A Cause for Celebration

Dear Families of Or Atid,

It’s been quite a noisy week in the news. The bluster and finger-pointing following the Iowa caucuses has dominated the airways; analysis of the Super Bowl has filled the sports pages; and local disputes between presidents and boards have been on the front page. Amidst all that noise, a few folks might have missed one remarkable news story, one which signifies a major step forward for the Jewish people.

On January 31, the Israeli government (Knesset) voted to approve an expansion of the West Wall area (Kotel) in Jerusalem, in order to create a space for egalitarian prayer and services. It is no exaggeration to say that this vote is an historic event for the Jewish people, and a triumph for the values of egalitarianism and equality.

Ever since the remaining structures of the Second Temple were brought back under Jewish stewardship in 1967, the Kotel in Jerusalem has been the site of continual prayer, both by individuals and by groups. Yet access to the Kotel, and the kind of worship allowed, was always tightly controlled by the Orthodox authorities. This meant that both women’s prayer groups and mixed prayer communities were not allowed to hold services there, let alone read from the Torah. For decades, the leadership of the worldwide Reform and Conservative movements, as well as the Progressive movements in Israel, have been fighting for the rights of all Jews, and especially women, to pray at the Wall according to their own religious practices. The pushback against this fight for equality has been marked by ugly words at time, and even uglier incidents of violence.

But now there is real hope. Women and mixed groups will no longer be forced to pray in the back of the plaza, or off to the side, at a distance from Judaism’s holiest site. All Jews, regardless of gender, or religious affiliation, will now be able to pray right next to the Western Wall, right next to those ancient stones which have absorbed the tears and heard the voices of our people in prayer for over 2000 years.

The Kotel, the Western Wall, can now become a symbol of Jewish unity, of the cohesion of all the Jews in the world, instead of a symbol of dispute and division. And was this not part of the symbolism of the First Temple, and the Second? Jews today may only have access to the remaining walls and steps of our ancient Temples, but now all Jews will have access.

We are grateful to those brave Israeli leaders, such as Natan Sharansky, who made this happen. We are grateful to all the leaders of Diaspora Jewry, and progressive Jewish communities and women’s groups in Israel, who never gave up. And we are grateful that Judaism once again proves itself able to grow and change. That wonderful truth is not only a cause for our survival – this week, it is truly a cause for celebration.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Finestone