

While I was living in Israel this past year, I had the immense privilege of bringing the Wornick 8th graders to the Kotel's egalitarian area to teach them about my experience praying with Women of the Wall. Once we were settled in the shade, I was able to share a full circle moment with them: when I was in Israel on the exact same Wornick trip in 2013, the government announced they were going to build that very plaza that we were sitting in together, a huge triumph for Women of the Wall. In 2013 I had heard of Women of the Wall, and I was excited about the possibilities that the new egalitarian section opened up, but I had no idea whether or not I would be able to see their struggles to fruition.

What my thirteen-year-old self didn't know was that in 2021 I would be accepted to Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's rabbinic program, and head back to Israel for my first full year of rabbinic studies. Immediately I knew that what I wanted most out of this opportunity was to pray with Women of the Wall. I knew that there was going to be anger and protests against us, but I had no idea to what extent. We prayed at the women's section of the wall, since the egalitarian section doesn't actually touch the Kotel and is very inaccessible, located down several flights of steps. My first visit I was pinched and prodded by the ultra-Orthodox girls around us, nearly knocked off my feet as they raged when they saw the tiny Torah we had smuggled in. The next few months were similar, with the addition of being harassed by Haredi men as we made our way out of the Kotel plaza, out the Dung Gate, and back into the New City.

One month, however, was by far the worst. I always travelled with a group from HUC, and we had just exited the Dung Gate when we heard a shout—a group of 35-50 young ultra-Orthodox teenagers were running after us. Usually, they left us alone once we were outside the city, but these boys were keeping pace with us, blowing whistles in our ears until we couldn't hear ourselves think, shoving at us and screaming profanities. They spat on us until our hair and jackets were soaked. They attempted to blockade us in, so we couldn't get away from them. For nearly twenty minutes we were alone with these boys and their adult teachers, who blew whistles and watched impassively as their charges attempted to shove us and spit on us. One of us was hit in the back with a rock 2/3 the size of a fist, my roommate was hit with a bottle, and one of us was shoved into a wall and broke the skin on his hand. Upon being asked what their end goal was, one of the teenagers responded, "To cause as much pain as possible."

My classmates asked me if this experience would keep me from going back the next month; my response was a resounding "of course not!" If anything, it had strengthened my resolve. My most meaningful Jewish experiences in Israel had occurred with Women of the Wall. We prayed together and supported each other, lifted our voices in song and praise together and celebrated holidays together.

I told all of this to the Wornick 8th grade class, and I was impressed at their thoughtful and inquisitive questions, and their outrage on our behalf. They were baffled that this kind of violence could happen at our holy site. Afterwards, I was invited to pray *mincha*, the afternoon prayer service, with them, at the egalitarian plaza. My heart was warmed to watch future Jewish leaders pray together at the site where I had experienced so much hatred, with love in their hearts and support for each other and me. My rabbinate will be one predicated on love, acceptance, and delight in Judaism, and I know that's almost entirely thanks to my time at Wornick.