As 2014 comes to a close, and we welcome in the Festival of Lights, we are proud of the recent achievements of our Masorti/Conservative community. We’ve focused on expanding our outreach at home, keeping the flame of connection burning brightly between our Masorti brothers and sisters in Israel and our supporters across the United States.

During the summer’s Operation Protective Edge, together with United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly we led two four-day solidarity missions to Israel comprised of rabbis, cantors and lay leaders from all over America to show our support and provide a beacon of hope to our communities closest to Gaza.

Throughout the year, Israeli leaders ventured across North America to increase awareness and provide a deeper understanding of our movement’s goals and challenges, while shedding light on some of the most recent topics engaging Masorti members today.

Before we bring 2014 to a close, Masorti speakers will travel to various US locations, courtesy of the World Zionist Organization’s Project Lech Lecha, providing insight on topics such as the challenges of being a liberal Jew in a Zionist State, balancing religion and politics in the Jewish homeland, and different perspectives from these pioneers of pluralistic Judaism.

Our increased social media presence — on Facebook and frequent email blasts detailing the Movement’s most recent developments — keeps Masorti’s 73 congregations connected to their American supporters. Sharing exciting developments has kept people aware of Masorti’s expansion, including seven new kehillot, the first ever organized, egalitarian prayer services at the Kotel on Yom Kippur, official government recognition of NOAM, our youth movement, and the launch of new and expanded Adraba programs for people with disabilities thanks to the Shirley Lowy Center.

Strengthening ties between Masorti Jews in Israel and their fellow

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Conservative Americans is critical to achieving Masorti’s mission of a pluralistic, egalitarian and democratic vision of Zionism.

If you are receiving this newsletter you are one of those who have supported this important link. We thank you for your generosity and look forward to achieving great things together in 2015.

May the lights of the Hanukah menorah bring warmth and joy into your hearts and homes.

Laura J. Lewis, Executive Director

Seven New Kehillot Join the Masorti Movement

As a result of the numerous requests received throughout the country, the Masorti Movement made traditional, egalitarian prayer services available in seven new locations this year, including Moshav Lavon, in Haifa’s Ahuza neighborhood, the Green neighborhood in Kfar Saba, the Masorti Minyanim of Malcha, Kibbutz Ma’ale Hachamisha, Kibbutz Tzuba, and Mechinat Ha’emek.

Yael Aberman from Kibbutz Ma’ale Hachamisha reports: The support we received from the movement was amazing. In just a few days all of the technical details were attended to and we met with Rabbi Natalie Lastreger who led the prayers. More than 100 people attended (of the 300 people who live on the secular Kibbutz) and there were many firsts – women being called for aliyot, and holding a Torah scroll for the first time in their lives, and all the children standing under a tallit during Neilah to receive a blessing, and more.

The Masorti Movement Is Proud to Welcome Rabbi Mikie Goldstein: Israel’s First Openly Gay Masorti Rabbi

Newly minted Rabbi Mikie Goldstein took his first pulpit this past September at Kehillah Adat Shalom Emanuel, in Rehovot. Since making aliyah from the UK, Israel’s first openly gay Masorti rabbi, Goldstein has had a rich history with the movement. Serving as Director of Resource Development, he was also an active member of the Rehovot congregation prior to his enrolment at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Our movement proudly supports the LGBTQ community as both leaders and congregants. As Rabbi Goldstein puts it, I’m interested in the religious spirituality of anyone who walks through my front door. It doesn’t matter what their affiliation is. They’re welcome.
Many in our 73 kehillot care greatly about the environment. In a land where every square foot counts, how are we to prevent erosion, and strengthen the soil? The Shmita year, meaning release [of the land] that began on Rosh Hashanah, is an excellent opportunity to bring additional meaning to Conservative/Masorti Judaism's synthesis of tradition with modern day values. The Torah says that every seven years the land must have time to restore itself. Consequently, halahah (Jewish law) prohibits all agricultural activity for a year, and mandates that the land lie fallow.

Unfortunately, the Shmita restrictions of ancient times would play havoc with Israel's modern day economy and food supply, particularly as the vast majority of Israeli society lives in urban areas. Many religious authorities have tried to find ways to avoid these consequences.

After extensive research, Masorti's Rabbinical Assembly (RA) in Israel ruled that Shmita can be interpreted as a midat hasidut, an act of piety (see http://www.responsafortoday.com/engsums/1_6.htm for the responsa). The RA suggested that we perform various symbolic and educational acts to enhance awareness of the Shmita year and its impact on the environment. They encouraged us to donate a portion of profits earned this year to the needy. Accordingly, a Shmita information session at Kehillat Yedid Nefesh in Modi'in, led by the Schechter Institute's president, Rabbi David Golinkin, provided suggestions for both individual and community-based projects incorporating Shmita values into our daily lives. Masorti-affiliated Kibbutz Hanaton also offers extensive, practical education programs on-site.

Observing Shmita

Enhancing awareness of the Shmita year and its impact on the environment

This year, for the first time ever, organized, egalitarian services were held at the Kotel on Yom Kippur. On Judaism's holiest day, at our people's holiest site, Masorti Rabbi Ari Hasit, and Shira Levin-Shani led Minchah and Ne'ilah services. Shira described the experience on Masorti Israel's Facebook page: My parents and I arrived at Azrat Yisrael, a first for all of us...the air is cool, and we relax and listen to the story...we hear the small birds which are always present, the voice of the muezzin, the church bells, and the raised voices of the masses of Jews as the holy day comes to an end. We are privileged to pray right next to the stones of the Kotel. To touch them, lean on them...and we are surrounded by the voices.

Azrat Yisrael (the expanded, egalitarian section of the Kotel) has grown in popularity and become the site for many kinds of ceremonies for Israelis and visitors. We are pleased to report that the space is now equipped with sun shades, several tables, cabinets to hold siddurim for all of Judaism's denominations, and much more.
Launched over the 2014 high holidays, High Holiday Healing is a comprehensive, ongoing effort organized by the Masorti Movement to connect with communities affected by Operation Protective Edge. By offering the spiritual assistance of our kehillot and members, staff and volunteers were able to reach out to communities directly affected by the sirens and rocket fire and those dealing with the deaths of soldiers, family and friends, who were in need of spiritual assistance in processing the trauma of war.

Emphasizing new beginnings and spiritual healing, the program focused on the community at large, and included intensive preparation for activities during and after the high holidays. Designed by a skilled team of rabbis, mental health professionals, and Jewish educators, the program’s main goal was to work with each community, making use of Jewish texts and prayer. Other congregations have requested assistance in arranging similar lessons, ceremonies, prayers, and individual and group support. These outreach efforts were so successful, that they seeded seven new kehillot and increased attendance at already established congregations.