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EASTER 'PRAYER OFFENSIVE' LAUNCHED ON BEHALF OF PALESTINIAN FREEDOM

By Elena Neuman

NEW YORK, April 3 (JTA) -- The holiest week of the year for Christians may this year become the setting for a unique offensive in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Middle East Council of Churches, a consortium of 24 Middle Eastern churches, has launched a "prayer offensive" on behalf of the Palestinian people, to take place from Palm Sunday, April 8, to the Feast of Pentecost on June 3.

To be distributed to churches throughout the world, and in America by the National Council of Churches, the "Prayer from Jerusalem" seeks to "strengthen those who thirst for mercy and justice, but have been deprived of the right to live in dignity."

"We come to Jerusalem with you," the prayer reads, "and we see that there are those who live in fear. Grant them inner peace. Free them from the illusion that depriving others of their rights, or even eliminating them, will provide security or reaffirm self-identity."

Jewish groups, including the American Jewish Committee and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, as well as the National Council of Christians and Jews, have reacted to the prayer with alarm.

"We believe this prayer transmits a strong anti-Israel bias," said Rabbi A. James Rudin, AJCommittee's interreligious affairs director. It makes the "reckless and unjustified claim that Palestinian Arabs are being deprived of their 'very right to life' by Israel."

"Such language implies that the physical destruction of the Palestinian community is the goal and policy of Israel. This is malicious slander," he said in a statement.

Full Of 'Mischievous Innuendoes'

Rudin asserted that the prayer is a thinly veiled attack on the State of Israel in liturgical form. Its use during the Christian holy week would inject a divisive and polarizing element into such services, he said.

The National Conference of Christians and Jews fears that the prayer will sour Christian-Jewish relations. "I urge you to be alert in a proactive manner to tensions that may arise in your region over the 'Prayer from Jerusalem,'" Elliot Wright, NCCJ senior vice president of program development, said in a memorandum to NCCJ regional directors.

Arden Shenker, chairman of NJCRAC, went as far as to call the prayer a "theological screen for political extremism and distortion," filled with "mischievous innuendoes, sly insinuations and gross inaccuracies."

The prayer seeks to "divide, polarize and to inflame," he said.

But the National Council of Churches does not see what all the fuss is about.

"I think they've read a lot more into the prayer than is there," said Charles Kimbell, the council's Middle East director. "To call it anti-Israel is to read it with prejudice. I think there are many positive points in the prayer that are being overlooked."

The council, which serves as an umbrella organization for 32 church denominations and approximately 45 million constituents, insists that the prayer is not unfair or inappropriate.

"It's no great surprise that there are serious issues of lack of full rights on the part of the Palestinians," said Kimbell. "What you're hearing is the words of Palestinian Christians who are praying. This is the concern that they themselves have voiced."

"We are merely responding to their request that it be distributed," he said. "Churches can use it or not use it as they see fit."

Some Churches Avoiding Prayer

Some churches, in fact, have decided not to adopt the prayer. The Dutch Council of Churches and individual Protestant churches in West Germany have refused to use the prayer, calling it "one-sided."

The Middle East Council effort, which goes under the name Christians for Peace in the Holy Land, was initiated at an international meeting in Geneva in November 1989, but its origins date back at least two years.

In January 1988, the heads of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican churches in Jerusalem issued a joint statement calling upon churches throughout the world to join them in a search for a "real peace based on justice" for all the people of the region.

In April 1989, they reiterated their appeal, adding a request to the United Nations "to give urgent attention to the plight of the Palestinian people."

The Palm Sunday prayer is meant to initiate "a period of action and reflection," according to Gabriel Habib, the Middle East Council's general secretary. Activities will include prayers and fasting, public events, representations to governments and various events in Jerusalem.

"This is nothing new," said Rudin. "Over the last 15 years, the Middle East Council has shown a consistent anti-Israel bias. This year it's responding to the intifada. If it wasn't the intifada, it would be something else."

LABOR INCHES CLOSER TOWARD COALITION AS BATTLE CENTERS ON LIKUD DEFECTORS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 3 (JTA) -- The Labor Party inched closer Tuesday to forming a government as it formally signed a coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael party and picked up support from Likud defectors.

Labor Party leader Shimon Peres needs a single vote to break the Knesset's current 60-60 deadlock and form a governing majority in the 120-seat legislative body. He has until April 11, when his presidential mandate to come up with a viable coalition expires.

Peres' fortunes depend on a group of five defectors from Likud's Liberal Party wing who were said to be split over whether to go with Labor or return to the fold.

The breakaways, who call themselves the Party for the Advancement of Liberal-Zionist Values, are headed by Yitzhak Moda'i, the former minister of economics and planning.

According to an army radio report Tuesday morning, he and colleague Avraham Sharir are prepared to join a Labor-led coalition.

But the other three defectors -- Knesset members Yosef Goldberg, Pessah Grupper and Pinhas Goldstein -- prefer to stick with Likud.

Moda'i himself was seeking a deal from Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir only a day to two ago.

Money Reportedly Offered

Likud Transport Minister Moshe Katsav confirmed media reports Tuesday night that Shamir offered the Moda'i group a cash guarantee to back their promise of safe seats on the next Likud election list. The reports put it at \$10 million.

Moda'i did not deny the amount. "If they intend to keep the promise, what difference does it make?" he said.

Labor reportedly did not offer Moda'i safe seats.

But Peres is said to have promised to name him finance minister, the portfolio Moda'i held when Peres was prime minister in the Labor-Likud coalition government in 1984-85.

There were unconfirmed reports that Moda'i had demanded that a new Labor-led government postpone for six months a decision to accept U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's proposal for an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

Moda'i opposed the peace initiative originally launched by Shamir and quit the government in protest against Shamir's diplomacy with the United States.

Meanwhile, the Labor Party was reported Tuesday evening to have requested that the Knesset, currently in recess, be convened Thursday so that Peres could present a government.

There was no confirmation from Peres, who said only that he hoped to announce a breakthrough in "a day or two."

3 IDF OFFICERS ON HUNGER STRIKE FOR ELECTORAL REFORM WIN SUPPORT

By Cathrine Gerson

JERUSALEM, April 3 (JTA) -- Three Israel Defense Force reserve officers, in the second week of a hunger strike for electoral reform, seem to be rallying thousands of Israelis to their cause.

Col. David Meital, Lt. Col. Avi Kadish and Maj. Shahar Ben-Meir have been camping in a tent outside the Knesset building, subsisting on liquids. They have drawn large crowds of well-wishers and praise from Mayors Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem and Shlomo Lahat of Tel Aviv.

Kollek sent a heater to their tent, which was buffeted by rain and sleet Sunday and Monday.

The officers were received Monday morning by President Chaim Herzog, an outspoken advocate of reform. They said they were immensely encouraged.

The officers said they expected a million citizens to attend a rally in Tel Aviv next Saturday night to demand that the nation be polled on electoral reform.

The three officers, who range in age from the late 30s to the mid-50s, said they were galvanized after the Knesset voted huge allocations to the religious institutions of the ultra-Orthodox parties, which would hold the balance of power in a new coalition government.

LUBAVITCHER REBBE SPEAKS OUT AGAINST RABBI SCHACH'S MESSAGE

NEW YORK, April 3 (JTA) -- Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the Brooklyn-based Lubavitcher rebbe, delivered a strong if indirect rebuke last weekend to Rabbi Eliezer Schach for disparaging non-religious Jews in a March 26 speech in Tel Aviv.

Addressing his followers in Yiddish here Saturday afternoon, the Chabad leader in effect said Schach should repent for having denigrated a part of the Jewish people.

The two venerated leaders of opposing camps of strictly Orthodox Judaism have long been foes. The Lithuanian-born Schach, 92, is an implacable foe of Chabad Hasidism, which he considers pagan. He has denounced the Lubavitcher rebbe as a heretic and false messiah.

But their feud has been one-sided. At least until now, the Chabad leader has not deigned to reply to Schach's attacks.

On Saturday, however, Schneerson's weekly Sabbath commentary was peppered with oblique references to Schach's now infamous speech, in which he denounced non-religious Jews in general and kibbutz members specifically for spurning religious practices.

Excerpts of the rebbe's remarks, provided by his spokesman, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, included assertions that "every Jew is part of God" and that "anyone who berates any Jew is touching the apple of God's eye."

The rebbe also was quoted as saying, "Every Jew, regardless of differences and levels of observances, is part of Am Echad," the unified Jewish people.

While the rebbe spoke in general terms, his words seemed very much an answer to Schach, who told an audience of some 10,000 male followers at the convention of the ultra-Orthodox Degel HaTorah party that kibbutz members forfeited their right to be called Jews because they failed to observe the Sabbath, Yom Kippur and the kashrut laws.

Rejects Territorial Compromise

Schneerson also disagreed sharply, albeit indirectly, with Schach's dovish position on the peace process and territorial compromise.

While the rabbi from Bnei Brak is prepared to trade land for peace because halachah upholds the primacy of saving lives, the Chabad leader said that the "Land of Israel" belongs to all of the Jewish people and that "no one has any permission to relinquish any part of it to anyone."

Schach founded Degel HaTorah shortly before the 1988 Knesset elections and the larger Sephardic Shas party before the 1984 elections. Both were offshoots of the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael party, which Schach charged was taken over by the Chabad movement, though the Lubavitcher rebbe claims no involvement.

The three so-called haredi parties were part of the Likud-Labor unity coalition government that collapsed under a Labor-sponsored no-confidence motion in the Knesset on March 15.

Labor Party leader Shimon Peres is courting them in his efforts to put together a government. So far Labor has an agreement with the Agudah, but has made no headway with Degel or Shas.

Schach's polemic against the kibbutzim seemed to shut the door to such an arrangement, since the kibbutzim are a Labor stronghold.

JEWISH GROUP ASKS U.S. TO PRESS SHEVARNADZE ON TRANSIT ROUTES

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 3 (JTA) -- Leaders of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry personally asked the State Department on Tuesday for assistance in finding new routes for Jews to leave the Soviet Union.

"If there were four or five transit points, that would ease the pressure," said Shoshana Cardin, chairwoman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

The NCSJ request, made to Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, came hours before the arrival here of Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Shevardnadze will be meeting with Secretary of State James Baker from Wednesday through Friday. Eagleburger went from the NCSJ meeting to Andrews Air Force Base to welcome the Soviet foreign minister.

More than 17,000 Jews have left the Soviet Union so far this year, the vast majority of whom have settled in Israel. Most fly from the Soviet Union to Budapest, Hungary, or Bucharest, Romania, and then board planes to Tel Aviv.

While the National Conference is seeking additional cities to serve as transit points, the group has not backed down from its position that the Soviets should begin direct flights to Israel.

"Obviously direct flights would be the prime choice" for Soviet Jews wanting to go to Israel, Cardin said. But until the USSR "deems it wise for itself to permit direct flights," the National Conference would like to see "as many additional transit points as possible," she added.

List Of 246 Refuseniks Presented

The National Conference told Eagleburger there is a need to "keep access routes open so that (Soviet Jews) don't have the sense of being trapped," Cardin said.

The group handed Eagleburger a list of 246 Jews refused permission to leave the Soviet Union. Of these, 121 are "poor relatives," those blocked from leaving by family members who rely on them for financial support; 86 were refused for alleged access to "state secrets"; and 39 were "arbitrary refusals," the group said.

The delegation also raised concerns about a six-month wait in customs for taking furniture out of the Soviet Union. Cardin explained that to Soviet emigrants, taking their furniture with them is very important, because they are not permitted to take money out of the country.

Addressing fear about the possibility of pogroms in the Soviet Union, Eagleburger said that U.S. officials "have not been able to document incidents of physical violence" against Soviet Jews, Cardin reported.

Eagleburger said Baker would ask Shevardnadze to formally recognize the Va'ad, the federation founded in December by 204 Soviet Jewish groups in 70 localities.

In the Soviet Union, "any inability to function as a registered organization means that one is illegitimate," Cardin explained.

Richard Schifter, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, was at the meeting Tuesday, as were representatives of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, B'nai B'rith International, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress and Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

KAHANE SEDITION TRIAL, NOW IN RECESS, COULD BE DISMISSED ON A TECHNICALITY

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 3 (JTA) -- Rabbi Meir Kahane's sedition trial opened Monday in Jerusalem District Court, but was postponed until after Passover and could be dismissed on a technicality.

The 57-year-old leader of the Kach movement, who was ousted from the Knesset two years ago for racism, has been charged with incitement to rebellion.

His attorney, Zvi Hadar, surprised the court by pointing out that the three-page indictment was not signed and therefore invalid. Kahane accordingly entered no plea on the grounds that there was no case to answer.

Although District Prosecutor Uzi Hasson argued that the omission was a minor oversight with ample precedent, Judge Ruth Orr reserved decision until after the holidays.

If she finds for the defense, the case will be dismissed.

The law says no charge can be pressed more than six months after an alleged defense. Kahane's indictment relates to events that took place in July 1989. If it is found to be invalid, a new indictment cannot be issued.

The charges against the Brooklyn-born rabbi stem from a terrorist incident that shook Israel.

An Arab passenger grabbed the wheel of a crowded Egged bus on the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway in July 1989, forcing it to crash and burn in a ravine. Sixteen passengers were killed.

Kahane, addressing a rally of his supporters in Jerusalem on July 7, asked rhetorically, "Who killed them?"

Answering himself, he said, "The Arabs in our midst, who are spreading like a cancer. And any Jew who says that is not humane or nice or against Judaism -- every such Jew has the blood of innocent people on his head, for he is a partner to the murder."

But civil libertarians who find Kahane's views repulsive have rallied to his defense on the grounds that the sedition trial violates his right to freedom of speech. Among them is Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz.

YUGOSLAV JEW GETS 3 YEARS AS PLO SPY

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 3 (JTA) -- A Jewish immigrant from Yugoslavia was sentenced Monday by a Haifa court to three years in prison for spying for the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Victoria David, 34, who came to Israel in 1987, also drew a three-year suspended sentence.

She pleaded guilty on March 5 to charges of passing information to the enemy, conspiring to gather information for the enemy and membership in an illegal organization.

David allegedly was recruited in 1985 by Al Fatah in her native Yugoslavia. She was accused of photographing military installations.

ISRAEL LAUNCHES SECOND SATELLITE

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 3 (JTA) -- Israel successfully launched its second space satellite Tuesday.

Ofek 2, built by Israel Aircraft Industries, soared into orbit at 3 p.m. local time. It will circle the Earth at an altitude under 125 miles, for an expected two-month stay in space.

PLO MAGAZINE CALLS HOLOCAUST A LIE, WIESENTHAL CENTER COMPLAINS TO BAKER
By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES, April 3 (JTA) -- Two articles in an official magazine of the Palestine Liberation Organization describe the Holocaust as "the lie of the 20th century," which contradicts PLO chief Yasir Arafat's recent claims of moderation, officials of the Simon Wiesenthal Center have said in a letter to Secretary of State James Baker.

The letter requests that the United States "officially protest and raise this matter during the next dialogue with the PLO."

While other Arab sources have tried to demean the Holocaust in the past, "this is the first time, to our knowledge, that the PLO has done so," Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center, said in an interview.

The two articles appeared Dec. 13 and 20 in the Cyprus-based weekly *El-Istiklal* ("Independence"), which was started last year by Arafat as the official PLO publication for Palestinians on topics dealing with the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Banner headlines above the articles read: "How Did Zionist Propaganda Cloud Science and Mind? A First Quiet Travel Through the Climate of Fear" and "Burning of the Jews in the Nazi Chambers Is the Lie of the 20th Century in Order to Legitimize the New Nazism."

The articles' author, Dr. Khaled Lel-Shamali of Jordan, is presented as a scientist with special expertise in intensive heat stoves, who said that he visited the former concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, last summer.

Citing first an alleged *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry that 6 million Jews and some 7 million other people were killed at Sachsenhausen, Shamali goes on to "prove" that, "contrary to the stupidities of Zionism," only 28,000 Jews were exterminated at the camp.

Also on the basis of his guided tour of the camp, Shamali claims that "Nazi camps were more civilized than Israeli prisons. Jews are complaining of their treatment by the Gestapo, whereas the truth is that they were served healthy food as proven by the dining rooms that we observed there."

The letter to Baker, signed by the Wiesenthal Center's dean, Rabbi Marvin Hier, concludes: "These remarks, printed with the full endorsement of the editor in the most important publication of the PLO on the territories, is hardly conducive to the peace process."

CARTER TO MEET WEDNESDAY WITH ARAFAT
By Edwin Eytan

PARIS, April 3 (JTA) -- Former President Jimmy Carter is scheduled to meet here Wednesday with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat.

Palestinian and Arab diplomatic sources in Paris confirmed that the meeting will take place at Carter's hotel.

They called it a major diplomatic breakthrough.

Carter, though ex-officio, will be the highest-ranking American personality with whom Arafat has met.

The meeting was kept under wraps until now, presumably to avoid public protests.

Jewish organizations, having learned about it, are preparing to demonstrate outside the hotel while the meeting is in progress Wednesday.

ARGENTINA PLANS TO EXTRADITE NAZI SUSPECT TO WEST GERMANY
By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK, April 3 (JTA) -- Accused Nazi war criminal Jozef Schwammberger, ordered extradited from Argentina, will be handed over to West German authorities on May 3, according to Manuel Tenenbaum, director of the Latin American Branch of the World Jewish Congress.

Tenenbaum received his information from the Argentine Justice Ministry and conveyed it to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC, which is headquartered here.

Schwammberger, 78, will be handed over to officials of the West German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. He is to stand trial for war crimes in Stuttgart, West Germany, for the killings of at least 5,000 Jews while he was commandant of the concentration camps at Przemysl and Mielec in Poland in 1943-44.

The Argentine Supreme Court decided last month to uphold West Germany's extradition order, filed in 1973 by a court in Stuttgart.

Schwammberger was arrested Nov. 13, 1987, in Cordoba province, Argentina, where he had been hiding.

He was arrested one month after the Simon Wiesenthal Center held a new conference that publicized Schwammberger as its No. 1 "most wanted" Nazi war criminal. His photograph was circulated in the Argentine media.

"This represents the first time ever that Argentina has ever extradited a Nazi war criminal," said Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center. "It's a positive indication that Argentina will look into other cases."

The cooperation of the West German authorities was called "excellent" by Elliott Welles, director of the Task Force on Nazi War Criminals of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

Welles cited the \$290,000 posted by the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. The reward was paid to an unidentified party.

Cooper said the West German government has over 50 eyewitnesses to Schwammberger's crimes. "He was unique because he was both a bureaucrat and a hands-on murderer," Cooper said.

THREE JEWS ON CITY COUNCIL OF NICE RESIGN TO PROTEST TIES WITH LE PEN
By Edwin Eytan

PARIS, April 3 (JTA) -- Three Jewish members of the Nice City Council resigned this week to protest Mayor Jacques Medecin's alleged cooperation with Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extreme right-wing National Front.

Le Pen was charged with "incitement to racial hatred" by an investigating magistrate in Paris on March 22 and is expected to stand trial before the end of the year.

Although claiming he is not anti-Semitic, Le Pen has publicly called the Holocaust fraudulent, and has insulted members of Parliament, both Jews and non-Jews, with puns on Holocaust imagery and oblique accusations that Jews are not good French patriots.

The Jewish municipal officials said they could not serve under Medecin after he hosted the National Front's convention at a Nice municipal hall last weekend. The Jewish officials -- Jill-Patrice Cassuto, Andre Sfar and Harry Levy--represent center-right parties.