Myths vs. Facts

Religious Pluralism Has Arrived in Israel: Case Study--The Masorti Movement
By Rabbi Alan Silverstein

Israel was established in 1948 by Socialist Zionist leaders like Ben Gurion. They agreed to a draft exemption to accommodate 400 Haredi young men. It was assumed that Ultra-Orthodoxy would wither and fade away. The Founders handed civic religious authority to the Dati Leumi [Religious Zionist] rabbinate. They predicted that Israeli society would remain divided starkly into 2 camps – the Religious Zionist camp and the Secular Camp. They never imagined that Haredim dramatically would increase to 1 million in number or that alternative "Religious Streams" would arise as a popular option within the spiritual life of The Jewish State.

Seventy years later, the Jewish Agency’s recent JPPI study, titled RISING STREAMS, documents the emergence of Israeli Religious Pluralism. As a Case Study, I turn to the Masorti Movement in Israel. Perceptions change more slowly than reality. The following are examples of unflattering residual "myths" about the Tnua, standing in contrast with the facts on the ground.

Myth –

Masorti is a movement of ANGLOS, from the USA and to a lesser extent from other English-speaking lands.

Fact –

Masorti is dominated at its grassroots by Sabras as well as by Olim from Latin America, the FSU, Moslem lands, and from North America, all unified via Hebrew.

Myth –

Masorti is an aging movement equivalent to some declining Conservative synagogues in the USA.

Fact –

Masorti of 2019 is young and getting younger all the time. Its kehillot abound with Gannin filled to capacity, with frequent Bnai Mitzvah ceremonies, with close to 2,000 members of the NOAM youth movement, with 800 summer campers at Ramah Noam, with integration of
Special Needs Teens into NOAM chapters, plus with options for Shnat Sherut [A Year of Service] prior to serving in the IDF.

**Myth –**

Masorti is a stagnant movement.

**Fact –**

Conservative/Masorti Jews world-wide should take pride in the pace of Masorti Israel's growth. Over the last 15 years, the Tnua has increased from fewer than 50 now to almost 80. The Movement has established itself in diverse locations such as Tzur Yitzhak, Holon, Maskeret Bayta and Petach Tikvah. More and more kehillot are being "seeded."

**Myth –**

Masorti is an unknown commodity to grassroots Israelis.

**Fact –**

Masorti is gaining public awareness. Recent survey data indicate that one sixth of Jewish Israelis have attended services at a "Conservative" or "Reform" Israeli congregation! Yizhar Hess, the Movement’s chief executive, is courted to write frequent op/eds in the Israeli press and to be interviewed on Israeli radio and television. The Tnua and its leaders are influential within the halls of the Knesset, leading to frequent meetings with key leaders of Blue and White, Likud, Labor, Yisrael Beiteynu and others.

**Myth –**

Masorti rabbis are Anglos, elderly, fatigued and soon-to-retire.

**Fact –**

The veteran rabbis in Masorti communities are energetic dynamos who are either Sabras or Olim from North America, Latin America and elsewhere. These pioneers have been joined by
dozens of younger rabbinic colleagues now serving as full-time or part-time community rabbis.

**Myth –**

Masorti is a pariah in local municipalities due to Haredi pressure.

**Fact –**

Once you leave Jerusalem, receptivity to Masorti improves dramatically, on a case-by-case basis. For example, in Kfar Vradim, a Masorti synagogue that came into being because of the strong support of the secular mayor and his colleagues. In Beersheva, the city council designated land to our Masorti kehillah so that it can construct new Gannim in a developing part of the city. Similar municipal assistance is currently taking place in Kiryat Bialik.

**Myth –**

Masorti serves precious few Israelis.

**Fact –**

Masorti’s kehillot include thousands of dues-paying members. But unlike in the USA, these kehillot do not serve only their membership. Under rabbinic guidance, dues paying members serve as activists in reaching out to the community-at-large. They do so via Gannim, Noam, life-cycle ceremonies, absorption of Olim, assistance to folks below the poverty line, advocacy of ecological concerns, outreach to Israeli Arab communities, and through the provision of special needs Bar/Bat Mitzvah training and ceremonies. When Rabbi Mauricio Balter served in Kiryat Bialik, he calculated connecting with 8,000 people per month! Rabbi Elisha Wolfin counts similar numbers in Zichron Yaakov! In total, Masorti touches more than 125,000 Israeli Jews annually. The JPPI and Panels Politics research reveal that between 300,00 and 400,000 Israelis self-identify as “Conservative.”

**Myth –**

Masorti Judaism has never entered into the public square.

**Fact –**

Masorti’s Shabbat and Weekly Siddur titled Vaani T’fillat was published by Israel’s largest publishing house [Yediot Aharonot]. It has been a best-seller in its book category. A similarly inspiring Masorti Mahzor has been printed and widely distributed. These liturgical expressions of Israeli life offer both the Traditional texts as well as prayers for Yom HaAtzmaut, Yom HaZikaron, for
entering into the IDF, for life-cycle ceremonies, and for egalitarian inclusion of women in Jewish life within the context of traditional texts.

**Myth –**

Pundits claim that Masorti rabbis play virtually no role in Israeli life-cycle ceremonies, due to the Haredi control of the Rabbanut.

**Fact –**

More than 2,000 family-seating bar or bat mitzvah ceremonies take place each year under Masorti auspices, including 200 ceremonies for Special Needs youngsters. Masorti rabbis each year officiate at hundreds of weddings, and hundreds of conversions [even though the ceremonies will not be officially registered by the Interior Ministry.] Masorti rabbis preside at many funerals, baby naming and bris ceremonies with great frequency. Israelis are unwilling to be intimidated by the Chief Rabbinate bureaucracy. They vote with their feet and come to Masorti.

**Myth –**

Due to the Netanyahu government’s cancellation of the Kotel Agreement, Masorti’s role with regard to ceremonies at the Kotel area has been frozen.

**Fact –**

It has been the Masorti Movement that has staffed and sustained egalitarian Bar and Bat Mitzvah options at Robinson’s Arch for twenty years. Over 100,000 worshippers annually attend services at Azrat Yisrael/Egalitarian Kotel under the domain of the Tnua. The Movement has begun to conduct a weekly Kabbalat Shabbat service at Robinson’s Arch, attended by hundreds. Furthermore, the woman of Masorti’s Noam Youth movement and kehillot often serve as the Torah readers and Baalay Tefillah for Women of the Wall’s monthly Rosh Hodesh service.

**Myth –**

Masorti has not had any impact beyond the realm of its synagogue and its youth movement.

**Fact –**

In the 1980s, the Masorti Movement created the Schechter Institute, which has emerged as a great blessing to Israeli society-at-large. Schechter’s TALI track of enhanced Judaica instruction is now present in over 100 government Gannin, and over 200 governmental
schools, educating hundreds of thousands of youngsters. Schecter’s Rabbinical Scholl has ordained 90 rabbis. The pluralistic Kibbutz Hannaton, and its Educational Center and its pre-IDF Mechina operate in the spirit of the Masorti Movement. Dozens of Masorti rabbis serve in educational capacities throughout the Israeli institutional world. Moshav Shorashim in the Galilee was established decades ago by a core group of Masorti Olim. It is served by a Masorti rabbi.

**Myth –**

Masorti is on the margins of the life of Israeli Judaism.

**Fact –**

Masorti is more and more central to the spectrum of Israeli Judaism. *It fills a unique niche by offering almost the only regular weekly Israeli Shabbat morning AM egalitarian minyanim.* Masorti also offers a halachic approach, which is both flexible, as well as traditional egalitarian. Its Teshuvot address unique Israeli issues such as the religious permissibility of women serving in the IDF and so forth. Paraphrasing the words Israeli President Shimon Peres to the “full-house” of 800 folks celebrating the Tnua’s thirtieth year: Masorti Judaism provides an important balance of Tradition and Jewish Values for Israeli society-at-large.

As a result of these factual developments, the Israeli public is ever more receptive to the Masorti message and to messages of the other streams. In the most recent polls, 2/3 of Israelis support official recognition for both Masorti and Reform by Israeli civic life. A growing percentage of secular Israelis indicate that they are “OPEN TO” encountering aspects of the Jewish tradition within their lives in a “non-coercive” manner. These are code words for Masorti, Reform and liberal elements of Modern Orthodoxy. As the evaluators of this Avi Chai poll conclude: "The results of the survey are evidence that Israeli Jews are committed to two significant values: preserving Jewish tradition on the one hand, and upholding individual freedom of choice on the other."

Religious Pluralism in general and streams such as Masorti Judaism have emerged as part of a broad Israeli-Judaism spectrum.

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