

WHY VOTE MERCAZ



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**WHY VOTE
MERCAL**

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Dedicated to my Zionist mentors

Rabbi Joel Meyers

and

Rabbi Joseph Wernik

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of voting for MERCAZ in the World Zionist Congress elections

Once every five years, Diaspora Jews vote for one of the “*britot*” (parties) that make up the World Zionist Organization (WZO). People often ask, “Why should I vote? What difference does it make which *brit* I vote for?” “Why should I vote for MERCAZ?”

The contents of this book provide some answers, but first, let’s clarify what “MERCAZ” represents. MERCAZ — which means “center” in Hebrew, but also was used as an acronym for “Movement for the Reaffirmation of Conservative (Masorti) Zionism” — was established in the late 1970s as the Zionist arm of the worldwide Masorti movement. The aim of its founding was to enable Conservative/Masorti Jewish organizations worldwide to have representation in the “national institutions” of the Jewish people — the World Zionist Organization, Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (JNF), and Keren Hayesod (United Israel Appeal).

MERCAZ is *not* just another movement organization; it is a comprehensive framework in which Israel/Zionist engagement is enhanced for the spectrum of Conservative/Masorti groups. The global MERCAZ delegation to the World Zionist Congress is composed of key representatives of many of the following groups:

Congregational unions

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in North America

The Masorti movement in Israel

Masorti Olami in Latin America, Europe, the former Soviet Union, Australia, Africa, and Asia

Rabbinical schools

The Schechter Institutes (Israel)

Jewish Theological Seminary and Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies (United States)

Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano (Latin America)

Zacharias Frankel College (Europe)

Youth organizations

United Synagogue Youth (North America)

Ramah Camps (North America and beyond)

NOAM (No'ar Masorti) (Israel)

NOAM Olami (Latin America, Europe)

TALI Jewish studies program (Israel)

Young adult networks

Nativ College Leadership Program

Reshet Ramah

Kibbutz Hanaton

The Conservative Yeshiva

Marom Olami

Associations

The Rabbinical Assembly

Cantors Assembly

Jewish Educators Assembly

The North American Association of Synagogue Executives
Women's League for Conservative Judaism
Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs

This inclusive approach also applies to the MERCAZ chapters operating in 16 countries — United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Germany, France, Ukraine, Russia, Hungary, and Sweden — with more on the way.

In addition to political influence at decision-making tables, the Conservative/Masorti movement gains financially from the votes cast for MERCAZ every five years for World Zionist Congress representation. Subsequent national institution allocations promote Israel-oriented conferences and missions, Israel awareness, and Israel engagement everywhere that Conservative/Masorti Jews reside. The allocations translate into approximately \$4 million annually, including:

- MERCAZ Olami's entire budget
- Masorti Olami's primary organizational budget
- Marom Olami's total funding
- The Israel Masorti movement (a sizable share of its revenue)
- The Schechter Institutes' TALI schools (an important part of its budget)
- NOAM Olami, USY Israel youth programming
- Funding the training of Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) as staff at Ramah Camps
- Funding for Israel-themed programs for each of the five rabbinical schools and for the affiliate associations (RA, CA, JEA, NAASE, WLCJ, FJMC)

Opportunities also arise for additional funding. One example is Israel-based programming funded during each *shmita* (sabbatical) year.

Votes for MERCAZ enable the Conservative/Masorti movement to obtain “seats at the table” as decisions are made with regard to issues facing the Jewish world.

For instance:

- MERCAZ receives important seats on the board of Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael. In this capacity, the movement has succeeded in obtaining \$50 million shekels for an environmental center and its programming.
- MERCAZ receives lay positions in the WZO *hanhala* (governing body) and expanded executive, as well as a full-time position — held since 2020 by Dr. Yizhar Hess — on the professional staff of the WZO, with its budget and staff serving Israel-Diaspora relations.
- MERCAZ receives important seats at decision-making tables of the board of governors of the Jewish Agency for Israel, notably Israel stream allocations, the unity of the Jewish people (promoting religious pluralism), and aliyah.

The size and strength of the MERCAZ delegation enable alliances with like-minded groups like Arzenu (the political voice of Reform, Progressive, and Liberal Religious Zionists) as well as periodic alliances with other *britot* in the Center, Center-Left, and Center-Right.

Through successful representation of the movement’s values, the stature of the Conservative/Masorti movement grows and the centrist voice within world Jewry is widely heard on behalf of:

- Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state
- Defense of minority rights inside Israel (including the LGBTQIA+ community, Arabs, differently abled individuals, adherents of minority Jewish religious streams)
- Advocating the expression of religious pluralism in Israel (worship at the Kotel, life-cycle ceremonies, governmental allocations, etc.)
- “Shrinking the conflict” with the Palestinians, where possible

- Environmental responsibility
- Defending the recognition of Conservative/Masorti conversions
- Opposing changes in Israel's Law of Return
- Jewish unity without uniformity
- Enhancing Israel-Diaspora relations

Support for MERCAZ is crucial! The next election is set to take place in early March through mid-May 2025. Each of the competing *britot* will be informing their potential supporters.

Be prepared to cast your vote for the 2025 World Zionist Congress. You will be affirming your personal commitment to Zionism, Jewish peoplehood, and the well-being of your *brit* — MERCAZ — within the slated options.

Illustrating the impact of support for MERCAZ

The World Zionist Congress (WZC) is the supreme institution and legislature of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). The First Zionist Congress was convened by Theodor Herzl and took place in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. The WZC now meets once every five years in Israel; its delegates formulate policy and oversee the WZO's institutions, notably the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

At the “extraordinary” session of the WZC in April 2023, held in honor of Israel's 75th anniversary, resolutions were approved that demonstrated Diaspora Jewry's point of view.

This “extraordinary” WZC session offered an opportunity for world Jewry to go on record as being in favor of — or being indifferent to — the liberal values perceived to be under assault as a result of numerous proposed right-wing policies.

Thanks to the carefully coordinated efforts of MERCAZ USA, the advocacy organization of the Conservative/Masorti movement; Arzenu, the political voice of Reform Judaism and other progressive and liberal Zionists; and additional allies representing the polit-

ical Center, Center/Left, and Center/Right, the WZC's resolutions were successful.

One hundred twenty-five delegates affiliated with MERCAZ and Arzenu constituted the “swing” votes in a victorious coalition among the approximately 625 delegates who voted. If these 125 affirmatives had instead been opposing votes, the outcome would have had negative results:

What they affirmed:

- Anchoring the position of Israel's Declaration of Independence, which clearly supports civil rights for all minorities in the world Zionist movement (418 yes, 202 no)
- Reaffirming the Jerusalem Program — affirming Jewish unity and Israel as the state of the Jewish people, not merely of the Jewish religion (398 yes, 225 no)
- The WZC's calling on the Israeli government not to amend or limit the Law of Return (399 yes, 237 no)
- Reaffirming Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and advocating against hasty and one-sided changes in its judiciary (368 yes, 262 no)
- Strengthening synagogues — of all streams, not just Orthodox — and Jewish community centers in the Diaspora in their connection to Zionism and the State of Israel (388 yes, 243 no)
- Complete equality for LGBTQIA+ individuals in the national institutions, including the WZO, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (JNF), Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Hayesod (354 yes, 271 no)
- The WZC's opposing the revocation of recognition of Conservative and Reform conversions conducted in Israel (384 yes, 238 no)
- Mandating appropriate representation — at least 40 percent — of women in all levels of the national institutions (432 yes, 197 no)

PART
ONE

**MERCAZ OFFERS
A VOICE ABOUT
ZIONIST ISSUES**

ZIONISM'S 'JERUSALEM PROGRAM': JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD, UNITY WITHOUT UNIFORMITY

June 6, 2023

When I became president of MERCAZ Olami, in February 2016, a comprehensive vision of Jewish unity governed the major institutions of the Jewish people — the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Kayemet LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund, and Keren Hayesod-United Israel Appeal. Substantive disagreements existed among more than a dozen Zionist parties that took part in the elections of the World Zionist Congress — the WZO's supreme legislative authority — held every five years. Yet it was clear from the outcomes of those elections that all were committed to forging a “wall-to-wall” Zionist coalition. All sides understood the benefits of being inclusive of every type of Jew, every type of Zionist. In fact, every WZO voter had to affirm the criteria of the 1953 (updated in 1968) Jerusalem Program, which emphasized “fostering the unity of the Jewish people.”

Regrettably, new “parties” have entered into the mix that seek to eliminate from the final coalition any factions whose views they disagree with. This divisive attitude made necessary the proposing of a resolution reaffirming “Jewish peoplehood” at a convening of last fall's Va'ad HaPoel HaTzioni (Zionist General Council). The resolution called upon the WZO “to deepen its activities in the areas of Jewish peoplehood, promoting the connection between the State of Israel and the Jewish communities inside the Jewish state and throughout the Diaspora, regardless of their affiliation.”

Rabbi Mauricio Balter, executive director of MERCAZ Olami and Masorti Olami, said that the proposal “might seem obvious, but in fact, it is tremendously important for our ability to initiate and act on behalf of pluralistic Judaism and to strengthen Jewish unity throughout the world.” WZO vice-chair Dr. Yizhar Hess noted that “the fact that this resolution gained support across the board proves that the Zionist movement has matured and understands that there is more than one way to be a Jew and to be a Zionist.” One prominent example is the Jewish Agency's goal of operating “as a living

bridge between Israeli society and the Jewish world by promoting Jewish peoplehood.”

What is “Jewish peoplehood?”

In the 1940s, both Rabbi Milton Steinberg and Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan pioneered the use of this term. They sought to capture a sense of communal identity beyond the nationalism supporting the concept of Jewish statehood. Dr. Erica Brown and Dr. Misha Galperin, authors of “The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We Be One?” (2009), noted that Jewish peoplehood “has been called by different names or spurred by different concerns: continuity, identity, renaissance, solidarity, unity. In Hebrew, peoplehood is *amiyut*, from the word *am*, or nation.... Peoplehood is about all of these terms but goes well beyond it.”

Mordecai Kaplan elaborated upon factors that characterize Jewish peoplehood:

- a sense of common history and destiny
- a common language and literature, a common ancestral land as the focal point of its future hopes, common folkways, and a common religion
- a social cohesiveness, with Jews being recognized as a distinct group by non-Jews
- Kaplan identified three categories of Jewish distinctiveness:
- Believing — a set of religious postulates and values affirmed in diverse ways
- Behaving — Jewish “sancta,” “folkways,” and practices identified with Jewish holy days, life-cycle milestones, and daily life-style
- Belonging — affiliation with other Jews in groups, networks, and associations

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, adherence to the inclusive nature of Jewish peoplehood gained traction. In the aftermath of Israel’s military victory in the Six-Day War of June 1967, United Jewish

Appeal's themes in seeking supporters relied heavily on the notion of *amiyut*.

Additionally, the aforementioned "Jerusalem Program" was revised by the 27th World Zionist Congress in 1968, emphasizing peoplehood among the "foundations of Zionism," such as:

- the unity of the Jewish people, its bond to its historic homeland, Eretz Yisrael
- Strengthening Israel as a Jewish, Zionist, and democratic state, and shaping it as an exemplary society with a unique moral and spiritual character, marked by mutual respect for the multi-faceted Jewish people, rooted in the vision of the prophets, striving for peace and the betterment of the world
- Ensuring the future and distinctiveness of the Jewish people by furthering Jewish, Hebrew, and Zionist education
- Nurturing mutual Jewish responsibility, defending the rights of Jews as individuals and as a nation, representing the national Zionist interests of the Jewish people

In 1986, Dr. Jonathan Woocher, of the Jewish Education Service of North America, authored "Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews," a study of UJA leadership. His research identified seven tenets of UJA peoplehood, as a Diaspora (American-Jewish) adaptation of the "Jerusalem Program":

- The unity of the Jewish people — "We are one"
- Mutual responsibility
- The priority of the Jewish people's survival amid a threatening world
- The centrality of the State of Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people
- The enduring value of Jewish tradition as an underlying source of Jewish peoplehood's inspiration for both observant and non-observant Jews

- Tzedakah as promoting the Jewish people's continuity for the future and commitment to social justice in the present
- Liberal democracy as a virtue for Jewish people in Israel and in the Diaspora

Dr. Charles Liebman augmented Woocher's assessment with guiding principles of this "folk religion," among which were:

- The Jews constitute one indivisible people. Denominational differences must not be permitted to threaten this essential unity.
- Ensuring the physical and spiritual survival of the Jewish people is more important than theological disputation.
- Jewish rituals are valuable forms of Jewish self-expression, but individuals must be free to select and adapt Jewish practices to conform with modern norms.
- Every Jew must work for the survival of Israel, even if they do not live there.

As supporters of Zionism's "Jerusalem Program" on behalf of the inclusive unity of the Jewish people, the national institutions of Am Yisrael must continue to endorse the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. This means promoting diversity and pluralism within the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Kayemet LeIsrael, and Keren Hayesod.

Irrespective of divergent views among the World Zionist Congress participants, we must remain unified both in what we favor and what we oppose:

We favor the defense and strengthening of Medinat Yisrael, encouraging aliyah, promoting Jewish values and identity through Hebrew education, and the building of bridges between Israel and the Diaspora.

We also are unified in opposition to antisemitism, to anti-Zionism, to assimilation, to Jewish illiteracy, and to indifference to one's Jewish destiny.

Naysayers — either of the Israeli Jewish or world Jewry communities — cannot be allowed to enter the Zionist institutional ranks to divide us. As Zionists and as Jews, we must preserve our unity amid our diversity.



THE RETURN OF ‘WHO IS A JEW?’

May 30, 2023

The Israeli conflict over “Who is a Jew?” is resurfacing.

A prominent Jewish identity controversy was the 1963 “Brother Daniel Case.” Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen was born a Jew in Poland in 1922, but converted to Catholicism during the war, assumed the name Daniel, and eventually became a priest. Daniel claimed he was still a Jew and sought to attain automatic citizenship under the Law of Return when he moved to Israel. The Israeli government ruled against him due to his Christian conversion; the decision was upheld by the Supreme Court.

With the awakening to activism by Soviet Jewry, aliyah by people of questionable halachic status increased. In 1970, the Supreme Court offered clarification about Jewish personal status, expanding the Law of Return to include grandchildren of Jews who — unlike Brother Daniel — had not adopted another religion. This expansion also applied to converts into Judaism through Orthodox institutions in Israel and worldwide, and to those who underwent Reform or Conservative conversions performed outside the State of Israel.

A monopoly in control of Israeli conversion remained in the hands of the government’s “Conversion Authority,” operating under the auspices of the Prime Minister’s Office, with approval of the Chief Rabbinate. This monopoly gained a reputation for generating unpleasant experiences, and so most prospective candidates for conversion did not apply through this structure. Some sought alternative paths, such as programs offered by Modern Orthodox bodies as well as by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel.

Battles with regard to “Who is a Jew?” inside Israel intensified in the late 1990s. These rivalries led, in 1998, to the Ne’eman Commission compromise, which aimed to address previously unsanctioned Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative conversions taking place inside Israel. The plan failed since the Chief Rabbinate refused to participate or to grant recognition.

As the numbers of *olim* of halachically questionable status from the former Soviet Union mounted, along with questions regarding the Jewish status of potential *olim* from Ethiopia, pressure was applied to the Jewish Agency for Israel for a definitive response. To assist *olim* from the FSU, in 2003 the Jewish Agency for Israel created an accelerated conversion program taking place at Israeli absorption centers in Eastern Europe. However, these programs faced an obstacle — they were staffed by Orthodox rabbis not endorsed by the Chief Rabbinate.

The next stage in the “Who is a Jew?” controversy occurred in 2005, when the Supreme Court extended Israeli civil — but not religious — recognition to Reform and Conservative conversions taking place abroad even if preparatory work was completed inside Israel.

By 2010, the Israel Defense Forces felt the need to weigh in. They introduced Nativ: The National Center for Jewish Studies, Identity, and Conversion. Designed for both soldiers and National Service volunteers, the center offered a framework through which people of questionable halachic status can study in a preparatory course for conversion into Judaism. Nativ has continued to graduate hundreds of prospective converts. Unfortunately, this approach too has been frowned upon by the official Israeli rabbinate.

As part of a counter-reaction, in 2010, Knesset Member David Rotem attempted to legislate an increase in the Chief Rabbinate’s authority over conversions. The effort failed to gain approval, but the legislative momentum did not die. In 2017, Shas and United Torah Judaism advanced a bill to solidify the Chief Rabbinate’s control as the sole body authorized by the government to perform conversions in Israel.

Through it all, a major part of the problem was not being addressed. The government-sanctioned process for conversion is off-putting to many prospective converts from the FSU. They speak Hebrew, serve in the IDF/National Service, and regard themselves as Jews. Yet more than 50 percent of candidates both in Israel's civilian program and in the IDF Nativ program drop out before completing the process.

Commentator Daniel Gordis pointed out, "Many thousands of these *olim* would be happy to convert...to fully join the Jewish people. Many, though, do not even bother trying, knowing what a horrific experience the rabbinate has in store for them."

Seeking alternatives, some folks seek conversion in alternative venues: notably the Modern Orthodox Giyur K'Halacha Conversion Court network or other non-Haredi Orthodox but unsanctioned programs. Here are but a few:

- Ami, a conversion program founded by Rabbi Chaim Druckman
- Meir and Ora Institutes in Jerusalem
- Beit Moriah in Be'er Sheva
- Machanaim in Jerusalem and Ramat Gan
- Kibbutz Ein HaNatziv in the Beit She'an Valley
- Ohr Torah Stone in Efrat
- B'not Ruth for women in Bat Ayin

Conversion institutes also are offered by the Conservative/Masorti and Reform movements in Israel.

While the independent, unsanctioned liberal Orthodox programs have been free from public disdain, the non-Orthodox movements have not been so fortunate. In response, in 2005 they submitted a case insisting that recognition for civil purposes be accorded to their conversion graduates. The Supreme Court delayed its response, hoping that permissive legislation from the Knesset would be forthcoming.

After 15 years of inconclusive Knesset deliberations, in early 2021 the Court acted. It ruled that individuals who convert into Judaism in Israel through the Reform and Conservative movements must be recognized as Jews for the purpose of the Law of Return and therefore entitled to Israeli citizenship.

Shas and United Torah Judaism were outraged. They vowed not to join any future coalition that was not committed to overturning the Court ruling or legislating to nullify it. With a historically right-wing Haredi government assuming power in the late fall of 2022, this vow gained traction. Proposals to dramatically weaken the authority of the Supreme Court and to enhance the Knesset's ability to reverse Court rulings have made this threat realistic.

Such a reversal would be harmful to hundreds of alumni and future enrollees in the non-Orthodox Conversion Institute. It also would damage Israel-Diaspora relations, already harmed by non-implementation of the Kotel Agreement of 2016 by often hateful comments made public by Haredi Knesset members and by the Chief Rabbinate's stranglehold on Israeli life-cycle policies.

Consequently, Rabbi Mauricio Balter, executive director of MERCAZ Olami and Masorti Olami, submitted a resolution to the April 2023 "Extraordinary Session of the" World Zionist Congress gathering which opposed the revocation of Conservative and Reform conversions taking place in Israel.

The resolution states:

"Whereas the Israeli Supreme Court in Israel has long recognized Conservative and Reform conversions held in recognized communities — both for the purposes of registration in the Population Registry as Jews and/or for the purposes of the Law of Return,

"Whereas most Diaspora Jews belong to the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism,

"And whereas there are voices in the new Israeli government seeking to bypass the court's ruling and to promote conversion legislation that will exclude the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism,

[the World Zionist Congress] “calls on the Israeli government not to enact a conversion law that will exclude or discriminate, directly or indirectly, against Jews who were converted under the auspices of the Reform and Conservative streams.”



THE CONTROVERSY OVER ULTRA-ORTHODOX DRAFT DEFERMENTS

August 14, 2024

With the withdrawal of the British mandatory authorities, the State of Israel emerged in 1947-49 into a military conflict, its War of Independence. In a battle for survival, able-bodied Jews were expected to serve in self-defense of the new country. In addition to military considerations, the unfolding Zionist infrastructure had to demonstrate its ability to unify a fragmented Jewish community. As noted by Daniel Gordis, “In 1947, hoping to avoid a split with the ultra-Orthodox on the eve of Israel’s creation, when he could least afford internal discord that might convince the international community that the Jews were not yet ready to govern themselves, Ben-Gurion agreed to what is now called the ‘status quo arrangement.’”

Concessions to the Haredim included a draft deferment for 400 exceptional full-time yeshiva students. The Haredi perspective was premised upon the destruction of European yeshivot and the murder of an entire generation of religious luminaries by the Nazis. Nurturing future scholars, they argued, was necessary to replenish the Torah scholarship that had been destroyed in the Holocaust. Ben-Gurion was persuaded that leniencies were justified in obtaining support for statehood; he assumed that ultra-Orthodoxy was a dying breed of Judaism that would gradually fade and disappear.

Initially, the cap of 400 draft exemptions remained stable. Over time, it increased only modestly to 800. But in 1977 a dramatic expansion took place when Menachem Begin’s Herut party surprisingly received the largest share of Knesset votes. Begin was given the opportunity to form a coalition government. He needed to court

the alliance of the Ashkenazi “Agudah” Haredi party. The courtship required increasing subsidies for Agudah schools — and removing the upper limit of 800 draft exemptions.

These concessions spawned a massive increase in both Agudah students and deferments. This Ashkenazi achievement incentivized the Sephardi/Mizrachi Haredim to pursue similar benefits and led to the creation of the Sephardi Shas party in 1984. By the time of Israel’s war with Hamas in the wake of the October 7, 2023, attack, Haredi — both Ashkenazi and Sephardi — draft exemptions numbered 63,000. This huge figure accounted for 13 percent of draft-eligible Israeli Jewish males. Post-October 7, as military pressures mounted in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, and Iran, as well as Iranian surrogate outposts in Syrian and Iraq, the IDF faced a manpower shortage.

Of necessity, the Knesset increased the age for “calling up” reservists. It also expanded the duration of service required of new inductees. As threats mounted for Jewish Israelis, the fact of the 63,000 exempt Haredim intensified the feeling of resentment among non-Haredi Israelis. Why shouldn’t the ultra-Orthodox take part in Israel’s self-defense during such a critical and dangerous period? What about the thousands of so-called “Lost Boys,” deferred Haredim who are not full-time students? An Israel Democracy Institute survey indicates that at least 22 percent of allegedly full-time Haredi yeshiva students are illegally employed, in violation of the terms of their exemption.

Feeling mounting societal pressure, Israel’s High Court recently ruled against sustaining automatic exemptions for all Haredi males. Instead, in addition to the current group of 1,800 Haredi soldiers, the court ordered a 3,000-man gradual increment annually in such draft notices. Intensified societal debate ensued.

In defense of Haredi exemptions were voices like Avi Shafran of Agudath Israel of America. Shafran wrote:

“Haredim believe...that the religious devotion in the form of Torah study, no less than the actions of foot soldiers or intelligence officers, is important to Israel’s security.... The Talmud, for exam-

ple, states (Sanhedrin 49a) that ‘if it weren’t for King David’s Torah study, his military commander Yoav would not have succeeded in war, and if not for Yoav’s efforts in battle, David would not have been able to learn Torah.’” For this reason, Shafran claimed that regarding “the Haredi insistence on preserving a sizable cadre of men engaged in full-time dedication to Torah study, . . . those dedicated Jews are not evading public service but contributing to it They sincerely believe [it] is essential to the safety and security of all their fellow Jews.”

Additionally relevant is that Haredi units within the IDF slowly have been increasing — 730 Haredi soldiers in 2009, 1,185 in 2021, 1,800 in 2024, with hundreds of others volunteering for duty post-October 7. Simultaneously, ultra-Orthodox parental opposition to their sons going into IDF service intensified. Consequently, a sizable percentage of Haredi soldiers became de facto “Lone Soldiers,” even though their close relatives are Israeli citizens and residents. They now comprise a sizable portion of IDF enlistees turning to the Michael Levin Lone Soldier Centers and base for support.

Journalist Liel Leibovitz has elaborated upon practical obstacles to Haredi integration into the IDF. He reminds readers that soon after October 7, as many as 4,000 Haredi young men volunteered to enter the IDF; however, 3,120 were “deemed . . . unfit to serve, mostly for being too physically weak to fight.” And among the remaining 880 Haredi volunteers, only 540 were officially accepted by the IDF — 13.5 percent of the initial 4,000. Leibovitz attributes the IDF’s reluctant welcome to its realization that “fully integrating Haredim into its ranks would require . . . providing [Haredi standards of] strictly kosher food [and] addressing concerns rising from co-ed military service.” Commentator Susan Greene added that IDF resistance to change suited the Haredi leadership’s desire “to keep Haredi young men cloistered in their communities, without exposure to Israel’s mixed-gender army or . . . the temptation to leave Haredi life after serving.”

As a rebuttal to the claim that Jewish texts oppose Haredi military service, Rabbi David Golinkin contextualizes the talmudic statement in Sotah 21a, “that only the Torah protects the people of Israel.”

Rashi explains that while Torah study does “protect from suffering [emotional distress] and saves from the evil inclination,” the Torah “does not protect against bullets, missiles, and bombs.” “Aggadic” (sermonic) talmudic sections were not intended to be taken literally. They certainly did not have the force of Jewish law. Instead, Halachah favors “doing one’s part” in the defense of the nation. Moreover, Golinkin laments, “63,000 Haredi yeshiva students not serving in the IDF constitutes a massive chillul Hashem” — a desecration of the God-revering life-style. Accordingly, “many secular Jews have distanced themselves from Judaism as a direct result of the exemption.”

“Times of Israel” editor David Horovitz added a historical context: “In contrast to centuries of Orthodox Jewish tradition, and in contrast to the abiding norm in Jewish communities around the world, only in Israel, and only in the past half-century, has full-time Torah study for the young male Haredi masses become the norm... in exchange for alliances” and enabled by funding from political factions in the Knesset. Haredi leaders insist “that their publics must not share in the practical burden of the defense of our homeland, indeed must not perform any form of national service...” In this way, Horovitz writes, “universal draft exemptions are undermining the other millennia-old Orthodox tradition in which the very best and brightest of scholars *are* subsidized by the rest of the community...”

In addition to the military’s need for additional manpower, Israel’s economy is challenged by the growth of a population ineligible for post-army employment benefits. In conjunction with the growth in military spending, Israel’s national budget is stressed by ever-expanding government subsidies to support the Haredim. Why? Nearly half of Haredi families live below the poverty line. The Israel Democracy Institute estimates that their welfare costs have grown to \$2.6 billion annually. Additionally, Haredi adult yeshivot (“kollels”) receive \$1.7 billion in national subsidies. As Haredi birthrates continue to grow, the numbers exceed 6.5 children per household. While most Haredi women do work outside the home, almost 50 percent of Haredi men study Torah in lieu of earning a living. Even

those who do work often do so only part-time. Haredi IDF service and post-army employment benefits would offer a partial remedy that can no longer be ignored.

On the optimistic side of the ledger, a Smith Consulting poll presented to the Knesset revealed that although 72 percent of the ultra-Orthodox oppose their ranks being subject to the draft, 59 percent “indicated — to one degree of another — that the creation of [IDF special] service tracks that would allow them to maintain their lifestyle would have a beneficial effect on overall enlistment numbers.” Even if the impact of unique Haredi units would be modest, it would help repair the growing rift between Haredim and the other Jewish sectors of Israeli society. For reasons of IDF manpower, Israel’s taxed economy, and a sense of injustice felt by non-Haredi Israelis, it is more urgent than ever to find a solution.



THE RISE AND FALL OF ISRAEL’S CHIEF RABBINATE

August 8, 2024

From 1517 until 1917, the entire Middle East was governed by the Ottoman Empire as a “caliphate,” an Islamic sacred polity. Within the vast terrain of Arab lands and North Africa, religious governance and a measure of minority group autonomy were assured through the “millet system.” The creation of “millet courts” enabled Istanbul to appoint a global chief cleric for each faith group. For Jews, a chief rabbi (“*chacham bashi*,” later renamed “*rishon letzion*”) operated out of Istanbul. This official was charged with administering his faith’s empire-wide bureaucracy of regional “chief” rabbis assigned to area after area.

The Ottoman Empire weakened and collapsed under the weight of being on the losing side in World War I. The victorious Western powers assumed control and assigned a “mandate” to the British and the French for the administration of designated areas. Palestine was placed under the control of the United Kingdom, which sought to not tamper with the Ottoman law status quo. Under Brit-

ain's Mandatory Palestine government, during World War I, London-based Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was appointed as the first mandatory Ashkenazi chief rabbi, serving alongside the Sephardi/Mizrachi *rishon letzion*.

Rav Kook “was a visionary, a leader who sought to bridge the gaps between secular and religious Jewish communities,” said journalist Zvika Klein. “He wasn’t just another political figure in a rabbi’s cloak” — presumably like Israel’s chief rabbis today. “He saw the secular Zionist movement as part of a divine plan.... He believed that even the non-religious efforts to build the state would eventually align with Jewish spiritual life.”

Rav Kook sought to use the Chief Rabbinate to bring all types of Jews closer to Judaism and to elevate the status of his faith in the eyes of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Led by Torah luminaries, the Zionist infrastructure accepted “the Rabbinate” as Judaism’s official authority. The Rabbinate certified conversions, marriages, divorces, and kashrut and spread Torah messages relating ancient texts that applied to current concerns. Rav Kook also affirmed the necessity of Palestine Jewry’s right and ability to conduct their own self-defense. Klein acknowledged that Rav Kook “understood the necessity of a military to safeguard the [emerging] Jewish state and balance defense with higher moral principles. His legacy was one of proactive, positive engagement with... challenges.”

Acclaimed mainstream religious leaders remained acceptable even after Rav Kook’s death in 1935. These revered Zionist Torah scholars included rabbis Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, Yitzhak Nissim, and Isser Unterman, as well as Shlomo Goren and Ovadia Yosef (whose terms ended in 1983). Rabbi David Golinkin assessed that these towering leaders “were widely respected for their Torah knowledge and courageous halachic decisions.” For example, Chief Rabbi Herzog (grandfather of Israel’s current president), who served from 1936 until 1959, had earned popularity for having openly opposed the restrictive British White Paper on Jewish immigration. He also made

efforts to save Jews in Europe during World War II, and he contributed significantly to the corpus of Torah scholarship.

Sadly, the lofty platform from which these estimable leaders promoted Judaism eroded amid a scourge of politicization, corruption, and nepotism. As assessed by Rabbi Golinkin, under pressure from Haredi parties in the Knesset, as of 1983 the chief rabbis have been “chosen not [necessarily] for their merits but rather for political reasons.” The nadir of the Chief Rabbinate was the term of Rabbi Yona Metzger (2003-13). As Zvika Klein reported, the Metzger era “ended in a flurry of legal troubles, namely bribery, fraud, money laundering, theft, and breach of trust.” The institution understandably lost the public’s trust.

Accordingly, in 2013, as recorded by Rabbi Golinkin, the process of selecting the chief rabbi by the Ministry for Religious Services degenerated into “a lengthy political campaign which included curses, newspaper ads, and...deals between candidates and political parties.... The only thing missing from most of the campaigning was a religious message.... The election was not about bringing Israelis closer to Judaism but about political power.” Additionally, nepotism became evident. In 2013 the two candidates selected for service were Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, son of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, and Rabbi David Lau, son of former Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, both controlled by Israel’s Haredi parties.

With the status of the Chief Rabbinate in decline, in early July 2024 the 10-year terms of Rabbi Lau and Rabbi Yosef came to an end. The succession process experienced procedural delays. As Zvika Klein pondered, “Chief rabbis retire, but did anybody notice?” Problems had proliferated in conversions, marriages, divorces, kashrut supervision, and so forth. Previously, the Rabbinate would not accept conversions, marriages, or divorces conducted by non-Orthodox rabbis. This non-recognition now extended to most Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora as well. Securing kosher supervision became more and more expensive and unreliable. Battles ensued regarding access to local *mikva’ot*. Some 450,000 Russian *olim* of questionable Jewish “status” were left without recourse. “*Agunot*” — women abandoned by their husbands or whose husbands had disappeared and

who were therefore “chained” and unable to remarry — remained in limbo. Increasing numbers of engaged couples avoided marriage ceremonies conducted under the authority of the Rabbinat.

Rabbi Golinkin concluded that “the sad fact of the matter is that the Chief Rabbinat of Israel is [today] a coercive bureaucracy without a constituency. It is disliked by Haredim, religious Zionists, Conservative and Reform Jews, and secular Israelis alike.... It only exists at this point so that political parties can use it as a tool of influence and patronage.” A survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute revealed that 72 percent of Israelis would prefer either the end of a state rabbinat or one emerging in a different format. Opinions have proliferated regarding a remedy to these mounting societal concerns. How can Israel’s Judaism be subject to a coercive and ineffective national rabbinic system, a remnant of the Ottomans?

Rabbi Kenneth Brander of Efrat, president of the Ohr Torah Stone network, wrote: “Israel needs a rabbinat that uses Halachah to serve the wide spectrum of the state’s Jewish public while also playing a leadership role in the changing needs of the Diaspora. The status quo will only continue to fuel public cynicism about religion, promote divisions in society, and put the state’s role in the Jewish world at risk.” Rav Brander urges modest changes, putting a more friendly face upon the Rabbanut. “When it comes to weddings, for instance, simply being more friendly to couples, including those who do not identify as religious, would go a long way to make sure they get married under a halachic chupah.”

Rabbi David Stav, a leader of the more user-friendly non-Haredi Tzohar rabbinical organization, offered himself as an alternative candidate for chief rabbi in the 2013 election. However, he failed to outmaneuver the Haredi-sanctioned candidates. Yet even critics of the status quo often were lukewarm in offering support. On the surface, Rav Stav did seek to democratize the Rabbinat both in its matters of selection and in its accountability to the public. Yet the objection to him was that he wanted to sustain the unacceptable status quo; he simply sought to replace the Haredi chief rabbis with members of his Tzohar group.

A more extensive reform of the Rabbinate has been advocated by Rabbi Seth Farber and his organization, Itim. Rav Farber looked not to America's separation of church and state but to the British Chief Rabbinate (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l), with inklings of Rav Kook's inspiring vision for the position. The chief rabbi should serve as a personal role model for all Israeli Jews, to whom his Torah messages would be addressed. As in the UK, the official Rabbinate would retain authority over kashrut supervision and still embody all facets of the state-sanctioned dimension of Judaism. However, akin to British Jewry, the chief rabbi and his entourage would relinquish control on matters of personal status. Each "stream" would operate marriages, conversions, divorces, etc., on its own terms.

Conservative/Masorti leaders Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Reuven Hammer (z"l), former president of the international Rabbinical Assembly; and Rabbi David Golinkin, president of the Schechter Institutes, called for the abolition of Israel's Chief Rabbinate. In their view, Judaism would remain the official state religion of Medinat Yisrael, but the link between Israel's polity and a specific stream of Judaism must be severed. Severed too would be the application of coercive power by any specific political party in matters of Judaism. Given the urgent needs of vast numbers of Russian *olim*, civil marriage and divorce should be legalized, along with leniency in criteria for burial in Jewish cemeteries.

For now, interim personnel are functioning in place of chief rabbis — Rabbi Eliezer Igra as interim president of the Supreme Rabbinical Court, and Rabbi Yaakov Roja as interim president of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate. Leading candidates for these roles once again face charges of nepotism from within Haredi rabbinic dynasties — Be'er Sheva Chief Rabbi Yehudah Deri, brother of Shas leader Aryeh Deri, and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, brother of the current Ashkenazi chief rabbi. The prominence once again of dynastic figures intensifies Rav Stav's call for unifying the two chief rabbi positions into one. Having both an Ashkenazi and a Mizrachi chief rabbi was a post-World War I creation of the British Mandate, not a move in accordance with Torah law. "Instead of being a source

of unity,” Rav Stav said, having two chief rabbis “is a source of divisions....” There used to be “a few arguments for why we have two rabbis: The rabbis would be able to balance one another — so if one is too liberal, the other could be more conservative. Or if one was an expert in one field of Halachah, the other could specialize in another.” Rav Stav noted, however, that the two-headed Chief Rabbinate instead “invites conflicts on a constant basis.”

Given all of this controversy, Rabbis Schorsch, Hammer, and Golinik all aspire to have the Chief Rabbinate revert to the days of Rav Abraham Kook. The goal should be to unify the Jewish people rather than fragment them further. They advocate a Diaspora-style “free marketplace” of Jewish faith. Every Israeli Jew should be permitted to select his or her preferred rabbi. This would apply to matters of marriage, divorce, conversion, and burial; of kashrut supervision; of access to mikva’ot; of state funding for community rabbis; and so forth. Masorti leaders are confident that free and open competition will not alienate Israelis from Yiddishkeit. Instead, more and more Israeli and Diaspora Jews will come to love Judaism and to respect Israel’s rabbis.



THE LEGAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ISRAEL’S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

May 19, 2023

I recently returned from a month-long stay in Israel, visiting family and attending the “Extraordinary Session” of the World Zionist Congress. The body’s deliberations included debates between proponents and opponents of the proposed changes in the Israeli judicial system. Often at issue was the meaning of Israel’s “foundational document,” the May 14, 1948, Declaration of Independence. Regarding Megillat Ha’atzmaut as a statement containing checks and balances for the securing of human rights, the World Zionist Congress issued a resolution calling for “anchoring the position of the Declaration of Independence in the Zionist movement.”

What issues are in question?

The unique nature of the text: The May 1948 document was not actually a “declaration of independence” from the British Empire, in contrast to the United States’ founding document of 1776. The British Mandate was coming to an end in 1948; in its wake, the ancient Jewish commonwealth was being restored. David Ben-Gurion referred to this verbal proclamation of statehood as Israel’s “founding *megillah*” (scroll). “*Megillah*” is sacred terminology for religionists and lofty terminology for secularists.

“*Megillat Ha’atzmaut*” was printed on sections of parchment that were sewn together, in the ancient manner, as befitted a document that was special and “foundational,” verging on sacred. The text was printed in a font modeled on that used for holy writings over the centuries.

The wording of Israel’s Declaration of Independence intentionally sought to be in accordance with the democratic standards recognized by the United Nations. The UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 1947 called for a Jewish independent state to be established side-by-side with an Arab state; both states were to be “democratic.” They were to hold “elections to a Constituent Assembly which shall be conducted on democratic lines.” Further, “the Constituent Assembly of each State shall draft a democratic constitution for its State....” The resolution also requires that “no discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants on the grounds of race, religion, language, or sex,” and it references “the protection of the Holy Places and religious buildings and sites,” particularly in Jerusalem.

Accordingly, the Israeli declaration’s paragraph 13 states that the State of Israel “will be based on freedom, justice, and peace...; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race, or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions....”

The word “democracy” was explicitly not included. Why? Ben-Gurion and his key deputy, Moshe Shertok (later, Sharett), were deter-

mined to obtain diplomatic recognition by the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet Soviet and American definitions of “democratic” were at odds, with liberal democracy as conceived in the United States very different from the communist version. As a compromise, Ben-Gurion turned to Judaism’s biblical heritage. In September 1948, he shared this point of view: “As for western democracy, I’m for Jewish democracy. ‘Western’ doesn’t suffice. Being a Jew is...also a matter of morals, ethics.... The value of life and human freedom are, for us, more deeply embedded thanks to the biblical prophets more than western democracy.... I would like our future to be founded in prophetic ethics.” The scroll said the society of the new state would be “as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.”

Why was an Israeli constitution not written? Ben-Gurion’s priority was to address two time-sensitive pressures. The British were determined to withdraw on May 15; Arab armies from neighboring countries were poised to invade. While the Declaration of Independence did call for a constitution, this goal proved impractical. Even a year later, with hindsight, Ben-Gurion reflected that “debate about a constitution will take years, keeping all of Israel and the Diaspora busy. If a word appears about freedom of conscience, an argument will erupt about [whether] this is freedom of conscience as opposed to freedom of religion.... Exactly as it would have been insane during the time of the 1948 war if the State Council had debated the constitution, the same is true now.”

Several types of “rights” were to be protected by the Declaration: “National and historic” rights to enable Jews to once again become masters of their own fate. “Natural rights” constituted the prophetic democratic values during ancient Jewish sovereignty. Ben-Gurion clarified: “Here [in Eretz Yisrael] the Jews’ spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance, and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”

Finally, “inherent” human rights automatically were accorded to each person. To Ben-Gurion, these individual rights “do not come from the state.”

No mention was made of precise borders: During the drafting of the Declaration, a debate ensued. Legal expert Felix Rosenblueth (Pinchas Rosen) insisted that “the issue of proclaiming international borders is a required legal matter.” Ben-Gurion countered, “No law is simply a matter that human beings [pragmatically] decide to do.” He pointed out, for example, that the American Declaration of Independence omitted mention of borders, thus leaving the door open to geographic expansion. In 1948, the emerging Jewish state saw its contours as proposed by the Partition Plan being whittled away by Arab attacks. Ben-Gurion concluded that specifying borders was unwise; either side could expand its holdings by creating new military facts on the ground.

God’s name was not explicitly invoked, though Ben-Gurion wished to include acknowledgement of the Supreme Being. Except for the Soviet Union, constitutions of countries all over the world invoked the power of divine providence. But secular leaders of his inner circle objected; they could not affirm the existence of God, nor could they assent to the concept that Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael was the result of God’s having made a promise of land to the Jews. Furthermore, they worried that the expanse of the Promised Land as implied by the biblical reference exceeded the contours of territory outlined by UN Resolution 181 — which was adopted on November 29, 1947, and called for the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. As a compromise, any mention of divine land promises was removed from the text; instead it premised Jewry’s claims to the land upon history.

Additionally, early in the drafting of the Declaration, Rabbi Harry Davidowitz successfully proposed use of the term “Tzur Yisrael,” “Rock of Israel.” For religionists, using a metaphoric name — as used in the introduction to the Amidah prayer — satisfied their need to invoke God as central to the proclamation of a Jewish state. For secular folks, “Rock of Israel” was regarded as a symbol of the human power and will of the Zionist pioneers.

Stages of international law influenced the evolution of the Declaration; its initial shaping, composed by Mordechai Beham, was premised upon the advice of Rabbi Davidowitz, an Americanophile

and a Conservative rabbi whose aliyah was in 1934. As noted above, in the final draft, Ben-Gurion turned away from strict reliance on American models alone. He added the democratic standards of Jewry's biblical prophets. This was akin to Woodrow Wilson's post-World War I "ethnic democracy" approach. New states were to provide equal rights for each individual citizen while special collective treatment was conferred upon a favored ethnicity, e.g., Jews in the State of Israel.

Just as the U.S. Constitution evolved over time, Israel's Declaration gained more legal standing within its judicial system. Initially, in December 1948, Israel's High Court issued an intentionally ambiguous judgment. On the one hand, it acknowledged that the Declaration "contains no element of constitutional law which determines the validity of various ordinances and laws or their repeal." Yet at the same time, the court affirmed that "the Declaration expresses the nation's vision and its basic credo." As noted by historian Martin Kramer, "The nation's vision and its basic credo" reminded Israeli society that "the Declaration did capture the state's core values."

Although the original text did not specify its legal role, absent a formal Constitution, the role of the Declaration in Israeli law continued to expand. By 1958, in *Kol Ha'Am vs. the Minister of the Interior*, High Court Justice Shimon Agranat asserted, "If the Declaration reflects the vision and basic credo of the nation, then it is incumbent upon us to carefully examine its content when we come to interpret and lend meaning to the state's laws."

In the 1990s, a "constitutional revolution" took place, as former Soviet satellite states crafted independent constitutions. The Knesset felt pressure to respond in kind. Israel's government issued the 1992 Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty, followed by the Freedom of Occupation [Career] Basic Law of 1994.

These Basic Laws now legally defined Israel as "a Jewish and democratic state."

High Court President Aharon Barak affirmed that this formula "totally transformed the status of the Declaration [of Independence]. Not only did that document now enjoy legal validity, but

the rights in it were not merely ‘legal rights’ as in other laws, but ‘constitutional rights.’”

Justice Barak elaborated: “The United States is a democracy, and so are we. Democracies share common concepts, including basic human rights..., freedom of expression..., of the press..., of demonstration..., of movement..., of association..., of occupation [work], and other basic human rights.”

Where does the legal role to be played by the Declaration stand in the current debate? The proponents of dramatic judicial reform side with “Originalists.” They cite the Declaration’s shifting of legal matters to a soon-to-fail constitution process. The opponents of the Rothman/Levin legislation fear that the recommended changes are hasty and heavy-handed. They insist these alterations are unnecessary, since the “constitutional revolution of the 1990s elevated the Declaration to promoting ‘constitutional rights.’”

The most recent scholarly treatment of Israel’s Declaration of Independence was written jointly by Neil Rogachevsky and Dov Zigler (on behalf of Yeshiva University’s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought). It attempts to craft a centrist compromise, affirming legal authority not just in the Declaration but in the Court. They conclude: “By combining an emphasis on democratic norms, with recourse to the Declaration as a ‘legal charter that expresses the nation’s values,’ the Supreme Court has built for itself a potent arsenal of normative language to interpret the practices of the state, the procedures of the Knesset, the governing bureaucracies, and the constitutional basic laws.”



DIASPORA JEWRY JOINS ISRAELI VOICES SEEKING JUDICIAL COMPROMISE

June 13, 2023

Israeli society is divided between proponents of and opponents to a proposed judicial reform program. Demonstrations and count-

er-demonstrations are taking place with unprecedented frequency and magnitude.

This is not a conflict between the Right and the Left; it is, rather, a competition between the party in power and the parties leading the opposition. A similar pattern was evident during the 29 years of Menachem Begin's term as head of the Herut party, when he led the opposition to the dominant Labor Party of David Ben-Gurion in the Knesset.

At that time, Begin said, "We have learned that an elected parliamentary majority can be an instrument in the hands of a group of rulers and act as camouflage for their tyranny." As protection against possible abuse by the Labor Party, Begin insisted upon "the supremacy of the law [as] expressed by a panel of independent judges." The High Court, he said, must "decide, in the case of a complaint, whether the laws made by the Knesset...abide by the fundamental [basic] laws or contradict the rights of the citizen that are stated in that law."

Currently, it is the Center and the Left that are out of power. The judiciary is the guarantor of their constituents' rights as minorities. The opposition fears that the Knesset and the prime minister will also gain control of the courts. Democracy's system of checks and balances, as embodied by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, would be impaired should this come to pass. Rabbi Gilad Kariv, Labor Party MK, explained in a talk at Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan that consensus reform of the judiciary under consideration is appropriate, but it cannot occur with haste and/or with one side imposing its will.

A wide range of issues are at stake:

- The ethnic: balance of court appointments in regard to Ashkenazi and Mizrachi
- The ambiguity of current "unreasonableness" court criteria for decision-making
- Refining the scope of "judicial review" of Knesset actions

- The role of government-appointed legal advisers to ministers
- Protection of minority rights (women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, non-Orthodox Jewish streams, Arab citizens, etc.)
- Preventing the politicizing of the selection of judges
- Retaining checks and balances among the branches of government

Hundreds of thousands of concerned Israeli citizens have been out in the streets every Saturday night. They are patriotic citizens, wrapped in Israeli flags, listening to impassioned speeches, and sharing concerns about the country's future.

Passions have become so elevated that Orthodox Rabbi David Stav, the moderate founder of Tzohar — the organization of over 800 Orthodox rabbis that aims to bridge the gaps between religious and secular Jews in Israel — on Rosh Chodesh Nisan called for a communal fast. “We ask for prayer, for a cry, a fast so our leaders find the way to continue this tremendous project which is the State of Israel.... We will pray...so that, God willing, we will know how to emerge from this great crisis.”

Calls for compromise have been espoused by Israeli leaders of the Center, Center-Right, and Center-Left. A statement issued by the centrist Israeli Masorti movement on March 27 said, “We join the ‘Agreement Tent’ outside the Knesset.... We will demand time and again: yes to dialogue, no to civil war.”

Israel's nonpartisan president, Isaac Herzog, articulated the fear of what emerges in the absence of compromise: “I've heard deep hatred. I've heard people from all sides say that, God forbid, if there'll be blood in the streets, it will no longer shock them.... Right now, in the 75th year of the State of Israel, the abyss is in reach, [but] civil war is a red line. I will not let it happen, at any cost, by any means.”

Herzog's call for negotiations between proponents and opponents was seized by Prime Minister Netanyahu as a lifeline when outrage followed his dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who had warned that the societal rift over the judiciary was impairing the

IDF. Recognizing his error in dismissing his defense minister, Netanyahu made amends with Gallant.

He then called for a hiatus in judicial reform activity. Instead, he convened negotiations under “the good offices” of President Herzog. Netanyahu acknowledged “the enormous tension that is building between the two camps, the two parts of the nation. I am attentive to the desire of many citizens to relieve this tension.”

In the prime minister’s words, “We are on the path toward a dangerous collision in Israeli society...that endangers the basic unity between us. Such a crisis requires us all to act responsibly.”

Leading the polls as a result of his calls for moderation, Benny Gantz reflected a similar view. As National Unity party chair, Gantz pledged to enter into good-faith negotiations addressing all issues. He stated that “the current coalition has full legitimacy to make decisions, but these should be made in a broad and nationwide manner, [since] they touch the heart of the administrative system.”

So, too, has Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid, head of the opposition, acknowledged the wisdom of compromise, which he called “the only possibility for finding [an in-common] solution.” He tweeted that he supported President Herzog’s efforts “to formulate a real, balanced, and considered proposal to correct and improve the judicial system and to regulate the relationship between the judiciary and the legislature.”

Both Gantz and Lapid acknowledged poll data affirming that the majority of Israelis seek a sane centrist agreement. They said that they know “the majority of the public prefers talking [under Herzog’s structure] to leaving the room.”

Caution was evident too in pronouncements by sectors of the Religious Right, such as that of Rabbi Aryeh Deri, leader of the Shas party. Although a critic of the court system, Deri expressed fears of damage to the fabric of Israeli society unless cooler heads prevailed. “We’re doing everything we can so that it will be in agreement and dialogue” with the opposition, he said. Cautionary words have also been uttered by moderate Orthodox spokespersons. For example,

Efrat's Rabbi Kenneth Brander noted that “for the first time in my life, I fear this collapse and the rift between our two Jewish communities” — religious and secular, Right and Left.

Calls for compromise from Diaspora leaders have been growing as well. Leaders of MERCAZ — Conservative/Masorti Judaism's global Zionist arm — have called for careful, planned-out negotiations. They said in a statement: “We commend President Herzog for hundreds of hours of high-level consultations. His resulting ‘People's Plan’ offers a serious, responsible framework to resolve the unprecedented crisis facing Israel's democracy and society.... We strongly support Isaac Herzog's efforts to bring about a broad consensus to preserve Israel's foundations as a Jewish and democratic state and to heal the deep rifts in Israeli society.”

Reflecting a similarly centrist position was the strong approval of a World Zionist Congress resolution composed by Rabbi Lea Muhlstein, leader of Reform Judaism's Arzenu. The resolution called for careful process and compromise in resolving the judicial reform impasse:

“The Zionist Congress believes that change in the State of Israel's judicial structure can only happen through broad public agreement, as the outcome of true and open dialogue and as part of a process of healing societal rifts across all of Israeli society.

“The Zionist Congress calls upon the government to reach consensus agreements that will bolster the democratic nature of the State of Israel and the checks and balances in the structure of government, while providing protection for human rights, minorities, and women.”

Speaking on behalf of Israelis and Diaspora Jews alike, Yedidia Stern, president of the Jewish People Policy Institute, concurred, urging that the judiciary not be politicized and insisting that minority rights be protected. Nevertheless, “new ideas can be broached regarding the proper set of powers granted to the court.”

As Israel celebrates its 75th year, let the majority of Diaspora supporters of the Jewish state rally around President Herzog's efforts toward a consensus standard for judicial reform.



DO NOT ALTER ISRAEL'S LAW OF RETURN

May 9, 2023

One of the resolutions presented at the recent “Extraordinary Session” of the World Zionist Congress called upon the Israeli government “not to amend the Law of Return.”

Authored by Rabbi Mauricio Balter, executive director of MERCAZ Olami and Masorti Olami, the resolution described the Law of Return as “a festive symbol of Jewish peoplehood at its best, a glamorous, Zionist symbol like no other which defines the collective borders of the Jewish people.”

Israel's Law of Return was enacted on July 5, 1950, in part as a commemoration of the *yahrtzeit* of Theodore Herzl (z"l), a move affirming Herzl's passionate commitment to creating a sovereign Jewish state as a safe haven for persecuted Jews fleeing lands of affliction.

The law proclaimed that “every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*,” a new immigrant/citizen. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, insisted that the law affirmed a pre-existing right that was “inherent in him [or her] from the very fact of being a Jew.... This right preceded the state; this right built the state; its source is to be found in the historic and never-broken connection between the Jewish people and the homeland.”

The Law of Return was amended in 1970 to add more clarity to its definition of what it means to be “Jewish.” The amendment extended the right to people of “no religion” who have a Jewish father or grandfather. (Note: Of course those with a Jewish mother and/or grandmother were automatically regarded as Jews.) The amendment additionally listed people who had converted to Judaism under the auspices of any recognized Diaspora religious stream. In 2021,

Israel's Supreme Court further ruled that Reform and Conservative converts from the Diaspora who converted inside Israel also would be recognized as eligible for the Law of Return.

Haredi parties have spearheaded efforts to alter the expansions enacted in 1970 and 2021. In 2023, this push for change has been promoted by the ultra-nationalist “Religious Zionist Party” of Bezael Smotrich and by Itamar Ben Gvir’s “Otzma Yehudit” party.

Yet any changes in the Law of Return would cause widespread dissension. Why?

- Russian Jews would become alienated. Israeli society contains large blocs of diverse voters: secular and religious, Ashkenazim and Mizrachim, Haredim and religious Zionists, etc. One large group — the more than one million Russian-speaking Israelis — is represented by the “One Million Lobby.” Leaders of this group say that an alteration of the Law of Return would alienate the half-million Jews from the former Soviet Union who claim “no religion” and are of questionable halachic status living in Israel. These individuals consider themselves to be Jews, as do their friends and relatives still residing in FSU countries.
- Opposition to a change in the Law of Return is multi-partisan and voiced by folks across a spectrum of views. Alterations are opposed by most centrist and center-left Israelis and are at odds with the views of many Israelis on the right. Why? In fact, many supporters of Likud and other right-wing Israeli parties are *olim* from the FSU or Israeli spouses of these *olim*.
- The cultural norms of the Jewish communities around the world are diverse. Israeli Jewry’s norms differ from those in other places. For example, FSU countries define one’s ethnic identity in a patrilineal manner; Israeli/Jewish norms follow matrilineal descent. Acceptance of patrilineal transmission identity is also accepted for Reform Jews in the United States.
- Jewish criteria with regard to “peoplehood” dictate that no change be made. The Law of Return and the eligibility for aliyah it confers serves as the gatekeeper for entry into the Jewish

people. Israel's Law of Return extends beyond religious definitions of Jewishness. It deals as well with Israeli civic matters of state. Israel is the state not of Orthodox Jews but of a broader entity, "the state of the Jewish people."

- Jewish pluralism is an established condition of modern Jewish life: As noted by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, "The Law of Return was not fashioned to certify a person for inclusion in a minyan, or to be called to the Torah, or as a suitable marriage partner. Rather it is the lofty gesture of a secular body [the Knesset], left intentionally vague to do justice to the irreversible diversity of modern Jewry."
- We live in an age of mounting antisemitism with tangible danger for Jews worldwide. In these times, it is important to recall that the Law of Return was established initially as a mirror image and remedy against the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 Nazi Germany. These racist and antisemitic measures applied to all Jews, defined as those with at least one Jewish grandparent, removing their rights and exposing them to persecution. It's crucial now that nothing be done to endanger the lives of individuals identified as Jews by the societies in which they live.
- Any changes in any details of the Law of Return — which has not been touched for 50 years — would open the door to further alterations. As former Likud minister and current Tikva Hadasa MK Ze'ev Elkin said, "If you touch it once, then someone else will touch it."
- Change would set in motion a clash between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. According to prominent educator Avraham Infeld, "The Zionist movement did not create a nation-state for a group of people who shared a common geographic area, but rather for the global Jewish people living scattered around the world." Altering the Law of Return would renege on a sacred commitment made in 1950, 1970, 2021 to world Jewry. It would launch divisive debates about whether defining "Who is a Jew?" ought to be based upon narrow ultra-Orthodox grounds. The message

would be that people who are part of Diaspora non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities have no right to be in Israel!

- A matter of life and death: Massive numbers of refugees are leaving places like Ukraine and Russia. The lives of both Jews and people of Jewish lineage (*Zera Yisrael*) are on the line, and they are seeking safety in the Jewish State. The Law of Return fulfills Herzl's vision of a country that serves as a refuge for persecuted folks identified *by others* as Jews. Dr. Infeld has written that today "there are more displaced persons than at any time in history. At the same time, there isn't a single [stranded] Jewish refugee. There is only one reason for that: The State of Israel [and its Law of Return]."
- Bitter battles regarding conversions would occur all over the globe. The Haredim do not accept Reform and Conservative conversions, those conducted both in Israel and globally. They also reject many conversions conducted by non-Haredi Orthodox *batei din* in Medinat Yisrael and in the Diaspora — even those conducted under the auspices of the IDF.
- Debate about this proposed change would weaken the commitment to the State of secular Russian-Israelis and their relatives and friends. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have "made aliyah"; they have mastered Hebrew, worked and made contributions to society, served in the IDF, and are immersed in Israeli culture. They would resent being told that many of their peers and relatives don't really belong!

In sum, as Rabbi Balter's resolution concluded, "An amendment to the Law of Return will alienate hundreds of thousands of people of Jewish descent and have a disastrous impact on aliyah."



PART
TWO

**MERCAZ ADVOCATES
FOR JEWISH RELIGIOUS
PLURALISM INSIDE
ISRAEL**

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM AND ISRAEL: A RESPONSE TO DANIEL GORDIS

November 23, 2023

In his blog post “How my toddler grandson convinced me it was time to leave Conservative Judaism” (November 20, 2023), Daniel Gordis implies that even during wartime a significant portion of Conservative/Masorti Jews and rabbis do not support Israel.

Not true! Quite the contrary! Among non-Orthodox Jews, Conservative/Masorti Jews comprise part of the backbone of Zionism.

Global Conservative/Masorti Zionism is anchored in MERCAZ Olami, our Zionist arm, with 16 country-based chapters worldwide.

The war commenced on October 7. Within a week, a solidarity mission was organized by Conservative/Masorti’s Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center. The following week a second mission was arranged by MERCAZ Olami and its allied global Zionist arm, Masorti Olami.

Most of the participants in the two missions were Conservative rabbis. When MERCAZ Olami mission participants met with President Isaac Herzog, he was amazed; from a group of 30, four had children or siblings serving in the IDF. The president even took down their names in order to send them personal notes.

Additional synagogue-based missions are being planned for December and January, as is a mission by the Cantors Assembly and by MERCAZ for its worldwide chapter leaders.

The 900,000 Conservative Jews in Canada, Latin America, Europe, Australia, and the former Soviet Union are staunch Zionists. They visit Israel; many speak Hebrew. They teach their children about Israel in their synagogues, schools, and camps and send many of them on Israel experiences. Many family members have made aliyah.

The majority of the 1.2 million Conservative/Masorti Jews in the United States identify with Israel. According to the 2020 Pew Research Center’s study of American Jewry, 95% of Conservative

Jews indicate that “belonging to the Jewish people” is “important” to them.

93% feel “a responsibility to help Jews in need.”

78% feel “emotionally attached” to Israel.

77% feel “a commonality” with Jews in Israel.

75% follow news about Israel.

71% donated to a Jewish charity during the previous year.

66% regard “caring about Israel” as being either “essential” or “important” to them.

59% have been to Israel, most more than one time.

54% listen to Jewish or Israeli music.

43% attend Jewish/Israeli film festivals.

Conservative Jews represent almost 30% of those who are synagogue members in the United States. Conservative shuls play an important role in support of Zionism. For example, delegations from Conservative congregations have comprised the largest “stream” at the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference.

A sizable minority of married American-Jewish *olim* and a plurality of American young single adult *olim* come from Conservative Jewish households. Many Conservative rabbis with adult offspring have at least one son or daughter who has moved permanently to Israel. I am proud to be among them.

Pro-Israel attitudes can be traced to Conservative Judaism’s youth education and programming, such as Solomon Schechter Day Schools and United Synagogue Youth. Nativ, USY’s gap year Masa Israel Journey program, reports that 96% of its alumni get involved in Israel-centered and Jewish organizational life on campus, with 77% in leadership positions; 16% make aliyah.

Nearly 100% of the alumni of the Conservative Camp Ramah system have been to Israel, 85% more than once. Almost all feel “at-

tached” to Israel, 75% have close friends or immediate family living in Israel, 5% currently reside in Israel, and 29% have lived in Israel for three months or more.

Each Ramah camp hosts a delegation of Jewish Agency *shlichim*, cultural emissaries. Ramah partners with the Nefesh B’Nefesh aliyah organization in programs in six metropolitan areas and on 15 campuses. (Among the roster of former Ramahniks is Israel’s president, Isaac Herzog.)

Conservative congregations represent the largest component within the State of Israel Bonds national USA synagogue campaign. Philanthropic involvement by Conservative Jews is pivotal to the UJA campaigns of Jewish federations across the United States. Their contributions are essential to the Jewish National Fund and to Friends of the Israel Defense Forces.

Family foundations established by Conservative Jews often designate funds for Israel-based projects. The movement produces a plurality of both lay leaders and professionals who steer institutional life on behalf of the Jewish community and Israel.

Along with schools and youth movements, American Jewry’s religious movements were the backbone of the recent march in Washington.

At this moment, we need solidarity with Israel and for Jewish unity. We need positivity toward each and every Jewish religious stream.

Am Yisrael chai!



PRIME MINISTER-ELECT NETANYAHU: ENSURE ONE WALL FOR ONE PEOPLE

December 27, 2022

As pressures mount upon Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu, one Haredi demand is to legislate against any type of egalitari-

an prayer service anywhere near the Kotel, including at Robinson's Arch.

Acceding to this demand would betray the promise of an egalitarian option for worship accessed by tens of thousands of Diaspora and Israeli Jews each year, a reversal of decades of the status quo.

Notably, each Rosh Chodesh for many years, it has been a custom for women to gather in group prayer in the women's section of the main Kotel Plaza. This monthly service is conducted by the Women of the Wall — a multi-denominational organization whose goal is to uphold the right of women to pray at this sacred site, a site that was open to both men and women prior to Israeli statehood.

Additionally, for the past several decades, egalitarian prayer — notably for b'not mitzvah ceremonies and for holy day celebrations — has been organized by the Masorti movement in the area of the Kotel, but apart from the main plaza, in the area known as Robinson's Arch. Many thousands of Jews from around Israel and the world come to pray there together each year.

Seeking a resolution of the quest for pluralism at the Kotel, Natan Sharansky, as head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, crafted a "Solomonic" plan that was approved by the Knesset in January 2016. The plan was a compromise; for the first time, it would codify the main Kotel Plaza as an Orthodox synagogue and called for the designation of a section of similar size in an upgraded Robinson's Arch area, to be renamed "Ezrat Yisrael," to serve as an egalitarian worship space. Sharansky's compromise also gave representatives of the non-Orthodox religious streams a place on the site's governing committee.

The plan was accepted by many members of Women of the Wall, by the Reform and Conservative/Masorti movements, and by quite a few Modern Orthodox leaders. As prominent Orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Riskin noted, "Judaism in general and the Western Wall in particular are precious and important; it is impossible to leave the future of Judaism to Orthodox Jews alone."

Regrettably, Haredi parties within the fragile Netanyahu coalition government of 2016-17 successfully froze the Robinson's Arch project. Leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements, along with leaders of the Jewish Federations of North America reached out to Israeli government officials demanding action, but to no avail. The opponents claimed they would tolerate no change in what was incorrectly labeled an "ages-old" status quo.

Battles over maintaining the "status quo" at the Kotel are not new; in fact they were taking place more than 100 years ago. In 1911, when the Land of Israel was under Turkish Ottoman rule, some among the Jewish worshipers at the Kotel broke with longstanding Turkish policy by attempting to erect a temporary *mechitza* to separate men and women during collective prayer. Due to complaints from local Arabs, the Turkish officials reinforced what was then the "status quo," insisting that no *mechitza* be permitted.

This challenge against Ottoman regulations resurfaced in the late 1920s, under the British Mandate. Israeli scholar and professor Yo-sef Yoel Rivlin, an eyewitness from that time, recorded: "Early in the morning the day before Yom Kippur, we would go to the Western Wall. That was the time when it was most crowded there, for people from all the different groups would assemble...: Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Yemenites, and Bukharians. There was no partition separating men and women at the Wall [even on Yom Kippur]; the early Sephardim and Perushim did not think of it. But when the number of [Ashkenazi] hasidim grew, and the group of 'guardians of modesty' sprang up, they erected a *mechitza* in the northern corner of the Wall on the day before Yom Kippur."

In response to this violation of the "rules," a British officer was stationed at the Kotel to enforce preexisting customs, i.e., no *mechitza*. In 1928, open confrontation erupted on the eve of Yom Kippur. With a sizable number of Jewish worshipers in attendance, a *mechitza* was put in place, illegally, as a form of protest. This act led to Arab objections and British intervention. After they failed to persuade the Jews to take down the *mechitza*, the British police forcibly removed the divider. The incident inflamed Arab nationalist groups and was

a factor in fomenting subsequent Arab riots centered in Jerusalem in 1929.

The age-old no-*mechitza* “status quo” at the Kotel continued until the British departure in 1948. Men, women, and children of all backgrounds together visited the Western Wall and offered individual prayers. The Kotel served as a unifying focus for adherents of both religious and national Jewish sentiments. Going back to the days of Theodor Herzl, the Kotel symbolized the unity of the Jewish people. The aspiration for Jewish sovereignty was for a state of the Jewish people, not a state solely for *Haredi* Judaism. As a 1935 guidebook recorded: “On Tisha B’Av, a veritable Jewish migration to the Wailing Wall sets in after dark. The thousands slowly and silently pass before the everlasting stones far into the night: young and old, believer and free-thinker, the Old Yishuv from the Street of the Jews and the *halutzim* from the colonies and *kvutzot*.”

“And if anywhere at all, here and at this hour you can feel that Am Yisrael is alive.”

Following the Jordanian conquest of Jerusalem’s Old City in 1948 and for the next 19 years, all Jewish visitation at the Kotel was prohibited. Within 48 hours of Israel’s acquisition of sovereignty over the Old City as a result of its victory in the Six-Day War of June 1967, and in time for Shavuot, a portion of the adjacent Mughrabi Quarter was cleared away, creating additional space for worship at the Kotel and extending the accessible portion of the Wall. There was no *mechitza*, and more than 200,000 men, women, and children gathered at the Kotel as an expression of national solidarity.

Jewish sovereignty over all of Jerusalem was affirmed, but, unfortunately, control of the Kotel was not assigned to the Jewish Agency, the representative body of both Israeli and world Jewry. Instead, on July 3, IDF Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren handed control of the Kotel to the Orthodox Ministry of Religious Services. On July 19, 1967, a *mechitza* was put in place at the Kotel Plaza. For the first time in its history, the Kotel was (unofficially) transformed exclusively into an Orthodox synagogue.

Activities that previously had not taken place at the Kotel became regarded as “status quo.” As Dr. Shulamit Magnus, a leader of Women of the Wall, said, “The Wall was liberated — for Jews who are men — in 1967, with abundant new customs created since then, but only on the men’s side. To claim that women cannot pray there as a group, with voice, Torah, tallit, tefillin, because these are innovations, ‘violations of custom,’ is absurd. Men doing any of this, or holding bar mitzvah or wedding ceremonies, is an innovation. So is the *mechitza* dividing men and women.”

The Kotel, like the State of Israel, belongs to Jews of all religious and secular views throughout the globe. The will of world Jewry, expressed by the World Zionist Congress and by large portions of the citizenry of the Jewish state, ought not to be obstructed by the militant minority of Haredim who wish to suppress views other than their own. In devising his plan, Natan Sharansky explained that there is an “urgent need to reach a permanent solution and make the Western Wall once again a symbol of unity among the Jewish people, and not one of discord and strife.” We need, he said, “one Western Wall for one Jewish people.”

Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu: Do not surrender to the divisive demands of Haredi parties entering into your coalition government. As prime minister, you have a responsibility to serve the needs of the entire Jewish people. The Kotel “status quo” must be sustained as a comprehensive and inclusive symbol of Am Yisrael.



THE PLURALISTIC PLAN FOR THE KOTEL AND THE JEWISH FUTURE

May 31, 2016

Millions of American Jews, concerned about Jewish continuity, long for a view of Israel with which our children can identify. Research indicates that young people can be positively influenced by encountering Israel firsthand. The success of Birthright Israel programs is living proof of this observation.

Through Birthright, our sons and daughters experience the pulsating vitality of a modern-day nation in which Jews are the majority, Hebrew is being spoken, Jewish holy days are marked as a national events, and where Jewry and Jewish values are at play in all aspects of life.

A cloud on this bright horizon of direct “*mifgashim*” is American-Jewish young people’s frustration at the Israeli government’s non-recognition of Conservative/Masorti and Reform Judaism.

Surveys affirm that disrespect by official sectors of the “state for the entire Jewish people” toward “the streams” is off-putting to many young American Jews. Their connection to Zionism was cultivated through their affiliation with Conservative and Reform congregations. As noted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his 1993 book, “A Place Among The Nations: Israel and the World”:

“In the Jews’ dispersion, the dual nature of Judaism [nation and religion] assumed vital importance. Stripped of their homeland, their government, and their language and dispersed into myriad communities, the Jewish religion became the primary vehicle by which the Jews maintained their national identity and aspirations. Into this vessel [of religion] they poured their dreams of Return and ingathering in the Land of Israel.”

The Prime Minister is correct. It is via American Jewry’s congregational cultures that Israel-attachment is nurtured. It is hard enough to counter the anti-Israel *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions* movement and other forms of delegitimization of Israel on college campuses; what we do not need is to have our youth offended by Israeli bureaucrats rejecting the legitimacy of their rabbis and congregations, their converts, and pluralistic forms of approaches to prayer. This challenge gives urgency to the implementation of a pluralistic plan for the Kotel. Continuing Israeli governmental delegitimization of Masorti/Conservative and Reform Judaism poses a serious threat to the future of global Jewish unity.

As noted by Theodore Sasson of Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, respondents in focus groups of American-Jewish Birthright Israel program alumni “cited the inferi-

or treatment of non-Orthodox movements in Israel as a reason for feeling personally alienated” from the Jewish state. Among representative comments, Sasson noted the following from a participant who said if he were to make aliyah, “I don’t know where...I would fit in, because I feel very connected to my religion and feel very much a part of it. But I feel I would be devalued completely in Israel in terms of the way I practice my religion and am involved in Judaism. It is alienating.”

Creating a pluralistic section of the Kotel Plaza is essential for Am Yisrael globally and for Medinat Yisrael in particular. In assessing 1.2 million Conservative Jews in the United States, the 2020 Pew Research Center’s study of American Jewry affirms that 98% are “proud” to be Jewish; 93% feel “being Jewish is important to their lives; 90% regard Israel as “an important part of being Jewish”; 89% feel an “attachment” to the Jewish state. Furthermore, nearly half of American Lone Soldiers — those serving in the IDF with no immediate family in Israel — come from Conservative homes. Two-thirds of synagogues conducting State of Israel Bonds campaigns are Conservative congregations. More than half of the 9,000 American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference synagogue delegates represent Conservative shuls. Young people from these households are the potential AIPAC, Israel Bonds, UJA, and JNF supporters of the 21st century. Their distancing from Israel would pose a threat to our collective Jewish future.

We must implement the Pluralistic Plan for the Kotel as a dramatic symbol of Israel as the state for all Jews worldwide.



‘THE NEW YORK TIMES’ INCORRECTLY PREDICTS DIVORCE OF DIASPORA JEWS FROM ISRAEL

February 14, 2019

“American Jews and Israeli Jews Are Headed for a Messy Breakup” — so stated a prominently placed column by Jonathan Weisman, deputy Washington editor at “The New York Times.” Yet a No-

vember 2018 J Street poll of American-Jewish attitudes toward the Jewish state reveals stability and strength.

The survey revealed that “65% of respondents felt either very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, compared to 35% who felt not very attached or not at all attached to the Jewish state.

“Asked if, compared to five to 10 years ago, they felt more positive, more negative, or the same toward Israel, 55% said they felt about the same, 26% said more positive, and only 19% felt more negative.”

A debate about the attachment of American Jews to Israel is not new. By the mid-1990s, Steven M. Cohen published, “Did American Jews Really Grow More Distant from Israel, 1983-1993? — A Reconsideration.” Cohen concluded that “prominent observers of American Jewish public opinion may have erred in inferring an increasing remoteness from Israel, when all they were observing was an increasing (and time-bound) discomfort with Israeli policies.... The Jewish public’s [positive] feelings about Israel...remain instinctual (that is, instinctually pro-Israel) and largely divorced from Israel’s policy judgments....”

The debate resurfaced in 2007. Partnering with history professor Ari Kelman, Cohen polled attitudes among non-Orthodox Jewish young adults. The survey results warned that “feelings of attachment may well be changing, as warmth gives way to indifference, and indifference may even give way to downright alienation.”

Yet, sociologists at Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies came to a different conclusion. They posted that most American Jews were “still connected.... There is no evidence that attachment to Israel [has] declined” over the 20-plus years of polling. So why did young Jewish adults exhibit a lesser degree of attachment than their elders? The Cohen Center team noted that Jews “age into” Israel attachment: “As they age, American-Jewish adults perhaps become more tolerant of parochial concerns [such as attachment to Israel].”

A source of varied perceptions is the manner in which polling questions are framed. For example, in January 2018, a Pew Re-

search Center survey reported a split among Democrats in which 27% “sympathize” with Israel and 25% with the Palestinians. Yet, a Gallup poll taken just one month later went beyond measuring “sympathy” and posed questions about being “pro-Israel.” After all, Israel is often regarded as a reliable and strong U.S. ally, as a democracy and as a high-tech innovative society. Gallup found that “Americans’ stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is as strongly ‘pro-Israel’ as at any time in Gallup’s three-decade trend” — 74% of American adults have a favorable view of Israel, while 23% have an unfavorable view. According to Gallup: Support for Israel is at 83% among Republicans, 72% among Independents, and 64% among Democrats; 21% say they have a favorable view of the Palestinian government, and 71% report an unfavorable one.

Democratic pollster Mark Mellman interpreted Gallup’s results and other relevant data to mean that “the majority of Democrats still have a positive impression of Israel — and the overwhelming majority of Democratic elected officials have a very strongly positive attitude toward Israel.” Mellman noted that even those progressive Democrats who indicate “more sympathy” with the Palestinians are not necessarily against Israel. “What does the question of sympathy mean? One meaning could be...who do you feel worse for? And if... you feel worse for Palestinians than Israelis, that doesn’t necessarily make you not pro-Israel.”

Later in 2018, a Jewishly targeted poll by the Mellman Group revealed that 91% of American-Jewish voters say to poll-takers that they are “pro-Israel” — albeit with a range of attitudes: 32% are pro-Israel as well as supportive of the policies of the current Israeli government; 35% are pro-Israel and critical of some of those policies; and 24% are pro-Israel and critical of many of those policies. Keep in mind that 91% support is an astronomically high figure in a highly diverse Jewish community, exceeding the percentage that attend a Passover seder or observe Yom Kippur.

Maintaining Diaspora attachment for Israel does require attention to areas of current concern.

First, the importance of a connection to Diaspora synagogue life looms large. The Pew survey of 2013 reveals “a gradient.” Greater intensity of Jewish religious living — Orthodox, then Conservative, then Reform, then no denomination, then no religion — yields greater attachment to the Jewish state. Young adults raised in Orthodox homes overwhelmingly feel an attachment to Israel. The AviChai Foundation’s publication “Eight Up: The College Years” examined the attitudes of Conservative college students and found that more than 90% regarded Israel as either “important” or “very important” to them. Most Reform young adults remain connected, too. Yet impressive levels of Israel attachment among the religious movements stand in contrast to data indicating less support among young Jews of “no denomination,” and especially to those who are “not Jewish by religion.” We must strengthen the affordability of American synagogues to prospective members, especially young adults.

The second area is the phenomenon of intermarriage. The 2007 Cohen and Kelman study noted that high percentages of young Jewish liberals and of young Jewish conservatives remain “attached” to Israel — albeit in different ways. They pondered, “If Israeli policies aren’t undermining Israel attachment, then what is it?” Their answer is that “the primary driver is intermarriage. Younger Jews are far more likely to marry non-Jews, and [many of] the intermarried are far less Israel attached than are the in-married — and even the non-married.”

Israel supporters should react strategically by assisting single Jews who seek to meet marital partners who share their Judaism via Jewish dating sites, and actively promoting Israel attachment among intermarried households raising their children as Jews.

And third is the impact of the Netanyahu government’s acceding to the delegitimization of non-Orthodox Jewish streams. Birthright Israel programs have proven that young people can be positively influenced by encountering Israel firsthand. But a looming cloud is the Israeli government’s rejection of non-Orthodox Judaism. After all, synagogue culture provides the Israel attachment nurtured among most American Jews. Talking to Birthright Israel participants, Theodore Sasson of Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern

Jewish Studies noted that a number of them cited the questionable legal status of non-Orthodox streams in Israel as a reason for not feeling personally accepted in the Jewish state, especially if they were to consider aliyah.

Finally, the fact that some hard-core respondents feel totally detached from Israel is not new. Jews on the extreme Right and the extreme Left do feel estrangement. The far Right tends toward isolationism — disengagement from all countries outside the United States. The far Left veers toward progressive coalitions aligning into “intersectionality” anti-Israel clusters. As a counter-effort, added support should be offered to AIPAC’s work among liberal Zionists and to groups like the Democratic Majority for Israel, which “plans to work with progressive groups to educate them as to why support for Israel reflects shared interests, but also shared progressive values.”

In sum, Gallup confirms that large percentages of Republicans and Independents are pro-Israel. The Mellman Group data documents even stronger, albeit diverse, “pro-Israel” attachments among nine out of 10 American Jews. As for somewhat smaller pro-Israel support among Democrats in general, Mellman concludes from polling data, “Most Democrats are strongly pro-Israel.... [Yes] there are a few discordant voices, but we want to make sure that what’s a very small problem doesn’t metastasize into a bigger problem.”

While “The New York Times” article is not accurate, it is correct in one sense. Supporters of Israel should remain vigilant in sustaining Israel-Diaspora relations. Yes, a minority of Jews has always and will continue to feel detached from Israel. However, for the mainstream, times of partial discord are to be expected, especially when Israel is governed by a right-wing coalition, and most American Jews tend toward the center-left. However, disagreements about policies are part of global Jewish family dynamics and not indications of an impending “divorce.”



AN UNDERSTATED ISRAELI ELECTION ISSUE IN ISRAEL-DIASPORA RELATIONS

March 15, 2021

As Israel's election day approaches — March 23, 2021 — parties seeking leadership of the Jewish state and, by extension, of the Jewish world must regard the religious streams in the Diaspora as strategic assets in sustaining Jewish peoplehood.

Knesset representatives ought to partner with the Jewish religious movements in promoting Israel in their respective countries. It's untrue that only “Orthodox” Jews and Evangelical Christians are pro-Israel; it's incorrect to assume that the majority of “non-Orthodox Jews” have turned away from the Jewish state.

In Diaspora Jewish life, there is no monolithic “Orthodox Judaism,” just as there is no monolithic “non-Orthodoxy.” “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” the 2013 study issued by the Pew Research Center, as it moves from surveying “Jews of no religion” to Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Haredi Jews, reveals a “gradient” of Jewish engagement. As an example, I cite the degree to which Conservative Jews affirm Israel.

In terms of political advocacy, Conservative rabbis and synagogue delegations comprise the largest single “stream” component at the annual Policy Conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Regarding aliyah, it is simply inaccurate to characterize *olim* only as either “Orthodox” or “secular.” Quite the contrary! The majority of young singles who make aliyah through the Nefesh B'Nefesh advocacy organization for newcomers to Israel are from Conservative households. The Michael Levin Lone Soldier Centers report that more than half of the Americans who are in Israel without family and serving in the IDF were raised in Conservative Jewish homes. Often, at least one of the adult offspring of Conservative rabbis has made aliyah — this is true in my family.

Nor are the majority of Conservative Jews moving away from identifying with Israel. The 2013 Pew Research Center survey indicates that 88 percent of self-identified Conservative Jews feel an

“attachment” to Israel, especially the 56 percent who have spent time there.

Related statistics reveal that Conservative congregations, Solomon Schechter Day Schools, United Synagogue Youth chapters, Ramah camps, and movement-sponsored Israel youth programs transmit commitment to Zionism with impressive results.

Among alumni of Nativ, USY’s gap year program, a program of the Masa Israel Journey organization, 96% are involved in Israel and Jewish organizations on campus, with 77% in leadership positions. It’s noteworthy that 16% of program participants make aliyah.

Recent studies involving thousands of Camp Ramah alumni reveal that nearly 100% have been to Israel; 85% have been more than once. Almost all feel “attached” to Israel, with two-thirds feeling “very attached.” Three-quarters have close friends or immediate family living in Israel, 5% currently reside in Israel, and 29% have lived in Israel for three or more months.

The Camp Ramah movement actively partners with Nefesh B’Nefesh, with a *shaliach*, an Israeli emissary, placed by the organization at each of Ramah’s 10 overnight camps. Ramah/Nefesh B’Nefesh programs are offered in six major metropolitan areas and on 15 college campuses in North America. Each Ramah camp hosts a large delegation of Jewish Agency *shlichim*, who serve as Hebrew language teachers and help cultivate pride in Israel identity among the campers.

At my own Conservative congregation, in suburban New Jersey, we actively promote Israel during Shabbat and holy day prayer services. We display the American and Israeli flags in our sanctuary. We recite prayers for the United States and for the Jewish state. We include liturgy on behalf of U.S. Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces. We chant the traditional texts that affirm the centrality of Eretz Yisrael in Jewish life. Sermons and talks by guest speakers often present issues concerning the Jewish state. During the past 10 years alone, nearly 30 of our shul’s young adults have made aliyah.

Conservative Jews both individually and collectively are major donors and leaders of causes and organizations that work on behalf of Israel.

Conservative synagogues represent the largest component within the State of Israel Bonds nationwide synagogue campaign. Philanthropic involvement by Conservative Jews is pivotal to Jewish federations across the country, including our own local Greater MetroWest NJ federation. In fact, 70 of my congregants serve on the boards of the federation or its agencies. Conservative Jews are crucial to the success of Jewish National Fund and Friends of the IDF. Dozens of Conservative Jews have established family foundations that allocate designated funds for Israel-based projects.

The 2013 Pew study confirms that we are a sizable group: Conservative Jews comprise nearly 30 percent of American synagogue members, and 1.2 million American Jews self-identify with Conservative Judaism. An additional 900,000 folks in Canada, Europe, Latin America, Australia, Africa, Asia, and Israel self-identify with Masorti/Conservative Judaism.

The Masorti movement in Israel has grown from 50 (in 2000) to more than 80 *kehillot*, offering not just worship services, but a full range of Torah and other Jewish areas of study, cultural activities, and programs to carry out deeds of lovingkindness and create and strengthen bonds among youth and adults. NOAM, Masorti's Zionist youth movement has expanded into 20-plus local Israeli chapters and has gained governmental recognition. Masorti's summer Camp Ramah-NOAM program is bursting at the seams, with some 700 participants.

The Masorti movement hosts more than 100,000 Diaspora Jews each year for b'nei mitzvah ceremonies at Robinson's Arch in Jerusalem. Thousands of Israelis turn to Masorti *kehillot* each year for b'nei mitzvah and other life-cycle ceremonies. A spring 2017 poll conducted by the Jewish Agency's Jewish People Policy Institute revealed that the majority of Israelis prefer the Masorti model family seating (men, women, and children together) for the celebration of their family *smachot*.

Conservative Judaism's commitment to the State of Israel and the people of Israel is unshakable, as we embrace the promise we have heard from Israeli leaders "ensuring that all Jews can feel at home in Israel — Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews."

Conservative leaders will never ask people to curtail visits to Israel, but we will promote itineraries that include site visits and spokespersons that reflect religious pluralism in the Jewish state.

We will always oppose calls to withhold donations to Israel, but will affirm the justice of re-allocating more of Israeli government funds to grow all "religious streams," not only the Orthodox.

We applaud the expenditure of Knesset funds to promote Israel awareness on American campuses with the expectation that such funds will be allocated equitably, proportional to the presence of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews at each institution.

In sum, Israel-Diaspora relations must be a key issue in the upcoming election and the priority of the new coalition that emerges. Diaspora Jewry seeks to be Israel's best partner; in return, Diaspora leaders respectfully request that the coalition government that forms will do its part to achieve this goal.



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM MEANS DISTINCTIVE DENOMINATIONS — A KEY TO JEWISH CONTINUITY AND VITALITY

June 19, 2017

The Jewish People Policy Institute has published its latest study, assessing Jewish intensity and demographic growth among Haredi Jews (7% of the total number of Jews in the United States). Impressive 2012 Pew Research Center data about Haredim is contrasted with alarming data about all "non-Haredi Jews." The stark differences led journalist David Rosenberg in Israel's Arutz Sheva media group to ask, "Is there a future for non-Orthodox American Jewry?" This line of reasoning falsely assumes a unified category exists among 93% of

American Jews — Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Unaffiliated, Jews of no religion, etc. It ignores major findings of the Pew data. Scholars Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, in their “The Pew Survey Reanalyzed: More Bad News, but a Glimmer of Hope,” noted that overall, a “denominational gradient” holds true: those raised Orthodox tend to be the most engaged, followed by those raised Conservative, followed by those raised Reform, followed by those raised with no denomination.”

The most problematic cluster among so-called “non-Haredi Jews” within the JPPI data are 600,000 adults who self-identify as only “partially Jewish” and 300,000 children “who are being raised partly Jewish and partly in another religion.” The next ring of loosely engaged folks identify as “Jews of No Religion,” another large segment of the Pew survey. In this regard, Cohen/Wertheimer point out that “Jews who [do] identify themselves with the Jewish religion are far more engaged with all aspects of Jewish life than are Jews lacking such an identification. By ‘all aspects,’ we mean not only such obvious things as synagogue attendance and ritual observance but also connection to Israel, engagement in non-religious Jewish organizations, likelihood of giving to Jewish causes, and forging close friendships with other Jews.” To lump “partially Jewish” and “Jews of No Religion” together with other American Jews yields misleading data.

Moreover, among “Jews affirming the Jewish Religion,” Cohen/Wertheimer point out the significance of identification with one of the Jewish religious denominations. They acknowledge the contribution of a few high-profile communities not connected to any of the movements but add a caution: “Our analysis of the Pew data challenges...the widely touted phenomenon of post- or non-denominationalism — allegedly, the leading edge of a new American Judaism — requires rethinking: on every measure, [in general] Jews by religion who were raised in no denomination evince lower levels of Jewish connection than do Jews raised in *some* denomination.”

What is clear is that there is a range of Jewish intensity along a denominational gradient by adherents of the respective movements (Haredi, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Unaffiliated), which yields a diminishing spectrum of results. This is the con-

text in which to read the JPPI study of Haredi Jews, living the most intensive Jewish life-style. These are the folks whom Dr. Wertheimer has previously identified who “self-consciously insulate themselves to one degree or another from Western culture or explicitly reject the assumptions of modernity.” Haredim do not send their children to live away from home at secular universities. They encourage very early marriage and large family size. Accepting the “price” of isolated living, they retain most, although not all, of their offspring within their ranks.

Less intensive Jewish living by “Modern Orthodox” Jews (3% of American Jewry) yields impressive but not as dramatic data reflective of widespread Jewish engagement (ritual observance, Jewish study, Israel connection to Israel, etc.). These are Jews strongly engaged in Jewish living balanced by involvement in the general society. They demand that their yeshivot provide high standards not only of Judaic studies but of secular studies as well. The goal is to send their children to America’s best college campuses as a launch into potentially lucrative careers. The age of marriage for their sons and daughters is noticeably higher than that among the Haredim. Family size is above the 2.1 replacement level but smaller than among Haredim. They face pressures in terms of the affordability of the Modern Orthodox life-style (yeshivah tuition, summer camp, private college). The challenges posed by affordability, by career, and by the assimilatory pull of the larger society result in a significant rate of disaffection. This dynamic of struggle is assessed in Werthemier’s essay “Can Modern Orthodoxy Survive?” subtitled “The culture wars have come to the Modern Orthodox movement. Is a schism on the horizon?”

The most intensive Jewishly engaged “non-Orthodox” group are self-identified Conservative Jews. Contrary to most media assessments, the Pew data do not reveal a catastrophic decline in Conservative Jewish numbers. Both in the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey and in the 2012 Pew survey, approximately 1.2 million folks self-identify as Conservative Jews. Stability in overall numbers does not represent growth but neither does it represent demise. The Pew survey indicates that 29% of current American synagogue members

are Conservative Jews, down from 33% in 2000. This reflects modest decline, but certainly not a reason to panic.

On the very positive side of the equation, a distinctive picture emerges: 98% of self-identifying Conservative Jews are “proud” to be Jewish; 93% feel that “being Jewish” is “important” to their lives; 90% regard Israel as “an important part of being Jewish”; 88% express “an emotional attachment to Israel,” especially the 56% who have visited Israel. Of eligible children from Conservative homes, 30% currently are enrolled in day school. Four out of 10 self-identifying Conservative Jews attend religious services at least one time per month. Fifty percent of these Jews are current synagogue members; 29% currently belong to “a Jewish organization”; 80% have made a donation to a Jewish organization during the past year; 40% feel that being part of a Jewish community is essential to being Jewish. In addition, 30% of adult Conservative Jews attended an overnight Jewish camp; 50% were part of a Jewish youth group; and 75% of married self-identifying Conservative Jews are in-married. Conservative shuls also serve as the primary “non-Orthodox” venues for kosher homes, kosher synagogue kitchens, as well as egalitarian Shabbat and daily minyanim.

Cohen/Wertheimer refute the false assumption of future “convergence of Conservative Jews with the Reform movement. In exploring the views of non-Orthodox Jews ages 35-50, they take note that “when we compare specific denominations of the non-Orthodox, we find striking differences in levels of Jewish engagement. In fact, those differences are more pronounced among younger Jews than among their elders. This pattern is especially evident with regard to the sense of belonging to and of responsibility for the Jewish people; on this measure, Jews under the age of 50 who have been raised Conservative exhibit far higher rates of connection than do their Reform counterparts. Similarly large gaps open between those raised Conservative and those raised Reform when it comes to levels of attachment to Israel, participation in religious life, joining Jewish organizations, and having mostly Jewish friends.”

The Reform movement, too, clearly plays a vital role in efforts at Jewish communal continuity. While less engaged than Conservative

Jews in connections to Israel, in ritual practice, in religious service attendance, they are much more so than among the Unaffiliated Jews of No Religion. With a 50% rate of intermarriage among self-identifying Reform Jews, Reform Judaism is at the forefront of outreach to a category of Jews most at risk to become unengaged: adult children of the intermarried. Cohen/Wertheimer emphasize the challenge. They note that “in the aggregate, individuals who have been raised by two Jewish parents make very different choices from those made by children of intermarried parents. We have seen the marked tendency of the latter to marry non-Jews in their turn and the relative unlikelihood of their raising their own children exclusively in the Jewish religion. Similar disparities can be shown on measures of religious participation and connection to the Jewish people, where adults raised by intermarried parents are, at most, only half as likely to be involved in the community as those raised by two Jewish parents; the gaps are even wider when it comes to joining synagogues, friendship with other Jews, and donating to Jewish charities.” If the adult children of intermarried remain unaffiliated, the chances of their future Jewish continuity are remote.

In sum, it is unhelpful to bundle multiple denominations along with the unaffiliated and Jews of No Religion as one unified data base as “non-Haredi” or “non-Orthodox” or as “Liberal.” Affirming Judaism as one’s religion has consequences. Whether or not “A Jew by Religion” currently belongs to a specific congregation, or at least identifies with a specific denomination, also is important. We see a clear denominational gradient revealed by the Pew study. This is evidence of the benefits to Jewish continuity and vitality that accrue from religious pluralism. American Jewry benefits by preserving its rich spectrum of distinctive options for Jewish religious identification.

American Jews rely upon each movement to retain a uniqueness lest the array of choices erode. In a free and open society in which Jews are a tiny minority, the presence of desirable and unique Jewish religious choices is the best strategy for assuring a Jewish future for the maximum number of Jews.

PART
THREE
A HISTORY OF
CONSERVATIVE
JUDAISM'S
ZIONISM

THE ORIGIN OF ZIONISM IN CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

August 23, 2024

The European roots of Zionism in Conservative Judaism commenced with an emphasis upon Jewish history and peoplehood as espoused by Rabbi Zechariah Frankel in the mid-19th century. Rabbi Frankel had withdrawn from the German rabbinical conferences of the 1840s due to emerging receptivity to replacing Hebrew as the language of Jewish prayer.

For Frankel, writes Dr. Neil Gillman in his 1993 book “Conservative Judaism: The New Century,” “Hebrew represented kinship, a sense of belonging, a tie to the Jewish past and to every Jewish community. That is precisely why Frankel’s pro-emancipation colleagues wanted to weaken its position in the synagogue service and why Frankel wanted to strengthen it.” Frankel’s appeal, writes Gillman “was to history and tradition, to the wishes of the community, clearly expressed since antiquity...; it has been ‘sanctified by millennia,’... the tie that binds Jews in widely different cultures.”

In “From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism (Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry series), Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminar in New York, elaborated upon Frankel’s commitment to the national element in Jewish practices: “To mediate the commands of Halacha and history, Frankel introduced the novel idea of the *volk* as a formative agent in defining Jewish practice.... The elaborate rituals of Jewish life were not just partitions erected to shelter Jews in hostile climes; for countless Jews, they remained the vital means of experiencing the divine.”

The great historian Heinrich Graetz, Frankel’s colleague at the Jewish seminary in Breslau, helped shape Frankel’s commitment to Jewish peoplehood as Zionism. Chancellor Schorsch said that Graetz ended a “deeply felt declaration on Jewish survival with a veiled allusion to the future possibility of a renaissance of Jewish life in Palestine.... Graetz was steeped in Jewish national sentiment.... He never ceased to regard Judaism as anything but a national reli-

gion.... Graetz had first articulated his national conception of Judaism in 1846, and his final reply to [extreme German nationalist Heinrich] von Treitschke in 1883 confirms that he could not be intimidated to relinquish it. German pressure could only force him to mute and disguise it.”

Shlomo Avineri’s “The Making of Modern Zionism” also calls attention to Graetz’s contribution to the evolution of modern Zionism. Avineri wrote that to Graetz, “the historical subject of Judaism...is not only the religious consciousness of the individual Jewish person...; it is also the historical context for the realization of these regulations.... This leads Graetz to focus on the political and geographical aspects of Judaism; that is, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel. ‘The Torah, the nation of Israel, and the Holy Land...are inseparably united....’ Graetz argues...that ‘Judaism without the firm soil of national life resembles...a half-uprooted tree, which still produces foliage at the top but is no longer capable of sprouting twigs and branches.’”

In Rabbi Robert Fierstien’s “A Different Spirit,” which assesses the history of the initial era of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886-1902), he identifies “the involvement of seminary personnel, at every level, with the fledgling Zionist movement.” Although JTS president Sabato Morais longed for a “more religious component in Zionism..., almost every major figure associated with the early Seminary was an active Zionist.”

Rabbi Fierstien provides a roster of committed Zionists: “Bernard Drachman, Gustave Lieberman, Joshua Joffe were extremely active in Zionist affairs, with the latter serving for a time as the president of the Federation of American Zionists....” In addition, “Marcus Jastrow, Benjamin Szold, Henry Pereira Mendes, L. Napoleon Levy [a trustee], Solomon Solis-Cohen, Aaron Friedenwald, and Harry Friedenwald were all extremely active in Zionist affairs, with Harry Friedenwald serving for a time as president of the Federation of American Zionists, and Mendes, Jastrow, and A. Friedenwald serving as vice presidents.”

In “The Emergence of Conservative Judaism,” Moshe Davis documents that “the Zionist Association of Baltimore — probably the first Zionist society in the U.S., organized in 1893 by Hebraists — ...was encouraged by members of the ‘Historical School’ [JTS supporters] such as Harry Friedenwald, Benjamin Szold, and his daughter Henrietta.”

Dr. Davis adds that even Sabato Morais associated himself with the Chovevei Zion organization in Philadelphia. Although not yet an advocate for Jewish statehood or political Zionism, Morais “fully accepted the promise of the ultimate restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land. He believed that the entire world would come to recognize Palestine as the center of spiritual truth and that the Jews would return to Zion and spread ‘words of peace and truth’ to all corners of the earth. But a prerequisite condition of that Return was a religious revival of the Jewish people. Settlement and cultural work and religious commitment could pave the way.”

Davis also singles out H.P. Mendes for praise as a “most eloquent spokesman” for religious Zionism. To Mendes, “the idea of restoration...meant more than the physical possession of Palestine. It meant making Palestine for the world at large what Rome was for the Catholic world — its spiritual center. This would bring mankind to a new stage of development, ‘the realization of the prophetic ideals for the benefit and blessing of the world at large.’”

Dr. Davis pointed out that Bernard Drachman and Gustave Liberman, respectively dean and Talmud instructor at the JTS, had been involved with the Chovevei Zion movement prior to arriving at the seminary. Subsequently, the JTS students “followed their example.”

Consequently, Fierstien assessed that “most seminary students also shared their professors’ zeal for Zionism, helping to found, along with students from [City College of New York], the Young American Zionists in 1896 and ZBT in 1899.... ZBT [Zion Bemishpat Tipadeh] was ‘a Zionist fraternity composed of college, university, and professional men....’ Of its 13 original officers and board members, eight were Seminary students, including the president, David

Levine, and the vice president, Dr. David Liknaitz, as well as board member Julius Greenstone, who went on to become a vice president of the Federation of American Zionists.”

In Davis’s words, “The purpose of ZBT was to further the Zionist movement and thus to ‘benefit the welfare of the Jews in general.’ By fashioning a body of Zionists who were educated university men, the organization hoped to bring the respect of the world to the Zionist movement.”

Fierstien concludes that “from its very inception, the Seminary was deeply, albeit unofficially, committed to the Zionist movement. So it can truly be said that when Solomon Schechter” — chief architect of what became Conservative Judaism — “first announced his acceptance of the principles of Zionism in 1905, he was not blazing a new trail, but was rather following in the paths of the Seminary founders.”



SOLOMON SCHECHTER'S ZIONISM

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In Professor Naomi Cohen’s “Diaspora Plus Palestine, Religion Plus Nationalism: The Seminary and Zionism” (“Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America,” Vol. 2), she emphasized Solomon Schechter’s early adherence — already in the 1880s — to Hibbat Zion, the cultural/religious brand of Zionism. Schechter’s twin brother, also a Hibbat Zion member, moved to Israel as one of the first settlers of Zichron Yaakov. Solomon Schechter told his future wife, Mathilde, that had she turned down his marriage proposal, he would have become, like his brother, “a farmer in Palestine.” Even before the formal birth of a Zionist movement in the late 1890s, Schechter was a Zionist. Toward the end of his life, he reiterated that “Zionism was, and still is, the most cherished dream I was worthy of having.”

Schechter came to United States, and JTS in 1902, prepared to do battle against assimilation and against Reform Judaism’s rejection of

Jewish tradition and concept of peoplehood. In Dr. Cohen's words, "Schechter always posited that a Jewish national consciousness was inseparable from the Jewish religious faith." As a religious Zionist, in contrast to adherents of Reform Judaism, Schechter insisted upon "the survival of the Jews as a distinct people." Like Ahad Ha'am, the prominent Zionist thinker whose writings he admired, Schechter viewed Zionism as a strategy to reinvigorate Jewish life worldwide. Enhanced Jewish life in Palestine would radiate vitality to Jews throughout the globe. Schechter was uncomfortable with the secular nature of New York's Zionist movement, the Federation of American Zionists (FAZ), and so refrained from official Zionist activity in the city.

Rabbi David B. Starr, in "Solomon Schechter's Path to Zionism," traced Schechter's evolution from discomfort with FAZ's brand of Zionism to public affirmation of the Zionist cause, in 1905, soon after Theodor Herzl's death in 1904. Dr. Starr attributes the change in Schechter's stance to several types of factors — 1) Global factors: the death of Herzl in 1904, the intensification of antisemitic violence with the Russian pogroms; discussions of territorialism within the World Zionist Organization, i.e., proposing an alternative Jewish "homeland" other than in Palestine. 2) Erosion of American Judaism: Schechter's realization that his distaste for a non-religious framing of Zionism was superseded by the necessity of mobilizing American Zionism in the battle against assimilation. 3) New York City Jewry: From his perch at JTS, Schechter rose in the ranks of communal leaders; his academic platform invited engagement with such contemporary issues as the cause of Zionism.

To these factors, Naomi Cohen adds the influence of Schechter's friend and his JTS faculty appointee, Israel Friedlaender, another admirer of Ahad Ha'am. Dr. Cohen notes that "Friedlaender, along with Conservative Jews like Judah Magnes and Harry Friedenwald, was shifting the focus of the FAZ to spiritual and cultural Zionism."

In a December 1905 speech at a Zionist meeting, Schechter publicly affirmed his identification with the Zionist movement. A year later, Schechter issued "Zionism: A Statement," a paper that elaborated upon Schechter's view of Zionism as "a bulwark against assim-

ilation.” Schechter explained: “What I understand by assimilation is loss of identity or that process of disintegration which, passing through various degrees of defiance of all Jewish thought and disloyalty to Israel’s history and its mission, terminates variously in different lands.... It results in the severance of all affiliation with the synagogue...and is consummated by a final, though imperceptible, absorption in the great majority [of non-Jews].”

As a Jewish communal leader, Schechter sought and worked for Jewish unity. To Schechter, Zionism offered unification through its diverse paths toward Judaism and the renewal of Jewish peoplehood. “It may appear to one as the rebirth of national Jewish consciousness, to another as a religious revival, while to a third it may present itself as a path leading to the goal of Jewish culture, and to a fourth it may take the form of the last and only solution of the Jewish problem [antisemitism].... On one point, however, they all agree: namely, that it is not only desirable but absolutely necessary that Palestine, the land of our fathers, should be recovered with the purpose of forming a home for at least a portion of the Jews, who would lead there an independent national life.”

As a devotee of Aham Ha’Am’s notion of cultural/spiritual Zionism, Schechter called for the rebirth of the Hebrew language as a unifying Jewish mode of expression. He lamented that “it is a tragedy to see a language held sacred by all the world in which the Holy Writ was composed, and which served as the depository of Israel’s greatest and best thought, doomed to oblivion and forced gradually from the synagogue” and replaced by the vernacular of the countries where Jews lived. Schechter pointed to concrete ways in which Zionism was strengthening the Hebrew language, synagogue life among Eastern European immigrants, and Jewry’s cultural creativity. In like manner, in 1913 Schechter joined with Israel Friedlaender and Judah Magnes in battling on behalf of Hebrew becoming the language of instruction at the newly established Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. In the words of Dr. Norman Bentwich, a high official in the Yishuv, Schechter “was absolutely convinced of the importance of the Hebrew language as a link among all Jewish

communities of the world; he himself used Hebrew regularly in his correspondence with Jewish scholars.”

While Schechter came to respect an array of Zionist options, he identified his quest with religious Zionism, regarding a Zionist revival as going hand-in-hand with the revival of Judaism. “I belong to that class of Zionists that lay more stress on the religious-national aspects of Zionism than on any other feature peculiar to it. The revival of Israel’s national consciousness and the revival of Israel’s religion...are inseparable.” In that regard, Schechter countered the anti-Zionist Reform accusation that affirming Zionism meant rejecting Judaism’s engagement with social justice causes. In Professor Cohen’s words, “Schechter countered that the nationalistic and universalistic elements in Judaism worked in harmony, that ‘Israel must first effect its own redemption and live again in its own life [in order] to accomplish its universal mission.’”

Schechter celebrated the worldwide reawakening of Jewish identity ignited by the Zionist movement. “Zionism has already achieved great things. There is hardly a single Jewish community in any part of the globe which is not represented by a larger or smaller number of men and women acknowledging themselves as Zionists and standing out as a living protest against the tendencies just hinted at. It has created a press and has called into life a host of lecturers and speakers propagating its doctrines and preaching them boldly to Israel [Jews] all over the world.

“It has called into existence numerous societies whose aim it is to make the sacred tongue a living language by means of writing and even conversing in it....”

As noted by Rabbi Robert Fierstien in “Solomon Schechter and the Zionist Movement,” Schechter took a strong stand against those Zionists who were willing to consider a Jewish homeland elsewhere other than Palestine and embraced the imperative of establishing a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Schechter’s championing of Zionism included his commitment to its being supported both by Jews who would become *olim* like his brother and Jews like himself, living in the Jewish Diaspora.

Additionally, Schechter defended American Zionism against the alleged critique by anti-Zionists of dual loyalty, claiming loyalty to a state other than the United States. Schechter adhered to Ahad Ha'Am's vision of multiple centers of Judaism around the world, all energized by the revitalization of Jewish life in Palestine. To be living in America as a loyal citizen and yet a Zionist was not a contradiction. Plus at the "end of time" — the messianic age — Schechter wrote: "America is not the final destiny of Judaism.... We believe in the advent of the Messiah who will redeem Israel and bring us back to the Holy Land...."

After the 1906 issuance of "Zionism: A Statement," Schechter became an active participant in Zionist affairs. Notably, in 1913 he spoke at the World Zionist Congress in Vienna. Frequently, he would take vacations in Tannersville, NY, the town where American Zionists assembled for their conventions. He participated with enthusiasm and eloquence in debating issues of Jewish concern. His last major publication, "Seminary Addresses" (1915), included updated Zionist reflections.

"Zionism declares boldly to the world that Judaism means to preserve its life by not losing its life [through assimilation]," he said. "It shall be a true and healthy life, with a policy of its own, a religion wholly its own, invigorated by sacred memories and sacred environments, and proving a tower of strength and of unity not only for the remnant gathered within the borders of the Holy Land, but also for those who shall, by choice or necessity, prefer what now constitutes the Galut [the Diaspora]." With these goals in mind, Schechter assembled a JTS faculty of cultural Zionists and Hebraists. He influenced a generation of future congregational rabbis to embrace Zionism. Plus, as Bentwich noted, Schechter "inspired a group of young Zionist intelligentsia, including Judah Magnes, Henrietta Szold, Horace Kallen, Max Radin, and Elisha Friedman."



THE ZIONISM OF SCHECHTER'S JTS FACULTY

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Upon assuming the leadership of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Solomon Schechter immediately proceeded to assemble a high-quality roster of faculty committed to joining with him in interpreting Judaism for American Jews. As Norman Bentwich, a high official in the Yishuv, observed, Schechter's recruitment of intellectuals was modeled upon his inspiring experience in England within a network that "sought to arouse Jewish consciousness and an interest in Jewish culture.... Included in this group were Dr. Moses Gaster..., chief rabbi of the Sephardi community..., Israel Zangwill..., Lucien Wolf and Joseph Jacobs..., Solomon J. Solomon..., Asher Myers, editor of 'The Jewish Chronicle'..., and Israel Abrahams..., a tutor at Jews' College [in London], who would later succeed Schechter in teaching rabbinical studies at Cambridge University...." This group of creative thinkers "called itself the 'Wanderers.'"

In New York's JTS, Schechter sought to duplicate the "Wanderers" synergy. To that end, Bentwich wrote, Schechter "found in the United States Louis Ginzberg, who, like Schechter himself, was a great master of Midrash, and J. M. Asher, who became professor of homiletics. From Europe, Schechter recruited Israel Friedlaender, of the Strasbourg University, in Bible exegesis and the historian Alexander Marx, who had just finished his studies at Konigsberg. Later, Israel Davidson was engaged to teach medieval literature.... Realizing also the great need in American Jewry for trained teachers, Schechter established in 1909 the Teachers' Institute as part of the Seminary, with Mordecai Kaplan as its director."

Assessing the Jewish peoplehood commitment of this New York City group that was akin to the "Wanderers," Dr. Naomi Cohen commented that the JTS faculty "fully supported Schechter's Zionist position. Like the president [Schechter], all were traditionalist Jews who subscribed to the two-centered [Palestine and the Diaspora] vision and cultural theories of Ahad Ha'Am. Their Zionism was a private and low-keyed affair. As Alexander Marx, professor of histo-

ry explained, 'We were all Zionists — but not active [in the Zionist movement]'.

“Except for Friedlaender and the young Mordecai Kaplan, the luminaries of the faculty — Marx, Louis Ginzberg, Israel Davidson — confined their organized Zionist activities primarily to participation in the short-lived Achavah Club [which] discussed aspects of contemporary Jewish problems from a learned perspective. Achavah limited its membership to [Zionists], ‘adherents of national Judaism.’ Like Schechter, “Friedlaender and Kaplan...regularly attended Zionist meetings and delivered Zionist lectures.... Their wives followed suit; Lilian Friedlaender, Lena Kaplan, and Mathilde Schechter...were among the first directors of Hadassah.”

In particular during the Schechter years at JTS, “it was Israel Friedlaender who chalked up the most impressive Zionist record.... He played a multi-faceted Zionist role: organizer, committeeman, polemicist, and, above all, theoretician. Baila Round Shargel’s biography of Friedlaender, titled ‘Practical Dreamer,’ offers numerous examples of Friedlaender’s approach: ‘Diaspora plus Palestine, religion plus nationalism.’... His views, like Schechter’s, but developed in far greater detail, made him a major influence on Seminary students, who knew him as the Zionist ‘par excellence.’”

Friedlaender tried to be a consensus builder. He rejected the polar opposites of either Jewish religion without nationalism as well as Jewish nationalism without religion. He offered a synthesis in accord with his formula of “Diaspora plus Palestine, Religion plus Nationalism.” His Zionist objective was to unite as many American Jews as possible around a common principle: to include the wealthy philanthropists as well as the still impoverished immigrants in support of the upbuilding of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine.

Dr. Shargel reminds us of the expanse of the Zionist activities that Friedlaender engaged in. He “served as chairman of the Zionist Council in New York in 1905. He headed the [nationwide] FAZ education program beginning in 1906. For several years he worked with Harry Friedenwald and Henrietta Szold assembling materials for a Zionist manual.... To assure a Zionist future in America, he

organized Young Judaea and was active in the Intercollegiate Zionist Organization. By 1910-11, he rose to serve as chairman of the FAZ executive committee.”

Rabbi Simcha Kling in “Zionism and the Conservative Movement,” added the observation that Friedlaender viewed Zionism as essential for Judaism’s survival in the modern era. He “did not believe that Judaism in the Diaspora could survive if there were no Eretz Yisrael; on the other hand, the establishment of a revived Eretz Yisrael did not mean the end of Diaspora Jewry....” In a pamphlet titled “Zionism and World Peace,” Friedlaender concluded that “Judaism represented an indissoluble combination of nationalism and religion..., a national religion.... The Jewish people was, first and foremost, a religious nation.”

Rabbi Kling made note of Friedlaender’s satisfaction in watching Zionist striving spread both among American Jews of the earlier German immigration as well as more recent arrivals from Eastern Europe. “The German Jews were beginning to appreciate the effects of a Hebraic life in Palestine on the Diaspora, and the Russian Jews were helping build a sound Judaism in the New World....” Kling wrote. “Zionism should not be concerned only with the securing of a Jewish center for the Jewish people as a whole.”

Additionally, like his mentor Ahad Ha’Am and colleague Judah Magnes, Friedlaender “did not minimize the potential danger of the Arab presence [in Palestine] to either the physical well-being or the spiritual advancement of the Jewish people [there].” He offered a list of educational recommendations to promote good will between Jews and Arabs in the Land: “A Bureau of Information to collect data on all aspects of Arabic life, a periodical devoted to promoting good relations between Arabs and Jews, translation of Arabic classics into Hebrew, and the republication of the works of medieval Jewish writers who wrote in Arabic.”

Schechter and his Zionist faculty did encounter opposition from key philanthropist and anti-Zionist Jacob Schiff. Fortunately for Schechter and his cohort, the non-Zionist chair of the JTS board, Louis Marshall, came to their defense. Dr. Naomi Cohen recalled

that “Marshall defended Schechter’s right to support Zionism publicly; the board, he said, never sought to control the judgment of individual directors [board members], faculty members, or students. He emphatically denied [Schiff’s accusation of] the incompatibility of Zionism with American patriotism.”

Cohen wrote: “A self-styled non-Zionist who was critical of political Zionism, Marshall nonetheless praised Zionist accomplishments in words strikingly similar to Schechter’s. ‘Zionism has been productive of immense benefits to Judaism. It has stimulated a living interest in its history and developments among thousands who have hitherto been indifferent to things Jewish and among many who otherwise would have been lost to [the people of Israel]. It has rescued Hebrew from the category of dead languages. It has given birth to manly Jewish consciousness, [and it] has made Jewish culture signify something that is positive instead of the shadow of a name.’”



THE ZIONISM OF SOLOMON SCHECHTER’S STUDENTS

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In “The Zionism of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1902-1948,” Dr. Naomi Cohen affirmed that Solomon Schechter’s “religious Zionism found a ready response among seminary students, many of whom were already Zionist sympathizers. The young men flocked to sermons and lectures by prominent Zionists and took an active part in Zionist youth and Hebrew-speaking organizations.

“Jacob Kohn, at the close of 1907, recalled how he and his schoolmates would travel to the Lower East Side for group meetings and for talks by Judah Magnes, Shmaryahu Levine, and Zvi Hirsch Masliansky. Zionism, Kohn said, made them feel the unity of Israel and the Jewish heritage. The students venerated their president [Schechter], and the rapport between them was strengthened by Schechter’s Zionist stand.

“At alumni meetings in 1908, Kohn, then a new rabbi, argued in Schechter-like fashion about the legitimacy of preaching Zionism

from the pulpit. ‘The return to Palestine,’ he stated in part, ‘was necessary for the proper development of Judaism and Jewish culture and for the spark of religious devotion to serve the flame of national enthusiasm.’”

Dr. Cohen reported that “thanks to their own leanings and to the input of Schechter and his faculty, more than 60 percent of the seminary-trained rabbis in 1914 were, according to one estimate, active Zionists.”

Other evidence of the Zionist leanings of Schechter’s students can be seen in iconic pictures from 1906 and 1907 of the delegation that participated in the annual Zionist convention at Tannersville, NY. In those pictures, alongside Schechter, we find a host of emerging Zionist leaders who had studied with him.

In “The Birth of Conservative Judaism,” Dr. Michael R. Cohen assesses the importance of Schechter’s students in fulfilling his vision for American Judaism/Jewry. For that purpose, “Schechter nurtured a small group of his disciples whom he groomed to take leadership of the emerging movement.... Schechter and several of his disciples created an informal rabbinical placement network.... [This] strengthened the disciples’ vague group consciousness and produced a cadre of trusted disciples who would take the lead in implementing Schechter’s vision after their teacher’s death.”

A commitment to Zionism was a part of the Schechter legacy that was continued by his corps of disciples. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 made implementing some of Schechter’s goals more difficult, even amid the launching of the United Synagogue of America (the congregational arm of Conservative Judaism) in 1913.

Nevertheless, with Schechter’s death in 1915, support for his Zionist dreams remained strong among his disciples. Michael Cohen says that the issue of Zionism did not “divide Schechter’s disciples. Schechter had called Zionism a ‘cherished dream.’ Accordingly, United Synagogue had in the preamble to its constitution that one of its six aims was ‘to preserve in the service the reference to Israel’s past and hopes for Israel’s restoration [in Palestine].’”

When the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917, the fledgling Conservative movement officially embraced the idea of a Jewish national home in Palestine. This was consistent with the view among the majority of United Synagogue activists. For example, Rabbi Jacob Kohn argued that “we men [Schechter’s disciples] have the right to infer that if we wish to organize a movement partly to maintain in our liturgy the voicing of this [Zionist] hope, that we would be glad and eager to see the realization of that hope” — a Jewish national home.

Like Kohn in his long and illustrious career at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and Rabbi Herman Rubenovitz of Mishkan Tefila in Boston, many of Schechter’s students went on to serve congregations in which they played a leadership role in the emergence of American Zionism. In the words of American Zionist leader Louis Lipsky: “It was Dr. Schechter...who made the Jewish Theological Seminary an institution for the graduation not only of rabbis, but also of Zionists. Without exception its rabbis — leaders and workers — have carried the message of Zionism to all parts of America.”

The following are a few examples among dozens of Zionist rabbinic alumni who were Schechter’s students:

Rabbi Louis Feinberg served Cincinnati’s Adath Israel Congregation from 1918 until the late 1940s and was active in religious Zionism (Mizrachi) and in the Zionist Organization of America. The “Encyclopedia Judaica” records that he was “a passionate Zionist. He helped establish a Palestine Scholarship Program in his community. This enabled five members of his congregation to spend an entire year in Israel.” Rabbi Feinberg was also among the founders of the Young Judaea movement and served as the editor of “Our Jewish Youth,” which evolved into “The Young Judean.” At age 50, in 1937, Rabbi Feinberg fulfilled a life-long dream by visiting Palestine. He referred to Zionism as “the newest development of the Messianic idea.”

Rabbi Feinberg’s posthumous publication of essays and addresses, “The Spiritual Foundations of Judaism,” included a Zionist section titled “Renaissance.” In this section were observations about “The

Hebrew University,” “The Romance of a Land,” “The Rebirth of a Nation,” and “A Year of Destiny (1948).” Feinberg’s influence upon the design of Adath Israel’s new building reflected upon Zionism as well. The interior decoration was developed by Dr. Boris Schatz of the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Palestine. The “monumental dome which comprised the ceiling of the sanctuary” included a “rim inscribed with Hebrew inscriptions from the Pentateuch, Hebrew prophets, medieval Jewish philosophers, and the modern Hebrew poet Hayim Nachman Bialik, selected and arranged by Rabbi Feinberg.”

Rabbi Israel Levinthal served for several decades as the leader of the Brooklyn Jewish Center (1919-73). Wikipedia reports that Rabbi Levinthal “became a leader in Hebrew letters, Jewish unity, and Zionism. He visited [British] Mandatory Palestine on numerous occasions as both a Zionist and a representative of American organizations, including at the laying of the cornerstone of The Hebrew University and the dedication of the Jerusalem Synagogue Center.” Additionally, he served as president (1933-35) of the Brooklyn region of the Zionist Organization of America. Like Feinberg, Rabbi Levinthal both preached and wrote about the evolution of modern Zionism.

In his sermon “The Miracle of Reborn Israel,” Rabbi Lilienthal recollected: “We first visited Palestine in 1925, when, as a delegate of the United Synagogue of America, the New York Board of Rabbis, and our own Brooklyn Jewish Center, I went to the dedication of The Hebrew University on Mount Scopus. We were there again in 1934, when, as the national chairman of the United Synagogue campaign to build a Synagogue Center in Jerusalem, I was privileged to lay the cornerstone of what is now the Yeshurun Synagogue on King George Boulevard.”

In 1934, Lilienthal noted the contrast to 1925; in 1934, he wrote, “I saw Palestine as a field, flourishing settlements with cultivated land and thriving orange groves on sites that used to be filled with mountain rocks. We saw a new Jerusalem that was beginning to develop beyond the Old City and a new Tel Aviv that was beginning to look like a town with a future.” Israel is today, he wrote, “the home

of the Jew, of every Jew who wants to return to his ancestral-new home.... Where Jews from all parts of the world [will] find an open door, a warm welcome to greet them, where they feel at home.”

Most prominent among alumni who studied under Schechter and who became part of the Zionist leadership was Rabbi Solomon Goldman, longtime leader of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago since 1929. The list of his Zionist roles was unsurpassed among synagogue rabbis. On the day he became the president of the Zionist Organization of America, Rabbi Goldman proclaimed, “I was born into Zionism,” reflecting the previous generations of his lineage.

He also served as chair of the Emergency Committee for Palestine, cochair of United Jewish Appeal, president of the Histadrut Ivrit of America, vice president of the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress as well as a board member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Jewish National Fund, American Friends of the Hebrew University, and the Palestine Hebrew Culture Fund.

In Rabbi Goldman’s first book, “A Rabbi Takes Stock” (1931), he asserts his unwavering Zionist commitment. Rabbi Alex J. Goldman, in his volume “The Greatest Rabbis Hall of Fame,” notes that for “A Rabbi Takes Stock,” Solomon Goldman “scanned newspapers and magazines for attacks against his people, Hebrew, and Zionism and came out fiercely in their defense.... The renaissance of the Hebrew spirit fascinated him. He delved into history for proof of the claim to Palestine as the Jewish home, [and he] always provided copious notes and precise sources.”

The small Conservative movement — which in 1913 had 22 congregations — grew to 170 by 1924 and more than 200 by the late 1930s. JTS rabbinic alumni served as synagogue rabbis all over the country.

Accordingly, in “The Political World of American Zionism,” Samuel Halperin noted that “the American Zionist movement derived

its most unanimously enthusiastic and dedicated supporters from the ranks of Conservative Judaism.”



CONSERVATIVE ZIONISM BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

September 25, 2024

After his death in 1915, Solomon Schechter’s legacy of Zionism continued through key members of the Jewish Theological Seminary faculty and through the stream of rabbinical school graduates. Conservative movement historian Rabbi Simcha Kling noted: “Conservative Judaism was unique among the contemporary interpretations of the Jewish tradition in that it had always insisted that religion and nationalism were integrated components of a totality.”

Professor Louis Ginzberg affirmed this position: “Jewish nationalism without religion would be a tree without fruit. Jewish religion without Jewish nationalism would be a tree without roots.” Ginzberg, accompanied by JTS professor Israel Friedlaender, had been a delegate to the controversial Sixth Zionist Congress during which the Uganda debate took place. Both voted “no” on the “Uganda as Jewish home” question, in contrast to JTS lay leader Harry Friedenwald, who voted “yes.”

In 1919, while serving as acting president of the nascent United Synagogue of America, Ginzberg lobbied for the fledgling Conservative movement to become much more active in Zionist endeavors. “I believe that the time has come when the United Synagogue should take an active part in the work for the restoration of Palestine,” he said. “Most of the members of United Synagogue, congregations as well as individuals, are enthusiastically engaged in this kind of work. It is high time that the voice of our organization be heard in a matter so deeply affecting the spiritual life of the Jew.”

Until his tragic death in 1919 — on a mission to assist the suffering Jews of Ukraine — Israel Friedlaender remained the most active Zionist within the faculty.

Friedlaender's collection of essays, titled "Past and Present" (1919), as well as his translation of many of the writings of Ahad Ha'Am testify to his devotion to the cause. Simcha Kling pointed out that "Friedlaender saw the renewed Jewish community in the homeland as far more than a place of refuge [for persecuted Jews] and even more than the locus of Jewish creativity. He recognized it as the connecting bond between all Jewries, the force preserving the unity of the Jewish people." Like his mentor Ahad Ha'Am, "he saw a center in Zion radiating new life to all parts of the Jewish body." In Friedlaender's words, a renewed Eretz Yisrael "will prove at the same time a powerhouse which will send forth its energies to the whole house of Israel. Zion is primarily an opportunity for the Jewish people to express itself in accordance with its ancient ideals and aspirations."

Cyrus Adler, Schechter's successor as JTS president, found himself at odds with the political Zionism of his faculty and students. Nevertheless, Adler remained committed to developing Jewish settlement and culture in Palestine. In 1915, Adler affirmed that although he was not a political Zionist, he did think that "it could easily be recognized, upon religious grounds, even without considering political grounds, that Jews have a claim to some sort of specially favored treatment in Palestine." This is why he did not refer to himself as a "non-Zionist" but rather as among those who were "pro-Palestinian Jews." For example, in 1917, following the excitement of the Balfour Declaration, Adler added, "Whether it be as an independent state or under English or Turkish sovereignty, Palestine is sacred and should be for those Jews who want to go to Palestine to practice Judaism."

Herbert Parzen, in "Architects of Conservative Judaism" (1964), credits Dr. Adler for being "an important factor in the creation of the Jewish Agency for Palestine..., participating in its management and work. He helped in the building of The Hebrew University and in the shaping of its policies."

Additionally, Adler joined in the effort to form Keren Hayesod and the United Synagogue's mid-1920s' project to build Yeshurun, an American-style synagogue center in Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood. In 1926, the Adler-led JTS awarded an honorary degree to Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik. Furthermore, in 1928-29

Adler launched a tradition of service by a rotation of JTS faculty as Hebrew University visiting scholars.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the type of Zionist commitments expressed by most JTS faculty and students, Adler was averse to political Zionism. In 1917, when the delegates to the United Synagogue convention voted to endorse Herzl's political Basel Platform, Adler resigned as president. Similarly, while in his address to the JTS class of 1920 Adler "pledged his continued help in the upbuilding of Palestine," he "turned down an invitation to join the newly established Zionist Organization of America." Dr. Naomi Cohen explained that while influential JTS alumni such as Solomon Goldman, Israel Goldstein, Israel Levinthal, and Simon Greenberg, like Adler, "aimed for a spiritual-cultural center in Palestine..., they did not limit their Zionism to that end alone.... They optimistically viewed the Balfour Declaration as a license for a Jewish homeland. During the interwar period the rabbis infused their congregations through the pulpit and Hebrew schools with strong Zionist sentiments."

At JTS, with Friedlaender's untimely death, Dr. Mordecai Kaplan emerged as the most vocal post-World War I Zionist influence. He attended the Zionist Congress in 1923 and returned as a forceful advocate. "The Zionist Congress must be regarded as a necessity in Jewish life..., as a demonstration of the unity and integrity of the Jewish people..., " he said. "The Congress has come to serve as a school where the Jew is learning his lesson in the art of politics, in the art of getting along with his brother Jew. There he learns to make compromises and to arrive peacefully at an understanding of Jewish problems."

In his writings, culminating in "Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life" (1934), Rabbi Kaplan explained by analogy, "What soil is to the life of a tree, a land is to the civilization of a people." Kaplan warned that "if we were to disassociate Jewish self from Palestine, and form ourselves into a religious organization pure and simple...it would not be Judaism." Kaplan had written back in 1929, "Any healthy-minded Jew could not help but feel to the very marrow of his bones...that without

Palestine reclaimed by the Jews there was nothing left for the Jews to do in the world.”

Rabbi Kaplan served as the dean of JTS's Teachers' Institute and its college, which influenced hundreds of future Zionists. Rabbi Moshe Davis made fond reference to the institute's faculty of the 1930s for their “Zionist motivations,” notably Mordecai Kaplan, Morris Levine, Hillel Bavli, and Abraham Halkin. Naomi Cohen records Rabbi Davis's observation about “the Teachers' Institute, which emphasized Hebrew and Jewish nationalism and which propagated active Zionism among its students.... Davis himself was one of approximately 250 graduates of the TI who, as of 1959, had gone on aliyah.... The Zionist stance of the Teachers' Institute left its mark on two generations of graduates who went on to teach at Jewish day and afternoon schools...and strengthened the ties between the Zionist and Conservative movements.”

In addition to the overt Zionism among many JTS faculty and that of synagogue rabbis and United Synagogue, Conservative Judaism's Rabbinical Assembly collectively voiced public support for Jewish statehood year after year. By 1938, the RA's convention adopted a “Pronouncement of Zionism”: “The Zionist ideal is to establish in Palestine a legally assured and publicly recognized home for the Jewish people.... [This] has been an integral part of the religious outlook as well as the program of practical activities sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly from its very inception.” A Jewish national home would create “a political government based upon the ethical teaching of our religion.... We reaffirm our historic claim to Palestine as the land where for more than a thousand years our fathers lived a national life and built a religious civilization....”



CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM'S ZIONISM FROM WORLD WAR II UNTIL ISRAELI STATEHOOD

October 10, 2024

Soon after the outbreak of World War II, Dr. Cyrus Adler passed away, and leadership of the Jewish Theological Seminary and of Judaism's Conservative movement was placed into the hands of Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, a JTS graduate and longtime assistant to Dr. Adler. Like his predecessor, Rabbi Finkelstein was committed not to political Zionism, but rather to spiritual Zionism. As historian Naomi Cohen assessed, "To be sure, Finkelstein was a card-carrying member of the Zionist Organization, but...his Zionism was purely of a spiritual nature.... He took little interest in [1940s Zionist] politics or strategy of modern Jewish state-building.... He viewed the establishment of a Jewish Palestine [solely through] a historical religious lens."

Dr. Cohen identified Dr. Finkelstein's "two premises" of his brand of spiritual Zionism: "One affirmed the need for Palestine for the religious Jew [since the religious Jew] 'can worship God in Palestine in a manner in which he cannot worship Him anywhere else in the world.' The second [premise] underscored the place of Palestine in a vibrant Judaism; in his words, 'Judaism without Palestine is spiritually retarded.'... Jewish substance always took precedence over political form."

Chancellor Finkelstein's spiritual version of Zionism reflected a commitment to Israel but placed him at odds with outspoken Zionist political advocates of statehood among the JTS faculty, notably Mordecai Kaplan, Hillel Bavli, and Shalom Spiegel. Finkelstein's apolitical Zionist stance during the years of the Nazi genocide also created strife with certain JTS students and JTS alumni, notably Rabbi Solomon Goldman (of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago) and Rabbi Milton Steinberg (Park Avenue Synagogue in New York). The tension between the chancellor and the Conservative rabbinate mounted when Finkelstein, while expressing opposition to the 1939 British White Paper — which restricted Jewish immigration into Palestine — again did not endorse the call for independent Jewish state-

hood. The split in views became more pronounced once the 1942 Biltmore Conference in New York City gained widespread support by endorsing the goal of a Jewish state. Finkelstein cautioned that “the concentration of the Zionist effort on the conception of Palestine as a ‘Jewish Commonwealth,’ rather than on widespread immigration, will have a harmful effect on the future of the Yishuv.”

The aforementioned politically Zionist rabbis Solomon Goldman and Milton Steinberg were “influencers” among many members of the Rabbinical Assembly. One example of their “reach” was upon my predecessor as rabbi of Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell, NJ, Dr. Morris Werb. When Rabbi Werb passed away in 1982, his devoted widow, Helen, invited me to select some volumes from her husband’s substantial library. Notably, I found and chose collections of books authored by Goldman and by Steinberg. Their writing was among the “sets” that clearly had had an impact upon the ideology of my predecessor. In practical terms, when I reviewed the synagogue board’s minutes of the late 1940s, as with the annals of Park Avenue Synagogue and of Anshe Emet, I found references to Congregation Agudath Israel’s support for the movement seeking the establishment of a Jewish state, a reflection of its rabbi’s priorities.

Opposition to Dr. Finkelstein from political Zionist rabbis was embodied forcefully in Rabbi Steinberg’s writings. In 1945 he published “The Creed of an American Zionist”; in it, he wrote, “From my Judaism I have derived a God faith, an ethical code, personal and social, a pattern of observance, but also, interwoven with these, a love for Palestine and the yearning that at least a part of the House of Israel be restored in its soil. . . . My religious heritage, then, makes me a Zionist.” Steinberg, like his teacher Mordecai Kaplan, affirmed the national Jewish cultural influence articulated by Ahad Ha’Am. Steinberg pointed out: “The brilliant renaissance in Palestine, the revival there of Jewish music, art, letters, folkways, the theater, and the Hebrew tongue have invigorated, stimulated, and enriched every Jewry in the world. . . . [W]hile I would remain a Jew without Jewish Palestine, my Judaism, by virtue of it, is more meaningful to me and my Jewish fellows.”

In his “The Place of Palestine in Jewish Life,” Steinberg observed that “Palestine is the one place in the world where a Jew is a Jew without the necessity of being something else first. Only there is Judaism the primary culture of the Jews.... The Jewish life of every Jew in America is the richer and the fuller because of Palestine.” Interpreting these words, Rabbi Simcha Kling explained that Palestine “bestows a sense of normalcy and meaning to the individual’s Jewish life. It provides a positive program, actions which make life significant, inspiration that results in a sense of inner worth.” According to Rabbi Kling, Steinberg’s “The Making of the Modern Jew” considered Zionism as “the greatest single factor making for Jewish survival and opening up new vistas of hope and rebirth.” In Steinberg’s “A Believing Jew,” the author regarded Zionism as having “blazed trails toward more equitable and cooperative forms of group life [and] evoked an infinitely rich and colorful revival of Hebrew culture....” It also transformed the state of distressed Jews among the Holocaust survivors “from pauperism to stalwart self-reliance..., from a problem to the world into a social asset for all mankind.”

In 1943, as a pacesetter among his rabbinic Zionist colleagues, Rabbi Steinberg advocated that as many of his congregants as possible publicly affirm their identification with the Zionist cause. His supporters put forward a pledge, resolving “that the Park Avenue Synagogue, recognizing the importance of Palestine as contributing to a solution of the problem of Jewish homelessness in Europe and as a fountainhead of Jewish cultural values, endorses the Zionist program in principle,” even while offering the opportunity for non-Zionists to abstain. As Simon Noveck, Milton Steinberg’s biographer noted, “For Steinberg this support by his own congregation represented a climax to his intensive Zionist efforts....”

With the proclamation of Jewish statehood in 1948, the leadership of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue as well as most JTS faculty and students affirmed support. At the United Synagogue biennial convention, in session May 13-17, 1948, the delegates were abuzz with excitement. “Numerous speakers cited the religious, cultural, and moral impact of the creation of the State of Israel upon the potentialities of Jewish life in

America.” United Synagogue executive director Rabbi Albert Gordon added that “Palestine Jewry is endowing its American brethren with a heightened sense of dignity and self-respect by demonstrating that the social and religious principles of Judaism are as valid today as they were in biblical times.”

The dean of the JTS Teachers’ Institute, Dr. Moshe Davis, surmised that “as the political situation stabilizes, the influence of Eretz Yisrael upon the spiritual and cultural life of American Jewry will increase beyond our powers of anticipation.” Then Rabbinical Assembly president Rabbi David Aronson called upon the RA membership convened at its annual convention “to authorize the appointment of a joint commission of the RA and the United Synagogue to study ways and means of organizing a religious [Conservative] Zionist wing, with our synagogues as local chapters, and affiliated with whatever federation of American Zionist organizations there will be established, as well as with the World Zionist Organization.” Although not acted upon at that time, this 1949 RA Zionist concept planted seeds for the future Conservative/Masorti presence within the new Jewish state.



CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM’S ZIONISM, 1948-1973

October 31, 2024

With Israeli statehood a reality, Conservative Judaism became a full-fledged Zionist movement. For JTS chancellor Louis Finkelstein, the commitment to Israel was personal as well; his daughter had settled and established a family in Jerusalem, with her father making visits year after year. The chancellor reflected that “when I was her age, I too thought I was going to spend my life in Jerusalem, but I did not.”

After 1948, Finkelstein’s spiritual Zionist point of view emerged with ever greater clarity. Historian Eli Lederhendler, in “The Ongoing Dialogue: The Seminary and the Challenge of Israel,” makes note of “a letter to Rabbinical Assembly members in November 1951” — composed by Simon Greenberg, JTS faculty member and

later vice chancellor, but sent out over Finkelstein's signature — “of a variety of steps that the Seminary was taking or planning in order to develop ‘common spiritual aims’ between the Jewries of Israel and America.”

As further noted by Dr. Lederhendler, Finkelstein's view was that “Israel reborn is a sign of moral hope to the world, because the restoration of the Jews to their land signifies the possibility of change in history.” The chancellor expanded upon his Israel messaging in “The State of Israel as a Spiritual Force.” As Conservative Judaism's paramount interpreter of Torah, Finkelstein explained that “in a certain sense it may be said that Conservative Judaism is itself the firstborn child of the marriage of Zionism and Americanism.... Precisely at this turn of human events [May 1948] so many of us have been called to Zion because part of the clarification of Torah in our day must come out of Zion. We turn to Zion not only in prayer but also in the hope of instruction.”

To further his Torah-centered Zionist goals, Rabbi Finkelstein, aided by vice chancellor Greenberg, negotiated with the Jewish Agency in 1952 “to strengthen the spiritual and cultural bonds between the State of Israel and America” by creating JTS's Israel Institute, which offered public lectures on the place of Israel in the Jewish tradition and facilitated the exchange of scholars between JTS and The Hebrew University. Lecturers of prominence were to include JTS professor Saul Lieberman, philosopher Martin Buber, Zionist leader Hayim Greenberg, Hebrew University archaeologists Yigael Yadin and Benjamin Mazar, and JTS professors H.L. Ginsburg, Abraham Halkin, Hillel Bavli, and Mordecai Kaplan. The texts of these addresses were published in “Israel: Its Role in Civilization,” edited by Rabbi Moshe Davis in the mid-1950s.

Dr. Finkelstein wrote with pride about the scholarly symbiosis between Jewish academia in Jerusalem and New York. JTS brought to America “a group of scholars from Israel who have helped stimulate the minds of our students.... Among these scholars are Professor Saul Lieberman [among the first graduates of The Hebrew University in 1925, rector of the JTS rabbinical school from 1958 until his death in 1983, and son-in-law of religious Zionist luminary Rab-

bi Meir Berlin/Bar-Ilan] and younger men such as Rabbis Shraga Abramson and Zalman Dimitrovsky [a sabra and veteran of the Haganah]...and [visiting] professor Martin Buber....”

Finkelstein continued, “Due to the growing intimacy between Israeli institutions and the Seminary, [a] revolution in *hokhmat* Yisrael [Jewish scholarship] has at last come to pass. [Moreover], the vast majority of Seminary scholarly publications are now in Hebrew.”

As engagement with the reborn Jewish state intensified at JTS and among Conservative rabbis and in their congregations, mounting interest yielded a public forum addressing Conservative Jews' connection to post-1948 Zionism. At the Rabbinical Assembly's 1958 annual convention, two JTS ideological luminaries, professors Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan, evaluated the theme in “The Ideological Evaluation of Israel and the Diaspora.” Rabbi Heschel spoke of the awe and wonder represented by the land, people, and state of Israel. His thoughts were put into print a decade later under the title “Israel: An Echo of Eternity.” Heschel reminded his JTS students and RA colleagues: “A mysterious relationship obtains between the Jewish people and the Jewish land.... [I]t is an essential part of our destiny...; one cannot detach himself from the land without upsetting one's position within the Covenant” between God and Jewry.

Dr. Kaplan placed the unique relationship of Conservative Judaism into a call for formal entry into the institutional structure of American and world Zionism. “Zionism is with us not merely a peripheral but a central interest.... The Zionist movement and the Conservative movement are organically related to each other. This is not the case with either Orthodoxy or Reform.” Dr. Kaplan regarded Zionism as the best source for Jewish unity. “In Zionism [that is, the World Zionist Organization], if it accepts responsibility for reconstituting the Jewish people [as one people], the different denominations [Orthodox, Conservative, Reform] would be united by a common spiritual or religious bond.”

Inspired by both Heschel and Kaplan, at its 1959 annual convention, United Synagogue of America (changed, in 1991, to United

Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) continued the debate as to whether the organization should join the World Zionist Organization. (This formal step would take place in the 1970s as part of the creation of the World Council of Synagogues.) As religious Zionists, Heschel, along with Simon Greenberg, expressed the concern that official entry into a secular Zionist structure would undermine the primacy of the synagogue within global Judaism. In contrast, Mordecai Kaplan and Dr. Nahum Goldmann urged taking this institutional initiative; their goal was to affirm the unity of the Jewish people, both religious and secular folks, worldwide. The Conservative movement ought no longer be set apart from the rest of Am Yisrael. In Dr. Kaplan's words, only by joining the WZO "can the common concern of all Jews for the State of Israel as the homeland of Judaism demonstrate the spiritual unity of the Jewish people."

Although no concrete action was taken, the power of this idea remained alive. In 1963, Simon Greenberg, then JTS vice chancellor and acting as an individual, became a member of the executive committee of the WZO. Experiencing the inner workings of the national institutions of the Jewish people — the WZO, Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-JNF — Rabbi Greenberg expressed frustration that the Conservative movement had remained too separated from this Am Yisrael political fray. "The Conservative movement always has identified itself with all efforts that encourage and help Jews to settle in or at least visit Eretz Yisrael. We must recognize that as a movement we have not done nearly enough in this area."

With firsthand familiarity, Dr. Greenberg lamented the Israeli religious establishment's singular recognition of Orthodoxy to the exclusion of the Reform and Conservative streams. As historian Eli Lederhandler assessed, Rabbi Greenberg "called for practical efforts to establish the Conservative spiritual approach.... He directed the prestigious Schocken Library in 1962 to become part of JTS Jerusalem, supported the momentum to establish a Conservative seminary for Israeli rabbis, and generally acted as JTS's Israel activities coordinator...." To this end, Dr. Greenberg also joined with another JTS vice chancellor, Bernard Mandelbaum, along with Rabbi David

Goldstein of Har Zion Temple in Philadelphia in raising funds to create a JTS student center in Jerusalem. This was the beginning of a JTS Israel campus, with plaques displayed honoring Har Zion and Rabbi Goldstein. Also as recorded by Dr. Lederhandler, Rabbi Simon Greenberg, JTS's primary Zionist activist and Goldstein's predecessor at Har Zion, under the JTS banner "organized groups of intellectuals, students, and academics in Israel, encouraging the formation of *Garin Aliyah*" — a core group preparing to settle in Israel — "among seminary students."

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, support for Israel blossomed among American Jews. Dr. Melvin Urofsky's historical survey, "We Are One! American Jewry and Israel," assessed that "polls found a level of support for Israel among Jews in general approaching near unanimity.... American Jews perceived intuitively that their destiny and that of the Jewish State were inextricably bound together.... This sense of belonging as Americans and as Jews, this rebirth of Jewish identity was perhaps the greatest legacy of the Six-Day War and forged new bonds between American and Israeli Jews." For JTS, this enhanced global sense of Jewish peoplehood was reflected in more and more JTS rabbinical students spending a year of study in Israel (a practice that became mandatory in 1975).

I was blessed to spend 1972-73 with my classmates, living and studying at the JTS "*penimiyah*" (dorm and classrooms) as well as attending classes at The Hebrew University. Commitment to Israel was universal among my peers. It shaped our rabbinic careers. We developed a familiarity with the geography and history of "Ha'Aretz" (The Land) and an appreciation for the spiritual vitality of Israeli Judaism. A full year in Israel planted in us a desire to consider future aliyah. We also bonded closely with Israeli friends and relatives. Many of the sermons, columns, and books we went on to write became more imbued with a Zionist perspective. Conservative rabbis and lay leaders became the backbone of UJA/Federation, Israel Bonds, Jewish National Fund, and AIPAC. We became a proud Zionist movement.

The Zionist thrust of Conservative Judaism under Rabbi Louis Finkelstein was enhanced by the installation of Dr. Gerson D. Co-

hen as JTS chancellor in 1972. Dr. Cohen was born in New York City to an Orthodox, Zionist, and Hebrew-speaking family of Russian origin.

His mother was a longtime teacher at the Shulamith School for Girls in Borough Park, Brooklyn, the first Jewish day school for girls in North America. Though it was an Orthodox school, members of the teaching and administrative staff — including Gerson Cohen’s mother and the school’s dean, Dr. Judith Lieberman, wife of Rabbi Saul Lieberman and daughter of Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan) — as family members of key JTS leaders, enabled Hebraism and Zionism to help shape the Conservative movement. Shulamith’s Jewish subjects were conducted in conversational Hebrew.

My wife — born Rita Neufeld, in 1951 — was a graduate of Shulamith in its stellar years. She benefitted immeasurably from her education at the school, which instilled in her a deep love for the Hebrew language (she is fluent), the State of Israel, and the Land of Israel. The JTS team of chancellor Cohen and rector Lieberman shaped the Zionism of Conservative Judaism during their era.

Early in his chancellorship, at the spring 1973 Rabbinical Assembly convention, Dr. Gerson Cohen delivered a paper to the movement titled “The Meaning of Israel in the Perspective of History.” The following are a few of his observations, guiding the Conservative rabbinate and institutional arms on behalf of the Jewish state:

Jewish Unity — “By virtue of its existence, and its successful struggle for survival, [the State of] Israel has become a unifying force for the Jewish people such as it has not enjoyed for some twenty centuries or more.”

Jewish peoplehood — “The events of 1948, 1956, and 1967 aroused many Jews to rediscover themselves as a people. There is an eagerness among Jews to work together, on some issues at least, that has not been felt since Judea was under siege by the Babylonian army [597 BCE].”

Jewish pride — “The rebirth of the Jewish state in the ancient homeland has also given the Jews of the world a new sense of

pride in their Jewishness.... [T]he Jew has long...walked about with a burden of self-doubt.... Centuries of denigration made deep inroads into Jewish self-esteem.”

Inspiration — “The noble traits displayed by Israel’s defense forces, by Israeli youth in their readiness to give of themselves for their country, and by Israel’s kibbutzim in their efforts to create new model Jewish societies...have been a source of spiritual energy and inspiration to Jews everywhere.”

Torah — “The Bible was oriented to the Land, and complete fulfillment of the Torah was possible only within its borders. Jewish faith...was forever sanguine about the imminent possibility of the reclamation of the homeland.”



THE GLOBAL ZIONISM OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM — THE WORLD COUNCIL AND MERCAZ

November 8, 2024

The initial effort to extend Conservative Judaism’s embrace of Zionism beyond the United States was launched by Rabbi Bernard Segal, who served as executive director of United Synagogue of America (later United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) from 1953 to 1970. As noted by historian Dr. Pamela Nadell, “Segal envisioned bridges to world Jewry, a vision that enabled Conservative Judaism to gain international stature. In 1957 he and a handful of colleagues founded the World Council of Synagogues to implement...Conservative Judaism in Israel and Jewish communities throughout the world.”

Soon after United Synagogue founded the World Council of Synagogues at the 1957 Rabbinical Assembly convention, Dr. Mordecai Kaplan introduced a call for Conservative Judaism to formally enter into the institutional structures of American Zionism (the American Zionist Federation) and world Zionism (the World Zionist Organization). “Zionism is with us not merely a peripheral but a central interest.... The Zionist movement and the Conservative movement

are organically related to each other. This is not the case with either Orthodoxy or Reform.” Kaplan regarded Zionism as the best potential source for overall Jewish unity. The World Zionist Organization, he said, “should accept responsibility for reconstituting the Jewish people [as one people]. This would require that the different denominations” — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform — “be united by a common spiritual or religious bond”: Zionism.

The idea of joining the WZO remained alive among the leaders of Conservative Judaism. Even while opposing movement-wide Zionist affiliation, certain Conservative Jewish leaders joined the WZO as individuals. Notably, in 1963 JTS vice chancellor Rabbi Simon Greenberg became a member of the WZO executive committee. As an insider, Dr. Greenberg experienced the political workings of the institutions of the Jewish people, including the Jewish Agency for Israel and Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-JNF. This exposure led Greenberg to join with other Zionists in voicing frustration that the Conservative movement had remained too far apart from this decision-making aspect of global Jewish life.

As a passionate Zionist, in his work “A Jewish Philosophy and Pattern of Life,” Greenberg praised Israel as a “unifying focus,” “source of self-respect and pride,” “source of inspiration and purpose,” “reviver of the Hebrew language,” “reinforcement of Jewish identity,” “center of gravity for world Jewry,” “center for the future development of the Jewish heritage,” “place to lead a Jewishly fulfilling life,” “means for earning the respect of non-Jews,” and as “an enhancement of a sense of rootedness in the Jewish past.”

Rabbi Greenberg noted that “the Conservative movement always has identified itself with all efforts that encourage and help Jews to settle in or at least visit Eretz Yisrael,” but, he lamented, “we must recognize that as a movement, we have not done nearly enough in this area.” This deficiency was intensified by the Israeli religious establishment’s continuing intolerance of non-Orthodox streams. Discrimination became much more overt after Menachem Begin in 1977 assembled a Knesset coalition into which he invited Haredi parties. Consensus issues such as “Who is a Jew” within the “Law of Return” were called into question. At the same time, antisemi-

tism spread worldwide following the 1975 United Nations resolution that declared Zionism “a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Pressure to join the WZO in combatting Jew hatred mounted in 1976, especially after the World Union for Progressive Judaism entered the WZO.

The concept of a Zionist political party for Conservative Judaism within the ranks of the WZO took shape under the influence of United Synagogue's new executive director, Rabbi Benjamin Kreitman. Historian Nadell took note that Rabbi Kreitman's 1976 inaugural address as executive director insisted that it was “time for United Synagogue to recognize that Conservatism had grown from a ‘tendency’ [the prevailing view of the JTS chancellor Louis Finkelstein era] into a ‘movement’ [that of chancellor Gerson Cohen].” Kreitman “transformed the World Council of Synagogues from primarily an agency of United Synagogue into an organization representing all branches of the Conservative movement.” This transformation “paved the way for the World Council to join the World Zionist Organization” as an “Irgun” for the movement.

The act of joining the WZO added to the movement's determination to become firmly planted in Israel. Influenced by Cohen and Kreitman, United Synagogue of Israel was incorporated in 1975. The World Council was already active in Latin America under the leadership of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1959. One year later, he opened the Latin American office of the World Council of Synagogues. Meyer's mission was to promote Zionist objectives wherever possible. As he noted at the November 1972 convention of the World Council, “The institutions of the World Council of Synagogues in Latin America are working seriously to guide their members toward a well-thought-out decision of aliyah.”

In the summer of 1959, Meyer established a successful Hebrew-speaking camp in Argentina, with hundreds of campers from Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. He also formed Latin America's only rabbinical seminary on a university level, sending its graduates to lead communities throughout Argentina and beyond. In 1963 Rabbi Meyer launched the “flagship” Latin American

Conservative synagogue, Comunidad Bet El, with its popular Bet El youth movement and Hebrew-immersion Jewish day school.

Success in the United States and in Latin America emboldened the World Council to enhance its Israel and international agenda. The Conservative movement's World Council of Synagogues transformed officially into a Zionist organization during the RA presidencies of Mordecai Waxman (1974-76) and Stanley Rabinowitz (1976-78), thanks to the leadership of RA executive vice president Rabbi Wolfe Kelman. This meeting of the minds at JTS, United Synagogue, and the RA resulted in the World Council's formal affiliation with the WZO in 1976. Conservative Judaism had at last achieved a voice in the political affairs of the global Zionist movement.

In its resolution accepting affiliation, the Conservative movement "recognized that the WZO has historically provided a platform for all who share the Zionist ideal, although they may differ in their religious and political views...." Rabbis Rabinowitz, Waxman, and Robert Gordis, among others, became convinced that only by creating a political presence inside the WZO could the interests and values of Conservative Judaism be protected.

The Zionist affiliation by the global movement's "Irgun" (World Council) was soon joined by the creation of its "*brit*," or political arm. On November 2, 1978, Rabinowitz became the founding president of MERCAZ, and MERCAZ became an affiliate of the American Zionist Federation, embodying the Conservative view of Zionism, in particular promoting religious pluralism in Israel. As Rabbi Gordis wrote: "What we call for is that the State of Israel recognize the equal rights of all interpretations ["streams"] of the Jewish religion..., demand that the process relegating us to second-class citizenship in the Jewish people be halted and revised." Gordis also emphasized the liberal qualities of the movement's Zionism: "We are dedicated to the furtherance of social idealism, integrity in government and public life, tolerance and mutual understanding among all groups." The MERCAZ by-laws stated among its objectives: "To adopt, from time to time, a platform of Zionist principles which shall include statements on the unity of the Jewish people, the centrality of the State of Israel, the encouragement of aliyah, and other Zion-

ist issues. To maintain affiliation with the American Zionist Federation, the World Zionist Organization, and such other organizations as may be appropriate to effectuate these objectives.... To cooperate with the United Synagogue of America, its affiliated organizations and constituent arms, and other agencies of Conservative Judaism in fulfillment of these goals.”

The existence of MERCAZ enabled the movement to participate in the once-every-five-years elections for delegates to the World Zionist Congress. With each five-year sequence, MERCAZ and its number of supporters grew. As Rabbi Neil Gillman wrote in his book “Conservative Judaism: The New Century,” “By the late 1980s, MERCAZ’s position in the WZO was so strong that for the first time a MERCAZ member, Rabbi Joseph Wernik [ordained at JTS and a former president of Masorti Israel] was appointed head of the Organization Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel. The Movement [became] officially represented in the centers of decision-making within the Zionist movement and can participate in the allocation of funds raised abroad for various religious and cultural endeavors in Israel, including of course, its own.”

A significant additional Zionist thrust for the movement took place in the year 2000. The entrepreneurial RA executive vice president, Rabbi Joel Meyers, noted that the fate of the World Council was endangered by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism’s decision to no longer provide funding nor help, plus the retirement of Rabbi Kreitman. Rabbi Meyers recruited several RA colleagues, including me, a past president, to revive the World Council on a movement-wide basis. As World Council president, I changed the organizational name to Hebrew, Masorti Olami. Next, I approached MERCAZ Olami president Rabbi Roy Clements and negotiated creating a joint central office in Jerusalem instead of operating out of the United Synagogue facility in New York City.

Third and foremost, I approached the movement’s leading Zionist activist, Rabbi Joseph Wernik, to serve jointly as the executive director of both Masorti Olami and of MERCAZ Olami.

With the energy and vision of Rabbi Meyers and Rabbi Wernik, Masorti Olami and MERCAZ Olami took shape, organizing and growing the international Conservative movement with a Zionist thrust. Rabbi Wernik utilized his 15 years of direct experience around the world for the WZO to upgrade Masorti Olami's rabbinic and congregational regions in Latin America and in Europe and to create MERCAZ chapters around the world. Rabbi Wernik also conducted outreach in Australia and the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Next, Wernik planted Zionist seeds for the movement's global future by initiating Marom Olami, a leadership training framework for young adults, as well as the movement's Peace Corps-like program for sending young adults to serve in Spain, Prague, and elsewhere. The ranks of these 20- and 30-somethings were augmented by Rabbi Wernik's success in extending the Zionist passion of Masorti Israel's NOAM youth movement into Latin America, Europe, Australia, and the former Soviet Union.

These successes, along with the growing number of MERCAZ votes in the elections for the World Zionist Congress, led the WZO to invite Rabbi Meyers to join with Rabbi Wernik in the WZO's *hanhala*, its top leadership decision-making body. The entry of Meyers and Wernik into the *hanhala* enabled the Conservative/Masorti movement to engage in crucial decisions addressing funding and political action in world Jewish life. In the process, the influence and success of the Conservative/Masorti movement was upgraded in the Jewish Agency for Israel, the World Zionist Organization, and Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-JNF.



RECENT EXPRESSIONS OF ZIONIST SUPPORT BY LEADERS OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

December 2, 2024

Expressions of Zionism have continued to proliferate throughout the Conservative movement in recent decades. In my synagogue in

New Jersey — where I served as senior rabbi from 1979 to 2021 — the Israeli flag stood on the bimah side by side with the American flag. The Prayer for the State of Israel was recited along with the prayer for the United States. Prayers on behalf of the Israel Defense Forces and its members who were missing in action or prisoners of war were uttered along with similar prayers for members of the American armed forces.

Over the last few decades, the numbers of *olim* continued to grow, notably among Rabbinical Association members and their adult offspring, as well as alumni of the Ramah camps and Nativ (the Conservative movement's student gap year program in Israel). Statements affirming the importance of Israel have been issued by all primary leaders of Conservative Judaism. The following are prominent examples.

Jewish Theological Seminary chancellor Gerson Cohen's successor in 1986 was Dr. Ismar Schorsch, who published "The Sacred Cluster: The Core Values of Conservative Judaism." His analysis commenced with Zionism:

The Land of Israel — "The centrality of modern Israel heads our list of core values. For Conservative Jews, as for their ancestors, Israel is not only the birthplace of the Jewish people, but also its final destiny. Sacred texts, historical experience, and liturgical memory have conspired to make it for them, in the words of Ezekiel, "the most desirable of all lands." Its welfare is never out of mind. Conservative Jews are the backbone of Federation leadership in North America and the major source of its annual campaign. They visit Israel, send their children over a summer or for a year, and support financially every one of its worthy institutions. Israel's accomplishments on the battlefield and in the laboratory, in literature and politics, fill them with pride. Their life is a dialectic between homeland and exile."

The Hebrew language — Chancellor Schorsch also emphasized the critical role played by Hebrew "as the irreplaceable language of Jewish expression.... Its existence is coterminous with that of the Jewish people, and the many layers of the language mirror the cultures in which Jews perpetuated Judaism.... It is part of the fab-

ric and texture of Judaism. [Hebrew] words vibrate with religious meaning, moral values, and literary associations.... To know Judaism only in translation is, to quote Bialik, akin to kissing the bride through the veil.... In a Jewish world of sundry and proliferating divisions, Hebrew must emerge as the common and unifying language of the Jewish people.”

Jewish peoplehood — The chancellor expounded upon the necessity of Jewish peoplehood. “Devotion to the ideal of *klal Yisrael*, the unfractured totality of Jewish existence and the ultimate significance of every single Jew. In the consciousness of Conservative Jews, there yet resonates the affirmation of *haverim kol Yisrael* [all Israel is still joined in fellowship] — despite all the dispersion...that history has visited upon us, Jews remain united in a tenacious pilgrimage of universal import. [This] brings Conservative Jews to support every worthy cause in Jewish life. Often communal needs will prompt them to compromise the needs of the [Conservative] movement.”

Rabbi Schorsch’s successor as JTS chancellor was Dr. Arnold Eisen, who blog post, “The Religious Significance of Israel: A Personal Love Story and Accounting,” offered additional perspectives.

Israel as defender of Jews in peril — While in Israel during the perilous period of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Eisen recollected, he felt that “only the army stood between me and people who wanted me elsewhere or dead.... Jews have the right, indeed the obligation, to defend the state against forces that do not want it there, do not want Jews there....”

Embodiment of Jewish values in practice — Dr. Eisen emphasized that only Israel offers the hope of embodying Jewish values being lived. “I hold to what I call a ‘Sefer Devarim Zionism,’ animated with a vision that the Torah wants to be lived not only in private spaces of home, school, and synagogue...but in public. I want an environmental policy shaped by Torah, an educational policy, a health care policy, a foreign policy, a policy on how one treats minorities and refugees, [along with] my conviction that democracy is a Jewish value, because it is instrumental to safeguarding the dignity of human beings who like us are created in God’s image.”

The president of the Schechter Institute, Rabbi David Golinkin, emphasized the uniqueness of Israel as a factor that drew him to become an *oleh*.

Venue for the study of Torah in its fullness — As a scholar of Jewish sacred texts, Dr. Golinkin noted — in his essay “Why I Made Aliyah” — that “*Limud Torah*, the study of the Torah, comes to life in Israel. [For example], when I visit Jericho, I take out my trusty pocket Tanach and read the story of its capture by Joshua 3,200 years ago....”

Best setting for experiencing our prayers/liturgy — Golinkin takes note of the manner in which our *tefillot* come alive in Eretz Yisrael. “When I lived in the Diaspora, many of our prayers and prophecies seemed unreal and remote. When I live in the reborn State of Israel, they are real and miraculous.... For 1,900 years, Jews have recited this prayer for *kibbutz galuyot*, the ingathering of the exiles, as a hope and as a dream. If you live in Israel today, you realize that it is no longer just a dream — it is a dream come true. When I did my basic training in the IDF, many years ago, the 66 soldiers in my unit had made aliyah from 23 different countries....”

Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles and of the Zacharias Frankel College in Germany, wrote to his students:

Ahavat Yisrael — As rabbis, we must exhibit “a love and solidarity with our fellow Jews in Israel, with the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in our own homeland, to the very real sacrifices this experiment in Jewish national self-expression has imposed from its inception..., love for the Jewish people, of which we are a part and which we aspire to lead. If a rabbi does not root their leadership in love and unity, they lose the ability to critique constructively, to encourage doing better, to inspire.”

Pursuit of peace in spite of everything — Rabbi Artson praises “brave Palestinians and Israelis who have been risking the work, year after year, of peaceful advocacy for coexistence, mutual democracy, respect, and nonviolence. These brave people hold the possibility of a two-state solution in which both peoples live in peace, justice, and

safety.... Centering their pioneering work and their commitment to mutual listening, mutual support, would have been fitting for people preparing for a life of rabbinic service.... I insist on owning the possibility — the necessity — of an authentically liberal Zionism, one that sees a democratic Israel side by side with a free Palestinian people, each committed to peaceful coexistence. There is no other way.”

Founding dean of the Schechter Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, Rabbi Lee Levine, articulated Israel’s importance:

The centrality of Eretz Yisrael — Rabbi Levine said that “one should not elevate fortuitous circumstances to the level of ideological necessity or desirability. In terms of Judaism and Jewish history, Los Angeles is not the promised land, Philadelphia, Chicago, or Miami cannot substitute for Zion, nor can New York ever replace Jerusalem as the center of Jewish interest and yearning. To argue otherwise is to deny a major component of our religious and national heritage. For our literature, holidays, mitzvot, history, holy sites, and future dreams are inextricably intertwined with Eretz Yisrael.”

Conservative/Masorti Judaism’s first official representative to the World Zionist Organization, Rabbi Joseph Wernik, articulated the case for aliyah, particularly among young adults: “Rather than hearing how much Israel ‘needs him,’ a Jewish young person must come to the deep-seated realization of how much he needs Israel. After all, he is a Jew living in a non-Jewish society with a non-Jewish culture. He knows in his soul that there is no life more congenial to the Jewish psyche than in Eretz Yisrael. This ‘positive Zionism’ must be inculcated into the individual from early childhood into adolescence and beyond.”

In the late 1980s, the Emet V’Emunah commission issued a “statement of principles” of the Conservative movement. It included:

The miracle of the State of Israel — “We rejoice in the existence of the State of Israel in the Land of Israel with its capital of Jerusalem. We view this phenomenon...to be a miracle, reflecting Divine Providence in human affairs. We glory in that miracle; we celebrate the rebirth of Zion.”

Israel must be an exemplary state to all its citizens — “We do not view Israel as just another state or political entity; rather, we envision it as an exemplar of religious and moral principles of civil, political, and religious rights for all citizens regardless of race, religion, ethnic origin, or gender. We believe that the litmus test of the character of the democratic Jewish state is its treatment of and attitude toward its religious and ethnic minorities.... Jews should be particularly sensitive to the well-being of all the various ethnic and religious groups living in the State of Israel.”

Israel must provide religious pluralism for all Jewish streams: “The essence of democracy is two-fold: it expresses the will of the majority and scrupulously protects the rights of minorities. Therefore the laws passed by the State of Israel...should not be used to support the religious view or establishment to the exclusion of others. The State of Israel, founded by the entire Jewish people, must in its actions and laws provide for the pluralism of Jewish life. The state should permit all rabbis, regardless of affiliation, to perform religious functions, including officiating at marriages, divorces, and conversions [and] provide civil options for marriage and divorce for those who so prefer...”

In sum, from the era prior to Solomon Schechter until the 21st century, Conservative/Masorti Judaism has been a Zionist movement and has played an important role in the history of Zionism and the rebirth and shaping of the State of Israel.



CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM'S ZIONISM EXTENDS TO A PRESENCE IN ISRAEL

November 22, 2024

Parallel to expanding Zionist activity among America's Conservative Jews was the effort to establish a Conservative Jewish presence in Israel.

Initially, the movement in Israel was very small, consisting only of Emet V'Emunah, the first Conservative synagogue in the country,

established in Jerusalem in the 1930s, and Kehillat Moriah in Haifa, founded in 1955.

In “A Brief History of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel,” Rabbi Theodore Steinberg’s contribution to “A Century of Commitment: One Hundred Years of the Rabbinical Assembly (edited by Robert E. Fierstien), he traced initial instances of RA members making aliyah, characterizing them as Zionist pioneers for the movement. Among them were luminaries like Max Kadushin and Simon Greenberg, who spent a period time in the 1920s studying in Israel. “The earliest [RA] pioneer of whom we have a record,” wrote Steinberg, “was Rabbi Harry Davidowitz, who reached Palestine [as an *oleh*] in 1934.”

Rabbi Davidowitz advocated support for Zionism among his colleagues, notably addressing the annual RA convention in 1946, when he urged his peers to spread their traditional — yet modern — religious synthesis inside the Yishuv. He ended his remarks with an invitation to other RA rabbis to become *olim* and, according to Steinberg, “make their unique approach to Judaism and life.” In February 1948, Rabbi Davidowitz assisted in the initial draft of Israel’s Declaration of Independence. Additionally, RA member Rabbi Abraham Goldberg, after serving four years in the Haganah and IDF, became the head of MACHAL (Mitnadvei Chutz La’Aretz, “Volunteers from Overseas”), coordinating those who came from outside Israel to support the fledgling state.

After the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in 1948, aliyah by RA members slowly increased. Among prominent *olim* who were RA members was Rabbi Moshe Davis, who in 1958 accepted an invitation from The Hebrew University to found and direct its Institute of Contemporary Jewry. In 1961, Rabbi Jack Cohen came to Jerusalem and directed the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation at The Hebrew University. Rabbi Hertzel Fishman, who had served in the Haganah and then the IDF, returned as a permanent Israeli resident in 1971 to serve as editor of “AVAR ve’ATID,” a journal of Jewish education, culture, and thought. In the 1960s, a growing number of RA pulpit colleagues spent sabbatical time in Israel, notably Sidney Greenberg, Myron Fenster, Simcha Kling, and Elvin Kose.

In 1965, the Rabbinical Assembly Israel Committee was established as part of the global RA structure. The increasingly international RA was renamed — from “Rabbinical Assembly of America” to “The Rabbinical Assembly.” Formalizing its presence as RA Israel in the early 1990s, the Masorti movement provided an office in Jerusalem. The energetic Rabbi Andy Sacks assumed the part-time director post and elevated RA Israel into a more effective and activist organization. This development was fueled by increasing numbers of RA members’ making aliyah, along with the first cohort of Israel-ordained RA members. RA Israel became the framework under which a Va’ad Halakha (Law Committee) and Institute for Converts were established, as well as modest efforts to enable RA members to gain access to mikva’ot and, under certain circumstances, to supervise kashrut and officiate at funerals in Israeli cemeteries.

Working on behalf of United Synagogue of Israel, Rabbi Moshe Cohen arrived in Israel in 1964 and spent the next two decades encouraging the formation of additional Masorti *kehillot*. In the aftermath of the Israel’s victory in the June 1967 Six-Day War, a spurt of aliyah by Conservative rabbis, educators, and activists took place, with Rabbi Philip Spectre assuming the pulpit at Netzach Israel in Ashkelon and Rabbi Charles Siegel doing so at Congregation Moriah in Haifa. Other RA members became *olim* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some assumed rabbinic leadership in emerging Conservative/Masorti *kehillot*. Several unsuccessful efforts were attempted in the early 1970s to create an official “Masorti movement” in Israel. Only in 1978-79 was success achieved, due to the leadership and energy of Rabbi Michael Graetz, president of RA Israel and the rabbi of the Conservative synagogue in Omer, just outside Be’er Sheva.

As noted by Rabbi Harvey Meirovich in “The Shaping of Masorti Judaism in Israel,” Rabbi Graetz’s approach in Omer — building upon successes by Rabbi Spectre in Ashkelon and Rabbi Siegel in Haifa — became a blueprint for other Conservative/Masorti communities. “From the outset, the Omer synagogue served as both a place of worship/study and as a community center offering a variety of activities, including a summer camp, to the community at large,” wrote Meirovich. “Over the years hundreds of unaffiliated residents

availed themselves of Rabbi Graetz's services to celebrate or commemorate family life-cycle events. Consequently, the congregation's impact was felt well beyond its walls, to the point that many Omer residents came to see the Masorti operation as 'their' synagogue even though they had no formal membership connection."

The official incorporation of the Masorti Israel movement occurred in 1979. By then, after 15 years of organizational efforts, Moshe Cohen had organized new Masorti *kehillot* in Ashkelon, Ashdod, Be'er Sheva, Ramat Zion (French Hill) in Jerusalem, Omer, Ra'anana, and Safed. These affiliates augmented previous *kehillot* of Haifa and Emet V'Emunah in Rehavia (Jerusalem). Within two years, additional communities entered the movement — in Arad, Carmiel, Kfar Saba, Netanya, Rehovot, Tel Aviv, and Kiryat Hayovel (Jerusalem). In 1981 Rabbi Spectre accepted the role of first executive director of the Movement for Conservative Judaism in Israel, a position he held for the next 16 years. Rabbi Spectre continued to build the movement until he retired and was succeeded in 1997 by Rabbi Ehud Bandel, a graduate of the first cadre of rabbis ordained by the *Beit Midrash l'Limudei Ha-Yahadut* in Jerusalem.

The Beit Midrash to train Israeli Masorti rabbis reflected a goal of JTS chancellor Gerson Cohen. In 1982, he had set that process into motion, with the 1984 opening of the Beit Midrash, later renamed The Seminary of Judaic Studies and then The Schechter Institute. Dr. Cohen assembled a talented group of advisers for this ambitious project: Ray Arzt, Moshe David, Seymour Fox, Moshe Greenberg, Reuven Hammer, Lee Levine, and Eliezer Schweid.

The JTS offered an initial setting, first at the Schocken Institute for Jewish Research and then at Neve Schechter (which housed the JTS student dorm and classrooms). JTS also provided a stipend of funding and enabled the Beit Midrash to hire a dean — first, Reuven Hammer (1984-87), then Lee Levine (1987-94), and then Benjamin Segal. During subsequent decades, the number of Schechter-ordained rabbis has grown to nearly 100. Gradually the Schechter Institute added educational programs in teacher training, outreach to Jews within the FSU, publications, and the TALI schools.

The TALI (“Enriched Jewish Studies”) program, offering supplemental education in Israel’s state-run secular schools, has been an enormous success. Dr. Meirovich reported that “in the two years following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, a core group of Conservative rabbis, recent *olim*, and a contingent of native Israelis... developed [in French Hill, Jerusalem] an alternative educational format that might bridge the growing rift between Israel’s religious [Orthodox] population [25 percent of the total] and the secular majority. The TALI founding rabbis included Raphael Arzt, Reuven Hammer, Lee Levine, Moshe Tutnauer, and Joseph Wernik. Israelis were Immanuel Etkes, Zvi Gal-On, Gershon Kravitz, Moshe Samet, and Yehzekel Wollman.” The first TALI school opened in the fall of 1976, with 33 students registered for grades one-three. Over the next three years, TALI schools arose as well in Kfar Saba-Hod Hasharon, Ramat Gan, and Be’er Sheva, with extensive parent participation.

Growth of the TALI network continued in the following years under the leadership of Barbara Levin. From 1981 to ’86, TALI experienced yet another period of growth, with the encouragement of Minister of Education Zevulun Hammer. In the mid-1980s, still more TALI-affiliated schools emerged in Haifa, Netanya, and the Gilo neighborhood of Jerusalem. With effective lobbying, TALI tracks were extended from preschool all the way through grade 12. TALI kindergartens arose in a number of settings, often connected to a local Masorti *kehillah*. To stabilize TALI for the future, the TALI Education Fund arose, thanks to the Samuel Bronfman Foundation and the Jewish Pluralism Committee of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Schechter also provided TALI curricula and teacher certification. TALI had a large impact on thousands upon thousands of otherwise secular Israeli youngsters and their families.

Among other effective Masorti movement ventures were Kibbutz Hanaton and Moshav Shorashim, both in northern Israel; the NOAM youth movement, serving a couple of thousand youngsters; Camp Ramah-NOAM summer camp; and opportunities for RA Israel members to preside over certain weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies as well as bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies for hundreds of children with special needs around the country. Aliyah of RA mem-

bers from North America, Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere elevated the number of RA *olim* to nearly 180, approximately 10 percent of the overall RA membership. Retirees purchased apartments and began to spend a portion of their year in Israel even without obtaining formal Israeli citizenship. Sizable numbers of adult sons and daughters of RA members became *olim*, thereby increasing the movement's presence.



CONSERVATIVE/MASORTI JUDAISM IS GLOBAL: CORRECTING A FALSE IMPRESSION

May 6, 2019

This week, Conservative Judaism's international rabbinic association, the Rabbinical Assembly, convenes in Montreal, Canada. This location underscores the inaccuracy of the notion that Conservative Judaism is present only in America.

While there are 1.2 million self-identified American Conservative Jews, there also are 900,000 (and growing) self-identified Masorti/Conservative Jews outside of the United States.

Recent surveys, for example, indicate that between 250,000 and 300,000 Israelis identify with Masorti/Conservative Judaism.

In Argentina, among 180,000 Jews — Latin America's largest Jewish community— an estimated 80% choose the Masorti movement as their first option for ongoing participation and for life-cycle events.

Additionally, there are 40 officially affiliated Conservative Argentinian synagogue communities, plus 20 others aligned with the values of the Masorti movement.

Conservative Judaism has dozens of youth group chapters in Argentina, with thousands of members and hundreds of staff. The chapters conduct weekly activities as well as more than 25 encampments a year.

The Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, one of the most important and relevant Jewish institutions in Latin America, serves the entire region. The seminary currently has 230 students enrolled in programs for leadership, education, youth, learning for enrichment, synagogue staff, and cantorial and rabbinical studies.

There is also a network of 15 Jewish day schools from the movement and/or related to the movement, with curricula provided by the Jerusalem-based Schechter Institutes' TALI program for Jewish schools and synagogues.

There are also nearly 150,000 additional Conservative/Masorti Jews in other parts of Latin America.

Another area of great strength for Conservative Judaism is Canadian Jewry, as revealed in a recent comprehensive survey. Canada has emerged to be among the Diaspora's largest Jewish communities.

According to the "2018 Survey of Jews in Canada," it was estimated that there were 390,000 Jews in Canada in 2017.

Canadian Jewry is more than holding its own in size and slowly growing, maintaining strong Jewish commitments from one generation to the next.

"Most Jewish parents with children under 18 years of age believe their children will grow up to have a connection to Jewish life that is as strong, if not stronger, than their own."

The following statistics reveal the impressive strength of Canadian Jewish identity in a country in which Conservative Judaism predominates.

- "Almost everyone surveyed says being Jewish in their life is very (64%) or somewhat (27%) important...."
- "Nine in 10 Canadian Jews report that both of their parents are Jewish, and a comparable proportion say they were raised in the Jewish religion."
- "Most Jews in Canada have participated in one or more types of Jewish education when growing up, [with] close to one-half

having attended a Jewish day school or yeshiva...for an average of nine years.”

- “43% of Canadian Jews regard “Caring about Israel” as “essential to being Jewish,” with an additional 43% regarding this as “important to being Jewish.”
- “Eight in 10 Canadian Jews have visited Israel at least once and have done so an average of five times to date.... Travel to Israel is...common across the population, especially among Jews under 45 years of age and those with a post-graduate degree.”
- “Most Canadian Jews claim some knowledge of the Hebrew language, with...four in 10 claiming to be able to carry on a conversation in the language.”

As a force in sustaining the strength of impressive Jewish engagement, “Conservative Judaism...is alive and well in Canada and tops the charts of affiliation, followed by Orthodoxy and then Reform, with a small number in the smaller movements, and a further 30% identifying themselves “just Jewish.”

Among the more than six in 10 Jews who report belonging to or being actively involved in one of the mainstream denominations, 26% are Conservative, 17% Orthodox/Modern Orthodox, 16% Reform. About 11% affiliate with one of the smaller Jewish movements, including Reconstructionism, Humanistic or Renewal Judaism, Hasidism.

It should be noted that of the remaining 31% who identify as “just Jewish,” a substantial proportion affiliate with congregations.

This means that the 26% of Canada’s Jews who affiliate as Conservative Jews is larger after adding in the “just Jewish” folks who are members of Conservative synagogues. The total number of Jews engaged in Canada’s Conservative Jewish life thereby jumps closer to 35% of Canadian Jewry, i.e., 140,000 Jews.

Furthermore, research reveals that “a large majority Canadian Jews feel somewhat, if not strongly, connected to Jewish life in their

city..., largely a function of denominational affiliation and active involvement.”

As in the USA Pew Study, among Canadian Jews, we witness a “gradient” of intensity in Jewish commitment. The “highest intensity” is among the Orthodox, with Conservative Jews a close second, followed by Reform and the unaffiliated.

This gradient reflects upon Jewish continuity, Jewish peoplehood, and Israel. For example: “Having a Jewish spouse is almost universal among those who are Orthodox/Modern Orthodox (97%) or Conservative (90%).” “Raising all of one’s children in the Jewish religion is almost universal among Canadian Jews who identify primarily through religion (93%) or in combination with culture and descent (95%), as well as among those who are Orthodox/Modern Orthodox (97%) or Conservative (97%).”

In sum, Canadian Jewry is large in size and growing in quality. Its Jewish identity is strong as is its commitment to Jewish peoplehood and to Israel, notably thanks to Conservative Judaism.

In sum, Conservative/Masorti Judaism continues to affiliate communities throughout the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, the former Soviet Union, Australia, Africa and Asia. As reflected in attendance at the Montreal-based Rabbinical Assembly convention, Conservative/Masorti Judaism’s 2.1 million adherents reflect a decidedly global movement.

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