

The Zionist
Organization of
the Conservative
Movement

MERCAZ USA



Summer 2021

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Welcoming Words

Dr. Marilyn Lishnoff Wind, President, MERCAZ USA



Sarrae and I hope that you have come through this past year plus with no illness and with your families healthy. We recognize that it has been a difficult time for all of us and we hope that you have been able to get your vaccinations and are ready to start the return to normality.

One of the things we have learned during this past year is that we can connect on Zoom. While meeting in person clearly has many advantages, many of you who wouldn't normally be able to attend meetings have been able to participate in meetings on Zoom. We hope that you were able to participate in our "MERCAZ Reads Israel" program as well as our Tu B'Shevat program. Having programs on Zoom has not only allowed more people to attend but has enabled us to partner with MERCAZ Canada and MERCAZ UK, as well as other arms of the Conservative/Masorti Movement. In addition, it has enabled us to host speakers from outside the United States. We will continue with online programming since it enables more of you to participate. I would note that our programs are recorded and can be found on our website – please share these programs with others!

As I write this, the cease fire has been put in place and missiles from Gaza have stopped targeting the Israeli civilian population. We grieve for all those Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, and Palestinian civilians who have lost their lives, been injured, and have had their homes destroyed.

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We grieve for the violence that has broken out between Arab and Jewish Israelis in cities where they formerly lived together in peace. We joined with the Rabbinical Assembly and other Conservative Movement organizations before the cease fire expressing our concerns (mercazusa.org/standinginsolidarity/). The war between Israel and Hamas has resulted in an outbreak of anti-Semitism in the United States and throughout the world. Our Movement has joined with the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements to speak out against these incidents (<https://urj.org/press-room/north-american-jewish-groups-denounce-antisemitic-attacks-wake-hostilities-between>).

In addition, we are faced with a crisis in the Zionist arena. In the last World Zionist Congress elections, ultra-Orthodox right-wing groups ran for the first time. They succeeded in getting a significant number of votes and have viewed this as a mandate to ignore the precedent of an across-the-board consensus including all the Zionist bodies. This would have resulted in a loss of funding and support for our Movement projects in Israel and around the world, as well as for other groups. This was dealt with at the World Zionist Congress where legacy organizations, such as Hadassah, understood what was happening and helped to ensure that the leadership of the National Institutions would continue to be broad-based.

Unfortunately, this kind of behavior has continued here at the American Zionist Movement (AZM). As in the past, MERCAZ USA in coalition with ARZA, Ameinu, Hadassah, Naamat, and PPI, has argued for a big tent approach to Zionism. These behind-the-scenes efforts have, unfortunately, consumed our time and energies for the past several months. While we have not always been content with the results, we continue to work in this arena because we believe in the values of democracy and pluralism and will continue to fight for them for the good of Israel and the Jewish people everywhere. This is what it means to be a Conservative/Masorti Jew.

We are proud of the growth of the Conservative/Masorti Movement in Israel and around the world. The increase in kehillot and membership shows that we serve an important purpose. We need you to be active players in our work by redoubling your efforts to recruit members for MERCAZ and paying your dues for 2021-2022 (new dues year begins on July 1). With your active involvement we can grow from strength to strength.



Executive Musings

Sarrae Crane, Executive Director, MERCAZ USA

The last year-and-a-half has been a blur with one day running into the next as I work from home and seem to be living on Zoom meetings. Last week, I went into the office and was instantly reminded by the materials and boxes I found that the pandemic began as the election of delegates for the World Zionist Congress ended. It seems like such a long time ago and so much has happened since then.

One of the lessons we learned from the election campaign, that proved extremely useful during the pandemic, is that the internet enables us to stay in touch with our members. We have increased our social media presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and upgraded our website (still a work in progress). You will notice that we did not send individual bills, but rather asked you to pay your dues or make donations online. Moreover, our newsletter is now an e-letter and when we have something time-sensitive to say, we send an e-blast! This has worked well for us and given us the opportunity to be in touch with you on a more regular basis.

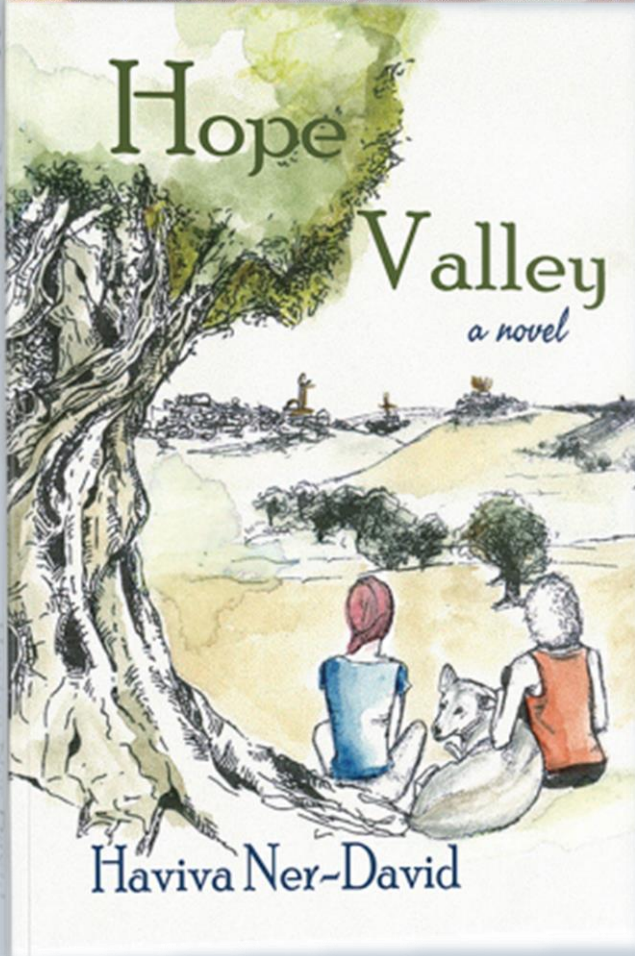
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In addition, the internet offers us program opportunities. We are working with MERCAZ Canada and MERCAZ UK on our lineup for 5782 / 2021-2022 which will be finalized by the end of the summer.

The goal of our programming is to strengthen our ties with the people of Israel. After four elections, there is a newly created government which is a coalition of 8 parties with significantly different views who have come together for the good of the country. We wish this government well and hope that it will be a sign that pluralism is possible – people with different convictions can live and work together respectfully. The promotion of pluralism at all levels is one of the missions of MERCAZ.

In an effort to deepen our awareness of life in Israel, we launched MERCAZ Reads Israel, an online book club featuring contemporary Israeli novels that provide insight into what Israelis are thinking about today. The stories authors write reflect the world in which they live and the issues of concern to them. As part of our mission to promote pluralism, we are working to find books written from diverse perspectives. MERCAZ does not endorse the position or politics expressed in the books, but rather wants the readers to know that not all Israelis see life through the same lens.

On July 13, we will hold an online discussion on *All the Rivers* by Dorit Rubinyan, a book that received a lot of attention in Israel. You can register for the session at mercazusa.org/alltherivers. (See the full article about our discussion for *All The Rivers* further in our newsletter!)



We are very excited about our next selection, *Hope Valley*, by Rabbi Haviva Ner David (rabbihaviva.com/hope-valley), who lives on Kibbutz Hanaton. This book is a must read! A beautifully woven, compelling story of 2 strong women, who develop an unlikely friendship. Their narratives and those of the people around them, learn that they share many of life's challenges and provide insight and understanding into the Israeli- Arab conflict. The book does not seek to justify the positions of any group, but rather to offer the opportunity for the reader to grasp the depth of the conflict. We will provide questions and thoughts to consider and discuss on our Facebook page as you read the book. **A discussion session with the author is set for Thursday, October 21, 2021.**

Our members have shared their desire to learn more about both the meaning of Zionism today and the work of the Masorti Movement in Israel. MERCAZ USA is eager to help you explore these important concerns. Accordingly, we are planning a four-session series on Zionism Today from 4 different perspectives, as well as holiday programs with a special emphasis on the Zionist aspect of the chag. If there are topics you would like us to address, please be in touch. We will be happy to work with you.

We wish you a summer filled with opportunities to reconnect in person with family and friends.

Feature Article

Masorti on Campus ... and MERCAZ USA

Eric Leiderman, Board Member, MERCAZ USA



The mission of Masorti On Campus is to provide for the needs of traditional-egalitarian Jewish campus communities ...



MASORTI
On Campus

Founded in 2013, Masorti On Campus (MoC) is an organization dedicated to supporting Jewish student life on North American college campuses. Its mission is to anticipate and provide for the needs of traditional-egalitarian Jewish campus communities. Building on the 23 year legacy of KOACH, USCJ's college outreach program, MoC was able to continue the important mission of supporting these communities across North America. Following the philosophy and precepts of Masorti/Conservative Judaism, MoC projects and programs help sustain and grow a vision of Judaism that is intellectually rooted, spiritually compelling, and emotionally satisfying. Ongoing campus partnerships provide current college students with opportunities to engage with one another, debate, question, and ultimately find a balance between Jewish tradition and modern life.

MoC was launched in the summer of 2013 as a grassroots, student-led movement. With the support of The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and an anonymous grant. 2014 saw the introduction of an inaugural student leadership shabbaton (weekend retreat). The annual shabbaton is now our signature program, aimed at sharing best practices by bringing students together with skilled educators and professionals in the field.

The shabbatonim and local campus activities are critical to identifying, engaging, and developing the next generation of Masorti/Conservative Jewish leaders both during college and beyond. These programs ensure that students are knowledgeable of Jewish texts and practice, skilled in engagement or organizational best practices, inspired by the mission and vision of Masorti/Conservative Judaism, as well as connected to other like-minded leaders across North America, Israel and around the world.

In 2018, MoC entered into a fiscal partnership with MERCAZ USA, the Zionist organization of the Masorti/Conservative movement. Together we are working to foster strong pluralistic communities built on shared Jewish values, devotion to social justice, and dedication to community and Israel. To this end, we are engaged in two new projects. The first is the development of a new cohort-based educational program to explore questions of Masorti/Conservative values, our relationship with Israel, and what it means to be a Zionist in the 21st century. The second is to capitalize on the reality that 1 in 4 members of our slate at the World Zionist Congress belong to Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012).

Our goal in the first project is to develop an impactful curriculum to educate teens and young adults on the issues of Zionism and antisemitism through the lens of Masorti/Conservative Judaism. We aim to provide all program graduates with the skills necessary to confidently articulate what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century, and how religious pluralism relates to Zionism and the State of Israel. Work on this project is also being supported by our global partners through MERCAZ Olami. We hope to launch our first pilots on college campuses for the fall 2021 semester.

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MERCAZ USA

Feature Article | Masorti on Campus ... and MERCAZ USA

In an effort to welcome Millennials and Gen Z into active leadership roles, work has begun on our second project to establish a joint advisory committee between MoC and MERCAZ USA with the intention of resetting the table. Too often young adults are caught between the competing interests of established institutions. One hand works to bring in new members and increase engagement in the programs and/or services they offer while the other hand there is resistance to change, or to innovation in content, style, etc.



The mission of MERCAZ USA is to (1) further the cause for true religious pluralism in Israel, (2) strengthen the connection between, and (3) create engagement opportunities for, the people of Israel and Jews living in the Diaspora. My hope for this advisory committee is to take these three principles and generate substantive recommendations on how to achieve these goals for current and future generations.

Additionally, it is important to establish clear definitions for how to approach a number of topics through the lens of Masorti/

Conservative Judaism, including but not limited to promoting Zionism, combating antisemitism, engaging with social justice movements within and without the Jewish community, and perhaps most importantly clearly articulating what it means to be a Masorti Zionist.

Utilizing the efficiency of small teams and a flat hierarchical structure, MoC and MERCAZ USA are perhaps uniquely positioned to both answer these complex questions and set the direction for the Masorti/Conservative Movement – at least in the United States.

Learn more about Masorti on Campus by visiting their website at masorticampus.org.

*Eric Leiderman (@EricLeiderman) is a Deputy Member to the Zionist General Council, Founder & Creative Head at MASORTI X, President & Co-Founder of **MASORTI On Campus** (@MasortiCampus), and a board member of MERCAZ USA. Eric grew up in the New York Metropolitan Area, and has spent significant time in several North American Jewish communities as well as in Israel. He currently resides in Chicago, Illinois with his wife.*

Coming to a Board Meeting Near You: MERCAZ USA

If you are reading this, you likely already know the critical role MERCAZ USA plays in connecting Jews in the United States to our siblings in Israel and representing Masorti (Conservative) Judaism in Israel and worldwide through the World Zionist Congress.

You probably also know that most of your synagogue members have never heard of MERCAZ, much less the role we play in supporting programs such as Masorti on Campus, Mercaz Reads Israel, and securing funds for movement programs such as USY Pilgrimage and Nativ.

As we begin to think about the 2025 World Zionist Congress elections, we are committed to partnering with our congregational communities to engage your synagogue's members with MERCAZ USA.

To learn more, invite us to join you for a (virtual) meeting with your leadership team! During our time together, we can brief your board and committee members on everything MERCAZ is doing to support pluralistic Judaism, and how our work can connect your members to Israel!



To learn more and book a time for us to meet with your board, email Sarrae at sarrae@mercazusa.org

Feature Article

Growing Our Zionist Romance As Masorti Jews

Rabbi Dan Ornstein, Congregation Ohav Shalom, Albany NY



I like to compare our relationship with Israel to a romance which struggles to blossom into mature love. I remember well my first serious summertime Zionist romance. I was fed a steady diet of puppy love for Israel from the time that I was very young. Growing up in a religiously traditional and politically progressive home, I was taught to love Israel, but I didn't know intimately or critically the Israel that I loved. This is comparable to young lovers' infatuations with each other before they come to terms with each other's imperfections. I had no mature sense of Israel's complicated political baggage, save for the urgency of protecting Her from Her enemies and the firm conviction that she was Super Woman, physically and morally; in the early years of the euphoric afterglow of the Six Day War, and the later years of darkness surrounding the Yom Kippur War, that urgency and that conviction were really the only narratives about Israel that I learned.

My love was shoved in a more complicated direction when, at seventeen, I spent my first summer in Israel volunteering on a very secular Socialist-Zionist kibbutz. This was a most unlikely place for a religious boy from Queens, NY to be in, but it fit my family's somewhat off-kilter style. Knowing how much Israel meant to us and recognizing the critical importance of young men cutting their umbilical cords, my father prevailed upon my mother to let me go that summer to volunteer with a friend who had family on the kibbutz. I spent that summer long ago exploring and developing a more grown-up Zionist love to replace my childlike adoration. Here is how that began.

One night, I had an argument with a young American *oleh* (immigrant) who was a member of the kibbutz, where discussions about Israel and the Palestinians were common. "Let the Palestinians have their state!" he yelled at me. "If they start a war with us, we're strong enough to bomb the hell out of them." No one I knew in 1979 was talking with such political candor, especially in the early years of the settler movement and following the UN's repugnant 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism. No one I knew in 1979 was really talking about Palestinians. My friend's coarseness notwithstanding, he showed me a way of thinking and holding dialogue about Israel which I had not before considered. I began to comprehend that if Israel is strong enough to fight wars in self-defense, then She is strong enough to make peace; further, love for Israel and the Jews and passion for civil rights and peace are not contradictory, but two sides of the same coin. I spent the rest of that glorious, shaky summer working, hitch hiking, making friends, failing disastrously at actual teen romance then falling head over heels into more of it. Meanwhile my Zionist romance began to blossom from puppy love into an adult relationship, thoughtfully, if at times tensely, a love informed by realism and criticism.

For years since that summer of my first adult Zionist romance, I found myself repeatedly hovering in a kind of stasis - some would argue paralysis - over the center, when it came to Israel conversations. My love for Israel remains defensive and fierce, fueled by pride, history, security concerns and the echo of Auschwitz. It pushes against and is pushed back by hopefully constructive criticism of Israel's behavior, which is fueled by Jewish and democratic values. This hovering can be exhausting, because remaining in the middle in a polarized community abounding in doctrinaire certainties demands tremendous energy. I worry at times that my centrist decision to not "decide" by not taking "either-or" stands is a cover for laziness or cowardice. Neutrality is a fine option until it neuters one's ability to speak out against evil and stand up for what is right.

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Feature Article | Growing Our Zionist Romance As Masorti Jews

However, far from being an intellectual or moral vacuum, the center that continues to hold (to paraphrase WB Yeats) is what could force people at the extremes to move into that discomfort zone of honest dialogue. No romance successfully evolves from infatuation into a real relationship without love being constantly in tension with self-reflective criticism. In the case of Israel, without criticism, love for Her degenerates from loyalty into blind, sycophantic loyalism. Without love, criticism becomes window dressing for blind, vitriolic hatred against Her. This insight applies as well to how we speak to each other about Israel, or any topic which is potentially uncomfortable. In practical terms, love and loyalty demand that you take your lover's or loved one's side. Yet respectfully but honestly naming the unpleasant facts about your lover or loved one, should be its own act of loyalty and love as well.

I am an "old married man", blessed and honored to be with my wife for thirty-seven years, this summer. We "old-marrieds" know that maintaining the balance between romantic love and critical honesty is what continues to strengthen relationships. Even more important, the ability to listen respectfully to one's partner is the foundation of long term, balanced relationships. We diaspora Jews just entered the seventy-third year of our romance with the modern state of Israel, yet our marriage with Her is still quite complicated. On the one hand, the miracle of Israel as the Jewish homeland continues to captivate vast Jewish and non-Jewish populations worldwide, including late boomer Jews like me, even as, tragically, millennials distance themselves further and more stridently from Her. On the other hand, we watch in horror as Israeli politics continues to be mired in polarization, even to the point of the former prime minister courting at times racist, homophobic political parties like the Jewish Power party so he could cobble together a ruling coalition. (If and how the new coalition aims to deal with this polarization remains to be seen.) As a regional board member of Jewish National Fund USA, I'm amazed at what Israelis are doing to improve their own society and the world as true world leaders. As a non-Orthodox Jew, (one whose Israel/Palestine politics have moved left of center), I shudder when I think about how right wing religious and secular parties are eroding the country's democracy while continuing to shut out pluralistic religious and political voices like those of the Masorti (Conservative) movement.

Yet, as an American Jewish Zionist and proud Conservative Jew, I don't despair, because my romantic attachment to Israel has truly grown over many decades into real love, and you stand by your lover, imperfections and all.

Israel is blessedly challenged to have religious communities such as our Masorti movement in Her midst. I celebrate the achievements of Masorti-Israeli Conservative Judaism - that directly address with a grown-up, critical love, two of the Jewish state's biggest issues: the lack of strong religious alternatives for Jewish Israelis to state sanctioned Orthodoxy and the overall lack of religious pluralism. It is not true that Israelis mostly don't care about Judaism and are happy to leave the business of religion to the rabbinate and the Haredi - ultra-Orthodox - communities. As the rabbinate becomes more politicized, religious parties become more extreme, and the Haredi community becomes more insular and aggressive, Israeli Jews are becoming increasingly vocal that this is not the marriage of religion and state that they want.

Against way too many odds, our Masorti movement is working to build solid, modern religious community on the ground in Israel and to push the political and legislative agendas that will guard Israeli pluralism and democracy as well. It does this in its many kehillot kedoshot (sacred synagogue communities), its magnificent political arm, MERCAZ, its great mosdot Torah (centers of Torah study) the Conservative Yeshiva and Schechter Institutes, and the tireless work of its rabbis and educators.

Happy 73rd birthday to our beloved Israel - our partner, our lover - and many thanks to our Masorti movement for helping to build our loving relationship with Israel and Israelis' loving relationships with each other.

Dan Ornstein is rabbi at Congregation Ohav Shalom in Albany, New York, rabbinic advisor to USCJ's Northeast District, a Jewish day school teacher, and a writer. He is the author of Cain v. Abel: A Jewish Courtroom Drama (Jewish Publication Society 2020). This article is adapted from a d'var Torah presented in celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut.

High Court Rules For Pluralism

On March 1, 2021, after more than 15 years of struggle, the Masorti Movement of Israel was vindicated by the Israeli Supreme Court, which now recognizes its conversions to Judaism for the purposes of the Law of Return and Aliyah to Israel.

Rakefet Ginsburg, the CEO of Masorti Movement, responded to this fantastic news by declaring: "Today is a historic day. The decision handed down by the Israeli Supreme Court was a just and clear verdict. There is more than one way to be a Jew in the State of Israel. Time and time again we are forced to fight for our rights in the courts instead of through dialogue. The elections are moments away. I call on our elected officials at this time to restore Israel's relations with Conservative and Reform Judaism in the State of Israel and in the Diaspora. The court said this in a clear voice and it is time for our elected leaders to recognize it too: "Judaism has more than one color."

MERCAZ USA stands with our Israeli partners on this crucial victory for religious pluralism in Israel – one that affirms the core identity of Israel as the homeland of Jews of all backgrounds. We applaud the Supreme Court for its wisdom in recognizing Masorti conversions. While today we celebrate, we know that many in Israel are still organizing against pluralism and so we will continue our support for Masorti Israel in the political, social and legal arenas, and of course for the crucial work of Masorti's Jewish Pluralism Watch.

MERCAZ USA Welcomes New American Zionist Movement (AZM) Leadership and New Member Organizations

On June 22, the American Zionist Movement (AZM) elected a new slate of officers, one that reflects the American Zionist community in this country, spanning the religious and political spectrum. We are hopeful that this new leadership can heal some of the rifts that have been created over the last few years:

- President, Deborah Isaac, AMIT Children, NY
- Chair of the National Board, Michael Laufer, ARZA, NY
- VP for Programming, Nomi Colton-Max, Ameinu, NJ
- VP for Inter-Organizational Relations, Ellen Hershkin, Hadassah, NY
- VP for WZO Relations, Mindy Stein, Emunah of America, NJ
- VP for Financial Resource Development, Martin Oliner, RZA-Mizrachi, NY
- **VP for Governance & Operations, Naomi Yadin-Mendick, MERCAZ USA, MD**
- Treasurer, Susan Longo, ARZA, IL
- Secretary, Lori Lowenthal Marcus, ZOA, PA



Mazal tov to Naomi Yadin-Mendick, of MERCAZ USA!

Todah Rabba to Richard Helfand, who represented MERCAZ USA on the nominating committee!

In addition, 6 new organizations were admitted to the AZM:

- A Wider Bridge
- Coordinating Council for the Jewish Homeland
- Dorshei Torah V'Tzion
- Maccabi USA
- Shas Olami America
- Volunteers for Israel

Diving Into the Israel Experience



All The Rivers A Novel by Dorit Rabinyan

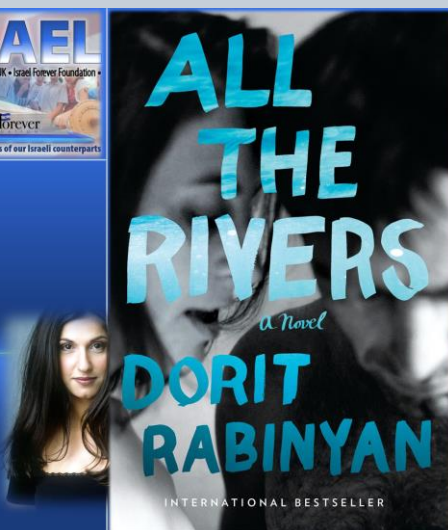
A controversial, award-winning story about the passionate but untenable affair between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man. Banned from classrooms by Israel's Ministry of Education, this remarkable novel is a bold portrayal of the strains - and delights - of a forbidden relationship, and explores the complex issues of Israeli life.

Book Club Meeting and Discussion:

Tuesday, July 13, 2021 3:00 p.m. EDT

Buy the book from your favorite online bookseller at tinyurl.com/alltherivers

Register for our book club meeting at
mercazusa.org/alltherivers



In the midst of the emerging pandemic and in the wake of the World Zionist Congress election campaign, MERCAZ USA launched an online book club featuring contemporary Israeli literature that provides insight into and understanding of the lives and concerns of our Israeli counterparts: **MERCAZ READS ISRAEL**, a partnership between **MERCAZ USA**, **MERCAZ Canada**, **MERCAZ UK**, and the **Israel Forever Foundation**.

Our first book club meeting in June 2020 was with author Avigail

Graetz. Nearly 150 book club members joined Avigail on Zoom to explore and discuss her book "A Rabbi's Daughter." This was followed in September 2020 with our second book club meeting, where we drew an equally large audience for our dive into "If All The Seas Were Ink" with author Ilana Kurshan. In addition to our book club discussions on Zoom, individuals can join our ongoing discussion of our book selections in our book club's [Facebook group](#).

This summer, we are reading our third book - 'All The Rivers' by acclaimed novelist Dorit Rabinyan. This work, a controversial, award-winning story about the passionate but untenable affair between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man, was banned from classrooms by Israel's Ministry of Education. This remarkable novel is a bold portrayal of the strains - and delights - of a forbidden relationship.

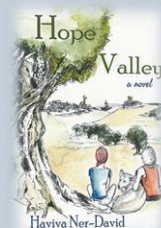
In choosing this book, MERCAZ is not endorsing its position or its politics, rather we want to expose our readers to a different Israeli perspective. This book may be a challenging read for some but exploring the complex issues of Israeli life is at the heart of our mission with MERCAZ READS ISRAEL.

To learn more about MERCAZ READS ISRAEL, [register for our July 13 book club meeting to discuss 'All The Rivers'](#), and watch the recordings of past book club meetings go to mercazusa.org/category/mercaz-reads-israel. To join our discussion group on Facebook, go to facebook.com/groups/MercazReadsIsrael.

Our fourth book will be [Hope Valley](#) by Rabbi Haviva Ner David

SAVE THE DATE for our book club meeting:

Thursday, October 21 | More details coming in August!



MERCAZ USA General Council Meeting **SAVE THE DATE: Sunday, November 7, 2021**

Every four years, MERCAZ USA holds its General Council meeting where we elect our new officers, vote on bylaw amendments, and learn together with guest presenters. Our past conventions have been in person - but learning from the positive outcomes and increased engagement with our virtual gatherings this past year, **we will hold this convention via Zoom so people from around the country can attend!** We hope you will plan on joining us. More details coming at the end of the summer ... so stay tuned and mark the date!

MERCAZ USA



 mercazusa.org

Your affiliation with MERCAZ USA implies acceptance of the Jerusalem Program.