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RABBI SHNEUR AISENSTARK
Do we love our children
more than we love Hashem?

LIFELINES
Her child was burnt
but she was frozen

RABBI EMANUEL FELDMAN
Dear Bibi, your Shanghai speech
was seasoned with foreign flavor

Mishpacha

JEWISH FAMILY WEEKLY

ETHIOPIAN ECHOES
Ari and Ari explore a
forgotten corner of Africa.

The Crusade to Reform the Kosel

The Women of the Wall's
unholy agenda

SEE DAN DEAL

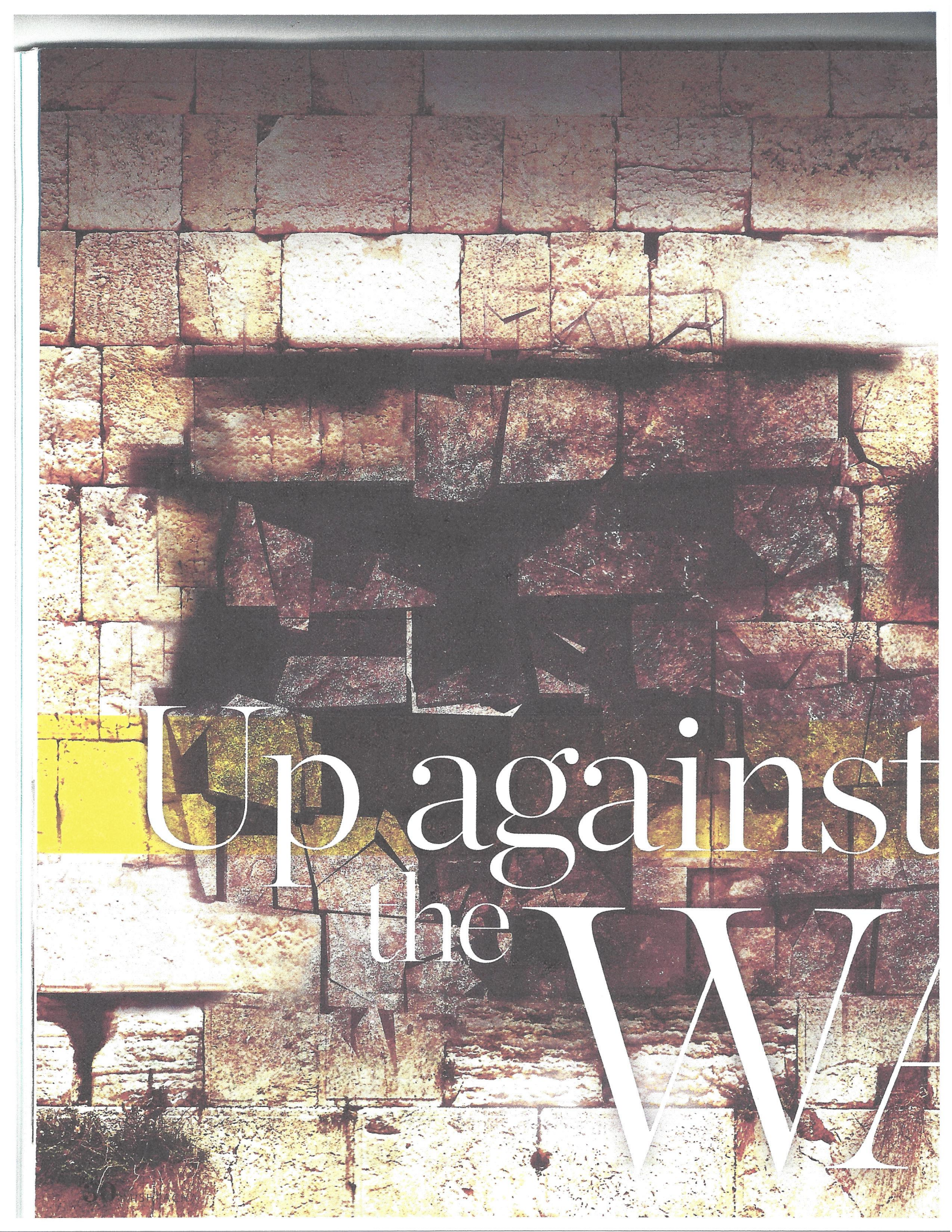
The points, perks,
and promotions whiz
takes his tips to the road



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Up against
the WALL

When a court ruled that the

Women of THE WALL

could pray at the Kosel Plaza wearing tallis and tefillin and read from a Torah scroll, it was more than just a coup for a group fighting for what they claim is religious freedom.

What's the REAL agenda

of these ritual petitioners, who have proclaimed they'd like to see the *mechitzah* at the Kosel removed and the Orthodox rabbinate stripped of authority?

ALL

BY Rachel Ginsberg

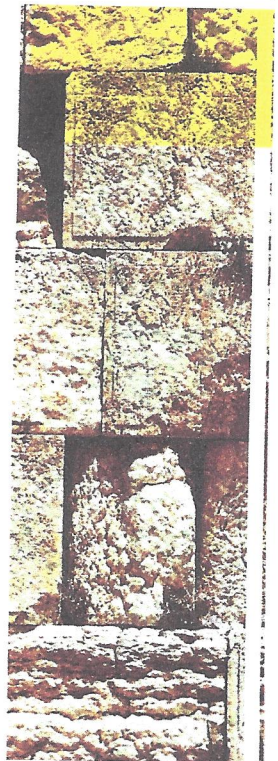



Both Ronit Peskin and Anat Hoffman are waiting for Rosh Chodesh Tammuz.

Ms. Hoffman, Reform movement leader and head of the “Women of the Wall” (WOW) group — buoyed by the recent Jerusalem District Court ruling allowing her prayer comrades to don tallis, tefillin, and read from the Torah in an official “minyan” at the Kosel — will be singing in front of the cameras on June 9. And if they’re really lucky, the phylactery-clad women who showed up at the Kosel on Rosh Chodesh Sivan will again endure curses, spitting, and abuse from a few dozen hot-headed young men on the other side of the *mechitzah*. Then their media event — the victimized underdog held hostage by a “backward, misogynist ultra-Orthodox regime” — will be another international success.

Mrs. Peskin, a young mother of three, resident of the settlement Kochav Yaakov, and head of the grassroots group “Women for the Wall” (W4W) — buoyed by the turnout of thousands of young women from across the religious spectrum who also arrived at the Kosel last Rosh Chodesh to rally for traditional prayer in Judaism’s holiest location — will be re-strategizing on June 9. Working with Israel’s rabbinical figures, she hopes to make sure that next time, those young men will be banned.

While the media at last month’s face-off had their cameras focused exclusively on a few rowdy, undisciplined youth and ran headlines such as “Hareidim Harass Women During Prayer,” three women — one self-described as “borderline chareidi” (Ronit Peskin) and the other two (Leah Aharoni and Jenny Menashe)





in the national religious camp — have harnessed massive support from religious and traditional women around the country with the endorsement of leading *rabbanim*, blowing the whistle on Women of the Wall and that group's not-so-hidden agenda, which they say is far broader than a noble, egalitarian cry for religious freedom.


“They claim they just want to pray peacefully in a way that’s meaningful to them, which of course sounds honorable,” says W4W founder Ronit Peskin. “But they also say openly that they want to ‘liberate’ us religious women, to ‘liberate’ the Kosel, to do away with the *mechitzah* and traditional prayer, to change how religion works in Israel, to wrest religious authority from the rabbinate. We respect those who desire a sincere connection to G-d in whatever form, but we ask that everyone respect thousands of years of tradition, and the rights of those who wish to pray as has been done for generations.”

Secret Weapon The Women of the Wall — a handful of women who’ve been coming to the Kosel on Rosh Chodesh for the past 24 years — never garnered much attention except for a few sneers of derision and nasty comments as they’d gather together in the back of the Kosel Plaza wearing tefillin, donning flowery feminine-style talleisim and singing Hallel. It’s an ironic contrast to a typical scene at the Kosel Plaza, where on any given morning throngs of visitors from around the world — whether they’re Buddhists, Christians, Chinese, or Scandinavians — adhere to the traditions of the site out of deference to its holy and historic significance.

Due to a long-standing ruling that prohibits behaviors at the Kosel that contravene “local custom” so as not to offend broad-based religious sensibilities, the women were legally prohibited from reading from the Torah, but that didn’t stop Anat Hoffman and her friends, who were arrested numerous times when they pulled out their “*klaf*.” In the past, an agreement was reached where WOW would be allowed to convene and read the Torah in the area of Robinson’s Arch, the southern extension of the Western Wall that doesn’t have the status of an official place of prayer.

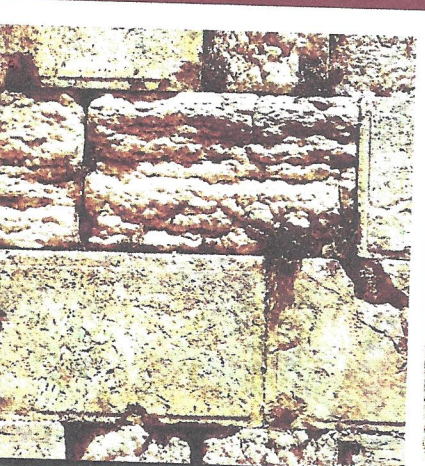
But WOW rejected that solution, and now the open-minded world seems to be on their side. Once a slightly kooky sideshow of flowery spiritual seekers, the group has morphed into the cause célèbre of the media and the liberal-minded. What happened in the last few months that two decades couldn’t accomplish?

WOW discovered a secret weapon — a public relations wizard named Oshrat Ben Shimshon. Although she’s been quoted in some media outlets as the group’s spokesperson, she was actually hired several months ago by WOW to promote their agenda, and managed to take the fringe group and turn it into something like the Suffragettes of 21st-century Israel. Almost overnight, WOW became the public conscience of freedom of religion, getting daily air-time in media that



“They also say openly that they want to ‘liberate’ us religious women, to ‘liberate’ the Kosel, to do away with the *mechitzah* and traditional prayer, to change how religion works in Israel

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“The Torah community has to draw the line somewhere.” Rav Aharon Leib Steinman in conference with Rabbi Pesach Lerner

never before took them seriously. Ben Shimshon cashed in on the fear tactics being promoted by the antireligious left and painted WOW as the front liners in the fight against religious domination: If we don't deal with the Wall, we'll be stuck with mandatory segregated lines in the banks, segregated streets, segregated buses, segregated playgrounds, religious oppression by the Orthodox rabbinate, and continued oppression of women. Ben Shimshon had a good teacher — another PR wiz named Libby Baikin, who took the shameful, isolated incident of an overwrought fanatic spitting at a girl in Beit Shemesh and two months after the fact used it to fuel the national outcry against unfair segregation and oppression of women by the chareidim. “Hadarat Nashim” has become the catchphrase for all that ails Israeli society, and spinning the WOW campaign into a rally against Orthodox oppression fits neatly into that niche for a media obsessed with the battle to determine the character of the country.

That's why for several months now, WOW's Rosh Chodesh services have been accompanied by more cameramen and reporters than praying women; and on Rosh Chodesh Adar, Ben Shimshon arranged the perfect media event: those three famous

paratroopers who liberated the Kosel in 1967 — immortalized in photographer David Rubinger's iconic photograph as they gaze up in wonder and awe at the Wall — now in their late 60s, joined the WOW team at the plaza and told millions of sentimental viewers how their own sweat and blood 46 years ago liberated the Kosel “for everyone.”

The Agenda With the rejection of the Robinson's Arch option and escalation of tensions at the Kosel, Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky presented an expensive, complicated plan to expand the Kosel Plaza and add another area for egalitarian convocations, but that plan — in addition to being highly religiously controversial, as it will surely involve Shabbos desecration and other rituals against halachah — has also angered both archaeologists and the Muslim Waqf.

Meanwhile, the courts ruled — for this month, at least — that WOW's prayer services are no longer in contravention to local custom, and praying men's-style — including reading from the Torah — is permitted. And that's what prompted W4W and their rabbinic backers to galvanize into action.

“This is what Rav Steinman called a *chilul hakodesh*,” Rabbi Pesach Lerner, executive vice president emeritus of the National Council of Young Israel, told *Mishpacha*. “There is a lot more involved here than a few ladies wearing tefillin. They say it clearly: today the Kosel, tomorrow the chief rabbinate. The Torah community has to draw the line somewhere.”

A group of concerned rabbis and W4W found each other, and Rav Steinman's subsequent endorsement was the call to action that brought out the masses. Rabbi Lerner says he acted purely as an individual in speaking to Israeli *rabbanim* and accessing endorsements for W4W. “Young Israel was not involved here at all. I was an individual, but I was one of 15,000 people — it wasn't only women — at the Kosel who were there in support of *kedushas hamakom*.”

Rabbi Lerner said, however, that Reform rabbis in America who are WOW sympathizers are sending out e-mails, threatening to cut off Federation funding to Israeli causes, and putting pressure on Sharan-sky. “These people have never even been to Israel and certainly don't understand the sensitivities.” And, he added, they're thrilled with WOW's stated agenda to free the Israelis from the “ultra-Orthodox,” and to allow reform and secular control of marriage, divorce, and conversion.

“Whoever thinks this fight is about the rights of prayer and self-expression is mistaken and naïve,” Rav Shmuel Rabinowitz, *rav* of the Kosel and Holy Sites told *Mishpacha*. “They say it themselves — they want the *mechitzah* down.”

In fact, Hoffman offered her solution to a Florida audience on a recent speaking tour: allow male-only prayers at the Kosel Plaza from 6 to 9 a.m., and then take down the *mechitzah* and offer mixed access for everyone for the next six hours as an open national monument. “Let go of the Israel you romanticize about,” she told a shocked audience, horrified to hear her description of what she deemed an

Iranian-like religious oppression in the Holy Land. "It is not a Club Med of the Jewish soul."

She says her suggestion, offensive as it is to religious sensibilities and defiant of the holiness of the area, is actually an offshoot of the government's own policy of turning the Kosel Plaza into a national icon. "What about the swearing-in of soldiers, or the Memorial Day ceremonies?" she reasoned. "Those are certainly not from the time of the Bible." In fact, during those ceremonies, the Kosel Plaza is cleared out and worshippers shooed away while police cordon off the area for the secular festivities, as many regular Kosel-goers can attest to.

But why are the Women of the Wall focused solely on the Kosel? In the Reform movement's ideology, there is no religious centrality to Eretz Yisrael, Jerusalem, and especially not to the Beis HaMikdash. In fact, the Temple with its ritual sacrifices is disdained. Hoffman, director of Israel Religious Action Center, the Reform movement's political and legal arm, admits that this was policy until 10 to 15 years ago. "The Reform movement is awakening to the national and spiritual importance of the Wall," she explained.

She brushed off the fact that her group's form of ritual is anathema to most of the Kosel's worshippers. "Our group has a need," she insisted, "and that need is to pray out loud, to read from the Torah, to wear the tallit, and to lay tefillin. Not all of us put on tefillin, but those of us that put on tefillin every day want to put it on at the Kotel, too. You know, our core members wear a tallit when they pray, just like the men. It's just not the same, getting to the Shema without the tzitzit in our hands — it just doesn't feel natural. And how can there be a proper *tefillat* Rosh Chodesh without reading the Torah? Besides, I'm sure many of the [chareidi] girls that were there [on Rosh Chodesh Sivan] will go back home after seeing us and ask themselves, *Why not?* I'm sure many will want to join us."

Leah Aharoni begs to differ. A business consultant who helps women business owners generate more income, Aharoni, who founded W4W with Ronit Peskin, traveled her own winding religious path from her native Soviet Union to the national religious camp, with a stop-off along the way at Rabbi Avi Weiss's congregation — a bastion of Orthodox feminism. But she says she has no desire to be "rescued" or join Hoffman or any of her friends.

"I was born into the most feminist of societies — Soviet Russia," says Aharoni. "Russia might have been Gehinnom as far as human rights went, but it was a mecca for women's lib. From tractor drivers to construction workers, from professors to judges, this was one big leveled playing field for us girls. The result was a mangled society of miserable women, emasculated men, and neglected children, with the highest divorce rate in the world."

Aharoni says that "conquering the Kosel" like men do and rejecting the feminine experience of Judaism "is the epitome of misogyny. There is nothing more demeaning to women than positioning the

Continued on page 38



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GLOBALVISION

Up Against the Wall

Continued from page 35

WALLED IN ON THE MONEY TRAIL

The Women of the Wall have long contended that they raise a great deal of money to finance their activities from the sale of women's tallisim on their website, which they say is their hottest demand item since Anat Hoffman's arrest in 2010. The embroidered tallis comes with its own matching Bukharian-style *kippah*, a fashion statement at \$275. But another click on their site takes you to the New Israel Fund (NIF) if you want to receive a tax-deductible receipt, and not just a tallis, in return for your donation.

The NIF was on the receiving end of its share of negative publicity last year for funding NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) who support anti-Israel boycotts, divestment from Israel, and even organizations that aided and abetted the collection of evidence that led to the United Nation's Goldstone Report that accused Israel of war crimes during its 2008 Operation Cast Lead invasion of Gaza.

The NIF contends that it supports a wide variety of social causes in Israel, without necessarily supporting every specific policy of those organizations, but the organization's 2011 tax filing with the Internal Revenue Service describes its goals clearly.

In one excerpt, the NIF tells the IRS it "works with civil society organizations to achieve the following objectives — foster diverse expressions of Jewish identity and practice, promote legislation that mitigates the control of the Rabbinate, advocate for equal allocation of resources to non-orthodox Jewish services and education, and strengthen liberal elements within Orthodoxy to achieve these objects."

The NIF's 2011 grant of \$45,169 to the Women of the Wall is just a drop in the NIF's \$18 million bucket that gets poured into an estimated 350 NGOs each year in Israel, but it does give an indication that the Women of the Wall earns high-profile support from a leading left-wing organization whose stated goals run contrary to the values held by most religious and traditional Jews in Israel.

According to the Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, NGOs receive funding via two primary channels: direct funding from bodies controlled by foreign governments, and indirect funding provided by governments to third parties, including foundations and humanitarian, development, and religious NGOs, which channel the funds to local NGOs.

The NIF falls into the second category. The IRS does not require the NIF to release the names of its donors; however, the NIF does give credit to its top supporters in its annual report. The list includes a half a page of foundations, including the Ford Foundation, which in the past has supported pro-Palestinian NGOs.

Since its spate of negative publicity, the NIF has backed off from its support of some of the most egregious anti-Israel organizations, but it is only the means that have changed, and not the ends.

In February 2011, the Knesset passed an NGO transparency law, requiring NGOs domiciled in Israel who received a donation from a foreign governmental body to report that donation to the Israel Registrar of Nonprofits on a quarterly basis.

The NIF lobbied against that law, unsuccessfully.

And a Wikileaks-intercepted cable sent from the US embassy to the Secretary of State in February 2010 when the transparency law was still under discussion quoted NIF associate director Hedva Radovanitz as saying that she believed that "in 100 years Israel would be majority Arab and that the disappearance of a Jewish state would not be the tragedy that Israelis fear since it would become more democratic." Under such a Muslim majority, Women of the Wall might look back on the good ol' days when they just had to contend with an "ultra-Orthodox dictatorship."

— *Binyamin Rose*

traditionally male experience as the only one worth living and setting up women for an ongoing game of catch up."

Mrs. Aharoni offers WOW another spiritual option, albeit out of the light of the TV cameras: "If you really want to liberate yourselves, come join the holy women at dawn who gather in a small grotto inside the Kotel Tunnels, opposite the *Kodesh HaKodoshim*. There's no media there, but there's also no *mechitzah*."

How many supporters does WOW really have? "They have about 15,000 on social media, but those are all in the US, and not all of them are even Jewish," said Ronit Peshkin. "They may have their fans, but those people have nothing to do with Jerusalem or the Kosel. For weeks they were calling on women to join them, and at the rally the entire group numbered about 200, half of whom were tourists, female Knesset members, and reporters."

Meanwhile, although the government has allocated about \$2 million to fix up the area of Robinson's Arch and Reform and Conservative groups hold services there today, WOW founders Susan Aranoff and Rivka Haut refuse, saying they insist on praying in the midst of chareidi women, whom they want to enlighten. "When hareidi women, and hareidi men, and hareidi children see women leading services, wearing tallitot, and even handling and reading from Torah scrolls, their world view is changed," Aranoff writes in her blog. "Like it or not, the sights and sounds of women leading services may initially shock them but then, when they get used to it, it will, it has to change their world view. Women will ... be able to function on their own without the 'help' of men.... This is why they fear and resist it. Their women will be influenced ... and demand change from their rabbis."

Was It Worth It? Looking back at W4W's Rosh Chodesh Sivan event where dozens of high schools and seminaries bused their girls to the Kosel, flooding the plaza, was it actually worth the effort?

In the end, the TV cameras didn't budge from the hoodlums who threw coffee, chairs, and worse on the female worshippers — essentially ignoring the thousands of girls praying quietly in a dignified salute to traditional values. Would it have been better not to bother?

"Let's say the greater Torah community would have ignored those women; there will always be those *kanoim* who won't, who are there anyway, so the negative PR will always be there," said Rabbi Lerner. "The media will always shoot that picture, whether we show up or not."

For Ronit Peskin, it's been a week of soul-searching. "When we called for the people to come pray at the Kosel, we asked that they daven for unity of Am Yisrael. That was one major goal. Women of the Wall have caused such infighting in the Jewish nation, and while as a nation we're still very fragmented, the fact that we had *dati leumi rabbanim* and chareidi *rabbanim* from across the spectrum gave me hope. That at least among religious Jews there can be some unity, even if the nation as a whole isn't ready for that yet."

Rabbi Lerner and Rabbi Yaakov Menken of Project Genesis in Baltimore gave the energetic, media-skilled W4W women the push they needed, accessing endorsements from rabbis across the religious spectrum, including Rav Steinman, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Rav Aharon Feldman, Rav Yitzchak Berkovits, Rav Zev Leff, Rav Dov Lior, Rishon L'Tzion Rav Shlomo Amar, Rav Shmuel Eliyahu, Rav Avigdor Neventzal, Rav Shlomo Aviner, Rav Tzvi Tau, and Rav Zalman Melamed.

"As motivated and inspired as I was by such beautiful backing, I was also afraid of all these names, because I knew how WOW would spin this story," Ronit admits. "Instead of acknowledging the truth, that this mass rally was a grassroots effort coming from us women, they would say 'the controlling, domineering rabbis forced all these women to come' — and that's exactly what happened. Just look at the articles. I'll give you an example. I went up to Judy Maltz from *Ha'aretz* to tell her why I initiated this prayer rally, and

she just laughed in my face. "You initiated it? What, are you delusional? It was the chareidi rabbis who did! They forced you into it!" And she rolled her eyes and walked off."

Ronit has been thrust into the world of media politics, but she readily admits she's no politician — just an idealistic young woman who wants to do good things for the nation. And W4W was a just a twist of fate. Until last month, when W4W was thrown together, Ronit was better known for her popular online Penniless Parenting site, dispensing somewhat extreme tips for managing a home on a shoestring budget. She homeschools her oldest child (he's five) and is also a professional forager, giving courses to other like-minded women who prefer to pick their dinner from the shrubbery in the Ramot forest or Gan Sacher. ("I make soups, quiches, pestos, salads, and patties — good, healthy food that doesn't cost me anything.")

But weeding out the poisonous plants from the healthy grass is nothing like trying to do good by a fickle public. "The rally was Friday, and I was afraid to leave my house all Shabbos. One person on the *yishuv* came up to me and said, 'Ronit, you made the biggest *chillul Hashem*. I hope you tear your clothes on Tisha B'Av and do *teshuvah*; it's because of people like you that we don't have a Beis HaMikdash and you should know that by your actions you were *me'akev* the Geulah by at least half a century: What could I say? I didn't bring the thugs. All I wanted was *ahavas Yisrael*."

These next two weeks, Religious Affairs Minister Naftali Bennett will be considering passing an amendment redefining "local custom," and the court's ruling that WOW didn't breach it might no longer be valid. But if no amendment is passed by Rosh Chodesh Tammuz, Ronit hopes the hoodlums will stay home. "The Kosel is not the place to throw coffee, and it's also not the place to advance political goals. I beg the Women of the Wall to go to the Knesset. Leave the Kosel, the holiest place in the world, to those who want a real spiritual connection without being dependent on a camera crew." ●

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