



NEWS AT A GLANCE

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Religiously traditional Jews in Israel divided over pluralism

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Two surveys of Israelis' feelings about legitimizing Reform and Conservative Judaism have revealed that those who define themselves as masorti — religiously traditional but not Orthodox — are deeply divided about religious pluralism.

And a substantial number of Orthodox respondents — though a minority, to be sure — said they support the official inclusion of the non-Orthodox movements in various aspects of Israeli life.

The recent telephone surveys, conducted by the Israeli polling firms Dahaf and Geocartography, asked Orthodox, traditional and secular Jews whether they support:

- equal status for the non-Orthodox movements;
- alternatives to Orthodox marriage;
- inclusion of Reform and Conservative representatives on local religious councils; and
- teaching about Reform and Conservative Judaism in the public schools.

A narrow majority — ranging from 50 percent to 61 percent of those surveyed, depending on the question — favors the elements of religious pluralism listed above.

Israel's Supreme Court ruled recently that non-Orthodox Jews must be allowed to serve on religious councils, and the Ministry of Education in September began to implement curricula about non-Orthodox views of Judaism.

Despite the court ruling, no Reform or Conservative representatives sit on any of Israel's 140 municipal religious councils because "the decision is being ignored by the politicians who control" the councils, said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

But the Orthodox rabbinate retains control over matters of personal status — marriage, conversion and divorce — as it has since the founding of the state.

Political wrangling over the issue has already played a part in the campaigns leading up to the May 29 national elections.

In Israel, people generally define themselves as haredi (fervently Orthodox), dati (Orthodox), masorti (somewhat traditionally observant but not dogmatic) or hiloni (secular).

More than half of Israelis define themselves as secular, some 15 percent to 20 percent as Orthodox or fervently Orthodox, and the rest as traditional, said Hirsch.

The whole model of religious identification in Israel is quite different than it is in North America.

Majority supports the four planks of pluralism

Many Israelis who define themselves as secular observe some religious traditions, such as lighting Shabbat candles.

Even those relatively few Israelis who identify as Reform or Conservative Jews tend to be more observant than most of their American counterparts.

While the Conservative movement in Israel is called the Masorti movement, the term is more widely understood in Israel, generically, to mean "traditional in religious observance."

The surveys revealed that a majority of those who describe themselves as traditional supports each of the four planks of religious pluralism.

But an extremely significant minority opposes them.

On the matter of equal status for the non-Orthodox movements, 54 percent of those who identify as masorti, or traditional, support it and 39 percent oppose it.

While 54 percent of those identifying as traditional support breaking the Orthodox monopoly on Jewish marriages, fully 43 percent oppose it.

When asked whether "all streams" of Judaism should be taught in the public schools, 48 percent of the traditional said yes, but nearly as many

■ The Jerusalem District Court convicted Simcha Dinitz of committing fraud and abusing the public trust. Concluding a trial that began in October 1994, the court found the former Jewish Agency chairman guilty of allowing the Agency to pay for personal expenses. [Page 4]

■ The House of Representatives passed a measure allowing tariff-free exports to the United States from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The bill, which is designed to spur economic development in Palestinian-controlled areas, is expected to pass the Senate in the coming weeks.

■ Argentine authorities issued a nationwide alert for possible attacks by Hezbollah suicide bombers. The Islamic fundamentalist group warned that it would attack Jewish targets worldwide to avenge Israeli actions in Lebanon. [Page 3]

■ The Swiss Bankers Association agreed to set up an independent commission with Jewish participation to determine the amount of assets deposited by Jews in Swiss banks during the Holocaust. The association's move marked a reversal from an earlier stance, when the group unilaterally issued the results of its own investigation without consulting Jewish representatives.

■ Israeli Health Minister Ephraim Sneh proposed new guidelines for accepting blood donations. Donations from those who spent more than four weeks during the past three years in a country with a high incidence of the virus that causes AIDS, or from people who have had sexual relations with anyone from those countries would be barred.

■ A new survey shows that a majority of Russians exhibit a relatively low level of hostility toward Jews and do not blame Jews for their country's problems. [Page 3]

■ Members of Congress gathered at the Capitol Rotunda for the annual commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day. Survivors also took part in the ceremony.

— 44 percent — said no. Only 50 percent of traditional respondents said Reform and Conservative Jewish representatives should be included on religious councils. Forty-three percent said no.

The close vote among the masorti respondents is interesting because they, as religious but not Orthodox people, would ostensibly stand to benefit the most from official recognition of the Reform and Conservative movements.

Hirsch said the division within the masorti population was expected because “that population often comes from Eastern countries as opposed to Western, where people have first-hand knowledge of non-Orthodox Jews and institutions and thinking.”

Although “non-Orthodox values are viciously attacked” in Israel and “every effort is made on the political level to shut out the Jewish authenticity of these movements, there still is a majority” of traditional Jews favoring inclusion of the non-Orthodox movements, Hirsch said.

According to an American Orthodox leader, “the masorti equivocation” is the most important finding of the two surveys.

“It really is a defining moment for the Jewish community. The ones who may gain with additional representation [on religious councils] realize there is something of greater value than dollars and cents, and that is tradition from Sinai,” said Rabbi Raphael Butler, executive vice president of Orthodox Union.

“A significant number yearn to maintain part of that link at any cost,” he said.

Nonetheless, a substantial number — 20 percent — of Orthodox respondents favor equal status for the non-Orthodox movements, according to the Dahaf poll, while 80 percent oppose it.

And while 72 percent of the Orthodox oppose teaching “all streams” of Judaism in the public schools, more than one-quarter — 26 percent — favor it.

Some 14 percent of Orthodox respondents support the inclusion of non-Orthodox representatives on religious councils, while 82 percent do not support it.

But an overwhelming majority — 86 percent — of Orthodox oppose allowing alternative marriage ceremonies in Israel.

Ten percent are in favor.

As expected, respondents who define themselves as secular overwhelmingly favor religious pluralism as defined by the four questions posed.

Seventy-six percent of secular respondents in the Dahaf poll favor equal status for the non-Orthodox movements and 18 percent oppose it.

About 80 percent of the secularists favor legalizing non-Orthodox marriages. Some 14 percent do not.

Two-thirds of secularists favor teaching all streams of Judaism in public schools.

A quarter of them oppose it.

Action Center wrote to every Knesset candidate

And 69 percent are in favor of non-Orthodox serving on religious councils, while 22 percent are opposed to it.

The Dahaf survey of 452 adults was conducted Feb. 29 and March 3. The Geocartography poll was conducted March 12-18.

Hirsch, of the Reform movement, which commissioned the surveys, did not know how many people were surveyed by Geocartography.

The responses do not always add up to 100 percent because some of those surveyed did not respond to particular questions.

The Dahaf poll, which was more extensive in

breaking down the respondents according to religious affiliation, was confirmed by the Geocartography poll, which produced responses only a few points away from those on the Dahaf poll on each question.

Statistically speaking, the findings were about the same because the surveys’ margins of error were plus or minus 3 percent to 5 percent.

Meanwhile, the Reform movement’s Israel Religious Action Center has written to every Knesset candidate from the non-Orthodox parties “to ask whether they agree with the majority of Israelis,” said Hirsch.

“We want to know what they think and to hold them to it later on,” he said.

The Reform movement has put on hold its effort to introduce legislation to the Knesset to legalize non-Orthodox marriage.

Just before the Knesset disbanded in preparation for the May 29 elections, 16 Orthodox members of the Knesset tried to introduce a bill that would have undermined the recent Supreme Court decision which recognized Reform conversions but put final responsibility for the decision in the hands of the legislators.

At the last minute, Prime Minister Shimon Peres “persuaded them to drop that,” Hirsch said.

“Those kinds of initiatives will be coming fast and furious as part of the Orthodox parties’ negotiating posture as soon as the elections are over.

“We’re preparing for that. We’re not going to be caught by surprise,” he said. □

Pope marks 10th anniversary of historic visit to synagogue

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Pope John Paul II met this week with Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff at the Vatican to mark the 10th anniversary of the pope’s historic visit to Rome’s main synagogue.

“Our meetings are a sign of hope to a world anxiously searching for authentic values of human brotherhood,” the pope told Toaff, who was joined at Monday’s meeting by other leading members of the Rome Jewish community.

“The new spirit of friendship and reciprocal solicitude which characterizes Catholic-Jewish relations can constitute the most important symbol that Jews and Catholics have to offer to a troubled world which doesn’t know how to recognize the supremacy of love over hate,” the pope added.

He invited Toaff to the Vatican to commemorate his April 13, 1986, visit to the main Rome synagogue, situated a half-mile from the Vatican, on the other side of the Tiber River.

That day marks the first time that a pope had visited a Jewish house of worship, a major step forward in Jewish-Catholic dialogue.

During that visit, the pope referred to Jews as the “elder brothers” of Christians.

During their meeting Monday, the pope thanked Toaff for playing host 10 years ago.

“Your visit today allows me to relive the experience and welcome you in my home like you welcomed me in yours,” the pope said.

The pope and Toaff have met on several occasions, but a Jewish source said it was believed that Monday’s visit was the first time that Toaff had led a delegation to the Vatican.

The pope has placed great emphasis during his papacy on improving Jewish-Catholic relations.

In a landmark agreement two years ago, the Vatican and Israel established full diplomatic relations. □

AJCommittee: Russians hold positive views of Jews, Israel*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — While recent opinion polls suggest that a significant part of the Russian population is likely to support pro-nationalist forces in the June presidential elections, a majority of Russians exhibit a relatively low level of hostility toward Jews.

These findings emerged from a new American Jewish Committee-sponsored survey titled "Current Russian Attitudes Toward Jews and the Holocaust."

Describing the overall picture of current Russian attitudes toward Jews, David Singer, director of the AJCommittee's department of research and publications, said the "situation is even more positive than we expected."

The survey, released Tuesday at a news conference in Moscow, revealed that a majority of Russians see the situation in their country in pessimistic terms, but that they do not blame Jews for their country's problems.

When asked about the level of influence Jews have over Russian society, 14 percent of the respondents answered "too much influence," 21 percent said "too little influence" and 29 percent said "the right amount."

When asked whether they would like to have Jews as neighbors, 17 percent answered that they would prefer not to, 67 percent said it would not make any difference and 13 percent answered affirmatively.

Other survey results also suggested that hostility toward Jews seems relatively low.

Five percent of those polled indicated that they would vote for a political candidate who was openly anti-Semitic, but 76 percent said they would not.

The survey also suggested that a majority of those supporting ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or the Communist Party felt no overt hostility toward Jews.

Singer said the survey indicated that the likelihood of the expression of anti-Jewish attitudes by Zhirinovskiy and Communist supporters was not significantly higher than among supporters of reformist candidates.

Zhirinovskiy's followers support him despite his anti-Semitism rather than because of it, Singer said.

'Answer for killing Christ'

The end of state-sponsored anti-Semitism that came with the fall of the Soviet Union had much to do with the relatively low level of hostility toward Jews in present-day Russia, Singer added.

The survey also found that 67 percent of the respondents had a favorable view of Israel, while 15 percent expressed an unfavorable view.

About 10 percent of those polled agreed with the statement: "Now, as in the past, Jews must answer for killing Christ"; 59 percent disagreed; and 31 percent would not give a definite answer.

Those conducting the survey pointed out that the relatively large percentages of respondents answering "don't know" to a number of questions dealing with attitudes toward Jews is a cause for concern, because it points to a potential anti-Semitic swing should the country's conditions worsen. For example, 37 percent responded "don't know" when asked whether Jews have too much influence in Russian society.

The second part of the poll revealed that unlike in Europe or the United States, many Russians lack even the most elementary factual knowledge about the Holocaust. Only half the respondents were able to identify Auschwitz, Dachau or Treblinka as concentration camps, compared with 92 percent in Germany, 91 percent in Poland, 85 percent in Australia and 67 percent in the United States.

The survey was carried out for AJCommittee by ROMIR, a Moscow-based public opinion and market research company, in January and February. The study had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent.

It was the ninth in a series of AJCommittee surveys dealing with attitudes toward Jews and minorities. Previous studies were conducted in the United States, Europe and Australia. □

Argentina tightens security after Hezbollah issues threats*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Argentine authorities have declared a countrywide alert against a possible terrorist attack by members of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement.

The government here said Tuesday that it was "alarmed" after the Shi'ite movement announced that it would attack Jewish targets worldwide in revenge for Israel's current bombing campaign in Lebanon.

Ruben Beraja, president of the Argentine Jewish umbrella organization DAIA, met with Argentine Interior Minister Carlos Vladimiro Corach to discuss special security measures for Jewish institutions and schools. "The minister gave me full assurances and ordered extra police personnel on duty to guard Jewish sites," Beraja said.

Israel's ambassador to Argentina, Itzhak Aviran, said, "Hezbollah is attacking the peace process, and if it cannot bomb northern Israel it will bomb Jewish targets elsewhere."

Also, security at Israeli embassies and other Jewish sites in Europe has reportedly been increased because of the Hezbollah threat.

On Monday, Hezbollah deputy leader Sheik Naim Qassem issued a warning to Jews worldwide, saying, "Let them take precautions and measures and let them know they are in danger anywhere and at any time."

American Jewish groups reportedly went on alert as a result of the threat, but did not specify what steps were being taken.

On April 11, Israel launched a bombing campaign in Lebanon, Operation Grapes of Wrath, to retaliate for Hezbollah rocket attacks on northern Israeli communities.

Israel and Argentina have accused Hezbollah of carrying out two terror attacks in Buenos Aires: the March 17, 1992, bombing of the Israeli Embassy, which killed 29 people and left more than 100 injured, and the July 18, 1994, bombing of the Jewish headquarters, which claimed 86 lives and left more than 300 wounded.

Argentina has come under pressure at home and abroad for its inability to locate those responsible for those attacks. □

Toll in bombings rises to 59*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli wounded in the Feb. 25 Hamas suicide bombing of a commuter bus in Jerusalem has died of his wounds.

Yitzhak Ira Weinstein, 54, was born in New York and immigrated to Israel in 1979.

He died April 13 at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, never having regained consciousness after the suicide attack.

Weinstein, who was buried Sunday, had been on his way to his job at a supermarket when the bomb went off aboard the No. 18 bus, the same line targeted in another Hamas attack a week later. His death brought to 59 the number of innocent people killed in four suicide bombings between Feb. 25 and March 4. □

Dinitz convicted of abusing Jewish Agency charge card*By Michele Chabin*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Former Jewish Agency Chairman Simcha Dinitz has been convicted of committing fraud and abusing the public trust for purchasing personal items at the agency's expense.

The Jerusalem District Court found Dinitz guilty Monday of charging \$6,700 worth of personal merchandise on his own charge card at Syms, a New York clothing store, and then allowing the agency to pay for it.

But the court cleared Dinitz of any wrongdoing related to personal charges he made on his agency-issued American Express card.

Although the court found that Dinitz did charge \$15,400 worth of personal items with the card, it accepted his claim that agency bookkeepers should have deducted these fees from his paycheck.

The agency is the principal Israeli recipient of funds raised by Diaspora local federations and the United Jewish Appeal and is a symbol of the Israeli-Diaspora partnership.

A former Israeli ambassador to the United States, Dinitz assumed his agency post in December 1987.

He was forced to take a leave of absence from the agency in February 1994 amid allegations that he had charged thousands of dollars of personal expenses to agency charge cards.

He resigned in January 1995.

When his trial opened in October 1994, Dinitz pleaded innocent to all the charges against him.

Although Dinitz called his actions an oversight, Judge Shalom Brenner described them as "criminal."

In a 152-page decision, Brenner wrote: "The behavior of the accused in the Syms case was shown to be an extreme case of closing one's eyes that constitutes criminal action."

Upon leaving the courtroom, Dinitz declined to comment, saying only that he needed time to study the decision.

He will be sentenced next month.

During a news briefing Tuesday, current agency Chairman Avraham Burg termed Dinitz's conviction "a very sad moment both on an individual and organizational level." Burg promised "to read every word, every line, every page [of the District Court ruling] and to implement whatever needs to be implemented."

Burg added that the agency had already "reached conclusions necessitated by this case and implemented new procedures and regulations accordingly."

To prevent the misuse of funds, Burg said, the agency has canceled all organizational charge cards as well as individual "frequent flier" benefits.

The agency, he said, has also created "a strict monitoring system" for travel and expenditures by employees and emissaries, including members of the Zionist Executive and senior staff.

The trial of former Jewish Agency Treasurer Meir Sheerit, a Likud Knesset member who is charged with using agency funds for personal expenses, began Monday, after the close of the Dinitz case. □

Peres: America has proposal to end Israeli-Hezbollah battle*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Shimon Peres confirmed that American officials have come up with a proposal for ending Israel's bombardment of Lebanon as well as Hezbollah's rocket attacks on northern Israel.

"Indeed, the United States is involved in an effort to bring about an agreement," Peres told reporters Tuesday after a meeting with Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Karim al-Kabariti.

While Peres said he welcomed the American initiative, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was quoted as saying that it would be difficult for his country to accept the U.S. plan.

The proposal reportedly calls for a Lebanese government commitment to rein in the Shi'ite Hezbollah movement's activities and stop its rocket attacks on northern Israel.

In exchange for a commitment from Beirut to maintain peace in southern Lebanon, Israel would agree to begin holding discussions about withdrawing its forces from its 9-mile-wide security zone.

The proposal also reportedly calls for Israel to stop its current military operation in Lebanon.

But it would maintain the option of responding should Hezbollah resume its rocket attacks on northern Israel.

Syria would also be involved as a guarantor of the Lebanese side of the agreement, according to reports.

U.S. diplomatic sources in Israel were quoted as saying that the State Department's Middle East envoy, Dennis Ross, was coordinating contacts among the Israeli, Lebanese and Syrian ambassadors in Washington.

As diplomatic contacts were continuing Tuesday, Hezbollah fired dozens of rockets into northern Israel, causing some damage. One person was lightly wounded. Two others were treated for shock.

In response, Israeli helicopters blasted targets in Lebanon, including Hezbollah regional headquarters in southern Beirut and the Bekaa Valley. The helicopter gunships also struck a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon, targeting the home of Col. Munir Makdah, who heads a militia that is allied with Hezbollah. □

Muslim refugee in Hungary attacks Jewish Agency envoy*By Agnes Bohm*

BUDAPEST (JTA) — An Afghani refugee who was angered by Israel's bombing campaign in Lebanon repeatedly stabbed an emissary of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Rabbi Yisrael Taub, who was taken to a local hospital Monday with stab wounds to the head, neck and hands, was later described as in serious but stable condition.

Taub, of Jerusalem, has a wife and five children. He has been in Hungary for nearly a year, serving as the religious director of an Orthodox elementary school.

Another teacher was also wounded in the attack, but was released from the hospital.

Hungarian authorities identified the assailant as Vahab Bashir, who has been living in Hungary under refugee status since 1992.

Bashir was an employee of the Hungarian Health Office and as part of his job, he often visited the Reichmann School, where he carried out the attack.

Hungarian state radio quoted Bashir as saying that he stabbed Taub and the other teacher after hearing reports on the radio about Israel's bombing campaign in Lebanon.

Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg reportedly sent safety instructions to all agency envoys after the attack.

The Israeli bombing campaign was initiated April 11 in response to a series of recent rocket attacks on northern Israel launched by Hezbollah fundamentalists operating in Lebanon. □