

NEWS AT A GLANCE**FOCUS ON ISSUES****Opponents of circumcision question necessity of Jewish rite**

By Luci Scott

PHOENIX (JTA) — Miriam Pollack says she will never stop hearing her two sons' screams as they were being circumcised.

"They were quite different from any other screams these children have ever had," the Berkeley, Calif., educator said.

"I had them circumcised because I felt, as a Jewish mother, this was my obligation and even joy to do, to bring these children into the faith and peoplehood that I love."

But after years of reflection Pollack has come to a different conclusion.

"How many thousands of Jewish boys and Jewish men did we lose during the Holocaust because they couldn't hide? All the oppressor had to do was pull down their pants," says Pollack, adding that girls carry their Jewish identity without having their bodies altered.

Pollack has written about her new thinking on circumcision in "Jewish Women Speak Out: Expanding the Boundaries of Psychology," a book edited by Kayla Weiner and Arinna Moon that was published in July.

She maintains that issues of gender and power are central to the ritual of circumcision.

"Circumcision functions to bond the baby boy to a male-defined community, a male-defined God, over and against the authority of the mother," she writes in the book.

"Our culture has totally disarmed us as women," Pollack says. "It is a cutting not only of the baby boy, but a violation of the maternal-child bond."

Despite such objections, circumcision, which is first mentioned in the Bible with reference to Abraham's being commanded to circumcise his sons, continues to be practiced by the majority of American Jews.

"Circumcision and being buried in a Jewish cemetery are two of the most fundamental commandments observed by even the most assimilated Jews who don't observe anything else," says Rela Geffen, a sociology professor at Gratz College in suburban Philadelphia.

"Any kind of ritual can be questioned," she says. "But this is so fundamental. Jews have been willing to die to preserve this."

Alternative ceremony offered on-line

And despite widespread acceptance of the practice, some opponents of the ritual have become increasingly vocal, setting up organizations advocating an end to the practice that has been a central tenet of Judaism.

The Bible tells Jews not to offer blood sacrifices or to harm the body in any way, but "circumcision is largely regarded as blood sacrifice," says Norm Cohen of Birmingham, Mich. Cohen, a member of the National Organization to Halt the Routine Mutilation of Men, also known as NOHARMM, has written an alternative ceremony for a bris, which he is offering on-line. One-third of NOHARMM's membership is Jewish.

Cohen, the son of a rabbi, also is concerned about the impact of circumcision on the mother-son bond. "Circumcision is a betrayal of trust that babies have in their parents, and in their mother, particularly," he says. "Whatever happens to the baby, the baby attributes to the mother, regardless of the good intentions that are present."

Other opponents of circumcision contend that there is no sound medical reason for maintaining the ritual.

"It's not over when the cutting stops," says Ron Goldman, a psychologist who runs the Circumcision Resources Center in Boston.

After reviewing medical and psychological literature, he says, he found "a lot of information that raises very serious questions about this practice, specifically the literature on childhood trauma."

In the medical world, the view on circumcision is also changing. The American Academy of Pediatrics has said there is no medical indication to support the surgery. Even the authoritative Dr. Benjamin Spock is changing his tune.

As recently as 1992, "we felt there was no medical indication to

■ The Israeli government extended a closure of the Gaza Strip until Friday morning because of information about plans for a massive suicide attack in Tel Aviv. The closure was initially imposed as Israel and the Palestinians were reaching their latest agreement.

■ Israeli ballistic experts matched the bullet that killed a Palestinian during a clash with Jewish settlers to the rifle owned by the prime suspect in the incident. Meanwhile, demonstrators continued their hilltop protests against the expansion of self-rule in the territories. [Page 4]

■ Tensions erupted between Jewish settlers and Israeli police in the West Bank town of Hebron after Rabbi Moshe Levinger was arrested and taken to the Hebron police station on unspecified charges. [Page 4]

■ The German Jewish community declined to comment on a recent German court ruling that prevents public schools from hanging crosses in the classroom. The ruling that the display of crucifixes in public schoolrooms is unconstitutional sparked tremendous controversy. [Page 2]

■ A group of Israeli parents petitioned Israel's High Court of Justice, asking that 14 children they adopted abroad and who underwent Conservative conversions in Israel be recognized as Jews. The petitioners said there is no legislation granting the Orthodox establishment sole authority over conversions.

■ The Israeli Foreign Ministry asked the Israel Defense Force to look into reports that Israeli troops killed Egyptian prisoners of war during the Sinai Campaign of 1956. The directive came after Egyptian demands for clarification of reports in the Israeli media. [Page 4]

■ Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian representatives resumed discussions about the future of Palestinians displaced during the 1967 Six-Day War. Israel estimates that about 250,000 people were displaced by the war. The Palestinian put that figure at closer to 1 million. [Page 4]

perform routine circumcision on newborn boys," says Dr. Michael Rothenberg of Seattle, co-author of the last two editions of Spock's famous book on baby and child care.

Rothenberg, pediatrics and psychiatry professor emeritus at the University of Washington, adds, however, that he and Spock understand that "there would be families who, for religious reasons, feel it is necessary to perform the ritual."

An estimated 60 percent of newborn males in the United States are circumcised today, a figure that has been dropping for about two decades, from a high of 90 percent.

The United States is believed to be the only country in the world that routinely circumcises male babies for nonreligious reasons.

American Jews who are speaking out against circumcision say many of their co-religionists are repressing and denying anxiety because even questioning the ritual is taboo.

Some who refuse to circumcise their sons say their decision has led to varying levels of ostracism in their communities.

"It put me in the position of heretic, which I don't want to be. I don't think of myself as a heretic," says Natalie Bivas of Palo Alto, Calif., who refused to have her son circumcised.

A rabbi told her that if she did not have the baby circumcised, no Jewish girl would go out with him, other children would make fun of him at camp, and he would hate his body and hate his mother.

"My choice was to have my son hate me or to do something I think is morally wrong," says Bivas.

As much as he understands at the age of 8, she says of her son, "He thinks it's a good idea to leave him alone."

Jewish medical personnel leading the charge

Moshe Rothenberg of Brooklyn says he withstood "enormous pressure" and temporary family alienation to have a bloodless bris for his son, Sammy, now 7.

"I only see this issue as one of abuse," he says. "I have a certain loyalty and commitment to my own people, but I'm opposed to abuse in all forms. I will not do it to my child in the name of continuing tradition."

Bivas, who once led the area's Alternate Bris Support Group, claims that circumcision is risky and dangerous.

There have been cases of circumcision resulting in medical problems, including blood infections and even death, she says.

At some hospitals, Jewish medical personnel are leading the charge in refusing to assist in circumcisions.

Betty Katz Sperlich, a registered nurse at St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe, N.M., risked losing her job when she declared herself a conscientious objector so she would not have to set up the equipment, strap the baby down or throw away the amputated foreskin.

The hospital says 40 percent of the maternity nurses are conscientious objectors.

They now have legal protection against losing their jobs if they refuse to participate in circumcisions.

Sperlich, a member of the national group NoCirc, co-founded another national advocacy organization, Nurses for the Rights of the Child.

"I felt guilty being a Jew and not having my son circumcised," she says.

But she has since reconciled her position on circumcision with her Judaism.

"Judaism is a living religion, and as a living religion, we can change our tradition," she says.

"I don't see why we can't keep the traditions that are beautiful and drop the ones that are brutal." □

German Jews unusually silent on ban of crucifixes in schools

By Miriam Widman

BERLIN (JTA) — The German Jewish community has been unusually silent about a recent court ruling that prevents public schools from hanging crosses in the classroom.

The normally outspoken Ignatz Bubis, executive director of the Central Council for Jews in Germany, has not commented publicly on the ruling.

The decision has been a source of controversy throughout Germany since it was issued last week, garnering widespread media attention.

A federal court ruled that the display of crucifixes in public schoolrooms is unconstitutional and that any crosses now hanging must be removed.

The ruling came in response to a complaint made by a couple in Bavaria, Germany's most staunchly Catholic state.

Conservative critics of the court noted that the last time crosses were banned in Germany was under Adolf Hitler.

Both German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Finance Minister Theo Waigel, who heads a party in Bavaria related to Kohl's Christian Democrats, attacked the judges and said the ruling was wrong.

The ruling was supported by politician Johannes Rau, a leading Social Democrat.

An assistant to Bubis said he was on vacation when the ruling was issued and that it was not unusual for the head of the Jewish community to avoid comment on such a topic.

Privately, several members of the Jewish community welcomed the ruling.

However, all of the Jewish leaders refused to go on record.

A poll published in this week's Der Spiegel newsmagazine found that 47 percent of those questioned felt that the ruling was wrong while 24 percent felt that it was right.

Unlike the United States, Germany does not have a strong tradition calling for the separation of church and state.

People who want to become a member of a church or synagogue here must declare their religious affiliation to the German equivalent of the Internal Revenue Service and pay a church or synagogue tax.

The synagogue tax amounts to about 8 percent of one's gross income. □

Cost of living rises slightly

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's cost-of-living index rose by only two-tenths of a percent in July, with the country's inflation rate rising by 2.8 percent since the beginning of the year, the Central Bureau of Statistics announced Tuesday.

Finance Minister Avraham Shohat welcomed the surprisingly low index and estimated that annual inflation could be the lowest in years, amounting to less than 10 percent.

The government has set a target range of 8 percent to 11 percent annual inflation.

Seasonal drops in the prices of fruits and vegetables, clothing and footwear contributed to the low increases.

Manufacturers and industrialists welcomed the rate and called on the Bank of Israel to respond with an appropriate drop in interest rates. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

**All the news that's fit:
The good news, that is**

By Uriel Masad

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Five Israeli soldiers killed by Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon. Two young hikers murdered presumably by terrorists. Thirty homes destroyed and vast forest areas turned to ashes in Israel's worst fire disaster. Dozens of people lose their lives and many are injured in road accidents.

These were some of Israel's news headlines during the month of July.

At least in most Israeli publications.

No so, however, for Hadashotvot, or GoodNews, a new Hebrew monthly paper in Israel.

Instead of dwelling on terror attacks, protests, the ongoing fighting in Lebanon or political infighting, the paper, as its name suggests, focuses solely on the happier side of life.

The July issue of GoodNews, for example, chose films for its central theme.

It ran several articles about Israeli filmmakers and films, included glowing reviews, sympathetic in-depth interviews, a portrait of two documentary filmmakers and their works — all uplifting and full of hope.

In addition, GoodNews included features about a promising young writer, a cable television channel's summertime safety campaign as well as a not-for-profit organization that sends advisers to countries in the Third World.

Not a single word of malice can be found throughout the paper's 32 pages.

Dvora Fishman, the paper's editor in chief, recently spoke about the publication during an interview at her spacious, yet slightly rundown office in the heart of Tel Aviv.

Filled with kitsch and schmaltz

Her biggest fear upon launching the publication, she said, was the reaction of her colleagues in the journalism business.

"I had a real anxiety of becoming the target of their ridicule and scorn," Fishman recalled, noting that one media expert had predicted that she and her staff would succeed in putting out no more than five issues.

"We're currently working on No. 8," she added proudly.

Fishman said her two other major concerns were the challenge of starting something new and unprecedented, and her desire to prevent GoodNews from becoming an esoteric publication, filled with kitsch and schmaltz and mindless naivete.

But once GoodNews started to appear, Fishman said, she was pleasantly surprised by the reaction of both media pundits and the public.

Initial skepticism was replaced by curiosity, which in turn was followed by growing interest.

A popular radio broadcaster dedicated an entire show to good news — with GoodNews supplying most of the features.

GoodNews' publisher, Sefi Kiriati, swiftly graduated from defender of the publication on media-related television and radio programs to hot interviewee on primetime entertainment shows.

Following the publication's lead, the producer of an evening news program on television said he wanted to have one show made up entirely of good news.

With the kind of headlines the Israeli public faces daily, GoodNews' popularity is easy to understand.

But is GoodNews a mere passing curiosity?

And can it survive, given the state of the newspaper industry in general?

Two major Israeli dailies, Hadashot and Al Hamishmar, recently shut down, and the rising cost of paper threatens many in the publishing world.

Publisher Kiriati is optimistic.

The 46-year-old architect and owner of a successful construction company is the paper's owner and sole sponsor.

"GoodNews' aim is to make people feel good," said Kiriati, exuding the confidence that stems from deeply held convictions.

"Other newspapers utilize fear to increase sales, and fear provides excitement. They concentrate on a negative reality, and thus enhance it," Kiriati said in a low, measured voice, weighing his words carefully.

"We have taken the opposite route," he said, displaying his self-described New Age philosophy. "As the absence of love creates fear, I believe that by providing good news and positive stories, and by doing it with love, we show that there is no need for fear."

He complained about the lack of balance in the Israeli media.

"Their emphasis on the negative has reached extreme proportions. We scan all the papers daily, and find only one positive news story in 20 pages, and this on a good day. Some days there are none."

Fishman, who has an extensive background in education and in journalism, does not subscribe to Kiriati's New Age convictions, but agrees with his premise.

"GoodNews isn't escapism," she said. "We just depict another commonly neglected facet of reality."

"The content is definitely not esoteric," she said, adding that other media outlets often pick up their stories.

Kiriati hopes that GoodNews will eventually turn profitable.

He said his target audience includes everyone — Jew and Arab, secular and religious, young and old, right and left, men, women and children.

Some 35,000 to 40,000 copies of the paper are published monthly, at a newsstand price of \$1.60, publisher Kiriati said.

The paper is produced and printed by the respected Israeli daily Ha'aretz as part of an arrangement that provides for 30,000 copies of GoodNews to be distributed free to Ha'aretz subscribers.

The remaining 10,000 copies go to GoodNews subscribers and selected bookstores.

Kiriati would not divulge how many people actually subscribe to GoodNews, but said the numbers are constantly growing.

No hiding behind pen name

He brushed aside questions of whether the publication is a sound business investment, saying only, "It does me good to make other people feel good."

GoodNews is being run by a handful of permanent staffers, with articles provided by free-lancers who work for more mainstream media outlets. They write under their names, and as a matter of the paper's policy, no one may hide behind a pen name.

Fishman said she does not commission critics to write reviews and that she routinely turns down reviews and stories that are not favorable or positive.

"I don't tell the journalists what to write, but they know what I need.

"If the story does not fit GoodNews, the writer can take it elsewhere, and I'll continue to assign new writers until I get what I want," she said.

And what did she want for August's issue?

The central theme, she said, is love. □

Teams focus on Palestinians as new tensions flare in Hebron

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian representatives sat down this week in the Gaza Strip to talk about the future of Palestinians displaced during the 1967 Six-Day War.

The talks, which began Wednesday and were expected to last two days, focused on achieving a definition of who is to be considered a displaced person.

Israel estimates that about 250,000 people were displaced by the war. The Palestinians put that figure at closer to 1 million.

In Eilat, meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators discussed unresolved issues connected to the implementation of the next phase of Palestinian self-rule.

Israel Radio reported that the Israeli team presented a position paper on water, which was rejected by the Palestinians.

Israel Radio also reported that the Palestinian team called for an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank city of Hebron in two stages.

The proposal would limit special security arrangements for the town's 400 Jewish residents to the center of Hebron.

Hebron has a Palestinian population totaling 80,000.

Last week, Israeli officials drew up a general security picture for Hebron that would leave Israel in charge of security for the areas in which the Jewish residents live and travel.

On Wednesday, tensions between settlers and Israeli police escalated after Rabbi Moshe Levinger was arrested and taken to the Hebron police station on unspecified charges.

Levinger, who initiated the settler presence in Hebron with a group of followers in 1968, is the spiritual leader of the town's settlers. □

Fatal bullet matched to Jewish settler's rifle

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli ballistic experts have matched the bullet that killed a Palestinian during a clash with Jewish settlers to the rifle owned by the prime suspect in the incident.

The suspect, Ze'ev Lipskind, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Beit El, was brought before the Jerusalem Magistrates Court on Wednesday, where his detention was extended by five days as police continue their investigation.

Lipskind was arrested Monday after he was identified from newspaper photographs showing him pointing his rifle directly into a group of Palestinians during Sunday's confrontation near Beit El.

Lipskind's lawyer, Yair Golan, told reporters that police have not proven that Lipskind actually fired the fatal bullet that killed 22-year-old Kheiri Al-Qaissi.

In any event, the lawyer added, the shooting of the Palestinian "was a clear situation of self-defense" because a crowd of Palestinians were throwing rocks at a smaller group of settlers.

The incident began when some 100 Palestinian residents of the nearby Arab village of Deir al-Kara went to a hillside encampment, where they tore down a tent erected by a group of settlers and set fire to an Israeli flag.

A short time later, a security officer from Beit El and several settlers came to the site and fired shots into the air to disperse the crowd.

The hillside encampment was set up as part of widespread settler demonstrations against any extension of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, demonstrators continued their hilltop protests Wednesday.

About 100 demonstrators from inside Israel remained on a West Bank hillside, setting up generators and water tanks and building structures. □

Father of missing soldier rejects claims his son is dead

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The father of an Israeli soldier who disappeared during the 1982 war in Lebanon has rejected unofficial assessments that his son is no longer alive.

Yona Baumel said that in recent weeks, the Israel Defense Force has indicated to him that his son, Zachariya, is dead.

He said he would continue to insist that any conclusions drawn about the fate of his son be based on facts.

He also accused Palestinians of withholding information about his son and other soldiers who have been missing since the Sultan Yakub battle.

Baumel said the most recent information he received on his son was in May.

"We have a steady stream of information that cross-checks that at least some of the boys are alive," he told Israel Radio.

Baumel said he believed that his son was being held near Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, adding that he wanted Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat to confirm this information.

An IDF spokesman said that as long as there is no proven information concerning the fate of these soldiers, they will be considered alive. □

IDF asked to investigate reports of 1956 POW deaths

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Foreign Ministry has asked the Israel Defense Force to look into reports that Israeli troops killed Egyptian prisoners of war during the Sinai Campaign of 1956.

The ministry's directive came after Egyptian demands for clarification of reports earlier this month in the Israeli media.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa was quoted by Egyptian media as saying that formal contacts had been established with Israeli officials.

"We are trying to determine who was responsible for these crimes," he reportedly said.

Earlier this month, a Jerusalem weekly quoted a retired IDF general as saying that he had killed dozens of Egyptian prisoners of war captured after an Israeli offensive in the Sinai Peninsula during the war.

Retired Gen. Arieh Biro said his troops were stranded behind Egyptian lines with more than 40 Egyptian prisoners when they were given the order to move south in the Sinai.

"I didn't have soldiers to guard them," he reportedly said.

"We had to move on to Ras Sudar, so I decided to liquidate them."

Biro's commanding officers at the time were Ariel Sharon, a Likud member of Knesset and former defense minister, and Rafael Eitan, a Tsomet member of the Knesset and a former IDF chief of staff. □