



American Jews and Zionism Today

Message from MERCAZ USA President, Dr. Marilyn L Wind

Since I became president of MERCAZ in the spring of 2016, the leadership has been actively engaged in a discussion of what it means to be a Conservative/Masorti Zionist in the 21st century and the mission of MERCAZ as the Zionist arm of the Movement. We would like to open up this discussion to our membership by sharing a summary of the presentation by Rabbi Irwin Kula at our March board meeting. Rabbi Kula was ordained at JTS and currently serves as co-president of CLAL – the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

Rabbi Kula focused on helping us understand what is happening across American Jewish life and the implications for MERCAZ/American Zionism, being very mindful that Millennials and those in the generations following are not accepting of the narratives that formed the basis of prior generations' connection to Zionism and Israel. The challenge for MERCAZ is to fig-

Continued on page 4

Revisiting, rethinking, reframing and reclaiming the Zionist idea

2017: A YEAR OF CELEBRATION AND CONTEMPLATION

“All human deeds begin with a dream, and dreams shall they become”

Dr. David Breakstone, Vice Chairman, World Zionist Organization representing the worldwide Conservative/Masorti movement.

The World Zionist Organization will be throwing a year-long party throughout 2017. I can't help but wonder how many people will actually show up, or will even know that it's taking place. And of those who do, I have no idea how many will care, or among the caring, how many will still feel the electricity.

What we're making all this fuss about is the 120th anniversary of the 1st Zionist Congress, as well as 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, 70 years since UN recognition of the right of the Jewish people to return to its homeland (just four months after the ill-fated voyage of the Exodus), and 50 years since the Six Day War. We should all mark these dates in our calendars and continue to be inspired by (and inspire others to appreciate) the historical significance of each momentous occasion. But at this juncture in Zionist history, no less important than the celebration is the contemplation that need accompany it, for each of the milestones noted raises questions and dilemmas for us to grapple with.

SIX DAY WAR, JUNE 5-10, 1967

Half a century later, what is the legacy of the Six Day War that we have bequeathed the next generation: a miracle to be savored or a conundrum to be unraveled?

In his book "Like Dreamers," Yossi Klein Halevi writes about a war that "reunited Jerusalem and divided a nation." As insightful as his narrative might be, we need dedicate ourselves to turning it into fiction. How horrific it would be if the ultimate legacy of the Six Day War were that it laid the foundations for a house divided against itself. I can't imagine that anyone who lived through those six days in June recalls the outcome as being anything less than miraculous. Yet half a century later, for many it has become synonymous with "the beginning of the occupation" rather than the unification of the eternal capital of the Jewish people. And while few among the supporters of a Jewish state can have enjoyed the recent spectacle of Israel having been chastised by the United Nations for its settlement activities, I know that there are many in our ranks who believe what we are doing "beyond the green line" is bad for Israel and makes the pursuit of peace more difficult. Add to that the reality that the Wall whose liberation

Continued on page 2

Revisiting, Rethinking... continued from page 1

we greeted with such euphoria has now become the epicenter of acrimony between our fractured people rather than the symbol of our essential unity. Against this background, how are we within the Conservative movement going to celebrate Yom Yerushalayim in this jubilee year of the city having been made whole again in a manner that will be meaningful, honest and joyous?

KAF-TET B'NOVEMBER, NOVEMBER 29, 1947:

70 years ago the UN voted to establish a Jewish state; today it misses no opportunity to censure it. How did Israel lose the world's support? What do we say to those who contend – friend and foe alike – that Israel is at least partially responsible for its own isolation?

As the BDS movement and campaigns to delegitimize the very essence of the Zionist idea gain momentum, fueled by prejudicial United Nations resolutions condemning Israel, it is difficult to imagine that it was within this once august body that Herzl's dream of establishing a Jewish state was first validated internationally. As our struggle for acceptance within the family of nations continues, we need constantly remind the world that Israel has made it a better place - and that it has every right to exist even if it hadn't. Still, we have to ask ourselves how it has come about that we find ourselves so isolated in the international arena, a virtual pariah in a world that we have contributed to in so many ways and in a region in which we stand head and shoulders above all our neighbors on every imaginable scale of merit that western democracies might devise to measure us by. Given the current political atmosphere, I believe that we in MERCAZ also need consider what we might do to ensure that support for Israel in the United States not become a partisan issue in the general public, or a divisive one within the Jewish community, regardless of individual political leanings.

EXODUS, JULY 18, 1947:

After two millennia of longing and 50 years of struggle, the Jewish people has finally succeeded in opening wide the gates of return. What meaning does that have for us – both personally as Jews, and as citizens of a world where nations are continuing to close their doors to refugees?

When the British prevented the 4,515 holocaust survivors aboard the Exodus from disembarking in Haifa, they set off a shock wave that many believe impacted significantly on the UN vote in favor of the plan to partition Palestine. Recalling the episode should serve as a reminder that we must never take for granted that after 2000 years of exile Jews no longer need anyone's permission to come home, whether escaping persecution or drawn by the exhilarating challenge of building a new life in the land of our ancestors. Commemorating the Exodus is also an occasion to assess our own

commitment to the Zionist mitzvah of Aliyah. It could find expression in a MERCAZ initiative encouraging members of our movement to climb the next rung on an Aliyah ladder, erected on the foundations of thousands of years of longing to return. These rungs might include thinking anew about the meaning of "next year in Jerusalem," visiting the country more often, becoming actively involved in partnership projects, assisting olim in their process of acclimatization, purchasing a home in Israel, and giving serious consideration to the possibility of actually living in it.

BALFOUR DECLARATION, NOVEMBER 2, 1917:

A century after gaining international endorsement for the right of the Jewish people to a homeland of its own, Zionist leadership today finds itself struggling to explain the need for a Jewish state to a new generation that isn't convinced. Is there an argument we can offer that takes into consideration the importance of the State of Israel for our lives in the Diaspora?

Herzl worked indefatigably to gain international recognition for the right of the Jewish people to a state of its own. He died not knowing that he had indeed set in motion a process that would lead to such a charter. It finally came with the Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." That our enemies are now demanding that Britain retract that pronouncement a century after it was made is bad enough; even worse is that many of our own young people are asking why we even need a Jewish state. In response, MERCAZ needs to actively engage in ensuring that our children are getting a Zionist education, which is not something to be taken for granted these days. What might we be doing to make sure that our synagogue educational programs, youth movements, camps and day schools are committed to the centrality of Israel in Jewish life and to the importance of Israel in the development of Jewish identity?

1ST ZIONIST CONGRESS, AUGUST 29-31, 1897:

In one of his speeches to the Zionist Congress, Herzl declared that Zionism sought to nurture "a new blossoming of the Jewish spirit" in our ancient homeland. As things have evolved since then, what is the meaning of Israel for Conservative/Masorti Judaism and what is the meaning of Conservative/Masorti Judaism for Israel?

Back to the beginning. And back to the future. At the conclusion of his novel *Altneuland* (Old-New Land), Herzl writes: "All human deeds begin with a dream, and dreams shall they become." Who could have imagined when the First Zionist Congress was convened 120 years ago that Herzl's dream would yield the glorious fruits that it has? Now it is up to us to turn the deeds of others into dreams for tomorrow. And onwards and upwards, one generation

inspiring the next, each feeling great pride in what has already been achieved, each embracing the challenge of contributing to what yet remains to be done. Nearly 70 years after it came into being, Israel is still very much a work in process. What role might we play in fashioning it as the sort of Jewish state we would like it to become?

As I put these thoughts to paper, a Jerusalem Post headline appears on my iPhone warning that “waning US Jewish support of Israel is a national security threat,” quoting from a report presented today to the Knesset’s committee on Diaspora Affairs. Each of us has

multiple opportunities to counter that trend during this special year of anniversaries. Choose one and make it your own. Help spread the word about the party we are throwing. Invite others to join in the festivities. And with colleagues, friends, and fellow congregants, give some thought to what it is we are celebrating.

We invite you to think about and to discuss the issues Dr Breakstone raises. Organize discussion groups in your kehillot and/or share your thoughts with MERCAZ USA members by posting them on our Facebook page.

Sarrae’s Corner

*Message from MERCAZ USA Executive Director,
Sarrae G Crane*



I write this shortly after we joyously marked Yom Yerushalyim, this year celebrating the 50th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem and on the eve of the semi-centennial of the start of the Six Day War. These 6 days were transformative not only for Israel and its citizens, but for Jews

around the world, including those of us in the United States. We continue to wrestle with the impact of that miraculous moment in time. One of the consequences of this new reality was that the Conservative Movement, which from its outset was Zionist in spirit, finally in 1979, entered the arena of the world Zionist movement with the creation of MERCAZ.

And so as we look upon events unfolding in Israel, we also need to reflect on the direction of MERCAZ here in the United States.

It’s not quite a year since I became the Executive Director of MERCAZ USA. We moved our office, realizing a significant savings in rent. **Our new address is: 520 Eighth Avenue, 4th floor, NY, NY 10018.** (A short walk from both Penn Station and the Port Authority Bus Terminal). We are located in the office of the JCCA along with a variety of other Jewish organizations, with many more in the neighborhood. We have also carefully monitored our expenses, paying off our loans and basically eliminating our deficit.

As promised, we have spent the past year re-evaluating our mission of engaging Conservative/Masorti Jews with Zionism/Israel and the Jewish people world over and of reaffirming our commitment to pluralism in Jewish religious life and promoting its acceptance in the State of Israel.

Aware that Zionism is multi-faceted and there is more than one way to connect to Israel and the Jewish people, we need to hear many voices, especially yours. We want to hear your views on Israel and Zionism. MERCAZ is a big tent organization and the articulation of all views is welcome.

To trigger your reflections this newsletter includes two thought pieces: “American Jews and Zionism Today” and “Revisiting, Rethinking, Reframing and Reclaiming the Zionist Idea.” The former is by our president, Dr. Marilyn Wind; the latter is by Dr. David Breakstone, who represents MERCAZ Olami on the World Zionist Organization Executive and currently serves as Deputy Chair of the Jewish Agency for Israel Executive. We urge you to read these pieces and share your reflections with us. Moreover, we ask of you to engage family members (especially high school and college students, as well as those in their 20’s and 30’s), in this discussion and share with us their perspectives.

We are opening a discussion on Zionism today on our Facebook page – Mercaz USA. We invite you to like our page, Mercaz USA and join the conversation.



Visit Us on Facebook
facebook.com/mercazusa

American Jews... continued from page 1

ure out how to operate in this new environment. We need to determine the risks and opportunities this situation creates.

Rabbi Kula began with the basic premise that there were always a variety of forms of expressions of Zionism and that same variety exists today having been transformed and shaped by the current reality. The Conservative Movement has always been fundamentally conscious of sociology, taking the needs of people seriously and finding ways to interpret halacha that enable more people to be observant. It is about tradition and change with the goals of inclusion and pluralism.

The issue for us is where MERCAZ fits in the current Jewish/Zionist landscape, recognizing that it is embedded in America and Conservative Judaism. Our debate on pluralism centers on how inclusive we can be. In the Zionist arena, the Conservative Movement has historically been pluralistic. Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, as chancellor of JTS, was a cultural Zionist who did not favor the establishment of the State of Israel, while Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, a prominent faculty member was a great supporter as was most of the student body. This wide range of political views has continued, with prominent Conservative Jews having held leadership roles in Zionist organizations across the political spectrum.

Rabbi Kula advocated that MERCAZ is in a unique position to be the organization with the widest, most deeply pluralistic, most substantive, most serious place to focus on the next iterations of the relationship between American Jews and the State of Israel. He urged us to be fearless about a rich and substantive debate, as the intellectual underpinning of Conservative Judaism is about there being more than one valid position. He

further suggested that we learn to live with more levels of diversity than have ever existed before.

The group engaged Rabbi Kula in a robust Q & A session in which Rabbi Kula challenged the members of the MERCAZ board to sit down with 3 family members under the age of 35 to ask them to honestly speak about their feelings/relationship with Israel. He asserted that by listening to people whom we love, whose views we may not share, we will learn a great deal.

We are very excited about the challenge and opportunity that faces us. As an umbrella organization that encompasses a broad range of opinions about Zionism in the 21st Century, we want to be at the table at which we can all discuss, in a civil non-judgmental manner, our differences and commonalities. Our strength will come from our diversity. We would like to challenge you as well as to reflect on your relationship with Israel and to share your views with us.

We will open up a forum for exchanging ideas on our Facebook page (Mercaz USA) and urge you to share your thoughts and comments. Take Rabbi Kula's challenge and listen to your family members or friends under 35 about their feelings towards and relationship with Israel. Share with us what you learn. The only rule about participating in this discussion is that it must be done in a civil manner. We welcome you to join in this discussion.

 **Join the discussion on our Facebook page**
facebook.com/mercazusa



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