The ‘Wall’ comes tumbling down for women

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The power of prayer belongs to all.

The Israeli cabinet confirmed that Jan. 31 by voting to create a place for non-Orthodox Jewish prayer at the Western Wall.

Now both women and men can pray there together; side by side.

A new plaza will be built where genders can mix. Two other areas will stay segregated as they always have.

It’s a solution Solomon would love. It’s not quite cutting a baby in half, but it is carving out a space so all are honored and included.

Anat Hoffman, director of Women of the Wall, said publicly: “For the first time ever, you will have a choice.” She and her group have held monthly prayer gatherings at the Wall. They want women to have the right to wear Jewish prayer shawls and read from the Torah at the Wall.

And why shouldn’t women be allowed to?

Women must serve in the Israeli army. They make up over a third of all Israeli Defense Forces soldiers, yet they can get arrested for carrying Torah scrolls and wearing traditional prayer shawls near the Western Wall.

Women hold up half the world. They shouldn’t just be tolerated at the Wall, their presence should be celebrated at the holiest of all places to pray.

What makes the Wall so holy?

An article on aish.com by Rabbi Shraga Simmons offers six reasons:

1. The Wall is closest to the Holy of Holies. The Western Wall survived even when the Temple Mount, considered the center of the spiritual world, didn’t.

2. The Wall is an eternal symbol of the survival of the Jews. No matter how many times Jerusalem was destroyed, the Western Wall remained standing.

3. It is a place for pilgrims and tears. Simmons quoted this Talmud teaching, “When the Temple was destroyed, all the Gates of Heaven were closed, except for one: the Gate of Tears.”

4. The Wall is the place to direct your prayers, no matter where you live in the world. The rabbi cited a Kabbalistic tradition that says “all prayers from around the world ascend to this spot, from where they then ascend to heaven.”

5. It is the wall that love built. Legend has it the poorest builders constructed the Western Wall. When the Temple was destroyed, angels spread their wings over the Wall and promised the work of the poor would never be destroyed.

6. Heroes made the Wall holy by fighting for every stone to survive. Simmons wrote, “In the Six Day War, Israeli paratroopers entered the Old City through the Lion’s Gate. ‘Har Habayit b’Yadeinu!’ – came the triumphant cry – ‘The Temple Mount is in our hands!’ Amidst shofar blasts, grown men wept and danced at the Western Wall.”

I’d offer a seventh reason: the massive wall is God’s waiting room. It is a place where prayers are offered and we wait in joyful hope for them to be answered.

When we went to Israel on our honeymoon in 1997, we stood in awe at those massive stones, tons of them, stacked 187 feet high. It was mindblowing to realize that Wall was built during Herod’s time. It felt holy to touch the stone and even holier to see what people had left there. Tiny notes, hundreds of them, tucked in the cracks and crevices, prayers for healing, for hope, for miracles.

I paused to put one in. Not for me, but for our dear friends who had desperately wanted to adopt a child. They couldn’t have a child of their own. Beth had diabetes that wore her body out. The only baby she was able to have didn’t live long enough to come home.

They deserved this perfect joy. So I wrote it down. Beth was Catholic, her husband was Jewish. Their God was neither.

At this holiest site, as people prayed and chanted and sang, I tucked in that small slice of prayer, their greatest hope.

She arrived a year later, a bundle of joy from Russia. A little girl with big brown eyes they named Michaela. She’s now 18. She was the answer to a prayer and proof for me of the power of that Wall, the power of a God that is present for all – women and men, Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, even Gentiles like me and Beth.

The Western Wall is where people pour their hearts out to God, a God who loves us too much to choose sides.

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