

Rosh Hodesh Report from Jerusalem

by Rabbi Dan Liben, Rosh Chodesh Iyyar, 5775/2015

When I am fortunate enough to be in Jerusalem on *Rosh Hodesh*, I walk to the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and, *tallit* and *tefillin* under my arm, arrive at the Kotel plaza by 7:00am.

Yesterday, Sara Miriam and I walked together. We were there to *daven* in solidarity with the Women of the Wall (WOW). She would pray in the women's section, and I would stand behind it, with a group of men who come every *Rosh Hodesh* to show their support.

Being led in prayer by WOW is always a spiritually intense experience for me. Prayer, social justice, and standing up for the rights of others seamlessly weave together at the Kotel Plaza. We are sometimes subject to heckling, or worse, by orthodox men and women, who think it's wrong for women to raise their voice in communal prayer, no less wear *tallit* and *tefillin*. But the psalms of Hallel evoke in us a sense of solidarity and resoluteness of purpose.

Things have quieted down since the last time I was here. The police used to arrest WOW participants for "provoking disruption" by wearing a *tallit* or *tefillin*, but now they enforce the court's decree, which guarantees the women's right to pray as they choose. *Rosh Hodesh*, however, is a Torah reading morning, and the Kotel authorities never allow a Torah into the Women's Section. The Women of the Wall are forced to chant the Torah portion from a text, rather than from a real scroll.

But yesterday was different. I wondered why the men weren't standing in their usual place overlooking the Women's Section, but were gathered in the rear of the men's section of the plaza instead. Separated from WOW only by the moveable dividers that form the official *mehitzah* of the plaza, a Bar Mitzvah was apparently in progress, and I went to join them. The young man

read beautifully, and everyone danced around him and his father, who was holding the Torah scroll. Suddenly, in a carefully synchronized action, the moveable partitions opened up, the Torah was transferred into the waiting hands of one of the women, and the partition again closed, before any Kotel authority had noticed. For the first time, Women of the Wall read Torah on Rosh Hodesh from a full-size kosher scroll, after which they danced and danced with the scroll!

Soon enough, however, pandemonium broke out when someone reported to the Kotel authorities that the women had a Torah scroll. Prayer and song were overshadowed by yelling, threatening, pushing, and the threat of arrests.

What happened yesterday morning at the Kotel was a thrilling, well-planned act of civil disobedience. The Bar Mitzvah was a hoax, and the revelers were all in on the ruse, providing a diversion, so that women could read from a Torah scroll on Rosh Hodesh.

But ultimately, little had changed. Jews raging in anger at one another at the Kotel is, sadly, old news. When the dust settled and the Torah scroll was returned to the men's side, we continued our Rosh Hodesh prayers, but not without a touch of irony: *“Bring us with song to Zion Your city, with everlasting joy to Jerusalem Your Sanctuary. There may we worship You with love and reverence...”*

Tonight is Yom HaZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day, which will be followed by Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day. May the coming hours bring unity, healing and increased peace to the Jewish people!