

the MASORTI option

With Kehilat Nitzan moving into its own purpose-built synagogue next year, the Masorti (Conservative) stream of Judaism – relatively new to Australia – has taken another major step forward. **Peter Kohn** examines the Masorti movement in Melbourne and Sydney.

THERE'S no place like home, for a family, and for a synagogue. So when Melbourne's Glen Eira Council last month approved Kehilat Nitzan's plans to build a synagogue and community centre at a Caulfield North site, Melbourne's Masorti (Conservative) shul was jubilant.

"Masorti" is Hebrew for "traditional", and this definition more accurately reflects the group's aims than the "Conservative" label, which was historically acquired as it responded to radical, early Reform.

Kehilat Nitzan's founder, Professor John Rosenberg, describes himself as "a traditionalist". He sees the acquisition of the shul's own synagogue building, with a capacity to host up to 400 worshippers on high holy days, as a milestone that ranks with the 2006 appointment of Rabbi Ehud Bandel, Kehilat Nitzan's first rabbi.

"We consider ourselves a community centre, with shiurim and other activities. We rent space at B'nai B'rith, but we only have that on Shabbat and yom tovim, and now we'll be able to have these activities in our own synagogue," he told *The AJN*.

Jerusalem-born Rabbi Bandel came to Kehilat Nitzan seven years after its inception, bringing impeccable credentials as the former head of Israel's Masorti movement from 1997 to 2005.

In 1998, Rabbi Bandel became the first native-born Israeli to be ordained a Masorti rabbi in Israel, after studying for his s'micha, and completing studies in Jewish history and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

On arrival he was no stranger to Kehilat Nitzan, as he had conducted the synagogue's first high holy days services in 1999.

At that time, Kehilat Nitzan had a membership of 124 family units. That has since grown to 230 – at 250, the shul will become financially self-sustaining.

Rabbi Bandel believes the more synagogues, the more interest there will be in Judaism as a whole. He foresees "two, three, four" Masorti synagogues in Melbourne. Prof Rosenberg predicts that within 10 years, Melbourne will have its second Masorti congregation, and meanwhile the Australian movement is in the process of setting up its own rabbinical beth din.

So, what is it that draws Jews in

Australia, historically conditioned to an Orthodox-Progressive duopoly, to a synagogue that is neither?

"It's exactly what Melbourne Jews are seeking. We're offering something that has a lot of potential," Rabbi Bandel said. "I think people are looking for a traditional liturgy and traditional customs, but with an open-minded, tolerant, egalitarian and broad approach."

The Masorti movement "is closer to Orthodoxy, as it is a halachic movement bound to Jewish law, but we're in the same camp as Progressive as far as openness to modernity, to innovation, to the development of halachah, to a critical historical approach to the study of Jewish sources", he added.

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RABBI EHUD BANDEL
Kehilat Nitzan, Melbourne



While Kehilat Nitzan's main membership target is unaffiliated Jews, of those from within Jewish streams who have joined Kehilat Nitzan, more have migrated from Orthodoxy than from the Progressives, said Rabbi Bandel.

"They are impressed with the decorum, silence and respect – there is no talk, particularly during the Torah service."

Theologically, the approach of the Rabbinical Assembly – Masorti's international rabbinical association – is an interpretation of Judaism that is a hybrid of Orthodoxy and Progressivism (see side story).

The Masorti model emphasises "klal Yisrael", the community of Judaism, said Rabbi Bandel, and the idea of compromising with Orthodoxy for a cohesive approach. For example, aspiring converts to Judaism are required by Kehilat Nitzan to explore all streams of Judaism, because Masorti conversions, like Progressive conversions, are not recognised by Orthodox synagogues, and there is a belief within the Masorti movement that those who choose Judaism need to see the full spectrum.

In fact, Orthodox Judaism does not recognise any non-Orthodox



Conservative Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins: "We're brave, broadminded and forward looking."

Photo: Ingrid Shakenovsky

streams. However, Rabbi Bandel does have warm relations with some Orthodox rabbis and with the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha.

While links with Orthodoxy remain unofficial, the Masorti movement has developed strong organisational ties with Progressive Judaism. The Union for Progressive Judaism (UPJ) loaned Kehilat Nitzan its first

These bridges mirror a cooperative approach in Israel, where the two movements have coordinated their campaigns through Israel's High Court to establish rights not granted by the Orthodox state rabbinate.

WHILE Kehilat Nitzan has sought its own street address, the approach in Sydney has been different. The Masorti movement is part of a multi-stream environment that calls Emanuel Synagogue in Woollahra home. The synagogue, which for decades was solely the Progressive Temple Emanuel, has for some time offered Progressive, Masorti and Renewal services in the same centre.

Kehilat Emanuel was officially established in 1999 as the brainchild of a small group at Temple Emanuel, who had been holding Masorti services since the early 1990s. Among them were Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins, a Progressive-trained US rabbi who was assisting at Emanuel; gabbai David Toben; and Prof Rosenberg, based in Sydney at that time. (On his return to Melbourne, Prof Rosenberg established Kehilat Nitzan in 1999).

What has evolved in Sydney is a Masorti service at which anyone with an *ArtScroll* siddur would feel comfortable, Rabbi Kamins told *The AJN*. "Temple Emanuel was nervous

about a rival shul at first, but relations have been positive."

Rabbi Kamins, as a rabbi in a UPJ congregation, is currently the head of the Progressive Moetzah, even though he conducts Masorti services. In fact, several Progressive rabbis in Australia are members of the Masorti world body, the Rabbinical Assembly. "We're brave, broadminded and forward looking," quipped Rabbi Kamins.

The cheek-by-jowl coexistence practised at Emanuel is a model that Melbourne, with its more fragmented Jewish community, might marvel at.

Of Emanuel's 1500 family memberships, around 200 are Masorti. Parallel Progressive, Masorti and Renewal minyanim take place on Shabbat and yom tovim, and while congregants tend to "sample", all three movements have a steady core of worshippers.

Organisationally, there is a single Emanuel board, and members have not felt the need to set representation quotas for the Progressive, Masorti and Renewal streams.

As a synagogue model, "we're unique in the world", said Rabbi Kamins. "And while our style and emphasis may differ across these three streams, we're all committed to common goals of education and social justice."

"Temple Emanuel was nervous about a rival shul at first, but relations have been positive."

RABBI JEFFREY KAMINS
Kehilat Emanuel, Sydney

A Masorti Zionist movement, Merkaz Australia – inspired to some degree by the Progressive Arza movement – has applied to join the Zionist Federation of Australia. Kehilat Nitzan is coordinating with the Progressives to establish a non-Orthodox Chevra Kadisha (burial society).

Where Australian Masorti Judaism stands

- Unlike Progressive Judaism, services are entirely in Hebrew.
- Women and men sit together.
- Like the Progressives, women participate fully in the service, including Torah laining, and can become rabbis.
- A triennial cycle for reading from the Torah, which was used in ancient Israel, differs from the Babylonian one-year cycle practised in other shuls.
- Like Orthodoxy, matrilineal descent is accepted as the definition of Jewish status, differing from the Progressive

practice of accepting matrilineal and patrilineal descent.

- Like the Progressives, Masorti has accepted in principle the eligibility of its rabbis to participate in same-sex commitment ceremonies, but as with the Progressives, mara d'atra, local rabbinic leadership, is given latitude on how the policy is implemented.

A Masorti primer

- **NUMBERS:** About 1.5 million globally.
- **CONGREGATIONS:** 800 (US), 49 (Israel), 10 (Britain); others in Europe, South Africa, and Latin America.
- **RABBIS:** More than 1000.