



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a scheduled meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa in Lisbon. Both men were planning to be in the Portuguese capital for a session of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe. [Page 2]

■ Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai called on Egypt to act as a "bridge" between Israel and the Arab parties to the peace process. Mordechai met with Egyptian Ambassador Mohammed Basiouny amid ongoing tensions between Jerusalem and Cairo over the impasse in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. [Page 2]

■ The U.N. General Assembly is set to consider a resolution that calls Jerusalem "occupied Palestinian territory" and calls for compensation to the Palestinians for any "exploitation, loss or damage to their natural resources." [Page 3]

■ The Association of Slovak Jewish Communities called on the Czech National Bank to provide compensation for gold that was taken from the local Jewish community during World War II by the Slovak government. The association said the gold "was stolen from Slovak Jews during the war and then transferred to Prague." [Page 4]

■ Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Karim al-Kabariti criticized what he described as the Netanyahu government's policy of double talk regarding the peace process. Kabariti told the Israeli daily Ma'ariv, "You hear from [Netanyahu] one thing and on the ground you see something else."

■ About 15 yeshiva students returned to a seminary at Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank town of Nablus. The students had not been at the yeshiva since late September, when six Israeli soldiers and one Palestinian were killed when anti-Israel rioting erupted in the town.

■ Argentina received Nazi gold that was first laundered in Switzerland during the war, an Argentine Jewish leader claimed. "We believe Argentina served as a country of transit for Nazi gold," Ruben Beraja told an Argentine newspaper.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Outreach program quenches real 'thirst' for Jewish life

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — In times as polarized as these, it is rare to find a religious program involving Jews across the denominational spectrum.

But the National Jewish Outreach Program manages to do it — and do it successfully.

Through Friday-night programs and brief, introductory courses on Hebrew and Judaism, the National Jewish Outreach Program has brought 165,000 Jews — most of them otherwise unaffiliated — through the doors of more than 1,300 synagogues of every stripe, according to Ephraim Buchwald, the program's founder and director.

One of those Jews is Marc Chervitz, 33, who took the outreach program's Crash Course in Basic Judaism at the Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner Synagogue in Overland Park, Kan.

Chervitz said he had felt alienated from Judaism since his Bar Mitzvah, after which his family stopped attending synagogue. He and his wife had recently moved to nearby Kansas City, Mo., when an acquaintance told them about it. They took the introduction to Judaism class and loved what they heard. That was three years ago.

Today they are regular attendees at the 120-family synagogue's Shabbat services, and Chervitz is the shul's vice president for membership.

For Chervitz, the five-week class "awakened something in me that I didn't even know I was looking for."

"Once I realized that it was my Jewish identity I wanted to learn more about, I began studying more," he said. "I finally learned why I was Jewish from a religious point of view."

When the outreach program first began in 1988, nearly all the participating synagogues were Orthodox. Now two-thirds of them are Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform. The synagogues that participate in the outreach — which includes a "Turn Friday Night into Shabbos" program, along with a two-part crash course in Hebrew reading and a crash course in basic Judaism — can be found across the country, from New York to West Virginia, from Alaska to Guam.

'Most Jews want to be touched'

"People are thirsting, fainting for Jewish life," Buchwald said in an interview. "Most Jews want to be touched."

"They're really waiting for it, and the tragedy is that we're not getting them fast enough while everyone else, like the Messianic missionaries, is working hard to do it," he said.

Buchwald's goal is to get 500,000 unaffiliated Jews involved in courses during the next 10 years, along with 150,000 volunteers, already-committed Jews, teaching in the classrooms.

His 20-member staff includes Orthodox and Reform rabbis, along with other professionals across the religious spectrum.

Buchwald has slated next April 4 as the first nationwide "Turn Friday Night Into Shabbos" and hopes to have 300 congregations from all denominations offer Shabbat dinners for their entire communities.

The programs are successful because "we bring them in with something cultural, universal, innocuous, which is reading Hebrew, and they walk away with a tremendous feeling," Buchwald said.

The effort has worked well at Reform Congregation Beth Shalom in Anchorage, Alaska, which has been offering the outreach program courses for 18 months, said Rabbi Harry Rosenfeld.

Between 75 and 100 people have participated in the basic Hebrew and Friday night programs at the 188-family temple, he said. Half of the participants had never before been involved in the temple, he said, and several have since become extremely active members of the congregation.

"The success rate in bringing in the unaffiliated has been good," said Rosenfeld of his experience in a city where about one-quarter of the 3,000 Jews belongs to his synagogue or the other one in town, a Chabad congregation.

The programs also help people find the connection between observing

rituals and God, he said. "The programs really work to stress that ritual consists of holy tasks, that it's not just doing an action for the sake of doing an action, but that ritual is really designed to bring you closer to God through your Judaism, and that's really important for people."

The Anchorage congregation's experience is no surprise as far as Buchwald is concerned.

The first time Buchwald offered the Hebrew reading crash course, in 1988, "we hoped to reach 800 people and 5,000 responded," he said of the program's appeal.

His current annual budget of \$1.5 million has almost doubled over the last three years, he said.

The program's primary funder is philanthropist Michael Steinhardt, who gave the organization a \$1.5 million grant to be paid over five years, and to be matched by other contributions.

Two decades ago, Buchwald virtually created the idea of outreach to the unaffiliated by developing a synagogue service tailored to the needs of uneducated Jews.

The beginner's service he led at Manhattan's Lincoln Square Synagogue — then the flagship modern Orthodox congregation — was an instant success.

He built on the same concepts he used then — making sure liturgy and customs were accessible and non-intimidating — when he founded the outreach program nearly 10 years ago.

His center offers materials, curricula and training to synagogues who offer the programs.

His ultimate goal, Buchwald said, is not only to bring people closer to their Jewish identity, but to coax them into greater Jewish observance.

"Hopefully, we'll be able to inspire them to go much further" than learning basic Hebrew or celebrating one Shabbat, he said.

"I'm not out to make everybody Orthodox, but I'm not abashed to say that I want to give everyone traditional Judaism," he said.

"We have 3,300 years of empirical evidence proving that only maintaining the rituals of Judaism maintains Jewishness," he said.

"After three or four generations secular Judaism doesn't work."

"No more than 10 percent of the people we reach become very traditionally observant, but virtually everybody we touch grows."

That is certainly true of Shoshana Cohen.

Cohen, a 46-year-old from Eugene, Ore., was involved with her local unaffiliated liberal synagogue but looking for something more when a friend told her that a small Orthodox synagogue, the Center for Jewish Learning, was offering a crash course in basic Hebrew.

Cohen signed up and since then has been studying with the rabbi and occasionally attending services at the 40-family shul, though she remains active in her first congregation, where she serves as the treasurer.

"Knowing Hebrew has allowed me to pray more in Hebrew, and that's made me more aware of my religion. It has made me more observant," Cohen said. "I'm not Orthodox by any stretch of the imagination, but I take what I can from it." □

Israeli-Egyptian ties in decline over impasse in peace process

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has canceled a scheduled meeting with the Egyptian foreign minister, a move that reflected worsening tensions between Cairo and Jerusalem.

The meeting between Netanyahu and Amre Moussa was to have taken place Monday in Lisbon, where the two were to observe a summit meeting of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe.

The 52-member organization brings together NATO countries and former members of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact to discuss security and human rights issues.

During his trip to Lisbon, Netanyahu is slated to hold separate meetings with French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and British Prime Minister John Major.

Netanyahu is also scheduled to visit Madrid and Dublin this week.

Israel's growing tensions with Egypt come amid repeated statements from Cairo that Israel is to blame for the current impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for handing over most of the West Bank town of Hebron to self-rule.

The negotiations have dragged on for two months, with each side blaming the other for delaying an agreement.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Saturday that he would seek international arbitration in an effort to force Israel to conclude an agreement.

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai met Sunday with Egyptian Ambassador Mohammed Basiouny in an effort to reduce the tensions with Cairo.

During the meeting, Mordechai called on Egypt to act as a "bridge" between Israel and the Arab parties to the peace process.

Cairo served as the setting Sunday for a meeting of the Arab League to discuss the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

A Palestinian representative told the meeting that the policies of the current Israeli government threatened to reignite violence in the region.

In Hebron, meanwhile, the absence of a signed agreement is creating further unrest in the already volatile town.

On Saturday, Palestinians scuffled with Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank town, with each side claiming the other started the incident.

Nine Palestinians were arrested and several hurt, according to news reports.

The scuffles took place as Palestinians demonstrated throughout the West Bank, calling on Israel to release Arab prisoners from its jails.

Arab marches and sit-ins took place Saturday in all the main West Bank cities. □

Stats on foreign workers published

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For the first time, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics has published figures on foreign workers in Israel.

As of November 1995, the number of foreign workers in Israel totaled close to 110,000, according to the bureau.

That figure includes more than 60,000 legal workers and some 47,000 illegal workers.

Unofficial estimates, however, put the number of foreign workers currently in Israel at close to a quarter of a million people.

The use of foreign workers in Israel, particularly in agriculture and construction, has increased as result of the closures of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The closures have prevented Palestinians in the territories from going to work in Israel.

The Israeli government has begun to take steps to deport illegal foreign workers. □

Conference recalls heroism of Jewish doctors in Shoah

By Jon Kalish

New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — One internist produced vitamins in a makeshift lab. Another physician suggested catching flies for food. Some doctors forged signatures of Christian colleagues to get prescriptions filled.

These were some of the actions of Jewish doctors during the Holocaust, the subject of a recent three-day conference held at the New School for Social Research in New York.

Sponsored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the New School's Graduate Faculty, the conference dealt with the role of Jewish physicians in saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

Referring to the 120 Jewish doctors who cared for some 40,000 Jews in the Vilna Ghetto in Lithuania, Dr. Steven Sedlis told the room of scholars: "I stand in awe of the competence and tenacity of these physicians."

For Sedlis, the chief of cardiology at the Veterans Administration hospital in Manhattan, it was not exactly a detached sentiment. His parents, who are both physicians, survived the ghetto.

Both Sedlis and his obstetrician father, Alexander, addressed the conference on the public health situation in the Vilna Ghetto.

The gathering was the idea of Yulyan Rafes, a Lithuanian-born doctor who specializes in the history of medicine. Rafes, a research fellow at YIVO, where he studies Jewish medicine in Eastern Europe before the war, has written a book about what he called "medical resistance" in the Vilna Ghetto based on records kept at the insistence of the Nazis and preserved by the Soviets.

"The German intent was to destroy the Jewish people with hunger, sickness and epidemic," Rafes told the conference. "The Jewish doctors, regardless of the terrible conditions, fought against this with high ethics and professional activities, which in full right should be called medical resistance."

The younger Sedlis described how Jewish "sanitary police" fined and in some cases imprisoned Jews who violated public health rules. There was extreme concern about the possibility of a typhus outbreak.

"There was a tremendous concern that the Nazis would use any sort of infectious disease as a pretext for liquidating the ghetto," he said.

Sedlis told of one internist in the ghetto who started producing vitamins in an improvised lab.

Typhus was diagnosed as influenza

The elder Sedlis, who is now affiliated with State University of New York Health Sciences Center in Brooklyn, was an orderly at the Jewish hospital in the Vilna Ghetto. He recalled a Jewish doctor there named Boba Zalkindson, "a mathematical genius" who proposed learning how to catch and eat flies to prevent starvation. Partisans hoped to help Zalkindson escape to the Soviet Union, but he perished in an Estonian camp in 1943.

Dr. Naomi Baumslag of Georgetown University Medical School dedicated her presentation to her uncle Bernard, a doctor who lost his life "due to the murderous activities of the Lithuanians and the Germans."

Baumslag said the diagnosis of typhus in Lithuania's Kovno Ghetto was concealed as "influenza" to protect the infected Jews.

Yitzhak Kerem, a lecturer in modern Greek history at Aristotle University in Salonika, Greece, said the Jewish physicians in Nazi death camps were "heroes. They helped a lot of people survive."

He told the story of a Jewish doctor named Samuel from Cologne, Germany, who sabotaged the Nazis' sterilization experiments. Samuel was supposed to infect Jewish girls from Salonika with cancer and remove their ovaries.

But Samuel "opened them up and he didn't do anything," Kerem said. The Nazis "caught up with him and executed him." □

Draft U.N. resolution calls Jerusalem occupied territory

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

RYE, N.Y. (JTA) — The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America has sharply criticized a draft U.N. resolution that refers to Jerusalem as "occupied Palestinian territory."

The resolution "brings us back to the sorry era of utterly unrealistic and poisonous rhetoric that so characterized the United Nations for too many years," said an O.U. statement that was adopted by the group's officers last Friday.

The statement was adopted during the O.U.'s biennial convention, held here over the Thanksgiving weekend. "The news that Egypt has joined in co-sponsoring this outrageous draft raises serious questions as to the Mubarak regime's continued commitment to the spirit of Camp David," said the statement, referring to the 1978 Camp David Accords which became the basis for Egyptian-Israeli peace.

The resolution is being co-sponsored by Egypt and other Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Mauritania, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

The resolution, which is expected to be submitted shortly to the U.N. General Assembly, calls for "restitution and full compensation" to the Palestinian people for the "exploitation by Israel, the occupying Power, of the natural resources of the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, and other Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967."

The General Assembly opened late last week its annual debate on the Middle East and is expected to vote this week on a resolution concerning the "Question of Palestine."

The draft resolution describes an "additional, dangerous impact of Israeli colonial settlements on Palestinian and other Arab natural resources, especially the confiscation of land and the theft of water resources."

There are several reasons why the strongly-worded resolution may be circulating now, according to David Luchins, an O.U. vice president and senior adviser to Sen. Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.).

Egypt may be seeking to retaliate against the United States for its recent veto of U.N. General Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali's bid for a second term, Luchins said. Boutros-Ghali is Egyptian.

Luchins said another possible explanation is that the resolution is intended to warn Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "that if he doesn't move on Hebron things will be tougher," referring to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on implementing an agreement to turn over most of the West Bank town to Palestinian self-rule.

"At worst, the resolution is an effort to implode the peace process," Luchins said.

If Egypt and the other sponsors "are serious about this resolution, it's a deal-breaker" for the peace process because "it can only delight the most extreme opponents of the peace process on both the Arab and Israeli sides," he said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Disabled Israeli teens offered chance to become B'nai Mitzvah

By Michele Chabin

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Hundreds of Israeli children celebrate their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs every week, and 13-year-old Asher Gorsky did not want to be an exception.

In mid-November, Asher, a handsome but frail boy with a radiant smile, realized his dream before two dozen relatives and friends.

Asher has cerebral palsy.

He has no control over his voice or limbs, and he can see nothing but shadows.

When called up to the Torah at a Masorti/Conservative synagogue in the heart of Tel Aviv, the wheelchair-bound teen "recited" the blessings by pressing a special, automated vocal device with his head.

Although the voice on the tape was not actually Asher's, the expression on the Bar Mitzvah boy's face as he waited for the exact moment to chant the blessings spoke volumes about his determination to officially enter the ranks of Jewish adulthood.

While Bar and Bat Mitzvah programs for disabled children have been operating for two decades in the United States, only one such program, introduced in 1994 by the Masorti/Conservative movement, is available in Israel.

This program has enabled nearly three dozen physically or developmentally disabled Israeli boys and girls to take an active role in their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, usually in a group ceremony. By the end of next year, at least 60 more will join their ranks.

Although Israeli society is progressive when it comes to special education, says Judith Edelman-Green, director of the Masorti movement's Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program for the Special Child, "few severely disabled Israelis have had a full-fledged Bar/Bat Mitzvah."

While some families would never consider having their disabled child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah for religious or cultural reasons, "in most cases, Israeli families simply don't know that such an option is available," says Edelman-Green.

Some parents "assume that it's impossible," she adds, because some religious authorities "say that severely disabled kids are exempt from the obligation of having a Bar Mitzvah ceremony."

While the Masorti movement continues to seek recognition for its religious institutions in Israel, the Bar and Bat Mitzvah program has received Ministry of Education funding since the summer of 1995.

Intensive one-on-one instruction

The ministry's approval of the program was "a very significant step of recognition for the Masorti movement as a whole," Edelman-Green says.

The program provides intensive one-on-one instruction to disabled children, regardless of their physical and intellectual limitations or religious background.

Asher, the most disabled child to ever enter the program, had special needs.

"Many children who can't speak simply point to the blessings, but since Asher can't see, we decided to use a machine with a microphone next to his ear," says Edelman-Green.

"Working with his Torah teacher as well as his speech clinician, we were able to tailor a service that was just right for Asher."

Although Asher can communicate only simple concepts with his vocal machine, Edelman-Green stresses that "everything came from him."

Putting on a tallit "was Asher's idea, as was his

request for a Kiddush cup. Believe me, he knew what was happening from beginning to end."

Ironically, had Asher's mother not read about the Masorti program in a local magazine, he would not have become a B'nai Mitzvah.

"We're not religious, but we had been told that according to Orthodox law, children like Asher can't have a Bar Mitzvah," says Ada Liza Gorsky. "I didn't know anything about the Masorti movement until I read the article."

Holding her son's hand after the ceremony, her eyes glistening with tears as relatives and friends smother Asher with kisses, Gorsky says, "We will never forget this beautiful day. It's hard to tell exactly what Asher is feeling, but I know he is happy." □

Slovak Jewish group seeks restitution from Czech bank

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — The Association of Slovak Jewish Communities has called on the Czech National Bank to provide compensation for gold that was taken from the local Jewish community during World War II by the Slovak government.

Association spokesman Jozef Weiss told a Czech newspaper that the gold "was stolen from Slovak Jews during the war and then transferred to Prague."

The Czech National Bank is a successor to the State Bank of Czechoslovakia, which obtained the gold from the Slovak government in 1953.

The association wants Slovak victims of the Nazis, who created a puppet government in Slovakia during the war, to be compensated by the bank.

The location of the gold, however, is not clear.

Bank spokesman Pavel Palivec said all its assets, gold included, were divided between the Czech Republic and Slovakia when Czechoslovakia split into the two countries in 1993.

But the Slovak government maintains that the gold in question was kept separate from other assets and was therefore not included in the division of former federal assets. □

Russian Jewish cemetery vandalized

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Vandals have destroyed 16 graves in the Jewish cemetery of Saratov, Russia, some 450 miles southeast of Moscow.

Leaders of the Russian Jewish Congress called the incident another manifestation of "anti-Semitic terror" in Russia, and urged authorities to investigate the crime and work to prevent such incidents in the future.

The Saratov cemetery was desecrated on a larger scale earlier this year, but no suspects were apprehended in that incident. □

E.U. student group accepts Israelis

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Thanks to the efforts of Palestinian and other Arab students, Israel's national student council has been accepted as a full member of the European Union's student association.

Student councils from Scandinavian countries had initially opposed Israel's inclusion, Israel Radio reported.

But the representatives were later persuaded by their Arab counterparts to change their opinion. Representatives of both the Israeli and Arab student councils signed a pledge to advance the principles of peace. □