It is a pleasure to write to you as the new Chairman of the Board of the Masorti Foundation. I became involved as a volunteer after witnessing first-hand the Movement’s impressive work during a Masorti Mission to Israel four years ago. That trip had a profound influence on me. After seeing the impact we are having on Israeli society, I agreed to head Masorti’s Rabbinic Cabinet and to join the dedicated Board.

The past four months have seen a whirlwind of activities for the Masorti Movement and Foundation. In July, a Masorti rabbinical student, Nathalie Lastreger, faced the threat of jail time for refusing a summons to the Rabbinic Orthodox Court for a religious divorce. Since Nathalie did not marry via the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, she did not, could not, agree to get divorced by it. Nathalie is demanding to have the divorce proceedings performed by a Masorti beit din (court). As of this writing, Nathalie’s widely-publicized case is still pending.

During Tisha B’av services commemorating the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem, a Masorti synagogue, Yedid Nefesh in Modi’in, was vandalized and its doors barricaded. The vandals tied ropes between the doorway to trip and harm worshippers when they left services. The rabbis of the Talmud teach that the second Temple was destroyed because of sinat hinam, baseless hatred. Sadly, two thousand years later, we are facing the same troublesome behavior.

Last Spring, a day after our fabulous April 27th Gala Fundraiser in New York City, we were shocked to learn that Mayor Malul of Rehovot had cancelled a b’nai mitzvah ceremony for four children with severe autism. The only reason given for so cruelly cancelling the event just two days before the ceremony was because it was to take place in a Masorti (Conservative) synagogue. All of us, especially the parents and staff from their school, were devastated.

Why would a Mayor have the right to cancel a religious ceremony? The answer is that in Israel, the Orthodox are afforded full religious rights and receive the vast majority of the government funding designated for religious institutions. As a result of this disturbing inequity, Masorti (Conservative) and Reform Jews do not have the same religious rights as the Orthodox in Israel. It is unfathomable and deeply disturbing that such injustices persist in the Jewish Holy Land where all Jews are supposed to have a religious home and be treated equally.

Although Masorti Judaism lost the battle for these children with special needs, the issue attracted a great deal of media coverage. We will not abandon our dream of a
Zionism that is inclusive and pluralistic and respects and supports all expressions of Judaism. We will not accept discrimination. We will continue to be advocates and provide religious training for children of any religious background with special needs, as we have uniquely and almost exclusively done the past 20 years.

The role of the Masorti Foundation is to provide financial support to the impressive array of religious and educational programs of our egalitarian, pluralistic Masorti Movement. Your generous contributions support our 74 kehillot (congregations) and programs such as the Noam Youth Movement, our highly acclaimed Shirley Lowy Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities and our outstanding Jewish Pluralism Watch. (Visit www.masorti.org to learn more about us.)

The High Holy Days are a time for giving tzedakah. We in the Masorti Movement feel the Orthodox rabbinate should NOT control religious practice in Israel. There is no better way to create an egalitarian, inclusive and pluralistic Israel than by supporting your Masorti Movement’s work.

Today, please consider not just renewing your support, but increasing it to enable us to continue to refashion the spiritual landscape of Israel.

Rabbi Robert Slosberg, Chairman of the Board, The Masorti Foundation

USY’s First Visit to Camp Ramah NOAM

NOAM hosted 35 USYers visiting on Israel Pilgrimage for the first Shabbat of Camp Ramah NOAM. The USYers, 11th and 12th graders from across North America, chose to spend their free Shabbat with Israeli teenagers of the same age for spirited tefillot, fun activities, and a real Israeli “back to nature” experience unlike any they had at home. This mifgash (meeting) continues a long tradition of cooperation between NOAM, USY and Ramah, yet it was the first time that a large group of USYers joined NOAM for camp. This created many opportunities for Israeli and North American teenagers to meet one another, and share their movements’ traditions and the spirit that makes both organizations so special. After a Shabbat in the forest, free from any distractions from the outside world, participants began the process of bridge building for this generation of community leaders.

Tag Meir, a Response to Racism in Israel

Never has our work against religious hatred been more important. During the summer, Israel saw multiple violent acts of hatred perpetrated by religious extremists including the torching of the Catholic Church of the Loaves and Fishes in the Galilee, the stabbing of six Jewish participants of Jerusalem’s Gay Pride Parade and the horrendous arson and murder of a Muslim baby, Ali Sayid Dawbasha, in the village of Douma near Nablus. These shocking events rightfully received enormous media coverage, but unfortunately they are nothing new.

We are founding members of Tag Meir (Light Tag), a grass-roots association, of more than 30 organizations working to expose and fight racism in Israel, particularly religiously motivated attacks. With its emphasis on inclusion and mutual respect, Masorti is proud to play a leadership role. Tag Meir, is a word play on Tag Machir (Price Tag) an organization whose supporters leave their graffiti calling card after perpetrating acts of violence as they did in Douma and the Galilee. Previously, in response to a number of violent assaults against Arabic speakers on the Jerusalem Light Rail, our NOAM youth, rode the train speaking with passengers in Arabic. Wearing shirts that said, in both Hebrew and Arabic, “Yallah (C’mon), let’s speak Arabic in Jerusalem.” they are at the forefront of the fight for equal and fair treatment of all Israelis, regardless of their religion or religious affiliation.
Dare to Dream was the theme for Masorti Foundation’s most successful Tribute Gala ever. Held on April 27th at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in downtown Manhattan, the event, attended by an unprecedented 250 guests, honored Rabbi Gordon Tucker of Temple Israel Center, White Plains, William and Susan Yarmuth, of Louisville, Kentucky, and Yizhar Hess, CEO of Masorti in Israel.

The night celebrated a Zionism of love, as eloquently described by Rabbi Tucker:

“The effort to keep a Zionism of love alive, the effort to prevent the suffocation of the Jewish diversity we have yearned to see rooted in its own soil for 2000 years – these efforts must proceed simultaneously with all the things we conscientiously do to guard the physical security of the State. On this, we can and should all agree. We must agree. Zionism is, at its core, about this: making it possible for Jews to give the fullest and most creative expression to the Jewish values and ideals that animate them.” (Read the full text at www.masorti.org.)

Outgoing Chairman, Rabbi Alan Silverstein, said:

“The Museum of Jewish Heritage, with its magnificent view of the Statue of Liberty served as an ideal backdrop to highlight Masorti’s emphasis on a Zionism of hope and the important accomplishments of those working and volunteering in the US and Israel for a democratic and pluralistic State that unites Jews everywhere.”

Bat Mitzvah Family Bonding

As it is still not the norm in Israel for girls to receive an aliyah, a group of girls and their parents from the Gabriele School in Tel Aviv searched to find a significant and special way to honor their reaching the age of Bat Mitzvah. Because of Masorti’s emphasis on women’s education and participation, they naturally came to Masorti to build a long-lasting connection to Torah and Judaism. Since this process is frequently a learning curve for all family members, the program began with a series of meetings with the girls and both their parents to learn Masorti’s egalitarian approach, and what it means to become a Bat Mitzvah.

Throughout, they were supported by members and staff of Kehillah Sinai in Tel Aviv, who helped to organize and host the special service.

Starting with a festive Mincha prayer service on Shabbat afternoon, all the fathers were called to the Torah together for the first aliyah. The second aliyah was dedicated to the mothers, all of whom were called to the Torah for the first time in their lives. The third and final aliyah was shared by the Bat Mitzvah girls.

Girls and parents from Gabriele School in Tel Aviv sought to find a special way to honor reaching the age of Bat Mitzvah.

After Seudat Shlishit (the third meal of Shabbat) in the courtyard, Kehillah member, Efrat Freiman closed out this special moment with a drash (talk) on Judaism and Feminism, and a presentation to each girl of Masorti’s best selling siddur, Vaani T’fillati, a gift from the Masorti Women’s League to commemorate the joyous occasion.
The program will build lasting relationships between matched rabbis and their respective communities, opening doors of collaboration for the future.

**Rav Siach** Bringing Israel and the Diaspora Closer Together

The natural connection between Diaspora Jews and Israel is something we can no longer take for granted. Masorti is very excited to announce the launch of Rav Siach, a new program in partnership with the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, to match Conservative congregations around the world with Masorti kehillot in Israel to work and learn cooperatively. Seeking to spark conversation about key issues confronting Israeli society and Diaspora Jews, the program will build strong, long-lasting relationships between the matched rabbis and their respective communities. Rav Siach will also assist congregations to plan trips to Israel that foster meaningful encounters and friendships between visiting groups and Masorti kehillot members and leadership. This unprecedented partnership between the government of Israel and the non-Orthodox Israeli movements will open many more doors of collaboration for the future.