



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **The Israeli delegation to the peace negotiations with Syria held consultations with U.S. mediators before resuming talks with Syria.** Dennis Ross, special Middle East coordinator, and Mark Parris of the National Security Council are expected to serve as mediators at the talks, set to reopen at a conference center operated by the Aspen Institute in eastern Maryland.

■ **Israel's Religious Affairs Ministry said it would allocate some \$160,000 to Reform and Conservative organizations.** Orthodox parties lashed out at the allocation, initiated by Religious Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet, calling it "robbery of public funds." [Page 2]

■ **The Argentine Supreme Court announced it would soon close its investigation of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires.** Israeli officials were said to be adamantly opposed to such a move.

■ **A French court is scheduled to hear arguments in March to determine if former Cabinet minister Maurice Papon will stand trial for crimes against humanity.** Papon, 84, was an official with the collaborationist Vichy regime in wartime France and stands accused of sending nearly 1,700 Jews to Nazi concentration camps.

■ **Israeli troops withdrew from five Palestinian villages located near the West Bank town of Hebron.** Some 300 Palestinian police arrived to relieve the Israelis, who will continue to have overall responsibility for security in the area.

■ **Former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir announced that he would not run for the Knesset in the fall 1996 national elections.** Shamir, 80, was replaced by Benjamin Netanyahu as the leader of the Likud Party in 1993.

■ **The president of the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan arrived in Israel for a three-day visit.** Prime Minister Shimon Peres was scheduled to meet with President Nursultan Nazarbaev to discuss security issues, including Israel's concern about the growth of Iranian-backed Islamic fundamentalism.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel's ban on American Jews reflects tense political climate

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel's announcement last week that it would bar entry to seven American Jews because they pose a danger to the state was met with grim recognition of the tense political climate after the killing of Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing Jew.

"It is part of a whole series of surgical strikes against terrorism in the aftermath of the assassination," said Gideon Mark, consul for communications and public affairs at the Israeli Consulate in New York.

Such a ban is one of the tools "a democracy can use to protect itself," he said.

"It is understandable that in this extraordinary environment, there would be an effort to isolate extremists," said Kenneth Jacobson, director of international affairs for the Anti-Defamation League.

At the same time, the move has elicited concern in some quarters over the extent of Israel's commitment to protecting democratic freedoms in general and those of Diaspora Jews under the Law of Return.

That law affords the right of immigration to all Jews except those who pose a threat to public safety.

"Even in the aftermath of the assassination and the trauma in Jewish and Israeli society, it is very important to find an appropriate balance between democratic values and security," said Shula Bahat, associate executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

One of the seven to be banned as both tourists and immigrants was Brooklyn's Orthodox Rabbi Abraham Hecht.

A statement issued Dec. 20 by Israel's Interior Ministry said he was targeted for having proclaimed last summer that Jewish law justified the killing of Israeli leaders who endangered Jewish lives by giving away land in exchange for peace.

The other six Americans were barred for either their alleged "connection to planned illegal activities in Israel" or their ties to "extremist organizations which have been banned in Israel," according to the statement.

Such groups include Kahane Chai and Kach.

Although virtually no one disputes the right of Israel to deny entry to those believed to be associated with criminal activity, some are disturbed by the ban on Hecht for his speech.

"If he was involved in conspiracy or found to be connected to actions that endangered the peace process, then Israel as a sovereign nation has every right" not to let him in, said Hebrew University's Steven M. Cohen, an expert on Israel-Diaspora relations.

But, Cohen said, "while I find his statements repugnant, I don't want him to be denied entry on the basis of speech."

For his part, Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg said in an interview from Jerusalem that the ban "falls within the parameters of the Law of Return."

'Ideological selection'

At the same time, he acknowledged that "the intensity of the day creates unconventional solutions."

But, Burg said, "I promise my overseas partners I won't automatically" implement the government's instructions in this area without examining their fundamental fairness.

Burg, whose agency oversees Jewish immigration, has been asked by the Interior Ministry to cooperate with the ban.

Burg said he has requested more information on the cases of the six besides Hecht.

Referring to Hecht, he added, "In principle, I am against ideological selection in aliyah, because today I select you and tomorrow you select me."

"Israel for me is the national home for the entire Jewish people, not just those who agree with me."

At the same time, he said, it is impossible to ignore the ideological export "from a very problematic corner of American Jewry" trumpeted by the slain Brooklyn-born right-wing Rabbi Meir Kahane and Baruch Goldstein,

the Brooklyn-born murderer of 29 Muslim worshipers in Hebron in 1994.

For them as well as for Hecht, "the sanctity of life and civil war are prices they are willing to pay for an ultimate value, whether it be Greater Israel or Messianic Israel," he said.

He added that the recent ban is part of "a multi-front struggle to combat [such] Jewish fundamentalism."

After the assassination, the Israeli Cabinet announced it would crack down on extremist Jewish groups.

It said that based on provisions in the Law of Return, it would bar entry to activists in extremist groups that support violent actions and are outlawed in Israel.

The announced crackdown elicited protests from members of the Likud opposition party, which said it amounted to a witch hunt in the politically charged aftermath of the Nov. 4 killing.

One American was subsequently barred entry.

Then, last week, Interior Minister Haim Ramon published a list of names of seven American Jews he said would be denied entry into Israel both as tourists and immigrants.

There was no indication that any had provoked the ban by seeking entry.

The pre-emptive nature of the list appeared unprecedented, though repeated attempts to confirm this with the ministry were unsuccessful.

What is clear, however, is that Israel has rarely used the Law of Return's provision against Diaspora Jews. In one example, notorious gangster Meyer Lansky was denied immigration in 1971.

Cohen charged that Ramon's move to ban Hecht was "his contribution to secular attacks on the religious."

But Burg said he believed that the impetus for the list came from the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service.

Another official Israeli source said he thought that the list was the fruit of cooperation between the Shin Bet and U.S. law enforcement.

Two of the Americans banned from Israel, Marc Bluestein and Howard Friedman, both longtime Jewish Defense League activists from Philadelphia, were arrested in December 1993 on suspicion of smuggling arms and conspiring to carry out attacks against Arabs.

'A wonderful principle'

Bluestein's brother, Hal, also of Philadelphia, and Michele Benveniste were also listed for ties to alleged illegal activities.

George Mostanza, a JDL activist from New York, and Bezahd Cohen, of Los Angeles, were also barred after allegedly supporting banned extremist organizations.

Israel's actions are understandable in their context, said Steven Bayme, director of the AJCommittee's Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations.

"The Law of Return is a wonderful principle," he said, "but it should not be regarded as absolute."

"Any state has the right to protect itself," and the right of immigration "doesn't extend to those who deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel," Bayme said.

Gad Ben-Ari, the head of the North American delegation for the Jewish Agency, also welcomed the action.

Those who have engaged in campaigns "to discredit government authority and democratic structures should know very well that the minimum price they will have to pay is they will not be allowed to enter Israel," he said.

The ADL's Jacobson sought to downplay the incident.

"One shouldn't make more of this than it is," he

said. "We all believe in the right" to "speak and oppose government policies."

Jacobson also said he did not believe that the action "necessarily" had "broader implications" for Israeli democracy or Israel-Diaspora relations.

Hecht, who wrote an apology for his pronouncements to Rabin a few weeks before the killing, could not be reached for comment. He has been suspended from his pulpit at Congregation Shaare Zion in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Efforts to reach the Bluestein brothers and Friedman also were unsuccessful. □

Reform, Conservative win large allocations in Israel

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Advancing the cause of religious pluralism in Israel, the Religious Affairs Ministry will allocate some \$160,000 to the Reform and Conservative movements in the Jewish state.

Secular organizations that deal with Jewish issues from a pluralistic perspective are also expected to receive funding.

Israel's High Court of Justice previously ruled that the Reform and Conservative movements should receive funding from the Religious Affairs Ministry for Torah studies.

But until now, only small amounts were disbursed in an informal matter.

In New York, the move by the Religious Affairs Ministry was greeted by Rabbi Alexander Schindler, outgoing president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"I could not be more delighted," he said.

The announcement of the allocations reportedly came in the wake of new funding criteria established by Religious Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet, who has sought to eliminate inequities in funding for non-Orthodox institutions.

The allocations provoked criticism from Orthodox parties in Israel. Knesset member Avraham Ravitz, of the Orthodox Degel HaTorah Party, said Shetreet "did something that should not have been done, when he allowed the Reform movement to embezzle the public coffers."

"The Reform movement has lots of money already, and it is outrageous that it should swoop down on the meager allowances of the Religious Affairs Ministry," Ravitz said.

However, Knesset member Avner Shaki of the National Religious Party, a former minister of the Religious Affairs Ministry, was more accepting of the decision.

"Their way is not mine," he said of the Reform and Conservative movements. "But it is a good deed to teach every Jew the Torah."

In related news, Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg has called for the establishment of a religious conversion court comprised of non-Orthodox rabbis to provide alternatives to Orthodox conversions in Israel. If non-Orthodox conversions that are performed abroad are recognized in Israel, he said, then there should be a way to perform them in Israel as well.

Burg said that if his proposal for establishing non-Orthodox conversions in Israel were not adopted, then the government should fund overseas conversions for all Israelis who want them.

The Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling that paved the way for possible Knesset legislation to enable the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel.

Orthodox parties are actively opposed to such legislation. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**U.S. peacekeeping role on Golan may depend on mission in Bosnia***By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — With Israel and Syria talking peace again, the prospect for deploying U.S. peacekeepers to help monitor an agreement could hinge on the success or failure of the U.S. mission in Bosnia.

Experts say a successful Balkan peacekeeping venture with minimal casualties could facilitate congressional approval for U.S. participation in a multinational monitoring force on the Golan Heights, which Israel is expected to cede if an accord is reached with Syria.

"They're not linked, but a wonderfully successful Bosnia mission would make it much easier" to make the case for a U.S. presence on the Golan "because Bosnia is by its very nature a more difficult mission than is even contemplated on the Golan," said Robert Satloff, Washington Institute for Near East Policy executive director.

Israeli-Syrian talks were scheduled to resume Wednesday in Maryland for three days. Secretary of State Warren Christopher plans to visit Damascus and Jerusalem after the first round of talks. Negotiators are then scheduled to return here for more talks in early January.

The governments of both Yitzhak Rabin and his successor Shimon Peres have said the presence of a small U.S. monitoring force on the Golan — similar to the force that has patrolled the Sinai since Egypt and Israel's 1979 peace treaty — remains an integral part of selling a peace agreement to the Israeli public.

The issue of peacekeeping troops, meanwhile, has galvanized opponents of territorial concession.

Some activists, including members of the Israeli opposition Likud Party, have turned to Congress in the past year, lobbying against the deployment of U.S. forces to the Golan. Their activity is widely seen among those who support an Israeli withdrawal as an attempt to topple any Israeli-Syrian accord that involves yielding territory.

'Premature and irrelevant'

Supporters of an American peacekeeping role, however, continue to call the entire debate premature. Israel and Syria have not yet agreed on a treaty, they point out, let alone on how to go about monitoring one.

In addition, neither country has formally requested American peacekeeping forces.

"Israel is talking about something much bigger than the Golan," said Jonathan Jacoby, executive vice president of the Israel Policy Forum, an organization aligned with the Labor government's peace policies.

"By focusing on a minor issue that is related to only part of the picture, we tend to lose perspective about what's going on in general."

"It's not just premature" to debate a U.S. peacekeeping role, "it's almost irrelevant at this point," Jacoby said.

But that argument troubles opponents of troops on the Golan, who fear that the time for debate is now. If Israel and Syria reach an agreement that involves the commitment of U.S. peacekeeping forces, opponents say their objections at that point will be rendered moot.

Congress will find itself handed a "fait accompli" — just as it was with Bosnia after the Dayton peace negotiations, said Frank Gaffney, director of the Center for Security Policy.

"The Golan deployment has such significant implications for the quality of Israeli security and is fraught with such significant perils for the Israeli strategic relationship with the United States, that it has to be thought carefully through before commitments can be made," said

Gaffney, who last year led an unsuccessful effort on Capitol Hill to convince members to hold hearings on the issue.

For that reason, opponents are urging Congress to weigh in on the issue sooner rather than later.

"This is the right time for Congress to hold hearings on troops in the Golan Heights," said Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, who has actively lobbied against a U.S. peacekeeping deployment as part of an Israeli-Syrian peace accord.

Supporters of a U.S. deployment maintain that congressional hearings at this stage could prove detrimental to the peace process.

They charge that the opposition is attempting to misrepresent the issue and tie negotiators' hands by focusing the debate on U.S. military involvement and swaying Israeli public opinion against a future accord.

"The entire question of whether there will be an international monitoring force and what role America will play has always been a relatively minor issue on the agenda," Jacoby said.

For now, as the U.S. continues to deploy 20,000 peacekeeping troops in Bosnia, both sides of the Golan issue will be carefully watching events as they unfold. If the mission founders, some experts believe that the window of opportunity to win congressional approval for troops on the Golan may close.

"The administration recognizes that if Americans are getting killed in Bosnia, the jig is up in terms of putting troops on the Golan Heights," Gaffney said. "If they're going to do it, I think they believe they'd better be doing it quickly." □

Senate passes sanctions bill on foreign firms linked to Iran*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The United States came one step closer to imposing sanctions on foreign firms that invest in Iran's oil industries.

The Senate passed the Iran Oil Sanctions Act in a voice vote without debate last week.

The measure, which is supported by the White House, is expected to pass the House of Representatives in the coming weeks.

In memory of the 259 people killed when terrorists blew up Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, the Senate included sanctions on firms that do business with Libya's fuel industries. The vote on the measure came on the eve of the seventh anniversary of the bombing.

Under the Senate bill, sponsored by Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), sanctioned firms would be denied access to financing sponsored by the Export-Import Bank of the United States and to licenses for exports to the United States.

U.S. law already prohibits American firms from investing in Iran's fuel industries.

The president could also prohibit mergers, acquisitions or takeovers involving U.S. companies that might provide Iran with cash, as well as limit funding from American banks to sanctioned firms, according to the measure.

Iran has desperately sought foreign capital to bail out its economy and to finance its nuclear program.

Tehran hopes that foreign investment can make up for what the international community has denied it in the areas of trade and credit.

Neal Sher, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which lobbied hard for the measure, called it a "pivotal step in the effort to curb terrorism and the nuclear threat to the free world." □

Chasidim pass Christmas Day by filling Borough Park stores

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — It is Christmas Day and the country is quiet as most Americans celebrate the birth of Jesus by gathering with family members around festively decorated trees and honey-baked hams.

In most places — even the usually teeming metropolis of Manhattan — nearly every store is shuttered and the streets are empty of cars. No one works. Silence has settled eerily over most public spaces.

Until one gets to Borough Park in Brooklyn.

Along 13th Avenue, cars are double- and triple-parked against sidewalks swollen with throngs of haredim out for a stroll and a browse along the main shopping street of what today seems like a neighborhood inhabited solely by fervently Orthodox Jews.

Babies and toddlers bundled against the sharp December wind whistling down the avenue are pushed in double strollers by mothers whose youth would defy their parenthood but for the wigs they wear in accordance with their custom as married Chasidic women.

Men, grateful today for the warmth of the long black coats — called kapotas — they wear even in the sweltering heat, cluster in twos and threes to chat on street corners, their heads covered by black shearling hats and their faces protected from the wind by long beards.

A dozen major Chasidic sects — and at least two dozen minor ones — are based in this lively Brooklyn neighborhood and today, it seems, everyone is out on the avenue.

Christmas is just a regular shopping day in Borough Park.

Snippets of conversation in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian and Hungarian are overheard as often as English.

Posters taped to streetlights and between storefronts tout the "Dial-a-Daf" and "Mishna-on-the-phone" programs offered by the Torah Communications Network as well as a special Chanukah concert by Uncle Moishy and the Mitzvah Men.

There are no risqué Calvin Klein billboards in this neighborhood.

The Le Bon lingerie shop — just up the block from the Vznitz Chasidic sect's synagogue — is crowded with housecoats and nightgowns closer to Lanz of Switzerland flannel than Frederick's of Hollywood satin.

A dozen disembodied mannequin heads wearing wigs in several shades of brown and blond occupy the storefront of the International Studio, a shop that sells sheitels, or wigs, worn by the married women.

A large sign on the front door warns customers, "For your shopping pleasure — no carriages and no 'lashon hara' please," instructing them not to partake in gossip.

Sweating in winter coats

Inside Amnon's Strictly Kosher Rabbinically Supervised Pizza Shop, the line of customers sweating in their long winter coats is long.

The narrow aisles between the handful of tables are clogged with strollers as parents fuel the several children they each have in tow with pizza and falafel for further shopping on the avenue.

Evelyn Polakoff has come to 13th Avenue from Manhattan's Upper West Side. She has brought the youngest of her four children to shop for a special dress to wear to the "sheva brochos," or post-wedding, dinners of her eldest daughter, who is scheduled to be married in February.

Evelyn Polakoff is not her real name, however.

Like almost all of the haredim interviewed about why Borough Park is bustling Dec. 25, she asked that her real name not be used.

As did others in the famously shy community, she demurred by saying that "I just don't like my name to be in the newspaper."

With every assurance from a visiting reporter that her true identity would not be revealed, she confided why she had made the hourlong trek from her own neighborhood.

"The clothing here is geared to the Orthodox community. The length of the sleeves and the skirts is right," she said as she and her daughter, who appeared to be about 13, finished up their cheese knishes and Cokes.

"I don't usually come because the traffic here is crazy and it's hard to find parking, but everything in Manhattan is closed, even the Jewish stores."

Eichler's bookstore, a block down the street, is jammed with shoppers eager to buy Torah-shaped nightlights, refrigerator magnets boasting that they hold to the refrigerator door the "Shabbos Shopping List" or leather-bound volumes of rabbinic commentary.

Clerks frantically ring up purchases as two dozen haredim wait on line, juggling novels with Jewish themes, packages of Judaic computer software and menorahs, which they are buying on the last day of Chanukah for 30 percent off their regular price.

"It's always busy here" on Christmas, said store manager Aryeh Eichler (his real name, he promised). "On legal holidays, Manhattan is closed so people come to Borough Park."

A block away, G & Sons Department Store is only a degree less packed than it is the day before Rosh Hashanah or Purim, when there are as many people squeezed into the enormous store as there are commuters on the subway at rush hour.

A Brooklyn institution, G & Sons sells kiddush cups and plush "kiddie" Torahs alongside packages of ladies' panties, toilet-bowl brushes, clock radios, armoires and cans of Unger's ready-to-serve cholent beans, all at prices not even a veteran New York "hondler" can dispute.

It is also one of the rare stores in New York that lets a neighborhood beggar sit at the front, near the cash registers.

The wizened and ancient woman rattles the few coins in her coffee can as she mutters "tzedakah, tzedakah," to exiting customers.

In a bow to the 40 percent of its customers who are not Jewish, said Fred, who is a manager of the store and would not divulge his last name, the store has a small room of Christmas decorations and wrapping paper, a few plastic Santa Clauses waiting forlornly in a bin as if they knew that their day had come and was going fast.

One wall is covered with tree-trimming decorations that obviously were not much of a hit at this time of year with the store's primary clientele.

However, in about 10 months the very same packages of Mylar sunbursts and strings of plastic fruit will line the walls of the room filled top to bottom with everything that the Jews of Borough Park and beyond will ever need to decorate their sukkahs. □

Shekel devalued again

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli shekel was devalued by 1.05 percent last week, making the new exchange rate 3.174 shekels to the dollar.

Israeli officials made a similar devaluation last month. □