Still Wailing After All These Years

I first clearly heard women praying at the “women’s section” of the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 1971 and learned why it’s Crusader-period nickname, “Wailing Wall”, is so fitting. I’ve never forgotten its ability to be a sounding board for all forms of women’s utterances: mixture of murmurs of requests and thanksgivings, blessings and more blessings, soto voce songs of the soul, diverse mutterings in accents of women of all ages and dress. It was a perfect place to hear Israel’s eternal gift of “Shema!” Rather than serving to separate one Jew from another, as does the mehitza in traditional synagogues where these physical barriers (curtains, walls, windows) partition men from women, the Kotel is itself a unique mehitza, one that serves to unite all Jews in time and space at this undisputed holy place.

How troubling it is, then, that in the name of the Wall, groups of Jews are fighting bitterly against each other for the right to honor the God of Sarah, Leah, Rachel and Rebecca and their husbands, our patriarchs, through prayer and reading sacred text. Yet, on December 1, 1988, a group of Jewish women, wrapped in talitot and some with teffilin, seeking merely to pray and read from a sefer Torah scroll, so deeply offended the sensibilities of frumm, dare I say ultra-orthodox Jewish men and women, that the fray drew out riot police, has become a significant challenge to Israel’s Supreme Court, and has become cause célèbre for Jews at home and in the Diaspora, to vocally condemn the “ultra-orthodox” for their exclusionary hold on religious affairs.

Yael Katzir’s film Praying in Her Own Voice, which premiered at the 2007 DocAviv Film Festival in Israel and in the USA at the 2008 San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, documents two years of the still-ongoing patient, persistent struggle, by the determined self-proclaimed “Women of the Wall”, Neshot haKotel. Not merely a film vérité about the latest clash between contemporary Jewish lifestyles, the film – is an unapologetic propaganda tool to promote the concerns of Women of the Wall, now a

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full-fledged organization with a Facebook page and website as well as an international support group in the Diaspora. Anyone in Israel and out (through photos on Facebook) is invited to participate in the effort on Rosh Chodesh, monthly celebration of the new moon, to simply pray in talit, holding Torah, and, worst of all, praying aloud. As recent as July 12, 2010, Anat Hoffman, founder of the Women of the Wall movement, struggled with Israeli police who attempted to wrestle a sefer Torah scroll from her arms at the Kotel and was arrested, charged with a felony and a restraining order set against her access to the Kotel.

The Wall Has Ears

What’s all the fuss? The Rabbi of the Kotel raised the mehitza higher when he said, while there was nothing in halacha, Jewish religious law, that the women violated; nonetheless, what they were doing was offensive to the “community of Israel”, that tradition must be maintained. If women still have to be seen, even a little, now, as in the fifteenth century, they at least also should not be heard. The minister of Religious Affairs is described as saying “the Wall can hear.”

The “wail” that I heard at my first visit to the Wall now has the benefit of unprecedented mass media, and now voices are loud enough to be heard, through this film, ‘round the world. For the past decade the Women of the Wall and their supporters, many of whom are practicing orthodoxy, opted to resist public protest and demonstration for publicity’s sake to stake their (and all women’s) claim to be able to pray in full voice in public. Instead they have engaged in costly legal battles as far up to a higher authority in Israel’s Supreme Court, which made some very controversial legal conclusions in the attempt to find a civil response to a religious challenge.

Writer / Director / Producer Yael Katzir said in an e mail to LA Jewish cable TV show host Phil Blazer (Jewish Television Network) following an interview about the film, “What happened in the course of the making of the film is that I realized that the film is not only for Israelis but also for the Diaspora Jews if we want to remain one people. My son Dan and Ravit suggested that I open the film and adjust it to the American Jewry, and I did it (with all the resulting extra labor and cost that it required).” She reflected, “In Israel, secular people are shocked. They didn’t know how violent women can become to women. The TV channels did accept the film as it has a powerful criticism of what is going on in the Wailing Wall.”
One can sense that Katzir does have some skill as a narrative filmmaker but this film desperately needs an editor. The *vorspeise*, endorsements through interviews that included a number of prominent Los Angeles women rabbis, was an afterthought, and, literally should have been put into extra DVD features. Just as American Jewish practice does not require politically pro-Israel activism to be legitimate, the mission and efforts of the Women of the Wall does not need “validation” by *kol isha*, the voice of women, from America. The Facebook page shows how the “movement” is spreading and gaining influence well better as it reflects a greater diversity of *kol isha*.

What was most poetic were the segments of statements by the Israeli Women of the Wall and their lawyers, progressing (and not) from one Rosh Chodesh to the next that is usually sacred to Jewish women. What is at stake is a precedent-setting case where civil liberties were challenged by religious justice. It was eerie seeing female justices in their black robes delivering the sentence that gave the government twelve months to come up with and take action on a solution how/where to relocate the women that was “fair, but not necessarily “near”

It is to the filmmakers’ credits that they were able to get footage during the ruckus that insured. According to Katzir, “Shooting was tough as there were many occasions when we were violently attacked by the hate, screaming and fists of the ultra-Orthodox women.” Clearly among the most stirring segments to this reviewer were the interviews and filming of the *haredi* Jews – young and old, men and women, not just the rabbinical authorities -- who could articulate why they were offended, not just that they felt so. It’s very disturbing to watch “religious” Jewish women wrestling with other “religious” Jewish women resulting in prayer books falling on the ground, and Jewish men, who would otherwise not touch a woman trying to pull a sefer Torah scroll away from Jewish women. The film shows how these well-intentioned Israelis were told to “Go home!”, “Go back to America!” as if they were carpetbaggers and threatened with shame for disturbing the wall and ruining Judaism by claiming to be so entitled. Chairs and feces have been thrown at them, curses cast and epithets about damnation have become weapons against these women and their supporters, as have the courts.

The media coverage and film’s promotion seems to focus on the sensational: the women’s struggle is called “courageous”, their protests “colorful”, the efforts to pray at the Kotel and receive a verdict through justice in the Supreme Court a “battle of the sexes”. The effort felt like a reality show.
brings to my mind a presentation by a number of self-declared radical Jewish feminists I met who, in the mid 1980s, visited Mea Shearim, the neighborhood in Jerusalem known for its strict observances of halacha. They were proud that upon entering the well-marked precincts in shorts and short-sleeved shirts without the benefit of bras, they were jeered and attacked by neighbors throwing stones. They wanted just to prove that it was their civil right to dress how they wished.

The predicament of the Women of the Wall, as Katzir’s film, and Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism’s Holy Site, edited by Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut (Jewish Lights, 2008) is a part of the holographic projection of Jewish identity in the twenty-first century, as it has been in the past. Who’s in? Who’s out? Who’s got rights? What right? Who says so?

Why do we Jews need walls? In the Pirke Avos, Sayings of the Fathers, a compendium of wisdom from 450 BCE through 3 CE included in the siddur, weekly prayerbook, each chapter begins with a three part admonition ending with: "... veasu seag latorah”, “... and make a wall around the Torah”. In his 1997 drash for the Library Minyan of Valley Beth Shalom Temple (Los Angeles, CA area), Leo Rain astutely observed, “The danger is that the fence becomes the focus of worship over and above the Torah itself.”

Rain comments, “One may certainly commend such fences because they keep you out of trouble. But what does it say about self-control, self-discipline, and the moral level of men and women? Women are seen as temptresses who are unable to control themselves and should be kept behind the wall of a mechitza or a veil as in other cultures. Does this match up with freedom and individuality?”

Looking for the question within the question, elevating the argument, I wonder, “What should we do when we’re angry with people when they pray to our God?”

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1The form and function of the Kotel’s lesser long-standing mechitza, protruding perpendicular due west from the ancient stones, continues to challenge the authorities. As of September 2010 the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, the body that administers the site, has endorsed the benefits of incorporating a one-way mirror, into the physical barrier’s current design iron with small openings, each only a few centimeters wide. This notion is supported by the Kosel Rov, Rav Shmuel Rabinovich, who said that he was” making every effort to replace the mechitza in a way that will accommodate the women on the one hand, and not offend the men on the other hand.” Rabbi Rabinovich has a cameo in the film as well.