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**UNITY OF ORTHODOX BLOC SEEN
AS HARMING LABOR'S FORTUNES**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 20 (JTA) -- The starting gun for Israel's election campaign sounded at midnight Tuesday, the deadline for filing party lists with the Central Elections Committee.

But as the race, which has been heating up for the past month, got officially under way, last-minute developments, not entirely unexpected, seemed to bode ill for the Labor Party's chances of forming the next government -- even though it is currently well ahead of Likud in the polls.

Given the inexorable splintering that results from Israel's system of proportional representation, either major party must form a coalition with smaller factions to govern or to prevent its rival from forming a governing coalition in the 120-member parliament.

According to seasoned observers, an 11th-hour agreement among the haredi, or strictly Orthodox, parties to join forces for the June 23 elections, and the Arab parties' failure to reach a similar agreement, diminished Labor's ability to form a "peace coalition."

Three separate parties will compete for the Arab vote, which theoretically could exceed 300,000. The largest is the Hadash Communists, a nominally mixed Arab-Jewish party that is overwhelmingly Arab in practice. It is led by the mayor of Nazareth, Tawfik Zayyad, and holds four seats in the outgoing Knesset.

But the Communists traditionally have been ignored by both the left and the right in the coalition-forming process.

The Progressive List For Peace, another ostensibly Jewish-Arab mix but virtually all Arab, is headed by Mohammed Miari, who is its sole representative in the Knesset.

The rival Arab Democratic Party, led by former Labor Party member Abd-el Wahab Darousha, is also a one-man faction. Personal animosity between Miari and Darousha defeated all efforts to form a joint list.

Peretz Changes His Mind

Their disunity may result in the elimination of both parties from the next Knesset since the threshold for a single seat has been raised from 1 to 1.5 percent of the total vote cast. In that case, tens of thousands of Arab votes will have been wasted.

Labor still could muster the 60 Knesset mandates needed to prevent Likud from forming a coalition with the religious and right-wing parties. But it would find it harder to induce the haredi parties to join it in forming a government.

After weeks of haggling, the Hasidic Agudat Yisrael and the Mitnagged Degel HaTorah parties agreed late Tuesday to file a joint election list.

They were joined by another haredi figure, Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz, who had second thoughts after announcing his retirement from politics last week.

Peretz, an independent member of the present Knesset, alarmed the haredi camp last month when he said he would head a new party called Moriah.

He abandoned that idea two weeks later,

only to revive it Tuesday as the filing deadline approached. But Moriah will run jointly with the Agudah-Degel coalition, not in opposition to it.

Peretz is a hawk who broke with the Sephardic haredi Shas party in 1990 when its spiritual leader, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, tried to lead it into a coalition with Labor.

The Agudah, for its part, has vowed never to join a Labor-led government. While Degel's spiritual mentor, Rabbi Eliezer Schach, has expressed dovish sentiments in the past, he has attacked Laborites, especially kibbutzniks, for their secular lifestyle.

Shas Mentor Losing Influence

Labor's chances of winning support from Shas received a blow when the party filed its list Tuesday. The ranking of names indicates that the dovish Rabbi Yosef has lost influence. Yosef Azran and Rafael Pinhasi, Knesset members who rebelled against him in 1990, appeared in safe spots and are likely to retain their seats.

The former chief rabbi therefore cannot be counted on to deliver Shas to the Labor camp.

According to observers, these circumstances point to one feasible outcome: another Labor-Likud unity government such as governed Israel from 1984 to 1990.

To many Israelis, that spells paralysis in both foreign and domestic affairs, since neither major party is capable of taking a policy initiative opposed by the other.

But there is a ray of hope for Labor. The haredim fear a unity regime more than any other because they would be left out.

Should Labor muster enough votes to block a Likud-led coalition on the right, the religious parties might swallow their ideological objections and align with Labor to get a seat in the Cabinet and the prestige and patronage that goes with it.

All in all, a total of 30 political parties registered to run in the June 23 elections.

The haredi parties submitted their lists just minutes before the deadline. Shas, led by Aryeh Deri, arrived at 11:30 p.m., with Eliezer Mizrahi's Geulat Yisrael list hot on its heels. Members of the combined Agudat Yisrael-Degel HaTorah list swept in at 11:45.

Moshe Levinger's Torah Ve'ereztz Party came in just under the wire, as did Medinat Hayehudim, led by Robert and Rachel Manning, who are awaiting extradition to the United States on murder charges.

**GROUPS URGE DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM
TO ADDRESS RANGE OF JEWISH ISSUES**

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, May 20 (JTA) -- The National Jewish Democratic Council urged the Democratic Party's platform committee this week to approve a plank that supports guaranteeing billions of dollars of loans Israel wants to help finance immigrant absorption.

Steve Gutow, executive director of the council, said such support is needed to "to repair the damage the Republicans have inflicted on this country's relations with the Jewish state."

The platform should "recognize that the alliance between the U.S. and Israel is based on a

bond of mutually beneficial goals and shared democratic values, which warrants continued American economic and military support for Israel," he said.

The council was one of 90 groups to testify this week at a 14-hour marathon session of the platform committee in Cleveland.

Others making pitches included the left-wing Jewish Peace Lobby, which testified in support of President Bush's policy linking loan guarantees to a freeze on Israeli settlement activity in the administered territories.

Jerome Segal, the lobby's president, urged the party to adopt a stance opposing Israel's "rapid settlement of the West Bank."

"The Bush administration, to its credit, has tried to block this effort," which is "made possible by U.S. tax dollars," Segal said.

Any mention of loan guarantees would expand the pro-Israel language contained in the 1988 party platform, which simply reaffirmed the "special relationship with Israel" and pledged to "provide new leadership to deliver the promise of peace and security through negotiations that has been held out to Israel and its neighbors by the Camp David Accords" struck with Egypt in 1978.

Arab Boycott Language Urged

In its testimony this week, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee proposed including a reference to the Arab-Israeli peace talks begun last fall. AIPAC President David Steiner asked the party to support "direct negotiations between Israelis, Palestinians and Arab states without imposed solutions" by parties outside the region.

Among the more specific platform planks proposed was a reference to the Arab economic boycott of Israel. This was requested by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the umbrella policy-planning group for national Jewish agencies and community councils.

NJCRAC called on the party "to vigorously condemn the Arab economic boycott against Israel and the secondary and tertiary boycotts against companies that deal with Israeli businesses."

Both NJCRAC and the NJDC urged that the platform recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, although Gutov's group called more specifically for recognition of a united West and East Jerusalem as the capital.

Pro-Palestinian activists are also trying to influence the platform, at least in limiting the amount of pro-Israel language.

James Zogby, executive director of the Arab-American Institute, testified that "our party's platform has ignored" the "complexities and concerns of the Arab world."

"Seen through the distorted lens of domestic concerns, at best the Arab world gets a one-line mention as 'Israel's neighbors,'" Zogby said.

It was Zogby who, at the 1988 party convention, proposed but later withdrew a plank that called for "mutual recognition" of Arab countries and Israel, "territorial compromise and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians."

The proposal resembled one that had been defeated earlier in Denver, when the 1988 platform committee approved its pre-convention version of the platform.

In his testimony this week, Zogby recommended that the platform recognize "equal rights for all people" in the Middle East and stress "working for peace through negotiations."

In other testimony by Jewish groups, Americans for Peace Now urged that the platform call

for the party to promote "security for Israel, recognition of Israel by all Arab states and the realization of the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

Church-State Concerns Raised

Linda Heller Kamm, co-chairwoman of Peace Now's Washington office, also urged that the platform say "the Democratic Party condemns the Bush administration's efforts to fuel the arms race in the Middle East."

"Instead of selling a new generation of strategic weapons to the region, the United States should use the multilateral arms control negotiations currently under way to seek verifiable arms control agreements" in the region, she said.

The Jewish Peace Lobby called on the Democrats to state in their platform that the party believes in "a vigorous policy of preserving the land-for-peace option."

"What is going on in the Middle East is that the Likud government is engaged in a determined effort to eliminate" that option, Segal testified.

On domestic issues, the National Jewish Democratic Council urged the platform committee to support the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1992, sponsored by Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.). The bill would make it more difficult for government to interfere in religious practices.

The NJDC also urged the party to oppose prayer in public schools as well as "school choice programs that would allow tax dollars to be used for religious education."

The Anti-Defamation League urged the party to back more comprehensive laws punishing those who commit hate crimes, "bona fide affirmative action programs" for minorities and Holocaust education programs.

NJCRAC urged the party to "include in its platform a strong commitment and clear path to address both the effects and the root causes of poverty."

MITTERRAND AGREES TO VISIT ISRAEL, BUT UNDERScores CHILLY RELATIONS By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, May 20 (JTA) -- French President Francois Mitterrand has accepted an invitation from his Israeli counterpart, Chaim Herzog, to visit the Jewish state, and he said he would try to make it before the end of the year.

He would be the first incumbent president of France to visit Israel.

But Franco-Israeli relations are chilly. Mitterrand made that clear by the way he received the new Israeli ambassador, Yehuda Lancry, when he presented his credentials Wednesday at the Elysee Palace.

Lancry, who came to Paris in February, had an embarrassingly long wait for Mitterrand to receive him so that he could officially begin his diplomatic duties.

The French Foreign Ministry advised the Israeli envoy-designate that the president only accredited ambassadors in batches of five -- so he would have to wait until that number accumulated. Lancry was finally presented together with the envoys of Uganda and Mauritius.

The French are known to be piqued with Israel since the Persian Gulf War last year. Mitterrand has obviously not forgiven Israel for accusing France of providing Iraq with technology to upgrade its Scud missiles.

ARIEL SHARON COMES UNDER FIRE FOR SPEAKING OF YEMENITE RESCUE

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, May 20 (JTA) -- Housing Minister Ariel Sharon is under fire for disclosing, in a Likud electioneering speech Tuesday, that the government is involved in an effort to bring Yemen's remaining 1,600 Jews to Israel.

Given their extremely delicate nature, such matters are not open to public discussion.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, reportedly taken aback when he heard Sharon's remarks on the radio, is said to have promptly reprimanded the minister by telephone.

The report said Sharon was apologetic and claimed he had not realized how sensitive the issue was.

Knesset member Yossi Sarid of the Meretz faction accused Sharon of revealing a state secret and demanded a swift investigation by the attorney general and the police.

Sharon's office lashed back at Sarid, calling him a "leftist squealer."

Avigdor Kahalani, chairman of the Committee for Yemenite Jewry and a Labor candidate for the Knesset, called Sharon's remarks "irresponsible and likely to damage Yemenite Jews." He told reporters he could not believe his ears when he heard Sharon's disclosure.

The mass-circulation daily Yediot Achronot said in an editorial Wednesday that it was astounded that "of all people, Arik Sharon, a reserve general and a former defense minister, should be the one to expose a top political secret, hoping to make political gain."

But Sharon defended himself in a statement issued Tuesday night.

"The things I said about the Yemenite Jews were general statements that have been made in the past on the subject and did not constitute any new revelations or secrets," he said.

He was referring to the remarks he made at a Likud rally in Kiryat Ata, an immigrant township in the Haifa Bay area.

'One Should Not Say Too Much'

At that gathering, Sharon credited his party with increasing immigration from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia and for "the release of Jews imprisoned in Syria."

"The government's efforts to liberate the Yemenite Jews is the latest in an immigration program which Likud governments have been involved in since 1977," he said.

He added, however, that "one should not say too much on the subject, one should restrain oneself."

Sarid, chairman of the Knesset's censorship subcommittee, said the news media had been asked specifically not to mention anything about the Yemenite operation in order not to jeopardize it.

But Sharon went ahead and disclosed it in a public speech, the Knesset member charged.

Sharon retorted that "the leftists who expressed their views on the issue showed greater irresponsibility. They are the ones who have focused attention on the issue."

He accused Sarid in particular of being "a regular informer to the Americans."

Sharon probably was referring to information about the true extent of Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which reached the Bush administration and prompted it to reject Israel's request for U.S. guarantees

covering \$10 billion in loans for immigrant absorption.

The flap over Sharon's remarks about Yemenite Jews is not without precedent. Negotiations with countries that restrict Jewish emigration are extremely delicate and are conducted discreetly outside the public view.

Operation Moses was a case in point. The secret airlift, which brought thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel via Sudan in 1984 and 1985, had to be halted when it was exposed through leaks to the news media. There were political recriminations at the time.

JOHANNESBURG RABBI OPENS CONCLAVE TO CREATE A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, May 20 (JTA) -- A leading Johannesburg rabbi recited the opening prayer at Codesa 2, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, which convened here last week.

Rabbi Dennis Isaacs of the Johannesburg Beth Din (religious court) said he was honored to accept the invitation to deliver the invocation at the negotiations on the future of South Africa.

Isaacs, rabbi emeritus of the Cyrildene Hebrew Congregation in Johannesburg, joined a Roman Catholic bishop and a Dutch Reformed minister in a spiritual start to the negotiations, held at the World Trade Center near Jan Smuts international airport.

Moslem, Hindu and Anglican religious leaders said the closing prayers, the idea being to give recognition to the spectrum of religions in South Africa.

Although the outcome of Codesa 2 was disappointing because it failed to draft a blueprint for transitional government, Isaacs told The Jewish Telegraphic Agency that "it is good people are talking."

Regarding the honor extended him, the rabbi remarked that "Jews have always had certain good standing at this kind of level. It is a good portent for the new South Africa."

In addition to assembling the political players negotiating the future of the country, Codesa 2 attracted international leaders, including those from neighboring black states and the Organization of African Unity.

Among the Jewish dignitaries present were the Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Zvi Gov-Ari, and former Democratic Party parliamentarian Helen Suzman, a veteran leader of the opposition and anti-apartheid activist.

Key Jewish figures in the negotiating process included Joe Slovo, national chairman of the South African Communist Party, African National Congress and Communist Party leader Ronnie Kasrils and ANC spokesperson Gill Marcus.

Isaacs opened his prayer in Hebrew and closed in Afrikaans which, with English, is one of the two official languages of South Africa.

He blessed the deliberations and called for a society built on the principles of justice, one that "acknowledges, as the Bible has it, that man was created in the image of God and is deserving of dignity and respect, a society free from suspicion and mistrust and hatred and prejudice."

Rabbi Isaacs made a plea for peace in a troubled land and called on the Almighty to "help us to help ourselves out of the darkness of strife and terror and violence and the destruction -- especially of human life -- that now plagues so many areas of the land."

ISRAEL THROWS BIG PARTY TO CELEBRATE JNF'S 90TH

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, May 20 (JTA) -- The Jewish National Fund, founded by the World Zionist Organization in 1902, is celebrating its 90th anniversary here this week.

About 600 JNF activists from 21 countries were greeted by national leaders and feted by almost everyone. President Chaim Herzog sent a message praising the JNF's "enlightened ecology" and its long record as an instrument of immigrant absorption.

The air force went all out to put on an air show for the visitors, who were guests at an air base in northern Israel on Tuesday.

There was a sound-and-light pageant at the Citadel in Jerusalem, complete with giant screens and laser effects.

The all-immigrant orchestra from Ra'anana gave a special concert for the benefit of the JNF mission. It featured as soloist 14-year-old Yoni Gandelman, a violin prodigy from the former Soviet Union.

A highlight of the visit was the inauguration of Campaign Machane HaChaim to establish a summer camp for children in memory of the 1.5 million Jewish children who died in the Holocaust.

The project, which will cost an estimated \$10 million, was initiated by an organization of Jews from Poland and concentration camp survivors in the Los Angeles area.

The ceremony was attended by Mordechai Dayan, co-chairman of the JNF board of directors and Ruth Popkin, president of JNF of America.

The camp will be located on JNF land at the Golani junction west of Tiberias. It will represent "a significant increase in the investment of world Jewry," in Israel, according to JNF Chairman Moshe Rivlin.

'Ours Is The Easy Job'

Rivlin quoted the late Chaim Nachman Bialik, Israel's poet laureate, who wrote at the JNF's 25th anniversary 65 years ago, "The sky's span above the head of a nation is equal to the land area beneath the feet of this nation."

That was a fitting introduction to the air force's tribute to the world gathering of the JNF. With the visitors sitting on the tarmac craning their necks upward, four F-16 jet fighters and Sikorsky and Defender combat helicopters put on a display of aerial acrobatics that awed the spectators.

It was an expensive show. The price tag on one F-16 is \$35 million and the cost of flying such an airplane is about \$20,000 an hour.

At the end of the air show, the guests were greeted by the air force commander, Maj. Gen. Herzl Bodinger, who gave a brief history of the base where "thousands of missions took off to protect the north."

The general added, "We are well aware of your work here and we appreciate it." To which Joe Hess, national campaign chairman of the JNF in the United States, replied: "Ours is the easy job. We support the development of the land from afar, but it is your young people who take their lives to the front to protect this land."

The jets that streaked over the air base to the wonderment of the air force's guests exemplified how much the world has changed since the JNF was founded, a year before the Wright brothers' first flight in 1903.

FIGHTING IN EX-YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC SCUTTLES A PERFORMANCE IN ISRAEL

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 20 (JTA) -- The annual Israel Festival, which began a 14-day run this week, had to scrub one of its biggest attractions because of the warfare in the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Obala Open Theater of Sarajevo had been scheduled to give four performances of its award-winning pantomime "Tattoo."

But the group's director, Mladen Materic, who managed to get out of the Bosnian capital three weeks ago, informed a news conference here Tuesday that he was forced to cancel because the two lead actresses and the sound man were trapped in Sarajevo by the heavy fighting.

He said arrangements to get the company out were made through Sarajevo's Jewish community. But "connections which had worked during the first two weeks were broken."

Similarly, arrangements with the U.N. force were abandoned after U.N. headquarters in Sarajevo was bombed, leaving the peacekeepers without transport for their own evacuation.

Although most of the cast and crew managed to reach Belgrade, the Serbian capital, where a plane was standing by to bring them to Israel, the trip was pointless without the stars.

Obala was invited to perform "Tattoo" at next year's festival. Meanwhile, ticket-holders may exchange them for other attractions now.

POLITICIANS MAKE MOVES ON THOUSANDS GATHERED FOR LAG B'OMER FESTIVITIES

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 20 (JTA) -- The politicians moved in in force on this year's traditional Lag B'Omer festivities at Meron in the Galilee.

They could hardly have been expected to stay away, as some quarter of a million potential voters descended on the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai beginning Wednesday at sundown. Bar Yochai was the second century sage reputed to have authored the Zohar, the central text of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah.

The idea of politicians working the crowds on a religious occasion angered the chief rabbi of nearby Safed. But it delighted the town's Likud mayor, Ze'ev Perl, who apparently saw an advantage for his party.

All the major political parties applied to the police for permission to set up stages from which party leaders could address the crowd.

Lag B'Omer is the 33rd of the 50 days separating Passover and Shavuot. According to tradition, it marks the end of the plague that decimated the pupils of Rabbi Akiva during the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans. It is therefore known as the festival of scholars.

Festival customs at the Meron hilltop include giving 3-year-old boys their first haircuts. Barren women pray at the tomb for the sage to intercede, allowing them to conceive.

Bonfires are lit throughout the area, creating a nightmare for the local fire brigades. The Red Magen David's paramedical services are also on call to treat people who become ill or are hurt in accidents.

Many are victims of exposure. Sleeping in tents or makeshift shelters, they fail to take into account the frosty nighttime temperatures on the Galilee hills.