For many Jewish children, the Kotel is the most easily recognizable landmark of the State of Israel and, by extension, of the Jewish people. From a very young age, Jewish children learn that the Kotel, a remnant of the Second Temple, is a holy place where written prayers can be placed between the cracks of its ancient stones.

All this is true, of course, but the Kotel is much more (and much more complicated) than a set of ancient stones. For parents and teachers who wish to round out their kids’ understanding of this sacred and contested space, here are five things your kids should know about the Kotel.

1. **The Kotel isn’t actually a wall of the Temple.** Although the Kotel is a remnant from the Second Temple period, it was not actually a wall of the Temple itself. Instead, it was an outer retaining wall – the word Kotel actually means “wall” – built to support the Temple Mount. When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., this outer wall remained partially intact; no walls of the Temple itself remain. It is considered a holy space because it reminds us of the Temple itself, and for a long time it was the closest Jews could get to the actual spot where the Temple stood. After the Six Day War in 1967, when Jews were able to return to that area of Jerusalem, it became a central location for prayer.

2. **The Kotel or “Western Wall” is in the east.** The Kotel is called the “Western Wall” because it is the western-most retaining wall of the Temple complex. While this idea is patently obvious to Jewish adults who face east for prayer, it requires quite a lot of explanation for young children to understand that the “Western Wall” is, in fact, in the east (if you live in North America). To convey this idea, it might help to cut out the bottom of a box (with the remaining sides representing the four outer walls of the Temple, one of which should be marked as the Western Wall) and put a block or Lego building inside it (to represent the Temple). Then place the box to the east of the child to show, in miniature 3-D, how a place can be both east (of the child) and west (of the Temple).

3. **The Kotel has a gender divider (**mehitzah**).** While the **mehitzah** is perhaps the most obvious feature of the Kotel for liberal Jews who have visited Israel, many Jewish educational institutions in North America omit teaching children that the Kotel, as it stands today, is physically divided by such a barrier. Men pray on one side of the **mehitzah**, and women on the other. The men’s side is significantly bigger than the women’s side, and, because the designated prayer space at the Kotel currently functions like an Orthodox synagogue, Torah reading is only permitted on the men’s side (though there are groups of women who break this rule).

4. **A third space, Robinson’s Arch, often is used by groups of men and women who wish to pray together.** In addition to the gender-segregated sections of the Kotel, there is a third space, Robinson’s Arch, just to the south of the Kotel plaza (to the right, if you’re facing the Wall). Also part of the Second Temple retaining wall, Robinson’s Arch isn’t divided by a **mehitzah**. People have different beliefs about Robinson’s Arch. Some people believe it is part of the Wall and is a good place for men and women to pray together; others believe the site isn’t actually part of the Kotel and that praying there is second best; still others believe that with some adjustments – including access...
from the main Kotel plaza and funds for Torah scrolls – Robinson’s Arch should become a non-
Orthodox section of the Kotel, known as the Ezrat K’lal Yisrael (an area for all).

5. **Jews disagree about the Kotel.** People also disagree about how the Kotel’s space should (or
should not) be divided, and about what kind of Jewish prayer should be allowed there. Although
some Jews believe the Kotel should remain as is, others are working for changes, but even they
don’t agree with one another. Some want an official, designated place for men and women to pray
together. Others want to allow Torah reading on the women’s side, but would prefer to keep men
and women separate. Many Jews in Israel and North America are working to find a compromise,
but currently, there is no arrangement that everyone agrees upon.

The Kotel is a symbol of the unity and disunity of the Jewish people, showing our resilience and our
fragility. Its stones have meaning both ancient and modern, and resonance both political and
spiritual. If we want our children to understand this most visible marker of the Jewish world, we
need to help them know more about it. This is a good place to start.

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