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Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site (review)

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Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut (eds.)
Women of the Wall:
Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site
Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2003. 429 pp.

reviewed by Brenda E. Brasher, University of Aberdeen

Women of the Wall (WoW), a group formed to hold women-only public prayer services at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, is one of the more controversial outgrowths of the twentieth-century collision of Jewish traditions with the women's movement. The collection of essays and reminiscences under review, edited by two of the group's American members, presents a continuum of insider viewpoints on the decades-long gender conflict sparked by WoW's activities at the Wall.

In a concise, helpful introduction, the editors explain that WoW had its genesis in December 1988, when approximately seventy women attending the first International Congress for the Empowerment of Jewish Women went together to worship and read aloud from the Torah in the women's section of the Western Wall plaza. According to Bonna Haberman, who was among those who went to the Wall that day, their action was partly a response to a proposal she had put forward at the conference for a regular *Rosh Hodesh* (New Moon) women's prayer group meeting at the Wall. The tremendous impact that service had on those who participated in it sparked off a local initiative to follow through on Haberman's proposal. Women of the Wall came into being.

After considerable deliberation, WoW embraced the practices of women donning *tallitot* (prayer shawls), praying aloud in public, and reading from the Torah scroll, all prohibited to women according to conventional Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law. In keeping with the Orthodox religious commitments of several founders, the group refrained from reciting *devarim shebikedushah*, prayers that traditionally may be recited only in the presence

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of a *minyan* of ten men. When the women returned to the Wall, some of the ultra-Orthodox worshippers, women and men, greeted them with suspicion and then with violence, which included the hurling of heavy objects at them from the men's section. In a move that outraged the group's advocates, law enforcement personnel responded by arresting several WoW members rather than their attackers. Soon after that, government officials charged with overseeing religious activity at the Wall imposed new regulations restricting group prayer by women at the site.

To the dismay of WoW supporters, the sectors of Israeli society whose philosophical inclinations were such that they might have rallied to WoW initiatives failed to do so. Secular feminists did not see the relevance of women praying in public at the Western Wall, while some religious feminists were put off by WoW's willingness to accommodate such gender-discriminatory aspects of traditional Jewish practice as the separation of men and women by a *mehitzah* (partition) and the requirement of ten males to constitute a *minyan*. Most surprising to WoW, the group garnered scant support from organized Orthodox Jewish women's groups, which considered such issues as the plight of *agunot* (women unable to obtain a Jewish religious divorce) and women's religious education more pressing than the endeavor to alter established worship customs at the Western Wall. However, WoW did garner the backing of an American ancillary group that named itself the International Committee for Women of the Wall (ICWOW). With ICWOW behind them, WoW pressed forward with a series of lawsuits designed to advance women's rights to public prayer at the Wall.

Divided into four major sections, *Women of the Wall* presents the stories of WoW's participants. It opens with a set of highly accessible, reflective writings in which they express what it has been like for them to pray with the group at the Wall. They paint a complex portrait of spiritual wonder interlaced with fear, the consequence of praying while looking over one's shoulder to ascertain what might be launched over the *mehitzah*. Next comes a section that recounts and analyzes the legal and political issues WoW has faced. Its high point is an excellent article by Frances Raday, professor of law and WoW's legal counsel, which brings into crisp focus the intersection of democracy, gender rights, and freedom of worship into which WoW has stepped. The third section, Denominational Views, is, unfortunately, the book's weakest point. While its articles are readable and interesting, the section as a whole

does little to clarify the responses of various streams within Judaism to the issues raised by WoW.

The final section, on “Halakhic Theory and Ritual Objects,” is comparatively short and not especially well integrated with the other sections, but it raises some of the most interesting topics in the entire volume. Rivka Haut’s essay describes how women’s *tefillah* (prayer) groups (WTG) developed as a dimension of Orthodox women’s spiritual practice and the relevance this had for WoW’s commitment to *halakhah*. Vanessa Ochs’s article on the material culture of women’s prayer introduces a refreshing tangibility to the text. She reminds readers of the feel and texture of the Wall, the symbolic richness of donning *kipot* (ritual head coverings) and *tallitot*, and what they can contribute to women’s spiritual practice.

Women of the Wall is a partisan account of an unpopular religious struggle, and it exhibits the weaknesses inherent to the mode along with its already-mentioned strengths. Scant attention is paid to the history of women’s attendance at the Western Wall, though *bat mitvah* celebrations and other formal and informal religious activities took place in its women’s section long before Women of the Wall existed. An appreciation of the political problems associated with holy sites in the Middle East is largely missing. Official altering of existing practices at the Western Wall would likely be invoked in attempts to justify the alteration of precariously balanced precedents at holy sites across Israel, but the potentially volatile consequences are never addressed. The nationalistic dimension of the Wall’s symbolism is also ignored, as are the barriers this introduces to any feminist interpretation of prayer there by women.

WoW suffered a major setback, if not a legal defeat of its cause, during the period when this review was being written. On May 19, 2003, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that WoW could not realize its legal right to pray at the Wall because the state could not guarantee the safety of the participants. Instead, they were consigned to pray at an alternative site, Robinson’s Arch, near but separated from the Wall plaza. How WoW will respond to the court’s decision remains unclear, but it would not startle this reviewer if they forged a way to press on with their claims. To WoW, the rights they seek for women at the Western Wall are fundamental to any meaningful advance in women’s rights in Judaism. As a women’s prayer group that uniquely integrates women from denominationally diverse backgrounds, WoW also believes that its

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composition and methods provide a model of progressive inclusiveness that ought to be adopted by other Jewish organizations.

Women of the Wall succeeds in portraying an arresting panorama of female religious innovators endeavoring both to claim and critique an inherited religious tradition. While the definitive critical work on WoW remains to be written, this book, assembled by the members themselves, offers an invaluable assemblage of primary accounts. As such, it is a necessary addition to Jewish studies and women's studies library collections.