I feel honored to be given the opportunity to lead alongside our chair, Rabbi Alan Silverstein, the Masorti Foundation at this moment in history. We are palpably excited about the changing facts on the ground in Israel. The on-going negotiations towards the government-funded expansion of Robinson’s Arch (the egalitarian section of the Kotel pictured above), represents an enormous opening for the growth of religious pluralism in Israel. For the first time, all Jews, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or conversion status, will be able to pray in fully egalitarian services at Judaism’s most holy site whenever they wish, 24/7, with Sifrei Torah, siddurim and all religious services needed, as at the regular Kotel Plaza.

These changes came about because of the enormous political pressure for religious pluralism manifested in the last election results. According to an independent Israel Democracy Institute survey, half a million Israelis identify as Reform and Masorti/Conservative Jews, an increase of 100 percent in the last decade. The exclusion of the ultra-Orthodox from the government for the first time in decades opened a window of opportunity and the Women of the Wall’s international and domestic media campaign came at the perfect time.

The Masorti Movement was the first to accept the government-proposed compromise on an egalitarian prayer space back in 2000, and has run the “Masorti Kotel” ever since. Today, we are at the forefront of an enormous opportunity to grow religious pluralism in Israel, push back against the forces of fundamentalism, and build a diverse, political and religious center that will allow Israel’s democracy to thrive.
Our Israeli and American professionals, clergy and layleaders are working hard to make sure that we advance this new openness and creative energy. We hope that we have the chance to meet many of you as we begin to expand our activities around the US. In the meantime, don’t be a stranger! If you would like to support our efforts, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me.

L’hitraot,

Laura J. Lewis

October 22, 2013, was municipal election day around Israel—where religion is state-funded and municipalities are responsible for most religious services offered in their communities. Very often, elected officials’ personal opinions determine the distribution of resources, especially the availability of spaces suitable for religious services. Knowing how this so negatively impacts religious pluralism, JPW expanded its reach to monitoring mayoral and city council races in six cities: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Herzylia, Modi’in, Safed and Kiryat Gat.

JPW’s website (www.mishmar.org.il) provided information on the mayoral candidates and their opinions (attained through questionnaires) regarding the provision of religious services in their communities, their attitudes toward the status of women, new immigrants, people with disabilities, Shabbat, and their willingness to distribute resources for pluralistic efforts. Similar questions were asked and posted about the different parties running for city council.

According to Adi Stein, JPW’s director, “we know that our information was widely disseminated and used. For the first time, candidates openly affiliated with Masorti won their seats. To find out who they are, visit http://bit.ly/1hMCUpo

Jewish Pluralism Watch Turns Its Eye to Israel’s Municipal Elections

Eighteen years have passed since PM’s Rabin’s assassination. Many Israeli communities mark the tragedy with events led by their young people. NOAM, with its focus on egalitarian, inclusive and spiritual activities, was featured in ceremonies throughout Israel. Pictured above is NOAM’s Shirat Machar performing on the municipal stage immediately after Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat’s memorial speech. To hear Shirat Machar’s beautiful music, please visit our website www.masorti.org.
This year, NOAM has expanded its post-high school programs to include three different options for preparatory years before the army, including service centers Kibbutz Keturah in the south, the city of Karmiel in the north, a shlichut to Congregation Anshei Emet in Chicago, and a preparatory study year at the Masorti Kibbutz Hannaton. More than a gap year, each program focuses on helping build community and Jewish identity amongst its participants as they prepare for their subsequent military service. In fact, those volunteering on kibbutz will join the army together, combining their military service with continued Masorti education and volunteering.

Next year, NOAM anticipates expanding its service-year programs to include options in Yokneam, Ramle and Jerusalem, each focusing on a different way of contributing to Israeli society, with a special emphasis on work with individuals with special needs.

Thanks to a generous donation from Shirley Lowy, of Australia, the Center, named in their honor, will be the Masorti Movement’s home for egalitarian Jewish activities for children and youth with disabilities. Headed by Ronen Bar-Avraham, a noted specialist in the field, the Center will bring under one roof Masorti’s existing Bar and Bat Mitzvah Program for Children with Disabilities, Camp Ramah/NOAM, Netaim Programs, its new integrated Batei Midrash, and other egalitarian, Jewish activities.

All of these programs represent unique opportunities for young people with disabilities to achieve success, affording their families what is sometimes their only opportunity to celebrate their children’s achievements in a public, religious space. They also
create additional opportunities to learn life skills and some even return to camp, joining our camp logistics staff. By creating an umbrella for existing and new programs, says Ronen, “the Movement can ensure continuity of programming to hundreds of children and youth throughout Israel whose spiritual needs have been long-ignored by the religious establishment. It also will enable us to develop professionalism among the staff, leverage programming synergy, and present potential funding partners with comprehensive programming opportunities for people with disabilities. We are delighted and excited by all the opportunities this generous grant affords us for making a difference for these children and their families.”