



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A delegation of American Jewish leaders representing all streams of Judaism expressed their "deep concern" over pending conversion legislation in a meeting with an Israeli minister. Natan Sharansky met with the members of the Jewish Agency for Israel Board of Governors in his capacity as chairman of the Ministerial Committee on Diaspora Affairs. [Page 2]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hired a criminal lawyer after police suggested that they might want to question him again about the controversial short-lived appointment of an attorney general last month. Police are investigating allegations that Roni Bar-On was appointed as part of a deal to provide a plea bargain to Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri, who is on trial for corruption.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu briefed Jordan's King Hussein about Israel's plans to build a new neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem. At a joint news conference in Amman, Hussein refused to comment directly about the controversial Har Homa project, saying that "the prime minister knows our views."

■ Four people with Russian and Israeli names are set to be extradited to Georgia to face felony charges stemming from the Feb. 12 theft of ritual items from a Savannah synagogue. [Page 4]

■ A bill barring fascist propaganda was passed by the lower house of the Russian Parliament. The measure, which still needs the approval of the upper house, has a new definition of fascism that would make it easier to prosecute extremists.

■ A Swiss watchmaker's advertisement hailing Swiss skiing champions for bringing home gold medals reportedly sparked a debate about its good taste among industry officials who said it could offend Jews. "As always, whenever there is gold, a good part of it ends up in Switzerland," said the advertisement for Swatch brand watches.

■ Kiryat Yam Mayor Shmuel Siso was named Israel's new consul general of New York.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Israeli Orthodox rabbis accused of taking bribes for conversions

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli television investigative report has left many people here wondering just how kosher the country's Orthodox conversions really are.

The report, aired recently on a popular program that regularly exposes alleged corruption, showed an Orthodox rabbi demanding thousands of dollars to perform what the media has termed a "quickie conversion."

The Chief Rabbinate's office has denied that the alleged extortion is widespread.

The program showed Rabbi Michael Dushinsky, the kashrut supervisor in the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, taking \$15,000 in cash from a reporter posing as a potential convert.

Caught on a hidden camera, Dushinsky told the woman and her "boyfriend" that even though a conversion ordinarily takes at least one year to complete, he would expedite the process by providing false witnesses who would testify before the rabbinical court that she is maintaining a religious lifestyle.

Dushinsky predicted on camera that he could complete the process within two weeks, even though the rabbinical court must hear Orthodox witnesses testify that the potential convert has observed the religious commandments for an entire calendar year.

After the broadcast, the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court placed Dushinsky, who allegedly took several other bribes, into custody.

The court also detained Rabbi Binyamin Bar-Zohar, who allegedly received two-thirds of the bribe money and then used his connections in the rabbinical court to expedite the conversions.

The television report came amid an escalating debate surrounding impending Orthodox-inspired legislation that would ban non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel and would prevent Israeli citizens and residents from obtaining them abroad.

Orthodox authorities, who already have sole jurisdiction over marriage, divorce and conversion in Israel, maintain that Reform and Conservative conversions do not meet the stringent standards of Jewish law.

And, in an apparent effort to boost their campaign for the new conversion bill, some Orthodox leaders have lashed out at the practices of the liberal movements.

Interior Minister Eli Suissa recently charged that Reform rabbis were poised to do "quickie conversions" of Black Hebrews, a sect based in Chicago, who may want to join their community in Dimona, Israel.

Both the Reform movement and the Black Hebrews vehemently denied the minister's accusation.

Hundreds convert in Israel each year

Rabbi Lennard Thal, vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, called Suissa's remark "incredibly outrageous."

The Reform movement does not do "quickie conversions," Thal said in a telephone interview. "Most Reform rabbis who function in large metropolitan areas encourage prospective converts to enroll in an introductory Judaism course which lasts 4 1/2 to six months."

In addition to the weekly classes, there are regular meetings with the rabbi who ultimately will perform the conversion.

Ben-Ami Carter, the leader of the Black Hebrews community in Israel, suggested that the minister's comment might be part of the Orthodox campaign against recognition of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel, according to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot.

An estimated 500 to 700 people undergo Orthodox conversions in Israel each year.

Another 300 people convert here through the Reform and Conservative movements, though these conversions are not recognized in Israel. The number who go abroad is not known.

In order to undergo an Orthodox conversion, the potential convert, or the parents of an adopted child, must vow to live according to Jewish law as

strictly interpreted by the Orthodox. Adoptive parents, for example, must promise to send their children to religious school, and they themselves must become observant.

Those who refuse sometimes turn to the Reform and Conservative movements, which offer the opportunity to obtain conversions overseas. The proposed conversion legislation would close that loophole by requiring all residents of Israel to obtain conversions in the Jewish state.

Although Reform and Conservative leaders here expressed relief that the so-called "conversion for pay" story was exposed, they asserted that both the rabbinate and the police were alerted to the problem in November, but failed to act.

At that time, Anat Galilee, spokeswoman for the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, told the Knesset's Aliyah and Absorption Committee that dozens of potential converts had been asked for bribes during the past several years.

Everyone involved in the conversion process "knows that this corruption has been going on for years, but the people who were asked to pay bribes have been unwilling to testify," said Rabbi Uri Regev, the center's director.

"Neither the police nor the religious establishment wanted to take this seriously."

Rabbi Einat Ramon, spokeswoman for the Masorti movement, as the Conservative branch is known in Israel, said the Dushinsky case "is far from an isolated incident. I am sure this is a widespread phenomenon."

"Something like 50 percent of the converts who convert through the Masorti movement tell us they were offered some kind of cash deal," Ramon added.

Ramon termed the Orthodox "monopoly" of personal-status issues "grave hypocrisy."

"Here they have been spreading lies about the non-Orthodox movements and the way we perform conversions, saying that our process is irresponsible, and we see how irresponsible the Orthodox are."

'In U.S., no bribes for conversions'

Regev called the alleged corruption a "direct consequence of the Orthodox monopoly" over conversions.

"The only conclusion must be that pluralism is essential. If there were recognized liberal alternatives to Orthodox conversions, people would not fall prey to such schemes because they would have access to non-Orthodox alternatives," Regev said.

"And the Orthodox themselves would find a more flexible framework. In the United States, no one has to bribe a rabbi to be converted."

Rafael Dayan, an adviser to Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, denied that there is a "network" of bribe-takers operating in the rabbinate.

But Dayan conceded that "we have known about some problems for a while and have tried to stop them from spreading further." He would not elaborate.

In a clear sign that the rabbinate takes the matter very seriously, Dayan said, "The chief rabbi holds the view that anyone found guilty of taking bribes is not worthy of serving as a rabbi, particularly not in the rabbinate."

Regev maintains that the public's interest in the Dushinsky matter reflects "a new attitude in Israel, and not just in the religious domain."

In recent years, "the police and law enforcement authorities, as well as the public, have become more assertive in their efforts to ensure freedom of information," Regev said.

"You see this in the number of corruption cases that are being tried in court. A lot of sacred cows are being slaughtered." □

Jewish Agency leaders press Sharansky on conversion bill

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A delegation of American Jewish leaders representing all streams of Judaism expressed their "deep concern" over pending conversion legislation in a meeting with Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky.

Sharansky met Sunday with the leaders, members of the Jewish Agency for Israel Board of Governors, in his capacity as chairman of the Ministerial Committee on Diaspora Affairs.

The leaders, all members of the newly formed Jewish Agency Board of Governors Committee for the Unity of the Jewish People, presented Sharansky with a document calling on the government to "abstain from" legislation altering the religious status quo and "not to allow any change in the Law of Return."

The pending conversion bill would ban non-Orthodox conversions in Israel and would prevent Israeli citizens and residents from obtaining them abroad.

Although the bill does not mention conversions performed abroad for non-Israeli residents, some Orthodox Knesset members have said they would seek legislation to curtail the Law of Return.

The Law of Return allows anyone to immigrate to Israel who was born to a Jewish mother or who has been converted to Judaism. For years, Orthodox parties have sought to amend the law to require that conversions be carried out by Orthodox rabbis.

But Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have balked at legislation that would alter the long-standing policy of recognizing Reform and Conservative conversions abroad.

According to a Jewish Agency statement released after the meeting, the leaders asked Sharansky to keep an open mind about issues of concern to American Jews.

Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, told Sharansky, "Just as you ask us to understand Israeli reality, you have to understand the reality of U.S. Jewry," according to the statement.

'Country owes me this much'

"So that we will remain one people, 3 million Reform Jews need to know that the government of Israel understands them, knows them, is aware of their problems and considers them legitimate," Yoffie said.

After the meeting, Vera Golovensky, Sharansky's adviser on Diaspora affairs, said that even though the minister recognizes "the political reality in Israel," he also seeks to prevent a further erosion of the religious rights of Reform and Conservative Jews.

While the meeting was in progress, about a dozen Reform and Conservative activists held a small vigil outside the ministry building protesting the conversion bill.

One of the protesters, Yoram Danker, said he had braved the stormy weather because the state refuses to recognize his 5-year-old daughter as Jewish.

"We adopted her five years ago and went to the rabbinate to have her converted," Danker says. "We were told that she could not be converted unless we lived an Orthodox lifestyle. I'm from an Orthodox family, but I'm not Orthodox." Danker said his daughter's Conservative conversion had not been recognized by Israel's Ministry of the Interior, which issues identity cards.

"I want my daughter's identity card to say she is Jewish. I feel this country owes me that much." □

(JTA staff writer Cynthia Mann contributed to this report.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Environmental issues prompt Jews to re-engage communally

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Rochelle Whiteman's spiritual awakening began with a turnip.

The 61-year-old teacher and designer from Milwaukee was gardening when she experienced an environmental epiphany of sorts.

Working the earth with her hands, she says she discovered a connection between spirituality and ecology that has led her into the world of environmental activism — and back to her Jewish roots.

Whiteman was not looking for ways to connect Judaism and environmentalism; she says the parallels simply manifested themselves and showed her a path back into the Jewish fold.

"It showed me a way I could be valid again, that I had something to offer," Whiteman said of her local Jewish community's embracement of environmental programs.

"I have not been a practicing ritualistic person, but I feel that the synagogue has become meaningful for me again," she said.

Whiteman is one of a growing number of Jews across the country whose environmental awareness and activism has helped create a deeper connection to Judaism.

She joined about 60 other regional leaders of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life in Washington this month to discuss the future of the Jewish environmental movement.

COEJL grew out of the 1992 Consultation on the Environment and Jewish life, convened by then-Sen. Al Gore and by astronomer Carl Sagan, who recently died.

Charged with integrating environmental education and action into the life and institutions of the American Jewish community, COEJL intertwines religious values, spirituality, science, public policy and community-building.

The coalition, established in 1993, is an umbrella group for 23 national Jewish organizations, including the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. About 600 activists, all volunteers, make up the coalition's core, and 6,000 people across the country currently subscribe to COEJL's newsletter.

'Obligations don't end with humans'

At its Washington gathering, which was held in conjunction with the annual NJCRAC conference, COEJL activists brainstormed ways to organize grass-roots environmental education and action.

Gaining greater Jewish institutional recognition and support for the environmental cause remains a central part of the coalition's agenda. The case activists make is simple: Jewish continuity and human continuity go hand in hand.

"For those of us who care about the continuity of the Jewish people, we must demonstrate our institutions as relevant to the issue that is of most concern to the youth of our country — the fate of humanity and the natural world," said Mark Jacobs, director of COEJL.

Ted Eisenberg, a 47-year-old COEJL activist from Roseland, N.J., agrees that Jewish obligations "don't end at the human border."

"As people we're facing a crisis in resources, in toxins, in the extinction of species," he said. "The Jewish people as human beings cannot divorce themselves from a crisis of this magnitude.

"We can't remain separate and apart from this calamity without moral complicity."

Jewish environmental activists, moreover, see their work as an effective means of bringing more people like Rochelle Whiteman back into Jewish circles.

"I think we have to look at the Jewish population on the periphery of the organized community and see what is animating them, and use that as a tool to bring them back in," Eisenberg said. "One of those issues is the environment."

For her part, Ora Shinnar, a 20-year-old student at Stern College in New York, wants to increase awareness about environmentalism within the Orthodox Jewish community.

"The rest of the Jewish community is very wonderfully environmentally aware and incorporates it into their lives very nicely, and the Orthodox community really doesn't," said Shinnar, who heads an environmental club at her Orthodox women's college.

In coming years, Shinnar said, she plans to set up an environmental curriculum for Orthodox day schools and synagogues laying out Jewish texts that testify to the biblical imperative to preserve and nurture the human habitat.

For Barak Gale, a 40-year-old COEJL activist from Walnut Creek, Calif., reading such texts strengthened his environmental awareness.

"I realized that our liturgy spoke so profoundly to the grandeur in creation, and I felt that definitely implies responsibility at the same time," Gale said.

At the NJCRAC conference, delegates unanimously adopted two environmental policy positions drafted by COEJL.

One calls for reauthorizing and strengthening the Endangered Species Act, and the other urges better standards as part of the Clean Air Act.

"Both resolutions deal with major pieces of environmental legislation and it is important for the Jewish community to be heard," said Lawrence Rubin, NJCRAC executive vice chairman and a member of COEJL's steering committee.

Meanwhile, over the next couple of years, COEJL plans to focus its efforts on strengthening ties between the Jewish environmental movement and the organized Jewish community, while working at the grass-roots level to create a permanent cadre of environmental activists for the next century.

At stake, Jewish environmentalists emphasize, is nothing short of an impending calamity.

"We have to deal with this from the vantage point of necessity, from the vantage point of morality and from the vantage point of the Jewish tradition," Eisenberg said. "All of these things converge. It's a no-brainer." □

Court clears agriculture minister

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's agriculture and environment minister has been cleared of charges of misusing classified information and violating a person's privacy.

Rafael Eitan and two members of his Tsomet movement had been accused of extracting information from the personal army file of another party member to prevent him from becoming director general of Tsomet.

The Haifa court Feb. 19 also cleared Tsomet activist Haggai Ashur and Gonen Segev, a member of Tsomet who later served in the Labor government of Yitzhak Rabin.

The court, however, decided to pursue legal action against another Tsomet activist, Sami Shenfeld, who is accused of procuring the personal information from the army database while serving in the reserves. □

Stolen ritual objects recovered when Florida police nab suspects

By June Bell

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (JTA) — Quick-thinking congregants of an Orthodox synagogue here have helped recover \$10,000 in ritual silver objects stolen from a Savannah, Ga., synagogue.

Jacksonville police say the suspected thieves, who had claimed to be collecting for charity, had documents suggesting that they might have successfully solicited across the country.

Three men and a woman with Russian and Israeli names are expected to be extradited to Georgia to face felony charges stemming from the Feb. 12 theft of items from Bnai Brith Jacob.

Papers and canceled checks in their possession "appeared to be records of money collected from cities all over the United States," a police report said.

Rabbi Avigdor Slatius of Bnai Brith Jacob traveled to Jacksonville this week to identify the stolen items, including an ornate silver yad, or pointer, donated 100 years ago by a Savannah family still active in the 133-year-old congregation.

Slatius said members of his congregation were tremendously relieved to discover that everything was recovered, with one small exception — a tzedakah box containing about \$5 in change.

Slatius had given \$250 to five people who visited his synagogue Feb. 12, ostensibly to solicit for Jewish charities.

While one man joined the congregation in prayer, the others apparently made off with small items that could be tucked into their sleeves or stuffed under their shirts, Slatius said. After they left, he discovered the loss.

"While we were at services, they made the rounds," Slatius said, describing the theft as "nauseating."

Items found in trunk of car

The rabbi immediately called synagogues in Charleston, S.C., and Jacksonville to warn them that they could be the next victims. One of his calls was to Jay Graff, a member of Jacksonville's Orthodox synagogue, Etz Chaim.

The next day, Graff said Etz Chaim was visited by three men and a woman who said their car broke down and asked for money to get back on the road. As soon as they got out of the taxi, Graff recalled, he said to a fellow congregant, "These are the guys. We're gonna get them."

He gave them \$30 and called police, who found the four at the home of Jacksonville's Chabad rabbi, where they were requesting money, a police report said.

Questioned separately by police, they gave inconsistent stories, Jacksonville police said. They gave police permission to search their 1987 Mercedes, which had a New York license plate.

Police said that in the trunk, they found seven silver ritual objects in a black coat, a tallit and scores of silver items with chains, identified by police as silver eyeglass holders. Slatius said they were clips for tallitot.

Arrested on a misdemeanor charge of fraudulent accosting were Meir Tetrashvili, 43, of Brooklyn, N.Y.; Meir Sepiashvili, 27, of Brooklyn, N.Y.; Lioudmila Kovalskaia, 49, no address given; and Rafael Batach, 57, of Israel. If extradited to Georgia, they would face felony charges.

The suspects were apprehended with the help of Israeli secret service agents, who happened to be in Jacksonville to provide security for former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who was speaking at the Jacksonville Jewish Center, which is next door to Etz Chaim. □

Party in German coalition protests exhibit on Nazis

By Daniel Dagan

BONN (JTA) — A party belonging to Germany's governing coalition has denounced an exhibit that details a series of criminal acts carried out by the German army during World War II.

The exhibit about the Wehrmacht, as Germany's wartime army was known, is "an insult to millions of German soldiers and a defamation of Germany," according to an official statement from the Christian Social Union.

The exhibit, which premiered last year in Hamburg, is scheduled to open this week at a university in Munich, the capital of the German state of Bavaria.

In that state, the Christian Social Union is the ruling party.

The exhibit documents the role of the Wehrmacht in rounding up European Jews and sending them to concentration camps.

It also portrays cases of the outright killing of Jews by German army units.

The exhibit was financed by Jan Philipp Reemtsma, a philanthropist who runs a Hamburg-based foundation that supports research projects about Germany's Nazi past.

Reemtsma said he was not impressed with the Christian Social Union's criticism of his project.

"This is something we have been expecting all along," he said.

"It is in fact difficult for Germans to be confronted with this terrible past and to face the truth on such a delicate issue."

The Christian Social Union's criticism echoed the sentiments of many Germans, who have long sought to distance the Wehrmacht from the war crimes carried out by the SS and Gestapo.

Members of the opposition Social Democratic Party responded to the criticism by charging that the Christian Social Union was cooperating with neo-Nazi groups in a bid to stop the exhibit from opening in Munich.

The Christian Social Union is "practically playing the role of the organizer of a neo-Nazi protest, which can easily end up in violence," said Dietmar Keese, the leader of the Social Democrats in the Bavarian Parliament.

The charges and countercharges come at a time of heightened debate within Germany about the role of its citizens during World War II.

That debate was fueled by the recent success of "Hitler's Willing Executioners," a book by American author Daniel Goldhagen that said the Holocaust would not have been able to take place without the active complicity of the average German citizen.

Meanwhile, neo-Nazi groups have announced plans to bring thousands of followers to Munich on March 1 for a protest march against the exhibit.

Some 40 left-wing groups said they would organize a counterdemonstration against the neo-Nazis. □

Discovery may halt AIDS onset

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science have isolated an enzyme that could help in developing drugs that slow down the onset of AIDS in people who have HIV, the virus that causes the disease.

The team, led by David Wallach, discovered the enzyme NIK, which plays a central role in the activation of the immune system.

The findings were to be published in the British journal Nature. □