

Western Wall Tradition Takes a Back Seat in the Name of 'Peace'

On Sunday, Rosh Hodesh Tammuz, for the first time since 1967, Jews were barred from the Western Wall. Their crime? Being noticeably religious Jews.

The Old City of Jerusalem was under siege. Places of prayer were inaccessible. Children were unable to get to school. Regular bus services were curtailed, and store owners denied the ability to conduct business.

Only a group unconcerned with the rights of any group but their own could call this a victory for religious freedom.

The Women of the Wall prayed at the Western Wall, with no large masses opposing what they were doing. Everything was calm at the Western Wall that day. Everything was quiet and empty—because thousands who wished to be there were denied access by the police.

On the first day of the previous Hebrew month, Sivan, thousands came, and tensions ran high. People feared that because of Judge Moshe Sobel's rulings, the place they consider holy and hold dearest would be transformed into something alien and desecrated, that the Women of the Wall would be given free rein to make the unholy changes they want to make at Judaism's most holy site. They showed that despite Sobel's decision, Women of the Wall's message, agenda and actions are in fact extremely offensive to others.

Unfortunately, a few male protesters got a little too rowdy, even though the vast majority were well mannered and let their voices be heard in respectful ways. The troublemakers ruined it for everyone, as the media focused only upon those few.

No one wanted a repeat of last month. Our group, Women for the Wall, which is dedicated to preserving tradition respectfully at the Western Wall, worked with authorities to plan for peace, calm and quiet.

The police also made plans to keep peace—plans that went vastly overboard and discriminated against thousands to provide for a few hundred provocateurs. The Women of the Wall were bused in, complete with a police escort and bodyguards. They were given a stage upon which to pursue their stated goals—to change traditional women, to change the Western Wall into a national monument, and to use this holy site as a wedge in a political battle.

Very few were in the Western Wall plaza to stand up for tradition because the police banned any obviously religious people from coming into the area past a certain time. Hundreds who traveled from other cities to show that they stood with our group were blocked by police barricades and prohibited from entering. Those already in the Western Wall plaza, who might have wanted to go to the Old City to buy a bottle of water, were told they would not be allowed back in.

Bus services did not bring their regular passengers. Roads were closed to car traffic and even pedestrians. Children attending school in the Old City were not allowed to enter. Thousands of worshippers who come to pray at the Western Wall on a regular basis, many daily, were banned from the holy site.

Even the bathrooms were closed.

Why? For the sake of “keeping peace” and allowing a small group of mostly Americans to pray unhindered in a spot most of them do not even consider holy, do not consider to be anything more than just “a wall” and not deserving of respect.

If they wish true freedom of religion, should that come at the expense of the freedom of religion of others? Should thousands

of worshippers be banned from the Western Wall, making it nearly Judenrein? Don't people who feel strongly about an issue deserve to be able to express their feelings? Freedom of assembly, speech and expression are not civil rights when they are only granted to one segment of society.

The Women of the Wall claim that they support "pluralism." Where, then, is their outrage? Where is their concern for the religious rights of those more stringent than themselves?

Even those men and women who made it to the Western Wall before the roads were barred still found themselves unable to pray because of the deliberately overloud singing of the Women of the Wall. Men on the farthest side of the Western Wall prayed with their fingers in their ears, as the singing was so loud that they were halachically unable to pray normally. Many women reported that they went home without praying, unable to concentrate on their conversation with God because of the disturbance from the Women of the Wall.

Sunday was a sad day for the Jewish people, as the Israeli government prevented thousands from praying in their usual manner at their usual spot, all for the sake of a small group of provocateurs. The police favored the select few and trampled upon the rights of the vast majority. The absence of condemnation from Women of the Wall is telling, though unsurprising.

Ronit Peskin is co-founder of Women for the Wall, , an organization dedicated to maintaining tradition at the Western Wall.

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