

## **Shemot 2009 Holy Ground? South London Liberal Synagogue**

In the section of Shemot that we read this morning Moses is told to take off his shoes for where he stands is holy ground. We have the idea of holy spaces, though for us this is perhaps less common than holy time. And for us Jews mostly what makes space holy is what happens in the place. Moses is speaking with God.

We think of our cemeteries as holy space for example—they are set apart for a specific purpose—the burial of those who have finished their earthly existence. I recently saw the pictures of a congregation I once belonged to walking around the periphery of the new cemetery space that had been allotted to them by the city. There they were, men women and children together walking, and thus setting the ground aside for a special communal purpose.

Well few of us speak with God in the same way Moses does, but still we may think of our synagogues as sacred spaces and I expect some of us have had the experience of finding themselves in an old synagogue like the one in Cordoba, in Spain for example and thinking of the people who once prayed there and perhaps uttering a prayer as an individual or as a group. In fact, I once saw a group of American Jewish tourists do just that.

I found myself once with a group of UK Rabbis in a very old synagogue outside of Jericho and we stood and prayed in the old synagogue completely unmolested. I once stood at the reading desk in a synagogue in Calcutta , my head covered in a kippah, and was given the scroll to open and examine; I even read aloud a section of it. None of this has ever been a problem.

And outdoor prayer—well I am very familiar with that. The chavurah I belonged to in Salt Lake frequently held services up one or another of the beautiful surrounding canyons—certainly magnificent sacred ground at its best. We also held services in the summer in local parks; dressed in tallitot and kippot, singing and praying. No one seemed to mind—public space, for public use.

What would you say if a group of Jews who stood and prayed were verbally abused, spat at, cursed while the police looked on with amusement. . What if the place they were in was an ancient place of prayer? Imagine this continuing month after month until one of their number was actually arrested while holding a Torah. The crime? Offending the sensibilities of others.

And then a month later the leader of the group is questioned by the police, fingerprinted and warned that she is at risk of arrest. .Would you be outraged? Well I was when I heard about it. What if it was here—how angry would you be that your government had

not protected your rights as a citizen? What if it was in say Argentina—would you be shocked at the behaviour of the government.

Would you like to hazard a guess where a Jew was arrested for praying? In Jerusalem, at the Kotel.

What does it feel like? Well here are the words of Nofrat Frenkel, arrested in November:

“Every morning, since I was 15, I have worn a tallit for prayer in my home. During my army service, I was forced to swallow many negative comments by other soldiers who prayed in the army synagogues, some of which did not even have a women’s gallery, because female soldiers never set foot in them. After leaving the army, I began to visit the *Kotel* every Rosh Hodesh. The atmosphere at the *Kotel*, the feeling that all those women praying around me were also turning to God and pouring out their hearts to Him, inspires me with the joy of Jewish fraternity. Here is one place in which, shoulder to shoulder, all the hearts are calling to God.”

“Prayer at the *Kotel* is so different from private prayer at home, or from communal prayer at the synagogue. It is a mixed creation: I am in a communal place, with many worshippers, but not even one voice can be heard. Just soft murmurings, choked crying, mute requests.

“God stands in the congregation of God” (Psalms 82) but it appears that God is not alone in this holy place. There is also hatred and contempt, arrogance and argument. At least that is what I experienced when I prayed in the women’s section wearing my tallit.

“Every Rosh Hodesh I could expect a different type of “blessing.” Curses in Hebrew and Yiddish, venomous treatment toward me and my tallit, and speculation regarding my gender and religion: “A man in the women’s section!” “He’s not even Jewish!” “Perhaps she’s dressed up for Purim?” (Nofrat Frenkel. “The ‘Crime’ of Praying With a Tallit and a Plea for Tolerance” *Jewish Daily Forward* 4 December, 2009)

And a few days ago the police called in Anat Hoffman, director of the Israel Religious Action Center. The police fingerprinted her and interrogated her for more than an hour on January 5 about her activities during Women of the Wall’s last monthly service in December. They told her she is now suspected of having committed a felony. Many of you met Anat—she was here with Danny Rich at our “Big Birthday Party”. Hardly someone we would think of as a “felon”.

Things have changed at the kotel and not for the better. In the last couple of years, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which answers directly to the prime minister’s office, has reduced the area allowed for female worshippers, by raising the height of the

*mechitza* and moving it farther south. Significant events that used to take place in the ever-shrinking public space adjacent to the prayer sections — the symbolic distribution of ID cards to new immigrants, performances by the Israel Defense Forces choir — have been curtailed or cancelled by the authorities. Separation of prayer space has grown to separation of the sidewalks in front. (*Jewish Daily Forward* 6 January, 2010)

The awe-inspiring, entrance to the Wall has been turned into the foyer of a Haredi synagogue.

A recent editorial in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (6 January) notes that: “Meanwhile, the egalitarian alternative prayer space at the southern end of the retaining wall to the Temple Mount, known as Robinson’s Arch, is overwhelmed by demand. When an agreement between the Masorti movement and the Israeli government first allowed men and women to pray together there in 2000, only 10 services were held that year. In 2009, there were more than 450.”

Those services are supposed to end by 10:30 every weekday morning; if they run into over-time, as they often do because of overcrowding, the participants must pay 30 shekels a person just to occupy the space, since it is primarily a tourist site. Rabbi Andrew Sacks, the director of the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel (Masorti), says he will work hard to expand those hours when he renegotiates the agreement with the government later this year. His good efforts deserve support, but they miss the basic point. The Kotel is public space, *not* a Haredi synagogue.

As the editorial from an earlier edition of the *Jewish Daily Forward* (18 November) says:

“The worn, mammoth stones tell a powerful story of Jewish spirituality, resistance, and allegiance. But today, the Kotel is speaking a language that most Jewish women and men cannot accept.

...With this arrest, the first in memory, the authorities guarding Jerusalem’s holiest site have taken their intolerance and arrogance to a new and dangerous level. In another land, in another culture, this would be held up as the antediluvian act of the modesty police.”

It is fair enough perhaps to give some thought to one’s dress when walking through Mea Shearim just as I always do when in a number of other countries, but the recent actions in Jerusalem stretch far beyond that. Besides the “parking lot” riots of the summer, the last few months in Jerusalem have seen attempts to institute segregated buses—women in the rear. I lived through that with the US Civil rights movement in the 1960s. It is inconceivable to me that such things are being started up in a democracy.

The practices of a small number of fundamentalists — a minority in Israel, in the United States and around the world — cannot be allowed to dictate the religious future of the Jewish people. Unless the Kotel is truly shared, those Jews who do not follow ultra-Orthodoxy — that is, most Jews — will feel increasingly unwelcome in what is for many the touchstone of their homeland. Hardly the way to show respect for holy ground.

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