

**ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS UNHAPPY WITH AMERICAN ROLE AT PEACE TALKS**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 17 (JTA) -- As Israelis and Palestinians size up the results of the ninth round of Middle East peace talks, concluded last week in Washington, both sides say they are disappointed in the role the American administration played.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has urged Secretary of State Warren Christopher to come to the region himself, or send a high-level emissary, in order to make substantive progress before the talks are scheduled to resume June 7.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, who left Israel early Sunday for visits to India and China, said he felt a breakthrough was needed "in the coming weeks" or else the window of opportunity, opened when the Middle East peace talks began in October 1991, could begin to close.

Palestinians, meanwhile, have accused the United States of colluding with the Israelis. They also have accused Israel of failing to live up to its promises of gestures and concessions.

At the weekly Cabinet meeting Sunday, Rabin pledged he would offer no further concessions unilaterally, but would insist on a Palestinian response being spelled out and clearly understood in advance.

After the Cabinet meeting, Health Minister Chaim Ramon said the Palestinians would be making a grave mistake if they failed to seize Israel's proposals for autonomy in the territories.

He implored the Palestinians "not to push too much, not to miss again the golden opportunity to start to rule their own lives."

The ninth round of talks wound up last Thursday with the two sides failing to agree on a joint declaration of principles, designed to express their common goals without papering over the still-vast areas of dispute.

Israeli officials said they do not know the real reason for Palestinian protests about the negotiations, but suggested it may have less to do with Israel than with differences between the Palestinian Liberation Organization leadership in Tunis and the Palestinian leadership in the territories.

**Arafat Opposed U.S. Draft**

Nabil Shaath, an aide to Yasir Arafat, confirmed privately over the weekend that the PLO leader himself had instructed the delegation to reject a draft of the joint statement proposed by the Americans.

Shaath said the Palestinians were angry not to have seen the draft before May 12 and felt it had been drawn up in cooperation with the Israelis and then presented to them as a fait accompli.

Nevertheless, both Shaath and Palestinian sources in the administered territories said the paper could have been -- and might still be -- an acceptable basis for an agreed declaration of principles.

Most of the Palestinian negotiating team gathered in Tunis early this week for debriefing sessions with the PLO leadership.

The situation in Israel and the territories,

meanwhile, continues to put constraints on what negotiators from both parties are able to do.

Israeli defense experts told the Cabinet on Sunday that the worsening situation in the territories, now sealed off from Israel for the second month in a row, is having a negative and potentially dangerous effect on the standing of the Palestinian negotiators and the pro-peace faction within the Palestinian camp.

The seriousness of threats against the lives of these negotiators is increasing, the experts were quoted as telling the ministers.

Some of the "doves" within the Cabinet, among them Tourism Minister Uzi Baram of the Labor Party and Absorption Minister Yair Tshan of the left-wing Meretz bloc, urged that the gradual lifting of the closure be accelerated as a way to relieve the mounting tension in the territories.

By preventing Palestinians from reaching jobs in Israel, the closure has caused economic hardship and fueled frustration in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The government has issued 45,000 work permits for Palestinians, but not all of them are actually being used. Roughly 120,000 Palestinians worked in Israel daily before the closure.

Regarding the peace talks with Syria, David Afek, deputy head of the negotiating team with Syria, reportedly warned the Cabinet that the Syrians might make an Israeli declaration of readiness to withdraw entirely from the Golan Heights a precondition for continuing the talks.

So far, Israel has been unwilling to discuss withdrawal from the Golan until it hears specifically from Syria about whether it is committed to a "full peace" with Israel that includes diplomatic, trade, tourism and cultural ties.

Afek reportedly indicated that despite the circularity of much of the discussion with the Syrians, and their obduracy on the key issue of "the nature of the peace," there is reason to think that Damascus is prepared to negotiate full normalization, to come into effect simultaneously with an Israeli withdrawal.

Some ministers understood Afek to be signaling that Israel must make a political decision regarding the future of the Golan now.

**PARTIES GIVE RABIN ANOTHER WEEK TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS IN COALITION**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 17 (JTA) -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, working hard to settle a coalition crisis caused by feuding between the two smaller parties allied with him, has won another week's grace to resolve the political conflict.

The Labor Party's two partners in government, the secularist Meretz bloc and the fervently Orthodox Shas party, agreed tacitly Monday to postpone a deadline for settling the crisis until next Tuesday, the eve of the Shavuot holiday.

But Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni warned she is determined to hold Rabin to his promise of offering her the Communications Ministry and the Department of Culture, including control of government-run broadcasting, as her price for agreeing to leave her post as education minister.

Shas, for its part, has agreed to let Meretz

retain the Education Ministry, with Amnon Rubinstein at the helm.

But Shas has dug in over its opposition to Aloni continuing to be in charge of the Department of Culture and her gaining control of all state-run broadcasting.

It has been Shas' objections to Aloni's many controversial remarks on religious issues, seen in the Orthodox community as deeply offensive, that led to a string of coalition crises, including the present one.

Shas has also come under pressure from right-wing politicians and Jewish activists in the administered territories for backing the Labor-led government's policies in the peace process.

For the second night in a row, settler activists clashed Monday with Shas supporters outside the Jerusalem home of the party's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Over the weekend, a leader in the Jewish settlers movement, Rabbi Menachem Felix, was badly bruised when a group of Yosef's followers attacked those at the sit-in "protest watch."

The thrust of the settlers' campaign is to urge Yosef to take Shas out of a "leftist, defeatist" government that they fear will make territorial concessions to the Arabs for the sake of peace.

Yosef's followers point out that the rabbi, in his writings on Jewish law, has specifically sanctioned such concessions, if made in return for peace and security.

#### Degel Against Joining Government

On the political plane, meanwhile, Shas continues to come under virulent attack from rival Orthodox parties.

The Degel HaTorah faction of the United Torah Judaism Front, in its daily newspaper Yated Ne'eman, attacked Rubinstein for his secular positions, suggesting that even if Aloni quits the education post, the government will still remain tainted by anti-religious attitudes.

By painting the government as being anti-Orthodox, the other Orthodox parties make it uncomfortable for Shas to remain in the coalition.

Yated Ne'eman on Monday published a lengthy article cataloging Rubinstein's secularist positions on a whole range of state-religion issues, culled from his books, speeches and articles.

Rubinstein was dean of the Tel Aviv University Law School and a prolific commentator in the Ha'aretz newspaper before joining the government.

The Degel HaTorah newspaper concluded that while Rubinstein is more "civilized in his style" than the irrepressible Aloni, he is "more dangerous" to Orthodox concerns about the character of general education and culture in the state.

Degel HaTorah leaders also accused Shas leader Aryeh Deri of seeking to stay in government "at any cost."

Moshe Gafni, Degel's secretary, accused Shas in a radio interview Monday of "betraying the values that we once shared."

But equally significant was the silence from the other, numerically stronger faction of United Torah, Agudat Yisrael. That party's spiritual leader, the Hasidic rebbe of Gur, Rabbi Pinhas Menachem Alter, gave a grudging green light last week to Agudah's three Knesset members to pursue negotiations with Rabin, with a view to joining the coalition.

Agudah's position has always been that Aloni as education minister represented an unacceptable

obstacle. But with the Meretz leader serving elsewhere, the party could well break its election-time alliance with Degel and join the coalition.

Degel's leader, the nonagenarian Rabbi Eliezer Schach of Bnei Brak, has forbidden his party to join the government.

Even if Agudah does not openly join the government, its leaders may reach agreement with Labor to support the government in key Knesset votes, in return for Labor's support of certain Agudah institutions and interests.

The prime minister is clearly anxious to broaden his government, if only to avoid further Shas-Meretz standoffs in the future.

With the backing of Agudah, Rabin would be significantly strengthened in the pursuit of his peace policy. Yet he also must take care not to alienate Meretz, whose 12 Knesset seats are still considered pivotal to the stability of the Labor government.

#### **LIKUD REJECTS 'GAZA FIRST' PLAN AS CONVENTION DEBATES NEW BYLAWS** By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 17 (JTA) -- The opposition Likud party has roundly rejected a proposal by one of its more moderate figures for Israel to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip and grant Palestinian autonomy there.

The issue came up Monday at a convention of Likud's 3,500-member Central Committee.

Knesset member Ronni Milo, a former police minister, repeated his support for the "Gaza first" concept, in which Israel would not wait to negotiate a comprehensive autonomy plan with Palestinians, but would unilaterally pull out of Gaza.

But the convention's Foreign Affairs and Security Committee rejected the proposal Monday amid strong criticism.

Former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, one of the more vociferous opponents to the plan, asked Milo rhetorically if he knew there were a million "anti-Israel Palestinians" in Gaza and if he was prepared to allow them to form the foundations for an independent Palestinian state sworn to replace Israel.

The Likud convention, which opened Sunday evening in the Golan Heights, in a gesture of support to settlers there, moved to Tel Aviv on Monday for its first day of working sessions.

The Central Committee also held what proved to be a controversial debate over new bylaws proposed by the party's new chairman, Benjamin Netanyahu. The proposed change would grant the chairman added control over the party apparatus.

Virtually all the veteran party leaders and functionaries are said to be opposed to Netanyahu's proposed new constitution for the party.

Sharon accused his younger rival Netanyahu of seeking to set himself up as a dictator.

And former Foreign Minister David Levy, who came in second to Netanyahu in the Likud primaries, continued to boycott the convention.

Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir also spoke to the delegates, receiving a standing ovation as he delivered what was described as his farewell address to the party.

Shamir said he had no regrets about retiring from active party leadership and political life.

"The time has come to hand (it) over to the younger generation," he said to the sound of applause.

## GIRL SEPARATED FOR NINE YEARS REUNITED WITH FAMILY IN ISRAEL

By Michele Chabin

LOD, Israel, May 16 (JTA) -- Nine years ago, 5-year-old Menhale Dessie became separated from her family as they made their way through the Sudan en route to Israel.

On Sunday, Menhale, now 14, was reunited with the loved ones who never gave up hope of seeing her again.

At 9 a.m., the entire Dessie family gathered at Ben-Gurion Airport to welcome the daughter they had not seen in nearly a decade. They waited on the tarmac as Flight 542 from Athens touched down and the passengers disembarked.

Menhale, a graceful figure in a flowing white robe, burst into tears at the sight of her parents. Their embrace was captured by dozens of journalists and photographers, who vied for a view of the reunion.

Flanked by officials from the Jewish Agency, the family then entered the airport's absorption terminal, where they continued the reunion in private.

Zimna Berhanie, the Jewish Agency's emissary in Ethiopia, recounted the amazing story that led to Menhale's discovery some five months ago.

"Back in 1984, a group of 70 Ethiopian Jews set out on foot from the Gondar region of northern Ethiopia for a difficult monthlong march through the Sudan on their way to Israel. They were forced to travel at night and hide by day to avoid detection by the police of the former Ethiopian regime.

"One night," Berhanie said, "the group arrived at a steep passage. One of the guides leading the group offered to carry 5-year-old Menhale on his back. At the bottom, the family discovered that the girl had disappeared."

"After two days of frantic searching," said Berhanie, "the guides warned the family that to stay any longer would put the entire group at risk.

"On September 1984, after a stay of several months in the Sudan, Genetu and Dvora Dessie and their six other children arrived in Israel and settled in Migdal Haemek," said Berhanie.

"The Dessies never gave up hope and asked the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department for assistance. We made every effort to hunt for any shred of evidence that might lead to the girl's whereabouts," Berhanie said.

### Found Working As A Domestic

The breakthrough they needed occurred several months ago, when an Ethiopian immigrant returned to his native village and overheard the story of a girl who had wandered, naked and in shock, into a nearby village some nine years ago.

She had been adopted by a man named Adgeh Kebede, who raised her as his daughter.

Upon hearing this story, the agency flew the girl's father, Genetu Dessie, to track down the adoptive family. After several days, the agency found Adgeh Kebede, only to learn that Menhale had been abducted a year earlier and taken to a village 150 miles away.

With the help of Berhanie, who enlisted the help of local guides and the girl's adoptive father, Menhale was found four months later working as a domestic.

On May 3, the agency presented the Dessie family with recent pictures of Menhale. The emotional family immediately identified the girl

thanks, in part, to a scar she has had since infancy. With the blessing of her adopted family, Menhale was flown to Israel two weeks later.

Sitting before the media in the absorption hall, Menhale seemed overwhelmed and bewildered by the day's proceedings. Her large dark eyes were rimmed with red and filled with tears. She was too overcome with emotion to speak.

"Having Menhale back among us is a miracle," said the girl's aunt, Rachel Issachar. "There is no other way to describe this reunion and all the events that brought it about."

Amid the joy, there was also concern for the teen-ager. "This is going to be a very difficult time for her and her family," said Jewish Agency official Micha Feldman.

"The absorption of every new immigrant takes time, but Menhale will have special needs that will have to be met," he said. "First, she and her family have to become reacquainted."

To ease the way, the agency has already contacted an Ethiopian social worker in Migdal Haemek, where the Dessies reside.

"I have no doubts that Menhale will adapt very quickly to her new surroundings. I've known the Dessies for years. They are a warm family and will do everything possible to ease the transition."

## RED CROSS WILL EXAMINE BODIES MILITIA CLAIMS ARE IDF SOLDIERS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 17 (JTA) -- At Israel's request, the International Red Cross is to examine the bodies of two men held by the Shi'ite Amal militia in Lebanon that the group claims are those of Israeli soldiers long missing in action.

Amal leader Nabi Berri offered to return the bodies some two years ago, but the Israel Defense Force doubted the truth of the Amal claim. The offer fell through since Israel was not prepared to release Amal prisoners in exchange, without adequate evidence.

Two months ago, after several Shi'ite prisoners held by Israel and its allied South Lebanon Army were released, Berri announced he would permit Red Cross inspection of the bodies if 14 women prisoners were freed from the SLA's El-Khiam prison.

The demand was first rejected by Israel, but following further negotiations, five Shi'ite women were released last week from El-Khiam.

Amal issued a statement in Beirut on Monday saying that representatives of the International Red Cross would be permitted to examine the bodies in preparation for further talks on returning the bodies to Israel, if they are found to be those of the missing Israelis.

If the bodies are returned, further prisoners will be released from Israeli or SLA prisons.

## MUBARAK WISHES PRESIDENT WEIZMAN WELL

JERUSALEM, May 17 (JTA) -- Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak telephoned President Ezer Weizman on Monday to congratulate him on the start of his five-year presidential term.

Mubarak apologized to Weizman for not having called earlier, saying he had been busy on an extensive tour of the Persian Gulf states.

Weizman, who was sworn in last week as Israel's seventh president, reportedly answered that he was pleased Mubarak was traveling in the region in order to advance the peace process.

**COURT DECLINES TO HEAR APPEAL OF CASE ABOUT BIBLES IN SCHOOL**

By Deborah Kalb  
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 17 (JTA) -- In a move welcomed by many in the Jewish community, the Supreme Court has let stand a lower court decision barring the distribution of Gideon Bibles to students in an Indiana public school district.

The court's decision Monday not to take the case was seen as a victory for those who believe in the strict separation of church and state.

"I'm delighted," said Steven Freeman, director of the Anti-Defamation League's legal affairs department. The case "was correctly decided from below," he said, adding that there was no reason for the Supreme Court to accept it for review.

ADL filed a brief at the lower court level, opposing the distribution of Bibles in the schools.

The court's decision not to take the case "affirms the vitality of the Establishment Clause," said Mark Pelavin, Washington representative for the American Jewish Congress. He was referring to a clause in the First Amendment to the Constitution that bars any "government establishment of religion."

AJCongress did not file a brief in the case.

The case, *Rensselaer Central School Corporation vs. Berger*, involved the distribution of Bibles to fifth-graders in public schools in Rensselaer, a community in rural northwest Indiana.

The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ordered the school district to halt the distribution of the Bibles, overturning a district court ruling.

**LESBIAN JEWISH POLITICIAN FACES BATTLE OVER FEDERAL NOMINATION**

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES, May 17 (JTA) -- Roberta Achtenberg, a lesbian Jewish politician from San Francisco who is no stranger to political battles, is now facing fierce opposition from conservative forces over her nomination for a top federal housing post.

As part of an effort to "increase Bill Clinton's misery index," conservative Republican senators have threatened a lengthy floor fight over the president's nomination of Achtenberg as assistant secretary for fair housing and equal opportunity in the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

If confirmed, Achtenberg, a civil rights lawyer, would become the highest-ranking openly gay official in the executive branch.

The 42-year old Achtenberg, who was elected in 1990 to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, was considered at that time a "triple minority" candidate as a Jew, woman and lesbian.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who has put a hold on Achtenberg's nomination, has demanded a full floor debate on the nomination as his price for letting the nomination move forward.

The Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs voted 14-4 last week to recommend Achtenberg's confirmation by the full Senate.

Among his other objections, Helms is incensed by Achtenberg's attempts as a San Francisco supervisor to pressure the Boy Scouts of America into admitting openly gay scouts and scoutmasters and to grant health benefits to gay and lesbian partners of city employees.

Helms told *The Washington Times* that he

opposed Achtenberg "because she's a damned lesbian." He added: "If you want to call me a bigot, fine."

Achtenberg recalled that during her unsuccessful campaign two years earlier for the state assembly, she received a lot of hate mail.

"In the litany of names I was called, they always included the word 'Jew': 'Communist Jew,' 'queer Jew,' 'Jew bitch' -- they never left 'Jew' out."

She is a member of the gay-oriented Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco and has described herself as a staunch supporter of Israel. Achtenberg has a 7-year old son, Benjamin, whom she is raising with her partner, Municipal Judge Mary Morgan.

**JEWISH WOMEN HOLD FIRST CONFERENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA SINCE APARTHEID'S END**

By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, May 17 (JTA) -- The International Council of Jewish Women held its 16th triennial convention here this week, the first international Jewish conference to be held in this country since apartheid laws were largely repealed.

Helen Suzman, a Jewish opponent of apartheid who spoke out against white-minority rule in her many years in the South African Parliament, welcomed conference delegates and talked of the nation's dramatic transformation.

First-time visitors to this country could "witness at close quarters the transformation of South Africa from an authoritarian regime, determined to maintain minority white domination at the tip of the African continent, to a non-racial democracy," said Suzman, holder of the honorary Dame of the British Empire award for her struggle against apartheid and for human rights.

The Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, which hosted the convention, said the meeting was significant because Jewish groups, as well as other organizations, had shunned South Africa for decades because of its white-minority apartheid regime.

Delegates from around the world listened to the keynote speaker discuss the process by which South Africa has been led to end apartheid and describe what challenges still remain ahead.

"The causes of the decision to transfer power are to be found in economic factors at home and abroad, and in the escalation of black resistance in South Africa," Suzman said.

She also reviewed the negotiating process and its setbacks, in particular the spates of violence that have beset the country. "It is no exaggeration to say that the escalation of violence -- political -- as the different factions strove for power; and criminal -- as unemployment increased -- has become the predominant obstacle affecting the transitional arrangements," she said.

Regarding the Jewish community, Suzman said many Jews had left in past years to protest apartheid and that many continue to leave out of fear of what may transpire in the future.

Addressing Jewish issues, Suzman said there is "a modern diaspora in South Africa as far as the Jews are concerned."

There has been an exodus after every major crisis and, unlike the earlier emigration caused by distaste for apartheid, today Jews are leaving South Africa because they are uncertain of a future under black majority rule.