

European Masorti / MERCAZ Forum Meets in Berlin

On Sunday, May 22 (13 Iyar) over 40 participants representing Masorti kehillot in the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and UK came together to discuss the growth and development of the Masorti Movement in Europe.



Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, Masorti Germany, welcoming participants



Participants at the European Masorti / MERCAZ Forum

Rabbi Joe Wernik welcomed the participants and sent greetings from Rabbi Alan Silverstein, President of Masorti Olami, Brian Wine, President of MERCAZ Olami and Claude Machline, chairman of the European kehillot, who were unable to attend. He welcomed Mr. Mel Seidenberg, a U.S. member of the Board of Directors of Masorti Olami. Joe spoke about the importance of continual education for lay leaders and the development of young leadership, so that we can look towards a future with local rabbis and educators. He noted graduates and students from the Schechter Rabbinical Assembly who are currently involved in Europe, including Rabbi Chaim Weiner, director of the European Masorti Beit Din, Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, director of Masorti Germany and rabbi in Weiden, Rabbi Rivon Krygier from Adath Shalom Paris, Rabbi Yeshaya Dalsace from Maayane Or in Nice, Michael Kogan in Dusseldorf, and rabbinical student Jean-Claude Suder, currently interning for six months in the new Masorti kehillah in East Paris. Rabbi Wernik reflected on the developments of the movement in Europe since we last met together in May 2003: the beginning of new kehillot in Valencia and Alicante, Spain as well as Almere, Netherlands; a larger space for Bet El, Madrid and soon for Maayane Or in Nice; connecting with the Anusim community in Portugal and the expansion of our Marom (young adults) organization throughout Europe.

Ms. Gabi Brenner, vice chairperson of Masorti Germany, welcomed the participants to Berlin and spoke about the challenges of the Jewish communities in Germany today. There are two distinct worlds between the large communities such as Dusseldorf, Berlin and Munich, and the small communities, such as Weiden. Gabi reflected on the challenges of both absorbing the large number of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and connecting them to the existing Jewish community. She spoke about Germany being a country of memorials to its past as well as a country filled with new Jews. She hopes that we will increase our contacts and all learn from one another.

Rabbi Gesa Ederberg was called upon to give a dvar Torah and opened by expressing how thrilled she was to welcome everyone to Berlin. She feels that the challenge of the Movement today is to build a future including programs for students, young children and families. She explained that the space where we were meeting is part of a Masorti bi-lingual (German / Hebrew) kindergarten which was begun in September 2004. Enrollment is increasing and they plan to expand and open another kindergarten in East Berlin in September. She believes it is important to know "when to be patient, but when to push". In this week's parsha, Behokotai, the message is "If you do what I tell you and follow My laws, you'll get what you deserve (rain, produce, etc.). If not, you will be punished". Gesa believes that the message here is that if you find a way to live a Jewish life, you will be rewarded--your soul will be nourished and you'll have the strength to build a future. She feels that you need to start at one point and get to another point step by step. Each step will help your life to become better. Our reward for observing Shabbat is that it helps us to grow, just as if there is more rain. If we walk with Abraham and walk together to establish relationships with each other, we will create a better world. It is important to ask "Where are we? Where do we start walking? What path are we taking?" We are not concerned about punishing those who don't take the path, but rather to engage in being together, using halacha

as a way of life and having a clear direction with a pure intention in our hearts. Then we'll be better people.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner, Director of the European Masorti Beit Din, led the next session entitled, "Getting to Know our European Kehillot". He emphasized that Europe is a unique continent with many countries, each with its own language and culture. But despite the differences and barriers, there's a tremendous amount in common and we can learn from each other. In order to understand the larger picture, he called upon a representative from each kehillah to report on its membership, programs, challenges and needs. Rabbi Weiner then spoke about our vision for the Masorti Movement in Europe. (See his comments in the next article.)

After lunch, Rabbi Joe Wernik presented a certificate to Mr. Tomasz Majewski, an active member of the Jewish community in Wroclaw, Poland. The certificate was given in appreciation of Tomasz's efforts, dedication and commitment to Masorti Judaism and for his tireless efforts on behalf of the renewal of the Wroclaw Jewish Community. Judy Dvorak Gray presented gifts to Rabbi Gesa Ederberg and Conny Riegler in appreciation for all of their hard work preparing the week of meetings in Berlin.

The next session focused on MERCAZ Olami and the Zionist Federations in Europe and was presented by Dr. David Breakstone, Head of the Department of Zionist Activities of the World Zionist Organization and a member of our movement, and Rabbi Joe Wernik. Dr. Breakstone explained the Masorti Movement's role in the WZO and Jewish Agency for Israel. He spoke about using the structure of the Zionist Federations in Europe for resources and funding of programs, lectures, Hebrew courses, hasbara activities, etc. He emphasized the importance of bringing new people into the Zionist movement and registering to join MERCAZ. Joe spoke about the upcoming World Zionist Congress in June 2006 and the importance of expanding our membership so that we can exert more influence in the WZO and Jewish Agency.

Mr. Tomasz Majewski chaired the session on the "Development of the Masorti Movement in Europe". He pointed out the importance of not only knowing how to dream but to also know how to put the plan into action. The session was dedicated to informing participants of various resources to help us with our activities so that we can develop and expand. Conny Rieger, from the Masorti Germany office, spoke about funding opportunities from the European Union and Masorti Germany's experience getting projects funded in Germany. She is willing to help communities to take advantage of grants offered for seminars, shlichim, teachers and special projects. Udi Givon spoke about the Hemshech Program, the new long-term program organized by Marom Olami, and subsidized by "Masa" of the Jewish Agency, which encourages post-university students to spend time in Israel and develop leadership skills. Dr. David Breakstone gave information about the L.A. Pincus Fund for Jewish Education in the Diaspora and the types of activities and projects it will fund. Joe Wernik spoke about the possibility of a seminar to teach synagogue skills to lay leaders in September.

The last session, entitled "Where are we going?" was chaired by Ms. Gill Caplin, co-chair of the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues, UK. Gill summarized the day's sessions, talking about our dream, vision and plan of how to achieve what we want to accomplish. She emphasized taking the resources available and using them wisely so they work on sustaining our kehillot and the future development of our movement. Communities can't function alone: we need rabbinic support, developing our resources to become self-sufficient, and working with each other to become stronger. Rabbi Gesa Ederberg added the importance of putting people in charge of their Judaism and the power to decide—based on Torah and Jewish sources, Avodah—service and prayer, and Gemilut Hasadim: working together to act and make changes.

The day ended with a ceremony for Yom Yerushalayim, created by MERCAZ Olami and led by UK member Adrian Korsner, and mincha, led by Rabbi Yeshaya Dalsace from Nice.

The European Masorti/ MERCAZ Forum was extremely successful in getting people to know one another better, remembering our shared vision and planning together for our future. We look forward to using the energy and enthusiasm that were created in our discussions to move ahead and continue to grow and develop our movement in Europe. We thank our hosts, Masorti Germany, for their warm hospitality and excellent logistical assistance.

A Vision for Masorti Europe

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner, Director of the European Masorti Beit Din

Delivered at the European Masorti Forum, May 22, 2002 in Berlin



We are turning on the Jewish lights in Europe once again.

In the haftorah that we read yesterday, Jeremiah bought land in Anatot. He bought land to invest in Eretz Yisrael even though there was a siege going on at the time. You do this type of action when you believe in a future. There will be difficult times, but we believe that there's a future. Beyond the darkness, there is light.

Masorti Olami continues to put pegs on the map of European communities. It's not easy going against the norm, but we believe in a future.

I travel to speak about building kehillot to communities in Europe. Some are new and just starting; some are more experienced than others. But the basic question is: How do we make a community happen?

We need two things: (1) a dream; (2) a plan.

What is our dream? What do we want to create? Where do we want to go? We take actions every day but we need the dream or vision to guide us and know where we are going.

It's the dream that unites us. Our communities are diverse and scattered around a large geographical area. Yet, as I go from place to place, I hear the same dream. It starts with a belief in the Jewish future wherever I am—in Poland, France, Czech Republic, Spain, etc. I meet Jews who do not want to disappear as Jews. The forces of assimilation around them are strong, but they love our tradition and they care about our history. They don't want to be the end of a chain. They look at their children and want to make sure that the children will share in their love and inspiration of our tradition.

We're part of the world around us—our competitors also provide Jewish solutions. But the Judaism we want to live is one that is integrated in the western world—a Judaism with values, belief in human rights, democracy, individualization. We don't want to let go of this.

Masorti Judaism seeks to integrate traditional Jewish values and practices with the values of life of a modern world. It is traditional, scholarly, tolerant, democratic and inclusive. That's what we share in common. This is our dream, our vision—to have this type of a community. This vision holds the promise of a future that will hold our children and attract the lost Jews out there. We can't forget this vision. It's easy to be occupied with money, space or politics. We need to remember that there's a dream out there and it matters.

But we can't only have a dream. We need to have a plan. We need guiding principles. Any community that strives to build itself needs to be financially independent. We need to be able to take care of ourselves. There are some resources to help, but the goal is to be to be an independent community.

Since money is limited, it has to be used wisely. We need to think together: What are the things we most need to do to strengthen our movement and bring growth? Money is best used for those purposes. What activities strengthen ourselves as a movement?

The European Beit Din is important. We have to be able to turn to our communities and say that we can cater to all of your Jewish needs and with the whole sphere of Jewish life. We can take care of every community—small and large—with conversion, marriage, divorce, kashrut, Jewish law. This strengthens our communities.

Remember, we're part of a large movement with over a million Masorti Jews in the world. We don't need to hand over our responsibilities to anyone else. We're not second class citizens in the Jewish world.

Every community must have rabbinic contact. When there are questions, someone must help to provide answers. We must have rabbinic leadership to think through developments, educational programs and be available to talk to members, share rabbinic wisdom.

Each Masorti community is different, yet I feel at home in each one of them.