

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's Knesset began debate on a controversial bill that would make all conversions in the Jewish state subject to confirmation by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. Although the Orthodox parties refused to delay the vote, it was agreed that if the first reading passes, attempts would be made to reach a compromise with the Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, which oppose the legislation. [Page 3]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the Arab League's adoption of a resolution that recommends reviving the economic boycott of Israel. The premier said the Arab League decision, which also called for halting the normalization of ties with Israel, was "a step backward." [Page 2]

■ Israeli forces demolished the Hebron-area home of the suicide bomber who carried out the Tel Aviv attack that killed three Israelis and wounded dozens of others. Israel's High Court of Justice gave the army permission to destroy the home, rejecting a petition from family members who said the Israeli army order was collective punishment. [Page 2]

■ A class action suit filed in U.S. District Court in New York charges that seven major European insurance companies have refused to honor policies purchased before World War II by Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution.

■ Swiss President Arnold Koller said he thought that the nation's voters would back the massive Foundation for Solidarity for victims of worldwide disasters, including Holocaust victims, Swiss media reported. The Swiss could vote on the plan as early as next year.

■ The Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah group, which is based in Lebanon but has ties to Iran, has established an "infrastructure" in Canada, according to a document from the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency. The document was released in connection with a deportation case against a Saudi national living in Canada who is accused of involvement in the bombing of a U.S. military base last year in Saudi Arabia. [Page 4]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**How a little-known rabbinic group scored a big public relations coup**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Rabbi David Hollander stood before reporters from most of the nation's major media outlets and worked himself into a preacher's cadence.

"People keep saying we have somehow driven Jews away," he said, the volume of his aging voice rising. "Can there be any such greater falsehood? The Reform and Conservative movements have shattered Jewish unity."

"They seceded from the Torah community and its rabbis. How dare they say we are causing disunity?" he shouted, his face reddening with passion as he wagged his finger for emphasis.

Reporters for publications ranging from The New York Times and the Washington Post to the Women's Catholic News service and the weekly Jewish Press scribbled in their notebooks, as television cameras from most of the major network and cable news stations recorded the event from the back of the crowded room.

Monday's event was the best-attended news conference ever convened by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, its director, Rabbi Hersh Ginsberg, said in an interview afterward.

The rabbinical union was founded 95 years ago on the Lower East Side of New York by European-born Orthodox rabbis, and while it was once considered influential and was led by some of the most prominent Orthodox rabbis of the day, it has largely lost the luster it enjoyed.

How this group managed to garner the attention of the country's most important media is, in part, the story of a successful public relations strategy.

It can also be attributed to two other factors:

- Many reporters from secular the media, unfamiliar with the distinctions among the many groups that claim to speak for Torah-true Judaism, were unable to judge the newsworthiness of the story.

- The schism between liberal and Orthodox Jews has grown so large that it has begun to attract attention in the world at large.

The rabbinical union has a membership roster listing 582 Orthodox rabbis, including some well-known figures from the centrist Orthodox world, including the deans of Yeshiva University.

Yet none of these centrist Orthodox figures was in sight at Monday's news conference, held at Manhattan's Hilton Hotel.

Sitting on either side of the podium were a dozen members of the rabbinical union's executive committee, their names known only within fervently Orthodox circles, and all but one of them apparently eligible long ago to begin collecting Social Security.

'A historic declaration'

The group, hitherto little-known outside devoutly Orthodox circles, has received widespread media coverage since it went public last week declaring that the Reform and Conservative movements are "not Judaism."

Rabbinical union representatives made their position official at Monday's news conference by giving it the force of Jewish law, in what they labeled "a historic declaration."

Yet there is nothing new about the policies that they presented to the media as developments.

A book titled "The Last Generation" was published in 1937 with the endorsement of 300 rabbis whose thesis was that Reform and Conservative claims on Judaism were dangerous and false.

And for years, the rabbinical union has placed advertisements in Jewish newspapers shortly before the High Holidays, informing people that Jewish law prohibits worship at non-Orthodox synagogues.

They say that it is better to pray alone at home — even if it means not hearing the shofar blown on Yom Kippur — than to join services at a Reform or Conservative congregation.

The rabbinical union began placing the ads so long ago that Ginsberg said he could not remember when the first one ran and that they have done it every year, he said in an interview. "This is a reaffirmation" of the long-

held view, he said. In fact, the prohibition against worshipping at liberal Jewish services is observed by most Orthodox Jews, whose view of Judaism differs dramatically from the way it is interpreted by the Reform and Conservative movements.

Years ago, the two giants of Torah Judaism most revered by mainstream Orthodox Jews in this generation — Rabbis Moshe Feinstein and Joseph Soloveitchik — ruled that it is forbidden.

At the news conference, Ginsberg, Hollander and some of the other speakers tried to make clear a distinction between rejecting liberal Jews, who they say are “innocent” and “being misled,” and rejecting their denominations and beliefs, which they described as “heretical.”

The group’s statements were quickly and loudly rejected by Reform and Conservative leaders.

Other more mainstream Orthodox groups also acted quickly last week to publicly reject the rabbinical union’s divisive approach, though many of their members privately agree with the group’s belief that the liberal movements do not offer valid approaches to Judaism.

The message from the rabbinical union, and the resulting flurry of news releases from Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups, left a number of reporters from secular news outlets thoroughly confused.

Even after Monday’s news conference, some reporters walked away saying that they still did not understand what the rabbinical union is and whom they do — or do not — represent.

Continued coverage expected

Yet the group’s rejection of liberal Judaism will continue to get widespread coverage, simply because the sometimes-skewed rules of journalism dictate that if something gets a lot of media attention, then every media outlet feels compelled to cover it, even if it is not really newsworthy.

Basha Oka is the woman behind the rabbinical union’s public relations coup.

Oka, who left her secular life behind to join the Lubavitch community several years ago, has also worked to publicize the view of some Lubavitch in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn that the late rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, was the Messiah.

In a telephone interview, Oka said she had tried to get advance coverage of the rabbinical union’s statement by tipping off reporters at the country’s largest daily newspapers that the group was about to issue its policy decision.

The New York Times reporter, among others, did not return her calls, Oka said last week.

But she did get through to the religion writer at The Los Angeles Times, which published a front-page story March 22.

That prompted the Associated Press and The New York Times to run articles on the matter, and as a result it became a subject of national interest among Jews and non-Jews alike.

Part of the reason the story elicited so much attention was that several news outlets initially — and wrongly — reported that the rabbinical union had, in fact, rejected liberal Jews as Jews altogether.

In explaining the group’s outreach to the wider world, Ginsberg said: “We had to go out to the world” with this.

“If we were going to keep it secluded in the Jewish press, the Reform and Conservatives wouldn’t hear about it.”

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, had his own take on why the issue has received so much attention.

“This kind of rancor in the Jewish community tends to draw the attention of the press, which is why we try and avoid it,” said Yoffie, who has expressed outrage at the rabbinical union’s positions.

At the same time, he said, “the American Jewish community is not as small and vulnerable as it once was, so we’re more prepared to engage in this kind of public debate.” □

Netanyahu sharply criticizes Arab League boycott decision

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Arab League resolution calling on its members to renew the Arab boycott of Israel has drawn sharp criticism from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu said Monday that the Arab League was “ganging up on Israel” with “these absurd ideas that the boycott will be reinstated.”

“Israel has known periods of Israel-bashing more than once and we’ve been able to overcome it,” he told Israel Radio. His comments came after Arab League foreign ministers, meeting in Cairo, adopted a resolution calling on its 22 members to abide by the Arab boycott of Israel in retaliation for the Jewish state’s recent decision to start construction at Har Homa.

In recent years, several Arab states have eased the boycott in recognition of Israeli-Palestinian peace moves.

The resolution, which will be presented to each of the ministers’ governments, also called on Arab states to stop all normalization of ties with Israel, to close Israeli offices and missions in their countries and to suspend the multilateral talks that deal with regional issues such as water, the environment and security.

Foreign Minister David Levy also criticized the Arab League resolution, telling reporters, “the peace process does not tolerate and will not tolerate an atmosphere of violence — not on the ground and not in diplomatic violence.”

The United States obliquely criticized the resolution, with a U.S. State Department spokesman, John Dinger, saying that Washington believes that a “regional environment supportive of peace-making is an essential part of promoting peace in the area.”

“We hope that the Arab League recognizes that it has a responsibility to shape such an environment,” Dinger told reporters.

But at the conclusion of its two-day conference on Monday, the Arab League ministers remained adamant.

“Netanyahu is playing with fire, and the first person to be burnt by this will be him,” said Esmat Abdel-Meguid, the secretary general of the Arab League.

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat had appealed to the foreign ministers at the Cairo meeting to form a united front against what he called the “Judaization” of Jerusalem by Israel.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, stressed that Israel remained committed to the peace process, but that the Palestinian Authority had to prove it would take real measures to combat violence and terrorist activities.

The territories were relatively quiet Monday, after more than 10 days of unrest throughout the West Bank.

Israeli troops firing rubber bullets wounded two Palestinians during a confrontation Monday with hundreds of Palestinian stone-throwers in the West Bank town of Jenin.

Also Monday, Israeli forces demolished the Hebron-area home of the suicide bomber who carried out the March 21 Tel Aviv attack that killed three Israelis and wounded dozens of others. □

Knesset begins debate on bill aimed at limiting conversions*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM(JTA) — A controversial conversion bill that some warn could drive a wedge between Israel and Diaspora Jewry has reached the Knesset floor.

The bill, which this week faced the first of three Knesset votes, known as readings, would make all conversions conducted in Israel subject to confirmation by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate.

Introduction of the bill Monday in the Knesset came two weeks after the Cabinet gave its approval to a legislative initiative that would bar the legal recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions performed in Israel.

Israel's Orthodox parties, with 23 seats in the 120-member Knesset, have demanded passage of the legislation as a condition for staying in the coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Orthodox parties originally had sought broader conversion legislation that also would apply to Israeli residents who undergo conversions abroad, but they gradually backed off from that initiative.

"We would like the [legislation] to be more broad, but we also know what we can achieve at this point," Knesset member Avraham Ravitz, of the United Torah Judaism bloc, said Monday.

Supporters of religious pluralism in Israel warned that the conversion issue would create a rift between Israel and world Jewry.

Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg lobbied both Labor and coalition Knesset members Monday, urging them to vote against the bill.

"It can't be that on the one hand, almost all the members of this House will turn to the leaders of U.S. Jewry — the majority of whom are Reform and Conservative — with requests for economic and political support in Israel, while they simultaneously cut them off from the Jewish people and Israeli society," he said. "Whoever speaks of a common destiny and unity of the Jewish people cannot sunder the Jewish people in the Diaspora."

Jewish leaders in the United States have warned that passage of the conversion legislation could have a negative impact on their fund-raising efforts on behalf of Israel.

Demonstrations outside Knesset

Burg said Monday that the legislation also would have a devastating impact within Israel. He said only some 400 immigrants each year request conversion through the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, compared with the thousands who seek conversions through other streams of Judaism.

"The meaning of these numbers is a vote of no-confidence by the immigrants in the existing system and solutions," he said.

Representatives from the Reform and Conservative movements demonstrated Monday outside the Knesset, warning that the legislation was ripping apart the Jewish people. Reform and Conservative conversions have been performed in Israel for years, but have not been legally recognized.

The Supreme Court ruled in November 1995 that there was no legal reason for barring that recognition for civil purposes. But the court did not explicitly recognize non-Orthodox conversions, saying at the time that it would be up to the Knesset to pass the appropriate legislation.

At a meeting of the Knesset coalition Monday, it was decided that after the first vote on the bill, the parliamentary process would be put off to give time for reaching a compromise between the Orthodox parties and the Conservative and Reform streams of Judaism.

The Orthodox parties had been pressing for a first vote on the bill before the Knesset recessed for Passover next week and before April 1, the date the Supreme Court had set for the matter to be dealt with in Parliament.

Even if the bill becomes law, non-Orthodox conversions of Diaspora Jews performed outside Israel would continue to be recognized.

In an effort to delay the first Knesset vote, Third Way Knesset member Alexander Lubotsky, an observant Jew, tried unsuccessfully this week to broker a compromise between the Orthodox parties and Reform and Conservative leaders. Lubotsky, who had been appointed to represent the government coalition on religious legislation, proposed a compromise under which all converts would be listed on their identity cards as Jewish, but the population registry would specify what kind of conversion they underwent.

Lubotsky said such a differentiation would serve the Orthodox rabbinate for purposes of marriage, but would also give Conservative and Reform converts recognition.

Conservative and Reform leaders said they were willing to put off their own ongoing court battles over the conversion issue to seek a compromise, but the Orthodox parties said the first Knesset vote must go ahead. □

Israeli prime minister meets with target of racist incident*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met this week with an Ethiopian soldier who was ejected from an army medical clinic by a major who told him that "no blacks" were allowed.

The officer was reprimanded for the incident, which this week prompted outcry among top government officials, Knesset members, Ethiopian community leaders and the public at large.

According to an Israel Radio report, the Israel Defense Force soldier with the prestigious Golani unit came to a clinic for treatment about three months ago.

A major who was in the clinic at the time grabbed the Ethiopian-born soldier, pushed him outside and made a racial slur, the report said.

According to the report, the major, Michael Valitzkin, then told the doctor on duty, "We need to put a sign up here saying, 'No blacks allowed.'"

The soldier reportedly did not file a complaint about the incident because he thought that no one would believe him. But word of the event reached Valitzkin's commander. Valitzkin has since said that he made the racial slur in jest.

The Ethiopian soldier told the premier during their meeting this week that he hoped that his community would no longer have to face racism. In addition, the United Ethiopian Jewish Association has asked the Israel Defense Force to establish a board of inquiry to examine the way soldiers of Ethiopian descent are treated. □

What next? A tofu lamb shank?*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Health-conscious Israelis can look forward this Passover to spreading the traditional charoset on organic matzah.

The Israeli association for organic agriculture said it had invested some \$33,000 to organize the marketing and distribution of the matzah, as well as other kosher-for-Passover goods.

Association officials said the price of the unleavened bread, made from wheat that was not treated with any chemical fertilizers, would be about 30 percent more than the run-of-the-mill matzah. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**As deadline for Marzook nears, Israel faces a difficult dilemma**By *Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The moment of truth is about to arrive for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: Will he order the extradition from the United States of Hamas leader Moussa Abu Marzook?

With an April 6 deadline fast approaching, the decision of how to deal with a prominent figure in the militant Islamic group could not come at a worse time for Israel.

In the wake of construction of a new Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem and a Hamas-inspired suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv cafe, talks have broken down with the Palestinian Authority, and street clashes with Palestinians are now in their second week.

Netanyahu, who is demanding that Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat crack down on Hamas militants and other terrorists, now faces a difficult choice.

If he brings Marzook to stand trial in Israel, it would likely further inflame Palestinian passions. But if he passes on the opportunity to bring a Hamas leader to justice, he would look weak in the war on terrorism.

Further complicating the issue are reports out of Israel that prosecutors may have a difficult time proving in a court of law that Marzook had a direct hand in Hamas' military operations, as the Israelis charge.

Marzook maintains that he was only involved with fund raising and organization of the political and social side of Hamas. He claims that the military wing operates outside his control.

Marzook, a legal U.S. resident, was arrested in July 1995 as he tried to clear customs at New York's Kennedy Airport. The arrest came after he was placed on the U.S. "watch list" of probable terrorists.

Faced with the prospect of the United States either freeing Marzook or deporting him to a third country, then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin requested the Hamas leader's extradition to Israel.

As expected, Marzook mounted a vigorous 18-month defense against extradition from his jail cell in New York. American law does not allow for bail in such cases.

Stunned U.S., Israeli officials

As his case dragged on and Hamas was losing support in the Palestinian-controlled areas, Marzook stunned Israeli and American officials in January by dropping his legal battle against extradition.

Apparently feeling that his case was losing visibility, Marzook decided he would rather face his accusers in an Israeli courtroom than wait out the fight against extradition, which could have dragged on for years.

Now, the U.S. government is bumping up against an April 6 deadline to act on the extradition request.

U.S. officials knowledgeable about the discussions between Israelis and officials at the State and Justice departments refused to comment for this article.

"This is a highly sensitive time," said one official, who insisted on anonymity.

For their part, Israeli officials also are not talking.

But one Israeli official in Washington did acknowledge that "there's some work going on on this. It's a question of wait-and-see."

There is some flexibility with the April 6 deadline, sources said, but only a few days. The administration also could seek an extension of the deadline.

In order for extradition to take place, the Justice Department must act upon the extradition request and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright must approve it.

With the original Israeli request for extradition driving the legal process, Netanyahu now faces four basic options, according to sources familiar with the case:

- Bring Marzook to Israel to face trial;
- Drop the extradition request and allow the United States to free him;
- Convince the United States to press charges against Marzook for transferring money to a known terrorist group, which is against U.S. law.

If Netanyahu drops the extradition request, the United States has the option to prosecute Marzook on charges of sending millions of dollars to Hamas. The U.S. government also has the option of deporting him.

- Broker a deal to have him sent to a third country.

Talks began about three months ago between Israel and Jordan about a possible compromise under which Marzook would be sent to Jordan instead of Israel.

Since that time, Hamas broke a year of quiet and launched a suicide bombing attack March 21 in Tel Aviv, killing three Israelis.

Attention focused again on the Jordanian option again this week as Jordan's King Hussein visited Washington for meetings with President Clinton and Albright.

"We have nothing to announce, yet," the Israeli official said. Added a Jewish official in Washington: "The ball is in Netanyahu's court." □

Canadian intelligence agency tracking Hezbollah operativesBy *Bill Gladstone*

TORONTO (JTA) — Hezbollah has a network of operatives working in Canada, according to the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency.

The agency maintained in a court document subsequently made public that the pro-Iranian fundamentalist movement based in Lebanon had established "an infrastructure" in Canada involving people who "receive and comply with direction from the Hezbollah leadership hierarchy in Lebanon."

The claim was made by the agency in a Federal Court document that provided evidence in a deportation case against Hani Abd Rahim al-Sayegh, who applied for refugee status upon arriving in Canada in August.

A Saudi national, Sayegh was allegedly involved in the June 25, 1996, terrorist bombing in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, that killed 19 U.S. soldiers and wounded some 400 others. The United States and Saudi Arabia are seeking his extradition. He was arrested March 18 in Ottawa.

At a closed-door hearing last week, Justice Donna McGillis ruled that only a summary of the security agency's evidence against Sayegh need be made public, as releasing more would be "injurious to national security or to the safety of persons." Another Federal Court hearing about the allegations against Sayegh is set for April 28. □

Firebomb hurled at Rome synagogueBy *Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — A crude firebomb was hurled at Rome's main synagogue, causing minor damage to the entrance.

The synagogue was empty at the time of the Saturday night attack, and no injuries were reported. Italian police detained a suspect, a 34-year-old Egyptian who apparently seemed drunk or mentally disturbed. Jewish community sources played down the incident, saying that it was the work of a disturbed individual.

The shul, the scene of an 1982 Arab terrorist attack that left a child dead, is heavily guarded by paramilitary police 24 hours a day. □