



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A federal judge in Utah dismissed a complaint by a Jewish high school student who alleged that her choir teacher violated her constitutional rights by proselytizing in class and forcing her to perform religious music. [Page 4]

■ Jewish advocates of church-state separation welcomed a federal court ruling that a public school district in rural Mississippi had abrogated the constitutional separation of church and state by allowing religion in the classroom. [Page 4]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres met with Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the transfer of power and security issues. The two men apparently did not address the possibility of the formation of a national unity government. [Page 3]

■ Israeli Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu said he was being briefed on the situation in Hebron, the last West Bank Palestinian city under Israeli control. The Israel Defense Force chief of staff told a Knesset committee that the army maintains full control of Hebron, but is ready to redeploy within hours, should the order be given.

■ The United States began investigating reports that Syria is constructing a poison gas factory.

■ Likud adviser Zalman Shoval said incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would adopt a new approach to negotiations with Syria that would focus on reaching limited agreements, rather than a formal peace treaty. He was reported saying such issues could include the sharing of water resources, economic cooperation and the cease-fire in Lebanon.

■ Polish officials ordered police to stop the renewed construction of a controversial mini-mall across the street from the Auschwitz death camp.

■ Former SS Capt. Erich Priebke, on trial for his role in the 1944 massacre of 335 Italian civilians, admitted that he took part in the killings, but said he faced death if he refused orders.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Shake-up in Israel promises parallel jolt for American Jews

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The victory of Likud opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu has only begun to reverberate through the American Jewish establishment, but it promises to shake the players and their platforms upside down.

Centrist organizations already are shifting their rhetoric to reflect a changing consensus on the peace process, while those marginalized in the past four years for their opposition to the Labor government policies are trading places with the left-wing "peace camp" groups.

For some, the biggest impact of the Israeli election reaches beyond the organizational landscape.

These individuals are asking whether Israel's turn to the political and religious right could alienate Diaspora Jewry's grass roots, which is largely non-Orthodox and more liberal.

Such alienation could result in a less central role for Israel in both non-Orthodox spiritual life and in mainstream Jewish fund raising, whose cornerstone historically has been an identification with Israel.

Israel's Orthodox parties captured an unprecedented 23 seats in the Knesset and have pledged to roll back reforms granting some legal legitimacy to the non-Orthodox Jewish streams.

Of most immediate concern is a commitment by these parties to pass a law nullifying a recent decision by the Supreme Court that opened the way toward recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions performed in Israel.

Also worrisome for the non-Orthodox is talk of passing what is known as a "basic law," which would assign virtually quasi-constitutional status to the Orthodox monopoly on religious life, referred to in common parlance as the "status quo."

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said the political rise of the religious right is "an enormous blow to the possibility of partnership" between Israel and the Diaspora in enhancing Jewish religious life and civilization.

"Israel will be seen and present itself as advocates for a medieval religious point of view, a point of view which is openly and explicitly hostile to our religious concerns," said Yoffie.

For his part, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, welcomed the changes.

"In essence it means the constant erosion of the religious status quo will now grind to a halt," he said.

Diaspora Jews "should be delighted that in Israel there are enough Jews who want to maintain Jewish tradition and put an end to the waves of assimilation and intermarriage," he said.

Sherer said he is saddened by the fact that this development might hasten the division between Israel and non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, but he also sees it as "inevitable," given the "path of Reform further and further away from religion."

Blaming the Orthodox for disunity is like "blaming a faithful spouse for the breakup of a marriage," he said. "The fault lies with those who stray."

'The largest Jewish ghetto'

But Yaron Ezrahi, a political science professor at Hebrew University, said a coalition of nationalist and religious parties that tries to stop "Israel's move toward an open society" would "create the largest Jewish ghetto in history."

"This kind of Israel will not be attractive to the Jewish world," said Ezrahi, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem.

Another Hebrew University professor, Steven Cohen, an expert on Israel-Diaspora relations, said non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews would "either walk away in alienation and disgust or stay to fight to retake Israel for themselves and for people like them."

The conflict could be good for the Israel-Diaspora relationship, he

said. "I'd be worried if American Jews didn't protest the changes. It would mean they didn't care."

On the political front, surveys before the election showing that the majority of American Jews supported the Labor government's handling of the peace process suggest that the shift to a Likud policy could produce tensions.

But Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, discounted predictions of any broad-based tension.

"I believe the American Jewish majority doesn't identify with Labor or Likud but with the State of Israel," he said. "I believe American Jews today, as before, will stand with the democratically elected government."

"Bibi is someone who appreciates Israel's relationship with the United States and with the Diaspora and won't want to alienate" either one in politics or in religion, added Hoenlein.

Hoenlein's conference as well as other centrist and umbrella Jewish organizations are expected to adjust gracefully to the political change, despite the fact that they have touted, with varying degrees of energy, the line of the Labor government on the Arab-Israeli peace process.

After all, they were forced to make the reverse swing only four years ago, after 15 years of a Likud-controlled government.

In the immediate aftermath of last week's vote, the leaders of these organizations were warning against an overreaction to the results.

They cautioned that it was the late Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin who, despite his hawkish politics, orchestrated the Camp David Accords with Egypt.

And they said that even though they expect modifications from a Netanyahu-led government, it is far too soon to declare that the current peace process will be derailed.

"I don't see this as cataclysmic, I don't see this as revolutionary," Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said of the Likudnik's victory.

The path of Peres represented "the express lane to pursue the peace process," he said, while Netanyahu's reflects "the local lane."

Rancor may again explode

For their part, some right-wing activists, such as Rabbi Avi Weiss, president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns-AMCHA, are shunning what he terms "triumphalism," despite his "joy that Bibi won."

Weiss called for unity, saying, "As concerned as I've been that this peace lacked security, the greater challenge facing Am Yisrael is we're really polarized and that's what really threatens" Israel and the Jewish people.

But the rancor that plagued the Jewish debate over the peace process both before and after November's assassination of Yitzhak Rabin is nearly certain to explode again over hot-button issues such as settlement expansion, U.S. funding for the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian statehood.

Left-wing organizations such as Americans for Peace Now have pledged to resume their time-honored role in the opposition and fight against any policy that it sees as undermining the peace process.

"We intend to organize to a maximum of our ability to prevent a rollback" in the process that would occur if Netanyahu makes good on his campaign pledges, said Gary Rubin, APN's executive director.

Thomas Smerling, head of Project Nishma, a dovish peace process educational group, predicted that the larger Jewish organizations "will fall into line very quickly" with the new government.

Indeed, as soon as any of its policies "elicit world criticism, most will run even faster to circle their wagons because that is the role they're accustomed to."

But he said peace process supporters would be unable to "rationalize the indefensible."

"If it's a replay of [ex-Prime Minister Yitzhak] Shamir, where Bibi invites the Arabs to the table while building settlements madly, there will be exponentially greater dissent than there was five years ago, because so many people have seen what's possible."

Some insiders fear that the free-for-all that began on Capitol Hill in recent years would only intensify and further dilute and undermine the political clout of the pro-Israel lobby, whose hallmark had always been a unified front.

But Morton Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America who was been roundly criticized for his political lobbying against the Peres-led peace process, was sanguine about the future.

Saying that he has been vindicated as "mainstream" by the Israeli elections, Klein added that he foresees a "period of healing" within most mainstream Jewish groups.

At the same time, he predicts that those on the left will "be complaining vociferously about pressure that will be placed on Yasser Arafat to honor his commitments to the Oslo accords or about Jews moving to Judea and Samaria." □

Airport opens in Gaza Strip

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The private airplane of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was the first to land in the Palestinian airport in the Gaza Strip that opened this week.

On Sunday, the pilot of the plane — the flight originated in Egypt — waved a Palestinian flag from the cockpit as the plane touched down on the runway.

"It's one of the most important projects, and this shows how we are moving to implement the peace process," said Arafat, who was present for the inauguration of the airport.

The opening of the airport was delayed as Israeli and Palestinian officials worked out final arrangements for security control and operations.

Ultimately, the differences were resolved by giving the airport a special status, enabling Israel to maintain overall security responsibility without infringing upon Palestinian self-rule. □

Share prices turn skyward

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Share prices on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange rose this week, apparently buoyed by assurances from Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu.

The market took a 5 percent dive last week after the Likud leader's victory.

The Mishtanim index rose by 2 percent Sunday and half a percent Monday.

Some of last week's drop was attributed to uncertainty over the policies of the right-wing leader, specifically in regard to the peace process.

During the past few years, Israel's economy has expanded, a growth linked in part to increasing trade opportunities brought on by the peace process.

The Likud leader this week reiterated that he would continue the peacemaking.

In his victory speech, Netanyahu also pledged to implement a "real market economy" and eliminate bureaucratic restraints on investment and initiative. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Peres' future uncertain
as Labor ministers bicker***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Shimon Peres never looked more uncomfortable than when he and Benjamin Netanyahu stood before reporters this week at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem.

The two men, who had just emerged from their first meeting since last week's election, had discussed "matters of national security" in advance of the expected handover of the government later this month, according to Netanyahu.

As he did during his victory speech to the Likud Party faithful Sunday night, the prime minister-elect once again went out of his way to praise Peres' contribution to the state and its security.

The 46-year-old Netanyahu said he would always want to sit with Peres and listen to his "fascinating and gripping" conversation.

Netanyahu said the Tuesday meeting should be "an example for the entire world, not just Israelis, that in a democracy like ours, governments can change hands smoothly."

Peres' face, meanwhile, grew longer and longer. His eyes stared straight ahead at an indeterminate point above the reporters' heads.

If he shifted his gaze, it seemed, his stony facade might crack completely.

The image reflected the man himself, a man whose future after 50 years of serving the state seemed uncertain. It was also a reflection of the uncertainty plaguing the Labor Party that Peres had led and that now stood defeated.

"My heart goes out to him," Minister of Housing Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said, watching the footage at the studios of Israel Television's Second Channel.

Likud member Tzachi Hanegbi, who is a likely ministerial appointment in the new Cabinet, also seemed to be embarrassed by the veteran statesman's obvious discomfort.

He sought to soften the moment for television viewers with words of praise for Peres' long record of service.

Big question mark

What Peres will do now is a big question mark.

Sources close to the outgoing prime minister dismiss speculation abroad that he might be a candidate for secretary-general of the United Nations or of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The sources said Peres might take a university position.

They say a special position may be created for him at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In addition, he will spend time on his writing, they said.

In any case, the implication is that he will stand down in the not too distant future as the chairman of the Labor Party.

Labor's constitution calls for a leadership election within 14 months of an electoral defeat.

However, Peres may not wish to stay on for that long.

For now, his presence at the helm is having a much-needed stabilizing effect, as the party leadership goes through a wrenching process of recrimination and internal struggle in the wake of Peres' defeat.

Amid all the wrangling, talk of creating a national unity government continued.

As Netanyahu began negotiating with the smaller, mostly religious parties who are expected to join his government, Yitzhak Shamir, a former Likud prime minister, said a unity government was the best way to heal the deep divisions among Israelis.

Before the elections, Netanyahu had floated the idea of forming a unity government with Labor.

But he has not raised the issue again since his victory.

While Peres reportedly opposes the idea, he did not rule it out in meetings with Labor Party ministers this week.

He said the party should wait for an offer from Likud.

Whether such an offer would be forthcoming is now taking second place to the internecine strife among Labor leaders.

Since the results became known last week, Peres has urged his two senior lieutenants, Foreign Minister Ehud Barak and Interior Minister Haim Ramon, to cease their high-profile feuding over who was to blame for the prime minister's defeat.

At a session of the party leadership Monday night, the two men traded accusations, which were instantly leaked to the media.

Ramon claimed that Barak, who had served as Peres' personal campaign manager, "did precious little except complain and hurl accusations at others."

Barak's camp contended that it believed for several weeks that Peres' standing was slipping.

It also contended that Ramon, who had headed advertising and publicity for Peres, had refused to take account of this information and did not let it filter through to Peres himself.

As the allegations fly, a picture of disharmony and backbiting in Labor's election headquarters is being depicted in ever sharper colors.

This internal conflict may subside once Labor settles down to life in opposition after the new Knesset begins its term June 17.

But it is bound to well up again once the battle for the party leadership begins.

Barak is a certain candidate for that important position.

Ramon is likely to run as well — unless after the current conflict he decides to take a break from the world of politics.

Another candidate expected to announce in the coming days his quest for the leadership is Minister of Health Ephraim Sneh.

Yossi Beilin, minister without portfolio and close Peres protege, says he will run for chairman of the Labor Knesset faction, an important position for a party in opposition.

Radically anti-Orthodox campaigning

But he is not explicitly ruling out a bid for the party chairmanship at a later date.

One man who has already declared his candidacy for the prime ministerial election in the year 2000 is Yossi Sarid, the leader of the left-wing Meretz Party.

With his party's win of nine seats in the incoming Knesset — after the polls two months ago were predicting five — Sarid can claim to have had a relatively successful election, even though Meretz dropped from its 12 seats in the outgoing Knesset.

But Sarid must first contend with widespread accusations both within Labor and among independent analysts that Meretz's radically anti-Orthodox campaigning may well have deterred a significant number of voters from supporting Peres. □

School prayer battle continues in wake of mixed court rulings

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The battle over school prayer continues in the wake of two recent federal court decisions that brought mixed news to both sides of the church-state controversy.

A federal judge in Utah delivered a setback last week to Rachel Bauchman, the Jewish high school student who alleged that her choir teacher violated her constitutional rights by proselytizing in class and compelling her to perform religious music.

At the same time, advocates of church-state separation hailed this week's victory of a Mississippi woman in her battle against what she called coercive religious practices in her children's school district.

U.S. District Court Judge Neal Biggers ruled Monday that the North Pontotoc County School District in northern Mississippi violated the constitutional separation of church and state by allowing students to recite prayers over the school intercom and by teaching Bible classes as part of the official school curriculum.

Lisa Herdahl, a Lutheran, said she and her five children were vilified in the community and received bomb threats when she objected to the school's religious practices.

Biggers had issued a preliminary injunction last year ordering the school to cease the activities, and this week's ruling made the injunction permanent.

School prayer can exist without violating the Constitution, Biggers ruled, but teachers must remain neutral. He said the Bible classes were taught from a fundamentalist Christian viewpoint.

Sam Rabinove, legal director of the American Jewish Committee, welcomed the Mississippi ruling.

He said, however, he was troubled by the judge's decision to allow children to continue meeting in the gym for a religious service prior to school, provided that they obtain written permission from their parents.

"Public school is not a house of worship and the student body is not a congregation," Rabinove said.

School officials contend that the student-led prayers — a 50-year tradition in the rural school district — should be viewed as an issue of free speech. They pledged to keep some religion in schools and said the district would likely appeal the ruling.

In Utah, Bauchman, 17, had won a temporary restraining order last year forbidding her school choir from singing religious devotional songs at her Salt Lake City high school's graduation ceremony. But a defiant choir went ahead and prayed anyway.

'Hostile to children'

After reviewing new evidence presented by Bauchman's attorneys, U.S. District Court Judge J. Thomas Greene last week dismissed some of Bauchman's claims as "speculative" and others as unsupported.

Bauchman was unavailable for comment, but one of her legal representatives said Bauchman and her mother intend to appeal the decision to the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

"I don't think this was an unbiased review of the facts by any means," said Lisa Thureau, executive director of the National Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty, which has assisted Bauchman in her legal challenge.

The judge "is affirming the right to have climates in public schools that are hostile to children that are in the minority," Thureau added. "I can't believe we want that."

Greene made an initial ruling against Bauchman

last year denying a restraining order, but that ruling was overturned on appeal.

Thureau said the judge has again "made it clear that he has a different perspective on the Constitution than we do," and hopes for better luck through another appeal. □

School prayer bill advocates seek override of Chiles' veto

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — With his veto of school prayer legislation last week, Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles dealt prayer advocates a setback, but not a decisive blow.

After attempting for three years to put a law on the books authorizing student-led prayer in Florida's public schools, conservative lawmakers are now turning their attention to a possible override of the governor's veto.

In a state where religious conservatives are on the rise and public opinion supports prayer in schools, Jewish activists hailed last week's veto as an important victory over the Christian right, but conceded that it amounts to only a temporary reprieve.

"Certainly it's a victory, but it is far from over," Jack Karako, southeast regional director of the American Jewish Congress, said of Florida's ongoing battle over school prayer.

Stephen Silberfarb, deputy executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council, called the recent showdown with religious conservatives and the Christian Coalition merely "a precursor of battle lines to come" in Florida and across the country.

In his veto message, Chiles, a Democrat, cited his personal belief in the value of prayer, but said the framers of the U.S. Constitution intended to provide citizens with freedom from religion as well as freedom of religion.

"I believe personally that a prayerful and spiritual life are richly rewarding," Chiles wrote. "I commend it, and I recommend it. But endorsing such a life is for me to do as an individual. It is different for the state."

The legislation, which was tacked onto a larger school reform bill, would have authorized public school boards to allow the use of a student-led invocation or benediction at secondary school commencement exercises, sporting events or student assemblies.

It passed the House 92-24 and was approved 33-6 by the Senate.

Florida's Jewish community spearheaded a grass-roots campaign against the measure. The governor's office received a record 20,000 letters and phone calls from citizens across the state.

A diverse delegation of religious leaders, local Jewish officials and Jewish legislators also personally pleaded with Chiles to veto the measure.

"Listening and trying to place myself in the circumstance of a minority, however, gives me a different perspective," Chiles wrote. "I do not believe that the right to petition the Divine should be granted or withheld by a majority vote."

Florida state Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Democrat and a Jew, said Chiles' meetings with Jewish leaders clearly "helped him to put himself into our shoes."

"I think the governor did a tremendous service to the schoolchildren of Florida," Schultz added.

"We avoided a whole lot of potential agony and discomfort."

Supporters of the school prayer legislation, meanwhile, have vowed to continue the fight.

Rep. Joseph "Randy" Mackey, a Democrat who sponsored the legislation, said "uninformed" opponents of the bill set a "terrible example" for children by spewing "hatred and venom." □