

The Kotel (Western Wall) Controversy

Kol Nidre, 5778

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Just eight weeks ago we gathered here on Tisha B'Av, sat on the floor and wept over the destruction of our temples. But after thinking about it, I asked myself, "Is it really such a bad thing that we no longer have a temple?" After all, look at how we fight over the *Kotel* (Western Wall), which is just a retaining wall of the Second Temple. If we had a temple, we would have even more to argue about. Who would serve as the *Kohanim* (priests) in the temple? Who would make decisions regarding temple ritual, the *Kohanim* or rabbinic authorities?

The Israeli government's decision to suspend plans to create an area for mixed gender prayer at the main *Kotel* plaza ignited outrage in much of the Jewish world. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Reform movement, stated, "The decision cannot be seen as anything but a betrayal." Rabbi Daniel Gordis, a leading voice for Conservative Judaism, urged American Jews to "cancel their El Al tickets and fly Delta" and suggested "withholding money from Israeli hospitals." Many in the diaspora are suggesting that they need to "rethink" their relationship with the Jewish state, which sounds like a thinly veiled threat to cease support of Israel.

Regardless of how one feels about creating a mixed prayer section at the main plaza (a small one already exists at the south

end of the wall known as Robinson's Arch), one should be able to understand why the advocates of such an idea are upset. A compromise had been reached, but due to political pressure the government has failed to honor it. We must acknowledge and validate the feeling of betrayal.

While it is certainly tempting to blame Netanyahu for capitulating to those on the right who pressured him to suspend the compromise plan, Alan Dershowitz reasons that Netanyahu had no choice. If he had not capitulated, his government would have fallen and a government to his right would have likely succeeded him, taking an even harder line. What is most troubling is not Netanyahu's capitulation, which was an act of political survival, but the fact that "religious parties" forced him into abrogating an agreement. You do not have to search hard in Jewish sources to conclude that it is a sin to fail to live up to an agreement. Based on "He shall not break his word" (Num. 30:3), the *Rambam* teaches that there is a command prohibiting one from failing to fulfill an obligation to which one has committed, even if the obligation was made without taking a formal oath (*Sefer Hamitzvot*, Negative Mitzvah 157). Furthermore, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that it is no accident that Torah broaches the topic of vows and oaths as the people approach the Promised Land. Authoritarian societies can coerce. The Israelites were freed from slavery not to build yet another coercive society, but to build a free society. As Rabbi Sacks puts it "Freedom depends on people keeping their word" and the failure to do so leads to disorder which eventually circles back to

authoritarianism. Jeremiah, who lived through the destruction of the first Temple, lamented “They are valorous in the land for treachery, not for their honesty.”

But instead of recognizing the error of their ways, opponents of the compromise such as former Israeli chief rabbi Shlomo Amar have doubled down. He stated that proponents of the agreement were “Like Holocaust deniers” and that “They don’t have Yom Kippur or Shabbat but they want to pray [at the Western Wall]. But no one thinks they want to pray, they want to desecrate the holy.”

Rabbi Amar, before you accuse others of desecrating the holy, remember that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. During this penitential season instead of castigating your fellow Jew, why not reflect on the fact that pressuring the government to renege on its word is a violation of *Halacha* (Jewish law).

Now I want to address those who feel betrayed. While we have already validated those feelings, we ask you to think long and hard about “rethinking” your relationship with Israel, which needs your support. Less than three quarters of a century ago one third of world Jewry was wiped out. Look to your right and left and imagine that one of those two people sitting next to you was not there. If there had been a state of Israel, then many of those we recite *Yizkor* for today would have been saved. It is estimated that, if not for the Holocaust, the world’s Jewish population would be 32 million instead of 13 million now, according to demographics professor Sergio Della Pergola. There would be no empty seats here today.

While the Holocaust may seem like ancient news to many, let me share some current pieces of news with you:

Item 1: Seventy two years after the Holocaust ended, in many quarters in Europe one can again be openly anti-Semitic without fear of been shunned. The British opposition Labor party is led by MP Jeremy Corbyn, who is known for his avowed admiration for Hezbollah and Hamas, and at Labor's annual conference anti-Israel activist Mike Peled said that people should be allowed to express skepticism about the Holocaust. Though we are blessed to live in America, which has welcomed us with open arms, we dare not forget that Israel is needed as a safe haven for Jews residing elsewhere. If you walk the streets of Netanya the language you may hear being spoken is French, because for years Jews have been fleeing France for the safety of Israel. This is particularly ironic being that Jewish "emancipation" was born in France.

Item 2: This one hits closer to home. Faculty and students run wild across many institutions of higher learning demonizing and delegitimizing Israel while championing the Boycotting, Divestment and Sanctioning (BDS) of Israel. In light of this, it is not surprising that support for Israel has decreased 27 percent over the last 10 years among college students, according to the Brand Israel Group. If this trend continues, we should not expect our next generation of

political leaders and activists to be as supportive of Israel as our current ones.

Item 3: In Charlottesville Neo-Nazis and the KKK held a march which ended in the loss of life, and the president's condemnation of the hate groups left much to be desired. While I am not prepared to suggest that the president is personally sympathetic to these hate groups, it is truly disturbing that his lack of clarity in denouncing them was likely due to a desire not to offend supporters of these groups because of the political clout they now possess.

Item 4: This past May 2, which happened also to be Israel Independence Day, the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization passed a resolution claiming the Old City of Jerusalem (which is where the Western Wall is located) is "occupied territory." What *chutzpah!* If that's not outrageous enough, in June the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) issued a picture of a girl identified as "Aya" claiming she had suffered from Israel's blockade of Gaza. It turns out she's not from Gaza but Syria. Israel and the Jewish people are fighting enemies who have no shame.

Item 5: Iran has provided its proxy Hezbollah with 150,000 rockets and missiles which can reach Israel. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic, which may very well obtain a nuclear bomb in the not too

distant future, continues proclaiming that Israel is a “one bomb problem.”

History and contemporary events remind us of the dangers of being a stateless people that lack political power. We maintain political power in two ways- by becoming politically active in the nations of which we are citizens of and by ensuring the survival of Israel. Since withdrawing support from Israel is not in the interest of any Jew, what do those who feel “betrayed” do? Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg of Baltimore explained that just because he has a disagreement with his wife doesn’t mean that he stops talking to her. Rather they work through it. Likewise, do not disengage from Israel; you will marginalize yourselves at a time when there is hope. The Israeli Supreme Court recently called on the government to either reinstate the agreement or explain why the state should not be forced to honor the deal. Rabbi Wohlberg did add that he will not support *Yeshivot* in Israel that do not treat him as an equal, but he does give to those that do. Give to Israeli organizations that champion your values. Become active in American Jewish organizations that lobby on behalf of a strong U.S. Israel alliance and consider joining Delaware’s delegation at the AIPAC conference in March. And for the sake of the Jewish people, do not cut off your nose to spite your face and contemplate withdrawing support from institutions which are essential to the wellbeing of Israel such as such as its hospitals and El Al. In fact, you can support Hadassah and demonstrate your love and appreciation for Ann Jaffe by joining

us in November as she is being honored with the *Ashet Chayel* (Woman of Valor) award by our local Hadassah chapter in November. You can also invest in Israel tonight by buying an Israel Bond.

Let's conclude by noting that according to rabbinic tradition King David composed *Ashrei* while fleeing from his son, Avshalom, who sought to depose him as king. Why would David write a psalm praising God at this time? You would expect him to compose a psalm calling out to God for aid. David realized that his son's coup was divine retribution for his sin with Bat Sheva. Just as a teenager would rather have a parent admonish him instead of kicking him out of the house telling him that he is now on his own, David preferred to have God stay engaged and actively punish him rather than simply abandon him. Why, because he realized the importance of maintaining the relationship.

You can be angry at the Israeli government's decision; every relationship has its ups and downs. But do not sever the relationship and turn your back on your brothers and sisters in Israel unless you are willing to abandon your family and live with the inevitably disastrous consequences.

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