

75th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 1992

VOL. 70, NO. 81

**U.S. AND ISRAEL HAIL SYRIAN MOVE
TO EASE TRAVEL LIMITS ON ITS JEWS**

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, April 27 (JTA) -- Syria's decision to lift travel restrictions on its 4,500-member Jewish community is being hailed by U.S. and Israeli government officials, who are hopeful that it will enable Syrian Jews to emigrate and reunite with family members abroad.

Israeli Deputy Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the announced change of policy as a "positive development" and thanked world governments and Jewish activists for pressing Syria to treat its Jewish population favorably.

News of the Syrian policy change was first reported over the weekend by Syrian emigres in the United States and Israel who had spoken to family members in Damascus. It was confirmed Monday by Bush administration officials.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said the administration had "obtained official confirmation from the Syrian government on Saturday of the lifting of restrictions on travel and disposition of property for the Syrian Jewish community."

That was corroborated by State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler, who added: "We have been told by the Syrian government that these measures have already been put into effect."

But Syria's chief negotiator at the Arab-Israeli peace talks here told reporters Monday he knew nothing about the policy change.

"We do not have the so-called problem of the Jewish community in Syria," said Muwaffak Allaf. "We do not classify our citizens on the basis of their religion."

Until now, Syrian Jews have been permitted to travel abroad, but only if they leave behind both a deposit of several thousand dollars and a family member who can serve in effect as a hostage for their return.

Still No Travel To Israel

The new policy will allow Syrian Jews to "travel abroad as a family, on business and for vacation," Tutwiler said. In that respect, "all members of the Syrian Jewish community will now be accorded the same rights as those afforded to all other Syrian citizens."

But Tutwiler pointed out that "Syrian law continues to prohibit travel to Israel" and emigration is still officially barred.

Israel Radio quoted Syria's chief rabbi Monday as saying that the Jewish community expected to receive written confirmation of the policy changes within four to five days.

In an interview from Paris, Rabbi Alber Ibrahim Hamara said several Syrian Jewish families had already applied to leave the country.

What is not clear is what will happen if those permitted to leave decide not to return.

Some observers suggest that Syrian President Hafez Assad is purposely leaving the travel law ambiguous, knowing full well that Jews who take advantage of it will emigrate.

Others say he may be laying a trap and could later reimpose the travel restrictions if Jews violate the official ban on emigration.

Tutwiler said the United States "would like to see free emigration" for all residents of Syria.

But Syrian Jewry activists will likely be satisfied if Assad allows Jews to emigrate, regardless of whether he alters Syrian law to officially allow it.

Gilbert Kahn, executive director of the New York-based Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, praised the Syrian policy change. He said the notion that "Jews will be treated like other Syrian citizens" in a non-discriminatory manner is especially significant.

"This is a wonderful development and a goal for which we have labored mightily," B'nai B'rith International President Kent Schiner said in a statement.

The fate of Syrian Jews, in fact, has been the leading cause of groups concerned with oppressed Jewry since the Soviet Union began allowing hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate and in the aftermath of the Operation Moses and Operation Solomon rescues of Ethiopian Jews.

The next focus of attention could well be the Jews left in Yemen.

U.S. Diplomacy Credited

Syria's decision to ease travel restrictions against its Jewish population is being seen as part of an overall effort to improve its image in the West and particularly the United States, following the disintegration of its former benefactor, the Soviet Union.

Other recent attempts to improve its image are support for the U.S.-led effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait and its decision to meet face to face with Israel in comprehensive peace talks.

More recently, Syria has received negative publicity from reports that it, and not Libya, may have masterminded the December 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Tutwiler tied Syria's policy change to an April 13 meeting Assad had in Damascus with Chief Rabbi Hamara. She said it was the first meeting between the Syrian president and Jewish community leaders since 1976 and that it led to the April 19 release of the last two Jews held in Syrian prisons, Eli and Selim Swed.

Tutwiler and Fitzwater credited U.S. diplomacy with helping produce the change in Syrian policy. They cited a November 1990 meeting President Bush had in Geneva with Assad and Secretary of State James Baker's eight visits to Syria last year. On one of those visits, Baker and Assad discussed Syrian Jewry for more than an hour, Tutwiler said.

Baker's meeting "focused on the release of the Swed brothers, granting exit visas for unmarried Jewish women and reunited divided families," she said.

In a statement Monday, the American Jewish Congress thanked Bush and Baker for "their persistent efforts in moving ever closer to making this decades-long dream of freedom for Syria's Jews a reality."

Members of the U.S. Congress have also sent numerous letters to Syrian leaders and raised the emigration issue on visits to Damascus. In March, 69 senators led by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) wrote Assad urging him to ease emigration restrictions, among other policy changes.

ISRAELIS AND ARABS STILL FAR APART, BUT INTEND TO NEGOTIATE SERIOUSLY

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, April 27 (JTA) -- As the fifth round of Middle East peace talks got under way here, both Israelis and Palestinians expressed a desire to negotiate seriously and achieve progress on autonomy for the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

But both sides are still far apart, as demonstrated by the two different proposals they are offering for elections in the territories.

Israel is offering municipal elections as a first step, while the Palestinians want to elect an autonomy regime before deciding on any other elections.

The Israeli proposal, presented to the Palestinians on Monday, was described by Deputy Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as an offer "to have pilot municipal elections."

While refusing to go into any details during a briefing for reporters, Netanyahu maintained the proposal is one "which we think will set the stage for further development in this area."

Netanyahu, who works in the Prime Minister's Office, added that "there is no question in my mind that there is a tremendous readiness in the Palestinian Arab population in the territories to espouse it."

As proof, he pointed out that since the Arab-Israeli peace talks began in Madrid last fall, there have been 30 elections for chambers of commerce, university student and faculty bodies, and unions and other organizations in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. He said the turnout was about 90 percent for these elections.

Two Different Approaches

But Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian spokeswoman, claimed Monday that the Palestinians are already entitled to have municipal elections by law.

She said that the last such elections in 1976 were dissolved by Israel after members of the Palestine Liberation Organization were elected in various communities.

Moreover, the municipal elections only included 30 percent of the Arab residents of the territories, she said.

Ashrawi said the Palestinians proposed elections for an autonomy regime in the last round of talks in Washington and that should be the way to go, since the negotiations deal with autonomy.

She said the elections should be held by the end of September so that the autonomy regime could be in place by the end of November, as envisioned at the Madrid talks.

The differences over elections reflect the gap between the two sides on how autonomy should be reached.

Israel wants to achieve it by a set of building blocks in which agreements are reached first on various administrative and judicial rights, in which the Palestinians would be able to govern their daily lives. This includes autonomy in such areas as industry, health, justice, education and transportation.

The Palestinians want to set up an overall self-government authority that would have executive and legislative powers. The Israelis see this as a step toward a Palestinian state, rather than autonomy.

Regardless of their deep differences, both

Israel and the Palestinians refrained from the name-calling of the last four rounds of bilateral talks and stressed their desire to move ahead.

While they continued to level charges of violence against each other, these were softened. Both sides also denied that Israel's June 23 elections will be a hindrance to making progress at the peace talks.

Prodding From The United States

"Our objectives here is to make progress, concrete progress," Netanyahu stressed. He said he hoped this would be achieved before the current round of talks ends Thursday.

Ashrawi said the Palestinians "are sincerely committed to this process" and believe there is a "distinct possibility" of moving forward in the talks.

Their attitude may also reflect pressure from the United States. Edward Djerejian, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, met Sunday with Elyakim Rubinstein, head of the Israeli delegation for the Palestinian-Jordanian talks, and with Palestinian delegates Monday.

He reportedly told them it was time to end posturing and get down to negotiations.

In a speech Sunday night, Djerejian urged the parties to "focus on those differences that need to be narrowed and to try to find common ground."

State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said Monday that the United States will not get involved in the specific proposals being offered, including elections.

But department officials have said the United States intends to continue serving as a catalyst, even after the bilateral talks shift to Rome for the next round.

Tutwiler said that even if no substantive agreements have been concluded, the peace talks have been successful so far just by virtue of the fact that they are continuing.

"With the opening of the fifth round of bilaterals, direct Israeli-Arab negotiations are becoming a normal part of the landscape," she said. "That's a remarkable development" and the first step toward substantive progress.

The negotiations will "be a hard, step-by-step process," she said. "No one can expect immediate breakthroughs."

Levy To Meet With Baker

She added: "What's important to keep in mind is that all of the parties are showing seriousness and a willingness to begin to engage in substance. We will be encouraging them to continue to do so during the current round and to begin to narrow their differences on substantive issues."

Tutwiler also announced that invitations for the upcoming multilateral talks on Middle East regional issues were being delivered Monday in the various Arab and Israeli capitals.

Neither Netanyahu nor Ashrawi would comment on the five sets of multilateral talks. Israel has threatened to boycott any session in which diaspora Palestinians participate.

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy, who is in the United States on a private visit, was scheduled to meet with Secretary of State James Baker on Tuesday.

Netanyahu said the meeting would focus not only on the peace talks but on bilateral issues between the United States and Israel.

**NRP MAY TAKE SWING TO RIGHT
IN ADVANCE OF JUNE ELECTIONS**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 27 (JTA) -- The National Religious Party, long a bastion of religious Zionism, seems to be veering to the right as the elections approach.

Considerable pressure has been put on its incumbent leaders, Avner Shaki and Zevulun Hammer, to rule out an NRP coalition with the Labor Party after a new Knesset is elected on June 23.

So far, they have refused to issue a categorical declaration to that effect.

But hard-liners are trying to revamp the party's traditionally moderate platform.

NRP Knesset member Hanan Porat and former Knesset member Haim Druckman want the party to declare officially that it no longer supports the 1978 Camp David accords or autonomy for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Instead, they want it to demand the immediate annexation of those territories.

The NRP, which has belonged to virtually every coalition government since the state was founded, whether headed by Labor or Likud, has lost ground in recent years.

It will be fighting in June to hold onto its nationalist-religious constituency against inroads made by Likud and the far-right Tehiya and Moledet parties, which, though secular, attract many Orthodox voters.

Moledet, which advocates "transfer" of all Arabs from the "Land of Israel," has placed a very popular religious nationalist high on its election list.

He is Rabbi Yosef Ba-Gad, founder and director of the Nahalim yeshiva high school near Petach Tikvah, who will be No. 3 on the Moledet ticket after party leader Rehavam Ze'evi and Professor Shaul Gutman, an astronomer from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa.

Moledet Will Again Emphasize 'Transfer'

Fourth on the list is Dr. Sarah Pollack, a medical doctor from Gush Etzion.

The slate was put together at a closed-door session of the party's 46-member executive Sunday night. Moledet has only two seats in the outgoing Knesset but expects to do better in the next one.

Although Moledet's 1992 election platform has not yet been published, Ze'evi confirmed that its central plank would again be "transfer," which he says is "the only way for Jews to have peace in Eretz Yisrael."

Ze'evi meanwhile has dumped his No. 2 man, Yair Sprinzak, concluding that at age 76 he should retire. The two men reportedly have not spoken to each other for weeks.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the left-wing Meretz bloc has accused the Orthodox-controlled Interior Ministry of trying to deny the vote to tens of thousands of recent immigrants.

Meretz Knesset members Shulamit Aloni and Mordechai Virshubski urged special legislation to enable persons without fixed addresses to cast ballots at absorption centers, much like soldiers on active duty vote at military bases.

The Interior Ministry has failed to make the necessary arrangements.

"It is hard to avoid the feeling that there is a deliberate intent in the Interior Ministry to

prevent the olim from voting because they do not adhere to religious or right-wing parties," Virshubski charged in a letter to National Election Committee Chairman Avraham Halima.

**MOROCCAN POST-PESACH FESTIVAL
TURNS INTO PITCH FOR ELECTIONS**
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, April 27 (JTA) -- The Feast of Mimouna, a tradition of the Moroccan Jewish community at the conclusion of Passover, became the target of electioneering politicians this week, despite objections from the festival's organizers.

"I am not responsible for this match of Mimouna and the elections," said Sam Shitreet, one of the community leaders.

Moroccan families who gathered in parks and public gardens to celebrate became fair game as campaigning for the June 23 elections heated up.

Ironically, the Mimouna festivities are supposed to celebrate the unity of the people. But that was disturbed by party functionaries handing out rival election flyers and stickers.

Likud partisans waved huge posters of the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Shulamit Aloni and Ran Cohen of the left-wing Meretz bloc were among the first to show up at Sacher Park in the center of Jerusalem, handing out flowers to Moroccan families.

Both Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his rival, Labor Party leader Yitzhak Rabin, made bids for the Sephardic vote.

Labor partisans were on hand to welcome their leader with chants of "Israel waits for Rabin." But Likud hecklers jeered him when he tried to speak. A few minutes later, Laborite hecklers interrupted Shamir.

**ALIYAH DOWN FOR 1ST QUARTER OF '92,
BUT LARGE NUMBERS ARE HOLDING VISAS**
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, April 27 (JTA) -- Immigration to Israel during the first three months of the year was lower than for any quarter since the first three months of 1990, according to statistics released this week by the Finance Ministry.

But the good news is that a huge number of potential immigrants are holding Israeli visas and only a very few of those who have made it here have gotten fed up and left the country.

According to the Finance Ministry statistics released Monday, which are considered accurate and reliable, a total of 18,726 immigrants arrived in Israel during the first three months of 1992.

In addition, Israel issued 14,000 new immigrant visas during that period to citizens of the former Soviet Union.

But future improvement is possible. The ministry reported that about 1 million Jews in the now-independent republics of the former Soviet Union now hold Israeli visa request forms.

That is the first stage in the bureaucratic procedure. It means that 1 million Jews have taken the first step to avail themselves of the aliyah option.

Their choice to exercise it may depend on their personal circumstances, whether the economic or political situation deteriorates at home, and Israel's ability to absorb them.

The figures showed very small re-emigration. During 1990-91, only 3,608 newcomers left Israel, less than 1 percent of the total immigration in that two-year period.

IMMIGRANTS HELPING TO REPLENISH FORESTS RAVAGED BY WINTER STORMS

By Michele Chabin

BIRIYA, Israel (JTA) -- Known for its pristine beauty and clean mountain air, Biriya Forest in Galilee has traditionally been a favorite recreation spot for nature-lovers.

This year, however, the first thing visitors to the 5,000-acre forest see is destruction: Tens of thousands of mature trees lie dead, as if they were discarded Popsicle sticks, while hundreds of thousands more have been severely damaged.

Ironically, the winter's heavy snowfall, which did so much to replenish the nation's endangered water supply, has now put its forests in danger. Snow and sub-freezing temperatures combined to uproot a million trees throughout the country, predominantly in high-altitude areas in the north and central regions.

Now, forestry professionals, new immigrants and youth volunteers are racing the clock to clear away the debris before it becomes this summer's tinder.

Dressed in work clothes on a drizzly day in April, 70 new immigrants are busy sawing fallen tree trunks and collecting scattered branches. Judging from the large pile of sawed wood nearby, they have been at it for several hours.

"This is an extremely important job," says Paul Ginsberg, a Jewish National Fund forester. "If we don't clear the dead trees away, they could catch fire when the weather gets hot. Also, to prevent mudslides, we need to plant saplings that will put down roots. We can't do that until the site is cleaned up."

Uri, a lab technician from the former Soviet Union, says the work "is hard but satisfying. I wanted to get a job in my own field, but so far, no luck. In the meantime, I'm just happy to have a job that pays the bills."

At nearby Levy forest, JNF has put to work more than 1,000 youths during a five-day working vacation. Though they will spend the majority of their time hiking and playing, the teens also will pitch in and help clear away flammable twigs and branches.

For 300 "veteran olim" teen-agers, whose trip has been sponsored by JNF and Gadna, the pre-army unit of the Israel Defense Force, "the experience is doubly important," says forester Avi Saguy.

"These kids have been in Israel only a couple of years, so most haven't developed the strong connection to the land that binds Israelis together."

JNF, which currently employs hundreds of new immigrants in forestry, has actively sought immigrant workers since the 1950s. Bunny Alexandroni, a JNF information officer, points out. Though most took the jobs solely for the pay, "over time many fell in love with the land. They stayed on, and today they hold senior positions.

"Decades ago, thousands of unemployed immigrants were put to work planting trees, building roads and clearing campsites, and forests like these are the result," she says.

Sadly, it was these very forests, planted soon after the establishment of the state, that sustained the most damage. In an attempt to quickly turn the barren land green, forestry experts planted whole mountainsides with Jerusalem Pine.

Ironically, the Jerusalem pine -- the very tree that was favored then for its ability to grow

quickly in shallow soil -- was this year's No. 1 victim. About 95 percent of the destroyed trees were Jerusalem pines.

"Back then, it seemed like the perfect tree for Israel's special needs," forester Paul Ginsberg explains. "It's incredibly versatile and attractive. It will grow in many types of sites, in high or low altitudes.

"Unfortunately, as we learned the hard way, the trees lost their grip when the heavy snow came, and they fell on top of one another from the roots. The rest snapped in the middle, from the sheer weight of the snow."

Though still stunned by the extent of the damage, both the JNF and Parks Authority say they have learned some valuable lessons in the past few months.

"For one thing, we now realize the need to plant a greater variety of trees at a single site," says forester Saguy. "That way, if one type of tree fails, there will be others to hold soil in place. During the snowstorms, the Cyprus pine fared very well, for example."

While acknowledging that earlier foresters made some mistakes in planning the forests as they did, "it's always easier to look back with 20/20 hindsight," says Ginsberg. "For a country almost devoid of trees 40 years ago, we have made tremendous strides."

He adds: "It took 40 years to learn this lesson, and will take another 40 years to see the results."

SALVADORAN EX-DIPLOMAT WHO SAVED THOUSANDS FROM NAZIS IS DEAD AT 90

NEW YORK, April 27 (JTA) -- George Mandel-Mantello, a Jew who as a Salvadoran diplomat during World War II saved 200,000 Jews and non-Jews from the Nazis, died Saturday at the age of 90 at his home in Rome, Yeshiva University announced.

No cause of death was given.

Mandel-Mantello, a Romanian-born Jew who obtained Salvadoran citizenship in 1939, was long regarded as one of the unsung heroes of the Holocaust.

It was not until 1989 that he was first commended for his wartime deeds, by being presented with the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award. In 1990, he was honored by Yeshiva University.

As first secretary of the Salvadoran Consulate in Geneva from 1942 to 1945, he mass-produced and distributed some 15,000 Salvadoran citizenship papers to Jews and non-Jews throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. It is believed that 95 percent of the holders of these papers survived the Holocaust.

During the summer of 1944, when the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators began deporting 100,000 Jews a day to the Auschwitz death camp, Mandel-Mantello obtained firsthand reports from two escapees.

He then circulated to the international media his "Auschwitz Protocol," a 30-page description of the camp, complete with statistical data and descriptions of the killings.

This report led to international calls by world leaders to halt the deportations.

Following the war, Mandel-Mantello helped church and political figures escape from Communist Hungary through Switzerland.

Funeral services for Mandel-Mantello were scheduled for Tuesday morning in Jerusalem.