



## The Fight against Being Silenced

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THE ASPECT OF THE WOMEN OF THE WALL'S case history that I will present here is its struggle against private violence and public veto in Jerusalem, a struggle that has brought them to petition the Israeli Supreme Court repeatedly over the past thirteen years. It is a struggle in which I have represented them as counsel, together with my friends and colleagues Jonathan Misheiker and Nira Azriel. I am writing this not only as counsel but also as an ally who has participated in and wholly supported the cause. Mine is not a religious perspective but a human rights perspective. The Western Wall of the Temple, the Kotel, has been expressly recognized by the Supreme Court as a site of great symbolic significance, for both Jews in Israel and Jews in the diaspora. It is not just a holy place; it is also a historical, national, and cultural symbol. On this historic stage, the struggle between enlightenment and theocracy and between patriarchy and feminism is being acted out. Its outcome is important not only for the Women of the Wall themselves but also for the future of human rights in Israel.

WOW's manner of prayer is women's prayer in a group, wearing prayer shawls and praying aloud from the Torah scroll. They have called it the three Ts: tallit, Torah, *tefillah*. This manner of prayer is customary for men but not for women and is therefore a

subject of controversy among Orthodox Jewish authorities. It is considered by many Orthodox rabbinical authorities to be prohibited by Jewish law, or, even if it is not, to constitute an impermissible deviation from the custom of the place (the Kotel). However, it is also fully condoned by some well-respected Orthodox authorities, and in this it is distinguished from the mode of prayer of Reform and Conservative Jews. The distinction is that WOW does not pray in a mixed group of men and women, but prays separately from men in the *ezrat nashim*, the women's section, at the Kotel. Nor does WOW attempt to pray in a minyan, which is a group of at least ten men, required for certain prayers. WOW prays in a group that is not a minyan and does not read those prayers whose recitation requires a minyan.

In Judaism, interpretation is not monolithic. Judaism is not given to a single hierarchy of authoritative interpretation. The interpretation of the sources is a matter of dialectic; theological rulings are determined by the accumulation of conflicting rabbinical writings and responsa to questions from the community. Thus, because alongside the core of opposition there is Orthodox authority that supports the women's claim, it can be said that the status of this mode of prayer is not decided under Halakhah. Hence it is within the limits of Orthodox Judaism that WOW is seeking to pray in a group as men do, to wear ceremonial prayer shawls as men do, to hold the Torah scroll as men do, and to raise their voices in prayer as men do. The women seek the chance to pray as full partners in the Orthodox Jewish tradition and not as silent, passive shadows of men.

WOW's prayer in this manner has been greeted with violent opposition from other Orthodox worshippers, male and female. WOW members have been physically attacked and verbally abused.

Similar violence has met Reform and Conservative congregations of Jews that have attempted to pray near the Kotel in mixed prayer groups of men and women. Scenes of spitting and even the throwing of excrement at these groups have appeared on television screens around the world. The violence is orchestrated by small groups of fanatics, mostly yeshiva students who study and live in the vicinity of the Kotel. However, the importance of these groups far exceeds the number of perpetrators. Many people who do not identify with the fanatical violence nevertheless openly condemn the participants in a women's or a mixed prayer group as provoking the violence. Officialdom has not banished the violent fanatics from the Kotel; it has instead banished WOW and the Reform and Conservative congregations.

In an open letter, Judy Labehnsen, one of the early members of WOW, reminisces about its initial encounter with violence and her own decision to abandon the group and leave the Kotel to the *charedi* fanatics. Subsequently regretting her decision to surrender, in the light of new manifestations of renewed violence, she argued that the Jewish people cannot allow the Kotel to be turned into a bastion of *charedi* intolerance and talked of her fear that, if this should happen, the words of Lamentations might become prophetically true for those Jews in search of a middle path: "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people—all beauty so departed."

Why the violence against the Women of the Wall? Even though this is not the way every Orthodox Jewish woman wants to pray, why should it arouse opposition to the point of violence? What is so threatening about it? It is not an activity that directly threatens or even delegitimizes the right of others to pray in their own way. It is not a mode of prayer that clearly infringes basic halakhic prohibitions. Nevertheless, although there is good authority for its

halakhic permissibility, WOW's attempt to pray in its manner arouses furious opposition and fanatical violence on the part of some other worshipers at the Kotel. The reason for the violence is that WOW's prayer threatens something deep in religious conviction that permeates and extends beyond the halakhic debate: patriarchal hegemony.

The violence against the Women of the Wall is a manifestation of the attempt of ultra-religious activists to preserve their patriarchal hegemony. This attempt is unique neither to Judaism nor to Jerusalem. The use of spiritual symbolism by traditionalist religious leaders to preserve patriarchy is no different from other forms of patriarchal politics. More than that, it is the most virulent form of patriarchal politics in this era. Religious fanaticism has the subjugation of women high on its agenda. Patriarchal hegemony was, of course, not invented by religion. Other forms of human thought, from the pagan and the political to the philosophical, have been patriarchal; in historical terms, religion merely assimilated into the prevailing patriarchal organization of human thought and society. However, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the patriarchal hegemony of religion persists as an ideological core at the center of a growing egalitarian women's role in society. Religious institutions preach and proselytize patriarchy, fueling resistance to feminist change and legitimizing such resistance.

Jewish fundamentalism aims to exclude women from active participation in public religious life and to retain the husband's exclusive power of divorce. Christian fundamentalism aims for control of women's bodies by the Church; it opposes contraception and violently opposes the autonomous choice of abortion. It preaches a return to traditional family values, with wifely obedience and moth-

ers educating their children at home. Muslim fundamentalism returns women to polygamy, obedience to their husbands in all social and sexual matters, and the veil, depriving them of both private power and public participation. Hindu fundamentalists have rallied to support reintroduction of the institution of *sati* (widow-burning). The fundamentalist religious communities are not only holding on to an internal ethos of patriarchy, but are also trying to reintroduce this ethos as a universal norm in pluralistic democracies.

WOW represents a new kind of activism struggling for feminist expression within the religious context. This struggle has also been carried on by women in Christianity, who have succeeded in some denominations in being admitted to the priesthood. It can be compared to the early days of the struggle to gain a voice in democracy. The attempt of women to gain a voice in Western democracies lasted more than a hundred years, from the time of the French Revolution. The struggle of the Seneca Falls feminists and the English suffragists against exclusion and silencing met with violent opposition from democratic governments. Their long struggle succeeded in achieving, for women in Europe and America, the right to vote. On the secular political level, women's participation and voices have become an accepted part of democratic discourse. The feminist struggle against exclusion from the public sphere and against silencing is now being reenacted in the context of religion.

All the aspects of WOW's mode of prayer—group prayer, wearing prayer shawls, and raising voices in reading from the Torah scroll—challenge the patriarchal hegemony of the religion. The reasons that each of these attributes is considered offensive are richly symbolic of patriarchy in feminist discourse. This explains the violent opposition by fundamentalist forces to their manifestation. In the eyes of the opponents of WOW, the different aspects of

its mode of prayer are linked to public participatory prayer in a minyan and therefore (directly or indirectly) to the performance of active duties at fixed times (*mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman*). Women are exempt from performing such duties, and there is conflicting opinion as to whether they may waive this exemption if the exemption is not to their advantage or to their disadvantage.

The objections to women's active participatory public prayer are ostensibly attributable to women's family role; it would seem as though the primary concern might be their traditional child-caring role. However, on closer examination, this turns out not to be the entire story. A medieval tract called the *Book of Abudraham* spells out for us the family functions that preempt a woman from carrying out *mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman*:

And the reason why women are exempted from *mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman* is that the woman is bound to her husband to tender to his needs. And had she been obliged to do *mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman*, it is possible at the appointed time for the carrying out of the mitzvah the husband might order her to do his mitzvah. And if she carries out the Almighty's mitzvah and neglects his mitzvah, let her beware of her husband. And if she carries out her husband's mitzvah and neglects the Almighty's mitzvah, let her beware of her Creator. Hence, the Almighty exempted her from His mitzvot so that she would be at peace with her husband.<sup>1</sup>

Even for the skeptical, this tract portrays an unexpectedly patriarchal picture. It does not relate to women's childbearing role or even to child rearing, but concentrates solely on the competing duties that a woman has to her husband and to God. However, it would be wrong to leave the impression that there is, in Judaism,

prevalent acceptance of the idea of subjugation of women to their husband's absolute power. Indeed, there are sources that deny that a wife has the duty to be submissive and obedient to her husband; in particular, it is clearly forbidden for a husband to coerce his wife to have intercourse with him. Nevertheless, in the context of *mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman*, the emphasis on wifely duty to her husband and the competition between her husband and the Almighty for the right to her obedience express patriarchal hegemony.

The objection to women's group prayer is actually an objection to official group prayer in a minyan or with tallit and Torah scroll, and not to the idea of a number of women praying together. There seems to be no real objection to women praying in a group, provided that the group has none of the trappings of "official" group prayer—that is, a minyan. The prohibition of women's public reading from the Torah, when public Torah reading is so central to Jewish culture and community, is a further manifestation of the exclusion of women from the public sphere and public functions. In this context, it touches on that aspect of public-sphere activity that is associated with the acquisition of power through knowledge and spiritual authority. A division between the public and the private spheres in which women are excluded from the public sphere is a well-worn theme of feminist analysis. In her book *Public Man, Private Woman*, Jean Bethke Elshtain summarizes the course of Western civilization starting from the Greeks:

Truly public, political speech was the exclusive preserve of free male citizens. Neither women nor slaves were public beings. Their tongues were silent on the public issues of the day. Their speech was severed from the name of action: it filled the air, echoed for a time, and faded from public memory with none to record it or to embody it in public forms.

The objection to women wearing prayer shawls is also primarily attributed to the exemption from *mitzvot aseh she hazman geraman*. Relying on the writings of Maimonides in the twelfth century, Shiloh and Shifman, the halakhic experts for WOW in the Supreme Court, conclude that women may wear prayer shawls. Relying on the later writings of the Rema, Shuchetman, the halakhic expert for the state, concludes that they may not. He argues that although it might be theoretically permissible, it would be an exhibition of “arrogance” for them to do so. Arrogance, in this context, is “behavior which is vulgar and proud, shows contempt for others, and is unconventional in the community”; arrogant behavior by women even in private, but most certainly in public, is considered improper and impermissible. It need scarcely be said that this requirement for women’s private modesty and public invisibility is another example of the patriarchal exclusion of women from the public sphere. Furthermore, Shuchetman points out that women’s wearing of tallit is contrary to the prohibition in the Torah according to which “a woman must not take man’s apparel.” This prohibition calls to mind Naomi Wolf’s analysis in her book *The Beauty Myth* of the role that the differentiation between male and female clothing has played in reinforcing male supremacy.

Perhaps the most emotive objection that has been brought to bear against the Women of the Wall is the argument that it is forbidden for men to hear women’s voices in song. It is pertinent to quote the opinion of Shuchetman, the state’s expert, on this issue: “An additional problem [to that of a women’s minyan] . . . is that . . . women who seek to organize themselves into a separate minyan in the Kotel Plaza certainly might, by their singing, disturb the prayers of others—a thing which is absolutely prohibited.” It is this objection that is most loudly heard in the fanatical denunciation of WOW.

The fear of the disturbing impact of women’s voices first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, which states that Shmuel spoke of the need for modesty in women’s dress, saying, “A woman’s thigh is seductive,” and admonishing women as follows: “If you show your thigh, you show your shamefulness.” In this context, the Talmud reports, Shmuel also said, “A woman’s voice is seductive, as it has been said, ‘Your voice is sweet and your countenance comely.’” This saying of Shmuel’s came to be taken as requiring women to preserve their modesty by not exposing their voices, in song, in public, analogously to not exposing their bodies. The requirement that women not raise their voices in song at the time of prayer later found expression as a prohibition in the *Shulchan Arukh*. However, the original source of the phrase referred to by Shmuel is the Song of Songs: “O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely.”

This etymological explanation of the “seductiveness” of women’s voices is stunning evidence that the silencing of women is linked with the politics of patriarchal domination as well as with the psychology of the fear of women’s sensuality. It is reminiscent of the sirens of Greek mythology, whose song lured sailors to their deaths. The move is from sensuality to silencing. This is indeed a fatal combination: silencing women’s voices to implement the exclusion of women from participation in the public arena and silencing women’s voices to protect men from women’s sensuality. This objection to WOW’s mode of prayer most clearly symbolizes the silencing of women throughout the history of patriarchy. The evolution of the prohibition in Judaism of women singing within earshot of men is a particularly revealing instance of the process of silencing and the reasons for it.

The accumulation of reasons for preventing Jewish women from praying in a group with tallit, Torah, and *tefillah*, embodies deep patriarchal fears of women's active participation and partnership in the public sphere of social life. The impact on women is, of course, marginalization. As Elshtain writes:

Because women have throughout much of Western history been a silenced population in the arena of public speech, their views on these matters, and their role in the process of humanization, have either been taken for granted or assigned a lesser order of significance and honor compared to the public, political activities of males. Women were silenced in part because that which defines them and to which they are inescapably linked—sexuality, natality, the human body (images of uncleanness and taboo, visions of dependency, helplessness, vulnerability)—was omitted from public speech.

The traditional limitations on women's prayer all refer to patriarchy, and the current opposition to WOW is a reassertion of that patriarchal power. The site of the reassertion of patriarchy is the Kotel, the symbolic heart of Judaism. How, then, have the secular authorities in Israeli society dealt with these violent attacks on women's quest for active participation in prayer at the Kotel? In order to understand this, one has to remember that the legal stage on which the scene is being acted out is one of state promotion of religion rather than one of nonintervention. The promotion of religion, since its introduction under the Ottoman Empire and its adoption as the Millett system by the British Mandate, has been pluralistic regarding the major religions of Israel. The various communities have their own religious courts, which have exclusive juris-

dition over questions of personal status of the members of their communities (e.g., the rights to marriage and divorce), their own officially recognized days of rest and holidays, and their own holy places. Regarding the promotion of the Jewish religion, there is in most contexts a monopolistic preference given to Orthodox Judaism over the other branches of Judaism; this is indeed a highly contested matter over a whole range of issues, and, not least, in the context of the Kotel.

The Kotel is one of the sites governed by the Protection of Holy Places Law of 1967, which provides that the necessary measures will be taken to prevent desecration of holy places or behavior that is likely to obstruct the freedom of access or offend the sensibilities of the members of the religious communities to which they are holy. The implementation of the law is placed in the hands of an administrator appointed by the Minister of Religious Affairs, in consultation with the chief rabbis.

At the time of the initial violent reaction to WOW, the secular authorities responded by excluding WOW from praying in its own manner at the Kotel; the administrator of the Kotel, who is also an ultra-Orthodox rabbi, issued an order preventing WOW from praying in this manner. The police also intervened to prevent WOW's active prayer at the Kotel, claiming that this was necessary to prevent a breach of the peace and desecration of the Kotel. They intervened to prevent both WOW's women-only prayers and the mixed-group prayers of Conservative and Reform Jews. There are eyewitness reports that on one occasion the police roughly pushed the Conservative and Reform Jews, who were praying peacefully, away from the area of the Kotel even though the only activity of the *charedi* Jews there had been to call out cries of denunciation.

Journalist Gideon Summet observed that police reticence in dealing with religious violence in all its forms is a result of dual forces: the deference shown by the political leadership of the state to religious leaders of the ultra-Orthodox camp, and a certain mystical, if not religious, personal identification of the police themselves with Orthodox religious sentiment. To this analysis one can add the speculation that, in the case of WOW, the police have little sympathy with the women's cause, the struggle against silencing.

In reaction, WOW petitioned the Supreme Court. Its petition was based on the constitutional right to freedom of worship, the right of access to the Kotel, and, less emphatically, the right to equality as women. The group also claimed that the administrator had acted beyond the limits of his statutory powers, as determined by the regulations under the Holy Places Law. Upon submission of the petition, the Minister of Religious Affairs promptly amended the regulations under the law to expressly "prohibit the conducting of any religious ceremony which is not according to custom of the place and which injures the sensitivities of the worshipping public towards the place."

In 1994, the Supreme Court rejected WOW's petition. Nevertheless, the majority opinions of Justices Meir Shamgar and Shlomo Levine recognized in principle WOW's right of access and freedom of worship. Justice Shamgar, then president of the Court, held that the common denominator for Jewish worship at the Kotel should not be the most austere halakhic ruling but should be good-faith worship by all who wish to pray by the Kotel. Shamgar recommended that the government find a solution that would "allow the petitioners to enjoy freedom of access to the Kotel, while minimizing the injury to the sensitivities of other worshipers." He based his recommendation on the need for mutual tolerance between groups and

opinions and on the need to respect human dignity. He did not mention the disempowerment of women and the need to guarantee their constitutional right to participate equally in the public arena. He was silent on the issue of equality, even though he noted, with the most tentative of criticisms, one of the primary manifestations of that inequality—the objection to hearing women's voices:

The singing of the petitioners aroused fury, even though it was singing in prayer; and anyway is there any prohibition of singing by the Kotel? After all, there is dancing and singing there not infrequently, and it is unthinkable that the singing in dignified fashion of pilgrims, whether Israeli or foreign, soldiers or citizens, whether male or female, should be prevented. In view of this, it may be, and I emphasize, "may be," that the opponents are confusing their opposition to the identity of the singers with their opposition to the fact of the singing, and this should not be.

Justice Levine based his recognition of WOW's right to pray in its manner at the Kotel on his view that the Kotel has not only religious but also national and historical importance to all the different groups and persons who come there, in good faith, for the purpose of prayer or any other legitimate purpose. Although the struggle for women's right to participate in the full ceremonial worship of Judaism, their struggle for equality, is at the core of the conflict, the majority of judgments were devoid of any mention of this right. The judges based their recognition of WOW's right to pray on the right to freedom of worship but not of equality. They upheld the need to protect pluralism but did not address the issue of religious patriarchy.

It was only in the minority opinion, written by Justice Menachem Elon, who was then the religious-seat incumbent on the

Supreme Court, that the issue of equality for women was discussed. Justice Elon examined in depth the various halakhic opinions on women's prayer groups. He concluded the following:

It is conceivable that the substantial change in women's status and position in the present century, in which religiously observant women are also full participants, will in the course of time bring about an appropriate solution to the complicated and sensitive issue of women's prayer groups. However, the area for prayer beside the Western Wall is not the place for a "war" of deeds and ideas on this issue. As of today, the fact is that a decisive majority of the halakhic authorities, including Israel's chief rabbis, would regard acceptance of the petition of the petitioners a travesty of the custom of a synagogue and its sacredness . . . such is the case as regards the Western Wall, which is the most sacred synagogue in the Jewish religion.

Thus Justice Elon examines the issue of women's right to equality in the modern world, only to dismiss the possibility of addressing it at the site that is, in his view, the most central to Judaism—the Kotel.

Why should the secular judges ignore the issue of women's right to equality while the religious judge alludes to it as a problem? This apparently paradoxical motif in the Supreme Court becomes less strange and more significant when we try to analyze the reasons for it. The approach of the secular judges can be deconstructed in light of the secular ethos regarding the autonomy of religion. Among the secular, the ways of religion seem to be outside the framework of secular ethical analysis. The religious are a closed community whose members act according to their own norms. Religious communities are entitled to autonomy, and the Court will

hesitate to interfere by imposing universalist values on their internal organization. This attitude rests on a freedom of religion, a multicultural conviction that abdicates responsibility for suppressed subgroups within the autonomous religious community. Subgroups that belong to the religious community are taken to have consented to its entire set of mores, including their own inequality. This being so, the issue of equality for women within the religion becomes, for the secular, a nonissue. The matter is otherwise for more progressive religious leaders like Justice Elon. For them, religion is a way of life that should provide solutions for current social problems. Justice Elon, in another case, has indicated his own conviction that religious institutionalism should not fail to take account of the change in women's status over the past two hundred years, and he hints at this view in the case of WOW. Nevertheless, he holds that the place is inappropriate for the conflict that will accompany change. Ironically and significantly, he holds that the Kotel is too important as a spiritual and religious center to be the site for a struggle over women's rights. The message is yet again the marginalization of women's issues, even by those who are the advocates of change within the Orthodox community.

In response to the Supreme Court's recommendation, the government set up a Committee of Directors General of various ministries. This committee, after deliberating for two years, finally made its recommendations: WOW could pray in its manner. However, this prayer was to be held outside the southeastern corner of the battlements of the Old City—well away from the Kotel. At the Kotel WOW could not pray in its manner for reasons of internal security (i.e., the threat to the breach of the peace). The government then appointed a ministerial committee, which, after taking a year to deliberate, went one better: WOW could not pray at the Kotel



for internal security reasons and, in addition, could not pray at any of the alternative sites considered because of external security reasons. The third committee to sit on the matter was the Ne'eman Commission, which at the time was deliberating the issue of non-Orthodox conversions; this commission recommended Robinson's Arch as the most practical alternative.

After the conclusions of the first committee were issued, we retraced our steps back to the Supreme Court. The Court issued an order *nisi*—an order to show cause—on WOW's renewed petition, and the hearing was held on September 24, 1998. We argued that because the government has shown itself to be clearly incapable of implementing the recommendations of the Court and securing WOW's right of worship and right of access to the Kotel, the last resort was the Court itself. Only after the conclusions of the third committee did the repeated hearings before the Supreme Court and the repeated postponements requested by the government and conceded to by the Court culminate in a summing up and a decision in May 2000. Our arguments were heard by Justices Eliahu Matza, Dorit Beinish and Tova Strasburg-Cohen, who conducted a tour of the Kotel and all the alternative sites that had been considered by the various committees before rendering judgment. It is worthy of note that in the first decision, which I shall refer to as "Hoffman I," all the justices were male; in "Hoffman II" the Court was composed of two women and one man.

In Hoffman II, Justice Matza wrote the opinion of the Court, and Justices Beinish and Strasburg-Cohen concurred. The Court held that the majority in Hoffman I had recognized the right of WOW to pray in its manner at the Kotel. Hence it concluded that the recommendations of the various governmental committees, in seeking alternative sites, had all been contrary to the directions of

the Court. Indeed, the Court held, on the basis of its own impressions from the tour of the sites, none of the alternative sites could serve, even partially, to implement WOW's right to pray at the Kotel. The Court directed the government to implement WOW's prayer rights at the Kotel within six months.

The decision was a groundbreaking and courageous opinion and constituted a significant step forward in the implementation of WOW's previously abstract right. It clarified that the Hoffman I decision bestowed full recognition of WOW's right to pray in accordance with its custom at the Kotel. It also transformed the Shamgar recommendation into a judicial directive and concretized the government's obligation to implement the right as an obligation fixed in time and place. However, the Court refrained from actively intervening and itself establishing the prayer arrangements at the Kotel. It held that it was, at this stage, refraining from doing so because the petition had been presented in the context of an expected government decision, but the government had not actually issued a decision. This somewhat evasive conclusion is probably to be attributed to the Court's defensiveness in the face of ongoing attacks by politicians, religious elements, and some academics that the Court is too activist, particularly in matters of state and religion.

The reactions in Israel to the decision in Hoffman II were aggressive. The religious parties immediately introduced a bill to convert the area in front of the Kotel into a religious shrine exclusively for Orthodox religious practices and to impose a penalty of seven years' imprisonment on any woman violating the current (Orthodox) custom of prayer at the Kotel. These bills were supported by a number of Knesset members from secular parties and are still pending at the time of this writing. The attorney general

asked the president of the Supreme Court to grant a further hearing of the case and to overrule Hoffman II—a surprising move on the legal level, as the decision had been unanimous. The attorney general claimed, amongst other things, that the Court misunderstood Hoffman I. The decision of the attorney general is political, demonstrating the reluctance of the government to implement the human rights of WOW in accordance with the Court's directive. The president of the Court, Aharon Barak, granted the request and appointed an expanded panel of nine justices to reconsider the issue.

The popular reaction to the decision in Hoffman II has also been hostile. The religious right has been predictably vicious in its response. However, even academics, intellectuals, and journalists who are generally committed to a liberal point of view have demonstrated an overt hostility to the women. They have claimed in newspaper articles and public discussion that this was a "provocation." This claim is not as surprising as it may seem; it is consonant with the general perspective of the secular majority in Israel that the Jewish religion is Orthodoxy. The secular liberal community has no interest in women's struggle to open up Orthodoxy and make it more egalitarian, regarding it as irrelevant to human rights concerns. Political hostility to WOW probably stems from the perception that the issue may create an obstruction to the various coalition maneuvers that each of the political players conducts in order to gain the support of the religious parties for its agenda. (In Israel's coalition government system, the religious parties hold the political balance of power and exercise disproportionate power.)

The case of WOW is heavy with symbolism. The violent opposition to the group, condoned by the public will and officialdom, symbolizes the silencing of women through the ages; it epit-

omizes tradition and patriarchy at the heart of Jewish nationhood. The petition of WOW, condoned by the Supreme Court, represents a universalist and feminist ethic. In this confrontation, there is little option but to await the Court's verdict for the third time. The other organs of government seem to offer little hope for a solution. The government has demonstrated its unwillingness to act. The Knesset is most unlikely to provide a political option. The fate of the petition is greatly significant not only for religious women and men but also for the secular world and constitutional values. Its success would signify the victory of pluralism and tolerance over fundamentalism. Whatever the legal outcome may be, the Women of the Wall have placed the issue of women's full personhood within religion on the public agenda in Israel.