

Archaeologist says entire Western Wall is ‘danger zone,’ public should stay away

Warning of ‘multiple cracks’ after boulder falls, Zachi Dvira says people should not be allowed near holy site — neither in the mainstream prayer pavilion nor at Robinson’s Arch.



View of the site where a large chunk of stone dislodged from the Western Wall in Jerusalem at the mixed-gender prayer section on July 23, 2016. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Archaeologist Zachi Dvira, head of the Temple Mount Sifting Project, told The Times of Israel on Monday after inspecting the Western Wall following the fall of a Herodian-era stone that the whole area is a “danger zone.”

On Monday morning, a boulder fell from the Western Wall onto the Robinson’s Arch egalitarian platform, which is located in the Davidson Archaeological Park alongside the Wall. Captured on film, the rock landed very close to a female worshiper there.

The fallen boulder weighed about 220 pounds (100 kilograms), Israel Radio said. It damaged the platform on which Daniella Goldberg, 79, was praying.

The incident came a day after the platform was filled with worshipers marking the Tisha B'Av fast, which commemorates the destruction of the two Jewish temples in Jerusalem.

Tens of thousands of Jewish Israelis also flocked to the main prayer plaza of the Western Wall between Saturday night and Sunday evening to solemnly mark the day.



"I didn't hear or feel anything until it landed right at my feet, " said Goldberg.



Daniella Goldberg, who was praying a few meters from where a boulder from the Western Wall fell onto a prayer platform on July 23, 2018 (screenshot: Hadashot)

She said she was praying at the site, as she does regularly, when suddenly the boulder crashed down.

She told Hadashot TV news she “tried not to let the incident distract me from my prayers” and refused to be drawn on whether divine providence had spared her.

“May we all be blessed,” she said.



A boulder from the Western Wall falls onto a prayer platform on July 23, 2018 (Courtesy/The Western Wall Heritage Foundation via the Masorti Movement of Israel)

During archaeologist Dvira’s inspection on Monday afternoon, he said, he noted multiple cracks in other stones and he believes that another stone fall is just a matter of time.



Archaeologist Zachi Dvira (Amanda Borschel-Dan/Times of Israel)

Other stones “could immediately fall on the heads of people,” said Dvira, who is completing a PhD on the recorded archaeology of the Temple Mount.

There are already several noticeable gaps in the Western Wall, where large Herodian stones have crumbled in the past. In a notable case in 2004, large pieces of Western Wall stone fell in the mainstream prayer plaza — slightly injuring a Yom Kippur worshiper — due to erosion caused by foreign metal objects inserted into the wall’s cracks by birds.

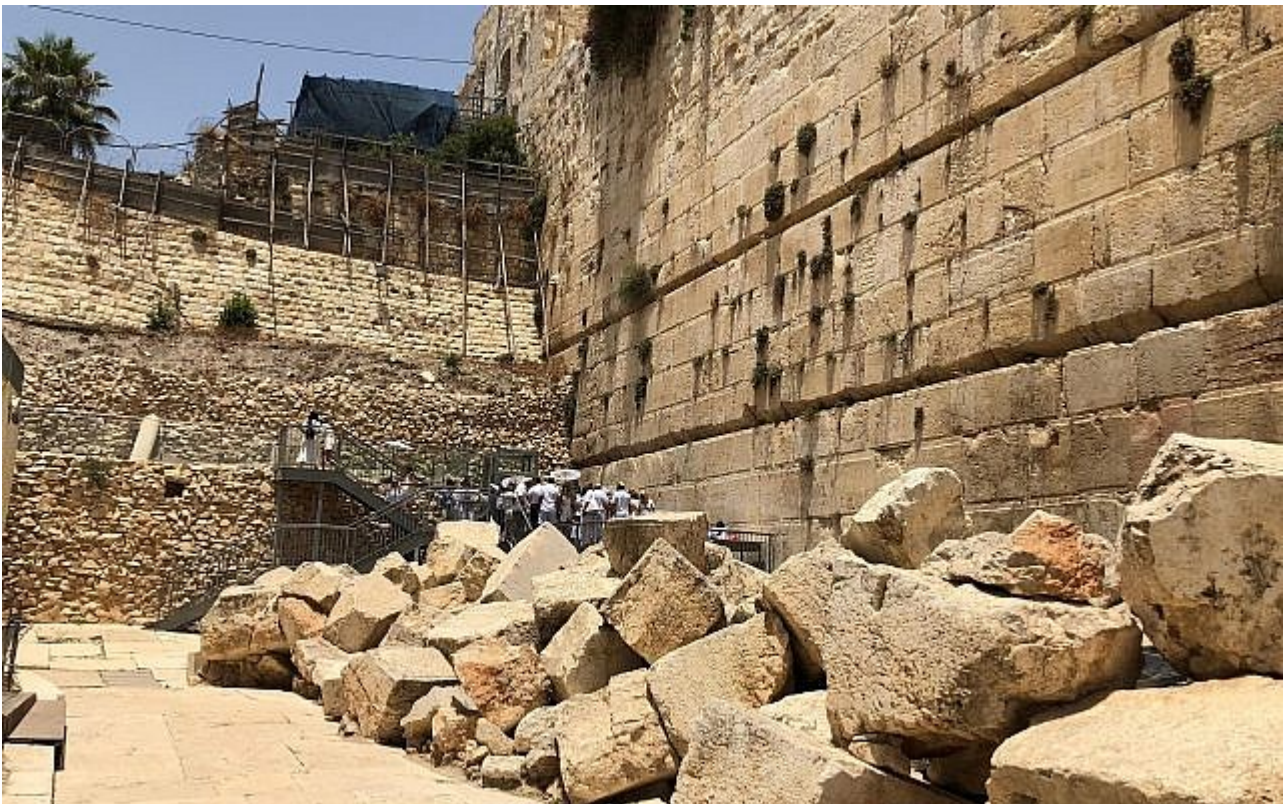
The State of Israel, Dvira alleged, “doesn’t do proper preservation because of politics.” In the 2004 case, repairs were made in the main Western Wall Plaza by the Jordanians following many rounds of negotiations, he said. The contentious nature of the egalitarian prayer area has likewise closed the site from preservation, he said.

In 2009, the IAA completed a three-month preservation project in the Western Wall Plaza which concentrated on 16 of the upper stone courses that date from the Ottoman period. Unlike the lowest Herodian courses, these stones are held in place with mortar, which was eroding with water damage over time.

During the 2009 project, the mortar was replaced and many of the caper plants were removed from the wall. According to the IAA report, the team’s work was circumscribed at the guidance of the Western Wall rabbi, but it was satisfied that danger was averted.



A boulder from the Western Wall falls onto a prayer platform on July 23, 2018 (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)



A family celebrates a bar mitzva at the small egalitarian prayer platform at the Robinson's Arch, July 2018. (Amanda Borschel-Dan/ToI)

While the egalitarian section is currently closed to the public since the stone's

fall, other areas are still accessible. It is Dvira's opinion that the public should not be allowed to approach any of the walls, including the Western Wall, and should be kept back two or three meters.

"It's a matter of life or death," said Dvira.

Following the stone's fall from one of the original Herodian rows of the Western Wall, a team of IAA experts, including archaeologists, engineers and conservationists, began careful examination of the affected area.



A team of professionals was deployed to the Robinson's Arch egalitarian prayer platform next to the Western Wall on July 23, 2018 following the fall of a Herodian stone. (Courtesy the Masorti Movement/Rabbi Valerie Stessin)

In a statement, the IAA said there were a number of possibilities that may have led to the stone's fall, such as vegetation growing in the wall's cracks, or entrapped moisture that may have led to the stone's wear. There is also the possibility of a still unknown engineering failure.



Daniella Goldberg (left), with Culture Minister Miri Regev, inspects the damage caused by a large stone that dislodged from the Western Wall in Jerusalem Old City on July 23, 2013, at the mixed-gender prayer section. The boulder fell close to where Goldberg was praying. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

“With the help of advanced technological methods, IAA experts will begin careful monitoring in the area of the fall, as part of a survey of the entire area and the formulations of recommendations for the elimination of such danger,” said the IAA. “The Israel Antiquities Authority is aware of the sensitivity required in handling this case and will work in cooperation with all the relevant bodies.”



Israel Antiquities Authority professionals assess damage at the Robinson's Arch section of the Western Wall after a stone fell on July 23, 2018. (Hannah Estrin)

Source: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/archaeologist-says-entire-western-wall-a-danger-zone/>

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