

New Teen Essay Contest: A Critical Defense of Zionism

The new MERCAZ USA/MERCAZ Canada/Women's League for Conservative Judaism Essay Contest is underway. Five scholarships, from \$250-\$1000, are available for use towards Conservative Movement sponsored Israel trips taking place from June 1, 2016 on.

This year's question connects to the 37th World Zionist Congress that recently took place. Entitled "A Critical Defense of Zionism," teens participating in the essay contest will be expected not only to answer the question of what Zionism means to them, but also to defend their answers in the context of our modern world. For example, we note that the Zionist Congress has taken place during a time of conflicting and often noisy political challenges. We have seen the rise, particularly on the college campuses, of the "BDS" movement. These challenges often leave members of the worldwide Jewish community confused about their own expressions of Zionism.

At the same time, we have seen statements and actions by the current Israeli government and the Chief Rabbinate that limit the expression of Jewish religious freedom in the Jewish State. As Conservative/Masorti Jews, we are keenly aware of the lack of separation of religion and state in Israel, dictated by an ultra-Orthodox rabbinat. There are too many instances in which our Masorti Israeli counterparts and Conservative Jewish visitors to Israel feel like second-class citizens.

Based on this background, teens will answer the following question: What does Zionism mean to you? In developing your essay, please take into consideration the following questions:

- Does a defense of Zionism mean that we must defend every action of every Israeli government?
- Does Zionism call for a reciprocal relationship with Israel?
- Can we support the legitimacy of Israel and still criticize about religious pluralism?

In your response, please consider what you hope to experience or learn during your expected visit/tour/program in Israel to help you develop even more fully your thoughts about Zionism and Israel.

The contest is opening now and will run through to March 1, 2016. No essay will be accepted that arrives after that date. All entrants will be notified by May 6, 2016. Winners will be announced publicly during the next Women's League convention.

Rabbi Jennifer Gorman, Director of MERCAZ-Canada, will once again be overseeing the essay competition. For a full explanation of the rules governing eligibility, essay format and deadline, go to <http://mercaz.ca/WLCJ-essay.html>.

MERCAZ Is Moving!

Because of the sale of the Bnai Zion building, MERCAZ USA's office will be moving during December to its new location: 475 Riverside Drive (the Interchurch Building), Suite 820, New York, NY 10115. MERCAZ and the American Friends of Neve Hanna are delighted to be joining Women's League for Conservative Judaism in our new location.

37th World Zionist Congress

Our thanks to the entire MERCAZ USA delegation who took part in the weeklong program in Israel, including the pre-Congress MERCAZ Olami Get-Together Shabbat, tour of Masorti institutions and orientation meetings and the 3-day Zionist Congress. Congratulations to Dr. Arnie Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who served as a panelist at the opening keynote plenary, and Rabbi Matthew Simon, past president of MERCAZ USA and MERCAZ Olami, who was elected an Honorary Fellow/Amit Kavod of the World Zionist Organization.



MERCAZ Olami leaders with Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid (center) after signing a joint faction agreement for the World Zionist Congress.

My Turn: Rabbi Robert R. Golub

The youngish rabbi whose photo appears nearby, that was me 20 years ago when, in September 1995, I started as Director of MERCAZ USA. Now as I retire at the end of 2015, my hair is all shades of gray, but my passion for Israel, Zionism and Conservative Judaism has not diminished.

Twenty years ago, I found myself in transition, having come to the realization that the two-year sabbatical back in the United States following seven years living in Israel was not going to be ending anytime soon but aware that I wanted to do something other with my rabbinical training and Israel experience than serve in another congregation. When Rabbi Joel Meyers, then Executive Vice-President of the Rabbinical Assembly, called to say that the position of Director of MERCAZ USA was now vacant, I responded that this seemed to make sense as an interim position until I figured out what I wanted to do. Within a short period of time, it became clear that MERCAZ was not destined to be a temporary way station.

Coming to MERCAZ gave me the opportunities to use all of my experience and expertise – my fluency in Hebrew, my intimate knowledge of life in Israel, my rabbinic training, my writing and administrative skills – successfully. As the son of an accountant, I was not daunted by the needs for organization and backroom office precision. As a former pulpit rabbi and high school rabbinics teacher in Israel, I enjoyed writing articles and teaching classes. As a former director of External Relations at the Technion in Haifa, I was used to planning in detail visits and conferences, including menus, transportation, etc. And I used all of these skills and experiences during my twenty years on the job.



And the fact that MERCAZ was a member organization of the Conference of Presidents with its annual study mission to Israel and an affiliate of the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency, with its annual Vaad HaPoel and Assembly in Jerusalem, meant that I would have to travel twice a year to Israel for business purposes. How bad could that be for a former new immigrant?

While no job is without its share of ups and downs, I am grateful for all the people with whom I have had the pleasure of working, including the five presidents whom I have served: Roy Clements (z"l), Evelyn Seelig, Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, Steve Wolnek and Janet Tobin. I am also appreciative of the help and support of the small MERCAZ office staff who have worked with me over these 20 years: Ahuva Oko and Marilyn Noble and formerly Shelly Grossman.

Virtually every word that has appeared over the past 20 years in the MERCAZ newsletters and e-letters has been composed by yours truly, but this is the first time my name has been formally attached to what I write. I wish my successor, whoever he or she shall be, all success in moving the organization ahead. He or she can feel free to count on me whether I am wintering in Israel with my wife, married children and grandchildren or summering back in New York.

VISIT ISRAEL TODAY:

Go to www.mercazusa.org/trips.html for a current list of Conservative Movement Israel trips that are open to all participants.

Join MERCAZ Today.

Please complete this form and return to:

MERCAZ USA 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 820, New York, NY 10115
or enroll online at www.mercazusa.org/membership.html



Please print!

Full Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Permanent Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

My email is _____

Congregation _____

Please enroll me as a member of MERCAZ.
I am enclosing my membership dues with this form.

Please charge my membership to my:

Visa Mastercard Amex

Account #: _____

Expires: _____ mo _____ yr Signature _____

\$54 Family \$12 Student \$250 Donor
 \$36 Individual \$100 Sponsor \$500 Benefactor