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CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT TO RETAIN EXISTING POLICY ON HOMOSEXUALITY

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, March 26 (JTA) -- The rabbis on a committee that sets religious policy for Conservative Judaism have voted to maintain the status quo on the roles that homosexuals may play in the movement's institutions.

The move by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards means that lesbians and gay men are welcome to join and participate in congregations, camps, youth groups and schools as individuals.

It also means that openly gay men and women will continue to be refused admission to the movement's rabbinical and cantorial schools. And rabbis affiliated with the movement will be prohibited from conducting "commitment ceremonies" for gay and lesbian couples.

The law committee left it to individual rabbis to determine whether lesbians and gay men may be active as youth leaders and teachers, as well as to what extent they may receive religious honors during worship services and hold lay leadership positions.

The traditionalist position, articulated by Rabbi Joel Roth, who chairs the law committee and who will soon be dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary's rabbinical school, got support from 13 of the 23 rabbis who ruled on the policy.

According to Roth, "the biblical and rabbinic sources do not really lend themselves to permissive interpretations," and there is no modern scientific evidence sufficient to overturn the halachic (legal) tradition regarding homosexuality.

The only proposal attracting significant support that might have altered the current position was offered by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, provost of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, the West Coast affiliate of JTS.

His position advocates that the status quo be maintained while the heads of all three branches of the movement institute a commission that would spearhead a movement-wide study of both heterosexual and homosexual norms.

United Synagogue Won't Cooperate

Dorff's position was adopted by the law committee, which requires a proposal to win only six votes from the panel's 25 voting members to pass. The six-vote requirement means that two or more opposing opinions are often adopted by the committee.

Committee members present were evenly split on Dorff's proposal: Eight voted for it, eight voted against it and seven abstained.

And the heads of two of the three central institutions of Conservative Judaism pre-empted some of the authority that the teshuvah (legal opinion) could carry by saying that their organizations would not participate in the proposed commission.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of United Synagogue, the movement's congregational arm, stated in a March 19 letter to Rabbi Roth that he was also speaking on behalf of JTS Chancellor Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, and that neither of them would participate in the study effort.

Roy Clements, a law committee representative of the congregational arm, said "there is no need" to conduct a study to find out the needs of the movement vis-a-vis homosexuality.

"It's a non-issue," said Clements, who is one of five non-voting lay members on the committee. "There are more important issues that the movement needs to study together, like intermarriage."

Advocates of Dorff's proposal strongly disagreed.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, outgoing dean of the JTS rabbinical school, compared those unwilling to study the needs of Conservative Jews to colleagues of the astronomer Galileo who refused to look through his telescope for fear of what they might see.

"I cannot understand what is so scary about studying an issue," he said. "We need to be informed jurists before we can act. There are things going on beneath the surface in our community that we don't have the first sense of the magnitude of."

'Most Emotion-Laden Issue Ever'

In any case, according to Dorff, passage of his teshuvah mandates that a commission be formed by the Rabbinical Assembly to study the issue -- with or without the congregational and seminary arms of the movement.

JTS Chancellor Schorsch circulated a second letter to members of the law committee, in which he said he fears that if the law committee "were not to reaffirm the halacha with a single unequivocal opinion, but to admit a second voice that elevates a homosexual relationship to the status of an equally valid communal norm, the lines separating Conservative from Reform and Reconstructionism would have been profoundly and irreparably blurred."

Several more letters from individual gay and lesbian Conservative congregants, and a petition signed by 50 members of four Manhattan Conservative synagogues, were sent to the law committee rabbis before their meeting.

Richard Gottlieb, a gay member of one New York congregation, in his letter urged the law committee members to carefully study current medical and psychological research on gay and lesbian issues and to "talk directly with the many gay and lesbian members of the Conservative movement, as well as their heterosexual fellow congregants."

Deciding the role of gays and lesbians in Conservative Jewry was described by one law committee member, Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman, as "the most emotion-laden issue" ever to come under the panel's consideration -- "even more so than the ordination of women."

While a clear mandate for maintaining the traditional interpretation of halacha, and the policies that many gay and lesbian Jews find exclusionary, was adopted by the law committee, the more than 20 hours of on-the-record rabbinic consideration did not leave gay and lesbian Conservative Jews without any change in their legal standing.

As Rabbi Dorff pointed out, "there is now a teshuvah on the books that says engaging in homosexual acts is not toeva," an abomination.

STATE DEPARTMENT DENIES THWARTING QUAYLE SESSION WITH ISRAELI OFFICIAL

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, March 26 (JTA) -- The Bush administration has denied an Israeli Cabinet minister's claim that it blocked Vice President Dan Quayle from meeting with him.

Health Minister Ehud Olmert, a close Likud ally of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, tried unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting Wednesday with Quayle.

Olmert then claimed that the State Department thwarted the meeting as part of a practice of barring contacts between U.S. officials and Israelis who do not hold the same rank in government.

Jeff Nesbit, Quayle's communications director, denied that the State Department exerted any pressure over Quayle not to meet with Olmert.

The vice president "meets with (Israeli) Cabinet ministers all the time," said Nesbit. He added that had Quayle's schedule permitted, "he would have been delighted to meet" with Olmert. "So there's not much to this," he said.

Olmert's claim was also called "not true" by State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler. As to the existence of "some kind of directive from the State Department" barring such contacts, "it just doesn't exist," she said.

The vice president "meets with Israeli officials all the time," she said, adding: "This was nothing more than a scheduling matter."

A pro-Israel lobbyist here also rejected Olmert's claim, citing the fact that Quayle was out of town campaigning part of Wednesday, all day Thursday and likely all day Friday.

Secretary of State James Baker was accused last year of trying to block any meeting between Israeli Housing Minister Ariel Sharon and his pro-Israeli counterpart, Jack Kemp, who is secretary of housing and urban development.

Unlike Olmert and Quayle, Sharon and Kemp did meet, but at the Israeli Embassy, rather than at Kemp's office.

Whether or not Olmert's allegation is true, the episode is a clear reflection of the current high state of tension in U.S.-Israeli relations.

The climate between the two countries has grown chilly since the Bush administration balked at providing Israel with loan guarantees and accused it of transferring U.S. military technology to other countries.

U.S. COULD OWE ISRAEL AN APOLOGY ON ARMS ALLEGATIONS, ENVOY SAYS

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, March 26 (JTA) -- The United States may eventually have to apologize to Israel for allegations that it sold Patriot anti-missile technology to China without authorization, U.S. Ambassador William Harrop suggested this week.

But meanwhile, the United States had to check to see if the allegations were true, the envoy said Wednesday evening on Israel Television's weekly Moked news program.

He defended Washington's dispatch of a team of army experts to Israel to investigate the charges and said he would recommend that its findings be made public.

At the same time, he praised Israel for cooperating and lauded in particular the statesmanship of Defense Minister Moshe Arens, who discussed the matter with U.S. Defense Secretary

Dick Cheney in Washington last week. Arens categorically denied the charges but welcomed the U.S. investigation.

Rejecting a Cabinet minister's complaint that the United States was treating Israel like Iraq, Harrop said the suspicions against Israel were so grave as to leave no alternative but to check thoroughly and quickly for any evidence that it violated the rules governing its use of American technology.

According to Harrop, the probe was necessary "to preserve the deep friendship between the two countries." Otherwise, too many questions would have been left hanging in the air, he said.

Harrop condemned administration officials who leaked the allegations against Israel to the news media. He agreed that their publication caused serious damage to U.S.-Israeli relations.

And he did not rule out the possibility that the United States would eventually apologize to Israel for the episode.

"If it turns out that intelligence which we had obtained and which was a cause of worry to us proves to be completely groundless, I would think an apology would not be out of line," the ambassador said.

"The matter is still under review, and we must see how it comes out," he added. "I have every hope that it will prove to be groundless. But as I say, it is serious, and it must be reviewed."

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir warned Wednesday that whoever believed the American investigators would find Israeli violations would regret such thoughts.

The 15-member team, which arrived in Israel on Sunday, was due to leave before the weekend.

The mass-circulation daily Yediot Achronot suggested Thursday that the team's check on alleged Israeli violations is a smokescreen to hide its real mission, which is to examine the anti-missile system for technical problems.

The newspaper quoted a senior officer as saying that the Americans came here to look for something that had nothing to do with Israel.

It claimed that all Patriot missiles were found in their original packing when they were shipped to Israel and that no use whatever had been made of them.

MILITARY COOPERATION CONTINUES WITH ARRIVAL OF F-15s IN ISRAEL

By Hugh Orrel

TEL AVIV, March 26 (JTA) -- Regardless of the severe strains between them, Israel and the United States are advancing their military cooperation.

The arrival here Thursday of the first of 60 F-15 jet fighters from U.S. Air Force units in Europe was hailed by the Defense Ministry as a sign that the "real strategic alliance" is on a firm footing.

The planes will be overhauled, updated and repaired by Israel Aircraft Industries over the next four years, at a cost of \$1 million apiece. The government-owned IAI won the contract from the Pentagon, in competition with American and European firms.

The Defense Ministry also announced Thursday that the Israel Test Bed, designed to evaluate combat theater ballistic missile defense concepts, was successfully completed and formally accepted by the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization and the U.S. Army Strategic Defense Command.

ISRAELI MISSIONS WORLDWIDE SAID TO BE TARGETED FOR ATTACK

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, March 26 (JTA) -- Israeli diplomatic missions in the Western world and Turkey are likely to become targets of a wave of terrorist attacks masterminded by extremist Shi'ite groups in Lebanon, L'Express reported Thursday.

All Western intelligence agencies have been put on red alert, the French magazine reported.

L'Express said it had corroborating information from Lebanon that Israeli missions in the West and Turkey are targeted for large-scale attacks such as the car bomb blast that destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, killing 30 people and injuring 252.

Similar attacks could be made in Ankara, Brussels or London by Shi'ite-influenced groups, L'Express said.

The Israeli Embassy in Brussels was in fact evacuated for two hours Tuesday because of what turned out to be a false alarm.

At least two dozen police, fire and military vehicles raced to the scene to investigate an aged red Ford Fiesta parked in front of the embassy.

Suspicion was aroused because the driver fled when security guards ordered him to move the vehicle.

It was a parked car loaded with TNT that wrecked the embassy in Buenos Aires.

The car in Brussels turned out to be harmless. The driver who retrieved it got a tongue-lashing from police for parking where he did.

Security at Israeli embassies around the world is usually tight. In Paris for example, the street off the Champs-Élysées on which the embassy is located is permanently sealed off by armed paramilitary police.

No cars are allowed unless they are duly registered in a police logbook kept at the entrance to the street. Pedestrians must show ID cards and inform the guards exactly where they intend to go and for what purpose.

(JTA correspondent Yossi Lempkowitz in Brussels contributed to this report.)

ISRAELI PHONE COMPANY LAUNCHES DIRECT DIALING TO 11 ARAB STATES

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, March 26 (JTA) -- The first-ever direct dialing service to 11 Arab countries began at midnight Wednesday.

But the service, provided by Bezek, the Israeli government's telephone corporation, is still a one-way affair.

The Arab states that can be reached include Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and Morocco. While these countries cannot block incoming calls, their nationals or visitors may not dial directly to the Jewish State. Their international exchange operators also cannot handle calls to Israel.

Israeli newspapers, which published the area codes for the Arab countries Thursday morning, lost no time testing the service.

Reporters mainly dialed hotels in the Gulf States. They were received with surprise and a queasiness over talking directly to Israel.

A reception clerk at a hotel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, told his caller he was embarrassed to be talking to Jerusalem. Asked how the weather was in Jeddah, the clerk replied, "I don't know."

A receptionist at the Bahrain Hilton, asked

if he could accept a booking from Israel for next month replied, "Please book through your local Hilton."

For the past few years, phone links to the Arab world have been made possible by special facilities opened up by the Solan Communications Corporation, an Israeli company which routes calls from Israel via its facilities in London.

Solan has protested the opening of the new service by Bezek which can undercut its prices because Solan must use Bezek services between Israel and Britain.

JEWISH LEADER IRED GERMAN STATE WON'T TRY EX-NAZI WHO KILLED JEWS

By David Kantor

BONN, March 26 (JTA) -- A Jewish leader in Germany has blasted the state government of Brandenburg for declining to try Gustav Just, a former member of its Parliament who admits to having killed Jews during World War II.

"This is a scandal," cried Heinz Galinski, chairman of the German Jewish community, after a meeting Wednesday with Brandenburg's prime minister, Manfred Stolpe.

"We are demanding an investigation and an eventual prosecution," Galinski said.

Just, a prominent Social Democrat, resigned from Parliament on March 10 after admitting complicity in the murders of six Jews in the Ukraine in July 1941, shortly after German forces invaded the Soviet Union.

He confessed when the weekly Welt am Sonntag exposed his role in the 50-year-old crime with information from the files of the former East German Security Ministry, known as the Stasi.

The state government decided not to put Just on trial after concluding that he was forced to participate in the killings. He was a 20-year-old soldier in the Wehrmacht at the time.

But Galinski says testimony and documents in his file show that Just had in fact volunteered to kill the Jews, who were rounded up in a Ukrainian village.

Galinski's demand for a trial is supported by the Christian Democratic Union, the opposition party in the Brandenburg Parliament. The CDU alleges that the Social Democratic state government kept the case secret for political reasons.

SCHWAMMBERGER WITNESS DIES ON STAND

By David Kantor

BONN, March 26 (JTA) -- A former SS officer called as a prosecution witness in the trial of alleged Nazi war criminal Josef Schwammberger collapsed and died shortly after taking the stand Tuesday in the Stuttgart courtroom.

Erich Scharf, 79, encountered breathing difficulties while answering questions to establish his identity and was soon thereafter pronounced dead.

Scharf was to have given testimony about SS activities during the war in Krakow, Poland, where he served with Schwammberger, who was also commandant of concentration camps in Poland.

Schwammberger, also 79, was extradited from Argentina two years ago. He has been charged with personally killing 52 Jews and complicity in the murders of some 3,200 others.

Throughout his trial, which began last summer, Schwammberger has pleaded loss of memory in reply to most questions.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:**CHRISTIAN VILLAGE IN GALILEE
REACHES OUT TO ETHIOPIAN OLIM**
By Gil Sedan

NESS AMIM, Israel (JTA) -- It was a frustrating experience.

Susan Weil, the Jewish Agency official in charge of new immigrants in western Galilee, was asking around for an agricultural settlement that could train a bunch of new immigrants from Ethiopia to be farmers.

But in her quest, she found that Zionism, the absorption of olim, aphorisms touting brotherhood among Israelis, were ringing hollow.

Until she met the people of Ness Amim, a Christian village in the heart of the Jewish state.

No proselytism, no fanfare of religious ceremonies. There is not even a cross in the local church. Just a handful of Christians who came as a gesture of solidarity with the Jewish people.

And when solidarity needed to be translated into employing 10 Ethiopian immigrants in its rose nurseries, the doors were opened immediately.

The Jewish neighbors of Ness Amim in western Galilee appreciate the importance of aliyah, of course. But when they must choose between an experienced Arab laborer and an Ethiopian immigrant who must learn the alphabet of work, they prefer the Arab.

Employing 10 Ethiopian immigrants, out of the 6,000 living in the area, of course does not solve much more than the personal problems of those 10 immigrants.

But one cannot measure in quantities the contribution of Ness Amim, whose name means "an ensign to the nations."

The presence of 100 Christians living in Israel will not change the rising trend of anti-Semitism in the world, but it is there to make a point, to hold the pillars of an old, shaky bridge between Judaism and Christianity.

"In that day, the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; Him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious," said Isaiah. This explains Ness Amim.

Extending A Hand To Jews

Ittay Talmi, the Israeli expert who runs the rose nurseries at Ness Amim, devoted considerable time, efforts and patience to teaching the Ethiopians the art of trimming roses.

The work must be faultless, as almost all the 1.5 million roses which grow in Ness Amim annually are exported to the prestigious Aalsmeer flower exchange in Holland, the world's largest.

Ness Amim extended a hand to the Ethiopians because it had come to the world extending a hand to the Jewish people.

Ness Amim is a product of the Holocaust. "We are here, a group of Christians who, following the Holocaust, evaluated the common history of the Christian church and Judaism, and realized that throughout history the church was the persecutor, and the Jews were persecuted," said Christine Pilon, one of the settlement's founders.

Her husband, Dr. Johann Pilon, was the man behind the dream of Ness Amim. He had worked from 1950 in the Scottish Hospital in Tiberias as a missionary doctor and gradually developed a different view of Israel. He began to believe in a dialogue instead of a mission.

From 1960 to 1966, Johann Pilon worked with a group of Dutch and German Christians who shared his dream of establishing a Christian

settlement in Israel. By 1966, the vision turned into reality: a Christian settlement in Israel, Christians who came to Israel, to share with the Jews the Zionist dream.

Now Ness Amim is a green spot in western Galilee, symbolically located next door to Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot (the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz), which was founded by Holocaust survivors.

The Christian moshav is populated by 70 Dutch nationals, 25 Germans and five Hungarians. An attractive guest house dominates the moshav, along with the rose nurseries -- which make it one of the major rose exporters in the country -- and the newly built church without a cross.

"We go out of our way to prove that we are not engaged in any proselytizing," said Christine Pilon. "We do not want to provoke any hard feelings when a rabbi visits our church."

This is the reason why the Ethiopian immigrants do not eat on the site, let alone spend the nights there. They bring their own kosher food.

'Informal Ambassadors' For Israel

Mulato Zerihul, 38, is the uncrowned leader of the Ethiopian group. With only a very small Hebrew vocabulary, he has acquired the title of respect because the others speak no Hebrew at all -- and because he has shown more dedication to his work than the others.

He does not quite understand what the Christians are doing in a Jewish country, but he is thankful that they are here. To support himself and his three children at the absorption center, "there is work, there is food, thank God."

Mulato, and perhaps another member of the group, will be the only ones to continue on the project. The other eight are leaving because they are moving south.

But another group of eight to 10 immigrants will be absorbed. Ness Amim's absorption project, Chapter Two.

Klaus Dursch, 39, the secretary of the moshav, originally from Mainz, Germany, will leave Ness Amim with his wife and three children after 10 years here.

Except for Christine Pilon, no one has stayed in Ness Amim permanently. Most of the inhabitants remain only a year or two. Then they move on, opening the way for new volunteers.

Dursch is leaving with mixed feelings. He has learned to become part of Israel. But, "after all, we are Germans, and I want to raise my children as Germans," he said.

But there is a Zionist reason for his going home, as well. "Israel needs us in Europe, to look after its interests," he said.

The Christian settlement is important even in economic terms. Former Ness Amim volunteers are now active in all of Holland's four flower exchanges, Dursch observed, "informal ambassadors to the European economy come 1993."

SOME OLIM GETTING ROLLING

TEL AVIV, March 26 (JTA) -- Not all immigrants from the former Soviet Union are living an austere life in Israel.

More of them are buying cars than apartments, and a few can afford both, according to a survey by the Tapitz Research Institute.

The survey, taken in March, found that 19 percent of the approximately 350,000 former Soviet Jews who have come to Israel since 1989 own cars. That is nearly 50 percent more than owned cars last October.