

TORAH FUND REVEALED

by Marilyn Cohen – INR Torah Fund VP



*Front: Debbi Goldich & Barbara Ezring
Back: Marilyn Cohen & Carol Simon*

It was truly a revelation to me to see how far-reaching the impact of Torah Fund has been on our Conservative Masorti Movement. Last week, I was privileged to be an Alternate Delegate to the 37th World Zionist Organization (WZO) Congress in Jerusalem. (The first Zionist Congress was convened by Theodore Herzl in 1897). I was representing MERCAZ-CANADA & joined the other 141 MERCAZ OLAMI and MASORTI OLAMI representatives from 17 countries around the World. Our delegation also included representatives from Federation of Jewish Mens Clubs (FJMC) and of course Women's League for Conservative Judaism. You can imagine how excited I was to have Debbi Goldich, International Torah Fund Chair as my roommate and right down the hall, Carol Simon, our International President of WLCJ. Along with many other Women's League women in leadership positions who were also delegates or alternates, we made quite a statement when seen wearing our Torah Fund pins. But more important, so many of the people we met who were leaders in their communities, were graduates or teachers of one of our seminaries – Jewish Theological Seminary

(JTS New York), Ziegler School (Los Angeles), Schechter Institute (Jerusalem) or Seminario Rabinico (Buenos Aires). It really made me think how far-reaching an education at one of our seminaries is and that were it not for our Conservative/Masorti institutions of higher learning, there simply would not be a Conservative/Masorti presence in North America, Israel or around the world.

I'd like to tell you a little about our trip:

We started with a wonderful Shabbaton at the Fuchsberg Center where we davened next door, in the Masorti/Conservative synagogue, Moreshet Yisrael. After our Shabbat afternoon shluf, I joined the group doing a walking tour of Yemin Moshe (near the Windmill) with Dr. David Breakstone, Vice Chairman, World Zionist Organization and a valued Masorti leader, who lead us through this enthralling neighbourhood, overlooking the walls of the Old City while reading the poetry of Yehuda Amichai.

We were treated to a tour of a TALM school where we saw how the Schechter Institute has created an environment of Jewish learning within the so-called secular Israeli school system. Those schools who sign on to be a TALM school, receive special text books, trained teachers and administrators and enhanced educational technologies, all with the aim of INTEGRATING core Jewish values, in every subject taught in the school. Dr. David Golinkin, President & Professor of Jewish Law at Schechter, proudly lead us throughout the school and we were able to converse and interact with the students in their classrooms.

Among the many speakers we heard were Benjamin Netanyahu (Bibi) – Prime Minister of Israel, Nir Barkat - Mayor of Jerusalem, Avraham Duvdevani - Chair of the WZO, Natan Sharansky - Chair of the Jewish Agency and Dr. Arnold Eisen - Chancellor of JTS.

We were taken to Netiv Asara – a small community on the border with Gaza, Yad Mordechai, one of the first kibbutzim in the Negev and had a scrumptious buffet dinner while being serenaded by a teen band of the Bikurim Youth Village for the Performing Arts.

The Congress was an experience in itself. It is the body representing the Zionist organizations all



WZO Congress MERCAZ Shacharit.

over the world as well as representatives from each party in the Knesset, so you can imagine the disagreements that can arise from those on the far right or far left. Our job was to first discuss in detail and then vote on resolutions which would affect the Jews around the world as well as in Israel. Our MERCAZ OLAMI's main focus was to try to incorporate in these resolutions more transparency, equality, democracy and inclusivity. For example, one resolution was about our Masorti Kotel at Robinson's Arch. We davened there on Monday morning. What an amazingly spiritual experience that was. But anyone with a handicap could not have attended since there are so many steps to descend before reaching the platform. The resolution we recommended was to the Israeli government to "commit to creating a third section in the Western Wall site that will be equal in size, funding and visibility and that will offer a dignified space of worship for the Conservative and Reform streams and to Women of the Wall" . In other words, raise the current platform to street level, allow 24 hour access and equal supplies & funds that the traditional Kotel receives. It passed!

Other resolutions focused on Aliyah, Antisemitism, BDS, GLBT rights, Intensification of Zionist Advocacy, Israel's relationship to USA, Development of Young Zionist Leaders, Funding issues of WZO, Increased Transparency, etc etc. There were 91 Resolutions but we only voted on about two thirds of them because of the disagreements and the fact that they instituted a new digitized voting system that some found difficult to operate.

This was truly an amazing experience for me and I'm sure, for the rest of our MERCAZ/MASORTI delegation. We made new friends, heard incredible speakers, experienced up close and personal how our modern-day Chalutzim live near the border, and joined close to 800 delegates from around the World who voted on important issues which affect us all.

It was a privilege to be able to attend the World Zionist Congress and to help spread the values and beliefs of our MERCAZ/MASORTI way of life to the rest of the Jewish world.

Shabbat Shalom
Marilyn