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Congregation Beth Israel
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I love Israel. I've vacationed there several times and even lived in Jerusalem for a whole year. I look forward to someday leading a congregational trip to our homeland. I also wouldn't rule out moving there in the distant future. I have only had positive experiences in Israel and can't wait to share my passion for this country with my children.

Unfortunately, Israel has disgusted me recently. And this is not the first time I've been repulsed by the country and its laws.

Just a few days ago, Anat Hoffman, director of the Israel Religious Action Center (www.irac.org) and founder of Women of the Wall (www.womenofthewall.org.il) was arrested at a Rosh Chodesh celebration at the Western Wall. She was joined by nearly 200 members of Hadassah who were in Israel commemorating the organization's 100 year anniversary.

Getting arrested at the kotel is nothing new to Hoffman. As a leader and participant of Women of the Wall, she's had her share of altercations with Israeli police and angry *davening* men on the other side of the plaza's 7-foot partition. You see, women are not allowed to wear *tallitot*, *kippot*, or *tefillin* at the wall, nor are they allowed to read Torah there either. These are all things that men can do. Women are free to pray at the wall, just not like men.

Each Rosh Chodesh this group comes together to pray and read Torah. The ones who wear *tallitot* have to wear them like scarves for fear of getting things thrown at them or even spit on. Women from almost all denominations join Hoffman at this monthly event. Hoffman, a leader of social justice, has been doing this for over 20 years. She is a champion of religious pluralism in Israel.

In 2003, Israel's Supreme Court upheld a government ban on women wearing *tefillin* or *tallitot* or reading from a Torah scroll at the Wall. And in 2005, Women of the Wall were banished from the women's section to a nearby archeological site, because the site of women wrapped in *tallitot* and the sound of their voices offended Haredi men and women. Failure to abide by these laws can bring a 6 month jail sentence and a near \$3000 fine.

What happened to Hoffman the other day was especially noteworthy. While she was reciting the Shema, our universal declaration of faith, police warned her to stop and then when she continued, they handcuffed her. She was then detained overnight where she was stripped completely and dragged on the floor of the station. She was thrown into a cell with no bed and had to keep herself covered with her tattered tallit.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, said that "There is no denominational monopoly on the spirituality" of the Western Wall and "it

is intolerable that any woman should be arrested for praying at one of Judaism's most cherished sites."

This kind of act against religious expression is inexcusable. The fact that there is really only one way to observe Judaism in Israel is repressive. We all know there are many ways to practice Judaism. Classifying oneself as either Haredi or secular is too limiting. The government even financially supports Orthodox sects, but no other denomination.

We need to strengthen our support for religious equality and pluralism in Israel. For Israel to truly be a light unto the nations, it must advocate and support this fact: the Jewish world is a diverse world filled with pious and righteous people from all backgrounds. A Jew is a Jew no matter what she eats, wears or how she prays. And no Jew is any more "Jewish" than the next Jew. If this is our homeland, it should feel like home, not some oppressive extremist country.

I feel horrible when I tell potential conversion students that should they want to make *aliyah*, the government will not accept their Jewish status since I oversaw their conversion. They will have to go through the process all over again under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis. This applies for the children of my conversion students too. This sickens me.

So what can we do? We can visit the Women of the Wall's website and donate to their cause. We can visit the websites of the Religious Action Center and the Israel Religious Action Center to become more informed about this and other divisive issues. When we visit Israel, we can even take part in this Rosh Chodesh service. We can write letters to Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States or to Dr. Andy David, the Israeli Consulate General to the Pacific Northwest. I wish there was even more we could do.

I am proud to be part of a movement that encourages and supports participation and leadership of women. In fact, of my 1st year Rabbinic school class, 13 out of the 60 students were men. This is a trend and it's wonderful. I only hope that one day, women and non-Orthodox Jews will feel at home in Israel, free to worship the God of our ancestors in peace.

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