

Yizhar Hess

How did we let them make fools of us?

We made a mistake. We believed the government, we believed the Prime Minister, we believed that it was time to finally put an end to this argument between us regarding the Western Wall, and we agreed to a compromise agreement. However, last night the government made a cynical and even evil decision that essentially threw this historical agreement to the dogs and spit in the faces of millions of Jews worldwide. To add insult to injury, the government decided to add a final slap in the face: Listen well, Jews of the world: not only will you have no part in the Western Wall, now or in future, but conversion in the Jewish State will also take place solely under ultra-Orthodox auspices.

We made a mistake. We wanted to return Jerusalem to the consensus, for the Jews to finally stop bickering among ourselves, about something that belongs to all of us. But we were misled. The settlement agreement forced us to give up the right for egalitarian prayer at the familiar part of the Western Wall. For decades we fought for this, but out of a feeling of historical responsibility - and let's admit it, enormous pressure which was brought to bear upon us - we acted in a manner which was contrary to instinct, and perhaps also to reason, and we compromised.

We made a mistake. The results of a survey recently published by the Shechter Institute to mark the fiftieth year of Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall show that we must rethink our actions. A significant percentage of the Israeli public supports us: 62% of Israelis support egalitarian prayers at the Western Wall and only 9.3% (less than the percentage of those Israelis that identify themselves as Orthodox Jews) think that Conservative and Reform Jews should be prevented from praying at the Western Wall according to their customs.

Just think how determined the Prime Minister was at the beginning when he assembled us to conduct the historical negotiations, and how festive he was at the Government meeting last January at which the agreement was ratified.



In an unusual action, Netanyahu requested that Natan Sharansky, who was abroad at the time, join the meeting by satellite. Reception was uneven and Sharansky could not be heard clearly, however Netanyahu did not give up. He knew that it was the right decision.

Mandelblit, Cabinet Secretary at the time, was trusted by both sides. Although the ultra-Orthodox Ministers expressed their reservations regarding the decision, they knew that they had achieved quite a bit. They supported the decision, but for the record - voted against it. Immediately after the vote, the Foreign Ministry reported the decision to all its representatives abroad and to all the Jewish communities throughout the world. After decades of conflict, the Israeli government managed to persuade all the different sides to compromise. The compromise agreement was painfully agreed to by both sides, yet each side found sufficient positive aspects that would excite their own supporters.

In hindsight, I admit that the ultra-Orthodox gained more than we did in this agreement. They were awarded with the familiar and well-known section of the Western Wall, and with recognition of regulations that finalized the definition of “local custom” as that associated with the ultra-Orthodox. They were forced to come to terms with the construction of a joint entrance to the complex and with the official presence of Conservative and Reform Jews on the other side. We received our own public space, including a budget and partial recognition, but were forced to give up that which is considered by most of the Jewish People “the actual Western Wall”. For years we struggled to share the Western Wall, however we found ourselves being pushed aside and forced to accept a small “piece of the Wall”.



Yesterday evening world Jewish leaders were struck with astonishment, and this shock was worse than the insulting slap in the face. It might possibly be the final chord. The Israeli Government has committed an act which can be considered un-Zionist. The Government has proven to its people, and to its enemies, that Israel is no longer the State of the Jewish People. Israel is a country that denies its own people.

Now the Supreme Court will decide. We might have saved ourselves five years of negotiations and let the Supreme Court rule on this matter long ago, but at the time, we believed that compromise was preferable to power games and inner bickering. It turns out that we were wrong. It is possible that the Supreme Court will do the dirty work for the government, and if it does – I assume that we will not be so bold as to retreat from the compromise agreement that we officially agreed upon previously.

What a terrible lesson we learned. How did we let the Israeli Government make fools of us?

Yizhar Hess is the CEO of the Masorti Movement

This article was published in Hebrew in Yediot Achronont:

<http://www.masorti.org.il/uploads/editor/files/1498458450.pdf>

