

LUBAVITCHERS SHOT BY UNKNOWN GUNMAN WHO MAY HAVE SHOUTED 'KILL THE JEWS'

By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK, March 1 (JTA) -- Reactions were swift and tough to the shooting on Tuesday of four Lubavitcher Chasidim in a drive-by attack on their van that sparked fear here that the violence last week in Hebron had spilled over onto these shores.

The vehicle had been part of a convoy accompanying the Lubavitcher rebbe back to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn from successful eye surgery in Manhattan. The rebbe, 91, returned home via a different route than many of his followers.

Initial reports said the gunman was an Arab male who shouted "Kill the Jews" as he fired on the van as it approached the Brooklyn Bridge. Police could not confirm those reports, but security was nonetheless tightened at Jewish institutions throughout the city.

One of the victims of the attack, Ari Halberstam, 15, of Brooklyn, suffered a serious head wound and was not expected to live. He was attached to a respirator at St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan.

Another victim, Nochum Sossonkin, 18, of Israel, was also shot in the head and was in very serious condition following surgery.

Police officials who spoke at a news conference at City Hall late Tuesday afternoon said the van had been shot at in three different locations, first in an approach to the bridge, then on the bridge and then on the other side, in Brooklyn. The attacks took place at around 10:30 a.m.

The most seriously injured passengers had been riding in the rear of the white van. The vehicle's passenger-side windows were all blown out from the gunfire, the police said.

Police said the Chasidic community had reported a similar-looking car following one of its vans on Monday, but the license plate of that car did not match that of the car involved in Tuesday's shooting.

In both instances, the automobile was described as being dark blue. There were differences over the car's make, but it was generally believed that the attack vehicle was a 1989 Chevy Caprice.

The owner of Monday's suspicious car, a Yemeni, was reported out of the country.

Heightened Security At 'Sensitive' Locations

Police also said there was stepped-up security at "sensitive and religious institutions." Reports from the Jewish Theological Seminary and Agudath Israel of America indicated that police were tightening security at those sites.

In fact, police officials reported that New York had been under tightened security for the last week because of jury deliberations over the World Trade Center bombing in lower Manhattan, and in light of the killings of at least 40 Arabs by a Jewish settler in Hebron last Friday.

Officials of Agudath Israel said they had already been "directly in touch" with top police

officials "and other city agencies since last week's events in the Middle East to discuss security concerns and were again in touch immediately after this morning's incident."

Meanwhile, a third Lubavitch victim of the attack, Yaakov Schapiro, 17, was treated for superficial wounds to the hand and head, also at St. Vincent's Hospital.

A fourth victim, Levi Wilhelm, 18, had reportedly undergone successful intestinal surgery at Caledonian Hospital in Brooklyn for the removal of a bullet and internal bleeding.

The four were among 15 passengers in the van, part of a caravan of 30 cars returning from accompanying the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, who had successful cataract surgery on his right eye Tuesday morning at Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital.

The last time violence was directed at the Lubavitch community, government leaders, especially former Mayor David Dinkins, were criticized for not reacting forcefully and sensitively to the Lubavitchers' needs.

That episode involved three days of rioting directed at the Chasidim in Crown Heights in 1991 after a car in the rebbe's motorcade accidentally killed a 7-year-old black boy.

With that incident perhaps in mind, politicians and Jewish leaders came out in force on Tuesday to condemn the shooting.

Staff from the New York Jewish Community Relations Council, including Executive Director Michael Miller, rushed to the Manhattan and Brooklyn hospitals to be with the victims and were also working with police and other city officials on the case.

'A Vile, Cowardly' Act

Gov. Mario Cuomo, in a statement issued shortly after the attack on the van, called it "a vile, cowardly attempted murder."

He added: "Of course all of us must condemn this act swiftly and emphatically. But we must do much more than express our horror. We must do everything possible to apprehend the assailants, to prosecute them and to punish them to the fullest extent the law allows."

At the news conference at City Hall, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said that "from the very moment that the department learned of this, it launched a full-scale investigation, which is ongoing."

Giuliani called the attack on the van "an outrageous attack on youngsters as they were praying for their religious leader.

"It will be treated as an attack on all New Yorkers, because that was what it was," Giuliani said. "Our city is not open for these kinds of attacks. We don't want them, we won't tolerate them."

Police Commissioner William Bratton said the story was "constantly changing." He gave assurances that "the police is treating this as an extremely serious matter. Until we learn the facts, we will be going all out."

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations issued a statement

calling the attack "unprovoked" and "an outrageous assault on civil order and thus an offense against society itself.

"In our anger and anguish at this vicious act, we applaud the efforts of Mayor Giuliani and Police Commissioner Bratton to make certain that the investigation of this crime is vigorously pursued."

U.S. STILL OPTIMISTIC ABOUT RESUMPTION OF MIDEAST TALKS

By Deborah Kalb and Steven Weiss

WASHINGTON, March 1 (JTA) -- While the Palestine Liberation Organization reportedly decided to postpone the visit here of an envoy to discuss ramifications of the Hebron crisis, American officials continued working this week to ensure that the Middle East peace process would not be sidetracked.

The administration has been in touch with Israeli, Palestinian, Arab American, and Jewish American leaders since the massacre Friday of Palestinian worshippers by a Jewish settler.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher, testifying on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, said that based on conversations with Middle Eastern officials, he was optimistic that the now-suspended peace talks would resume soon.

The secretary was referring both to the Israeli-Palestinian talks, and to related negotiations between Israel and Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Following news of the massacre, President Clinton invited the Israelis and Palestinians to Washington to resume their talks on implementing their declaration of principles.

The Israelis have accepted, while the Palestinians are debating under what conditions they would come here.

The Palestinian envoy, now scheduled to arrive here by the end of this week, will reportedly carry with him PLO demands for resumption of the talks. These will include an end to the expansion of Jewish settlements and the disarming of Jewish settlers in the territories.

Christopher, appearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, said that he had spoken to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat earlier Tuesday.

"He said we need a little time, there will be some delay, but there was no indication that he would not live up to the commitment that he gave me last Friday, that if the United States would take an active role and move the negotiations here, that they would not lapse," Christopher said.

Christopher voiced confidence in both Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat.

"Prime Minister Rabin is a magnificent leader of Israel in very difficult times," Christopher said.

Of Arafat, the secretary said that although the PLO leader has opponents, "he is the indispensable figure. He is a political leader but he is also the flag and the Star Spangled Banner all wrapped into one person."

Christopher said that the Israelis and Palestinians had resolved about 95 percent of the issues involved in their negotiations.

"The last 5 percent sometimes is the hardest 5 percent, and I think perhaps if they return

here, the United States will do what we have not done in the past, and that is be actively involved with the parties to try to see if they cannot resolve these last issues," Christopher said.

Testifying Tuesday before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the new assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, Robert Pelletreau, also discussed the peace process.

"The Palestinians themselves are looking forward to resuming the negotiations, but they also tell us that they are under great pressure from Palestinians, particularly in the territories, to have a greater assurance that they will be protected, and this will create an atmosphere under which they can come back to the negotiating table," Pelletreau said.

Pelletreau said the U.S. government had "noted positively the steps which the Israeli Cabinet has announced" to deal with the situation.

These include the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the Hebron attack and new restrictions on some extremists among the settlers.

He added that he was not sure if anyone knew whether those steps would be enough to coax the Palestinians back. "That will depend in part on the rapidity and the effectiveness of the Israeli implementation of these measures. The implementation must be seen as more than tokenism," Pelletreau said.

An 'Insufficient' Action

Pelletreau said that the Israelis had initially detained five settlers, and that he had heard from Arab sources that number was "quite insufficient."

In response to a question from committee chairman Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), Pelletreau said the United States did not favor putting international monitors into the West Bank and Gaza at this point.

"We would look toward the question of international monitors being addressed in Israeli-Palestinian discussions and then we could address it as members of the international community," Pelletreau said.

Pelletreau said he believed the Israelis would be willing to discuss the issue of an international presence once the talks resumed, but would not be willing to discuss it as a step toward resuming the talks.

The assistant secretary also said that the key issue of Israeli settlements -- a question at the heart of the current crisis -- is "deferred by agreement in the declaration of principles."

But he added that the parties are already addressing questions relating to settlements even at this point in the talks.

Overall, though, he said that settlements "remain to be addressed in their final form as part of final-status negotiations."

Underscoring the administration's desire for a resumption of peace talks was Vice President Al Gore, who spoke Tuesday via "live interactive videoconference" to the Israel Forum, an international conference focusing on the peace process and related economic opportunities.

"Only through prompt agreement and rapid implementation will the hope of peaceful reconciliation be kept alive," Gore said.

Rabin also participated in the videoconference.

SETTLERS AND PALESTINIANS VOICE FEARS IN TALKS WITH AMERICAN JEWISH LEADERS

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, March 1 (JTA) -- Palestinians told American Jewish leaders visiting here this week that they remained committed to the peace process, but said Israel's credibility depended on the government's disarming of Jewish extremists.

Jewish settlers in the Jordan Valley told the same visiting Americans that they feared that the armed Palestinian police force promised in the peace accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization threatened their safety.

The American Jewish leaders were here for the annual mission of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, held under the shadow of last Friday's attack by a Jewish settler in a Hebron mosque.

They found what one delegate, Lawrence Rubin, described as "a very difficult time," in which the Israeli government "feels betrayed, the settlers feel abandoned and the Palestinians feel vulnerable." Rubin is executive vice chair of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

The delegates roundly condemned the massacre of at least 40 worshippers, with most fearing the damage caused to the peace process and eager to see peace negotiations back on track.

Several hoped the United States would not allow the Palestinians to exploit the tragedy to change the terms of the negotiations. "A lot depends on the U.S. reaction," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

"When the U.S. says this isn't going to change the ground rules (for the talks), it sends a message to those who would try to exploit the tragedy to extract political concessions which properly belong in the negotiating sessions," said Hoenlein.

Threat Of Polarization

"There is a threat of polarization, both Palestinian and Israeli," he continued. "The challenge for the Israeli leadership is to ensure the polarization not be allowed to predominate."

In east Jerusalem, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, addressed the group after asking it to rise for a moment of silence for the victims of the massacre.

"We're still interested in peace," he said. "We are still committed to the accords and still committed to dialogue in spite of the pain."

But Abdul Hadi lamented what he called Israel's failure to deliver on its promises. "Nothing has changed on the ground and we are still victims of the occupation," he said.

"If there is no change, we will see more blood, more pain and more suffering," he said.

He also said he saw, in the wake of the massacre, the start of a transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into an ideological one between two religions. "We can't afford it," he said.

There was a testy exchange when Abdul Hadi was repeatedly asked by Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, to condemn the Palestinian killings of innocent Jewish victims and the clauses in the PLO covenant

calling for Israel's destruction. Abdul Hadi ultimately challenged Klein to write a condemnation in his own words and said he would sign it. But Hadi left before the program ended and Klein could not give him the document.

The incident left Klein shaken. "The refusal of Abdul Hadi to condemn the murder of Jewish Israelis sent a very powerful and frightening message about his insincerity in wanting to live in peace with the Israeli people," he said.

Hanan Ashrawi, former spokeswoman for the Palestinian negotiating team, spoke quietly but passionately about what she called the "extremely painful and dangerous" situation.

Ashrawi, who resigned her post to work for human rights in the territories, said the attack "confirmed the worst fears of the Palestinians" about the threat posed to their safety by the Jewish extremists.

She also said the settlements and the peace process were irreconcilable. She said there is a climate among some of the settlements which nurtures extremists such as Baruch Goldstein, the killer in Hebron.

"These people do not emerge from a vacuum," she said. "It was not an isolated act."

"You have placed in unhealthy proximity hostile people" who are fully armed, she said, referring to the settlers in Palestinian centers in the territories. "You can't create an unhealthy situation and then say it's an isolated act."

Two Or Three Generations To Dissipate Hate

After the meeting, Harriet Green, immediate past president of Na'amat, predicted, "It will be at least two or three generations before all the venom and hatred that exists will be dissipated and Jews and Arabs can live alongside one another in peace and cooperation.

"Being a Jew," Green continued, "I understand (the Palestinians') pain, but at the same time they can't be so narrow-minded that they can't see another point of view. And I think they don't understand where the Israeli government or Jews are coming from."

A day later, the delegates traveled, with military escorts, past Jericho to the Jordan Valley. There they heard David Levy, head of the Jordan Valley Regional Council, tell of the pain, fear and uncertainty of the region's Jews.

He said the region's settlers, most of them farmers of dates, flowers and vegetables, were unwittingly drawn into politics once "somebody decided the agreement with the Palestinians has to start here, in the Jordan Valley."

Under the declaration of principles signed between Israel and the PLO last September, the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the beginning of Palestinian autonomy will take place first in Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

Under the accord, the withdrawal was supposed to conclude April 13, but an agreement on implementing withdrawal and autonomy has yet to be reached.

Before the Hebron massacre, Israelis and Palestinians expected a signed agreement within a month, but peace talks are now deferred.

Levy spoke of Israel's constant assurances that the Jordan Valley would remain secure, only to find those assurances "crushed" in wake of recent developments. "Crossing Jericho is a source of life, and no one can give us any answers."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:

MURDERER OF DOZENS IN HEBRON DESCRIBED AS CARING PERSON, BUT DEVOTED TO KAHANE

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, March 1 (JTA) -- In the spring of 1977, the seniors at Yeshiva College chose Benjamin Goldstein as their classmate with the best character -- the most caring, the nicest and the most decent.

Seventeen years later, Goldstein, now known as Baruch, opened fired on hundreds of Muslims kneeling in prayer in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing at least 40 of them, and the words caring, nice and decent were still being used by those who knew him.

He had traveled an arc from Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood to the Jewish enclave of Kiryat Arba to the annals of Jewish history as the man responsible for one of the most heinous mass murders committed by a Jew. And only that last segment came as a surprise.

In the wake of last Friday's massacre, reminiscences flowed within the modern Orthodox community of the quiet man who had become fanatically attached to the militant Rabbi Meir Kahane.

There was a frequently expressed conviction that he had "snapped," because why else would he leave a widow and four orphans?

The reasons for the snapping had to be appreciated, said those who knew him: a peace process which threatened to uproot his settlement, the murder by terrorists of a close friend the month before, the shouting by Arabs of "slaughter the Jews" during the reading of the Book of Esther on the evening of Purim.

Some figures associated with Yeshiva University, where Goldstein studied as an undergraduate and as a medical student, say that while the values of Kahane were far from those of the institution, the school and the modern Orthodox culture which it anchored were for too long too tolerant of Kahane's extremism.

Goldstein grew up in a modern Orthodox household in Bensonhurst, a mixed Italian-Jewish neighborhood removed from the front lines of urban tensions in other parts of Brooklyn, where Kahane first organized his Jewish Defense League in the 1960s.

'As Nice A Boy As You'll Ever Find'

He attended the modern Orthodox Yeshiva of Flatbush, and was a camper and counselor at Camp Hillel in upstate New York.

At Yeshiva College, his yearbook and classmates paint the picture of a well-rounded pre-medical student: studious, athletic and civic.

"He was as nice a boy as you'll ever find," recalled Rabbi Louis Bernstein, a professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva College, who fondly recalled Goldstein as "Baruchel."

For such a nice boy, it was no surprise that as a medical student at Yeshiva University's Albert Einstein College of Medicine, he would spend Sundays delivering parcels to the poor and elderly in the South Bronx.

And it was no surprise that he would think about making aliyah and moving to Israel.

Y.U. boasts that 10 percent of its alumni currently reside in Israel.

"These are dedicated, committed Jews, and

they feel they can find fulfillment there," said Rabbi Israel Miller, Yeshiva University's senior vice president. Two of Miller's children, for example, live in Israel.

Among Y.U. students, said Rabbi Moshe Tendler, who serves on both the school's Talmud and biology faculties, "It's understood that if you can settle in the Land of Israel, you do that. No one questions it. Those who don't move there, it's because they feel they can't support themselves in Israel."

But at some point, Goldstein crossed a line. The well-rounded college boy, devoted to Israel, became a serious follower of Kahane.

While classmates and teachers at Yeshiva College do not remember him as being ideological, a fellow student at Y.U.'s Albert Einstein College of Medicine remembers the Goldstein of 1979 as being deeply committed to the militant rabbi.

"He was a serious, earnest, clean-cut individual, likable, one of the guys. Except for this peculiar idiosyncrasy that he would quote Rabbi Kahane as his spiritual mentor," said this former classmate who, like many who spoke about Goldstein, did so on condition of anonymity.

Democratic Israel At Odds With Torah

The point of Kahane's religious teaching was simple: Israel, as a democratic state tolerant of Arabs, was at odds with the teachings of the Torah and halachah, or Jewish law.

While Goldstein was seen as eccentric and mistaken in his devotion to Kahane, he was not seen as deviant from the culture of modern Orthodoxy.

"Kahane was not encouraged at Yeshiva, but he reached people there," said Bernstein. "A-shamnu, we are guilty, we have tolerated his phenomenon of Kahanism in Jewish life," he said.

This tolerance reflected both an indifference and a respect for Kahane's positions, even though they were not endorsed by Orthodox authorities.

The tolerance was manifest in the fact that Kahane was afforded a platform at the campus, which barred speakers on campus seen as too liberal religiously.

By the early 1980s, Goldstein had moved to Israel, where he worked in the office of Kahane's political party and, according to a woman who knew him then, suffered no skepticism about the truth of Kahane's teachings.

Kahane's followers were at odds, politically and theologically, with the Gush Emunim movement which was the mainstay of the settlement activity on the West Bank and which was widely supported at Y.U.

But both groups shared the realities of day-to-day life amid a hostile Arab population, in an area they view as the frontier of Zionism.

And while recent events may have triggered Goldstein's brutal attack, it was an incident more than a decade ago which put Goldstein squarely into the camp of Kahane's radicals, according to a Kahane follower who knew him then.

The story involved Aharon Gross of Kiryat Arba, who was fatally stabbed in Hebron in 1983. Goldstein, as a physician, was called to the scene.

"I remember him telling me that as a Westerner, he had trouble understanding the depth of hatred of these Arabs. I think this was something that awakened him to the cruel reality of the Middle East," the Kahane follower said.