Over Protests from the Israeli Public and Masorti Leadership
President Rivlin Empowers “Sham” Orthodox Bar Mitzvah
For Children with Disabilities, Fails to Invite Masorti Rabbis

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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New York, NY (June 23, 2015)-- The new week dawned dreary for the families of the children with autism who had been working towards a participatory and inclusive bar mitzvah ceremony with specially trained Masorti staff and rabbis in Israel for six months.

Through the auspices of the Masorti Foundation, a groundbreaking b’nai mitzvah program for almost 4,000 children with disabilities has been held for the past two decades (http://masorti.org/masorti-programs/masorti-youth-programs/youth-bar-bat-mitzvah-for-children-with-disabilities/) in 500 services all over Israel.

While the interpretation of halacha practiced by Israel's Rabbinut prohibits those with such disabilities from being counted in a minyan or being called to the Torah, Masorti's understanding of Halacha provides religious training and welcomes each individual into the fellowship of the Jewish People.

The previously cancelled, much-publicized and greatly compromised event was held yesterday but it was a shadow of what had originally been planned, say Masorti leaders.

The families of nine b’nai mitzvah with autism found themselves spectators at a shell of a ceremony at an Orthodox synagogue in Rehovot, presided over by a rabbi whom they did not know but who filled a single requirement: being Orthodox. The atmosphere was gloomy and tense, reported observers.

On Sunday (a day in which the Torah is not read publicly by any Jews), the children were virtually passive spectators in an almost joyless ceremony, despite the extensive training they had undergone.
Rabbi Mikie Goldstein of Rehovot and other Masorti professionals – who had worked extensively with the children – were excluded by the event’s planners. This shadow bar mitzvah ceremony yesterday was the culmination of a drama that began in early May when Rahamim Malul, the mayor of Rehovot, cancelled the original b’nai mitzvah ceremony on the eve of the event because it was to be held in a Masorti synagogue. The story of the single minded, rigid Orthodox mayor and the kids with disabilities went worldwide, garnering outrage.

Shortly thereafter, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin further infuriated non-Orthodox Jews in Israel and around the world by reneging on an agreement to which he was a full partner to host the event at his official residence to be co-officiated by an Orthodox and Conservative Rabbi. Instead, he issued a public invitation to an exclusively Orthodox ceremony without any warning.

At the time of Mayor Malul’s cancellation of the ceremony, Rabbi Goldstein wrote, in an essay that ran in the Times of Israel, “In Israel, there is no freedom of religion for Jews: it’s either the Orthodox way or no way. Any official, state-run Jewish institution is Orthodox. There is an unholy alliance of politics and religion in Israel that has led many Jews to reject Judaism outright.”

Shock does not adequately capture the reaction of the Masorti leadership in Israel when they found out, after the fact, about the staged b’nai mitzvah that took place yesterday, said Rabbi Robert B. Slosberg, chairman of the Masorti Foundation.

“What happened, in essence, is that the children, who had all volunteered to be in our program were taken to an unfamiliar synagogue, propped up and posed for a photo-op instead of given a legitimate and respectful bar mitzvah,” said Rabbi Slosberg. “We were neither invited nor informed of the ceremony. In a situation where all services for children with disabilities are provided by the municipality, Mayor Malul coerced these parents and their children into participating in a sham bar mitzvah, and spat in the face of Masorti Judaism.”

The fact that none of the parents has yet to post a joyous photo on Facebook is a strong indication of the unhappy nature of this much-anticipated rite of passage, added Laura Lewis, executive director of the Masorti Foundation.

“According to a new poll released today in Israel, 71 percent of Israelis disagree with what President Rivlin did two weeks ago...and yet, he went ahead with his plan,” she said. “The tragic thing is that children are the latest victims in a situation that refuses to be resolved. For the past 30 years, we have sought to overcome the Rabbinut’s hegemony, enduring discrimination against all of our rabbis around the country and against our kehillot.”
“This is a pattern of intolerance against non-Orthodox Judaism”, added Lewis, "Just last week, Israel’s new minister of religious affairs, David Azoulay, called the Reform movement “a disaster for the nation of Israel.”

This morning, Yizhar Hess, CEO of the Masorti Movement in Israel, said, “With this group of children from Rehovot, the shameful saga and game has ended. The bar mitzvah was tense. The disabled children were passive. It was sad.

We were hoping for a better ending, but at least the children and their parents are not left "hanging" in the air. We can’t do anything more for them."

In the disappointing aftermath of the b’nai mitzvah debacle in Rehovot, the Masorti Foundation is discussing its next steps. An emergency mission to Israel is in the works, with high-level government meetings.

Numerous articles, Op-Eds and statements have been released regarding Masorti’s b’nai mitzvah for children with disabilities. To view these, please visit http://masorti.org/recent-rehovot-press/.

For further information on the Masorti Foundation, please visit www.masorti.org. To arrange interviews with Laura Lewis in New York, Yizhar Hess or Rabbi Mikie Goldstein in Israel or Rabbi Slosberg of Louisville, KY, please contact: Laura Lewis, at the Masorti Foundation’s office in New York at 212.870.2216 / 917.363.7921 or llewis@masorti.org.