

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The U.S. Supreme Court left intact a lower court ruling that declared unconstitutional a 1994 Mississippi law allowing student-led group prayer in public school.

■ President Clinton said the administration has broadened its inquiry into Switzerland's dealings with Nazi Germany and will expedite the declassification of documents related to the disbursement of Nazi assets after World War II. In a letter to the World Jewish Congress, he said he had named Stuart Eizenstat to coordinate a wide-ranging probe involving several agencies.

■ A welfare center for elderly Holocaust survivors was dedicated in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. The Chesed Avot Charity Center, funded by a major contribution from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, is one of a series of welfare projects in the former Soviet Union sponsored with the proceeds of restituted property.

■ A Palestinian woman accused of involvement in the July 1994 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in London was freed after a judge ruled there was insufficient evidence against her. Cases against another woman and two men charged in connection with the bombing are scheduled to continue.

■ The FBI reported that Jews were the most frequent target of hate crimes motivated by religious bias in 1995. American Jews were targeted in 1,058 instances, accounting for 83 percent of all religion-motivated attacks and about 13 percent of all hate crimes.

■ An Israeli committee formed to study the issue of barring Sabbath traffic recommended closing Jerusalem's Bar Ilan Street during prayer times on the condition that acceptable alternatives are found for the secular public.

■ Israeli police called off their emergency deployment of security forces around Israeli cities, but remained on alert for possible terrorist attacks.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**U.S. Jews warn of major fight over new conversion legislation**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Reform and Conservative movement leaders are warning of a "Who Is A Jew: Round Two."

A decade ago, non-Orthodox Jews embarked on a major battle to fight legislation in Israel that they believed threatened their legitimacy.

Now the liberal movements again are adopting a no-holds-barred lobbying strategy against an Israeli government initiative that would delegitimize all non-Orthodox conversions.

Proposed legislation, which was expected to be submitted to the Knesset as early as this week, states that no conversion to Judaism will be legally recognized in Israel without the approval of the Chief Rabbinate.

The measure, which is supported by Orthodox Jews in America, was initiated by the Orthodox political parties in the coalition government and has the full backing of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The bill does not specifically refer to conversions within Israel. As a result, it is being read by American Jewish religious leaders across the denominational spectrum to mean that it would also undermine the legal standing of non-Orthodox conversions performed outside of Israel.

At issue for many Diaspora Jews is not the relatively small number of people who convert to Judaism within the liberal movements and either live in or want to emigrate to Israel.

Instead, non-Orthodox leaders say, the heart of the matter is the message that Israel would be delivering to the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jews: that the Jewish state, homeland for all Jews, is rejecting as illegitimate their definition of Jewishness.

"It's an absolute affront to world Jewry that legislation would be introduced to deny the religious sensibilities of the vast majority of the world's Jews," said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, warned: "If American Jewish leadership does not articulate its dismay quickly, we could find ourselves with a law that will distance Israel from the Diaspora."

For its part, the Israeli government says it is in a quandary.

Israel's Supreme Court "is putting pressure on us, saying that either we make a decision or they will," an official in the Netanyahu administration said in a telephone interview from Jerusalem.

'We don't want the government to fall'

When the Supreme Court last year issued a decision paving the way for the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel, Orthodox parties vowed to introduce legislation to bar them, and made support for such legislation a condition for joining Netanyahu's coalition government.

"Within Likud, there is a great deal of concern that we don't want to alienate Diaspora leadership, but on the other hand we don't want the government to fall," the Israeli official said, noting the coalition's dependence on the Orthodox parties.

The quasi-governmental Chief Rabbinate's office, which is strictly Orthodox, does not currently recognize as valid any conversion performed under the auspices of the liberal religious movements. The rabbinate controls all matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, conversion and burial. But the government of Israel differs. Through the Law of Return, it guarantees citizenship to anyone who is born Jewish or converts to Judaism outside of Israel.

"The bill is a back door way of modifying the Law of Return and changing the definition of 'Who is a Jew,'" Hirsch said.

A direct effort to alter the Law of Return in the mid-1980s by the Orthodox parties then in the Israeli government resulted in the "Who is a Jew" debacle, which threatened to create a wide rift in Diaspora support for Israel. The parties sought to add the words to the Law of Return: "converted according to halachah," or the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law.

This time around, the anticipated legislation is being welcomed by the

heads of the Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel of America, two major groups representing Orthodox Jews.

Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union, said he was happy with the Netanyahu government's effort "to strengthen the Chief Rabbinate."

"We have always rejected attempts to transplant the pluralism of the U.S. or of Christian countries to a Jewish society," he said. "The secular builders of Israel understood that Israel can only have one chief rabbi, one set of laws for kashrus and conversion and Jewish identity" when they endowed the rabbinate with control over all matters of personal status, Ganchrow said.

Ganchrow also lambasted the Reform and Conservative movements for "making this an issue."

"Let us not super-saturate the air with this kind of controversy, and let us work together here on assimilation and intermarriage," he said.

Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel of America, said, "This type of legislation is important in order to not further split the Jewish people into two groups, one which cannot intermarry with the other because they are merely pretending to be Jews."

"It is more important to keep the Jews intact as a nation," he said, than to worry about creating problems between "a segment of American Jews and Israel."

Leaders of the Reform and Conservative denominations, which represent more than 90 percent of American Jews who identify with a movement, are approaching the matter in several ways.

The goal of their strategy, they said, is to convince the Israeli prime minister that the bill must be withdrawn to preserve the financial and emotional relationship between Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel.

"To risk additional confrontation with the two religious movements which represent the majority of American Jews is the height of folly," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "A prime minister who has a reputation for understanding American Jewish life should do better."

Yoffie and Schorsch jointly sent Netanyahu a terse letter last Friday, requesting a private meeting with him when he comes to the United States next week to address the Council of Jewish Federations' General Assembly.

"We are gravely concerned at the news" of the pending legislation, they wrote.

Yoffie also wrote to the president of CJF, asking him to put the matter on the agenda of the group's G.A., which will bring together thousands of Jewish communal leaders in Seattle.

Unprecedented lobbying effort

When the Israeli government was on the brink of amending the Law of Return in 1988, North American Jewish communal leaders embarked on an unprecedented lobbying effort and traveled in waves of delegations to the Jewish state. They met with Israeli government leaders to impress upon them the damage that such a change would cause. In the end, the legislation was withdrawn and a crisis was averted.

With Reform and Conservative leaders at the helm of the protest effort, other Jewish organizations are also speaking out. Martin Kraar, CJF's executive vice president, said, "We're seriously concerned about this. It is causing a significant number of our constituents to be concerned and this week we are weighing our options for how to deal with it."

Six months ago, veteran Jewish leader Shoshana Cardin, a former president of CJF who in 1988 led the organized Jewish community's fight against the proposed legislation, suggested that CJF create a committee to

explain to Israeli leaders why efforts to delegitimize non-Orthodox movements in Israel would damage Israel-Diaspora relations.

That committee is now being formed. David Minkin, the chair of the as-yet-unnamed committee, responded to the latest developments, saying, "We are accelerating, to say the least."

When this proposed legislation becomes known, said Minkin, an Atlanta attorney, "I expect we'll see responses in every community across the country."

Cardin, for one, fears that the Jewish community will not respond the way it did in 1988.

"There has been a growing gap" between American Jews and Israel over the last nine years, she said.

Cardin said she worries that young American Jewish leaders will react by simply retreating from pro-Israel activism. "Some may say that if things for Israel improve [politically and economically] and 'I am not included, or a member of my family is not considered to be a full Jew, then I will express my Jewishness only here in the U.S.," she said. □

In Israel, liberal conversions equal those of Chief Rabbinate

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Chief Rabbinate in Israel gets some 10,000 requests for conversions a year but completes only about 400, according to Reform sources.

After the Israeli Supreme Court last year issued a decision that opened the door to the possibility that the government might recognize Reform conversions performed in Israel, the movement there was flooded with people seeking to become Jewish, said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Outside of the rabbinate, which recognizes only Orthodox conversions, the Reform movement now converts between 300 and 350 people a year in Israel, he said, about two-thirds of them immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

The movement requires converts to study Judaism for several months, establish that they are keeping a Jewishly observant home and attend religious services. Then most leave the country to complete the process because the government will not recognize a Reform conversion done in Israel, only one done outside the country.

Many of the converts finish the process in England, Holland or the United States, where they go to a Reform religious court, or beit din; immerse in a ritual bath, called a mikvah; and for men, have a symbolic brit milah, or circumcision. When they return to Israel, they are immediately recognized by the government as Jewish, Hirsch said.

So are the hundreds of babies each year adopted by Israelis from Eastern Europe and South America. The new parents have the babies converted to Judaism by non-Orthodox rabbis in Europe and North America, he said.

On the other hand, the Masorti movement, sister to North America's Conservative movement, last year performed about 100 conversions to Judaism in Israel, according to Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

Those conversions are begun and finished in Israel even though the converts are not recognized as Jews by the state.

"The legal status of the converts is in dispute but they are willing to test the law with us," said Schorsch.

In fact, the Conservative movement has a lawsuit pending before the Israeli Supreme Court, seeking legal recognition for the conversion to Judaism of 21 infants. □

ELECTION '96

Jewish political endorsements spark election season debate

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The election campaign may be over, but the debate over Jewish involvement continues.

When B'nai B'rith President Tommy Baer recently criticized Bob Dole's attempt to link his struggle with his disability to discrimination faced by Jews, there was an outcry. For what readers of the Sept. 30 article in The New York Times article quoting Baer did not know was that he had already endorsed President Clinton's re-election bid. Baer's comments had Republican Jews seething and sparked renewed controversy about whether it is appropriate for presidents of Jewish groups to endorse candidates.

Although Baer was far from alone in his political involvement this election season, he was singled out by some Jewish activists for attacking Dole in the name of B'nai B'rith while endorsing Clinton in his private capacity. The incident raised the question of whether presidents of Jewish groups even have a private capacity when they sit at an organization's helm.

Federal rules prohibit non-profit groups from engaging in partisan activity and endorsing candidates. But the law allows lay leaders as individuals to endorse candidates. Although the practice of endorsing candidates is not new, campaigns this year at the national and local levels increased their quest for public support from Jewish leaders. The campaigns had hoped that Jewish voters would support their candidate after seeing that prominent leaders had.

Baer was not the only organizational president to sign on to the Clinton-Gore Jewish Leadership Council.

Issue has many concerned

Seymour Reich, president of the American Zionist Movement, and Robert Rifkind, president of the American Jewish Committee, also joined the 600-member Jewish support committee for Clinton.

Dole won the endorsement of about 55 people for his Jewish Americans for Dole committee, including veteran Jewish leaders such as Max Fisher, who also served as national finance co-chairman of the Dole campaign. None, however, lead any Jewish organizations.

The issue has many concerned. "The heads of Jewish organizations, both lay and professional, ought not support political candidates while in office," said Lawrence Rubin, executive vice chairman of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

"You can't turn your affiliation with an organization on and off. It will not be generally understood."

The Council of Jewish Federations subscribes to NJCRAC's position, according to Frank Strauss, CJF's director of communications.

"This is not a question of law but one of prudence," said Marc Stern, co-director of the legal department at the American Jewish Congress.

"Conflict of interest rules have not been well-applied to the Jewish community," said Stern, who is slated to speak at a special session devoted to the issue at the CJF's General Assembly in Seattle later this month.

For her part, Diana Aviv, director of the CJF's Washington Action Office, believes that the endorsements of candidates by presidents of Jewish groups "is fraught with danger."

"If someone asked me for my opinion, I would discourage them from being active in a political campaign while serving as president," Aviv said.

But Baer and others say this is a free-speech issue.

"When I became president of B'nai B'rith, I did not sacrifice the right to endorse Democrats, as I have for a long time," he said. "I see no conflict of interest," he added, "so long as an association is not made between Tommy Baer in my private capacity and Tommy Baer as president of B'nai B'rith."

As for his criticism of Dole, he said it was not motivated by partisanship.

"I would have said the same things if it were Clinton who made the awkward comparison," he said.

Baer's criticism came in response to remarks Dole made during a speech to a B'nai B'rith convention over Labor Day weekend. "Nor have I forgotten that I'm sort of a member of a special group, with a disability, and what would happen to those of us with disabilities if we discriminated in America," Dole told the convention delegates.

Seeking to reassure Jews, he said, "You don't face any risks in a Dole administration. I know what it's all about."

In a Times story a few weeks later that addressed Dole's outreach to minority communities, Baer said: "Physical disabilities and discrimination, I don't think they can be equated."

"The attempt to draw the two together takes away from both. I thought Dole was trying to show his concern, but the manner in which it was articulated was perhaps a bit awkward."

While saying that he was not singling out Baer for criticism, NJCRAC's Rubin said of this exchange, "This is precisely the kind of conflict we are taking about."

"He would have had much more credibility criticizing Dole if he had not endorsed Clinton."

But the AJCommittee's Rifkind, who also endorsed Clinton-Gore, agreed with Baer. "I did not give away my rights as a citizen when I became president of the American Jewish Committee," Rifkind said.

Consensus regarding lower-level leaders

In contrast, Reich of the American Zionist Movement said he now regrets his endorsement. "In retrospect, I probably should not have endorsed a candidate," he said. "I think it is not wise for a sitting president to engage in political matters on a public plane."

While there is disagreement on the propriety of political endorsements by organizational presidents, there appears to be a consensus that political involvement by lower-level lay leaders and by board members can, in fact, be important. "For the federations to be effective at all, we need lay leaders on both sides of the aisle to be very active so we have contacts with whoever wins," Aviv said. "We have assiduously sought out lay leaders closely affiliated with candidates and parties."

Steve Grossman, the former president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee who now serves as chairman of the board of the pro-Israel lobby, agreed.

"People who are in leadership positions in major Jewish organizations need to maintain strong and productive bipartisan relations," said Grossman, who served as chairman of the Massachusetts Democratic Party before he became AIPAC president.

"If I were still president of AIPAC, I clearly would have supported the president for re-election but probably would have avoided public endorsement of all kinds," said Grossman, adding that he endorsed Clinton during this election.

Meanwhile, some Republican Jewish leaders say they hope this election cycle marks the end of group presidents endorsing candidates.

"The one thing that Washington does have is people with long memories," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the National Jewish Coalition. □

Justice Department seeks deportation of war criminal

NEW YORK (JTA) — The U.S. Justice Department has initiated deportation proceedings in Detroit against Ferdinand Hammer, a Nazi war criminal who was stripped of his U.S. citizenship in May.

Hammer, who is now 74 and lives in Sterling Heights, Mich., was a guard at the Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen concentration camps and served as an SS guard on prisoner transports between the camps.

Hammer was born in Croatia and came to the United States in 1955.

Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, said, "We intend to seek Hammer's expeditious removal from this country."

On May 22, U.S. District Judge Horace Gilmore stripped Hammer, a retired foundry supervisor, of his American citizenship after concluding that he misrepresented his wartime past when applying for that citizenship in 1963. When Hammer applied for citizenship, he signed an affidavit specifically stating that he had not served as a camp guard and that he had never sent anyone to a concentration camp.

The court found that Hammer willfully concealed his wartime activities to gain entrance into the United States. Evidence included prison transfer records, found in Russian and German archives, with Hammer's name.

Hammer did not appeal the decision by Gilmore, who had said, "Horrible mistreatment was meted out to inmates of these camps." □

Argentina files complaint against Israeli ambassador

By Sergio Kiernan

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — The Argentine government has filed a complaint in Israel against the Israeli ambassador to Argentina, Itzhak Aviran.

Argentine Assistant Foreign Minister Andres Cisneros called Aviran to a meeting last week and protested recent public statements made by the envoy.

Aviran recently spoke out after a recent series of anti-Semitic incidents here, including the defacement last month of 100 tombstones at the Jewish cemetery of La Tablada. "It is not enough to show solidarity with us," Aviran said. "The government must do something because we only see darkness, more violence and less security."

During his meeting with the ambassador, Cisneros called Aviran's statement an intrusion in the internal affairs of the country, adding that it "does not reflect the opinions of the State of Israel or the Argentine Jewish community."

In an unusual step, the Argentine government publicized over the weekend details of Cisneros' meeting with Aviran and filed a complaint in Israel.

These steps were taken "to make very clear that our problem is with Aviran and not with Israel," an Argentine Foreign Ministry source said in an interview.

Argentina's protest "did not create tensions with Jerusalem," the ministry source said. "We expect that Aviran will be instructed to tone down his constant criticism of the Argentine government."

The Israeli Embassy did not comment on the incident.

At first a low-profile ambassador, Aviran has become during the last few months an outspoken critic of the Argentine government, citing its inability to find those responsible for the March 17, 1992, bombing of the Israeli Embassy, which left 29 dead and some 100 wounded.

Aviran, along with Jewish groups here and abroad, has also criticized the government's inability to solve the

July 18, 1994, bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association, also known as AMIA.

The AMIA bombing left 86 dead and more than 300 wounded.

The Argentine government has repeatedly raised expectations that they had achieved breaks in the two bombing cases — only to dash those hopes at a later time.

Last week, for example, authorities arrested four neo-Nazi suspects in connection with the recent attack on the La Tablada Jewish cemetery outside Buenos Aires.

This week, the four were released because of a lack of evidence.

The suspects were arrested Oct. 24, less than a week after the cemetery attack, during which vandals smashed and marked tombstones with swastikas, and daubed the site with graffiti saying that the Holocaust was "a great Jewish lie."

The case caused a stir after authorities found floor plans of the AMIA building during a raid on the suspects' homes.

But this week, the official in charge of the case, Judge Victor Termite, denied there was any break in the AMIA case, saying the floor plans were photocopies taken from a book that was published after the AMIA bombing.

In the past five years, eight attacks on Jewish cemeteries in Argentina resulted in the destruction of more than 400 headstones.

Vandals were caught in only one of those attacks.

In a separate development, Argentine authorities are looking for an Iranian national in connection with the 1992 embassy bombing. They would not reveal the identity of the Iranian suspect. □

Canada seeking to deport 2 alleged Nazi war criminals

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — Canada's Justice Department has launched denaturalization and deportation actions against two alleged Nazi war criminals.

The actions against 75-year-old Vladimir Katriuk and 82-year-old Ladislaus Cszicik Csatory bring to eight the total number of such cases the department has initiated during the past two years.

The Justice Department alleges that Katriuk, a Montreal resident, served as a section leader in the Schuma 118, a Belarussian police battalion that brutalized partisan groups, and that he participated in atrocities against civilians between 1942 and 1944.

Csatory, who moved to Toronto from Montreal several months ago, allegedly served in the Royal Hungarian Police at Kassa, Hungary, and participated in the internment and deportation of thousands of Jews to death and labor camps in 1944.

Both suspects lied to gain admittance to Canada and to obtain citizenship, the Justice Department contends.

It has been nearly two years since the Canadian government announced its intention to launch proceedings against a preliminary list of 12 Nazi war crimes suspects.

Proceedings have already been launched against Katriuk, Csatory and six others. The government has yet to act on the remaining four cases.

Though they commended the government for initiating action against the latest two suspects, Jewish officials expressed dismay at the slow pace of the government and the court system.

"It's especially troubling that the process is so lengthy, knowing that time is on the side of the alleged war criminals," said Jack Jedwab, executive director of the Canadian Jewish Congress' Quebec region, referring to the advanced ages of the suspects. □