

'Darkenu', The Masorti Vision

Foreword

The Assembly of Masorti Synagogues is proud to publish *Darkenu – The Masorti Vision*. Originally penned by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg it has been written in full co-operation with the other Rabbis of our movement who have played an integral part in its composition. In my visits to communities throughout Britain, the questions most frequently posed to me are 'What is Masorti?' and 'How does Masorti differ from other strands of Judaism?' These are difficult questions to answer, since we are a movement that validates a multi faceted approach to Jewish practice. We further embrace the difficult yet ultimately cohesive approach of combining a commitment to Halachah in the light of modern scholarship. Since we stand for an approach that encourages inquiry and debate *Darkenu* does not attempt to describe an all encompassing system of religious life. We aim rather to provoke discussion and engage in exploration in order to strengthen our Jewish identity through Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Hasadim. It is our intention to use this document in the series of seminars 'Continuing the Quest' commencing in February 2003. The answer to our questions comes through our searching. May that search be fruitful and leshem shamayim – for the sake of heaven.

Michael Gluckman
Executive Director Cheshvan 5763/November 2002

The Masorti Vision is to be:

- a movement of traditional Jewish faith and practice led by the dynamic understanding of Torah and Halakhah;
 - a movement of traditional Judaism receptive to truth from every quarter, responsive to the dilemmas of the modern world;
 - a movement that, without prejudging, seeks the participation of every Jew on the journey to greater knowledge, observance, ethical sensitivity and spiritual depth;
 - a movement that includes all men and women in every sphere of Jewish life;
 - a movement that says 'You can!' to every aspiration to learn and practise;
 - a movement with facilities to meet all the needs of Jewish life;
 - a movement that plays its full part in creating a thriving Judaism in Israel and the Diaspora and good relationships with other faiths.
-

Principles of the Masorti Movement

Faith

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one

We affirm that Judaism is not only a way of life, but a way of life rooted in faith in the one God as revealed in the Torah, the Bible and subsequent history. This has been the key and definitive feature of Judaism from when God first spoke to Abraham until this day. It is the starting point of Jewish ethical and spiritual insight. We thus recognise the sanctity and dignity of all life, in accordance with the teaching that every human being is created in God's image. We seek in the works of creation the manifestation of God's presence. We have faith that there are spiritual bonds which unite all humanity, beyond all differences of gender, race and creed. We appreciate that our greatest philosophers have struggled to describe and define faith, and that throughout the ages ordinary Jews have striven to find the meaning of their faith and to live by it. We recognise the inevitability of doubt and uncertainty, but trust nevertheless that the beaten path of Jewish life and teaching can help us to find God, each of us within the unique context of our own experience. We affirm that our spiritual heritage as Jews is an invaluable treasure, and that to strive to live by it is at once a great challenge and a great privilege.

Torah

You shall meditate on the Torah day and night

The Torah is Judaism's most sacred text. It is the record of God's revelation to our people and the root and base of our understanding of how God wants us to live as Jews. The Torah commands us. The written Torah is Judaism's core and central text, the most significant starting point for all further interpretation. At the same time it is inseparable from this tradition of interpretation, the oral Torah, which has formed, and continues to form, our Judaism as we know it today. Yet the Torah itself is the product of history and interpretation. There are many aspects of this history of which we are ignorant. But legal, archeological, literary and linguistic evidence all indicate that the Torah came into being over a significant period of time and was composed from particular historical perspectives. It is in accordance with this understanding that we affirm the sanctity of the Torah as the record of God's will and God's presence in history, as the word of God, as interpreted by our people. Rooted in the experience of God's presence, the narratives and laws of the Torah are of profound and inexhaustible significance for Judaism, and for humanity, for all time.

Halakhah

Halakhah, Jewish law, is central and authoritative in determining the way of life and conduct of the Jewish people. Rooted in the Torah, defined by the rabbinic processes recorded in the Mishnaic and Talmudic literature and decided in the Codes and Responsa up to and including our own day, halakhah determines the parameters of the ethical, ritual and spiritual life of the Jew. The Talmud, the Codes, their commentaries and the Responsa literature, including that produced by our own movement, are the sources to which we turn for decisions in matters of Jewish law. Thus halakhah is based on texts and processes which contain many voices and interpretations as they debate the meaning of Torah in the context of the manifold and changing realities of life. Masorti Judaism acknowledges and seeks to understand the impact of history and society on the development of Jewish law and teaching and to add its voices to the process of informed halakhic debate. It recognises that where there are profound and enduring changes in society, established laws and customs may require fresh exploration in the light of the overall spiritual and moral vision of Judaism. This always has been, and still remains, the case. Masorti Judaism trusts in the enduring value of the structures upheld by halakhah as the backbone of Jewish ritual, ethical and spiritual life and turns overwhelmingly to the classical sources for guidance. At the same time, it believes in the dynamism of the traditional halakhic process in confronting the challenges of modernity. Masorti Judaism seeks to motivate Jews to live their lives more fully in accordance with halakhah.

Authority

Masorti Judaism acknowledges the authority of Jewish law and teaching over our lives. This authority is rooted in the fact that Jewish law and teaching express what we understand to be the will of God. Jewish law and teaching are the product of the best human understanding of what that will is. All human understanding has its limitations and we cannot know God's will to the full. Jewish sources also contain views later rejected by the consensus of opinion, and some views we cannot uphold today. Yet the process of centuries of meditation on the Torah and debate on its meaning by great minds and fine sensibilities, has determined how we should understand the precepts of the Torah so that we can live by them. It is this process which, because it is rooted in and faithful to the encounter with God described in the Torah, and because it has been pursued unstintingly and with total dedication over millennia, and because it has been ratified and sanctified by the spiritual and ethical lives of countless Jews through the ages, gives Jewish law and teaching its authority. This authority is coextensive with life itself, and engages us in every sphere of our activity, civic and ritual, ethical and spiritual, personal and communal, among Jews and non-Jews. Masorti Judaism both accepts this authority and debates with it, as Jews always have. Masorti Judaism seeks to encourage all Jews to observe halakhah and to live as full a Jewish life as possible in the realms of ethical, ritual and spiritual practice. It seeks to do so by teaching and positive example. It therefore endeavours to provide as many opportunities as possible to study Jewish texts and traditions, laws, practices and values in every area of life in a context which motivates us not only to learn about but also to practice traditional Judaism.

Values

Peace, peace, to the far and to the near

Our Ethos

Masorti communities seek to achieve an ethos of inclusion and welcome. We do not validate people simply by how much of Judaism they observe, but welcome them as people. Only God 'sees to the heart' and truly knows the value of each life. We therefore aim to provide positive Jewish experiences and activities for all ages and interests – social and cultural as well as spiritual and intellectual. We appreciate that the Jewish identity of every person is complex and evolving. We respect the fact that everyone brings a different personal history to his or her Judaism, and that people have different needs at different times in their lives. But, from wherever we start, we believe that our Judaism should take us on a journey towards a richer and more committed ritual, spiritual and ethical life. Just as life is a journey to an unknown destination, so our spiritual life is less about certainty and arrival, than about questing and questioning, learning and searching.

Talmud Torah – Jewish Learning

The study of Torah is a daily mitzvah. It is essential to all serious and sustained Jewish living. Everyone can, and should, be engaged in talmud Torah. Through it we listen to, absorb, and add our own voice to, the many voices that speak to us through Jewish text and history. Through it we endeavour to listen to God's voice. The Masorti Movement is committed to encouraging all its members to engage in Jewish learning at whatever level they are able and in whatever field they are interested. We seek to develop communities of people who are knowledgeable and engaged. Our ideal is to equip all our members, from our youth upwards, in a positive and motivating manner, with a level of literacy which will enable us to follow any and all Synagogue services, practise key Jewish life skills, such as observing kashrut, Shabbat and the festivals, study Torah and have access to other core texts of Judaism. We are committed to offering learning opportunities in all areas of Jewish scholarship, by providing the best local opportunities at synagogue level, central learning resources at movement level and international opportunities in Israel and throughout the Masorti and the wider Jewish world. We recognise that learning takes place in many ways, in retreats to renew our spirit, in intensive seminars, in chevruta – partnership study, and over the internet. We constantly seek engaging and challenging ways to learn. We strongly believe in the crucial importance of informal, as well as formal, education and regard Noam, our youth movement, and Marom, our provision for young people, as essential and invaluable. Informal education, led by young people for young people, provides positive Jewish experiences and role models and communicates knowledge and values in a way which is uniquely powerful in forming a life-long sense of identity and belonging.

Prayer and Spirituality

Spiritual life is essential to our very being. We affirm the importance, especially in a world preoccupied with things and activities, of devoting time to the development of our spiritual lives. We recognise the value of regular prayer as established by Jewish tradition. We encourage all men and women to engage seriously in prayer. We believe in the spiritual power of the traditional liturgy and its melodies and seek to promote knowledge of and participation in all the services of the Jewish calendar. We encourage our communities to teach synagogue skills, to promote exploration of the meaning and music of the liturgy, and to offer wide opportunities for spiritual growth. We seek to be open to the new as well as the old in fostering contemplation, participation, understanding, and engagement with prayer. We encourage our members to devote time to our spiritual lives, through the rhythm of the Jewish day and year, and through study, prayer and reflection.

Gemilut Hesed and Tzedakah

The value of hesed, loving kindness, and the principle of tzedakah, sharing from our wealth and possessions because it is right and just to do so, have distinguished Judaism in every age and community since the Torah and the Prophets. Gemilut hesed and tzedakah are the expression of our social conscience and of our commitment to working for a better world. Masorti, like all Judaism, is determined to encourage its members to engage actively in gemilut hesed and tzedakah through giving time, money and personal dedication. This is part of our obligation to our own communities, to Israel, to the Jewish world as a whole and towards all humanity and creation. In this way we affirm in practice the central Jewish teaching that every human being is created 'in the image of God' and that we are entrusted to help care for God's world. We understand our Judaism to require us to be concerned with justice and compassion, human dignity and care for our environment. We strongly encourage all our synagogues to develop serious projects to express our social responsibility both within, and beyond, the Jewish world.

Community

Do not separate from the community

The key unit of Masorti, as of all Judaism, is the community. We seek to establish and develop communities in which we work for the ethical and spiritual ideals of Judaism; we care for every person through all life's joys and sorrows; we inspire our members to contribute in whatever ways they feel able, and we offer all age groups as many opportunities as possible for Jewish life and learning. We aim to achieve this through the creative partnership between lay and professional leaders in encouraging and valuing the involvement of all our members at all levels; through being proactive in establishing supportive and attractive educational, spiritual, cultural and social environments, and through learning from good practice world wide. We aim to foster security, encourage vibrancy and create spaces both within and beyond our synagogues where young and old feel at home. We seek both to establish new communities and to encourage existing communities to grow and develop in the scope and quality of their activities.

The Dignity of Life

Caring for one another is at the core of Jewish values and at the heart of community. We try to work for an ethos of inclusiveness, warmth and support so that we care for each other through all life's joys and sorrows. We aim to open many doors into community to enable different people to enter and feel at home. We recognise that people have different needs and wishes, and may be vulnerable in different ways. We therefore seek to foster and teach respect and sensitivity towards everyone, according to the overriding values of Judaism. We welcome those who genuinely seek to convert to Judaism and join the Jewish people. Our procedure for conversion is serious, demanding, just and in accord with halakhah. Children and young people are our privilege and responsibility, and our greatest resource for the future. Throughout the stages of life we seek to honour the needs of our members according to the traditional rites and ceremonies of Judaism, while being attentive to the new situations and concerns that arise in the modern world.

Men and Women

Masorti Judaism recognises the importance of offering full opportunities to men and women in all areas of Jewish life, – in education, observance, lay leadership and ritual and spiritual practice. We recognise that it is very important for women as well as men to be seen as leaders and teachers in the Jewish community. We are a pluralist movement. We recognise that our communities encompass diverse, and strongly held, views about the roles of men and women in prayer and that there are many ways in which spiritual and ritual opportunities can be offered, from separate to egalitarian services. We therefore accord the right to each synagogue to determine its practice in this area, in a manner which conforms with the ethos of Masorti Judaism and with halakhah. We respect the depth of feeling of those men and women who hold by Jewish gender roles enshrined in halakhah and established over the centuries, and who want to pray in services which keep to them. We recognise the authenticity of their position. We similarly respect the depth of feeling of those men and women who believe in equality in all areas of Jewish practice and who want to pray in egalitarian services. We recognise the validity of established halakhic arguments which hold that men and women may participate equally in all ritual roles in the Synagogue. As a movement we are inclusive of egalitarian and non-egalitarian services. We encourage all men and women to engage in Jewish learning and practice.

Israel

We affirm the significance and centrality of Israel for us and for all Jews. Israel is the historic heart-land and homeland of the Jewish people and the spiritual centre of the Jewish world. A place for which Jews have longed throughout the ages, a place of refuge for Jews in trouble, a place on which our hopes and worries are centred, Israel is the concern of all Jews at all times. We hope and pray that Israel will soon live at peace with its neighbours and in harmony with all its citizens. We are committed to supporting Israel in person, as well as financially. We do so by visiting the country and by keeping closely in contact with family, friends and colleagues as well as by encouraging as appropriate the mitzvah of Aliyah. We see Israel as a key and fertile resource for Jewish learning and experience and for the regeneration our own Jewish lives. We strongly encourage our member communities to arrange courses and trips in Israel for all age groups, and to make close ties especially with Masorti institutions such as the Conservative Yeshivah. We promote a range of courses of study at the Yeshivah and encourage individuals and groups to go and learn, whether for shorter or longer periods of time. We believe in, and are committed to working for a close, positive and mutually supportive relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. We hope, pray and are committed to working for a relationship of peace and understanding between Israel and other nations and between Judaism and other faiths.

Klal Yisrael

Masorti Judaism is part of Klal Yisrael, the whole Jewish community. Especially in these difficult times, we affirm the need to stand together and to express our solidarity with our fellow Jews and with Israel. We particularly seek to promote connections and cooperation across the wider Masorti world, through its institutions of higher learning, its professional bodies, its international organisation Masorti Olami, its youth movement Noam, its provision for young people Marom, and between communities, schools, families and individuals. We consider the diversity of the Jewish community to be positive and creative. No one path in Judaism can lay sole claim to authenticity; no one kind of community can provide a home to everyone. There are many ways of living a good Jewish life. We seek to learn from, and with, institutions and members of other streams of Judaism. We value and endeavour to promote communal harmony. Yet we also realise that there are issues of principle and practice which it is right to debate leshem shamayim, for the sake of heaven. We are ready to stand up for the ideological and halakhic legitimacy of the Judaism in which we believe. We have an important role to play in taking responsibility for the many challenges that confront Judaism today. We know that to meet these challenges we must all work together across the streams of Judaism. In these times of increasing polarisation and mistrust we affirm the need to create links of understanding and cooperation with other faiths and communities. We seek to work for our common good, and for the good of all humanity, in a spirit of partnership and trust.