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NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intends to discuss during his meetings in Washington ideas for restarting the stalled peace talks with Syria.** If Syrian President Hafez Assad genuinely wanted progress, Netanyahu said, the talks could resume at the Wye Plantation, outside Washington, where they were held earlier this year.

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher urged Israel to take "concrete steps" to advance the peace process with the Palestinians.** Christopher, during a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy, also pressed the Likud government to ease the closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

■ **Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai spoke with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat by telephone and agreed to meet soon.** A spokesman for Mordechai said the two would meet after Arafat returns from a trip to Japan.

■ **Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert will be indicted on corruption charges, according to news reports.** Israeli Attorney General Michael Ben-Yair said he would ask the Knesset to lift Olmert's parliamentary immunity.

■ **Some 3,000 peace activists held a demonstration Saturday night at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, urging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to press ahead with the peace process.** Another 1,500 Peace Now members marched through downtown Jerusalem to the prime minister's official residence, bearing the same message.

■ **Labor Party members of the Knesset Interior Committee visited Orient House.** The group, acting in defiance of government policy, made the visit to hear the problems of Palestinians living in Jerusalem.

■ **Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg, dean of the Od Yosef Chai Yeshiva in the West Bank town of Nablus, was permitted to enter the site of Joseph's Tomb, where the yeshiva is located.** Ginsburg had been barred from all of the West Bank, including Nablus, by the Israel Defense Force's Central Command.

FOCUS ON ISSUES [Part 1 of 2]

Non-Orthodox Jews in Israel search for a spiritual identity

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Gilat Shilo grew up in Haifa in what she describes as a "very, very secular house."

Holidays were celebrated through food — "gefilte fish on Rosh Hashanah" and "milchik on Shavuot."

"We never went to synagogue except on Yom Kippur, 10 minutes before the shofar to show off the well-dressed kids."

Today, Shilo teaches Bible in a secular public high school here and maintains, with her husband, what she calls a secular household.

Nevertheless, they went to great expense to move to a neighborhood that boasts a Tali school, one of a network of schools initiated by the Conservative or Masorti movement, for their two elementary school children.

Masorti is the Hebrew word for "traditional" assigned Israel's Conservative stream in the early 1980s.

Shilo and her husband decided that Tali, now part of the public school system but affiliated with Masorti and Reform Judaism, "was a great opportunity" to expose their children to Judaism while "it wouldn't force us to do things we can't do," she says.

In fact, their home has become more traditional both because of the school's call for extensive family involvement in holiday celebrations and because their second-grade daughter "learns and comes home and teaches us" about the tradition.

She also "asks for more" than the abbreviated kiddush they customarily did on Friday nights and has taught them morning prayers, says Shilo. "I feel great about it," she says of the change. "It was something I missed."

She and her husband find it ironic, she adds, that "we can give our children support in almost anything — math, science, Bible — and the only thing they can't learn in the house is Judaism."

Shilo says that she and her "secular" friends believe that if there is no alternative to Orthodox Judaism, "there will be nothing for our children."

Shilo's openness to other streams of Judaism may well reflect a new trend in Israel as more and more of the non-Orthodox population — an estimated 85 percent — talk of a search for Jewish meaning.

But she cannot be called typical.

Many Israelis, from secular to Orthodox, demonstrate unfamiliarity with or outright hostility to the non-Orthodox movements, often describing them as irrelevant or even insidious to Israeli culture.

In the secular camp, many dismiss the streams as synagogue-based imports from North America and say that although they are not subscribers, the only true Judaism is Orthodox Judaism.

Reform and Conservative champions, for their part, say these attitudes are a function of ignorance. They say it results from a historically uneven playing field in which they suffer a distinct disadvantage in the face of the state-sanctioned Orthodox monopoly over religious life.

Elections were a wake-up call

In recent years, however, that monopoly, long termed the "status quo," has been eroded by a series of Supreme Court decisions. These decisions have caused delight among Reform and Conservative sympathizers and deep alarm in the Orthodox establishment.

The Israeli elections in May further polarized the Orthodox and non-Orthodox. They consolidated the power of the religious parties, which secured an unprecedented 23 seats in the 120-seat Knesset and vowed to reverse any legal gains made by the non-Orthodox movements. The latest eruption of this conflict came in August when religious newspapers assailed the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Aharon Barak, for his judicial activism, calling him "a new dictator" and a "dangerous enemy."

For many non-Orthodox Israelis, the elections were a wake-up call. Some proclaimed the start of a cultural war that they believe will trigger a broad search for Jewish meaning and defense of religious freedom.

But the number of Reform and Conservative adherents and their

congregations are paltry. And it is uncertain whether the movements will be able to capitalize on the new sense of urgency to counter exclusive Orthodox power.

Ruth Calderon Ben-Shahar is one Israeli who believes that the public has been jolted by the prospect of intensified Orthodox coercion.

But she does not believe the alternative necessarily rests with Reform or Conservative Judaism. "Our community needs to find its own ways," she says.

The elections "put the non-dati [non-Orthodox] community in a corner where it can no longer leave Judaism and Jewish culture to the Orthodox to decide," adds Calderon Ben-Shahar, the founder of Elul, a Jewish studies center for religious and secular Jews.

Israelis "have adjusted repeatedly to things" decided by the Orthodox that are "far away from their lives and values, and now it's coming to a red line," says Calderon Ben-Shahar, who describes herself as "not unreligious, but not affiliated."

She is now building a college for the study of Hebrew culture and getting her doctorate in Talmud because, she says, "you need a knowledge base to fight a cultural war."

Others reflect an antipathy to the Reform movement, a feeling that is not uncommon in Israel.

"The Reform are Jews but they don't act according to the Torah," says Shalom Biton, a taxi driver who was born in Casablanca and is a member of the Orthodox National Religious Party. "They do what's comfortable for them. They desecrate the Sabbath. It's not religion."

'Lack of information and knowledge'

For Meir Azari, the only Reform rabbi with a congregation in Tel Aviv, Beit Daniel, this reduction of religion in Israel to the extremes of "black and white" is a function of ignorance.

"There is a need in Israel for modern Judaism, but there is a lack of information and knowledge and prejudice because of lack of understanding," he says.

And that, charges Azari, reflects a failure of commitment by Reform and Conservative leaders in North America. They "didn't invest in Israel the heart and the money needed to build the movements."

Azari is overwhelmed with requests for Bar Mitzvahs and weddings. But the majority of even the most secular Israelis seek Orthodox ceremonies for life cycle events, even when they have alternative options.

One is Nava Eisin, who runs the Archives of Jewish Education at Tel Aviv University, who describes herself as secular and an advocate of pluralism.

Nevertheless, "for the sake of continuity," she chose an Orthodox synagogue where her grandfather, an ordained rabbi, had been president when it came time for the Bar Mitzvah of her son. It was a rite of passage which signified to her that "he belongs to a nation."

Aharon Yadlin, a secular sabra who as an education minister during the 1970s was involved in launching the Tali schools, also believes strongly in pluralism and that the Reform and Conservative movements "may help us in some way." But he is convinced that Israelis ultimately will fashion their own stream of Judaism combining "continuity and innovation."

Yadlin is based at Beit Yatziv, a center in Beersheba that is training teachers in the new Jewish studies curriculum recommended by the Shenhar Commission.

That commission was appointed in 1991 by the government to remedy a widespread ignorance of Jewish culture and heritage, an ignorance that it said threatened the state's Jewish identity.

In an important boost to the non-Orthodox movements, it recommended that secular public schools provide a more intensive Jewish studies curriculum. That curriculum was to include the study of a diversity of Jewish thought and tradition, including non-Orthodox streams. But it is now in jeopardy, due to budget cuts and the more Orthodox bent of the new government.

For now, Yadlin believes that Israel's new stream of Judaism will evolve from the consciousness that is cultivated by this new curriculum.

Meanwhile, like many secular Israelis, he feels that the Reform and Conservative emphasis on the synagogue "is a problem because the majority of Israeli society don't go to synagogue every Shabbat."

"To the average Israeli, the religious aspect of Judaism is not dominant," he says. "People, state and Hebrew are the elements."

But Rabbi Ehud Bandel, for one, strongly believes that the message of the movements would resonate for Israelis — if only it could be heard.

The first sabra to be ordained in Israel as a Conservative rabbi and a former spokesman for the Masorti movement, Bandel tries to reach out to couples when they come to him seeking a Conservative wedding.

But the non-Orthodox Jewish education of these couples and others is an uphill battle.

"The moment it is not officially recognized, it can't compete," says Bandel, of Masorti Judaism. Because of its illegitimate status, "it never had a real chance to bring its message to the people."

Non-Orthodox rabbis may perform weddings, but such unions are not legally recognized. The couples usually leave the country for civil ceremonies, which are then recognized by the State of Israel.

Like Beit Daniel's Azari, modern Orthodox Rabbi David Hartman lays the blame for the movements' fledgling status on their leaders in North America.

He calls them "deeply guilty for the Orthodox hegemony in Israel" because they did not understand the importance of building a cultural base there, while the Orthodox did.

'We have to build our soul'

Conservative and Reform leadership failed to "recognize the enormous power Israel would have on the future of Jewish life" and they are now facing the consequences, says Hartman, the director of the Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies.

Rabbi Benjamin Kreitman of the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues in New York, acknowledges that his movement did not make Israel a "priority" arena until the early 1980s.

"The priority has grown over the years as the importance of Israel has become pivotal for American Jewry," he says.

For his part, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, acknowledges that his movement's pre-state anti-Zionism contributed to years of inattention to community-building in Israel.

But he says that inattention ended in 1973, when the institutional headquarters of Reform Judaism — the World Union for Progressive Judaism — moved to Israel. Since then it has spawned a host of institutions, including the Religious Action Center, which spearheads the legal fight against the Orthodox monopoly.

Meanwhile, says Hartman, Orthodoxy in Israel views Conservative and Reform Judaism as "a distortion of Judaism, as a dangerous accommodation to modernity."

"We've built a country, now we have to build our soul. We've reclaimed the land, now we have to reclaim our heritage," he says. "Non-Orthodox Judaism may have a serious contribution to make." □

Netanyahu denies he intends to curb Supreme Court power

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has denied that he is contemplating moves to curb the powers of Israel's Supreme Court.

In an official clarification issued Sunday, the Prime Minister's Office said comments Netanyahu made to this effect that were published by the Israeli daily Ma'ariv had been misunderstood by the paper.

Netanyahu said his comments to the newspaper on this matter had been theoretical, but his quick effort to squelch the quoted remarks demonstrated the sensitivity of the issue.

The issue is currently at the heart of a major political controversy in Israel.

The Orthodox parties, along with some Likud members, feel that the Supreme Court, and particularly Chief Justice Aharon Barak, is too "activist" and liberal in its interpretation of laws.

Religious Jews have assailed Barak about his rulings recognizing gay rights and women's rights.

But the hostility toward the chief justice boiled over with the court's recent decision to keep Bar Ilan Street, a main Jerusalem thoroughfare that passes through religious neighborhoods, open to traffic on the Sabbath and on holidays.

The court's ruling overturned a decision by Minister of Transportation Yitzhak Levy of the National Religious Party to close the street during hours of prayer on the Sabbath and religious holidays.

An article last month in the Yated Ne'eman newspaper, published by the fervently Orthodox Degal HaTorah Party, blasted Barak as a "dangerous enemy" of religious Jews.

In recent weeks, Barak and other justices have received telephone threats.

Security has been stepped up around the Jerusalem home of Barak, who recently said, according to a court source, that he was determined to preserve the rule of law in Israel and that "no individual will scare him."

Netanyahu has urged tough police action to apprehend those issuing the threats, saying he would not tolerate "lawlessness" in Israeli society.

But some members of the legal community fault him for not speaking out forcefully enough against religious and conservative politicians who are campaigning for a reduction in the Supreme Court's powers.

The fervently Orthodox, or haredi, community has long complained that the Supreme Court issues rulings that contravene the beliefs and needs of Orthodox Jews.

Netanyahu discusses separation of powers

The Orthodox parties are seeking to have greater say in the appointments of Supreme Court justices and want greater powers for the Knesset to circumvent the high court's rulings.

Ma'ariv quoted Netanyahu as saying he had been meeting with "eminent jurists, rabbis and academics" to discuss the separation of powers between the court and the Knesset.

Netanyahu told the paper there was "no need for quotas" in an effort to appoint judges of various ideological stripes.

But he added that it was legitimate to consider the question of the court's sphere of authority in relation to the legislature.

"This is a fundamental issue, by no means simple, which we have to deal with as the state matures," Ma'ariv quoted the premier as saying.

"We will not be able to avoid it, and I intend to work out my own opinion on it in the months ahead," Netanyahu added.

Opposition spokesmen, among them former Justice Minister David Liba'i, immediately charged that Netanyahu was giving in to Orthodox pressures to cut down the Supreme Court's power and that he was thereby dealing a serious blow to the rule of law in Israel. □

Fire ravages kibbutz lands, in wooded hills near Jerusalem

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Fourteen months after a forest fire destroyed more than 3,200 acres of woodland in the forested hills near Jerusalem, another blaze has claimed an additional 500 acres of forest and several buildings in the kibbutz of Kiryat Anavim.

Complaining about the poor response to last Friday's fire, kibbutz residents and others living in the affected area outside Jerusalem are leading a vociferous outcry against what they describe as the negligence, apathy and inefficiency of the firefighting services.

They claimed that the report and recommendations of a blue-ribbon inquiry committee set up to study the disastrous July 1995 fire have been largely ignored.

According to a preliminary investigation, last Friday's fire began in the Arab village of Abu Gosh when wind carried the flames from burning garbage.

As the fire spread, black smoke engulfed the area and reached the main Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway.

Thirteen people required medical attention for smoke inhalation, but there were no reports of serious injuries.

Interior Minister Eli Suissa has ordered a new inquiry — both into the weekend blaze and into the apparent failure of the authorities to learn the lessons of last year's fire.

President Ezer Weizman, in a grim-faced visit to the scene Sunday, urged the air force to purchase special firefighting planes and hold them in readiness for such events.

A former air force commander, Weizman said the Israel Air Force's Sikorsky helicopters, which lug large tubs of water from nearby reservoirs and dump them over a blaze, are by no means the most advanced airborne firefighting technique.

But most of the residents' criticism was directed at the ground-based fire services, headquartered at Beit Shemesh, at the foot of the Jerusalem hills.

Kiryat Anavim residents claimed it took hours for the fire officers to appreciate the strength of the spreading blaze and to call up fire-engines from Jerusalem and elsewhere.

"They could have stopped it when it was still small," kibbutz member Chava Abrahams said, surveying the charred wreckage of her mother's home.

Meir Wiesel, chairman of the Mateh Yehuda regional council, charged that "none of the recommendations made after last year's fire was carried out in practice."

These recommendations included beefing up firefighting services in both material and manpower, cutting wider safety swathes through forest tracts, and maintaining better watch for fires, especially during hot weather.

The village hardest hit in last year's fire was Shoresh.

This time, its inhabitants sought to offer shelter and comfort to those forced out of their homes in Kiryat Anavim. □

New Sierra Club president is first Jew to head group

By Yaakov Arnold
New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — It was time to put up or shut up for Adam Werbach.

"I've been mouthing off for so long saying that young people need to assume positions of authority," the 23-year-old southern California native says. "Now was the time."

The Sierra Club board of directors agreed, narrowly electing Werbach as its youngest president.

The December graduate of Brown University assumes control of the oldest and largest environmental organization in the country, with its 600,000 members and $44 million annual budget.

Werbach is also the Sierra Club's first Jewish president.

"There is a long Jewish tradition of young people inheriting their future and taking responsibility for preserving it," he says, noting the biblical characters David and Joseph.

Werbach has delayed plans to attend film school at Columbia University.

He also had to move from Vermont, where he was working on a novel, to Sierra Club headquarters in San Francisco.

While it may seem strange for a group whose average age is 47 and whose founder, John Muir, was 54 when he was chosen its first president, to elect someone so young, Werbach has been active in the 104-year-old club since he was 8.

"There was an open discussion about the level of his experiences, a normal degree of caution because it was precedent setting," recalls Robert Cox, the club's immediate past president, of the recent 8-6-1 vote for Werbach over two other nominees.

"Adam was able to assure people that he was capable."

It was Werbach's "exciting vision to reach out to new constituency [that] won over his colleagues. I was a supporter," said Cox, 50, who still serves as vice president and a board member.

'New format for the 21st century'

Not surprisingly, Werbach is taking a modern approach to educating the masses regarding environmental issues.

"What we need to do now is to create the new format for the 21st century, which is going to use the World Wide Web, it's going to use MTV and it is going to use rock 'n' roll.

"We need to continue to have a greater on-line presence," Werbach says. "We have a very, very active" Web page.

Werbach was a second-grader at Valley Beth Shalom Day School in Encino, Calif., when he came across a letter from the Sierra Club asking his parents, who also are members, for help in a petition drive to remove then-Interior Secretary James Watt.

Adam took the petition to school, and by the end of the day he had some 200 signatures. He was hooked on the Sierra Club.

Five years later, Werbach became a bar mitzvah and took out a student membership.

He also became a vegetarian, "so de facto I was kosher."

Werbach also created the now 30,000-strong Sierra Student Coalition and served as its first director.

In high school and at college, he handed out black snow cones to dramatize the risk of opening up the Alaska Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling.

During his three summers at Camp Alonim in southern California, Werbach initiated the Brandeis-Bardin Institute camp's environmental program and helped start composting and waste-reduction programs.

Werbach — appropriately, Adam means "earth" in Hebrew — credits his love of nature to a combination of "seeing the national parks when I was a child" and to the Valley Beth Shalom Day School.

The day school, which he attended from kindergarten through the sixth grade, "was really involved with tree planting. A critical part of Jewish education was learning about planting trees in Israel and learning how to reclaim the land," Werbach says.

His Judaism, which he says is "a totally formative thing of who I am and something that I am very proud of," will affect his decisions at the Sierra Club, Werbach says.

"Caretaking over the planet, 'shomrei adamah,' is not a political issue," Werbach says during a telephone interview. "It is an issue of goals, ethics, our values, American ethics and world ethics, and that definitely comes from my Jewish upbringing."

The Sierra Club does not ask the religion of its members and does not know the number of Jews in its ranks.

That Werbach's environmental outlook evolved from his Jewishness does not surprise Mark Jacobs, project coordinator for the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.

"Most of us feel connected to God when we have experiences in the outdoors that provoke awe, wonder, reverence and gratitude," Jacobs says.

'Preserving the big picture'

The environment, Werbach proclaims, is "somewhere where common collective action, community action has really made a difference. Environmentalism is the best example of how people in the United States have worked together over the last 20 years to make a difference."

Werbach aims to disprove a misconception that has dogged the environmental organization — that it's only for the rich.

"The club's agenda reaches to all," says Werbach. "The Sierra Club is one of the leading organizations working on the Clean Water Act. Drinking water is something we all share."

Werbach points to the club's urban lead-poisoning program, something he initiated while in college.

"Lead poisoning affects one out of five children under the age of 5 in the United States," he says.

The Sierra Club also has an Inner Cities Outing Program which takes kids "that have never really been out of the city" and gives them a chance to go camping and participate in other outdoor activities.

Because he believes that environmentalism is also deeply spiritual, Werbach, who is generally unknown to most Jewish environmental organizations, would like to reach out to Jewish and other religious environmentalists.

"Religion gives us spirituality, it helps us understand the big picture," he says.

Environmentalism is about "preserving the big picture."

"I don't expect the Sierra Club to take upon any particular religious faith," says the new president of an organization that was founded by the son of a minister, "but to raise the spirituality and be more explicitly open and open-handed to people of religious faith.

"It is actually in religious traditions to protect the planet." □