

# Jerusalem Letter

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### THE MOVEMENT OF M'SORATI JUDAISM IN ISRAEL

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On September 17, 1979, the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem, Yaakov Bezalel Zolti and Shalom Mashash, issued a Halachic ruling forbidding participation in the "prayers" (quotation marks in the original) conducted by Conservative congregations. Moreover, they declared that by attending a Conservative "prayer" house, "one cannot fulfill one's obligation to hear the blowing of the shofar."

This pronouncement, published immediately before the High Holy Days, was included in a prominent advertisement that appeared in the Israeli daily press. What prompted these noted representatives of the Israeli Orthodox establishment to issue a public condemnation of such magnitude? The answer would seem to be that rabbinical anger was provoked by advertisements sponsored by the Conservative Movement informing the public of the twenty-nine locations at which its holiday services would be conducted, thereby reflecting the growth of the Movement in this country.

#### The New Thrust of the Conservative Movement

Until recently, the local institutions of the Conservative Movement followed the patterns of the American organization. This past year, however, there has been an attempt to embark on a new course and establish a separate and distinctive Israeli identity. The Israeli branch adopted the name, "M'sorati\*Movement," its financial base has been considerably strengthened and its country-wide institutions, which previously existed in name only, have been expanded. The new organization is also intent upon devoting more time, effort and resources to educational enterprises with a supra-local orientation.

The major changes do not reflect a difference in goals but, rather, in emphases with respect to matters of organization and policy. The M'sorati Movement remains committed to the implementa-

\* Literally, "traditional."

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tion of a Conservative approach to Judaism, while adopting a strategy more in tune with local circumstances, one that seems more conducive to the attainment of the Movement's goals.

### Pattern of Development

It is about twenty-five years since the Conservative Movement first appeared in Israel. The Movement began sending youth missions to the country and Neve Shechter was established as an Israeli campus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, principally for rabbinical students who chose to spend one year of their course studying in Israel.

For all intents and purposes, the first congregations were products of the post-Six Day War period. Formed simultaneously in different locations, at the initiative of local groups, they developed spontaneously and not in accordance with an imposed blueprint. The original founders of most of these initial congregations, familiar with Conservative patterns abroad, tended to maintain such practices in Israel. Later, various groups joined to form a loose-knit, fluid country-wide organization.

Today, Conservative congregations can be found in most medium and large urban concentrations in Israel. Based primarily on the American model, they emphasize family activity, working together, involving all members, community orientation and development of educational enterprises. Most do not have a full-time rabbi.

### The Case of One Congregation

Two years ago I conducted a demographic and attitudinal study of one of the larger and longer-established Conservative congregations.\* While subject to the limitations of a case study, it appears to offer scope for broader generalization since the congregation in question is considered to be one of the most, if not the most successful in attracting Israelis. As such, others look to it as a model. Basic personal data and information on levels of participation in congregational activities (such as attendance at services, participation in cultural and social activities and organizational involvement) was gathered from all members. Then a questionnaire was administered to a sample of active and inactive members, focusing on a number of issues including aspects of religious commitment, the nature of the loyalty to a separate religious movement and how membership, in each member's view, influences patterns of thought and behavior. "Actives" were defined as those attending services at least once a month, while those with a lower rate were

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\* The full study is available in Hebrew through the Center for Jewish Community Studies.

categorized as "inactive." What follows is a summary of the findings of the case study.

The findings revealed that the membership was socially quite homogeneous. In educational attainments, the group was far above average. The occupational distribution also pointed to a high concentration in prestigious and better-remunerated professions. With regard to knowledge of Judaica, less than half the sample population had been involved in any formal Jewish studies. More than half of those with some Jewish education had acquired it in their childhood and for short periods of time; very few had continued these studies out of choice; and even fewer had considered this field as one with occupational or professional possibilities.

There was also high uniformity in the findings on the age and family composition of most of the members, who were predominantly middle-aged with grown children. More than half of the surveyed households consisted only of husband and wife; less than a quarter had children of primary school age who could be drawn to family activities under the auspices of the congregation.

In contrast to the uniformity in the demographic data, there was some diversity regarding the members' geographical background. Although the representation of immigrants from Anglo-Saxon countries in the active group far exceeded their proportion in the Israeli population, they nevertheless comprised no more than forty percent of the members attending services at least once a month. Those of Eastern European origin constituted about twenty percent of the actives, while immigrants from Western Europe, South America, North Africa and Arab countries, and native Israelis each constituted around 10%. Overall, these figures reinforce the popular conception that non-Orthodox congregations in Israel largely consist of immigrants, but the fact that almost two-thirds of those regularly attending services are not English-speaking contravenes the notion that these communities cater only to recent American olim.

In sum, the demographic data reveal that the congregation's appeal is limited to a well-defined sector of Israeli society, selective and highly uniform in most of its attributes. Informants in the M'sorati Movement indicate that the membership composition of most other congregations corresponds with the study findings.

#### Patterns of Observance

The members were asked the extent of their observance of ten traditional Jewish practices relating primarily to Shabbat, kashrut and holidays and strongly associated with the ideology of Conservative Judaism. Not included were practices normally associated with strict Orthodox observance only, or those such as Chanukah candles and Passover seder, which in Israel have a special symbolic character not necessarily perceived as religious.

Average observance was five out of ten, which in view of the

nature of the specified practices, seems relatively low. No significant differences were found between the active and non-active members. Kashrut was maintained in fewer than half of the homes, while Shabbat candles were lit in three-quarters of them. The distribution of observance patterns showed no indication that they had been affected by length or intensity of membership in the congregation.

Members were also asked to rank by importance four elements of religious commitment which, in addition to observance, included moral behavior, belief in God and personal religious experience. Three-quarters felt that moral behavior was the most important, while almost half felt that observance was the least important. In sum, the members' religious commitment seems to be basically universalistic in orientation, minimizing the sacramental aspects of Judaism in favor of the cultural value of religious ties.

The respondents' motivations for joining the congregation reflect their attitudes. They were attracted by the decorum and aesthetic style of the worship; the tolerant, liberal or modern attitude of the congregation; the search for Jewish significance in their own lives or for a forum in which to celebrate Jewish ritual; the need for spiritual comfort; and an attempt to satisfy their associative needs.

No basic differences were found in the responses of active and less active members, although the latter placed greater emphasis on the first and fifth factors. Considerations relating to personal experience appeared to be the least important, while highest rank was accorded to the need for Jewish expression, which was given first place by approximately a quarter of the sample.

Only a negligible number stated that they were attracted to the congregation because they rejected Orthodoxy. At the same time, following the common Israeli pattern, a decisive majority of both actives and inactives chose the Orthodox as a reference group in religious matters and traditional criteria of observance as the basis for measuring religiosity.

These expressions of acceptance of Orthodox categories coupled with behavior reflecting dissociation from Orthodox prescriptions suggests that Conservative Judaism does not serve this group as a source for defining "real Judaism." Therefore, although members are searching for Jewish significance in their lives and for a way to express their identification with the Jewish people, these yearnings have found no practical expression beyond the development, on the part of the more active members, of a social commitment to the Conservative movement.

#### Prospects for the Future

A major goal of the M'sorati Movement is the broadening of its base, to draw its membership from a more heterogeneous population.

Given the highly homogeneous social and demographic characteristics of the existing congregations, this would entail a major restructuring, and the resultant changes might alienate the present members who, when questioned about their motivations for joining, gave high priority to aspects of form considered typically middle-class. On the other hand, even previous efforts to expand within that specific class met with little success. It seems that only a small percentage of middle-class Israelis who are currently religiously uncommitted or unaffiliated are open to possible affiliation with Conservative congregations. Thus, the Movement's growth will be limited if its attempts to "reach out" are directed solely to its presently perceived constituency.

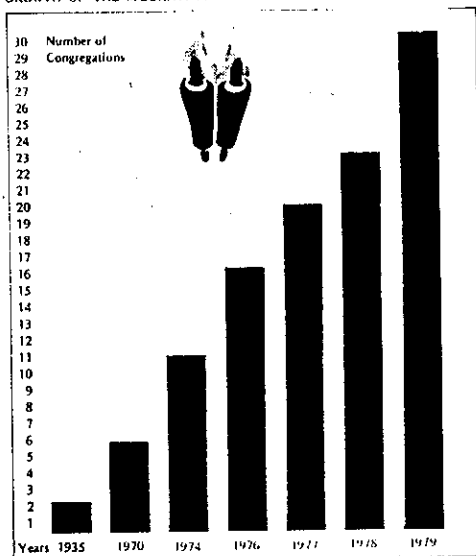
### Education as a Key

It may be that the M'sorati Movement can develop a wider appeal for its educational approach, eventually resulting in both quantitative and qualitative changes in its congregations, and, perhaps, in some form of integration into the Israeli school system. The establishment of a state-sponsored M'sorati school in Jerusalem several years ago is a step in that direction.

The movement recently emerged from a year of planning which culminated in a series of decisions in the organizational and educational fields. As a result of that effort, there are plans at Neve Shechter to conduct seminars for high school students, leadership seminars, adult and student study groups, and extended summer camps. The possibility of a new traditional high school is also being considered along with various forms of assistance to educational institutions interested in furthering Jewish content in their programs. Other plans involve publications and a "think tank" of experts on various issues to clarify problems involving ideological and policy issues, parameters of Halachic legitimacy, and so on. As a result of this ambitious effort in the educational sphere, the M'sorati Movement may very well be able to make important contributions to the synthesis of Jewish tradition in Israel, just as the Conservative Movement has been able to do in America and elsewhere in the world.

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GROWTH OF THE MSORATI MOVEMENT



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