



RABBINIC GUIDE TO THE VOTE MERCAZ 2020 CAMPAIGN FOR THE WORLD ZIONIST CONGRESS

**VOTE
MERCAZ** 

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Every five years, Jews from around the world are called upon to cast a ballot in the World Zionist Congress election. American Jews rarely have the chance to directly effect change in Israel, and the World Zionist Congress provides that opening. We have collected these resources and commentary as a way to engage the core concepts at play in this election – pluralism, religious freedom, democratic principles - into a d’var torah, a discussion or learning opportunity. We hope that beginning with the High Holidays, you will find a way to begin to introduce the election to your Congregation and to other audiences that you touch and inspire them to take action and Vote for MERCAZ – the official slate of the Conservative Movement.

VOTE FOR MERCAZ — AN OVERVIEW

As congregational rabbis, we take a risk when we critique Israel. After all, with all of the tzuris that Israel has, why would we bother bringing up pluralism, the Kotel, or the country's struggle over religious equality?

The problem is that when we don't stand up for what we believe, others are eager to deny us our rights, or to declare that Conservative/Masorti Judaism has no place to exist in the Jewish state.

The election cycle for the World Zionist Congress runs from January 21 through March 11, 2020. It's the moment when we in the Diaspora get to have our say about critical policy decisions and how Israel will spend money. What we hope and work for is that Israel will choose to support the Judaism we believe in. Those of us in the Diaspora have a small role to play, but we have the potential for a huge impact on the lives of our Masorti colleagues, who are doing pioneering work in Israel and worldwide.

And all we have to do is to get Conservative/Masorti Jews to vote for MERCAZ in the Zionist elections.

To that end, we are asking you, a rabbi with the power of the pulpit, to consider speaking to your own congregation about the kind of Israel we would like to see – one where all Jews are free to worship as they please, where a woman's voice is not silenced, and where all people may read from the Torah or lead a service without fear of intimidation or reprisal.

We hope you'll join us in sending a strong message to the Jewish state. We want to let Israel know that we support a nation in which the decision about where and how a Jew davens isn't a political football to be kicked around in the Knesset, it's a fundamental right. While we are not electing Knesset members, we are electing representatives to the World Zionist Congress who can send the message that we seek equal stature for Masorti synagogues, including financial support for Masorti synagogues and programs on par with the support other synagogues in Israel receive. We are working for a time when Masorti Judaism will be seen as an equally respected branch of Judaism that speaks to all Jews who have a modern view of the world.

Below are some Sermon Starters, with texts and interpretations on a range of topics relating to the upcoming election. These sources portray our vision of Israel as one rooted in diverse understandings of our 2,000-year-old rabbinic tradition. We hope you will consider using one or more of these sources from the pulpit to begin a conversation about a religiously pluralistic Israel – one that includes Masorti Judaism – and especially about your congregants' votes in this all-important election cycle.

MERCAZ, the official slate of the Conservative Movement needs our votes in this year's election. Every rabbi and every congregant needs to speak out and convince others to take action on behalf of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. Please use these texts and commentary to inspire others to make their voice heard and their vote count.

SERMON STARTERS

FROM THE RABBINIC PERIOD

Rabbi Aba said in the name of Samuel: The school of Shammai and the school of Hillel were in dispute for three years, these saying the halacha is according to our opinion, and these saying the halacha is according to our opinion. A heavenly voice came out and said these and these are the words of the living God, and the halacha is according to the school of Hillel. Since both are the word of the living God, why did the school of Hillel merit that the halacha be according to their opinion? Because they were kindly and modest, and they taught both their opinion and the opinions of the house of Shammai and not only that, but they mentioned the opinions of the house of Shammai before their own opinions.

– Eruvin 13b

Not only is the idea of pluralism part of the nature of our faith but those who defend the faith through acts of anger, spite, and coercion do not understand what Judaism is really all about.

Truth does not depend on defending halachic arguments or shutting down other opinions. It rests on being kind, modest and humble. A range of opinions has long been the norm within Judaism. As Conservative Jews, we are simply looking for our own place at the Jewish table in Israel.

Just before the Jewish people left Egypt, they were instructed to take a “bunch of hyssop,” dip it in blood and sprinkle it on their doorposts. The bunch represents the unity of the Jewish people. This unity was a precondition for their redemption from Egypt.

– Shemot Rabbah 17:3

Israel can move forward as a nation and as a people only when we work together rather than get angry at each other.

This does not mean we all have to agree all the time. But we need to understand each other and make space for each other. Pluralism in Israel – what Mercaz stands for – doesn’t mean an end to fundamentalism. It just means that it is one choice for Israelis, who should be free to choose how to practice their faith.

SERMON STARTERS

FROM THE RABBINIC PERIOD, CONT.

Be a disciple of Aharon: Love peace and pursue peace, love people and draw them near to the Torah.

– Hillel, Pirkei Avot 1:12

How can there be peace when some seek to deny a place in Israel's future to those who favor egalitarianism and a non-fundamentalist approach to Torah and modern commentary?

We seek to draw all Jews closer to Torah by accepting them wherever they are in their faith.

[Ben Zoma] used to say, "Treat no one lightly and think nothing is useless, for everyone has one's moment and everything has its place."

– Pirkei Avot 4:3

Stand up for what you believe in.

The time will come when others will understand what egalitarian Judaism is about. Speak out about it until that time will come. This was a lesson learned by King David, according to the Midrash; the truth does not depend on what others may think of it today.

Said Rabbi Tanhum: "Had the Torah been given in cut and dried form; the Teachers of the law would have lost prestige entirely if they erred. But since final rulings were not given, teachers who follow reason are not regarded as guilty of errors, since they can find companions to share their opinions. The decision by the majority contrary to the opinion of some teachers does not stamp the latter as guilty of error."

– Pesikta Rabbati 21, 6

There is no single way to read and interpret Torah.

All Jews must be able to express their Judaism without coercion. In some parts of the world, non-fundamentalist Judaism may be a minority; in other places, it may be the majority. We aren't guilty of error just because we may hold different opinions.

SERMON STARTERS

CLASSICAL COMMENTARY

Intelligent people ought to examine all different opinions.

– Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed, 1190, 3, 13

To examine all opinions means having our eyes open to all possibilities.

Anyone can say something is forbidden. It takes a sage to understand how to make things possible.

This is to be compared to two wise men who appear before a king – one covering his head and the other removing his hat. For despite the fact that they differ in their actions as to how to show honor to the king, they agree that honoring the king is the correct thing.... Our sages spoke about this matter (Kiddushin 30b) that “even father and son or teacher and student who study Torah together become enemies of each other but at the end they become friends....” This is because in the beginning, when they disagree, they will seem like the people we have mentioned, for it seems that he wishes to honor the king and the other does not. However, after they will discuss the matter and everyone will understand the reason of the other, each will understand that the other is striving for the very things that he is....

– Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, Akedat Yitzchak

**We want the same thing – which the Chief Rabbinate of Israel also wants –
to bring people closer to God.**

We disagree on points of law, but not on the end result. All Jews want to honor God – we just have different ways of showing our honor. We seek only to be understood and welcome for what we can bring to Israeli society.

SERMON STARTERS

HASSIDIC COMMENTARY

Three characters can be found in a man about to perform a Mitzvah: if he says, "I shall do it soon," his character is poor. If he says, "I am ready to do it now," his character is average. If he says, "I am doing it," his character is praiseworthy.

– Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

The time to take action is now.

This isn't a matter just of saying what you believe but also of taking action to do what's necessary to bring pluralism to Israel and break the lock held by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. If we believe that Israel needs pluralism, it is incumbent on us to vote and secure our rights now.

Israel is the nerve center of the people Israel. Each person has a share in it as long as that person honors God. One who desecrates God's name loses his connection to Israel.

– Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

We all have our own way of bringing honor to God and our faith.

We need to see the connections of all Jews to Israel in the way that they practice Judaism.

There is not just one way to God. We find God when Jews are respected for their beliefs and treated civilly by other Jews. This can be the highest service to God. We may disagree with other Jews, but we all still stand up for our way of expressing our faith. There is more than one way to serve God, and our Sages knew this centuries ago.

SERMON STARTERS

MODERN THOUGHT

The trouble is that some see all of Judaism reflected in its Law; in their concern for the letter of the Law they give up the Jewish spark. They make the fence more important than the tradition it is meant to protect. Such extremism and severity do us great harm; even the Creator of the world, finding that a world could not exist by justice alone combined the quality of justice with the quality of mercy.

Flexibility, not fanaticism, is needed.

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,
“We Cannot Force People To Believe”

Judaism is not just about black hats, beards and long frock coats. It is not about keeping sexes separated and not being able to hear each other’s voices. Judaism is not about traveling only one road. We are demanding that our faith be flexible, not rigid. In this flexibility, we can find a place for everyone in Judaism. Only then can we be fully free to practice our faith.

It is an inherent weakness of religion not to take offense at the segregation of God, to forget that the true sanctuary has no walls. Religion has often suffered from the tendency to become an end in itself, to seclude the holy, to become parochial, self-indulgent, self-seeking; as if the task were not to ennoble human nature but to enhance the power and beauty of its institutions or to enlarge the body of doctrines. It has often done more to canonize prejudices than to wrestle for truth; to petrify the sacred than to sanctify the secular. Yet the task of religion is to be a challenge to the stabilization of values. Religion is not for religion’s sake but for God’s sake Who is “gracious and merciful ... good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made” (Psalm 145:8.)

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Religion in a Free Society”

The crux of the matter is that Masorti/Conservative Judaism sets Jewish thinking free from those who wish to bind it to the past or to misunderstands its truth in the present. Judaism calls on us to be fully human, to bring holiness into this world. We can follow a path created by our ancestors, but we can also create our own path in life, as long as we keep Judaism’s commitment to justice, mercy and care for our fellow human beings.

SERMON STARTERS

MODERN THOUGHT, CONT.

Halakha literally means “to walk” or “to go” but within Jewish practice it refers to biblical, Talmudic and rabbinic law as well as customs and traditions. There are certain halakhot, such as the prohibition against worshiping idols which are fixed and observed by all Jewish denominations. Other halakhot, such as whether or not women can wear tallitot, vary in different Jewish communities because of the number of halakhic authorities who have disagreed with each other across generations and have formed their own sets of practices and legal rulings. It is this diversity of opinion in Jewish legal interpretation and practice that has brought internal conflict to the Jewish people; it is also this diversity that brings depth, complexity and beauty. The Torah (Exodus 35:25) teaches that the wise and skilled women of the desert generation wove a cover for the ark, creating a cloth of many hues that blended into a harmonious whole. We, at Women of the Wall, view our services as a similar offering to God, utilizing all our talents, all our differing theological views, to create a united service.

– Natalie Bergner, Women of the Wall.org.il

For some people, diversity means that the way forward is not clear.

For others, it means that we are free to choose our own path. Some need direction; others need the freedom to find their own way. Our direction also depends on where we have come from. The diversity we seek enables us to learn and grow from the different experiences that define gender as well as other groups. We believe everyone has the right to serve God in ways that are consistent with their needs and backgrounds. Judaism is more than one path.

Reality may be read through an infinity of lenses. Each refraction carries its own unique bias. Children speak of true or false; adults know better. This is not to say that we have given up on truth, only that we now understand how elusive it is. Nor is it to suggest that truth is relative. Indeed, we now suspect there is an absolute truth and that it is mysteriously connected to what some people call “God.” God is not truth but standing in God’s presence may be. How matters appear to God, that is true. We choose our truth by the scope of our vision.

– Rabbi Lawrence Kushner,
The Book of Words

We are fighting for a wider vision of Judaism than exists in a fundamental reading of Torah and Jewish law.

The richness of our faith depends on opening our texts and our minds to new ways of seeing who we are and what we are capable of becoming. God wants us to broaden our vision to include new ideas and new ways of understanding God.

SERMON STARTERS

MODERN ISRAEL

It would be immoral if we would exclude anyone, whatever his origin, his descent, or his religious background, from participating in our achievements ... There is only one way to do it, the highest tolerance.

– Theodor Herzl, Altneuland

We should not forget that Zionism started out as a secular movement, with religious groups joining later. Only Conservative Judaism embraced Zionism from the beginning. If the notion of a Jewish state is to work, it must include all Jews. Israel must not write off the Jews who don't have political parties, who don't believe that religion should be mixed with politics, who think that all Jews can help Israel grow as a nation and as a Jewish state. Masorti Judaism is not just a diaspora phenomenon. It is something essential to the core of both Israel and our faith.

Israelis who long ago stopped caring about Judaism have found God again through their connection to our movement in Israel. We could reach more Jews and secular Israelis if we had the same resources the fundamentalist movement in Israel has. A faith that forces people to think only one way will not long survive. We must stand up for what we know is the future of Judaism. Pluralism means that Jews in different places may have different customs and rituals but we all believe in the one God, who cares enough about people to create us, to give us a Torah, and to turn us loose to create a society based on the principles of the primacy of life, the importance of justice, the essential elements of compassion and mercy and a humility that puts God at the center, not ourselves nor any human being.

The State of Israel will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of shrines and holy places of all religions....

– Israel's Declaration of Independence

Israel is about civility, tolerance and respect. This is the fundamental value of the State of Israel.

This was the intent of the founders of the Jewish state. Civility, tolerance and respect are not dependent on political expedience, they're at the foundation of the state and beyond political debate. May we soon bring about the day when this will be applied to the religious world and Men and Women will be able to worship equally in the Jewish state.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This is the story we need to tell those who belong to our movement, and we ask you to inspire them with your words. Say to them, if this is what you believe in, join me in voting Mercaz.



MERCAZ2020.ORG

Here are other steps you can take:

- **Pledge to Vote.** Go to Mercaz2020.org – we'll remind you when it's time to vote.
- **Organize.** Get involved by volunteering to organize in your synagogue.
- **Reach out.** Reach out to friends and family and help them sign up to vote.
- **Spread the word.** Host a salon-type event in your home and invite other congregants, friends, and family for an informal discussion about diversity and pluralism in Israel.
- **Vote.** Cast your ballot for the MERCAZ between January 21 and March 11, 2020.

For more information to get an Organizing Toolkit go to Mercaz2020.org, contact the office at [212.533.2061](tel:212.533.2061), or send us an email at votemercaz@mercazusa.org.