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The Politics of Praying at the Western Wall with or without a Mechitza: Examining the Historical Evidence from the Nineteenth Century

F. M. Loewenberg[1]

Abstract

Whether or not to permit all Jewish denominations to conduct religious services at the Western Wall according to their own custom is again on the political agenda in Israel. In this controversy it is repeatedly claimed that the rigid separation of men and women at the Western Wall was not practised in previous centuries. The available evidence on this point is examined in this paper, with special emphasis on photographic evidence and travelers' reports. The testimony presented to the 1930 Royal Commission on the Western Wall is also re-examined. The changing utilisation of the *Kotel* is examined in terms of the demographic and lifestyle changes of the Jerusalem Jewish community over the centuries.

Introduction

The *Kotel* is again front-page news.[2] The current political controversy is whether to permit all Jewish denominations to conduct religious services at the Western Wall according to their custom, or whether to retain the present practice of limiting religious services only to those who follow the Orthodox tradition of gender separation. There are three sides to this political controversy. One group wants to apply the requirement of gender separation to the entire length of the Western Wall, a second group wants to limit this ruling to the area of the present *Kotel* (thus making the southern part of the Western Wall available for egalitarian worship), while a third group wants to cancel the requirement for gender separation entirely.

One argument regularly advanced by proponents of a change in the *status quo* is that in previous centuries, especially in the nineteenth century, the rigid separation of men and women at the Western Wall was neither practised nor enforced. A professor of religion summarised this argument:

> Apparently, [in the nineteenth century] many Jews did not see any necessity for a screen *(mechitzah)* to be set up at the Western Wall, which was not really a synagogue in their minds. When gender separation was maintained at the Wall, it was in deference to a particular 'strictly observant' group of Jews who were demanding a standard beyond the customary practice. (Charmé 2005: 8).

In the following pages I re-examine the evidence available from the nineteenth century on this question. But first I want to remind the reader that the 'original' Western Wall was quite different from the present-day Western

Wall Plaza that was erected in 1967 after the Six Day War. For more than four hundred years after Ottoman Sultan Suleiman ordered his engineer to prepare the Western Wall as a site for Jewish prayer, the *Kotel* was only a small, narrow closed alley, 3.5 m (11.5 feet) wide and 28 m (92 feet) long. This area could accommodate at most a few hundred tightly packed people — unlike the present-day Western Wall Plaza which has room for thousands of worshippers. Access to the original Western Wall was quite difficult. Until the mid-1860s none of the streets in the Old City were paved. As late as 1913 a European visitor noted that 'the Wailing-place is reached by many devious ways: by stairs slimy with dirt, by vaulted passages, by rambling and unclean lanes' (Treves 1913: 113-116).

Examining the historical evidence

Many books on the current controversy about the status of women at the Western Wall include a discussion of the historical background. (See, for example, Chesler and Haut 2003, Cohen-Hattab and Bar 2020, Jobani and Perez 2017, Shilo 2005). What were the practices that were followed at the *Kotel* in earlier centuries? What did people do at the Western Wall 200 years ago? Was it always a place of prayer? What kind of prayer? Was gender separation which is obligatory today also enforced in earlier times? Or did people in earlier times pray at the *Kotel* without a *mechitza*? And if so, when and why was this practice changed?

The evidence of what happened at the *Kotel* in earlier centuries is scarce, but there is an abundance of data for the nineteenth century. The evidence includes photographs, travelers' reports, and testimony presented to the 1930 Royal Commission that was established to examine the claims of Moslems and Jews at the Western Wall, including the claim that a screen was used to separate men from women in earlier times.

A picture is worth a thousand words

Louis Daguerre is credited with discovering modern photography in 1839. This new daguerreotype process produced a sharper and more refined picture than previous techniques. It also reduced the exposure time necessary from several hours to less than 20 minutes. In the autumn of that year a French photographer took the first photographs of Jerusalem. Between 1839 and 1914 more than 100 photographers visited Jerusalem and almost everyone included one or more pictures of the *Kotel* in his or her portfolio (Ben-Arieh and Davis 1997: 35; Nir 1985).

Since pictures taken with this new process required an exposure time of up to 20 minutes, most of the early photos were of landscapes and landmarks such as statues and public buildings. Early photographs that included people were necessarily posed. This was the situation until the mid-1850s when the use of improved chemicals for coating the glass photography plates made it possible to reduce the exposure time drastically. Almost-instant snapshots

have been in use since the 1880s when George Eastman began producing film on rolls which enabled a photographer to take multiple pictures in quick succession.

The popular phrase that 'a picture is worth a thousand words' suggests that a photograph tells a story better than any written statement. Photographs make history visible and establish historical facts. No one can argue later that what was portrayed in a photograph did not happen. But there are several considerations which limit the use of this media to establish historical facts, including the following:

Firstly, a photograph freezes a moment of time without providing any information what happened a minute (or hour) before and/or after the picture was taken.

Secondly, the interpretations we make of a photograph may tell us as much about ourselves and our cultural assumptions as about their original significance (Cosgrove, 2008: 184). When seeing an 1880 photo of a group of men and women at the Kotel, we generally assume that they are doing what people do there today (that is, pray) when they might have been engaged in a different activity.

Thirdly, until the mid-1850s, photographs that included people were necessarily posed. They more accurately reflect the cultural assumptions of the photographer than those of the participants.

Finally, as Levine (1993: 256) has concluded, 'photographic images do not lie, though the truth that they communicate is elusive and incomplete'. As he insists, photographs are a source that needs to be interpreted and supplemented by other evidence.

I have examined more than a hundred nineteenth-century photographs and pictures of the Western Wall. Many do show men and women together, but there are others which show them in separate gender groups.[3] I cannot recall seeing any photo that shows a screen or *mechitza.*[4] None of these photographs tell us clearly what the men and women that are portrayed in the pictures were doing at the time. And if these people were praying, did they offer individual prayers or was this an organised communal (*minyan*) prayer service. Without this additional information one cannot rely on pictures alone to argue that the demand for gender separation is a more recent development in response to the demands of ultra-religious Jews. For example, the earliest picture (not a photograph) I have seen shows men and women in distinctly separate groups — but there is no information on what they were doing. In summary, photographs alone do not permit us to support or dismiss the argument that gender separation was not required at the Kotel in the nineteenth century.

Travelers' reports

Documentation of Jewish life in Jerusalem in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is scarce. No complete set of community records has been found for

these years. If they did exist, they may have been destroyed by fires and earthquakes (Barnai 1979: 272-273). Instead, most of our information for those years comes from travelers' reports. A comprehensive, but not complete, bibliography of these reports, prepared in 1890 by the German historian Reinhold Röhricht (1842-1905), lists 1596 printed travelers' reports prior to 1800 and another 1919 reports published during the years 1800-77 (Röhricht 1890). Most of these were written by Christian pilgrims who did not always understand the Jewish rituals that they observed. For example, when they speak of 'prayer at the Wailing Wall' it is generally not clear whether they observed an organised communal prayer service or a number of individuals who were offering private individual prayers. Additional limitations of these reports are discussed by Ben-Arieh (1986).

Improved means of transportation and communication created new opportunities for international travel after the middle of the nineteenth century. Prior to that time only the most committed religious pilgrims would undertake the difficult and lengthy journey to the Holy Land. But since then Palestine began to be accessible for many more foreign travelers. Before long the Holy Land became a five-star attraction not only for religious pilgrims but also for tourists seeking an exotic destination.

One of the earliest travel guides, *Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine*, appeared in London in 1868. It directed its readers to various tourist attractions which they should not miss. The Western Wall is described as follows:

> The Place of Wailing: … winding through some narrow, crooked lanes, which it would be vain to attempt without a guide, we reach another most interesting section of the ancient wall — the Jews' Place of Wailing. … Here the Jews have been permitted for many centuries to approach the precincts of the temple of their fathers, and bathe its hallowed stones with their tears. It is a touching scene that presents itself to the eye of the stranger in this spot each Friday. Jews of both sexes, of all ages and from every quarter of the earth are there raising up a united cry of lamentation over a desolate and dishonoured sanctuary (Porter 1868: 112-113).

Another popular travelers' guide, Baedeker's *Handbook for Travellers: Palestine and Syria,* first published in 1876, included 114 pages on the city of Jerusalem. It especially recommended 'the Wailing Place of the Jews [as] a spot [that] should be visited repeatedly, especially on Friday after 4 p.m. or on Jewish festivals…' (Baedeker 1876: 186). Charles Warren, head of the 1867 archeological exploration of the Palestine Exploration Fund, confirmed the popularity of the Western Wall as a tourist attraction. He noted that the Wailing Wall was 'a great rendezvous [for European tourists] who walked about laughing and making remarks, as though it were all a farce …' (Gilbert 1985: 131, 159). Most of the pilgrims' reports and tour guides took note of the large number of women at the Western Wall.

Testimony presented to the 1930 Royal Commission

An International Commission was set up by the British government at the request of the League of Nations in 1930 following the 1929 Arab riots that protested the Jewish use of the Western Wall. It was hoped that this Commission (whose members came from Sweden, Switzerland, and Holland) would settle the conflicting claims of Jews and Muslims about their respective rights at the Western Wall. Much of the testimony concerned the practices that were followed at the *Kotel* during the hundred years preceding the date of the inquiry. Many of the aged witnesses gave first-hand testimony of what they had observed in their youth.

One example was the testimony of Joseph ben Akiva Goldschmit, an old resident of Jerusalem, who testified that:

> ... about 43-45 years ago [that is, 1885-88] ... I was accustomed to pray at the Wailing Wall every Sabbath eve [Friday night]. There were about 8 to 10 *minyanim* [each including a minimum of ten men], Sephardim and Ashkenazim. (Goldschmit 1930:71).

In their final report the members of the international commission summarised the customs of the Wall in earlier centuries as follows:

> To judge from the memorandum presented by the Jewish Side the Jews' devotions at the Wall were limited during the course of several centuries to wailing and lamenting. The Faithful approached the Wall and, bringing their foreheads into contact with it, wet it with their tears; they would often also slip into the crevices between the stones of the Wall strips or sheets of paper containing petitions and other pious wishes. Later on, the Jews began the practice of reading or reciting at the Wall certain psalms, fragments of the Law of Moses, or prayers (Report of Commission 1931).

On the basis of the evidence presented to them the commission concluded that no organised communal prayers were held on a regular daily basis until after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The women of Jerusalem

Many who wrote about their visit to the *Kotel* in the nineteenth century were amazed by the numerous women whom they saw there. They were astonished because 'back home' they had never seen such a large number of women at a sacred site. What made the *Kotel* different?

One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that the nineteenth century Jewish population in Palestine was characterised by a disproportionately large number of women. The excess of women over men among the adult Jewish population of Jerusalem included an unusually large number of widows. In 1839 49 percent of all adult Jewish women in Jerusalem were widows. This was not a one-time fluke; the 1866 census listed 36 percent of the adult Jewish women as widows (Schmelz 1976, cited by Shilo 2021). Contributing to this demographic imbalance was the rapid increase of the Jewish population of

Palestine in the seventy years prior to World War I. Approximately 10,000 Jews lived in the country in 1840, mainly in the four Holy Cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias. In 1914 there were 86,000 Jews in the country. Remarkable improvements in transportation, together with changing political conditions in Europe made migration possible for many older Jews who had previously only dreamed of living in the Holy Land.

The immigrants who came to Jerusalem became part of the Old Yishuv where every man was expected to devote all his waking hours to the study of Torah and Talmud — except for the three times a day when all adult males were in the synagogue for public prayers. Women, on the other hand, were exempt from Prayer and Study. They were expected to manage the home and produce and raise children so that their husbands could devote themselves completely to their religious obligations. In this emphasis on the male world the Old Yishuv was no different than most contemporary societies. But many women had come to the Holy Land to fulfill their religious ideals. Men found established channels for this — the Houses of Study and the many synagogues provided them with institutional supports. Women of the Old Yishuv had no such institutional supports. This large number of women, and especially the widows among them who no longer needed to devote much time to homemaking, had to find alternate places and ways to realize their religious ideals which had motivated their coming to the Holy Land.

Many of Jerusalem's women early on identified the *Kotel* as a sacred site where they could fulfill their religious commitments. Jerusalem's men made little use of the *Kotel* because they had a choice of many synagogues and study halls — but these provided no room for women. Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem would have been a logical place for women's devotion, but until the end of the nineteenth century anyone who wanted to go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem had to undertake a dangerous and difficult journey, too difficult for most elderly women.[5] Instead, Jerusalem women started to congregate at the *Kotel* which was largely neglected by their men. There they developed unique customs, such as kissing every stone along the *Kotel*-wall. Others recited private prayers or listened to a Torah lecture by one of the men who happened to be there.

Changing styles of prayer at the *Kotel*

Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent designated the Western Wall as a site for Jewish prayer in 1550 without first consulting with any of Jerusalem's rabbis or lay leaders. At first the Jews did not know what to do with this new site. It was used only now and then by individuals to pray for Divine help with a critical problem. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century there are no reports of any organised communal prayers for which gender separation is required. For more than 300 years the question of a *mechitza* at the *Kotel* was therefore not relevant.

Giovanni Zuallardo, an Italian nobleman who visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem in 1586, was the first Western pilgrim to mention Jews at the Western Wall but he did not indicate what they were doing there (Schur 1979). A 1607 letter written by R. Shlomo Shlimel Meinstrel of Safed stated that an elderly very sick Jew had been advised by his rabbi to pray at the Western Wall for health and long life — and in this way he could add 22 years to his life (Yaari 1943: 205-206).

In 1625 an Italian Jewish pilgrim came to the Western Wall and 'kissed it and prostrated before it and there I offered regular prayers' (Bahat 2007: 34). This is a description of an individual offering his prayers but does not suggest an organised communal prayer service. Thirty years later, the Karaite Binyamin ben Eliyahu wrote that 'we prostrated and touched the stones of the wall'. Again, this is about an individual who prayed at the Western Wall (Bahat 2007: 35).

Rabbi Yehudah Ha-hassid and a group of his followers came on *aliya* from Poland to Jerusalem in October 1700. Reb Gedalyah, a member of this group, described the role that the Western Wall played in Jerusalem Jewish life at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Some Jews, especially women, came to the Wall to pray on the eve of the New Moon (*Rosh Chodesh*), on fast days, and on *Tisha b'Av*. He emphasised that these were not communal prayer services, but rather prayers or lamentations by individual women. He added that organised prayers were never held at the Western Wall, not even on the Sabbath. Instead on Saturday mornings, immediately after concluding the regular services in the synagogue, many Jerusalem Jews walked toward the Western Wall, "but actually [they did] not walk to the Western Wall because it was too far away and it was necessary to walk through the alleys and market places in white Shabbat coats". Instead, they walked to a spot from where they could see the Temple Mount. There they recited those psalms that mention Jerusalem and Zion. (Yaari 1976: 345-346).

The first group of students of the Vilna Gaon made *aliya* at the end of the eighteenth century and settled in Safed. An 1810 letter describes how every year they would send some yeshiva students from Safed to Jerusalem to pray for the health of the supporters of the yeshiva. These students would offer these prayers at the Western Wall, as well as at the graves of Prophet Zechariah and of King Uzziah (Yaari 1943: 337).[6]

In an 1830 letter the heads of the Kollel Perushim in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed wrote to the Ten Lost Tribes that they prayed for their welfare at the Western Wall, at Rachel's Grave, at the Machpela cave in Hebron, and at the graves of many Talmudic sages. Though the Western Wall appeared first in this list and was called the 'Gate of Heaven', it did not seem to be considered more sacred than any of the other holy sites mentioned (Yaari 1943: 357).

In the 30s of the nineteenth century several Jewish observers reported that the Wall was used more frequently for prayer, but not for regular daily

devotions. Menachem Mendel Kaminetz (1800-73) who opened Jerusalem's first hotel in 1842, came from Lithuania to the Holy Land in 1833 and settled in Safed where he joined the students of the Wilna Gaon. He described his first visit to the Western Wall in 1833 as follows:

> We went to pray at the Western Wall. … Every Friday they go thither and many people sit there to receive alms. They recite a number of chapters from the Psalms, then they hold afternoon services and [they recite the psalms of] *Kabalat Shabbat*. … All who approach the Wall take off their shoes. Thereafter we went to the Zion Synagogue for evening prayers (Kaminetz 1840).

Kaminetz noted that people were engaged in a variety of activities at the *Kotel* — some read psalms, others read from Scriptures, while still others conducted regular *Mincha* prayer services. But everyone left the Western Wall for a synagogue when it was time to pray the Shabbat evening prayers. Evidently at this time Jews assessed the sanctity of the Wall as lesser than that of a synagogue. The requirement of a *mechitza* was not applied to the Western Wall because it was not considered a synagogue (where a *mechitza* is required). On the other hand, Kaminetz (and many others) reported that those who approached the Wall took off their shoes, something that is not practised today and is generally not required in a synagogue.[7]

The geographer Joseph Schwartz (1804-65), a contemporary of Kaminetz, wrote:

> This wall is visited by all our brothers on every feast and festival; and the large space at its foot is often so densely filled up, that all cannot perform their devotions here at the same time. It is also visited, though by less numbers, on every Friday afternoon and by some nearly every day (Schwartz 1850: 260).

Schwartz explained in an 1837 letter to his brother the type of 'devotions' he had observed. Emphasising that regular prayer services were usually held in the synagogue and not at the Western Wall, he wrote:

> All week long prayer services are conducted in the synagogue. Only on Friday afternoon does the *mincha* (afternoon) prayer take place out of doors at the Western Wall. But afterwards *Kabbalat Shabbat* (the psalms introducing the Sabbath) and the evening prayer (*maariv*) are again recited in the synagogue (Yaari 1943: 371).

Schwartz thus confirmed what Kaminetz had reported earlier.

Yizhak Parchi also made note of Friday afternoon prayers at the *Kotel* in an 1843 Hebrew publication:

> It is also the custom [in Jerusalem] to go every Friday to the Western Wall and sit there in groups. Some study the Mishnah, others study the weekly Torah portion with Rashi's commentary. Men and women come thither for prayer and supplications before the *Shechina* of our strength. There they recite the afternoon prayers (Memorandum 1930: 38).[8]

Isaac Ezekiel Yahuda, an old resident of Jerusalem, wrote that when his aged grandmother's mother came to Palestine in 1841

> she … used to go every Friday noon, summer and winter, to the *Kotel Maaravi*, and remain there to read the entire Book of Psalms and the Song of Songs, till it was time to kindle the Sabbath lights. In those days the city was forsaken and desolate. Not a single Jew was found [at the *Kotel*] at noon. However, from early afternoon people would come for the Inauguration of the Sabbath. So she would be there alone for many hours (Memorandum 1930: 41-42).

Sir David Wilkie, the first Christian professional artist to visit Jerusalem, made no mention of Friday afternoon prayers in an 1841 letter, but he did report that:

> … On Fridays it is their custom, men, women, and children, to collect where a portion of the wall of the Temple is left open, to weep and wail, and kiss the huge stones of the foundation, reading and chanting the 137th psalm. 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat, yea, and wept, when we thought of Zion.' (Wilkie 1843: 451).

William Henry Bartlett (1809:54), another British artist, best known for his numerous drawings rendered into steel engravings, described his visit to the Wailing Wall in his 1842 book. He wrote,

> We repaired to this place on Friday, when a considerable number usually assemble. In the shadow of the wall, on the right, were seated many venerable men, reading the book of the law, wearing out their declining days in the city of their fathers, and soon to be gathered to them in the mournful Valley of Jehoshaphat. There were also many women in their long white robes, who, as they entered the small area, walked along the sacred wall, kissing the ancient masonry and praying through the crevices with every appearance of deep devotion (Bartlett 1842: 140-141).

Rev. John Anderson (1804-67), a Scottish missionary, made two trips to Palestine in mid-century, visiting Jerusalem and the Wailing Wall on both occasions. In 1850 he wrote:

> Along the wall, in rows, were gathered men, women, and children. Some were reading the Bible in Hebrew, which they did in a loud and mournful tone, moving their bodies to and fro. Others were weeping aloud. Some laid their heads on the wall, and sobbed. Some kissed the stones, as if they had been living objects of affection. It was no affected grief, that of these poor Jews; it was the outbursting of the treasured grief of years. From the ends of the earth they had come to weep there. At times their wailing, generally deep and low, became loud and violent, as if the sight of the 'long desolations' had become 'greater than they could bear'. I never heard tones of deeper sorrow, and I never saw a scene more affecting than at the Jews' Place of Wailing (Anderson 1853: 125).

In the following year he observed:

> On both occasions when I was at the Place of Wailing, they had no set words, but everyone in his own words and in his own way gave utterance to his own sorrow. After remaining a short time I came away, leaving the poor Jews weeping there 'as they remembered Zion' (Anderson 1853: 248).

During the second half of the nineteenth century a number of Christian visitors reported what they saw on Friday afternoons at the Western Wall. James Creagh (1836-1910), a native of Ireland, described his 1866 visit to "the Howling-place of the Jews at Jerusalem". He found that the local Jews and Jewesses who participated in the weekly Friday afternoon event included "whole families of Jews, some dark and some fair, some wearing the English and some the Asiatic costume, and coming from every part of the world". Among those who were 'crying and wailing in the most bitter accents' were some "lovely Jewish girls, who wept and sobbed with an appearance of real grief that would appear more natural for the loss of a lover than for the misfortune of their nation in the remotest times" (Horowitz 2009).

Albert Rhodes (1840-94) served as US consul in Jerusalem in 1863-65. He recommended the prayers at "the wailing-place of the Jews" as a spot of interest for every traveller. On Friday afternoon every available spot along the foot of this wall is occupied by "weeping Jews ... the greater part of these are women, who often sit in little circles around a Talmud-learned Jew, who reads to them … portions of the Jewish chronicles". He also noted that "those [women] who arrive early … commence at one end of the wall and kiss and touch every stone within reach, from one end of the wall to the other". Rhodes made no mention of public communal prayers (Rhodes 1865: 363-364).

Alfred C. Smith (1822-98), visiting the Wailing Wall eight years later, did observe late-Friday-afternoon prayers and specifically noted the gender separation of worshippers. This is what he wrote about 'the Jews' wailing place':

> [most of the week there will be] two or three Israelites weeping and praying, but on Friday afternoon when we visited it there must have been 60 or 70 Jews of both sexes assembled for the very touching service which is held every week just before the Sabbath begins. We found the men assembled on one portion of the wall, the women at another… (Smith 1873: 274).

An 1884 report mentions daily synagogue services at the Western Wall, but emphasises the Friday afternoon services. Eliyahu Schei'id wrote:

> … the alley in front of the Western Wall serves as an open-air synagogue all year long. Regular synagogue services are conducted here daily. On Friday afternoon, starting at 1 p.m., afternoon services take place whenever there is a quorum of ten men. The service lasts 15-20 minutes and immediately after it is concluded another *minyan* starts.[9]

Public prayer and gender separation at the Western Wall

These and many other reports indicate that prior to the 1830s no public prayers were conducted at the Western Wall. Around that time the custom evolved for some Jerusalem Jews to pray the *mincha* prayer on Friday afternoons at the *Kotel.* I am not aware of any reports or photographs that indicate the use of a screen/*mechitza* to separate men and women worshipers any time before the late 1880s. This raises the question how was it possible to have an Orthodox communal prayer service without a *mechitza*? One possible answer is that on late Friday afternoons no Jewish women were present at the *Kotel* since all were busy at home, preparing the Shabbat meals and getting ready to light Shabbat candles. There is no need for a *mechitza* to separate men and women if only men are present. But there must have been women at the *Kotel* on Friday afternoons — woman pilgrims who were guests of local families did not need to prepare Shabbat meals. Others suggest that the requirement for a physical separator, such as a *mechitza*, applies only to a synagogue building or to a place where regular communal prayers are conducted three times a day, every day of the year. In other situations, such as in the house of mourners or on hikes, the practice is to separate men and women before starting the prayer service, but no *mechitza* is required. Therefore, as long as there were no regular prayers, three times a day, the *Kotel* was not considered a synagogue and gender separation without a *mechitza* was sufficient.

The popularity of Friday afternoon *mincha* prayers at the Western Wall continued throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century. Yisrael Meir Sofer (Schreiber) wrote in 1891 that most Jerusalem Jews hold regular prayers in their own synagogues, but on Friday afternoons they go to the Western Wall for afternoon prayers, returning to their own synagogues for *aravit*.[10]

The first reference to *daily* organised religious services (with a *minyan*/prayer quorum of at least ten males) at the Western Wall is dated 1874 (or 1871 according to another source) when Rabbi Hillel Moshe Gelbstein (1832-1907) organised daily afternoon and evening prayer services (*mincha* and *aravit*). But this project was the undertaking of one individual. It came to a sudden end when because of ill health Gelbstein was no longer able to take responsibility for continuing these services. His efforts to establish a synagogue in one of the courtyards facing the Western Wall were also unsuccessful.[11]

Regular daily prayer services, three times a day, did not take place at the Western Wall until late in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth century.[12] It was only at this time that the question of gender separation was raised in the public discourse. Evidently, until that time the Western Wall was a holy site but was not considered a synagogue so that the laws of a synagogue were not applied.

An early report of gender separation at the Wall was made by Dr. Christie, a minister of the Church of Scotland and a member of the Presbytery of Glasgow. He visited the Wailing Wall many times in the 1890s when he was teaching at the Mount Carmel Bible School in Haifa. He testified before the 1930 International Commission that '… there were Jewish men and women praying in groups, reciting after a leader and also as individuals, *the men and the women being apart* and the women occupying mainly the north end of the Wall'.[13]

When the very pious object

The anonymous author of *Mahazeh Erez Ha-Kedosha* (1891) described in detail the Western Wall and the Jewish prayers there on weekdays and on the Sabbaths. People of advanced age used to visit the Wall at midnight and pray till morning.

> From dawn to dusk Jews may be found there reciting Psalms and praying. Often minyanim come to pray for those who are ill, and all day long there is no end to loud praying and the loud wailing of women and children. ('Memorandum' 1930: 42).

The testimony of Annie E. Landau, the legendary Headmistress of Jerusalem's Evelina de Rothschild School from 1900 until her death in 1945, is of special importance because it deals directly with the presence or absence of a *mechitza* at the Western Wall in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. Known to everybody as 'Miss Landau' this London-born Orthodox Jewess became a member of Jerusalem's elite soon after arriving in the city in 1899. From the first Friday afternoon after her arrival and for many years thereafter she regularly prayed at the Western Wall. She testified that

> Orthodox women coming for prayer at the Wailing Wall, and I among them, often went in for prayer to the little enclosure on the left hand side of the Wailing Wall Pavement, since many of the strictly observant Jews objected to praying in the presence of women. This usually happened whenever there was no screen on the Pavement itself and someone raised an objection to women praying on the Pavement without being separated from the men.[14]

Miss Landau further recalled that apart from persons who came at all times for private devotions there was the custom that on the Sabbaths and the Festivals 'large groups of people, sometimes the greater part of a whole congregation' came to the Wall for the *Musaph* prayer, with each group taking its turn. She also noted that on *Tisha b'Av*, the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples, the Wall was visited by thousands of worshipers and regular Services were conducted. It appears from her testimony that at the turn of the century the general practice was to have communal services without a *mechitza,* but with women and men praying in separate groups. But she does note that

> … on certain occasions a screen used to be put up to separate the women at prayer from the menfolk on the Pavement. This was done in particular when a prominent devout worshipper of the community and specially a prominent orthodox foreign visitor came for prayer at the Wailing Wall and objected to praying in the sight of women.[15]

She further described how in 1902, after there had been no rain for several seasons,

> … the communities of all religious denominations were asked and did in fact offer special prayers for rain. The Chassidic element of Jerusalem Jews stated that we could not expect any answer to our prayers for rain when we had let the Jewish custom of the separation of the sexes at prayer lapse at our holiest praying place, the Wailing Wall, though we had kept it in our Synagogues. Accordingly, a screen was put up for that occasion. Hundreds of people flocked to the Wailing Wall for special prayers for rain and that day was a fast day for the community.

Miss Landau did not identify these 'strictly observant Jews [who] objected to praying in the presence of women'. Some were prominent Orthodox foreign visitors, while others came from Jerusalem's 'Chassidic element'. The latter group may reflect the demographic changes that were occurring in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Jerusalem's Jewish population due to the large influx of Eastern European Jews that broke the Sephardi hegemony of the Jewish community.

Margaret Thomas (1842-1929), an English-born Australian travel writer, poet and artist, was in Jerusalem in the waning years of the century. She wrote,

> …the Wailing Place of the Jews … should be seen on Fridays to be seen at its best. … Leaning tenderly against these stones, may be seen sometimes as many as two hundred Jews, reading, praying aloud and weeping, men in one group and women in another (Thomas 1899: 160-163).

At the turn of the century benches were placed at the Western Wall for the use of elderly worshipers (Rossoff 2001: 231). Mendele Hacohan Pakover told the International Commission (Report of Commission 1931:398-401) that in 1900 he put up a partition to separate men and women at the Wailing Wall and that three Jewish courts appointed him to be in charge of that screen. For about ten years, on Sabbaths and Festivals, he used to put up the screen at the Western Wall. Other witnesses confirmed that on certain occasions during the first decade of the 20th century they saw a screen before the Wall.[16]

As more and more Jewish worshipers flocked to the Western Wall, Muslim officials became increasingly vocal in their opposition to the presence of a dividing screen, tables and benches, because they feared that the alley might become a synagogue. In this conflict between the Muslim and Jewish

authorities the Ottoman rulers tended to side with the former, though for cause and baksheesh they were known to make exceptions.

Recent history

Regular, daily, public prayer services, three times a day, did not take place at the Western Wall until late in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth century. By 1941, they had become established and so popular that the British-appointed chief rabbis of Palestine, Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog (1888-1959) and Ben Zion Uziel (1880-1953), felt it necessary to issue regulations for proper behaviour at the wall. These rules included a prohibition against riding a bicycle through the alleyway; the strict separation of men and women (even though the Mandatory government did not permit the erection of a physical barrier for gender separation); and an admonition not to start a second prayer service while one was already under way.

Following the 1948 War of Israeli Independence, the Jordanian army occupied East Jerusalem, including the Old City and its Christian and Jewish holy places. The armistice treaty between Jordan and Israel required free access to all Holy Places for everyone, including Jews.[17] However, between 1949 and 1967, Jordan violated this provision and prevented any Jew from approaching the Western Wall. Once the Israeli army dislodged the Jordanian army from the Old City in the 1967 Six Day War, access to the Western Wall was again possible for everyone. The first Jewish prayer service at the Wall took place even while the fighting was still going on in other parts of the Old City.

Shortly after the re-conquest of Jerusalem's Old City the current Kotel Plaza was established. A short time later the Knesset passed the Protection of Holy Places Law 5727/1967. The Chief Rabbis were instructed to set rules and regulations for the *Kotel*. A *mechitza* was erected to separate men and women worshipers on the lower level immediately adjacent to the wall, but at that time no such separation was demanded on the upper level where various public, non-religious events (such as the army's swearing-in ceremonies) took place. On special occasions so many people came to the *Kotel* to worship that there was no more room on the lower level and the overflow spilled over to the upper level. For many years in the 1990s I participated in the sunrise *minyan* on the festival of *Shavuot*. Invariably when I arrived there was no more room on the lower level and I joined a *minyan* on the upper level. There each of the groups scrupulously observed gender separation but there was no *mechitza* anywhere on the upper level. Some years later a *mechitza* was also required on the upper level.

In more recent years the area of contention has shifted to the egalitarian prayer area, often referred to as Robinson's Arch or Ezrat Yisrael. This site is situated south of the main Western Wall plaza, on the other side of the Mughrabi Bridge. In 2016 the Israeli government approved what is known as the Kotel Compromise which called for the establishment of this non-

Orthodox mixed prayer area. Under political pressure from Orthodox parties the government backtracked from this plan in the following year. One of the reasons for the opposition to this plan was the 2017 ruling of Jerusalem's Sephardic chief rabbi Shlomo Amar that 'all the laws of a synagogue and a house of study apply' anywhere along the length of the Western Wall because 'along its entire length [it] is a holy place'.[18]

Summary

The assertion has been made that in previous centuries, especially in the nineteenth century, a rigid separation of men and women at the Western Wall was not practised or enforced. The available evidence from 19th century photographs, as well as from travelers' reports and testimonies of participants is either ambiguous or silent on this point. It appears that the real question is how the Western Wall was used in earlier times — not whether or not there was gender separation. Since its inception in the sixteenth century the Western Wall was used as a place for prayer and mourning by individuals. It was only during the last decades of the nineteenth century that it became a site for communal prayer. The first reference to *daily* organised religious services (with a *minyan*/prayer quorum of at least ten males) at the Western Wall is dated 1874. It was only at this time that the question of gender separation was raised in the public discourse. Evidently, until that time the Western Wall was a holy site but was not considered a synagogue so that the laws of a synagogue were not applicable.

Endnotes

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of my grandson Yedidya "Didi" Baum who died on 27 November 2022/4 Kislev 5783 at the age of 38. May his memory be a blessing for all Israel.
2. *Kotel* is short for *Kotel Ha-ma'aravi*, the Hebrew for Western Wall. In previous centuries this wall was called (mostly by non-Jewish writers) the Wailing Wall (German: Klagemauer) because Jerusalem Jews used this site to lament for their destroyed Temple and pray for its restoration. The Hebrew usage throughout the ages was always *Kotel Ha-ma'aravi* or *Kotel*.
3. Prof. Golinkin listed 11 nineteenth century photographs of the *Kotel.* He concluded that these photos showed men and women praying side by side as individuals or in small groups or in mixed groups (Golinkin 2010). I have additional photos on my computer archive that show the same, though I would leave out the word 'praying' because there is no way to determine the activities in which these people were engaged.

4. Two of the photos in Golinkin's list do show a *mechitza* but these were taken in the first decade of the twentieth century and therefore do not fit the time-frame of my investigation (Golinkin 2010).
5. In the mid-nineteenth century some of the younger and sturdier Jerusalem women started a "new" custom to pray at Rachel's Tomb every *Rosh Chodesh* (New Moon) (Schiller 1977). For a more detailed discussion of Rachel's Tomb see Shragai 2005 and 2010, and Bowman 2014.
6. For the *aliya* of the students of the Vilna Gaon, see Morgenstern 2007.
7. Taking off shoes is not known in European synagogues, but is practised in many North African communities. Muslims are also required to take off their shoes before entering a mosque. The source for this practice for both Jews and Muslims is Exodus 3.5 where God demands that Moses take off his shoes before approaching the Burning Bush. See also Sperber (1998: 3: 84-86).
8. Zionist Archives, file J1\331\2, document 48, citing *Sefer Yishuv Ha'aretz,* 1843, 17 [Hebrew]. Parchi's comments were also cited by the *Memorandum on the Western Wall on behalf of the Rabbinate. Jerusalem, June 1930,* 38, archived at Zionist Archives, file J17\6805.
9. Cited in *Ariel* 180-181 (2007), 11.
10. Zionist Archives, file J1-331\2, document 24, citing Israel Meir Sofer (Schreiber), 1891. Machaze Eretz Hakedosha*,* Jerusalem [Hebrew].
11. Zionist Archives, file J1\331\2, document 54b. See also Rossoff (2001). The International Commission's report mentions that about 1860 an unnamed rabbi used to hire a quorum to pray every day morning, afternoon, and evening, at the Wall (Jewish Exhibit No. 1, 39). I have not found any supporting evidence for this 1860 claim.
12. Gliss, Yaakov. (n.d). *Minhagei Eretz Yisrael*. Jerusalem, [Hebrew], citing Keter Shem Tov. (n.d.).
13. Typescript copy archived at Zionist Archives, File J1\331\6. Emphasis added.
14. Typescript copy archived at Zionist Archives, file J1\ 331\6.
15. Typescript copy archived at Zionist Archives, file J1\331\6.
16. *Report of the Commission…* (1931), 398-401; also cited in the Commission's Summary.
17. Jordanian-Israeli General Armistice Agreement, 3 April 1949, art. 8, par. 2. Accessed at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arm03.asp.
18. *Times of Israel,* 8 July 2017.

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