

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel will continue its closure of the Gaza Strip and West Bank until Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat shows he can control terror, said Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The announcement came as the Palestinian Authority continued to crack down on Islamic extremists.

■ Housing Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer was reported to be in satisfactory condition after undergoing triple bypass surgery. The Cabinet minister was hospitalized at Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in the Ein Kerem section of Jerusalem. He was said to be conscious in the cardiac recovery room, but breathing with the aid of a mechanical respirator.

■ As part of his annual Easter message, Pope John Paul II called on the Palestinians and other ethnic groups to use dialogue, not arms, in their quest for self-determination. He also spoke of the victims of the Holocaust, referring to the Auschwitz death camp within the context of this year's 50th anniversary commemorations of the end of World War II. At another service attended by the pope, a nun urged the faithful to seek forgiveness for having "rejected the Jewish people." [Page 2]

■ The American Israel Public Affairs Committee released a detailed study of Iran's terrorist activities, nuclear capability and international trade relations. The report is part of an effort to prod U.S. lawmakers to cut off all economic ties with the rogue state. [Page 3]

■ Several thousand Kohanim gathered at the Western Wall to give their priestly blessing to the people of Israel. The annual service, which takes place during the intermediate days of Passover, was watched by several thousand visitors. Traffic was backed up in and around the Old City during the day.

■ An Israeli animal rights lobby petitioned a Tel Aviv court to ban alligator wrestling at Hamat Gadar, where an American alligator trainer took on one of the reptiles to show that wrestling the creatures causes them no harm. [Page 3]

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Zairian Jews prosper, but carry walkie-talkies for emergencies

By Alexandra J. Wall

KINSHASA, Zaire, April 18 (JTA) — How is a seder in this corner of the world different from all other seders? The answer is, it's not.

But preparing for it can sometimes be a challenge.

Rabbi Shlomo Bentolila recalls his first Passover here, four years ago, when he was making rounds delivering matzah to his congregants.

Whites rarely drive themselves here, so the Lubavitch rabbi was soon stopped by the authorities. After a lengthy explanation, he was forced to part with some cash — and some matzah.

The police had stopped him to try to obtain bribe money to buy some beer, he said, and they figured that they might as well have a snack to go along with it.

The Jewish community here, 100-families strong, faces hurdles such as this all the time. All heads of households, including the rabbi, carry cellular phones, because lines in their homes are so unpredictable.

They also carry walkie-talkies that are connected to other Jewish families, in case of emergencies.

When the congregants enter the synagogue, they leave their communication equipment on a table outside, making it look like a display at a cellular phone store. But despite practices that may seem strange to Jews in the West, community members consider themselves no different from other Jews around the world.

"We are not exotic," said Robert Franco, president of the congregation here. "We are a Jewish community here from the beginning of the century."

A community in flux

Until the 1970s, Zaire's Jewish community was centered in the city of Lubumbashi. The Jews were all of Sephardi descent, hailing from Turkey, Egypt and the Greek island of Rhodes. But the Jewish population here is in constant flux. Many families who had long lived in Zaire left in the past few years, for either South Africa or Belgium.

Zaire, the former Belgian Congo, gained its independence from Belgium in 1960. Although many Jews left, some stayed and others continue to come, from Belgium, Morocco and Tunisia. Recently, there has been an influx of Israelis, making the community both French- and Hebrew-speaking. And the community has moved to the capital city of Kinshasa.

When speaking to the residents of Kinshasa, the history of their community is divided into two distinct periods: before and after the riots.

Zaire has been ruled since 1965 by President Mobutu Sese Seko, a leader widely seen as corrupt.

In September 1991, and then again in late 1992, the city of Kinshasa was besieged by riots, as the Zairian army revolted against the government after months of not getting paid. The rebellious soldiers were joined by angry civilians, causing the worst riots in Zairian history.

For many Jewish families, the riots were the deciding factor in their choosing to leave Zaire, and for those who stayed, the impact was profound.

"Many thought that the first riot was an accident," said Franco, "and so they stayed on. But when it happened again, they were very afraid, and so many left."

A Jewish community center with a swimming pool, tennis courts and restaurant sits unused because residents are too afraid to go to that part of the city. In another area of the city, ground was broken for the new synagogue before the riots, but the building reflects the impact of the violence. Two guards with Kalashnikov rifles sit outside the cement wall that surrounds the rectangular building.

Inside the synagogue compound, a courtyard is lined with the rabbi's office, a classroom and a storage room where congregants can buy kosher products, including kosher meat flown in from South Africa.

The structure is 3 stories high and has a basement, with the top floor being a large apartment where the rabbi and his family resides.

The synagogue is traditional, with the ark against one wall of the

main floor. The rabbi faces it from a pulpit in the center. Women sit in a balcony. No permanent seats are in place, so the main floor can be converted from synagogue to social hall with ease.

The synagogue is testimony to the fact that the Jews of Zaire are a prosperous community, though Franco claims that the wealthiest have left.

On a drive around Kinshasa, a city of 4.5 million inhabitants, the influence of the tiny Jewish community can be felt.

"See that shopping complex right there?" a community member points out on a tour of the city. "It's owned by a Jew. And that building right there? Owned by a Jew. And that one? And that food processing plant? It supplies almost the whole city with its food."

All the Jews here are in business, with many of them involved in the exporting of diamonds. Zaire is among the poorest countries in the world, but the Jews' standard of living here, like that of all foreigners, is extremely high, even by Western standards.

The average salary for a Zairian is the equivalent of \$60 a month, enabling all the Jewish families to have at least one domestic worker, a driver and more help if there are children.

Rabbi finds a receptive community

When Myriam Bentolila goes out shopping, the stacks of bills fill her entire purse, because the exchange rate is constantly fluctuating and 4,000 Zaires make one dollar. Notes are usually only in denominations of 500.

Rabbi Bentolila is not only the rabbi of Kinshasa, but the director of Chabad-Lubavitch for central Africa.

Bentolila, who with his family emigrated to Montreal from Morocco at age 9, first visited Africa when he was still in yeshiva. He met with the Jewish communities throughout central Africa and found that most were grateful for his attempts at outreach.

He found the community of Kinshasa especially receptive. When the former rabbi of Kinshasa decided to leave after the first riots, the congregation asked Bentolila and his Italian-born wife to stay permanently. They now have two children, Deborah, 4, and Benjamin, 2.

Bentolila believes strongly in the philosophy of the Lubavitch movement, as evidenced by his tenure here.

"My being here is part of the rebbe's great love for his fellow Jew," he said, referring to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the spiritual leader of the Lubavitch movement who died last year.

Bentolila's home, office and car are decorated with pictures of Schneerson. It is this great love for his fellow Jew that prompted Bentolila to bring a student rabbi from New York to conduct a seder in Tehikapa, a diamond-mining town some 420 miles from Kinshasa. The town is so remote that one of its Israeli inhabitants calls it "the end of the world."

"They didn't believe I was actually coming until they saw me get off the plane," said Shlomo Litzman, who flew two hours from Kinshasa in a plane loaded with kosher-for-Passover food to make the seder for 10 people.

Bentolila speaks highly of his Kinshasa congregation, though he and his wife are much more observant than any of them.

"You take a Jew, and you put him in such a remote place, and it is inevitable that he will come back," Bentolila said.

When he arrived, maybe two or three congregants were putting on tefillin every morning, and now that number has increased to 10, he said with satisfaction.

Morris Habib, vice president of the congregation, agreed with the rabbi's assessment.

"I am not religious," he said. "But when [the

rabbi] asks me to do something, such as come for a minyan (a quorum of 10 needed for prayer), he is so nice that I can't refuse him. And people are becoming more religious because of him."

Bentolila says that being broad-minded is also part of the Lubavitch philosophy, that if he looked down on his congregants because they were less observant, Chabad would be out of business.

The rabbi and his wife always have people over for Shabbat dinner. They also invited congregants for the second seder in their home this year.

The Bentolila children attend a school for foreign children, and they receive their Jewish education at home. Myriam Bentolila teaches the children of the congregation twice a week.

"A smaller community is just as good as a larger one," said Habib. "The rabbi maintains the religious way of life, and we maintain the cultural way of life."

Franco concurred. "I myself feel very involved in Jewish life here. I want to conserve the spiritual values of Judaism, and we can do that very easily here," he said.

Franco describes himself as optimistic, and says he hopes that Zaire will once again prosper.

"I can only hope that the government will stabilize and provide unity for the country," he said.

But, he added, his family has no plans of leaving. "This is my synagogue," he said.

Habib agreed. "I don't feel at home anywhere else." □

Pope's Easter talk touches on Palestinians, Holocaust

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, April 18 (JTA) — Pope John Paul II devoted part of his annual Easter message to call on the Palestinians and other ethnic groups to use dialogue, not arms, in their quest for self-determination.

He also recalled the victims of the Holocaust, making a reference to the Auschwitz death camp within the context of mentioning this year's 50th anniversary commemorations of the end of World War II.

"To those who await, in suffering, the recognition of their deepest aspirations, such as Palestinians, the Kurds or, among others, the native peoples of Latin America, the church proposes dialogue as the only path able to promote just and fair solutions," the pope said in his "To the City and the World" message Easter Sunday.

The Vatican established relations with Israel 15 months ago. It has long supported a Palestinian homeland.

But the Vatican has strongly condemned terror attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups that have resulted in the deaths of scores of Israelis during the past year.

During his Good Friday re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross at Rome's ancient Colosseum, the pope recited a prayer he wrote about "the victims of fratricidal wars: Bosnia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Burundi, the Middle East, Somalia."

In the prayer he also spoke of "the tragic anniversaries" that are being commemorated this year: "of Auschwitz, horrid extermination camp; of Dresden, razed to the ground; of Hiroshima, city of appalling slaughter."

The Stations of the Cross ceremony, which recalls the route Jesus took on the day of his crucifixion, was deliberately ecumenical in character, with two Protestant nuns and a Russian Orthodox priest also taking part.

One of the nuns, Minke de Vries of Holland, wrote a meditation for the service in which she urged the pope and his faithful to ask forgiveness from God for having "rejected the Jewish people" and "sneered at them even in the liturgy." □

Point man at the White House is an unknown to Jewish groups

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, April 18 (JTA) — The White House once again has a full-time liaison to the Jewish community.

President Clinton appointed Jay Footlik, a relative unknown in the Jewish community, to the post last week.

Footlik is responsible for outreach to the Jewish community, scheduling administration briefings and reporting on issues of Jewish concern.

Although unknown to the organized Jewish community, colleagues say Footlik's connections at the White House will ultimately benefit American Jews.

"He's not well known to the Jewish community, but he's well known to the president," said Steve Rabowitz, a public relations specialist who worked in the Clinton White House and knows Footlik, who has been with the Office of Presidential Personnel. "Frankly that's more important to the community."

In 1989, while a student at UCLA, Footlik helped to run a conference on Soviet Jewry in Washington. Mark Levin, the executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, said Footlik served as an unofficial liaison at the time between his organization and Professor Steven Spiegel, whose think tank put on the conference.

Based on his performance in that job, Levin predicted that Footlik "will do a good job in this post."

Jewish Washington reacted with mixed enthusiasm to the appointment of Footlik, who is originally from Skokie, Ill. "We all asked: 'Who?' when we found out about the appointment," said one leader of a Jewish organization in Washington who would only speak on the condition of anonymity. "We'll meet with him and see what he's like."

Footlik replaces Amy Zisook, another relative unknown who left the post in January. □

AIPAC report on Iran's activities aimed at urging further sanctions

By Jennifer Batog

WASHINGTON, April 18 (JTA) — As Iran continues to export terrorism around the world, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee is attempting to prod U.S. lawmakers to cut off all economic ties with the rogue state.

In a 74-page study released April 2, AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, details Iran's terrorist activities, nuclear capability and international trade relations. The report also tries to head off criticism by detailing the effects that a true trade embargo would have on American businesses.

Despite Iran's outlaw status, the United States is Iran's largest trading partner, according to the study, "Comprehensive Sanctions Against Iran, A Plan for Action."

Last year, U.S. oil companies bought 33 percent of Iran's oil exports, worth \$4.25 billion. U.S. firms exported an additional \$329 million in goods to Iran, according to the study.

Although direct trade with Iran is banned, many American companies circumvent restrictions by purchasing Iranian oil through their European subsidiaries. "By cutting all its trade and economic ties with Iran, the United States will be ending the anomaly of being both the regime's loudest critic and largest trading partner," the study said.

It suggests banning all U.S. trade with Iran, deterring European and Japanese companies from trading with Iran and cutting off multilateral financial support for Iran from institutions such as the World Bank.

Expanded sanctions would restrict Iran's ability to buy weapons and technology and support terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the report said.

To be effective, sanctions must target Iran's oil industry and credit-worthiness, the report said. "Iran is vulnerable to an embargo on its oil exports and to a termination of its availability to secure and reschedule its international credit and loans," the study said.

"Economic sanctions can work," an AIPAC official familiar with the study said. Similar actions against Iraq have been successful, the official said. "The U.S. is on the right track with Iraq," and activists would like to see the administration take the same tack with Iran, the official said. Sanctions have the potential to make Iran "sober up and have a real interest in changing the direction the country is moving," the official said.

Although cutting business ties to Iran would initially have a negative impact on U.S. oil companies, the companies could make up the shortfall through trade with the region's other oil producers, the study said.

Administration officials are reportedly considering a proposal to win support for an embargo from American oil giants with strong financial ties to Iran. Instead of buying Iranian oil, the proposal suggests that these companies purchase Saudi Arabian surplus oil in an effort to help the cash-strapped regime pay off its estimated \$5 billion debt it owes for the purchase of American fighter planes.

Many of the ideas outlined in the report could soon become law. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) have introduced legislation to ban trade between Iran and U.S. companies, including their European subsidiaries.

The bill, known as the "Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Act," would also make it difficult for multilateral financial institutions, such as the World Bank, to support Iran. A companion piece of legislation designed to prod European and Japanese companies to impose sanctions on Iran is also on the table in the Senate.

That bill would prevent the U.S. government from doing business with these companies and would ban export licenses for sensitive technology to these companies. In the House, where import sanctions must originate, lawmakers will consider banning imports into the United States from the sanctioned European and Japanese firms.

The Senate Banking Committee, which D'Amato chairs, plans to vote on a final draft of the legislation when Congress returns later this month from its spring recess, according to a Capitol Hill aide. The House International Relations Committee also expects to take up the bill after Congress returns from its recess. □

Expert wrestles scaly reptile in case on rights for animals

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, April 18 (JTA) — An American alligator trainer took on one of the scaly reptiles in a Tel Aviv courtroom last week to show that wrestling the creatures causes them no harm.

The Hamat Gader alligator farm, which has been targeted by animal rights groups, flew in reptile wrestler Jim Moulton from St. Augustine, Fla.

The "Let the Animals Live" lobby wants the court to ban future wrestling shows at the farm.

Before District Judge Hila Gertler, Moulton grappled with the 3-foot-long reptile before flipping it over on its back, and pinching a nerve under its neck to render it unconscious. "There has been no damage so far to any of the alligators, just to people," Moulton said. He said he had trained three Israeli wrestlers who have been staging the daily, 30-minute show at Hamat Gadar. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Brazilian rabbi emphasizes social issues, not anti-Semitism

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, April 18 (JTA) — After 25 years in Brazil, Rabbi Henry Sobel says he is finally getting his congregants to share in his belief that social action is “the essence of Yiddishkeit.”

In the past year or two, Sobel has introduced programs in synagogues and schools to involve the Jewish community in helping the poor.

Support for such programs among Sobel's lay leaders has been spurred by the election last November of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a human rights activist.

Henrique was exiled during Brazil's military dictatorship that ended in 1985. He most recently served as foreign minister.

“All of a sudden, social issues are no longer the agenda of the left from the perspective of the Jewish community, of the Jewish establishment. It has become fashionable to be socially conscious,” said Sobel in a recent interview.

Sobel was in New York to receive an honorary doctorate from the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he was ordained in 1970.

The U.S.-born Sobel is senior rabbi at Congregacao Israelita Paulista in Sao Paulo. With 2,200 families, it is the largest congregation in Latin America. But the community's 100,000 Jews constitute only a tiny percentage of the city's 16 million inhabitants.

The Jewish community's new participation in popular movements to combat hunger, poverty and discrimination has received wide publicity in the Brazilian press, Sobel said.

32 million in abject poverty

This comes in the wake of the positive image created for Israel by its accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993.

The Brazilian government has reported that at least 32 million of the country's 150 million inhabitants live in abject poverty. Sobel said helping people without food to eat, clothes to wear or homes to live in is a Jewish priority and a political priority. These goals are all also in the Jewish community's self-interest.

“Our concern for the rights of the underprivileged masses generates respect for our rights as Jews,” said Sobel. “I am more convinced than ever before that a parochial battle against anti-Semitism is a lost battle,” he said.

Sobel does not consider anti-Semitism a serious problem in Latin America. But the bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires last summer, which killed 99 people, led Sobel's community to increase security “like never before.”

What indigenous anti-Semitism there is in Brazil, he said, “is not institutionalized.”

Unlike in the past, there has been “tremendous, authentic support from the federal and municipal authorities” for the Jewish community, he added.

Sobel downplays recent incidents of anti-Semitism, including anti-Semitic graffiti daubed on campaign posters for a Jewish gubernatorial candidate in last year's elections.

The candidate, Jaime Lerner, won election in the state of Parana. In February, a small number of posters of Adolf Hitler were posted in Sao Paulo, before being removed by the authorities.

“We have to be prepared to pay a price for the

openness of society. Just as Jews have the liberty to express themselves as Jews, anti-Semites are free to express anti-Semitism.

“During the many, many years of military dictatorship, there were Jews in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America who let themselves mistakenly believe that the military establishment worked to the benefit of the Jews,” said Sobel.

“They believed that one contact or one telephone call to a given general could easily prevent a potential anti-Semitic incident or problem. This, of course, was pure illusion. When the masses are oppressed and repressed by dictators, they get angry. They need an outlet for their anger. And more often than not, they find an outlet by putting the blame on the Jews.

“History teaches us that Jews fare better in open, free societies. Democracy and religious pluralism go hand-in-hand.

“But the openness of society has made Jews more aware that they belong to a larger world. I think for the good of Jews, and for the good of Jews in South America, Jews are becoming less parochial and more sensitive to the society in which they live,” said Sobel.

Meanwhile, Brazil's Christian majority has received a taste of Judaism, as the country's national television network presented its first-ever program on Passover. □

U.S. lawmakers warn Eastern Europe on restitution of Jewish property

By Jennifer Batog

WASHINGTON, April 18 (JTA) — Eight congressional leaders, including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R-Kan.), have joined the fight to help Eastern European Jewish communities reclaim property lost during WWII.

In an April 10 letter to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the legislators accused 13 Eastern European countries of restricting the rights of Jewish communities and other claimants to their assets.

The assets, worth billions of dollars, were plundered by the Nazis and then nationalized by the Communists. The Eastern European countries have burdensome restitution laws with cutoff dates and measures stopping non-residents and non-citizens from making claims.

The congressional letter warns that the way the countries respond to the claims could affect their relations with the United States. “It should be made clear to the countries involved that their response on this matter will be seen as a test for their respect for basic human rights and the rule of law and could have practical consequences on their relations with our country,” the letter said.

The bipartisan letter also calls on the countries — Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine — to enact legislation providing for prompt restitution.

“It is a matter of both law and justice,” the letter said. The letter comes on the heels of a personal plea from World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman, who went to Capitol Hill to lobby lawmakers on the issue.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.); Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House Committee on International Relations; Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), ranking member of the House Committee on International Relations; and Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) signed onto the letter.

Others that signed: Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations; and Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. □