



IS THE KOTEL A JEWISH QUESTION?



THE 4HQ OF IT... PEOPLE OR FREEDOM?

This session addresses an issue that is regularly addressed as a question of Judaism [PEOPLE]. Since the ability to pray at the Kotel is of huge significance to the Jewish People, so limiting women's ability to do so in the form of their choosing is preventing them fulfilling their Jewish practice and identity. Likewise those who oppose women wearing talitot and tfillin and reading from sifrei torah at the Kotel also argue that the question of Judaism is central to the dispute. But is it? Only? In this session we dig in to the nature of the dispute, and wonder whether the challenge is not religious, but political. The dispute might actually be about political power, and Israel's democratic system [FREE]. In which case this issue that emerges from the question of People, actually lands in the question of Freedom...

AIMS

Learners will:

- Explore their own understandings of "decorum" in a sacred space - and how Israeli Judaism may differ from what they are used to in their home communities.
- Understand how the ongoing tension about the Kotel was born in and can only be resolved through Israeli politics (and, by extension, all aspects of Religion and State in Israel)
- Game out their own political prioritization of their values

PART 1 - THE FOUR P'S OF YOUR TEMPLE/SYNAGOGUE - 20 MINUTES

Either brainstorm the following with the whole group, or split into smaller groups and have them report back: What are the Four P's of your temple?

At your temple/shrine, what kind of actions and behavior is

- **Prescribed** (this must happen here)
- **Preferred** (it would be good if this happens here)
- **Permitted** (it is allowed for this to happen here)
- **Prohibited** (this must not happen here)

Gather all these ideas, in order to draw out clear answers to questions such as: "What would happen if a group of Bikers decided to ride into your synagogue and park their bikes there and hang out with each other, drinking and eating?" "Which P is applicable to men wearing a kippah - and women?"

Finally, discuss how these four P's were established. Are they written down? Who established them? How?

PART 2: THE FOUR P'S OF THE KOTEL - 20 MINUTES

The Kotel in Israel is not governed as a national monument, or a park. It is effectively governed as a synagogue according to the Western Wall Foundation (the government-appointed authority over the Kotel area). And this government-appointed "synagogue committee" holds to a strict orthodox tradition. This means that their four P's include:

- **Prescribed** - Men must cover their heads. Women must cover their arms and legs. Men and women must stand separated by a barrier.
- **Preferred** - People should use the place for prayer, contemplation, and religious celebration.
- **Permitted** - People can touch the wall and can place written notes in the wall. Anyone is allowed to touch the wall and place notes. Begging is permitted.
- **Prohibited** - Women must not wear tallitot/tfillin. Women must not carry or read from the Torah scroll. Men must not pray together with women. No business - shops, etc - is permitted.

GROUP EXERCISE:



Hand out a print-out of the 4 P's of the Western Wall Foundation, and have groups compare them with the P's of their synagogue.

Is there a way that 4 P's might be created that would please everyone?

Assume that the "Preferred" and "Permitted" elements might be open to compromise, but that "Prescribed" and "Prohibited" elements are not open to compromise - from either side.

The chances are that this exercise will lead to an impasse, and possibly calls of "who gave them the right?" That's where we'll go next: Who gave them the right? And in order to answer that question, we need to do a bit of history:

PART 3 - HOW DID ISRAEL COME TO CONTROL THE KOTEL? - 15 MINUTES

Jews did not always have the right to the most basic Jewish acts, like the right to blow the shofar on Yom Kippur.

Watch the following video:
[Echoes of the Shofar](#)



Then came 1967 - watch the following video: [The Six Day War Shofar Story](#)



Leave space for addressing questions that might arise - about the pre-State British Mandate, about the borders of Jerusalem between 1948-1967.



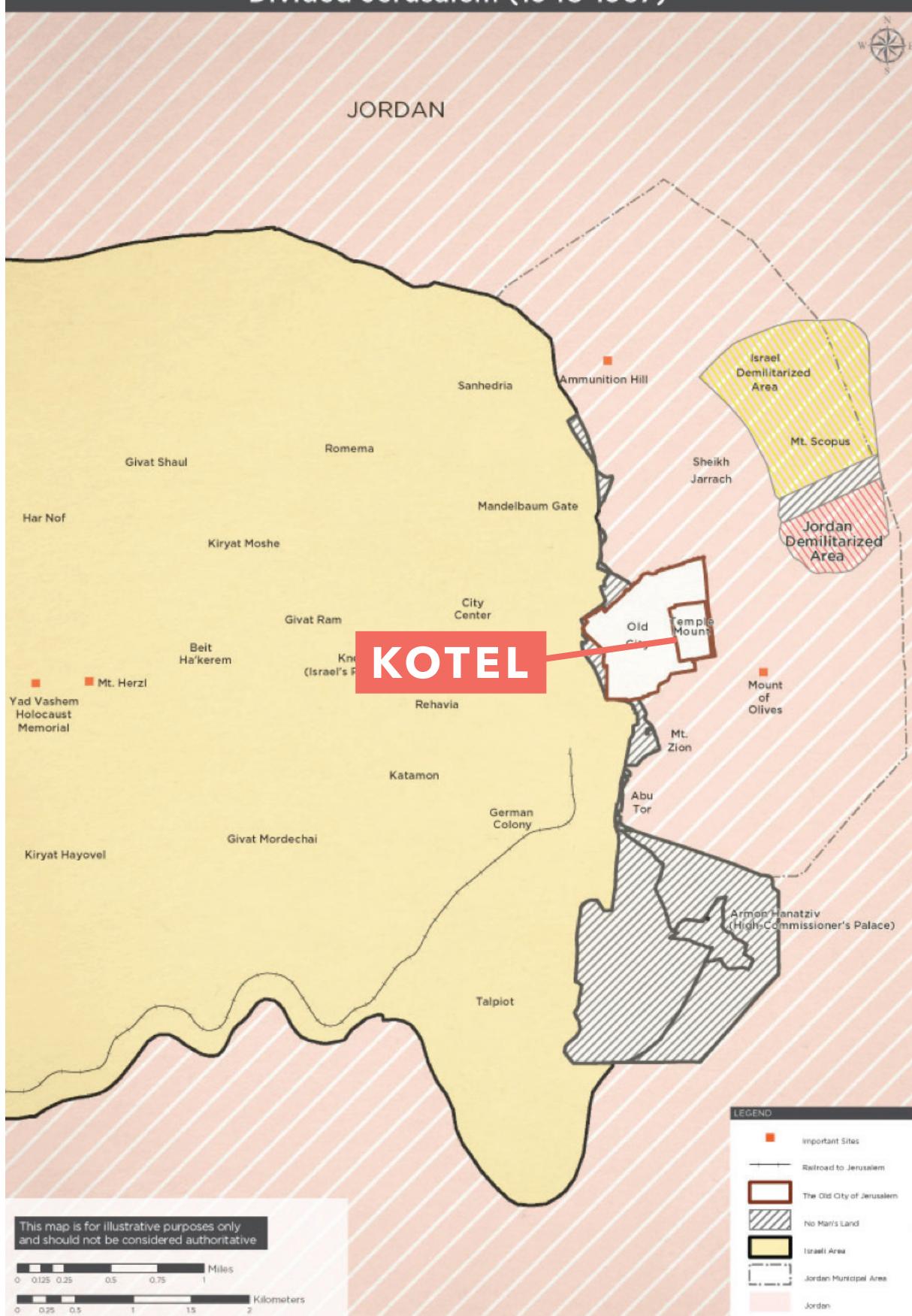
So before we go further, let's celebrate!

After two thousand years, we are finally in the position where we can argue about what we want to do with the Kotel! For generations upon generations, we never had a choice. We never had a choice because we were helpless, and the Kotel was governed by others. (See map below)

That is reason to celebrate. For a minute.

Now let's look at what happened from 1967 onwards, when the Israeli government was in control of the Kotel.

Divided Jerusalem (1948-1967)



PART 4 - WHO CONTROLS THE KOTEL? - 15 MINUTES



Screen this video, allowing a few minutes for questions and comments

FINAL EXERCISE - 15 MINUTES

Write down for yourself three key policies (apart from the Kotel Agreement!) you would introduce in Israel if you were Prime Minister.

1. You are now offered a deal: If you give up on one of them, the Kotel Agreement will be implemented immediately. Which one would you give up on?
2. And if you must give up on two of them?
3. All of them?

You may wish to offer some examples of policies, if your learners might find it difficult to come up with their own list. For example,

- Withdraw all Jewish settlements from the West Bank and grant the Palestinians their own State
- Give all Jews around the world a vote in Israel's elections
- Introduce a non-binary non-gendered Hebrew font to all government offices
- Change the lyrics of the Hatikvah National Anthem to include Palestinian Arabs' aspirations as well as Jews'

CONCLUSION - 5 MINUTES

Many issues that we would readily define as issues to do with the Jewish People, such as Kotel arrangements, marriages, kashrut, Shabbat observance – while they emerge from a question about being Jewish [People], they are enacted in Israel through the democratic process [Free]. At the end of the day, things are the way they are in Israel because either most Israelis like them that way, or because they are more concerned about other issues.

Let's return to the quotation from Avishai Margalit in our elections session: "Ideals tell us something important about what we would like to be, but compromises tell us who we are."