

Western Wall Crisis

Q&A

A Guide for the Perplexed



On Sunday, June 25th, 2017, the Israeli Government decided to freeze the Western Wall Compromise Agreement.

We collected some answers to frequent questions concerning this issue.

What are the main points of the Compromise Agreement?

- **One holy place, two plazas** - at the Western Wall there will be two official prayer plazas. At the northern plaza of the Western Wall (the familiar Western Wall plaza) the “custom of the place” which is to be followed is Orthodox. At the southern plaza of the Western Wall (“Ezrat Yisrael” or what is known as “Robinson’s Arch”) the custom which is followed is pluralistic and egalitarian.
- **One entrance** - a respectable, shared entrance will be built that will lead to the two plazas.
- **Management** - a public council will be set up to manage the egalitarian plaza. The Council, whose representatives will be appointed by the Prime Minister, including representatives (although not a majority) from the Conservative Movement, as well as representatives from the Reform Movement and Women of the Wall.
- **Visibility** - the egalitarian plaza of the Western Wall will not be concealed from the public eye. Those approaching the Western Wall from the Dung Gate will be able to see it.
- **Funding** - The state will provide initial funding for the physical development of the egalitarian plaza, and each year will allocate a fixed budget for its administration (a significant budget, albeit significantly smaller than the budget of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation).



How did the Western Wall Compromise Come About?

A period of negotiations which lasted over three years with the participation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, the cabinet secretary at the time Avihaï Mandelblit, representatives from the Masorti Movement representatives from the Reform Movement, the Jewish Federations of North America, and the Women of the Wall concluded on January 31, 2016. The Rabbi of the Western Wall and the representatives of the ultra-Orthodox parties refused to sit in the same room with the above-mentioned representatives, but nevertheless, the negotiations with them, which were conducted by the cabinet secretary, were serious, thorough and profound. Representatives of the ultra-Orthodox public were full partners to the in formulation of the agreement and agreed to all its details.

The government approved the compromise vote by a majority vote: 15 Ministers were in favour, 5 opposed.

A few days after the approval of the compromise, the ultra-Orthodox media began to attack the agreements, the ultra-Orthodox ministers began to withdraw from the agreements, and the implementation of the compromise (which was supposed to commence approximately one month after the approval by the government) never began. At the end of February 2017, about a year after the approval of the compromise agreement and after prolonged foot-dragging and the appeal by the Reform and Conservative movements and the Women of the Wall to the Supreme Court, the Prime Minister appointed Minister Tzachi Hanegbi as the person responsible for settling the differences and promoting the compromise. Minister Hanegbi never convened the representatives of the parties, and the few informal meetings that took place with him did not lead to anything. Almost a year and a half after the Government approved the compromise agreement, the government held a brief meeting that did not appear on the agenda, and decided to freeze it. In reaction to this decision, a public storm arose.





What does it matter if the compromise agreement is frozen?

We signed an agreement with the Israeli government. A compromise in which we were forced to give up basic principles of freedom of worship and the right to equality. The Prime Minister's promise to "promote solutions in the field itself," that is, to (ostensibly) implement a small part of the physical aspects agreed to in the compromise plan, is a breach of a government promise, contempt for long negotiations conducted in good faith, and a slap in the face of millions of Jews. We will continue to hold traditional and egalitarian family prayers and events at Ezrat Yisrael, and will wait for the ruling of the Supreme Court. Women of the Wall will continue to pray as they are accustomed to at the Women's section of the Western Wall, until the compromise agreement is implemented.

Where is the compromise?

The compromise, like any compromise, was difficult for both sides. The non-Orthodox movements and women of the Western Wall were to achieve their own space, but gave up their rights. There were rights for which they had fought for over forty years, namely - to pray as they are accustomed to at the recognized Wall, which has been the focus of Jewish consciousness for thousands of years. The Haredi leadership received legal recognition of the Orthodox status at the recognized Western Wall but agreed to a certain implicit recognition of Conservative and Reform Judaism by the State of Israel.

Why now?

This is happening now because after many postponements and petitions from many bodies, July 2017 is the deadline for the State to respond to the Supreme Court regarding key questions relating to prayer arrangements at the Western Wall. Those who feared that the court would oblige the government to implement its decision of January 2016, and demand that it implement the outline immediately, rushed to remove the compromise agreement from the agenda and freeze it before the court delivered a verdict. If the government decision is not valid, it is impossible to compel the government to implement it.

"Ezrat Yisrael" stands empty, that proves that there is no need for it

Firstly, this is not true. Second, non-Orthodox religious Judaism, as the name itself indicates, is not Orthodox. The Conservative and Reform movements are different. "Ezrat Yisrael" which is set aside, lacking a proper entrance, lacking proper access, visibility and status, and which may be found only with the aid of a map and compass (which is, let's admit it, like the back seat of the bus) is full on Mondays, Thursdays, Rosh Hodesh, and with dozens of Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies... By the way, on the separate beach for religious bathers in Tel Aviv, there are fewer bathers than on the other beaches – does that mean that the separate beach should be cancelled? We think not.

What happens at ceremonies and prayers conducted at "Ezrat Yisrael"?

The regulations that apply to us at "Ezrat Yisrael" prohibit the use of chairs, musical instruments, amplification systems, food and even throwing sweets (as customary) at the Bar or Bat Mitzva child.

We provide Torah scrolls, prayer books (siddurim) and tables, which the Masorti Movement supplies for the use of the celebrating families.

We are proud that grandmothers in our ceremonies do not have to stand on a chair in a separate women's section to peek at their grandson who is called to chant from the Torah. Male and female Rabbis, fathers and mothers, hold traditional and meaningful ceremonies in Ezrat Yisrael. Hundreds of ceremonies.

To be honest, we are ready to give up the place. Tomorrow morning. Let us pray according to our custom at the Western Wall plaza, next to you, and we will gladly give you the keys.

Who wants to pray at the Western Wall in the first place?

Well, firstly, those who do not want to do not have to, but if there was (not sure if "was" or "were" is correct) a recognized and respectable option of egalitarian prayer, is there any doubt that more people would come to the Western Wall to celebrate their ceremonies? But we will recall that the Kotel (The Western Wall) is not just a place of prayer. The Kotel is a national symbol, perhaps Judaism's most significant symbol and the place to which all Jews throughout the generations turned their hearts and their eyes. A partition was certainly not there, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and the Western Wall Rabbi are newcomers as well. It is important for all of us that this place, which is not only a synagogue but a symbol and common denominator for all Jews throughout the world, should be open and accessible to all men and women. It should include men and women who live Jewish lives of all kinds. The breach of the agreement has profound symbolic significance: it is a violation of a commitment to representatives of the entire Jewish people. Most Jews in the world (both in the Diaspora and in Israel) not sure this is true here in Israel pray without a partition. Are these Jews not eligible to pray at any part of the Wall?

Isn't it of interest only for Diaspora Jews?

No. It also interests 7% of Israeli Jews who associate themselves with Masorti (Conservative) Judaism and Reform Judaism, and interests hundreds of thousands more men and women who are tired of the setup at the Western Wall plaza where Grandma is standing on a plastic chair and mother is wrapped in a cloth rag. How do we know this? Three separate surveys that were published recently by the Institute for Policy of the Jewish People, the Schechter Institute and Hiddush revealed that most of the Jews in Israel not only support the compromise agreement at the Wall but also support the possibility of holding egalitarian prayers at the recognized Western Wall.

How does the Western Wall issue relate to Israel's status as "The State of the Jewish people"?

Israel is not only the country of the Jews living within its boundaries but the nation-state of the Jewish people. This is how the State of Israel presents itself upon every international platform, and rightly so. As such, the State of Israel has a great responsibility to the Jews of the Diaspora, a responsibility to transform Israel into a Jewish center in the world and a home in which every Jew will feel comfortable. This responsibility must be expressed in our ability to make them feel at home in Israel and to allow them space for their beliefs and views. Diaspora Jewry is not just our cash register, they are not just our lobbyists in Congress. They are family. This is how one should treat family.



התנועה המסורתית
יהדות ישראלית

