

"WOMEN IN ZIONISM: PAST AND PRESENT"

Biennial MERCAZ/Women's League Contest Launched

Attention all teens! The biennial MERCAZ/Women's League Essay Contest has begun. A joint effort of MERCAZ USA, MERCAZ-Canada and Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the competition provides teenagers, ages 14-19, whose families are members of Conservative congregations, the opportunity to win scholarships for use on any Conservative Movement-approved program to Israel.

This year's contest, which opened in the fall and runs through early 2014, focuses on the theme "Women in Zionism: Past & Present," in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the 1983 historic decision by the Jewish Theological Seminary to admit women to rabbinical school.

Two of the essay options have been developed to enable the participants to discuss the important role of women in the history of the Zionist Movement and the current State of Israel and to examine the path (and the obstacles therein) they face towards assuming leadership positions.

A third option, reflecting the current struggle of the Women of the Wall for full access to prayer at the Kotel in Jerusalem, deals with the issue of women and religion in Israel. Go to www.mercazusa.org/pdf/2014-Essay-Womens-Ordination.pdf for the complete essay questionnaire.

The deadline for the 500-word essays is March 7, 2014, with the announcement of the five winners, who will receive awards ranging from \$250 to \$1000, scheduled to take place during the upcoming Women's League Convention, July 17 – 20, 2014, in Whippany,



President Janet Tobin, with MERCAZ Board members Eric Weis (left) and Irwin Tobin (right) at FJMC convention.

New Jersey. Those winners applying for programs scheduled during the summer of 2014 will be notified privately by May 12.

For more information, contact the MERCAZ office at 212-533-2061 or info@mercuzusa.org.

While discussions regarding the ordination of women took place informally during the 1960's and 70's, it was in 1977 that the Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Theological Seminary jointly created "the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis" which announced that "there is no direct halakhic objection to the acts of training and ordaining a woman to be a rabbi, preacher, and teacher." These findings were presented to the Rabbinical Assembly, but the issue was shelved, and the debate continued.

Finally, in 1983, the Seminary faculty voted to admit women to the Rabbinical School. A year later, Amy Eilberg was admitted and became the first woman to be ordained by JTS in May, 1985. Two months later, Beverly Magidson and Jan Kaufman, both graduates of Hebrew Union College, were admitted as rabbis to the Rabbinical Assembly.

By 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the historic decision, the number of ordained female Conservative rabbis had reached 177, about 11% of the total membership of the Rabbinical Assembly, and this figure continues to increase every year not only by women in North America but also in Israel, Europe and South America. In recent years, women rabbis have headed the Rabbinical Assembly as president (Gilah Dror) and executive director (Julie Schonfeld) and the Schechter Rabbinical School as deans (Einat Ramon and Tamar Elad-Appelbaum)

As Janet Tobin, President of MERCAZ USA, noted, "In focusing attention on the place of women in Zionism and Israel, women like Henrietta Szold and Golda Meir, we salute the brave women and their supporters who courageously broke down the doors to JTS and changed the face of Conservative/Masorti Judaism." ■

