW believe that religious expression can and must be consistent with Western liberal ideas about gender equality. The Orthodoxy disagrees, preferring a traditional practice that is not altered by liberal democratic ideologies. In a letter to WoW in the summer of 1989, the Western Wall Supervisor Rabbi Getz pleaded with the leader of WoW to respect Jewish law: “I beseech you, dear sister, to help me protect the holiness of the site from desecration, God forbid,

¹⁷ Shakdiel, “Women of the Wall,” 135-136.

¹⁸ Kobi Nahshoni, “Rabbi Yosef Condemns Women of the Wall,” *Ynetnews*, September 11, 2009, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3801872,00.html>.

¹⁹ Haberman, “Women Beyond the Wall,” 15.

²⁰ Rachel Adler, “Feminist Judaism: Past and Future,” *Cross Current* 51, no. 4 (2002): 487, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24461272>.

and not to change anything in our people's tradition of many generations [emphasis in original]."²¹ To the Orthodox authorities of the Wall, preventing female public prayer at the *Kotel* is not merely an excuse to exercise chauvinistic power: it is about adhering to a sacred Law and preventing the desecration of an ancient holy site.

Fortunately for the Orthodox, they possess a substantial amount of political power to defend their traditions. Orthodox Judaism in Israel overlaps significantly with secular national governance. Many prominent politicians are traditionalists, and "several political parties represent Orthodox interests."²² As a result, the Orthodox sector has considerable power in the *Knesset*, the Israeli Parliament.²³ Orthodoxy is the only stream of Judaism officially recognized by the government,²⁴ and the "major religions are subsidized by the government, [so] the clergy ... are on the state payroll."²⁵ Thus, there are numerous and strong connections between church and state that WoW must address while appealing to the government.

The Women of the Wall questioned this close connection of religion and government after a dramatic encounter at the Wall in April 1989. In honour of the Feast of Esther, WoW held a communal prayer at the *Kotel*. Almost immediately, Orthodox men present "began to hurl metal chairs toward [them] over the partition."²⁶ Outraged, the group responded by petitioning the Supreme Court. WoW "challenged the

²¹ Letter appended to Supreme Court Case 257/89, *Hoffman et al vs. the Supervisor et al.*

²² Lahav, *The Woes of Wow*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Michel L. Allon, "Gender Segregation, Effacement, and Suppression: Trends in the Status of Women in Israel," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 279.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁶ Haberman, "Women Beyond the Wall," 17.

authority of the official appointed by the government to be responsible for the Wall, explaining the incompatibility of his religious convictions and loyalties with the responsibilities attaching to his secular appointment.”²⁷ They argued that appointing an Orthodox rabbi as supervisor of the Wall was a conflict of interest. After deliberating on the subject, the Supreme Court issued a report the following year declaring that the women’s campaign was insensitive to other worshippers at the Wall (i.e. the Orthodoxy), and violated the Protection of Holy Places Law.²⁸ This report defended Orthodox interests and power while implying that the women’s religious sensitivities were comparatively unworthy of recognition or protection. The tone of the report is characterized by a preference for Orthodox interests and reflects the influence of the church at a national, governmental level.

Secular Feminists

Women’s groups like WoW that advocate for gender equality often garner the attention and support of secular (i.e. non-religious) feminist organizations. One might expect that Jewish females would unite to overthrow what they see as oppressive, sexist powers. However, according to Lahav, the secular Jewish female population is “utterly indifferent”²⁹ to the lamentations of WoW. Instead, they tend to focus on women’s issues beyond the religious arena while dismissing religion as an inherently oppressive institution. Wolf describes the attitude of early Jewish feminists as “rejectionist: to them the Torah and tradition were ... irrevocably sexist and discriminatory.”³⁰ For secular feminists, engaging in religious discourse is counterproductive and antithetical to modern secular ideals. Most women of this group would prefer the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Haberman, “Women Beyond the Wall,” 17.

²⁹ Lahav, *The Woes of WoW*, 14.

³⁰ Arnold Jacob Wolf, “The New Jewish Feminism,” *Judaism* 47, no. 3 (1998): 351, EBSCOhost.

women of WoW to emancipate themselves from religion altogether and instead embrace a secular lifestyle. Recognizing that the Orthodoxy essentially has a monopoly on religious power, secular feminists believe that feminist energy and resources would be better spent addressing secular gender equality issues.

The Women of the Wall are positioned in a kind of ideological limbo, as they attempt to fight a religious battle using secular logic. Many twentieth-century feminists,³¹ informed by a liberal democratic narrative that conceptualizes the religious realm as entirely separate from the public and the political realms, see religion and feminism as being irreconcilable. This distinction creates a huge obstacle for WoW. Shakdiel writes, “[i]n a society that instinctively gravitates towards the modernist dichotomy of religion and secularism ... WoW is perceived as too religious for the secular and too secular ... for the religious.”³² This tendency to differentiate will continue to be problematic for WoW unless some common ground can be found between the religious and secular realms.

³¹ See, for example, Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 6. In the first edition of this book, published in 1968, radical feminist and theologian Mary Daly likened feminist pleas for equality in the church to a Black person’s demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan. Though she has since admitted the extremity of this claim, the fact of its very existence serves to indicate the amount of tension that existed between second-wave feminism and institutionalized (particularly monotheistic) religions. The lasting effect of such extreme ideas can still be seen today, among certain radical feminists who refuse any involvement with religion on the grounds that it is inherently oppressive and sexist.

³² Shakdiel, “Women of the Wall,” 139-140.

Reframing the Discourse

The failure of WoW to rally the support of secular feminists and to compromise with the Orthodoxy exemplifies the core problem with popular discourses surrounding religion and feminism. Focusing on the essential differences between two groups is a dangerous tendency because it reinforces existing categories of thought and creates philosophical boundaries that are difficult to overcome. Joyce Dalsheim cautions against the “*desire to differentiate* [emphasis in original],” a tendency to focus only on the ideological disparities that ultimately “conceal the very depth of commonalities” between groups.³³ Though secular and religious feminists are ultimately concerned with female empowerment and equality, the preoccupation with doctrinal discrepancies often prevents cooperative action.

Goldstein argues that Jewish feminists do not necessarily have to be secular to value women’s rights. She notes: “In Jewish feminist circles, a great deal of attention is now being paid to spirituality and to ways in which we can incorporate a feminist worldview into the ‘religious’ realm.”³⁴ By recognizing the common values of female empowerment shared by both the religious and secular feminists, it may be possible for these groups to support one another despite differences in their religious beliefs.

This is essentially the argument of Dr. Judith Plaskow, who suggests that Jewish women need to re-interpret their religious traditions from a feminist perspective in order to empower themselves:

Jewish feminists ... must reclaim the Torah as our own. We must render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of

³³ Joyce Dalsheim, *Unsettling Gaza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

³⁴ R. E. M. Goldstein, “Jewish Feminism and ‘New’ Jewish Rituals,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 16, no. 4 (1996): 51, ProQuest.

women erased in traditional sources. We must tell the stories of women's encounters with God. ... We must expand the notion of Torah to encompass not just the five books and Moses and traditional Jewish learning, but women's words, teachings, and actions hitherto unseen.³⁵

In Plaskow's view, patriarchal narratives have played a large role in shaping Judaism, leading to a disproportionate focus on male rights and religious contributions. She criticizes this system for excluding a significant portion of its devotees, and urges other Jewish women to re-create Judaism according to the liberal democratic ideals of American feminism, which emphasize women's concerns and desires.

The second problematic discourse is that between WoW and the Orthodox authorities at the *Kotel*. The authorities at the Wall argue that WoW's presence compromises the Orthodoxy's ability to pray comfortably, thereby violating their right to religious expression. From a feminist point of view, this argument sets a dangerous precedent: "the purported right to live according to a religious code is often exploited as license to discriminate."³⁶ Recently, however, Jewish theologians have been attempting to reinterpret tradition from a gender-equality perspective. Though Orthodox authorities argue that prayers at the Wall have always been segregated, Charme notes that segregation is "in fact [a] relatively recent innovation" and cites multiple examples of women and men praying together at the Wall in the early twentieth century.³⁷ Additionally, Mendel Shapiro addresses the argument of women's religious roles: though they are not bound by *Halakhic* law to read the Torah, there is a communal obligation to make the Torah heard

³⁵ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 28.

³⁶ Allon, "Gender Segregation, Effacement, and Suppression," 285.

³⁷ Charme, "The Political Transformation of Gender," 7, 12.

to a congregation, and since there is no “primary objection to women’s reading,”³⁸ a woman could logically perform this duty in place of a man.

These are a small sample of the recent attempts to reconcile the differences between secular and religious traditionalists and feminists. Although some ideological differences may never be overcome, participants in the WoW discourse are learning to resist the “desire to differentiate.” This is evidenced by the April 2013 Supreme Court ruling that WoW was not disturbing public order and should be allowed to pray according to their traditions.³⁹ This ruling indicates that religious feminists have made some progress in their attempt to upset existing ideological understandings. The atmosphere at the *Kotel* is far from peaceful, however, and it may be many years before a mutually satisfying agreement can be reached. This will only be achieved if the involved parties avoid the temptation to dismiss their opponents as a repugnant “other” and sincerely attempt to understand and compromise according to the other’s concerns. It is only by re-examining the religious/secular discourse that people will be able to listen to and sympathize with one another.

³⁸ Shapiro, “Qeri’at ha-Torah by Women,” 4.

³⁹ Isabel Kershner, “With Guile and Tiny Torah, Women Hold Bat Mitzvah at the Western Wall,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/25/world/middleeast/women-hold-western-wall-bat-mitzvah-in-jerusalem.html?_r=1.

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