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**Mishy Harman (narration):** This episode is also sponsored by Lisa Farber and Justin Liberman, in honor of their daughter Saskia’s seventeenth birthday. Saskia lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she attends Mount Scopus Memorial College. She’s passionate about being Jewish and cares deeply about Israel. Saskia is a wonderful daughter, a beautiful sister, a caring granddaughter and is truly loved by her many friends. She makes everyone proud, and all of us here at Israel Story join her family in wishing her a very happy birthday and a great year ahead. Mazal tov, Saskia.

And now, to our episode.

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**Shulamit Magnus:** We are Jews. And we’re davening. And we put on *talit* and *tefillin*, and on Torah-reading days, we read Torah. And we raise our voices. We’re not sexual objects that have to repress ourselves because men can’t control themselves or because whatever about men. It’s not about men - it’s about us and being Jews. And we just do it.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Shulamit Magnus.Now, perhaps you’ve never heard her name before. But you’ve probably heard about her activities. You see, she was among the founders of a group that’s been in the news quite a lot in recent years.

The Women of the Wall. And that wall? It’s the Western Wall, the Kotel.

For the last thirty years Shulamit and her sisters-in-arms have been fighting for the right to pray there. As women. As Jews. Just like the men do. Theirs is a public and legal struggle for freedom of religion, freedom of worship, gender equality. But it’s also about much more than that. About how we view our holy places, our religious landscape and - at the end of the day - this magical experiment called the Jewish State. For most of those thirty years their struggle received little attention. It slipped under the radar and populated the backpages of Jerusalem’s local press. But from time to time, and especially in the last few years, it became national, even international, news. Many of you will already have a strong opinion about Women of the Wall. And honestly, it’s hard not to.

But our story today isn’t just about their campaign. It’s about friendship and camaraderie. And it explores how idealism and pragmatism can often tear such bonds apart.

Hey, I’m Mishy Harman, and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by PRX, and is produced together with Tablet Magazine.

So, we’ve reached the final episode of our miniseries, in which we’re telling the tales of some of Israel’s most important walls. Over the last three episodes, we’ve gone searching for Hulda, a Jewish/Arab baby born at the Kotel in the middle of the Six Day War. We’ve heard how folks have dealt with, built and fought against the separation wall, or security fence. We’ve visited pivotal soccer games, explored powerful firewalls and even heard a never-written opera by Leonard Bernstein. And today, in the last episode of this wall journey, we go back to the place where we began - the Kotel. But this time we won’t meet Holocaust survivors who became Muslim housewives. We’ll meet Jews. Who - in the name of their Judaism - set off on a lifelong crusade. So welcome to **The Wall - Part IV, ‘This Wall Is My Wall.’**

Zev Levi will take it from here.

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**Shulamit Magnus:** I was fifteen years old when my family came to Israel for the first time.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit Magnus grew up in an Orthodox family in New York. Back in the early 60s, she was a bit of a goody two shoes.

**Shulamit Magnus:** Very religious and very obedient. I did what I was told.

**Zev Levi (narration):** She was short and slight, with a serious-looking face. While her peers were obsessed with the Beatles, the Stones, and the latest fashion in miniskirts, she was gobbling up biographies of Marie Curie and Hellen Keller. For fun, she liked to learn Torah. Particularly the “weeping prophet” - Jeremiah. She told me she was in love with Jeremiah.

Once, to stop her older sister from barging into her room, Shulamit wrote her a poem of rebuke in Jeremiah’s passionate Hebrew.

Just like the prophet’s own attempts to persuade the people to repent, it… didn’t really work.

But when the Magnuses decided to go on a family trip to Israel, the land of Jeremiah and his fellow prophets, Shulamit was in seventh heaven. For her, it was like going to Disneyland, just better.

**Shulamit Magnus:** This was in ‘66 so it was before we got Jerusalem.

**Zev Levi (narration):** At the time, Israel only controlled West Jerusalem. The Eastern parts, including the Old City and the Kotel - the holiest Jewish site in the world - were under Jordanian rule. Now the Kotel is a section of the outer retaining wall of King Herod’s ancient Jewish temple. But over the centuries - ever since the destruction of that temple in 70 AD, it’s become a symbol. A dream. Jewish tradition says that the physical world was created from the spot where the Temple stood. That it’s G-d’s entry point into our world.

Whether or not you believe that, it’s clear that for generations of Jews all over the world the Kotel was, and is, a deeply significant space. And, like so many others, what fifteen-year-old G-d-fearing Shulamit wanted to do more than anything else was to come and pray at the wall.

But, of course, she couldn’t. When she arrived in Jerusalem she discovered that Jews were barred from visiting it. They could get close, and even see the Old City’s rooftops, but that was it. A barbed-wire border with menacing looking Jordanian guards stood between her and the heart of her Disneyland.

**Shulamit Magnus:** My sister and I... we knew there’s a Kotel and we knew we couldn’t get to it. And so we would walk around looking for tall buildings or any place where we thought we could see over.

**Zev Levi (narration):** The teenage Magnus sisters were crushed. They had come all this way, and - just like Moses - they could only look at their Promised Land from afar. And what did they want, after all? Just to pray. To touch.

In their minds, they didn’t pose a threat to anybody, so why were they being kept away? Why were they being punished?

**Shulamit Magnus:** We felt a terrific deprivation and sense of injustice. Why can’t we go there?

**Zev Levi (narration):** The only thing to do was to get as close as possible. And even that was risky.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And I remember they would say sometimes the Jordanians shoot from on top, so we had that little drama.

**Zev Levi (narration):** The Kotel was only a stone’s throw away, but Shulamit and her sister might as well have been back home, on the streets of Manhattan.

**Shulamit Magnus:** This was etched in my memory. So it was an extremely emotional experience.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Eleven months later, in early June 1967, Shulamit was back in school, in New York. But she couldn’t concentrate. Her mind was still in Israel, which was now at war with Egypt, Syria, Iraq and… that’s right, Jordan. Unable to pay attention to her algebra teacher while Israel’s existence hung in the balance, Shulamit snuck her transistor radio into class, threading the earpiece up her long-sleeved shirt and under her collar.

**Shulamit Magnus:** I heard when they announced that Israel had gotten Jerusalem. That we had gotten the Old City. And I just tore out of that room. I didn’t ask, I just ran.

**Zev Levi (narration):** This was the greatest moment of Shulamit’s life.

**Shulamit Magnus:** I’ve never davened like that in my life.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Jerusalem was reunited. And after nearly two millennia, “her” Kotel was once again in Jewish sovereign hands. The Israeli troops, as she saw it, had fought and pushed the Jordanians out of Jerusalem on her behalf. So that she could now visit *her* wall.

Within days, Israel dismantled *Schunat HaMugrabim*, the Palestinian neighborhood in front of the wall, and built a big plaza. A week later, on the festival of Shavuot, it was officially opened to the public. Professor Hannah Kehat, the founder of *Kolech* - Israel’s first Jewish Orthodox feminist organization, remembers that day.

**Hannah Kehat:** Oh, it was very very very special. People just run to the Kotel. All the people of Jerusalem came. There were a lot of people dancing together. Men, women, religious, secular. It was full full full of people. Very very exciting.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit and her family wanted to see the miracle with their own eyes. The following year, 1968, they returned to Israel and immediately made their way up to Jerusalem. Shulamit traced the steps she had taken on the previous visit, pausing at the once-forbidding boundary.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And all of a sudden, what we couldn’t do, we could. We can just go!

**Zev Levi (narration):** She had dreamt of crossing this border. And now…

**Shulamit Magnus:** Oh my G-d, I’m just walking there, it’s nothing. I cross the street and I keep going, and I walk. And I just, go there.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit finally reached the Kotel. And it was just as magical as she had always imagined.

Three months later, much to her dismay, Shulamit had to go back to school in America. The following year she went off to college, and immersed herself - big surprise for a lover of Jeremiah - in the study of Jewish texts. Ultimately, she became an academic, a professor of Jewish History at Oberlin. She got married, started a family, and even though life kept her on that side of the Atlantic, she’d return to Israel frequently. And whenever she did, she told me, she’d go straight to the Kotel.

**Shulamit Magnus:** This was kind of my custom. It was this ritual.

**Zev Levi (narration):** With each visit, however, she’d notice subtle changes. The age-old stones stayed more or less the same, but the context around them started to shift. You see, right after the Six Day War the Government of Israel had to decide what to do with the Kotel. Would it become a museum? A pilgrimage site? A national monument? A civic center? A backdrop for high profile photo-ops? A synagogue?

The solution was a bit of each.

But that immediately raised all kinds of questions, like who would oversee the site? And what kind of events would take place there?

Ultimately, in late June 1967, just a few weeks after the end of the war, the Knesset passed the so-called ‘Protection of Holy Places Law.’ The new law stipulated that while people are allowed to visit and worship, they aren’t allowed to desecrate the sites. The legislators didn’t really specify what constituted a desecration, but they did say that doing so was a jailable offence.

In accordance with this new law, a rabbi - an *Orthodox* rabbi - was named as the Kotel’s ‘site administrator.’ And his first order of business? Making sure that the Kotel had all the necessary infrastructure and equipment for Orthodox prayer services. That meant prayer books, baskets with *kippot* and *talitot*, Torah scrolls, tables on which to read them, and - importantly a permanent *mechitzah*, a physical barrier separating the men and women’s sections.

For a wall that had seemingly seen everything, this was a new feature. For centuries (and you can see this in countless old paintings and pictures of the Kotel), there was no separation between the sexes - because the ruling powers forbade it. But now Israel was the ruling power. And the Kotel was a synagogue. And synagogues have rules.

In keeping with the Orthodox tradition of men leading services, all the Torahscrolls were placed on the men’s side which - incidentally - was significantly larger than the women’s. The *mechitzah* itself wasn’t, as in many synagogues, a cloth curtain or a row of plastic planters. Instead it was a tall barrier made of brick and metal.

**Shulamit Magnus:** The women’s space was defined first of all, and then it got smaller, and then it got smaller, and then the *mechitzah* got higher.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Now Shulamit had grown up in an Orthodox home, and was still Orthodox herself. But, throughout her twenties, as the rules around the Kotel began to take shape, it became more and more complicated for her to find her place there. Her wall stopped being an instant portal to spiritual and religious bliss. She found it almost impossible to hear a service, let alone participate in one.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And I went there once and there was a *Bar Mitzvah*. And the mother of the *Bar Mitzvah* boy was straining to see and to hear. And it was a scene of terrible degradation. She was on tip-toe, and she had her neck straight up and her head thrown back trying to see. I don’t know if she could hear anything. It was her son. It was her child. She raised him for nine months inside her body and then raised him for thirteen years. It was horrible to see.

**Zev Levi (narration):** For a while, Shulamit had been struggling with the way mainstream Orthodox Judaism treated women. But seeing that woman straining to observe her own son’s *Bar Mitzvah*, at Judaism’s holiest site - that was more than she could stomach.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And the combination of feeling connected to that place, and feeling degraded there as a woman, was too much. It’s like the definition of an abusive relationship. And I decided, you know, I can’t... this is too awful. I can’t… I can’t do this.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit stopped going to the Kotel - *her* Kotel - altogether.

In many ways, Anat Hoffman’s life was very different from Shulamit’s. She was born and raised in a secular family in Jerusalem. In 1964, when she was ten years old, a local swimming coach noticed a certain fearlessness in her, and decided to make her into a champ. Even though she could barely float when they began training, the coach was right and Anat went on to win many national titles and medals. When she quit the pool, in the mid-seventies, she set off on a career as a social and political activist. She wrote a scathing weekly column against *Bezeq*, the phone company, and was later elected to be a city councilwoman in Jerusalem.

But as different as their backgrounds are, Anat and Shulamit have one major thing in common. Here’s Anat, describing a visit to the Kotel in the late seventies.

**Anat Hoffman:** I went to the wall with my brother’s two little daughters. One was, I think, a year old, and one was five. I held them both in my arms. I wanted to show the little girls how men are dancing with the Torah, so I stood on a bench and one of the men shouted from the other side of the partition, “*zonah, tirdi min ha’safsal*” *-* ‘prostitute, get off the bench.’ I was extremely insulted. What a crazy thing to shout at a woman who’s trying to show two little girls the Torah! I went with them to the ladies’ room and I remember telling these two little girls that the place for women at the wall is the ladies room! *Oy yoy yoy*.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Following that incident,Anat couldn’t stand being at the Kotel, just like Shulamit.

**Anat Hoffman:** Why would I want to go? This is the discoteque of the Ultraorthodox, my foot is not going there.

**Zev Levi (narration):** In 1988, two decades after Shulamit’s first visit to the Kotel, she was in Israel for the year, on a sabbatical at the Hebrew University. Just by chance, both she and Anat - who didn’t know each other - attended the first International Jewish Feminist Conference. And there, they heard a New Yorker by the name of Rivka Haut describing a new, and exciting, project she ran in the States called the Women’s *Tefillah* Network.

**Rivka Haut:** Congregations of women only, who gather together, usually for Shabbat morning prayers, once a month, with a full Torah and Haftorah reading. It follows Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Rivka passed away in 2014. This is a recording of her talking at a 2010 panel hosted by JOFA - the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.

**Rivka Haut:** And I had the idea, instead of just talking about this, to organize such a group at the Kotel.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And so I heard this circulating rumor like, ‘you wanna come to a meeting about going to the Kotel to have a women’s *tefillah* the next morning?’

**Zev Levi (narration):** A *halachik* women’s prayer at the Kotel? This was music to Shulamit’s ears. She vividly remembers that meeting. More than one hundred women pulled chairs into a big circle and discussed what a Torah-reading women’s prayer at the Kotel might look like.

**Shulamit Magnus:** You know, what will we do? How will we do it? And what this offered to me was the possibility of going to that place and feeling good, as opposed to feeling awful. And to read Torah there? It offered the possibility of feeling whole.

**Zev Levi (narration):** But Anat, the former swim champ, remained a bit skeptical.

**Anat Hoffman:** I’m not starry-eyed romantic like the North American women who were there. They were expecting, you know, a spiritual experience. I knew what’s coming. You can go, *gezunteheit*, but I wasn’t going to join and neither was any of the Israeli women that I knew.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Starry-eyed or not, Rivka convinced the women to go for it. Like a seasoned community organizer, she assigned them roles. Norma was in charge of the Torah scroll, Deborah was going to lead the prayer, and Shulamit was given an especially sensitive task.

**Shulamit Magnus:** She asked me if I would read Torah. I had to go home and like cram that Torah reading real fast. *[Shulamit laughs]*.

**Zev Levi:** Do you remember which one it was?

**Shulamit Magnus:** Totally! Totally! It was Yaakov’s dream. *Chalom chalamti*. Amazing!

**Zev Levi (narration):** Despite her initial reluctance, even Anat was persuaded to join, and was given a role.

**Anat Hoffman:** She asked me as someone who’s a social activist, do I own a folding table? The answer is “yes!” You cannot be a social activist without a folding table and a megaphone.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Everything, it seemed, was set for the following morning.

Now, before we continue to the events of that fateful day in December 1988, I should just say that contrary to popular belief, perhaps, there’s nothing about women’s services that goes against Orthodox *halacha* or law*.* One of the frequent arguments leveled against such initiatives has to do with *Kol Isha*, a woman’s voice. According to mainstream *halachic* interpretations - the voice of a woman is intimate or distracting to men, and thus prohibited. But once the prayer is for women only, that reasoning basically goes out the window.

Still, the idea of women reading the Torah or leading prayers on their own, challenges Orthodox tradition. Many see it not as a new and meaningful way for women to engage in prayer, but rather as a disturbing fad. As a bunch of radical feminists using religious ritual to make a political point.

Take Eliana Aaron, for example. Eliana is the director of a medical case-management company in Israel.

**Eliana Aaron:** What’s cool about the Kotel is that you’ll see people from all different nations, you know. From all different religious backgrounds - coming to pray. And putting on a *kippah*. And the women wearing something on their hair. And respecting the religion which is the Jewish nation. The great majority of the country - even those who are completely not religious - want to have a traditional (meaning Orthodox) Kotel. When their kid gets a *Bar Mitzva*h, he goes to an Orthodox shul and their mother is behind the *mechitzah*. And that’s how it works. You know, even Ben-Gurion said, “the synagogue that I don’t go to is Orthodox.”

**Zev Levi (narration):** As far as she’s concerned, women’s services at the Kotel are no more than an unnecessary provocation. But for Rivka, Shulamit, Anat and many others, it represented something different.

It represented freedom.

So, early the next morning, seventy women from the conference got on buses and headed to the Kotel plaza.

**Shulamit Magnus:** It was pretty early.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit again.

**Shulamit Magnus:** It wasn’t packed. I mean it was a weekday. You know, there were women there.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Rivka led the group into the women’s section, and directed the service; cueing those leading the prayer. Shulamit recalls feeling that they weren’t just looking at the Kotel from afar. They were breathing in its stones. Its history. Its sanctity. They prayed in unison, and Shulamit reconnected to a sense of spirituality she thought had been lost.

**Shulamit Magnus:** It was a true religious experience. We’re in that space and I realize ‘oh my G-d, look where we are. This place is a miracle.’ We hear a woman lead *tefillah*, and we hear women’s voices ring out in prayer. It’s just inexpressibly beautiful. Astoundingly empowering. So we got through much of it without anything. And that’s what I was aware of mostly, was us, until the men started screaming.

**Zev Levi (narration):** The service may have been *kosher* according to the letter of the law, but it felt too foreign to some of the other worshipers at the Kotel. When Shulamit opened the Torah scroll, and began chanting the *parasha*, two elderly *charedi* women started pushing the group to get them to stop. The scuffle caught the attention of some *charedi* *men*, who stood up on chairs to see over the barrier. Shulamit remembers one man yelling...

**Shulamit Magnus:** *“Ani mocheh! Ani mocheh!”*

**Zev Levi (narration):** “I protest, I protest.” Very quickly, the jostling and screaming got louder and more intense. They could feel that something bad was about to happen.

**Shulamit Magnus:** They became aware that we had a Torah. I think that’s what set them off. You know, we got nervous.

**Zev Levi:** You guys immediately thought that…

**Shulamit Magnus:** We were going to be assaulted. We were going to be attacked. That’s when I think Norma said, “we have to get out of here now.”

**Zev Levi (narration):** The women quickly rushed through the remainder of the service, and got back on the bus.

Despite the somewhat unceremonious exit, they had succeeded.

**Shulamit Magnus:** We did go out singing. *Hava nashira shir halleluyah*. We sang in rounds. It was wonderful. All the way from the Kotel to the bus.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Once they were all safely on the bus, Rivka Haut stood up and said, “my dear friends, today we redeemed Torah for women.”

Shulamit felt as if she reclaimed her Kotel.

**Shulamit Magnus:** When people talk about religious experiences of like a different order - you’re in an altered state… this was. This was. Totally. I mean, we were just flying. I would not be the same person if I had not experienced that *tefillah*.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Anat was also energized by the reception she had witnessed.

**Anat Hoffman:** When I went back on the bus with my folding table, something changed in me. I thought, ‘this can’t go on.’

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit, Anat, and several others began talking. They didn’t want this to be a one time thing. A *zbeng ve’gamarnu*, as we say in Hebrew. And as the conversation that began that day on the bus continued, they started imagining a new idea. A group. A movement.

**Anat Hoffman:** We started the ‘Women of the Wall.’

**Zev Levi (narration):** Women of the Wall. The idea was to hold a women’s prayer, just like that first one Rivka had organized, once a month.

**Anat Hoffman:** And we decided to follow in the footsteps of the Women’s *Tefillah* Network. To be only women, to be multi-denominational, and to have a presence there every *Rosh Chodesh -* every new month.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Though the services followed Orthodox law, they were designed in an inclusive way that allowed women of every Jewish denomination to have an active role.

But despite these lofty goals, their beginnings were inauspicious. Most of the women from the conference soon flew back home to America, and the group that remained in Jerusalem was tiny. Anat was named the Chairperson, and Shulamit - who, you’ll remember, was here on sabbatical for the year - was one of the few reliable attendees.

**Shulamit Magnus:** Within a few weeks, there was the next *tefillah*. There was significant violence at that one. The men burst across the *mechitzah*. You know like, that’s forboden by their rules… and attacked us.

**Zev Levi (narration):** But that didn’t deter the women. Quite the opposite. Israeli paratroopers, Shulamit and her friends reasoned, hadn’t liberated the Kotel just for Orthodox men. So they returned the next month. And the month after that.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And what happened that first year was… craziest experiences I’ve ever had in my life of just raw, unmitigated violence.Every month, I never knew like what craziness I was going to encounter. You know, I would pack a medical bag. I would pack like first-aid and I would pack something like to put over my face if I’m tear-gassed. You know - I’m going to daven! You go to shul in the morning - is that what you do when you go to shul?

**Zev Levi (narration):** They encountered riots. Dirty diapers and cups of boiling coffee were hurled at them. And throughout, she says, the men wouldn’t stop assaulting them, yelling and cursing.

**Shulamit Magnus:** You know, “you should die of cancer, your child should be killed in an accident.” Like what?! They threw chairs, metal benches. We have photos of this. People got hurt.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And where were the authorities, you might ask? Well, while men threw metal chairs at Shulamit and her prayer group, the police basically did... nothing.

**Shulamit Magnus:** They were not protecting us.

**Zev Levi (narration):** In fact, when they did spring into action, it was to arrest the *women* on the charge of disturbing the peace. Go to our website where you can see pictures of them - shoulder pads, frizzy 80s hairdos and all - being dragged out of the plaza.

Now, you might think the uproar that this prayer caused is a thing of the past. That that was then, and now is now. But, well, thirty years after those early services, I recently visited the Kotel, and basically encountered a redo of the exact scene Shulamit had described.

**Kotel Protestors:** *[In Hebrew]**Oy, Oy, Oy, do you want to kill me? Do you want me to die? Move back!*

**Zev Levi (narration):** Take Dovid Meirfeld, one of the protestors I spoke to.

**Dovid Meirfeld:** A Jewish religious place - a place that’s here for religion - has to be done in the Orthodox way. And therefore, when they’re coming, that’s interfering. That’s interfering…

**Zev Levi:** And ‘interfering’ is them just doing their own thing?

**Dovid Meirfeld:** Yeah, but they’re doing it in our place. What makes it so severe is because they’re coming to make themselves known to everyone that they’re also a part of religion. That’s something that we cannot accept.

**Anat Hoffman:** When they say, ‘I want to keep these women from my children,’ they’re right.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Anat again.

**Anat Hoffman:** Because a child - a Jewish child - who’s educated, who is exposed to Women of the Wall will ask, ‘why not?’ ‘Why not’ is a very subversive question. And especially when the answer to ‘why not’ is, ‘hey, there is no *halachic* reason for why not. Actually, it’s *halachic*. Why not?’ It topples a lot of heads. And they’re right to go to war to try to keep the power where it is.

**Kotel Protestor:** Reform, you’re not welcome over here. Please leave quickly.

**Dovid Meirfeld:** So I was saying, look at the Arabs. When someone comes and wants to do something against their religion, they’re ready to kill the person.

**Zev Levi:** Wait, and that’s a good thing or a bad thing?

**Dovid Meirfeld:** It’s bad to kill. It’s good to be serious about religion.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Eliana, the medical case-management exec, understands where people like Dovid and his fellow protestors are coming from.

**Eliana Aaron:** As somebody who’s coming in from the outside, by offending people, you are contaminating the spirituality of the place. Obviously, we don’t want people throwing rocks at them, but the minority has to respect the site rules.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Of course, Shulamit never felt like she was “coming in from the outside.” This was *her* Kotel too.

**Shulamit Magnus:** Where Jews went for hundreds of years, was to the Kotel. This is what I was raised on as a kid. This is why I wanted to go there when I was fifteen years old, and couldn’t go, and experienced in my bones the feeling of injustice and deprivation. This has nothing to do with *halacha*. It was just that we were not women who knew how to stay in our space. In our place. The place that they determined for us. We were violating that and we were. And that infuriated them.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Today, the Kotel’s administrator - whose salary is paid by the Israeli taxpayer - is Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz. He doesn’t give interviews but his press office directed us to speak to Gedaliah Goldstein, one of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation’s tour guides, who echoed what Rabbi Rabinowitz has said publicly.

**Gedaliah Goldstein:** This is a place that’s been opened up as a synagogue and as such it has certain standards. The rules of a place are set to try to keep the peace, to try to keep a proper atmosphere, respecting the place and the people who are there. Whoever you are, and however you dress, when you’re coming here, you’re coming here as a son or a daughter to G-d. To *Hashem*. And He wants to see you. He wants to see you.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** This episode is the final installment of our Wall miniseries. And these episodes you’ve been hearing? Well, they’re based on our latest live show - which we took all over North America in May. The live show includes all kinds of things we can’t give you in the podcast version, like a live band of amazingly talented Israeli musicians on stage, stunning visuals, videos, street art and so much more. But don’t worry, we’ve got some good news for you: We’re coming back to North America with ‘The Wall’ in early 2020. So if you’d like us to come perform near you, contact us at [live@israelstory.org](mailto:livetour@israelstory.org).

OK, so we’re in the middle of Zev Levi’s story about Shulamit, Anat and their fellow Women of the Wall. We reached out, by the way, to the police, but they refused to be interviewed for the piece. Before the break we heard how the movement was born, and what fierce and violent opposition it faced back in the late 80s and early 90s. But the truth of the matter is that - despite all the mounds of news coverage and verbiage about the Women of the Wall, despite high profile compromises and settlements, despite real ruptures between the Government of Israel and segments of world Jewry, despite all that - not much has changed. Zev will tell us about these developments. But mainly he’ll tell us about two tough fighters, sisters in arms, who - when faced with a new reality - had to choose between pragmatism and idealism. Here’s Zev again.

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**Zev Levi (narration):** Back in 1989,Shulamit, Anat and some other members of Women of the Wall brought their case to the Supreme Court. But the court kept postponing the hearings.

In the meantime, Shulamit returned to her life in the US, and *charedi* politicians successfully introduced laws regulating permissible conduct at holy sites.

Time passed and since the court hadn’t yet adjudicated, a new status quo emerged: Anat and co. would pray, quietly, in the women’s section. Once they reached the part with the Torah reading, they’d move elsewhere, outside the Kotel plaza. Only then would they don their prayer shawls. So to most onlookers at the Kotel, they blended in with the other female worshipers, and essentially became invisible. There was no real way to tell that they were even praying together. And so, the clashes at their monthly services gradually lessened. The heat that had accompanied their arrival on the scene cooled down, and Women of the Wall basically became... ignorable.

**Anat Hoffman:** But we came, every month. In pregnancy. In Intifada. In the rain. In the snow! Every month, there was a presence of Women of the Wall.

**Zev Levi (narration):** For years, Anat admits, the group was small.

**Anat Hoffman:** I’m ashamed to tell you what is the lowest number we ever reached. But for a good twenty years, we were very few.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit kept in touch with Anat and her other Women of the Wall sisters, and joined them at the Kotel whenever she visited Israel.

But the wider Israeli public rarely heard about the group.

After multiple judicial recommendations, committees, reports and appeals, in 2003, the Supreme Court finally ruled on the matter. Women of the Wall, they determined, did indeed have a legal right to hold services at the Kotel.

**Shulamit Magnus:** But they said that it’s politically sensitive, and that we should go to Robinson’s Arch. That was the first time that was formally proposed.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Robinson’s Arch is right next to the Kotel. In fact, it’s a continuation of the very same western retaining wall of Herod’s temple. But it *isn’t* the Kotel. And that’s probably why the court suggested it as a compromise.

On paper, at least, it seemed like a win-win: The women would get their sanctioned prayers right next to the Kotel, and the Orthodox establishment wouldn’t have to see or hear them.

The few members of Women of the Wall faced a dilemma. Was it time to be practical? Was it time to give up their crusade and seek a truce? Anat, Shulamit and their friends were unanimous.

**Shulamit Magnus:** We absolutely rejected that deal. Because it’s not the Kotel. What matters to me is not historical artifact, but sacred Jewish memory. This site was sanctified by Jews for hundreds of years who went there. So to say, ‘it’s the same thing, why don’t you go there?’ is an insult to intelligence.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Agreeing to hide themselves far away from the public eye so that Orthodox men wouldn’t have to be reminded of their existence? It was simply out of the question.

And besides, moving their prayer to Robinson’s Arch had another downside: Women of the Wall was made up of individuals of every denomination. There were Reform members, Orthodox members, and basically everything in between. Now, as long as their prayers took place at the Kotel’s women’s section they were only attended by… women.

And that is what made them, at least for the Orthodox women, strictly *halachic.* At Robinson’s Arch, on the other hand, you couldn’t exclude men, should they want to join, and there was no *mechitzah.* So if they moved their services there, the Orthodox members of Women of the Wall would have to stop praying with the group.

Everyone seemed to be on the same page, and the group stayed at the Kotel, largely coasting by, under the radar.

That changed in late 2009, when a few members of the small group began wearing their *talitot* - their prayer shawls - inside the women’s section. This disturbed the delicate status quo, and the police responded by detaining them.

It was back to 1989 all over again. Except that this time it was in the age of social media, iPhone cameras and around-the-clock cable TV.

It was a game of cat and mouse: Women would defiantly wear their prayer shawls, the police would detain them, interrogate them for a few hours, and then release them without charges. When Shulamit returned in 2012 for yet another sabbatical year, she too was arrested. So was Anat.

**Anat Hoffman:** He grabbed my arm, and he bent it around my back. And he started marching me towards the Jerusalem police station at the Wall.

**Zev Levi (narration):** With the police detentions came heightened media attention, larger protests, and heated public debates.

There were pluralist voices and sectarian ones. People who condemned the Rabbinate and those who criticised the fetishization of the Kotel. There were misogynists and feminists and some, like Eliana, who claimed that Anat, Shulamit and their cohort were actually harming women’s causes.

**Eliana Aaron:** If you’re fighting for women to be given appropriate rights after birth, for them to be able to nurse their children, for them to be able to get childcare so they can work, to make sure they’re being paid equally to men and given the opportunities of getting ahead career-wise, even if they choose to have children. I’m all for that. That’s great! That’s progression. I’m good with that, but as soon as you start telling me, ‘but we have to be like men’ and ‘we have to do the same things as them,’ I feel like that’s really counterproductive. Because what you’re doing is saying that you’re not secure in your own skin. And that you’re not comfortable with the differences that you were born with. Women are not supposed to be like men. We don’t have the men’s hormones, DNA, bodies, minds, or anything else. And I think that aiming towards something like that is anti-feminism.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Perhaps unsurprisingly, reactions like this, coupled with viral images of the arrests, actually *helped* Women of the Wall. Here’s Anat.

**Anat Hoffman:** The more they resisted us, the more we were able to recruit more women to come.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Monthly prayer attendance shot up to more than a hundred and thirty. Many of the newcomers were members of the small Reform and Conservative movements in Israel. And these new faces? They injected energy into the movement, and soon took on leadership positions as board members.

Now that Women of the Wall were once again a political hot potato, the Robinson’s Arch option resurfaced. But Shulamit and her sisters still sung in unison. They continued to view it as a slap in the face, and as far as traditionalists like Eliana were concerned, that was simply proof that they were no more than petty provocateurs.

**Eliana Aaron:** If someone is sincere and wants to pray, wonderful. Robinson’s Arch is an equally religious place that will not offend anybody. But if you purpose is to offend, or to have a political statement, and if you really want to be arrested and you want to have media coverage and you want attention, then you have to stay at the Kotel and protest and get arrested and make a big deal about it.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Fearing that this could get out of hand and mushroom into a serious crisis with American Jewry, the Prime Minister himself got involved. In December 2012, Binyamin Netenyahu sent an emissary to try and convince the Women of the Wall to move to Robinson’s Arch. Here he is, speaking at the General Assembly of Jewish Federations of North America.

**Benyamin Netenyahu:** We will soon conclude a long-overdue understanding that will ensure that the Kotel is a source of unity for our people, not a point of division. As Prime Minister of Israel, I will always ensure that all Jews can feel at home in Israel. Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews. All Jews.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Netenyahu signaled that if they were to come to the negotiating table, Women of the Wall stood to gain even more ground. And that dangling carrot managed to do what more than two decades of ongoing harassment and abuse at the Kotel had not. It managed to divide the women. There were some, led by Anat, who began to see the option of Robinson’s Arch in an entirely new light.

**Anat Hoffman:** A grassroots organization fights to be at a table where policy is made. If we’re invited to the Prime Minister’s office and we want to change policy, we gotta put our butts at that seat.

**Zev Levi (narration):** She realized it would come at a cost.

**Anat Hoffman:** So it was clear that if we negotiate, we will have to give up our place at the women’s section. And the question is, ‘under what conditions are we willing to let go of the women’s section?’ And some of our sisters said, “under no condition are we willing to leave the women’s section.” I feel that this is an untenable position. Not only me, most of our board felt that this is untenable. We will have to compromise. We will have to play the political game if we want to make gains and change policy.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Compromising, she said, was choosing the harder path. It’s much easier to remain a purist. This approach had its opponents.

**Anat Hoffman:** So we had a vote. A very dramatic vote, and we weren’t unanimous for the first time, really, in our history, we weren’t unanimous.

**Zev Levi (narration):** If Anat chose pragmatism, Shulamit, her long term comradeand friend, opted for idealism.

They’d been in it *together* from day one. Through the ups and the downs, the triumphs, the trials and the tribulations. They’d celebrated births and mourned deaths. Prayed, side by side, in the summer heat and in the winter snow. Together they’d been spat at, shouted at, called names and insults. But now, for the very first time, they weren’t together anymore. Here’s Shulamit.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And I called her up and I said, “Anat don’t do this, this is a terrible mistake, you can’t do this. This is a betrayal of everything that we’ve been about for all these years, you can’t do it.” But Anat tried to tell me that she was the boss and that I had no business raising objections.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Anat was right. She *was* - technically - the boss. And though most of the original founders opposed the decision, the board - by now made up of many of those newer faces - embraced it.

Shulamit and her fellow founders felt stung. As if their cause, their movement, had sold out, and left them behind.

**Shulamit Magnus:** And so we started talking, like, ‘what do we do? What do we do?’ It’s been very distressing and unfortunate. Sad.

**Zev Levi (narration):** In 2014, Shulamit made *Aliyah* and settled in Jerusalem. She could now attend services regularly. But it wasn’t the joyous reunion she had always imagined. Anat led Women of the Wall into negotiations. And, in all fairness, they seemed to get many concessions from the government. The state sweetened the deal, promising to expand the ‘mixed’ egalitarian prayer area at Robinson’s Arch, and call it *Ezrat Yisrael*. It would be significantly larger than the women’s section at the Kotel and would be accessed by the main Kotel plaza. And - most importantly - it would be run and administered by a council which would include representatives of both the Reform and Conservative movements and Women of the Wall. This was a huge step for non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Finally - after decades of struggles for recognition - they would officially be acknowledged and funded.

In January 2016, the Israeli government approved the plan, which became known as *Mitveh Ha’Kotel*, or ‘The Kotel Compromise.’ You may remember it. It was a big deal, both in Israel and around the world.

Some people were thrilled. Others outraged. But for some, like Shulamit, it was more personal. It was a betrayal of everything she had fought for.

**Shulamit Magnus:** The Conservative and Reform movements have wanted state recognition and funding forever.

**Zev Levi (narration):** For her, the price was simply too high. Because in exchange for all those gains at Robinson’s Arch, Anat and Women of the Wall had essentially given up on the Kotel itself. It would legally become an Orthodox synagogue run by Rabbi Rabinowitz.

**Shulamit Magnus:** If that’s its status, then he is within his rights to throw us out of there. Women’s group *tefillah* at the Kotel, doing everything that we do, would have been made a crime punishable by seven years in jail and heavy fines.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Tempers ran high.

**Shulamit Magnus:** What Anat did, and Women of the Wall did, was to take our currency and trade it, so that the Reform and Conservative movements could get what they want, because they had nothing to offer the state.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Anat, of course, sees it differently.

**Anat Hoffman:** We have a role in a choir of many voices demanding religious pluralism, gender equality and tolerance in Israel.

**Zev Levi (narration):** Shulamit and some of the other founders didn’t give up. After all, this was their organization too. They tried to convince the leadership to reverse its decision. But the rift was simply growing. Anat denied their request to address the board. The verdict, she announced, was final. The compromise was signed.

Women of the Wall were just waiting for the new area at Robinson’s Arch to be renovated as the deal specified, and then they’d leave the Kotel, once and for all.

Shulamit couldn’t believe that *her* movement, which originally, fought for women’s prayer at the Kotel, was now signing a document that made that very thing illegal.

She and a few others felt they had only one option left:

Leave. And start a new group. The ‘*Original* Women of the Wall.’

The small, cohesive group of stalwart women splintered. And for all involved, it’s a painful breakup.

**Shulamit Magnus:** We’re sticking to the founding goals of the whole thing and they’ve departed from it.

**Anat Hoffman:** They come to the wall every once in a while to pray. They’re never more than ten, twelve.

**Shulamit Magnus:** We have a *tefillah*, we don’t have a publicity event. We don’t have a political circus.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And the sad irony is that the Kotel Compromise that tore them apart? Well, it never happened. The *charedi* parties worked behind the scenes, threatening to topple the coalition. And by June 2017, the government had officially suspended the deal.

But the damage was already done. And even though they still pray in the exact same place - that is the Kotel’s women’s section - the Women of the Wall and the Original Women of the Wall are now two separate groups. They rarely talk.

Shulamit and Anat are now on two sides of a divide. It’s as if there is a tall, sturdy *mechizah* between them.

Anat is still trying to resuscitate the Kotel Compromise.

**Anat Hoffman:** Everyone knows that that’s the solution. The question is what needs to happen for this solution to be implemented. I hope you have this on tape - I think until one of us is stabbed, they will not implement it. If one of us is stabbed at the Wall, they will implement it immediately. It’s a tragedy waiting to happen.

**Zev Levi (narration):** And Shulamit, on the other hand, is hoping that the Kotel Compromise never sees the light of day. I asked her what she’d do if it became illegal for her and her fellow worshipers to pray together at the Kotel. Her response was decisive. It sounded as if it came right out of her favorite childhood book. “They will fight you,” G-d said to Jeremiah. “But they won’t defeat you. Because I am with you.”

**Shulamit Magnus:** We’ll fight it. I mean, no change.

**Zev Levi:** And these days, when you go, what goes through your mind? Like where… where are you?

**Shulamit Magnus:** When I go there, when I’m not with women, the place repels me. You know, I can’t turn off what I’m seeing there. It’s just so revolting. But when I go with women, I manage to overlook it because it makes me whole. The same way it did the first time. It’s uplifting. And it feels good. It’s beautiful. It’s so beautiful.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Zev Levi.

So we end our wall journey where it began. At a wall that, for two thousand years, has stood at the center of prayers and dreams. Yearnings that have, in a very real sense, kept us together.

Whether or not the matter of women’s prayer at the Kotel will tear us apart remains to be seen. For some it’s a non-issue, for others it’s indicative of the direction in which the state is going.

But what’s clear to everyone, I think, is that walls are powerful. We get that. It’s part of our collective DNA.

As we’ve seen in many different contexts throughout this miniseries, walls are a double-edged sword. They make us feel safe, and warm, and protected. But that’s also what’s dangerous about them. You see, walls can cut us off from what’s going on outside, and hiding behind them can give us a false sense of security.

What we tried to do throughout this series was open up small windows in the walls that make up Israeli society. And that’s a difficult thing to do, really. I mean you need to make sure you don’t damage the foundations that keep us bonded together. And also, you need to be ready to see the neighbor, and let the neighbor see you.

But if we pull it off, if we manage to open those windows, then on late afternoons of the end of the summer, just like now, we can let the cool Middle Eastern breeze come in, and gaze out at our tiny little country. A country that is still in mid-renovation. Still figuring it out. And will, I hope, never stop doing so.

And, that’s both the end of our episode, and the end of ‘The Wall’ miniseries. The season will continue with all kinds of other wonderful themes, but for now, at least, we say goodbye to our walls.

You can hear all our previous episodes on our site, israelstory.org, or by searching for Israel Story on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or anywhere else you usually get your podcasts. You can also follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story, and sign up for our newsletter. And, dear listeners, *please* do us a favor - go to Apple Podcasts, rate us, and leave a review. That will really help us get to many new ears. And while we’re on the topic - if you like Israel Story, send a link to a friend, download it on your mom’s phone, talk about it to your neighbor. One of the biggest goals for this season is to reach new audiences, so - if you can, if you’re so inclined - do your share and spread the word!

If you want to sponsor episodes of Israel Story, and reach a large and committed audience of people - in one hundred and ninety two countries around the world - email us at [sponsor@israelstory.org](mailto:sponsor@prx.org).

Before we go, I want to give you a great podcast recommendation. Many of you listen to our show because you care about Israel, because you know it’s more complicated a place than the one you see on TV or in newspaper headlines. And if that’s the case, there’s another podcast you should also check out. It’s called “The Promised Podcast” from TLV1. Each week the fabulous hosts - Noah Efron, Allison Kaplan Sommer and Don Futterman - try to make sense of what’s happening here: In politics, in arts, in religion, in the economy. Now, that all sounds pretty serious and heady, and it is. But, let me tell you, these people are funny, outrageous, and kind-of-brilliant. And while they love this place like mad, they’ve got their qualms, criticisms and harangues too. And also, they play some great music. Basically, it’s like an hour each week of the best conversation in the best bar in Tel Aviv. So check it out, The Promised Podcast, on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks to Danya Kauffman, who first approached us with the idea of doing an episode about Women of the Wall. To Dana and Ronit Boytner, Cheryl Birkner Mack, Rene Feinstein, Leah Aharoni, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, Kfir Shay, Adam Milliner, and Julie Subrin, for her always wise editorial advice. Joel Shupack and Yochai Maital scored the piece, and Sela Waisblum, the proud new papa of Tal Yair Waisblum, mixed the episode.

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And to all of you out there who are now saying, ‘why didn’t we bring Israel Story to our community’ - remember, we’ll be back in North America with ‘The Wall’ in early 2020, so if you’d like us to come perform near you, contact us at [live@israelstory.org](mailto:livetour@israelstory.org).

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Our staff is Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Shai Satran, Roee Gilron, Maya Kosover, Joel Shupack, Yoshi Fields, Judah Kauffman, Hannah Barg, Ari Wenig, Sharon Rapaport and Rotem Zin. Scarlett De Jean, Pola Lem, Yair Farkas, Harry Sultan, Rebecca Carrol, Kayla Levy, Anna Correa, James Feder and Clem Brookfield have been our wonderful production interns this year.

I’m Mishy Harman, and we’ll be back very very soon with a brand new Israel Story episode.

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# **Lisa Miara:** And it hit me as a Jew - gas doesn’t just belong to us.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** We are going to end with an original song we commissioned. It’s called ‘A Wall That Has A Door,” and it waswritten and composed by our very own Israel Story Band leaders - Ari Wenig and Dotan Moshonov, together with Eden Djamchid, Ronnie Wagner-Schmidt and Ruth Danon. So till next time, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye*.

*[A Wall That Has A Door]*

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