

**RH2 Sermon 5782-2021**  
**Masorti & Partnering to Support the Diversity of Judaism in Israel**

So much is the same about Judaism and Jewish identity as its observed in Israel. For example, they celebrate 2 days of Rosh Hashanah like we do in the Diaspora. But beyond that, the structures of Jewish religious life in Israel are in many ways so different than here. This is one of the reasons the reasons we've launched a partnership between Shaare Shalom and The New Kehilah of Ramat Aviv, the Conservative synagogue in Tel Aviv, so that in this new year we can get to know each other, spiritually, socially, and then we will be able to advocate for our brothers and sisters in Israel and they us, benefit from their wisdom and experience, and develop a closer relationship between our two worlds.

In order to explain more, I would like to take you on a journey.

When I was studying in Israel for a year during rabbinical school fifteen years ago I interviewed for the student Rabbi position at a lovely congregation in Loudoun County, Virginia. At the time, I had a vague idea of where Loudoun County was, somewhere, as my father explained it, in the neighborhood of Dulles Airport. We chatted on a Skype connection from our apartment in Jerusalem at a time when Zoom only meant to 'go really fast'.

During that year in Jerusalem, Rachel and I joined a synagogue called Kehilat Mayanot, a Masorti congregation, Israel's branch of Conservative, egalitarian Judaism.

It was so different from what I knew growing up. Mayanot did not have its own building. At the time, they held services in a classroom in a school building in the Baka neighborhood of the new city, a 15-minute walk from our apartment. Members of the synagogue rotated hosting the oneg after Saturday services. The dress was very casual, and one Saturday morning someone's dog wandered into and out of the room where we were praying. During the Dvar Torah, members of the synagogue would interrupt the speaker and ask questions. Children sat under the table during the Torah reading eating Bamba snacks. The overall feel may have been casual, but we were in the company of high-level professionals, and professors both of Judaic studies and other subjects as well who all were motivated to teach, give divrey Torah, and to lead soulful and energetic services.

During our time there, the Ramat Rachel neighborhood was well under construction and growing, a former Kibbutz property turned into many new apartment buildings to the east of the Old City, and just north of where Mayanot gathered.

A parcel of that land was zoned for a synagogue, and Mayanot submitted a bid to build its building on that property. Most of the Mayanot members lived in or near that neighborhood. The bid looked to be successful, until it wasn't.

A group, supported by one of the religious political parties, having discovered that a Masorti community wanted to build there, submitted a competing bid and eventually the municipality chose their bid over Mayanot. The party who's bid was accepted was not local and did not even have an established congregation in the area.

This was a difficult moment, because I love Israel – a place of wonderful relationships we made with Mayanot members and faculty at Machon Schecter with whom we still keep in touch after all these years, but I struggle with the way its citizens who are Jewish, but not Orthodox, are treated.

The government pays the salaries of Orthodox rabbis, and so the members of their congregations do not need to pay dues. Masorti communities not only need to pay dues, but face discrimination on establishing places to pray. If a Masorti rabbi was found to have officiated a wedding, they could be jailed. For years, even our way of praying has not been included. And as you may know, it is forbidden to pray in a mixed group at the main plaza of the Western Wall.

And then, just this past month, after Orthodox Jews interrupted and interfered with Masorti Jews praying in the current egalitarian area at the Western Wall, Eliezer Melamed, a leading Orthodox Rabbi, chief Rabbi of Shomron and head of its yeshiva, wrote a piece in a religious news publication that echoed like the voice of the angel telling Abraham to stay his hand and not go through with sacrificing his son.

He said, quote, “it is correct to set aside the ‘Ezrat Yisrael’ area for them to hold their prayer services in a respectable manner,” Rabbi Melamed wrote.

“If more people come to pray adhering to their rules, the area allotted to them in the Ezrat Yisrael space should be increased as needed.”

[Orthodox and charedi people] should be happy that more of their Jewish brothers and sisters are connecting to the site of the Temple, and more of them want to pray to their Father in Heaven.”

[And if] They need a Torah scroll [the Western Wall's rabbi] should take care of it.”

(<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/310396>)

On this second day of Rosh Hashanah, with the Binding of Isaac as the central story that anchors the day, while it may seem the Conservative and Reform movements are, in a way, bound on the altar there is change occurring at the highest levels.

Heads of the Masorti/Conservative movement sent a high-level delegation to meet with leaders of the current government, and Nachman Shai, the minister for Diaspora affairs, recently wrote that the government of Israel, in setting the relationship with Jews in the diaspora, quote, “is slowly but surely taking responsibility...we realize we have disappointed you and are doing teshuvah, repentance, with a sincere desire to make things right in the future.” Shai explains the government is committed to bringing back the Kotel compromise, that is, formalizing an egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall. He wants us to know that they believe in us, and are ready for our critique and ideas, and most of all to be our partners.

If I could speak directly to Mr. Shai, I would say, here at Shaare Shalom, we are already your partners! Our partnership with The New Kehilah of Ramat Aviv launched with a series of joint

online classes to help us prepare for the high holidays, and that was just the beginning. Together we will be able to accomplish things we could not do alone.

It's so important for us to connect with Israelis, both us grown-ups and our kids. This fall the students of both communities will be learning together in a joint religious school program. They will literally put faces and names to people who live there, and so, when our kids go to college, they will not only know about Israel in theory, they will have relationships and a holy connection.

Jeff Cymet, the Rabbi of the New Kehilah, is American born and raised, and is one of the leaders of the Masorti movement. He is an amazing teacher, and spokesperson for the movement, and we're blessed that he and his community are 100% in favor of this partnership that will strengthen both our communities. Among the many projects Jeff has worked on, he is one of the visionary founders of a school in Tel Aviv for students from Charedi orthodox, Masorti, and secular backgrounds. I feel sure he will be able to help us begin to resolve disunity amongst the Jewish people here in North America. We have a lot to learn from each other, not only in information but also in inspiration.

The Masorti movement benefits from dynamic leaders like Rabbi Jeff as it's grown now into a phenomenon that the Israeli public is increasingly recognizing as a meaningful way of connecting Jewishly, with 80 communities, and reaching thousands of youth and adults each year, a program for enabling Bnai Mitzvah students with disabilities to celebrate their simchas, a school training Rabbis and educators in Jerusalem, a youth movement, and Tali, a like-minded school movement, the Masorti movement is growing.

Masorti offers many Israelis a way of reconnecting to Judaism as a religious and spiritual path. A May 2016 study showed 1/3 of Israeli Jews identified with Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Our partnership and wish for Israel to be more supportive of Masorti and Reform Judaism is not an indictment of Israel as a nation. Israel's existence, and persistence, as a democratic state in the middle east is a miracle, a miracle of courage, endurance, and an indefatigable vision of hope, strength, and belief in the power of an evolving homeland in which calls of the muezzin mix with the sound of church bells and the buzz of Jews praying and learning, where scientific and technological discovery proceed at a rapid pace, and where our ancient dream of building a homeland continues to evolve into a light unto the nations.

This project of ours is a way of helping Israel, and us, grow and evolve even further. It's a learning curve whose only goal is increasing blessing, and as our tradition says, ma'alim ba'kodesh, rising up in holiness.

In the same way, at the end of the Akedah, we read Abraham returns to his servants, but the Torah does not mention Isaac returning. Our ancestors believe Isaac is going off to school, to the primeval yeshivah of Shem and Ever, where he will himself grow from this experience into a more mature adult.

That's our hope too, that the miracle of modern Israel continue to be an ongoing story in which the State celebrates and supports all forms of Judaism practiced within its borders. Diaspora Minister Nachman Shai and his government are eager to do so, and what a blessing that will be.

Just as all of us, here, in Israel, and all over the world say Ado-nai Echad, God is one, we pray for unity and strength here, and with our brothers and sisters in Tel Aviv, with whom, God willing, in another year or so, we will be able to meet in person as we go together on a mission to visit Israel and literally join hands in prayer and thanksgiving for the blessings that flow from Israel to us, and from us back to them in return.

Please join us as we continue to create and grow this partnership with Israel!

Shana Tovah.