The Rabbinical Assembly of Israel: Establishing, Persevering and Celebrating

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This essay is a short review of the history, challenges, and achievements of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel since its inception in the early 1980s.

Establishing

The intentional establishment of a Masorti rabbinate in Israel began in earnest in the 1980s. Before that time, individual colleagues were engaged with a few congregations (particularly in Jerusalem and Haifa), and a few more colleagues served on the faculties of Israeli universities. As the State of Israel has recently marked seventy-five years of independence, it is possible to count about 175 colleagues as members of the Rabbinical Assembly living in Israel. Many of these colleagues were ordained abroad and have made aliyah—over eighty from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and smaller numbers from other rabbinical seminaries in the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

The Schechter Seminary of Rabbinic Studies was established in 1984, an initiative of then–JTS Chancellor Gerson D. Cohen, along with partners from the Masorti movement who were eager to provide Israel-trained rabbinic leadership to the growing list of Masorti congregations in the country. The first Schechter ordination was held in 1988 at the amphitheater at Hebrew University. Four colleagues were ordained in that first class: Ehud Bandel, Shlomo Fuchs, David Levine, and Shmuel Shaish, *z"l*. The first class would prove prophetic in its makeup: two Israeli-born (Bandel and Fuchs), an *'oleh* from Latin America (Shaish), and one child of the American movement (Levine is the son of Rabbi Professor Lee [Israel] Levine, one of those legacy colleagues born and ordained in the United States who made aliyah and taught at Hebrew University). To date, The Schechter Rabbinical Seminary has ordained 110 colleagues.

The absence of women in this first class (and the next eight) is particularly striking, as the Schechter rabbinical program opened after JTS began to admit women to their rabbinical school (1983) and after the international

Rabbinical Assembly admitted women into its ranks. The contention was that "Israel was not yet ready for female rabbis." The first female Rabbinical Assembly members in Israel were consequently those who were ordained abroad. Of particular note is Israeli-born Rabbi Gilah Dror, who served two Israeli congregations over the course of the Israel chapter of her career (in Gilo, Jerusalem and in Beersheva) and was the first woman to hold the office of President of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel. She ultimately created another precedent as the first woman to hold the office of president of the international Rabbinical Assembly.

In response to the dissonance of women studying in the JTS rabbinical school and included as members of the Rabbinical Assembly, I was asked to create a committee called "The Status of Women in the Masorti Movement." We interviewed Schechter faculty and administration, as well as the leadership of No'ar Masorti (NOAM) the Israeli equivalent of the Conservative youth movement in the United States, United Synagogue Youth (USY). We also surveyed the leadership of the Masorti congregations in the country and mapped out the practice and policies of each community: which had mixed seating, which had women reading Haftarah and/or Torah (with or without receiving the aliyah) and/or leading services, and which congregations would accept female rabbinic candidates to serve their communities. The data gleaned from this survey helped to advance the ordination of women at Schechter. Our final committee report was submitted in early 1990, and Schechter subsequently embarked on its own decision-making process, which included seminar days, internal discussions, and *divrei Torah* by students at weekday minyanim. A number of women were already studying at Schechter in anticipation of the decision to accept women into the rabbinical school; several were in the M.A. program, although one individual was officially registered as a JTS rabbinical student with the intention of transferring to the Israeli program when allowed.

The first female colleague to be ordained at Schechter and welcomed into the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel as an Israel-ordained woman was French-born Rabbi Valerie Stessin, who would, along with JTS-ordained Rabbi Miriam Knight Berkowitz, pioneer the field of chaplaincy and pastoral counseling in Israel. I was the second woman to receive Schechter ordination, and Rabbi Tami Kohlberg was the third. We each went on to serve congregations, in Jerusalem and Raʿanana, respectively.

Members of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel have established or served in *kehillot* that had begun as self-generated *ḥavurot*, were central to the

formation and establishment of the network of TALI schools around the country, teach in high schools and universities, and are licensed tour guides, social workers, consultants, spiritual directors, and entrepreneurs.[1]

It is worth noting the very different dynamics of Conservative Judaism in the United States and Masorti Judaism in Israel. In the United States, JTS in New York served as the central, generative institution that spawned the subsequent branches of what would become the Conservative movement. The Rabbinical Assembly began as the alumni association of JTS, while the Ramah Camps, USY, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the National Federation of Men's Clubs, and the Cantors Assembly were all also generated at JTS and for many years had their offices there.

In Israel, the dynamic has been quite different: the Masorti movement and the Israel region of the Rabbinical Assembly were the first bodies established in Israel (almost entirely by *'olim* from North America), and it was the Masorti movement that generated the Israeli iterations of JTS, USY and Ramah—namely, the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary, NOAM, and the Ramah NOAM summer camp. To date, there are over fifty Masorti congregations around the country as well as a number of minyanim that meet just for the Days of Awe. Of the fifty established communities, fewer than twenty enjoy rabbinic leadership, and about half of those positions are full time. The absence of rabbinic leadership in over half of the Masorti communities in Israel is yet another reflection of the difference in structure between Israel and the communities abroad. Here in Israel, Israelis regard religious services as covered by their taxes; this includes synagogues, rabbinic leadership, burial in public cemeteries, and weddings. As a consequence, the dynamic of community members joining forces to establish a congregation, build a building, hire a rabbi and professional staff is generally not known here. The Masorti movement has established a Congregations Department through which they provide a modest subsidy for rabbinic salaries in order to help provide as many congregations as possible with rabbinic leadership.

Persevering

The experience of serving as a Masorti rabbi in Israel in our current political and social setting is challenging. It is fair to say that every colleague serving in Israel from time to time feels that they are walking around with gifts that

[1] TALI is a Hebrew acronym for "Enhanced Jewish Studies."

many Israelis would consider a blessing if they only knew such things existed—namely, the gift of a pastoral rabbi chosen by one's own community, and the gift of egalitarian halakhic Judaism that works to create healthy, mutually supportive communities created and sustained by their members.

This does not sound like a very innovative idea for many Conservative/Masorti Jews around the world, but the dynamics of Jewish communal life are very different in Israel. Billions of shekels of government funds are invested in building and maintaining Orthodox synagogues, hiring Orthodox (and ultra-Orthodox) rabbis, and maintaining Orthodox government-funded cemeteries and burial societies. Billions of shekels of government funds also support ultra-Orthodox yeshivot and pay monthly stipends to the thousands of full-time fully mature students so that there will be food on the table for their wives and children. These funds come from the taxes paid by Israelis of every background: Muslim, Christian, and Druze, as well as secular, Reform, and Masorti Jews. The Rabbinical Assembly of Israel receives no public funding at all. Our challenge is to amplify our voice with the means at our disposal, which is largely made up of the perseverance, gifts, and determination of our colleagues.

What happens when a regular Israeli experiences a Masorti rabbi in action? When I served a congregation just outside of Jerusalem, I was sitting with a family as they planned their son's bar mitzvah. We were, as one does, making a list of who would receive each aliyah. The father agreed to the seventh aliyah so that he could stand with his son for the *maftir 'aliyah*. I said to the boy's mother: "you know, you can have the aliyah together, we are egalitarian!" At which point she replied: "No, I just can't. You don't understand… I grew up on a Hashomer Hatsa'ir kibbutz [Hashomer Hatsa'ir is not just a secular Zionist movement but an antireligious secular Zionist movement!]. My brothers are coming from the kibbutz…it's amazing that they are coming at all. But I can't imagine what they would say if I were to say a *berakhah* over the Torah scroll!" So she didn't. We had the bar mitzvah, and the boy was great. At the kiddush, the three (over six-foot tall) brothers came up to me and said, "This is the Judaism we need in Israel!"

A year or so later, I was working with a family to plan their daughter's bat mitzvah in a congregation in the Galilee. I offered the mom an aliyah, and she replied: "I couldn't possibly! My Orthodox grandmother is coming and it's amazing that she's coming at all! But I have no idea how she would feel if she saw me taking an aliyah." So she didn't… The bat mitzvah girl was great, and, at the kiddush, the Orthodox *savta* came up to me and said,

with tears in her eyes: "all my life I have sat behind the *meḥitsah*…and this is the first time in my life I have felt a part of the tefillah."

Every one of my colleagues here in Israel has stories like this to share.

With miniscule resources compared to our orthodox and ultra-Orthodox counterparts, the members of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel persevere, create, reach out, and inspire regular Israelis all over the country with their accomplishments. Imagine what we could do were we to receive a quarter of what the government spends on orthodox and ultra-Orthodox rabbis and institutions.

Celebrating

What do we celebrate?

We celebrate the vibrant communities our colleagues serve today from the Negev to the north of Israel.

We celebrate the moments when our rabbis and our communities are acknowledged on a national scale. Rabbi Chaya Rowen Becker, the incoming dean of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary, has spoken at Beit Hanasi, at the official president's eesidence, the first female rabbi to do so. Our colleague Rabbi Gustavo Greenzweig has welcomed President Isaac and Michal Herzog to the sukkah of his congregation, the Masorti Kehillah Ra'anana Amitai!

We celebrate our colleagues' capacity to reach out, to influence, to draw near with the meager resources at their disposal.

And we aspire to celebrate so much more! The colleagues of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel around the country are eager to share the gifts of Masorti halakhah and Torah, as well as pastoral, community-focused rabbis.

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