



Women of the Wall reading from the Torah at Robinson's Arch in 2012. Photo by Women of the Wall, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2zW8YIv>

## Note on this Case Study:

When considering this case study, remember that every major world religion originated and has grown in patriarchal societies—that is, societies where men hold most of the culture's power, and people of any other gender are largely excluded from power. In this patriarchal context, religions have responded in very different ways, sometimes upholding and supporting misogyny, and sometimes subverting and rejecting it in favor of gender equality. Powerful women, feminists, and members of the LGBTQ community have played major roles in all faith traditions, in diverse ways across different times and cultures.

As always, when thinking about religion and gender, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and embedded in specific cultures.

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## The Women of the Wall (WoW)

One of the most important sites of modern Judaism is the Western Wall (or *Kotel* in Hebrew) in the city of Jerusalem. The Wall is the only standing remains of the ancient Temple of Judaism. This Temple was the center of religious activities for many ancient Jews who believed it to be the dwelling place of God. The First Temple, believed to be built by the famous King Solomon, was destroyed by invading Babylonians in 586 BCE. A Second Temple was built, but destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The destruction of their holy Temple was deeply traumatic to the Jewish people and is still remembered with sorrow by many Jews today. For this reason, the Wall is sometimes called the Wailing Wall. It has become a major site of pilgrimage, prayer, and ritual for many Jews around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Israeli authorities have given management of the site to Haredi Jews, also known as ultra-Orthodox—a very conservative strand of Judaism. Their decisions at the site have been controversial. In particular, they have divided pilgrims at the Wall by gender, building a five-foot-tall barrier to separate men and women. The men's section is larger and the women's section has major restrictions. For many Haredi, these restrictions are a part of their tradition, and they believe the *Kotel* should be administered like a Haredi synagogue. Still, the Wall is holy to most Jews, and the restrictions have angered many Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Jewish communities. Recently, resistance has grown, in part from a diverse group of Jewish feminists who call themselves the "Women of the Wall" (WoW).<sup>2</sup>

Formed in 1988, WoW has advocated for the right of women to pray in ways forbidden by the Wall's Haredi administrators: to pray in a group (*tfila*), publicly read from the Jewish holy text (*Torah*), and wear both ceremonial prayer shawls (*tallit*) and small boxes containing verses from the Torah (*tefillin*). Though these are common actions in the men's section, they have been prohibited in the women's section. The Haredi argue that orthodox Jewish law (*halakha*) and custom gives these rights solely to men. While many WoW members adhere to orthodox Jewish law, they argue that the gender rules at the Wall do not come from the *halakha* but only from custom, and can therefore be rejected. Other WoW members reject *halakhic* restrictions entirely and want women to be able to pray exactly as men do. To press their claims, since

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Biblical Temple." ; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Western Wall."

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Chesler & Rivka Haut, *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground...*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003), xxvi-xxvii.

1988, WoW has organized a monthly prayer service at the Wall on *Rosh Hodesh*, a monthly holiday, where they have tried to pray in a group, read the Torah, and wear *tallit* and *tefillin*.<sup>3</sup>

These attempts have often been foiled, as Haredi administrators and Israeli police cracked down. At the first service in 1988, the women were met with violence from other worshipers, and WoW members were removed by police for “disturbing public order.”<sup>4</sup> Future services were met with similar responses. Women have been threatened, pushed, spit at, and even had stones and chairs thrown at them by other Jews.<sup>5</sup> Haredi authorities continued to prevent the women from bringing Torah scrolls, and over the years several women have been arrested for “disturbing the peace,” and performing a “prohibited act in a holy site.” WoW did not limit their activities to civil disobedience at the *Kotel*; they quickly went to the Israeli Supreme Court. The court’s first decision in 1994 came down on the side of the Haredi. They stated that since WoW’s practices were unacceptable at Orthodox synagogues, they were unacceptable at the Wall. One justice stated that women’s prayer opposed “the custom of the place” and endangered the peace. Later rulings, however, agreed with WoW, including an important 2013 ruling which gave WoW complete legal backing to pray at the Wall in their preferred manner.<sup>6</sup>

Still, Haredi Jews continued to prevent WoW worship. In 2010, Shmuel Rabinowitz, Rabbi of the Western Wall, issued a regulation that forbid bringing Torah scrolls to the Wall without his permission. He claimed this would prevent theft of the historic Torah scrolls at the Wall, but all the scrolls are on the men’s side; none are on the women’s. Some have claimed this regulation is “directed exclusively” against WoW. Indeed, WoW tries to bring Torah scrolls to the women’s section every month, but they rarely succeed. However, on October 24, 2014, they smuggled in a tiny Torah scroll—only 11 inches long—which was used by 12-year-old Sasha Lutt for her Bat Mitzvah, a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony. Using a magnifying lens to read the tiny print, she became the first woman to read from the Torah at the *Kotel* in 25 years. Rabinowitz and other Haredis were angered by what they saw as “deception” by WoW.<sup>7</sup>

Trying to appease all sides, the Israeli government created a plan in the early 2000s to build a new plaza for gender egalitarian prayer at the Wall at a nearby site known as Robinson’s Arch. The new plaza would be open at all times to all Jews, and would have no rabbinical supervision. All Jews would be able to pray in whatever manner they wished. At the same time, the gender segregation and Haredi control of the original Wall plaza would be made permanent. WoW officially supported the plan, but some of their members disagreed and formed a new group which they called “Original Women of the Wall.” These women believed that this new plaza would not have the same religious authority as the original site, and wanted the 2013 court ruling to stand.<sup>8</sup> However, in January 2016 in an apparent win for WoW, and Reform and Conservative Jews, the government announced it would begin building the new plaza. The victory was short-lived. In June 2017, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suspended the plan, bowing to pressure from Haredi Jews in his coalition government. Members of WoW and many other Jews were furious, and the rights of women at this holy site have remained uncertain.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Yuval Jobani & Perez Nahshon, *Women of the Wall: Navigating Religion in Sacred Sites*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), 20-33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, XXVIII, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Jobani and Nahshon, *Women of the Wall*, 41-44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46, xv-xvi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-51.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Goldman, Eoghan Macguire and Rachel Elbaum, “U.S. Jews Angry as Netanyahu Scraps Western Wall Mixed-Prayer Plan,” *NBC News*, June 28, 2017, <http://nbcnews.to/2pMouD0>.

## Additional Resources

### Primary Sources:

- WoW members describing their position and advertising their advocacy efforts (2013): <http://bit.ly/23qkTT1>
- WoW members discussing the situation at the Wall, including Sasha Lutt on her Bat Mitzvah (2014): <http://bit.ly/2C51epv>

### Secondary Sources:

- Al Jazeera English on Western Wall gender disputes, the arrests of members of WoW, and comments from Rabbi Rabinowitz (2013): <http://bit.ly/2pRySt5>
- The Forward on American Jewish support for WoW (2013): <http://bit.ly/2zIwiFw>
- Footage of Haredi women trying to disrupt WoW services using whistles and physical actions, courtesy of The Times of Israel (2016): <http://bit.ly/2BQAaWP>
- CBC News on the Canadian Jewish reaction to Netanyahu's decision to scrap the Robinson's Arch plan (2017): <http://bit.ly/2E97n1q>
- NBC News reporting on American Jewish reaction to Netanyahu's decision to scrap the Robinson's Arch plan (2017): <http://nbcnews.to/2pMouD0>

## Discussion Questions

- How do the different views about gender segregation at the Western Wall show the ways in which Judaism is internally diverse? What about different views within the Women of the Wall movement?
- How do the attempts at gendered reforms at the Western Wall show how Judaism is changing over time?
- Watch one of the secondary sources on North American reactions to Women of the Wall and the Robinson's Arch plan. Why do you think North American Jews are so concerned about the regulations for this holy site in Jerusalem?
- Watch the footage taken of a WoW service at the *Kotel* from The Times of Israel in the secondary sources. What strikes you about this video? Is anything surprising to you?
- Why might the Haredi Jews have authority to administer the Western Wall rather than some other Jewish group? Whose voices are ignored by this decision, and why?
- Why might some women feel that building a new plaza at Robinson's Arch does not meet their demands for equality?



The Western Wall. The gender separating prayer barrier is visible in the center right. From Israel Tourism, via Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2kITGH7>