



Discussion Guide: Religious Pluralism





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Created in collaboration with [Bryan Oren](#)

Introduction:

Religious pluralism in Israel – can it be achieved? This discussion guide centers around Israel Story Episode 43: [“The Wall” Part IV – This Wall Is My Wall](#), which engages in the dynamics of prayer at the Western Wall via the story of two tough sisters-in-arms who have to choose between pragmatism and idealism in their search for equality at one of the most hotly contested places among worldwide Jewry. After listening to the episode, use this guide’s discussion questions to explore its various themes. We’ve broken the story into excerpts (linked below) to facilitate discussion of particular subjects and storylines, as well as to help foster personal reflections.

Goals:

- Explore the complexities of religious pluralism.
- Understand and empathize with the needs of those with different religious identities.

Definitions:

Religious pluralism: According to the Aspen Institute, **religious pluralism** is “the state of being where every individual in a religiously diverse society has the rights, freedoms, and safety to worship, or not, according to their conscience.” ([Source](#))

Historical Context:

Before 1967, Israel only controlled West Jerusalem. The Eastern parts, including the Old City and the Kotel – the holiest site for the Jewish people – were under Jordanian rule. Historically, the Kotel was a section of the outer retaining wall of King Herod’s ancient temple, but since the destruction of that temple in 70 AD, it’s become a staple in the heritage of the Jewish people.

Following the 1967 Six Day War, Jerusalem was reunited. After nearly two millennia, the Kotel was once again in Jewish hands. Within days, Israel dismantled *Schunat HaMugrabim* – the Palestinian neighborhood that had been erected in front of the wall – and built a large plaza. A week later, on the festival of Shavuot, it was officially opened to the public.

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 desecration, but they did say that doing so was a jailable offense. In accordance with this new law, an Orthodox rabbi was named the Kotel’s ‘site administrator.’ 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.



Overarching Questions:

- How can a society foster religious pluralism when those with different religious identities have needs that conflict with one another?
 - What makes extending religious freedom to people in a religiously diverse society complicated?
 - When people of different religious expressions are at odds, whose priorities should take precedence?
 - What does achieving religious pluralism mean in the context of the Kotel?
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Reflect on the centuries-long significance of the Kotel, considering this segment from the episode ([Audio Excerpt no. 1](#)):

Zev Levi (Narration): 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 God'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.

Reflect on personal experiences at, and connections to, the Kotel, considering this segment from the episode ([Audio Excerpt no. 2](#)):

Zev Levi (Narration): 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.

[Music]

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 God, 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.

[Music]

Questions:

- What significance does the Kotel hold for you?
- What was your experience like at the Kotel? Do you remember your first visit? What feelings did it evoke? What did you see, hear, smell, and feel when you were there?

Reflect on who oversees prayer at the Kotel, considering this segment from the episode ([Audio Excerpt no. 3](#)):

Zev Levi (Narration): 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 offense. 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 Torah scrolls 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.

Questions:

- Which challenges to religious pluralism does the decision to appoint an Orthodox rabbi to oversee the Kotel raise? How does it impact worshippers of varying religious identities?
 - Given both your religious identity, and other identities you hold, does the way the Kotel is currently organized accommodate your prayer needs?
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Reflect on the prayer customs and needs of different types of Jews, considering the following characters from the episode:

From Shulamit, an observant Jewish Israeli woman ([Audio Excerpt no. 4](#)):

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... 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.

This is how Shulamit felt about the proposed Women of the Wall services ([Audio Excerpt no. 5](#)):

Zev Levi (narration): A *halachic* 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.

From Anat, a Reform Jewish Israeli woman ([Audio Excerpt no. 6](#)):

Zev Levi (Narration): 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’safsaf*” – “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 discotheque of the ultra-Orthodox, my foot is not going there. When they say “I want to keep these women from my children,” they’re right. 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.

From Eliana Aaron, an Orthodox woman ([Audio Excerpt no. 7](#)):

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 Mitzvah*, 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. 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. 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. If someone is sincere and wants to pray, wonderful. Robinson's Arch is an equally religious place that will not offend anybody. But if your 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.

From Dovid Meirfeld, an Orthodox man ([Audio Excerpt no. 8](#)):

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.

Kotel Protestor: *[In Hebrew] Have you no shame? You're disgracing the place. This is a tallit. You're just going to stand there showing your hair?*

Dovid Meirfeld: 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.

Kotel Protestor: Reforms are 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.



Questions:

- Throughout the episode, we meet many different characters: Shulamit, Anat, Eliana, and Dovid among them. What did each of them need in order to pray?
 - What kind of experience were each of them hoping to have at the Kotel? What enables or prevents each of them from having that experience?
 - How are these characters' different needs in harmony or conflict with one another?
 - Where did you hear one person or one Jewish community's religious needs take precedence over another's?
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Reflect on what it meant for different people when Women of the Wall started holding services at the Kotel on Rosh Chodesh, considering the following segments from the episode:

Audio Excerpt 9:

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 God, 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 Haredi women started pushing the group to get them to stop. The scuffle caught the attention of some Haredi *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.”

[Audio Excerpt no. 10:](#)

Zev Levi (narration): Shulamit felt as if she had 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.’

[Audio Excerpt no. 11:](#)

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 forbidden 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, 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 eighties hairdos and all – being dragged out of the plaza.

Questions:

- What significance did it have for Shulamit, Anat and other Women of the Wall members when they started holding services at the Kotel?
- How did others – protestors, the authorities, fellow worshippers – respond to the Women of the Wall services?

Reflect on the political decisions made to move the Women of the Wall protests to Robinson's Arch, considering the following segments:

[Audio Excerpt no. 12:](#)

Zev Levi (narration): 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's 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.



[Audio Excerpt no. 13:](#)

Zev Levi (narration): Netanyahu 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 comrade and friend, opted for idealism. 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.

Audio Excerpt no. 14:

Zev Levi (narration): And the sad irony is that the Kotel compromise that tore them apart? Well, it never happened. The Haredi 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.

Questions:

- What would have been the benefits and costs of keeping the Women of the Wall services on the women's side of the Kotel for Anat, for Shulamit, and for others?
- Do you think the Women of the Wall service should have made the compromise to move? Why?

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