

Resa Davids forwarded this powerful michtav that her husband Rabbi Stan prepared for ARZA.

Ki MiTZion, Volume I by Rabbi Stanley M. Davids
For Out of Zion ... Reflections ... On a Very Busy Season
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Resa and I returned home to Jerusalem on January 25th. We plunged immediately into what has become a month long period of programs, meetings, encounters and conference calls. We aren't complaining. It's just that the days aren't long enough.

First up was Resa's challenge to organize a national meeting of the 15 chapters of Women of Reform Judaism - Israel for February 14th. (OK. For those who are curious: besides the "Day of Love," which is observed in Israel on February 14th, what is the date of the OTHER celebration of romantic attachment in Israel? Did you guess the 15th of the Hebrew month of Av? Congratulations!). The national meeting just happened to have been scheduled in the midst of rising concern over events regarding the Women of the Wall. By now we all know of Nofrat Frenkel who was arrested while worshipping with WOW in November at the Kotel on Rosh Hodesh (New Moon).

That event set off a tsunami of anguished responses throughout the Diaspora, as Reform and Conservative Jews expressed profound resentment at what clearly has become a series of escalating restrictions aimed at accommodating the ultra-Orthodox at the expense of just about everyone else.

What kinds of restrictions? Women cannot wear Tallitot at the Kotel; there is now a 'men only' walkway at the rear of the Western Wall Plaza; some bus routes in Jerusalem have been proclaimed 'women in the rear of the bus' routes; some Haredi air passengers are demanding the right to wear portable Mechitzahs (barriers) over their heads (sic) while they are flying, so that the sight of women won't distract them and so that they will not see the projected movies; in some areas of Jerusalem Haredim have gender-segregated sidewalks. Nofrat Frenkel's arrest for many was simply the last straw.

In some ways, the powerful response in the Diaspora was not matched by a similar expression of concern among many in Israel itself. The image of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott found little resonance in Medinat Yisrael. The cause of WOW was not easily embraced by many liberal, progressive and even secular Israeli Jews for whom the Wall not only is of little personal religious significance, but whatever significance there is had been dissipated by the State's acquiescence to the turning of the Kotel area into an Orthodox synagogue.

This lack of congruity in what was seen by many to be a matter of profound ethical concern led in February to an extremely healthy and open dialogue among the leaders of Progressive/Reform Judaism in Israel and in North America. In fact, there is no question that Nofrat Frenkel's arrest served as a superb motivation for the kinds of conversations which served to dramatically enhance understandings of the differences between religious sensibilities in Israel and in the Diaspora. Though WOW is not at all a part of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, the IMPJ or of IRAC, these organizations (guided by a superb paper written by IMPJ Executive Director Gilad Kariv) has now clarified and sharpened their own internal consensus, and all parties have dramatically ratcheted up their understanding of and respect for each other.

And so Resa's WRJ-Israel program was held amidst a keen awareness of the unique challenges confronting women in Israel. Each of the 15 chapters of WRJ-Israel was represented, and a 16th new chapter was announced. The president of WRJ, Lynn Magid Lazar, together with WRJ Executive Director Shelley Lindauer, presented gavels and charters to each of the 15 groups. Naama Kelman (HUC-J Dean) delivered a wonderful D'var Torah; Gilad Kariv gave a superb keynote address; and Resa basked in what was nothing less than an historic achievement.

The next morning was Rosh Hodesh Adar. I accompanied Lynn Magid Lazar and Shelley Lindauer to the Kotel, where they were joined by more than 150 other women. As the women began to quietly chant the Shacharit (Morning) Service, being careful not to violate the letter of the law when it came to the wearing of Tallitot, the attention and the scorn of some of the others worshipping at the Wall began to escalate. The police were everywhere present and very active and effective in trying to keep the Haredi women from pushing and shoving into the worshipping women.

From the other side of the Mechitzah dividing the Western Wall Plaza, Haredi men began to scream, to chant and to verbally harass the worshipping women. I walked down to the men's side with a group of HUC students who had come to bear witness and to davven. The Haredim called the women every ugly and demeaning thing they could think of, while all the while screaming at the top of their lungs. The rising frenzy served to egg on the Haredi women who now surged past and around the police - pushing and shoving and spitting and screaming.

Then the WOW reached the end of their special Hallel prayers. It was time to leave the Kotel and to head to the Robinson's Arch area in which they would be allowed to read Torah and to wear a Tallit in relative peace. As I walked out of the men's area to say goodbye to Lynn and to Shelley, my eye caught an old friend of mine, Rabbi Janet Liss. Janet was just standing there, looking stunned. I went up to her, put my arm around her and asked her what had happened. Janet had been hit in the face by one of the Haredi women who were finding novel ways to express their embrace of the holy. Not so much seriously hurt but feeling grotesquely violated, Janet just needed a brief respite to regain control of her motions. She had been physically attacked in broad daylight at the Kotel by Jewish women in the name of holiness. This was a great deal to handle. (You may want to go to the Women of the Wall home page on Facebook to see an album of pictures from Rosh Hodesh Adar.)

Does anyone need to be reminded as to why we American Reform Jews must begin to change our Movement's approach to the need of the IMPJ and of IRAC to dramatically increase their available financial resources so that their capacity to engage in the battle for Israel's soul can be enhanced? WRJ, a great friend of ARZA, has now forged significant ties with many of our Israeli congregations. ARZA is preparing to consider taking upon itself serious responsibility for the raising of funds for the IMPJ and for IRAC. Reform/Progressive leadership groups in America and in Israel have begun long-delayed efforts to strengthen their understanding of each other.

And it was still only February 15th. The marathon had only just begun.

More to come.

Stan