The Zionist Organization of the Conservative Movement

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Fall 2015

### MERCAZ: #2 IN ZIONIST POLL

MERCAZ USA, although down from 33 to 25 mandates, still scored an important success in the recent American Zionist poll, rising to become the second largest party among the 11 slates running in the election.

While trailing ARZA's 55 mandates, MERCAZ bested both the Orthodox slate, the leftist "HaTikva" and rightist ZOA slates and several new groupings representing Russian Jewish Americans, Orthodox students and SHAS. In addition, with a planned political faction being envisaged comprising the new Zionist Spring Party, the "Confederation", HaNoar HaTzioni and the Israeli Yesh Atid Party, MERCAZ should become one of the key players at the international Jewish parliament taking place this October in Jerusalem.

MERCAZ USA looks forward to sending a delegation with 25 delegates and nearly 50 alternate delegates including the required 25% youth leaders (ages 18-35) and 30% women to join MERCAZ and Masorti Olami participants from Israel and elsewhere around the world. The weeklong program in Jerusalem will include a Shabbat get-together, a visit to Masorti institutions, orientation meetings and the 3-day Zionist Congress.



MERCAZ President Janet Tobin with Yehuda Yaakov, Israel's Consul General to New England. The next MERCAZ Israel Advocacy conference will take place Sunday, November 8th in the Greater Philadelphia area. Go to the MERCAZ USA website for more information.

# The Darkness Before the Dawn: Israel's Majority VS Orthodox Minority

There is a popular saying that the darkest hour is always just before the dawn. Looking at recent events concerning religious pluralism in Israel, things certainly appear darker today than before. But a new poll indicates that a majority of Israelis are in favor of a new dawn in the Jewish State.

The darkness began this past May when the Likud Mayor of Rehovot Rachamim Malul, originally of the ultra-Orthodox SHAS Party, cancelled a planned Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony for children with special needs because it was to be held at the Masorti synagogue in town. The mayor's decision took all by surprise as similar services had been taking place in the past in Rehovot at the same Masorti congregation with no protest.

And later, when negotiations followed to move the disputed ceremony from Rehovot to the President of Israel's official residence in Jerusalem, President Reuven Rivlin – he or his staff – turned around and refused to permit the Masorti rabbi of Rehovot to take part in the service, ostensibly on the grounds that the President's Residence should not be involved in "controversial" situations.

At the same time, the Chief Rabbinate and its supporters in the new government of Prime Minister Netanyahu have been out to reverse whatever small steps had been taken towards religious pluralism during the two years of the previous coalition. First of all, the new government voted to repeal the regulation which would have allowed municipal rabbis to set up independent conversion courts without the permission and supervision of the Chief Rabbinate. Secondly, the government reversed the decision to move the rabbinical courts to the jurisdiction of the secular Justice Ministry and returned them back to the SHAS-held Religious Affairs Ministry.

Add to these acts the attempt to disqualify American-born modern Orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Riskin from a 5-year extension as Chief Rabbi of Efrat and to prevent a Masorti rabbi from participating in an Orthodox-sponsored community event for Shavuot in Tel Aviv, (both acts were fortunately unsuccessful) and it is indeed a darker hour than before.

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It is against this backdrop that the recent survey commissioned by the Hiddush organization is so significant. A non-profit agency that works to promote religious freedom in Israel, Hiddush found that 59% of all Israeli Jews believe that the state should recognize Reform and Conservative rabbis and grant them the same legal status as their Orthodox counterparts, while 71% disagreed with President Rivlin's decision regarding the terms for holding the bar mitzvah ceremony for disabled children.

In his recent responsum "Is Judaism Really in Favor of Pluralism and Tolerance?" (Responsa in a Moment, Vol. 9, Issue 6, June 2015), Rabbi David Golinkin, President of the Schechter Institutes, noted: "[T]he attempt of certain Orthodox rabbis [and their political allies] in Israel to impose their specific halachic opinion on all the Jews of Israel (and in the Diaspora) contradicts the way that Jewish law has worked since the dissolution of the Sanhedrin. May we aspire, rather to the Jewish ideal of unity without uniformity. In the words of Rabbi [Abraham Isaac Kuk, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine] "the multiplicity of opinions . . . that is the very thing which enriches wisdom and causes it to expand."

#### **VISIT ISRAEL TODAY:**

Go to www.mercazusa.org/trips.html

for a current list of Conservative Movement Israel trips that are open to all participants.

## Mazal Tov

To the Abayudaya community of Uganda whose Abayudaya Youth Association held a convention earlier this year with support from Masorti Olami and the "Far West" chapter of United Synagogue Youth. The gathering drew about 200 youth from all over the country who engaged in a number of study sessions led by Rabbi Gershom Sizomu and other leaders of the community. The participants concluded the program passing a resolution for strengthening Jewish tradition through marriage within the community.

To Yaffa Oknin, the veteran Principal of the TALI Oranim School in the northern Israeli city of Yokneam, who recently received the Genger Prize for Excellence in TALI Education. The TALI school system, whose name is a Hebrew acronym for "enriched Jewish studies", was founded by educators and rabbis from the Conservative/Masorti Movement nearly 40 years ago. Its 260 schools and pre-schools, comprising over 10% of all secular schools in Israel, are sponsored by the TALI Education Fund, which is housed at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem and is unofficially associated with Masorti Judaism.

To the Mosley family of Ashkelon, a large African-American family of converts and members of the Masorti congregation Netzach Israel, whose conversion to Judaism by a Reform rabbi in Overland Park, KS, was finally recognized by the Interior Ministry after a drawn-out legal battle lasting more than four years. Despite the High Court's ruling back in the 1980's that conversions performed within organized Jewish communities outside of Israel would be recognized for the purposes of making Aliyah, the Interior Ministry had tried to discredit the Mosleys' conversion since their arrival in Israel in 2011, and thereby depriving them of the ability to secure Israeli citizenship and the employment and health services to which they as immigrants would be entitled, on the suspicion that as "Jews of color", they were covertly connected to the Black Hebrew community of Dimona. Congratulations to Rabbi Andy Sacks, Director of the Rabbinical Assembly Israel Region for leading the fight on behalf of the Mosleys and to Congregation Netzach Israel for providing financial help and support to the family over the past four years.

## Join MERCAZ Today.

#### Please complete this form and return to:

MERCAZ USA 136 East 39th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10016 or enroll online at <a href="https://www.mercazusa.org/membership.html">www.mercazusa.org/membership.html</a>

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City State Zip	Account #:
My email is	Expires: Signature
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