

# Jews rally around woman arrested for praying at Western Wall

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Jews from Manhattan to Mozambique held prayer vigils on Monday (Oct. 22) to protest the arrest and incarceration of an Israeli feminist as she was leading 250 American Jewish women in prayer at the Western Wall.

The Oct. 16 arrest of Anat Hoffman, who co-founded Women of the Wall to enable Jewish women to pray together at the wall, has elicited outrage, especially from American Jews, the vast majority of whom do not practice Orthodox Judaism.

The wall, one of the holiest sites in Judaism, has segregated prayer sections for men and women. Israeli regulations on holy sites forbid "conducting a religious ceremony contrary to accepted practice" and "wearing unfit attire."

Hoffman was officially arrested on charges of "disturbing public order."

Police have recently begun to arrest women praying at the wall for wearing black and white prayer shawls, the type traditionally worn by men. Hoffman was wearing a brightly colored shawl worn by many Women of the Wall members.

Hoffman said she was handcuffed, strip-searched, dragged on the floor and forced to spend the night on the floor of her cell, wrapped in her prayer shawl.

The police deny that Hoffman was mistreated.

The arrest comes against the backdrop of growing tensions between non-ultra-Orthodox Israelis and government authorities who, critics say, are increasingly caving into demands by religious extremists to segregate and marginalize women in the public sphere.

The New York-based United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism spearheaded group recitations of the Sh'ma Yisrael prayer – the prayer Hoffman and the American

women intoned before her arrest – and the observances quickly spread to Jewish communities around the world.

In Jerusalem, at exactly 7 p.m., about 50 mostly young women and men took up positions at a pedestrian mall in the heart of Jerusalem and, flash mob-style, came together as they sang, quite loudly, the Sh'ma Yisrael prayer.

Simultaneous vigils were held around the world.

Marne Rochester, who came to the Jerusalem vigil with her 7-year-old daughter, Leora, said she participated "to show support for Anat Hoffman and my disdain for what is happening in this country."

Two decades ago, Rochester said, "I used to be able to pray at the back of the Western Wall plaza in a mixed group of men and women and nobody bothered us. Now, that's impossible. The wall has been taken over by extremists."