

Rabbi Brad Bloom

Rosh Hashanah Day Sermon - 2013

It has taken some time for American Jews to wake up to the call of The Women of the Wall. They have endured the scorn and derision of the black hat and ultra Orthodox sectors of the country, while receiving little support from the majority secular Israeli population. At the celebration of each rosh chodesh (or the new Jewish month) these women gather together at the women's section of the Western Wall and put on their talitot and kippot and sometimes tephillin, creating a spectacle which sometimes leads to the arrest of their leader, Anat Hoffman, who is, by the way, also the director of the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center. These progressive Jewish Israeli women refuse to give in to rejection by their own people, and to police intimidation, and to the so-called pious men on the other side of the mechitza who sometimes spit on them or yell at them, and to the religious women beside them who deride them with every sort of insult that pious women are not supposed to utter towards their Jewish sisters.

Recently, the courts in Israel ruled that these women had a right to pray as they wished at the Western Wall and now the police protect them instead of arresting them. Even Prime Minister Netanyahu realized that the optic of Jewish women of the wall being hauled off to jail had become a public relations disaster for Israel in America and around the world. He directed Natan Sharansky to come up with a plan fix this problem. Sharansky's plan, it turns out, was to widen and expand the entire Kotel plaza to include the south end of the wall by Robinson's Arch, thereby creating a separate gender-neutral area for worship, which has garnered cautious bipartisan support amongst religious and secular parties. We shall see what takes shape in the months to come.

Why should this issue concern us? What is the relevance to our purpose as Reform Jews? The point here is that we have devoted this morning's aliyot to the women of Beth Yam as a sign of support for the Women of the Wall and for Jewish women who yearn to find their place in Israel to pray with the same prayer garb that men use and to read the Torah. Today, on Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, or on Rosh Hashana, we at Beth Yam stand in solidarity with the Women of the Wall and all women in Israel who seek the right to pray in public places as their Jewish birthright. Reform Judaism stands for equal justice and especially for equal participation of both genders in public worship. We have ignored this cause for far too long and it is time we did something about it.

We all understand that Israel has many issues more pressing on its plate that relate to its very survival, security issues like the threat of Hamas rockets from Gaza, or even more powerful Hezbollah rockets from Lebanon, or the tumult in Syria and Egypt, not to mention the existential threat of nuclear weapons being developed in Iran. But Israel is a vibrant, prosperous and strong nation with a robust economy, capable of dealing with many different issues. The fact is, however, that the issue of The Women of the Wall and free access to worship at the Wall is critical to Israel's reputation, not only in the American Jewish community and to Jewish communities around the world but also to nations in the western world, where Israel knows it must demonstrate that it shares common values with other democratic societies, and especially regarding the role of women. Resolving this issue by creating an expanded gender neutral public

space at the south end of the Western Wall will fortify Israel's standing as a beacon of light for women's rights in the Middle East.

Going back to this morning's Haphtarah and the story of Hannah, who enters the area of the Tabernacle at Shiloh and prays by herself to God so that she may become pregnant by her husband. The high priest Eli watches her and becomes infuriated with her, presuming, just by the movement of her lips in prayer, that she is intoxicated. He then accosts her, saying,

"How do you propose to carry on drunk like this? Get rid of your wine!" To which she replies, "I am a sober woman: I have been pouring out my heart before the Lord. Do not think your servant so debased. All this time I have been speaking out of my great sorrow and grief." Realizing his error, Eli replies, somewhat chastened: "Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your request." Ultimately, God does grant her request and she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy who would one day become the great prophet Samuel.

Even then, you see, a woman could be challenged and derided while at prayer, and so this text reminds us that the women's desire to approach God in prayer in a public place was an uphill battle, even in biblical times, and despite the fact that Eli the priest relented.

Furthermore, traditional Jewish law has created two separate tracks for men and women in public worship. In Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism, men occupy a privileged center of public worship, while women, according to halachah, are not obligated to participate in any mitzvah that is defined as a time-bound mitzvah, meaning a mitzvah that is performed at a specific time. The assumption behind this is that women must be free to take care of children and family first. The problem is that the term "exempt" or "not obligated" came to mean, as a practical matter, "forbidden."

In addition, the law of our tradition states that the kol ishah ervah, the voice of the woman is a "temptation." In other words, a woman's voice in public worship will distract men to thoughts other than communicating with God, which added further to the cultural norms throughout history for why women could not occupy a pulpit and lead a worship service. That is how Jewish religious practice worked until the 19th century, and until the advent of Reform Judaism. It is, therefore, an anathema for ultra Orthodox Jews to watch women put on a talit and tephillin and participate in services just like men. For them, such religious practices violate every cultural norm of Jewish religious practice. It is no surprise, therefore, that secular Israelis do not get behind this issue because they have become so distant from traditional religious practice that these kinds of issues simply do not appear on their radar screens.

What is fascinating about this subject is that if we dig a little deeper we will find a few examples in the Talmud itself of women who did, in fact, pray with talit and tephillin. Such women were Michal, the daughter of King Saul and the scholarly Beruriah the wife of Rabbi Meir. Both women, the Talmud suggests, wore talit and tephillin. One sage even advised that they should have recited the traditional blessing before donning these prayer garments. Modern day scholars are recovering these ancient sources, few though there are of them, to establish a precedent that women have and can today participate equally as men do in communal prayer. Even though it has not been mainstream religious practice in Judaism to allow women to wear talit, or tephillin or to read from the Torah, these scant examples from the Talmud serve as

precedents for legitimizing the movement toward gender equality in worship that progressive Judaism must and is making today.

Sadly, on Rosh Hashana we should be talking about ways to unite the Jewish people and here we see an issue that divides us. At the same time should we simply cover our eyes when Israelis who want to practice Judaism out of our movement are not allowed because of their gender? How can we remain silent to their aspirations to open the opportunities for diverse Jewish religious practices? Is it ok to bow to the hordes of Hasidic men and women who represent an image that many non-Jews consider "authentic" Judaism, even if the majority of us do not subscribe to, or believe in, that way of being Jewish? It has been a problem for us and it is a problem for how Israel defines the religious contours of Jewish identity in this blessed state that struggles to maintain peaceful co-existence between so many different kinds of Jewish Orthodoxies and one huge alienated secular majority. If we ignore this issue then I am afraid we risk committing a communal transgression, as we shall read on Yom Kippur, "We sin against you when we sin against ourselves: In the category of sins of Justice and for the sin of silence and indifference."

We spend so much time training our young girls to become Bat Mitzvah in this congregation leading them to believe that reading the Torah, Haphtarah, and delivering a drash is the norm. What are we doing to prove to them that this effort is not in vain when they go to Israel on their first trip in high school or college? Do we not have a sacred duty to our young ladies here to clear the pathway for them and the young ladies of the same age in Israel?

There is a lot we can do to support this group, from such simple things as sponsoring an Oneg Shabbat for Women of the Wall at their monthly celebrations, to going to Israel and participating in their Rosh Hodesh vigils at the Western Wall. Even buying one of their talitot at their online store goes a long way towards giving them the financial, moral and spiritual support they deserve to carry on with their arduous but honorable soul work. In fact this November fourth Women of the Wall will celebrate their 25th anniversary. Yes, for 25 years these women have been trekking over to the western wall and performing their prayers-- and that is all they want to do-- to pray as Jews in the tradition of Jews. Can we at Beth Yam be part of this historic venture or will we remain on the sidelines?

Reform Judaism was not about creating a rupture in European Jewry 160 years ago. Instead it intended to provide new opportunities for women and men to experience Judaism with one foot in the world of tradition and the other in the modern world. And that is exactly what these women, our fellow Reform Jews in Israel, want to do beside the holiest site in the Jewish world. The prophets called us to stand up for what is just and right and this is not about exposing a weakness of Judaism but demonstrating our strength to fortify the middle ground of modern and progressive Judaism in Israel. If these women succeed it might very well trigger more secular Jewish women to reclaim their Jewish spiritual heritage in Israel and worldwide. Is this not the meaning of redemption and renewal, by returning to the sources of the spiritual core that for many non-observant women was never available to them but for us could be a watershed in Jewish history? We will not know if we remain silent.

If our beloved Israel will continue to be a cutting edge society in so many areas, like the sciences and the arts and technology, why should it not lead the way in its spiritual contribution for the 21st century?

Our people bequeathed the world a faith tradition that produced the Hebrew Bible and we have saved traditional Judaism from the fires of Hitler's furnace. Now is the time for a modern day woman like Hannah who can stand at the Western Wall in a minyan of women, with her talit, kippah and tephillin and pray for God to give her a child or any other blessing God should bestow upon her just like any other pious man would pray to God for while davening at that same Wall.

The Talmud elaborates the story of Hannah pleading with God to give her a child by having her say: "Master of the Universe, is it so hard for you to give me just one son?" Rabbi Elazar explains her remarks with a parable. "A king made a feast for his servants and a poor man came in, stood by the door and said to them, "Please give me a piece of bread, but no one paid attention to him, so he pushed his way into the king's chamber and said to him, "Your majesty, seeing that you made this great feast is it so hard for you to give me this one small piece of bread?" (Talmud Berachot)

The Women of the Wall are pushing their way in too, and like Hannah they are asking, is there not room for us to have room for our prayer –to read torah? All they want is just enough space to meet their needs and not to take away space or prayer time from the Haredim. They too have been ignored or denied, but now, like Hannah, they are pushing their way into the king's chamber, into the chambers of the Israeli government, and into the chambers of world opinion. It is the chamber of God as well.

As Hannah asked God to remember her for a child, let us pray on Rosh Hashana in remembrance not only of Hannah's prayer for a child, but also that God remember these women of the Wall as well who yearn for the natural right to express themselves as Jews in communal prayer. It is their birthright too.