When Rome destroyed the Second Temple in 70 C.E., only one outer wall remained standing. The Romans probably would have destroyed that wall as well, but it must have seemed too insignificant to them; it was not even part of the Temple itself, just an outer wall surrounding the Temple Mount. For the Jews, however, this remnant of what was the most sacred building in the Jewish world quickly became the holiest spot in Jewish life. Throughout the centuries Jews from throughout the world made the difficult pilgrimage to Palestine, and immediately headed for the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi (the Western Wall) to thank God. The prayers offered at the Kotel were so heartfelt that gentiles began calling the site the “Wailing Wall.” This undignified name never won a wide following among traditional Jews; the term “Wailing Wall” is not used in Hebrew.

The Western Wall was subjected to far worse than semantic indignities. During the more than one thousand years Jerusalem was under Muslim rule, the Arabs often used the Wall as a garbage dump, so as to humiliate the Jews who visited it.

For nineteen years, from 1948 to 1967, the Kotel was under Jordanian rule. Although the Jordanians had signed an armistice agreement in 1949 guaranteeing Jews the right to visit the Wall, not one Israeli Jew was ever permitted to do so. One of the first to reach the Kotel in the 1967 Six-Day War was Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, who helped revive a traditional Jewish custom by inserting a written petition into its cracks. It was later revealed that Dayan's prayer was that a lasting peace "descend upon the House of Israel."

The custom of inserting written prayers into the Kotel's cracks is so widespread that some American-Jewish newspapers carry advertisements for services that insert such prayers on behalf of sick Jews. The mystical qualities associated with the Kotel are underscored in a popular Israeli song, a refrain of which runs: “There are people with hearts of stone, and stones with hearts of people.” A rabbi in Jerusalem once told me that the Hebrew expression “The walls have ears” was originally said about the Western Wall.

Unfortunately, even a symbol as unifying as the Kotel can become a source of controversy in Jewish life. Ultra-Orthodox Jews have long opposed organized women’s prayer services at the Wall; prayer services they maintain, may only be conducted by males. On occasion they have violently dispersed such services, throwing chairs and other “missiles” at the praying women. Under intense public pressure however, the right of women to pray collectively at the Kotel is gradually being won.

In addition to the large crowds that come to pray at the Kotel on Friday evenings, it is also a common gathering place on all Jewish holidays, particularly on the fast of Tisha Be-Av, which commemorates the destruction of both Temples. Today the Wall is a national symbol, and the opening or closing ceremonies of many Jewish events, including secular ones, are conducted there.

On January 31, 2016, the Israeli government approved the creation of an “egalitarian” prayer space where non-Orthodox Jewish men and women can pray together at the Western Wall. This decision was met with praise from Jewish leaders across the globe, and opposition from Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Israeli citizens and members of the government. Israeli Prime
Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the creation of this space was a “fair and creative solution,” to rising tensions at the site.

The advocacy group Women of the Wall called the decision a victory, with the government recognizing that, according to the organization's chairwoman, “that there is more than one way to be Jewish.” The new prayer space will be designated South of the mens and women's prayer sections of the wall, in an area known as Robinson's Arch. The first Reform, mixed-gender prayer service to ever take place at the Western Wall was held at this new space on February 25, 2016.

Sources: Ettinger, Yair. “More Than 150 Reform Rabbis Hold Mixed-gender Service at New Western Wall Prayer Space,” Haaretz (February 25, 2016);
Kershner, Isabel. “Israel Approves Prayer Space at Western Wall for Non-Orthodox Jews,” New York Times (January 31, 2016);