

**ASSAD TOUTS CONGRESSIONAL LETTERS
PRAISING HIM FOR ACTION ON JEWS, DRUGS**
By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, July 28 (JTA) -- In an unusual twist of congressional activity on the Middle East, three well-known pro-Israel members of Congress have sent letters to Syrian President Hafez Assad praising him for his efforts in combatting drug trafficking and for allowing Syrian Jews to emigrate.

U.S. Reps. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), known as hawks when it comes to Syrian and narcotics issues, hoped that their letters would prompt the Syrians to reveal information on the whereabouts of Israeli soldiers missing in action and lead to movement on the Israel-Syria peace track, according to sources on Capitol Hill.

The letters were sent with a delegation that traveled to Damascus last week, according to the sources.

At these meetings, participants reportedly pressed Syrian officials on the whereabouts of Israeli MIAs, including Ron Arad, an Israeli air force pilot whose plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986.

Much to the dismay of the congressmen, who had apparently been assured the letters would remain private, Syrian newspapers reported on the correspondence and Assad has been touting the letters in his continuing effort to get Syria off the State Department lists of drug traffickers and state-sponsors of terrorism.

Getting off the two lists has been a priority for Assad, whose country has been disqualified from certain economic benefits because of the listing.

In a brief letter to Assad dated July 22, Schumer wrote, "I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge your leadership in providing freedom of travel to members of the Syrian Jewish community. Members of Congress recognize your efforts and positive consideration of this matter."

In the letter, obtained by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Schumer wrote, "I am pleased that the vast majority of Jews that have requested permission to travel freely have been permitted to do so."

'A Recognition Of What He Has Done'

In April 1992, Syria lifted travel restrictions on the estimated 4500 Jews. An estimated 4,000 have since left the country, emigrating mostly to the United States.

Schumer, one of Syria's most outspoken critics on Capitol Hill, concluded his letter by saying, "I look forward to working with you in the future on issues of vital congressional concern."

Explaining his unusual correspondence with the Syrian president, Schumer said through an aide, "When we asked Assad to do something, he did it, and this letter was simply a recognition of what he has done."

Gilman, the ranking minority member of the

House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Rangel wrote to Assad regarding his improved record of combatting drug smuggling in the Middle East.

The letter complemented Assad for "progress in your government's efforts to combat drugs, both with assistance in large-scale opium eradication in the Bekaa Valley and enactment of some tough anti-narcotics domestic measures."

The Bekaa Valley, in eastern Lebanon, is one of the primary opium and cocaine centers in the region. The area remains under Syrian control.

Rangel and Gilman were founders and co-chairmen of the now-defunct U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Narcotics.

Schumer's office reacted with disgust when the letters were published this week in the government-sponsored Syrian Times, an English-language newspaper based in Damascus.

"Someone obviously violated our trust," an aide to one of the congressman said.

The letters were sent "as a diplomatic thing for only Assad to see," the aide said.

Asked for the reasoning behind Gilman's letter, an aide said the letter was sent "to acknowledge that Syria has made some constructive progress combating narcotics and to encourage them to go further."

**A FRESH VOICE IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY
'COMES OUT ON THE SIDE OF THE ANGELS'**

By Pamela Druckerman

NEW YORK, July 28 (JTA) -- The new president of the Urban League has taken a fresh stand on black-Jewish relations, praising Jews as "longstanding allies" of the African American community and mapping out an inclusive road to black empowerment.

Hugh Price, who became president and CEO of the black civil rights group on July 5, said in a recent speech that a weakened economy and a lack of communal infrastructure -- not white racism -- are the major obstacles confronting poor blacks in the United States.

And at a time of heightened tensions between black and Jewish groups, Price stressed that Jews have been key players in the civil rights struggle.

"Many whites of good will have accompanied us on our long journey for racial, social and economic justice," Price said. "None has matched the Jewish community as long distance runners in the civil rights movement."

Price, 52, a former member of the New York Times editorial board, was a senior officer at the Rockefeller Foundation before joining the Urban League, a group traditionally supported by the black middle class.

In his keynote address to the Urban League's national convention in Indianapolis on July 24, Price said that looking at social and economic problems exclusively through the filter of race is simply bad business.

"It's suicidal economically to become so bitter that we isolate ourselves from others," Price said.

"For all our suffering, we cannot become so

fixated on our problems that we ignore our commonality of interests with others."

"What constructive purpose is served by driving deeper wedges between races?" he asked. "Of course we must root out vestiges of racism, but let's not wallow forever in real or perceived grievances, lest we become Bosnia some day."

In his speech, Price called on middle-class blacks to fund "prevention strategies" in the inner cities, including a youth development fund, and to work within the African American community for economic self-sufficiency.

In a clear reference to Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan, whose incendiary racist and anti-Semitic statements have been the subject of recent controversy, Price stressed the need to denounce racism wherever it occurs.

"Just as we denounce misleading stereotypes of African Americans, it is morally repugnant as well to impugn an entire people, especially long-standing allies, like Jews, because of the unconscionable behavior of some of them," he said.

But in another reference to Farrakhan, Price defended the right of African Americans to dialogue with all black groups, even those who espouse racist or anti-Semitic ideas.

He said the sheer magnitude of the problems facing the black community make such dialogues imperative.

"Would there ever have been a Camp David accord had Begin refused to dialogue with Sadat?" he asked in his address, referring to the former prime minister of Israel and former president of Egypt who made peace in 1979.

"Did Yitzhak Rabin compromise his moral integrity by meeting with Yasser Arafat as a prelude to today's Middle East peace?" he asked.

'Lower The Decibel Level'

Price acknowledged that recent tensions between blacks and Jews are real.

He stressed the need to "lower the decibel level" of discussions.

In a telephone interview this week, Price said it is important to move debate from the op-ed pages of newspapers to closed-door meetings between black and Jewish groups.

"The real work of intergroup relations is on the ground," said Price. "If you don't talk, you can't have civil discourse."

Amid concern over the growing appeal of separatist and anti-Semitic messages in the black community, Jewish leaders warmly welcomed Price's remarks.

"He's really talking tachlis," said Kent Schiner, international president of B'nai B'rith. "Finally someone's making some sense."

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, which has had a long working relationship with the Urban League, praised Price.

Price "said things that needed saying," Foxman said.

And Foxman, who is among those Jewish leaders who have long been critical of the inclusion of Farrakhan in dialogue with mainstream black leaders, said he understood the context of Price's willingness to include Farrakhan in such discussions.

"(Price) is carrying water on both shoulders," said Foxman, "but it comes out on the side of the angels."

POLICE ARREST GROUP OF ULTRA-ORTHODOX FOLLOWING RIOTING AT EXCAVATION SITES By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, July 28 (JTA) -- Israeli police arrested some 25 fervently Orthodox Jews in the Jaffa quarter of Tel Aviv this week after a demonstration against archaeological excavations turned into a riot.

The demonstration involving more than 100 people turned violent on Wednesday when protesters began attacking the police.

Some of the protesters also overturned a jeep belonging to the Antiquities Authority.

Most of those arrested were released by Wednesday evening, but a few were held in custody for further questioning.

The manager of the site, Yossi Levy, said the demonstration will not prevent continued work on the dig.

Religious groups frequently have held protests at archaeological sites in recent months, claiming that the remains being dug up were those of Jews.

But archaeologists at the Jaffa site say the graves being investigated are those of Muslims and Christians dating back to the Byzantine period.

A yeshiva student was arrested two weeks ago for allegedly stealing bones from the site after tying up and beating a guard.

The excavations are being carried out prior to the construction of several hundred new apartment buildings in Jaffa.

Archaeologists are concerned that the construction will destroy all remaining artifacts at the site.

The excavations in Jaffa, like those elsewhere in Israel, are permitted by the attorney general.

But permission is only granted on the condition that if human remains are found at any excavation sites, they will be transferred to the Religious Affairs Ministry for examination and burial.

AMERICAN-BUILT SHIP ARRIVES IN HAIFA By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, July 28 (JTA) -- The Israeli navy this week received the first of three high-tech missile ships that were built in the United States according to the specifications of Israeli naval engineers.

The ship, known as the Eilat, arrived Wednesday in Haifa.

The two other ships are nearing the end of construction at shipyards in Mississippi.

The ships carry a range of armaments, including a marine helicopter, electronic detection equipment and sophisticated surface-to-surface and anti-missile missiles developed and produced by a number of Israeli companies.

The ships can remain at sea 24 days and travel thousands of miles before needing to refuel or take on provisions.

Speaking at a ceremony welcoming the Eilat's arrival, the navy's operations commander, Maj. Gen. Ami Ayalon, said Israel was preparing itself to face the navies of those countries still technically at war with Israel, particularly the Syrian navy.

RETIRING RABBI OF BERLIN COMMUNITY CRITICIZES LACK OF INTEREST IN RELIGION

By Miriam Widman

BERLIN (JTA) -- After 14 years of service to Berlin's Jewish community, Rabbi Ernst Stein was happy to see the term of his contract come to an end.

As his term ended, Stein, 65, stayed up late with a group of close friends. At the stroke of midnight, when his contract officially came ended, the short, energetic rabbi took a deep breath, picked up a shofar and blew long and hard into the instrument.

The sound blasted onto the streets, and Stein's wife, Ruth, worried that the neighbors might wake up. But no one complained, and the celebration went on.

In an interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Stein's mixed emotions about serving Berlin's Jewish community became evident as he shifted from severely critical remarks about the community to a more understanding stance.

"It's not the fault of the community but of history," Stein said in his spacious apartment in the city's center. "This is a community that has been slapped together. It hasn't grown. It's an abnormality that's born out of the past."

The German-born American citizen took over the Conservative Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue in 1980 following rabbinical training in England.

The rabbinate was Stein's second career. On Sept. 7, 1940 -- Stein recalled the exact date -- his family fled from Germany to Moscow.

After the war, they lived in Jerusalem. Stein moved to the United States in 1958, where he worked as an engineer. In 1973, he entered rabbinical school in England.

Coming to Germany was not an easy decision. Stein said his wife told him that if he did not go, he would always regret it. But his two children vehemently opposed the decision and stayed in England.

The rabbi came with an initial five-year contract that was extended for 14 years. He stayed, he said, because of a "sense of duty." But he added that inertia also played a part.

Simply Not Interested In Judaism

Stein's chief complaint was that except for very few members, Berlin's 10,000-strong Jewish community was simply not interested in Judaism.

He said that 40 percent of the Jews in Germany who have powerful communal positions are in it for the politics. Another 40 percent seek business contacts, he said, adding that the "others have a Jewish interest, but this is the smallest percentage."

He claimed that congregations elsewhere, particularly in England, are different.

The rabbi was also critical of the influence real estate professionals as a group have in the Jewish community. "There are too many real estate people today in positions of authority in the Jewish community," he said.

Stein also found it hard to believe that after almost 50 years since the end of World War II, there has not been one native-born rabbi serving in Germany.

Responding to some of the criticisms, Jerzy Kanal, chairman of Berlin's Jewish community, stated that leaders of the German Jewish com-

munity are elected, not appointed, and that anyone can offer his or her candidacy, whether or not they are in real estate.

Kanal also noted that the community paid for rabbinical training for several Berlin-born rabbis, but none wanted a pulpit in Germany. A rabbinical post in England or America, said Kanal, was simply more attractive.

But Stein said the reason rabbis emigrate elsewhere is that those who know the community do not want to be a part of it, since its members are not interested in religious tradition and the rabbinate is "very weak."

Stein said he wished he had problems with his board of directors, a common problem among rabbis in other communities.

"I wish I would have problems with them. They're not interested enough to have problems with me," said Stein.

He also pointed out that many classes of the Jewish Adult Education program here have more non-Jewish than Jewish attendees.

Kanal agreed that religion was not the top priority among some members of the community, but he blamed Stein for that, saying "it's a rabbi's job to motivate his congregation."

A main reason for the disinterest is the way the community is set up, Stein explained. German Jews do not join a temple; they pay a tax to become part of the community.

Stein was hopeful that the situation would change as increasing numbers of dissatisfied Jews get together and form their own institutions.

Stein hopes to see alternative Jewish groups flourish as Berlin becomes more international, with Americans and others joining the community.

COMET THAT HIT JUPITER STRIKES MYSTICAL CHORD

By Pamela Druckerman

NEW YORK, July 28 (JTA) -- The meteoric fragments that struck Jupiter last week were a sign for all the world to see.

This, according to the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach, which last week issued a press release claiming the event was foretold in the Zohar, the 13th century Jewish mystical text.

Rabbi Shmuel Butman, chairman of the campaign and member of the Lubavitch Chasidic sect, said the smashing of fragments from the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 into the planet Jupiter coincides with the arrival of the messianic era.

Butman said the Zohar predicted that in messianic times the world would witness a "great fiery plume" streaking through space, striking a large planet "three times daily" and sending out "great flashes of light in all directions."

Twenty-one fragments from the comet struck Jupiter between July 16 and July 22, at an average rate of three per day. The dazzling light show produced by the impacts was broadcast on worldwide television.

The comet is believed to have been traveling through space for 4.5 billion years.

Butman, a leader of the campaign to anoint the late Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as the messiah, said the world should know that redemption is near.

"You cannot dismiss something happening in the world and say, 'well, it just happened.'"

"Nothing just happens," Butman said.

50 YEARS POST-NUREMBERG, A JEWISH JUDGE WILL PRESIDE OVER A WAR-CRIMES TRIBUNAL

By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, July 28 (JTA) -- Nearly 50 years after the Nuremberg war trials, a Jewish judge from South Africa has been appointed to serve as chief prosecutor of the United Nations tribunal on war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.

But Judge Richard Goldstone, who has long played a leadership role in South Africa's Jewish community, feels that his Jewishness is irrelevant to his appointment.

Rather, he sees it as a reflection of the speed with which the world community is reaching out to South Africa in the wake of the country's first all-race elections in April.

"My being Jewish does not affect my attitude and feelings toward the appointment," he said in a recent interview.

"At the same time, the upholding of human rights is something I regard as crucially important."

Goldstone, who was named to the Balkan tribunal by the U.N. Security Council in early July, will head the first international war-crimes prosecution since the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials were convened after World War II.

Interestingly, his daughter, Nicole Goldstone, who lives in Israel, was one of 20 Israelis who went to South Africa to help monitor the country's first democratic elections, in April.

Judge Goldstone said he saw his appointment as "a great honor" and said it was "an illustration of how quickly South Africa has been readmitted into the international community."

"It's a wonderful feeling that South Africans can again contribute to the international organizations in many parts of the world," he said.

He stressed the need for the tribunal to bring those responsible for perpetrating war crimes in the two-year conflict in Bosnia to trial, adding that if the inquiry succeeds in its mission, "it would be a tremendously important step in the further internationalization of human rights, which is something very close to my heart."

Goldstone's appointment ended a four-month search to replace Ramon Escobar Salom, who resigned the post in February to become Venezuela's interior minister.

Thousands Of Documents To Examine

Among Goldstone's first duties will be to pore through thousands of pages of documents collected by a special U.N. commission created more than a year ago to investigate war crimes committed during the Bosnian conflict.

He will then issue indictments against suspected war criminals and prosecute them.

In its final report, the U.N. commission accused Serb forces operating in Bosnia of crimes against humanity, genocide and of perpetrating a systematic policy of rape.

Goldstone currently serves on the bench of South Africa's highest court, the Appeal Court.

He is also prominent in Jewish circles, as vice chairman of the World ORT Union and as honorary life president of ORT South Africa.

In a recent interview, Goldstone said he believed the South African Jewish community is in a particularly good position to assist in the reconstruction of the country's society.

"Many black people I speak to assume that the Jewish community is more sensitive and more feeling to people who suffered racial discrimination, and I hope that is true."

"It is expected of the Jewish community," he said.

"I think it is a reason why so many Jews in South Africa involved themselves in the liberation struggle."

Goldstone's personal involvement in ORT helped contribute to the country's transition to a multiracial democracy.

Prior to the acceptance of the country's liberation movements and the release of their leaders in 1990, World ORT refused to become involved in the apartheid school system in South Africa, despite its need for technical education.

We "can enter into a democratic non-racial South Africa as a Jewish organization and be accepted with open arms," Goldstone said.

AUSTRIAN BISHOP BANS ANTI-SEMITIC CULT

By Marta S. Halpert

VIENNA, July 28 (JTA) -- On the eve of his retirement, Austrian Bishop Reinhold Stecher has banned an anti-Semitic cult that worships a small child said to have been ritually murdered by Jews during the Middle Ages.

Stecher's liberal positions have been acknowledged and in some cases honored by Jewish organizations.

He imposed the ban in the name of Austria's Roman Catholic church to ensure that his successor, who may be of a more conservative bent, complies with the decree, which has the full weight of church law.

For more than 500 years, the Catholic inhabitants of Rinn, a small community set in the mountains outside Innsbruck, have worshiped the bones of a 3-year-old said to have been tortured and sacrificed by wandering Jews.

The so-called blood libel, used throughout the Middle Ages as a pretext for the persecution of Jews, "cost innumerable Jews their homes, wealth, freedom, health and life," Stecher said in his decree.

The decree denied that Jews ever took part in ritual murders, adding, "This was a terrible superstition all over Europe."

TEEN-AGERS BREAK DOWN WALLS OF HATRED

By Marta S. Halpert

VIENNA, July 28 (JTA) -- In an effort to break down the walls of hatred and mistrust separating them, 40 Israeli, Arab and Austrian teen-agers gathered here recently for a one-week series of discussions and outings.

The youths, who practically lived together, attended seminars and discussion groups focused on the Middle East peace process.

They spent a few days trekking through the Tirolean Alps.

While some of the young people used the seminars to promote their governments' views, others sought to build personal relationships.

As one Israeli girl summed up the week, "Despite all the problems, we do have a lot of things in common. 'We mostly share similar wishes and worries -- and we are all wearing the same jeans.'"