

SECURING A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

A JOINT ISRAEL/DIASPORA INITIATIVE TO BOLSTER JEWISH IDENTITY IN DIASPORA

Over the past several months, The Jewish Agency has been working with the Prime Minister's Office on a new framework to expand dramatically the connections of young Jews in the Diaspora to Israel. The new framework, called "Securing a Thriving Jewish Future", centers on four elements – Israel Education, Israel Experiences, Israel Engagement on Campus and Aliyah of Young Adults.

In order for the initiative to be transformative, the goal is to build a fund – two-thirds from the Diaspora and one-third from Israel – from \$100 million in 2014 to \$1 billion annually within five years.

Announced at a gathering of government officials and Diaspora leaders in Jerusalem last November and formally adopted by the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors this past February, the initiative is a first in that the government of Israel is pledging to formulate and fund programs collaboratively with Jewish communities abroad with the goal of investing billions of dollars over the next two decades to bolster the Jewish identity of Diaspora Jews.

Despite the reluctance of government officials to directly comment on how much money Israel expects to invest, a Jewish Agency document sent to Diaspora participants indicated that "the intention is to build the initiative [from Israel's side] from \$30 million in 2014 to \$300 million annually within five years." And the intention, as sources report, is to continue the program for 20 years, meaning that there could be a total long-term investment of over a billion and a half dollars in Diaspora Jewish identity from Israeli coffers.

Following the success of Taglit-Birthright Israel and other such intensive cultural and historical-experience programs, the state is determined to use a connection to Israel as a tool for combating increasing levels of assimilation and intermarriage around the world.

"At the outset, the initiative was designed to bring world Jewry to Israel and bring Israel to world Jewry," one Jewish Agency document explained, citing a goal of determining how best to "reposition Israel as a cornerstone of Jewish identity for a rising generation."

As Dr. David Breakstone, the MERCAZ Olami representative at the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency and the designated

representative of the WZO in developing the new initiative, said: "Those things that we, the Conservative/Masorti Movement, excel in are precisely the sort of programs that will be enhanced by the anticipated influx of funding. In particular, there is recognition on the part of all the partners of the incomparable importance of short and long-term Israel programs and the need to intensify Israel and Hebrew education in both formal and informal settings."

The new initiative has brought together leading Israeli and world Jewish leaders including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky and Minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs Naftali Bennett and their respective professional staffs.

Aimed at younger Jews between 12- to 35-years-old, the initiative is looking to create programming in seven content areas: immersive experiences; follow-up; Israel and peoplehood education in formal institutions an informal settings; serving "the global good;" Jewish life and Israel engagement on campuses; and the immigration of young professionals. Among the recommendations that came out of an online "jam session" earlier this year was the creation of a Global Jewish Service Corps.

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Ashkelon children and soldiers enjoying MERCAZ/AZM Purim baskets



Around the Conservative/Masorti World

Mazal Tov

To the New City Jewish Center, which just became the first ever recipient of the MERCAZ “EL AL Promotional Award,” winning one free roundtrip airline ticket to Israel as reward for getting 200 membership units, most of them new to MERCAZ, signed up as MERCAZ members. For more information about the new promotional campaign, contact the MERCAZ office at 212-533-2061 or info@mercazusa.org.

To Rabbi Judith Hauptman, Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who became the first guest lecturer from the Diaspora to address the Knesset’s weekly beit midrash. Hauptman, herself the first women ever to earn a doctorate in Talmudic studies, was invited by the Knesset program’s founder MK Ruth Calderon from the Yesh Atid Party, herself a scholar of Talmudic literature.

To Prof. Shamma Friedman, who was just awarded the Israel Prize in Talmud for 2014 at recent ceremonies held in Jerusalem. Friedman, a veteran scholar of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Schechter Institute who, following ordination from JTS in 1964 and aliyah in the 1970’s, was instrumental in developing the Jerusalem-based Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. He is the fourth JTS professor to receive The Israel Prize in Talmud, which has been awarded only seven times since 1948.

To Rabbi Yoav Ende, Rabbi and Director of the Educational Center at Kibbutz Hannaton in the Lower Galilee, who earlier this year became one of six non-Orthodox rabbis to begin receiving salaries from the Israeli government for providing religious services in regional communities. Other recipients include one Humanistic rabbi and four Reform rabbis, including Rabbi Miri Gold, of Kibbutz Gezer, in whose name the original lawsuit against the Israeli government was brought by the Israel Religious Action Center in 2005.

To the alumni of USY Pilgrimage, Ramah Seminar and Schechter Day School Network trips still under the age of 26, who now have gained eligibility to receive a free 10-day Taglit-Birthright Israel trip. Heretofore, young adults (18-26) who had already participated in an organized peer educational trip to Israel were excluded from the free 10-day trips. But earlier this year, Taglit-Birthright announced that it would expand the program to include those who had previously toured Israel as part of a high school trip. As a result, a partnership of Conservative movement youth organizations has been established under the name “Shutafim” to provide Conservative young adults with movement-oriented Birthright trips.

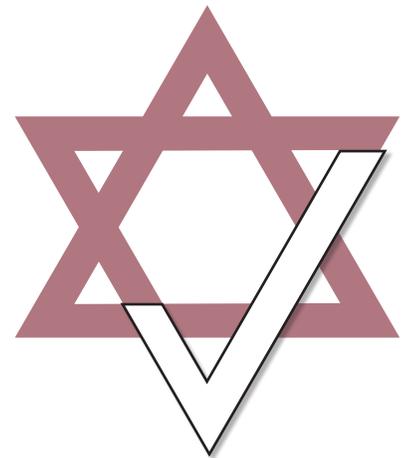
For more information, go to www.freejourneytoisrael.org/conservativeshutafim.



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As Janet Tobin, President of MERCAZ USA and a committee member on the Jewish Agency Board of Governors remarked, “Unlike in the past when Zionism was identified with the ‘negation of the Diaspora,’ now Zionism and Israel are saying that ‘we are all in this together and we need each other to succeed. MERCAZ is thrilled to represent the Conservative Movement in the Jewish Agency in these crucial discussions to make the joint initiative a reality.’”

Watch for Zionist Congress Elections, January 2015



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