

**WITH WEEKLONG REPRIEVE IN CRISIS,  
RABIN AIMS AT EXPANDING COALITION**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 11 (JTA) -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin managed to stave off yet another looming coalition collapse in the nick of time this week, and immediately began negotiations with other political parties in an effort to broaden the base of his parliamentary support.

Trying to settle a bitter feud between his two coalition partners, the secularist Meretz bloc and the Orthodox Shas party, Rabin won agreement Tuesday from the top minister of each party to temporarily "deposit" their respective portfolios in Rabin's hands for one week until a more permanent solution could be worked out.

The deal was struck just minutes before the Shas party chairman, Interior Minister Arye Deri, was to have resigned and pulled the party's six-seat Knesset delegation out of the Labor-led government.

Deri had announced his resignation Sunday, but gave Rabin 48 hours to remove Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni as education minister.

Under the deal worked out Tuesday, both Deri and Aloni will become ministers without portfolio until a compromise agreement is reached.

Meanwhile, Rabin is trying to use the coalition crisis to his benefit, by taking the opportunity to see if he can add any other parties to the government and thereby make the coalition less vulnerable to such crises in the future.

Just after securing the one-week breather, Rabin proceeded to call in Avraham Shapira, leader of the fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism Front, and asked him to begin negotiations with Labor with a view toward joining the coalition.

Similar efforts are expected to be made with the National Religious Party and with Rafael Eitan's Tsomet party. Labor is prepared to promise these two right-of-center parties that any territorial concessions in peace talks with the Arabs will be made only if sanctioned in advance by new elections or a national referendum.

Rabin could then presumably offer the education post to NRP's Zevulun Hammer or to Eitan. Both men have said they see themselves as suited for the job. Hammer held it for years under the Likud-led coalitions of the 1980s.

**Best Hope Is With United Torah**

But political observers believe the best prospects of enlarging the coalition lie with United Torah, especially since Aloni, as a result of the past week's crisis, has apparently been reconciled in principle to forfeiting the sensitive Education Ministry.

United Torah has said in the past that it could not join the government if Aloni were education minister.

It has been Aloni's controversial comments, seen in Orthodox circles as disparaging, that have triggered several coalition crises with Shas, including the present one.

Sparkling this latest crisis was a comment by Aloni criticizing Rabin's recitation of the Shema Yisrael prayer at a commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising last month. Aloni, dismaying even

many of her supporters, said Rabin's use of the prayer was fatalistic.

Shas' Council of Torah Sages, led by former Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, demanded that Rabin make good on an earlier written pledge to remove Aloni from the education post if her controversial statements continued.

Deri's announcement Sunday that he planned to resign put Rabin on notice that this time, Shas meant business.

One compromise proposal to remove Aloni from overseeing the Education Ministry but have her retain control over the sub-portfolio of culture was also rejected by Shas.

Under that proposal, Aloni would have retained control over the two state-run television networks.

Another Meretz minister, Amnon Rubinstein, was to have taken over the shrunken Education Ministry.

But Yosef and the other Shas sages vetoed this -- on the grounds that it still left Aloni with unacceptable powers over the country's culture and media.

Shas said it wants a Labor Party minister at the Education and Culture Ministry. It proposed compensating Aloni with another senior -- but non-controversial -- portfolio.

**Could Govern Without Shas**

But Meretz, with twice as many Knesset seats as Shas, balked predictably at the order dictated by the smaller party.

Nevertheless, under intense pressure from the prime minister, the Meretz leadership agreed Tuesday evening to the one-week "timeout" -- with the clear understanding that if no acceptable solution is found during that time, Rabin will allow Deri's resignation to go forward.

In such a case, Rabin would have to govern with a 56-seat plurality in the Knesset, supplemented with the tacit support of the five Knesset members from Arab parties. This would yield a combined parliamentary majority of 61 seats against the opposition's 59.

The thinness of that margin would plainly not be the premier's preferred political position, especially given the context of hard decisions that may soon be needed in the peace talks.

Rabin, however, declared Tuesday night that he was anxious to demonstrate "to any potential coalition partner" that he is both determined and capable of continuing to govern even if Shas drops out.

At the end of the day, the premier stressed that "no government is possible other than a Labor-led government -- given our 'blocking bloc' in the Knesset."

As if to drive home this point, Rabin held a cordial meeting at his office in the Knesset with the five Arab Knesset members, whose support would be needed for this "blocking bloc" to hold.

The days ahead, according to political observers, will witness a new round of intensive coalition negotiations, with Labor anxious to broaden the base of its government.

Labor's hope is that the Shas-Meretz clash, by precipitating Aloni's removal from the Education Ministry, has opened the way for adding other parties to the coalition.

## PROBLEMS DOG PALESTINIAN TALKS, BUT SYRIA SENDS HOPEFUL SIGNALS

By Deborah Kalb  
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 11 (JTA) -- Problems that have cropped up this week in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have dashed hopes of a quick breakthrough in this ninth round of Middle East peace talks.

At the same time, however, the Israelis are encouraged by new signs of flexibility from Syrian President Hafez Assad.

In an interview published Tuesday on the op-ed page of The New York Times, Assad said he could accept the idea of the four sets of negotiations proceeding at different paces and possibly reaching agreements with Israel at different times.

That was seen as a departure from Assad's earlier stance that an Israeli agreement with any one party was unacceptable until a "comprehensive settlement" had been reached with all four: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians.

Israeli Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, who heads his country's negotiations with Syria, welcomed some of Assad's comments in the interview, a longer version of which was published last weekend in the London-based Arabic-language paper al-Wasat.

"While not everything in the interview is precisely to our liking, there are some very positive elements in that interview," Rabinovich told reporters before his Tuesday morning negotiating session with the Syrian delegation.

"We welcome this use of public diplomacy in the effort to negotiate peace between Israel and Syria," the ambassador said.

The two sides discussed the Times piece in their session Tuesday, Rabinovich said after the meeting.

But one observer of the peace process cautioned that Assad's comments were not that different from his previous remarks.

Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Council of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, pointed out that Assad had said earlier that he would resume the peace talks with Israel last month whether or not the Palestinian delegation attended.

Assad's comments represent "another incremental step forward," Pipes said. "Overall, it looks positive. But it's not commensurate with what the Israelis have done. The Israelis have made a great number of concessions in the past few months."

### No 'Great Leap Forward'

Another expert, Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the full interview had both positive and negative aspects.

He said the Syrian leader's comments about agreements standing on their own was useful, but added that it was "disconcerting" that Assad referred to Lebanon only in the context of how much it benefits Syria.

Overall, Satloff said, "the fact that one is discussing whether or not this is a great leap forward means that it isn't."

Meanwhile, in the Israeli-Palestinian talks, the forward momentum of the previous week was slowed, but not entirely halted, when Palestinian leaders decided to cut their negotiating team from 14 to three members for this week's talks.

Faisal Husseini, the overall delegation leader, and Haidar Abdel-Shafi, chief of the Palestinian

negotiating team, were among those absent from Monday's session.

The Palestinians, in a statement Monday, said they were protesting what they called "Israel's failure to carry out commitments it had made earlier to the Palestinian side and to the U.S. administration."

One major concern for the Palestinians is the fate of some 400 Palestinians deported by the Israelis last December. The Palestinians feel the deportees are not being returned quickly enough.

The Israelis agreed Monday to let another 25 of the deportees return, but the Palestinians said they were not satisfied by this gesture.

But Middle East experts said this week that they did not feel the deportation issue needed to be completely resolved for progress to be made in the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

Despite the "public image of frostiness" between the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators, "there's also give and take" on substantive issues, said Satloff of the Washington Institute.

"They're negotiating," he said. "The presence of the deportees in South Lebanon" is not stopping them.

### Parties Discussing 'Core Issues'

In Tuesday's negotiating session, the truncated Palestinian delegation and the Israeli delegation discussed draft statements of principles put forth by both sides.

The Palestinians said their negotiators were not satisfied with the Israeli draft, which was presented late last week. They cited areas of "territorial jurisdiction, powers and responsibilities, and legislation" as particular concerns.

After Monday afternoon's session, the Palestinians presented the Israelis with an informal draft of their own statement of principles, and the two sides met in what Israeli officials called an "ad hoc working group" Tuesday afternoon to discuss the two drafts.

The Israelis say that their draft statement of principles could serve as a "framework document" for further negotiations on Palestinian autonomy.

The document could define "the outer limits of what we negotiate here," said Israeli spokesman Yossi Gal. He added that once the parties agreed on the general issues, they could then start negotiating on the specifics.

Palestinian elections was one of the topics discussed in the draft statement, Gal said. The two sides would have to work out a formula as to how the concept of elections would be represented in the document, and then in the next stage, they would discuss such details as who would be eligible to vote and what type of elections would be held.

Gal said that the Israelis hoped to finish this round of talks with something concrete for the Palestinian negotiators to take home to their constituency. "It is high time the Israelis and Palestinians show that they can reach agreement" on something, he said.

But such agreement could take a while, one expert cautioned.

Richard Haass, a top Middle East adviser in the Bush administration, who is now a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said negotiators are often afraid that "what they agree to now" in a statement of principles "will come back to haunt them."

The "good news," though, Haass said, is that the two sides are "beginning to talk about real things" and "core issues."

## JEWISH GROUPS EXPRESS IMPATIENCE WITH SLOW U.S. RESPONSE ON BOSNIA

By Deborah Kalb  
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 11 (JTA) -- The organized Jewish community, which has been pushing the United States to take tougher measures to halt atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is becoming increasingly frustrated with the Clinton administration's seeming inability to decide on a course of action.

Convinced that only stronger U.S. action will stop the killings and "ethnic cleansing" campaign in the former Yugoslav republic, Jewish leaders have continued to press their opinions in meetings with high-level administration officials.

Last week, executives of the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress and Anti-Defamation League discussed the situation with Deputy National Security Adviser Samuel Berger.

For months now, Jewish groups have been encouraging the United States to help alleviate the plight of the Bosnians. The Jewish community has expressed special concern about the "ethnic cleansing" practiced against Bosnian Moslems mainly by Bosnian Serbs, which, for some, stirs up memories of the Nazi Holocaust.

Among the steps urged by Jewish groups in recent months have been the lifting of the arms embargo against the Bosnian Moslems and military action, if necessary, to stop the killings.

One leader who attended the meeting with Berger, AJCongress Executive Vice President Henry Siegman, expressed impatience with the administration.

Speaking for himself, and not for his organization, Siegman said he felt a "deep sense of disappointment and disillusionment. It does not seem that this administration is at all clear about what it intends to do," he said.

### 'We Can't Simply Be Sitting By'

By being "indecisive," Siegman said, the administration is signaling to the Serbs that "they can really continue with the genocide and ethnic cleansing with absolute impunity," and that nobody in the United States or Europe will "lift a finger to stop them on this bloody road."

ADL National Chair Mel Salberg and AJCommittee President Alfred Moses, the other participants in the Berger meeting, were less critical, saying they understood the complications facing the administration, in dealing with often-reluctant European allies, for example.

But both leaders also said they saw a need for forceful American action on the Bosnia issue.

"There is no other leader in the world than the United States in dealing with issues like Bosnia," said Salberg.

"The situation is one that, despite the obvious difficulties and uncertainties as to the outcome, we can't simply be sitting by, seeing whole communities decimated," Moses said.

Meanwhile, a group of religious leaders from the former Yugoslavia held a news conference here Tuesday to bring attention to the conditions in their homeland.

Spearheaded by Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the ecumenical Appeal of Conscience Foundation, the news conference included representatives of the Jewish, Catholic, Moslem and Serbian Orthodox communities of the former Yugoslavia.

## AMERICANS BELIEVE A HOLOCAUST OF EUROPEAN JEWRY COULD RECUR

By Deborah Kalb  
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 11 (JTA) -- A majority of Americans believes a holocaust against the Jews of Europe could happen again, according to a national survey released this week.

The survey was commissioned by a group called the Committee of Concerned Christians, which describes itself as "the first all-denominational Christian organization whose sole purpose is to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten."

Fifty-four percent of respondents said they believed another holocaust similar to the Nazi Holocaust could happen in Europe.

Thirty-two percent said it could not happen again, and the remainder was unsure or did not know.

The survey, released Tuesday in the office of Richard Halverson, the chaplain of the U.S. Senate and a member of the committee's advisory board, sampled 1,022 adults between April 30 and May 2.

Ben Friedman, founder of and spokesman for the committee, said in a statement that the results show most Americans do not believe the Holocaust-related slogan "Never Again" is accurate.

The slogan "is an obsolete and ineffective warning against another Holocaust, and should be abandoned immediately by the Jewish people," said Friedman, a businessman who was described by the Los Angeles Times as an active member of the Jewish community.

"Unless a full-scale program is implemented to prevent another Holocaust, a more accurate slogan is 'It will happen again,'" said Friedman.

### One Sermon Per Year Pledged

The committee plans to launch a program to educate Americans about the Holocaust, including distribution of a free videotape about the Holocaust to 10,000 churches, and distribution of copies of "The Diary of Anne Frank."

Friedman founded the committee last year, in an effort to ensure that the Holocaust is not forgotten. He has enlisted 1,000 ministers and bishops across the country in his cause, and they have pledged to deliver one sermon per year about the Holocaust.

The survey found that older people are more likely to believe a holocaust could happen again.

Sixty-one percent of people age 45 to 64 believe that another holocaust could occur, while only 48 percent of younger respondents felt that way.

Ninety-eight percent of respondents had heard about the Holocaust, the survey said. It also found that one in six Americans is unaware of the centuries of persecution suffered by the Jews of Europe before World War II.

Only 14 percent of respondents had ever attended a class, seminar or sermon about the Holocaust in a church or synagogue.

A recent study by the American Jewish Committee found that many Americans are ignorant about events relating to the Holocaust.

When asked if they knew what the term "Holocaust" referred to, 38 percent of adults and 53 percent of high school students in the AJCommittee study either said they did not know or offered completely incorrect answers.

## AJCOMMITTEE AND AJCONGRESS AGREE REMAINING SEPARATE IS BEST FOR NOW

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, May 11 (JTA) -- Merger talks between the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress came to an unsuccessful end last week, with the two organizations agreeing to remain separate.

A merger had promised to reduce overhead, administrative expenses and overlapping programs of the two groups, which have similar goals of protecting Jewish interests around the world and promoting American democracy at home.

Similar talks had taken place in the early 1970s. Given the general decline of money available to Jewish organizations, as well as specific budget crises undergone by the two groups in the late 1980s, this round of talks was seen as potentially more fruitful.

But the once-bitter differences between the two groups remain manifest in their distinct governance systems, and they could not be overcome despite six months of talks.

A central obstacle to the merger, though one not officially raised in the talks, was the political stances of the groups. AJCongress is strongly liberal on domestic issues and Israeli politics. AJCommittee is more centrist on Israel and publishes the neoconservative magazine *Commentary*.

AJCongress was founded in 1922, in large measure out of anger and frustration among Eastern European immigrants that they were excluded by the German-Jewish elite which founded AJCommittee in 1906.

The ethnic gap was reflected in ideology, as well, with AJCommittee distinctly cool toward Zionism in its early years and AJCongress embracing it.

While all that is history, and both sides agree that little separates the AJCommittee membership from that of AJCongress, the residue of the original differences remains entrenched in the organizations' bylaws.

In keeping with its original aspirations to be a democratic congress, the AJCongress leadership is elected by its members; in keeping with the original self-selection of AJCommittee, some AJCommittee leadership positions are reserved for those who contribute at least \$5,000 to the organization.

### 'Difficult Gap To Bridge'

Trying to contain both groups within a new organization is "an enormously difficult gap to bridge," said AJCongress President Robert Lifton. "That's not culture; that's hard, practical common sense."

AJCommittee President Alfred Moses also dismissed talk of cultural differences.

"We're as grass roots as you can be. We're the people who have the daily minyan at our meetings," he said.

Also at issue was the proportionate weight the two groups would have in a merged body.

Weighing by membership would give parity to AJCongress, which claims 50,000 members against the 40,000 reported by AJCommittee.

But as measured by size of operations, the \$19 million budget of the AJCommittee budget far outweighs that of AJCongress, which is \$7 million.

Had the merger been based on anything less than an equal footing, it would have been likely that the distinctive AJCongress political position would have been lost.

The political differences between the two organizations were highlighted in March, when the admission of the left-wing Americans for Peace Now into the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations was debated.

AJCongress strongly favored Peace Now's admission. AJCongress had been one of the few organizations bringing a dovish perspective to the communal consensus, as voiced by the Conference of Presidents.

AJCommittee, however, supported an unsuccessful effort to table the issue.

At the time, one observer described the Peace Now vote as "the deathblow for the merger," because it made clear that "it would be an absorption" of AJCongress.

In a joint statement this week, the presidents of both groups said the talks had "given us a renewed appreciation and respect for the traditions and accomplishments of both organizations, something that will undoubtedly result in continued close cooperation on matters of mutual concern."

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RESTORATION BILL WINS UNANIMOUS APPROVAL IN THE HOUSE

By Deborah Kalb  
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 11 (JTA) -- A bill that would make it harder for the government to encroach on free exercise of religion cleared the House of Representatives this week, much to the satisfaction of Jewish organizations.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act was approved Tuesday in a unanimous voice vote.

"This is the most important vote for religious freedom we will see in our lifetime," a jubilant Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said in a statement.

Supported by a broad coalition of Jewish and other religious groups, the bill is designed to circumvent a 1990 Supreme Court ruling that gave states greater leeway in outlawing certain religious practices.

Supporters of the legislation are now awaiting an upcoming vote on the Senate floor. The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 15-1 last week to send the bill to the full chamber.

President Clinton is expected to sign the bill into law if it clears Congress.

## GERMANY COMMEMORATES BOOK-BURNING

BERLIN, May 11 (JTA) -- Recalling a sinister prelude to the Holocaust, several cities throughout Germany on Monday held ceremonies to observe the 60th anniversary of the first Nazi book-burning, in which books by such authors as Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka and Sigmund Freud were torched.

In Berlin's Opera Square, where the book-burning began, German Jewish writer Stefan Heym read from the work of British writer Salman Rushdie, a secular Moslem whose work provoked the late Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a death warrant against him.

"Freedom of speech is everything," the 80-year-old Heym quoted from Rushdie, who today lives in hiding.

The northern port city of Rostock, which gained notoriety last year for a series of violent racist incidents, had invited members of the Israeli Knesset to its commemoration.