

**Support Adath's commitment to the
Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel
and our sister Congregation Magen Avraham in Omer**

Adath has a long standing commitment to building our Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel, which now consists of more than 50 kehilloth (congregations/communities). In the mid-1970's we established a twinning relationship with the newly established Congregation Magen Avraham in Omer.

Since 2002 Adath has made a commitment to strengthening that relationship, helping the congregation to build an addition to expand it's after school programming for Israeli children. Since 2005, we have made a significant contribution each year to support two rabbinic interns (pirchei rabbanut), from the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, who work in the congregation in Omer. This is an important training ground for the preparation of rabbis for the Masorti Movement in Israel.

Please show your support for this effort by sending a check to the synagogue made out to the *Foundation for Masorti Judaism*.

If you have questions about the Masorti Movement or about Congregation Magen Avraham, Omer please contact Rabbi Kravitz or Rabbi Sadoff.

Rabbi Dr. Gil Nativ Congregation Magen Avraham, Omer, Israel
Sermon, Adath Jeshurun, Minnetonka, MN
Sabbath Parah, 5770, March 6, 2010

A Bridge between the Extremes

I was born a year before my country, Israel. The most memorable words I remember from my elementary school years, are the last words of Trumpeldor "Tov laMut be'Ad Artzenu –It is good to die for our country". For all the boys and most of the girls in my High School class, it was clear that right after graduating we begin serving in the army. During the two and a half years I served in the paratroopers, I rarely used public transportation. I would stand near a crossroad, stretch out my hand, and usually the first car on the road would stop and pick me up. I hitch-hiked all over Israel. Right after the Six Day War, an Israeli poet,

Hayim Hefer, wrote "Paratroopers who are 20 years old carry on their back 2000 years". I felt as if he had written this poem **for me** and **about me**.

Things have surely changed since the Six Day War. It is not surprising that I stopped hitch-hiking after my army service. It is surprising, even disappointing, that Israeli soldiers do not hitchhike any more. They are forbidden to do so by army regulations, from fear of being kidnapped by terrorists.

There are grounds to criticize the State of Israel, but I strongly believe that this state is what we have been waiting for and dreaming of for two thousand years of being a small and often persecuted minority in countries all over the world. I strongly believe that an independent Jewish state has been and will be the best option for the rebirth and rejuvenation of the Hebrew-Jewish culture and tradition.

I am as worried today about the future of Israel, as most Israelis were before the Six Day War, but for different reasons. Our army has proven to be the strongest in the Middle East, but the threat of Iran launching a nuclear attack on us, is different from the threats we faced in the past. I am sure that Israel's nuclear capability does not lag behind Iran's. However, if the leadership of Iran is infected with a fanatic-Islamic-suicide mentality, our retaliation options may not deter this leadership from launching such an attack.

Every freedom lover should be deeply concerned about Iran's plans and endeavors. However, almost as much as I am worried about the **Iranian threat**, I am worried that my country, Israel, will become **a second Iran**. Fundamental, fanatic Judaism is not much better than fanatic Islam. In a Jewish theocracy all married women will be forced to cover their hair in public, just like in Iran. Jewish women and men who committed adultery will be stoned to death, since this is the law of our Holy Torah, long before it became the law of the Holy Koran. Who will dare argue against the sacred law in a future state of Israel, when it is dominated by Ultra-Orthodox rabbis?

Is it only a nightmare? This nightmare is gradually becoming a reality. It will not happen during the next decade, but there is a gradual shift in the balance of power and influence in Israeli society, and there is a clear demographic

change: almost half of our elementary school children today grow up in families that deny the basic values of Israel's Declaration of Independence. Their families are either Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews or Arab. These groups object to Israel's being either a **Democratic state and/or a Jewish** state.

Extreme Religious rabbis have gained more control over the site of the 'Kotel' –the 'Wall' in Jerusalem. They do not allow women to worship freely even in the special section for women. A young Masorti woman was arrested for wearing a tallit in the women's section at the Wall. On the third night of Hanukka a crowd of some 300 Conservative and Progressive Jews assembled in front of the Kotel and lit Hanukkah candles. I lit the first candle and I said: In 1967 I fought with my brigade to liberate the Old City of Jerusalem. We fought and liberated this place so that all Jews will equally feel at home here. Today I feel it should be liberated again. We must liberate it from bigotry, prejudice and discrimination.

In Jerusalem today some buses have separate seating for men and women. Guess who is seated in the front and who in the back of the bus! Conversions that were conducted by liberal-minded Orthodox rabbis (e.g. Rabbi Druckman) were annulled by the more rigid, State supported, rabbinic courts.

I am fortunate to live in **Omer**, where the local city council is relatively free of Orthodox or Haredi pressure. Hence, I am allowed to conduct funerals and burials in the local cemetery. I hold a key to the local mikveh. I often invite other Masorti rabbis to use this mikveh for the ritual bath of converts who were accepted by our rabbinic court. However, three times in the past three years the local Chabad rabbi, who was appointed by the Rabbinate as the city rabbi, replaced the lock on the door to the mikveh in order to prevent me from using it. Each time I had to appeal to the mayor, and arrange for a key to the new lock. Moreover, this rabbi demanded that a fence be set up in the middle of the cemetery to separate the Jews who are buried the Orthodox way, in a shroud, from the Jews who are buried the Conservative way, namely having a choice between a shroud and a casket. His demand was rejected by the city council.

Most other cemeteries in Israel are under absolute control of Orthodox or Haredi rabbis, and no Masorti or Reform rabbi can officiate there.

Every year before Simchat Torah I make it my task to buy flags for the children who join Magen Avraham Congregation for the 'Hakafot'. Two decades ago I could easily find flags with a picture of boys and girls dancing around a Torah scroll. Torah scroll.



These flags have almost disappeared from the market. There are only boys and men dancing on these card-board flags! The manufacturers are apparently careful not to upset the **'religiously correct'** trend in Israel. This is not the only case where Haredi, i.e. Ultra-Orthodox Judaism has an impact on commercial life...



Now, for the Good News: There has been a surprising change in Jerusalem in the past year: Among the active members in the coalition against Haredi 'Take Over' of the city, there are several modern-orthodox Jews. These are people who do not drive on Shabbat, but do not want the municipality to close down all public parking lots on the Sabbath Day. I also do not drive on the Sabbath, but I feel that my fellow Jews should have a free choice whether to drive or not. If you refrain from driving on Sabbath from fear of getting a parking ticket, I do not believe that G-d gives you credit for your Sabbath observance...

How have the ultra-orthodox groups gained political power? They have excelled in the art of using a spoils system when forming a coalition government with the major political party, be it a right wing or a left wing party. The Ultra-Orthodox political groups get generous Gov't funds for their parochial schools and their synagogues. The children who attend these schools do not celebrate Israel Independence Day and will most probably not serve in the I.D.F., but these facts do not deter them from extorting millions from the state they barely recognize.

The children who attend these schools, mostly from low income families, are the future voters and supporters of the parties that financed their education.

In a way they are a captive audience, since they get almost no vocational training, very little knowledge of math and science. Almost the entire curriculum is devoted to Judaic texts. Indeed we ought to admire those that study Torah, but our tradition frowns upon those who choose to rely on the public dole rather than work. They marry young, give birth to many children who will not be a part of the workforce, but become citizens whose livelihood depends mainly on whatever allowance their political parties get for them from the national budget. This vicious cycle has been going on since the early eighties. There are exceptions, but I refer to the majority of the Haredi population.

Israeli society is polarized. The extreme right wing combines religious fanaticism with arrogant nationalism, and has more power in the present government than in any of our former governments. On the other hand, there is the extreme left wing which combines secularism and a denial of the basic Zionist premise that we, Jews are entitled to a country of our own. Maimonides' advice was to look for *Derekh haEmtzait*- the middle way, in whatever we do. I strongly believe that this middle way is what Israeli society needs both in religious and in political life.

There is another crucial factor concerning the present and future of Israel: "The stranger in our midst" We were an ethnic-religious minority for so many centuries in so many countries and suffered for it time and again. It is our great challenge to treat the Arab minority in Israel with justice and fairness.

What does this have to do with Conservative-Masorti Jews in Israel? So far, we have had a minor impact on Israeli life. We are small, but we are in between the extremes. We can make an important contribution to Israel by serving as a bridge between these extremes. Many Israelis still view us as a foreign import from English speaking countries, but even this attitude has been changing in recent years.

The Israeli Masorti Movement strives to find the proper balance between practicing traditional Jewish values and upholding the values of equality and human rights for all citizens of Israel. We can help the country find the middle road, which Maimonides so strongly advocated. We are a small movement: only

1% of Israelis are affiliated with Masorti congregations, but there are many more who identify with us, although they do not pay membership dues, and we have potential allies on both sides: Modern Orthodoxy on one side, and Progressive-Reform Judaism on the other side.

The third edition of VaAni Tefilati, the prayer-book of our Movement in Israel, has become a 'best-seller' in the past 3 months. It has an added subtitle 'An Israeli Siddur' to imply that it takes into account the changes in our Calendar since the establishment of the State of Israel, and that it reflects the changes in the status of Jewish women in recent decades.

Another project which serves as an 'outreach' for Masorti Judaism to various segments of Israeli society is the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for children with special needs. On a weekday morning service for these handicapped children, Orthodox, Masorti, Reform and secular families sit together in a Masorti synagogue. This program reaches out to parts of Israeli society who otherwise would have never set foot in a Masorti Synagogue!

I wish to be a local-patriot again: Magen Avraham Congregation in Omer is one of the first six congregations in Israel which united in the early seventies to form the Masorti Movement. However, we still struggle with discrimination between the generous Government grants to Orthodox Synagogues and almost no government or municipal budgeting of our synagogue.

If your grandchild or great-grandchild decides to make aliya to Israel, I hope that he or she receives Israeli citizenship based on the 'Law of Return'.. Although this law discriminates between the naturalization process of Jews and Non-Jews, it expresses the essence of the state of Israel: There should be one state in the world with a Jewish majority. On the other hand I hope and pray that no Orthodox or Haredi rabbi stops your grandchild at Ben-Gurion Airport and says: "We found out that your maternal great-grandmother was converted to Judaism by Reform or Conservative rabbis, and therefore we do not consider you a Jew. We welcome you as a tourist, but the 'Law of Return' does not apply to you..."

American Jews should be involved in determining the type of country we are to become. The notion that only Israelis know what is good for Israel and that Jews outside Israel should be supportive without having a 'say' on the public and moral character of Israel, is no longer applicable. You should impress upon Israelis what lessons Israel should learn from the Great Democracy, the United States of America: Freedom of religion and the principle of **Separation of Synagogue and State.** We cannot sit back and allow anti-democratic groups take over. For this we need your help!

When you support a Masorti Congregation in Israel, you support the 'Sane Center" in Israeli society. Directly or indirectly you strengthen the communities which will eventually ensure that Israel will grow to be a tolerant, pluralistic and democratic state that Jews all over the world can and will be proud of! Amen.