



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's Justice Ministry appointed a team of lawyers to prepare a draft bill for a national referendum on withdrawing from the Golan Heights. Israeli leaders have pledged that a referendum would be presented to the Israeli public prior to embarking on any withdrawal from the Golan as part of an eventual peace deal with Syria. [Page 3]

■ Likud member David Levy threatened to leave the party and form his own after Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu called a meeting of the Likud Central Committee to pass a framework for upcoming party primaries. Levy said the framework would minimize opportunities for his supporters. [Page 3]

■ The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross reportedly acknowledged his agency's "moral failure" to denounce Nazi atrocities during World War II. Cornelio Sommaruga's admission was the first time the Swiss-based agency publicly accepted criticism for its inaction.

■ The Bank of Israel cut interest rates by half a percentage point, bringing the country's rate to 13.5 percent. The bank cited positive results in its anti-inflation policies.

■ Cabinet member Uzi Baram stepped down as Israel's interior minister. Baram, who will continue to serve as tourism minister, announced in mid-May that he wanted to spend more time with his wife, who is suffering from cancer. On his last day at the Interior Ministry, Baram earmarked \$1 million for paving new roads.

■ Bereaved families in the Tel Aviv area were forced to delay the burial of their loved ones for several hours, after members of the Chevra Kadisha burial society went on strike seeking higher wages.

■ The Jewish community of New South Wales, Australia, welcomed a landmark legal decision against racist behavior. A city council member was fined and ordered to apologize for referring to aborigines as "half breeds."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Expansion of prayer initiative by religious right could backfire

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, May 30 (JTA) — A calculated effort by the Christian Coalition to solicit wider support for prayer in public schools by broadening its initiative could backfire.

The group, which once advocated a limited school prayer amendment, has shifted gears. Now the goal is a broad-based "religious equality amendment," part of the group's recently unveiled "Contract with the American Family."

But American Jewry, for one, is not buying it.

"We believe Congress and the American people will not be fooled by a destructive constitutional amendment with an appealing name," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

The religious equality amendment is the latest incarnation of the school prayer debate, following previous efforts to introduce school prayer or a moment of silence legislation.

The Jewish community has uniformly rejected such attempts in the past, albeit at different volumes. This latest effort also has fallen on deaf ears throughout the organized Jewish community.

This is true even among most Orthodox groups, which the Christian Coalition had apparently hoped to bring on board by incorporating some of the principles they support.

Concerned over the ramifications of such an amendment, Jewish organizations have made the issue a centerpiece of their legislative agenda for the next few months. Working on their own and in concert with Christian organizations opposed to the effort, Jewish groups are publicly mobilizing their forces to make their views known.

Although the final language of the proposal is still being hammered out by leaders of the religious right, the goals are clear: to overturn Supreme Court decisions that ban prayer at graduations, student-led prayer in schools and religious symbols in public buildings.

The amendment also seeks to give religion the same protections as speech under the Constitution. Thus, it would allow prayer at all government meetings, including gatherings of the courts and the armed forces.

Concern over prospect of a 'Christianized America'

Many observers say that if this amendment is adopted, Jews would be reminded daily that they are a religious minority. "While the Christian Coalition itself purports not to want a Christian America, the amendment it proposes would do just that," said Mark Pelavin, Washington representative of the American Jewish Congress.

The effort would "turn over important decisions of religious liberty to majority will," he said. Because "clearly a majority of America is Christian," localities would adopt the traditions of their communities, which, across most of America, are definitely not Jewish, Pelavin added.

Concerns over the prospects of a "Christianized America" has solidified opposition in a way rarely seen in the Jewish community on matters relating to church-state separation.

Jewish organizations have been on opposing sides, for instance, on such issues as religious symbols on public property and school vouchers.

But the Christian Coalition has failed in its effort to splinter opposition to the amendment by including provisions some communities, such as Orthodox Jews, support.

"Orthodox Jews in general have a certain sympathy to the religious right because people bash them for their religious values," said David Luchins, an Orthodox activist who represents the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America on the board of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

"But that sympathy doesn't mean that we're going to embrace their entire agenda or even parts of it, for that matter," said Luchins, who also serves as a senior adviser to Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.).

And even though the fervently Orthodox group Agudath Israel has not yet taken an official position on the forthcoming amendment, Jewish

observers here widely expect it to join the general Jewish opposition.

Although its adherents believe that religion should play a larger role in American society, Agudah has "reluctantly opposed" school prayer legislation, believing that it would force Jewish students into Christian prayer, according to Abba Cohen, director of Agudah's Washington office.

Of the religious equality amendment, Cohen said: "Right now it's wait and see."

Explaining the cautious approach to the religious right's agenda, Luchins said: "Most Orthodox Jews are one generation removed from religious intolerance in Europe."

Despite their opposition, many Orthodox Jews are remaining quiet during the debate over the religious equality amendment.

One Orthodox activist, who spoke on the condition his name not be used, said, "Right now we have the best of both worlds."

"The religious right thinks that we're on their side and so does most of the secular Jewish community. This is not a bad place to be."

Hearings on the measure planned for June

One of the amendment's first tests will come in early June when the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution holds the first in a series of planned hearings on the measure. That is expected to happen after the Christian Coalition finalizes its desired language for the amendment and begins to move it through Congress, under the leadership of Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.).

At least one representative of a Jewish group is expected to be invited to testify at the hearing, according to a congressional aide.

The hearing will present the first opportunity for Jewish groups and others to argue before Congress that no new laws are needed to protect religion in America.

As the debate heats up, a statement, which was spearheaded by the American Jewish Congress and outlines current law with regard to religion, is expected to take center stage.

Already sent to every member of Congress, the statement, "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law" has been endorsed by more than 20 organizations, including several Jewish organizations that oppose school prayer as well as a handful of Christian organizations that support amending the Bill of Rights, such as the National Association of Evangelicals.

The statement seeks to clear up "common misperceptions" about what is permissible today, AJCongress' Pelavin said.

Observers say the document is meant to counter the rhetoric such as that expressed recently by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

America's schools are religion-free zones where "children cannot even say grace over meals," Gingrich charged.

According to the statement, students can pray privately, read the Bible and discuss religion in schools.

They can express religious beliefs in assignments, and make religious or anti-religious remarks in a classroom discussion as long as they are relevant to the topic at hand. Students can also distribute religious material.

What is not allowed, according to the document, is vocal prayer in the classroom, a point that school prayer advocates will likely use to justify their support for the religious equality amendment.

Although public schools can not give religious instruction, they can teach the history of religion, comparative religion and Scriptures as literature, the statement says.

On one point, both supporters and opponents of

school prayer agree: Passing a constitutional amendment will not be an easy task.

Supporters would have to muster a two-thirds majority of lawmakers for passage — 290 backers in the House and 67 in the Senate. It would then have to be ratified by three-quarters of the states.

Recognizing the difficulty, Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition and the amendment's loudest cheerleader, began to backpedal only days after announcing his contract, suggesting that his group would settle for legislation rather than an amendment to the Bill of Rights.

"We think an amendment or a statute, preferably an amendment, will help rectify what we think is 30 years of hostility towards faith in the public square," Reed said.

The prospects for a simple bill instead of an amendment are uncertain. It is unclear whether hardline supporters or religious conservatives in Congress would bow to a law.

If, however, supporters are unable to pass an amendment and settle instead for the legislative path, which requires only the support of a majority of members of Congress, President Clinton would be thrust to center stage in the debate.

Although Clinton opposes amending the Constitution, presidents have no veto power over constitutional amendments passed by the Congress.

They can, however, strike down legislation. And even though Clinton supports some of the goals of the coalition's initiative, it is unclear where he would come down on a law. As recently as last weekend, George Stephanopoulos, one of Clinton's senior advisers, said the president supports prayer at graduations and religious symbols in public places.

"He sees no problem with having religious prayers at certain graduation ceremonies," Stephanopoulos said on NBC's "Meet the Press." The president also supports the display of Christmas manger scenes in public places, he said. □

Germany probes statement discouraging Jewish tourists

By Alexandra J. Wall

NEW YORK, May 30 (JTA) — The German government is investigating a statement made in a tourism report suggesting that American Jews, blacks, Hispanics and Asians be discouraged from visiting Germany.

The recommendation appeared in a 1984 market research report for a Frankfurt tourism agency, D.Z.T., which is largely subsidized by the German government.

Economics Minister Guenther Rexrodt said the idea of discouraging Americans from visiting Germany is shocking and that he would personally look into the matter.

The statement comes as a surprise to many, considering that the German government has gone out of its way to invite Americans, especially Jews, to visit Germany. A group of Jewish journalists is currently visiting the country on a trip paid for by the German government.

The Anti-Defamation League's assistant national director, Ken Jacobson, said he has found no evidence of the statement becoming official policy, but that it does indeed exist.

This is the second time in a month that the German tourism office has been charged with anti-Semitism.

Two weeks ago, an employee was fired after 18 years, when it was discovered that she was married to a prominent figure in the Holocaust-denial movement and had herself translated an article of his for an anti-Semitic journal. □

Golan referendum explored as debate over future heats up

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, May 30 (JTA) — Israel's Justice Ministry has appointed a team of lawyers to prepare a draft bill for a national referendum on withdrawing from the Golan Heights.

Israeli leaders have pledged that a referendum would be presented to the Israeli public prior to embarking on any withdrawal from the Golan as part of an eventual peace deal with Syria.

Because no referendum has been held in Israel before, the lawyers have to determine the legal basis for calling a referendum. They are also studying past referendums in Switzerland and Scandinavia, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

A senior legal source told Ha'aretz that the lawyers would also determine whether the referendum should focus solely on the question of a Golan withdrawal or on the entire peace agreement with Syria.

The preparatory moves come as senior Israeli and Syrian military officers are planning to resume talks in Washington in June on security arrangements that will form part of an eventual Israeli-Syrian peace deal.

The latest developments, as well as recent comments by Israeli leaders stressing that any peace agreement with Syria would require territorial concessions on the Golan, has renewed concern among Golan residents as to what their future holds.

Ha'aretz reported Tuesday that hundreds of Golan residents have already begun looking into what form of compensation they would receive if and when they are forced to give up their homes.

Among the possibilities that have been raised were financial compensation based on each family's needs, relocation to another community and relocation of entire communities to an alternate location in another part of the country, Ha'aretz reported. □

Rabin pledges united Jerusalem as 28th anniversary festivities held

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, May 30 (JTA) — As festivities were held throughout Jerusalem this week, marking 28 years since the city's reunification, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared that the city would remain united.

At its weekly Cabinet meeting, the ministers approved a resolution that said: "The government will act to reinforce the status of united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel only, and will fight any attempt to hurt this status."

Rabin, speaking later at Ammunition Hill, said at a ceremony for soldiers killed in the battle for Jerusalem that "there aren't and won't be two Jerusalems."

"It is ours and will remain ours," he added.

The prime minister made similar remarks Monday at a special Knesset session that marked Jerusalem Day.

The declarations came against the backdrop of the latest controversy over the planned expropriation of mostly Arab-owned land in eastern Jerusalem. The government froze those plans last week.

After the special addresses in the Knesset, the plenum debated no-confidence motions submitted by the opposition over the decision to freeze the expropriations. The coalition defeated the motions.

Rabin's comments were criticized by members of the opposition, who said the negotiations with the Palestinians contradict his statements.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, who was also invited to appear before the Cabinet Sunday, echoed the

calls for a united Jerusalem with continued development. However, he later lashed out at the prime minister for putting Jerusalem on the negotiating table with the Palestinians.

Under the Oslo accords, Israel and the Palestinians are to decide the final status of the city in negotiations scheduled to begin next year. □

Netanyahu-Levy rivalry threatens to split Likud

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, May 30 (JTA) — Internal strife within the Likud intensified this week as a power struggle between party leader Benjamin Netanyahu and archrival David Levy threatened to tear Israel's main opposition group apart.

After months of political tensions and personal resentment, Levy this week threatened to leave the party and form his own. The threat surfaced after Netanyahu called a meeting of the Likud Central Committee for June 5 with the intent of passing a framework for upcoming party primaries.

Levy said the framework would minimize the chances for his supporters to appear on Likud bloc lists in next year's general elections.

In an effort to head off a split, Netanyahu appealed to Levy to meet one-on-one about their differences. But Levy rejected the call, saying he would only do so if Netanyahu first called off the central committee meeting.

Netanyahu later issued a statement, saying that "anything Levy wants to bring up at a meeting will be discussed openly and seriously." But the Likud leader refused to agree to any conditions for their meeting.

Sources close to Netanyahu said he would probably agree to call off the central committee meeting after holding talks with Levy.

One Likud source called Levy's demand "a clear attempt to bring Netanyahu to his knees. [Netanyahu] won't agree to that. It's enough for him to make concessions at a reconciliatory meeting."

Meanwhile, Likud member Ariel Sharon offered to mediate. "The danger the current government is placing the country in requires all forces in the Likud to be unified," he said. □

Paraguay agrees to extradite suspects in Argentina attacks

NEW YORK, May 30 (JTA) — A Paraguayan judge has agreed to extradite seven suspects to Argentina in connection with the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires.

Judge Jose Emilio Yaluk signed the order Monday to extradite the suspects, who include five Lebanese men and a Brazilian woman. The seventh suspect, a man born in Lebanon, has obtained Brazilian citizenship.

Five of the suspects agreed Tuesday to waive their right to appeal the extradition order, saying they were willing to appear before an Argentine court to face charges for the embassy car bombing, which claimed the lives of 29 people.

In January, Paraguayan police arrested the seven in a rented house just outside Asuncion, Paraguay's capital. All seven had entered Paraguay on Brazilian passports, and all had overstayed their tourist visas. They were eventually charged with drug trafficking, violating immigration law and illegal possession of weapons.

In the wake of their arrests, Jewish groups, joined by Argentine President Carlos Menem, demanded that the seven be extradited to Argentina. □

FAR FROM MOSCOW (Part 2 of 4)

Quiet Jewish revolution brings new thaw to Siberia

By Deborah Kazis

NOVOSIBIRSK and OMSK, Siberia (JTA) — After a year and a half in Siberia, Rabbi Yehudah Weissler, chief rabbi of Siberia and Novosibirsk — and the only rabbi in all of Siberia — recently returned home to England.

But during their stay here, the 26-year-old rabbi and his wife, Mirella, sent by the Israeli organization Shvut Ami, sparked a quiet revolution.

Weissler started a small yeshiva and his wife opened the first Jewish kindergarten in Novosibirsk. Together, they built the only mikvah to be used in Siberia for more than 50 years, and they made sure there is now kosher meat.

Up five flights of stairs in a grim, decaying Siberian apartment building, their home was the first kosher home in Siberia in decades.

Novosibirsk, deep inside Siberia, is the capital and economic and cultural center of Siberia, which stretches across eight time zones.

Novosibirsk feels like a frontier town, and is said to be the exact center of Russia.

Noisy, rickety trams lumber through the city under a thick network of overhead electric wires.

Old women in heavy parkas and fur hats clean mud from the tram tracks.

Gigantic factories line the Ob River, billowing smoke into air already thick with pollution and spewing waste into the water.

Here, as throughout Russia, crime and unemployment have drastically increased over the past several years.

"There are officially about 10,000 Jews in Novosibirsk," Weissler said in an interview before his departure after Passover.

"But there is enormous assimilation here, and no one really knows how many Jews there are," he said. "People tell me, 'My parents are both Jewish, but I'm not.'"

About 2,000 Jews from Novosibirsk have immigrated to Israel in the past several years.

"In 1989, when it became possible, all the Jews who wanted to packed up and left. Now we are trying to build a community again," Weissler said.

Hazy memories of being Jewish

And the community is growing.

In what has become known here as the "Law of Russian Jews," the more Jews leave, the more remain. Jews are coming out of the woodwork, attending events and associating with the Jewish community.

Even the mayor of Novosibirsk is believed to have a Jewish father, even though he has no connection with the community.

Under communism, Jewish communal life was forcibly eradicated.

Most Jews here have only hazy memories of being Jewish.

"When I arrived, I found virtually no Jewish life," said Weissler. "Even for Yom Kippur there was only a tiny gathering."

Now there are many sparks of Jewish life. More than 800 people came to a Purim celebration.

The government of Israel runs an Israeli cultural center and a Sunday school for 75 children.

The Jewish Agency organizes aliyah and activities for young people.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

funds many of the new community activities and has established a Jewish library in the center of town.

Originally, there were two synagogues in Novosibirsk.

They were both confiscated after the 1917 Communist Revolution.

About 20 years ago, the Jews were allowed to open a synagogue in a tiny blue wooden house on the outskirts of town. They had to stop using it when the ceiling fell in. The oven that was once used to bake matzah now lies rusting and useless.

The community thinks that a large brick building standing in the center of town used to be their main synagogue and they are trying to reclaim it.

There are 27 active Jewish communities across Siberia and the Soviet Far East. But Weissler believes that there could be at least the same number of cities with a sizable number of Jews where there is not yet any organized Jewish life.

Eli Regimov, JDC's representative in Novosibirsk, estimates that there could be more than 200,000 Jews in all of Siberia.

Weissler has traveled to communities throughout Siberia. "The further east in Siberia you go, the further away from Europe, the more cut off from their past the Jews are and the less Jewish identity they have retained," he said.

The first Jews are believed to have come to Siberia from Lithuania in the 17th century. Although Siberia lay outside of the Pale of Settlement — the area where Jews were allowed to live — some Jewish criminals and political exiles were sent to labor camps here. Jews also came to Siberia as traders, particularly in furs.

But most of the Jews here today came from Ukraine and Byelorussia during World War II, fleeing the Germans. Others came as factories were moved east, farther from Hitler's reach.

The neighboring — in Siberian terms — community of Omsk, with about 8,000 Jews, is an overnight journey away on the Trans-Siberian railroad.

Recent fire believed to be arson

Omsk has no rabbi, but the leader of the synagogue, Ruvin Epshtein, leads services and presides over the revival of Jewish life in his town.

For holidays, close to 400 people fill up the hall.

"One hundred years ago, there were two synagogues, a Jewish school and two rabbis. But during the Soviet period, people were afraid to come. After you visited the Jewish community, you might be invited to visit the KGB," Epshtein says.

A recent fire in the synagogue in Omsk is believed to have been arson, motivated by anti-Semitism. The fire was set immediately after a movie about fascism appeared on television.

Omsk now has a Sunday school with 90 children, Hebrew classes, a Jewish newspaper, a Jewish cultural society and two youth clubs with more than 100 teen-agers.

"It's our dream to one day set up a Jewish school," says Ludmilla Brook, a young activist in the community. "And we need a rabbi."

Throughout Siberia, Passover has very special meaning. For many Jews, matzah is their only link to Jews around the world.

"It's like a revival of the dead," said Weissler. "The matzah here goes like water. When we have matzah to sell, it's like they wake up. We had 1 ton of matzah this year, and it went in an instant."

"As long as the Messiah doesn't come, I see life in Siberia slowly getting better. I believe there will one day again be proper Jewish communities here." □