

**RELIGIOUS GROUPS JOIN COALITION  
TO FIGHT SCHOOL PRAYER AMENDMENT**

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 (JTA) -- A broad coalition of religious groups is vowing to fight any efforts to amend the Constitution to allow prayer in public schools.

In front of the Supreme Court, where school prayer was declared unconstitutional, and across the street from the Capitol, where Republican leaders have promised a vote on a school prayer amendment by July 4, 18 organizations came together to voice "unequivocal opposition to a school prayer amendment."

"We are very much in favor of prayer and that's precisely why we're opposed to an amendment," said Brent Walker, general council of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The coalition includes Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jewish groups as well as representatives from the Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist communities.

Jewish defense organizations including the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress played an instrumental role in organizing the coalition.

The National Council of Jewish Women and the National Jewish Democratic Council also signed onto the coalition.

"We believe it is our rabbis, educators and synagogue members who can best convey our religion," said Nina Shanker, staff counsel of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.

"The government's role is to foster respect and tolerance for religious beliefs," Shanker said, "not to intervene in prayer."

**'Unnecessary And Unwise'**

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, agreed, saying that a school prayer amendment is "unnecessary, unjustified and unwise."

When Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) threatens "to tamper for the first time in our 205-year history with the Bill of Rights, it sends shivers of fear to all who cherish those rights."

Gingrich, slated to be the next Speaker of the House, has promised to introduce a school prayer amendment before July 4.

Not all Jewish organizations joined the coalition.

The fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel has deferred a decision on whether to sign onto the effort until its five-member Council of Sages re-evaluates the group's position in light of the renewed debate.

"There's now an opportunity for the rabbis to revisit this issue," said Abba Cohen, Washington director of Agudath Israel. The organization in the past opposed a constitutional amendment, but has not ruled out supporting prayer in schools "if there are iron-clad safeguards built in to ensure non-coercion and non-denominational prayer." The group is expected to decide its position in the coming weeks.

The coalition members are in the process of planning lobbying strategies, and have already begun to educate their constituents across the country about the battle against a school prayer amendment.

**SYNAGOGUE COUNCIL DISSOLVES ITSELF  
AFTER 68 YEARS; NEW GROUP TO BE FORMED**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Nov. 22 (JTA) -- After nearly 70 years as a joint effort of the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements, the Synagogue Council of America has collapsed.

But another organization -- minus the Orthodox and including the Reconstructionists-- is quickly forming to take its place.

The Synagogue Council's mandate since its founding in 1926 has been to serve as a forum for interdenominational communication and as a representative of American Jewry in dialogue with other faith communities.

The Synagogue Council has had an ongoing dialogue with the American Catholic Church's National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and a relationship with the National Council of Churches, which is the umbrella body for dozens of Protestant and Orthodox denominations.

It has also been one of the partners in, and the secretariat for, the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, which represents world Jewry in dealings with the Catholic church.

For the last two-and-a-half years, the organization has died a slow death due to lack of funding. It is officially closing its doors this month. A new president and executive vice president were brought in in October 1993 to try to resuscitate the struggling organization, but to no avail.

"There don't seem to be enough people who are really interested in maintaining the organization," said Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, an Orthodox rabbi in Manhattan who has been the council's president for the last year.

"It doesn't have a natural constituency of lay people. Those of us who are volunteer leaders have tried very hard, but we can't keep afloat something that isn't sustained by the community," said Lookstein.

According to another Synagogue Council official, Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, the Synagogue Council's demise stems from the fact that so many Jewish groups are involved in interreligious work.

"The fact is that interreligious work has been conducted for years by the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee. Even NJCRAC (the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council) is into the act now," said Schonfeld, co-chair of the Synagogue Council's interreligious affairs committee.

The Synagogue Council's six membership agencies were the rabbinic and congregational arms of each of the three largest religious movements.

Building consensus among Jews -- partic-

ularly among representatives of three movements that often take opposing positions on everything from theological to political issues -- has never been easy for the Synagogue Council.

Non-Orthodox members of the Synagogue Council have blamed the Orthodox members, who represent the Rabbinical Council of America and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, for part of the collapse.

According to Rabbi Mark Winer, the council's second vice president and co-chair of its interreligious affairs committee, the Orthodox vetoed a suggestion to move the council's administrative headquarters temporarily to his offices at a Reform temple in White Plains, N.Y., while more attempts to raise money were made.

Rabbi Lookstein and Schonfeld, who is also chairman of the RCA's delegation to the council, denied that the Orthodox caused the agency's final collapse.

### New Organization Planned

In the meantime, however, Winer is involved in an effort to get a new organization off the ground which will attempt to serve the same role played by the Synagogue Council, with most of the same players -- but with a significant addition, a likely significant loss and a new set of ground rules.

The new, as-yet unnamed organization will include the Reconstructionist movement, said Winer.

It is not likely to include the Orthodox movement's organizations, but may include individual Orthodox rabbis and congregations, Winer said.

"The reason we want to create a new one is that the constituent organizations want new ground rules. There will not be the same ability of one organization to veto" a decision, said Winer.

One of the most controversial elements of the Synagogue Council's procedures -- and some say, the element that paralyzed it -- was the right of any one of its constituents to veto a proposal.

In addition, one of the council's ground rules has been that the council cannot address anything theological in nature, an issue of concern for the Orthodox.

The non-Orthodox members say that the veto was most often used by the Orthodox. Schonfeld says that in his 32 years of participating in the Synagogue Council, it was used mostly by the Reform and Conservative members, and "maybe once" by the Orthodox.

According to Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, executive vice president of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, the movement applied twice for membership to the Synagogue Council, and was twice vetoed by its Orthodox members.

"The Synagogue Council was an artificial organization because the Orthodox maintained a stranglehold over it, not allowing any substantive discussion and preventing any real interfaith dialogue," said Liebling.

"The Synagogue Council was an empty shell functioning as a symbol of Jewish unity that really didn't exist," he said. "We would be happy to be part of any liberal synagogue coalition."

One Orthodox Synagogue Council repre-

sentative wished the new organization luck, but did not indicate an interest in participating.

"If they succeed, fine," said Schonfeld.

The Synagogue Council has long been plagued by financial troubles.

Each of its constituent agencies is supposed to contribute several thousands of dollars a year in dues, with some other funding coming from Jewish federations and private contributions.

The Synagogue Council's 1994 budget was about \$200,000, said Lookstein, which is considerably lower than its operating budget of recent years, when it hovered at about \$400,000 per year.

Lookstein said that the Synagogue Council has debts of about \$100,000, in part owed to the Jewish fraternal organization B'nai Zion, which has rented the SCA space in its brownstone on Manhattan's East Side.

Other sources, including Schonfeld, estimate the debts to be closer to \$200,000, including severance pay and "private obligations to individuals" who loaned the foundering organization money, he said.

Because of its financial woes, the organization has not been very active on the interreligious front in the last 18 months or so.

One of its only ongoing projects in recent months is called "The Common Ground for the Common Good."

The project, funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, brings together representatives of Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other religious bodies. The project works to create a common vocabulary to address moral issues of the day.

It is work, promised Winer, that the Synagogue Council's heirs will continue and expand.

### **MURDERED PROFESSOR FROM TECHNION APPARENTLY SOUGHT TO SPREAD AIDS** By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) -- The investigation into the murder of a professor at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology who had AIDS took a macabre twist when police said that the victim had solicited sex with dozens of men during the past year in an apparent effort to spread the virus.

Police subsequently called on all those individuals who had sexual relations with the victim to undergo AIDS testing.

Yeshayahu Demner, a 46-year-old Technion professor for the past 11 years, was found dead in his Haifa apartment earlier this month.

During a search of his home, police found medical documents indicating that Demner had known he was HIV positive since August 1993, but that he had continued to have unprotected sexual relations without informing his partners he had AIDS.

Police also found Demner's diary and written lists, in which he wrote out names of those with whom he had sex.

Based on the findings, police believed Demner, enraged by his own illness, was trying to infect as many people as he could.

They believed that the murderer was someone who knew Demner, and had acted out of revenge after finding out that he had contracted AIDS. Police believed Demner had apparently let the suspect into his home.

**NEWS ANALYSIS:****AS CIVIL WAR THREATENS PALESTINIANS, ISRAELIS WORRY ABOUT FUTURE OF PEACE**

By David Landau and Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Nov. 22 (JTA) -- As civil war threatens the Palestinians, an equally potent challenge confronts Israel: Can the peace accord survive?

Last Friday's violence in Gaza between Hamas activists and the Palestinian police is being regarded here as a historic turning point.

It was not clear, however, which way history would turn.

As the death toll mounted among the young radicals of Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- at least 14 were killed and at least 200 were injured in the four-hour splurge of shooting outside a Gaza City mosque -- Israelis talked of a looming "Lebanonization" of the Gaza Strip and even of the entire Palestinian community in the West Bank.

No Israeli, regardless of political views, regards that prospect with equanimity.

Civil strife among the Palestinians would increase the risk of more terrorist attacks directed both against Israeli settlers living in the territories and against Israelis living in Israel proper.

Virtually no one in Israeli politics, moreover, seriously advocates the idea of sending Israeli troops back into Gaza to "restore order" between the warring Palestinian sides.

In one respect, the Rabin government ought to have derived a certain grim satisfaction from the bloody events in Gaza.

After all, for many weeks now -- as the number of anti-Israeli attacks by fundamentalist terrorists has mounted -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his senior political and military aides have been strenuously urging Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat to crack down on Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.

But each time the Palestinian police rounded up fundamentalist activists after an attack on Israelis, Arafat would order their release within a matter of days.

**Israel: A Passive And Cautious Role**

The suddenness and severity of last Friday's violent confrontation disturbed even those Israeli officials who have been pressing Arafat to get tough with his fundamentalist opposition.

The fear is that the mass violence could prove counterproductive. Instead of strengthening Arafat's position, it could ultimately strengthen the determination of his political foes and their standing among the Palestinian public.

Because of this fear, the Israeli government staked out a passive and cautious role. Rabin, on a visit to the United States, sent back strict instructions to Jerusalem not to get involved in what he called the "internal matters" of the Palestinians.

Some Israeli analysts say that if the Gaza violence continues, it will drastically delay the planned implementation of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank. The next phase of the self-rule accord calls for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and the holding of Palestinian elections.

Any delays in implementing the self-rule accord will only increase the erosion in popular

support for Arafat, who already faces grave economic difficulties that many Palestinians perceive as his failure to deliver the fruits of self-rule.

According to European observers, living standards in Gaza, far from benefiting from the peace process with Israel, have actually dropped since the original Declaration of Principles was signed in Washington in September 1993.

The unrest in Gaza is also scaring off private investment, both from the Arab world and from the West, further disheartening those who were once optimistic about the future of Palestinian self-rule.

The bloody riots in the streets of Gaza were a sign of "weakness for Arafat's rule, and their continuation could weaken it even further," observed commentator Danny Rubinstein in Ha'aretz.

Gerald Steinberg, a professor at Bar-Ilan University, said last Friday's developments have provoked more questions than answers regarding Arafat's future dealings with Israel.

"Are we going to see continuing negotiations," he asked, or "a sudden end and a major crisis between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority?"

**Pushing To Expedite Aid To Palestinians**

While Israeli officials are avoiding any direct involvement in Gaza -- a move that would only make Arafat seem like an Israeli stooge -- they are attempting to get the much-needed financial aid to the Palestinians.

Rabin took up this issue when he met with President Clinton on Monday in Washington. And Foreign Minister Shimon Peres is scheduled to attend a session of foreign donor countries in Brussels on Monday to make the same case.

Meanwhile, the outlook for immediate reconciliation among the Palestinians appears grim.

As Israeli Arabs tried to mediate an agreement this week, Hamas activists issued a proclamation that Arafat has proven by his actions that he is the head only of the Fatah faction of the PLO and not of the Palestinian people as a whole.

Tens of thousands of Gazans demonstrated early this week in support of Arafat. Many were armed members of the Fatah Hawks, the military wing of Arafat's PLO faction, sending an apparent warning to Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

At the same time, Hamas planned a massive rally scheduled to take place in Gaza later this week -- a move that is likely to further fuel the flames.

Rubinstein of Ha'aretz is pessimistic. He predicts the "circle of blood" will widen as Hamas activists seek to avenge the death of their comrades and as Arafat and the Palestinian police respond with force.

Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, the stakes are high.

If Arafat does not end this violence once and for all, "and prove who is in charge, it seems to me we should forget about Gaza and the rest of the process for a very long time," said Housing Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer.

An article in Yediot Achronot suggested that if Arafat fails to suppress what appears to have been the beginning of an "armed intifada" against his rule, it could "bring the peace process to a complete halt."

## INTERVIEW WITH TERRORIST RIGHT BEFORE HIS DEATH OFFERS GLIMPSE INTO MIND-SET

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 22 (JTA) -- Six days before a young Palestinian terrorist strapped explosives around his waist and drove his bicycle into an Israeli checkpoint, he was interviewed by a Simon Wiesenthal Center consultant studying the mind-set of radical Islamic terrorists.

In the Nov. 11 attack in the Gaza Strip, 21-year-old Hisham Ismail Hamad obliterated himself and three Israeli soldiers, and wounded 11 other Israelis and Palestinians.

Hamad was among a group of Islamic Jihad militants who talked openly with Kenneth Timmerman about their aims and beliefs. Timmerman is an international security expert who has previously undertaken studies for the Wiesenthal Center on Iraqi chemical warfare capabilities and Iranian and Libyan weapons programs.

The meeting took place on Nov. 5 in an abandoned parking garage in Gaza, near the home of Hani Abed, a Palestinian journalist and suspected terrorist, killed by a car bomb on Nov. 2. Islamic Jihad has blamed Israel for Abed's death and vowed revenge.

What struck Timmerman, a non-Jew, as "scary" was the ritualistic incitement to hatred of all Jews, at the meeting and in the Gaza streets.

"The streets outside Hani Abed's mourning house were filled with graffiti and huge banners proclaiming revenge," reported Timmerman.

" 'Yes to martyrdom,' read one banner. 'The slaughter of Jews is our choice to victory,' read another. 'The children of Israel will be the sheep for the butchers of the Islamic Jihad,' read a third," said Timmerman.

Inside the meeting place, the hatred of Jews was the most extreme Timmerman had witnessed in many years of talking with Arab militants, he said in a telephone interview.

Hamad told the group that "according to the Torah, the Jews say they are the leaders of nations. But in fact, Israel wants to destroy the world.

### Koran: 'Israel Will Be Destroyed By Muslims'

"They want to destroy American society, French society, British society. They want to destroy the whole world. But we believe Israel will be destroyed by Muslims. This is what the Koran says."

At another point, perhaps anticipating his own death, Hamad said, "Hani Abed, peace be upon him, is blessed today in heaven. He is not dead. No, he is happy. That is why the women are ululating. They are happy because he has given himself to Allah."

Timmerman preceded the Gaza meeting with interviews in Damascus and Amman with leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Muslim Brotherhood. In 15 years of covering the (Palestine Liberation Organization), I have never encountered such rank anti-Semitism," Timmerman said.

"For instance, I never heard PLO officials mention 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,' but the Hamas and Islamic Jihad men believe this old czarist forgery is the absolute truth," he said.

The fight against such terrorists will be long and difficult, said Timmerman.

"The bombers are generally between 14 and 22, without children of their own and without a police record that would make them suspicious to the Israeli authorities," he said. "Once selected, they are indoctrinated into the ways of sacrifice. Or, if you prefer, prepared like sacrificial lambs for the knife.

"To persuade young men like Hamad to blow themselves up, Islamic Jihad goes to great lengths to separate them from their families, sealing them off in a bubble of hate-filled rhetoric that makes their choice of death seem rational, even sublime," Timmerman said.

He said he would not presume to advise Israeli and other security services on how to fight the terrorists but warned that while the supply of suicide bombers was limited, more than a few seemed to be willing.

Islamic Jihad, for instance, has claimed that it is training a suicide brigade of 70 members.

From the longer perspective, Timmerman believes that "the breeding ground of terrorism is the grinding poverty in Gaza," and with the recent confrontations between PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and the Islamic extremists, the situation is likely to get worse.

"Only massive infusion of foreign aid and investments will help Gaza residents, but with each new act of violence, foreign investors are scared off, the poverty gets worse and violence increases. It's a vicious cycle," said Timmerman.

Timmerman has written a 40-page booklet on his recent interviews in Gaza, Damascus and Amman titled "In Their Own Words" and published by the Wiesenthal Center.

## TERRORISTS ATTEMPT NEW ATTACKS AS ARMY STEPS UP SECURITY IN GAZA

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Nov. 22 (JTA) -- Terrorists attempted three attacks in the Gush Katif bloc of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip this week, but no one was hurt.

The attacks came as the Israeli army stepped up security at its outposts in the Gaza Strip.

Appearing before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the commander in charge of the southern sector, Maj. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, said 35 army outposts in Gaza had been fortified against suicide attacks.

Mofaz also said that concrete blocks and sandbag re-enforcements have been set up at a post near the settlement of Netzarim, where terrorists killed four Israeli soldiers in two separate attacks in two weeks.

Tuesday's attempted attacks included an explosion at the Morag settlement at the southern end of the bloc and two separate instances in which gunmen opened fire on an army lookout post near the settlement Nezer Hazzani.

Meanwhile, the army altered its standing orders to allow commanders in the field to decide how to react should Palestinian demonstrators threaten a checkpoint.

Until now, soldiers had been under orders to retreat to avoid a confrontation and allow the Palestinian police to take over.

However, on Saturday night the Palestinian police failed to intervene when some 300 Hamas supporters overtook the army checkpoint near Netzarim and raised a Palestinian flag.