

Female MKs enter Western Wall after entry denied

By MELANIE LIDMAN, JEREMY SHARON 12/03/2013

Lawmakers join Women of the Wall struggle; Labor MK Shaffir to introduce legislation to address women's prayer at site.



Labor MK Stav Shafir (middle) and Meretz MK Tamar Zandberg (far right) at Western Wall. Photo: courtesy

Three female Members of Knesset joined the Women of the Wall on Tuesday for a quiet monthly service which was the first time in 22 months that police did not detain any women for “violating the customs of the site.”

“Women of the Wall asked me to come and pray and I believe in their struggle,” said MK Stav Shaffir (Labor), who was joined by MKs Michal Roisin and Tamar Zandberg (both of Meretz).

“Even though I’m secular, and don’t usually wear tallit [prayer shawl], I came because religion in Jerusalem is based on one type and doesn’t respect the different streams of Judaism and the different ways of praying,” Shaffir told the *Jerusalem Post*. “This place belongs to them as well as the Orthodox.”

She said that she would consider introducing legislative measures in the Knesset to protect women’s rights at the Western Wall.

Police tried to prevent Shaffir and Zandberg from bringing tallitot into the Western Wall plaza, but they eventually managed to pass through along with their tallitot, because they have diplomatic immunity.

Police asked the MKs to leave their tallitot outside of the site in order to prevent a disturbance of the public order, but Zandberg and her fellow MKs refused to leave their prayer shawls behind.

“As a member of the Knesset, I demand entry,” she said. “The law with regard to holy places as interpreted by the extreme denomination is not acceptable to me and I refuse to leave my tallit outside.”

Shaffir described the service as a moving experience, and insisted that the right of women to pray according to their beliefs should be upheld.

“There’s no room in this country for coercion by one religious stream towards others,” Shaffir told the *Post*. “These women choose to pray how they want to, and we need to promote this freedom for all denominations of Judaism to practice the religion according to their beliefs, especially here at this holy place.”

Shaffir said that it was important to act in a sensitive manner but that the Women of the Wall prayer services “are not harming anyone.”

“This is their way, they’re not dressed in an exposed fashion, they don’t go into the men’s section, they stand at the side with their tallitot and pray,” she said.

The monthly service has become something of a flash point between the police and the Women of the Wall activist group, with women regularly detained at the site for wearing “male-style” prayer shawls.

The law forbids performing religious ceremonies “not according to local custom” or which “may hurt the feelings of the worshipers” at the site, which is interpreted by the police as meaning anything deviating from Orthodox practice.

As in past months, police prohibited women from bringing tallit. Some women circumvented this by hiding their tallit in plastic bags or underneath their coat, according to Michal Gavrieli, who was arrested last month with nine other women for wearing a “female” tallit, according to police.



Women unravel a Torah scroll together at the Western Wall.

Even though many women did wear tallitot, including the MKs, and some of the women wore the so-called male-style prayer shawls, no arrests were made.

According to Women of the Wall Chairwoman Anat Hoffman, this is the first time in nearly two years that no women were detained following their monthly service, and credited US President Obama's upcoming visit and the presence of the MKs for the lack of arrests on Tuesday morning.

"The police were acting like they do every month, saying to us 'Sorry for disturbing your prayer, but you're violating the law of the holy places.' Usually that's their war cry to let us know they will arrest us," she said.

Also on Tuesday, Jews around the world will hold a dozen solidarity events with the Women of the Wall, including services in New York and Washington DC.

"Our group has reached a nuisance level that is considerable, especially abroad," she said. Hoffman added that arrested women for attempting to pray just days before Obama visits would be an embarrassment to the country.

Last month, Hoffman was among ten people arrested for wearing "female" tallit, according to police spokesman Shmuel Ben Ruby. Police also arrested an eight-month pregnant rabbinical student and American comedian Sarah Silverman's sister Rabbi Susan Silverman and her daughter Hallel.

Hoffman said that she would continue to invite high profile guests to their monthly prayer in order to maintain pressure on the police to stop the arrests. "Barbara Streisand is coming on June 15," she said. "We want her to sing Hallel with us."

Ahead of the monthly service, extremist haredi factions posted "pashkevilim" or gossip notices calling on men to come to the Western Wall at the same time in order to "protest against the desecration of the holy." The large police presence kept men away from the barrier between the men and women's side, though about a dozen women attempted to interrupt the service by yelling obscenities at the Women of the Wall.

"What you're doing hurts God! Let us observe our traditions!" yelled one woman. Another hysterical woman screamed over and over "You are an embarrassment and you smell! When I get to heaven God will ask me what I did to stop this desecration!"

The Women of the Wall responded by praying louder and dancing in circles around the screaming women.

The Rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinowitz, has repeatedly condemned the Women of the Wall for making provocations and bringing inappropriate protests to the holiest spot in Judaism.