As Rosh Hashana approaches, it is a perfect time to look back at the closing year while looking ahead to a new year full of possibilities. For over a decade, but particularly in the last election, religious pluralism has emerged as a primary concern for hundreds of thousands of Israelis. Finding the stark choice of either strict Orthodox or secularism no longer satisfactory, they are seeking a diversity of access points. From sources on “the Jewish bookshelf” to finding meaning and relevance in our Jewish heritage, they wish to transmit Jewish identity to their children and grandchildren.

Masorti Judaism contributes measurably to this quest. Unlike so many Israeli shuls, Masorti congregations are not merely places for prayer services. Instead, they serve as full-fledged “kehillot” [communities], providing opportunities for life-long Torah study in an open and non-judgmental manner. Masorti kehillot offer “ganim” (nursery schools) for “members” and “non-members” alike. They connect boys and girls to their local chapters of the NOAM youth movement for ages 10-18 and beyond. They embody Jewish values in action via social justice projects. In the process, they forge life-long friendship networks, sustained through serving in Masorti IDF Units, “gareen”, participating in “Marom”, our young adult program and joining a kehillah.

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Masorti rabbis are gaining a reputation for being exceptional. Unusual for the Israeli religious scene, they are educated not only in traditional texts but also in secular studies. Like their non-rabbinic peers, they admirably serve in the IDF and its reserve duty. They exhibit fluency in Jewish law but also are adept in guiding individual, Jewish spiritual journeys. They embody a genre of Judaism that is unique within the Israeli religious spectrum. It is Zionist. It is religiously Traditional ['Dati']. It also is Egalitarian. This blend enables Israelis to sustain authentic religious practices, remain committed to Zionist ideals, promote equality for women and welcome all who wish to enter the Masorti tent.

Ultimately we are working for the Israeli government to fund our synagogues, schools, youth groups, and camps at the same level that Orthodox institutions receive, but that day is not here yet. Overseas supporters of Israeli Masorti Judaism have the opportunity to play an active role in assisting 70 kehillot, 16 branches of NOAM and its Ramah NOAM summer camp, Bar and Bat Mitzvah for Special Needs youngsters, Masorti male and female rabbis, Kibbutz Hanaton and so much more. Generous donations as well as strengthening personal ties elevate North American Conservative Jews to full partners. We welcome your involvement and support.

Please also join our Board in welcoming the Masorti Foundation's new and outstanding Executive Director, Laura Lewis, as she guides us in the fulfillment of our Mission.

Shana Tova,

Alan Silverstein

THE NUMBERS DEMAND AN EQUAL VOICE: The Growth of Masorti and Reform Judaism Cannot Be Ignored

The Israel Democracy Institute’s (IDI) latest population survey shows that the number of Israelis choosing to identify as Reform and Conservative is very close to those identifying as Haredi. Professor Tamar Hermann, a leading academic researcher, Senior Fellow at the IDI and Academic Director of its Guttman Center, recently released the results of a survey focusing on the growth of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Her conclusions confirm those of the 2009 Guttman-AVI CHAI survey. Up until now, there was hardly any data on this demographic, and Prof. Hermann describes her findings as eye-opening. The survey also confirms the anecdotal reports from our community leaders and participants all noting the Movement’s diversity. According to Yizhar Hess, the Masorti Movement’s Executive Director, “We have transitioned from being founded and led by American olim (immigrants), to being composed of Sabras (native born Israelis) and immigrants from all over the world. This survey tells us how Israeli society has changed and how ready it is for the Masorti message.”

Building Israeli Zionism through Jerusalem Spirituality

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, decided to celebrate the birth of her third daughter in a unique way; by creating a Jewish community for her family, her friends and her teacher, Prof. Alice Shalvi. Tamar grew up in Jerusalem, in an Orthodox family that encouraged her to study — and study she did — Talmud at Pelech, and Jewish Philosophy at Hebrew University. What she discovered is that there was a significant gap between what she was taught and reality; and that in reality the place of women is very limited.

Fast forward to her rabbinical studies at the Schechter Institute, where Tamar decided to dedicate her life to the revival of Jewish community and Jewish tradition in Israel. What began as a small group in her living room on Erev Yom H’atzmaut, is already a group of more than 80 adults and children who meet in Ba’aka regularly for Friday night services. These egalitarian services are unique in that they combine Ashkenazi melodies and Sephardi traditions with Eretz Israeli songs resulting in what can only be referred to as Israeli style. This new community, called Zion: an Eretz Israeli Community, does not only limit itself to services, but also offers opportunities for learning and for participating in Tikkun Olam.
Did you know that a youth movement in Israel with 2,500 members is entitled to government support? As the new school year begins NOAM, Masorti’s youth movement for ages 10 to 18, is gearing up for a social media campaign aimed at growing membership from its current 1400 members. NOAM’s 16 chapters attract youth from all segments of Israeli society, and for many of its members, NOAM is their first meaningful contact with Judaism, including Masorti.

Just like USY participants, NOAM members are involved in weekly activities, special events, tikun olam projects and summer camp. Just this summer, our NOAM/Camp Ramah hosted more than 500 participants, including those with special needs, engaging them in a wide variety of physical activities. But more importantly they celebrated Judaism - through services, song, making talitot, studying texts, and more.

Regrettably, unlike their American cousins, Israeli youth do not live in a religiously pluralistic society. Consequently, NOAM members must take it upon themselves to be the voice for their generation, promoting egalitarian, traditional, Zionist Judaism in Israel.

Meeting the government’s threshold qualifications for an officially recognized youth movement means receiving the same kind of reliable, steady funding that Orthodox and secular youth organizations can depend upon each year to support their programs.

The opportunity to impact more Israeli youth with NOAM’S critical pluralism message and increase government funding makes NOAM’S new social media campaign vitally important.

NOAM members must take it upon themselves to be the voice for their generation, promoting egalitarian, pluralistic Judaism in Israel … This is vitally important work.

A quick review of both Israeli and US media shows us the importance of making Israeli society more inclusive. NOAM members’ involvement in such issues prepares them to become true leaders for all walks of life – the army, politics and community-building. Following high school, many NOAM participants join “NOAM gareen”, a cohort that joins the army together in order to participate in a program combining both army and community service simultaneously. Others join NOAM’s Shnat Sheirut program, and postpone their army service for one year to volunteer in needy neighborhoods (this year in Karmiel) where their work makes a real difference. Some participate in the Hanaton Educational Center’s Mechina, Israel’s first and only Masorti gap year program that combines Jewish textual study with community service.

Enclosed in this newsletter is an envelope. Please consider making a gift to support NOAM’s social media project! By helping us grow the number of NOAM members, your contribution will move us toward official recognition and government funding of our youth movement. Together with NOAM you can create a more pluralistic and inclusive Israeli society.
A boy preparing for his bar mitzvah asked his mother for the name of her Torah portion. She couldn’t tell him, not because she didn’t know, but because she had never had a bat mitzvah with its associated parashah.

However, there is good news. From this simple question grew a vital new pilot program supported by Women’s League for Conservative Judaism and the Masorti Movement. Designed around a series of workshops, mothers and daughters will prepare for this significant religious milestone together. For many, it will be their first exposure to accessing Jewish text and participating in synagogue ritual. Together they will become familiar with prayers and customs that previously felt so foreign. Jewish tradition has long lauded a mother’s ability to create a Jewish environment in which to raise children while modern day statistics confirm that the Jewish home is the greatest influence on a child’s Judaism. Thanks to Women’s League and the Masorti Movement, many more women will be able to inspire their children – both boys and girls – as full and equal participants in Jewish life.

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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 on 212.870.2216.

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