

On Women of the Wall and provocation

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Yizhar Hess Mar. 12, 2019 | 3:56 AM

For ten years now, on every Rosh Hodesh, the first day of the new Hebrew month, I have made a point of being at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. I stand in the public plaza and support my sisters, the Women of the Wall, who have come every month for thirty years and counting, rain or shine, to do what this site is intended for: To pray. I acknowledge that I love them.

The group includes native-born Israelis, new and not-so-new immigrants, Orthodox women in addition to Conservative and Reform; and most importantly, they have a passion that is shared by activists and those seeking to repair the world, wherever they may be – a genuine fervor for doing what is good and just. And never bowing to fear.

But the ultra-Orthodox violence directed at the Women of the Wall this Rosh Hodesh was jarring. Thousands of teenagers were bussed in with one goal: Harassing the Women of the Wall and preventing them from praying. Young women and their teachers pushed, shoved and pinched. Many even spat. The harsh cursing that accompanied their acts of physical violence were a new low. Even the most veteran members of Women of the Wall said they could not recall ever being subjected to such intense hatred.

At the same time, in the public plaza adjacent to the prayer area, where we, the male supporters of Women of the Wall, stood, real violence raged. Thousands of ultra-Orthodox men were there along with children as young as 10 and yeshiva students whose rabbis instructed them to set their studies aside to show up at the Western Wall to let us have it. This was a crowd that had been incited, with a burning fervor.

They surrounded us in waves, in circles. They had a strategy: From the closest circle they begin grabbing. One hand pulls at your prayer shawl while, from another direction, someone grabs your skullcap, and yet another grabs the

other corner of the prayer shawl, which is already being dragged on the ground.

The skullcap gets trampled and disappears from sight. And all the while, you are being kicked and spat upon like rain. Your face is wet at this point. You feel humiliated. You try to disappear. Some of the spitting hit its target. Some does not.

In short, this is what occurred in the plaza: Jews were attacked and removed from the Western Wall on the eve of the Sabbath by incited masses. This is the headline that should have shaken the foundations of the sovereign state of the Jewish people. But it all passed in relative silence.

Did Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu say or tweet anything? If Arab citizens from the Temple Mount had behaved this way toward Jews at the Western Wall Plaza, not a half hour would have passed before the prime minister would have issued a reaction – complete with analogies from the Maccabees to Israeli army paratroopers.

And with the mention of the paratroopers, it is also worth noting that the very Israeli paratroopers who liberated the Wall in 1967 were standing there with us. About forty men, now in their 70s, members of the paratroop battalion that liberated the Old City, showed up in solidarity. They, too, were assaulted.

What is most astounding is the reaction of the police, who did not properly prepare and intervened too sparingly and too late, and not by chance. And then they issued a statement blaming the victim: “Women of the Wall came to create a provocation.” The police may not have known how to protect them but they did know how to defame them.

From time immemorial, every time women have stood up for their right to equal treatment, they have been labeled provocateurs. It’s only been 100 years since women gained the right to vote. The first suffragettes experienced degradation and violence and were charged with causing a provocation. In every battle, whether to inherit property or to receive an education or for equal pay, they were accused of provocation.

“Why the hurry?” they were asked, “Why cause an upset? Why not allow

things to develop on their own?” Such allegations are heard time after time. Thankfully, there have always been women who have refused to wait passively.

Women of the Wall will win this battle because it is clear today that in the religious realm, women are no longer invisible. Opponents can call it a provocation as long as they want, but in another 100 years, these women will be remembered as pioneers. This is the Jewish feminism for which I have the honor to endure hitting and spitting.

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