

# THE KOTEL CONTROVERSY

## Will We Ever Have One Kotel for One People?

More than six months ago, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voted to approve the agreement hammered out by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, formerly the Cabinet Secretary, regarding the Western Wall and the proposed creation of a new upgraded area for egalitarian minyanim and women-only prayer services with Torah reading.

Now, however, as the new Jewish year is about to begin, the implementation of that agreement, which had been conceived originally by Jewish Agency head Natan Sharansky back in 2013 to solve the dispute regarding the monthly Women of the Wall services at the traditional Kotel, seems further away than ever, with tensions between the two sides and within the Netanyahu government growing sharper every day.

On the one side, the supporters of the agreement — the Conservative and Reform Movements who represent the overwhelming majority of North American Jewry, together with the Jewish Agency and the Jewish Federation of North America — have accused the government of dragging its feet in putting the proposal into effect. Rather than force the Ultra-Orthodox Minister of Religious Affairs David Azoulay to sign off on the agreement immediately after its adoption or be replaced, the prime minister agreed to a 60-day extension and appointed his new Cabinet Secretary to see how to answer and assuage the objections raised by the Ultra-Orthodox leadership to the proposal whose motto is “one Kotel for one people.”

Curiously, what seems to have become the core of the conflict for the traditionalists is not only the idea of an egalitarian prayer area per se but also the planned single entrance to both the traditional Orthodox section and the new egalitarian area and the creation of a new governing body, comprised formally of representatives of the Reform and Conservative Movements, to oversee the new section.

Rather than using this extension as a cooling-off period, the same Ultra-Orthodox politicians, who had not voiced active opposition during the original Cabinet debate, have been acting to heat up the scene. For example, they have taken to denouncing the proposal as a disgrace and defamation and vilifying the proponents as comparable to Haman and other villains of the Jewish People.

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## Welcoming *Sarrae G. Crane*

MERCAZ welcomes Sarrae G. Crane as its new Director. A product of Temple Sholom of Westbury, NY, Sarrae's first trips to Israel were with USY, and since then, she has returned to Israel on multiple occasions. In fact, she attended the first of several Zionist Congresses as a youth delegate.

Sarrae brings a vast work experience to MERCAZ. She coordinated the Zionist Congress elections for the American Zionism Federation (now AZM) and worked as Executive Director of the Labor Zionist Alliance. At the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, she was the Director of Social Action & Public Policy, Israel Affairs & Biennial Convention. Most recently, she served as the Executive Director of Women's League for Conservative Judaism.

Sarrae is a graduate of Barnard College, with master's degrees from both Columbia and Brandeis Universities. She is married to Rabbi Jonathan Waxman, who serves Temple Beth Sholom of Smithtown.

As MERCAZ President Dr. Marilyn Wind noted, “Sarrae has deep roots in the Conservative Movement and has a long-time involvement with Israel and Zionism. We are proud to have her as our new director.”

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And at the same time, they have sought to extend their control to the area of the Kotel around Robinson's Arch, south of the Mughrabi Bridge, which is the intended site of the egalitarian prayer area. While never before had there been Orthodox prayer in this area, at the beginning of the summer, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, arrived at Robinson's Arch with police protection and conducted an Orthodox minyan there, complete with a temporary mechitza to separate between men and women.

In response, the Conservative and Reform Movements have now begun to hold egalitarian prayer services in the public area on the upper plaza opposite the traditional Kotel, an area which heretofore had been tacitly under the supervision of Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the Ultra-Orthodox rabbi of the Western Wall. These services have been widely advertised as a way to make it clear to the government that both sides can play the same game of creating facts on the ground.

As Rabbi Reuven Hammer, a past President of the Rabbinical Assembly and former head of the Masorti Bet Din, wrote: "Of course what is really at stake and what is really the cause of all the fuss is simply a struggle for power and control. It is the attempt of the official rabbinate to control religious life in Israel and to declare illegitimate all other groups that claim to represent Judaism as well. The answer to 'Whose Wall is it?' must be . . . this Wall belongs to you and me."

# Mazal Tov

... to the **TALI School Network**, the Israeli pluralistic Jewish education system operating under the guidance of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, as it celebrates this fall the fortieth anniversary of its founding.

... to **Rabbi Ariel Kleiner**, former spiritual leader of the NCI Community of Montevideo, Uruguay, who has been appointed the new Director of Masorti Latin America (AmLat).

... to **Rabbi Gershom Sizomu**, spiritual leader of the Abayudaya community of Uganda, who was elected to the Ugandan Parliament in the country's February elections, becoming the first Jew to serve in the nation's legislature. A fourth-generation Ugandan Jew, Sizomu is an ordained Conservative rabbi from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies.

... to **NOAM Olami**, the international umbrella for Conservative/Masorti youth movements, which held this past summer its first "Onward NOAM Olami" program. Participating in the new six-week trip, whose goal is to improve and strengthen leadership skills, were representatives of Masorti youth groups from Australia, France, Germany, Spain, Uganda, Ukraine and the UK.

... to the **Seminario Rabbinico Latinoamericano**, the Masorti-affiliated rabbinical school founded by Rabbi Marshall Meyer in Buenos Aires, which opened its first Jewish Studies graduate degree program and rabbinical preparatory (mechina) program in Brazil, in collaboration with the UniSal, the Centro Universitario Salesiano de Sao Paolo. The aim of the new programs is to train native Brazilian rabbis and teachers to serve this growing community.

### VISIT ISRAEL TODAY:

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