

May 24, 2012/ 3 Sivan 5772

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu:

I write as chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America to express concern and disappointment at the harassment of two of our female rabbinical students, and a third from our sister institution, while they were praying this past Tuesday, Rosh Hodesh Sivan, at the rear of the women's section of the Kotel.

We are of course familiar with the long history of dispute, litigation, compromise, arrest, and tension around the issue of prayer by non-Orthodox Jews, women and men alike, in the vicinity of the Kotel. We understand that the police who demanded that the students adjust their tallitot to appear like scarves rather than prayer shawls, even as the students were in the midst of saying the Shema, were only enforcing the law as they understood it. We also believe, however, that the officers displayed excessive zeal and insensitivity to the holiness of the site and to the moment of *tefillah* when they moved to forcibly alter a tallit before the women in prayer—with *tzitziyot* wrapped around their fingers—had the chance to comply with the law, which was their full intention. They were, in fact, not given a chance to comply when police acted peremptorily.

The law the officers were enforcing is patently unjust. We urge your government to act with all due speed to change that law so as to ensure that the holiest site in the Jewish world becomes a place where all Jews can pray in accordance with their interpretation of our shared tradition. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America bears witness to the unbreakable bond linking Jews the world over to the Land, State, and People of Israel by sending all of our rabbinical students to Israel for a year of study. We trust that their experience will provide the firsthand knowledge needed to become forceful advocates for Israel upon their return to the United States, and will instill or strengthen the passionate connection to Israel that they will transmit to the communities they will lead over the course of many decades. Every time an incident like the one this past Tuesday occurs, it damages the relationship that we know is essential to the well-being of our people.

I write days before Shavu'ot, when Jews recall the giving of Torah at Sinai and affirm their obligation to carry on the teachings and practices of the Covenant. Surely a way can be found for all Jews, male and female, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, to share the holy space of the Kotel with mutual toleration and respect and so demonstrate our shared devotion to our people, our tradition, and our homeland.

We are pleased to work with you and other leaders of Israel and the Jewish people in coming months, as we have in the past, to achieve this goal.

Thank you for attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Arnold M. Eisen
Chancellor
The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

cc: Michael Oren, Israeli Ambassador to the United States