Shnat Sherut is Growing

There Is More Than One Way to be Jewish in Israel

Rav Siach Update

Sukkat Shalom — In the Name of Peace

Since April, I have been honored to serve as the chair of the Masorti Foundation’s Rabbinic Cabinet and I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to help advance religious choice in Israel.

I write this on the plane as I return from Israel having attended the 37th World Zionist Congress as an alternate representative of MERCAZ, the Zionist organization of the Conservative Movement. For three days, Jews from all over the world came together in support of Israel. We may have been from various backgrounds and represented different religious perspectives, but we all came to Jerusalem with a love for Israel and the Jewish people. I thought about the First Congress in Basel, Switzerland that was organized by Theodor Herzl in 1897. I was moved to contemplate how far Israel has come since then and at the same time how much work still needs to be done in many areas including religious pluralism.

On the Sunday before this Congress began, members of our delegation visited the Fuchsberg Center, the Conservative Yeshiva and Kehilla Ramot Zion, a Masorti congregation that is thriving in French Hill under the leadership of Rabbi Chaya Baker. It was wonderful to see the great work being done by our Movement’s various Israel-based institutions which continue to grow as more and more Israelis learn why Masorti is the place for them.

I am confident that if we continue to spread our warm message of inclusion, even more congregations will be started and our understanding of Torah and tradition that welcomes all into our large tent equally, will thrive throughout Israel.

At the end of November Americans celebrate Thanksgiving. This is an opportunity to join with our family and friends and take time to be grateful for the many blessings in our lives. As you gather around the table, please ask each person what he or she is grateful for. You may be surprised at some of the answers. The key is to always count our blessings not only
on Thanksgiving, but throughout the year. As Jews, we are given that opportunity three times a day when we recite the blessing in the Amidah that begins, “We give thanks to You” referring to God. Each day, we have multiple opportunities to pause and think about what we are grateful for in our lives. Although this will change as we go through life’s different stages and challenges, no matter what, we need to pause and give thanks for something that touches us.

Let us also be grateful for the State of Israel and for the Masorti Movement’s successful efforts to engage Israelis in a Jewish tradition that so profoundly resonates with Herzl’s vision for a Zionism that satisfies the soul of all the Jewish people.

With gratitude for your generous support,

Rabbi Jay M. Kornsgold, Chair, Rabbinic Cabinet

Shnat Sherut is Growing

In Israel, prior to mandatory army service, young adults can opt to volunteer in different ways to work with disadvantaged youth, the elderly and with those living in economically distressed neighborhoods. Masorti’s NOAM youth movement offers a variety of gap year and army programs with a pluralistic social action agenda, community contribution and Jewish learning. One such program is Shnat Sherut, a year of service where participants volunteer in a particular city’s education system, through the local NOAM branch. Participants also spend time doing group work and Jewish learning. Up until August 2013, there was one program, located on Kibbutz Ketura in the South (with an emphasis on agriculture and education), but in September of that same year, we opened a new group in Carmiel (with an emphasis on youth at-risk). Due to this project’s success, we have since doubled the program to include an additional two locations - the Katamon neighborhood in Jerusalem (emphasizing social action, youth and fighting racism) and Haifa (emphasizing special needs populations.) Shnat Sherut operates on the school calendar, and at year-end, many participants choose to attend a three month leadership course at the Hannaton Educational Center, learning and living together as a group while working the land in the Galilee. Following the leadership course, the four groups recruit together into the army.
There Is More Than One Way to be Jewish in Israel

While the latest national government coalition has unfortunately rolled back many of the recent advances on conversion reform or discussion on civil marriage, local Israeli lawmakers are increasingly recognizing that Conservative (and Reform) Judaism have much to offer their communities.

This year, tens of thousands of Israelis attended Yom Kippur prayer services held at Masorti kehillot (congregations) across Israel, including four new kehillot in Mazkeret Batya, Rishon Lezion East, Kibbutz Gazit and Kibbutz Or Haner.

Called a “quiet rebellion” by Haaretz, local governments are increasingly willing to promote Jewish pluralism by opening up indoor and outdoor spaces to non-Orthodox groups, over the High Holidays and on a more permanent basis. Masorti’s Director of Community Outreach Rakefet Ginsburg said:

*Discussions with municipalities are much less confrontational these days. There’s an openness to cooperation that simply didn’t exist before. When we come with requests to the municipalities, they know us already, and we no longer have to clarify that we are also Jewish. This change in attitude explains the growing number of Conservative/Masorti groups sprouting up around the country. Between five and seven new groups start up each year - anything from a weekly prayer group to a one-time event or activity. City government officials, explained Ginsberg are far more accountable to their electorates than Knesset Members and are even providing the movements, free of charge, land with which to build their own synagogues.*

Conservative Judaism is flourishing in Israel—Yom Kippur Havdala at the Masorti Kehilla in Givatayim, now in its third year, was attended by 250 worshipers

Even in Jerusalem, a bastion of ultra-Orthodoxy the Council, recognizing that secular Jews are fleeing the city, is providing alternative ways to be Jewish.

Often billed as cultural events rather than religious programs, many municipalities find ways to circumvent budgetary restrictions on non-Orthodox, Jewish programs and land use. Some don’t have to.

At Masorti’s Amitai Congregation in Ra’anana, the Havdalah service concluded with a Shana Tova toast, and an address by Mayor Zeev Bielski, who declared his intention to facilitate the establishment of a Masorti community in his town. The Masorti Foundation is grateful for these openings and recognizes how essential it is for Israel’s democratic future that all Jews be treated equally in the Jewish homeland. V’ahavta l’reacha kamocha” (you shall love your fellows as yourself) is a core belief of Masorti Judaism.

RAV SIACH UPDATE

The Masorti Movement’s Rav Siach outreach program – designed to connect Israeli Masorti members with their brothers and sisters worldwide is off to a great start. Many US congregations are exploring Jewish texts and making meaningful connections. Operated in conjunction with the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, Rav Siach distributed English language versions of a beautiful Yom Kippur supplement and an Ushpizin welcome mat for our sukkot followed by a special presentation at USCJ Convention, Shape the Center.
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CONTACT US
To find out more about the Masorti Foundation and our work in Israel, please visit www.masorti.org or call Laura J. Lewis, Executive Director at 212.870.2216.

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Here we act; we don’t talk. We need peace in our country.
— Sami Bebar, a Druze from Yahuh-Jat Youth Council.

Sukkat Shalom — In the Name of Peace
Masorti’s kehillah (congregation) in Kfar Vradim, Haminyan Hamishpachti, hosts an annual ‘Sukkat Shalom’ event, that brings together people of different faiths. This year, our youth held an encounter with their peers from the nearby Druze village, Yanuh-Jat which had a profound impact on Sami Bebar, of the Yanuh-Jat Youth Council who wrote, While our country is bleeding, while our country lies injured, there are people who work for peace, building a link between different people ... to promote coexistence ... to [learn] to live together [and] to reduce tensions. This was just a beginning. There will be many more meetings between both communities, in the name of peace for our country. Here we act; we don’t talk. We need peace in our country.