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## L.A. rabbis in Israel seek to model tolerance

The 18 rabbis visit Israel on a trip intended to show that different factions of Judaism can coexist. Their message is exemplified by their behavior at the Western Wall.



Rabbis from Los Angeles visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem. (Ilan Mizrahi / For The Times / October 28, 2009)


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Jerusalem, where the spirit moves

By Richard Boudreaux

October 31, 2009

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Reporting from Jerusalem - The Western Wall is a unifying spiritual magnet for Jews the world over. It is also a place of contention over a rule by its Orthodox custodians that forbids women from standing beside men while praying there.

So how to worship was a sensitive question for 17 leading Los Angeles rabbis, including two women, as they strolled toward the sacred site one evening this week. The itinerary called for "private prayer," but as they entered the plaza one of the men quietly asked Rabbis Laura Geller and Sharon Brous to join him and others.

What happened next flowed easily from casual conversation. The entire group posed for photographs under an Israeli flag. Then the six who are Orthodox approached the ancient wall,

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on the male side of a partition, and prayed among a crowd of worshipers. The others, who lead Conservative and Reform congregations, found an isolated spot away from the wall, stood together and prayed aloud, defiant but deliberately low-key.

"Everyone respected each other's preference," said Elazar Muskin, an Orthodox rabbi who leads Young Israel of Century City, as the 17 reunited and walked to dinner.

That was the message of pluralism the high-powered visitors wanted Israelis to get.

Israel is constantly playing host to overseas Jewish groups to bolster its ties to the Diaspora and show how Judaism and politics are practiced here. The Los Angeles rabbis said their "unity mission" was an act of support for the Jewish state at a time of international criticism, but also a display of tolerance among streams of Judaism that often quarrel bitterly within Israel. Eighteen rabbis came, including one who wasn't present at the wall.

The diversity and stature of the group made the visit unusual.

"This is the A-list," said Jacob Dayan, Israel's consul general in Los Angeles, who organized the [delegation](#) and said he hopes it will serve as a model for missions from other Diaspora communities. "The idea was to bring a message that we are one people, united. Israelis don't often hear this tune."

Outsiders are often taken aback by the sparring in Israel, where coalition governments can fall over the slightest offense to one religious faction or another. The Orthodox tend to be more hawkish than their brethren toward the Palestinians. Tension is aggravated by a state-backed Orthodox monopoly over Jewish marriage, burial and conversion.

Interior Minister Eli Yishai, who is ultra-Orthodox, was booed here last week by an audience made up mostly of American Jews when he argued against equal rights for Reform and Conservative Jews in Israel. "Look at what is happening to the Reform Jews in America because of assimilation," he said. "They are disappearing."

The Los Angeles group's three-day tour was organized in part as a rebuke to such attitudes, and found a receptive audience in Israel.

"Thank God L.A. is not run by a reactionary rabbinate, like the one that exists here," said Rabbi David Hartman, an Israeli philosopher of contemporary Judaism.

The rabbis visited Tel Aviv's Bialik-Rogozin School to show support for the 302 children -- more than a third of the student body -- who face possible deportation under a crackdown led by Yishai's ministry against illegal immigrant laborers and their families.

They peeled potatoes at Hazon Yeshaya, a soup kitchen that feeds Jerusalem's poor.

"Do you serve the Arab population?" one rabbi asked the organization's chairman, Abraham Israel.

"I hope no one is offended," he replied defensively. "But yes, we do."

The rabbis nodded in approval, and the chairman was relieved.

"Some people are close-minded," he explained. "They'll say, 'What the hell you doing helping Arabs?'"

Many Israeli Jews feel threatened these days. Criticism over the military offensive in the Gaza Strip last winter, the election of a conservative-led government, and a breakdown of peace talks with the Palestinians have left Israel more isolated than it's been in years.

Although some American Jews have joined in the criticism, their religious leaders have sprung to Israel's defense. The Los Angeles support group spanned an ideological spectrum; it included Marvin Hier, the Orthodox rabbi who founded the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Denise Eger, a Reform rabbi who became the first woman and openly gay person elected to lead the Board of Rabbis of Southern California.

"If you ask the question 'Was the sea split?' you'll have a number of opinions [from us] whether the biblical account is the way it is or not," Hier said. "But when we're able to come as a group, as

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colleagues, to show our solidarity for Israel, that itself is a message."

In conversations with Israeli leaders and among themselves, the rabbis found consensus on one hot topic: They agreed that the Goldstone inquiry, a recent United Nations fact-finding report alleging war crimes by both Israel and Hamas during the war in Gaza, was biased against Israel and abetted a campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state, even if it exposed abuses Israel should investigate and punish.

But they differed on the issue of J Street, the 18-month-old Washington-based lobbying group focused on Mideast issues that is far more critical of Israeli government policies than the established American Israel Public Affairs Committee, known as AIPAC.







Rabbi Isaac Jeret, who leads Congregation Ner Tamid in Rancho Palos Verdes and is active in AIPAC, said American Jews should feel "a sense of duty to champion the policies of the democratically elected government of Israel."

Geller, who heads Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, said J Street helps the cause of pluralism that the rabbis came to preach. Until the lobbying group's founding last year, she said, American Jews critical of the Israeli government found it harder to speak their mind.

"The challenge is to get people connected to Israel in a wide enough tent so that real conversations can take place," she said. "As long as people engage with Israel, that's the goal."

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