



# ISRAEL MATTERS!

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## Israel to Create an Egalitarian Prayer Plaza at the Western Wall

### Germany Rejects European Union's Labeling of Israeli Settlement Products

Germany rejects the recent decision of the EU to label Israeli products made beyond the Green Line, said Norbert Lammert, president of the Bundestag, the German parliament. "Germany not only didn't agree to the decision, it rejected it," he recently told a joint press conference with his visiting Israeli counterpart, Knesset Speaker, Yuli Edelstein. He said he understood "Israel's anger" over the fact that the EU did not label products from other disputed territories in the world like Tibet, Crimea, or the Western Sahara.

In an address to the Bundestag, Edelstein expressed Israel's staunch disapproval of the EU's decision to go ahead with settlement labeling. Edelstein repeated Israeli concerns that the labeling of products from Israeli settlements in the West Bank and from the Golan Heights galvanized the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which he said acts under the pretense of humanitarian concern but is really motivated by "blind hatred" for Israel.

Edelstein also said that Palestinian workers would feel the brunt of measures like labeling settlement products. He said Israelis and Palestinians are most likely to encounter one another in "Israeli factories, which employ thousands of Israelis and Palestinians in the industrial areas of Judea and Samaria." Ironically, the boycott will actually bring about more damage to Palestinians," he said. [EJPress]



Israel recently approved a plan that would dramatically change the layout of Jerusalem's Western Wall plaza, one of the holiest sites in Judaism, creating a space for egalitarian prayer and mixed-gender ceremonies for non-Orthodox Jews. The new area, which will enable men and women to pray

side by side, is to be adjacent to the existing plaza run by stringent ultra-Orthodox rabbis. That area is split into prayer sections for men and women, although women are not allowed to read aloud from the Torah, wear prayer shawls, or sing there.

Along with creating a change to the delicate status quo, this marks an unprecedented move by the Israeli government to officially recognize the rights of Conservative, Reform, and other Jewish denominations to hold organized prayer at the site.

Jewish groups in Israel and the United States hailed the decision as a historic step toward religious pluralism in Israel. American Jewish organizations, many of which feel that their religiosity is sidelined in Israel, have been integral in pushing the plan forward and ensuring that it remains on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's agenda. "The Jewish state has always held a promise that it is for all Jewish people, and the Wall is such an amazingly spiritual and inspirational place," said Jerry Silverman, president of the Jewish Federations of North America, an organization representing hundreds of Jewish groups. "Now, to have a space that will recognize the way the majority of Jews practice their religion — at least Jews from the United States — is a monumental step forward," he said.

After long-running negotiations with several Jewish groups, the plan was drafted by former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky, head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, and outgoing Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit. The evolving plan has gone through numerous incarnations and faced high hurdles.

The ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, which enjoys a monopoly on religious Jewish life in Israel from births and marriages to places of worship, was unwilling to allow any changes at the site. Archaeologists expressed dismay that more development at the Western Wall could destroy precious artifacts and change a visitor's view into the past.

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The area around the ancient wall, part of the first and second Jewish temples, is also a sensitive spot for Muslims, who consider the adjacent al-Aqsa mosque compound the third-holiest site in Islam. Administered by the Islamic Waqf trust, it is overseen by Jordan and has been a flash point of violence in recent months. The Palestinian Authority denounced the decision to expand the Jewish prayer section of the Western Wall to accommodate non-Orthodox and mixed gender services, as a further attempt to change the status quo at the Temple Mount. Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, condemned the cabinet decision saying, the prayer space adjacent to the Western Wall is “the property of the Islamic Waqf, taken by the Israeli occupation in 1967.”

Netanyahu, who brought up the proposal for a vote during his weekly cabinet meeting, commended the plan, saying that the area was a “place that is supposed to unite the Jewish people.” “While I know that this is a delicate issue, I think that this is a fair and creative solution,” he said. But five ultra-Orthodox members of Netanyahu’s cabinet, including Religious Affairs Minister David Azoulay, did not vote for the plan. They also did not fight it or threaten to bring down the government.

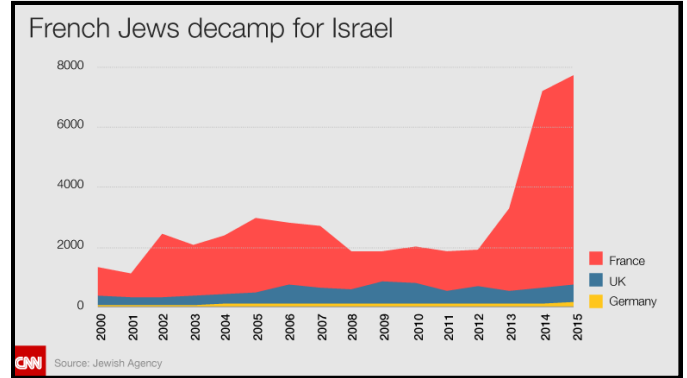
“I am gratified that the cabinet voted this plan into existence,” said Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, head of the Rabbinical Assembly, an international association of Conservative rabbis. “At the same time, there are opponents to this plan and to religious pluralism within the government, and we have to continue working to make sure this plaza is built.”

Anat Hoffman, director of Women of the Wall — a feminist group that has been pushing for a solution to allow egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall — said government approval of the plan was a “wonderful gesture.” “We will offer an option to all Israelis and Jews from around the world to express their Judaism,” she said. “We had a vision 27 years ago that the holiest site of Jewish people needed to be run different, and today the government has taken a step towards it,” Hoffman said. “Of course, there are still a thousand hurdles and many ways for this to be sabotaged, but we will not stop moving until the new plaza is ready and fit for us.”

Shmuel Rabinowitz, rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites, said that he received the decision regarding the new prayer arrangements “with a heavy heart and a sigh of relief.” “Ever since the fringe and vociferous group of Women of the Wall started its mass-media activity, the Western Wall went from being a unifying site to one of incessant quarrels,” he said. Using a Hebrew phrase referring to the defamation of God’s name, he added, “The chilul hashem that this group and its supporters have caused is terrible, and it will take years to repair it.” [WashingtonPost and JPost]

## Jews Leave France for Israel in Record Numbers

According to the Jewish Agency, which handles Jewish immigration, or aliyah, to Israel, nearly 8,000 French Jews moved to Israel in the year following the Charlie Hebdo attack. The number of French Jews moving to Israel has doubled -- and doubled again -- in the past five years. In 2013, less than 3,300 French Jews moved to Israel. Only two years earlier, that number was 1,900.



Many French Jews settle in Ashdod, a city in southern Israel known for its large French population. You are as likely to hear French on the streets as you are Hebrew, especially in one of the city’s many French cafés. “It’s great for me here, much better than France,” said Charly Dahan, a musician who moved to Israel from Paris two years ago. “This is the first time in my life that I am relaxed. In France, I also felt good, but the situation and the current problems... It’s very difficult to live as a Jew in France,” he added.

The Jewish Agency says violence is part -- but not all -- of the reason for French immigration. “While high-profile attacks such as those at the Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012, the Jewish museum in Brussels in 2014, the kosher supermarket in Paris and the synagogue in Copenhagen last year have certainly been the most vivid instances of violence targeting French and European Jews, the French Jewish community has been living with a deep sense of insecurity for quite some time,” says Avi Mayer, spokesman for the Jewish Agency.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls recently expressed the fear that an exodus of Jews would change the country for the worse. “Without the Jews, France is no longer France. It’s the oldest community. They have been French citizens since the French revolution,” he told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour.

But when the European Union studied the prevalence of anti-Semitism in 2013, it found that 74% of Jews in France avoid openly identifying themselves as Jewish at least some of the time, and more than a quarter of French Jews always do.

[CNN]