

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Rabbi Yehuda Amital had an overriding mission during his first visit to the United States as a member of the Israeli Cabinet.** To every audience, the Orthodox leader preached tolerance and tried to demonstrate that Jewish law is not at all inconsistent with the peace process. [Page 3]

■ **The confessed assassin of Yitzhak Rabin turned down a proposal from an extreme right-wing activist to head a new political movement called the New Right.** Avigdor Eskin, who led a group of extremists that would curse Rabin in front of his home, had approached Yigal Amir, whose murder trial is under way in Tel Aviv.

■ **Two of Europe's most outspoken nationalists announced plans over the weekend to form a European union of extreme right-wing forces, saying only that could prevent wars.** French right-wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy predicted that nationalism would soon become the dominating political force throughout Europe.

■ **Poland's president pledged to a World Jewish Congress official his support for a Jewish commemoration of the 1946 Kielce pogrom and the restitution of Jewish property.** The Polish leader wants to open a new chapter in ties between Poland and Jewish communities around the world, the WJC official said. [Page 4]

■ **The World Jewish Congress repudiated a survey released by the Swiss Bankers Association that concluded that Swiss banks had some \$32 million in as-yet unclaimed accounts that might have belonged to Jews who perished in the Holocaust.** Jewish leaders protested the manner in which the survey was conducted and vowed to take the issue to the U.S. Senate. [Page 4]

■ **The United States delayed Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations for at least two days because the Wye Conference Center in eastern Maryland, where the talks have been held, has been booked for Feb. 26.** The talks will start about Feb. 28.

NEWS ANALYSIS**Religious, Arab voters wooed in national election campaigns***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In the three months leading up to Israel's national elections, the Hebrew political lexicon will adopt some important new words.

More and more politicians — and not necessarily those who put on tefillin every morning — will make use of terms such as "be'ezrat haShem" (with God's help) and "bli neder" (without making a formal vow) and sprinkle their speeches with biblical references as they make appeals for votes.

Among these politicians will be Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who will be seeking to attract Israel's religious voters as they go head-to-head in the country's first direct vote for the premiership.

The two candidates are investing a lot of effort — and money — in trying to woo the religious vote, which has the potential to elect some 16 to 18 Knesset members.

They are also launching a similar effort to attract the Israeli Arab vote, which can fill 12 Knesset seats.

After meeting with Peres on Monday night, Netanyahu told reporters that May 28 seemed to be a date Labor and Likud could agree on for holding early elections.

The Knesset was expected to pass by the end of this week legislation dissolving itself and setting the election date.

The elections will be different from all previous Israeli elections in that there will be two separate ballots — one for the premiership, the other for the Knesset.

It is commonly accepted that with the direct election of the prime minister, the elected candidate will find it much easier to form a coalition than in the past, when success often depended on the support of individual Knesset members.

As a result, the campaign will focus more than ever before on the personalities of the two candidates for the premiership.

Whether they are appealing for the religious vote or seeking the support of Israeli Arabs, Peres and Netanyahu will have to adjust their vocabulary for the constituencies whose support they seek.

In this vein, Netanyahu has reportedly refrained during the past year from entering any nonkosher restaurant, something believed to be a novelty in his gastronomical habits.

Peres, a veteran suitor of the religious community, is certain to try and revive old relationships.

Given that Arab voters historically have favored Labor over Likud, Peres is expected to be more successful than Netanyahu in this community.

Public opinion polls have shown that Israel's Arabs will overwhelmingly support Peres.

Moreover, some 37 percent of the Arab vote is expected to go to Labor's Knesset candidates, despite the existence of several Arab-based parties.

Hurdles to overcome

Courting the haredi vote will present Peres with a more formidable challenge.

The Labor Party's governing coalition with the secularist Meretz Party and its failure to prevent major court decisions that chipped away at Orthodoxy's virtual monopoly on Israel's religious life are issues that do not sit well with the fervently religious community.

Not that Netanyahu's path to the haredi community runs through a rose garden.

Certainly, his commitment to a Greater Israel is more appealing to most religious voters than Peres' willingness to cede land for his vision of a new Middle East.

But Netanyahu also has hurdles to overcome, including his secular image; his public confession three years ago that he had an extramarital

affair; and his agreement last week to share party lists with the right-wing Tsomet Party, whose platform calls for recruiting yeshiva students into the army.

The importance of the religious vote has prompted Peres and Netanyahu to hire experts to help them gain that support.

Likud has hired Mordechai Halperin, a former spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudat Yisrael who is now a candidate in the Galilee in the Likud primaries.

Halperin now spends most of his time arranging meetings between Netanyahu and fervently Orthodox rabbis.

The Likud has meanwhile prepared its first campaign ad aimed at religious voters.

The ad contains a large picture of Peres and Labor Knesset member Yael Dayan, who in the past infuriated the haredi community with insinuations that the biblical friends David and Jonathan were homosexuals.

Under the picture is the slogan: "The Haredim Don't Interest Them!"

Meanwhile, Labor has engaged David Silberschlag, 38, a Chasid who is one of the leading advertising experts in the religious community.

Three years ago, Silberschlag ran Likud candidate Ehud Olmert's campaign among the haredim, which contributed to Olmert's victory over Teddy Kollek for mayor of Jerusalem.

In a recent newspaper interview, Silberschlag indicated what would be some of the main pillars of Labor's election campaign among the haredi community: more housing; no provocative archaeological excavations, which lead haredim to charge that ancient Jewish cemeteries are being desecrated; and stressing the differences between Labor and Meretz regarding the religious status quo in Israel.

"Our polls have shown that many haredim have moderate leftist views. They can be supplemented by many others, with the proper information campaign," Silberschlag said.

Divided electorates

One difficulty in running an orderly campaign within the haredi community is the large-scale division that splits the religious vote.

Both parties will need to map carefully the competing factions within the haredi community in order to successfully get out the vote.

The Arab electorate also is divided.

Although they have a potential of electing 12 Knesset members, only seven Arabs and one Druse serve in the present Knesset.

Attempts to draw up a unity list have repeatedly failed and there are still three major Arab blocs running for the Knesset: Hadash, a Communist grouping of Jews and Arabs that currently holds three Knesset seats, two of them Arab; the Arab Democratic Party, with two seats; and a newly formed bloc, headed by Dr. Ahmed Tibi, a gynecologist who serves as special adviser to Palestinian Council President Yasser Arafat.

Tibi last week succeeded where many predicted he would fail: The fundamentalist Arab Islamic List and the radical-leftist Progressive List both signed an agreement with Tibi's Arab Movement for Change.

Tibi predicts that the newly born political bloc would win at least four Knesset seats.

"Arab voters are yearning for unity," he said.

For Labor, meanwhile, Arab support is critical to its maintaining a Knesset majority. After all, it was the support of Hadash and the Arab Democratic Party that gave the governing coalition its majority — albeit a slender one — in the current Knesset. □

Arafat sworn in as president

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Yasser Arafat was sworn in as president of the Palestinian Council in a ceremony at the new legislature's offices in Gaza.

Arafat's swearing in came three weeks after his landslide victory in the first Palestinian elections, in which he won 87.1 percent of the vote for president.

Arafat's supporters gained 55 of the council's 88 seats.

Placing his right hand on the Koran, Arafat said, "I swear by almighty God to be faithful to the homeland, uphold the constitution and the law and maintain the interests of the Palestinian people and the integrity of its land, and to achieve its national aspirations and God is my witness."

He took the oath before Salim al-Zaanoun, the acting head of the Palestine National Council, the so-called Palestinian parliament in exile.

Also present for the swearing-in was Palestinian Chief Justice Qusai al-Abadleh.

Under the self-rule accord with Israel, Arafat will head a Palestinian government during an interim period, until both sides agree on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Permanent-status talks — which will also determine the future of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, final border arrangements and Palestinian refugees — are slated to begin in May. □

Israel seals off territories

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel sealed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Monday night, barring Palestinians from entering the Jewish state.

The move was reportedly taken to prevent a feared terrorist attack in retaliation for last month's murder of Hamas bombmaker Yehiya Ayash.

Meanwhile, about 200 Palestinians confronted Israel Defense Force soldiers at Rachel's Tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem on Monday.

The demonstrators were protesting Israel's building of a concrete wall around the shrine and adjacent parking lot.

Israeli security forces maintained that the wall was necessary to protect visitors to the tomb from possible stonethrowing and firebomb attacks.

Bethlehem Mayor Elias Freij accused Israel of violating agreements it previously signed with the Palestinians.

On Sunday, Palestinian police set up roadblocks at the entrances to Bethlehem and barred Israeli drivers from passing through, as a way of protesting the construction work. □

2 SLA soldiers killed, 1 wounded

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two soldiers from the South Lebanon Army, Israel's ally in the region, were killed and another wounded when an explosive device went off near their patrol.

The Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement claimed responsibility for Monday's incident, which occurred in the western sector of the southern Lebanon security zone.

The incident comes after a similar explosion Saturday, when a SLA soldier was wounded after an armored personnel carrier drove over a mine. □

Armed with a mission, rabbi brings message of tolerance

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Rabbi Yehuda Amital was on a mission last week as he met with the U.S. vice president, Jewish leaders and laypeople, rabbis, students and Christian clergy.

It was the 71-year-old Orthodox rabbi's first visit to the United States since he was appointed to the Israeli Cabinet after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

To every audience, Amital preached tolerance and tried to demonstrate that Jewish law is not inconsistent with the peace process. Amital is unequivocal about his view of Judaism's values: The primary value, which supersedes all others, is for human life, he said. Next in the hierarchy is Torah, and third comes land.

Amital explained his view in separate meetings with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Catholic, Protestant and Russian Orthodox religious leaders; and students and faculty at Yeshiva University, among others. He also talked with members of the Jewish media.

Amital told his listeners that "the prime minister asked me to be the minister for inspiration," and that is clearly how this minister without portfolio understands his role. The elderly rabbi repeatedly said he is not a politician, though his diplomatic finesse belies the disclaimer. By virtue of his "natural calling," he said, he is a teacher of Torah and head of Har Etzion, a yeshiva in the West Bank that he co-founded and that was the first yeshiva to combine study with military service.

He also founded Meimad, the Movement for Religious Zionist Renewal, based on the principles of democracy and openness.

Amital, a Holocaust survivor whose family perished at Auschwitz, said he was asked by Prime Minister Shimon Peres to try to help heal the wounds Rabin's death inflicted on Israel and the Jewish people.

He was asked, he said, to try to help narrow the bitter ideological and religious differences that yawned and threatened to "destroy the whole society."

In the end, it was his "obligation to represent Torah" that compelled him to serve, he said.

'I have no choice'

But the questions remain. "I ask myself, am I worthy to represent Torah?" He then said: "I have no choice." Amital said he is serving, ultimately, to protest the "chillul haShem," or desecration of God's name, that took place when Rabin was killed by another Jew.

He is also seeking to protest the notion "that Torah means extremism, that Torah means you don't support the peace process." In fact, "there is no contradiction between halachah and the peace process," he said, referring to Jewish law. "You may oppose the peace process, but don't say it's a question of halachah."

Amital seems eager to paint himself as a maverick, perhaps so he can win credibility as a fair arbiter in the midst of a conflict. "I don't represent religious Jews because I wasn't sent" to the government "by religious Jews and I suspect that some of the religious people are really unhappy I am there," he said with deliberate understatement and a wry smile.

Yet he does not always agree with the government.

He said he disagreed with the Israeli government's recent decision to ban Brooklyn Rabbi Abraham Hecht from entering the country because he allegedly poses a danger to the state. Hecht had said Jewish law permits killing Israeli leaders who endanger Jewish lives by trading land for peace. "I don't think he's dangerous," said

Amital, adding that the government action is "a way to turn him into a hero."

Amital said he had no illusions that the Oslo accords, the term used for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, would lead to an ideal peace, only that it is a "way to prevent more bloodshed."

Amital also describes his ministerial mandate as one of strengthening Jewish identity inside Israel as well as the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jews.

He is the head of a new Israeli government ministerial commission on the Israel-Diaspora relationship that will address, in part, what he termed the "emergency" of assimilation and intermarriage in the Diaspora. Amital said he was "moved" by how warmly "the secular community" in America received him, leading him to feel that it believes that "Torah still has a relevant message."

In America, "even secular Jews believe that the Torah has a relevant message. The main problem in Israel today is Jewish identity, and Jewish identity means you have to dialogue with Torah," he told several hundred Jews who gathered to hear him speak Feb. 8 at Manhattan's Congregation Oheb Zedek.

Earlier that evening, about 250 Jews studied rabbinic texts on debate and tolerance with Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis in the synagogue's basement — the very same place where Hecht first announced that it was permissible, according to Jewish law, to assassinate a leader who endangered Jewish lives.

The rabbis who led the Torah study session have participated in regular joint dialogue and study sessions for the past four years under the aegis of the Jewish Community Center on New York's Upper West Side.

But when news of their joint session last week became public, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada appealed to the Orthodox rabbis not to participate. The 94-year-old organization, based on Manhattan's Lower East Side, has "close to 500 members," said its director, Rabbi Hersh Ginsberg, among them the heads of some of the most prestigious fervently Orthodox yeshivas in North America, as well as deans of Yeshiva University's rabbinical school.

'A rabbi and a nice guy'

The group's effort to get Orthodox Jews to withdraw from participating was not rooted in opposition to Amital, Ginsberg said. "He's an Orthodox rabbi and a nice guy, so why not hear him speak?" said Ginsberg.

Instead, the group tried to convince Orthodox rabbis that it is prohibited by Jewish law for them to participate with non-Orthodox rabbis in any type of religious event. But the effort seemed to have little impact. The four N.Y. Orthodox rabbis who usually participate in the dialogue came to the Amital event.

At most of his stops, the rabbi was asked about efforts to win legal legitimacy for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism inside Israel. He listened intently, sometimes to lengthy arguments about civil rights. Then he dismissed the idea, saying that the battle for religious pluralism should not be fought in the political realm, but among the people.

"Come to try to convince people to build [Conservative and Reform] synagogues," he said. He said he supports the Conservative-supported school system in Israel and is against banning Conservative and Reform representatives on local religious councils.

He also has empathy for those who would like Israel to officially embrace non-Orthodox Judaism as it does Orthodox. Yet he warned listeners that "you cannot bring the American way" of Judaism to Israel. "You must find the Israeli way. This is your main problem." □

(JTA staff writer Debra Nussbaum Cohen contributed to this report.)

Poland: Jewish commemoration of 1946 Kielce pogrom to occur

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The president of Poland has given his support to a Jewish commemoration of the 1946 Kielce pogrom and to the return of property once owned by Jews and the Jewish community.

President Aleksander Kwasniewski made the pledges last Friday, when he met with World Jewish Congress Vice President Kalman Sultanik.

Kwasniewski wants to create a new chapter of ties between Poland and Jewish communities around the world, Sultanik said in a telephone interview from Warsaw.

"I feel that this president is disposed to find better relations with Jews everywhere," the WJC official said, adding that the Polish leader said there was no room in Poland for anti-Semitism.

Sultanik said Kwasniewski would see to it that the Kielce pogrom would be commemorated in July, which is 50 years after the massacre occurred.

Sultanik's visit comes after a recent letter from the Polish foreign minister to the WJC in which he asked the Jewish community for forgiveness for the pogrom.

"The new democratic Poland deeply regrets and mourns all the injustice suffered by the Jewish people," the letter from Foreign Minister Dariusz Rosati said. "In 1996, we shall shed tears over the victims of the infamous Kielce pogrom, which was committed 50 years ago during the chaos of the Polish civil war."

The president added that he would look into the idea of including two Jews in the current investigation of the massacre.

Kielce, a southern Polish city that had a Jewish population of 24,000 at the outbreak of World War II, was virtually eliminated during the Holocaust.

Polish anti-Semitism, which has a long history, was intense in the mid-1940s, and rumors spread that masses of Jews would soon return to claim their former houses and belongings. It was also rumored that the blood libel, the false accusation that Jews murder Christian children and drain their blood for ritual use, was taking place.

In early July 1946, a mob attacked and massacred 42 Jews and wounded about 50 more. The event touched off a mass Jewish migration from Central and Eastern European countries.

In addition last Friday, Kwasniewski promised that legislation on restoring some of the communal properties — such as the synagogues and schools taken over by Communist authorities after the war — to Poland's tiny Jewish community would be passed "as soon as possible," Sultanik said. The question of private property restitution remains open, but some progress has been made.

Before the outbreak of World War II, about 3.3 million Jews lived in Poland, comprising nearly 10 percent of the total Polish population. About 3 million Jews — or 90 percent of Poland's prewar Jewish population — were annihilated during the war. □

WJC rejects Swiss survey of unclaimed bank accounts

By Tamar Levy

GENEVA (JTA) — The World Jewish Congress has rejected a survey released by the Swiss Bankers Association that concluded that Swiss banks were not holding vast sums belonging to Holocaust victims.

The survey released last week indicated that the banks had some \$32 million in as-yet unclaimed accounts that might have belonged to Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Swiss bankers began investigating the issue of unclaimed accounts last year after Jewish organizations accused them of withholding funds belonging to Holocaust victims.

Last September, the bankers association said that they had found assets worth some \$34 million that could be from secret accounts of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Others have estimated higher totals, peaking at nearly \$7 billion.

The Swiss banks' premium on privacy and the difficulty of producing proof of ownership of an account that once belonged to a Holocaust victim have made it difficult for descendants to identify or claim assets.

The WJC sharply criticized last week's announcement by the Swiss Bankers Association, saying that it was made unilaterally and was therefore unacceptable.

"The ethical considerations here involve the necessity of the process being transparent, so that there can be no doubts as to the findings," WJC President Edgar Bronfman said in a statement. "In this regard, the Swiss bankers have not met the test."

Bronfman joined Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg in issuing a second statement that further complained about the manner in which the bankers association had confronted the issue.

The two said that under the terms of an earlier agreement with the Swiss bankers, the process of locating financial assets belonging to Holocaust victims and their families was supposed to be transparent and open, in order to prevent there being any doubts about the results.

"The Swiss Bankers Association did not fulfill this promise," Bronfman and Burg said in a statement. "The matter was handled without the cooperation of all involved parties. Hence there are doubts. We wonder — What do they have to hide?"

Swiss Jewish leaders voiced the opinion that there would be a tough fight over the accounts between the Swiss banking establishment and Jewish leaders.

"The sum of [\$32 million] looks like a handout," said one prominent Jewish banker.

In New York, WJC Executive Director Elan Steinberg said his organization had asked for hearings in the U.S. Senate on Swiss banking practices.

Steinberg said WJC officials had already met with Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, to discuss holding the hearings. "We have no doubt that the hearings will take place, unless the Swiss change their stance," Steinberg said.

He also spoke of the possibility of filing a suit to freeze Swiss bank accounts in the United States. "There are legal claims that can be filed here — and Swiss assets can be frozen under those claims," Steinberg said.

In a further action, he said, WJC Secretary General Israel Singer is scheduled to testify at a Swiss parliamentary hearing later this month on the restitution issue. □

(JTA foreign editor Mitchell Danow in New York contributed to this report.)

Everything's coming up roses

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli flower exports have grown to new heights in the time leading up to Valentine's Day.

Growers here said that in the past 10 days, Israel exported 75 million flowers, with a profit of \$16 million.

The mostly red flowers were shipped in 23 jumbo jets to American and European markets.

Roses and carnations are among the most popular blooms this time of year, said Ya'akov Siton, the head of Israel's flower council. □