



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu returned home to a political storm over the building of a new Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. Some Knesset members have threatened to leave the coalition if the government does not proceed with construction of Har Homa. [Page 2]**

■ **Both Jewish and Swiss leaders heralded a new spirit of cooperation after meeting in New York City. The recently created Swiss humanitarian fund for Holocaust survivors was among topics discussed at the private gathering, also attended by U.S. and Israeli officials.**

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met separately with Orthodox leaders and with Reform and Conservative leaders in New York. The prime minister reiterated his commitment to back controversial conversion legislation. [Page 3]**

■ **Delegates to the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council's annual meeting heard upbeat reports about the state of U.S.-Israel relations. Some 700 public policy activists, including 300 college students affiliated with Hillel, are attending the four-day conference in Washington. [Page 3]**

■ **The cause of the collision of two Israeli military helicopters that resulted in 73 deaths is still unknown, though there were shortcomings in planning and flight procedures, according to an interim report. New safety procedures already are being adopted, the head of Israel's air force said.**

■ **Israeli and Palestinian officials opened a new round of talks on implementing the 1995 Interim Agreement. Among the issues discussed were border crossings, the environment and communications. [Page 2]**

■ **Argentine leader Juan Peron set up a commission in the decade after World War II to find former Nazi leaders in Europe and offer them refuge in Argentina, the newspaper *La Nacion* said. The report was based on research by a Jewish group.**

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Hillel assembly in Russia marks emergence of Jewish students

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Hillel in the former Soviet Union?

In a sign of the resurgence of Jewish life, more than 250 Jewish students from across the former Soviet Union gathered here recently for the first Hillel Student Leadership Congress.

"Students are gradually becoming the moving force behind" local organized Jewish life in many communities of the former Soviet Union, said Yevgenia Mikhalyova, Moscow's Hillel director.

Those older than 40 have traditionally been at the helm of organized Jewish life since the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union.

But since the region's first Hillel center was established more than two years ago in Moscow, the international organization has seen a growth in Jewish student activism.

Three other student centers were subsequently set up in St. Petersburg, in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

There are plans to increase the total to 24 within the next 18 months.

The main goal of the congress "was to expose Jewish students to Jewish history and culture, to strengthen their Jewish identity," said Yossi Goldman, Hillel international assistant vice president and founder of the Hillel centers in the former Soviet Union.

The congress is a "vital element in a wider process of empowering the resurgent Jewish community with the leadership and skills needed to ensure its long-term vitality" in the former Soviet Union, Goldman added.

"The message coming out of this congress is that you can and should create your Jewish future. And you don't have to wait for somebody else to do it for you."

The four-day event was co-sponsored by Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

While some of the participants came from the four cities with existing Hillel centers, the majority represented remote communities located in Siberia, the Ural Mountains and the Russian Far East.

For many participants, the congress was their first opportunity to become familiar with Hillel and to learn about the resources available to develop their own local student programs.

The congress offered participating young Jewish men and women more than 50 skills workshops, a study session, leadership training seminars, Jewish identity workshops and Israeli song and dance seminars. A representative of the U.S.-based National Conference on Soviet Jewry was among the workshop leaders.

In the former Soviet Union, Hillel extends its programs beyond the university community to include young professionals as well.

Meeting like-minded people

Many young Jews here see Hillel programs as an opportunity to meet other people. In the last two years, these meetings have resulted in a few "Hillel" weddings.

At the congress, there was considerable sharing of experiences among the young activists.

"Most of those who have contacted our centers over the past two years are people that have their own ideas and projects," said Mikhalyova of Moscow's Hillel center. "Hillel gives them a chance to find like-minded people and to see their projects work."

During the congress, Leonid Gelfman, a 23-year-old postgraduate philology student and Russian language teacher at a St. Petersburg day school, spoke about how to publish a Hillel newspaper.

"For me, it's important to combine my Jewish and professional interests," said Gelfman, who is the editor of *Dvarim*, the publication of the St. Petersburg Hillel center.

Some of the Hillel activists already participate in social and cultural programs in their home communities.

Last year, Mikhail Gubenko, a 20-year-old sociology student from

Kiev, organized a group of students to lead Shabbat and holiday programs for elderly Jews.

"We tell them about Shabbat and festivals, about Jewish history," he said of the program, which involves about 25 volunteers.

In a reversal of traditional generational roles, grandchildren often teach their grandparents about Jewish topics, discussions that had been denied their elders during their lives under the Soviet regime, said Gubenko.

Since mass Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union began eight years ago, students have represented a significant portion of those opting to leave.

At the congress, some Jewish students said that although they would prefer to stay, they do not see a future for themselves in their native countries.

For Gubenko of Kiev, Ukraine's future appeared problematic. "Professionally I don't see any future for myself in Ukraine," he said, referring to the country's serious economic problems.

"I just want to have a normal life. But the current economic situation does not give me this option."

Some students said they also do not see a long-term future for the Jewish student movement in the former Soviet Union.

"Everyone who gets involved with the Jewish movement will emigrate sooner or later," said Svetlana Rabinovich, 18, a high-school student from Minsk. "This is especially so with Jewish youth, for whom the decision to emigrate is somewhat easier than for their parents."

Said Igor Varkin, a 32-year-old postgraduate psychology student from the Siberian town of Tyumen: "Some join the movement having a wish to emigrate. Others are pushed toward emigration by the Jewish activities they get involved in."

But many of the student activists want to be part of the Jewish future in the former Soviet Union. "It's hard to say now, but I'd prefer to stay after I graduate," said Alexander Slutsky, 23, a law student from Yekaterinburg, a city of more than 1 million in the Ural Mountains.

"My future is here, in Russia," said Gelfman, the editor of the Hillel newspaper in St. Petersburg.

For one student from the Far East, the Jewish student movement will ensure that those who want to stay will be able "to express themselves as Jews." □

New coalition crisis looms over Jerusalem building plan

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The biggest crisis now facing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu comes not from the Arab world, but from members of his own governing coalition.

Returning to Israel on Monday, Netanyahu landed in the heart of a political firestorm sparked by reports that he had pledged to freeze construction of a new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

The controversy overshadowed this week's resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks aimed at resolving outstanding issues of the 1995 Interim Agreement.

Before leaving the United States, Netanyahu denied reports that he had promised President Clinton to delay construction of the Har Homa neighborhood in order to avoid tensions with the Palestinians.

On Monday, the premier vowed to strengthen Israel's hold over all Jerusalem, adding that he would convene in the coming days the Ministerial Committee on Jerusalem, which has final say on all construction projects in the capital.

Netanyahu said the committee, which he chairs, "will take all the necessary decisions." He added that

those decisions will "better reflect our absolute commitment to Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem in all parts of the city."

But the initial reports about a vow to Clinton had already set off a string of political reaction and demands that Israel strengthen its hold over Jerusalem to counter continued activity by the Palestinian Authority in eastern portions of the city.

Last week, a group of Knesset members threatened to leave the governing coalition if Netanyahu did not approve construction in eastern Jerusalem.

"Constructing the neighborhood is the watershed of my support for the government," Jerusalem Mayor and Likud Knesset member Ehud Olmert said this week.

The Har Homa project, first formulated in 1991, calls for the construction of 6,500 housing units on a plot of about 460 acres, two-thirds of which was expropriated from Jewish owners. One-third was expropriated from Palestinians.

The project, which had the backing of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, has now brought opposition members into the fray. Labor Knesset member Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a strong supporter of the project when serving as housing minister in the previous Labor government, sharply criticized Netanyahu this week, saying that "on Jerusalem there is no compromise."

Labor legislators noted that the Har Homa plan originally had been postponed after Netanyahu, then opposition leader, spearheaded an effort to team up with Arab Knesset members to vote against land expropriations in an effort to embarrass and possibly bring down the Rabin government.

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat has repeatedly warned that any Jewish construction projects in eastern Jerusalem would present a serious obstacle to peace.

Hebron settlers 'furious'

Meanwhile, a group of wealthy Jews in Israel and abroad have purchased a plot of land near Har Homa and plan to develop the area if Netanyahu does not approve the Har Homa project, Israel Radio reported.

In a related development, Jewish settlers in Hebron held a heated meeting Sunday with Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who refused to grant them permission to build Jewish settlements in the West Bank town.

"We are furious because we did not receive one building permit," settler spokesman Noam Arnon said after the meeting.

The debate over construction projects came as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met this week in an effort to implement portions of the Interim Agreement.

Foreign Minister David Levy led the Israeli delegation; Arafat second-in-command Mahmoud Abbas, better known as Abu-Mazen, led the Palestinian side.

Negotiators agreed to establish nine subcommittees to discuss issues including the creation of a safe-passage route for Palestinians crossing between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the operation of a Palestinian airport and seaport in Gaza.

On Monday, representatives of the two sides met in Jerusalem to discuss procedures to be established at international crossing points into self-rule areas.

Abu-Mazen said other subcommittees would begin their work in the coming days, adding that he hoped to see tangible results from the talks in two to three weeks.

Levy expressed optimism with the first round of contacts, saying that the discussions were conducted in a positive atmosphere. During a meeting last week, Netanyahu and Arafat had approved the start of the latest round of negotiations. □

Netanyahu firm on conversion in talks with American rabbis

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Reform and Conservative rabbinic leaders are frustrated — but not surprised — that they have been unable to stop pending legislation that would end any possibility of recognizing non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel.

The latest effort by U.S. Reform and Conservative leaders came Saturday night in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“The only thing he promised us was a continuation of the discussion in a friendly way,” said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Meanwhile, Orthodox leaders emerged from a separate meeting with Netanyahu confident that their position on conversion will soon be written into Israeli law.

The tone of their meeting was one of “being among friends,” said Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union. The meetings took place at Manhattan’s Essex House on the last night of Netanyahu’s visit to Washington and New York.

According to participants in each of the meetings, Netanyahu reiterated his intention to keep the commitment he made to the Orthodox parties last year to persuade them to join his coalition.

Netanyahu “listened, expressed some degree of empathy and basically said that his hands were tied,” said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

“I don’t think he understands that he’s delegitimizing 85 to 90 percent of American Jewry,” which is represented by the liberal movements, Epstein said. “The meeting allowed us to express to him the real possibility for a schism in world Jewry.”

The proposed Israeli legislation, while affirming the Orthodox monopoly over conversions performed in Israel, would not affect the current practice of recognizing conversions performed abroad. However, the bill would require all residents and citizens of Israel who want to convert to Judaism to do so within the Jewish state.

‘Talking about intent here’

“We do not believe the arguments that this in any way delegitimizes anyone,” said Ganchrow.

The bill will “just take care of a loophole,” he said. “If someone lives in Israel and goes to the U.S. or Cyprus or Europe for one day and say they were converted, it is a subterfuge. We’re talking about intent here.”

Currently, non-Jews can study and prepare for conversion to Judaism in Israel under the non-Orthodox movements’ auspices and then finalize the process in the Diaspora.

Under the Law of Return, they arrive back in Israel with their status as Jews recognized by the government.

Last year, the Israeli government authorized the conversion of 350 people in Israel. Several times as many people were converted by the Reform and Conservative movements in the Diaspora, returning to Israel as Jews, say representatives of those movements.

Orthodox leaders maintain that permitting non-Orthodox conversions, rather than denying them, is the source of the schisms between Israel and the Diaspora, and between Orthodox and liberal Jews.

“We are concerned that with different streams” of Judaism recognized, “the children of those conversions will not be able to marry the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people,” said Ganchrow, whose group represents centrist Orthodox Jews.

“The problem is that the Reform and Conservative have not won the hearts and minds of the Israeli people. They need to not fight this legislatively, but to bring 200,000 or 300,000 Jews on aliyah if they want to be recognized as legitimate in Israel.”

Netanyahu first met with leaders of the Reform movement’s UAHC, Central Conference of American Rabbis and Association of Reform Zionists of America, and the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Later, Netanyahu met with leaders from the Orthodox Union, Rabbinical Council of America, National Council of Young Israel and Agudath Israel of America. □

NJCRAC delegates hear upbeat reports on U.S.-Israel relations

By Cynthia Mann

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left Washington “more hopeful than ever” about achieving peace and security in the Middle East, according to Israel’s ambassador to the United States.

In talks last with President Clinton, “all subjects were raised of common interest,” including the “peace process in all its aspects,” Ambassador Eliahu Ben-Elissar told hundreds of public policy activists at the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council’s annual conference.

Negotiations with Palestinians on permanent-status issues will start “in a matter of days,” Ben-Elissar said. But he warned not to expect these problems, including Jerusalem, refugees and settlements, “to be solved as quickly as we would like to have them solved.”

Also featured Sunday at the Mayflower Hotel were U.S. National Security Adviser Samuel Berger and former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

Responding to a request to clarify “confusion” over the Israeli government’s policy on settlements, Ben-Elissar said, “We do believe it is our right, human, historic, political and emotional, to have Jews live wherever they wish.” However, he added that in deference to how “inflammatory” the issue can become, “we’re not going to create in the near future any new settlements.”

At the same time, he said, “we will not do anything to stop the natural growth of Israeli communities even if they are in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip.”

The ambassador also referred to the recent campaign launched by Churches for Middle East Peace calling for the division of Jerusalem, saying that the group has couched its call in “politically correct” language by urging “shared” control over the city.

He thanked NJCRAC for “understanding the nature of this campaign” and for mobilizing to counter it.

Ben-Elissar pledged that Jerusalem would never be divided.

For his part, Berger reiterated the upbeat view of the Netanyahu visit, calling the talks “open, trustful and thoughtful.” He said there was “renewed hope” for peace after the conclusion of the Hebron agreement last month.

Berger pledged the administration’s “commitment to staying the course and achieving a comprehensive and lasting settlement” in the peace process and to strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship.

“The imperative now is to build on the momentum from last month’s agreement,” he said, adding that the two leaders also “exchanged ideas on how to revive negotiations with Syria.”

Meanwhile, he reiterated Clinton’s “unshakable determination” to do what is necessary to preserve Israel’s military edge. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES
Dialogue with evangelicals is 'last frontier' of interfaith work

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

PASADENA, Calif. (JTA) — When one religion claims to possess the only path to God, is pluralism possible?

Is there room for dialogue between religions when one is working to convert the other?

Jews and evangelical Christians danced at the edges of those questions at a recent historic gathering at Fuller Theological Seminary here.

Convened jointly by Fuller — the largest and most influential evangelical seminary in the country — and the American Jewish Committee, the conference was held on the campus of the school, which is tucked among this city's stately homes. The seminar was officially devoted to the theme "Religious Convictions in the Public Arena: How People of Faith Can Be Citizens of a Pluralistic Republic." It examined the differing views of the two communities in areas such as church-state separation and social justice work.

But percolating just under the surface for Jews here were concerns about the recent focus of evangelicals on targeting Jews for conversion. Fuller itself offers degrees in Judaic Studies and Jewish Evangelism and trains missionaries sent by Jews for Jesus and other church groups.

For their part, participating Christians were grappling with the appropriateness of sharing a platform with Jews, whose rejection of Jesus flies in the face of their whole belief system.

'Deceptive missionary activity'

Some on the faculty had unsuccessfully pushed for the inclusion of Messianic Jews on the program, and many of the Fuller students who attended were born Jewish, but who now believe in Jesus.

Rabbi A. James Rudin, the Jewish convener of the meeting and director of interreligious affairs for the AJCommittee, said the presence of Jews for Jesus made it "risky" for the Jewish community to participate. But he also said it was necessary if there is any hope of convincing evangelicals to end their support of what he considers deceptive missionary activity.

"It's good strategy to approach the toughest challenges first," he said, adding, "What Fuller does, other evangelicals will do, too." Rudin believes that Jews should be concerned about the relationship with evangelical Christians because "the evangelical community is the fastest growing Christian group in the U.S." and "an enormous factor in the political life of America."

He described the relationship as "the last frontier" of interreligious work.

Evangelical Christians are theological conservatives who interpret the Bible literally. Mainline Protestants, including Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians, tend to be more liberal theologically and politically.

Rudin issued a challenge at the conference for both evangelicals and Jews to develop a "theology of pluralism," meaning the acceptance of a multiplicity of religious approaches to God. While his call was not addressed directly by the evangelical Christian leaders present, Rudin said afterward that he sensed "an opening" that he hopes to widen with time.

The relationship with evangelical Christians, one of the country's largest religious groups, is regarded by many Jews as a double-edged sword. Evangelical Christians are among Israel's strongest non-Jewish supporters.

They are frequent and committed visitors to the

Jewish state. In 1995, as many evangelical Christians as Jews from the United States traveled to Israel.

But the domestic political agenda of the evangelical community has, in recent years, been dominated by the religious right. The policy goals of organizations such as the Christian Coalition, which include prayer in the public schools, are viewed by most Jews as threatening.

The evangelical community, however, is not homogenous. Fuller President Richard Mouw, an avowed moderate, in his opening remarks at the conference distanced himself from "the religious right," condemning some evangelicals' "theocratic takeover mentality" in the political arena.

Common to evangelical Christians is what they see as a "special love" for Jews. They see themselves as a branch grafted onto the tree of Judaism originally planted by God. Many also view themselves as part of a Jewish continuum and the fulfillment of the Messianic promises made by God in the Old Testament.

Ultimately, Jews and evangelical Christians make contradictory and mutually exclusive claims on the role of religion and the path to God's grace, a breach that some believe no amount of dialogue can bridge.

"There can't be serious discussion about the differences because there are irreconcilable differences," said Mark Powers, national director of Jews for Judaism, an anti-missionary organization based in Baltimore.

"As we're going to hell" in their view, "what is there to talk about?" said Powers, who did not participate at the Fuller gathering.

Focus on converting Jews

Indeed, the theologies remain far apart. While Judaism does not require gentiles to convert in order to earn God's grace, evangelical Christians believe that there is no connection to God without working through Jesus.

That view contrasts with the Roman Catholic Church, which has embraced a dual-covenant theology that says that God's commitment to the Jewish people predates Jesus and circumvents the need for them to believe in him to be blessed by God.

The work of Messianic Jews, who clothe Christian theology in Jewish culture to make it more comfortable for Jews to believe in Jesus, is funded almost entirely by evangelicals.

Long-simmering tensions boiled over in June when the country's largest evangelical denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, decided to focus its missionary activity on converting Jews.

For the moment, at least, it looks as though the tenor of the relationship has changed.

Mouw was under pressure from conservative elements at Fuller not to lend the Jewish community credibility by meeting with it as an equal partner.

"There are understandable fears among some in the Fuller community that our attempt to cooperate with Jews on issues of public morality will be used to compromise our position on evangelism," he said in an interview.

At the same time, he empathized with the sense of vulnerability Jews often feel when confronted by evangelical Christians bent on convincing them to believe in Jesus.

"It's one thing to say we need to bear witness and another to talk about targeting Jews in insensitive ways," Mouw said in an interview.

Christians have to learn to work among Jews with greater sensitivity, he said. At the same time, he affirmed his belief in Messianic Judaism.

"I in no way meant to back off of our evangelical mandate," he said. But, he added, "I'd like to create an atmosphere in which evangelism and dialogue are not incompatible." □