

Kol Ha-Rav March 2016

I add my congratulations to the leaders of the Reform and Conservative Movements who, along with groups like Women of the Wall, negotiated the agreement for the Southern Plaza at the Kotel which respects egalitarian traditions. But I do feel compelled to express concerns before we open the champagne bottles. The victory is more symbolic than real.

It has been said that walls by their nature divide. However, we Jews have a Wall that unites, the Kotel Ha-Maaravi, which has become, sadly, more a divisive than a uniting force.

Moreover, the Israeli government has a long record of making agreements that never get implemented. For one thing, archeologists have already indicated their opposition to the plan and not for religious reasons. Nor do we expect the local rabbinate, the Rav of the Kotel, or the many Orthodox groups (which know how to get 5000 protesters to the Kotel on a moment's notice) to roll out the red carpet for the construction crews. Nor the ultra Orthodox-dominated Jerusalem municipality. And then there is the Finance Ministry, which very often quietly buries agreements like this simply by not finding funds. For better or worse, my guess is that it will be a long time before the "historic compromise" becomes a functioning reality.

Netanyahu's government has claimed that this is a symbol of "openness and liberality" for the non-Orthodox of the Diaspora. We have seen these past weeks great excitement in the Reform and Conservative communities here and elsewhere; though much less excitement in Israel. Education Minister Naftali, who was high on the list of those thanked in the Masorti Foundation's statement, a few days later terminated Ministry funding for non-Orthodox educational programs.

With rights come responsibilities. If we have an egalitarian Kotel half the size and right next door to the "traditional" Kotel, we will have to show we deserve it. Hundreds of non Orthodox Jews pray at "our" Kotel on Shavuot along with synagogue groups and Jewish American tourists, but the space calls for numbers and a level of activity we will be hard pressed to match.

If the secret for a successful gathering is to use a small room, I'm wondering (in my heart of hearts) if we might not be best off with the funding and recognition promised by the agreement for our use in the place we have now near Robinson's Arch. It enables us to pray and celebrate at the Kotel in privacy, and when it's quiet and empty, which is most of the time, nobody on the other side of the Arch notices or cares. As Churchill said, this is not the beginning of the end or even the end of the beginning, but at least it's a start.