GORE FAILS IN BID TO REASSURE AMERICAN JEWS ON SCHOOL PRAYER
By Lisa Hostein

DENVER, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- Vice President Al Gore tried to reassure American Jews on the question of school prayer last week, but he was less than successful.

In a speech before some 2,600 delegates at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations last Friday, Gore scored marks for defending the separation of church and state as neither a Democratic nor a Republican idea, "but an American idea" and for emphasizing the Clinton administration's opposition to "coerced" prayer in public school.

He defended religious liberty and said that both he and President Clinton are adamantly opposed to allowing the government to take over the responsibility of "telling others how to pray."

But the vice president never mentioned a word about voluntary prayer or a moment of silence in public school, concepts that most Jews also reject as a violation of the separation between church and state and a threat to their security.

At a news conference with representatives from the Jewish media following his speech, Gore was more specific, strongly hinting that the president would, in fact, support moment-of-silence legislation.

As governor of Arkansas in 1985, Clinton helped write legislation allowing silent meditation at the beginning of the school day.

Clinton "wants to be respectful of those who feel that there might be some way legislatively to accommodate people who seek only an opportunity on their own initiative to silently participate in their religious tradition," the vice president said.

Clinton Shocked Many Jewish Supporters

Gore's remarks here came just days after Clinton shocked many Jewish supporters by suggesting he would consider supporting a constitutional amendment to allow voluntary school prayer. Despite his history of support for voluntary school prayer, this marked the first time as president that he seriously discussed a constitutional amendment.

The president's comments, made during a news conference in Jakarta, Indonesia, were interpreted as a peace offering to the newly elected Republican leadership in Congress.

U.S. Rep. Newt Gingrich, (R-Ga.), who is slated to be the next speaker of the House, said recently that he intends to bring a constitutional amendment on school prayer to the floor of the Congress by July 4.

Clinton's remarks unleashed an avalanche of protest from Jewish organizations and individuals. While the issue was not officially on the agenda of the G.A. here, it became an important topic as Jewish organizational officials met in emergency sessions to devise strategies for dealing with the subject.

The National Jewish Democratic Council, a staunchly pro-administration group, was one of the first to fire its salvo at the White House.

In a Nov. 16 letter to the president, NJDC Chair Monte Friedkin, a major financial backer of the president, and the group's policy committee chair, Howard Squadron, took the president to task for his comments.

NJDC "is in the mainstream of American Jewry in unambiguously opposing organized school prayer in any form," the letter said.

The NJDC leaders warned that Jewish voters, the majority of whom vote consistently Democratic, might turn their back on the party over such issues.

Breaking the wall of separation between church and state through a constitutional amendment "could gravely undermine the decades of trust built between American Jews and the Democratic Party," the letter said.

The next day, White House aides tried to clarify the president's remarks by saying he really meant that he would consider only a moment of silence.

Delegate Mounts Letter-Writing Campaign

At the G.A., delegate Edith Everett of Manhattan mounted an impromptu letter-writing campaign to the president. "This is very scary stuff," Everett said. "If this is what our president -- whom we have been relying on to do the right thing -- is going to use as a signal to the Republicans that he's going to play ball, that makes me sick."

By the end of the conference, Everett said she had attained her goal of collecting 100 letters to the president expressing opposition to school prayer.

There is no doubt the message -- from Jewish groups as well as other religious and civil rights organizations -- reached the White House.

The president "has gotten a ton of mail," according to an official close to the Jewish community traveling with the vice president.

"He understands the depth of concern" in the Jewish community, the official added.

In addition to sending letters, a few Jewish organizational professionals spent the two days between Clinton's reported remarks and Gore's speech here in constant contact with the White House, hoping to persuade the vice president to assuage their concerns through his speech.

The vice president was warmly received by the crowd, especially when he spoke of the administration's opposition to right-wing conservatism and ongoing support for the Middle East peace process. But though much of his speech focused on the importance of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, many of those who were listening closely were disappointed by what he said.

"It's not what I was looking for," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center. He said he was particularly disappointed that the vice president did not specifically express opposition to a constitutional amendment on school prayer.

Gore "didn't go far enough," agreed Diana
Aviv, Washington director of the Council of Jewish Federations.

Reflecting widespread dissatisfaction and continuing unease over the issue, CJF's board delegation moved quickly and spontaneously to amend its prepared resolution endorsing the separation of church and state and opposing school prayer.

The amendment, passed unanimously by more than 100 of the CJF communities attending the conference, said that a moment of silence is "equally unacceptable," Aviv said.

The issue of school prayer squarely on the table for the first time in years, the Jewish community is strategizing how best to combat it.

At the same time, while many -- though not all -- continue to express vigorous opposition to any form of organized prayer or reflection, others are quietly suggesting that Jews need to re-evaluate long-held positions on the subject.

"We owe it to ourselves to re-evaluate the issue," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "I doubt the position would change, but the last time we tackled it was 30 to 40 years ago," said Foxman, whose organization was among the first to write to Clinton last week opposing a constitutional amendment.

More than one G.A. delegate suggested that a moment of silence might not be so terrible. The issue could prove divisive in the community, observers say, as others work to keep erect the wall separating church and state.

However, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council seems clear in its position and has shifted the issue to the top of its domestic agenda.

"So-called voluntary prayer that is organized by the school is a violation of the Establishment Clause," which prohibits any government establishment of religion, said Jerome Chanes, co-director of domestic concerns at NJCRAC. "We have always said so."

NJCRAC leaders, following emergency sessions here, issued an "action alert" to its constituent national agencies and community relations councils around the country, urging Jewish communal leaders to take a stand on the grass-roots level in an effort to thwart any initiatives on school prayer.

"The organized Jewish community must take the lead in opposing any proposed school prayer amendment or other legislation mandating organized prayer in the school," said the communications from Lynn Lyss and Lawrence Rubin, NJCRAC's chair and executive vice chairman, respectively.

**RABIN, AT G.A., LASHES OUT AGAINST OPPOSITION LOBBYISTS IN WASHINGTON**

By Larry Yudelson

DENVER, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- Shortly before his visit to Washington, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin harshly attacked lobbying efforts under way on Capitol Hill by Israelis opposed to any withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

"They are causing long-term damage to the State of Israel," Rabin said, referring to Israelis rallying American opinion against the possible deployment of U.S. troops on the Golan Heights in the event of an Israeli-Syrian peace accord.

Rabin made these remarks last week at a news conference following his address to the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations here on Nov. 17.

In English-language remarks to reporters, Rabin took a low-key position against the lobbying effort, pointing to the 1,000 American soldiers already stationed in the Sinai as part of a multinational force observing compliance with the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Those soldiers do not constitute "a peace-keeping force like in Somalia or Sarajevo," he said.

But responding in Hebrew to an Israeli journalist, the prime minister lashed out at the ongoing efforts on Capitol Hill as encouraging American isolationism. "Imagine if that atmosphere prevailed during the (Persian) Gulf War," he said. "The face of the Middle East would be different from end to end."

An America unwilling to do on the Golan what it has been doing in the Sinai for 15 years "will be a different America with negative implications for the future of the Middle East."

Rabin also spoke out against the lobbying effort in private remarks to major donors to the United Jewish Appeal.

Rabin's remarks came against the backdrop of a new, potentially more hostile environment in Washington that is taking shape as Republicans start to spell out their agenda for the incoming Congress that they will dominate.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), the powerful conservative who is slated to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told interviewers on the CNN program "Evens and Novak" on Saturday that he is opposed to sending American troops to the Golan.

**Netanyahu Also Addresses G.A.**

He criticized the whole effort at peace between Israel and Syria. "This whole peace process over there is a fraud," Helms said. "Syria doesn't want peace. They want the Golan Heights. They want access to the pocketbooks of the American taxpayers."

At the G.A., Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyau dissociated himself from the current lobbying efforts in Washington.

Addressing the CJF meeting the day after Rabin, Netanyahu said that lobbying on Israeli issues should take place within the Knesset, not on Capitol Hill.

"If I wanted to launch a lobbying effort on the Golan," Netanyahu said, "I would have plenty of excellent talent. But I don't want to do so."

In his address, the first delivered by a leader of the Israeli opposition to the CJF assembly, Netanyahu repeated the arguments being made in Washington by the Israeli right-wing lobbyists.

Disputing Rabin's argument that the situation is comparable to the observers in the Sinai, and that what is being contemplated are relatively small numbers of observers, Netanyahu insisted that what would be required would be "not a thousand troops, but divisions with thousands of tanks."

Notwithstanding Netanyahu's presentation, the CJF Board of Delegates adopted a resolution applauding "the bold policy" of Rabin and his government "to achieve peace, security, and to normalize relations between Israel and the Arab world."


ISRAEL SAYS IT WILL NOT INTERVENE IN WAKE OF PALESTINIAN FIGHTING IN GAZA
By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- While Palestinian leaders attempted over the weekend to calm tensions in the wake of last Friday's bloody rioting in the Gaza Strip, Israeli officials offered restrained reactions, careful to avoid any appearance of interference.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said flatly that Israel would not intervene in what he described as a matter best left for the Palestinians to work out for themselves.

"I propose we leave it to the Palestinians to deal with their internal matters," he told Army Radio from the United States, where he was on an official visit since the middle of last week.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres echoed this view. "The current struggle between the (Palestine Liberation Organization) and Hamas and the Islamic Jihad is an internal Palestinian issue," he told Army Radio. "We must be very cautious and not create the impression that Israel is involved."

Peres instead stressed the economic problems facing Gaza, noting that pledges of financial support from foreign donor nations have failed to materialize. As a result, he said, the Palestinian leadership has been hampered in its attempts to improve the lot of the average Gazan.

At its weekly meeting Sunday, the Cabinet was briefed on last Friday's violence in Gaza, the worst outbreak of Palestinian infiltrating since the start of self-rule in May.

The violence, which left 12 Palestinians dead and about 250 injured, was sparked by clashes between the Palestinian police and followers of rejectionist fundamentalist movements who had gathered outside Gaza City's main mosque. Each side has blamed the other for starting the fighting.

The Cabinet on Sunday was also briefed by the Israel Defense Force chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak, about a Saturday night terrorist attack near the Israeli settlement of Netzarim in Gaza, where an Israeli soldier was killed -- the fourth in less than two weeks at the site.

Soldier Killed At Same Netzarim Post
Barak told the ministers about a demonstration by some 300 Hamas supporters who overtook an army checkpoint near Netzarim and raised a Palestinian flag after destroying the post.

Following standing orders, the soldiers fled the checkpoint under a hail of stones thrown by the demonstrators.

Staff Sgt. Gil Sadon, 26, of Tel Aviv, was later killed at the site, when a speeding car with Gaza license plates opened fire on the army post. It was the same post where, on Nov. 11, a terrorist rode up on a bicycle and exploded a bomb that claimed the lives of three other Israeli soldiers.

Sadon was buried in Tel Aviv on Sunday.

Barak criticized the Palestinian police for not doing enough to prevent the rioting at the army post, but Economics Minister Shimon Shevet said ensuring the safety of Israeli civilians in Gaza was not the Palestinians' responsibility.

Peres and Environment Minister Yossi Sarid expressed support for the IDF's decision to order the soldiers to abandon their post temporarily. Peres, who is acting prime minister while Rabin is in the United States, said the evacuation prevented a large-scale bloodshed.

The Likud party caucus in the Knesset, meanwhile, said responsibility for the events at the Netzarim army post lies with the Israeli government.

Cabinet Chairman Moshe Katzav said that further implementation of the self-rule accord should be suspended until PLO leader Yasser Arafat gets full control of the situation in Gaza.

The leader of the right-wing Tsomet Party, Rafael Eitan, called the standing IDF orders that required soldiers to flee the outpost at Netzarim an "incomparable disgrace."

Arafat, who held meetings with his aides in Gaza over the weekend to discuss the situation in the wake of the bloody confrontation, later announced that he would appoint an official committee to look into the causes of the violence.

Arafat invited members of Hamas to join the investigative committee, but on Sunday leaders of the movement demanded that several top officials in the Palestinian Authority first be dismissed.

In a statement, Hamas officials blamed the violence on the Palestinian police and threatened revenge.

The Palestinian Authority in turn accused some Palestinian elements of attempting to incite a civil war and promised to take all measures necessary to ease the tension.

The severity of last Friday's clashes left the Palestinian community in a state of shock.

On Saturday, the Arab newspaper An-Nahar ran a banner headline that proclaimed, "No to civil war."

(JTA correspondent Hugh Orgel in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.)

ISRAELI POVERTY RATE HITS 12 PERCENT; ELDERLY AND CHILDREN ARE MOST AFFECTED
By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- Despite a booming Israeli economy, about 12 percent of Israel's population, or some 648,000 Israelis, lived below the poverty line in 1993, according to the National Insurance Institute.

The report released this month said the number of Israeli poor in 1993 rose by 5.4 percent over the previous year. But there were marked increases among the old and among large families.

According to the report, the number of elderly poor rose by 16 percent and the number of families below the poverty line increased by 13 percent over the previous year. The figures showed that some 279,000 Israeli children were living in poverty.

In contrast, the number of immigrants living below the poverty line dropped by more than 30 percent. In previous years, the massive influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union had caused an acceleration in poverty.

The poverty line was defined as households living on less than half the average national wage, which the Central Bureau of Statistics set at $1,327 a month.

At a news conference marking the report's release, Labor and Social Affairs Minister Ora Nami said a drop in unemployment during 1993 had slowed the increase in poverty.
FALL OF BERLIN WALL MAY HAVE THWARTED PRISONER EXCHANGE DEAL INVOLVING ARAD
By Gil Sedan

BONN, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- The collapse of East Germany five years ago may have prevented a prisoner exchange deal that included efforts to return Israeli navigator Ron Arad and other missing Israeli soldiers in Lebanon, according to new documents published recently in Germany.

The documents, which were obtained by Professor Michael Wohlsohn, a German Jewish historian, included a written agreement between Israel and East Germany and internal memorandums of the East German government.

The key figures in the deal were East German lawyer Wolfgang Vogel and Israeli lawyer Amnon Zichroni. Both signed the agreement in 1989 on behalf of their respective governments.

Vogel, who brokered the exchange of spies and the ransom of some 30,000 prisoners from East Germany and the Soviet Union during the Cold War -- including Natan Sharansky -- was recently brought before a Berlin court on blackmail charges.

According to the deal regarding Arad, East Germany reportedly would have done its best to secure the release of the missing Israeli soldiers. In return, Israel would have released convicted Soviet spies Marcus Klingberg and Shabtai Kalmanovitz.

The prisoner exchange was also to include the terrorist Hamadieh brothers, both of whom were imprisoned in Germany; Sheik Abdul Karim Obeid, a leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement who had been kidnapped by the Israelis; and Nelson Mandela, who at the time was still in a South African jail.

Had it gone through, it might have been one of the biggest prisoner exchanges of the decade.

Perhaps the most important point in the documents located by Wohlsohn was Vogel's strong belief on the part of Vogel that Arad was alive at the time, two-and-a-half years after his plane had been shot down over Lebanon.

Arad bailed out from his fighter plane over Lebanon in 1986 and was believed to have been held by pro-Iranian troops in Lebanon.

There have been sporadic reports that he was subsequently transferred to captivity in Iran.

Documents released earlier this year suggested that Arad was held by the Amal Sh'ite organization under Syrian auspices in West Beirut until the spring of 1989.

But negotiations for the prisoner swap dragged on, and then the entire deal fell through with the collapse of East Germany in November 1989.

GERMANY BANS NEO-NAZI GROUP THAT WAS FOUNDED IN 1952
By Miriam Widman

BERLIN, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- The German government has banned a paramilitary neo-Nazi organization called the Viking Youth.

The recent ban on the group was accompanied by police raids throughout Germany to search the homes of the group's 400 members.

The arrests were reported, police seized bank accounts, weapons and neo-Nazi propaganda from the members' homes.

Viking Youth, which was founded in 1952, advocates the elimination of the current German government, by violence if necessary, and replacing it with a Nazi state.

Announcing the ban on Nov. 10, Interior Minister Manfred Kanther said the group has been giving paramilitary training to young Germans and indoctrinating them with Nazi ideology.

"Germany is not an exercise ground for extremists of any kind," Kanther said.

Members advocate requiring Jews to wear a yellow star on their clothes and call for restrictive immigration laws to protect the "substance of the German people.

Germany banned three other neo-Nazi groups -- the National Front, the German Alternative and the National Offensive -- in late 1992.

The Bonn government has repeatedly come under attack in recent months for being too soft on right-wing extremists.

ISRAEL'S COST-OF-LIVING INDEX RISES DUE LARGELY TO AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS
By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- Israel's cost-of-living index rose by 1.4 percent during October, the Central Bureau of Statistics announced last week.

The bureau said inflation rose by 14.5 percent during the first 10 months of the year, with projections indicating that inflation for all of 1994 will be more than 16 percent.

The October increase was as anticipated, given the considerable recent rise in the costs of fruits and vegetables.

This was due in part to seasonal fluctuations, but it also resulted from a ban on the importation of agricultural produce from the Gaza Strip because of a recent outbreak of cholera there.

Housing costs -- the leading factor in recent monthly cost-of-living increases -- were comparatively stable.

Seasonal increases in the cost of clothing and footwear also contributed to the October rise.

SERVICE HELD FOR BUS BOMB VICTIMS
By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Nov. 20 (JTA) -- Marking the end of the 30-day mourning period for the Oct. 19 terrorist attack aboard a Tel Aviv bus, hundreds of people took part last Friday in a memorial service for the 22 victims of the bombing.

The service was held on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, the site of the attack, which was carried out by a member of the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement, who was also killed in the bombing.

In the wake of the attack, a plaque commemorating the victims was erected at the site on a tree that had been burned in the explosion.

Tel Aviv Mayor Ronni Milo said the attack was not the first time terrorists had targeted an Israeli bus.

He cited the bombings of buses in the Israeli cities of Afula and Hadera in April which resulted in a total of 14 dead and more than 80 wounded.

While several Knesset members and municipal leaders were present, no government ministers took part in the memorial ceremony.