

Walls within Community

By Vanessa Ochs

On May 22, 2000, the Israeli High Court of Justice granted Women of the Wall the right to pray aloud as a group at the Western Wall, to wear prayer shawls there and to read from the Torah. The Court declared: "We hereby order the government to establish proper arrangements and conditions so that the petitioners can fulfill their right to worship, according to their custom, at the Western Wall." The Court ordered the government to provide police protection for the women, and to set up a prayer schedule within six months. Additionally, the Women of the Wall were awarded \$4800 in damages.

The Women of the Wall are a women-only, non-minyan, halachic, inter-denominational prayer group. They do not ask to be integrated with men at the Wall, nor to abolish the mechitza, nor to pray from an egalitarian siddur. While the group has agreed to pray the Orthodox liturgy, the group is, in fact, interdenominational.

I have been one of the Directors of the International Committee since the late 80's, when women who attempted to pray together at the Wall were physically attacked by other worshippers. When the Israeli and International women petitioned the court for police protection, authorities responded by making their worship there illegal. (In fact, a group of Hadassah women, who apparently didn't know that Jewish women couldn't pray together at the Wall nearly ended up in jail.) The issue stayed tied up in the Court for years, and then, after the Court finally ruled in 1994 that the women "ought" to be able to pray at the Wall, the governmental commissions that were mandated failed, time and again, to offer acceptable arrangements. (For instance, one suggestion was that the Women of the Wall pray in the parking lot where tourist busses drop off their passengers at the Wall!)

I, along with my sister Directors in Israel and abroad, feel both elated and cautious. While we yearn to head for Jerusalem with our timbrels so we, like Miriam and the women, can sing and dance in celebration, we know how rulings of the High Court that favor the religious rights of religious Jews who are not ultra-Orthodox have been sidestepped or ignored. Who has received a positive judgment without fearing that one's opponents may find a legal loophole in the decision? In fact, soon after this most recent ruling in favor of women's prayer, 10 Shas Party Knesset members submitted a bill attempting to override the High Court of Justice.

I share this information with you, Derekh CLAL readers, because the issues that emerge out of this struggle over sacred space and political power are very linked to CLAL's mission of creating respectful dialogue between different groups of Jews, each of which believes they are acting out of the purest motives and with

the greatest respect for the integrity of Jewish tradition. Of course, creating and sustaining compassionate bonds between Jewish communities take enormous time and energy.

For me, seeing the real pain that some Israeli Jews are inflicting upon other Israeli Jews, causes me only to deepen my commitment to work towards creating respectful encounters. (And as hard as it is to create such encounters in America, I'd be the first to acknowledge that it is much easier to do it here than in Israel!) I am especially disturbed to learn about the fire that was set on June 24th in the Conservative congregation, Kehilat Ya'ar Ramot, in Jerusalem. Before the fire, the synagogue had been defaced by graffiti and anonymous threats to burn the building had been received. From what I have read, it is suspected that the arson was the work of someone from the ultra-Orthodox community. The congregation's rabbi, David Bateman, who made aliyah just two years ago (and attended a CLAL Rabbinic Retreat when he was still living in the States) is quoted by Deborah Sontag of the New York Times as wisely saying that one should not read the violence "as an expression of the 'ultra-orthodox' as opposed to 'some kind of lunatic fringe.'" Such an incident should only move us to redouble our efforts.