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And G'D Said: "Let There Be LIGHT"

by Rabbi Marcelo Bater

When G-d created the world thousands of years ago the first thing He did on the first day of Creation was to separate day from night by means of *light*.

Little by little the stage was set for the future inhabitants of this world. However, there was one thing that perhaps our ancestors did not realize: the difference between day and night can be as subtle as a tiny ray of light.

Each year in December we are surrounded by "lights". It does not matter what our religion is, be it by the lights of Christmas trees or by the flames of the candles that burn during the eight nights of Hanukkah.

However, this December, the month of light is submerged in a starless night, in dark fog, to paraphrase the biblical text.

Once again one enemy of light wants to erase our memory. Iran, headed by its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is the venue of a conference whose main objective is to restate revisionist theories denying the Nazi genocide and the subsequent proclamation of a wish for the disappearance of Israel.

Nevertheless, if there is something that our Jewish people know how to do well is to find that small flame that will make the light reappear.

History is our most reliable witness: the *Shoah* (Holocaust), the great oppressions suffered at the hands of powerful empires, and many exiles are examples of the experiences we have had to endure as a people. We know and are aware of this reality. Therefore, we have a great challenge: to be "creators" of light, imitating G-d in the creation of our world.

And here, in the month of light, I would like to remind you of the 16th century mystic theory that taught us that the world problems were too big for one person to solve (read here "the Messiah"). Thus, the mystics taught each one of us had to be a "mini-Messiah." Doing something, no matter how small the action, would help repair and redeem the world.

If we open our eyes and our hearts to the text of the Creation in *Bereshit* (Genesis) we will realize that each one of us is created in G-d's image and is special in the eyes of the Creator. Now G-d is depending on us to restore the light and separate the darkness.

Hanukkah or the Feast of Lights, (*Chag Haurim*) as it is known in our tradition, is a clear example of what we must do at this time in which we seem to be wrapped in darkness. We must raise our voices in the face of the injustice and let the world hear us. Let us fight for our identity, for our memory, and for our future, and condemn the one who is guilty.

"...You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the corrupt into the hands of the pure in heart..., You delivered the arrogant into the hands of those who were faithful to your Torah..." (Amidah).

We are a people who are small in number, yet we are enough to rekindle that small inner fire and make the flame burn to scatter the wicked, the numerous, and the arrogant who long for a world that resembles a starless dark night.

May you have a December and a 2007 filled with blessings and light.

Chag Urim Sameach!!

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)

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NES GADOL HAIAH PO¹

We had been working hard at organizing a beautiful Hanukkah party. Announcements had been placed in our local newspapers, and our Rabbi had received many calls from visitors who wanted to join us in the celebration.

At the appointed time our social hall was packed with local and overseas members, visitors, and their children.

We had tried to take care of every detail: chocolate coins were on the table, and a number of *chanukkiot* made by our Hebrew School children were displayed proudly at each table; the tantalizing smell of *sufganyot*² followed us everywhere.

As soon as the sun set we were ready to light the first candle. Alas!

Suddenly there was a massive power failure which affected our whole island, and we were submerged in darkness.

The first reaction was stunned silence, but then, as if by tacit agreement, each parent decided not to deprive his children of the joy of Hanukkah, and lit the first candle to challenge the mantle of black shadows. Those who knew the blessings by heart led the others as reading was impossible.

One of our guests, a cantor, gave an emotional rendition of Maoz Tsur and, under the stars, the little ones played with their new *svivonim*³.

Not one of our guests thought of leaving, and the spirit of friendship and sharing prevailed in more than one way.

Right before us, I thought, is the real miracle; people from different corners of the world coming together to celebrate the Feast of Lights in a dark temple, sharing thousands of years of history and bringing the magic light from their hearts to illuminate the holiday and their lives.

The electric power was restored eventually and we could see each other's faces. At that moment we discovered that many had tears in their eyes.

I will always cherish that Chanukah celebration. It dispelled the shadows that weighed down my heart with a most powerful light, a light that has been burning for thousands of years, guiding us home, to our people.

Martha E. Lichtenstein

December 2006

¹ "Nes Gadol Haia Sham", there was a great miracle there. Nes Gadol Haia Po: There was a great miracle here, referring to Aruba; in Israel they also use "Po", for it was "here" where it happened .

² Hanukkah donuts

³ Hanukkah tops with the initials Nun, Gimel, Hey,Shin for "a big miracle took place there".



Holocaust Denial

By Edgar M. Bronfman (Presidente del Congreso Judío Mundial).

Nueva York (CJL-OJI) – The upcoming Holocaust Conference in Teheran is another manifestation of the Iranian government's Holocaust-denial and anti-Semitism. Combined with President Ahmadinejad's past statements referring to the Holocaust as a 'myth', and just weeks alter a recent Holocaust cartoon contest, this government-sponsored event demeans the memory of 6 million murdered Jews by seeking to "clarify" the "hidden angles" of a global tragedy. Such vitriol and denial is by now a well-practiced art in Tehran in its attempts to de-legitimize Israel and deflect attention from its own actions. It is a cheap and insensitive ploy and should be condemned by all.

(Source: "Iran Update" WJC).

Ahmadinejad convenes a "Conference on the Holocaust."

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who repeatedly has called the Holocaust a "myth," announced a conference in Teheran next week to examine the truth of the Shoah perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II.

"The president simply asked if an event named 'Holocaust' really existed," reported the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), quoting the words of the vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manouchehr Mohammadi. Mohammadi added that "no rational answer has been given to the questions raised by Ahmadinejad," who also has asked that Israel "cease to exist." This new meeting is part of Ahmadinejad's public campaign against the Jewish state.

Vice-minister Mohammadi rejected all suggestions that such a conference would encourage anti-Semitism. He replied that "the discrimination of Jews is a phenomenon intrinsic to the Western world."

As proof that in Iran there is no anti – Semitism, he said that in Iran is a community of 25,000 Jews. In his press conference Mohammadi stated that the planned conference was an opportunity "for the experts to express freely their opinions on the subject."

On several occasions in the past Teheran had announced its intent to host the conference. One of these announcements was issued when the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan visited Iran last September. During that visit, Annan denounced an exhibit by Iran of cartoons that ridiculed the Holocaust as an incitement to hatred. The Iranians organized that exhibit after a wave of anger and violence was unleashed in the Islamic world as a result of the publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad.

*(Source: "Global News", World Jewish Congress) December 6, 2006
(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)*



UJCL YOUTH ENCOUNTER

On January 25, 2007, we will have the honor of opening a new Youth Encounter within the framework of the yearly UJCL Conference at our B'nei Israel community in San Jose, Costa Rica.

For several months we have been working intensely with a big and enthusiastic group of youths from the congregation to have everything ready on time. We are thinking of you, who are going to travel for so long and with so many expectations. It seems unbelievable that within such a short time we will meet.

In scarcely a month you will be settling in at the hotel in order to start enjoying an intense and enriching weekend. We will have days of talks, outings and, parties during which you will be able to meet people of the same age who share the same Jewish identity.

Although it may seem strange or hard to imagine, you will encounter similar life experiences in spite of living in different countries.

All activities were planned with you in mind. You will be able to talk, exchange opinions, and have fun. You are going to play and practice extreme sports in the open air. But the most important thing is that many of you will meet each other for the first time and will start new friendships.

We look forward to your arrival, and we will keep working so that no detail will be overlooked.

We know that together we will live an unforgettable weekend.

WE ARE READY TO WELCOME YOU!

Diego Levinson

UJCL January 2007 Youth Encounter Coordinator



(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)



UJCL

UNION DE CONGREGACIONES JUDIAS DE LATINOAMERICA Y EL CARIBE
UNION OF JEWISH CONGREGATIONS OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

X CONFERENCIA VI ENCUENTRO DE JOVENES

X CONFERENCE VI YOUTH ENCOUNTER

Costa Rica – 25-28 Enero/January 2007

Favor llenar una hoja por participante (adulto o joven) y remitir a Florencia Gelman por correo electrónico a gelman@racsa.co.cr o Fax: +506-231-5787.

Please complete one form per participant (adult or youth) and send to Florencia Gelman by e-mail at gelman@racsa.co.cr or Fax: +506-231-5787.

Favor utilice letra de molde/Please print.

INFORMACION GENERAL DEL PARTICIPANTE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Nombre y apellido/First and last name:

En caso de participar en el encuentro de jóvenes, edad:
For youth encounter participants, age:

Comunidad/Community:
Cargo/Position:

Dirección postal/Mailing Address:

Ciudad/City:

Estado/State:

País/Country:

Código/Zip:

Teléfono/Phone:

Correo elec./E-mail:

Llegada/Arrival

Día/Date:

Hora/Time:

Vuelo/Flight:

Salida/Departure

Día/Date:

Hora/Time:

Vuelo/Flight:

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Idioma de preferencia/Language preference:

Español/Spanish:

Inglés/English:

Hebreo/Hebrew:

La cuota de inscripción de **\$190 por adulto** incluye el coctel de bienvenida, dos almuerzos, cena de Shabat, cena de gala, coffee breaks y materiales. También está incluido el transporte desde y hacia el aeropuerto. **Para el alojamiento, cada persona debe hacer la reservación directamente con el Hotel San José Palacio**

La cuota de **\$100 por joven** (13-18 años) incluye 3 noches de alojamiento en el Hotel Colaye con desayunos, recepción de bienvenida, paseo del viernes, cena de Shabbat, almuerzo del sábado, cena de gala, coffee breaks, materiales y transporte desde y hacia el aeropuerto. **Los jóvenes NO deben inscribirse directamente en el hotel; al llenar esta inscripción, se le reservará su habitación. El boleto aéreo corre por cuenta de cada participante.**

La cuota de inscripción tendrá que **ser cancelada en efectivo o con tarjeta de crédito** en la mesa de inscripción de la conferencia en el hotel.

Le rogamos nos comunique si tiene necesidades especiales (comida, discapacidad, otra)

Favor asesorarse si requiere visa para entrar a Costa Rica

The registration fee of **\$190 per adult** the welcome cocktail party, two lunches, Shabbat dinner, the gala dinner, coffee breaks and materials. Also included is transportation to and from the airport. **Hotel reservations should be made directly with the Hotel San José Palacio.**

The registration fee of **\$100 per young person** (ages 13-18) includes 3 nights at Hotel Colaye with breakfasts, a tour outside San Jose, welcome reception, Shabbat dinner, Saturday lunch, gala dinner, coffee breaks, materials and transportation to and from the airport. **Youth encounter participants should NOT make reservations directly with the hotel; once you complete this inscription form, we will reserve your room. Airline tickets are NOT included.**

The registration fee will have to be **paid in cash or by credit card** upon arrival at the convention registration desk at the hotel.

Please let us know if you have any special need (food, wheelchair access, other)

Please check if you need a visa to enter Costa Rica.



Conference of the Latin American Communities

by Hilda Ten Brink (First UJCL Vice President)

The Conference of the Latin American Jewish Communities, celebrated in Punta del Este, Uruguay, from Nov. 16 to 19, had three purposes:

1. To define new directions for the activities of the liberal congregations in the region, to find points of convergence between the two principal institutions and to elaborate an agenda to face common problems, exchanging already developed experiences.
2. To divulge Reform and Conservative Judaism, as well as the mutual knowledge that the two movements represent alternative possibilities for Jews.
3. To establish connections between people, communities and movements, and to develop a direct relation among groups from different geographic regions.

This was a first effort to establish a dialogue between the Masorti and Progressive Movements in Latin America. Together with Rosario and Marvin Sossin I had the opportunity to attend. There we met Rabbi Marcelo Bater from Aruba and together we constituted the UJCL delegation. I think that the objectives of the conference were fulfilled although not everything was a walk in a rose garden. I am going to attempt to clarify what this conference represented for me.

Let us first talk about what separates us. The words "tolerate" and "accept" were mentioned at the conference; Rabbi Sergio Berman said that the ideal is to accept, not tolerate. I am not sure that acceptance was reached from everything we discussed. There are ideological differences; patrilineal descent on the side of the Progressive and the adherence to a halachic framework on the part of the Conservative will make it difficult to be accepted by both sides.

We talked for hours about it, we became excited, we almost booed the part we did not like but, in the end we were unable to convince anyone. However, the second objective, the mutual knowledge of the movements, although painfully, was fulfilled because we know who we are and what we believe in, and it is fundamental to establish that knowledge.

Now let us discuss the parts where the aims were pleasantly fulfilled. I attended three workshops, and I had the honor of presiding one of them entitled "How to Involve Non-affiliated Jews in Our Synagogues? How to Implement Successful Programs?" I shared it with an Argentinean who is a resident of Sao Paulo and I never knew his affiliation among the currents of Judaism. We spoke about the low rates of affiliation of Jews to the synagogues, what to do to attract them, what programs had been successful. We shared concerns and ideas and we came out feeling we were not alone in our problems.

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Later on, I went with Rosario to a workshop that we loved: "Transferring Power to Women in Congregational Life; Successful Stories." Four women told us their experiences. A Brazilian, the only *soferet* in the region, narrated how she had earned that specialization and how busy she is, although her Torot must have a stamp specifying that they have been written by a woman. An elderly lady, when her husband died, studied cantillation and Hebrew and, in her Montevideo community, every Shabbat, she always sings the second *alyah*. A young Israeli mother presented a different aspect: in her community there are two Torot, one next to the other; a man sings one *alyah*, a woman the other. I do not share this attitude but I respect it because, apparently, it satisfies some women. Finally, the president of a very large Jewish women organization in the States commented on what it meant to her to come out of her shyness and begin to be a leader of women groups. We saw several shades of Judaism among these women, and the tone was one of pride for the accomplishments and I believe a genuine acceptance of the differences.

Also with Rosario I attended a last workshop called "Working with Non-traditional Family Units - Single Parents, Mixed Marriages, Alternative Lifestyles." Rabbis Alvin Berkun from the Conservative Movement, and David Gelfand, from the Progressive Movement, told us about their experiences in the United States with communities showing a high rate of these alternative lifestyles. The Rabbis had not met before the workshop. I want to think that they came out of the room feeling mutual admiration because that was the feeling they transmitted. Both are fantastic individuals, committed to consider their fellow man as people made in the image of Elohim, and to try to solve the difficulties faced by those who do not conform to pre-established social mores.

In all workshops the first objective was achieved. We defined new directions for the activities of the liberal congregations in the region, and we found that since we have common problems we might very well be able to devise an agenda to face them. Whether this agenda is worked out or not, it will depend on us and whatever we may want to do, but in any case we learned that we have very much in common.

What was the thing that united us more, and put as above insults and rudeness, what made us feel that, in spite of everything we really are a unique people? Undoubtedly, the celebration of Shabbat. I have no words to describe the impression that listening to the piano, drum, maracas and guitar in solos, together and sometimes mixed up but in precious harmony made on us. The voices that led us in the singing were wonderful. Youth, adults, the elderly, we all sat together and very few did not join their voices and clapped their palms to the rhythm of the songs. Everything happened within a framework of spontaneous joy, personal and shared. It was a great celebration where we all enjoyed together, we laughed and were enchanted together, and we established connections among people that were conducive to our talking about our communities and to develop a direct relation among all of us. The Shabbat Shalom embrace was sincere.



And what did we gain by all of this?

The conference was dominated by two giants: Argentina and Brazil. The rest of the participants was from Uruguay, the host community, some from Chile, some North American, Danny Fainstein from Mexico, a youth from El Salvador, and us, although it is possible that I left someone out. I felt a tremendous pride in the UJCL and what we have accomplished in our ten years of existence. When resentments and differences threatened to undermine the spirit of the conference, I found the strength to get up and tell everyone what we have done. Something very nice happened to me. I felt the need to know where was Rabbi Bater and, luckily, he was next to me although I had not realized it. I said that, in reality, I did not know what Marcelo did in his community, that is his privilege, and possibly he did not know what we did in ours, but each one of our communities had only a bunch of youths, not enough to organize a camp. I told them what our youth encounters have accomplished and what getting to know each other has meant for a group of Jews who lived isolated in their communities. I felt very well because I transmitted the spirit of what we are: a heterogeneous group, with many variations, with different languages and cultures, with a Jewish culture that differs in each of our communities. But that does not divide us.

In a letter Marcelo wrote that the definition of the UJCL of being inclusive, regardless of the movement to which each community adheres, adding instead of subtracting is our characteristic and our virtue. And I would like to close with words from Jack Davidson, our President: "We are not an organization full of committees that studies problems and in the end does little. We have united the Jews of the area, we have supported each other and our youth is integrating at the regional level."

We are waiting for all of you in Costa Rica, with open arms, to learn and to study together about what unites us, to know what our differences are but, above all, to have the pleasure of celebrating a Shabbat together and enjoy the beautiful Jewish heritage we are leaving to our children.

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)

MASORTI OLAMI - WUPJ CONFERENCE: **THE VISION OF OUR YOUTH** *by Arnoldo Castro*

The Conference of the Latin American Jewish Communities, in which the Masorti Olami Movement and the World Union for Progressive Judaism participated, that took place from November 16 to 19, 2006 in beautiful Punta del Este, Uruguay, was not just a reunion, rather it was a conference that, as you can perceive by its title, represented two currents of the practice of Judaism: the Conservative Movement (Masorti) and the Reform Movement. Both of them coordinated this encounter that was preceded by a discussion by the most important leaders of these currents of the practice and philosophy of Judaism in Brazil, in 2004.

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But, finally, a group of young representatives and leaders in charge of activities in their own *Kehilot*, introduced us to a scene rich in personal community experience and spirituality that converged during those days, bringing about an atmosphere full of smiles, comments and talks concerning getting to know each other. That interest in knowing other people's experiences and sharing our own was special, it involved from Brazilians with their decided attempt to speak Spanish to Chileans and Argentineans, among others.

We discussed topics such as the experience of ecumenicalism done in Argentina by some communities with different religions, specially Christians, how to teach the basics of What is a Jew, and other themes of the simple knowledge that can open doors to interfaith understanding and tolerance, besides, *tzedakah* activities organized in Argentina for their society. On the other hand, Brazilians shared with us their musical experience in synagogue services, based on the tradition and development of the *Amidah* with melody, special Shabbat music and other incentives for the young *b'nai mitzvah*, to stimulate them to actively participate in Shabbat study and services, with the aim of supporting Jewish life with a personal as well as community dimension in their lives. Also discussed was how to attract again those *madrichim* that are already involved with university work, so that they may, somehow, keep their ties to the *kehilah* and its activities. Although not all are called to maintain a steady interest in the community's activities, they are, however, exhorted to occupy themselves with matters that support community life, be it in its social aspect, like outings to dinners or sports events, or other recreational activities that lead to unity and sustained relationships among the members of the community.

Furthermore, we studied the possibility that they share with the new *madrichim* their own experience as leaders.

On this topic, the possibility was being considered of contribution by Jewish organizations and the State of Israel to make possible for the *madrichim* a stay in Israel, to get to know the land in order to give their experience greater personal content at the time of teaching the Noar children what Israel and our tradition are. There is an element of emotion and depth that can only be reached with the Israel experience. Within these former themes there were others such as: The Change of Roles for the Jewish Woman, Working With Non-traditional Family Units, Single Parents, Mixed Marriages, The Sanctity of Eretz Israel. The Challenge of Creating New Borders in the State of Israel, and How We Relate to Israel in Our Movements.

Also discussed were topics such as Programs To Promote Dialogue, Understanding and Interfaith Recognition, Relevance of the Conservative and Progressive Jewish Message, Post-modern Jews and their Pre-modern Past (What sacred texts can still teach us?), etc. For the lectures there were approximately twenty one rabbis as speakers and an equal number solely as participants, different community and regional organizations leaders that enriched the conference activities, next to Youth Groups such as Marom, a youth movement that organizes educational Jewish activities.

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Other sensational moments were the *Shacharit*, *Mincha* and *Arvit* services, not to omit those for Shabbat that, with their familiar and new melodies, and with such sweet voices, generated a number of emotions and particular feelings that became one unique prayer.

To conclude, we were able to experience an event that enriched its participants in many ways, and created an environment of respect and understanding to allow harmonious work between both movements with the aim of realizing the preservation of our tradition and of our identity, keeping in mind that, although we have differences in the way we live our Judaism in both of them one fact binds us: we are Jews. And, if we take as a point of departure what Dr. Daniel Fainstein and Prof. Alyssa Gray expressed in their last lecture, the most important factor that will propel both movements is the study of the sources of our Judaism and tradition, starting with the Torah and continuing with the Talmud up to the contributions of Rashi, Maimonides, Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, etc. in order to consolidate a solid and sustained growth that allows the future continuity of Judaism.

Editor's Note: Arnoldo Castro participated in this encounter as a representative of the *Comunidad Israelita* of El Salvador thanks to the generous support of Netzer Olami, the Youth Organization of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

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CONFERENCE IN PUNTA DEL ESTE Reflections on Its Significance

By Rabbi Shmuel Szteinhendler (Director of Masorti AMLAT)

The Conference of Latin American Jewish Communities that took place last November in Punta del Este was organized by the *Masorti Olami* (World Council of *Masorti/Conservative Synagogues*) and the World Union for Progressive Judaism. This was an event that went beyond simply bringing together an important number of participants from diverse countries in the region: it allowed the discussion of diverse current issues in Jewish life and in the area with the contributions of highly qualified scholars and Rabbis.

Undoubtedly every opportunity that allows us to study together and analyze -with respect for diversity- topics that relate to the continuity of a significant and transcendental Jewish life and the search to strengthen it is an essential expression of the vitality of both Movements. Another facet of this is how to face changing challenges and the constructive interaction with the society at large. All of these were apparent during the Conference.

There were study sessions, sanctification of time through religious services, moments fraternally shared, encounters and re-encounters. All of this within a framework filled with the multifaceted expressions of the diverse participants from Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Aruba, Costa Rica, Mexico, U.S.A., Israel and others. The hallways, the study halls and the wonderful green spaces at the shores of the (Atlantic) Ocean were the background for the voices speaking different languages but sharing in the end the same interests: to meet each other, to learn and to search for answers to the questions that the work and Jewish community life require.

The sessions allowed youth and adults (all with a young spirit) representing both Movements to express their opinions, to share their experiences and manifest their concerns. All of this was seasoned with diversity, a passionate dedication, and the desire to be able to do more and do it better.

The highest international leaders of both Movements were in attendance. This added relevance to the Conference, and allowed the participants to appreciate with increased clarity the visions and the proposals, and how to articulate each one of them. At the closing of the Conference a declaration was drafted. It analyzes the opportunity to share and learn. It also expresses the will to continue exploring at a future date all the opportunities that may come up.

As our teachers say in *Pirke Avot*: "*mikol melamdai hiskalti*" - my wisdom was increased by all of those who taught me- i.e., from whom I could learn. We are therefore grateful for having had this opportunity. We also praise very much the immense effort made by the Organizing Committee, composed by representatives of the Reform Movement and, on behalf of the *Masorti* Movement the President and treasurer of *Masorti AMLAT*, Mr. David Rajj and Mr. Mario Grunebaum respectively.

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)

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CONFERENCE OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA **- A HISTORIC GATHERING - NOVEMBER 16-19, 2006**

By RABBI JOEL OSERAN

VICE PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (WUPJ)

It was indeed a gathering of historic proportions. For the first time ever, rabbis and lay leaders from both the World Union and Masorti Olami (the international Conservative Movement) in Latin America gathered to discuss their similarities, differences and to explore ways to work more cooperatively in the future. The group of over 220 leaders, including a large youth contingent from both movements as well as leaders from North America who came especially for this gathering, took this unusual step to strengthen liberal (non-Orthodox) Judaism in the region which is challenged by growing assimilation on the one hand and an aggressive Chabad outreach effort on the other.

The Conference was a direct outgrowth of the May, 2004 Conference of the same name which took place in Sao Paulo, Brazil and sponsored by the World Union. The decision was taken after the Sao Paulo Conference that the region needed more such efforts, but the ideal was to bring both the Progressive and Masorti movements together to "officially" give their blessing to the event - an important statement in and of itself.

It required 18 months of hard work, compromises and determination to realize the goal of the Punta Conference. Credit must certainly be given to the four members of the steering committee: Miriam Vasserman and Sergio Brukman representing the World Union and David Raj and Mario Grunebaum representing the Masorti Olami movement. The Program Committee was under the creative and patient leadership of Helio Zylbertstein (representing the World Union) while administrative matters were in the capable hands of Berta Zylberstein (our World Union administrator for the Latin American region who lives in Sao Paulo and is a member of CIP congregation).

Among the challenges facing the Conference organizers was the need to have a "balanced" program which meant at every session there were to be an equal number of Masorti and Progressive presenters. Fortunately there were more than enough wonderful speakers between the two movements resulting in a rich and varied list of presenters. In addition to regional rabbis and lay presenters, the World Union, in partnership with the Union of Reform Judaism and NATA in North America and with the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in North America, was able to facilitate the participation of two outstanding professionals from North America to add their expertise to the program: Professor Alyssa Gray from HUC-JIR and Mr. Jeffrey Herzog from NATA. Alyssa and Jeffrey added tremendously to the high level of the Conference and we thank HUC-JIR, the URJ, and NATA for their loyal support in helping to fund these visits. This was truly a "Family Affair" and we all benefited as a result .

Appreciation is also extended to Rabbis Roberto Graetz, David Gelfand, Mark Winer and Bob Sachs as well as to the many North American World Union leaders on a WUPJ sponsored Latin America mission led by Jerry and Pat Tanenbaum who made the effort

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to come all the way to Punta del Este to participate in the Conference program. Rabbi Uri Regev, Tamara Schagas (who led the youth programming for the World Union) and I represented the Israeli contingent of the World Union. The Masorti Movement was represented, among others, by Rabbi Joel Meyers, head of the Conservative movement Rabbinical Assembly and Dr. David Breakstone, who is the professional head of Masorti Olami and also heads the WZO Department for Zionist fulfillment in Israel.

The Conference program was an amalgamation of keynote presentations and workshops designed to provide both concrete help for congregational leaders in terms of programming ideas and skills, as well as updates on Israel and other important issues facing the Jewish people in the region and throughout the world. Professor Gray added a number of text study sessions for those participants eager to engage in Talmud Torah (Professor Gray is an expert in Talmudic literature and rabbinic texts in general).

Rabbi Regev and Dr. Breakstone addressed the all important issues of religion and state in Israel and encouraged all in attendance to become more involved in preserving the democratic and pluralistic elements in Israeli society. This is precisely the work which both our movements can accomplish together in Israel and cooperation is essential if we are going to achieve our long term goals. I want to add that I have never heard Uri speak more eloquently as he did in Punta - he brought great distinction to all of us in the World Union and we were very proud of his presentations .

Rabbi Meyers and I led a session which "attempted" to explain the similarities and differences between Reform and Conservative Judaism. This was a particularly challenging session as it was difficult to keep institutional "politics" and ideological distinctions totally separate. The Conservative movement's focus on the "Halachik Process" was clearly understood to be the central distinguishing feature between the two movements, though many in the audience wanted to ensure that even this fundamental difference would not prevent our two movement's from cooperating fully in all ways "on the ground". The tension between recognizing and maintaining differences on the one hand and yet accepting and respecting the right to be different on the other hand was an issue which certainly impacted the conversation and at times, led to some heated comments. Nevertheless, the session ended amiably with the hope that both movements would focus attention on their commonalities since the grass roots needs of the Jewish community in the region required our full combined efforts and commitment.

The Conference closing session which included presentations by both Professor Gray and by Dr. Daniel Feinstein ,former Dean of the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires and Professor of Jewish Studies in Mexico stressed this approach as it focused on the importance of Jewish study and learning and how both our movements must be committed to helping the region in this regard. Our institutional differences pale in relation to the important work which must be done in the region to combat assimilation and Jewish apathy. Towards this end, the Conference steering committee drafted a closing declaration which stressed the importance of institutional cooperation in the future.

MIFGASH



The Punta Conference comes at a critical time for the World Union, as we enter into a strategic focus process of clarifying our short and long term goals for work in the region. Over the past 4 plus years of renewed efforts in the region, we have learned to appreciate the many important issues impacting the Jewish communities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and other places in the region. We recognize and credit the historic role which the Masorti Movement has played in the region - especially in Argentina - as a result of the pioneering efforts of Rabbi Marshal Meyer which date back to the 1960's. And yet, we have seen the importance of the World Union's Yad B'Yad Committee on Latin America which during these past several years has re-introduced the voice and energy of Progressive Judaism to the region and , as a result, has helped to revitalize, in particular, our North American Reform Movement's connection to Jewish peoplehood and Klal Yisrael .These and many other considerations will form the basis of our discussions as we deliberate on our future course of action in Latin America .

In the final analysis, the Punta Conference highlights, once again, the incredible good fortune we in the World Union are blessed with by having such dedicated and committed lay and rabbinic leaders representing our movement. Without exaggeration, the Punta Conference would not have taken place were it not for the determined leadership of people like Miriam Vasserman, Helio and Berta Zylberstein, Sergio Brukman, Sergio Bergman, and others in our World Union family in Latin America. We as a world movement are only as strong and capable as the individuals who comprise our leadership. We are long on challenges and short on resources but we thank God we have the devoted souls around the world who share our vision and are willing to give so much of themselves to strengthen the Jewish People. The Punta Conference is yet another step in this direction - and thanks to our leadership in the region, efforts are already underway to take the next step, and the next.....



Punta del Este Resolution, November 19, 2006

"We, MASORTI OLAMI (Conservative Movement) and the WORLD UNION FOR PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM (Reform Movement), meeting at the Conference of the Jewish Communities of Latin America repudiate the discriminatory attitude of the AMIA in relation to the *Gerim* (Jews by Choice) and Community Cemeteries."
Punta del Este, Uruguay, November 18, 2006, Cheshvan 28, 5767.

The leading representatives of the Conservative and Reform Movements worldwide, headed by the President of the North American Rabbinical Assembly, met last weekend in Punta del Este, Uruguay. The meeting was an historic First Encounter and Conference between both movements for the Latin American communities. The meeting was attended by the President of the North American Rabbinical Assembly and by representatives of the Latin American Rabbinical Assembly and the Executive Directors of both Movements in addition to representatives from Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Aruba, Mexico, Israel, USA, the United Kingdom, and other countries. As a result of this encounter, the two movements made public one of their most important joint declarations, namely, the lack of resolution of the status of the conversions performed for decades by these movements in Argentina and their lack of recognition by the AMIA authorities. This has created well-known problems related to religious pluralism and the authorization of burials of *Gerim* in community cemeteries.

(source: Jewish Agency)