

WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT... THE KOTEL BEING JUDAISM'S HOLIEST SITE?

By Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky

MISCONCEPTION: The “Kotel”¹—the Western or Wailing Wall—is Judaism’s holiest site.

FACT: The location of the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (the “Holy of Holies” section of the Beit Hamikdash) on the Temple Mount is Judaism’s holiest site. In recent centuries, when Jews were barred from the Temple Mount and the closest accessible site was a piece of the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount, that “Western Wall,” the “Kotel,” took on added significance and Jews prayed there. This, coupled with midrashic references about the unique status of a “western wall,” have bestowed a mystical aspect to the Kotel, which has since been hallowed by torrents of Jewish tears through history. This has led some people to mistakenly believe that the Kotel is Judaism’s holiest site.

Background:

The Kotel is by far the most visited “tourist site” in Israel. Jews and non-Jews, religious and non-religious, Israelis and foreign tourists all make their way to the ancient stone wall to pour out their hearts, stuff prayers into its cracks, be awed by the sense of holiness and history, and rejoice at the throngs of worshippers.²

On the purely physical dimension, it is an engineering wonder of the ancient world. The wall is constructed of large limestone blocks with narrow borders around the edges and smooth and slightly raised bosses in the center. There is no mortar or cement, with the

stones simply stacked one row on top of the next, with each subsequent row slightly recessed from the one below it. The stones are massive, each about 15 feet deep and ranging in height from 3.6 to 4.3 feet. But in length they vary considerably, from two feet to an awe-inspiring 44 feet. The original height of the Western Wall is estimated to have been about 200 feet; looking up today, one sees a height of about a third of that, 60 feet.

Herod the Great, a ruler of Judea during the late Second Temple period, was a megalomaniac known for his colossal building projects, including Herodian, Masada and the building of Me’arat Hamachpelah. What can no longer be seen is his total renovation of the second Beit Hamikdash, about which Chazal said (*Sukkah* 51b; *Bava Batra* 4a): “Whoever has not seen the Beit

Hamikdash [of Herod] has not seen a splendid building in his life.”

As part of his reconstruction of the Beit Hamikdash, Herod (and his descendants) greatly expanded the surface area of the mountaintop by constructing four massive retaining walls, the “Kotel” being part of the western one, to support a large artificial platform. That wall, still standing today, is about 1,600 feet long. The area of wall at which people pray today is a small section, approximately 187 feet long, and consists of 45 layers of stone—17 subterranean and 28 above ground. Of these, about half are from the original Second Temple period, most of the rest are from various Muslim periods, and the very top row is an Israeli addition. At the time the western retaining wall was built, the area of today’s prayer plaza was a large street and market. For most of history, the prayer area was much smaller, with the current plaza constructed immediately following the miraculous liberation from Jordan of the eastern part of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War.

The Kotel plaza, in addition to serving as an open-air synagogue, is used for national and religious ceremonies, e.g., swearing in of IDF soldiers, mass recitations of Selichot/Tehillim, communal Birkat Kohanim and the Hakhel gathering (see *Yabia Omer* 10:YD:22).

Most of the rest of the Western Wall remains hidden behind buildings abutting the wall. However, there are two other exposed sections. To the south where the wall is exposed



Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky is a professor of neuroscience at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

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all the way to its southern corner is the amazing Davidson Center-The Jerusalem Archaeological Park. In the other direction is a small exposed area known as the Kotel HaKatan, the Small (Western) Wall. It is considered by many to be the point on the wall closest to the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, and although no Torah scrolls are housed at the site, it is also regularly used for prayer services.

The Kotel's Special Status

Some of the earliest rabbinic sources that attribute a special status to the “Western Wall” are in the *Midrash Rabbah*. *Eichah Rabbah* (1:31), in relating the story of the *Churban Bayit Sheini* by the Romans (cf. *Gittin* 55-58), adds that after conquering Jerusalem, Vespasian assigned to each of his four generals a different quarter of the city to destroy. The general who was supposed to destroy the western side did not do so, and when questioned by Vespasian, he explained that he left it as a witness to what a powerful city Vespasian had conquered. The Midrash explains that in Heaven it had been decreed that the Western Wall never be destroyed because the *Shechinah* was on the western side of the Temple, i.e., the Holy of Holies was in the western part of the Temple. Thus, this *midrash* attributes the significance of the Western Wall to its proximity to the source of holiness, a holiness that is permanent despite the destruction of the Temple (Rambam, *Hilchot Beit Habechirah* 6:14-15). *Bamidbar Rabbah* (11:2) similarly says that because of its proximity to the holiest location, the Western Wall will never be destroyed but adds a crucial phrase—it calls it the “Western Wall ‘of the Temple.’” Neither of those *midrashim* assert that the *Shechinah* remained connected to the Western Wall itself. Actually, the next two sections

in *Eichah Rabbah* (1:32-33) assert that when the Jewish children were exiled, the *Shechinah* went with them.³ *Shemot Rabbah* (2:2) debates whether the *Shechinah* ascended to Heaven, remained on the Temple Mount, or, as Rav Acha asserts based on *Shir Hashirim* (2:9), remained, and will remain, on the Western Wall.⁴ On that verse in *Shir Hashirim*, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (2:22) does not mention the *Shechinah*, but says that G-d promised the Western Wall of the Temple that it would never be destroyed.

Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik observes (*The L-rd is Righteous in All His Ways* [Toras HoRav Foundation, 2006], pp. 204-7) that in the alphabetical acrostic *kinah* “*Zekhor Asher Asah*” by Elazar HaKalir (pp. 228-232, *ArtScroll Kinot* [1991]), the line for *tzadi* states, “*al tzad ma'aravi*,” on the western side, referencing the *midrash* in *Eichah Rabbah* about the Western Wall. The Rav highlights the fact that the *Shechinah* never left the western side of the Temple Mount, whose holiness is permanent,⁵ and thus the Western Wall was indestructible. The Rav also notes that neither the *Bavli* nor the *Yerushalmi* mention the Kotel, and thus he views this *kinah*⁶ as one of the earliest references to it. Furthermore, he says, Rishonim did not pay much attention to the Kotel. For example, the Rav points out, the famous letter written by the Rambam when he arrived in Jerusalem mentions where he prayed and makes no mention of the Western Wall.

The *midrashim* that include the phrase “of the Temple” present a challenge. If the *midrash* was being precise, that implies that the Kotel is not the retaining wall of the Herodian platform, but a wall of the Temple itself, in which case the area immediately to its west

(today's plaza) is part of the Temple Mount and it thus might be problematic to approach the wall or to touch it since everyone today is *tamei*, ritually impure.⁷ Rabbi Avraham Danzig (d. 1820; author of *Chayei Adam*) opined as such.⁸ Nonetheless, the custom has always been to approach the Kotel, and thus most authorities assume that the *midrash* was not being precise and that the western wall of which it spoke is in fact the wall standing today, which all archaeological evidence indicates is a retaining wall.⁹ Even if it is “merely” the retaining wall of the Har Habayit, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (*Mo'adim U'zmanim* 5:350), in a minority opinion, rules that nonetheless the Kotel has the sanctity of the Temple Mount and therefore one should refrain from putting his fingers into the cracks or benefiting from the wall, such as by leaning on it.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe*, OC 2:113) says that because Jews have been *davening* there for generations, there must be a reliable tradition that it is permissible to approach it and that it is not a wall of the Temple itself, and thus there is no room for disagreement; he expresses amazement about any such discussion. So too, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 5:YD:27), after surveying the earlier literature, concludes that there is no question whatsoever that the Kotel is the retaining wall and not the wall of the *azarah* of the Beit Hamikdash. He says that the data bears this out,¹⁰ as does the custom, and anyone who acts stringently and does not approach the Kotel because of this doubt is acting inexplicably.

Over the years, various legends about the Kotel have developed. Rabbi Yoel Sirkis (d. 1640; Poland; *Bach*, OC 561) records that he saw in “*Likutim*” (presumably the not-yet-organized

writings of the Arizal, d. 1572) that “when one sees the Sha’arei Rachamim (Gates of Mercy) that are in the Western Wall, the wall that King David built,”¹¹ he recites certain verses.¹² He commented that there is no such Talmudic statement for this and he does not know the source.

Jerusalem-born Rabbi Moshe Hagiz (d. 1750) describes (*Eileh Masei*, pp. 12b-14a in 1884 ed.; pp. 18-20 in 1959 ed.) the “rediscovery” of the Kotel following the 1516 Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem. He says that he heard from historians that when the Ottomans captured Jerusalem, Kaiser Selim, father of the more famous Suleiman the Magnificent,¹³ saw a very old non-Jewish woman dumping a basket of garbage close to his palace on top of a huge garbage heap. In anger, the kaiser summoned her to inquire where she was from and why she dumped the garbage close to his palace. She replied that she was a descendant of the Romans, lived a two-day journey from the palace, and was quite tired from hauling the trash so far, but that she was perpetuating what the Romans had been doing for generations. Their rationale, she explained, was that when the Romans were unable to completely destroy the Jewish Temple, they instituted that its site should forever be buried in garbage so that it should be forgotten, and this was the location. The kaiser investigated and confirmed that this was the local tradition. Choosing to be kind to the Jews, he scattered coins daily in this massive trash heap to encourage the poor to come and dig for the coins, thus removing the trash. After thirty days, with 10,000 people digging, the Western Wall and its foundations were exposed for all to see.

There is a popular legend, found in many twentieth-century works, which, alas, has no source. It asserts that when the first Beit Hamikdash was built, King Solomon divided the work among different sectors of the population and the building of the Western Wall was tasked to the poor, who, unable to hire others, built it with the sweat of their own brow. Because of this, at the time of the destruction, Divine Providence protected that wall.

The Western Wall was not always the primary prayer and tourist site that it is today, and in fact, the southern and eastern walls of the Temple Mount are also still standing.¹⁴ For many centuries, first the southern wall and then the eastern, which is near both the Shaarei Rachamim and the Mount of Olives, were popular locations to pray. With the completion of the still-extant Jerusalem Old City wall in 1540, that all changed. With Jews still barred from ascending the Temple Mount by the ruling Muslims, they searched for a close location, and since the Western Wall was now located safely inside these new walls, it became the preferred site.

The twelfth-century explorer Benjamin of Tudela wrote: “. . . in front of this place is the Western Wall, which is one of the walls of the Holy of Holies. This is called the Gate of Mercy, and thither come all the Jews to pray before the wall of the court of the Temple [*sic!*].”¹⁵ But another twelfth-century traveler, Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon, in describing the Mount of Olives, says: “prayers are offered up there” (Adler, p. 90), and makes no mention of the Western Wall. Similarly, the thirteenth-century Rabbi Jacob, the messenger of Rabbi Yechiel of Paris, describes ascending the Mount of Olives and writes: “Thence we see the Temple Mount and all the buildings upon it, and we pray in the direction of the Temple” (*ibid.*, p. 117), with again no mention of the Western Wall. The fourteenth-century Ishtori Haparchi (d. 1355) in his *Kaftor vaFerach* makes no mention of the Western Wall (Meir Ben-Dov, *The Western Wall*, 1986, p. 68). In 1488, Rabbi Obadiah Da Bertinoro mentions that the Western Wall is partially standing (Adler, p. 240), but mentions nothing about praying there. He mentions regular prayers in a synagogue (*ibid.*, pp. 235-6) and in the Kidron Valley (near the eastern wall) on fast days (*ibid.*, p. 241). However, Isaac ben Joseph Ibn Chelo in 1334 does say the Jews prayed at the Western Wall (*ibid.*, p. 131).

Despite the clear fact that the Kotel is not Judaism’s holiest site, this obvious and potentially damaging error is oft-repeated by politicians

as well as in articles and books. In Judaism, Hashem is accessible in all places and at all times. Regarding this, King David declared (Psalms 24:1) “The earth is the L-rd’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” Nonetheless, there is a concept of *kedushah*, holiness, which defines certain places, times or people as separated and distinct due to restrictions, obligations or privileges that apply to them. It helps to give people islands of time and space in which to focus attention on the spiritual.

The ten levels of holy space are listed in the Mishnah (*Keilim* 1:6-9). The first step up, according to the Mishnah, is that the Land of Israel is holier than all other lands. This is followed by walled cities, the city of Jerusalem and the Har Habayit (Temple Mount). Within the Har Habayit, there are concentric regions of holiness, culminating in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, which was centered around the *Even Shetiyah*, the Foundation Stone, which, according to most opinions, is today the stone in the center of the Dome of the Rock.

While the Kotel is today an important prayer site, it is “merely” the outer wall of the Temple Mount. Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg (d. 2006) quotes the Radvaz that if someone was on the Temple Mount (on the other side of the Kotel), he should pray in the direction of where the Temple had stood, with his back to the Kotel (*Tzitz Eliezer* 10:1:80). The site of the Temple is more holy than the Kotel.

The answer to the question “what is Judaism’s holiest site?” is clear. Jews have always directed prayers toward the Temple Mount, and the Temple Mount is the only area on Earth where, according to Jewish law, certain sections may not be entered in a state of ritual impurity.¹⁶ Probably one of the greatest mistakes in modern Jewish history was Moshe Dayan’s handing control of our holiest site to the Waqf as the Six-Day War was still raging and the world was still in shock and awe. This is not to minimize the significance of the Wailing Wall, which has been saturated by Jewish tears and yearning for centuries and thereby consecrated as

a special place of connection to Hashem and to Jewish community and history.

Today, the Jewish tears of yearning coming with tears of joy. Rabbi Ovadia Hedaya (d. 1969; *Yaskil Avdi* 8:43:2) was asked in 1967 whether one should say the *Shehecheyanu* blessing upon seeing the Kotel for the first time, reflecting the overwhelming sense of jubilation that its liberation by an independent Jewish country elicited among the Jewish people, who for 1,900 years had only been tearing *keriyah* at the walls of the Temple Mount. Rabbi Hayim David HaLevi (d. 1998; *Aseh Lecha Rav* 1:14, 1976) says that in the past, a Jew coming to the “Kotel *Hademaot*” (“the Wailing Wall”) would instinctively burst into tears over the exile of the *Shechinah*. But, he says, today, even on Tishah B’Av, one cannot help but feel some internal joy in seeing the masses of Jews filling the “courtyard of the Temple,” and it seems that the *Shechinah* is also no longer “cloaked in mourning” as it confronts a unified Jerusalem under Jewish sovereignty. May this sense of the “*Shechinah* no longer [being] cloaked in mourning” be the first step, seventy-five years after the founding of the Jewish State, and fifty-six years after the liberation of the Temple Mount, toward the complete Redemption and the building of the Beit Hamikdash.

Notes

1. The Hebrew word for wall, “*kotel*,” is almost never used in the Bible, but is more common in rabbinic Hebrew. In Biblical Hebrew, “*chomah*” or “*kir*” are more

common. “*Kotel*” appears only once (Shir Hashirim 2:9), and its Aramaic cognate, *ktal*, twice (Daniel 5:5; Ezra 5:8).

2. Historically, the Kotel has been a unifying symbol for the Jewish people, and any struggle was against foreign powers who were restricting Jewish access. Unfortunately, today there is internecine fighting surrounding the Kotel, leading to tension over a formerly consensus issue.

3. Based on Devarim 30:3, the Talmud (*Megillah* 29a; quoted by Rashi on the verse) says that the *Shechinah* follows the Jews in their various places of exile. See *Tzitz Eliezer* 10:1:81 regarding different uses of the term “*Shechinah*” in these assorted contexts.

4. Rabbi Hayim David Halevi (*Aseh Lecha Rav* 6:83) uses this *midrash* as part of his explanation in ruling that a *kallah* should not use the Kotel as a backdrop for photos.

5. The Rav notes the ramifications—if we had the opportunity, we could build an altar and bring sacrifices because the *kedushah* is still there.

6. He assumes that Elazar HaKalir lived in the Land of Israel in the tenth century (*ibid.*, p. 138).

7. See “What’s the Truth About ... Har HaBayit?,” *Jewish Action* (summer 2009) regarding a *tamei* person ascending the Temple Mount; https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-thought/whats_the_truth_about_habayit/.

8. In 1812, while a *dayan* in Vilna, he published *Shaarei Zedek* detailing the *halachot* of the Land. In the introduction, he included three prayers that he composed, the first said upon entering Israel, the second upon arriving in Jerusalem, and the third to be said as one stood at the Kotel. In the section *Mishpetei Haaretz* 11:8, he states that the Kotel is a wall of the Beit Hamikdash.

9. See *Orchot Rabbeinu*, p. 322, in which the Steipler cited the archaeological evidence.

10. For a discussion and eight proofs, see *Ir*

Hakodesh V’Hamikdash, vol. 4, chap. 2, sec. *gimmel* (pp. 20-22).

11. Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, *Ir Hakodesh V’Hamikdash* (4:2:4, pp. 22-23) similarly accepts that King David laid the foundation of the Western Wall, and says that explains why it was never destroyed.

What is known as the Shaarei Rachamim today are sealed gates in the eastern wall of the Old City/Har Habayit. And there is no evidence that any of the walls date to the period of King David. Similarly, British Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz erroneously asserted regarding the Western Wall that “it goes back 3,000 years. Originally it formed part of the Temple of Solomon ...” (speech as part of a fast day, circa 1928, declared to protest the British capitulation to Arab threats leading to persecution and harassment of Jews at the Western Wall).

12. Quoted also in *Mishpetei Haaretz* 11:7.

13. There is a parallel version of this story recorded by Rabbi Eliezer Nachman Poa [or Foa] (d. 1659; Italian kabbalist known by the acronym of his name, Arnan) in his *Midrash BeChiddush* commentary on the Haggadah. Commenting on the *pasuk* in Hallel (pp. 146-7 in 1967 ed.) “He raises up the needy from the earth; He lifts up the poor from the garbage heap” (Psalms 113:7), he quotes a similar story as that told by Rabbi Hagiz, but featuring Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.

14. These are well worth visiting. A section of the southern wall and the excavations at its base are part of the Davidson Center, while the more eastern part is included in other tours. The eastern wall, with its Hasmonean stones and the wall’s noticeable “seam,” is impressive.

15. Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts* (Dover reprint, 1987), 371.

16. With the exception of a *metzora* who is barred from walled cities because of the unique status the Torah accords to walled cities, not because of a particular location. ■

