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Dear Mr. Gissin,

I had the privilege of meeting you at a Board session of ARZA Canada. At the time, the conflict in Gaza was still raging. Around the table that evening, you received full and enthusiastic support for our beloved State of Israel.

My reason for writing to you is that, this time, the threat to Israel comes from within. The battlefield is the Kotel. On November 18, 2009, an Israeli woman, Nofrat Frankel, was arrested at the Kotel. Her crime? She was wearing a Tallit and holding a Sefer Torah. It was a shock to me – and to many – that these two acts seem to be a crime under Israeli law!

The battle continues. On January 5 of this year, another Israeli woman, Anat Hoffman, was called in for questioning by the Israeli police. Before they released her, she was fingerprinted. The crime? She was wearing a Tallit at the Kotel.

If this kind of police action had taken place in any other country, the world Jewish community would have accused the state of anti-Semitism and violation of basic human rights. So how can such a travesty be tolerated within the Jewish State itself?

We both know the historical circumstances that have led to the ultra-Orthodox hegemony over the Kotel. However, I believe the time has come for this persecution to stop. These self-appointed guardians of the Kotel do not even have Halakha on their side, since there is no legal reason why a woman may not wear Tallit and Tefillin. Their actions stem from bigotry pure and simple. I do not deny the right of Haredim to pray as they see fit, as do all Jews. But when they seek to deny the rights of other Jews to pray in their way, then they have overstepped the bounds of democracy and must be stopped.

I wish to know what the Government of Israel plans to do to redress the injustices done to Ms. Frankel and Ms. Hoffman. I wish to know what steps the Government will take to ensure that the Kotel, the centre of Jewish hope and prayer throughout the centuries, will become a place where all Jews will be welcome to worship according to their own tradition. And I would like to know how soon these measures will be taken.

As a Reform Jew and devout Zionist, I cherish the State of Israel as a bastion of democracy and an exemplar of the prophetic values of justice and peace. These values are too precious to lose to religious fanaticism and political manipulation.

Shalom uv'racha,

Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander

Cc: ARZA Canada

Anat Hoffman, Director, Israel Religious Action Centre