



NEWS AT A GLANCE

On eve of trial of Rabin suspect, a grandmother frets over future

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

■ A former kosher butcher in Jacksonville, Fla., pleaded guilty to charges in connection with planting a pipe bomb at a local synagogue prior to a speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. The federal charges against Harry Shapiro, 31, carry a mandatory 10-year prison sentence.

■ The U.N. Security Council deliberated on a request by Arab countries to demand a halt to Israel's controversial housing project in eastern Jerusalem. The United States, which already vetoed a council resolution critical of the construction, would be certain to veto another such resolution. But reports suggest the U.S. would support a non-binding statement calling on Israel to stop the project.

■ Palestinians protesting Israeli construction at Har Homa marched on Rachel's Tomb in the West Bank town of Bethlehem. Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli troops, who responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons. [Page 3]

■ Five Jewish families moved into the Silwan neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem. The families, who refer to the mostly Arab area as the City of David, said they had purchased the property legally from its Arab owners. The Prime Minister's Office said it had no connection to the move, but admitted that it came at a politically sensitive time. [Page 3]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proposed an accelerated schedule for the final-status talks with the Palestinians to tackle such heated issues as the future of Jerusalem, the status of Jewish settlements and the fate of Palestinian refugees. Palestinian Authority officials flatly rejected the proposal, calling it a public relations ploy. [Page 3]

■ Two former Albanian Cabinet ministers requested asylum in Israel, according to Ma'ariv. The request came in the wake of the massive civil unrest that erupted in Albania after people blamed the government for the loss of their life savings in a series of ill-fated pyramid schemes. One is Jewish; the other is married to a Jewish woman.

NEW YORK (JTA) — Pnina Peli is worried about her granddaughter. Margalit Har-Shefi, a friend of Yigal Amir's from their time together as students at Bar-Ilan University Law School, is slated to stand trial in connection with the November 1995 murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Her granddaughter was friendly with Amir, who was convicted of the assassination, only because they jointly coordinated student Shabbat trips to Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Golan Heights, Peli said in an interview during a recent visit to New York.

And even though Amir — who is now serving a life sentence in prison — had romantic hopes about his relationship with Har-Shefi, her granddaughter was never interested in him that way, Peli said.

"She had no reason to not be friendly with him. He was a nice intelligent boy, until he became a murderer," she said.

Har-Shefi is from a prominent Israeli family.

Peli, her maternal grandmother, is one of the founding mothers of Orthodox feminism. In 1986, in Jerusalem, she organized an international conference to examine the role of women in Jewish law.

Har-Shefi's grandfather, Pinchas Peli, who died in 1989, was a professor of Jewish thought at Ben-Gurion University, a popular commentator on the Torah and a lecturer around the world.

Her mother, Bitkha, teaches Talmud at the Reform rabbinical seminary's Jerusalem campus, and her father, Dov, runs a packaging plant in their West Bank settlement town of Beit El.

Another of the Pelis' daughters is Emunah Elon, who serves as the adviser to the prime minister on the status of women. Elon is married to Benny Elon, a son of former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Menachem Elon. Benny Elon, an outspoken member of the Knesset, represents the right-wing Moledet Party.

Took prosecutors more than a year

It took prosecutors more than a year to decide whether to file charges against Har-Shefi.

She was arrested immediately after the assassination, and questioned for close to 20 days on the suspicion that she was part of a plot to assassinate the prime minister and carry out terrorist attacks against Arabs.

However, she was subsequently released with no charges filed.

Since that period, no new evidence has come to light. Har-Shefi's former attorney said he was totally surprised by the recent decision to press charges against his client.

The prosecution explained the move, saying that it was awaiting results of the investigation of five other suspects in connection with the assassination.

It also said it was waiting for the rulings in the conspiracy trials of Yigal and his brother Hagai Amir, and their friend, Dror Adani, in which Har-Shefi was a defense witness.

In September 1996, they were all found guilty.

Har-Shefi, 21, has been charged with knowing of Yigal Amir's plans to assassinate Rabin and failing to notify authorities.

She has also been charged with providing Amir with information to commit criminal acts.

According to the charge sheet and excerpts from police questioning of Har-Shefi that have been published, the two first met on campus, within the framework of activities against the Labor government's policies.

The prosecution has said that on more than one occasion, Amir told Har-Shefi that he believed a religious edict that justifies killing to save Jewish lives applied to Rabin, and that he believed that the prime minister should be killed.

The prosecution also said Amir confided in Har-Shefi a number of times about specific plans to kill Rabin, but that circumstances prevented it.

One of those instances was Jan. 22, 1995, when the two attended a demonstration in Jerusalem at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, where

Rabin was due to take part in a ceremony. Because of a suicide bombing the same day in another part of the country, Rabin did not attend the ceremony.

On the way back from the demonstration, according to the charge sheet, Amir told Har-Shefi that he had brought his pistol with him and had planned to shoot Rabin.

Har-Shefi has said that in her circles, many people were deeply disturbed by the political process and the idea of killing Rabin had been expressed, with a certain amount of cynicism.

"It's possible that I have said I would be happy if Rabin would die," Har Shefi was quoted as telling police. "We know that there are lots of people who speak like this, but I never thought it would actually happen. Thousands of people heard him speak like this. Who thought he would go and do it?"

"It's fate's joke that I should be sitting here, because I always told him not to do it."

The charge sheet also states that Amir told Har-Shefi of plans to form an underground that would protect Jewish settlements after Israeli redeployments in the West Bank and would carry out attacks on Arabs. The prosecution said Amir asked Har-Shefi for help in setting this up.

According to the prosecution, Har-Shefi told Amir the location of the storehouse for weapons in Beit El, the Jewish settlement where she lives. The charge sheet also states that she gave Amir the name of a Beit El resident who could provide him with information to build explosives.

'She thought he was crazy'

According to her grandmother, however, Har-Shefi refused Amir's request to put him in touch with someone who could obtain explosives.

"She told him she thought he was crazy and said she'd call the police if she thought he was serious," Peli said.

An hour or two after Rabin was murdered, Har-Shefi remembered what Amir had said and called his family's house to see whether he was there. When Amir's brother told her that he was not, "she lay down on her bed shaking," said Peli, who called the Har-Shefi home soon after that.

The government's indictment of Har-Shefi is based on that phone call to the Amir home and on Amir's request for help getting explosives, said Peli.

If Har-Shefi is as innocent of involvement as her grandmother thinks she is, then why is she going on trial?

"Because the left is trying to harass the right all the time," Peli said.

Those on the political left "want to get back into the government and would sacrifice a 21-year-old girl to do it, sure," Peli said.

According to Barukh Binah, minister counselor for public affairs at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, "Everything in the judicial system in Israel is done according to law."

Peli said Har-Shefi's indictment has shocked the family and all who know them. "We can't even contemplate her being imprisoned."

Her daughter and son-in-law estimate that their legal bills will total at least \$100,000 by the time Har-Shefi's trial ends.

"I feel angry about it. I'm concerned, certainly, about Margalit, that she should be put on trial and about the financial side of it, which may leave the family bankrupt." □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

Israeli envoy chides Argentina on fifth anniversary of bombing

By Sergio Kiernan

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Argentine Jews this week commemorated the fifth anniversary of the March 17, 1992, bombing of the Israeli Embassy here with bitter criticism of the government for failing to capture those responsible for the attack.

Some 1,500 people gathered Monday morning across the street from the Argentine Supreme Court to criticize the government's inability to solve the car bombing, which left 29 dead and some 100 wounded.

Later in the day, at the exact time of the explosion, mournful ceremonies took place at the Jewish cemetery in La Tablada, just outside Buenos Aires.

Under a garden tent, government officials, Cabinet members, politicians from almost every party, diplomats and Jewish community officials observed a minute of silence for the explosion's victims.

Argentina's chief rabbi, Shlomo Ben Hamu, said Kaddish.

Israel's ambassador to Argentina, Itzhak Aviran, was the sole speaker — and he did not mince words.

Looking directly at the gathering of Argentine government officials, he said, "Any country has a duty to protect its guests. A diplomatic mission is a guest. Our mission, and I say this with pain, was not protected by Argentina.

"This country should capture those who helped the bombers here," said Aviran.

"Such an attack is impossible unless the terrorists have a local connection, people ready to do intelligence work.

"Capturing them is the only way to guarantee that there will not be other bombings.

"But unfortunately, after five years, there is nothing to report," he added. "Everything seems empty, so empty.

"Why does not Argentina go after those who spread anti-Semitism, those who vandalize our cemeteries, those who bomb us?" asked Aviran, a frequent critic of the government's fruitless investigation.

"The Argentine judiciary and security agencies have to identify the terrorists and capture them," Aviran added.

Indignant voices crying "Justice! Justice!" interrupted the ambassador's speech several times.

When the ceremony was over, the contingent of government officials made a quick exit.

Argentine officials have also been unable to solve the July 18, 1994, bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association, also known as AMIA, which left 86 dead and more than 300 wounded.

Jewish leaders here and abroad have cited incompetence, corruption and anti-Semitism among security and government officials as causes for Argentina's inability to solve either case. □

Israel targets Hezbollah positions

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, March 20 (JTA) — Israeli warplanes struck Hezbollah targets Thursday in southern Lebanon near the Syrian border.

The attack came a day after one Israeli soldier was killed and three others were wounded when Hezbollah guerrillas attacked their patrol in southern Lebanon.

Sgt. Avner Hezi, 20, of Alon Moreh, was laid to rest Thursday at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl military cemetery. □

Palestinians rebuff Netanyahu on expediting final-status talks*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has proposed that Israel and the Palestinians move to complete their final-status talks within six months.

Netanyahu floated the idea earlier this week with Jordan's King Hussein, who visited Israel Sunday, and with American officials. However, senior Palestinian officials rejected the idea outright, calling it a public relations ploy, and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat refused to meet with the premier to discuss the matter.

Netanyahu's proposal comes as Israeli-Palestinian relations have reached their worst crisis since the two sides signed a framework for peace in 1993. Palestinian anger continues to rage over Israel's decision to begin building a new Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem.

At Rachel's Tomb, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Israeli soldiers used tear gas Thursday to disperse Palestinian demonstrators who hurled stones at the troops.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai warned the Palestinians against escalating the violence and said that Friday prayers in mosques should not be exploited to increase tensions. "I hope that nobody will use violence to try to change the situation in the area," he said.

In another development that added to the tension surrounding construction at Har Homa, five Jewish families moved into an empty house Wednesday night in the Silwan neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem.

The families, who refer to the area as the City of David, said they had purchased the property legally from its Arab owners, who now live in the United States.

According to representatives of the families, there are currently 10 Jewish-owned houses in Silwan. About 100 Jews, including 30 yeshiva students, live in the primarily Arab area outside the walls of the Old City.

The Prime Minister's Office said it had no connection to the move, which it said came at a sensitive time.

Effort to break impasse in negotiations

Netanyahu's proposal to move straight to final-status talks, ahead of implementing other interim steps, is not new — he made a similar offer shortly after his election last May. But in renewing the offer this week, Netanyahu appeared to be seeking to break the impasse in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Israeli officials said that under the proposal, the accelerated final-status talks would be concluded by November, when Israel is scheduled to carry out the second of three redeployments in rural areas of the West Bank that were called for in the Hebron accord.

However, if accelerating the final-status talks proves to be unworkable, Netanyahu said negotiators could revert back to the original step-by-step process.

Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan was believed to have raised the idea with Arafat when the two met in Gaza earlier this week.

Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh also discussed the proposal with Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat.

However, the Palestinians were not receptive.

Erekat accused Netanyahu of "trying to destroy the foundations of the peace process and the autonomy agreements, in order to get out of honoring his commitments, including the next two phases of the Israeli military redeployment in the West Bank."

Final-status talks began ceremonially in May under the previous Labor government. They were scheduled to resume Monday, but the Palestinians balked in the wake of the Har Homa situation.

Some of the thorniest issues remain to be resolved

in the final-status talks, including Jerusalem, borders, Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements.

Members of Netanyahu's coalition and the opposition expressed support for the proposal to move up the talks. Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said the idea could be a "good one" but that he wanted to study it first.

Labor Knesset member Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Israeli-Palestinian accords, also welcomed the plan.

But other opposition figures remained skeptical.

Meretz leader Yossi Sarid said that unless the Netanyahu government altered its policies significantly, it could set as many target dates for accords as it wanted, but would never reach an agreement with the Palestinians. □

Court orders Priebke moved from prison to house arrest*By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Former Nazi SS Captain Erich Priebke will be released into house arrest pending a retrial for his role in a World War II massacre outside Rome.

An Italian military court made the ruling Tuesday during a closed-door session.

It was not clear where Priebke would be housed, but judicial sources said he might be placed in a convent.

Military prosecutor Antonino Intelisano said the court took into consideration evidence presented by the defense showing that the 83-year-old Priebke was suffering from a deterioration of mental health.

Priebke was extradited to Italy in November 1995 from Argentina, where he had lived openly for nearly half a century.

Priebke was tried last year by a military court for his involvement in the March 1944 Nazi massacre of 335 civilians at the Ardeatine caves south of Rome. About 75 of the victims were Jews.

The military court Aug. 1 found Priebke guilty of involvement in the massacre, but ordered him freed because of extenuating circumstances, including a statute of limitations. This verdict caused an uproar and Priebke was rearrested. The verdict was quashed on appeal in October, and a new trial was ordered.

The retrial is expected to begin next month. □

Report: Israel's chief rabbi ignored ban to wed couples*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Reports that Israel's chief rabbi has been charging couples to wed them have sparked a public debate. The Religious Affairs Ministry bars rabbis from charging for conducting weddings, because Israelis already pay a fee to their local religious council.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported Wednesday that Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau performed more than 100 marriages a year and regularly collected fees ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 per couple. The paper said the chief rabbi often was paid cash, which was handed to him in an envelope on the night of the event.

According to the report, Lau sometimes opened the envelope, counted the bills and, referring to his personal driver, asked, "What about him?"

Responding to the allegations in the article, Lau said he never charged to perform marriages.

"I never asked, and certainly never conditioned my services, on any kind of payment," he told the paper.

When told that some 30 couples had recorded statements claiming otherwise, Lau said he had received donations as gratuities. "There is no directive against receiving a gift from someone who would like to express appreciation," he said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Hussein's flip-flop on Israel prompted by ties to Jerusalem

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For a tense few days, it seemed that Israeli-Jordanian relations had completely broken down.

Jordan's King Hussein, sharing Palestinian anger over Israel's decision to start construction of a new Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in eastern Jerusalem, last week wrote a sharply worded letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying that he had lost confidence in the Israeli leader's commitment to peace.

Netanyahu, on a trip to Moscow at the time, responded with leaks to his media entourage hinting at the existence of mental problems in the royal family — a reference to how Hussein's father, Talal, had suffered from mental illness.

The leaks, though later denied by Israel, were perceived in Jordan as a direct insult to the king.

"King Hussein is perceived in Jordan as the father of the kingdom," Alexander Bligh, head of Middle East Studies at Jezreel Valley College, said in an interview.

"His subjects look up to him and often imitate him."

This may have provided the motivation for Jordanian soldier Ahmed Moussa, who shot and killed seven Israeli schoolgirls last week while they were on a field trip to an Israeli-Jordanian border site, Naharayim, called "The Island of Peace."

According to reports from Amman, the soldier simply could not accept any disrespect to his leader.

The killing of the schoolgirls, in an odd twist of fate, helped restore Israeli-Jordanian relations.

Hussein and Netanyahu, rather than proceeding on a collision course, embraced each other Sunday.

With the Israeli premier at his side, Hussein made a series of emotional condolence visits to the bereaved families.

Jordan has custodial role in Jerusalem

Outwardly, Hussein appeared to have flip-flopped overnight.

With Palestinians making up two-thirds of Jordan's population, Hussein has long kept a wary eye on the aspirations of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.

At the same time, with Netanyahu's pledge to honor the king's role as custodian over Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem — a role enshrined in the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty — Hussein supported Netanyahu's election last year.

In addition, he and Netanyahu do not support the creation of a Palestinian state, with each feeling that they would have a lot to lose from such a development.

Hussein was hoping, along with the small majority of the Israeli electorate that voted for Netanyahu, that the premier would know how to steer forward the peace process without giving in too much to the Palestinians.

But that was before Hussein knew of Israel's determination to build at Har Homa, which touches on what is the most sensitive issue for the Arab world in its dealings with Israel — the future of Jerusalem.

Whatever the extent of Hussein's support for Netanyahu — or his reservations about Arafat — when it comes to Jerusalem, Hussein is squarely on the Arab side.

This was what prompted his angry missive to Netanyahu.

"The letter to Netanyahu was not an emotional act. It was the result of a calculated political reaction," said Bligh.

"Whereas Israel has no specific commitment toward the Palestinians regarding Jerusalem, Israel did commit itself to preserve the special status of the king as guardian of the holy Muslim places in Jerusalem," said Bligh.

"Hussein mentions time and again his special obligation toward Jerusalem, as a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed."

Although Jordan relinquished its claims to the West Bank years ago, "it had never detached itself from Jerusalem," he said.

Letter not motivated by fear of opposition

Jordanians who are close to the king insist that his letter to Netanyahu was not motivated by a fear of opposition from his subjects if he were perceived as siding with Israel regarding Har Homa.

The letter, these observers say, was not meant to mollify the Islamic opposition within the Jordanian Parliament or the 3 million Palestinians living in Jordan.

Nasser a-Din Nashashibi — a veteran Palestinian politician who has been close to the royal court from the days of Hussein's grandfather, King Abdullah — said in an interview that the crisis of last week, as well as the reconciliation of this week, were both independent of internal considerations within Jordan.

In both cases, he said, Hussein acted because he believed that this was the right way to behave, that this was what needed to be done to save the peace process.

Mustafa Abu-Libdeh, the editor of the Jordanian economic daily Al-Aswak, wrote that Hussein's dramatic visit to Israel on Sunday had a political as well as a human face.

"Beginning with the afternoon hours, Hussein began the race to prevent an explosion between Israel and the Palestinians," he wrote. "The king was offering Netanyahu a ladder to get off the high tree on which he had climbed in the Har Homa affair."

Dr. Ahmed Tibi, an Israeli Arab who is an adviser to Arafat, not surprisingly played down the potential political benefits of Hussein's trip to Israel.

"One should not misunderstand the visit," Tibi said in an interview.

"It was a condolence visit, but the deep crisis with the Palestinian Authority, as well as with the Jordanians, still exists.

"Hussein has not changed his very negative opinion over Israeli building plans in Jerusalem."

In fact, Hussein can no longer adopt an independent stand on Har Homa, according to Tibi, who said that Israeli-Jordanian relations are totally dependent on progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

"Relations between Israel and Jordan are like a thermometer. If [Israel's] relations with the Palestinians are warm, temperatures will rise on that thermometer — and the same applies to Egypt." □

Israeli police probing source of videotapes saluting assassin

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police have launched an investigation into the distribution of videotapes containing songs and skits praising Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassin, Yigal Amir.

The tapes, which have been distributed in Jewish communities in the West Bank, also include material praising right-wing activists who have killed Arabs, including Baruch Goldstein, who gunned down 29 Moslem worshippers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron three years ago. □