

U.S. Jewish groups, Israel reach Western Wall deal

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue

Several American Jewish groups celebrated a recent Israeli government decision to greatly expand—and fund—a pluralistic and egalitarian prayer section adjacent to the Western Wall plaza as a first step toward official Israeli recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

The Western Wall, or Kotel, the holiest site in Judaism after the Temple Mount, is a remnant of the second Jewish Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 66.

The decision by Israel's cabinet will lead to the creation of Israel's first official prayer site for Jewish people who wish to pray in mixed-gender groups and for women who want to read from a Torah scroll.

"The new space is a dramatic, unprecedented, and critical acknowledgment by the State of Israel that Judaism's holiest site—the Kotel—should incorporate the traditions of the Masorti (Conservative) and Reform streams in which men and women pray together," the Reform and Conservative movements and the Jewish Federations of North America said in a joint statement.

Although much work regarding the implementation of this decision still remains, the joint statement added, "we are measurably closer today to the ultimate symbol of that reality—one wall for one people."

The negotiations to create an official mixed-gender space at the southern part of the Western Wall were spearheaded by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the urging of non-Orthodox U.S. Jewish leaders and the feminist prayer group Women of the Wall.

Israel's strictly Orthodox establishment has marginalized both groups. The government does not recognize the authority of Reform and Conservative rabbis and institutions and provides them with only nominal funding.

The decision concludes more than two years of negotiations between the Israeli government, representatives of the Jewish Federations of North America, the Reform and Conservative movements in the United States and Israel, and Women of the Wall.

Under the agreement, the government and quasi-governmental Jewish Agency will provide most of the \$8.8 million budget over a two-year period. The enlarged prayer space, which the Conservative movement has maintained without government funding for 15 years, will be jointly governed by a new body that will include Women of the Wall and the Conservative and Reform movements and will be led by the Jewish Agency's chairman.

The deal was necessary, all parties say, because the ultra-Orthodox religious authorities who oversee the main northern section of the Western Wall compound refuse all but those who adhere to the strictest interpretation of Jewish law.

Over the years, the authorities have called on the police to detain and even arrest members of Women of the Wall who entered the women's section wearing prayer shawls and tefillin—boxes with verses of the Torah, also called phylacteries—which the ultra-Orthodox reserve for men.

Liberal Jews also find the religious atmosphere, as well as gender-segregated prayer sections, at the wall inhospitable. Ultra-Orthodox Jews have thrown rocks and plastic chairs at liberal worshipers.

Shmuel Rabinowitz, the ultra-Orthodox rabbi of the Western Wall, said in a statement that the decision left him with "a heavy heart" but that he feels relieved that the Women of the Wall group has agreed to pray in the new area.

"Ever since the fringe and vociferous group of Women of the Wall started its mass-media activity," he said, the wall "went from being a unifying site to one of incessant quarrels."

Rabinowitz did not address reports that some of the group's members have vowed to continue praying at the wall even after the egalitarian space is completed.

Vanessa Ochs, a leader of the group calling itself the Original Women of the Wall, confirmed that women plan to risk arrest by praying at the wall with prayer shawls and tefillin, she wrote in a Religion News Service commentary.

The deal between the current leader of the Women of the Wall and other groups to “declare holy an archaeological site in the vicinity of the Western Wall called Robinson’s Arch, already used for mixed-gender prayer,” she wrote, is “a betrayal” to the efforts of women to pray at the wall itself.

Ochs wrote that “the ultra-Orthodox Jews are giving up nothing at all. They get complete control of the Kotel, and they will no longer have to tolerate the presence of Jews who do not pray as they do.”

Julie Schonfeld, the U.S.-based executive vice president of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, called the decision “a very important step,” especially because “there has been no previous acknowledgment of egalitarian Judaism by the Israeli government.”

Schonfeld said that although the \$8.8 million government allocation for pluralistic prayer is welcome, it is a fraction of the funding allocated to the northern wall’s administration.

“We continue to seek equal funding,” she said.

While the new prayer space is a partnership between religiously liberal Jews and the government, Schonfeld said, “we don’t view this as something the government is doing for the Diaspora. This is something we are doing for Israel, to help build a vibrant democratic state.” —Religion News Service

This article was edited on February 16, 2016.