



Statement on Violence at the Kotel March 2019

The leadership of the Rabbinic Council of Australian, New Zealand and Asian Progressive Rabbis and of the Union for Progressive Judaism were saddened but not surprised by the events which unfolded at the Kotel on Friday. Ultra-Orthodox rabbis, with the intention of disrupting the monthly Rosh Chodesh service of Women of the Wall (also a celebration of the International Day of Women and the 30th anniversary of these Rosh Chodesh services at the Kotel) bussed in thousands of yeshiva girls to crowd out and verbally (and physically) attack the women as they prayed the morning service. The tensions were also further increased by a large group of Haredi men who were yelling and screaming at the Women of the Wall. Billboards attacking Progressive Judaism and inflammatory statements from the chief rabbinate all served to increase the chances of verbal and physical violence. We were also saddened by the response of the police, who laid the blame on the victims, rather than the perpetrators of the violence.

It is our very strong belief that the Kotel is the inheritance of the entire Jewish people, and not one segment. There is no reason why a multiplicity of authentic expressions of the Jewish tradition cannot worship in peace and security simultaneously at the Western Wall. It is also not a legitimate expression of state power to give priority or lend legitimacy to one expression of Judaism, while denying equal rights to the rest.

Judaism has a strong tradition of respect for a diversity of opinions, stemming back to the Talmudic dictum, "Eilu v'eilu d'varim Elohim chayim" (This [answer] and this [contradictory answer] are both the words of the living God). We also do not see fulfilment of the mitzvah to love our neighbors (and indeed the strangers) as we love ourselves in the violence or hate filled attacks against non-Orthodox Judaism. We hope one day that acceptance of diversity and respect for others as enshrined in our tradition will find expression in prayer services at the Kotel, and in the laws of the State of Israel.

There is a sad irony that our tradition teaches that the second Temple (of which the Kotel is the last remaining construction) was destroyed because of a failure of derech erez (basic respect) and sinat chinam (intercommunal strife). It is said that a third Temple, meaning redemption and a completion of Tikkun Olam, will not occur until both of these sins vanish from the world. Based on the events of the past week, a lot of work is still required to be done. It is the commitment of our Assembly to work with all like-minded segments of the Jewish Community to make these hopes a reality.