



MERCAZ-Canada, MERCAZ USA, & Women's League for Conservative Judaism Biennial Essay Contest

THEME OF THIS YEAR'S ESSAY COMPETITION:

“A Critical Defense of Zionism”

This year's contest celebrates the 37th World Zionist Congress.

AWARDS:

Five Scholarships in the amounts of: \$1,000, \$600, \$400 and \$250 (2X). The scholarship will apply to any Conservative Movement sponsored Israel program (including Israel programs taking place from June 1, 2016 and forward).

ELIGIBILITY:

Applicants must be residents of Canada, Mexico, or the United States, in grades 7-12, and a member of a Conservative synagogue. Each student may only submit one essay for consideration.

HOW TO ENTER:

Essay Contest Opening: October 13, 2015. Entry forms and additional information can be found at www.mercaz.ca, www.mercazusa.org, or www.wlcj.org.

Deadline for Entries: Entries must be submitted electronically by March 1, 2016. Late entries will not be accepted. MERCAZ and WLCJ cannot be responsible for delayed or misdirected entries. Read receipt requests are recommended.

Announcement of Winners: All entrants will be notified by May 6, 2016. Winners will be announced publicly during the next Women's League convention.

Essay Format: Essays must be submitted as a typed Word document or PDF form with the entry form as a cover page. Essays should be double-spaced, up to 1000 words. Submitted essays must be the entrant's original work, with quotes properly cited. (Citations do not count towards the word count.)

Submission: Entries must be submitted via email. Mailed entries will not be accepted. Essays and the accompanying cover page should be emailed to info@masorti-mercaz.ca with the subject “MERCAZ USA/CANADA/Women's League Essay Contest”. By entering this contest, the student agrees that all information submitted becomes the property of MERCAZ – WLCJ to publish at their discretion.

For further information, questions, or comments, contact one of the sponsoring organizations.



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Cover Page (Please write legibly. Illegible forms may be disqualified.)

Name: _____

Full Address (including city, state/province, zip/postal code):

Date of Birth: _____ Telephone: _____

Email Address: _____

Synagogue Information (name, address, city, state/province, zip/postal code):

Rabbi's Name: _____

Current School: _____

Current Grade: _____

Parent/Guardian 1 Name

Parent/Guardian 2 Name

Parent/Guardian 1 Email

Parent/Guardian 2 Email

Parent/Guardian 1 Phone

Parent/Guardian 2 Phone

Are you affiliated with a USY Chapter or Camp Ramah? If yes, which? _____

Israel Program(s) Applying For*
(Scholarships may be reserved for use on future programs.)

* All Conservative Movement trips are eligible for scholarship use. Writing a specific trip here does not obligate you to use the scholarship only for that trip.



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BACKGROUND:

In October 2015, the World Zionist Organization the 37th World Zionist Congress convenes, the next in the chain of international Jewish gatherings that began with the First Zionist Congress assembled by Theodore Herzl in 1897, and which have met every few years since. The World Zionist Congress is the closest thing we have to an international Jewish parliament. More than 700 delegates from Israel and across the world will be in attendance. Included in that number are nearly 165 elected delegates from the United States and Canada. In addition, hundreds more will be present as alternate delegates and observers. Of special note is the fact that at least 25% of the elected delegates will be “youth” delegates (ages 18 to 35) and 30% will be women. The Congress offers an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel.

Principles of Zionism, as set by The World Zionism Organization Jerusalem program affirm:

- The unity of the Jewish people, its bond to its historic homeland, Eretz Yisrael, and the centrality of the State of Israel and Jerusalem, its capital, in the life of the nation.
- Aliyah to Israel from all countries and the effective integration of all immigrants into Israeli society.
- Strengthening Israel as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state, and shaping it as an exemplary society with a unique moral and spiritual character, marked by mutual respect for the multi-faceted Jewish people rooted in the vision of the prophets, striving for peace and contributing to the betterment of the world.
- Ensuring the future and the distinctiveness of the Jewish People by furthering Jewish, Hebrew and Zionist education, fostering spiritual and cultural values and teaching Hebrew as the national language.
- Nurturing mutual Jewish responsibility, defending the rights of Jews as individuals and as a nation, representing the national Zionist interests of the Jewish people, and struggling against all manifestations of anti-Semitism.

The Zionist Congress is taking place during a time of conflicting and often noisy political challenges. We have seen the rise, particularly on the college campuses, of “BDS,” the attempt by some on the political left, to pass boycott, divestment and sanctions resolutions against companies doing business with the State of Israel, and other anti-Israel movements. These challenges often leave members of the worldwide Jewish community confused about their own expressions of Zionism.

As Jews, we love Israel and take great pride in her accomplishments. From the Diaspora, we appreciate that Israel is a Jewish State. Shabbat is the official ‘weekend’. Jewish holidays are national holidays, and it is Jewish culture that permeates the very air of the land. At the same time, we have seen statements and actions by the current Israeli government and the Chief Rabbinate that limit the expression of Jewish religious



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freedom in the Jewish State.

As Conservative/Masorti Jews, we are keenly aware of the lack of separation in of religion and state in Israel, dictated by an ultra-Orthodox rabbinate. The result is that our religious institutions, and others not endorsed by the Chief Rabbinate, are discriminated against. Our synagogues do not receive government funding, unlike Orthodox congregations. Our rabbis, notwithstanding a few exceptions, do not receive salaries from the state for performing religious services, unlike their Orthodox counterparts. They are not allowed to officiate at State-sanctioned weddings. Women are prevented from praying with tallit and/or tefillin or from reading Torah at the Western Wall. Reform Jews (often a code word for all non-Orthodox Jews) are labeled as sinners or simply not Jews at all. There are too many instances in which our Israeli counterparts and visitors to Israel feel like second-class citizens.

QUESTION:

Answer the following question: **What does Zionism mean to you?**

In developing your essay, please address the following questions facing the Zionist Movement, the legitimacy of Zionism and the Jewish State, and the limitations or shortcomings of the State of Israel vis-à-vis religious freedom for all Jews.

- Does a defense of Zionism mean that we must defend every action of every Israeli government and politician?
- Does Zionism call for a reciprocal relationship with Israel? In other words, does Zionism oblige Israel to care about the Diaspora community?
- Can we support the legitimacy of Israel and still reserve the right to criticize Israel in the arena of religious pluralism and/or anything else? Can we criticize Israel in a world full of anti-Israel sentiment? And if so, how?

In your response, please consider what you hope to experience or learn during your expected visit/tour/program in Israel to help you develop even more fully your thoughts about Zionism and Israel.