

## Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association RESOLUTION

### WOMEN AT THE WALL

1990

Since January, 1989, a group of women has been going to the Western Wall in Jerusalem for group prayer, including a Torah reading on Rosh Hodesh and other days when this is customary. The women have sought to continue as an ongoing tradition the first women's prayer service at the Wall, which occurred during the first International Conference of Jewish Feminists in December, 1988. On that occasion, some one hundred Jewish women from all denominations joined in an historic service which affirmed their identities as women and Jews, and which declared by its very existence a love of klal yisrael transcending denominational labels and doctrinal differences.

The "Women of the Wall," is a religiously diverse group of Israelis as well as foreigners spending a year or more in Israel. The group's chief purpose is to enhance and encourage women's spiritual expression and to claim Jewish sacred space as a place of celebration and affirmation for women, as it currently is for men. But the goals and activities of the group have expanded, for internal reasons and in response to external pressures.

What began as an expediency - cooperation among women of various streams of Judaism to make the first women's service a reality - has become one of the group's most cherished characteristics, and an utterly unique feature on either the Israeli or Diaspora religious scene: pan-denominational collaboration for a religious cause. In an age of rampant sin'at hinam, which the women have experienced bitterly themselves, the Women of the Wall and their supporters abroad consciously rise above differences "for the greater good of Jewish sisterhood; for our common love of Torah and Israel; and for our daughters, our mothers, and our foremothers, known and nameless." (Statement, ICWK, January, 1990) Each prayer service is an awesome act of tikkun and ahavat hinam.

The women have been attacked by ultra-Orthodox worshipers of both sexes who have punched, kicked, spat on and bitten members of the prayer group and have verbally harassed them during services - while police and religious authorities looked on. After several services, the women stopped bringing a sefer Torah or wearing prayer shawls because the level of violence made it untenable to do so - but appalling violence continued, now allegedly, because of the very voices of women in prayer. It should be noted that the group, by conscious decision, violates no halacha. But halacha is clearly not the issue here. What is at issue is repression of women and an outrageous collusion with violence and fanaticism by authorities who hold the holy places of the Jewish people in a sacred trust to all of us.

The violence and the effective official collusion with it led the women to file suit before the Supreme Court of Israel to assure the right of Jewish women to group prayer at the Wall - something we thought had been secured for all Jews in June, 1967. The case will be a landmark in the history of religious rights struggles in Israel. It is the only case ever to be argued on behalf of the religious rights of Jewish women.

In the latest development, the State of Israel (the defendant in this case), has moved to criminalize women's prayer at the Wall. After receiving from the Court a seven-and-a-half month delay in proceedings for the stated purpose of promoting mutual understanding - during which time the women were barred from wearing prayer shawls, reading from the Torah or even raising their voices - the State has just published its response to the women's suit: a new ruling (89 1 A) by the Religion Ministry prohibiting, on pain of imprisonment and fines, and "unaccustomed religious ceremony which offends the sensibilities of worshipers regarding the (holy) place." Framed explicitly to bar the women from prayer, this arbitrary, discriminatory ruling institutionalizes what State religious authorities have maintained all along: that the Western Wall is the preserve of the ultra-Orthodox, who may suffer or prevent the worship of other Jews, not even according to the mandates of halacha, but at will.

The ruling will be contested vigorously by the women's attorneys, but it, and the issue as a whole, call for the most determined response by Jews everywhere.

Resolved:

That the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association categorically affirms the right of Jewish women to pray as a group whenever and wherever they choose, and certainly at Judaism's holiest site;

And that it calls on its individual members to take the following actions:

To publicize the issue from the pulpit; in synagogue schools; adult education programs; Hillels; communal organizations; and any other forum in which they have official status;

To support and urge their congregants, students and associates to support the Women at the Wall in the following ways:

1. To send letters and petitions of protest, addressed to:

Zevulun Hammer, Minister of Religion

Ministry of Religious Affairs

Jaffa Street

Jerusalem, Israel.

These should state:

- a. That Jewish girls should be able to have joyous bat mitzvahs at the Wall, something now illegal;
  - b. That women should have the option of joining a prayer group at the Wall;
  - c. That there is something beautiful, not criminal, about women holding and reading from a sefer Torah.
  - d. That there has been much innovation in custom at the Wall since it returned to Jewish hands - weddings; bar mitzvahs; the swearing-in of soldiers - and that it is absurd, therefore, in the name of "custom." to bar new customs only in the women's area of the Wall;
  - e. That the brave soldiers who risked and gave their lives to bring the Wall back into Jewish hands did so for all of us;
  - f. That the Chief Rabbinate and the Ministry of Religion administer the holy places in sacred trust to all the Jewish people, while ruling 89 1 A recognizes and protects the "sensibilities" only of some worshipers, denying completely those of other worshipers;
  - g. That what is now barred to women at the Wall: group prayer; Torah reading; celebration - was barred to all Jews under the Turks and British, and that it is an outrage and a disgrace for the Jewish State to perpetuate such a practice against Jewish women now;
  - h. That such action is discriminatory and sexist; that it has no basis in halacha and is a violation both of Israel's Declaration of Independence and of Torah.
2. To organize special children's letter-writing campaign to Minister Hammer in Hebrew schools; to particularly involve girls approaching bat mitzvahs in such campaigns; but also to sensitize boys approaching bar mitzvahs at the Wall and to encourage them to write letters to Minister Hammer from the perspective of a boy committed to justice and non-discrimination as a Torah value.
    - . To encourage parents of such children to write letters along with their children.

3. To support the Women at the Wall and help fund their lawsuit and outreach efforts by sending tax-deductible donations, and encouraging congregants, students and associates to send such donations to:

The International Committee for the Women of the Kotel, Inc.

c/o Gehlfuss

125 West Mt. Pleasant Ave.

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