

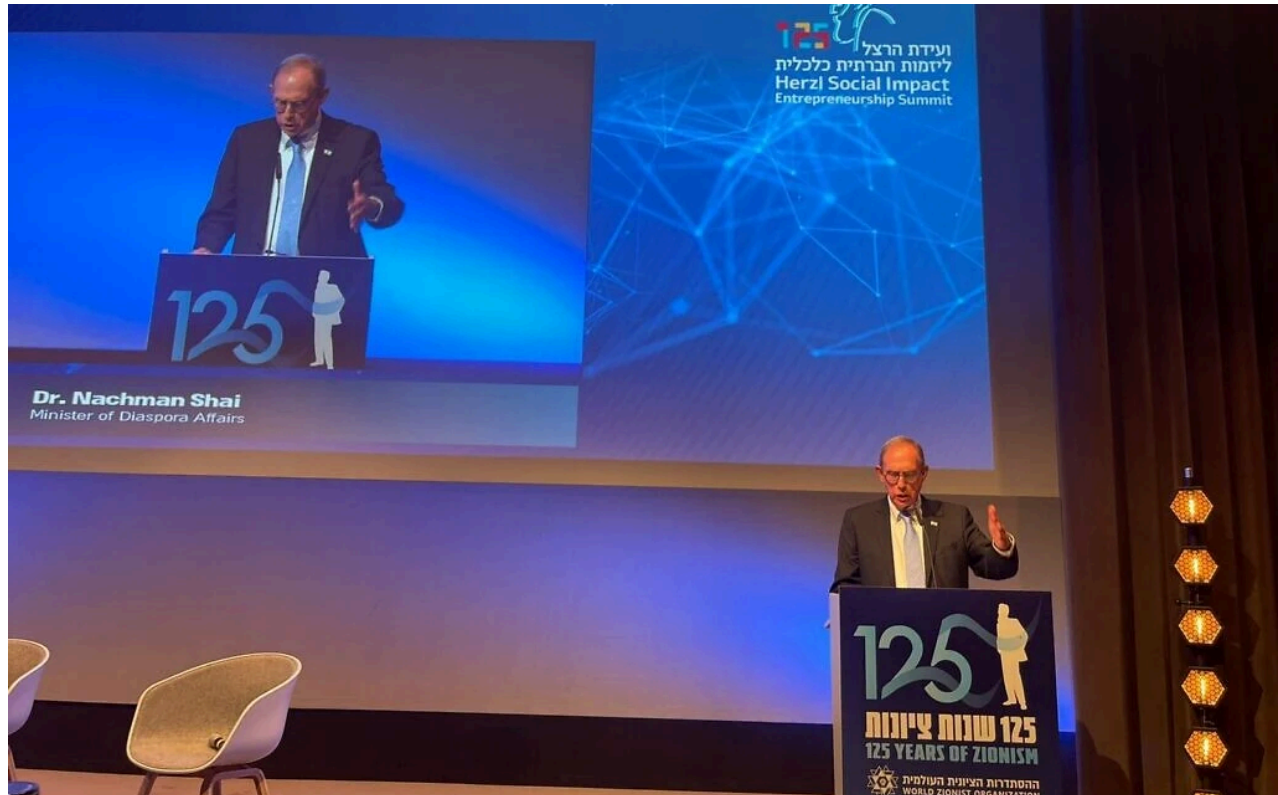
A CRUCIAL ELECTION THAT 'EVERYONE' NEEDS TO BE AWARE OF

Billions at stake: WZO vote sees Orthodox-liberal struggle, opportunity for N. American Jews

Held online from March 10 to May 4 and open to almost all US Jews, vote will help decide how over \$1 billion a year of 'the Jewish people's money' will be allocated to institutions

By ZEV STUB

Today, 5:46 am



Then-Diaspora affairs minister Nachman Shai addresses a World Zionist Organization conference marking the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, on August 28, 2022. (Courtesy)

The upcoming World Zionist Congress election, which takes place online between March 10 and May 4, will establish how a budget of more than \$1 billion a year will be divvied up by Jewish institutions over the next five years.

The vote also gives Jews around the world a measure of influence over Israel's governance and represents the single biggest opportunity for North American Jews to influence the future of the Jewish people, World Zionist Organization officials say.

It's a global inflection point for world Jewry with a number of dramas playing out, including a historic showdown between pluralistic and ultra-Orthodox slates that could affect religious matters for years to come.

"This is the one moment every five years where American Jews can express their opinions on issues that they care about," said Herbert Block, executive director of the American Zionist Movement, which is administering the election.

"There are parties that want to use funding for religious pluralism, for Haredi institutions, for developing Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, for a two-state solution, and for just about every viewpoint in the Jewish world," Block said. "The vote will influence decisions on everything from Israel's post-October 7 rebuilding to Zionist

education to security for Jewish institutions in the Diaspora to supporting vulnerable members of Israeli society. This is the opportunity for people to vote for what they think is important.”

Established by Theodor Herzl in 1897, the congress and its representatives from Jewish communities around the world allocate \$1 billion to Jewish causes every year and oversee Israel’s so-called national institutions, including the World Zionist Organization, which carries out the congress’s vision; the Jewish Agency, which plays a central role in Jewish immigration to Israel; and the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund.

“There are no ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in this election — participation is a victory in and of itself,” Block said. “The larger the voter turnout is, the more the American Jewish voice is heard.”



Herbert Block, executive director of the American Zionist Movement (US Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad)

Voting for the 39th congress is open to all Jews aged 18 or older with permanent residency in the US. Those who voted in Israel’s most recent election in November 2022 are not eligible to vote. Voters must accept the WZO’s principles of Zionism and pay a \$5 fee to vote online.

“There is an element of an honor system, but we also have sophisticated technology in place to prevent voter fraud,” Block said.

Powerful bodies

Many people in the Jewish world aren’t aware of how powerful the congress is, said Yizhar Hess, vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization and representative of Mercaz, the slate of the global Masorti/Conservative Movement.

“We are talking about the budgets of three significant national institutions,” Hess said. “Just as an example, JNF-KKL owns approximately 13% of the land in Israel, generating an annual budget that is larger than what all the Jewish Federations in North America raise together.”

“This is money that belongs to the entire Jewish people,” he added.



Yizhar Hess, vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization, at the National Institutions Building in Jerusalem, February 3, 2025 (Zev Stub/Times of Israel)

The World Zionist Congress is composed of 525 total seats, with representation from three different geographic areas. Israel has 200 seats, which are automatically divided along the lines of political parties' representation in Knesset. Another 152 seats represent the United States, divided according to the election results. The final 173 seats are chosen by other countries, either through a public vote or, in smaller communities, by local Jewish leadership.

The upcoming elections will allow US Jews to choose their 152 representatives from a record 22 slates, a significant increase from the 13 slates to choose from in 2020.

The 39th World Zionist Congress will convene in Jerusalem on October 28-30, 2025.

Approximately 124,000 US Jews voted during the last elections in 2020, from a population of more than 7 million. AZM expects much greater turnout this year, Block said.

More than 2,900 candidates are hoping to be voted in. The WZO requires of every slate that at least 40% of delegates are women and that a quarter are under age 35, Block noted.

"The Zionist Congress has been progressive from the very beginning," Block said. "There were female delegates at the very first congress in Basel, and they could vote in the second congress, at a time when almost no countries allowed women to vote."



Delegates to the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, April 20, 2023. (Twitter video screenshot: used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

Battles between religious camps

One of the most significant dramas of this year's election is the faceoff between pluralistic and ultra-Orthodox slates after the surprising results of the previous election upended the balance of power, Hess said.

"The pluralistic slates had several problems in the 2020 elections," Hess said. "First, our constituents in North America did not turn out to vote in great numbers, and all of the liberal movements' slates lost delegates. That was bad enough."

However, the entrance of a new Haredi party to the congress added further challenges, he said.

"Generally speaking, the Haredi parties in Knesset do not send delegates to the Zionist Congress, but this new [American] party, Eretz HaKodesh, is associated with the United Torah Judaism party, and they managed to win 25 out of 152 seats, a very strong showing for a new party. All of a sudden, the liberal movements became a minority for the first time, while Haredi Jews, who make up only about 5% of American Jewry, have more than 16% of the vote."

Ultra-Orthodox Jew at the headquarters of United Torah Judaism party in Beit Shemesh, outside Jerusalem, during the Municipal Elections there on February 27, 2024. (Yaakov Lederman/Flash90)

This can potentially affect all sorts of decisions affecting the balance of religion and state in Israel, from the Rabbinat's accepting non-Orthodox conversions to decisions about non-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall, Hess said. He noted that the main source of funding for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism in Israel is the Jewish Agency, whose budgets are controlled in part by the congress.

"Israel is at a point where we see a growing trend of Jewish pluralism on one hand, and a growing trend of Jewish fundamentalism on the other," Hess said. "For any of the important decisions that Knesset votes on, the real influence and pressure comes from the national institutions, via the congress."

Fears of Christian involvement

Meanwhile, on the religious right wing, fears are mounting that an influx of new parties will divide the bloc and dilute its strength. Five out of nine new slates running for Congress this year are associated with the religious right, and insiders are concerned that the slates will exhaust their resources fighting against each other and lose focus on their external rivals.

A controversy arose recently when accusations were made that one of the new slates, Israel365 Action, may have a hidden Christian agenda. Israel365, a right-wing pro-Israel advocacy group, has strong ties to evangelical groups, and there were concerns that the organization may have downplayed its interests when it approached former US ambassador to Israel David Friedman and asked him to lend his support to the slate.

Former US ambassador to Israel David Friedman speaks during a Republican Jewish Coalition event in Philadelphia, August 17, 2022. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

After some confusion, Friedman later distanced himself from the group, stating he was not affiliated with any slate or candidate, leading to accusations that Israel365 misused his name. The group is now more transparent about its relationship with “faith-based Christians” on its party platform, saying it plans to “invest in these vital relationships, particularly focusing on the next generation of Christian supporters, ensuring strong backing for a secure, united Israel continues into the future.”

Despite internal disputes and defections, the slate remains on the ballot, and election officials have declined to cite any rule violations.

Meanwhile, Block and the AZM continue to lay the groundwork for the beginning of the elections next month, in what Block says is a vote he hopes everyone will become aware of.

“If you go to a synagogue or a Jewish community center today, there aren’t a lot of people talking about the vote,” Block said. “I hope that by March 10, everyone will have heard about it.”