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ZIONISM RENEWED:

Mizrachi at the

World Zionist Congress

An interview with **Rabbi Doron Perez,**
Executive Chairman of World Mizrahi



Q: What is the World Zionist Congress?

A: Every five years, the World Zionist Organization (WZO) holds an international assembly of Jews – the World Zionist Congress (WZC). The 38th World Zionist Congress took place last month on October 20–22, 2020, with 524 delegates: 199 from Israel (38%), 152 from the United States (29%), and

173 from other countries (33%). Representation was determined by elections held in early 2020. Worldwide, Mizrahi won 60 seats at the Congress, 27 of which were from the United States, as part of Mizrahi's Orthodox Israel Coalition (OIC), making it the second largest delegation.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the World Zionist Organization

decided to hold all Congress sessions and deliberations online by means of a global virtual platform.

Q: What is decided at the WZC?

A: Since Theodore Herzl's first Zionist Congress in 1897, the WZC has continued to meet regularly. Upon the establishment of the State of Israel, the WZC became "The Parliament of the Jewish



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Rabbi Perez signing the unity agreement at the WZO in the very room that served as David Ben-Gurion's office during his tenure as Chairman of the Jewish Agency.

People” and gave voice to world Jewry in decisions affecting Israeli society and the Israel-Diaspora relationship. This year, a wall-to-wall unity agreement was decided on regarding the appointment of the major portfolios and positions of influence within the National Institutions – the WZO, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (KKL), Keren HaYesod and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Q: What is a wall-to-wall unity agreement? Why was this important to Mizrachi?

A: The unity of the Jewish people is a primary value at Mizrachi. In the negotiations, there were many different parties pushing for a more extreme stance either to the Right or to the Left.

We saw our role as to not only secure significant leadership positions for ourselves, which we did, but also to act as a bridge ensuring a wall-to-wall agreement in the spirit of the round table nature of these institutions. Mizrachi representatives consistently advocated for a fair deal which should give everyone power and influence based on their relative strength as is the custom in these institutions.

Our negotiating team played a pivotal role in the signing of the agreement in ensuring that ultimately there would be one large table around which all can sit to build the Zionist Movement together going forward.

Q: What key positions did Mizrachi secure?

A: This is the first time since the advent of the Zionist Movement that a Torah-observant Jew – Mizrachi’s Avraham Duvdevani (Duvdev) – has been appointed to head the influential KKL. After we head the KKL for two years, Mizrachi will lead for three years the Rural Development Department of the World Zionist Organization, which, like KKL, works to develop Israel’s periphery in the Negev and Galilee, a goal that is the key to the future of a country that is overly populated in its center and underpopulated in its periphery.

Mizrachi will also head the Education Department of the WZO, which deals with *shlichim* and, in particular, educational *shlichim* to schools around the world, reflecting a commitment to education that has been the focus of religious Zionists for centuries. This position will be held by Gael Grunewald who will also act as the Deputy Chairman of the WZO.

Mizrachi also received the Department for Religious Affairs for the Diaspora, which will be headed by Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman, for the next eight months, followed by Roi Abecassis, who is also deeply committed to these Jewish educational values.

Q: How did Mizrachi succeed in obtaining these positions?

A: This historic milestone happened not because of any backroom deals in Jerusalem but through the strong unified Religious Zionist delegation from Mizrachi branches worldwide, the Mizrachi-driven OIC in the US, and the Religious Zionist parties in Israel, totaling around 80 delegates. This made Mizrachi one of the largest and most influential delegations in the WZC and hence succeeded in obtaining these positions.

Q: How will Mizrachi use these key positions to advance its goals?

A: Mizrachi plans to use their greater influence to benefit the State of Israel

and *Klal Yisrael* – all branches, sectors and streams. Mizrachi will continue to be the bridge builders, facilitating friendship and collegiality among Jews around the world. At such a divisive time for the Jewish people in the US, Israel and around the world, this has never been more important.

Q: What are your take-away impressions of the WZC?

A: This was indeed historic. We at Mizrachi herald this moment of unity and look forward to working with all parties for a better future for the Jewish people, Israel and the Zionist Movement. We are equally humbled at the successes of Mizrachi at the World Zionist Congress in securing influential positions to further the ongoing impact of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* in Israel and around the world. A heartfelt thanks to all our many passionate professionals, lay leaders, ambassadors, volunteers, delegates and voters, who all worked together to secure this incredible result of building on our common fate and furthering the impact of our collective destiny.



Mizrachi’s representatives in the National Institutions: (clockwise from top left) Avraham Duvdevani, Gael Grunewald, Roi Abecassis and Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman

I, along with Chairman of the Board, Mr. Harvey Blitz and all at Mizrachi, wish Avraham Duvdevani, Gael Grunewald, Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman and Roi Abecassis much success in their new and important positions. ■