

**NEWS AT A GLANCE**

■ Members of Israel's Knesset mobilized both for and against the emerging deal on the West Bank town of Hebron. Meanwhile, Jewish settler leaders called for efforts to persuade ministers believed to be wavering on the accord to vote against it. [Page 2]

■ Several U.S. Jewish groups signed on to a friend-of-the-court brief urging the Supreme Court to uphold the constitutionality of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The 1993 law makes it harder for the government to infringe upon the free exercise of religion.

■ Outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher urged Jewish leaders to fight additional cuts in U.S. foreign assistance. Aid to Egypt, Israel and Jordan could come under "irresistible pressure" if foreign aid is cut further, he told the gathering of Jewish officials in Washington.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has scheduled Jan. 26 for his first official meeting with non-Orthodox rabbis. He is slated to meet with 60 American Reform rabbis, who are heading to Israel to lobby against proposed legislation that would strengthen the authority of Israel's Chief Rabbinate over conversions performed in Israel.

■ A leading Swiss Jew said anti-Semitism was on the rise and has been fueled by the former president's accusation that Jewish groups were trying to "blackmail" Switzerland for seeking compensation for Holocaust victims.

■ Iran denied inviting Israeli athletes to attend an international fencing tournament in Tehran, Iranian media reported. The head of Israel's fencing association, who said the team received an invitation, said he thought that it was sent only to meet international tournament rules that all members must be invited to competitions.

■ The United States warned South Africa that it might cut off aid if a planned \$650 million arms sale to Syria was carried out. The United States says Syria is a state sponsor of terrorism.

**FOCUS ON ISSUES****Scientific discovery shows genetic link to biblical Aaron**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — A scientific discovery of what could be called the "Kohen chromosome" has sparked interest among Jewish religious leaders of all persuasions and could have religious implications that the scientists themselves never anticipated.

After about four years of work, Dr. Michael Hammer, a geneticist at the University of Arizona at Tucson, and Dr. Karl Skorecki, a professor affiliated with Haifa's Rambam Medical Center and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, found that Jewish priestly lineage could be genetically traced to the progenitor of all Kohanim, the biblical Aaron.

In a sample of 188 men, they found that the lineage is visible in two markers on the Y chromosome that is transmitted from father to son.

Hammer warned in a telephone interview, however, that the research is not complete and that only 20 percent of the men who might be descendants of Aaron had those particular markers.

The findings have prompted questions whether genetic testing could be used as the basis for Jewish legal decision-making.

Skorecki said, "This research is not currently applicable to testing of individuals with regard to their status in the Jewish priesthood."

"Persons should be valued on their own individual merits, without regard to their ancestry," he wrote in an electronically mailed response to questions.

But after the findings were published in the London-based scientific journal *Nature* and were picked up in *The Jerusalem Post*, Skorecki received many requests from Orthodox Jews in Israel who want to be tested to prove scientifically that they are descendants of Aaron.

In the time of Israel's First and Second temples, the Kohanim performed holy rites at the site where God was believed to be manifest.

Jews were traditionally divided into three classes: Kohanim, Levites and Israelites.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 C.E., the priests' role has changed.

The honor of the first blessing over the Torah is given to a Kohen in Orthodox and some Conservative congregations.

**A spiritually powerful act**

Kohanim also recite special blessings during worship on some Jewish holidays.

The ritual recitation, called *duchening*, is a mystical and spiritually powerful act in which a Kohen takes off his shoes, has his feet washed and then, standing before the congregation, raises his tallit over his head and with outstretched arms acts as a conduit for God's blessing over the congregation.

"It's one of those things that is numinous," said Rabbi David Wolpe, who teaches Jewish philosophy at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

"It gives you a sort of awe-struck sense of something beyond us," he said.

The ritual is being reclaimed by some liberal Jews who did away with it in the move toward egalitarianism in years past. But in the last two or three years, the Conservative movement has officially begun to encourage its practice.

The Reconstructionist movement's founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, discarded all references in prayer to the Jews as God's chosen people, and his followers are not likely to reintroduce a custom that represents "the chosen of the chosen," said Rabbi Michael Cohen.

Cohen is a Reconstructionist rabbi who in another denomination would be considered a Kohen.

Reconstructionists "don't deny that Kohanim existed at a certain point in time, but we understand now that the notion of someone having a right purely by birth doesn't sit well with many of the principles that we hold dear," he said in a telephone interview.

For those who observe the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law,

Kohanim are bound by certain restrictions. They are not permitted to marry divorced women, to go near corpses or into cemeteries.

Some rabbis have expressed concern that the genetic testing could be used to define who is a Kohen when the man in question may not care.

In Israel, for example where the Orthodox rabbinate controls marriage, a secular man who is also a Kohen could potentially be prohibited from marrying a divorced woman.

Most rabbis of all denominations, though, dismissed that as highly unlikely.

While not inconceivable, "that is a far-out possibility," said Orthodox Rabbi Irving Greenberg, who is himself a Kohen.

"Though with the Israeli rabbinate, you never know."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for Agudath Israel of America, which represents fervently Orthodox interests, said he "severely doubts" whether genetic testing could ever be used to make a Jewish legal, or halachic, determination of whether a man is a Kohen.

Jewish law permits as evidence only those "things that are discernible to the five unaided senses," Shafran said.

"If it's too small to be seen by the unaided eye," then it could not be used in making a halachic determination.

Of the men who want to be tested for the markers, "I think it's more a matter of their curiosity than for any down-to-earth purpose," Shafran said.

"No one will ever be forced to take the test," he added.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists in America, said he did not expect that the Israeli Orthodox rabbinate would soon, if ever, be able to use the findings in any way that would hurt non-Orthodox Jews.

"I don't really understand why people would be overly concerned. One small study wouldn't do it" to establish these findings as widely accepted fact, Hirsch said.

Hammer, an unaffiliated Jew whose most recent religious connection has been to the Indian guru Sri Chinmoy, said he was motivated to locate the Kohen chromosome by historical and scientific impulses rather than piety.

As a result of the unanticipated potential religious implications, the scientists are uncertain how far to take their research.

"We're in a dilemma," Hammer said. "We can't prove or disprove very easily if someone is a Kohen from this data. Do we want to?"

"If we don't, will somebody else come along, a genetic-testing company, and do it, or would the Orthodox rabbinate hire some company to do it for them?" Hammer said.

"Are we in a situation where someone could patent this as a genetic test?"

"This is very troublesome and worrisome," he said. "It's up to the scientists to say what can and cannot be determined at this point," but "the ethical issues are up to the rabbinate, or whoever's in charge of those rules and laws and things." □

### **Israeli opponents of deal on Hebron lobby Cabinet**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israelis opposed to an impending agreement on Hebron began mobilizing Monday

in an effort to thwart the transfer of the West Bank town to Palestinian self-rule.

Seven of the 18 Cabinet ministers are believed to be opposed to the agreement.

Settlers from the Jewish community in Hebron decided in a meeting to focus efforts to persuade those ministers, as well as others believed to be wavering, to vote against the agreement.

The National Religious Party and Tsomet factions in the Knesset convened to discuss their position on the agreement.

And the Yesha Council, which represents settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, met to discuss what actions it would begin taking to rally forces against the agreement.

Among the steps it was considering were demonstrations, a hunger strike and a symbolic resignation of all local council leaders.

Concerns among Israelis opposed to the redeployment of Israeli troops from most of Hebron rose as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators worked Monday to finalize the wording of an accord.

The intervention of Jordan's King Hussein, who met separately Sunday with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, helped to clear a main stumbling block over further Israeli redeployments in the West Bank.

The sides agreed that three further Israeli redeployments in rural areas of the West Bank would be completed by mid-1998.

Although Sunday's breakthrough made a signing appear imminent, officials from both sides stressed Monday that differences still had to be overcome.

During talks Monday at Jerusalem's Laromme Hotel, the Palestinians charged that their Israeli counterparts were trying to change nine clauses that had already been agreed on.

Israeli officials taking part in the talks denied the accusation. □

### **Gay partner of IDF officer wins right to get benefits**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Tel Aviv court has ordered the Israel Defense Force to grant the homosexual partner of a deceased IDF career officer all the benefits awarded surviving spouses.

In its precedent-setting ruling, which forces the IDF to recognize gay unions, the court's appeals committee accepted the appeal of Tel Aviv resident Adir Steiner.

Steiner had appealed to the committee on the grounds that he was publicly known as the companion of Col. Doron Maisel, an officer in the medical corps who died of cancer in 1991.

The IDF had previously rejected Steiner's requests for recognition as the surviving partner.

Steiner argued that the law on granting rights to a person's known partner, even if there was never a formal marriage, did not specify his or her sex.

He maintained that the IDF's policy of refusing to grant him the benefits because of his gender was discriminatory.

Steiner argued that if he were a woman, he would not have encountered any resistance to receiving the benefits.

In accepting Steiner's arguments, the committee said that the law providing benefits to the survivors of career officers applies to couples who have been formally married and to those who are known in public as life companions. □

**Polish premier to visit Israel, return famed Wolf Haggadah***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Poland's prime minister this week was set to make an official visit to the Jewish state, in an effort to build economic ties between the two nations and to bolster the Polish-Jewish relationship.

Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz will meet with top Israeli political and business leaders and with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.

Also during the visit, Cimoszewicz, in an official ceremony, will present the 14th-century illuminated Wolf Haggadah to the National Library at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The fate of the Haggadah, worth more than \$1 million, has been in question for years.

Officials in Warsaw said the visit, which begins Tuesday, had historical significance, in large part because Poland was home to millions of Jews before World War II.

Cimoszewicz and other Polish leaders apologized last year for the 1946 Kielce pogrom, which prompted many of Poland's remaining Jews to emigrate, and for other anti-Semitic episodes in Poland's past.

The leaders also called for an end to the stereotype that all Poles are anti-Semitic.

Poland also adopted a plan to better conserve the former Auschwitz death complex.

Polish Defense Minister Stanislaw Dobrzanski is accompanying the prime minister, and will likely discuss Polish plans to buy the NT-D anti-tank missile, now being developed by Israel's Rafael.

Polish exports to Israel totaled \$20.7 million in 1995. Imports from Israel totaled \$65 million.

In the first nine months of last year, there were \$12.1 in exports and \$61.3 million in imports from the Jewish state. □

**Stalled peace talks hinder German investment in Israel***By Daniel Dagan*

BONN (JTA) — German companies are hesitating to invest in Israel and the Middle East because of the region's unfavorable political climate, according to a number of media reports here.

Handelsblatt, the nation's leading economic daily, recently ran a full-page story on what it termed the "bad atmosphere" created by a long period of foot-dragging in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Another German daily, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, referred to recent anti-Israel demonstrations during an Israeli trade fair in Amman, Jordan, as a sign of deteriorating relations between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors.

"All this is bound to have a negative impact on our decisions," an unnamed executive was quoted as saying.

"Of course, we must consider the general atmosphere in the region."

Handelsblatt quoted a representative in Israel of the German electronics giant Siemens as saying that recent political developments in the Middle East were causing difficulties for the German business community.

Siemens was one of several major German companies that opened offices in Israel during the past few years in hopes of taking advantage of potential economic cooperation between Israel and the Arab world.

Daimler Benz, the largest German industrial conglomerate, also started activities in Israel after the start of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

But it has so far failed to invest in any major projects.

Israeli diplomats in Germany emphasized the importance of German investments in the Jewish state.

They cite as an important example a \$400 million investment by Europe's biggest automobile producer, Volkswagen, in a magnesium plant at the Dead Sea.

But, as Handelsblatt noted, this investment was made in 1995, when the peace process was still on track and an atmosphere of confidence characterized Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Since that time, the paper said, there have been no major German investments in Israel and the prospects for such moves are gloomy.

But Israeli officials here, seeking enhanced economic ties with Europe's most powerful economy, tend to downplay recent events.

"Once the peace process resumes and the Hebron accord is implemented, the current mood will certainly change," an Israeli official here said.

"We are working hard to convince the business community here that in spite of current difficulties there are many economic opportunities, and that German companies can play a major role in developing infrastructure and other big projects in the region." □

**Possible Argentine police link to anti-Semitism to be probed***By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — The Argentine government has announced the creation of a special police unit that will investigate charges of police involvement in anti-Semitic attacks.

The Jan. 9 announcement came in the wake of harsh criticism by the Argentine Jewish community, which has alleged police complicity in recent attacks on Jewish targets.

Ruben Beraja, president of the Argentine Jewish umbrella organization DAIA, said last week that community leaders suspect that police were involved in October's desecration of a cemetery near Buenos Aires and in November's failed bombing of the Ezrah Hospital in the capital.

The creation of the special police unit was announced by Buenos Aires Province Security Secretary Eduardo De Lazzari after he met with top police officials. Beraja and Oscar Hansman, president of the Argentine Mutual Aid Association, or AMIA, also took part in the meeting.

De Lazzari said the creation of the force "shows that there is no animosity against the Jewish community among policemen."

"We shall enforce the anti-discrimination laws and will show that the Buenos Aires police force is against any form of bigotry," he said.

Beraja welcomed the decision to create the investigative unit, but said police officials are only "just admitting that there is a problem." □

**Minister issues order on cemetery**

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's religious affairs minister, Eliahu Suissa, has ordered the local council of Arad to allocate space in its cemetery for people whose Judaism is questioned.

Officials in the southern town of Arad said work to this effect had already begun.

The order comes after recent public debate about where to bury an 8-year-old boy who was killed in a traffic accident. □

**South Africa can require 'get' before approving civil divorce***By Suzanne Belling*

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — Jewish leaders here have hailed an amendment to South Africa's divorce law that links civil and religious divorces.

As a result of the amendment enacted late last year, the country's courts may now refuse to grant a civil divorce until the necessary steps have been taken to obtain a religious divorce.

In the past, when the two divorces were not linked, there were often abuses within the Jewish community, such as when a husband would refuse to grant his wife a religious divorce, or "get," but would be able to obtain a civil divorce.

Under these circumstances, wives remain "agunot," Hebrew for "chained," unable to remarry under Jewish law.

Now the parties to a divorce, particularly women, will be free to rebuild their lives.

But because the amendment is not retroactive and will only apply to future divorces, the plight of existing "agunot" is not affected by the new legislation.

South African Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris was an active proponent of the amendment.

The rabbi applauded the new law, saying, "Our unique South African democracy again comes to the rescue.

"So many legal experts in other countries have dismissed the problem as one belonging solely to the religious community and not the law of the land," Harris said.

Rabbi Rafael Grossman, president of the Rabbinical Council of America, hailed Harris' work in promoting the amendment.

Grossman added that he had forwarded a copy of the amendment to American legal experts to see whether it was possible to enact similar legislation in the United States.

The amendment to the South African Divorce Act appeared to have wide backing among the country's legal profession.

The president of the Association of Family Lawyers in South Africa, Billy Gundelfinger, termed the amendment "a magnificent piece of social legislation which eliminates the possibility of unscrupulous people making unconscionable demands."

"There is now a mechanism to compel an uncooperative party to undergo a religious divorce."

Gail Goldberg, national vice president of the Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, said her group had been "involved in efforts to improve the lot of women who have been refused a get by their husbands."

"The UJW therefore applauds the linking of the get to the civil divorce in South Africa, as this will vastly improve the situation of many such women." □

**Holocaust survivors cannot escape Mengele nightmares***By Marta Halpert*

VIENNA (JTA) — For some, the memories never fade away.

"I own a document which says that I was liberated on April 15, 1945. But I am still not free, not free of horrible nightmares," said Vera Alexander, a Slovakian-born Jewish woman who was an inmate at the Auschwitz death camp.

"My memories and dreams mix up between past and present.

"I have two sons, age 45 and 50, and I still dream of them as kids in Auschwitz," says Alexander, breaking into tears.

She shared the stage with three elderly men who, like her, came here from Israel recently to share their experiences at Auschwitz with an audience of some 1,500 mostly young Austrians.

The three men — Otto Klein, Solomon Malek and Ephraim Reichenberg — belong to a group of some 180 survivors of the "twin experiments" that were carried out by camp doctor Josef Mengele, the "Angel of Death," at Auschwitz between 1943 and 1944.

Alexander, who now works as a painter and sculptor in the northern Israeli city of Safed, was not one of the twins.

Her job at Auschwitz was to care for the needs of the twins after the man she called the "good-looking and proper doctor" had finished carrying out his hideous experiments on them.

The Bavarian-born Mengele, who escaped to Argentina after the war, had experimented at Auschwitz on some 3,000 twins, dwarfs, giants and hunchbacks in hopes of detecting their genetic code.

The goal of his "medical" work was to help gather data for creating the tall, blue-eyed, blond-haired Aryan model of perfection.

The first-hand witnesses to those experiments were brought to one of Vienna's largest theaters under the sponsorship of several private sources as well as the Austrian Foreign and Education ministries.

Ephraim Reichenberg, like the other speakers, gave a glimpse into the heart of darkness that was Auschwitz.

"My twin brother Laszlo had a beautiful voice. So Mengele, a fervent music lover who was always humming some opera arias, wanted to look behind this miracle," said Reichenberg.

He can be heard only with the help of a throat microphone — a result of the throat cancer that developed as a direct consequence of Mengele's "treatments."

**'Injections into throats'**

"Mengele injected something into our throats. We got high fevers and our throats were terribly swollen for at least three days," Reichenberg told the audience.

This procedure was repeated for nearly four months, he said.

He and his twin brother were born in 1927 as sons of a famous cantor in Papa, Hungary.

They were deported to Auschwitz on July 10, 1944, along with the rest of their family.

At the arrival point at the death camp, Mengele, who oversaw many of the infamous selections, "ordered all twins to step out of the line," according to Reichenberg.

"Laszlo and I did not want to leave our family, so we did not identify ourselves," recalled Reichenberg, who now lives in Beersheba.

"But another Jewish prisoner pointed at us, and so we were taken out.

"Probably he saved our lives, because my parents and my sister were taken to the gas chambers."

After suffering Mengele's experiments, the Reichenberg twins were liberated and taken to a hospital in Prague.

Laszlo Reichenberg died in 1946 as a result of lung cancer.

His brother was the initiator of a symbolic trial against Mengele that took place in February 1985 at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

"It was morally important for me that the 'symbol of Mengele' should be convicted," he said. □