

Reform Zionist Leaders Respond to Leah Aharoni's Op-Ed on the Kotel Agreement

Leah Aharoni's "Undermining unity at the Kotel won't make Reform great again" (op-ed JJ, July 11) is so riddled with mistakes and faulty metaphors that we are compelled to respond in order to set the record straight.

Ms. Aharoni began her tirade against the international Reform and Conservative movements, the Jewish Federations of North America, and Women of the Wall in our advocacy of an egalitarian and equal prayer space at the holiest site in Judaism by citing a Chassidic tale in which a father tells his son that "If you want to be taller, make yourself a mound and get up on it. But don't drive your brother into a hole."

We in the Israeli and international liberal religious community are not trying to knock anyone down. All we are doing is reminding the Prime Minister and his government that the Kotel Agreement that he himself initiated and oversaw negotiations in good faith led by Jewish Agency Director Natan Sharansky is about equal recognition for all Jewish religious streams in Israel and preserving Israeli democracy.

Despite Ms. Aharoni's false claim that our protest is a way to prop up a failing liberal Judaism, the facts are otherwise. The liberal movements in fact growing rapidly.

Her claim that Reform and Conservative Judaism represent only a combined 25% of American Jews is wrong according to the Pew Survey that reports that 35% of the American Jewish community is Reform and 18% are Conservative (<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>)

Her statement is pure nonsense that "Outside of North America, in Israel, Europe, Russia, and Australia, when Jews want to pray they go to an Orthodox synagogue, even if they are not observant in their private life. Reform and Conservative movements are negligible there."

There are, in fact, vibrant Reform and Conservative movements and synagogues in every country in the world where there is a Jewish community.

Ms. Aharoni's claim that "the main reason the Kotel is run like an Orthodox synagogue [is because for] the overwhelming majority of Jews worldwide, this is the face of Jewish holy places" is also false.

The Kotel became an orthodox "synagogue" after 1967 because the Chief Rabbi of the army was given jurisdiction over the area and because the Israeli government has handed over the official power of religion to the most extreme and fanatical ultra-Orthodox authorities.

The Kotel area is a national site and we in the non-Orthodox world believe it should be open and accessible to all. After the Kotel Agreement was made, Prime Minister Netanyahu said with pride that the agreement now enabled the Kotel to be "one wall for one people."

Ms. Aharoni wrote: “By creating an alternative at the Kotel, Judaism’s holiest place, the liberal movements had hoped to create legitimacy in the eyes of Israeli and visiting Jews. For if you can pray this way at the Kotel, why not look up (or establish) a liberal community back home. While I disagree with the Reform and Conservative rejection of the Torah, attracting new membership is certainly their prerogative. But tearing the holiest Jewish site apart is not the way to do it. Questioning the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry only hurts all of us. Bashing the Israeli Orthodox community isn’t what’s going to make the liberal movements great again.”

No - Ms. Aharoni. Our idea is to grant equal access to the Kotel as a national site to the majority of Israelis who do not consider themselves Orthodox and who would like to pray there without interference by the extremist Orthodox authorities.

Ms. Aharoni’s most egregious accusation is her assertion that we in the Reform and Conservative movements reject the Torah. To the contrary, we in the liberal streams believe that women ought to have the right and to be able to read and hear the Torah at the Kotel just like men.

We are not bashing Israeli Orthodoxy, though we vehemently disagree with its claim to be the only true and authentic expression of Judaism. Rather, we insist that Orthodoxy and the liberal movements should have equal rights to pray according to our customs and values at the Kotel. We do not at all wish to supplant Orthodoxy.

Ms. Aharoni says that “Maybe they [Reform Jews] should consider what makes traditional Jewish practice attractive to young Jews and do more of that.”

She ought to realize that extremist Orthodox religious claims that there is only one way to practice Judaism is among of the single greatest turn-offs to the younger generation of Diaspora Jews and is one of the reasons that young Jews are turning away from the State of Israel.

In her op-ed, Ms. Aharoni is called the “co-founder of Women For the Wall.” Her organization is to be distinguished from “Women of the Wall” which has been the driving force for equal rights for women at the holiest site in Judaism for more than 25 years. Ms. Aharoni has nothing to do with that large group of Israeli Jewish women.

Rabbi Josh Weinberg, President, Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA)
Rabbi John Rosove, National Chairperson, Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA)