



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The leader of the Reform movement called for the dismantlement of the chief rabbinate in Israel. Rabbi Eric Yoffie's proposal came in response to a rabbinate official's comments that Reform Judaism should be treated as a separate religion. [Page 3]

■ Prime Minister Shimon Peres expects to discuss a U.S.-Israel defense pact with President Clinton during his scheduled visit to Israel after the anti-terror summit in Egypt. Peres hopes to sign the agreement before Israel's national elections in May. [Page 4]

■ The Polish president condemned the construction of a mini-mall across the street from Auschwitz. The condemnation came after Jewish groups expressed their outrage about the shopping center, which is to include a supermarket, a fast-food restaurant. [Page 3]

■ The House of Representatives passed a one-year extension of a measure that affords special privileges to Jews seeking to immigrate to the United States from the former Soviet Union. The Senate now needs to take action on the legislation, which is known as the Lautenberg amendment and which is named after Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.).

■ An Israeli Cabinet minister said the government would have little choice but to ease the closure imposed on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinians in the self-rule areas are suffering from food shortages and curtailed access to medical facilities as a result of the closure. [Page 4]

■ World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman said a proposal to boycott Swiss banks was put before the group's executive committee to protest the lack of progress in negotiations with Swiss banks over the unclaimed assets of Holocaust victims. The WJC and the Swiss Bankers Association are at loggerheads over the issue.

■ The leaders of Israel's Likud, Tsomet and Geshet parties signed an agreement to join forces in the May 29 national elections. [Page 4]

Finalized merger plan heads for the road, seeking approval

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish leaders have finalized a plan to merge the central American Jewish fund-raising organizations and are set to present it to federations across the country in hopes of securing their approval.

The plan is aimed at strengthening flagging campaigns, making the fund-raising bureaucracy more efficient and ensuring that domestic and overseas needs are met in a fair and systematic way.

If implemented, the plan could lead to one of the biggest changes in the American Jewish fund-raising structure since the United Jewish Appeal was founded.

The finalized plan promises \$310 million a year for overseas programs for the first three years, the sum received by the UJA in 1994.

While that promise is considered a linchpin for the plan's survival, it also poses the biggest challenge in the effort to win the support of federations.

Sources say many will balk at the prospect of losing flexibility in their allocations process — even for a period of three years — at a time when the Jewish world is undergoing such rapid change.

At the same time, there is broad consensus that the Jewish philanthropic system must change to respond to changing needs, which augurs well for the fate of a restructuring plan.

"The idea of the merger is good. The idea of the Jewish community being frozen for three years is bad," said Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

The plan calls for the consolidation of the Council of Jewish Federations and the UJA. The United Israel Appeal, which funnels and oversees campaign money to the Jewish Agency for Israel, would remain intact for three years of transition and then join the new entity.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee would receive funds raised by the new organization and be part of its governance but would remain independent. Federations raise about \$725 million annually in concert with the UJA. The overseas portion is distributed by the UJA to the UJA and to the JDC, which provides humanitarian relief to Jews throughout the Diaspora and in Israel.

The authors of the plan, which has been two years in the making, have been hoping to get the federations' final approval by May at a CJF gathering. But that timetable is "looking less and less possible," said Joel Tauber, president of the UJA and co-chairman of the committee that devised the restructuring plan.

Method sought for dividing the money

The boards of the other entities also have to sign off on the new entity before it takes flight, though this is actually a formality. Their leadership already has registered its support.

Most challenging throughout the planning process has been finding a method acceptable to all parties of dividing the money raised by the federations between needs at home and programs in Israel and elsewhere overseas. Such a division is especially sensitive at a time when campaigns are flat, Jewish education has become a top priority and federal budget cuts are expected to drastically hurt federation-supported social programs.

In fact, allocations to Israel have been dropping in recent years. Nevertheless, calls for guaranteed minimum funding for overseas needs have been resisted by local federations that like to guard their autonomy.

The current plan represents a compromise.

According to Tauber, it offers a "guarantee" that the new national entity will funnel \$310 million annually overseas for the first three years. Planners have held that such a transition is needed to build confidence for the change among those concerned with overseas programs.

But rather than ask the communities for guarantees, each community will be asked to give "assurances" that they will give a certain sum of cash per year "so the national system will have enough."

The assurances, said Tauber, would be based on "discussions with individual communities based on each situation." Among the factors used to

calculate the sums, he said, would be their cash collections and allocations from the past two years.

Leaders of some major federations have signaled their support for the plan, but still need approval from their boards. For others, concerns remain that clearly need to be assuaged. "I understand the need for assurances of stability within the system," said Boston's Shrage. "I'm not attacking the concept that there are needs to be met overseas — I believe that very strongly. But, there needs to be flexibility."

Shrage said federations would want to know they can respond to "emergency needs" and that their obligations to the Jewish Agency for Israel will not be "frozen," even for three years. He also said federations would want to be assured that there would be "significant savings quickly" in the system as a result of the plan.

For Tauber, the planned restructuring is of critical importance. The changes in the Jewish world are "cataclysmic," he has maintained, and if nothing is done to reform the existing structures, "the organized Jewish community could become irrelevant."

The committee touted the proposed system's "ability to raise more financial resources; connection with Jewish life worldwide; rescue; strong flexible and responsive governance structure; building leadership and community; as well as effectiveness and efficiency."

Planners say they have designed a governance structure, to be put into place after the transition period, which reflects a balance of domestic and overseas interests and which will allocate campaign money accordingly.

Under the plan, the new structure will include an assembly of up to 1,000 members, half of whom would represent federations, while the other half would represent the "cross section of the Jewish world," Tauber said.

It will also include a 125-member board, which will reflect the same balance and will be charged with choosing an 18-member operating committee.

Under the latest plan, the Jewish Agency will be represented in the assembly and on the board, accounting for the new entity's only non-American members, Tauber said. □

Aid to Palestinians held up as lawmakers demand compliance

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congress has tightened its noose on \$13 million slated for the Palestinian Authority.

The move came this week after hearings on Capitol Hill aimed at investigating the Palestine Liberation Organization's commitment to peace.

Wielding his powers as chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) last month quietly put a hold on part of the U.S. assistance slated to go to the Palestinian Authority.

But to bipartisan congressional cheers, Gilman dug in his heels at a hastily convened hearing in the wake of Hamas' renewed terror campaign against Israel.

"The hold on these funds will remain until the PLO responds to congressional concerns about its assets, and fulfills its written obligations to root out terrorist groups in its midst," Gilman said at the hearings Tuesday.

Clinton administration officials have expressed dismay at the move, saying that cutting off funding to the Palestinians at this time will not help Yasser Arafat's attempts to crack down on Hamas.

Last month, Gilman placed a hold on about \$13 million slated for the Holst Fund, an international bank account of sorts used to pay expenses incurred by the Palestinian Authority.

After the recent spate of bombings, Gilman went public with his decision to withhold the funds.

Before any foreign assistance is sent abroad, the Agency for International Development notifies four relevant committee chairmen as a formality.

At that point, any of the four can delay the spending in an action called a hold.

Gilman has led the charge against funding to the PLO in an effort to win greater compliance from Arafat's government with the peace accords with Israel.

After the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, the United States pledged \$500 million over five years to the PLO.

The United States delivered more than \$154 million to the Palestinian Authority in 1994 and 1995. About \$80 million in direct assistance is slated for delivery this year. The remaining money is channeled through nongovernmental assistance programs.

In a brief interview after the hearing, Gilman said he would not allow any further funds to go to the Palestinian Authority until it "eliminates Hamas," amends its covenant calling for the destruction of Israel and extradites terrorists to Israel.

Arafat must also stop making statements out of "both sides of his mouth," Gilman said, referring to Arafat's habit of saying different things to different audiences.

Since the bombings, the State Department has unsuccessfully pressed Gilman to release the \$13 million.

Before the bombings, however, Gilman authorized three separate money transfers after initially putting a hold on them.

Skeptical panel of lawmakers

While avoiding direct criticism of the committee, witnesses at the hearing urged the lawmakers to continue U.S. assistance.

"Cutting off aid to the Palestinians would weaken the ability of Palestinian authorities to manage the areas under their jurisdiction," said Robert Pelletreau, assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asian affairs.

Hasan Abd Al-Rahman, chief representative of the PLO in Washington, also asked the committee to release the funds — and even to give more. Rahman faced a skeptical panel of lawmakers and received an unfavorable response to his call for funding and complaints about Israel's closure of Gaza and the West Bank.

Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres balked at the invitation to send a military official to testify on behalf of the Jewish state's war on Hamas and about its peace policies, Israeli officials here said.

Calling the invitation "unprecedented," an Israeli official said the testimony could not be cleared by Peres and the military chief of staff in time for the hearing.

In addition to government and Palestinian officials, Steven Emerson, an investigative journalist, testified on Hamas activity, and Steven Spiegel, a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, testified about the need for greater anti-terrorism measures.

With the House committee vowing to continue holding up funding for the Palestinians, attention over aid now shifts to the White House. The State Department recommended in a March 1 report that President Clinton certify the PLO in compliance with its accords with Israel. That certification is required for the funding to continue.

Although most lawmakers expect Clinton to accept the State Department's recommendation by the end of the month, Pelletreau said the administration would "closely monitor Palestinian performance over the next three weeks and carefully weigh all the facts before the president makes this determination." □

Proposal to 'separate' Reform sparks a sharp UAHC response

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The head of the Reform movement has sharply criticized remarks by an official of Israel's Orthodox chief rabbinate, who this week termed Reform "a separate religion" from Judaism.

Rabbi Yisrael Rosen, head of the rabbinate's conversions department, reportedly said, "Maybe it's Judaism, but a separate kind of Judaism."

Rosen has proposed that Reform Jews in Israel be legally placed in the same category as Christians, Druse and Muslims.

Each of those faiths has its own religious leadership — recognized as valid under Israeli law — which oversees all matters of personal status, including conversion, marriage and divorce.

The Reform movement has spearheaded the drive for the religious recognition and rights of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel.

Rosen reportedly made the proposal as part of an internal working document within the National Religious Party, which is Orthodox.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president-elect of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, responded sharply.

"No petty comment by a functionary of the chief rabbinate will divide us from the Jewish people," Yoffie said.

"We have no need for approval by Rosen or anyone else in the chief rabbinate," the president-elect also said.

In another salvo in the ongoing battle between Orthodox and non-Orthodox leadership over the matter of religious pluralism in Israel, Yoffie also called for the Israeli government to dismantle the office of the chief rabbinate.

"The chief rabbinate is a foreign implant established by the British [in pre-state days] to gain greater control over the Jewish population," Yoffie said.

It is now part of "a corrupt political and religious bureaucracy."

"The chief rabbinate has no legitimacy, no religious standing" in Israel, he said.

"Have the truly distinguished rabbinical leaders of Israel in recent years served as chief rabbis? No. Because it's all a corrupt political process.

"In fact, it's an obstacle to the embrace of Torah and the emergent spirituality which we would hope to see in the Jewish state." □

Polish leader condemns work on mini-mall near death camp

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The president of Poland has condemned the construction of a mini-mall across the street from Auschwitz.

President Aleksander Kwasniewski was quoted in news reports as saying that he believes that the site for the shopping center is inappropriate, regardless of legal circumstances that might allow for it to be built.

Plans for the mall included a home and garden center, supermarket, fast-food restaurant, clothing and textiles stores, and a parking ramp.

The president's press office also said he had assured Knesset Speaker Shevach Weiss in Israel that he would take action to resolve the issue.

In addition, the Polish culture minister, Zdzislaw Podkanski, who formally supervises the museum at the camp, reportedly said he had told the local governor to halt

construction and the local authorities to review the construction permit.

The plans for the mini-mall have outraged Jewish groups around the world.

Kalman Sultanik, vice president of the World Jewish Congress and a Holocaust survivor, said in an interview that he had appealed to the Polish president on the matter Tuesday morning, communicating his distress about the mall.

"It's grotesque and insensitive," Sultanik said, adding that Auschwitz represents all the Nazi camps in Poland.

Some 1.6 million Jews were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau during World War II.

According to news reports, town officials and top Auschwitz museum administrators agreed to the shopping center.

Museum Director Jerzy Wroblewski said the plan was "in no way harmful" and accused the media of misrepresenting it.

He added that the project would "bring order" to the zone around the death camp, a 547-yard protective zone established in 1979 to maintain the area's character and mood.

Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, 73, a former Auschwitz inmate who now heads the museum's council, said he believed that the mall project was created out of "thoughtlessness," not "ill will."

Fueling the fire is the contention of the project's Polish developer that there is nothing wrong with the idea.

The developer, Janusz Marszalek, and a German partner planned to open the mini-mall in a renovated factory and warehouses in early June.

"How can that desecrate the memory of this place?" Marszalek was quoted as saying.

He added that the mini-mall project would create jobs in Oswiecim, the town of 45,000 where Auschwitz is located.

Marszalek is also the president of the Polish Catholic organization that now is housed in the former Carmelite convent at Auschwitz.

Jewish groups previously campaigned against the convent and a church at the site, saying that the camps are a huge graveyard and the major symbol of the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews died.

'Roulette in the barracks?'

Rabbi Avi Weiss, national president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns-AMCHA, was one of those actively opposed to the presence of the church and convent.

One of Weiss' protests, in 1989, ended with convent workers kicking him and his followers — in the presence of police.

Weiss said in a telephone interview Monday that he ultimately places the blame for the mall project on the Polish church and the Polish government, both of which, he said, have "no moral backbone."

Weiss made it clear in the interview that he would go to great lengths to stop the construction of the mall, "even if it means sitting in front of tractors."

The project also reportedly drew condemnation from the regional newspaper Trybuna Slaska, which last week called for it to be halted in a story headlined "Supermarket Auschwitz."

In addition, Szymon Szurmiej, chairman of the Coordinating Committee of the Jewish Organizations in Poland, said, "It is simply unthinkable that directly in front of the biggest death factory of all time" that a "supermarket is to be built."

He added, "Maybe tomorrow they'll set up roulette tables in the barracks." □

Food shortages compel Israel to rethink Palestinian blockade*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Amid reports of dwindling food supplies and acute medical emergencies, an Israeli Cabinet member said the government had no choice but to ease the closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"At some point, we will be forced to ease the closure," Finance Minister Avraham Shochat said this week. "We do not want to starve the residents" of the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel imposed the closure Feb. 25, in the wake of two suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Ashkelon, as part of a crackdown on Hamas. The militant Islamic group has claimed responsibility for the Feb. 25 attacks, and for the March 3 bus bombing in Jerusalem and the attack the next day at a shopping center in the heart of Tel Aviv.

A blockade imposed by Israel on West Bank villages was lifted temporarily Monday to allow Palestinians to stock up on food and supplies.

At a meeting of the Labor caucus in the Knesset this week, Prime Minister Shimon Peres said he opposed the idea of collective punishment, but said there was little other choice in the fight against terror.

Peres reportedly discussed with his ministers easing the closure in the coming weeks, including allowing some Palestinian laborers back into Israel.

Meanwhile, an army intelligence officer warned that the prolonged closure could result in the collapse of Yasser Arafat's self-rule government.

Brig. Gen. Ya'acov Amidror, the head of research for the Israel Defense Force's intelligence branch, told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Israel must provide backing to Arafat or face his collapse.

Arafat himself described the ongoing closure as "inhumane."

Palestinian doctors claimed that the closure was responsible for the deaths of a number of seriously ill Palestinians.

Riyad Zanoun, the Palestinian official in charge of health affairs, said at a news conference that delays in transporting patients to Israel, and between villages in the West Bank, had led to at least two deaths.

He added that essential hospitals in the territories were facing acute shortages of medical supplies.

Hospitals in eastern Jerusalem also reported staff shortages because doctors living in the territories were not allowed into Israel.

The closure prevents 60,000 Palestinians from going to their jobs in Israel.

On Tuesday, an Israeli military court reprimanded an official who was believed to have delayed an ambulance carrying a Palestinian infant. The 3-month-old baby, who had suffered an asthma attack, later died. □

U.S., Israel edge closer to forging defense pact*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel and the United States are moving closer toward forging a strategic defense pact.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres has instructed officials from the Foreign and Defense ministries to bring up the topic during their discussions with Clinton administration officials.

President Clinton was expected to visit Jerusalem after attending Wednesday's anti-terror summit in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Senior political sources were quoted by the Israeli

daily Ha'aretz as saying that Peres hoped to sign a pact with the United States before Israel's May 29 elections. The defense pact could be signed when Peres makes a scheduled visit to the United States in April, the sources said.

If completed before Israel's elections, the pact could bolster Peres' election chances against Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been in a see-saw race with Peres in the polls after a series of recent terror attacks killed scores of Israelis.

The defense pact would include provisions specifying a U.S. commitment to Israel's security needs and to maintaining the Israel Defense Force's technological advantage in the region. Previous U.S. administrations have made verbal commitments on these issues, but never in the form of a written agreement.

The idea of a bilateral defense pact was raised last year, when Peres visited Washington after assuming the premiership in the wake of the Nov. 4 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Israeli defense establishment officials were against the pact at the time, fearing that it could limit freedom of Israeli military activity.

The officials suggested that Israel make do with a strategic memorandum of understanding that would deal with such matters as the research and development of defense systems and a U.S. commitment to provide military supplies in times of emergency, Ha'aretz reported.

At the time of Peres' trip to Washington, U.S. officials were inclined to link raising the level of strategic relations with Israel to progress in the Syrian negotiations.

But Israeli officials now believe that stance may have changed, given Israel's recent suspension of talks with Syria, which has not officially condemned the terror attacks against Israelis. □

David Levy gets second spot in revamped Likud-Tsomet list*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The heads of the Likud, Tsomet and Geshet parties have signed an agreement to form a joint list in the upcoming Knesset elections.

As a result of the agreement reached Tuesday, Prime Minister Shimon Peres will face only one opponent in the race for the premiership in Israel's May 29 national elections: Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

The agreement came less than a month after Likud maverick David Levy announced that he was forming a new party, Geshet — Hebrew for "bridge" — and that he would run for prime minister as party head.

Levy, 58, broke away from Likud in June in a dispute with longtime rival Netanyahu over internal party election procedures.

When he formed his own party Feb. 19, Levy rebuffed overtures to join a Likud-Tsomet list that brought the two opposition parties under one parliamentary banner.

Under the terms of the earlier Likud-Tsomet agreement reached Feb. 7, Tsomet leader Rafael Eitan had agreed not to run for prime minister. He was given the second position behind Netanyahu on the joint list.

When Levy formed his own party, he was viewed as having the potential to siphon votes from Netanyahu by running separately on his new party's centrist platform.

Observers of the long-standing adversarial relationship between Levy and Netanyahu were treated Tuesday to the sight of the two shaking hands with each other at the Knesset, as well as with Eitan, accompanied by a brief burst of singing by others in the room.

Levy agreed to join the new three-way list after being promised the second spot behind Netanyahu, with Eitan now shifting to the third position. □