

PRAYING WITH OUR FEET

BY RABBI ANDREW SACKS



Clockwise from top: Nofrat Frenkel talks to the crowd at the March rally in Jerusalem; Nofrat Frenkel; Rabbi Barry Schlesinger speaks at the rally; a view of the crowd.



IN 1965 PROFESSOR Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish thinker, went to Selma, Alabama, to march with Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle for civil rights. Someone marching alongside him questioned why such an eminent scholar would come to Selma instead of remaining in his ivory tower in New York. Heschel's reply was profound: "When I march in Selma, my feet are praying."

For many years this phrase has stuck with

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me. Most of us associate prayer with attending synagogue, davening each day, or reciting blessings. We place a premium on social action – *tikkun olam* – but rarely see the connection between action and prayer.

In November I felt a sense of pride in our Masorti/Conservative movement as Heschel's words rang true to life in real time.

For some 21 years the group known as Women of the Wall has been davening in the women's section of the Kotel, the western wall in Jerusalem, on *rosh chodesh*, the beginning of each month on the Hebrew calendar. These are women from all Jewish streams, many of whom pray with tallit and tefillin.

Over the years, the Masorti movement has reached a compromise, born of a violent struggle, with zealously Orthodox Jews

– *haredim* – who tried to keep us from mixed prayers even in the upper plaza of the Kotel. We now sponsor some 450 minyanim each year at Kotel HaMasorti in front of Robinson's Arch at the southern end of the Wall. We pray enveloped by all of the sanctity of the Kotel but without the *ballegan*, the nonsense, associated with its most-visited section. Women of the Wall usually move to Robinson Arch to read from the Torah.

Let me be clear. I do not believe that most haredi Jews are violent. But they certainly have a disproportional say in the way our country is governed, even though most do not serve in the army and many do not pay income or property taxes. Let it also be clear that Zionist Orthodox Jews in Israel unfairly suffer the stigma created by those more rigid in their approach.

Rain or shine, WOW come to the Kotel at 7AM every rosh chodesh. The Israeli Supreme Court has found that their desire to pray in keeping with their customs indeed is legal. However, that same court accepted the now disproved police contention that should the women pray as a minyan in the women's section, the police would be unable to maintain public order and provide them with adequate protection. So rather than punish the perpetrators of violence against the women, the court sent them off to Kotel HaMasorti. For all these years the women complied quietly. For all these years they allowed the authorities to determine how and where they would pray.

Although we have found a home at Robinson's Arch, the Masorti movement never relin-

quished our call for the right to pray in the plaza at the Western Wall in keeping with Jewish tradition. We may not hold our minyanim there but we certainly accept the principle of religious pluralism and back Women of the Wall's right to daven as they wish.

Over the years the Kotel has become much like a private *shtiebel*, a neighborhood Orthodox shul. Celebrations there have become rare. Few swearing-in ceremonies for the Israel Defense Forces now take place there, and new *olim*, immigrants to Israel, are no longer officially welcomed there. No longer does the army choir sing there on Israel's Memorial Day, because the singers include women, whose voices the haredim feel they are prohibited from hearing.

This haredization of the Kotel is symptomatic of much that is happening all over

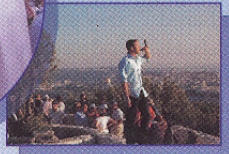
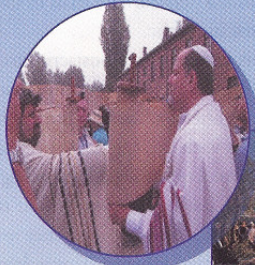
Jerusalem. There are weekly clashes between the haredim, who seek to impose their will on the entire city, and the rest of its citizens.

There have been clashes over parking lots and businesses kept open on Shabbat (staffed by non-Jewish workers), gay pride parades, gender-segregated buses, and even a desire to create separate hospitals for men and women.

Masorti is a religious movement. We are not in favor of breaking Jewish law. But we strongly oppose religious coercion through legislation, and most certainly through intimidation.

On rosh chodesh Kislev one brave woman, Nofrat Frenkel, took a stand. Without sounding overly dramatic, in a scene reminiscent of Rosa Parks, Nofrat, who grew up in Noam, the Masorti youth movement, and is active in a Masorti congregation, decided that she was unwilling to hide her tallit under her coat. The Torah, she decided, did not have to be carried off elsewhere to be read. Her actions were unpremeditated. For this nefarious, subversive, sinful act, Nofrat was taken into custody by Jerusalem's

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who joined us in 2009 on the historic

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finest. She was guilty of carrying a Torah scroll while draping her shoulders with her ever-so-offensive prayer shawl.

The citizens of Jerusalem had seen enough. In an almost unprecedented show of unity, people affiliated with Masorti, Orthodox, Reform, and secular groups poured into the streets on a Saturday night, in the very center of downtown Jerusalem, to claim that Jerusalem belongs to all of us. It was time to take back our city.

Nofrat, the unlikely hero, a fifth-year medical student, quoted Psalm 82 as she told the crowd, “God stands in the congregation of God’ but it appears that God is not alone in this holy place. There is also hatred and contempt, arrogance and argument. At least that is what I experienced when I prayed in the women’s section wearing my tallit.”

That Saturday night, in the presence of hundreds of people from all of our congregations; from our organizations, including Noam and Marom, which is for young adults; and dozens of our rabbis, we all felt that Jerusalem is the city of holiness and justice for all humankind. We cannot allow the tyranny of the minority to rule us. While the tide of intolerance and extremism has been on the rise, it now has peaked and will no longer sweep away those who love Israel. As Nofrat said that night, “From Zion, the voices calling for equality should be heard, for boundless love, for better understanding between people. Jerusalem already has been destroyed due to unfounded hatred. Let us hope it will not happen again.”

The throngs that evening, many of whom were active members of Masorti in Israel, were praying with their feet, just as Heschel had done some 44 years ago.

The following week we were witness to yet another, more distant Masorti community praying with its feet.

Judaism goes to great lengths to show respect for the dead and dying. The High Priest, on his way to the service of God in the Temple on Yom Kippur, must delay those duties if he is the only person available to bury a body. Respect for the dead is a matter of paramount importance. Jewish tradition mandates that the terminally ill, their families, and ultimately the body be treated with awe and reverence. So it is with the utmost

disappointment, sadness, and horror that I share the following true story.

The Ben-David family are active members of the Masorti community in Madrid, Spain. Zohar Ben-David is Israeli-born. His wife and his son, Gai, were converted to Judaism. Gai, a wonderful young man, recently celebrated becoming bar mitzvah. Sadly, he also was diagnosed with a brain tumor. While his family did everything in its power to help, Gai’s situation deteriorated. Soon he was unable to swallow or even to breathe on his own. The only thing left to do was to pray for God’s mercy.

Gai had a respiratory tube in his throat. He was unable to swallow and was being supported by hospital machinery. He could not be moved. But this did not trouble Rav Amar even one iota. The suffering of Gai and of his family just was not relevant to Rav Amar. It was far easier to say no rather than to look, with compassion, for a solution.

Facing the inevitable, his brave father began to look into how his son would be buried. He was shocked to learn that the chief rabbi of Madrid, Rav Dahan, would not authorize Gai’s internment in the Jewish cemetery without an official okay from Israel’s Sephardi chief rabbi, Rav Shlomo Amar.

Gai was a righteous *ger* (convert). His conversion included *brit milah* (circumcision) and *mikvah* (immersion in a ritual bath). He lived as a Jew because he was a Jew. But because the *beit din* (religious court) that officiated at his conversion was made up of Masorti rabbis, Rav Amar was unwilling to temper his stern justice with a bit of mercy. This despite the fact that Jewish law, *halachah*, forbids the mistreatment of the convert, including reminding a convert that he or she was once not a Jew.

Rav Amar demanded that if the family wished their precious child to be buried in the Jewish cemetery he would have to be

taken again to a mikvah, in the presence of witnesses acceptable to Rav Amar. Gai had a respiratory tube in his throat. He was unable to swallow and was being supported by hospital machinery. He could not be moved. But this did not trouble Rav Amar even one iota. The suffering of Gai and of his family just was not relevant to Rav Amar. It was far easier to say no rather than to look, with compassion, for a solution.

Rav Amar made the final call that Gai must be buried outside the main cemetery.

Each chief rabbi, Dahan and Amar, blamed the other. Let us call upon the rabbis to stand up and take the heat for the damage they have done to the Ben-David family, to the Masorti community in Madrid, and to Judaism.

Gai died on a Friday and was buried that Sunday, at the edge of the Jewish cemetery, in a special section reserved for outsiders. I believe that God will treat his soul as that of a righteous Jew. The punishment, if it is to come, will be for those who caused his family humiliation and even more suffering. Israel’s chief rabbi violated the principle of halachah that says it is better to hurl yourself into a fiery furnace than to shame your fellow in public.

There is an interesting postscript to this sad tale. The Masorti community of Madrid prayed again after Gai’s death – but this time they prayed with their feet. Many leaders and members of the community have signed a document stating that when their time comes (may it be a long time off), they would like to be buried where Gai was laid to rest. Others who never have been affiliated with the Masorti movement also signed this document.

May Gai’s memory serve as a blessing to all of us. May the light of his life guide those who are unable to temper justice with mercy. May his family be comforted with the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. May we all continue to pray with our hearts, our souls, and our feet.

As an expression of support you may get in touch with the director of the Masorti community in Madrid and with the Ben-David family by writing to mario@bet-el.org. Then you will be praying with your heart, words, and hands. 