



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Jewish groups staked out their positions on school vouchers after Sens. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Dan Coats (R-Ind.) introduced legislation that would provide vouchers to low-income families. Although the legislation would not apply to many Jewish families, opponents and advocates of school vouchers are joining the debate because of the precedent they believe this legislation could set. [Page 1]

■ A lay leader of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee called Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin "absurd and arrogant" for comments he made at a meeting in Jerusalem last month. AIPAC distanced itself from the letter, which has fueled further debate over U.S. aid to the Palestinians. [Page 2]

■ Support for the U.S. role in the Middle East peace process increased to 54 percent, up 10 percent over the last six months, according to a new public opinion poll, which was sponsored by the Israel Policy Forum. The group touted the poll during a whirlwind visit to Capitol Hill. [Page 4]

■ Morocco opened a liaison office in Tel Aviv, six months after announcing it would establish diplomatic ties with Israel. The office, which was announced two weeks after its opening at the request of Morocco, is focused mostly on economic issues. Morocco also opened a liaison office in the Gaza Strip.

■ Palestinians in the Gaza Strip protested against heightened Israeli security checks of goods being imported from Gaza into Israel. Israeli authorities adopted the measures after police last week found a truck filled with explosives that terrorists had planned to detonate in Beersheba. The protesters complained that Palestinian exports have been cut in half since the new security checks were put in place.

■ An Israeli satellite was launched in Russia, marking the first time Russia helped Israel launch a satellite. It was not clear whether the \$4 million satellite, developed by scientists at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, actually entered its planned orbit.

Orthodox senator launches debate over school vouchers

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, March 28 (JTA) — The Senate's only Orthodox Jew has launched a controversial drive to give low-income parents vouchers to send their children to private and parochial schools.

To the cheers of Orthodox Jewish organizations and the boos of civil liberties and Reform Jewish groups, Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), joined by Sen. Dan Coats (R-Ind.), one of Congress' staunchest conservatives, introduced the Low-Income School Choice Demonstration Act last Friday.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism said it is reviewing its stance on the issue, which has proved to be one of the most explosive and divisive among American Jews.

The Lieberman-Coats bill, narrowly tailored to apply only to a designated number of low-income areas for a trial period, would most likely not apply to many Jewish families.

However, traditional opponents and advocates of school vouchers alike are joining the fray because of the precedent they believe this legislation could set.

Jewish supporters of school vouchers have argued that they need the money to send their children to Jewish day schools, while opponents argue that giving federal money for private education violates the fundamental separation between church and state.

Opponents fear effects on public schools

Many opponents in the Jewish community also say a voucher system will harm America's public schools when role models and better-than-average students flock to private and parochial schools, taking valuable federal dollars with them. Opponents also point to the dangers of opening up federal funding to religious schools.

"Once the barrier is broken, any group that says it's religious can get money," said Albert Schanker, the outspoken president of the American Federation of Teachers.

In an interview, Schanker went as far as to say that "vouchers would essentially allow the United States to finance Nation of Islam schools."

At a news conference unveiling the bill last week, Lieberman acknowledged the possibility that a school run by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who is widely believed to be anti-Semitic, could receive federal money through vouchers.

But the senator said the bill minimizes that risk by requiring participating schools to comply with all civil rights laws. There are currently no known Nation of Islam-run schools in the country.

The legislation under consideration would not apply across the country, but instead would create up to 20 demonstration projects for three years to test the theory that vouchers will benefit children in the poorest American school districts.

The measure asks for \$30 million to fund the program for the first year. The Department of Education would be responsible for determining the pilot areas. Then, based on the number of pupils eligible for the funding, the department would come back to Congress to determine funding for the second and third years.

At his news conference, Lieberman argued that a voucher program will give "more children the opportunity they deserve."

"Lower-income parents who want their kids to learn in a religious environment should have that chance, just as wealthier parents do," he said.

Although generally supportive of school vouchers, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations said it has some problems with the Coats-Lieberman bill because of its own concern about separation of church and state.

The organization supports vouchers for school choice only if the money does not pay for the religious portions of the curriculum.

A school voucher bill "should be written and can be written so money does not go directly to fund religious education," said Betty Ehrenberg, director of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs.

In a letter thanking Lieberman for introducing the bill, O.U. leaders

wrote, "Properly drawn educational choice programs can constitutionally and equitably provide funds for the secular portion of the education of non-public school students."

In contrast, Agudath Israel of America, the fervently Orthodox group, is unconditionally supporting the bill. "Vouchers should be applied as broadly as possible. It is the parents' choice," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, Agudah's director of public affairs.

In Capitol Hill visits during the group's mission here this week, Agudah leaders were expected to ask members of Congress to support vouchers.

Sen. Lieberman said "he feels very strongly" that the courts will find his school voucher bill constitutional.

Opposed to vouchers because federal money would go to fund religious schools, the Anti-Defamation League disagreed with Lieberman's assertion.

"The bottom line is that no federal court has ever upheld using vouchers," said ADL's legal counsel in Washington, Michael Lieberman, who is not related to the senator.

ADL, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism all plan to fight the Coats-Lieberman bill.

A similar bill, which Lieberman also supported, was defeated in the Senate last year 52 to 41.

Observers say that if all the senators who returned to Capitol Hill this year vote the same way as they did last year, supporters start with 37 votes and opponents with 44. The new senators and those who did not vote last year are an unknown in the debate. □

A public spat with Beilin fuels debate over aid to PLO

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, March 28 (JTA) — Fueling the raging debate over U.S. aid to the Palestinians, a leader of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has chastised a senior Israeli official for arguing that Congress and American Jews should not concern themselves with Palestinian behavior.

Jonathan Mitchell, AIPAC's regional vice president for southern California, called Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin "absurd and arrogant" for comments he made at a Jerusalem meeting last month with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Mitchell, a resident of Los Angeles, made his attack in a letter that has been circulated to Jewish newspapers across the country. Officials of AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, have distanced themselves from the letter.

Beilin countered this week, accusing Mitchell of "trying to be more Israeli than the Israelis."

The heated exchange comes at a time when the fate of U.S. aid to the Palestinians is unclear.

The Clinton administration has pledged support for the financially strapped Palestinian Authority. As recently as last week, Vice President Al Gore reiterated that promise, telling Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat in Jericho that the United States would keep its commitment to provide \$500 million in economic aid through 1998.

The United States has already provided close to \$100 million to the Palestinian autonomous zones in Gaza and the West Bank Jericho enclave.

At the same time, however, some members of Congress and some members of the Jewish community have argued that the PLO has not complied sufficiently with its 1993 agreement with Israel, thereby disqualifying it from receiving U.S. aid.

These groups are specifically concerned that Arafat

and the PLO have not done enough to contain terrorism or amend its covenant, which calls for the destruction of Israel. Legislation was enacted last year to give the president the authority to cut off aid if he determines that the PLO has not complied with the peace accords.

With the legislation up for renewal June 30, some members of the Jewish community have turned up the heat on Capitol Hill in recent months to cut off all aid to the PLO. Indeed, there are indications that Congress will consider legislation which at least will beef up the provisions for compliance when they return from the Easter recess toward the end of April.

However, supporters of the current peace process, including the Clinton administration, have expressed fear that backing down from U.S. aid to the Palestinians could threaten the entire process.

It was in this context that a member of the Conference of Presidents, during a recent mission to Israel, asked Beilin to reaffirm statements he made after Israel and the PLO signed the Declaration of Principles in Washington in September 1993.

'Trying to be more Israeli than the Israelis'

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, who asked the question, said he was referring to Beilin's prior remarks that there would be no peace if the PLO does not stop terrorism and amend its covenant.

Mitchell, when he got wind of this exchange, decided to go public with his information.

Mitchell, who said in an interview that he believed he was breaking AIPAC's policy prohibiting its lay leaders from publishing views without the lobby's endorsement, quoted Beilin in his letter as saying, "If Arafat complies exactly with the Oslo Accords or not, it is none of your business."

"It is not the business of Jewish organizations, not AIPAC's, not the American Congress' and not of any other country in the world except the State of Israel," Beilin reportedly said.

Incensed at the notion that it was no one's business but the Israelis, Mitchell also wrote in his letter: "The U.S. provisioned payments to the Palestinians as an incentive for Arafat to control terrorism."

"Instead, acts of Palestinian barbarism have risen to unprecedented levels. Under the circumstances, Beilin's criticism of our government and those of us dedicated to preserving and strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship is both absurd and arrogant."

Reacting to the letter, Beilin said through a spokesman, "The kind of people that are trying to be more Israeli than the Israelis themselves are causing damage to the pure national interests of the State of Israel."

Beilin refused to comment on the role of the Congress or the American Jewish community, saying he did not want to prolong the issue.

AIPAC, meanwhile, distanced itself from the letter, saying in a statement: "AIPAC does not publicly critique Israeli government officials."

AIPAC has been in the forefront of tying U.S. aid to PLO compliance with the accords.

But Jewish activists across the political spectrum, including those who support aid to the PLO, said Beilin was out of line with his remarks.

As Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, said of the whole PLO compliance debate: "We have an interest in this matter because it is American money."

"It is surprising that Yossi Beilin of all people would take that position," Baum said, adding that the deputy foreign minister "has always argued for a partnership between Israel and American Jews." □

The king and us: Hussein comes calling in L.A.

By Robert Eshman

Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES, March 28 (JTA) — The man who once ordered his armies to drive Israel into the sea was feted last weekend in a series of historic — and at times poignant — appearances across this city.

Arriving in Los Angeles eight months after the signing of a peace treaty with Israel, King Hussein of Jordan was honored not as a victor in a war, but as a partner in peace. "The enemies of yesterday have become good neighbors and friends and cousins for all times to come," the king told one enthusiastic audience after another.

Accompanied by Queen Noor al-Hussein, the king visited the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance, fielded tough questions from the World Affairs Council and spoke before hundreds at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Even as thousands of Israelis are now including Amman and Petra on their travel itineraries, the 59-year-old monarch added Los Angeles' Jewish community to his, following the same whirlwind awards-and-banquet circuit that Israeli leaders have long endured.

First stop, March 24: The Simon Wiesenthal Center and Museum of Tolerance. There, as a Marine Corps band played "Heveinu Shalom Aleichem," the king and queen were greeted by Gov. Pete Wilson and his wife, Gayle.

A small media army — even the television show Entertainment Tonight fielded a crew — surrounded the 4-year-old granddaughter of Wiesenthal Center Director Marvin Hier as she presented the queen with a bouquet of lilies.

Queen of Jordan visibly shaken

The king and his large entourage, which included Jordan's Prime Minister Zeid Bin Shaker, then toured the museum itself for 55 minutes.

As the king and queen sat on low benches watching a video describing how Nazis threw Jewish infants out the fourth floor windows of a Polish hospital, the queen, visibly shaken, clasped her husband's hand.

Both insisted that their three children, who accompanied them to the United States, go through the museum with them. In an elevator with Hier after the tour, the queen asked her husband for the photo "passport" he, like all museum visitors, received as he entered the exhibit hall.

"I want to take them back to Jordan to remember this exhibit by," Hier reported her as saying.

After the museum tour, in a ceremony before trustees of the Wiesenthal Center and the media entourage, Hussein was presented with the center's first Peace Award.

"The Museum of Tolerance is a haunting reminder of man's inexplicable cruelty to his fellow man," said Hussein. "We have to strive to rid ourselves of such intolerance."

The award itself was a spiraled Yemenite-style shofar, sheathed in silver, engraved with the Hebrew words for "Sound the Great Shofar to Herald our Freedom."

While ovations followed the king's many declarations of peace, some of the loudest applause went to Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.). She greeted the king on the dais with promises that she would work for congressional approval of a measure to excuse all of Jordan's \$480 million debt to the United States.

In the wake of the peace treaty, Hussein is looking to American Jewry to shore up support for much needed foreign aid. Even the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — with Israel's blessing — has been lobbying

Congress on the Arab nation's behalf. "Jordan's willingness to take brave risks for peace should not be forgotten," said Feinstein, to loud applause.

The more personal aspects of those risks were evident by the armada of police motorcycles, patrol cars, anti-terrorism units and bomb squad vehicles that accompanied the king on his visits. Vehicles entering the Wiesenthal Center garage were searched under the hood and chassis, and bomb-sniffing dogs greeted invited guests as they entered the museum. The bands of Jewish protesters now de rigueur at visits by Israeli officials were nowhere in sight.

The ceremony at the Wiesenthal Center came about after a delegation of officials from the center met with Hussein at his palace in Jordan on Feb. 28.

For the center, whose officials are generally considered to support right-of-center Israeli politics, it was a chance to highlight the kind of Middle East peace agreement of which they approved. "We're doing this because this is a real peace," one official said. "Would we invite [Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman] Yasser Arafat? Certainly not. We don't think Arafat has been the ideal peacemaker."

As with many such Los Angeles visits, celebrities joined in the festivities. Longtime Wiesenthal Center supporter Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, attended the ceremony and the luncheon that followed, and O.J. Simpson defense attorney Robert Shapiro was in the audience at the World Affairs Council on March 25.

At that event, some 1,000 people gathered at the Beverly Hilton Hotel to hear the king's remarks on the peace process and answer some substantive questions on Iraq and Islamic fundamentalism.

Jordan, which supported Iraq during the Persian Gulf War, has been accused of providing Saddam Hussein's regime with much-needed capital through continuing oil purchases. Hussein said Jordan's goal during the war and since has been to avoid the destruction and waste that has occurred as a result of the events of 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

But such hard questions remained masked in the warm glow of the Wiesenthal event. At a luncheon afterward that cost more than \$2,500 a plate, the king and his wife posed for photographs with Wiesenthal supporters.

In an unscheduled toast, the queen said, "We understand there are 400,000 members of the Wiesenthal Center. Consider His Majesty the 400,001st member and consider me the 400,002nd." □

Australian official to visit Israel

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, Australia, March 28 (JTA) — Due to an ease in Australia's restrictions on visiting the Jewish state, Defense Minister Robert Ray will make an official visit next month to Israel.

This is the first time an Australian defense minister has made such a trip.

The original restrictions were imposed after the 1982 war in Lebanon. Australian leaders decided that it was inappropriate for their country to have perceived military links with Jerusalem while the Israel Defense Force remained in the southern Lebanon security zone.

Ray, also a senator, said Australia eased the restrictions because of the peace process under way in the Middle East. Ray has visited Egypt and Oman while serving as defense minister. He said the trip to Israel "wouldn't be seen as taking sides." The visit will be part of a larger tour, which includes the United States, Italy and Britain. □

King Hussein secures pledge of full debt relief for Jordan*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON, March 28 (JTA) — Jordan's King Hussein will return to the Middle East next week with a pledge from the Clinton administration that Congress will approve full debt relief for his country.

"I think there is a growing realization in the Congress that it's very important for the United States to keep its commitment," said Secretary of State Warren Christopher after meeting with Hussein on Tuesday.

"I hope it will be worked out in the very near future," the secretary told reporters.

Debt relief was high on the agenda during Hussein's visit to Washington this week. He arrived after receiving a peace award from the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center.

After meeting Hussein on Monday, President Clinton also reaffirmed his support for Jordan.

"The United States must demonstrate that it stands by those who take risks for peace," said Michael McCurry, White House spokesman.

Clinton promised Hussein last year that if he made peace with Israel, he would ask Congress to forgive Jordan's outstanding debt to the United States.

But budget cutters in the House of Representatives passed legislation earlier this month that approved only \$50 million of relief.

Under the debt-relief formula, \$50 million would forgive about \$100 million.

The Senate was more forgiving, approving the same \$50 million plus an additional \$225 million in next year's budget.

That total would forgive Jordan's \$480 million debt.

After meeting with Christopher, Hussein said of the prospects for debt relief in Congress: "I am quite satisfied the results will be positive."

Hussein also told reporters that he believed that his country's peace treaty with Israel, signed in October, should be "an example to others." Hussein was believed to be referring to Syria and Lebanon.

During his four days here, Hussein also met with Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas.).

Hussein was also scheduled to meet with Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and members of both the House and Senate International Affairs committees.

Secretary of Defense William Perry was scheduled to meet with the king at the Pentagon on Wednesday.

Hussein is also reportedly seeking U.S. military aid to buy F-16 fighter jets and M1A1 Abrams tanks.

After a weekend visit to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for his annual checkup, Hussein, who has cancer, is scheduled to meet with U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. □

Poll shows Americans support U.S. involvement in peace process*By Jennifer Batog*

WASHINGTON, March 28 (JTA) — Armed with a recent poll showing that Americans support U.S. involvement in the Middle East peace process, 20 members of the dovish Israel Policy Forum descended on Capitol Hill on Tuesday to lobby for the peace process.

In the one-day whirlwind visit, the group met with 23 key legislators and other officials.

They included House Minority Leader Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.) and

members of the State Department's "Peace Team" in an effort to bolster support for U.S. involvement in the peace process.

The Policy Forum, which is closely allied with Israel's Labor Party, is dedicated to promoting support for the peace process.

Among the leaders who came to Washington this week were Robert Lifton, former president of the American Jewish Congress, and Jack Bendheim, a vice president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Other leaders were Peggy Tishman, former president of the UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, and Debra Pell, co-chairwoman of the United Jewish Appeal's Young Leadership Cabinet.

According to the poll, sponsored by the Policy Forum, support for the U.S. role in the Middle East peace process increased 10 percent during the last six months.

In the recent poll, 54 percent favored America's continued involvement in the peace process, up from 44 percent in September.

Of the 1,005 Americans interviewed, 17 percent said the United States should end its efforts to promote Middle East peace. The remaining 29 percent gave no opinion.

Also, 64 percent of those polled felt that stability in the Middle East is important to U.S. interests. Fully 13 percent disagreed with that statement and 23 percent had no opinion.

The Washington-based Mellman Group conducted the telephone poll between March 16 and 19.

The poll shows that "at a time when public opinion is divided over other issues, it is more united and clearer on this issue," said Jonathan Jacoby, the Policy Forum's executive vice president.

Observers generally agreed with the poll's results.

Daniel Pipes, editor-in-chief of Middle East Quarterly, said there is a sense in other research that Americans in general support the peace process and America's role in it, though American Jews are more apprehensive about it.

"People generally want it to go forward, but they are skeptical about the next steps," he said.

Also launched Tuesday was the Policy Forum's "Adopt a Member" effort.

The effort calls for group officials to stay in touch with members of Congress on a consistent basis. □

Mideast water project to be funded*By Tamar Levy*

GENEVA, March 28 (JTA) — The World Meteorological Organization and the World Bank have decided to help improve the management of water resources in countries that border the Mediterranean Sea.

The meteorological organization and the World Bank are scheduled to sign an agreement on a three-year project, expected to begin in mid-1995.

The World Bank has offered a \$1.7 million grant to initiate the project, the Mediterranean-hydrological observing system, also known as "med-hycos."

The bank offered the grant with the expectation that other donors will contribute to the total expenditure of \$15 million.

Once that system is in place, it will provide a better way to assess water resources.

The system also is expected to improve the gathering of information on the flow and content of rivers that feed into the Mediterranean.

Med-hycos is part of a worldwide initiative, the world hydrological observing system, or "whycos," which was launched by the meteorological organization. □