

**COURT RULES AGAINST WOMEN AT WALL,
SAYS COUNCILS CAN'T BAR NON-ORTHODOX**
By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- Israel's Supreme Court has issued two important rulings on religious pluralism: one rejecting a petition by women to conduct prayer services at the Western Wall and another saying that local religious councils cannot bar non-Orthodox members.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court turned down the petition of the women, who sought to pray aloud at the Western Wall in the face of violent opposition by fervently Orthodox groups.

Nevertheless, the Women of the Wall, as they have come to be called since they filed their petition in 1989, claimed a partial victory.

They pointed to the court's call for the establishment of a government committee to investigate the matter and to find a way to balance the needs and sensitivities of all the worshippers at the Wall.

The high court also issued a separate ruling that the nation's local religious councils, which dispense basic religious services to all Jews, could not exclude non-Orthodox members.

This decision was hailed by the petitioners as a "milestone ruling" that advances the cause of religious pluralism in Israel.

The decision on the Women of the Wall was "extremely positive," said Bonna Haberman, the group's founder. "The Supreme Court has demanded that the state recognize that women's voices, our freedom of access and our right to prayer are included in the mosaic of religious pluralism at the holy site," she said.

Miriam Isserow, the attorney for the Israel Women's Network, however, called the decision "very disappointing" and charged that it "bowed to the demands of the ultra-Orthodox."

Rabbi Yehuda Getz, who oversees religious practices at the Wall, was equivocal as he walked out of the courtroom.

He called the ruling "neither here nor there" and said he trusted the government committee charged by the court to investigate the matter would use "common sense" in making a final decision.

The Religious Affairs Ministry failed to return repeated phone calls requesting comment on the case.

Prayers Continue Each Month

Rabbi Simha Meron, a lawyer and former director of Israel's rabbinical courts, helped represent the Orthodox position in the case.

He expressed confidence that the government committee would "find ways around" the women's claim that they have a right to pray the same way men do, which he said is "not according to halacha," or traditional Jewish law.

Until the committee renders its decision, he said, religious activities at the Wall will continue to fall under the Orthodox rabbinate's authority.

The women's petition was filed in 1989, several months after the group of mostly Orthodox women began to pray together each Rosh Chodesh, or new month, in the women's section of the Wall.

They sang aloud, wore prayer shawls and

read from the Torah, in the same fashion as the men on the other side of the low partition dividing the two sections.

Each time the women prayed, they were harassed by the fervently Orthodox groups, who claimed the women were violating Jewish law.

They also maintained that because the women were praying with raised voices, they were distracting the men from worship. They said women are permitted and even encouraged to pray at the Wall but should do so silently.

The hostility culminated in a violent attack on the women in March 1989, when police were called in to disperse the crowds with tear gas.

The women subsequently filed their petition with the Supreme Court, calling for the Religious Affairs Ministry, the chief rabbis, the police and fervently Orthodox political parties to show why the authorities failed to protect them as they exercised their right to pray as they saw fit.

Since then, the group has dwindled to a few dozen, but it has continued to pray each month at the Wall. The group has been subject to a court order, however, barring them from praying with a Torah and with prayer shawls.

'Step In The Right Direction'

The court on Wednesday rejected their claim to an unqualified right to pray as they wish, but called on the yet-to-be-formed government committee to examine how to take into account the feelings of all the worshippers.

For most of the women this was a partial victory.

Deana Fein, a law student and member of the group, said the ruling avoided an outright confrontation with the fervently Orthodox, who, with their political clout, might respond by passing new legislation codifying "the supremacy of Orthodox customs at the Wall."

"It is a step in the right direction, (but only) the beginning of a long process," said Anat Hoffman, a member of the Jerusalem City Council and a feminist activist.

"We say we have a right to recite the Shema Yisrael in a normal voice and should not be deterred by violence," she said, explaining the group's position prior to the ruling. Having a "voice is the core of the issue."

Meanwhile, the ruling on the religious councils invalidated decisions by the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem councils to reject Reform and Conservative candidates.

The court, in a unanimous ruling, said the candidates may not be barred on the basis of their affiliation with non-Orthodox Jewish movements.

The decision also will apply to the Haifa council, which has held up non-Orthodox appointments pending the court's ruling.

The local councils, supervised by the Religious Affairs Ministry, have exclusive jurisdiction over marriage, kashrut, burial and other religious matters for all Jews living in Israel. The services provided by the councils are rendered according to Orthodox practice regardless of the affiliation or religious customs of the individual receiving the service.

The court's decision this week is "ground-breaking" because it "breaks the Orthodox mono-

poly on religious councils," said Joshua Schoffman, director of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which filed the petition on behalf of the candidates rejected in Jerusalem.

'The War Continues'

The ruling will have both practical and symbolic effect, he said. "It will result in the council taking the needs of the non-Orthodox (public) into consideration, and it recognizes the legitimacy of the non-Orthodox."

"We've been waiting 4 1/2 years," said Rabbi Ehud Bandel, one of the Masorti, or Conservative, candidates for the Jerusalem council.

"It's a great victory in one battle, but the war continues."

Rabbi Uri Regev, head of the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center, filed the petition on behalf of the candidates in the Tel Aviv council and called the ruling a "milestone decision."

"We will go to work right away and make sure that not only in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and incidentally Haifa, but all other municipalities, the (non-Orthodox) candidacies will be advanced."

Rabbi Meron, who was also involved in the religious councils case, sharply decried the court's ruling. He said it opened the way for those "who are against halacha" to serve on the councils and "fight against what they do."

He said he feared the non-Orthodox members would not approve allocations to mikvehs, or ritual baths, because they do not believe in them.

Meron said he thinks the ruling may lead to the dissolution of the councils. There is no use for them, he said, if "they reflect the same people who are on the city councils."

NEWS ANALYSIS:

ISRAELI PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO TURKEY AUGURS CHANGE IN REGIONAL RELATIONS By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- The fruits of peace are already ripening for Israel, even before formal peace agreements have been signed.

One such fruit was plucked in late December, when Israel and the Vatican established full diplomatic ties.

Israel's willingness to negotiate with the Palestinians bore a second fruit this week, when Israeli President Ezer Weizman visited Turkey. It was the first state visit to Turkey by an Israeli president.

Turkey has a population approaching 60 million. Its army numbers more than 1 million -- the largest in NATO. With its vast size straddling the seam between Europe and Asia, Turkey is a major player in the Middle East region and a force to be reckoned with on the world scene.

The fact that the bulk of its people are Muslim -- even though the state itself is secular -- gives added meaning to the Weizman visit.

Along with Iran and Ethiopia, Turkey is one of three non-Arab powers that bring considerable weight to bear on Middle East politics.

Over the past decades, Israel's relations with each of these three countries have followed a roller-coaster course.

The highs and lows were shaped at times by events within each of the three countries -- revolutions, coups, Soviet influence and so forth -- and at other times by the intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

All three have their own long-standing feuds

with various elements in the Arab world. But all three have been loath to risk exacerbating those problems by focusing too much attention on their ties to Israel.

Turkey and Israel always had diplomatic ties, although not until recently did they upgrade them to full relations. And in the early 1980s, their ties plunged -- at Turkey's insistence -- to the exchange of low-ranking diplomats.

Similarly, Turkish President Suleiman Demirel, who went out of his way this week to demonstrate the warmth of his welcome for Weizman, showed a markedly cooler attitude when he was prime minister during the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, beneath the generally cool surface of the relationship, both sides have quietly recognized the confluence of interests that exist between them, whether in strategic terms or in terms of combatting terrorism.

A Message For Assad

Now, in the wake of the self-rule accord signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, and with the ongoing negotiations between Israel and its neighboring states, Turkey is shaking off its previous inhibitions.

The Ankara-Jerusalem relationship is warming -- and Ankara is going public with the news.

The new atmosphere was signified not only by the red carpets, gun salutes, toasts and other trappings of a state visit that greeted Weizman this week, including the posting of Israeli flags at major intersections in the capital. There was substance to the president's visit as well.

Weizman traveled to Turkey with a delegation of key figures from Israel's military industries, who met openly with their Turkish counterparts and with potential Turkish clients from the armed services.

Reports reaching Jerusalem spoke of a possible military deal worth in excess of \$500 million under which Israel Aircraft Industries and allied companies would upgrade Turkey's fleet of F-4 Phantoms and F-5 fighter-bombers.

On Tuesday, Weizman was the guest of the Turkish air force and aviation industry -- a clear signal that the defense-related links between the two countries can now be openly proclaimed.

Weizman's visit and its significance will not have been lost on the country positioned between Israel and Turkey: Syria.

Indeed, as if to make sure that his visit was not missed by Damascus, the Israeli president took the opportunity of a formal toast at a state dinner in Ankara on Monday night to send his condolences to President Hafez Assad on the death of his son Bassel, who was killed last week in a car accident.

The condolences were doubtless sincere. And as such, they had a significance of their own in the context of the ongoing, infinitely delicate Israeli-Syrian dialogue.

But, because of the venue Weizman chose, his remarks carried additional meaning. He was signaling to Assad that with Turkey as Israel's openly avowed friend, Damascus should be more willing to conclude a deal with Jerusalem.

If Syria did not get his first message, Weizman tried again on Tuesday.

"I see the key to furthering peace in the Middle East in finding a solution to Syria," Weizman told reporters. "And I still see Assad as a leader through whom peace could be achieved."

His messages were loud and clear. The question remaining is whether Assad was listening.

CLINTON HOPES FOR 'NEW PROGRESS' IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- In his State of the Union message this week, President Clinton pledged his administration would continue pushing for further breakthroughs in the Middle East peace process.

"We will also work for new progress toward the Middle East peace," Clinton said Tuesday night, in his high-profile annual address before members of Congress, Cabinet secretaries, Supreme Court justices and other officials.

The president evoked the most powerful symbol of Middle East peace so far -- the famous handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat -- and vowed he would work to broaden successes in the peace talks.

"Last year the world watched Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat at the White House, where they had their historic handshake of reconciliation," Clinton said.

"But there is a long hard road ahead," the president continued.

"And on that road, I am determined that I and our administration will do all we can to achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace for all the peoples of the region."

While the administration was not instrumental in the Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough, it has played a key role over the past year in encouraging the Israeli and Arab participants to continue the peace process.

Overall, Clinton's speech Tuesday focused far more heavily on domestic priorities than on the administration's foreign policy agenda.

The key issues Clinton stressed in this election year were health care reform, welfare reform and cracking down on crime.

One Jewish Democratic activist said he thought most of Clinton's themes "will resonate reasonably well with Jewish voters."

Steve Gutow, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council, a group encouraging grass-roots Democratic political participation, said he thought the president's concept of universal health care is backed by most Jewish voters.

But he added that some Jewish Americans, particularly physicians and small-business owners, will want to study the president's plan in detail.

'A Moderate Speech'

Clinton's call for tougher measures on crime will also sound a welcome note among Jews, Gutow said. "Everybody wants a much more diligent, tough view of crime," he said.

Among Clinton's proposals was a "three strikes, you're out" plan making life imprisonment mandatory for three-time violent offenders.

Gutow also said he thought Clinton's call for job training was "a Jewish given. I don't think most Jewish Americans have a problem with government being involved in something as intrinsic as job training or retraining."

"It was a moderate speech, and most American Jews are moderate Democratic-type voters," he said.

But a Republican Jewish activist said that while Clinton's rhetoric may be moderate, his actions are not, and that Jewish voters, like other Americans, would recognize the difference.

"If Bill Clinton continues to talk like a

moderate and govern like an ultraliberal," people will not be satisfied, said Matt Brooks, executive director of the National Jewish Coalition, a group promoting Jewish Republican activity.

Brooks said Clinton had given a "great speech." But he said Americans should "watch whether his actions follow his words."

Clinton's tough line on crime in his speech mirrored Republican proposals in Congress, Brooks said.

The Republican Jewish activist also said Clinton is wrong in asserting that America is in the midst of a health care crisis.

Problems such as the "portability" of health insurance from one job to another, or the insurance problems facing people with pre-existing medical conditions, "are all things you can legislate," Brooks said.

These problems do "not necessitate overhauling the whole system" of health care, thereby imposing "huge costs on the American people," he said.

KING HUSSEIN HOPES TO MEET WITH RABIN 'BEFORE TOO LONG'

By Deborah Kalb and Steven Weiss

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- In a move that could boost the prospects for peace between Israel and Jordan, King Hussein said this week that he is willing to meet publicly with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The Jordanian monarch told reporters Wednesday that he hopes to meet with the Israeli leader "before too long."

"Our people are meeting. We are negotiating. It is only normal that such a meeting would take place before too long," the king said prior to a scheduled meeting with Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

Secret meetings between Hussein and various Israeli leaders are rumored to have taken place several times in the past, including a purported meeting between the king and Rabin last September. However, he has never had an open meeting with any Israeli leader.

The king's comments, which were welcomed by Israeli officials here, came just two days after he held an unprecedented meeting with a group of 30 American Jewish leaders here.

During the meeting Monday, he spelled out his vision of a "warm peace" between Israel and Jordan once a treaty is signed, including cooperation in economic, environmental and other areas.

Israel and Jordan initialed a draft agreement in September and have instituted three-way economic discussions with the United States.

But the king has been reluctant to jump ahead of other Arab countries currently negotiating with Israel and sign a peace treaty.

During his visit to Washington, the king has been meeting with U.S. administration officials to discuss the peace process and other issues.

At his meeting Wednesday with Secretary of State Christopher, the two leaders agreed to set up a joint commission to enhance consultations and cooperation between the United States and Jordan on political, economic and security issues.

On Tuesday, the king had what one Pentagon spokesman described as a "get-acquainted meeting" with William Perry, the deputy defense secretary just nominated by President Clinton to take over the top job at the Pentagon.

Last Friday, the king had a private meeting with President Clinton at the White House.

ARGENTINE JEWS ARE FEARFUL AFTER CHIEF RABBI IS BEATEN

NEW YORK, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- Argentine Jews are experiencing a heightened fear of anti-Semitism in the wake of a violent attack on the country's leading rabbi.

Rabbi Salomon Benhamu, 57, was walking to his synagogue in Buenos Aires last Shabbat with his 10-year-old son, Yosef, when he was assaulted in broad daylight by four people who first shouted anti-Semitic slurs and then ferociously beat him.

Benhamu was slapped, kicked, punched and then knocked to the ground.

He refrained from talking about the attack until the Sabbath was over. But he subsequently told reporters that the attack alarms all of the country's 350,000 Jews.

On Wednesday, the attack made headlines in Buenos Aires.

Argentine President Carlos Menem telephoned the rabbi and condemned the violence. Benhamu said he was moved to tears by the president's call. He also received a sympathetic phone call from Menem's estranged wife, Zulema, a Muslim.

The DAIA, the representative body of Argentine Jews, sent a message to the Interior Ministry calling for "the adoption of immediate, aggressive measures to find and punish those responsible for the attack," the World Jewish Congress reported.

Argentine Interior Minister Carlos Ruckauf visited the rabbi in his home in the presence of reporters and Pedro Olschansky, press officer of the Latin American Jewish Congress.

Manuel Tenenbaum, who is head of the Jewish congress, also called on Benhamu at home, expressing the group's solidarity with him. Tenenbaum brought up the matter with the DAIA's board of directors.

The rabbi also received a letter of solidarity from WJC Secretary-General Israel Singer, who wrote, "We view this brutal episode as not only an assault upon you personally but as directed against the Jewish community of Argentina and the Jewish people in its entirety."

The brazen attack on the rabbi follows a recent spray-painting of swastikas in the Once neighborhood of Buenos Aires, a Jewish area where Benhamu lives.

Reuben Beraja, president of the DAIA, said that until now, "the problem of neo-Nazis gangs was something that made headlines in other parts of the world."

ITALY CONVICTS, THEN FREES SKINHEAD By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- A Rome court has sentenced a 22-year-old youth to four months in jail for anti-Semitic vandalism amounting to "apologizing for genocide."

However, the vandal, Alessandro di Martino, who was sentenced Tuesday, was then released on conditional parole.

He was convicted for actions dating back to November 1992, when a group of skinheads affixed signs with a Star of David and slogans such as "Zionists out of Italy" on a number of shops belonging to Jews in a Rome neighborhood.

When Di Martino was arrested, police found a number of the placards in his possession, and others were found at his home.

He has refused to give the names of the other youths who acted with him.

JEWISH MAN MAY BE THE LATEST VICTIM OF ISLAMIC ASSASSINATIONS IN ALGERIA By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, Jan. 26 (JTA) -- A 62-year-old Jewish man was murdered in Algiers this week, and leaders of the tiny Jewish community there fear he may be the latest victim of a wave of xenophobic assassinations that has rocked the country.

The victim, Raymond Louzoum, was murdered Sunday in the optical shop he owned on the largest street of the Algerian capital.

No one claimed responsibility for the killing, but Jewish leaders believe it may have been the work of the Islamic Salvation Front, fundamentalists opposed to the Algerian government.

If so, he would be the first Jewish victim in the wave of killings that has terrorized the country since September, claiming 26 other lives.

Louzoum, of Tunisian origin, was known for the bit parts he played in Algerian films 15 years ago. He recently applied for Algerian citizenship.

There are only a few dozen Jews left in Algeria, mostly elderly people who have repeatedly refused to leave the country.

The main Algiers synagogue was desecrated and looted in 1985 and has been closed since. Jews had been attending prayers in another building owned by the Jewish community. But because the building is located in an area with loyalty to the Islamic Front, the few Jews who went there have mainly avoided the building since the violence began.

Louzoum's funeral was scheduled to take place Wednesday in Algiers's Jewish cemetery, under heavy police guard.

JEWS FIGURE PROMINENTLY IN ANC LIST FOR ELECTIONS By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, Jan. 24 (JTA) -- Four Jews are among the top 50 names on the African National Congress' slate of candidates for South Africa's first non-racial elections in April.

Several other Jews are listed among the ANC's top 200.

The list of Nelson Mandela's party was published in the national media.

Joe Slovo, chairman of the South African Communist Party, a longtime ally of the ANC, holds the No. 4 slot in the list. The only ones to receive a greater number of votes for party candidate were Mandela; Cyril Ramaphosa, ANC secretary-general; and Chairman Thabo Mbeki.

The flamboyant Ronnie Kasrils, former chief of intelligence of the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe and formerly one of the country's "most-wanted" people, received the eighth-highest number of votes.

Raymond Suttner, who was detained in South African prisons for many years for his anti-apartheid activities, is at No. 30, and ANC spokesperson Gill Marcus holds position No. 47.

Slovo, Kasrils and Marcus, all former exiles, returned to South Africa after the ban on the ANC was lifted in 1990.

Polls show the ANC likely to win over 120 of the 200 seats in Parliament under the new proportional representation system.

In a statement, the ANC said, "The democratic ideal rests on nothing less than true representation; on the assurance that the interests of all are served."