



NEWS AT A GLANCE

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Torah and pluralism spark passion for delegates to NJCRAC gathering

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Welfare cuts, campaign finance reform, the balanced budget amendment and federally funded school vouchers dominate the domestic Jewish public policy agenda these days.

But when Jewish community activists from across the country gathered this week in Washington, some of the most stirring discussion focused on other matters.

Delegates to the annual conference of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council passionately debated American Jewry's role in Israeli policy matters, from the peace process to religious pluralism.

At the same time, they celebrated a new marriage throughout the community relations field of social activism to Jewish values and tradition. The mantra of the movement appears to be "Torah and tzedek," Hebrew for "justice."

For the first time at a NJCRAC plenary conference, delegates crowded into a late-night Beit Midrash, or study session, which explored how Jewish texts on helping the poor inform the current debate on welfare reform.

Nancy Kaufman, executive director of Boston's Jewish Community Relations Council, and a pioneer of "Torah and tzedek," said that "for a long time there was a nervousness" about this in the field.

Now, she said, "slowly but surely, there is a recognition and acceptance and embracing of the inextricable link between the justice part of our agenda and the Jewish part."

Having a Beit Midrash "shows us there's something beautiful and special about our texts which infuses us with the energy and commitment to do this work."

About 400 delegates attended the convention of NJCRAC, an umbrella body serving 117 local Jewish community relations councils and 13 national agencies.

Long plagued by its unwieldy name, NJCRAC was expected to change its name to the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Another conference, the B'nai B'rith Hillel Spitzer Forum on Public Policy, was held in conjunction with NJCRAC's and drew 300 students from more than 100 college campuses.

Some of the programs overlapped, to the evident pleasure of many.

"I like the way they mix the generations," one young Spitzer delegate said on a crowded elevator after the Beit Midrash, where all ages were encouraged to mingle.

'Going from dark to light'

The strong showing of the students reflected what Richard Joel, president and international director of Hillel, called a Jewish "renaissance."

Renaissance, he said, using Hillel's watchword, is different from continuity.

"Continuity has meaning if you're 75, but a 20-year-old won't be excited about it."

A renaissance, on the other hand, "has the image of going from dark to light, of unleashing creativity and a rebirth of culture."

Afterward, Sarah Manekin, a junior at the University of North Carolina who belongs to a multicultural campus group called Masala, a Hindi word for "spice mixture," said, "I've learned that the stuff I do on campus has to do with the fact that I'm Jewish."

Ultimately, she said, "I want to be a voice in the community and help shape and direct the way Jews approach other groups."

The main NJCRAC conference drew a host of political personages, including former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres; Israel's ambassador to the United States, Eliahu Ben-Elissar; National Security Adviser Samuel Berger; and former Republican vice-presidential nominee Jack Kemp.

Some expressed disappointment that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not appear Sunday, instead ending his U.S. visit early that morning.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross and Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.)

■ The U.S. Supreme Court is set to hear arguments Wednesday in a case challenging the constitutionality of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Jewish communal activists have called the law, which makes it harder for the government to infringe upon the free exercise of religion, one of their crowning legislative achievements.

■ Israeli forces shelled villages in southern Lebanon, killing a woman and wounding two other civilians, security sources said.

■ Israeli police investigators questioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in connection with allegations that the short-lived appointment of a Jerusalem lawyer as attorney general was part of a political deal.

■ An Israeli ministerial committee on Jerusalem decided to speed up construction of new roads around and leading into the capital, but put off until next week discussions on building the controversial Har Homa neighborhood. The U.S. State Department stopped short of condemning the construction, saying that it preferred that the building occurred at another time.

■ The director of the FBI is in Israel to garner broader support for regional counterterrorism efforts. His visit comes amid reports of U.S.-Israeli discussions about the fate of jailed Hamas leader Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook. Officials denied that such talks took place.

■ Gennady Zyuganov, chairman of the Russian Communist Party, warned that urgent measures are needed to contain the spread of nuclear and chemical weapons from Russia and the former Soviet republics to other nations and to terrorist organizations. Zyuganov expressed his concern to representatives of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

■ Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin to discuss Russian-Palestinian relations and the Middle East peace process.

were among those honored at the chairman's dinner Monday night.

At the session on NJCRAC's joint program plan, where the annual communal policy agenda is set, delegates adopted a resolution in support of the Middle East peace process, but only after some heated debate over a reference to Jewish settlements.

The section on settlements was then deleted after a vote of 221-118.

The controversial passage called for the Israeli government to "show maximum restraint on this issue," including "ending economic incentives for settling on the West Bank, freezing the growth of the vast majority of existing Jewish settlements there and banning new Jewish settlements."

That debate came the day after Ben-Elissar told the group that in light of how "inflammatory" the issue was, Israel would "not create in the near future any new settlements."

During debate on the issue, Michael Perry of the Jewish Labor Committee, a co-sponsor of the measure with the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said settlements "will impede the peace process" and "exacerbate tensions."

"This language is not helpful to the peace process," countered David Luchins of the Orthodox Union. He termed the matter "extremely sensitive" and said the delegates were "sticking our feet" in places "where we don't belong."

"When we want to criticize Israel, we need to do it privately."

One activist who asked to remain anonymous said the moderate tone adopted by the usually more dovish umbrella group reflected the upbeat mood after the agreement on Hebron and the overwhelming support for it in the Knesset.

"Given Netanyahu's political moorings," he said, referring to the prime minister's conservative leanings, his policy on settlements "is a measured one."

Intense discussion on religious pluralism

A quieter, but more intense discussion ensued on religious pluralism in Israel in a session devoted to "Challenges to the American-Jewish Israel Relationship."

The discussion came on the heels of Netanyahu's meetings with U.S. rabbis over the weekend, at which he said coalition politics would force him to support legislation reaffirming exclusive Orthodox control over conversions in Israel.

NJCRAC officials had taken pains, including the euphemistic title, to defuse the volatility of the issue in deference to the sensitivities of the Orthodox Union, which adamantly opposes putting pluralism on the policy agenda.

Many delegates expressed disappointment and frustration after the two speakers in the forum made it plain that there are few solutions to questions burning through the Jewish grass roots about the status of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel.

JCRC professionals from across the nation said they increasingly are hard-pressed to counter growing protests over the issue, which, in some instances, threaten to spread to federation campaigns.

The forum's featured speakers were Julius Berman, an Orthodox past chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Shoshana Cardin, another past conference chairman who currently serves as chair of the United Israel Appeal and head of the U.S. side of an Israeli interministerial committee on Diaspora affairs.

Cardin declared her personal frustration over the lack of legal legitimacy in Israel of non-Orthodox Judaism

and said she raises the issue with Israeli officials at every opportunity.

There is a "major chasm of understanding" between U.S. and Israeli Jews, she said, adding that most Israelis "don't care" about Jewish pluralism.

She said the current battle is "an internal one" and cautioned against going to battle for "issues that are not life-threatening."

"Right now, there is no way to make change," she said. The only solution is to work to educate and "sensitize" Israelis at the grass roots to the richness of pluralistic Jewish life.

"Please do not, do not punish those in need, to whom we are responsible, for policies of the Israeli government," she said, referring to threats to the central fund-raising campaign.

For his part, Berman said umbrella organizations such as NJCRAC are "unique instrumentalities," which should not take up the pluralism issue because it is a divisive one.

Apologizing in advance for remarks he knew would raise hackles, Berman said it is the "albatross of Reform Judaism" in America that is responsible for the failure of Reform Judaism to take root in Israel.

The 80 percent of Israelis who are secular "are telling you they don't want it," he said, "and maybe they have got good reason." Berman found support from O.U.'s Luchins, who said he was "pained" by the session. Interdenominational meetings going on behind closed doors in the United States are one thing, he said, but the community "can't have public confrontation."

"If we start having discussions in NJCRAC" over halachah, or Jewish law, "I'm afraid we will not have a NJCRAC to come together at."

But most delegates who spoke appeared frustrated with both speakers.

"I heard a non-discussion," said Theodore Eisenberg, a lay leader in New Jersey's Metrowest federation and community relations committee. "I don't believe talk of division is divisive," he added. "This is an emergency."

Emily Fink Bauman of St. Louis said that "whether or not it is legitimate to interfere, intercede or advocate" on these issues, "there's a great deal of pain and dissension" in communities.

"JCRCs and NJCRAC have the responsibility to deal with that pain," she said.

"It's not just a question of pain," said Kenneth Sweder, president of Boston's JCRC, "it's a question of disengagement."

"The issue is civil rights," said Bernice Balter, of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism. "The troops are champing at the bit." □

Israel, Mexico join to fight drugs

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel and Mexico have signed an agreement to fight drug trafficking between their countries.

The accord was signed this week by Foreign Minister David Levy and his visiting Mexican counterpart, Angel Gurria. The two also signed agreements to establish regular consultations between their ministries and to waive their countries' visa requirements for holders of diplomatic passports.

The signing ceremony coincided with an announcement by Israeli police that they seized more than 30 pounds of pure cocaine from Mexico last month at the port of Haifa. Seven Israelis suspected of involvement were detained, police said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES
Vacant Jerusalem hill at eye of political storm in Israel
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The hill, covered with pine and cypress trees, is a quiet place — for now.

Every now and then, a group of Christians visit the hill as part of their pilgrimage to sites where Jesus once lived.

There is no hint of the gathering political storm.

Sitting squarely in the center of this storm is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces growing threats not only from the Palestinian leadership, but also from members of his own governing coalition.

A group of Israeli politicians from across the political spectrum is calling for the construction of a new Jewish neighborhood, Har Homa, on the now uninhabited hillside southeast of Jerusalem.

Proponents of the plan see the hill, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as a bulwark.

As Israel prepares to turn over rural portions of the West Bank to Palestinian self-rule over the next two years, Har Homa's advocates want to prevent the creation of an Arab territorial continuum stretching from Bethlehem to the southern outskirts of Jerusalem.

To counter this possibility, they want to surround Arab areas near Jerusalem with a chain of new Jewish neighborhoods stretching from south of Jerusalem to the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim in the east.

The original decision to build Har Homa was made by the previous Labor government in April 1991, but the move was repeatedly delayed for political reasons. Israel's zoning and planning committees already approved some 2,000 housing units, of 6,500 to be built on the site.

The final decision to send in the bulldozers to start clearing the land now rests with Netanyahu.

Closest friends make threats

There has been a crescendo of threats from conservative parliamentarians to cease supporting the government if Netanyahu fails to give Har Homa the go-ahead. Among this group are some of his closest friends in his own Likud Party, including Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and fellow parliamentarian Michael Eitan. Olmert heads a group of 17 Knesset members, known as the Eretz Yisrael Front, which Netanyahu will find difficult to ignore.

Some Labor Party members also have called for construction to begin, but the party's Knesset members this week backed away from supporting a no-confidence vote against the government over the issue.

Netanyahu, who chairs a ministerial committee dealing with construction in Jerusalem, is expected to make a decision next week. Finding himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place, the prime minister also has faced a series of threats from Palestinian leaders that the construction of Har Homa will derail the peace process.

Israeli security officials take these threats seriously, warning that building the new neighborhood will touch off Palestinian rioting similar to the three days of violence that erupted last September after Israel opened a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel located near the Temple Mount.

Arabs living near the proposed construction site also warn of violence. "There will be a lot of trouble if the Jews build there," said Ibrahim Hussein, the mukhtar, or village chief, of Umm Tuba, an Arab village near Har Homa. "Israel has so much territory. Why does it need to occupy this hill as well?"

He was keenly aware that Har Homa's proponents envisaged a ring of new Jewish communities that would surround existing Arab villages in the Jerusalem area. "If

they build here, Umm Tuba will die," he said. "We will be suffocated. We will be surrounded by the Jews."

Others in the village saw construction of Har Homa as an assault on the peace process itself.

"It's true that Israel had built other neighborhoods in Jerusalem in the past," said Saud Masri, a grocery store owner. "But now we are in the midst of a peace process. One cannot build in spite of the Palestinians."

Omar Mohammad Khalil, a construction worker in the nearby village of Soor Baher, had a slightly different take on what would happen if the bulldozers started work at Har Homa. "The villagers will shout and yell and demonstrate," he said. "But once building starts, half of the construction workers will come from our village." □

Knesset to probe allegations of biological weapons research
By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Knesset committee has decided to investigate work practices at a scientific research center that reportedly is researching and developing biological weapons.

Labor Knesset member Rafi Elul, who is chairman of a parliamentary committee on scientific and technological research, initiated a discussion this week about the activities of the Ness Ziona Biological Research Institute in central Israel.

Elul, who lives near the institute, claimed to represent many area residents in expressing his concern that an accident at the institute or a missile attack during wartime could have a catastrophic impact on the local community. He said that now was the time to consider moving the institute away from densely populated areas.

"I don't want to wait until a disaster and for a commission of inquiry to be established afterwards," Elul said. "I want to know if the activities there endanger local residents and if all steps are being taken to prevent accidents."

The institute, which was established in 1952 to conduct basic and applied biological and chemical research, has had no accidents during its 45-year history.

In recent years, the institute became involved in the research and development of defense systems against chemical and biological warfare, according to foreign news reports, which also have speculated that work is being done there to develop biological weapons.

Adding to the center's mystique are the formidable walls surrounding the heavily-guarded facility, which operates under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office.

The center was once situated in orchards on the outskirts of Ness Ziona, but suburban sprawl has brought residential neighborhoods right up to its gates.

Among the participants at Tuesday's Knesset committee deliberations was the director of the institute, Avigdor Shefferman, who stressed that all work at the center was being conducted in accordance with international regulations and standards. "There is a public committee which oversees this," he said.

The Knesset members at the hearing later decided to establish a committee that would tour the site, review work practices and make recommendations.

One of the institute's former senior scientists, Marcus Klingberg, was convicted in the early 1980s of spying for the former Soviet Union.

In a separate development Tuesday, a special parole board rejected an appeal brought by Klingberg, 79, who asked that he be cleared of the remaining six years of his 20-year sentence on the grounds of his poor health.

The parole board rejected the request, saying that there had been no change in the security risk he posed. □

Spirit of cooperation prevails as Jewish, Swiss officials convene

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish and Swiss leaders are pointing to a new spirit of cooperation in their efforts to learn the fate of Jewish assets deposited in Swiss banks during the World War II era.

The mutual praise comes in the wake of a decision by Switzerland's three largest banks to create a humanitarian fund for Holocaust survivors that might begin to make payments as soon as this summer.

"The mood has brightened," Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, told reporters during a break in last Friday's meeting in midtown Manhattan of his group, Swiss Jewish community leaders and Swiss government representatives.

Also in attendance were Israeli and U.S. officials involved in the issue, including Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat and Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee.

Bronfman also is president of the World Jewish Congress, which, with the Jewish Agency for Israel and other leading Jewish groups, created the WJRO in 1992.

The reciprocal admiration is somewhat unprecedented.

Past negotiations have been marked by mistrust on both sides.

One focus of the private meeting was how to transfer Swiss francs into the pockets of Holocaust survivors.

The humanitarian fund, which now stands at more than \$100 million as a result of contributions from the three banks and other Swiss businesses, is separate from the outstanding issue of how much Jewish wealth is sitting in dormant accounts in Swiss banks.

Jewish organizations have said Swiss banks hold up to \$7 billion in such accounts. Preliminary audits of the dormant accounts could come as early as mid-1997, an official said.

The Swiss government and the Swiss National Bank have pledged to infuse the fund as well, but only after the release of two "fast-track reports." An independent Swiss historical commission is expected to complete the reports by June.

"There has been a move from confrontation to cooperation," said Eizenstat, the Clinton administration official who deals with restitution issues.

"It is without precedent in history for a government to shine the spotlight on itself and live with the consequences," he added.

'Now back on track'

Special Ambassador Thomas Borer, who is coordinating Switzerland's response to all issues surrounding its wartime financial role, said, "I think it's a historic moment. What was hard and overly emotional is now back on track."

Borer, who also spoke of a "spirit of cooperation," said the details of the fund would be worked out with Jewish groups in the "next days and weeks."

"We want to do something our people and descendants could be proud of," he said.

Other developments emerging from last week's meeting included:

- Payments from the humanitarian fund may first go to Holocaust survivors now in Central and Eastern Europe, because those people suffered under both communism and Nazism, a Jewish official said.

- Borer talked of a second humanitarian fund. Last Friday, Swiss academics, writers and politicians unveiled

a private aid drive, dubbed the "Fund for Humanity and Justice," for Holocaust victims.

- The government of Switzerland invited Israel Singer, chairman of the WJRO executive committee and secretary general of the WJC, to meet with Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti.

Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy has also been invited to meet with Cotti.

- Knesset member Avraham Herschson, chairman of the body's committee on restitution, invited D'Amato and Bronfman to address the Israeli Parliament.

Meanwhile, British politicians seeking compensation for Holocaust survivors won Switzerland's backing for a proposed conference of all countries that handled Nazi gold during World War II.

One of those seeking support for the conference was British lawmaker Greville Janner, a vice president of the World Jewish Congress.

And earlier this week, the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center called on Switzerland to investigate all secret bank accounts opened by Nazi officials during the Third Reich and turn over the money to Holocaust victims. □

Former Ukrainian premier swayed to return from Israel

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A former head of the Ukrainian government who immigrated to Israel after allegations of embezzlement is expected to return soon to Kiev.

Yefim Zvyagilsky, who was the country's acting prime minister from 1993 to 1994, was granted parliamentary immunity last week after the Ukrainian Parliament dismissed all charges previously brought against him.

Zvyagilsky originally was accused by the media and some members of Parliament of embezzling \$25 million in public funds.

Jewish officials in Kiev praised the Parliament's decision to grant Zvyagilsky immunity.

Zvyagilsky wants very much to come back to Ukraine, where he left his 88-year-old mother, one Jewish official said in a telephone interview.

According to Arkady Monastyrsky, vice president of the Jewish Council of Ukraine, the nation's umbrella Jewish organization, citizens of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine recently collected 40,000 signatures to encourage Zvyagilsky to return.

Zvyagilsky served as mayor of Donetsk before he was appointed acting premier.

Shortly after Zvyagilsky moved to Israel more than two years ago, a group of parliamentary members representing far right and Communist factions visited him.

Upon their return to Kiev, the legislators issued a statement saying that Zvyagilsky had not been involved in the illegal dealings ascribed to him.

No formal investigation has ever been carried out.

Zvyagilsky is now working as a consultant for an Israeli electronics company.

In an interview published last week in a Kiev daily newspaper, Zvyagilsky said his premiership was a "tragedy" for him as a Jew.

Zvyagilsky called the media campaign against him a "moral terror." He believes he fell victim to groundless allegations mainly because he is Jewish.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Gennady Udovenko said during his visit to Washington last year that Ukrainian authorities might want to think twice about appointing Jews to senior offices in the future.

Udovenko later said that reporters misinterpreted his remark. □