

ROSH CHODESH WITH WOMEN OF THE WALL

The conflict at the Kotel goes on

DANNY HOCHBERG



HE frenzied flight of the swallows of the Kotel is choreographed by the level of noise and activity coming from the worshippers below them. Today, Rosh Chodesh Sivan, the dance is particularly frenetic.

Rosh Chodesh at the wall has become a battleground between the Women of the Wall and the Charedi-dominated Western Wall Foundation – a quasi-governmental authority led by an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who is appointed for life. The authority segregated the men and women, and demands women pray in complete silence, with no group prayer and no Torah scrolls.

Despite a Jerusalem District Court determination in 2013, after over 50 arrests and detentions, that the Women of the Wall have the right to pray in peace and do not pose a “threat”, the rabbi of the Kotel implemented regulations preventing women from accessing Torah scrolls, despite there being over 700 in the men’s section. He also banned all “outside” Torah scrolls from being brought in.

The din from the Charedi protesters is so great that the women recently created a choir, so that by singing together in unison they can hear each other.

The plan for a pluralistic section not administered by the rabbi of the Kotel, despite government approval, was rescinded when the ultra-Orthodox parties threatened to leave the government



The Women of the Wall.

Photo: Danny Hochberg

of the time. There is a small temporary wooden platform, removed from but facing the wall, south of the main plaza at Robinson’s Arch. It falls well short of the needs of worshippers.

My partner Sandra and I join the Women of the Wall on this Rosh Chodesh. Arriving at the wall, security is extra intense and we are body checked. They are checking to ensure nobody is trying to bring in an outside Torah. Sure enough, our small Torah scroll is discovered and confiscated. Expecting this, the women have an excerpt from today’s parsha copied onto a sheet which is not detected.

Metal security barriers are set up to herd us, like condemned sheep, towards designated areas. There is pushing and a constant barrage of instructions, including through megaphones. The Wall Authority guards are clearly not there to protect us, but rather to intimidate. The women are separated from the men. I am sent to a small barricaded section behind the women’s prayer section. We can see the women but it is hard to hear

because we are surrounded by Charedim, mainly young, many of them bussed in to harass us. They are abusive, calling us “dogs” and telling us we are not Jews. They swear, whistle and chant “bushah” (shame).

I met a 19-year-old gap year student who identifies as a halachic egalitarian, who has been coming regularly to support the women. He tells me, “I have received plenty of abuse. They have told me God hates me; that I caused the Holocaust. It’s hurtful, but it puts a fire in your belly!” As I am interviewing him, I am shoved and a young bocher tries to cover the lens of my camera.

The women have been corralled to a corner of the women’s section, far from the wall. They are approximately 60, and huddle together in a circle, both for safety and to hear each other sing. The din from the Charedi protesters is so great, they recently created a choir, so that by singing together in unison they can hear each other. Behind the metal barriers, they are protected from the worst of the abuse

from women and young girls. Sandra is given an aliyah to the Torah.

“It was such an empowering experience. I was both emotional and proud to be with these women and to be called to the Torah at the Kotel,” she said.

I asked her if she felt safe: “I didn’t feel safe when we were being pushed by the Wall Authority guards, but standing there, surrounded by these brave and determined women, I felt very safe.”

The service complete, we begin the logistical exercise of exiting in safety. We are again surrounded by guards who act as a barrier between us and the abusive Charedi protesters who are intent on chasing us out. At one point I look up and a young Charedi girl spits at us. We retrieve our precious Torah scroll, and board the awaiting buses.

The experience was both uplifting and demeaning. Lesley Sachs, vice-president of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism and a previous CEO of Women of the Wall tells me, “The people at the current protests against the Judicial coup and the recent ultra-Orthodox centric budget are making the connection between their rights as women, or secular Jews, or LGBTQI+ or Arabs and even as Likud supporters, and our battles for recognition at the Kotel. Citizens of Israel have had enough, and are looking for a paradigm change away from ultra-Orthodox hegemony over their lives.”

Michah Eshet, who leads a group of soldiers who conquered the Old City in the 1967 war and supports the women adds, “We are the liberators of the Wall. You (Women of the Wall) are the modern liberators of the Wall.”

At the Kotel, the swallows circle, the worshippers chant, the ancient stones bear witness, and the battle for women’s rights to express their Judaism there goes on.

Danny Hochberg is a member of the Sydney Jewish community.

‘THE WORK WE DO CHANGES FACTS ON THE GROUND’

JOFA Australia to embark on an unexpected first

‘VE been running the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance in Australia for almost three years. During my years so far as president, we have been able to create a great number of changes for Orthodox women in our community.

In addition to holding events, JOFA Australia has been able to set up the first scholarship fund that trains Orthodox women in a range of areas with courses that have previously not been offered to women in our community.

This includes training the first all-Australian cohorts of kallah teachers, a course dedicated to understanding the intersection between mental health and halachah, a program dedicated to teaching women how to write opinion editorial pieces and courses specifically for mikvah ladies as well as a Torah-learning Midrash program.

In just over two years, JOFA Australia has granted 132 women from six Australian states and territories a range of scholarships to complete these courses. The women who have done so have ranged in age from 18 to 80 years.

Being a national body means that we have been able to effect change in communities that do not usually have the resources or funds to run courses like this. However, JOFA Australia would

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not be able to operate as it does without generous donors who are committed to supporting the Torah learning of women in our community.

In two years, there have been many firsts: the first-time courses have been offered, the first time a national women’s speaker’s bureau has existed for Orthodox women, the first time airtime has been given to many topics that are close to women’s hearts and did not necessarily have an avenue for discussion outside of JOFA.

However, JOFA Australia is embarking on an unexpected first: we are training men. Yes. The latest scholarship that JOFA Australia is offering is to train men to be chatan teachers. Why? Well, firstly, mikvahs are the backbone of any Orthodox community. Ensuring that the men and women of Australia have access to highly trained teachers who embody sensitivity, knowledge and care for the laws of taharat hamishpachah is critically important.

The 10-week chatan teacher training

course is taught by Rav Yoni Rosensweig, a highly esteemed Jewish educator and the head of the Israeli-based mental health charity Maaglei Nefesh.

The course focuses on how teachers can help couples to have a personally meaningful and welcoming experience using the mikvah.

JOFA Australia is keen to continue to help the Australian community infuse mikvah with relevance to the lives and challenges of couples today as well as providing support and resources for crisis and life-cycle moments and increasing knowledge about intimacy and health.

As a feminist alliance, women are always at the forefront of anything JOFA does, but at the same time, training men in this area of Jewish law is important for both women and men. In fact, the best part of running a feminist alliance is allowing women to flourish and learn and gain new confidence and skills to take on leadership.

The work we do changes facts on the ground. It moves the needle from “will Australian communities dedicate resources to women’s Torah learning” to creating an active and vibrant set of opportunities that have been embraced with relish by women from across the country.

When we train the men in an area like taharat hamishpachah, we set up women for success in having an equal partner in an important mitzvah.

Originally, when I had the kernel of an idea to start JOFA Australia I was a little bit reluctant. My thoughts went as follows: if Australia was supposed to have a feminist alliance, surely, almost 30 years after the founding of an American alliance and more than a decade after the founding of a British alliance, we would already have one here if it was supposed to exist?!

However, over the past few years it has been pleasing to be proven so resoundingly wrong. Women in Australia want the opportunities JOFA Australia is offering and the demand for quality Torah learning resources and opportunities are high.

It is a total privilege to be able to lead this organisation from strength to strength and continue our mission wherever possible: to encourage Australian women to learn Torah and strengthen their leadership no matter where they are located!

Nomi Kaltmann is president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) Australia.