

**DJEREJIAN RESIGNS AS ENVOY TO ISRAEL;
MOVE CATCHES JEWISH GROUPS BY SURPRISE**
By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, May 19 (JTA) -- The resignation of Edward Djerejian from his post as U.S. ambassador to Israel has caught Jewish groups by surprise.

Djerejian's announcement that he is ending a 32-year foreign service career to head a newly formed policy institute comes less than six months after he assumed his post.

Djerejian's nomination to the post was widely hailed by Jewish groups last year. A former ambassador to Syria, his appointment was seen as an indication of the importance the Clinton administration attached to advancing the peace negotiations between Jerusalem and Damascus.

The announcement came in a statement Thursday from Rice University, where Djerejian will head the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, named for former Secretary of State James Baker. He is scheduled to take up the post in August.

Djerejian was in Jerusalem with Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who was concluding a round of shuttle diplomacy between Israel and Syria. He was expected at Rice, located in Houston, for a formal public announcement on Friday.

Before becoming ambassador to Israel, Djerejian had been assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs under both President Clinton and President Bush. It was in this position that he played a key role in promoting the Middle East peace process -- perhaps more so than in his current post.

Resignation May Reflect Dissatisfaction

One Jewish organizational official speculated that Djerejian's resignation may represent dissatisfaction with getting shut out of the negotiations with Syria, where Christopher has taken the lead. But it was unlikely to reflect a policy difference with Christopher, according to the official.

"His role was probably not what he believed it should have been," said this official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

By contrast, Djerejian's counterpart in Washington, Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, not only heads the Israeli delegation to the bilateral Israeli-Syrian peace talks in Washington, but has also frequently returned to Jerusalem for consultations when the locus of negotiations shifted back to the region.

There has also been speculation in Washington that Djerejian is preparing to serve as a policy adviser to Baker, who may be contemplating a bid for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination.

In New York, Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said he found Djerejian's resignation "very surprising.

"Djerejian told us often how much he looked forward to this position (as ambassador to Israel).

For much of his career it was a goal of his," said Hoenlein.

"This may represent an opportunity he couldn't pass up," he said of the new position.

Hoenlein described Djerejian as "a good friend of Israel," who was very helpful regarding Syrian Jewry during his Damascus posting and maintained a close relationship with the Conference of Presidents while working in the State Department.

"It's a real loss, because he was one of the few diplomats who had won the respect of the Arabs and particularly Syria, as well as Israel and the Jewish community," said Thomas Smerling, executive director of Project Nishma, a Washington group supportive of the present peace process.

"With the Syrian track now at the top of the agenda, his expertise was particularly valued. During times of negotiations, what Israel needs most are real negotiators, not just cheerleaders. That's why men like Djerejian, who can work effectively with both sides, are so valuable right now," said Smerling.

(Contributing to this report was JTA correspondent Deborah Kalb in Washington.)

**COMPTROLLER'S REPORT UNLEASHES STORM
AMID ACCUSATIONS OF POLITICAL PREJUDICE**
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 19 (JTA) -- A scathing annual report by the State Comptroller, pointing to improprieties and possible corruption in a government ministry, has unleashed a storm of political controversy in Israel this week.

Anger among Israel's opposition parties was heightened Thursday, when it became clear that police inquiries into the alleged corruption were focused on the period before July 1992, when the previous Likud government was in power.

State Comptroller Miriam Ben-Porat, a former High Court justice, termed her findings in this year's report "serious."

She declined, however, to characterize the performance of the present government, saying she and her office were concerned with the quality of public administration, regardless of which party was in office at any particular time.

A key section of her report, issued Wednesday, points accusatory fingers at the present housing minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, and his director-general, Aryeh Mizrachi. Both men are leading figures in the ruling Labor Party.

According to the report, the minister funneled funds to local authorities in accordance with the political stripe of the particular mayor, rather than taking steps in accordance with objective criteria.

Ben-Eliezer and Mizrachi deny any wrongdoing.

Likud officials called repeatedly on Wednesday and Thursday for the government to resign in the wake of the report.

Likud spokesmen recalled that the Labor Party's 1992 campaign had dwelt on alleged government corruption -- and now the comptroller

was clearly implying that the Labor government itself was guilty of the same behavior.

Inside Labor, too, there was voluble discomfort, with Knesset member Hagai Meir demanding stern action against anyone found to have acted improperly.

A Likud spokesman blasted Attorney General Michael Ben-Yair on Thursday night when it became clear that Ben-Yair had instructed the police to investigate only the comptroller's findings regarding a local authority run by the fervently Orthodox in the West Bank town of Emanuel. The alleged malfeasance took place before Labor came to power.

The Likud spokesman explicitly accused Ben-Yair of acting out of political motives and favoring Labor. It was not clear, however, whether the attorney general had decided that other alleged instances of wrongdoing uncovered by the comptroller were not to be investigated by the police -- or whether in fact he would instruct such investigations to be opened in the weeks ahead.

JOINT ISRAELI-PLO PANEL CONVENES TO INVESTIGATE JERICHO SHUL INCIDENT By Dvora Getzler

JERUSALEM, May 19 (JTA) -- A joint Israeli-Palestinian commission convened in the West Bank town of Jericho on Thursday to deal with settler complaints that the ancient synagogue there had been desecrated by the Palestinian police.

The Jericho synagogue has been a focal point of charges and countercharges on an almost daily basis since Israel turned over Jericho to Palestinian authority last Friday.

The impression among Israeli journalists who have visited the site is that the settlers have overstated any damage that was done to the synagogue when Palestinian police entered the building, a move that Palestinian officials later explained was the result of a misunderstanding.

According to news reports, Palestinian police who were living in a tent broke into the synagogue on Wednesday night, apparently in an effort to find a comfortable place to spend the night.

The deputy commander of Palestinian police in Jericho later expressed regret for the incident, and Israeli military sources were quoted as saying that they did not believe the police had acted maliciously.

Maj. Gen. Nasser Yusef, commander of security forces in the Gaza Strip and Jericho, visited the synagogue on Thursday and said that the major problem is that the settlers arrive for prayer fully armed.

"We can't put up with that," he said. "We accept their right to enter the building, but they must do so unarmed. That is the ruling of the Cairo agreement."

On Wednesday, some 250 additional Palestinian police arrived in Jericho, bringing the total there to more than 1,000.

That same day there was an incident in Gaza that further tested Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in the wake of the newly implemented self-rule accord.

An attack took place at the junction of two roads in Gaza that left a 34-year-old Israeli resident of the settlement of Netzarim moderately wounded.

Members of the Israel Defense Force responded with a rapid sortie into a neighborhood of Gaza City in an attempt to find the attackers. They left equally quickly.

An army officer later explained that the Palestinian police should be responsible for investigating such incidents, but that the IDF entered the area because the Palestinians had not yet fully organized their police force. In the future, joint Israeli-Palestinian commissions are supposed to investigate such incidents.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS IN HEBRON COMPLAIN ABOUT BEING UNDER CURFEW By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 19 (JTA) -- Representatives of the international observer force in Hebron have complained that the Israeli army had placed them under virtual house arrest during a nearly two-day curfew which was imposed on the West Bank town this week.

The curfew, which lasted from Tuesday until Wednesday night, had been imposed on Hebron after members of the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement launched an attack that left two Israelis dead and a third seriously wounded.

The attack took place Tuesday morning near the settlement of Beit Haggai, on the road linking Beersheba and Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement on the outskirts of Hebron.

On Thursday, a delegation of the observer force, known officially as the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, complained to Israeli army officials that they had been unable to leave their quarters during the curfew.

An official with the Israel Defense Force reportedly told them that the army was "very reluctant" to let the observers move about in Hebron during the curfew.

"We got nothing from that meeting," said Bjarno Sorenson, a spokesman for the observers. "They closed the entire city because of the killing of two Israelis, but that was outside Hebron. Why should that incident prevent us from moving around?"

The army said they had notified the observers in advance that the curfew was to be put into effect "as is required from us."

The observers confirmed that they had indeed received the notice, but protested the scope of the curfew.

In Copenhagen, Danish Foreign Minister Niels Helveg Petersen said that Denmark, a participant in the force, was considering lodging an official protest as well.

The unarmed 150-member observer force, recruited from Norway and Italy, as well as Denmark, arrived in Hebron on May 8 following an agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization allowing for the force's deployment there.

The PLO had demanded the presence of an international monitoring team to protect Palestinians living in Hebron after the Feb. 25 killings of at least 29 Palestinians at a local mosque by an Israeli settler.

While the Israeli army confirmed that it had prevented the observers from moving about during the curfew, it said it was the army's right to restrict the observers' movements under the terms of the agreement with the PLO.

JEWISH GROUPS URGE CLINTON TO PROCEED APACE WITH NEW HAITIAN REFUGEE POLICY
 By Pamela Druckerman

NEW YORK, May 19 (JTA) -- Jewish groups are pressing the Clinton Administration to proceed speedily with its plan to grant asylum hearings to Haitian refugees.

Sixteen national and local Jewish organizations issued a joint statement last week calling the administration's recent decision not to repatriate immediately refugees picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard an "encouraging move."

But Jewish activists say they will be watching closely to insure that refugees receive due process, including legal representation and fair hearings to determine their status.

Sponsors of the May 10 statement include the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Council of Jewish Federations and B'nai B'rith.

Refugees from Haiti have been fleeing to the Florida coast on makeshift sailboats, rafts and dinghies since a military junta overthrew Haiti's first democratically elected President, the Rev. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in September 1991.

Of the nearly 45,000 who have been interdicted by American officials since then, fewer than 3,000 received asylum hearings, and only approximately 600 were granted asylum.

Under the newly announced policy, all refugees will be given hearings at sea, or in a still-unnamed third country, to determine their eligibility for asylum. Only those who can prove they are political refugees will be admitted to the United States.

Safe Haven Could Be Third Country

The joint statement calls on the administration to expand upon this policy and provide a "safe haven," preferably in a third country, to those refugees who are not political refugees but who have a "credible fear that they will be subjected to political violence in Haiti."

Mwiza Munthali, information specialist at the watchdog and lobbying group TransAfrica, said this would include most Haitian refugees. "Once they apply (for asylum) they're already in danger. It's a political act just to apply," he said.

Jewish organizations have denounced the forced repatriation of Haitian refugees since the 1991 coup. Many have been involved in lobbying and letter-writing campaigns for the refugees.

In the joint statement, the Jewish groups said Jews have a special interest in the Haitians' plight: "The Jewish community knows from its own experience the horror of being denied safe haven when lives are at stake."

It cited the 1939 case in which 936 Jewish refugees aboard the S.S. St. Louis were denied entry to the U.S. and subsequently returned to Europe, where many were killed in the Holocaust.

In supporting asylum hearings for refugees, the Jewish community has aligned itself with the Congressional Black Caucus, affirming what both black and Jewish leaders say are strong mutual interests.

"What is happening to Haiti can happen to any small country," said Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.). "No one remembers this better than the Jewish people."

Rangel, a leader in the Congressional Black Caucus, said the Jewish community's continuing involvement in the predicament of Haitian refugees should serve as a model to other groups.

Jewish groups say they are not discouraged by recent delays in implementing the new U.S. policy, which has come under criticism by human rights activists as insufficient. They said President Clinton had acknowledged it would take a few weeks to go into effect.

"People want to know, how is the administration going to make this work? And there aren't any answers yet," said Karen Senter, co-director for domestic concerns at NJCRAC.

Since Clinton announced the change in policy on May 8, more than 600 refugees have reportedly been returned to Haiti without an asylum hearing.

Meeting with Aristide on May 13, the board of trustees of AJCongress was reportedly encouraged by the ousted leader to support unilateral military intervention to restore him to power.

ARAB PAPER THAT LIBELED JEWS CLOSED BY OWNER FOLLOWING OUTCRY
 By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, Australia, May 19 (JTA) -- An Australian Arabic newspaper which published the claim that Jews practice ritual murder has been closed by its owner in the wake of a public outcry.

Morris Tadros, publisher of Al-Moharrer Al-Arabi (The Arab Editor), printed a front-page apology to the Jewish community in the last issue of the newspaper, which came out almost a month after the offensive article appeared.

The blood libel, as it has been called since Medieval times, was published in an issue of the newspaper that came out during Passover, and the article claimed that the blood of slain non-Jews was extracted by Jews for use in making matzah.

Although Tadros has claimed he was "extremely upset" at the publication of the article, he took no action until Jewish leaders publicly declared that they were taking him to the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board under state anti-racism legislation.

In an article in this week's Australian Jewish News, Tadros said he "would never become involved in a newspaper again."

But the Robert Klarnet, public affairs director for the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that the matter is still being pursued. He said the Jewish community will ask to see in writing future activities of Tadros and the staff member who placed the article in the paper.

The article, titled "Blood for Zion's Unleavened Bread," included claims that "directives" of Judaism include killing "gentiles, who are not different from animals" and said that the shedding of "Muslim blood is justifiable" for Jews.

Jews were depicted as followers of a religion that finds it "easy" to murder "hundreds of human beings, even the entire human race."

Holy Jewish texts were depicted as "perverted books" with "bloody teachings."

In its apology, the paper claimed the article had been "erroneously and unintentionally" published after it was received from a newspaper in the Persian Gulf state of Abu Dhabi.

AMERICAN JEWS STILL STRONGLY SUPPORT PEACE PROCESS, ACCORDING TO NEW SURVEY
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, May 19 (JTA) -- Results of a new nationwide survey of American Jews reveal that they are as supportive of the Middle East peace process as they were last fall, during the euphoric period that followed the signing of the declaration of principles between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The poll of 500 randomly selected American Jews, conducted May 10-12, showed that 88 percent of respondents supported the peace process and only 5 percent opposed it.

In addition, there was strong support among respondents for the Palestinian self-rule agreement that went into effect this month, with 78 percent supporting it and 9 percent in opposition.

The poll was commissioned by the Israel Policy Forum, an American Jewish group linked to the Israeli Labor Party, and was conducted by two leading Democratic pollsters, Stanley Greenberg -- who is President Clinton's pollster -- and Mark Mellman.

Greenberg, Mellman, and Israel Policy Forum President Robert Lifton -- former head of the American Jewish Congress -- released the poll at a news conference here Thursday.

Organizers said it was the first poll of its kind to be conducted since last fall, when surveys indicated overwhelming levels of support for the peace process in the wake of the historic White House handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Still, the poll revealed mixed emotions among respondents regarding the peace process, with 85 percent considering themselves "cautious," 84 percent saying they are "hopeful," and three-fourths saying they are both cautious and hopeful.

'Hope Outweighs Fear'

"What is clear is that hope outweighs fear," Mellman said, basing his comment on a regression analysis the pollsters conducted with the data.

In recent months, there have been indications of a drop-off in support among the Israeli public for the peace process, as people have reacted to delays in implementing the accord and to a series of terrorist attacks throughout the country.

But the results of this survey suggest that American Jews are far more supportive of the process than their Israeli counterparts.

"Support for the agreement is a mainstream Jewish position," Greenberg said, adding that such support is "most marked for those most active in the Jewish community."

Results indicated that those most supportive of the Gaza-Jericho agreement are well-educated, wealthy, high contributors to Jewish groups, and those who have visited Israel.

Any discrepancy between American and Israeli public opinion on the peace process could be a result of American Jews being "not influenced by the opponents (of the peace process) but by Rabin," Lifton said.

The survey results show very high favorable ratings for the Israeli prime minister, with 84 percent of respondents rating him positively and only 7 percent negatively.

Most respondents also agreed with various decisions made by Rabin in recent months.

Eighty-three percent backed Rabin's decision to continue negotiations despite terrorist bombings in Israel by the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hamas; 62 percent supported Rabin's decision to outlaw followers of Rabbi Meir Kahane after the Hebron massacre; and 65 percent agreed with Rabin's willingness to trade territory on the Golan Heights to achieve peace with Syria.

Rabin received the highest positive ratings of the leaders included in the survey.

Clinton also ranked high, with a 75 percent-21 percent favorable-unfavorable rating. Other leaders included were Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, 68-14; Secretary of State Warren Christopher, 61-24; Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, 37-29; and Arafat, 31-60.

GOD LOSES GROUND TO DEVIL IN SURVEY, AND NUMBER OF FRENCH JEWS IS A PUZZLE
By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, May 19 (JTA) -- Decreasing numbers of people in France believe in God. But belief in the devil is on the rise.

These were among the findings of a survey conducted in this predominantly Catholic country earlier this month for the prestigious daily newspaper Le Monde.

In one of the survey's more enigmatic results, 3 percent of the respondents said they could be described as Jews.

By extrapolation, this would put the total number of French Jews at about 1.5 million -- some three times the total estimated by demographers, who put the total at around 530,000.

But when asked to state their religion, only 1 percent of the respondents replied that they are Jews, which would correctly reflect the actual size of the Jewish community here.

No explanation was offered for the apparent discrepancy between the two results.

Nearly 24 percent of the respondents said religion has no relevance to them, and 22 percent said they are rationalists or atheists.

In the 18-24 age group, 36 percent said they have no religion at all.

Some 57 percent of those polled agreed with the statement "The notion of sin has no meaning to me," while 39 percent disagreed and 4 percent said they did not know.

The poll also found that 61 percent of the French public believes that the existence of God is "certain" or "probable." In a similar poll conducted eight years ago, 66 percent voiced belief in God.

Asked whether they believe Jesus is the son of God, 39 percent said no, while 56 percent said they adhere to this belief.

Some 59 percent of those polled said they do not believe in the Holy Trinity, one of the central tenets of the Catholic faith, while 32 percent said they do believe in the Trinity.

When it came to belief in the devil, 34 percent said they believe in Satan. Eight years ago, only 24 percent expressed this belief.

According to the poll, 71 percent of the French public believes in mental telepathy, 60 percent in astrology, 41 percent expressed belief in witchcraft and charms, and 39 percent said they believe in the existence of extraterrestrials.