

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat left the door open for a crisis summit, but each set conditions.** Meanwhile, both Israeli and Palestinian forces dispersed Palestinian rioters in Hebron and outside Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem as violence continued in the territories. [Page 2]

■ **Israeli security forces have thwarted a number of terrorist attacks in recent days, said the head of Israel's government counterterrorism committee.** Meir Dagan also said the public must remain on high alert in light of the continuing threat since last Friday's suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. [Page 2]

■ **Israel released three Arab Israelis who had been suspected of involvement in the bombing of a cafe in downtown Tel Aviv.** [Page 2]

■ **Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat said an upcoming American report on Switzerland's wartime dealings with Nazi Germany would be "objective, fair and searching."** Speaking to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Eizenstat said the 200-page interim report, to be released next month, would also be "exact-ing" with regard to the role of the United States.

■ **Nazi Germany sold more than \$700 million of looted gold to five European nations during World War II, according to a new analysis of wartime documents prepared by the World Jewish Congress.** Meanwhile, Swiss banks this week pledged an extra \$13.7 million for a Holocaust memorial fund launched by the nation's three largest banks.

■ **German conservatives called for a limit on Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union, angering the Jewish community and opposition politicians.** Ignatz Bubis, head of the German Jewish community, rejected a proposal by the Christian Social Union to discuss the issue, saying that he would feel like a Jewish leader in wartime Poland negotiating with the Nazis about how Jews should be treated.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Little-known Orthodox group inflames Jews across spectrum**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — When a little-known organization of Orthodox rabbis disseminated a statement declaring Reform and Conservative Judaism "not Judaism at all," angry reaction emanated from both Orthodox and liberal Jewish quarters.

Nearly everyone — from the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, which many mistakenly thought was the source of the statement, to the organization of Reform rabbis — decried the position of the group, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the U.S. and Canada.

Read by many as a complete rejection of non-Orthodox Jews, the statement even drew a response from Agudath Israel of America, a group whose fervently Orthodox constituents are essentially the same as the rabbinical union's.

Agudah officials condemned what it called a misinterpretation of the rabbinical union's position, even as it made clear that it agreed with its central point.

The statement's greatest significance is that it underscores deepening divisions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism, with leaders of each blaming the other for the breach.

Underlying the furor, which received significant attention in some of America's prominent daily newspapers, was this question: Just what is this group, which claims a membership of 582 rabbis and whose most recent act was to threaten a boycott of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum over its inclusion of gay victims of the Nazis?

In fact, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis is the oldest and, for a long time, was the pre-eminent Orthodox rabbinical organization in the country.

Today, there are strong differences of opinion about the organization's importance and relevance. Its leaders claim the backing and membership of some of Orthodoxy's best-known spiritual leaders, while others in the Orthodox world describe it as an association with little credibility or power.

In its controversial statement, the rabbinical union, known in Hebrew as Agudas Harabbonim, wrote: "Reform and Conservative are not Judaism at all. While their adherents are Jews, their religion is not Judaism."

The overwhelming majority of American Jews who identify with one of the religious movements — between 85 percent and 90 percent — identify with the Reform or Conservative movements.

The rabbinical union's statement was prompted by steps the Reform and Conservative movements have taken abrogating Jewish law, Rabbi Hersh Ginsberg, its director, said in an interview in the book-lined study of his home in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn.

'We'd like them to leave their temples'

Ginsberg, whose face is framed by a white beard and large black yarmulke, cited the Conservative movement's policy of permitting members to drive to synagogue on the Sabbath, both movements' ordination of women and the Reform movement's approval of same-sex civil marriages.

None of these are new policies. When asked why the group decided to issue a position on the liberal movements now, Ginsberg said, "Now they're penetrating Israel."

Ginsberg was referring to the liberal movements' efforts to gain official footing in the Jewish state, where the Orthodox rabbinate controls all matters of personal status, including conversion, marriage and divorce.

The conflict over religious pluralism in Israel — highlighted by recent controversy surrounding conversion legislation — is increasingly affecting relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox movements in the United States as well.

"We'd like them to leave their temples and return to Judaism," Ginsberg said. "If their way is Judaism, you might as well burn these books," he added, gesturing toward the volumes of Talmud and other Torah commentary filling floor-to-ceiling shelves.

The history of Ginsberg's organization dates back to its founding in 1902. Based then, as it is now, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the union's

current members span a wide range of Orthodox orientations.

The renowned Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the decisor of Jewish law whose interpretations were accepted by Orthodox Jews around the world, was president of the rabbinical union for a quarter of a century, until his death 11 years ago.

While some members are Chasidic rabbis, including Lubavitchers, others also belong to the more moderate Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, known as the RCA, which was founded in 1936 as an American-oriented alternative to the rabbinical union, which was then made up almost solely of European-born members.

Some of Yeshiva University's best-known deans and faculty members — including Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, dean of its rabbinical school, and Rabbi Moshe Tendler, a professor of Talmud and a dean at the institution — belong to the rabbinical union. Y.U. has historically been rooted in a worldview that embraces both Torah and modernity.

Two rabbis who are members of both organizations declined to speak for the record and indicated that they were embarrassed by the rabbinical union's position.

But Tendler defended the group's new statement as valid, though he said the rabbinical union "has not been very active and certainly has lost touch with much of the American Orthodox community."

"These are beloved people," Tendler said in an interview, referring to Reform and Conservative Jews, but "their leadership has been deceitful. They are the only religion in Western civilization that says that the Bible is not divine."

This is not the first time that the rabbinical union has weighed in on issues of pluralism and the legitimacy of non-Orthodox groups.

In 1956, it had prohibited Orthodox institutions from participating in the Synagogue Council of America, which had brought together Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis to work together on matters of common concern.

But not until 1993 did the rabbinical union's view prevail. At that time, the Orthodox Union and RCA withdrew, forcing the Synagogue Council to fold.

Most meetings in Brooklyn

Although the association maintains its Lower East Side office, most meetings now take place in Brooklyn, where the majority of its members now live and work, Ginsberg said.

It also has members in places as far flung as San Francisco; Los Angeles; Tulsa, Okla.; Philadelphia; Lakewood, N.J.; Antwerp, Belgium; and Mexico City, according to its membership list.

Today, though only 10 percent of its members are European-born, according to Ginsberg, most of the business at its several meetings a year is conducted in Yiddish.

Leaders of the rabbinical union proudly identified themselves as "right wing" and "ultra-Orthodox."

In explaining the group's statement, Rabbi David Hollander, who serves as a member of the rabbinical union's executive committee as well as of the RCA, said, "Pluralism and Judaism are incompatible."

"One must make a choice," Hollander said in a telephone interview. "Either one believes in the Torah or one believes in pluralism."

His organization was called "the O.U." in the article that first made the position public, in Saturday's Los Angeles Times.

That prompted an avalanche of calls and e-mail correspondence to the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, which is more commonly known as the O.U., according to its officials.

Most of the correspondence came from Orthodox constituents horrified by the statement, they said.

On Monday, the O.U. and the rabbinic group, the RCA, issued a joint statement repudiating the rabbinical union's statement.

"Despite diversions on core theological issues" with the liberal movements, the joint statement said, "they are still considered disagreements within the family. We must never lose sight of our strong sense of unity as Jews and as one people."

Rabbinic leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements also condemned the rabbinical union's position.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, laid part of the blame for the rabbinical union's statement at the feet of Israel's leadership.

"They have left room for fostering this kind of comment, and they encouraged it implicitly by not saying there is a respectable pluralism and diversity in the Jewish community today," Epstein said.

He described the atmosphere as one "almost of *sinat chinam*," or the causeless hatred of one Jew for another that sages say caused the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem and led to the dispersion of the Jews.

"Causeless hatred really is bred when people look for ways to delegitimize others," he said. □

Israeli security officials busy in wake of Tel Aviv cafe blast

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli security officials remained busy this week as a result of last week's suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv cafe.

Israeli police on Tuesday released three Arab Israeli residents of Umm el-Fahm who had been suspected of being involved in the attack, which killed three women and wounded dozens of others.

As the nation remained on high alert, top Israeli security officials said a number of terrorist attacks had been thwarted in recent days.

Meanwhile, Israeli-Palestinian clashes continued in the West Bank.

Both Israeli and Palestinian forces dispersed Palestinian rioters in Hebron and outside Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem. As in disturbances earlier in the week, the Israeli soldiers used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up the demonstrations.

As investigators continued their probe into the bombing, they were trying to determine whether the bomber, who had worked in Israeli restaurants in the Tel Aviv area, had brought the explosives with him from the territories or if he had received them in Israel.

The three Arab Israeli men, freed hours after their arrests became public Tuesday, were arrested Saturday.

Their names had been found on a note in the pocket of the suicide bomber, 28-year-old Moussa Ghneimat.

Police have determined that the men had no direct connection to the bomber, a resident of the Hebron area. One of the suspects said the note was a business card from his company, which bought poultry from the bomber's family.

Meanwhile, security officials remain split over specific details concerning the attack.

But they agree that the Tel Aviv cafe was a deliberate target.

In addition to questioning the bomber's family and friends, Israeli security officials have been arresting Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists in areas under its control in the territories. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Compromises are sought after conversion measure is approved

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Israeli Cabinet received the news of last week's Tel Aviv suicide bombing as it was debating an issue divisive to the Jewish world.

At that meeting, the Cabinet approved an amendment that would bar the legal recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions performed in Israel.

Whether the amendment gets sent to the Knesset before the Parliament breaks next week for Passover depends on the outcome of a flurry of negotiations now taking place between politicians and Reform and Conservative representatives.

Such legislative action has been expected for some time, despite blitzes on Israeli officialdom by delegations of Diaspora Jewish leaders warning that it would alienate many U.S. Jews and should be forestalled.

Although the timetable of the legislation is uncertain, and three readings are required for Knesset passage, American Jewish religious and fund-raising establishments here are girding for the repercussions.

The Israeli Cabinet action was likely to top the agenda of a meeting already scheduled for this week in New York for fund-raisers and religious movement representatives.

The Jewish community's central fund-raising campaign, run by the United Jewish Appeal and local federations for both Israel and for local needs, has been a target of protest in this political struggle.

Some critics claim that it is not doing enough to champion the rights of Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel.

"In light of the action by the Cabinet, there is a necessity for action by the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Jewish Appeal," said Philip Meltzer, president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

"This is an attempt to delegitimize 85 to 90 percent of American Jewry who are their constituents, and we would hope they would react with outrage."

"Mere statements are not enough," said Meltzer, referring to resolutions adopted by the fund-raising establishment protesting changes in Israeli religious laws that would be divisive for world Jewry.

"Perhaps it's time to organize missions to make clear the depth of feeling by American Jewry on this issue."

'Where were the movements?'

For its part, CJF distributed a memo this week, saying that it would continue to voice its "concern that any legislative amendment that has the potential to form a wedge between Israel and Diaspora Jewry is unacceptable."

It also urged federations to send a similar message to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other officials.

Richard Wexler, national chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, called the Israeli political situation "frustrating for the national system and the campaign" and said that "the implication for allocations is serious."

Wexler said the fund-raising establishment was "derelict" in recent years in the fight to strengthen the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel. But, at the same time, he said, "where were the movements?"

Still, he said, "we ought to be more responsive to the movements consistent with meeting our responsibility to raise money for Jews in need."

For its part, U.S. Orthodox Jewry welcomed the Cabinet action.

The Orthodox community "is united as never before on the issue advocating the passing of the conversion law by the Knesset," said Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union.

"Every day the law was not passed" contributed to "greater friction in the Jewish community," he said.

The legislative action reinforcing exclusive Orthodox control over conversions was demanded by the fervently Orthodox parties as a condition of their joining the coalition of the Netanyahu government.

Reform and Conservative conversions have been performed in Israel for years, but have not been legally recognized. The Supreme Court in 1995 said there was no legal reason for barring that recognition for civil purposes.

That ruling prompted the determination of the Orthodox parties to pass legislation foreclosing such recognition.

These Orthodox coalition partners voted last Friday against the amendment put forward because they see it as too narrow. They want a law that also bans conversions performed abroad of Israelis who prepare for their conversions in Israel. Non-Orthodox conversions of Diaspora Jews performed outside Israel are recognized. Netanyahu has pledged not to change their status.

Meanwhile, Knesset Member Alexander Lubotsky from The Third Way party has been appointed to represent the government coalition on religious legislation.

Against this backdrop of political pressure and looming deadlines, he is trying to craft compromises with Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel around conversion cases they have pending in the Israeli courts.

The ball, however, is more immediately in the court of the Conservative movement.

A Supreme Court hearing is scheduled for May 13 on a petition filed by the Conservative movement on behalf of families seeking recognition of conversions for children they adopted from abroad and had converted on the Conservative Kibbutz Hanaton.

'This is no solution'

If no legislation is submitted before the Knesset break next week, the Supreme Court could issue a ruling granting legitimacy to the conversions.

The Orthodox parties want the legislation introduced before the hearing to preclude that possibility.

Lubotsky is trying to convince the Conservative movement to postpone its case for six weeks, and in return, drop any legislative initiative on conversion, according to Rabbi Einat Ramon, spokeswoman for the Conservative/Masorti movement in Israel.

"We say this is no solution," said Ramon. "Lubotsky knows it's just pushing the problem underneath the carpet."

"What do we get in return?" she continued, adding, "We are in a dilemma."

For its part, the Reform movement has also been meeting with Lubotsky.

Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform Israel Religious Action Center, said Lubotsky has asked him to postpone the cases pending on behalf of his movement in return for "preventing legislation."

The Reform movement has 16 motions in the courts on behalf of Israeli residents who have studied for their conversion in Israel, gone abroad for conversions and returned seeking recognition as Jews in the civil population registry. They want the same legal status as people in the Diaspora who convert through Reform and Conservative auspices, move to Israel and are recognized as Jews in civil matters. □

Renewed drive for school prayer sparks vow for defeat from critics

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As conservative lawmakers launch a renewed drive for a school prayer amendment, church-state watchdogs have vowed to make defeat of the initiative a top legislative priority.

Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) has once again taken up the campaign he launched in the last Congress to win passage of a constitutional amendment allowing for prayer and other forms of religious expression on public property.

"This amendment is the only way we can end 30 years of court decisions that have turned First Amendment rights upside down," Istook said at a Capitol Hill news conference Monday.

Flanked by representatives of conservative religious groups, Istook said he intends to formally introduce the amendment when Congress returns from its Easter recess.

The outlook for the proposed amendment, however, is far from certain. In the last Congress, efforts to win passage of a similar "Religious Equality Amendment" became bogged down by disputes over language.

But Istook has not given up. With his backers pledging that this effort will be the most concerted to date, the lawmaker said, "Courts have gone far beyond outlawing prayer in many public school settings. They have aided a systematic campaign to strip religious symbols, references and heritage from public view."

Banding together in opposition to the proposed amendment, representatives of the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty — an alliance of more than 50 religious and civil liberties groups — held their own news conference on Capitol Hill, at which they described the proposed amendment as both "unnecessary" and "dangerous."

The coalition includes Jewish groups across the political and religious gamut.

Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, echoed the view of many Jewish organizations when he said at the news conference: "We already have a religious freedom amendment — it is called the First Amendment."

"If somewhere in this nation a child is being told by her teacher or principal that she cannot say grace over her lunch," he added, "then the answer is to educate the teacher or the administrator — not to amend the Constitution."

'Effort is a sham'

The Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, dismissed the effort as a "sham."

"It is based on the bold pretense that religious freedom is in serious jeopardy in our country, when in fact it is not," he said. "It will marginalize non-Christians and it will give government officials the power to run roughshod over the rights of religious minorities."

Istook's "Religious Freedom Amendment," as it is being billed this time, specifically calls for securing "the people's right to acknowledge God."

"The right to pray or acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property, including public schools, shall not be infringed," the amendment states.

"The government shall not compel joining in prayer, initiate or compose school prayers, discriminate against or deny a benefit on account of religion."

In addition to concerns about opening the door for prayer in schools, some critics expressed alarm that the amendment could also pave the way for government-funded school vouchers and other forms of aid to religious institutions.

The Christian Coalition, for its part, is pledging to funnel between \$1 million and \$2 million into radio ads, mailings, telephone banks, rallies and town hall meetings to help win support for the amendment.

"There is no issue and there will be no legislation in this Congress that will take a higher priority for us than the passage of this amendment and we are confident that we will begin to move the ball forward in this session," said Ralph Reed, executive director of the coalition.

Lynn and other critics of the conservative Christian lobby were quick to pounce on Reed's remarks, noting that earlier this year, Reed unveiled a legislative agenda that suggested that helping the urban poor was the group's top priority.

The likelihood of passage is far from certain, despite the strong conservative hold on both houses of Congress. In addition, to win approval, a constitutional amendment must pass by a majority of two-thirds in both the House and Senate, and then be ratified by three-fourths of the states.

Last time around, conservative lawmakers split over competing proposals offered by Istook and Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.).

The 105th Congress is already presenting a new opportunity; House Majority Leader Dick Army (R-Texas), who introduced his own version of school prayer legislation last year, has declared his support for Istook's amendment, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) last week commended Istook for beginning the debate on the issue.

Hyde, meanwhile, has indicated that the House Judiciary Committee, which he chairs, is also ready to take up the issue. It is not certain whether he will back Istook this time around.

At least for now, there is no movement in the Senate for such an amendment.

Church-state watchdogs, for their part, have vowed to fight the effort at every turn.

"The success of 207 years of our present First Amendment demonstrates that what Thomas Jefferson and James Madison gave us, Ernest Istook and Ralph Reed should not be allowed to take away," Lynn said. □

E.U. official to Jewish leaders: Group has not become pro-Arab

By Joseph Kopel

BRUSSELS (JTA) — A senior European official is attempting to convince European Jewish leaders that the European Union has not become pro-Arab.

Speaking last week at a conference here about the peace process, Manuel Marin, the European commissioner in charge of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean affairs, said the European Union "wants peace, only peace."

"We are not pro-Israeli, nor pro-Arab," he added, attempting to dispel the growing perception that E.U. policies had taken a pro-Arab slant.

Joining European Jewish officials at the conference were Israeli politicians as well as representatives from Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Marin asked European Jewish communities to "help us pass on the message that the European Union is not against the Israelis."

"We are not playing the Israelis against the Arabs," as had "perhaps been suggested by the press," he said. Marin said the European Union, which is the largest foreign donor to the Palestinian Authority, had made "tremendous financial and economic efforts" to help the Middle East peace process.

He also voiced E.U. concerns about the current crisis in Israeli-Palestinian relations. □