

ORTHODOX SHAS PARTY SIDES WITH LIKUD, DIMMING CHANCES OF LABOR GOVERNMENT

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 23 (JTA) -- Shimon Peres' chances to form a Labor-led coalition government suffered a possibly fatal blow when the pivotal Shas party agreed late Sunday night to support Likud instead.

Barring a sudden change in Peres' fortunes, the task of forming a new government will go to acting Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the Likud leader, as soon as Peres' presidential mandate expires Thursday.

Another strong possibility is the replacement of Peres by Labor's more popular No. 2 leader, former Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, as head of the party.

But Peres, who has struggled unsuccessfully to form a government since March 20, refused to give up Monday.

He flatly rejected Likud urgings that he acknowledge defeat and hand back his mandate to President Chaim Herzog immediately, so that it could be passed to Shamir without further delay.

While members of the Rabin camp insisted their man stood a better chance than Peres to set up a government and might still pull it off, Laborites as a whole seem resigned that Shamir will become prime minister-designate before the week ends.

But many in Labor think it is not too late to change the party leadership. They believe that with Rabin at the helm, Labor can successfully block Shamir's coalition-building efforts for the 42 days he is allowed by law.

After that, the theory goes, Rabin's candidacy might be advanced, either as prime minister of a narrow coalition or of another national unity government.

Peres' supporters insist the game is not over.

But their bravado seems to stem from vague hopes that Likud's allies on the extreme right wing will balk at the deal struck between Shamir and the Sephardic sages who govern the ultra-Orthodox Shas.

Speculation Over Agreement

A paradox that fueled Labor's hopes was that Shas, uncompromising on religious issues, is remarkably dovish on the peace process.

The party's spiritual mentor, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a renown halachic authority, subscribes to the land-for-peace formula, which is compatible with Labor's views but anathema to Likud.

Yosef demanded last month that the Shamir government accept U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's formula for Israeli-Palestinian talks in Cairo to implement Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Although elections were part of the peace plan launched by Shamir in May 1989, the Likud leader balked on the issues of who could represent the Palestinians at preliminary talks and which Palestinians could cast ballots in the elections.

When Shamir could not give an ironclad commitment, Yosef ordered Shas' five-member

Knesset faction to absent itself during the March vote on a Labor-sponsored no-confidence motion. As a result, Shamir's government was toppled.

Labor thought it could count on Shas support or at least its neutrality. Indeed, Yosef declared on the radio March 18 that he would have had to "answer to God for the needless blood that might be spilled" had he supported a "rightist-extremist" government of Likud with the right-wing Tehiya, Tsomet and Moledet parties.

That seemed to be the thinking of Shas until Sunday night, when its four Torah sages met under Yosef's chairmanship and agreed to align with Likud.

Immediately afterward, Rabbi Arye Deri of Shas, who has been interior minister, met privately with Shamir, and the two men signed an agreement. Its undisclosed contents were the subject of much speculation, since Deri, too, is willing to trade land for peace.

Shamir met with Likud ministers and was scheduled to meet later with Tehiya party allies to try to convince them he made no meaningful concessions on the peace front to satisfy Shas.

Likud Consolidating Position

Shas sources said the prime minister and the rabbi reached a full understanding on the peace process. They said Yosef was convinced Shamir genuinely intends to press ahead with it.

But the same sources indicated that Israel would not respond favorably to the Baker plan if Shamir forms a new government led by Likud. They maintained that the Cairo dialogue would proceed, but were vague on the issues of Palestinian representation that has stymied it so far.

Likud, meanwhile, was busy Monday trying to consolidate its advantage. The party reached an agreement with Eliezer Mizrahi, who quit the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael party two weeks ago because it had made a deal with Labor.

If Shamir succeeds with Mizrahi, he will have 60 Knesset votes, enough to prevent Labor from setting up a government.

He is working on a Likud renegade, Avraham Sharir, who offered himself to Labor in exchange for a safe seat on its next election list.

Likud is also trying to woo away a possible Labor defector, Knesset member Efraim Gur.

U.S. OBJECTS TO ASSISTANCE ISRAEL GAVE SETTLERS IN CHRISTIAN QUARTER

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 23 (JTA) -- The State Department expressed dismay Monday at reports that the Israeli government helped Jewish settlers acquire a building in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

"Today's admission by the Israeli Housing Ministry that it subsidized the settlers' action is deeply disturbing," said department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler.

She also called the settlers' activity, launched during the Christian holy days immediately preceding Easter, an "insensitive and provocative action."

The controversy erupted April 11, when 150 Orthodox Jewish settlers moved into a building owned by the Greek Orthodox Church, which they

claimed to have leased from an Armenian businessman.

Their presence, the first settlement of Jews in the Christian Quarter since Israel captured the Old City in 1967, touched off interreligious strife in Jerusalem and sharp criticism of Israel abroad.

Israel's High Court of Justice is now considering whether the lease was legal and whether the settlers should be evicted, as a lower court ruled.

Charges that Israel's Construction and Housing Ministry had provided nearly \$2 million of the funds used to lease the building were levied Sunday by a left-wing Israeli Knesset member and confirmed late in the day by the ministry.

If the money used came from U.S. foreign aid dollars, that would violate U.S. policy, which bars the use of U.S. funds beyond Israel's 1967 borders to help non-Palestinians.

Tutwiler said that the U.S. ambassador in Israel, William Brown, has officially complained to the Israeli government.

AJCongress Sharply Denounces Move

In New York, the American Jewish Congress said it was "appalled" that "members of a narrow Israeli caretaker government, operating during a political (transition period) without a democratic mandate, have participated in a clandestine effort to settle Jews in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem."

AJCongress said the settlement activity "underscores once again Israel's desperate need for electoral reform," aimed at preventing small political parties from having hold over the large ones.

Tutwiler had no assessment when asked if the incident could delay passage by Congress of a bill that would provide Israel with \$400 million in loan guarantees to house Soviet Jews in Israel proper.

But AJCongress argued that "this controversial and polarizing action can endanger the prospect of U.S. support of Israel generally and of desperately needed housing guarantees for Soviet Jews specifically."

"It also threatens to complicate the difficult task of raising unprecedented sums of money from world Jewry," the group said.

"By its complicity in this activity," the group added, "the caretaker government jeopardizes the historic exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel."

Tutwiler said the United States has not asked Israel yet for any assurances on how the U.S.-guaranteed funds are used, particularly because the caretaker government is currently in charge in Israel.

On April 3, the House of Representatives approved the \$400 million as part of a \$2.4 billion supplemental appropriations bill for this fiscal year, which began Oct. 1.

But the administration has yet to formally request the \$400 million in housing loan guarantees.

In the Senate, the bill is tied up in the Appropriations Committee. A committee session had been scheduled for Monday exclusively to consider the bill, but the hearing was delayed indefinitely.

A source on the committee said the delay had nothing to do with Israel's admission to helping the settlers, but rather to accommodate senators who took a long weekend.

NJCRCR PANEL DECIDES NOT TO ADOPT STAND ON SETTLEMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

By Allison Kaplan

NEW YORK, April 23 (JTA) -- A controversial statement that would have expressed American Jewish concern over settlement of Soviet Jews in Israel's administered territories has been overwhelmingly rejected by the Israel Task Force of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

The original recommendation that the Israel Task Force take up the matter was the subject of heated debate during NJCRCR's plenary session in February.

The proposal, which narrowly passed the plenum in a 216-207 vote, voiced concern that the construction of new housing for Soviet Jewish immigrants in the territories would "detract from the aliyah potential and our fund raising," as well as "increase tensions between Israelis and Palestinians."

At the time, the vote drew media attention in the United States and Israel, and provoked significant criticism. A heated editorial in the Jerusalem Post even claimed that NJCRCR, an umbrella organization of 13 national and 117 community member agencies, was not representative of the American Jewish community.

Members of the Israel Task Force said that recent events, particularly the force of the Arab campaign to curtail Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, has convinced them they must now stand staunchly behind Israel, despite their personal opinions regarding settlement in the territories.

"We realize now that we are in a battle," said Kenneth Jacobson, director of international affairs for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and a member of the Israel Task Force.

"This is not a time when the American Jewish community should be perceived as criticizing Israel," he added.

'Number Is Insignificant'

The task force noted that Israeli government statistics show that very few Soviet Jews are going to the territories.

"The number is insignificant, and addressing this diverts from the major issues," said Maynard Wishner of Chicago, co-chairman of the panel.

One of the architects of the plenum proposals, Theodore Mann of Philadelphia, reacted to the Task Force decision "with disappointment."

Mann, who represents the American Jewish Congress on NJCRCR's executive committee, said he may continue to push for the statement's inclusion in the Joint Program Plan, NJCRCR's annual advisory guide for member agencies.

Rabbi David Saperstein, co-director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, a forceful proponent of the proposal during the plenum, said he does not consider the task force decision a defeat.

He said the vote in February sent a significant message to the Israeli government at a crucial time.

"The point was made through the action of the plenum regarding American Jewry's concern about efforts to settle Soviet Jews on the West Bank," Saperstein said.

"The dramatic impact of the voicing of the plenum's concern helped put an end in Israel to any plans to increase such settlement activity."

"Clearly, the political situation since the plenum has changed," he said.

**SEVEN ISRAELI FLIERS KILLED
IN CRASH OF AIR FORCE CHOPPERS**

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 23 (JTA) -- Two Israeli air force helicopters collided in mid-air Sunday night, killing all seven pilots and crew members aboard.

The disaster occurred at about 9:45 p.m. local time over the Samaria region of the West Bank.

Both helicopters were Sikorsky CH-53D transports known as Stallions, or "Yas'ur" in Hebrew.

The giant choppers, each able to lift 50 fully-equipped combat troops, were on a routine training flight, according to the air force. One carried two pilots and two crew members, and the other two pilots and one crew member.

Maj. Gen. Avihu Bin-Nun, the air force commander, who visited the crash site Sunday night, has named a high-level board of inquiry to determine the cause of the crash.

The air force said the collision occurred when the aircraft were several miles north of Ramallah, near Ba'al Hatzor and Nevo Shilo, on the eastern slopes of the Samaria range overlooking the Jordan Valley.

Soldiers at a nearby Israel Defense Force camp saw a sudden fireball in the air and rushed to the scene.

They found the burning remains of one helicopter and pulled two of its three occupants out alive, but both men died before they could reach a hospital.

The wreckage of the second helicopter was found on a rocky hillside several hours later. All four aboard were dead.

The IDF identified the four pilots Monday as Lt. Col. Hagay Koshet, 39; Maj. Shai Tzofni, 29; reserve Capt. Ilan Kaufman, 29; and Capt. Nimrod Paschi, 23.

The dead crew members were Chief Master Sgt. Gideon Hanon, 31; Master Sgt. Mordechai Goren, 23; and Master Sgt. Yaron Hadad, 22.

Funeral services were being held Monday and Tuesday. The IDF asked the news media not to attend, in deference to the families' wishes.

**BUSH SIGNS SECOND BILL ENACTING
LEGISLATION AGAINST HATE CRIMES**

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 23 (JTA) -- President Bush signed the Hate Crimes Statistics Act on Monday, marking the enactment of the second major anti-bias bill in two years.

"By collecting and publicizing this information, we can shore up our first line of defense against the erosion of civil rights by alerting the cops on the beat," Bush said at a ceremony attended by 175 people in the Old Executive Office Building.

Jewish groups, including the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee, along with civil rights and homosexual rights groups, had strongly lobbied for the measure.

Religious groups had worked in 1988 for passage of the first hate crimes bill, which created federal penalties as high as \$250,000 and 10-year jail sentence for religious vandalism.

The president promised to use the White House pulpit to "speak out against hate and discrimination everywhere it exists."

Bush also announced that the Justice De-

partment has set up a toll-free telephone number -- (800) 347-HATE -- for people to inform it of bias crimes.

"For America to continue to be a good place for any of us to live, it must be a good place for all of us to live," Bush said.

**12 MEMBERS OF HOUSE PANEL PROTEST
U.S. HOSTING RUSSIAN NATIONALISTS**

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, April 23 (JTA) -- A dozen members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee have written to President Bush, protesting the government-sponsored tour of the United States by a group of Russian nationalist editors that includes three persons considered to be anti-Semitic.

The letter, initiated by Rep. Lawrence Smith (D-Fla.), also was sent to Bruce Gelb, director of the U.S. Information Agency, under whose auspices the tour is being conducted.

While expressing their general support for USIA exchange programs, the House members said the agency "made a gross error" in selecting persons known for anti-Semitic views.

"No matter how far the State Department tries to distance itself from the views of some of the visiting leaders, the mere presence of such leaders on the tour will be perceived as U.S. government acceptance and/or endorsement of their views," the letter said.

The State Department had admitted knowing of the anti-Semitic views, but it argued that the purpose of the visit was to teach the participants "how the United States works as a multiethnic society based on individual freedom."

Smith's letter also was signed by Reps. Howard Berman, Barbara Boxer, Mel Levine and Tom Lantos, all California Democrats; Sam Gejdenson (D-Conn.), Robert Torricelli (R-N.J.), Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.), Edward Feighan (D-Ohio), Dan Burton (R-Ind.) Porter Goss (R-Fla.) and Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.).

**180 CZECHOSLOVAK JEWS TO ACCOMPANY
HAVEL ON HISTORIC VISIT TO ISRAEL**

By Josef Klansky

PRAGUE, April 23 (JTA) -- President Vaclav Havel has invited 180 members of the Czechoslovak Jewish community to accompany him on his trip to Israel on Wednesday.

Havel offered the free flight to the community members during a radio broadcast.

The president's Jewish compatriots will accompany him in two Czechoslovak air force planes departing April 25. They will stay in Israel until April 29. Havel and his government entourage leave on April 27.

Havel will receive an honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree from the Hebrew University. The presentation ceremony will be held Thursday on the university's Givat Ram campus.

The ceremony will be attended by international notables, including British newspaper tycoon Robert Maxwell, a Czechoslovak-born Jew.

Havel's visit to the Hebrew University is preceded by that of a countryman 63 years ago. In 1928, Tomas Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's first president and, like Havel, a writer, visited the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus, two years after its opening.

(JTA correspondent Gil Sedan in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

SPATE OF ANTI-SEMITIC INCIDENTS WORRIES THE JEWS OF AUSTRALIA

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, April 23 (JTA) -- Beefed-up police units patrolled Australia's largest Jewish population centers over the weekend, alert for neo-Nazi activity on Yom Hashoah, the memorial day for Holocaust victims.

Australia, which is virtually the size of the continental United States but with a population of only 16 million, is home to a proportionally high percentage of Holocaust survivors.

It also has a reputation as a land free of anti-Semitism and discrimination.

That is why a spate of anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi incidents in recent months has seriously disturbed the Jewish community, although no one has been injured and property damage has been minimal.

The incidents, mainly vandalism and verbal abuse, have been attributed to neo-Nazi teenagers and Skinheads, shaven-headed youths who wear Nazi-like regalia and harass minorities.

The incidents occurred in the three main Jewish population centers: Melbourne, Victoria, in southeastern Australia; Sydney, in the neighboring state of New South Wales; and Perth, across the continent in Western Australia.

The most serious occurrences were in Melbourne, which has a Jewish population of 40,000.

Three gasoline-bomb attacks on synagogues occurred in the past month, without casualties or serious damage.

In Perth, with a Jewish population of 5,000, the president of the Council of Western Australian Jewry, Doron Ur, was given a police escort after he was threatened at a public forum on "Race, the Press and Free Speech."

A spokesman for the Australian League of Rights, the country's largest racist, anti-Semitic organization, used the forum to deny the Holocaust occurred.

He drew a vigorous response from the Romanian-born Ur, a Holocaust survivor who was heckled and threatened by Skinheads in the audience.

In Sydney, where the Jewish community numbers more than 30,000, vandals have defaced Hebrew schools, synagogues, mikvehs (ritual baths) and communal offices during the past year.

Bomb threats interrupted the two largest Jewish day school classes. Graffiti has greeted worshippers arriving at synagogues, and Jewish youth groups have found equipment vandalized, despite security patrols.

Community spokesmen admit they are disturbed by the increasing incidence of what they call "petty anti-Semitism" and the lack of progress so far in identifying the perpetrators.

The government's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is preparing a report on an inquiry into racial violence in Australia.

HOLOCAUST SCHOLAR DENIES NOTION THAT NAZIS MADE SOAP FROM JEWS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 23 (JTA) -- Professor Yehuda Bauer, head of the Hebrew University's Holocaust history department and regarded as one of the foremost researchers of the Holocaust, has denied the frequently quoted charge that the Nazis used the bodies of Jewish death camp victims to make soap.

The technical possibilities for transforming human fat into soap were not known at that time, Bauer said Sunday at a Holocaust memorial meeting for Yom Hashoah.

The camp inmates were prepared to believe any horror stories about their persecutors, and the Nazis were content to let them go on believing the reports, he said.

"The Nazis did enough horrible things during the Holocaust. We do not have to go on believing untrue stories," Bauer said.

Unsubstantiated rumors about the use of bodies of British soldiers to make soap had circulated during both World War I and World War II, he said.

Professor Raoul Hilberg, an eminent historian of the Holocaust, agrees that the soap rumor, although widespread, was probably unfounded.

"There were all kinds of rumors," he said, noting that a New York Times article during the war suggested that Jews were given lethal injections before deportation and arrived at the extermination camps already dead.

Other rumors speculated that Jews were killed in the Belzec camp by electrocution in water; some thought that Jews were gassed in the trains.

"All of these rumors are untrue, based on nothing at all," Hilberg said. "No evidence has turned up" to suggest that the Nazis used human fat to make soap.

In Danzig, Germany (now Gdansk, Poland), pictures of dead, heavyset people cut into pieces and a recipe for soap were discovered in 1945 at the Stutthof camp. "But we don't know that the bodies were of Jews, or that the pictures and recipe went together," said Hilberg.

Moreover, the rumor was being circulated as early as 1942, according to documentary evidence.

"It's fairly reliable that the story was circulated, but I can't say whether or not it is true," said Hilberg.

(JTA staff writer Elena Neuman in New York contributed to this report.)

ISRAELI JEWS OF LITHUANIAN ORIGIN ASK LITHUANIA TO ADMIT HOLOCAUST ROLE
By Cathrine Gerson

JERUSALEM, April 23 (JTA) -- Israelis of Lithuanian origin are demanding that Lithuania acknowledge its role during the Holocaust before it asks world support for its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union.

The Lithuanian government, headed by President Vytautas Landsbergis, has not spoken publicly of collaboration between Lithuanians and the Nazis during World War II.

Lithuania is trying to rewrite Lithuanian history of that era, according to Dr. Abba Gefen, chairman of the Organization of Israelis of Lithuanian Origin.

He said it was "most serious, especially now, when even the East German government has accepted their responsibility for the Nazi crimes and have asked forgiveness from the Jewish people and Israel."

The organization is protesting specifically against turning the site of Holocaust atrocities in Kovno (Kaunas) into a museum of Stalin's terror.

Lithuania, which was occupied by Soviet forces in 1939, declared independence when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 and, according to many sources, were enthusiastic collaborators in the killing of more than 46,000 Jews.