

Feminists call temporary Western Wall prayer platform called a 'sundeck'

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JERUSALEM (RNS) One week after unveiling an expanded prayer platform near the Western Wall, Israel's Minister of Religious Affairs reached out to Reform and Conservative Jews in the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, which begins Wednesday (Sept. 4) evening.

But while the non-Orthodox leaders welcomed the new platform that can accommodate up to 450 worshippers, a group of Jewish feminists called it nothing more than "a sun deck" designed to marginalize anyone who is not Ultra-Orthodox from praying at the Wall.

Naftali Bennett, the religious affairs minister, called for "a new page in the Israeli-Diaspora relationship" in his letter to leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements, whose institutions and clergy have no official status and receive virtually no government funding.

The temporary prayer platform at Robinson's Arch, near the southern part of the Western Wall, serves as a government-designated place for mixed gender, non-Orthodox prayer.

The government permits only Orthodox prayer at the northern part of the Wall, called the Kotel, a remnant of the Jewish Temple. A recent court ruling said the feminist group, Women of the Wall, should be allowed to pray in prayer shawls and phylacteries in the main women's section, which is separated from the men's section by a partition.

Women at the Wall staged a sit-in at the Kotel when the platform was announced. It would like women to pray in the women's section at the Kotel.

The Reform and Conservative movements sought reassurances from Bennett that the government would implement the so-called Sharansky Plan, which, if approved, would create a permanent prayer space accommodating thousands of worshipers, as opposed to the temporary platform that accommodates hundreds.