



NEARLY 10% of ISRAELIS CONSERVATIVE OR REFORM *Government Proposes New Funding Procedures*

Nearly one out of ten Israelis now define themselves as Conservative or Reform according to a survey conducted by the Israeli Democracy Index for 2013. This figure reflects the positive change in Israeli Jewish identity that has been taking place over the past 50 years, since Conservative Judaism began to make its presence known in Israel in the early 1960's with the founding by the Jewish Theological Seminary of Neve Schechter in 1962, and the formal creation in 1979 of both MERCAZ USA within the World Zionist Organization and the independent Israeli Masorti Movement.

While still small in comparison to the 26.5% who define themselves as Orthodox/Ultra-Orthodox, the growing non-Orthodox religious community is now seeing a much more positive government response to demands for state funding and equal access than at any time in the past. For example, the Ministry of Religious Services announced in May that regulations were now being formulated to begin providing salaries to Reform and Conservative rabbis who serve as community rabbis not only in rural areas, but cities as well. Additionally, public ritual baths or mikvaot could now be used by Conservative and Reform groups for their conversion activities.

Both announced steps come in response to lengthy legal battles begun more than a half dozen years ago which have been working their way to the Israeli Supreme Court.

Of course, rabbinic salaries and access to mikvaot are only two of a number of issues about which the Reform and Conservative Movements have been fighting. Even more important battles lie ahead regarding the Orthodox monopoly over marriage and conversion, military draft for haredim, curricular reform in yeshivot and access for egalitarian and women's only prayer services at the Kotel.

In response to the recent government announcements, Rabbis Gerald Skolnik and Julie Schonfeld, president and executive vice-president respectively of the Rabbinical Assembly, issued the following statement: "We are pleased to learn that the Ministry of Religious Affairs has announced its intention to end discriminatory practices in the selection of religious leadership by communities. We are hopeful that such policies will bring us significantly closer to restoring the principle of freedom of religion and conscience, one of the pillars of democracy undergirding Israel's political system.

As Janet Tobin, MERCAZ President, said, "We look forward to a day when Masorti projects will be supported on the same per capita basis as Orthodox institutions. Until that time, however, MERCAZ continues its lobbying work within the WZO and Jewish Agency for affirmative action allocations to our Israeli institutions." Visit the MERCAZ website for a list of Masorti projects funded by the WZO and Jewish Agency.

CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT *Israel Trips* 2013-2014

October 21 – November 3, 2013

Women's League Israel Mission
Price per person: \$3,468 (land only)
Contact: Anna Tractenberg
(484) 433-3619
annatract@aol.com

October 30 - November 11, 2013

Seaboard Region FJMC Israel Tour
Price per person: \$4,000
Contact: Jim Sloan
(703) 561-0775
Seaboardisrael2013@gmail.com

November 3 – 14, 2013

HAZAK Journey to Israel
Price per person: \$3,500
Contact: Jo-Anne Tucker-Zemlak
(800) 600-5194
zemlak@uscj.org

December 25, 2013 - January 5, 2014

Cong. Sons of Israel, Briarcliff Manor, NY
Price per person: \$3,120 (land only)
Contact: Rabbi Steve Kane
(914) 762-2700
rabcsi@aol.com

June 29 – July 14, 2014

Temple Israel, Sharon MA
Price per person: \$5,250
Contact: Hazzan Steven W. Dress
(781) 784-3986 x20
sdress@tisharon.org



MERCAZ Organizing Committee briefing Amb. Michael Oren (center) on Israel Advocacy seminars.



[Ed: On May 19, Janet Tobin was elected for a second term as MERCAZ USA president. Here is an excerpt of her address. The full text is available on the MERCAZ website.]

Two and a half years ago, when I delivered my inaugural address as the newly installed president of MERCAZ USA, I spoke of the MERCAZ presidency entailing both a privilege and a burden: the privilege to head up an organization that sees Zionism as an invaluable tool for strengthening Jewish identify and combating assimilation; and a burden because of the many problems that seem to be insurmountable. And I enumerated four challenges facing the Jewish world.

Now as I complete my first term as MERCAZ president and look forward to the next 2 1/2 years, while the challenges I enumerated then still remain the same, I am pleased with the progress that we have made in addressing them.

1. The threat of Iran: As a constituent organization within the Conference of Presidents and the American Zionist Movement, as an affiliate of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency and Jewish National Fund, MERCAZ has created a respected role at a number of key tables, and it has been my honor to represent the organization to help our Jewish community face the threats that face us.

2. The constant delegitimization of Israel and of Jewish peoplehood: I am very pleased that Israel Advocacy has become a key element of the MERCAZ agenda. To date, we have organized four two-day seminars. I am grateful to the help and support that MERCAZ has obtained from the Embassy of Israel, the Israel Consulate in New York and the World Zionist Organization in funding these seminars.

3. The malaise facing our Conservative community: The ongoing effects on religious institutions of the 2008 economic meltdown here in the United States continue to impact us. I am pleased

that MERCAZ has sought ways to maintain most of its ongoing programs and I am most excited about our new initiative in Young Zionist Leadership Development.

4. The fact that we have over a million Conservative Jews and we have less than 10,000 MERCAZ memberships: My friends, this is the biggest challenge facing MERCAZ now and as we move into my second term. I want to compliment the Membership Committee for all of their efforts in helping us start to rebuild our numbers and I am happy to say that our numbers are up thanks to their hard work. Numbers DO count and they seriously impact the kind of funding we can secure for our fellow Conservative Masorti institutions in Israel and around the world: the Israeli Masorti Movement and its more than 60 kehillot, the Schechter Institute and the TALl Schools, the United Synagogue's Fuchsberg Center and Masorti Olami's congregations.

We will likely have to prove ourselves again in the upcoming elections for the 2015 Zionist Congress. We will need all of the arms of the Conservative Movement to put aside egos and turf and get behind the MERCAZ election campaign, both with resources and energy. MERCAZ will do everything that we can, but I will expect that the Conservative/Masorti recipients of the WZO and JAFI funding will do theirs as well.

We have proven time and time again that we are not afraid. Together we can realize our goals to strengthen unite and support each other. Together we can overcome the challenges facing us in Israel, as a people and as a movement.

Work with me. I will not and can not face the challenges that we have alone.

MERCAZ – our organization – and I as your president need every one of you.

Join MERCAZ Today.

Please complete this form and return to:

MERCAZ USA 136 East 39th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10016 or enroll online at www.mercazusa.org/membership.html



Please print!

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Congregation _____

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Please charge my membership to my:

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Account #: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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