

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### A Wall that is Opening Doors

Walls are usually thought of as physical barriers, designed to keep some in and others out. The Berlin Wall, separating East and West Berlin, was a famous example that became an international symbol of a Cold War for almost three decades. The Great Wall of China has, for centuries, been a landmark structure to protect citizens from outside invasions and to control borders with respect to trade and immigration. The wall surrounding the Warsaw Ghetto and other ghettos kept Jews confined in a prison-like existence.

The Western Wall in Jerusalem is a different kind of structure. Rather than a symbol of restrictions, the Western Wall is a place for prayer. Technically, it was the outer structure of the compound that surrounded the Holy Temple. The Temple was built initially by King Solomon, then destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again. Today, Jews and others who visit the Western Wall find it to have a spiritual connection to the spot that was once considered the Holy of Holies, where Priests (descendants of Aaron) performed the sacrifices commanded in the Torah. Millions of visitors place notes and personal prayers in the crevices of the Wall, feeling a sense of proximity to holiness. Rather than an enclosed barrier, the Western Wall is open to all.

This prayerful site also has its controversies, even within the Jewish world. Israel does not have “separation of church and state,” so the religious site is under the auspices of the Israeli government. Most of Israeli religious practices are consistent with Orthodox traditions, and the Wall has been no exception. Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch has been the Rabbi of the Western Wall since his appointment by Israeli Prime Minister Yithak Rabin in 1995. As long as the Wall has been part of the State of Israel, the regulations have adhered to the strictest of Orthodox practices. This includes some laws that some Jewish communities differ as to whether or not they are specifically commanded by Torah. The strictest observers believe that men and women are forbidden from praying together, that men are prohibited from hearing women sing and that women are prohibited from reading Torah and wearing ritual garments like *tallit* and *tefillin*. Like most Jewish laws, there are conflicting Talmudic rulings about women’s obligations and rights (for more specific commentary, visit [www.womenofthewall.org](http://www.womenofthewall.org)). Today, there are women rabbis and other observant women whose practices include embracing some of the traditions that were previously reserved for men. To respect the strictest Orthodox standard, there is a men’s section and a women’s section for prayer. Those wanting to have a bar or bat mitzvah at the Wall would have to choose which side. Some women were even arrested for wearing a *tallit* in the women’s section.

In early 2016, the Israeli government, by a vote of 15-5, created a new agreement that opens a new door. Unlike the Berlin Wall, which was destroyed, nothing is destroyed. This agreement was made in cooperation with the Conservative and Reform Movements in Israel, along with Women of the Wall, a group that began in 1988 to promote equal access to the Jewish holy site. **THE BIG NEWS:** After remodeling and upgrades, prayer space at the Western Wall will include three sections: one for men, one for women and an egalitarian section where men and women can pray together. The agreement required many compromises from all sides, and was an historical moment of recognition for *K'lal Yisrael* – the WHOLE community of Israel. A statement signed jointly by religious leaders in both the U.S. and Israel said, “Twenty-five years in the making, the decision brings us measurably closer to the simple, basic fact that there is more than one way to be Jewish and that there should be ‘One Wall for One People.’”

The significance of the idea “more than one way to be Jewish” is particularly timely. Many Jewish people find themselves bonding, not so much with a particular movement (like Reform or Conservative), but with being “just Jewish.” Historic moments are often the result of gradual change. I am personally excited to see some of the walls within Judaism opening the doors of mutual respect.

L’shalom,

*Rabbi Dan Gordon*