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# Natan Sharansky on the Kotel Compromise

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by Natan Sharansky, Lahav Harkov, Dorottya Czuk, Jonathan Zalman • 4 min read

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Every few years, a controversy erupts in Israel that strikes at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. These debates, between the Israeli Orthodox establishment on one side and those seeking greater recognition for liberal strands of Judaism on the other, typically end in vague formulations and nondecisions, as we postpone our moment of reckoning for a few more years. Because theological agreement between the two sides is impossible, and because political realities further undermine consensus, we have instead become accustomed to living with conflict: one people divided by one religion.

The latest round in our ongoing drama, involving the sensitive issue of prayer at the Kotel, might seem to be yet another iteration of this familiar story. In fact, however, the case of the Kotel is unique—both in the historic nature of the compromise reached and in the destructive consequences of its looming failure.

To understand why this compromise was so significant, we must first understand the nature and seriousness of the conflict. Although for millennia Judaism played a central role in forging and unifying our people, today American and Israeli Jews—who together constitute more than 85 percent of world Jewry—find themselves increasingly divided on religious matters. According to the latest studies, more than 60 percent of American Jews are members of non-Orthodox communities, while half of Israelis identify with Orthodoxy and only 5 percent with non-Orthodox movements. And while Israel's official religious body refuses to recognize liberal Jewish practices, the state itself continues to insist that Israel should be a home for each and every Jew, whether or not they are ready to adhere to Orthodox standards.

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Given this situation, the compromise reached over the Kotel was truly remarkable. After three-and-a-half years of intense negotiations, initiated and fully supported by the prime minister, the rabbi of the Western Wall and representatives of Reform and Conservative Jewry, together with the leadership of Women of the Wall had agreed to reimagine our people's holiest site in a way that would be inclusive and respectful of all. By creating a separately administered, egalitarian prayer space alongside the traditional one, together united by a single entrance, this agreement granted legitimacy to liberal communities while acknowledging that Orthodoxy remains Israel's de facto religious common denominator. The proposed arrangement, in turn, received the support of a huge majority of the Israeli government.

Each of the parties to this unprecedented agreement understood something their constituents tend to overlook.

On one side, the representatives of the Israeli religious and political establishments recognized that Reform and Conservative Jewry are not fringe sects, as some in Israel seem to imagine, but important venues for large numbers of Jews who reject the strictures of Orthodoxy yet want to remain part of the Jewish people. While many Israelis simply identify Judaism with Orthodoxy, to Americans the different denominations are almost like different religions. As a result, to expect Reform and Conservative Jews to adopt Orthodox customs whenever they are in Israel is unrealistic and unfair—as unrealistic and unfair as it is to expect Orthodox rabbis to recognize Reform and Conservative practices. If we want these sizable groups of co-religionists to feel drawn to the Jewish state and experience it as their home, we must understand and accept the importance of liberal strands of Judaism in their lives.

For their part, the non-Orthodox parties to the agreement recognized that Orthodoxy's preeminence in Israel is not an accident. Rather, it stems from the historic need for a unifying religious force in the Jewish state. Orthodoxy, the most prevalent form of Judaism in Israel, has long played a crucial role in forging a nation out of previously disparate communities and, whether one wishes it or not, continues to play such a role today. It is to their credit that the representatives of the liberal movements conceded this fact in agreeing to preserve the Kotel's traditional prayer section as is, and even sign into law that it would not be subject to future interference.

The compromise thus reflected, in a highly visible and even tangible way, Israel's capacity to unite the Jewish people. The Kotel is the symbol of our national existence and the heart of our religious life. The fact that we could literally make room there for everyone consequently shows that our differences need not divide us. The parties' commitment to a shared future, with Israel as our common home, could have inspired future cooperation on a host of other issues as well.

Instead, we may be abandoning a uniquely hopeful agreement to a uniquely disastrous failure. The demise of the Kotel compromise would be devastating for two reasons. First, never before have we seen so much energy and goodwill invested in a negotiating process; never before has the prime minister been so personally involved; and never before has the government itself stood officially behind such a solution. If under all of these circumstances we still cannot manage to implement a lasting agreement, what does this say about our future as a people?

Second, Israel and world Jewry are fighting together against various efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state, including the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement. One of the main tactics of these efforts is to distance young Jews from Israel by convincing them that it is illiberal and retrograde—in short, that it is not a home for them. By failing to offer these Jews a respectable place in our public square, we are effectively telling them their communities are not welcome here, confirming the message they receive from our adversaries at precisely the moment when we ought to be bringing them closer.

Therefore, to abandon the Kotel agreement now is to legitimate extremism, to alienate large groups of fellow Jews, and to allow discord to further poison our public life. With Israel facing unprecedented attacks on the world stage and with anti-Zionist sentiment routinely used as a pretext for anti-Semitism, we are weakening ourselves at an especially vulnerable moment, playing directly into the hands of those on the outside who would truly do us harm.

Anyone who cares about the future of the Jewish people should care about this issue. We must not simply throw up our hands but rather take action now, before it is too late.

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*Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel, was a founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Group and spent nine years in the Gulag for his human rights activities.*

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