



NEWS AT A GLANCE

NEWS ANALYSIS

Labor-Likud agreement reflects national consensus for future

By David Landau

■ Fifty American Reform rabbis voiced their "grave concerns" about Israel's pending conversion law in a meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The rabbis told the prime minister that the so-called "Rabbinical Court Conversion Bill," which the Cabinet is reportedly about to approve, would delegitimize millions of non-Orthodox Jews in both Israel and the Diaspora. [Page 2]

■ Switzerland's ambassador to the United States resigned after the publication of a confidential document he authored last month calling for a public relations "war" against American Jewish groups and other vocal critics of Switzerland. Jewish and U.S. government officials lambasted Carlo Jagmetti and called his resignation appropriate.

■ Natan Sharansky, former Soviet dissident and Israel's minister of industry and trade, arrived in Moscow, more than a decade after his release from a Soviet jail. Sharansky said he felt that he was returning to a new country that was enjoying freedom. [Page 3]

■ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel and the United States were working to find a formula that would allow for the renewal of Israeli-Syrian talks. [Page 4]

■ The U.S. State Department certified that the Palestinian Authority "on the whole" is in compliance with its accords with Israel. The written report allows aid to and diplomatic contact with Yasser Arafat's government.

■ Israel's ambassador to Jordan announced that he would leave the post in February. An embassy spokesman denied rumors circulating in Amman that Shimon Shamir's decision reflected differences with the current Israeli leadership.

■ An Israeli manufacturer has for the first time won a Jordanian government contract. The Elsint corporation of Haifa, a leading manufacturer of magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, equipment, will supply the medical imaging system to the al-Bashir hospital in Amman, at a cost of \$1.4 million.

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A widely publicized agreement signed this week by prominent members of Israel's two major parties is the latest indication of an inexorable shift from the political right to the political center.

In many ways, the agreement between members of Labor and Likud on issues related to final-status talks with the Palestinians was anti-climactic, coming as it did after the redeployment in Hebron.

The handover earlier this month of most of Hebron to Palestinian self-rule was the true watershed, marking the first time that a Likud government transferred land to the Palestinians.

Further, the deal on Hebron, which also included an Israeli commitment to further withdrawals from the West Bank, plays out in practice what the Labor and Likud members were discussing only in theory.

Still, this week's paper is significant in that it reflects what is widely seen as the national consensus on what is attainable as Israel moves toward a final deal with the Palestinians.

The final-status negotiations, scheduled to resume in March, will tackle a host of thorny issues — including the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian statehood, Jewish settlements, future borders and the disposition of Palestinian refugees.

Sunday's signing of the position paper capped more than three months of discussions that were spearheaded by Knesset members Michael Eitan of Likud and Yossi Beilin of Labor.

The paper immediately triggered vigorous criticism within both parties and among their allies.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced the essence of the mixed political reaction to the so-called "Beilin-Eitan Document" by on the one hand welcoming it, but on the other insisting that it does not bind his party or his government.

Netanyahu said he rejected certain sections of the document, implying that it would not be wholly wrong to see the document as something of a trial balloon for future peacemaking efforts, or as the basis for ongoing behind-the-scenes discussions on the possibility of forming a government of national unity.

Even as the sole leader of Israel, Netanyahu clearly wants a broad consensus as he moves toward the final-status talks.

Among the Labor leadership, there was also equivocation, though party leader Shimon Peres offered no public response.

However, former Labor Finance Minister Avraham Shochat said the document was "harmful" for future peacemaking — despite the fact that he had taken part in much of the dialogue prior to the position paper's publication.

Ground shifted because of Oslo accords

While the areas of agreement signal a shift in thinking in both parties, it is among the Likud where the change appears most radical.

Indeed, it seems to reflect a further acquiescence that is slowly but steadily permeating the entire national camp in Israeli politics.

For Eitan and his Likud colleagues, the ground had shifted because of the Israeli-Palestinian accords signed by the previous Labor government.

Based on the realities on the ground, they could not continue to call for a Greater Israel when Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was holding Cabinet meetings in Ramallah and Hebron.

In that regard, the joint Likud-Labor position paper clearly provides for a border to run through the West Bank.

For his part, Beilin, in comments to a packed meeting of journalists Sunday, maintained that the new document did not in any way contradict the famous "Beilin-Abu-Mazen Accord."

He concluded that informal agreement with the second-in-command in the Palestinian hierarchy, Abu-Mazen, late in 1995.

Both that accord and the new document envisage a permanent-status agreement in which Israeli settlements close to the pre-1967 borders are

annexed to Israel, leaving a minority of the settlements situated inside Palestinian territory.

For Eitan, the chief significance of the document is tied to the fact that no settlement is to be uprooted under the envisioned permanent-status agreement.

"This is an historic day for the settlers," Eitan said, noting that for the first time they had won the support of a "national consensus."

Indeed, the paper's reference to Jewish settlements signaled that on the left, there is increasing recognition that the approximately 150,000 settlers in the West Bank cannot be abandoned in any workable peace plan.

Among the other major points addressed in the document:

- **Jerusalem:** The Beilin-Eitan document calls for Jerusalem in its currently delineated municipal boundaries to remain united under Israeli sovereignty.

It also calls for the Palestinians to have a site outside those boundaries for their capital. Although not explicitly stated, both sides confirm this to mean a site northeast of the current municipal lines.

The document adds that within Jerusalem, the Palestinians are to have "a status that will provide for their participation in responsibility for running their lives in the city."

- **Palestinian entity:** The two sides could not reach full agreement on this issue and therefore issued separate wording. The Labor side envisages a Palestinian "state." Likud speaks of "broadened autonomy."

Whatever its eventual status, members from both parties agreed that this entity would have no army; the Jordan River is to be Israel's security border; no foreign forces are to be deployed within the entity's territory; and the entity is not to sign any military pacts with foreign nations.

- **Jordan Valley:** Here again, there were two versions. For Labor, the area is to be a special security zone, with the Israeli army deployed along the Jordan River; for Likud, the valley is to be under full Israeli sovereignty.

- **The right of return for Palestinian refugees:** The document calls for this to be "negotiated in the permanent-status negotiations, with reference to Israel's overall security considerations."

Talks initiated by Jerusalem think tank

The discussions, which began as an academic exercise and soon developed their own political momentum, were initiated by the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem-based think tank headed by Professor Yigal Carmon.

About a dozen Knesset members, half from Likud, half from Labor, participated in weekly discussions at the institute.

Signing with Beilin for Labor were parliamentarians Haim Ramon and Shlomo Ben-Ami.

The conservative Knesset members who signed were Ze'ev Boim, Eliezer Sandberg, Meir Sheerit and Yehuda Lankri.

Earlier Likud participants in the discussions — such as Naomi Blumenthal and Michael Kleiner — dropped out before the end of the discussions in protest against various provisions of the evolving document that they felt stood in flagrant contradiction to established Likud positions.

On the Labor side, Shochat, Uzi Baram and Ephraim Sneh — all pronounced doves — dropped out before the end, accusing Beilin of selling out Labor's principled positions in return for what they considered a spurious consensus.

Political observers, however, saw the three men's

departure as prompted more by internal Labor politics — and the struggle for the party's future leadership — than by principle.

This consensus, of course, apart from the discord it has provoked within the Zionist parties, is not shared by Israel's Arab politicians.

Knesset member Toufik Ktib of the Arab Democratic Party-United Arab List said, "It may bring peace between Labor and Likud, but it won't bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians."

And Dr. Ahmed Tibi, the Israeli Arab activist who is a leading Arafat adviser, said the Palestinians would not accept the idea that the settlements must stay in place after peace.

Nor would they accept that Arab Jerusalem be permanently annexed to Israel in the permanent-status accord. □

U.S. Reform rabbis voice concerns on conversion bill

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Fifty American Reform rabbis have voiced their "grave concerns" over Israel's pending conversion law in a meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

During Sunday's meeting, the rabbis told the prime minister that the so-called "Rabbinical Court Conversion Bill," which the Cabinet is reportedly about to approve, will delegitimize millions of non-Orthodox Jews in both Israel and the Diaspora.

Once the Cabinet approves the bill, it must pass three readings in the Knesset.

If the bill passes in its current form, the Rabbinical Court will legally have sole jurisdiction over conversions performed in Israel.

"This law's fundamental message is that there are first-class Jews in this country and second-class Jews — and the 90 percent of Diaspora Jews who are non-Orthodox will be second-class Jews," Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, said at a media briefing after the meeting with the prime minister.

The Reform rabbis told Netanyahu that the bill would delegitimize non-Orthodox Jews who are residing in Israel.

Although the pending legislation, which replaces an earlier private members' conversion bill, does not currently contain any references to people wishing to undergo conversion abroad, the Reform rabbis expressed fears that such a clause might be introduced at a later date.

Netanyahu has said in recent months that he would support legislation that affirms the Orthodox control over conversions in Israel, but would not back a measure that attempts to dictate conversion practices in the Diaspora.

At the media briefing, several rabbis said they were heartened by Netanyahu's willingness to listen to their concerns, but stressed that the premier had made no concessions.

"We do think we awakened a degree of consciousness on the part of the prime minister," said Rabbi Lennard Thal, vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"We hope that this legislation will not take hold," Thal added.

Hirsch said Netanyahu "expressed some understanding, and we emerged somewhat satisfied. He made an effort to listen to us."

However, Hirsch warned, unless the bill is blocked, "there will be a further weakening of relations between Israel and the Diaspora." □

Sharansky returns to Moscow to promote Israeli-Russian ties

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Former Soviet Jewish dissident Natan Sharansky returned to Moscow this week, two decades after he was arrested here by the KGB for his underground Zionist and human rights activities.

"I'm glad to be back in Moscow, the city which I was forced to leave 20 years ago," Sharansky said during a meeting Monday with Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

Prior to his arrest in 1977, Sharansky lived in downtown Moscow very close to the Moscow mayor's office. On Monday, he was received by the mayor as Israel's minister of industry and trade.

Accompanied by a delegation of Israeli businesspeople and industrialists, Sharansky was scheduled to meet this week with senior Russian officials for talks on developing Israeli-Russian economic ties.

But for Sharansky, 47, the visit also has a very strong personal meaning.

In 1978, Sharansky was found guilty on charges of treason and espionage and sentenced to 13 years in prison. Eight years later, as a result of an international campaign for his release, he was freed from a jail in northern Russia as part of a much-publicized prisoner swap. He has not been to Russia since February 1986, the time of his release.

After arriving in Israel, he changed his first name from Anatoly to Natan. He became a minister in the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after his immigrant-rights party, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, won seven seats in the Knesset in last May's elections.

"I started my first day [in Russia] by seeing my father's grave, which I have never seen before," said Sharansky, whose father died when he was in prison. "I'm surprised that after so many years I can recognize many things" in Moscow, he said. "But when I see the people, I realize that this is a different country."

Sharansky's visit was also to include meetings with members of the Jewish community and visits to Jewish institutions. He was also to meet with a few friends with whom he was active during the 1970s underground Jewish movement.

One of these friends is Mikhail Chlenov, a former underground Hebrew teacher who later became president of the Va'ad, the first Jewish umbrella organization in the Soviet Union. In 1973, he was Sharansky's first Hebrew instructor. Chlenov said the current visit is important for Russian Jews because it will give them the opportunity to learn who Sharansky and other Jewish activists were during the Soviet era. "Today, they still know very little about the underground movement of Soviet Jews back in the 1970s," said Chlenov. "Many non-Jews might also be proud to see how their former fellow countryman is received by high-ranking [Russian] officials," he added.

During Monday's meeting with Luzhkov, Sharansky secured a promise from the mayor to help the Steinsaltz Yeshiva find a new home in the Russian capital.

The yeshiva, founded by Israeli Talmud scholar and translator Adin Steinsaltz, was destroyed in August by what was believed to have been an electrical fire.

Luzhkov promised to help the yeshiva, saying that he respected Steinsaltz as an outstanding scholar. □

British jury deems man unfit; 1st war crimes trial collapses

NEW YORK (JTA) — A British jury has deemed that a man accused of being a former police commander in Nazi-occupied Byelorussia is unfit to appear before a court, collapsing the nation's first war crimes trial.

Szymon Serafinowicz, 86, has been accused of killing three Jews between 1941 and 1942 in Nazi-occupied Byelorussia, now an independent nation called Belarus.

The prosecution also reportedly alleged that Serafinowicz had taken part in a massacre of some 2,000 Jews in Mir in November 1941 and had led his forces in convoys of horse-driven sledges that swept through Byelorussian villages, rounding up Jews and killing them.

Serafinowicz has denied the charges.

The London jury on Jan. 17 accepted the defense team's claim that Serafinowicz was suffering from dementia, probably caused by Alzheimer's disease, and was not fit to stand trial.

Serafinowicz, a retired builder who lives in Surrey, became a British citizen in 1947.

He was the first person to face war crime charges in Britain as a result of Parliament's 1991 passage of the War Crimes Act.

Under the act, suspects can be charged with crimes committed in another country before they were British citizens.

He was arrested in July 1995 by a special police war crimes unit set up after the controversial act was passed.

Britain's Crown Prosecution Service reportedly said that it was considering bringing five cases to court, but that Serafinowicz's was believed to have been the one most likely to succeed.

Some of the nation's major newspapers emphasized the cost of prosecuting Serafinowicz, reportedly about \$8 million.

The Express, a London-based daily with a circulation of more than 1.2 million, said in a Jan. 18 editorial, "The very idea of trying to uncover the truth, beyond a shadow of a doubt, of events that took place 56 years ago in wartime must give any sensible person pause."

The editorial also said it was "all for nought" that taxpayers' money had been spent on setting up the trial and on investigating alleged war crimes. The publication urged that the government drop cases against other suspected war criminals. □

U.S. moves to deport SS guard at Buchenwald and Auschwitz

NEW YORK (JTA) — The United States late last week initiated deportation proceedings for a Philadelphia man who served the Nazis as an armed SS guard at the Buchenwald and Auschwitz camps.

Johann Breyer, 71, a native of Slovakia, "had no right to enter" the United States "in the first instance," said Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Office of Special Investigations, the U.S. Justice Department's Nazi-hunting arm.

The proceedings to deport Breyer began Jan. 23. The United States wants him removed "as expeditiously as possible," Rosenbaum said.

Breyer was stripped of his American citizenship in July 1993.

He admitted at that time that he had served as an armed SS perimeter guard at the Buchenwald camp in Germany and the Auschwitz camp in Poland with orders to shoot escaping prisoners and that he escorted slave laborers to work sites.

U.S. District Judge William Yohn Jr. in Philadelphia concluded in his stripping Breyer of his citizenship in 1993 that he had assisted in persecution and was a member of a movement hostile to the United States.

The decision to revoke Breyer's U.S. citizenship was upheld in 1994 by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit. □

Israeli opposition beckons Netanyahu to discuss Syria*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week responded to an opposition request to explain to the Knesset his government's approach to resuming negotiations with Syria.

Addressing the Knesset on Monday, Netanyahu said Israel was making an effort to renew the stalled talks — but that it could not force Syrian President Hafez Assad to do anything he did not want to.

Negotiations between the two countries were suspended last March, after Assad refused to condemn a wave of Hamas suicide bombings that targeted Israel, claiming 59 innocent lives.

In recent months, Syria has demanded that the negotiations resume from where they left off, including the verbal assurances of the previous Labor government to consider withdrawals on the Golan Heights in exchange for peace. Israel captured the heights from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War.

Netanyahu has said both sides can raise whatever demands they want at the negotiations, but they must come to the table without any preconditions.

On Monday, the premier said the two sides were now "looking for a bridging formula between these two opposing positions."

Netanyahu said he believed that it was possible to reach such a formula and that Israel and the United States were working on one.

"I believe that with goodwill from both sides, and help from the United States, we can reach a formula that will allow the renewal of direct dialogue between us and Syria."

Last week, Foreign Minister David Levy confirmed an Israeli newspaper report that he had been in touch with his counterpart, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, via an unnamed senior European official.

On Monday, after addressing the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Levy said that he, too, hoped that a formula for renewing negotiations with Damascus could be reached soon.

Netanyahu appeared before the Knesset after 40 members of the opposition signed a petition asking him to appear before Parliament to clarify his government's position regarding the long-stalled talks with Syria.

Under Israeli law, a minister must appear before the Knesset to address a specific issue if a minimum of 40 Knesset members sign a petition calling on him or her to do so.

Shai Bazak, Netanyahu's media adviser, said Monday that the petition was not necessary, adding that Netanyahu was always available to address the Knesset when requested to do so. □

Israel's foreign minister to head Palestinian talks*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has appointed Foreign Minister David Levy to head Israel's negotiating team with the Palestinians.

The appointment came after Dan Shomron, the previous top negotiator, resigned from the position after the signing of the Hebron agreement earlier this month.

Netanyahu has also decided to have Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai coordinate security discussions with Syria, when those talks resume, according to Israel Radio.

If Syria placed its foreign minister at the head of

its negotiating team, the report added, the Israeli delegation would be led at the same level.

The prime minister has also requested that attorney Yitzhak Molcho, a confidant, continue his involvement in the talks with the Palestinians.

As part of the Hebron agreement, Israel and the Palestinians decided to resume the final-status negotiations in the spring.

The most difficult issues confronting the two sides — including the future status of Jerusalem — will be addressed in those talks. □

Netanyahu announces plan to sell government companies*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Prime Minister's Office this week unveiled its plan to sell off government-owned companies in a massive privatization effort.

Under the plan, some 13 state firms, including the Bezek telephone company, Israel Chemicals and Zim shipping, would be sold by the end of 1997.

Except for Israel Chemicals, no specific recommendations have been drawn up for selling off the companies, or the size of the stock offering that will be involved.

Companies that did not appear on the privatization list included the electric company, the Mekorot water company and Rafael Defense Industries.

Officials from the Prime Minister's Office who were involved in drawing up the plan noted that the primary purpose was to reduce the level of government involvement in the economy, rather than to make a sizable profit on the sale.

"We prefer to carry out the sell-off in a shorter time period over getting the highest price," said Moshe Leon, deputy director general at the Prime Minister's Office.

Leon and Tsipi Livni, director of the Government Companies Authority, led the team that prepared the privatization report issued this week.

The privatization plan divided state companies into three categories: those ready for immediate privatization in the coming year, those not ready and those that should be considered for privatization.

The first category includes Israel Chemicals and Zim, in which the government already does not have a controlling share.

Other companies are already involved in the privatization process, in accordance with a decision made by the previous Labor government.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated since taking office last year that he intends to pursue privatization.

Netanyahu chairs the ministerial committee overseeing the privatization effort.

Finance Minister Dan Meridor and Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi also sit on the committee. □

Libyans see Israeli AIDS program

NEW YORK (JTA) — An Israeli educational program about AIDS is being presented in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, Israeli media reported.

The Arabic-language program, "Youth Learns About AIDS," is based on a program used in Israeli high schools since 1987.

Two doctors from Libya who took part in an international course on AIDS education had become familiar with the Israeli program, "The Immune System and the Disease of AIDS." One of the doctors said he was already using the program in Tripoli. □