



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher** told Jewish leaders that the United States would not prejudice the new Israeli government and would maintain its "unshakable commitment" to Israel as it moves through its "transition process." He also told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that he was working with Arab leaders to tone down the inflammatory rhetoric in advance of the Arab summit in Cairo.

■ **An Arab gunman shot and killed an off-duty Israeli police officer and wounded his wife in the West Bank village of Bidya.** The youth fled from the scene of the attack, the second in two weeks that Israeli security officials suspect was carried out by Palestinian gunmen. [Page 4]

■ **Leaders of the Lubavitch Chasidim reacted strongly to a Rabbinical Council of America resolution condemning those who believe that the late Menachem Schneerson is the Messiah.** The resolution represented a rare public criticism by one Orthodox group of another. [Page 3]

■ **Israeli Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu** expected to present his newly formed government at the opening session of the Knesset. The Likud Party signed agreements with the National Religious Party, Shas and The Third Way, and was continuing to negotiate with both Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and United Torah Judaism on the eve of the parliamentary meeting.

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher** is expected to visit the Jewish state next week to help Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu prepare for his first official trip to Washington next month.

■ **The president of Turkey** told Israeli President Ezer Weizman that his country would not bow to Arab pressure to cancel a military pact with Israel. Meanwhile, Israel and Greece agreed to hold joint naval maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean Sea later this year in what Israeli officials described as an effort to ease Greek concerns over closer military ties between Turkey and Israel. [Page 4]

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Tunisia's Jews quietly rejoice amid developing links with Israel

By Alissa Kaplan

TUNIS (JTA) — Like the children of Israel, it took her 40 years to make her way home.

Mazal Nathan, now 73 and in a wheelchair, recently came to the Tunisian island of Jerba to return to her birthplace and to take part in its annual Lag B'Omer pilgrimage.

Lag B'Omer, a one-day holiday respite from the semi-mourning period between Passover and Shavuot, is a Jewish Mardi Gras of sorts on Jerba, which is 200 miles south of Tunis and, many here claim, the Island of the Lotus Eaters that detained Odysseus.

Even the origin of the island's 800 Jews is awash with legend. Their presence is dated to either after the fall of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. or to the arrival of refugees after the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

In the El Ghriba ("The Marvelous") synagogue, where the floor has been blanketed by accidentally dropped dried fruit, pilgrims sling back shots of Boukha, the potent local liquor made from figs, as they re-establish contact with childhood friends.

Dragonflies zoom above the blue and white open-air "fonduk," a hotel and meeting area where people sample brik, an egg fried in a popcorn-flavored batter, and grilled lamb skewered on palm branches.

A few hours into the festivities, Nathan's son Tahar steers her through the crowd of 5,000 so she has a clear view of the "menara," a tiered, metal structure mounted on wheels and decorated with five-pronged menorahlike candelabras. The famed Tunisian musician Bshini, hunched over his lute, leads the procession — with menara and accompanying musicians in tow — from the fonduk in the town of Hara Seghira, now called Er Riadh, through a neighborhood that was once exclusively Jewish.

Mazal, clapping along, remembers every word of the songs of her youth, even after a four-decade exile.

But the story of her return to this Arab nation is neither as exotic nor unique as it might have been just a few years ago. It is yet another sign of the warming relations between Tunisia and Israel.

In the most significant development to date, Tunisia recently opened an economic interest section in Tel Aviv. The May 27 opening followed the April 15 opening of Israel's office in Tunis.

Tunisia has also opened a diplomatic office in Gaza, where the Palestine Liberation Organization has been headquartered since July 1994.

Although delayed several times, the low-level diplomatic exchanges between Israel and Tunisia represent an important step forward in Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors.

Attitude of 'guarded euphoria'

For many here, these recent moves have come faster than the average Tunisian — both Jew and Muslim — has been able to adjust to them.

One expert on the region calls the attitude "guarded euphoria."

Because of these changes, the Jews here — a total of some 2,000 — are looking toward a new future, rather than focusing on their sometimes difficult past.

Tunisia is a more progressive nation — many compare it to Morocco — than its larger neighbors, bloody Algeria and Col. Muammar Gadhafi's Libya, both places where Islamic fundamentalism has a foothold.

In Tunisia, a nation of 9 million that was once home to the Arab League and the PLO — only the PLO's foreign department remains in Tunis — expressions of fundamentalism are banned. And the president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, in office since 1987, has endeared himself to the Jewish community in several ways, including through the restoration of synagogues and, as one Tunisian man said, by keeping "an eye out" for the Jews.

In the wake of the accords between Israel and the Palestinians, Tunisia was one of the first Arab countries to make diplomatic moves toward the Jewish state.

Israel's economic office is temporarily housed at the Tunis Hilton, just a few hundred yards from a partially constructed building that was to

have served as the new headquarters for the Arab League. In 1990, the league decided at the last minute to move its headquarters back to Cairo.

Security for the Israeli office is tight. After moving past a trio of Tunisian security officers and surrendering a passport to them, it becomes clear that speaking freely in the offices of Shalom Cohen, who is heading the interest section, is a highly unlikely prospect.

The Tunisian government is believed to monitor most of his conversations. And he is followed by Tunisian security officers almost everywhere he goes.

Once inside the cluster of hotel rooms that make up the office, Cohen proudly points to his birthplace in downtown Tunis, played outside his office window.

Between sips of his morning coffee, Cohen talks about his birthplace and its relationship with Israel. Cohen's father, a leader in the Tunisian Jewish community, took his family to Israel in 1960, just after what Cohen called the "golden age of the Jewish community" in Tunisia, when some 150,000 Jews lived here.

Some Jews began to leave Tunisia after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The trend accelerated during the Six-Day War in 1967, when anti-Jewish rioting broke out across the country, and again in the early 1980s, during the war in Lebanon.

Although Cohen, whose office is plastered with posters of Israel, says his real home is Jerusalem, he clearly is attached to this northern African nation. "I know the smell of Tunis" and "understand the Tunisian attitude," says Cohen, who celebrated Lag B'Omer in Jerba, the first Israeli official to do so openly. He was there with some 600 other Israelis — three plane loads flew to Tunis via Rome — the highest number ever to attend the festivities.

Now that the Tunisian office has opened in Tel Aviv and a new Israeli government has been elected, Cohen may have to rely on his insider knowledge.

He says he now has to "persuade" Tunisians that the "peace process will not stop" because of the new Likud-led government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Earlier, projects in such areas as tourism, agriculture and medicine were on hold because the Tunisians had not yet "completed the equation" by opening their office, the Israeli diplomat says. At first, the Tunisians said technical reasons were behind the postponement in the opening of their Tel Aviv office, Cohen says, adding, "Then we entered into the Lebanese shooting."

'Keep a low profile'

Tunisia was among the 64 nations that voted for a U.N. resolution condemning Israel's April 18 shelling of a U.N. refugee camp in Kana, Lebanon, which killed at least 91 civilians. Only Israel and the United States opposed the April 25 measure; 65 countries abstained.

Cohen says that in the wake of the shelling, Israeli officials in Tunis were "asked to keep a low profile in our activity."

But now, projects may be postponed for another reason. "I wouldn't be surprised if the development of relations between the two countries slowed down" until the Tunisian leadership feels that this Israeli government "is as committed as the previous one," he says.

Tunisia, along with other Arab countries, probably will want time to watch the direction of the new leadership in the Jewish state, he says.

Tunisian officials would not comment directly on recent developments concerning Israel.

But a Tunisian Foreign Ministry news release dated June 3 states, "Though the results of the Israeli elections may be considered an internal affair, what Tunisia is interested in first and foremost is the guarantee that the peace process in the Middle East continues at all levels."

It goes on to say: "Tunisia hopes that the process continues with certainty and with the total commitment of all sides, especially the Israeli side."

Even before the Israeli elections, feelings of hesitation and uncertainty were widespread in the Tunisian Jewish community, which does not want to react too quickly to the new political reality between Tunis and Jerusalem. Jews here are handling the newfound openness as if they are handling a newborn baby. They are tentative, prudent and understated in their excitement about Tunisia's new relationship with Israel.

As he stands in the lobby of a resort hotel, Yusef Mamou, a Jerban jeweler who wears a gold charm around his neck spelling "Shaddai," a Hebrew word for God, feels anxious when talking about his views in such an open setting. In a low voice, Mamou says that between 80 percent and 90 percent of the Jews in Jerba have been to Israel at least once.

Clearly, many Tunisian Jews visited Israel when the trips were not permitted officially. Even today, Jews cannot travel directly between Tunisia and Israel; the trip requires a stopover in Europe.

But before the recent warming of ties between the two countries, these trips could not occur openly at all. Tunisian Jews often obtained Israeli visas through a European country, such as France, where many Jews of Tunisian descent live. Tunisia was a French protectorate until 1956.

Until the last few years, Israeli Jews could not obtain Tunisian visas.

In Tunis, where 1,200 Jews reside, a Jewish businesswoman, who asked not to be named, has just returned from a trip to Israel. "The peace process is no longer in question," she says from behind her desk, above which hangs a picture of the president, an image that is plastered everywhere in this country. But "real harmony" between the Arabs and Jews does not yet exist, she says, and Jews have to continue to be careful in their daily life.

The woman, more openly critical of the Tunisian government than most other Jews here, says Tunisia is reaching out to the Jews and Israel in part to increase tourism, which she called the country's "first business."

Wants more U.S. tourists

Annually, the country welcomes 4 million visitors, most of them from Europe. Tunisia wants to attract more U.S. tourists, including those from the American Jewish community, the woman says.

In what appears to be a move toward this end, the Tunisian government was one of the sponsors of a recent symposium in Washington, D.C., titled "Tunisia Today." The gathering, also sponsored by B'nai B'rith, focused on the Tunisian Jewish community. And an exhibit, "Jews in the Cultural Fusion of Tunisia," which received funding from Tunisia, will be shown until Oct. 31 at the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington.

In some ways, Tunisia already has "fused culturally," as in the case of Miriam, a Jerban toddler on a quiet picnic with her family on Lag B'Omer about half a mile from the El Ghriba synagogue.

Miriam picks delicate white flowers as her mother and aunt, dressed in traditional robes of gold, red, green and blue, cook lamb on a open fire. With a shy smile, Miriam, whose hair and hands have been stained with henna, presents her bouquet.

In other countries in northern Africa and the Middle East, visitors would peg Miriam as an Arab.

But if they knew about the unique history of Tunisia, they would realize that she is Jewish and that, unlike generations before her, she most likely will make an open visit to Israel during her lifetime. □

Orthodox rabbis condemn Messianic sect of Lubavitch

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — An organization representing more than 1,000 mainstream Orthodox rabbis has passed a resolution condemning the belief of many Lubavitch Chasidim that the late Menachem Schneerson is the Messiah.

Members of the Rabbinical Council of America passed the resolution at its annual convention in Spring Glen, N.Y., on June 12, a week before the second anniversary of the Lubavitcher rebbe's death.

Many Lubavitchers — no one knows exactly how many — continue to believe that Schneerson is the Messiah, even though the rebbe died June 12, 1994, at the age of 92.

Few Lubavitchers are able to describe that event as their leader's death.

Instead, the strongest language many use to describe the third day of the month of Tammuz on the Jewish calendar is as "the day the rebbe ascended on high."

Before Schneerson's death, nearly every Lubavitcher Chasid believed that the rebbe was the Messiah and that he had not yet revealed himself to be the Redeemer because the Jewish people did not merit it.

At issue now is the fact that a significant segment of the Lubavitch movement continues to believe — and is publicly promoting that belief — that the rebbe will be resurrected as the Messiah.

There are also a few members of the Messianic camp who believe that the rebbe never died at all.

They think that he is simply not yet ready to reappear.

At the same time, many other Lubavitchers acknowledge their beloved leader's death and have dedicated themselves to carrying on his work, reaching out to Jews wherever they may be.

The author of the RCA resolution, Rabbi David Berger, has publicly urged the mainstream Orthodox community to distance itself from the large Messianic faction in Lubavitch by not raising money for the Chasidic group.

The alternative, he says, risks altering "the basic contours of the faith."

The single-sentence resolution, which was passed by consensus, reads:

"In light of disturbing developments which have recently arisen in the Jewish community, the Rabbinical Council of America in convention assembled declares that there is not and has never been a place in Judaism for the belief that Mashiach ben David [Messiah son of David] will begin his Messianic Mission only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it."

The resolution does not finger Lubavitch by name because the RCA's leadership wanted to be careful "not to deprecate or castigate" the entire Chasidic group, said the RCA president, Rabbi Rafael Grossman.

'Not in the Torah tradition'

The original version of the resolution had named Lubavitch.

It was taken out in the end, Grossman said, because "there is a substantial part of Lubavitch leaders who do not hold this view, and among those who do hold the view there are some wonderful dedicated Jews, so it is not our intention to deprecate these people, but to make it clear that this view is not in the Torah tradition."

It is rare for one Orthodox group to publicly criticize another, even if not by name.

Still the response among both factions of the Lubavitch was strong.

Rabbi Shmuel Butman, chairman of the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach, responded to the RCA by saying: "Questions of belief in Judaism are a matter of halachah (Jewish law) and should be referred to recognized Torah giants of the generation for a decision."

"They have never been decided by popular vote, even of a rabbinic organization," he said, adding that he hoped the RCA would refer the issue to its halachic committee.

Butman also said the Lubavitch rebbe himself wrote in 1951 that the "Moshiach can arise with those select few who will be resurrected before the redemption."

Thus, he said, a vote such as that taken by the RCA "is like voting against the rebbe."

Those Lubavitchers who do not endorse the Messianic camp were clearly pained by the RCA resolution.

"It is unfortunate that the rabbinic convention chose to focus yet more attention on these activities, only further obscuring the real work and philosophy of Lubavitch," which is "to spread the light of Torah to every corner of the world," said Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, who is a leading member of the movement's umbrella organization.

He also said, "We have no record of the promoter and driving force behind this resolution ever having attempted to contact the figures of authority within the Lubavitch movement, all of whom are well-known to oppose the irresponsible pronouncements and activities of a few."

Berger, who is an RCA member and works as a professor of history at Brooklyn College and at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, wrote a lengthy article criticizing Lubavitch messianism in the magazine of the Orthodox Union last fall.

The Orthodox Union is a sister organization of the RCA.

Heated debate and correspondence in the magazine followed the controversial piece.

In an interview, Berger said if the Orthodox community allows these Messianic views to become regarded as legitimate in the Jewish world, "it's a fundamental change in the Jewish religion."

In addition, "Jews have then taken away from themselves one of the central arguments we've been using against the Christian missionaries for the last thousand years," he said, referring to the belief that the Messiah died and was resurrected.

Indeed, the so-called Messianic Jewish community, which cloaks Christian theology in Jewish customs and language, has seized on Lubavitch messianism, often using it to bolster its own theological arguments in its promotional literature.

'A second Christianity'

One Jew who converted to Christianity and became a Southern Baptist minister, later evangelizing for Jews for Jesus and other Hebrew Christian groups, described Lubavitch messianism as "the birth of a second Christianity."

"Does this sound like something that happened 2,000 years ago?" said Joseph Daniels, who lives in Baltimore and asked that his real name not be used.

Butman, however, took issue with this view.

The belief that the Messiah can die and be resurrected before redemption "is an integral part of Judaism," he said.

"Because someone else misuses it does not take away anything from Jewish belief," he said. □

Israel seeks Palestinian help to capture policeman's killer

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Security forces continued their search for the Palestinian gunman who killed an off-duty Israeli police officer and wounded his wife in a shooting Sunday in the West Bank village of Bidya.

The attack was the second in two weeks that Israeli officials suspect was carried out by Palestinian gunmen.

In Sunday's attack, Meir Alush, his wife, Nitza, and their son, about 18 months old, had stopped at a toy store in Bidya, a village that straddles the trans-Samaria highway.

A lone gunman followed them in and opened fire at close-range, critically wounding Meir Alush and moderately wounding his wife before fleeing.

Nitza Alush, who was injured in the chest, ran out of the store with her baby and flagged down a car. She was taken to Beilinson Hospital, where her condition was described as satisfactory. The child was not hurt.

Security guards summoned from the nearby Jewish town of Ariel, where the couple lived, found Meir Alush in critical condition in the store. He died of his wounds.

A curfew was imposed on the village.

"We are working on two tracks," said the head of Central Command, Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan. "The first is to try to catch the terrorist. At the same time, we are going to close all the shops along this road in order to provide Israelis with the possibility to move freely and feel safe here." Thousands of Israelis who live in the area travel daily on that road.

Israeli officials believe that Sunday's attack could have been carried out by a member of a terrorist cell operating in the Nablus area. No Palestinian group has claimed responsibility for the incident.

About a week ago, an Israeli couple returning to their home in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba was killed in a drive-by shooting inside Israel. A Hebron-based cell of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was reported to have been responsible.

Israeli security forces gave information to their Palestinian counterparts to help search for the gunman who carried out Sunday's attack. □

Turkey vows to maintain military accord with Israel

By Suzan N. Tarabulus

ISTANBUL, Turkey (JTA) — A much-publicized two-day visit here by Israeli President Ezer Weizman has given a new prominence to the growing ties between Israel and Turkey.

During a meeting last week with Weizman, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel vowed that Ankara would not cancel the military pact that the two countries signed in February. Weizman later told a group of Turkish businessmen. He said Demirel had told him that "no one will tell Israel and Turkey what to do."

Demirel's comments regarding the pact, as related by Weizman, came only days after the leaders of Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt urged Turkey to cancel it.

"The agreement will not be canceled and it will continue without interruption," Weizman reportedly told the group of businessmen.

Details of the pact officially remain secret, but according to a copy of the agreement leaked last week, it calls for the two countries to expand military cooperation by land and sea during a five-year period.

Egypt, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, has been among the most vocal opponents of the

accord in the Arab world, expressing reservations about whether it would disturb the regional balance of power.

Weizman said during his visit here that Israel is not interested in posing any kind of threat to other Arab countries in the region through its developing ties with Turkey.

In a related development, Israel Aircraft Industries was reportedly close to completing a \$600 million deal to upgrade the Turkish air force's fleet of American-built F-4 Phantom jets. The agreement was reached last year, but was delayed as Turkey sought financing from Israeli financial institutions.

The future of the military accord nonetheless remains unclear, given the ongoing negotiations here to form a new coalition government that may be led by the pro-Islamic Welfare Movement.

The party's leader, Necmettin Erbakan, has been a vocal critic of the military accord, though in recent days, as he confronts the chance to form a government, he has softened that stance.

During his visit, Weizman also addressed a U.N.-sponsored international conference on the future of the world's cities.

The Israeli president used his speech before the Habitat II Conference to offer a reassurance that Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu would pursue the peace process, despite some of his hard-line comments during the election campaign. "The commitment of Israel, its people and its leaders, in the past, the present and the future, to the attainment of peace, is unshakable," he said.

During his meeting with Demirel, Weizman conveyed a message from Netanyahu in which the incoming prime minister underscored his commitment to attaining regional peace and to strengthening Israeli-Turkish ties.

In a separate development, Arab representatives at the non-governmental portion of the Habitat II Conference promoted Jerusalem as an Arab and Islamic entity.

The Islamic Congress for Jerusalem, based in Amman, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority were among the Arab groups with delegates at the June 3-7 NGO forum.

Housing in the West Bank was discussed at several sessions, and the Israeli government was condemned for destroying homes of suspected terrorists, said Harris Schoenberg, director of U.N. affairs at B'nai B'rith, who attended the meeting.

Anti-Israel sentiment typical

Criticism of Israel has been a typical feature of the non-governmental gatherings that run parallel to the governmental portions of U.N. conferences. Anti-Israel feelings were evident at the last such U.N. gathering, the conference on women held last summer in Beijing.

The Habitat II Conference was called to examine how nations could improve the conditions of cities as well as provide adequate shelter for their populations.

Nearly half the world's population lives in cities and it is estimated that more than two-thirds will inhabit cities by the year 2015.

Although housing traditionally has not been a Jewish issue, a Jewish presence at the conference is important because "as a community, we must also be vocal on issues related to humankind," said B'nai B'rith's Schoenberg. Schoenberg said a Jewish presence at such international gatherings is necessary to build coalitions. A Jewish presence at this particular conference demonstrated solidarity with Turkish Jewry at a time when anti-Semitism is on the rise here and the Welfare Movement is seeking to form the next government, he said. □

(JTA correspondents Naomi Segal in Jerusalem and Deborah Leipziger in London contributed to this report.)