From Wailing to Rebirth: The Development of the Western Wall as an Israeli National Symbol After the Six-Day War

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Abstract This article focuses on the changes that occurred in the significance of Israel's Western Wall after the Six-Day War in 1967, when the site became a prominent Jewish and Israeli symbol. We examine the processes that established the Western Wall as a site combining both Jewish and Israeli components of identity — a place of national importance in Israeli consciousness. During these processes, the religious and historic contexts of the site remained intact and were even strengthened, but they were now supplemented by modern Zionist-national values and expressions. The new reality created at the Western Wall accorded it a new and extraordinary status as a national holy place. The site continued to represent the past and Israel's religious and historical heritage, and Jews continued to visit it for religious and traditional reasons. The innovation was that the Western Wall was now infused with new content relevant to the post-Six-Day War period and to the social and cultural characteristics of Israeli society during those years. The site served as a source of connection for the diverse expressions of Israeli identity, and it accommodated a relatively wide range of worldviews, from religious-traditional (and perhaps even ultra-Orthodox) perspectives to civil-national perspectives.

Keywords Western Wall · Holy places · Nationalism · National holy place

On the third day of the Six-Day War — June 8, 1967 — Israeli forces swept into the Old City of Jerusalem and reached the Western Wall. Following the military conquest of the Old City, a struggle began among various state authorities over

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control of the site and the development of the Western Wall as the most important Jewish holy place in the State of Israel.

In the first months after the Six-Day War, the question of Diaspora Jewry's role and status at the Western Wall was not a topic of discussion in Israel or in the Jewish world at large. Moreover, when Diaspora Jews made an effort to share in the symbolism of the Western Wall, the Chief Rabbinate, the Ministry of Religion, and the Knesset rejected the effort out of hand. In July of 1968, members of the Reform Judaism movement sought to conduct a festive prayer service at the Western Wall during their annual convention. This was intended to express their excitement about the State of Israel, Jerusalem, and the Western Wall. The site symbolized for them not only the destruction of the Temple, but also many components of their identity as Jews living in the Diaspora. The Western Wall offered a solution for an internal debate that characterized much of North American Jewry regarding their identity and sense of Jewish peoplehood (Pianko 2015). The Orthodox religious establishment in Israel viewed the Reform Jews' plan to pray at the Western Wall — according to their religious practice, with women and men together — as an anti-Orthodox plot to take control of the site (Wallfish 1968). However, the desire of Reform Jews to pray there stemmed from motives that were much more complex; it reflected not only their religious customs, but also an aspiration to express their Jewish-national identity and sense of Jewish peoplehood. Even today, the connection between Diaspora Jewry and the Western Wall is part of a broader dispute pertaining to Israel-Diaspora relations and the tensions among Israeli identity, Jewish identity, and Jewish peoplehood.

Hardly a day has gone by since the Six-Day War when the Western Wall has not been a part of the Israeli public agenda. The recent establishment of an egalitarian plaza in the area of Robinson's Arch, which is adjacent to the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount, and the attempt to find a solution that will enable free access to the Western Wall for non-Orthodox and egalitarian Jews — a majority of Diaspora Jews — are part of an ongoing debate on the place and nature of Israeli and Jewish diasporal content at the sacred site (The *Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 2017; *Haaretz*, June 27, 2017). The attempt to find a framework that will enable conflicting attitudes and religious beliefs and practices to find their expression at the Western Wall, without diminishing the rights of the other, characterizes the more general process the Western Wall has undergone since 1967.

Following the military conquest of the Old City during the Six-Day War, public figures began to stream toward the Western Wall, including Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Minister of Religion Zerach Warhaftig (Harif 1967; Warhaftig 1998). In retrospect, the visits to the Western Wall by these two ministers were a harbinger of the following years: a struggle among various state authorities over control of the site and the development of the Western Wall as the most important Jewish holy place in the State of Israel.

Since June of 1967, Israel's leaders have had to decide how to deal with the Western Wall. Is it only a Jewish holy place, as it was primarily in the past, or is it also a site of national importance? Should it be treated as a ceremonial space available to the entire Israeli-Jewish public, or should it be reserved only for religious pilgrimage and prayer?

This article focuses on the changes that occurred in the status of the Western Wall in the years following the Six-Day War as the site became a salient Jewish and Israeli symbol. We examine the processes that established the Western Wall as a national site that combines numerous Jewish components of identity and that serves as a prominent Israeli “town square.” During this period, the connection between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Western Wall grew significantly stronger. The Paratroopers Brigade was the first to conduct ceremonies at the site. Later, as the connection between the IDF and the Western Wall deepened, Israelis held annual Memorial Day ceremonies there, as well as swearing-in ceremonies for new IDF recruits. These ceremonies stoked tensions with ultra-Orthodox Jews and the religious establishment (the Chief Rabbinate and the Ministry of Religion), which worked over the years to ensure the primacy of Judaism at the site and to keep men and women separate — not only at the prayer site, but also in the Western Wall plaza, where these ceremonies take place. In addition, Israelis and Diaspora Jews held an increasing number of mass gatherings there over the years. These gatherings addressed a broad range of national and religious topics. Some expressed distress and a call for Jewish-national solidarity, while others were a show of religious strength — for example, protest rallies against Sabbath violations and archeological excavations. All of these developments are related, and they reflect the significant changes that occurred in the public image of the Western Wall, establishing it as a place of national importance in the consciousness of Israelis and Diaspora Jews. The religious and historical contexts of the site remained intact, and they were even strengthened, but they were now supplemented by modern Zionist-national values and expressions.

The Western Wall, which was one of the retaining walls built by Herod the Great during the Roman period, became sanctified because of its relative proximity to the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism. The Western Wall was the place to which local and Diaspora Jews directed their prayers for many generations. During the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, when the Zionist movement extended its activities into Palestine, the status of the Western Wall as the “Wailing Wall,” the place where Jews lament the destruction of the temples, was strengthened. Simultaneously, Zionists began to view the Western Wall as one of the major symbols representing the religious-historical ties between the Land of Israel and the Zionist renewal.

The Six-Day War generated an enormous shock wave at the Temple Mount and the area around the Western Wall. There was an atmosphere of messianic times, accompanied by calls for Jews to ascend the Temple Mount. Some also called for the destruction of the mosques there and for the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple in its place. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan feared that establishing a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount would unite the Muslim world against the State of Israel, and he ordered that the administration of the sacred site be left in the hands of the Muslim *waqf* (“charitable endowment”). At the same time, the Mughrabi neighborhood adjacent to the Western Wall was razed. The act of building a large plaza on the ruins of this Muslim neighborhood redirected the surging messianic sentiments from the Temple Mount to the Western Wall, turning the latter into a preeminent religious and national symbol (Cohen 2017). The broad plaza at the foot

of the Western Wall provided a view of it from afar, enabling one to see it as both a secular Israeli monument and a sacred space. Thus, the Western Wall became a symbolic religious-historical and national site of the utmost importance (Schwartz 2017).

The State of Israel's concession of sovereignty over the Temple Mount, while strengthening its national and religious hold on the Western Wall, came in the context of a Palestinian challenge to Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount and the Western Wall and the Arabs' refusal to recognize Jewish religious and historical ties to these places. This Arab withholding of recognition has characterized the Palestinian national movement since the 1920s (Porath 1977; Reiter 2008). The national importance that Israelis accorded to the Western Wall after 1967 was, in part, a response to such voices on the Arab side, and we can assume that the symbolic aspect of the Western Wall strengthened in the wake of these challenges.

In recent years, a number of studies have been written on the history of the Western Wall and its surroundings since 1967. These include studies about the physical development of the Western Wall plaza and the significance of the area's redesign (Cohen 2009; Nitzan-Shifan 2011; Cohen-Hattab 2016), and the connection between pilgrimage and tourism at the Western Wall (Cohen-Hattab 2010a, b). Some of the researchers focus on sociological and anthropological questions related to the Western Wall and their implications for Israeli society and Diaspora Jewry (Storper-Perez and Goldberg 1994), including the significance of the Women of the Wall organization's struggle for the right to pray at the site (Chesler and Haut 2003; Reiter 2016). Other studies address legal issues related to the Western Wall (Berkovitz 2001; Reiter 2009) and the tension among religious, national, and Israeli values at the site (Azaryahu 2002; Cohen-Hattab 2010a, b), including the role and significance of archeology (Bar and Cohen-Hattab 2017).

This article supplements existing research and addresses the question of the development of the Western Wall as a national Israeli symbol. This subject raises key questions about the tension between state and religion. In Israel's case, this is particularly complex, because the state is defined as both Jewish and democratic. The question of separating religion from the state in Israel has been a subject of contention from the outset. On the one hand, secular Israelis argue that a modern democratic state should not coerce its citizens to observe religious commandments. On the other hand, religious Israelis contend that separation of religion and state would lead Israel to lose its character as a Jewish state. Over the years, heated arguments over religion-state relations have been stirred by legislation pertaining to conversion, marriage and divorce, kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) and the character of the Sabbath in the public sphere (Stern 2003; Ravitzky 2005). Amid the struggles that have occurred in Israeli society in recent decades over the character of the state, the Western Wall received a new identity that turned it into a battleground between religious and national aspirations. It also became a place where religion and nationality blended, a symbol of the national-religious symbiosis that flourished in the wake of the Six-Day War.

Nationalism and Holy Places

Prior to the Six-Day War, sacred Jewish space was clearly separate from sacred national-state space in Israel. While sacred Jewish space primarily comprised holy gravesites of figures from the Bible, the Mishnah, and the Talmud, the sacred national-state space mainly consisted of battlegrounds, memorial sites, and the graves of Zionist leaders (Azaryahu 2002; Bar 2016). The first time these maps partially overlapped and combined was after the Six-Day War, when the Western Wall was established as both a national memorial site and a holy place.

In the academic research, nationalism is perceived as one of the leading processes in structuring modern society — an ideological and practical framework for shaping a shared national identity. Many studies have examined the role of geographic space in shaping national identity. Tombstones, historic relics, cemeteries, and battlefields are seen as shapers of identity and as key symbols in the growth of modern nationalism (Mosse 1975, 1990). The history of these places is seen as bestowing national rights, and it serves as an anchor in linking societies to the national space and in molding the local national consciousness. This connection between the past and the space is often accorded national meaning via new interpretations that emphasize the importance of various places from a historic perspective in the spirit of the emerging national ethos (Bar-Tal and Staub 1997).

But what about holy places in the national space and their role as part of it? To what extent have they influenced national identity in the modern era, and how have they contributed toward shaping this identity? Have nations tended to use holy sites, like historic sites, to define their identity? Have ancient and new holy places become part of the national sacred space?

Because of the inclination of most Western nation-states to separate religion and nationalism, the combination of religious symbolism and nationalism is relatively rare. Therefore, temples, mosques, synagogues, churches, and holy tombs have usually not become part of the national sacred space. It is true that throughout history, churches have often served as coronation sites in various countries. This custom has also continued in some states, where leaders are sworn in at churches that are sometimes defined as “national.” But it is much rarer that the holy places themselves contribute to the establishment of national legitimacy, partly through ceremonies of national significance.

Contrary to this reality in most of the world’s countries, where the two sacred spaces — civil-national-state and religious — are separate, Judaism’s primacy in the State of Israel influences the perception of the national sacred space. The Jewish religion assumes an important role in Israeli nationalism. Religion and state are intertwined, and Israelis have neither the ability nor the desire to separate them (Katz 1979; Almog 1992; Shapira et al. 2000).¹ The connection between religion and nation is expressed in many different ways in Israel. For example, today, the Ministry of Religious Services operates a national center for holy places that is primarily responsible for fostering Jewish holy sites.

¹ The idea of mobilizing holy places to promote the idea of a national Jewish revival in the Land of Israel can be traced to the late Ottoman period (see Cohen-Hattab and Kohn 2017).

One of the prominent scholars in the study of the roots of modern nationality is Anthony Smith, who emphasizes the central importance that nations attribute to their historical roots and the role these roots play in shaping a nation's shared modern identity. This importance is often conveyed via myths, symbols, values, traditions, and shared memories (Smith 2000). Smith focuses on the popular, emotional, and moral dimension of the nation and the way in which the members of a nation draw inspiration and legitimacy from a particular piece of land or a political alliance. According to Smith, modern nationalism entails uncovering and interpreting the past for the purposes of the present, as well as a conscious choice to interpret the past in a way that will mold the community into a modern nation. The Jewish people has a special place in Smith's thinking about nationalism. He regards Jews as an ancient people who have undergone many changes in their long historical path toward a modern national identity, and he recognizes the religious component that has played a key role in Jewish culture throughout the generations (Smith 2000: 44–50)

Against this background, it is interesting to examine the perception of the Western Wall as one of the prominent sites in the Jewish tradition, a place that represents the past (religious, biblical, and exilic, and the yearning for redemption), and one that was adapted to meet evolving national needs after it came under Israeli-Jewish sovereignty. The State of Israel's appropriation of the Western Wall area in June 1967 further reinforced the national status of the site, a process that had already begun during the period of British rule (Saposnik 2015; Cohen-Hattab and Kohn 2017). In the wake of the Six-Day War, the site became a Jewish and national holy place under Israeli control for the first time, an extraordinary phenomenon on an international scale. This holy place, where the Israeli flag now flies atop a tall flagpole, highlights the uniqueness of the phenomenon of combining religion and nationhood, which intensified in the post-1967 period (*Government Gazette*, September 14, 1967; Bar 2015).

As will be seen below, during the years following the Six-Day War, a dynamic process took place in which the national component of the image of the Western Wall was formed. This was accompanied by spirited religious activity that was compatible with the new reality developing there. These processes were not equivalent with regard to their cultural strength, since they both drew their strength from different psychological sources. But the growth of these two forces at the site during this period occurred in relation to one other; they sometimes drew sustenance from each other. Thus, for example, many of the worshippers at the Western Wall belonged to the national-religious (*dati-leumi*) camp and saw the development of the Western Wall as both an Israeli and a Jewish symbol, and as a true expression of their religious and spiritual worldview.

Between Religion and Nation, or, Who is Responsible for the Western Wall?

The Western Wall remained under the IDF's control in the immediate aftermath of the war (Welner 1967), but the question of its future hovered in the air. Various authorities were assigned responsibility for the historic and religious sites in the Jerusalem area and in the West Bank, including the Israel Parks Authority, the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Ministry of Religion, without any coordination among them (Elon 1967). The problem was particularly acute at the Western Wall, whose symbolism and importance led the various authorities to compete for control of the site, which bestowed status and prestige.

At the time, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan initially considered transferring responsibility for all of the religious and historic sites in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including the Western Wall, to the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The agency was planning a national park surrounding the walls of the Old City (*HaTzofe*, August 4, 1967; Goldstein 2003; Wilkof and Nitzan-Shiftan 2017), and, thus, it seemed logical to assign it the responsibility for developing and maintaining the Western Wall, which was now a site of national importance. But the plan to transfer responsibility to the parks authority sparked fierce opposition from the religious establishment, and a struggle ensued between Dayan and Warhaftig. The latter won the battle when the Knesset enacted the Protection of Holy Places Law in 1967 (*Haaretz*, July 21, 1967), whose primary objective was to declare the State of Israel's commitment to protect Christian and Muslim holy places in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. However, the legislation also applied to Jewish holy places.² Since the law assigned the protection and religious supervision of the holy places to the religious leaders and the minister of religion (Rosenthal 1967), the Ministry of Religion interpreted it as transferring the authority to determine the practices and arrangements at the Western Wall to the Chief Rabbinate, the leaders of the Jewish religion in the State of Israel. The Chief Rabbinate quickly appointed a special rabbi to serve as "Rabbi of the Western Wall" (*HaTzofe*, June 26, 1967; *Davar*, July 3, 1967). These decisions determined the status of the site and the reality that has prevailed there ever since: The Western Wall is first and foremost a holy place, and its historical and national aspects are secondary. The agenda at the site is set according to religious considerations, and its symbolic-national status is accorded lower priority.

The Ministry of Religion immediately began organizing the Western Wall site for prayer and visits. In addition to placing a divider between the separate prayer areas allocated for men and women, ministry officials defined mandatory rules of conduct at the Western Wall. In part, this was a response to the lack of regulation at the site, but it mainly reflected a desire to show the public that the Western Wall is essentially a Jewish holy place. Ministry officials kept panhandlers away from the site and put an end to popular religious activities that had begun taking place there after the war (weddings, ritual circumcisions, and other ceremonies), but they

² Israeli law defined the Western Wall as a holy place only in 1981, as part of the Regulations for the Protection of Holy Places for Jews (see Berkovitz 1978).

strongly encouraged bar mitzvah ceremonies (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 31, 1972). The Ministry of Religion also worked extensively to make the Western Wall accessible to the public, primarily worshippers, and initiated efforts to improve the physical conditions at the site. The ground adjacent to the wall was leveled and later paved. The Western Wall plaza was connected to the electric grid and lighting was installed (*HaTzofe*, August 13, 1967). To keep order at the Western Wall, the ministry deployed a crew of attendants who were dressed in dark blue uniforms with a logo featuring a sketch of the wall (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, March 27, 1968). The ministry even installed “electronic guides” at the site — telephone-like devices that enabled visitors to listen to explanations about the Western Wall in various languages (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 19, 1968; *Maariv*, November 6, 1968).

A Holy Place or a National Historic Site? The Debate Among the Israeli Public

With the transfer of authority over the Western Wall into the hands of the Ministry of Religion in 1967, Minister of Religion Zerach Warhaftig promptly made this declaration: “Some would like the Western Wall to be a museum or monument, but this will not happen. The Western Wall will not be a historic site like other historic sites” (*Davar*, August 7, 1967). The minister’s statement revealed his fear that the Western Wall would be given the status of a historic heritage site, or even a military one, and its Jewish-religious connection would become secondary.

The question of the Western Wall’s definition as a holy place and as a national historic site accompanied it from the moment it was liberated from the Jordanians. This issue was of interest not only to the political and religious establishment, but also to the Israeli public at large, which wrestled with the question of whether the Western Wall was only a holy place or also a national historic site. Politicians, intellectuals, religious figures, and the public debated this issue for a long period.

One of the fiercest critics of the process of the religious popularization of the Western Wall after the Six-Day War was Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a professor of biochemistry, organic chemistry, and neurophysiology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He had been a critic of the development of Jewish holy places and the religious rituals performed there before the 1967 war. After the war, and against the backdrop of the sharp change in the attitude of the Israelis toward the Western Wall and the rest of the Jewish holy places in the Israeli-occupied territories, he expressed the wish to “be rid of the holy places, including the Western Wall.” He called the Western Wall the “*diskotel*” (*kotel* [the wall]), as if it had taken on the status of a discotheque] (*Haaretz*, July 21 1967).

After the Western Wall came under the control of the Ministry of Religion, ministry officials hurried to formulate regulations regarding visitors’ behavior at the site. These included prohibitions against violating the Sabbath, eating and drinking, conducting assemblies, and walking bareheaded near the wall, as well as a requirement for appropriate dress (*Davar*, August 11, 1967; Reicher 1967). These measures, which made it clear that the Western Wall was, above all, a Jewish holy place, stirred considerable opposition. Yaakov Yanai, director of the Israel Nature

and Parks Authority, was one of those who protested: “Since when is the Western Wall a place visited only by religious Jews? Why do they believe that Jews come to the Western Wall only to pray? And secular Jews in Israel — why should they be forced to stand at the Western Wall without their wives? What will a person do who wants to stand at the Western Wall and commune with himself — silently, without prayer?” (Rimon 1967).

Yanai identified the main point of contention at the Western Wall, a topic that underlined the change that had occurred there and its transformation into a place where religion takes precedence over nationalism: the barrier placed between the men’s prayer area and the women’s prayer area. The men’s area was four times larger than the area allotted to women (Benziman 1967). Earlier, in the late Ottoman period and during the British Mandate, efforts had been made to separate men and women at the Western Wall, but these were not completely successful, primarily because the British authorities did not want to change the status quo at the site (Commission Report 1931). During the first month after the Six-Day War, when the Western Wall was under the control of the IDF’s Military Rabbinate, there was no extreme separation. Prayers and visits by tourists and others were conducted in mixed groups. However, within a few weeks, this changed, and the issue of the barrier became a subject of intense debate in Israel, sharpening the general debate about the definition of the Western Wall: Is it only a holy place (where there is ostensible legitimacy for gender separation) or also a national historic site, where egalitarian rules of conduct apply?

Israeli poet Nathan Alterman, one of the leading advocates of the Greater Israel Movement, wrote this at the time: “The gist of the Western Wall is that it is tied to the roots and essence of the Jewish religion. It is a remnant of a place of worship, a remnant of the loftiest symbol of the singularity and power of faith ... Because the Western Wall is a place of prayer of an existing religious entity and not a relic of a faith that disappeared and no longer exists, the control by religious circles here is not unfounded. On the contrary, it is a matter of natural connection and self-evident” (*Maariv*, August 25, 1967; Laor 1999).

There were also opposing views on this subject: “And who determined that the Western Wall has an exclusive religious character? Isn’t it a national historic relic? ... For wide circles among the people today, a divider between men and women is unacceptable and intolerable” (Elitzur 1967; *Haaretz*, August 13, 1967). Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was asked to weigh in on this topic, and he called the areas fenced in by the barriers “corrals” (Barash 1967; *HaTzofe*, August 4, 1967).³ The placement of the barriers and the question of defining the Western Wall in general developed into a political issue and a topic of dispute among the various political parties (ISA G-12/6423; *Maariv*, November 10, 1967).⁴

³ *Haaretz* (July 21, 1967) published a caricature entitled “The second incursion to the Western Wall,” showing Minister of Religions Warhaftig running toward the wall, carrying a sign, “Under the Supervision of the Ministry of Religions,” together with a rabbi holding a fence with the inscription, “Women’s Section.”

⁴ The religious ministers in the government supported the separation of men and women, while some political leaders, including Moshe Kol and Mordechai Bentov, were vehemently opposed.

The Israeli public's interest in this issue was reflected in letters to the editor published in the daily press, as people argued for one side or the other. One *Maariv* reader declared this: "The Western Wall is not a national site and it has no connection to nationalism." The writer went on to suggest to those who thought otherwise that they should travel "to the antiquities of Megiddo or the Greek temples in Athens" (Abrahami 1967). A *Davar* reader joined the fray, comparing the question of whether the Western Wall is a national or a religious treasure to the question of whether a ritual circumcision is a religious or a national ceremony (Dorsinai 1967). Another reader countered that the Western Wall is "a national monument, sacred to us ... more important than Masada" (Grungold 1967).

The minister of religion responded to his critics that the law empowered him to determine what constitutes a holy place and what constitutes a historic site, and he noted that the Western Wall was a holy place for the Jews before it became a historic site (*Haaretz*, July 25, 1967). To those who claimed that there was nothing sacred about the Western Wall and that the Ministry of Religion was deliberately concealing from the public the fact that it was merely a supporting wall for the Temple Mount plaza and not a remnant of the Temple itself — "and thus is only a venerable secular relic of a glorious historical period" (Haimi 1967) — the minister made this response: "No power in the world can take the Western Wall from the sacred to the secular." He explained that the dispute over control of the Western Wall was not merely a technical matter, but rather one of principle: Would the Western Wall be a holy place, or would it become a secular site? (*HaTzofe*, August 4, 1967).

The IDF and the Western Wall

The liberation of the Western Wall in June 1967 by soldiers of the IDF's Paratroopers Brigade created a new and complex connection between the IDF and the sacred site. This connection became institutionalized over the years, primarily by the establishment of the plaza as a venue for swearing-in ceremonies for IDF soldiers and for the main ceremony marking the start of Yom Hazikaron, the annual Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism. This infused the Western Wall with additional meaning, beyond its religious status, and turned it into a national icon. Anthropologist Don Handelman and sociologist Elihu Katz were among the first to discuss the internal organization of this ceremony, and they noted its place among other national ceremonies in Israel, including Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day (Handelman and Katz, 1998).

The first year after the Six-Day War was very significant in this context. One of the first expressions of the connection that developed between the IDF and the Western Wall was a short ceremony conducted there a few days after the fighting ended, with the IDF's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan delivering speeches to an audience that included top IDF officers (Mor 1967).

On Memorial Day in 1968, a delegation of bereaved parents lit a memorial candle at the Western Wall plaza. The following year, a state ceremony was held in the presence of Israel's president, Zalman Shazar (*HaTzofe*, May 3, 1968; IDF Archives, January 4, 1969; *Davar* April 22, 1969). This became an annual tradition and reinforced the status of the Western Wall as a national treasure in the eyes of the Israeli public. In subsequent years, the Israelis organized each Memorial Day in accordance with a detailed protocol that included the participation of the president, the IDF chief of staff, and bereaved parents. An honor guard was deployed at the Western Wall plaza, with representatives from the navy, the air force, and ground forces. The IDF's chief rabbi read from the book of Psalms, a bereaved father recited the Mourner's Kaddish, and the IDF chief cantor sang "*El Malei Rahamim*" (IDF Archives, Independence Day, 1970). The format of the ceremony was revised from time to time, including the addition of a siren to mark the start of Memorial Day, a speech by the president (IDF Archives, March 3, 1972)⁵ and a message from the chief of staff to bereaved parents (IDF Archives, April 27, 1973).

The thread connecting the elements of the Western Wall plaza, the official start of Memorial Day, and the emphasis on the presence of bereaved parents at the ceremony played an important role in embedding the Western Wall in the heart of the Israeli people. The broadcast of the ceremony from the Western Wall plaza — initially on the radio and later on Israel Television (then the only channel in Israel) — invested it with supreme national importance. The entire nation turned its eyes to the Western Wall on the eve of Memorial Day — for the sounding of the memorial siren, the military ceremony, and the speeches marking the Jewish state's national day of mourning at the site of the symbolic remnant of the destroyed Temple.

Another connection between the IDF and the Western Wall was the swearing-in ceremonies the army conducted at the site. Prior to 1967, there was no special connection between IDF units and Jewish holy places. The IDF held swearing-in ceremonies for new recruits at military bases, open sites, or places of historical significance, such as Masada. All of this gradually changed after the Six-Day War, when the army and the Ministry of Defense, which deemed it important to strengthen IDF soldiers' connection to the Western Wall, decided to conduct some of their ceremonies at the site. The first swearing-in ceremony at the Western Wall was held in September of 1967 for paratroopers — a tradition that continues today (*Maariv*, September 22, 1967).

Prior to the next swearing-in ceremony for paratroopers, in March of 1968, the IDF formulated a detailed protocol for such ceremonies. Responsibility for conducting the swearing-in ceremonies was transferred to the IDF Central Command, in an effort to ensure that they would adhere to the detailed protocol and respect the religious nature of the site. In consideration of the worshippers at the site, the ceremonies were scheduled after evening prayers, and bugles were the only musical instruments allowed. Readings from the Hebrew Bible also became a part of the ceremonies (IDF Archives, March 7, 1968). Swearing-in ceremonies at the Western Wall became routine, first for the Paratroopers Brigade, and later for other combat units. Toward the end of the 1970s, the Israelis decided to expand the

⁵ The first time a siren was included in the ceremony was apparently in 1972 (*Davar*, April 18, 1972).

military presence at the site, and to conduct swearing-in ceremonies for all field units there (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, December 30, 1981). These ceremonies combined a national-state ritual, marking the Western Wall's place in the history of Jerusalem and expressing respect for the sanctity and religious status of the site. The same ceremony was conducted for all of the units, with an emphasis on incorporating both state and national symbols and sacred religious components (IDF Archives, February 1, 1982).

The increased military presence at the Western Wall plaza stirred some counter-reactions. Even though the ceremonies were conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion and the Rabbi of the Western Wall, they sometimes still sparked friction with worshippers, particularly the ultra-Orthodox community. In the view of many ultra-Orthodox Jews, the presence of military units was a blatant expression of Israeli statehood, which many of them opposed (IDF Archives, April 3, 1984; June 15, 1984).⁶ Another dispute arose over a request from the Gadna⁷ to hold a ceremony at the Western Wall plaza to conclude its summer activities. The main opponents of this proposal were Rabbi Meir Getz, then-Rabbi of the Western Wall, who submitted his resignation to the Minister of Religion over this issue, and Rabbi Shlomo Goren, a former Chief Rabbi of Israel, who argued that there were "breaches" at Gadna ceremonies that would harm the religious status of the Western Wall. In the end, a compromise was reached that established rules to ensure that the ceremonies would be conducted in a dignified manner (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 4, 1991, August 6, 1991).

The Western Wall Plaza as a National Town Square: Mass Prayer and Expressions of National Solidarity

After the Six-Day War, Israelis began celebrating many religious holidays and rituals at the Western Wall. This was ostensibly a natural development, a sort of continuation of pre-1948 customs. In fact, however, many of the ceremonies initiated after the Six-Day War were completely new.

The first holiday marked at the Western Wall was Shavuot, which began a few days after the war concluded. More than two hundred thousand visitors streamed to the site. Many of them came to pray, but many others were driven by a feeling of postwar elation and a sense of national connection to the site. A few weeks later, large crowds gathered at the Western Wall to mark Tisha B'Av. Even before the East-West division of Jerusalem, many thousands of Jews had gathered at the wall on Tisha B'Av, but now, for the first time, the lamentations over the destruction of the Temple were recited under Jewish-Israeli sovereignty. About one hundred thousand people visited the Western Wall on that day of fasting, including President Zalman Shazar (*Davar*, August 16, 1967). The prayers and ceremony were mainly based on pre-1948 practices, but now, many of the tens of thousands who visited the

⁶ For example, well-known Talmudic scholar Shalom Albeck, urged the IDF to reconsider conducting military ceremonies at the Western Wall. The IDF Chief of Staff's Bureau responded that the Western Wall is also a site of heroism and is not a synagogue."

⁷ The Gadna is a pre-military education program run by the IDF.

site identified not only with the memory of the Temple's destruction, but also with the results of the Six-Day War and the liberation of the Western Wall (*HaTzofe*, August 16, 1967; *Maariv*, August 4, 1968; *The Jerusalem Post*, August 1, 1971).

In many ways, Israeli-national elements were incorporated into the holidays celebrated at the Western Wall. For example, in light of the prohibition imposed by the Turks and the British on sounding a shofar at the site, the shofar blasts on the High Holidays during the late 1960s were perceived not only as the fulfillment of a religious practice, but also as a declaration of nationhood (*HaTzofe*, October 15, 1967). The festival of Hanukkah provided another example of the convergence of religion and nationalism at the Western Wall. During those years, a runner would carry a torch from Modi'in to light a number of large menorahs at the Western Wall (*Barash*, December 26, 1967). "For the first time since the Maccabees," one newspaper reported, "Hanukkah candles were raised this year in the royal council hall of the Hasmoneans ... and heralded Israel's freedom in the renewed State of Israel" (*Barash* December 25, 1970).

Israel instituted a new type of commemoration after the Six-Day War — Jerusalem Day, to be celebrated at the Western Wall on the 28th day of Iyar, the date on the Jewish calendar when the Old City was captured in the Six-Day War. This annual event combined military, religious, and national components. More than fifty thousand people, including many Diaspora Jews, participated in the first Jerusalem Day ceremony held at the Western Wall, a year after the military victory (*Davar*, May 27, 1968). The ceremony, which officially launched an observance, "The Year of the Western Wall," featured prayers, including a memorial prayer for fallen soldiers and a prayer for the state, as well as the singing of the national anthem, "Hatikvah" (Jerusalem Religious Council 1968). The variety of Jerusalem Day events increased over the years, but the celebration at the Western Wall remained its most central observance. This Jerusalem Day tradition reinforced the holiness of the site and helped to strengthen its national status. The crowds at these celebrations grew from year to year and included ministers, rabbis, IDF officers, and public figures (*Davar* May 16, 1969). By the third anniversary of the war, the crowd had topped one hundred thousand, and included President Shazar, who prayed at the wall (*Hamodia* June 6, 1970). The crowds continued to grow during the following years.

The process of establishing the Western Wall plaza as a symbol that combined religion and nationalism contributed to making it a key site for holding mass gatherings in the State of Israel. Such gatherings, which usually focused on issues that troubled the Israeli public, reinforced the site's historic image as the "Wailing Wall," a place to lament personal woes and national problems. The Western Wall served as an important background for public struggles and represented at the same time both historic suffering and the state independence. The annual commemoration marked an effort to connect the lessons of the often-traumatic past and the Jewish-national struggles for liberation and redemption with the ongoing hardships of Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.

A salient example of an effort to mobilize the Western Wall's symbolism was the struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jewry in the early 1970s, when protest rallies against the Soviet authorities' refusal to allow Jews to emigrate were held at the Western Wall plaza (*Haaretz*, September 21, 1970; *Maariv*, December 21, 1970;

Haaretz, December 24, 1970; *Maariv*, April 9, 1971). Immigrants from the Soviet Union also held hunger strikes at the Western Wall in solidarity with those remaining behind the Iron Curtain (*Maariv*, May 20, 1971). At one of the protest rallies in late 1971 in honor of “Prisoner of Zion” Silvia Zalmonson, Israeli Minister of Police Shlomo Hillel made this declaration: “From the Western Wall, we say to Sylvia Zalmonson and to all of the Jews in Russia and in Arab lands: You’re not alone in your battle; we’re with you. From this place, we declare: ‘If I forget the exile, let my right hand forget [its cunning]’” (*Maariv* October 28, 1971). Sometimes, the gatherings at the Western Wall reflected national discord. For example, in the early 1980s, there was a rally at the Western Wall plaza protesting Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai following the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt. This “prayer assembly and cry to overturn the decree of uprooting settlements from the Land of Israel” was conducted with the participation of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef as well as Knesset members, rabbis, and settlers from the Golan Heights and the West Bank (*Yedioth Ahronoth* December 8, 1981).

Another internal Israeli field of contention, far more acute, was the struggle being waged by the ultra-Orthodox population against the State of Israel vis-à-vis the Western Wall. This became a natural venue for protests against the violation of the Sabbath and other religious matters. Over the years, even as the Western Wall emerged as a national icon, it also took on a more ultra-Orthodox character, as ultra-Orthodox Jews comprised a growing percentage of Jerusalem’s population (*Yedioth Ahronoth* August 25, 1987). The ultra-Orthodox community regarded the Western Wall as a public space beyond their neighborhoods where they could voice their protests in mass prayer rallies. Paradoxically, those rallies underlined the community’s recognition that the Western Wall had become a national Israeli symbol as well as a holy place.

The prominence of the Western Wall helped to turn it into one of the central tourist attractions in Jerusalem for both Jewish and non-Jewish tourists (Cohen-Hattab 2010a, b). Celebrities and Diaspora Jews from around the world came to the site when visiting Israel — heads of state, politicians, spiritual leaders, cultural figures, athletes, artists, and musicians. Their visits to the Western Wall made headlines, further boosting the importance of the site (*Maariv* May 25, 1971). Visitors participating in conferences in Jerusalem also made sure to include a symbolic stop at the Western Wall on their itineraries (*Yedioth Ahronoth* July 21, 1977).

Summary

In 1973, nearly five years after the end of the Six-Day War, a proposal was made to erect a monument opposite the Western Wall in memory and honor of its liberators and of the soldiers who had fallen in battle in Jerusalem. According to the proposed plan, granite stones from Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula would form the base for a memorial candle to be used in Memorial Day ceremonies there (*Davar* February 23, 1973). But the plan encountered strong opposition from religious members of the committee appointed to discuss the proposal. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, an Orthodox Zionist, feared that erecting the monument behind the prayer area would distract

worshippers, while Minister of Justice Yaakov Shimshon Shapira opposed the very idea of erecting a monument at the Western Wall, fearing that the monument might overshadow the holy site (*Yedioth Ahronoth* February 22, 1973). The dispute over this monument, which was never built, reflects the inherent tensions that have accompanied the Western Wall since the end of the Six-Day War — tensions between the inherently Jewish and inherently Israeli character of the site, and between its identity as a holy site and its identity as a place of national significance.

The controversy over the essence and character of the Western Wall and the right of different parts of Israeli society and the Diaspora to participate in its symbolism, began immediately after the end of the Six-Day War. In the initial postwar months and years, a new reality — physical, but primarily political and religious — developed at the site. After homes in the bordering Mughrabi Quarter were razed and a large plaza was built adjacent to the wall, additional parts of the ancient wall were uncovered and the area in front of the wall became one big prayer space. But this physical change was accompanied by a more profound change in the status and importance of the site: In the years following the Six-Day War, there was an effort, for the first time in its history, to imbue the Western Wall with an Israeli character for the first time in its history, in addition to the site's obvious Jewish character. Many came to view the Western Wall as a unifying monument, inspiring Israeli confidence, cohesion, and stability — a symbol of the victory in the Six-Day War and a source of identification. In those years, the name “Wailing Wall,” which the Jews perceived as humiliating, was suppressed. Instead, the emphasis was placed on the heroism demonstrated in the Six-Day War, and on linking the distant and recent history of the Western Wall to the Israeli present. Consequently, a diverse community of Israelis and Diaspora Jews streamed to the site in the months and years after the war, each person identifying with a distinctive component of the place: Some viewed the Western Wall as a historic Jewish site symbolizing the Jewish presence and independence of the past, and some focused on its holiness. The ultra-Orthodox and other observant communities felt strongly about the Western Wall, but now other segments in Israeli society also sought to express these feelings; they regarded the wall not only as a religious symbol, but also as a national symbol linking the past and the future. It is clear, therefore, that the new reality created at the Western Wall in the wake of the Six-Day War accorded it the new and extraordinary status of a national holy place. The site continued to represent Israel's religious and historical heritage, and Jews continued to visit it for religious and traditional reasons, as in the past. The innovation was that the Western Wall was newly infused with content relevant to the post-Six-Day War period and the social and cultural characteristics of Israeli society during those years. The unique status of the holy site over the course of Jewish history only served to reinforce the various national expressions attached to it, and endowed them with a special validity of their own. A nearly unanimous Israeli consensus developed around the site's civil and sacred symbols, and particularly around the ceremony on the eve of Memorial Day. Some of the religious streams — primarily the national-religious (*Dati-Leumi*) sector — now accorded religious significance to the national symbols associated with the Western Wall, while, for secular Jews, this national connection gave new meaning to the traditional symbolism of the site. In parallel with the strengthening

of the national Israeli component at the site, the Western Wall's status as a holy place and site of worship, especially for the Orthodox stream in Judaism, reached an unprecedented status of preeminence.

Thus, the Western Wall, in the context of the national and religious emotions that swept through Israeli society after the Six-Day War, served as a source of identification for the diverse expressions of Israeli identity and accommodated a relatively wide range of worldviews, from religious-traditional (and perhaps even ultra-Orthodox) perspectives to civil-national perspectives. This reality was made possible largely by the geographic separation between religion and nationalism at the site. On the one hand, there is the prayer area, developed as the sacred part of the space, where the customs of an Orthodox synagogue were established and where religious ceremonies are held in close proximity to the Western Wall. On the other hand, there is a separate visitors' plaza, where tourists can watch from a short distance away and where national ceremonies are held.

The nationalism associated with the Western Wall has turned out to be complex, because the IDF's recapture of the site elicited a sense of both national and state pride. The sense of nationalism arose through popular activity that created a sense of affiliation and communal attachment to the site, while the sense of statehood was imparted through institutional and public activity aimed at establishing an Israeli identity at this central religious site in the State of Israel. For example, the latter was reinforced through Memorial Day ceremonies, mass rallies, and hunger strikes. The various expressions of national identity evident at the Western Wall plaza throughout the years are part of an Israeli desire to establish the Western Wall not only as a prominent symbol of the traditional Jewish religion, but also as an expression of the system of values of the nation's secular society.

As described in this article, tension emerged in the wake of the Six-Day War among various approaches to the significance of the Western Wall. Some wanted to develop the Western Wall as a site of national historic importance. Others saw it as the most sacred place in the State of Israel. And still others emphasized the central role the site plays in shaping a Jewish national identity and a sense of peoplehood among Diaspora Jewry. This tension continued in subsequent decades, and it still exists today. Moreover, in light of recent events at the site, primarily the battle for egalitarian prayer, this tension is deepening in the context of the major changes occurring in Israeli and Jewish society.

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