

**RABIN AND ARAFAT SET TO SIGN ACCORD,
7 WEEKS AFTER EMPOWERMENT TALKS BEGAN**
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- Officially launching the next phase of the Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat are planning to sign an agreement Sunday that will extend Palestinian authority over five key areas of civilian life throughout the West Bank.

The agreement on the so-called "early empowerment" -- which will give Palestinian officials control over education, health, welfare, taxation and tourism in the West Bank -- comes seven weeks after Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began meeting in Cairo to hammer out the details of the transfer of responsibilities.

News of the signing, which is scheduled to take place at the Erez crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel, was carried in an Israeli television report on Wednesday. The report aired as the two teams of negotiators meeting in Cairo were preparing to initial the series of agreements they had reached.

The accords call for the transfer of authority to go into effect by Sept. 12 at the latest.

On Wednesday, the first official transfer already began in one area of responsibility: education.

At a ceremony in the West Bank town of Ramallah, Israeli authorities handed over to the Palestinians control over some 150 schools in the town and its surrounding villages.

Israel was expected to transfer control over schools in the West Bank's six remaining school districts by the end of the week.

**ASSAD MEETS WITH AMERICAN JEWS,
IN NEW SIGN OF WARMING RELATIONS**
By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- In a new sign of Syria's turn away from confrontation with Israel, President Hafez Assad met last week in Damascus with the immediate past leaders of the American Jewish Congress.

The meeting followed recent visits to Syria by two American Jewish groups, who held discussions with senior government officials.

These visits follow a long tradition of contacts between Arab leaders and American Jews that have preceded Arab-Israeli diplomatic breakthroughs.

At the same time, the intense deliberation within high Syrian governmental circles over permitting these contacts highlights the decidedly cautious approach Assad has taken toward possible peace with Israel.

Last week's delegation went under the auspices of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, whose U.S./Middle East Project is headed by Henry Siegman, the AJCongress former executive director.

Assad "did not meet with us as Jewish leaders, though he was clearly aware all of us had

played a role in American Jewish life," said Siegman.

Siegman said that in reporting the meetings, the official Syrian media did not mention the group's Jewish ties.

The other delegation members, who are also involved in the Council's Middle East project, were Robert Lifton, AJCongress' immediate past president; Lester Crown, the Chicago industrialist and Jewish philanthropist; and Steven P. Cohen, a consultant for the Council on Foreign Relations, who has long played a role in back-door negotiations between Israel and the Arab states.

Six weeks ago, a 10-person delegation representing Project Nishma visited Syria for four days and met with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa.

Project Nishma is a Jewish group which supports the peace process.

In January, members of Americans for Peace Now also visited Damascus.

That these meetings are being seen as a step forward by Israel is evident from remarks made by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on Aug. 17, after meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

'An Advance' In The Peace Process

Peres said that Assad had told the Egyptian leader of his willingness to receive a delegation of American Jewish leaders in Damascus to discuss Israeli-Syrian relations.

Peres said Assad's offer signified "an advance" in the peace process.

Israeli officials now say that Mubarak, and Peres, were apparently referring to Siegman's group, which met with Assad on Aug. 16. The meeting was facilitated by Mubarak.

"These contacts could serve to boost and help establish a direct and continuing dialogue with Syria," said an official at the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

"The more Assad speaks to and hears from people, Jewish leaders and others, of the message of peace and the need for peace, the better the chances are for peace," said the official, who asked not to be named.

Another Israeli official in Washington offered a more cautious assessment.

By meeting with Jews as part of a non-Jewish organization, Assad "did not really make an ideological concession," said this official. "There is an absence of sufficient qualitative change.

"This is in no way a substitute. If he thinks meeting with Americans, whether administration officials or American Jews, is a substitute for direct dialogue with Israeli officials, he is misreading the reality," the Israeli official said.

Israel and Syria are apparently involved now in indirect negotiations, with U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher passing ideas and general proposals from one party to the next. But Israel believes that for the process to really move forward, it requires direct discussions.

Siegman said his group did not carry any messages to or from Damascus, although it met

with Israeli leaders both before and after the visit.

Their visit also included meetings with Mubarak, Jordan's King Hussein and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Richard Murphy, a former undersecretary of state and former ambassador to Damascus, said meetings between Syrian officials and American Jews reflect not only a warming toward the Jews, but toward America.

The trip to Syria "has not been a voyage often made by private individuals," said Murphy, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations. He added that Syrians have had little contact with the outside world.

"That desire to reach out on the part of Syrians, to explain their position, and listen to other points of views, I think is a plus for both sides," said Murphy.

Cohen agreed that his group's visit reflected Assad's increasing engagement with American society.

"As he engages more deeply in American society he understands there are institutions other than the American government that are important to engage with, such as the Council on Foreign Relations. And that will increasingly include the Jewish community," he said.

Syria Mainly Interested In The U.S.

While the meetings with Syrian officials mark a new course for American Jews, this is not the first time that such contact has preceded official Israeli-Arab dialogue.

Similar meetings were held in the past between American Jews and Egyptians, Palestinians and other Arabs.

"Our feeling is that over the years the peace process is generally preceded by relationships between the American Jewish leadership and the parties in question," said Theodore Mann, co-chairman of Project Nishma.

"Syria, like other parties to the peace process on the Arab side, is primarily interested in opening relations with the U.S. and we are, after all, Americans," he said. "Apparently Syria believes that we have some influence with the American government."

During the almost two-hour meeting at the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Project Nishma delegates stressed the importance of more public diplomacy by Syria in order "to convince the Israelis that peace will be genuine and safe for them," Executive Director Thomas Smerling said.

Smerling said the American Jewish community is "extremely valuable" in peace negotiations as a "vehicle that Israel and Arab governments can use to take incremental steps towards engagement with each other.

"Every breakthrough is preceded by a long series of small steps, of tiny gestures, of precedents being broken. That's how the peace process moves forward and at some point crystallizes in a serious breakthrough," Smerling said.

Smerling noted that Egypt extended the red-carpet treatment to then-Hadassah President Charlotte Jacobson shortly before President Anwar Sadat made his surprise trip to Israel in 1977.

According to Israeli official and others familiar with Israeli diplomacy, Cohen, who was part of the recent delegation that met with Assad, has served as a "conduit" for Peres in

back-door dealings with Palestinians and other Arabs.

Cohen dismisses this account, which is widely accepted.

Smerling said Syria is now involved in a slow, incremental process of coming to terms with Israel.

He said Syria's decision to welcome the Project Nishma delegation as an organization and not as individuals represents one step in this process.

The earlier group from Americans for Peace Now received visas only as individuals.

"It is a distinction that is very meaningful to the Syrians," said Smerling, who said the Syrian government considered his group's visa request for more than a year.

Another partial gesture from Syria came earlier this month, when it granted a visa to David Makovsky, a reporter from the Jerusalem Post who also writes for U.S. News and World Report.

While he officially went on behalf of the weekly American magazine, he said the Syrians understood and agreed that he would write about the trip for the Post, as well as a Hebrew newspaper, after he returned to Israel.

Makovsky said Syrian Foreign Ministry officials told him that "they had had a whole discussion as to whether I constitute a confidence-building measure," said Makovsky. "They decided I wasn't, because I traveled on an American passport."

(JTA correspondent Matthew Dorf in Washington contributed to this report.)

SIX MONTHS AFTER HEBRON MASSACRE, AUTHORITIES CONSIDER RE-OPENING TOMB **By David Landau**

JERUSALEM, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- With Rosh Hashanah approaching, Israeli authorities are making arrangements to re-open the Tomb of the Patriarchs in the West Bank town of Hebron.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin met with military officials and Chief Rabbis Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron and Yisrael Meir Lau to discuss the re-opening of the site, which is holy to both Jews and Muslims.

The army closed the site following the Hebron massacre of Feb. 25, when Israeli settler Dr. Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Palestinians praying there.

Jewish settlers are pressing authorities to re-open the site in time for Rosh Hashanah, which falls this year on Sept. 6. Local Muslims also want to see the site re-opened for their own prayers.

According to Jewish and Islamic tradition, the tomb is the burial site of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their wives, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah.

Until the massacre, Jews and Muslims sometimes prayed there simultaneously, separated by temporary partitions. But Israeli security officials now want a rigid separation of the prayer schedules of the two communities.

Another proposal reportedly under consideration -- and hotly opposed by settler leaders -- is for a permanent physical separation of the two communities: Jews would pray in the Halls of Abraham and Jacob, while Muslims would have exclusive use of the much larger Hall of Isaac.

RABBIS URGED TO SUPPORT PEACE DURING THEIR HIGH HOLIDAY SERMONS

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- Supporters of the Middle East peace process have launched a campaign to encourage rabbis to use their pulpits on the High Holidays to praise the recent steps Israel has taken with its Arab neighbors.

The Israel Policy Forum, a North American group advocating the peace process, has sent to 4,000 rabbis and rabbinical students from every religious movement a resource guide drawing on biblical, rabbinic and contemporary sources supporting peace.

"The peace process can't be ignored," said Gordon Tucker, rabbi of Temple Israel, a Conservative congregation in White Plains, N.Y.

Titled "Mipnei Darchei Shalom," or "For the Sake of Peace," it cites Jewish voices from the prophet Isaiah to Abraham Joshua Heschel, from Rabbi Hillel to former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, in support of peace.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has endorsed the project.

In a letter enclosed with the booklet, the prime minister encourages rabbis to use the material "to educate our fellow Jews to act in accordance with Jewish values, and to preserve our unique identity."

The Israel Policy Forum undertook the effort "to bring the peace process into religious communities," said Jonathan Jacoby, executive vice president of the group.

"Rabbis are one of the most important groups of leaders in the American Jewish community and no other leader is in as close touch with as many American Jews as a rabbi," he said.

The resource guide includes four articles -- three of them by Orthodox Jews -- addressing aspects of the peace process.

No Orthodox Rabbis Signed Cover Letter

The articles are by Avraham Burg, a Labor member of Knesset; Rav Yehuda Amital, who leads the Orthodox Har Etzion Yeshiva; and Ovadia Yosef, the former chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel and spiritual leader of the Shas political party.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists in America, also contributed to the guide.

A cover letter introducing the packet was signed by 13 rabbis from the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements.

Jacoby said that "it is disappointing that no Orthodox rabbis signed the letter."

But he added that the response to the mailing had been "very positive" within the Orthodox community.

One Orthodox rabbi who was approached about signing onto the letter was personally enthusiastic but afraid that it would be too politically sensitive among his constituents.

The \$15,000 cost of producing and distributing the resource guide was paid for by private donations raised by the Israel Policy Forum to underwrite the project.

One rabbi drew a connection between peace and the Torah portion read during Rosh Hashanah, in which Isaac and Ishmael, progenitors of the Jewish and Arab peoples, are introduced as they bury their father, the patriarch Abraham.

"Recent events promise coming together not for a burial, but for the renewal of life," said Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, rabbi of the Reconstructionist/Conservative congregation Beth El Zedeck in Indianapolis.

"That promise is very much part of the High Holy Day spirit," she added.

Both she and Tucker signed onto the cover letter.

In a related effort, the Reform movement's Commission on Social Action sent to each of its 860 affiliated rabbis a memo urging them to speak from the pulpit about peace in the Middle East.

The memo also urges them to seek out local Christian and Muslim clergy to issue a statement about the common goal of peace.

OSI INITIATES CASE TO DEPORT ILLINOIS MAN FOR WORLD WAR II CRIMES

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- The Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations has initiated proceedings to revoke the U.S. citizenship of an Illinois man charged with concealing his services as an armed guard at a Nazi slave labor camp in German-occupied Poland during World War II.

The complaint against Bronislaw Hajda, 70, was filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Chicago, with the OSI and the U.S. Attorney's Office in Chicago alleging that Hajda willfully concealed his wartime activities when he applied to immigrate to the United States in 1950 and to become a U.S. citizen in 1955.

The complaint alleges that Hajda, a native of Poland and a retired machinist living in the Chicago suburb of Schiller Park, had been trained as a guard at the SS training camp in Trawniki, Poland.

The complaint also alleges that Hajda was an armed guard overseeing prisoners at the SS labor camp at Treblinka, Poland, from March 1943 until the camp was liquidated in July 1944.

Thousands of Jews and Poles died at the camp from shootings, beatings, hangings, malnourishment and exhaustion, the complaint says.

The complaint also alleges that in July 1944, during the liquidation of the labor camp at Treblinka, hundreds of Jewish prisoners were shot to death in a single massacre and that Hajda participated in this killing operation.

The complaint alleges that Hajda subsequently served in the SS Streibel Battalion until at least April 1945.

Karl Streibel was a key staff member of Operation Reinhard, which recruited Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians for SS training.

These recruits were used for ghetto-clearing operations.

According to OSI, 50 Nazi persecutors have lost their U.S. citizenship as a result of OSI's investigations and prosecutions and 42 have been removed from the United States.

VANDALS WIDELY DAMAGE JEWISH CEMETERY

PARIS, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- Police are investigating the desecration of the Jewish cemetery of Fegersheim, near Strasbourg, in eastern France, where more than 100 headstones were recently broken or overturned by unknown vandals.

No inscriptions or graffiti were found.

KNESSET CONSIDERS BOOSTING SANCTIONS AGAINST HUSBANDS WHO WON'T GRANT GETS
By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- A new bill likely to pass the Knesset would strengthen sanctions the rabbinical courts could levy against husbands who refuse to grant divorces to their wives.

The bill reflects an effort to improve the plight of thousands of Israeli women, called agunot, whose husbands will not give them a get, or Jewish divorce, and who, therefore, are forbidden by Jewish law to remarry. Civil marriage is not performed in Israel.

Given that it was prepared by the Justice and Religious Affairs ministries, with the approval of the rabbinical courts, the legislation will likely have the support of the religious parties in the Knesset and thus a good chance of passing.

Women's groups say they welcome the legislation as a first step in addressing the problem.

They add, however, that they would prefer to see the authority over the recalcitrant husbands be in the hands of the civil, rather than religious, courts.

"The religious courts don't use the authority they already have, and we're afraid they won't use the (increased) authority this law gives them," said Gittit Nachliel, a lawyer in the rabbinical courts and the coordinator for the International Coalition for Agunah Rights.

But Nachliel acknowledged that shifting the authority to the civil courts is impossible in the current political climate, which essentially gives the religious parties veto power.

Given the political realities, she said, "We'll give them a chance."

Current law allows for the rabbinical courts to have a man imprisoned in order to force him to grant a get. But for those not imprisoned, the bill would bar these men from getting a passport, opening a bank account, getting a job in the public sector or working in a field which requires a government license.

The bill was discussed this week in a special meeting of the Knesset law committee. The committee is expected to take it up again with judges from the religious courts before it is put before the full Knesset for a vote.

SURVEY: JEWISH SUMMER CAMP BOOSTS IDENTITY IN FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS
By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- Forty-five percent of the youths who participate in Jewish Agency summer camps in the former Soviet Union want to live in Israel, while 61 percent want to study here, according to results of a survey recently released by the Jewish Agency.

Before the summer program, the number who wanted to live in Israel was 39 percent and those who wanted to study in Israel numbered 56 percent.

The Guttman Institute for Practical Social Research surveyed 2,976 youngsters who participated in last year's Jewish Agency camps to assess if the camps strengthened Jewish identity and ties to Israel.

The number of youths who expressed an identification with the Jewish people worldwide

increased over the summer from 79 percent to 89 percent.

The number of those who expressed a feeling of closeness to "the concept of Jerusalem" increased from 66 percent to 77 percent.

Fifty-six percent of youngsters at the start of the summer said they believed their families planned to remain in the former Soviet Union. This number dropped to 53 percent at the end.

This summer the Jewish Agency ran camps for 20,000 children in 45 locations, double last year's numbers.

The Jewish Agency currently budgets approximately \$2.5 million for these camp programs, according to Daniel Allen, assistant executive vice president of the United Israel Appeal, which allocates and monitors funds to the Jewish Agency raised by the United Jewish Appeal.

Participation in a summer camp is the first Jewish-Israeli experience for most of the participants, according to Baruch Gur, head of the Jewish Agency's unit for the former Soviet Union.

The survey found that "social motives," or desire to be with other Jewish youth, was the principal motivation for going to camp.

CALMING CRISIS, RABBIS RULE KOSHER COW PANIC JUST HOT AIR
By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Aug. 24 (JTA) -- Rabbinic authorities have put an end to a rumor that was circulating nationwide last week that milk produced in this country was not kosher.

Leading mainstream kashrut supervision agencies have ruled that the milk is indeed kosher.

The cause of the problem was gassy cows and the surgical techniques commonly used to relieve their discomfort. The procedures render the bovines and all that they produce "treif," or non-kosher.

The gas-releasing procedures have been performed for years. But the controversy erupted recently when an on-site supervisor of a cholov Yisrael dairy reportedly noticed that it was being done more often than people seemed to be aware.

Sharing his observation with a handful of people was all it took for the rumors to take off in religious circles, say observers.

Leading kashrut supervision agencies, including the Orthodox Union, Kof-K, Star K and OK Labs, investigated the matter by examining the cows at dairy farms and consulting experts in bovine anatomy and veterinary medicine.

They concluded that the majority of cows are kosher and, therefore, so is most of the milk produced in the country. If most milk is kosher, then milk overall is rendered acceptable, according to the authorities.

"A certain amount of cows are definitely treif. We're relying on the law of majority," said Rabbi Mayer Bendet, spokesman for the OK Laboratories, based in Brooklyn.

Cholov Yisrael dairies, or those in which a kashrut authority supervises the milk production, are separating kosher cows from those which have had the gas-relieving procedure performed.

According to Bendet, this process is likely to cause the price of cholov Yisrael to increase, at least initially. Competition will bring the prices back down by the end of September, he predicted.