

Women of the Wall  
by  
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A number of years ago I travelled to Israel with a group of Rabbis and Rabbinical students from the Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale, New York (AJR). We toured together, prayed together and studied together.

Reminding myself of that journey, I want to speak tonight about the egalitarian struggle which has been going on in Jewish life for over one hundred years. How wonderful that we have an outstanding Bat Mitzvah represented by Elena Tal Rubens Goldfarb, and wonderful cantorial soloists in our congregation represented by Beth Rubens, Elena's mother, as well as Caron Dale, and a woman Associate Rabbi, Rabbi Devorah Lynn.

For many years rabbis have forcefully argued against women's participation in leading services, Bat Mitzvah, being scholars, and in general staying out of what became a man's domain, the synagogue service.

You know that in many congregations, women sit separately, and are encouraged not to sing. All this seems quite remarkable. Yet it goes on right here in Rockville-Potomac in Orthodox congregations.

What was the basis for this? One is the rabbinic ruling made by male rabbis, that only men have the obligation to pray the services, go to the Torah, have a Bar Mitzvah, and even have the authority to sign a Ketubah which in Orthodoxy is given by the groom to the bride. A woman may not sign as a witness which in traditional Judaism invalidates the document. Some of these rules were made so that women could do 'women's work' of staying home, caring for children and their house.

So it was a welcome change when Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Society for Progressive Judaism, SAJ, invited his daughter, Judith, to take an aliyah for her Bat Mitzvah in the 1920s. For this small gesture, he was criticized and ostracized by traditional rabbis. He was placed in Herem - total ostracism. He could not be given any honor in

a synagogue. He was addressed as Mr. Kaplan instead of Rabbi Kaplan, and he was considered a disgrace to the Jewish people.

In the 1950s the Reform Movement began to celebrate Bat Mitzvah on a regular basis in Temple's in the United States, and around the world. By the 1960s the Conservative Movement welcomed Bat Mitzvah as Jewish ritual. Yet, the battle for women rabbis and cantors was just beginning.

The Reform Movement led the way, and the first rabbis were ordained, and most of these firsts are now retired. The Conservative movement took another 20 years, and even more years for cantors. During my tenure as cantor, I am proud to say that I wrote and spoke for the ordaining of women, even in the Jewish Week. My argument was that since it was a matter of obligation that men could do this, a woman could take this obligation by making a commitment. Where did I get such a notion?

Maimonides, the 12th century scholar, would not have supported me in this, yet his arguments made this possible. He wrote that a convert to Judaism can take the obligation of the Mitzvot and consider the Patriarchs (and Matriarchs) their spiritual ancestors. So to me this meant, that if a Jew by Choice can change their non-obligation to being obligated for the Mitzvot, then surely a Jewish woman could change their status to one of obligation. A Jewish woman had fewer rights than a convert when it came to prayer.

When I spoke at the closed session for cantors about this, interestingly, some of the cantors who were Jews by Choice, did not support women as cantors. They had become traditional. I am happy to say that the cantors voted to accept what was already an accomplished fact - that there were women cantors, and now they would be accepted as members of an assembly with full rights.

In the recent decades, Orthodoxy has tried to deal with this as well, and it is definitely because of the actions taken by Reform and Conservative Jews. In Baltimore's largest Orthodox congregation of 10,000 people, a young woman recites an Hafotrah for her Bat Mitzvah, although she has to do so without going up to the top level where the Ark is located. Alright, this is some progress. In Georgetown, Keshet Israel has a women's only service in the afternoon for a Bat Mitzvah, allowing the Young lady to read from the

Torah without men being present, because they are not allowed to hear a woman chant. The voice of a woman may lead them to impure thoughts!

I listen to Carol's voice - it is one of the great joys in life, and I observe how my granddaughters are mesmerized by Carol singing to them. I could not imagine some religious authority restricting that on the basis of foolish controlling rules, which are unnecessary and intrusive.

In spite of this progress, it is still an upward struggle for women to be fully accepted as rabbis and cantors. There is still resistance in all the places of the world where Orthodoxy or Cabad dominate.

Of all places, Israel should be more open, yet we frequently find that the Orthodox Rabbinate, which has been allowed to dominate due to a lack of interest in religion by political leaders, continues to harass and thwart any progress in women's participation.

Most importantly, the rabbinate has been able to thwart women reading Torah or participating at the Kotel, the Western Wall. Women were removed from the area for wearing a tallit or tefillin, and no Bat Mitzvah was permitted.

Attitudes are difficult to change, yet ten years ago an egalitarian group of men and women rabbis from my seminary conducted a weekday service on the large stones near the wall known as Robinson's Arch. Right next to us was an Orthodox minyan which looked on but did not interfere.

In the interim, women have been arrested, and political pressure has been brought by the Reform Movement and a group called Women of the Wall. years ago a member of that group, Linda Yitzchak spoke to our congregation. We know that there needs to be an attitude upheaval in Israel, so that women are not harassed either at prayer or walking through a Hassidic neighborhood, or on public busses.

Separate but Equal applies to women on buses used in Haredi communities. However, at long last a compromise was worked out so that the area where I prayed with my rabbinic group has now become the official egalitarian area where no one will harass women who wish to pray, to wear tefillin or lead a service. They will be able to sing out without being shushed! They will express themselves through prayer, and the celebration

of Bat Mitzvah, so that someone like Elena Tal Reubens Goldfarb, can know that when she visits Jerusalem, she can have an aliyah if she wishes, or can lead a service.

This new non-Orthodox worship area has been the site of surging crowds in recent days. On a weekday they had over 100 people. Protesters still shouted, and the compromise still does not permit Torah in the women's section. However, this new site area will be under the control of a non-Orthodox committee, while the traditional site will remain under the Orthodox control under the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

While the Women of the Wall agreed to the changes, it will take years for all the adjustments which are necessary. Women of the Wall has members who reject the compromise and vowed to continue to fight for change.

**Nevertheless, these were signs of the beginning of change, and the beginning of hope that the unfair excluding of women in prayer based on traditional rabbinic law, will have to find the kind of enlightened rabbi the Rambam represented. It is difficult to imagine that we are fighting over this, yet it cannot be ignored. The best argument for the change is the Bat Mitzvah we heard tonight, and the cantorial soloist who brings spirituality to our prayers.**

**“We sang with the feeling that now we truly begin a new path to ‘being a free people in our land,’” Women of the Wall chair Anat Hoffman said in a news conference. Being a free people includes, freeing us from ancient restrictions while helping us to build a stronger more inclusive Jewish community.**

**Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arnold Saltzman**