

## Desecration of God's Name at Judaism's Holiest Site

### *Shabbat Pekudei 5779*

March 8, 2019

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This Shabbat has been designated as the thirtieth anniversary of Women of the Wall. For some three decades, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform women have gathered to worship at the Western Wall, also known by its Hebrew name, Kotel, typically on Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon, marking the beginning of a new month in our Jewish calendar. Rosh Chodesh is particularly designated for women, likely because the monthly female reproductive cycle is roughly the length of a lunar month. Notably, though, neither the first gathering of Women of the Wall nor the one we mark with this thirtieth anniversary took place on Rosh Chodesh. Women of the Wall was inaugurated at the first International Jewish Feminist Conference. Without incident, women carried a Torah scroll to the Western Wall, where they prayed together. But that's not the anniversary we're noting tonight. Three months after that initial assembly, Women of the Wall went to the Kotel for the Fast of Esther, observed on the day before Purim, another occasion particularly important to woman because of Esther's heroism. That time, on March 20, 1989, Women of the Wall were met with violent resistance, as ultra-Orthodox detractors hurled chairs at them, disrupting the women's worship and threatening them with bodily injury.

This morning, to mark the thirtieth anniversary of violent resistance to Women of the Wall, a large gathering assembled for the group's regular monthly observance at Judaism's holiest site. Today's gathering, on International Women's Day, might have been particularly joyous. Moreover, today was Rosh Chodesh Adar Bet, the first day of the month when we celebrate the joyous festival of Purim. The motto for today and this month: "Be happy; it's Adar!"

That joy was disrupted by violence.

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reports: "At the instruction of their rabbis, thousands of teenage girls from [Orthodox] high schools around the country gathered at the Kotel, while hundreds of young ultra-Orthodox men tried to break through police barricades to attack the prayer group."<sup>i</sup> The assault was not spontaneous. A group called Hazon distributed a fake front-page newspaper, proclaiming, "Reform Jews have conquered the Kotel," and calling all who would ostensibly protect the Western Wall from conquest to gather there this morning.

And so they did, prepared for a violent struggle. My colleague, Rabbi Noa Sattath, Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center, sustained scratches on her face, wounds suffered at the hands of violent protestors. *Haaretz* explains: “The non-Orthodox leaders and supporters of Women of the Wall were scratched, spit on, bullied, and threatened. Meanwhile, the women participating in the prayer service were attacked by the ultra-Orthodox girls.”<sup>ii</sup> Susan Bass, a woman from Houston whom I have known personally for many years and who currently serves as President of the Women of Reform Judaism, told the newspaper: “I know that when I check I will find bruises on myself from all the kicking, punching and shoving I endured.”<sup>iii</sup>

Making matters worse, the police blamed Women of the Wall for the violence they encountered, claiming: “[S]ome members of Women of the Wall came to the main prayer area, apparently with the express intention to create friction and provocations.”<sup>iv</sup> No. Women of the Wall came to the women’s section of the Western Wall prayer space to pray, as they do every month at the same time.

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, Executive Director of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, responded: “[T]he Israeli police collaborated this morning with the rabbi of the Western Wall and extremist and violent organization[s] in order to prevent Women of the Wall from exercising their legal rights.”<sup>v</sup> I am reminded of British police in Palestine, who would stand idly by when Arabs carried out violence against Jews, but would arrest the Jews when they defended themselves. We are all reminded of racist police who collaborated with white supremacists during the Civil Rights era, attacking Black Americans and their supporters who were merely seeking to exercise their constitutional freedom.

Women of the Wall completed their worshipful gathering in the makeshift egalitarian prayer space that is adjacent to the same retaining wall of the Temple Mount, a separate and not at all equal venue for men and women to pray together there. Note that Orthodox women, who do not pray with men, are every bit as much a part of Women of the Wall as Reform and Conservative women, so moving to the egalitarian location did not meet the needs of the entire group.

I first learned about this morning’s horror when I awakened to an email from Rabbi Josh Weinberg, Vice-President of our Union for Reform Judaism and President of the Association of Reform Zionists of America. He recalls the Torah and Haftarah portions we read this Shabbat, the completion of the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple of Solomon on the same mountain aside which

this morning's violence was wrought. Rabbi Weinberg writes, "This was the place that was meant to be for worship, for pilgrimage, and as the single symbol meant to unify our people. The Temple ... served as the focal point for all of Jewish society while it stood, and its memory served as the most important force in keeping us alive during our centuries of exile. ... And today, it became once again a place of senseless hatred, of rage, of violence. A place where Jews showed up to fight and to prevent their fellow Jews from welcoming the happiest of months"<sup>vi</sup>

In the minds of the ultra-Orthodox attackers of Jewish women at prayer, Women at the Wall are engaged in the most heinous of sins, *chillul ha-Shem*, desecration of God's Name. To the contrary. God's Name is praised when women or men gather in prayer, praising God's Name with many of the same prayers we offer here tonight. Hooligans who would seek to enforce their sense of God's will through violence: They are the ones desecrating God's Name!

Among those at the Kotel today, seeking to defend the Women of the Wall, were Israeli veterans of the Six Day War, members of the paratroopers battalion that liberated that holy place from Jordanian control in an obligatory war of self-defense. On that fateful day in June of 1967, the brigade commander, later General, Moti Gur, triumphantly proclaimed, "The Temple Mount is in our Hands!"

This morning, Rabbi Josh Weinberg asks, "Is the Kotel in our hands?"<sup>vii</sup> No, Rabbi Weinberg does not ask whether the Western Wall belongs exclusively to Reform Jews, or to women. Instead, we all insist that the remnant of the ancient Temple belongs to the whole Jewish people, indeed to anybody and everybody who would seek to worship there. The prophet Isaiah, speaking of the Temple completed and dedicated by King Solomon in the Haftarah we shall read tomorrow morning, proclaimed, "Let my house be a house of prayer for all people."<sup>viii</sup> Let that be God's will.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Judy Maltz and Jonathan Lis, "Thousands of ultra-Orthodox Youths Violently Disrupt Feminist Prayer Service at Western Wall," *Haaretz*, March 8, 2019, 12:31pm.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Josh Weinberg, "The Kotel in our Hands?" *ARZA*, March 8, 2019.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah 56:7.