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Women of the Wall call themselves “Modern-day Western Wall liberators.”

Anat Hoffman, Board of WOW, Executive Director of Israel Religious Action Center Jan. 3, 2018 webinar.

- We are going to mend the world. Dec. 1988 – 30<sup>th</sup> year, struggle for equality, pluralism and tolerance at Western Wall.
- What has changed over past 30 years?
- If you look at strategic goals from 30 years ago. The 3 goals were to read from the Torah, wear a tallit when we pray and 3<sup>rd</sup> goal was to put on tzitzit and to pray out loud. We've accomplished all of this.
- We are allowed to read but not bring the Torah. We sneak it in. We've got it all. The group has reached its strategic goals.
- It doesn't make sense, but because we are not recognized as part of the public that's allowed to read Torah.
- Ours board has not added new goals, except for tefillin.
- Legal path – went to court. WOW vs. the State of Israel. We are there every month and changing public opinion. We have a secret tool – you and JOFA. Idea of women's tefillah group – North American women. If it weren't for the great support from JOFA.
- Obstacles you've faced? One of the major obstacles is our motive, it's always questioned. You are just doing it to provoke, to get attention.
- Calling us provocateurs. What group would keep coming to the Wall for 30 years, if it wasn't yirat shomayim. This can't be a provocation..
- We have an innocent and clear and frank and honest motive.
- I don't know of any male groups that had to prove that their motive is honest.
- Court cases: we had to fight ignorance of very educated people, of Supreme Court judges. If we pray in our way, there will be riots. On Rosh Chodesh when we come, there aren't that many people there. They thought there were many people there all the time.
- We had to deal with the religious establishment. Even though the rabbis know that what we do is halachic, but they are not willing to see a change in local custom. Local custom is a sticky thing. **That's our challenge. Everyone knows that its halachic.** Rivkah Howt and Norma Joseph. The problem is local custom. How does local custom change? When men want to change it. But when women want to change it, we can't change it. I've never heard a serious theological argument that what we are doing is not right.
- Doing with great modesty. By now we are local custom. That's what the court recognized in 2015 in the Sobel decision that they have been around so long, they are by now the local custom at the wall. Our tenacity paid off.
- Hold tefillah on rosh chodesh once a month? Rivkah Haut Dec. 5, 1988 – at conference, asked women to join her at the Wall. I immediately said I'm not going. She was so romantic and starry eyed about this project. The Hyatt was not willing to rent her a folding table to put the Torah on. Do I have one? I do have one.
- I did – that's how I joined the WOW.
- I didn't realize that joining Rivka would change my life. It seemed so innocent and they were attacked.
- We are on the shoulders of
- When you see the amount of work, we'd like to have it more than once a month. It's like organizing a wedding. Who is going to run the prayer, take photographs in case there is violence, who is going to take care of a million things.
- It's like every month a wedding.
- One of the biggest surprises – WOW broke the partition between ourselves. When Rivkah Haut, an Orthodox woman turns to Anat Hoffman; we are the authors of WOW siddur – we produced our own texts we can pray from. We broke the partition between of us and you. We became sisters with diaspora Jews. We drove the partition between us and men. They are there to help us. They follow our prayer with our siddurim, they say the prayer for WOW in the female gender. A few months old, the 70 year old

paratroopers who liberated the wall are signing a partition in our support – this is a large surprise, these are totally secular paratroopers. We liberated it for everybody including women.

- If the kotel was open to all; I can't think of a time when it wasn't regulated. There is a lot of strife between different denominations – Church of Nativity.
- There is a reason, people would come and desecrate the wall. Someone has to be in charge, but that person has to realize “my house will be a place of prayer for everybody.” This includes the Pope; he was asked to take out his crucifix. It shows disrespect. They have to show that they have pluralism in their blood. We have a zealot running this. It ends when he dies. He's unfit to run the Wall.
- Recent agreement to create a new plaza. For 25 years, we were fighting for equality at the Wall. In 25<sup>th</sup> year, the Israeli government decided to arrest women for wearing a tallit, lighting a menorah. This brought anger and disgust from American Jews. You talked to the Israeli minister, made yourself heard. This cannot be. Netanyahu negotiated to find a solution. After 4 years, what are the conditions that we would be willing to pull out of there and move to a different location, still next to the Western Wall in order for us to be able to have our way and to reduce the amount of friction and anger over there? The Govt of Israel voted on January 31, 2016 and ratified the agreement 15 – 5. However, the govt did not implement it. The first step was to appoint Natan Sharansky as the new head of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and that Sharansky would hire an architect to design the new plaza. The govt did not appoint Sharansky, therefore nothing is happening over there. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 2017, the govt decided to abort the kotel agreement as we know it.
- We are now engaged in a Supreme Court decision against the government. We will be heard in an enlarged panel of Supreme Court judges. The usual panel is 3 judges, WE are going to have 9 judges on Jan. 14<sup>th</sup>, When the court enlarges itself in this way, **it's** usually because a landmark decision is on the way. An important decision is about to happen.
- We talk to some of these women; we have a sense that they are being incited by men, men who have political interests. I came with my daughter and I don't want her to ask a why not question? Why can they read Torah and we don't. I don't want her to ask, because I don't know why not? My sense is there is no good reason why not? She doesn't want these questions. How well did WOW integrate into the women's section. Maybe there should be an ultra-Orthodox plaza and next to it a dignified, separate egalitarian section where they are welcome. It will be egalitarian all except for when a group of women want to come together and pray, they will have a place of their own.
- **A hearing is just that. It's going to take a long time for the court to arrive at a decision. What we are going to say is fine, there is no agreement, so let's redive the kotel as it is today. Men have 48 meters; women have 12. We are going to change that. It's going to be men, mixed, and women.** And women are going to be able to sit on the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and we want to be able to say what to do with all these hundreds of millions of shekalim you spend there. Govt money. If you are not giving us a place of our own, we are going to have to make do with what is there but the power has to change.
- Do we really want that? No. Is it a legal move that is very wise? Yes.
- For a long time there were buses that were segregated in Israel. Women were pushed to the back of the bus and asked to board at the back of the bus. At our Religious Action Center, we represented 26 Orthodox women who refused to sit at the back of the bus, we did not say stop segregation. What we said was, there should be another bus at the same frequency and at the same price driving along with the segregated bus so women have a choice, if she wants to sit at the back of the bus or anywhere she wants. Economically, that makes absolutely no sense. Legally, it is pure gold. The result? The desegregation of buses in Israel. The segregated buses are on the decline. We won through a legal move. The same here. We are asking for redistribution of the wall and **it's** legally the correct thing to demand, but I think the only thing that makes sense is what we realized after 4 years of negotiation that is an egalitarian plaza alongside an Orthodox plaza.
- I think the OWOW have a very good point. They are saying that if WOW are committed to the **women's section, we should stick to the women's section at all costs. The argument with them started when we started negotiating with the govt of Israel. They said, let's not negotiate because under no circumstances will we ever leave the women's section. This is where the majority of WOW differed from this group. The majority of us believed that when the prime minister of Israel invites**

you to talk about changing policy, if you are a serious organization for change, you come to the table because that is the table where policy is changed.

- In order to sit at the table, you need to compromise. I think my sisters are right, but I want to stay married. I want our group to want to have bat mitzvos at the Wall. I want women to celebrate rosh chodesh at the Wall. I want us to succeed in bringing on a revolution in women's participation of prayer at the Wall and the way to do it is to be at a place that we run. We decide who are the ushers. We decide what is modest and what is immodest. We decide what is the local custom. We will be nice. There are 9 million visitors who come every year to the Wall and we will compete in the world of plazas, and may the best plaza win.
- We will run our plaza in a way that people will be attracted to it. First and foremost Israelis. Grandmom will not have to climb a plastic chair in the way that we are going to run it. Girls will be invited to have a bat mitzvah with content, with meaning. We will train mothers and grandma to have an Aliyah, too. We will change how women see themselves in Judaism and we will do it in the plaza that we run. And the way we are going to do it is by continuing to fight as we are today. We are the force that is changing the world in this respect. We have to negotiate with the govt and stick by that agreement. I love my sisters. I believe every group has to have people like that. But every group has to have someone like me; a pragmatic, practical person who analyzes what can be done politically from a public perspective, an international perspective, what is possible and to push the envelope as much as we can. But still within the possible.
- When you move to another plaza, egalitarian presence, would women be allowed to pray with tallit at the regular kotel? This points out the price of the kotel agreement. The price is that everyone who wants to pray the way that we do, will go to the plaza, which we run. And everyone who wants to pray the way the rabbi wants, that person will go to the plaza, we know today.
- The big question is how will they give us the plaza that we want? Right now they are offering us the back of the bus. But we're not moving to the back of the bus. We have an experience of that and we can recognize a back of the bus a mile away. Right now it is undignified, unpleasant and WOW do not go there at all. But if the great vision of Sharansky and all the federations of North America, the two big streams of Jewish life, If that vision happens, we are looking at a plaza that will be majestic.
- I'm hoping that Israel will lead the Jewish world by doing this. This will end, I hope, 3000 years of patriarchy. And will allow us to break the final frontier – the role of women in religion.
- Israel is way too important to be left to Israelis. It is your duty to take part in the dialogue of what are the values of the Jewish state. Don't let Israelis silence you. Israelis will tell you that if you don't pay taxes in Israel, if you don't send your children to the army in Israel, don't involve yourself in our internal affairs.
- This is all lies. The Jewish values that navigate the only Jewish state on the planet is your business. You have a place at the table where these values are discussed.
- If you believe that the values of the Jewish state are tolerance and pluralism and equality, then you have to make yourself known and heard. Otherwise, it will be racism, chauvinism and intolerance. #1 take your seat at the table. #2, read more about what's happening in Israel, not just the conflict with the Palestinians but what's happening internally. The WOW is an excellent place to look at. Support the WOW. Shop at our store, we sell talitot, chamots. Plan your trip to Israel around rosh chodesh. We will give you an Aliyah; we have real kavanah and its contagious. You will feel it. This is your country and the values that run it are your business.
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