Why vote Mercaz?
by Laura J. Lewis, Masorti Foundation Executive Director

If you care about Israel and its future as a democratic state in which all Jews (including Conservative/Masorti Jews) are treated equally by the government and under the law, then please read on. If you also think it’s important to maintain the connection between young American Jews and the land of Israel, then please go right now to www.votemercaz.org and vote. Mercaz is our voice within the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish National Fund. Elections, which will determine how much funding these organizations allocate to democratic, pluralistic Judaism (including Conservative/Masorti Judaism) are taking place now. As a member of the Jewish community you have a right to vote. As a recipient of this newsletter, you support Masorti’s vital role in bringing religious freedom to Israel. Your vote is a way to make sure that we receive our fair share of this funding and that our voice is heard by elected Israeli officials.

At the risk of sounding alarmist, Jewish identity within the State of Israel is imperiled. The 1947 status quo agreement which gave absolute control over all religious issues to the ultra-Orthodox has created a state in which many of the those 50 per cent who identify as secular also identify as Israeli but not Jewish. The inclusion of non-Zionist parties in almost every post-1977 government has resulted in a religion budget of around $1 billion for the Orthodox, with barely anything going to those who offer religious alternatives such as Reform and Conservative/Masorti Judaism. Our ways of worship, our rabbis, our Jewish education and our congregants are disenfranchised. As a result, the vast majority of Israelis can only conclude that there’s one form of authentic Judaism and it wears either a black hat or a sheitel.

As evidenced by the fall of the Soviet Union, and the empty pews in Western Europe’s churches, when there is only one choice — people will turn away. Freedom of religion is an essential element of any democracy.
A vast number of Israelis have turned away from an Orthodoxy that they find irrelevant to their 21st century lives. When this goes on generation after generation, the result is a distancing from the very reason we have a Jewish state.

Young American Jews, raised on American democratic principles of equality and respect for all, are distancing themselves from an Israel which doesn’t reflect their values. Our children find their Jewish identities through their American synagogues, yet as many as 70 per cent of some Birthright trip participants may not be considered Jewish by Israel’s religious authorities. Israel is not a country with many friends, and if it continues its religious disenfranchisement policies, it will lose this next generation of American Jewish leaders. And then, who will lobby Congress for the next Iron Dome?

A vote for Mercaz is a vote for:

- Religious freedom in Israel
- Engaging the next generation of N. American Jews in the shaping of a 21st Century Israel
- A vision of Israel actively striving for peace with its neighbors, encouraging social justice, gender equality and honorable treatment of minorities, environmental sustainability, good governance, and the security of Israel and Jews everywhere
- Strengthening relationships between N. American Jewry and Israelis
- Providing and leveraging resources to allow Conservative/Masorti Judaism to thrive.

As we prepare for Pesach and the Festival of Freedom, we are reminded of all that our people has endured to be free — so please remember to stand up for what is right by voting at www.votemercaz.org now. The polls close soon.

Hag Sameach,

Laura J. Lewis, Executive Director
Some 200 youth participated in this year’s Seminar, at Kibbutz Hannaton. Focusing on the question, Are We the Chosen People? Students explored how religion both connects us as a nation, while defining our individual identities. How this impacts other religious and ethnic groups who live in Israel was brought home when participants were hosted by troops of “Peace Scouts” (Muslim and Orthodox Christians) in Acre and Shfaram. “This was a very interesting meeting, with youth from different backgrounds who we very rarely get to talk to,” said Almog Amiga, NOAM’s Chair. In addition, NOAM’s annual meeting, held as part of the Seminar, approved position papers on issues such as religion and state, the environment, refugees, and NOAM’s relationship with the gay community.

NOAM explores pathways of connection with the Peace Scouts

Participation in NOAM encourages Israeli youth to explore their Judaism, while building an Israeli society that reflects their values on coexistence, religion and state, the environment, refugees and their relationship with the gay community.

Innovative Beit Midrash Program Launched by the Adraba Center

An innovative Beit Midrash program which combines both learning and community work was launched by the Adraba Center — the Shirley Lowy Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities and Israel Unlimited (a partnership between the Government of Israel, the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel) which assists people with disabilities. The egalitarian Batei Midrash integrate those with and without disabilities. Together, they learn on a bi-weekly basis and perform self-selected, community outreach projects in their Beit Midrash cities. The two year program funded by Israel Unlimited, launched in Jerusalem and Kiryat Bialik will open soon in Rehovot and Arad.
Founded four years ago, with the assistance of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta (Partnership 2000), Kehillat Ohel Moshe, now offers 16 girls and their parents eight unique meetings in preparation for their Bat Mitzvah. This outreach program was based on interviews the kehilla (congregation) conducted with pre-Bat Mitzvah students and their families. Designed specifically to meet their needs and expectations, it combines elements of feminist Jewish leadership, acquaintance with Jewish text and tradition and meaningful Bat Mitzvah celebration. Some meetings are held with the students alone, while others include mothers and/or fathers. Bat Mitzvah remains a nascent concept in Israel, where most kehillot are Orthodox and so many of the girls cannot plan to celebrate inside their synagogues. This program is part of Masorti’s efforts to raise awareness and offer opportunities for girls to celebrate this important life-cycle event. The classes are funded in part by the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism.