

THE ZIONIST CONGRESS, MIZRACHI AND THE INFLUENCE OF RABBI SACKS

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The wall-to-wall unity agreement reached at the recent 38th World Zionist Congress is not something to be taken for granted. Neither is the role World Mizrachi played in this unique achievement.

A seismic shift took place in Israel's National Institutions at this particular Congress. For the first time in Zionist history, the majority of the 525 delegates from Israel and around the world were identified with the political and religious right-wing of the Zionist Movement.

This could perhaps be likened to the 1977 revolution in Israeli politics when Menachem Begin rose to power after 30 years of Labor leadership.

For the first time, Israel had a right-wing Prime Minister and government. This gradually brought more religious and traditional elements of Israeli society into political leadership positions.

A similar phenomenon has begun in the National Institutions.



The shift in numbers was the result of multiple factors – the size of the Likud Party, the strength of Mizrachi's Religious Zionist global representation and the joining of the new Haredi Eretz HaKodesh delegation from America, to name but three.

One tangible sign of this new reality is that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the powerful Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (JNF Israel), and

the Chairperson of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), are affiliated with the political and religious right.

However, the National Institutions are not only about influence and power politics. They are about preserving a singular and diverse balance. A very delicate one.

Let me explain. The WZO is akin to the parliament of the Jewish people. It is perhaps the only forum in which



members of the political parties in Israel, as well as delegates from Zionist movements and Federations across the Jewish world, are all formally represented in one place.

From the progressive liberal Hatikvah slate to Eretz HaKodesh and everything in between – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox religious streams and the gamut of political ideologies – all finding a place around one large round table dedicated to the Zionist endeavor.

To preserve this fine balance, the Zionist Congress has traditionally upheld a gentlemen's agreement, giving fair representation to all parties based on their relative strength. This is very different from the majority winner-takes-all system in democratic politics. As de Tocqueville had warned of the potential tyranny of the majority over the very significant minority.

This year, certain parties were pushing for this more polarizing and partisan approach.

Enter Mizrahi.

Over and above its impressive gains in attaining major leadership positions in the Keren Kayemet and the WZO, Mizrahi played a pivotal role in securing a wall-to-wall agreement, in which each party was awarded fair and reasonable leadership positions based on their relative size. Led by

Mizrahi's Avraham Duvdevani, the most experienced member of the WZO Executive, the Mizrahi delegation was instrumental in ensuring unity within diversity.

Indeed, this has been Mizrahi's role since its very inception. Almost 120 years ago, it was founded as a movement of religious Jews committed both to Torah and the Zionist cause. At a time when many distanced themselves from this seemingly secular national movement, Mizrahi found a way to partner, to communicate, to bridge the gaps. To shoulder together the collective challenges at that time.

Remaining loyal to its religious beliefs and Halacha while being an active and influential member of the Zionist Movement.

In fact, the very word *Mizrahi* is an acronym of **Merkaz Ruchani**, a spiritual center, integrating core spiritual values into the nucleus of the nascent Zionist Movement.

Mizrahi blazed a trail of unity, partnership and inclusion.

The message was clear and refreshing: there need be no contradiction between the sacred and the secular, the national and the religious, the universal and the particular. Between Judaism and Zionism.

So too today, Mizrahi continues to play this role of partnership,

bridge-building and unity, in the Jewish world in general and in these important institutions in particular.

I cannot conclude without connecting these sentiments to the recent tragic passing of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, a great supporter of and partner in World Mizrahi's activities. Like our forefather Avraham, who was both "a stranger and a resident" among the inhabitants of Canaan, so Rabbi Sacks was masterfully able to personify and ever so eloquently communicate that balance – on the one hand being proudly Jewish and loyal to his faith and the Torah, while on the other, being deeply immersed in global visions, broad universal ideas and expansive philosophical thought. The ability to synthesize, connect and bridge the divide. He was a ladder, "whose feet were firmly on the ground and whose head was in the heavens." And just like Avraham, he profoundly connected to Divine wisdom and to the spark of the Divine in every human being. To connect all of life to its spiritual center.

At a time of deepening ideological rifts and polarization – in Israel and worldwide – the Mizrahi mission in general and the great life and legacy of Rabbi Sacks are perhaps more relevant than ever.

We hope you gain new insight and learn from the memories, Torah and wisdom of Rabbi Sacks that we are honored to present to you לעילוי נשמתו.