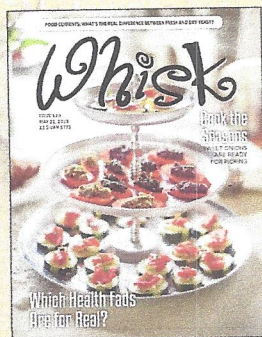


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THE WOMEN OF THE WALL THE TRUE STORY



>>> **THE CLEAN BILL** MY FATHER WAS ACTING STRANGE BUT REFUSED MEDICAL ATTENTION >>> **PARENTING** IF YOU'RE A HYPERPARENT YOU'LL LOVE THIS ARTICLE >>> **TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES** SHOULD I REVEAL THAT THE CHASAN'S MOTHER DOESN'T HAVE THE FUNDS FOR THE ENGAGEMENT RING? >>> **OUR DAYS** FUNNY, THE THINGS YOUR KIDS CAN TEACH YOU >>> I MAY BE OLD, BUT I'M STILL ME >>> **COOK THE SEASONS** BAKE YOUR ONION RINGS >>> **HEALTH FADS** AMERICA IS JUICING AND GOING GRAIN-FREE >>> **FOOD CURRENTS** WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FRESH YEAST AND DRY YEAST?

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The Torah world was transfixed this past Rosh Chodesh, the Friday before Shavuot, as news spread that thousands of *frum* women and girls had assembled at the Kosel Plaza to *daven* early in the morning. The plaza was filled with women, young and old, including thousands of seminary students. The women were there to take a peaceful stand against the Women of the Wall group, which has repeatedly brought nontraditional women's prayer—complete with *tefillin*, *talleisim* and *sifrei Torah*—to the Kosel.

For thousands of years, Jewish *chutzpah* has helped us thrive in the face of all sorts of enemies and tribulations. But the recent impudent attacks on the *kedushah* of the Kosel by the Women of the Wall have struck many onlookers, both religious and nonreligious, as *chutzpah* beyond all bounds of decency. Their brazenness was met by the boldness of the faithful Jewish women that Friday morning.

But it turns out that it isn't just simple brazenness that the Women of the Wall are involved in. The danger posed by this group, which was opposed by thousands of Jewish women on that Friday morning, is not just to the holiness of the Kosel. It's a danger to the holiness of the Jewish people themselves.

BAD ACTORS

One disturbing fact about the Women of the Wall is that it was started by a group that included Orthodox women.

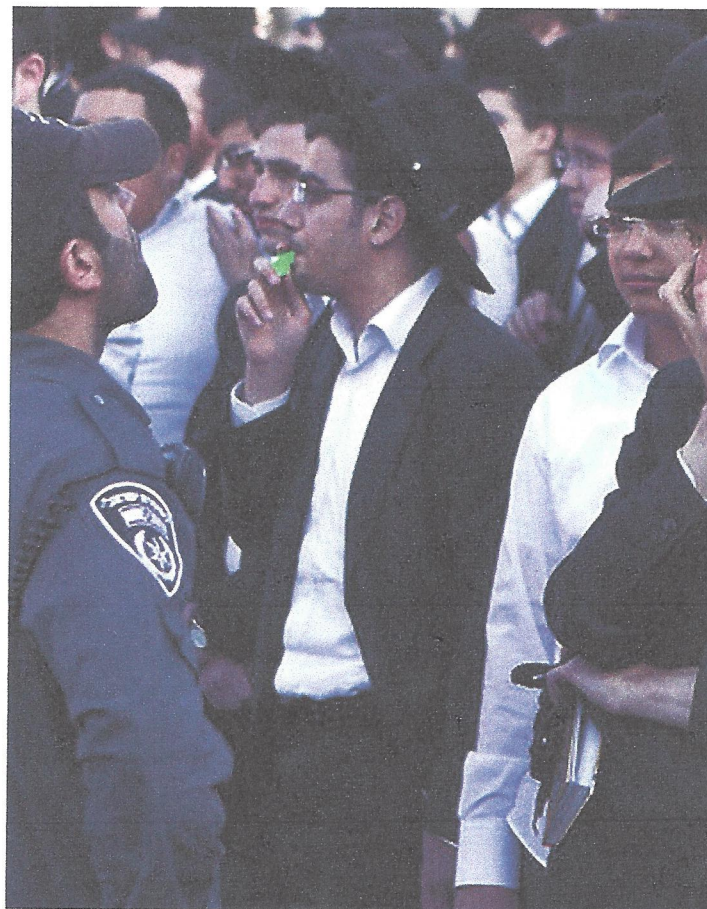
In 1988, a group of women went to the Kosel to hold a prayer service. These women came with a *sefer Torah*, and some of the women sported *talleisim*. A hint to those women's intentions can be found on the Women of the Wall's website, which notes that the first prayer of the Women of the Wall was held in conjunction with the first International Jewish Feminist Conference, held in Yerushalayim that year.

Shira Pruce, director of public relations for Women of the Wall, described it to me.

"The very first prayer service was around the first Jewish women's feminist conference, which was in Jerusalem at the time, and several women wanted to go pray at the Western Wall. Among them were Orthodox women, who were intimidated to go on their own, so they invited other women from the conference to go with them. Not all of them were Orthodox. Many of them were Reform, Conservative, non-denominational or non-affiliated women. How they would pray and which tradition they would use, they compromised on."

What were they intimidated about?

"Because for the last 30 or 40 years it [*davening* at the Kosel] has been run by the ultra-Orthodox. The space was known already then to be enforcing ultra-Orthodox norms. One can assume that if a woman goes in a tank top and is handed a *shmattah* to put around her shoulders, you can assume that if she



goes with other behaviors that are not ultra-Orthodox, she'll be intimidated, although these [non-ultra-Orthodox behaviors] are religious traditions that have been around for hundreds of years."

Meaning, of course, the "traditions" of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Since 1989, the Women of the Wall have been fighting in Israeli courts for the right to hold their monthly prayer meetings at the Kosel. For most of that time, they haven't been very successful, with Israeli courts and commissions only ceding them the right to pray at Robinson's Arch, a section of the Kosel to the south. Since 2003, "egalitarian" prayer services have been held at Robinson's Arch.

But the Women of the Wall group has continued to complain about their exclusion from the main plaza of the Kosel, and over the last four years there have been a number of arrests of women at the Kosel for various behaviors that violated the customs in place there, including women wearing *talleisim* and *tefillin*, and singing loudly.

Israel's Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, tasked Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, with developing a compromise for the Kosel. He came up with a deal that would improve the access and facilities at Robinson's Arch for the heterodox groups. But courts soon went even further.

On April 11, a magistrate court in Yerushalayim ruled that five women who had been arrested at the Kosel had not been disturbing the peace and had been arrested for no reason. The



THE DANGER POSED BY THIS GROUP IS NOT JUST TO THE HOLINESS OF THE KOSEL. IT'S A DANGER TO THE HOLINESS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE THEMSELVES.

backgrounds, including *charedi*, *dati leumi* and *chiloni*. She said that she was inspired to start the group with several friends when she saw that the Women of the Wall rejected the Sharansky compromise, continuing to demand the right to *daven* in the areas of the Kosel that would be reserved for *halachic* observance.

"That showed that they're not interested in a way to *daven* peacefully. They're looking to cause trouble," Ronit explains.

(Anat Hoffman, the head of Women of the Wall, has stated, "I want to see and be seen," making her priorities clear.)

Soon after forming Women for the Wall, they already had big plans. "We were organizing a large group that would meet at the Kosel. Then the court ruling came out," which would legitimize the Women of the Wall, Ronit said.

The Israeli attorney general said that the court ruling might not be binding, and referred the decision about what to do with the Kosel to Naftali Bennett of Habayit Hayehudi, Israel's religious affairs minister. So far Bennett has only met with the Women of the Wall, not those who oppose their position, so Ronit and the other women working with her knew that a large gathering could be influential, by showing Israeli politicians that those who care about the *kedushah* of the Kosel well outnumber those who wish to destroy it.

"I got in touch with *askanim* whom I am connected with, and one of them put me in touch with Rabbi Pesach Lerner," executive vice president emeritus of the National Council of Young Israel.

She had been contacting seminaries to try to get them to send their students to the Kosel on the morning of Rosh Chodesh Sivan. But she had gotten responses from many of them that they wanted to hear support from the *gedolim* before they would send their students. Rabbi Lerner's involvement came at just the right time.

Rabbi Lerner told *Ami* that he had been planning a trip to Eretz Yisrael just before Rosh Chodesh..

"Once I was going, we decided that the right thing to do, before we did anything, was to ask a *shaalos chacham*."

Rabbi Lerner made his contacts. "Tuesday evening, I had an appointment with Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman and his two key *gabbaim* in Bnei Brak. We went through the issues. I asked him some questions.

"First of all, was it proper to try to get the women to come?"

police department appealed the ruling. A district court upheld the magistrate court's ruling and stated that the Women of the Wall should have access to the main plaza of the Kosel. That led to the triumphant entrance of the Women of the Wall into the Kosel Plaza on Rosh Chodesh Sivan, where they found they had been preceded by thousands of *frum* women.

STARTING A REVOLUTION

Arranging for thousands of women to converge on the Kosel at once would seem like a monumental task. Official police estimates put the number of women at over 7,000, but other estimates said that there may have been as many as 15,000. Any of the estimates would mean a staggering number of women showed up at the crack of dawn to peacefully stand against the Women of the Wall. And those whose idea it was didn't know they would be as successful as they were.

Ronit Peskin is a founder of Women for the Wall (that's Woman *for* the Wall, sometimes abbreviated "W4W"), a recently formed group that has been countering the propaganda of Women of the Wall. Her group, she says, formed in mid-April.

"The Women of the Wall had been in the media for so long," she noted, "and were spreading lies. There was a need for the sane voice of women who want to keep the Kosel as a place of *kedushah*, and don't need the Women of the Wall to 'save' them. Our motto, in fact, is 'We don't need to be liberated.'"

She describes her group as consisting of women from different

The more space we could occupy, the less space they would have. We could occupy the front rows near the Kosel; they wouldn't be able to be at the front. To that he said yes, that it was a good idea.

"I described the Sharansky plan to him, to which he said, 'It's a *chillul hakodesh*, and we should do everything we can to oppose it.'

"I asked him if it was the responsibility of American Jews to voice their opinions and write letters and do whatever they could to put counter-pressure on Natan Sharansky and others, and he said, 'Definitely.'"

Rav Shteinman repeated twice that there should be no force used against the Women of the Wall.

"On Wednesday morning, I went to Rav Chaim Kanievsky. I asked him the same questions and he gave the same answers. Rav Chaim Kanievsky called the obligation of American Jews a '*mitzvah gedolah*.'"

Rabbi Lerner also spoke to the chief rabbis, who supported the gathering. After the Rosh Chodesh gathering, on Erev Shabbos, Rabbi Lerner went to the Gerrer Rebbe, who gave the Women

for the Wall organization a *brachah*.

There were also letters supporting the Women for the Wall movement from several *rabbanim* associated with *dati leumi*.

Unbeknownst to the organizers, Rabbi Lerner said, Rav Shteinman issued a statement on Wednesday afternoon calling for all the seminary students to attend the gathering, and he also had an emissary contact many seminary heads. Not every seminary got the message clearly. Several seminary heads who spoke to *Ami* said that they did not realize until late Thursday night that Rav Shteinman had called for all students to attend, though a number of their students did attend. But Rav Shteinman's call gave increased impetus to the gathering. Rav Ovadia Yosef eventually joined that call, lending his strong voice.

Once Rav Shteinman had issued his directive, schools in Bnei Brak hired almost 50 buses to bring their students to the Kosel. Schools in the Yerushalayim area followed suit, hiring about 40 buses. Many women and students came with public transportation; Egged's religious coordinator made sure there would be increased service to the Kosel that morning.

Students from all the well-known *charedi* seminaries, including those attended by mainly American and European girls, went, as well as numerous *dati leumi* and *Mizrachi* women.

And when the Women of the Wall showed up in small numbers (some estimates said less than 50, and Rabbi Lerner points out that this was all they could muster even with the knowledge they would be challenged), they met the *real* women of the wall, brought there by the Women for the Wall.

I WENT TO RAV CHAIM KANIEVSKY. I ASKED HIM THE SAME QUESTIONS AND HE GAVE THE SAME ANSWERS. HE CALLED THE OBLIGATION OF AMERICAN JEWS A 'MITZVAH GEDOLAH.'

WHAT DO THE WOMEN OF THE WALL REALLY WANT?

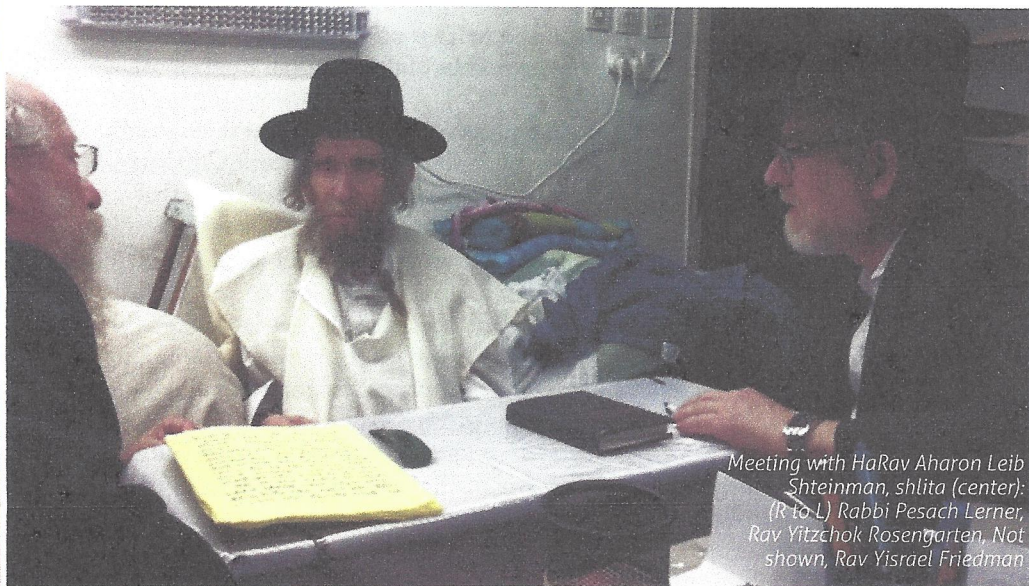
Is all of this just about the Kosel?

No, it's not, both Rabbi Lerner and Mrs. Peskin emphasize. Women of the Wall has repeatedly made clear they are trying to make much larger changes than just having women wear *tefillin* and read from the Torah at the Kosel.

The group's agenda has been made clear in several instances. Anat Hoffman, chairwoman of Women of the Wall, told the BBC in an interview, "I think when you change the holiest site of the Jewish people, you are actually asking 'Why not?' about a variety of other life choices dictated to Israelis by the Orthodox monopoly...."

"I am also questioning," Hoffman continued, "why the Orthodox are the only ones in charge of marriage and divorce in Israel. Some of us wish to get buried not by Orthodox custom but by Reform, Conservative or secular custom."

Susan Aranoff, one of the Orthodox founders of Women of the Wall, wrote in a recent op-ed in *The Times of Israel* that Women of the Wall's experience



Meeting with HaRav Aharon Leib Shteinman, shlita (center); (R to L) Rabbi Pesach Lerner, Rav Yitzchok Rosengarten, Not shown, Rav Yisrael Friedman

illustrates “what happens to women who are constrained to follow the rules enforced by a patriarchal system,” and can therefore be an impetus for rabbis to move forward on “implement[ing] *halachic* solutions to end the abuse of issuing a *get* divorce decree,” the so-called *agunah* crisis.

In her words:

“When *chareidi* women, and *chareidi* men, and *chareidi* children see women leading services, wearing *tallitot*, and even handling and reading from Torah scrolls, their worldview is changed. 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 worldview. Women will no longer be seen as following men when it comes to communal prayer, allowing men to lead, but as individuals who are able to function religiously, on their own, without the ‘help’ of men.”

It didn’t require searching to find out that these are the true intentions of Women of the Wall. Their director of public relations, Shira Pruce, told *Ami* that explicitly.

“We’re really the embodiment of what is going on in Israeli society today,” she said, “which is the fight against the exclusion of women from the public sphere and the struggle against religion being forced on society. By religion, I mean, of course, the most extreme ultra-Orthodox form of it, which is what we have controlling all our lifecycle events and many other factors in our lives here.

“The majority of Israelis are secular; they don’t know any other way to be Jewish than to be ultra-Orthodox. It’s been shoved down their throats since they were born, and they feel no connection. For most people who have lived in Israel their entire lives, the Western Wall has been presented as an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, which it isn’t. But that’s how they see it.

“It’s only in recent years that they’ve tried to take things back from the ultra-Orthodox. The Western Wall has become a blatant example, but it’s not the only one. In Jerusalem there are struggles to have businesses open on Saturday. Across the country, there are struggles to have freedom of marriage. These issues are becoming more and more in the forefront of Israeli life.

“I think that’s because the various Jewish movements are becoming larger here, and I think Israelis are starting to embrace Judaism in a way that is not what the ultra-Orthodox are forcing on them. I think that in general the country is evolving, and regular citizens are taking back more power into their own hands.”

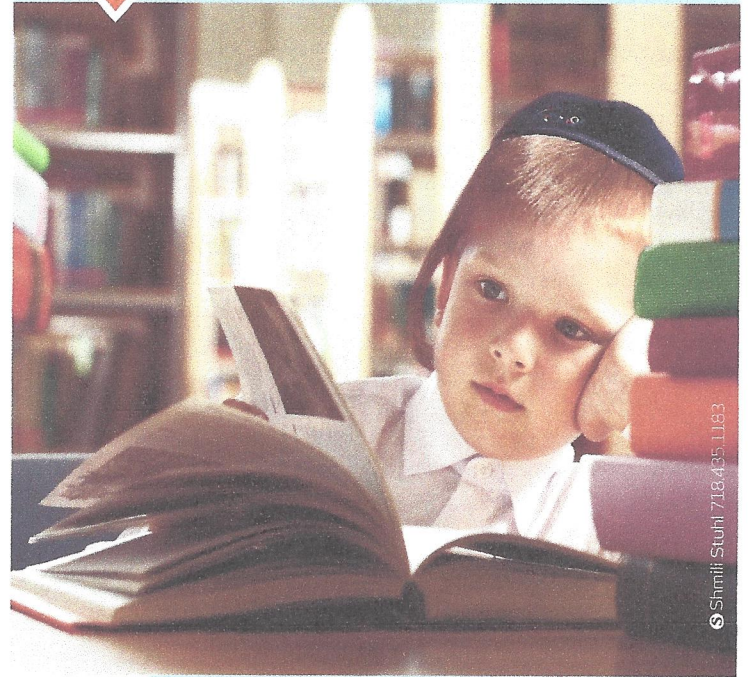
Her statements about “various Jewish movements” become clearer when you realize that Anat Hoffman is not just the chairwoman of Women of the Wall. She is also the “Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center, the legal and advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel.” It is, in fact, a reformist agenda that the Women of the Wall are really hiding behind their supposed love of the Kosel.

The presence of *tallis* and *tefillin* is also a sign of the strong influence of the Conservative movement on the group, though it is anyone’s guess how often these women don *tallis* and *tefillin*—or eat kosher or keep Shabbos—when not at the Kosel.

Additionally, it is actually a very American reform agenda

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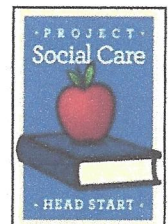
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creativity and learning through play

they are pushing. Almost none of the members of the board of Women of the Wall were born in Israel. Some are still not Israelis. Susan Aranoff, the founder, is a professor at Brooklyn's Kingsborough Community College, of the CUNY (City University of New York) system.

The Women of the Wall is an American import into Israel, and like many American imports, it is an unhealthy one.

(Unfortunately, that's not the only American import causing problems for the Kosel. The Yesh Atid MK Dov Lipman recently gave a speech in the Knesset in which he said that there was no need for a *mechitzah* at the Kosel, because it does not qualify as a *beis haknesses*. He referred to old photos of the Kosel, in which there was no *mechitzah*, as proof. But the photos in question were from a time when the Ottomans wouldn't allow a *mechitzah*, and there was no regular *minyan* in the area, unlike today. Those facts didn't stop Lipman from pushing for something that even Anat Hoffman has not advocated yet: the abolishment of a *mechitzah* at the Kosel at all times. Even she would be willing to "allow" the Orthodox a few hours of prayer with a *mechitzah* in the morning.)

What do the Women of the Wall want with the Kosel? Is it the *kedushah* of the place that is drawing them?

Their spokeswoman revealed a different angle to *Ami*. "The Western Wall is a very strong symbol in Israel. It's not only a holy site—that's one aspect of it. The Kotel was conquered in 1967 by Israeli paratroopers. Those pictures are Zionism. That's Israel. That's everyone's memory. It's a national site. It's an archaeological site. It's also a holy site, but it's not an ultra-Orthodox synagogue."

It seems that in the eyes of the Women of the Wall, this national symbol and archaeological site requires a *sefer Torah* and *tefillin*, along with a bevy of cameramen, to make the most of it.

WHAT NEXT?

The Women of the Wall group did win in one way on Rosh Chodesh Sivan. They successfully co-opted the secular press to present a picture of thousands of *charedim* violently attacking them.

Rabbi Lerner pointed out that based on where the Women of the Wall were logistically, it wasn't possible for garbage to have been thrown at them from the men's side, so that reports of men throwing garbage at them were ridiculous. He also praised the police for their handling of the situation.

Shira Pruce told *Ami* that the *chareidi* leadership should condemn the violence. In fact, the leadership had demanded ahead of the event that there be no violence, and Women for the Wall condemned any violence.

Nitsana Darshan-Leitner of Shurat Hadin Israeli Law Center told *Ami* that the attorney general should never have allowed the Women of the Wall group to enter the Orthodox section of the Kosel Plaza, in the same way that Jews are not allowed to enter the *Har Habayis* to pray, due to fear of violence. Women of the Wall have been asked about their support for Jews praying on the *Har Habayis* and have not supported it. Apparently they have

a double standard for Jewish and Muslim sensibilities.

Rabbi Lerner and Ronit Peskin said that Women for the Wall will be bringing a similar gathering next Rosh Chodesh as well. But their efforts may have already borne fruit.

Rabbi Lerner told *Ami* that the police have already indicated they will be pressuring the government to find a solution before next Rosh Chodesh. Ronit Peskin says that several Israeli politicians have been affected by the gathering, including Likud MK Miri Regev, who previously supported the Women of the Wall's right to pray in the Orthodox area of the Kosel, but now says she only supports their use of Robinson's Arch.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, *rav* of the Kosel, told *Ami*, "The Kosel should be a place of unity, not contention. [The gathering on Rosh Chodesh] showed people that this [the Women of the Wall prayers] cannot continue at the Kosel."

Rabbi Lerner told *Ami* that American Jews need to take action to oppose not just the Women of the Wall, but also the Sharansky compromise, which he says will bring a full-fledged Reform temple to the Kosel area, with all of the attendant behaviors.

"The plan is," he said, "because they want to be equals, to move back the security gate. Right now, when you come to the Kosel, you come through the Mugrabbi Gate to get to the Kosel. The Reform won't accept that. They want the security gate moved back, so that when you walk through, if you turn right you'll be at the Reform temple and if you go left you'll be at the Kosel. How many people might make a right turn? The potential *chillul hakodesh* is immense."

Rabbi Lerner says that the Reform movement and the Jewish Federations have been putting pressure on the Israeli government to allow them a full place at the Kosel, and he says that American Jews must join with Women for the Wall to apply pressure in the opposite direction. "Every Orthodox Jew who cares has to, twice a week, pick up the phone or fax or email Sharansky and say, 'Please protect the *kedushas hamakom*.'"

The Jewish Agency's address is 48 King George Street, P.O.B. 92; Jerusalem, Israel; at zip code 91000. Sharansky's telephone number is 011-972-2-620-2080. His fax number is 011-972-2-625-2352. His email address is natansh@jafi.org.

"This fight isn't the Kosel. It's a fight about whether your grandchild or my grandchild can marry a typical Israeli, or whether they'll need a *sefer yuchsin*," added Rabbi Lerner.

The first moves in the campaign have been made.

Shira Pruce told *Ami* that she thought the seminary girls were probably terrified by the situation they found themselves in. Some activists associated with Women of the Wall suggested that the girls might be moved by the sight of the women wearing *tefillin* and exhibiting the rest of their behaviors as to actually join them.

But the truth is just the opposite. All Jews can be proud of the strong impression that women, young and old, made in defending the *kedushah* of the Kosel. And it is these faithful women who will make the impression, not their supposed liberators. ■