

The Kotel's symbolism

With his head covered by a kippa and his hand on the ancient stones of the Kotel, US President Donald Trump struck an august pose.

It was the most memorable image from his short visit to Israel.

Trump on Monday was not only taking time to pray at a site where generations of Jews have shed tears of mourning and hope, he was making a statement about Jewish ties to Jerusalem.

As with any symbol, however, there is an ongoing battle among Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora over what the Western Wall represents.

Some insist on seeing it as a purely religious site – the world's oldest synagogue with special attributes of holiness. And as with any other synagogue, they believe it should be governed by strictly Orthodox customs.

Proponents of this approach seek to deny access to those who worship differently. A cabinet decision to create an egalitarian space at the Kotel for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism and for the Women of the Wall organization has been stymied by zealous politicians.

Others see political importance in emphasizing the Western Wall as a symbol of Jewish sovereignty. Archeology is enlisted in the service of nationalism. The Temple Mount is the most salient example of the Jews' illustrious past. It harkens back to an ancient time when Jews were a people with a common religion and language who populated the Land of Israel. Far from being European colonialism, the Jews' creation of the modern State of Israel was a miraculous example of an ancient, exiled people returning to its homeland.

But while archeological proof of Jewish ties to the Land of Israel is an important component of present-day national identity, it does not serve as a solution to the very real problems and conflicts faced by the modern State of Israel. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Israelis and Arabs all have claims and grievances in Jerusalem. Acknowledging the historical ties of any one of these groups does not undermine the ties of any other.

The Kotel, indeed the entire Temple Mount, means different things to different people.

As a relic of the ancient Temple, the Western Wall is a reminder of the Jews' glorious past. But the Kotel also serves as a focal point for contemporary activities. The IDF holds swearing-in ceremonies for soldiers there; new immigrants celebrate their homecoming in the Western Wall Plaza; fervently religious Jews of all backgrounds venerate the site as a gateway for prayer and a place where God's presence is more pronounced. Jews adhering to Orthodox practice are not the only ones who yearn to pray at the Kotel. Jewish women who feel more comfortable worshiping God by wearing prayer shawls and phylacteries and leading prayers and reading from Torah scrolls also want a place at there. More liberal streams of Judaism that permit men and women to pray together rightly believe they should be allowed to worship the way they feel comfortable.

How are we to negotiate these different approaches to the Kotel that are often at odds with one another? Respect for freedom of expression should be the basis of any solution. No single narrative of what the Western Wall represents should be permitted to dominate discourse or appropriate control. A poll conducted for the Schechter Institute of the Conservative Movement by the Geocartography Institute found that almost two-thirds of Israelis (62%) answered "yes" to the question, "Should everyone be allowed to pray at the Western Wall in an equal manner?"

The Kotel is resonant with religious meaning. But it is much more than an open-air synagogue, let alone an Orthodox one. As a remnant of the Temple, the Kotel has meaning as archeological proof of deep Jewish ties in Jerusalem and in the Land of Israel. But it is not solely a national symbol reaffirming Jewish ties to the Land of Israel.

Only by upholding freedom of expression will every Jew regardless of religious or political background be made to feel comfortable at the Kotel.

Trump's visit provides a unique opportunity to articulate what the Western Wall symbolizes as a focal point of prayer, a national site and a place resonant with Jewish history. Reducing the site to any one of these dimensions does an injustice to Judaism and to the Kotel.