



Rethinking Zionism: What Does Zionism Mean to Me?

We are pleased to share the winning essay in the MERCAZ-CANADA, MERCAZ USA and Women's League for Conservative Judaism biennial essay contest for students grades 7 - 12 who will be participating in a Conservative Movement sponsored Israel program.

UNITY

By *Dalya Kahn*, Congregation Beth Am, San Diego, California

Carefully folding my hands into the fabric of my *tallit*, I grasp the top and bottom of the parchment, cautious not to let my skin and all its oils come in direct contact with the section of the holy scroll unrolled in front of me. Standing amongst my fellow campers, I look around and see we've formed a complete and closed circle with the exposed Torah before us--each using our *tallitot* as a protector for the book, each in silent awe at the sight before us. In the final days of my last summer at Camp Ramah in California, my *edah* immersed itself in nature for a week of growth and reflection as our time as campers came to a close.

On Thursday morning, a Torah reading day, we walked up to a big open area in the mountains and unrolled the entire book. We read from it, sang while holding it, delivered words of compassion before it, and lifted it as one for *hagbah*. Never in my life had I felt a greater sense of pride in my Judaism than when I was a part of that circle, holding my section of the Torah, looking around at the amazing people with whom I share this sacred book of our people. That morning, up on the hill, seeing the faces of people I've grown up with holding the basis of what brought us together years ago, I felt whole.

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MAZEL TOV TO OUR 2018

MERCAZ-WOMEN'S LEAGUE ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS:

1st place - *Dalya Kahn*, Congregation Beth Am, San Diego, CA

2nd place - *Genna Wolinsky*, Congregation Beth Emeth, Herndon, VA

3rd place - *Abigail Sara Elson*, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

AWARDS: Three Scholarships in the amounts of: \$1,000, \$850, and \$650 USD to be applied to any Conservative Movement sponsored Israel program

All 3 essays can be found on our websites: mercaz.ca, mercazusa.org, and wlcj.org



President's Message

Message from MERCAZ USA President, Dr. Marilyn L. Wind

In May, there was an article on the front page of the Washington Post which stated that Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israel no longer need to rely on the support of North American Jews who are largely Reform and Conservative because he has the support of the evangelicals. It was clear from the guests and speakers at the U.S. Embassy opening in Jerusalem that the current administration in the U.S. feels the same way. The Post article stated what we have heard in briefings at the Knesset, namely that Diaspora Jews are not taken seriously in Israel. The belief is that both Conservative and Reform Jews will disappear in the not too distant future, so there doesn't need to be any concern about pluralism and the issues we promote.

Not long before the article appeared, on April 30, 2018, The Schechter Institutes and the Jewish Theological Seminary co-sponsored a very successful academic conference at The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem on: "The State of Israel and the Jews of North America: How Can We Bridge the Gaps?" Speakers included JTS Chancellor Professor Arnold Eisen, Jewish Agency Chair and 2018 Israel Prize winner Natan Sharansky, MK Rachel Azaria, and

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many esteemed faculty from Schechter and JTS. The event was planned in recognition of the growing gap, and the need to speak openly about it together. It was an exploration of the relationship between the State of Israel and North American Jewry and dealt with hot-button, current issues: Why are there gaps in the education of children in the two largest centers of the Jewish people today? What is the demographic difference between the two centers and how does this impact religious, civil, political, and social perceptions? Do Diaspora Jews have the right to criticize Israel? If so, when? Does Israel need American Jews, or not? Most importantly, how can these gaps be bridged? The discussions brought to light differences in perceptions as to whether Diaspora Jews are guests in Israel or family; should they engage in political debates or simply be present. American Jews are politically engaged in the U.S. and do not share the same political perspective as Israelis. You can view the conference at <https://www.schechter.edu/resounding-success-state-israel-jews-north-america-can-bridge-gaps-conference-honor-israels-70th-anniversary/>

MERCAZ encourages conversations on all aspects of Zionism today. The 2018 MERCAZ USA/MERCAZ Canada/Women's League essay contest theme was **Rethinking Zionism – What Does Zionism Mean to Me?** We have included the full text of the first place essay in this newsletter and I have excerpted a couple of statements from the 2nd and 3rd place winners that follow:

Genna Wolinsky, the second place winner from Congregation

Beth Emeth, Herndon, Virginia stated, "Zionism to me means a physical connection to my religion, of which the spiritual aspects aren't as significant. It means fighting for the cause that my ancestors fought for, and died for. It means being determined to seek the truth about Israel to protect its reputation from being tarnished in the media and society. And above all else, it means ensuring that our nation will continue to exist in the future."

Abigail Sara Elson, the third place winner from Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, Maryland spoke about the changing relationship of Diaspora Jews to Israel since its birth. She stated, "And now, in 2018, Jews worldwide see Israel as their rock in an era of constant change. American Jews, who link their political beliefs to their spiritual selves, see Israel as a peaceful democratic ally in the tumultuous Middle East. By the same token, Israel must be conscious of their decisions since Jews around the world have a stake and a voice in Israel as a nation. Consequently, it is my generation's duty to enable Israel to reach that state and hold it accountable."

If you would like to read the full essays, they can be found on the MERCAZ USA website: www.mercazusa.org.

MERCAZ is focusing much attention on conversations that deepen our understanding of Israel and strengthen our Zionist commitment. We ask you to join MERCAZ USA or renew your membership and encourage your friends and fellow congregants to do so as a sign of support for Israel and Conservative/Masorti Judaism and as a way to say that Conservative Jews in the U.S. are alive and well and should not be discounted.

Sarrae's Corner

Message from MERCAZ USA Executive Director, Sarrae G Crane



Seventy years of the State of Israel is amazing! Indeed there were many wonderful celebrations of milestones in our history all over the world in the past year, especially this spring. One of the most moving events was the Times Square Israel Block Party – the world's largest Israeli block party in honor of the 70th Anniversary – that followed this year's Celebrate Israel Parade

in New York. There are no words to describe the sense of awe at watching the giant audiovisual display of Israel on the screens of Times Square. It was a moment of great pride for American Jews. It's easy to share the joy of Israel's existence and accomplishments. It's a time that brings the whole community together. However, as we scratch the surface, we know that there is much work that still needs to be done to ensure the continued strong relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, especially American Jewry with its diverse perspectives. MERCAZ's mission is to engage American Jews in Israel and increase understanding of Israeli society and how it functions. In

order to promote religious pluralism, we need to engage in discussion and educate ourselves as to how Israeli democracy is similar to the U.S. and how it differs. We need to learn that our views and opinions are the products of our environments.

MERCAZ USA is pleased to work with the World Zionist Organization Department of Diaspora Activities in promoting the materials they have produced to help us bridge the gap. The Beit Ha'am series aims to spark dialogue on the subject of Zionist identity and our unique relationship with Israel and its relevance to our lives. There are 14 booklets that explore aspects of contemporary Israeli life and society. MERCAZ USA can help you obtain the materials. Please contact me at sarrae@mercazusa.org if you are interested in learning how you can bring this material to your community.

Being a Zionist means caring not only about political security, but also about the quality of life in Israel today. For us at MERCAZ the fight for religious pluralism and the recognition of the authority of Conservative/Masorti rabbis remains a high priority. We take great pride in the work of Masorti Israel, its over 80 *kehillot* across the country, the Schechter Institutes, the Tali program, the Conservative Yeshiva and so much more. In order for us to be good partners with our family in Israel, we need to continue the dialogue and increase our understanding. MERCAZ USA is committed to working with you in these efforts.

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Zionism is wholeness. Zionism provides a sense of oneness to Jews all over the world.

Zionism emphasizes a coming together of all Jews not in spite of our differences but because of them. Judaism, as a religion, is built on interpretation, question asking, and evolving, so naturally, there's going to be a broad spectrum of views on how one practices the religion. That being said, what it truly means to believe in Zionism is to trust and be confident in two central ideas: that every Jew is supportive of his/her fellow Jew, no matter the affiliation or practice; and that Israel and everything associated with the Jewish homeland is open to and accepting of all Jews. This is what I strive for, not only for myself, but for every Jewish community in Israel and the diaspora. To not disregard any fellow Jew for not dressing the same in public, davening and studying the same texts in the same ways, or engaging in only one mode of celebration. Taking our differences and embracing the multifaceted beauty of our diverse and complex religion enables us to understand each other and unite with each one another in ways that we couldn't if we weren't accepting of those differences.

Looking into the future of Zionism and the Jewish people, the most important thing to think about is how we treat each other within our religion. We, as Jews, are in charge of our own existence; it's an internal obligation, within ourselves individually and within our communities, to support one another and come together to ensure a Jewish future. Zionism doesn't ask us to get caught up in the fine print of the religion: arguing about whether or not to eat legumes during the eight days of Passover; whether or not there should be a *mechitza* that divides men and women during services; whether or not we should daven *shacharit*, *mincha*, and *maariv* every day. Zionism supports and commands our not getting so worked up about disagreements that we forget the commonalities present in our heritage. That we are the oldest monotheistic religion, and have continued to thrive even while overcoming the worst obstacles humans can endure. That we are all grounded by the ideals of *tikkun olam* and giving *tzedakah*. That we all perform *mitzvot*, practice the rituals associated with Shabbat and the holi-



days, and participate in Jewish life milestone events. Even if we don't read Hebrew, we are guided by the *Tanakh*, Talmud, and traditions brought forth by those before us, shaping our reli-

gion to what it is today. Our knowing of how to behave and how to be is what unites our different Jewish selves. Through this knowing, we also know what it means to be a Zionist.

As my *edah* finished up our Torah service and slowly rolled the individual sections of the Torah closer to where the two sides would eventually meet up, we began singing the song *Acheinu*:

*Acheinu kol beit yisrael, han'tunim b'tzara uvashivyah,
haomdim bein bayam uvein
bayabasha*

Our siblings the whole house of Israel, those in trouble or captivity, who are over land or sea.

*Hamakom yirachem aleihem, v'yotziem mitzara lirvacha,
um'afaila l'orah, umishiabud lag'ulah, hashah bagala
uvizman kariv*

May God show them mercy, and bring them from distress to comfort, from darkness to light, and from slavery to redemption, quickly and at a near time.

Those lyrics were more than just a song to sing. They were words I wanted to live by, coming to me straight from my soul, my *neshamah*. Regardless of where we were, whether we were Ashkenazi or Sephardic, reform, conservative, orthodox, reconstructionist or a member of any other movement that connects us to our Judaism, we were together. Holding that scroll, the Jewish past was presented to us, but we were amongst each other: the Jewish present and the Jewish future. We understood what it meant to be united. What it meant to be those siblings of Israel, helping each other even when we didn't have everything in common. And most importantly, what it meant to believe in Zionism, not only for the continuation of the holy land Israel, not only for making *aliyah* or continuing the Hebrew language, but so that Jews anywhere and everywhere could come together and celebrate the spirited connection that has enabled us to flourish throughout time.

**Save the Date for the
MERCAL USA
ANNUAL MEETING**

**Sunday, November 11, 2018 • New York City
(Prior to the Masorti Olami Gala)**

MERCAZ is proud of the work of our partner agencies and the support we provide them through MERCAZ's participation in the WZO, JAFI and KKL

News from Masorti Olami: Marom Shabbaton 2018

Marom, the Masorti organization for Jews 18-26, brought together 65 participants from Brazil, Argentina, England, Canada, the U.S., Uganda, and Israel at Kibbutz Hanaton to learn and explore their Jewish identity and relationship with Israel.

A highlight was a panel of Movement leaders: Rabbi Joel Levy, Head of the Conservative Yeshiva; Rabbi Yoav Ende, Head of Hanaton Educational Center; Doron Rubin, Chair of Marom's board; Shira Levin, member of Hanaton; and Eitan Gottfried, Marom Latin America coordinator; addressing the questions of "what makes me a Masorti Zionist?" and "what are the challenges of Masorti Judaism in the Israeli society?" recognizing that the State of Israel has an important role in Masorti identity and that there is a responsibility to help shape it and to make it a better place.



News from Masorti Israel: B'chol D'rachecha – A Siddur Designed to Meet Special Needs

ADRABA-THE SHIRLEY LOWY CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES, a project of Masorti Israel has created the **B'chol D'rachecha** (In All Your Ways) siddur. This egalitarian siddur, which integrates cognitive accessibility and communication symbols, is the first of its kind in the world. It contains the text of the prayers accompanied by communication symbols, paragraphs in simplified language, and accessibility symbols to provide an extra level of clarification of the meaning of the text on the page.

The siddur includes Shacharit and prayers and blessings that are recited at home. Siddur B'chol D'rachecha is available online at the Masorti Foundation <http://masorti.org/publications-bchol-drachecha/>



Join MERCAZ Today.

Please complete this form and return to:

MERCAZ USA 520 Eighth Avenue, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10018
or enroll online at www.mercazusa.org/membership.html



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