Here have been many tentative directions for this article, influenced by newspaper headlines, bulletins from our 68 kehillot or NOAM branches, events at the Knesset, and meetings with Conservative Jews from abroad. The list of possible titles included “Civil Marriage in Israel”, “The Pew Study Shows ….”,” “L’chaim! Conservative Hashgahah on Israeli Boutique Wines”, “Is the Kotel What It’s All About?”, and “BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions).”

So much is happening in this small country and there are so many issues critical to worldwide Jewry. Where to focus? Why must we always be fixing or improving things? Is it never good enough? These muffled echoes reverberate in my head, all the time!

When I became the Masorti Movement’s Chair over four years ago, a friend asked, “What exactly will your job be?” Frankly, I wasn’t sure! I knew that it would include lots of meetings, phone calls, decision-making, representing the movement in Israel and internationally, and other elements that I would learn along the way.

And I did learn. I was reminded that pre-State politics led to Ben Gurion’s renowned “status quo letter” which cemented the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate’s control of critical aspects of Israeli Jews’ personal and communal lives, and which is the basis for the struggle for religious pluralism we engage in today. I understood that without larger societal and political change religious pluralism’s potential will forever be limited. And, I recognized that Israeli Jews – many alienated by this situation – are now searching for meaningful ways to celebrate Judaism. And I concluded, with my colleagues, that the time was right for Masorti to ratchet up its response to this new face of Israeli Jewry and to profoundly impact Israeli society. Masorti operates on two levels: bottom-up grassroots activities of thousands of Israelis who are connected to kehillot, NOAM, educational programs, religious ceremonies, and social activism; and top-down political and lobbying work with the public, Knesset members and municipal policy makers.
More than 200 heads of Masorti kehillot travelled from all over Israel for our annual meeting. This year’s shiruim (lectures) focused on gender equality in halachah (Jewish law), community and daily life. Speakers included Orthodox Rabbi Benny Lau, who treated us to a positive historical perspective, and Conservative Rabbi David Golinkin, President of the Schechter Institute, who spoke about how Masorti, which means tradition, incorporated Jewish history and Conservative halachic interpretation to develop inclusive, egalitarian Jewish ritual that remains true to its Jewish roots. Their presentations were followed by a panel on implementing gender equality into all aspects of Masorti kehillot. Participants unanimously agreed that “these meetings are so important. They are a safe place to agree and to disagree, because we all know that we share a common goal of building a stronger Masorti Movement.”

We have much to celebrate. Our influence is mounting within the halls of the Knesset, on op-ed pages and in public platforms. New kehillot, more young people joining NOAM, and post-high school, pre-army programs grow annually. As more Israelis explore their Jewish identity, we are becoming their central address. Issues of state and religion are part of the public and political discourse to an extent that has not existed for years. We are making a difference!

My walk down this winding road has reinforced my belief that these issues are no less important for Jews worldwide than they are for Israelis. If the Jewish homeland does not give equal recognition and support to all streams and expressions of Judaism, if freedom of religious expression is not guaranteed for all, and acceptance of others is not a given – the entire Jewish people will pay a huge price.

And now, after almost five years, I have figured out what my job includes! The winding road has taken me to new, stimulating and sometimes difficult places. Along this road, I received the gift of thinking, working and laughing with fellow volunteers from kehillot around the country, with a dedicated professional team led by Yizhar Hess, who has become a dear colleague and friend, with inspirational professional and lay leadership at the Masorti Foundation and with colleagues at the Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue, Schechter Institute, Masorti Olami, and numerous others.

I look forward to continuing to be involved in this critical work. I could not be more thankful for the fulfilling experiences and encounters that were my partners on this long and winding road. Thanks to all.

Hag Pesach Sameach,

Emily Levy-Shochat

Emily and family made Aliyah in 1979, “to be part of a unique opportunity in Jewish history—to build and maintain a modern, democratic state”. Her professional career focuses on community organization and NGO management.

The Masorti Annual Meeting

Chanukah Seminar continued from page 1

are led by the participants themselves. 10th to 12th graders participated in a seminar planned by the NOAM board, while 9th graders, in the midst of a leadership course, participated in integrated learning activities. Revital Meter, coordinator of Modi'in’s NOAM branch reported, “The seminar was excellent, and you could see the board members’ planning and intense investment reflected in every activity.” NOAM grads go on to become successful army, industry and community leaders and teachers of a leadership course, thanks to the skills they acquire in Masorti’s youth movement.

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This year, for the first time, NOAM, our youth movement, placed one of our shin shin (abbreviation for Shnati Sherut) participants, for a gap year of service in an American community. Ayelet ben Shitrit, 19, of Jerusalem, works at Chicago’s Anshe Emet Synagogue and Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School. Active in NOAM since 7th grade, Ayelet has served in a number of leadership positions. “NOAM is part of me, and despite the distance, I still feel very attached.” Ayelet has begun laying the ground work for a NOAM branch for 6th-8th graders in Chicago. “One of the things that really mean a lot to me is how the children run to request my assistance planning their trips to Israel and then rush to tell me about their Israeli experiences. But they also know they can turn to about many different things.” Thanks to Masorti and NOAM, Ayelet is building the next generation’s connections to Israel.

Masorti supporters know only too well that we receive little to no funding from the tax receipts of Israeli citizens. Therefore finding alternative revenue streams to fund our growing movement is truly imperative. Becoming a MERCAZ member is a way to help drive funds to Masorti. As the Zionist arm of the Conservative Movement, among other things, MERCAZ represents our interests in the World Zionist Organization (WZO), Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and Jewish National Fund (JNF), the international bodies which serve as the parliament for Jews around the world, no matter what their “stream” (denomination).

These organizations collectively allocate over $2 million in direct grants to our Conservative stream, funding such important Israeli institutions as the Masorti Movement, the Schechter Institute and TALI Schools, the Fuchsberg Center in Jerusalem, as well as Masorti congregations throughout South America, Europe and the Former Soviet Union.

When MERCAZ lobbies these organizations on our behalf, they request allocations for funding from Jewish communal contributions, (primarily from Federations), effectively leveraging your original donations, because coming from “general” community funds, these allocations do not require any additional or special fundraising efforts.

Unfortunately, that large pot of money is in danger of disappearing. Our ability to access WZO and JAFI funds depends on our organization’s strength, as measured in membership and voting. But you can save the day! By becoming a MERCAZ USA member, you can increase our influence in WZO and JAFI and the proportional allocation of funds received by our movement. To become a member and maintain Masorti’s funding, visit www.MERCAZUSA.org or contact them at 212-533-2061 / info@mercazusa.org.
Recently, a friend revealed to me that she was struggling with her ethical will. Exactly what will be her enduring legacy to her family and to the community she most cares about? Creating a philanthropic legacy makes an enduring statement to your loved ones and makes sure that the charities you care about continue to flourish over the long-term. Please consider including Masorti in your will or making us a partial beneficiary of your IRA or retirement account. Making a planned gift to Masorti guarantees your ability to advance religious pluralism and civil rights in Israel for generations to come. If you’d like to know more, please give me a call at 212.870.2216 and we can discuss your charitable intentions and furnish you or your advisers with information best suited to your philanthropic objectives.

Laura J. Lewis
Executive Director