

Suspending the Kotel Agreement: An affront to Zionism

DONNIEL HARTMAN | JUNE 26, 2017, 1:34 PM |

Tisha B'av came early this year.

In June of 1967 Jerusalem became the united capital of the Jewish people worldwide. Fifty years later, this week, we destroyed the unity of Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred. In 2017, a united Jerusalem was ruined on the altar of petty politics by politicians who failed in their sacred responsibility to preserve the foundational principle of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people.

The government's decision to suspend the Kotel agreement was perceived by many as a slap in the face of North American Jewry. We immediately witnessed a public debate across social media regarding the right of world Jewry to claim influence within Israeli society and politics. For many Israelis, the issue is simple. There was a clash of two interests and the government chose Israel's over that of world Jewry.

To counter this argument, some emphasized world Jewry's contribution to Israeli society. The argument is in essence as follows: Since world Jewry helps in combatting BDS, and/or provides political and financial support, Israelis owe them a place at the Kotel.

Yet the minute the Kotel agreement was presented as a compromise for the sake of liberal North American Jews, the die was cast and the outcome inevitable. The political pressure exerted by those who vote in the Cabinet and Knesset will always prevail over those who do not. Furthermore, Israel's never-ending security concerns provide its politicians with a values-based rationalization – if not justification: “While we would like to be sensitive to Diaspora Jewry's feelings, the coalition stability provided by the Orthodox parties enables Israel to defend itself against its existential enemies.”

Prime Minister Netanyahu has taken this argument to the extreme. He views his prime ministership as necessary for Israel's survival, and his role as Prime Minister as Israel's greatest security asset. To that end, anything that secures his position, secures Israel's future. For that reason, he was willing to give ministerial control over the five central ministries (Defense, Finance, Justice, Education, Interior Affairs), for the first time in Israel's history, to coalition parties, without

his ruling party holding even one. His purpose is clearly not to govern Israeli life, but rather to ensure his position as the one who navigates Israel's foreign policy and security status.

The Kotel agreement is not solely a Diaspora Jewry concern, but rather an Israeli concern, and in 2017 the unity of Jerusalem was destroyed because we did not understand this. The unity of Jerusalem was destroyed because we believe that its preservation and protection is a military question and not a values-based one. History unfortunately repeats itself, and we are making the same mistake that the rabbis two thousand years ago warned us against. When they declared that Jerusalem was destroyed because of senseless hatred, they were attempting to teach us that our greatest strength is and must always be the type of society we build and the way that we treat each other. Unfortunately, we never see our hatred, disrespect, and disregard for others as "senseless." In our own minds, there is always a cause and a reason. Our tradition posits that if you cannot see through the cloud of self-justification, you risk destroying the fabric of Jewish society.

Israel needs a third section of the Kotel because its *raison d'être* is to serve as the homeland of the Jewish people — a place where all Jews can feel at home. We need a third section at the Kotel so that egalitarian committed Jews, religious, traditional and secular alike, can celebrate in accordance with their conscience. Where liberal Jews, Israeli and North American, can spiritually connect through Jerusalem to God and Israel.

Israel as home of the Jewish people cannot merely be a fortress, a place of refuge from external danger. A home is not a synagogue, a place where all religiously concur. A home is a place that embraces diversity, where no one is asked to leave because of ideological differences. A home is a place where one feels respected and within which one's individual identity is nurtured and allowed to unfold.

A people is also not a denomination or political party. Zionism and Israel, as homeland of the Jewish people, require that within our public sphere all voices within our people are respected and have a place. Israel's Basic Law of Human Dignity and Freedom established this as the essence of what it means to be a Jewish democracy.

If we learned anything through the unification of Jerusalem, whose fiftieth anniversary we celebrate this month, it is that Jerusalem and the Kotel are not a synagogue, nor the sole inheritance of one ideological group. Jerusalem is a symbol, connecting all Jews to their past, and to their future. Jerusalem, when treated properly, is a catalyst for Jewish unity and peoplehood.

No. Suspending the Kotel agreement is not principally an affront to world Jewry. It is an affront to Zionism, its dreams and aspirations. It is an affront to Israel's commitment to being a Jewish democracy. It threatens Israel's core identity and future.

Given our history, we of all people know that Jefferson was right: "All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent." We of all people know that silence in the face of discrimination against some, inevitably leads to a society that tolerates discrimination against all.

We have become good at mourning and remembering our failures. We are great mourners of Jerusalem, the city that was destroyed some two thousand years ago. Today, as sovereigns over Jerusalem, the critical question we face is what type of unified Jerusalem we want to build. As sovereigns over Jerusalem, we are blessed with the opportunity to learn from our past and to do better. It is time that we do precisely that.