

**NEWS AT A GLANCE**

- **Israel's Knesset passed a first reading of a controversial bill that would give the Orthodox sole authority over conversions conducted in Israel.** The measure was approved in a 51-32 vote, with seven abstentions, after a compromise was reached to suspend the legislative process to give the various sides time to work out a compromise. [Page 3]
- **Two Palestinians blew themselves up near Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, in what the Israeli army said appeared to be failed attacks against Jewish school buses.** Palestinian officials acknowledged that one of the men had detonated the explosives, but charged that the other man was killed by a bomb or grenade thrown by Israeli soldiers. [Page 1]
- **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he would visit Washington next week.** The announcement came as President Clinton met with Jordan's King Hussein. [Page 2]
- **Legal immigrants to the United States began to be ineligible for federal food stamps Tuesday, while bigger benefit losses from Supplemental Security Income will come by summertime.** Some states plan legislative "fixes" to try to offset the loss of these benefits.
- **The Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary received a \$15 million gift from an octogenarian Conservative rabbi and his wife.** Rabbi Myer and Dorothy Kripke met while both were studying with Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, who taught at JTS and went on to found the Reconstructionist movement.
- **The Anti-Defamation League called on American Jewish organizations to suspend temporarily all meetings with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.**
- **The American Jewish Congress filed a friend-of-the-court brief urging the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the principles of a 1985 ruling, *Aguilar vs. Felton*, that prohibited public school teachers from instructing remedial classes at parochial schools.** The high court is set to hear arguments in the case April 15.

**NEWS ANALYSIS****Arab world 'ganging up' on Israel, says Netanyahu**

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Criticizing Arab states for "ganging up on Israel," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week evoked memories of a period that many thought was safely in the Jewish state's past.

The Arab boycott of Israel, the Palestinian uprising — these were events of years ago, before the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat shook hands one sunny September afternoon on the White House lawn.

But this week, the old specters were back.

Arab League foreign ministers convened in Cairo and called for a resumption of the boycott.

And Arab nations requested an emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, where confrontations between Palestinian stone-throwers and Israeli troops entered their second week, it looked more and more like a resumption of the 1987-1993 intifada.

The Arabs' actions came in response to the start of construction March 18 on the new Jewish neighborhood of Har Homa in eastern Jerusalem, Arab critics say.

Two weeks after Israel sent in the bulldozers, the Jewish state appeared to stand alone, as it had years before, in a confrontation with the entire Arab world.

On Monday, after a two-day session in Cairo, the Arab League adopted a resolution calling on its 22 members to resume the Arab boycott of Israel.

In recent years, several Arab states have eased the boycott, but in the eyes of the Arab foreign ministers, Har Homa necessitated a reconsideration.

The resolution 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.

Netanyahu was not impressed. "Israel has known periods of Israel-bashing more than once and we've been able to overcome it," he said Monday. "They are testing our steadfastness," he added, vowing that Israel would not bow to Arab pressure.

Whether the league's recommendations, which will be presented to each of the ministers' governments, will be implemented remains to be seen.

The resolution was not expected to affect Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, though each may decide to reduce contacts with Israel.

**Concrete steps against Israel may follow**

But it may spur action by five Arab League members — Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Oman and Qatar — all of which established low-level economic ties with Israel in recognition of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The Persian Gulf states of Oman and Qatar have stated their intention to freeze relations with Israel, but whether they will take concrete steps remains uncertain — particularly because they had originally established commercial ties with Israel as a matter of economic self-interest.

But some observers, such as Professor Yossi Kostiner of Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center, believe that concrete actions will ensue.

"I do not believe the recommendations are merely" a technicality, Kostiner said in an interview. "They will take action because they feel compelled to do so, and not because they want to."

"The real interests of countries like Oman and Qatar lie in the Gulf and not in the Palestinian context," Kostiner added. "But precisely for that reason, if Saudi Arabia and Iran push them further to stay away from Israel, they may be unable to refrain from doing so."

Labor Knesset member Yossi Beilin said the Arab League recommendations would be detrimental to the peace process even if they are not implemented. They "will only create further distrust within the Israeli public toward the peace process," he said in an interview. Even if the recommenda-

tions are not put into effect, he added, they "create a negative situation."

In the wake of the Arab League meeting, Omar Abdul-Monem Rifai, Jordan's ambassador to Israel, seemed almost embarrassed as he appeared this week at Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Strategic Studies Center.

He said Jordan was the only Arab country that was maintaining the normalization process with Israel.

"I hope the government of Israel appreciates that," he added. But even Jordan may have to bow to pressure from other Arab states if Israeli-Palestinian confrontations worsen.

Jordan's King Hussein met Tuesday in Washington with President Clinton to seek ways to restore confidence on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

But that task appeared more difficult than ever this week, as violence spread throughout the major Palestinian population centers of the West Bank.

On a daily basis, Palestinians showered Israeli troops with a hail of stones, eliciting images of the intifada.

Israeli-Palestinian relations plunged deeper into crisis Tuesday, when the violence escalated even further and the two sides traded angry accusations.

In the Gaza Strip, two Palestinians blew themselves up in what the Israeli army said were suicide bombers targeting Jewish school buses. No Israelis were injured in the blasts. Palestinian officials acknowledged that one of the men had detonated the explosives, but they charged that the other man was killed by a bomb or grenade thrown by Israeli soldiers.

In the first blast, a man with explosives strapped to his body blew himself up at the entrance to the Netzarim settlement. Settler leaders said a school bus preparing to leave Netzarim was running behind schedule and managed to escape the blast.

Shortly afterward, near the Kfar Darom settlement in Gaza, a Palestinian dressed in a police uniform was killed by an explosion on the main road. Seven passengers in a passing Palestinian taxi were wounded.

The secretary general of the Palestinian Authority, Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, quoted eyewitness accounts that the man was killed by a bomb or grenade thrown at him from an Israeli jeep. Israel rejected the claim, saying that both incidents involved suicide bombers.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the number of Palestinians killed or wounded in confrontations with soldiers mounted.

In Nablus, a Palestinian police officer who was not in uniform was killed and four other Palestinians were wounded Tuesday when Israeli soldiers fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse protesters. In Hebron, a Palestinian youth was shot dead after soldiers spotted several Arabs involved in a theft, the army said.

Clinton vowed Tuesday to do what he could to help salvage the peace process.

But he knew the dimensions of the task ahead.

"We've got to keep the lid on things over there," he said, adding, "It's not going to be easy." □

## **Netanyahu to visit Washington as Clinton seeks move forward**

*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Clinton has brought the crisis in the Middle East peace process back to the Oval Office with the announcement that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will visit here next week.

Ending weeks of speculation about Netanyahu's travel plans, Clinton said Tuesday, after meeting with Jordan's King Hussein, "I'm glad he's coming."

Despite early conflicting reports from the White

House and the State Department about Netanyahu's intentions, the Prime Minister's Office made it official Tuesday night, announcing in Jerusalem that the premier had "decided to make a quick visit to the United States beginning Sunday night."

Officials at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee were likely relieved at the announcement. The pro-Israel lobby has billed the Israeli premier as one of the featured speakers at its annual policy conference, which is scheduled to begin Sunday night.

Speculation was rife that as a condition of next week's meeting, Clinton had persuaded Netanyahu to agree to a package of concessions to present to Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.

But U.S. officials continued to refuse to comment on the process, citing orders from Clinton to keep the diplomatic efforts quiet.

After the Hussein meeting, Clinton said, "I can tell you this: The United States is prepared to take significant efforts," but "the less I say about it, the more likely I am to have some success."

Netanyahu has already rebuffed Clinton's numerous requests to stop construction at Har Homa, the housing development in eastern Jerusalem, which has sparked worldwide condemnation and Palestinian violence.

As a result, the mood at the Clinton-Netanyahu meeting is likely to be very different from their last session Feb. 13, which was billed as a congratulatory tour after Israel signed a long-awaited Hebron accord.

Since then, relations between Israel and the Palestinians have soured and talks have stalled.

Concern is so great over the future of the peace process that Clinton is personally overseeing his peace process team's effort, according to U.S. officials.

### **'Zero tolerance for terrorism'**

Pursuing a broad policy that includes extracting an unequivocal Palestinian renunciation of terrorism and an Israeli pledge not to prejudge any final-status issues, Clinton is hoping to put the process back on track.

"Let me say that, unambiguously, a precondition of going forward is a commitment to zero tolerance for terrorism," Clinton told reporters Tuesday when asked whether Arafat had given a clear signal to terrorists.

At the same time, Clinton continued to criticize Israel for going ahead with the Har Homa development.

"Subjects that are clearly identified as to be negotiated in the final status should be negotiated in that way," he said, referring to settlements, Jerusalem and boundaries, "whether any side likes it or not."

Clinton added, "But I don't believe there's an excuse for terrorism in any case."

Clinton enlisted Hussein's support in U.S. diplomatic efforts to get Netanyahu and Arafat back to the negotiating table, officials said.

Special Middle East envoy Dennis Ross made a quick trip to the region last week. Another option under consideration to move the process forward is to send Madeleine Albright on her first trip to the Middle East as secretary of state.

But Clinton said such a visit would have to be "part of a clear strategy designed to produce progress."

The administration is also considering a Netanyahu-Arafat Washington summit if the Israelis and the Palestinians cannot come together in the region.

Meanwhile, Israeli officials are working on the details of Netanyahu's visit.

In addition to speaking at AIPAC, the prime minister is expected to address a Washington gathering of Voices United for Israel, an umbrella group that has included evangelical Christians who proselytize Jews. □

**Premier criticizes non-Orthodox for seeking to change status quo**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is accusing Reform and Conservative activists in Israel of “misrepresenting” the controversial new conversion bill to their communities in the United States.

The prime minister said some of the misrepresentation seemed to be “willful.”

He made the remarks to Jewish journalists Tuesday, just hours after the Knesset passed the measure by 51-32, with seven abstentions, in the first of three Knesset votes known as readings.

During the briefing, Netanyahu also discussed the possibility of forming a national unity government, a proposition he said he is seriously considering.

The bill would make all conversions conducted in Israel subject to confirmation by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. It normally would go next to the committee stage, but a compromise under discussion may alter the usual legislative practice.

Secular coalition parties had threatened to torpedo the bill by opposing the vote or abstaining — prompting Michael Eitan, coalition chairman of the Likud Party, to propose a compromise to ensure its passage.

All the coalition parties then backed the measure after Eitan signed a letter pledging a suspension of further steps in the legislative process, pending efforts to reach an accord with representatives of non-Orthodox denominations.

It is now predicated upon the non-Orthodox denominations’ agreement to freeze legal actions currently before the High Court of Justice, and to desist from further such legal actions while negotiations are under way.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said Tuesday that the Knesset action “upset us greatly.”

At the same time, he said, it was too early to render judgment on the compromise effort. “We’re trying to determine how serious the compromise is,” he said.

**‘We all very suspicious’**

Indications exist that the compromise offers “some hope,” he said, but there is not yet enough information to know whether it is a genuine effort to resolve the dilemma or merely a delay.

Rabbi Einat Ramon, spokeswoman for the Conservative/Masorti movement in Israel, said, “We are very suspicious.”

“If a serious negotiation goes on and something worthwhile is offered, we will consider it.”

Netanyahu indicated in his meeting with reporters that the legislative process would be frozen if the two non-Orthodox denominations stopped the petitions they now have before the High Court of Justice seeking recognition of their conversions.

Such a freeze would provide “an opportunity for creative solutions,” he said.

Inside sources said the final call would be made in New York, where leaders Tuesday said that more time and information would be needed before any decisions could be made.

In Israel, however, Reform and Conservative leaders said that while they welcomed efforts to strike a compromise, they would not cease litigation efforts.

Ramon said that “it is unacceptable” for the Reform and Conservative movements to withdraw their court cases in return for dropping the conversion bill because that would not achieve the movements’ objectives.

“We need to see progress in registering our

converts and recognizing liberal, non-Orthodox movements in Israel,” she said.

Uri Regev, director of the Reform Israel Religious Action Center, said that while his movement would gladly discuss a compromise, they still intend to submit more petitions to the High Court of Justice on behalf of families who adopted and converted their children overseas. Those conversions have not yet been registered by the Interior Ministry, said Regev.

Netanyahu said it had been the misguided efforts by these movements to use the court in the first place to change the religious “status quo” that had “forced” his governing coalition to back the Orthodox-inspired proposed legislation.

The premier said the Knesset was moving to “formalize” the historical non-recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions carried out in Israel because the non-Orthodox movements had tried, by litigation, to change the status quo.

“What I hoped would happen,” he said, “was that someone would have the good sense to remove the litigations.”

Orthodox legislators, some of whom had threatened to leave the coalition if the bill was not passed on its first reading, also maintain that it will not change the status quo.

“There is nothing new here,” said Transportation Minister Yitzhak Levy of the National Religious Party. “It is only setting into law an existing situation.”

Meanwhile, Netanyahu said 99 percent of American Jews seemed to believe that the new legislation meant that Israel would refuse in the future to recognize Reform and Conservative conversions performed in the United States.

Netanyahu said he would never allow such an erosion of the status quo. Israel, he stressed, had always recognized such conversions — and would continue to do so.

Meanwhile, the premier praised the two non-Orthodox denominations as “indispensable parts of the Jewish world and of Judaism, vital” in keeping the fabric of Diaspora Jewry unified.

Referring to threats from some quarters to cut off philanthropic funds to Israel or rechannel them, Netanyahu said that “these come from uninformed circles, or, worse, from informed circles who know the truth and still threaten.”

**‘More votes than Camp David’**

Netanyahu deftly skirted the issue of conversion abroad of Israeli nationals and residents.

The Orthodox parties intend to introduce new wording at the committee stage of the conversion bill. They plan to shut off this loophole through which the two non-Orthodox movements have been feeding a slender stream of their converts over recent months.

The premier said he did not accept the Orthodox argument in this case. He also said he was still weighing the question of whether to form a government of national unity. If he decided to go ahead, he noted pointedly, he would do so “in a short time.” This was in response to a specific reference to June 3, the date of the Labor Party leadership election.

On the one hand, he said, a unity government would “formalize” the wide support he believed exists in Israeli public opinion for his peace policies.

On the other hand, “We get such support anyway. On Hebron we had more than 80 votes — more than Begin had on Camp David.” A unity government, moreover, “could become a disunity government,” as had happened in the past, he said. □

**BEHIND THE HEADLINES**

**Jewish historians roundly reject cultists' appropriation of Masada**

*By Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

NEW YORK (JTA) — Judaism didn't escape the theological stew that led members of the Heaven's Gate cult to kill themselves last week.

The 39 people found dead at a mansion outside San Diego were adherents to a philosophy based on a loose amalgamation of extreme millennialist Christianity and New Age attitudes, overlaid by science fiction.

Information that cult members had posted on the Internet cited the dramatic saga of the Jewish suicide at Masada in the first century as the model for their mass suicide.

It is an analogy soundly rejected by Jewish historians.

Another Jewish connection to the eerie story that has rocked the country was the claim of Heaven's Gate founder Marshall Herff Applewhite — who was not a Jew — that he worked as the cantorial soloist at a Houston-area Reform temple.

The congregation in question is Temple Emanu El, where, according to Rabbi Roy Walter, Applewhite did not work as a cantorial soloist, but may have sung in the choir at some point in the mid-1960s.

It is not unusual for Reform temples to employ non-Jews to sing worship liturgy as cantorial soloists or as members of a paid choir.

Meanwhile, the Masada connection made by Heaven's Gate members to their own plans was a misappropriation of Jewish history, historians say, because the Jewish zealots who killed themselves in the year 73 on the top of the desert plateau did so under siege by Roman troops.

**'Obviously, a paranoid state'**

From a statement, "Our Position Against Assisted Suicide," which was published on the Heaven's Gate Web site and reprinted in The New York Times, members wrote:

"We fully desire, expect and look forward to boarding a spacecraft from the Next Level very soon (in our physical bodies) ...

"It has always been our way to examine all possibilities, and be mentally prepared for whatever may come our way.

"For example, consider what happened at Masada around 73 A.D. A devout Jewish sect, after holding out against a siege by the Romans, to the best of their ability, and seeing that the murder, rape and torture of their community was inevitable, determined that it was permissible for them to evacuate their bodies by a more dignified, and less agonizing method."

According to Yael Zerubavel, director of the Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University and an expert on Masada, "Obviously, this was really a paranoid state" that they were in.

"Masada can become a self-fulfilling prophecy," she said. "If you think everyone's after you, that you will be enslaved, then you may get to the point where you think you have no way of surviving."

Heaven's Gate mass suicide was antithetical to Judaism, which rejects suicide except when the threat of death at the hands of an enemy is imminent, said Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, a historian who serves as chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

Under such conditions, self-inflicted death is considered martyrdom and a sanctification of God's name.

The Jewish community's rejection of suicide is

embodied in the principle that people who kill themselves should be buried outside the gates of a Jewish cemetery.

In practice, though, Jewish law permits most suicides to be viewed as victims of mental illness so that they can be interred normally.

The basic approach is that "Judaism embraces life," Schorsch said. "Judaism is a this-worldly religion, and suicide flies in the face of embracing life."

Although universally known as the site of a Jewish mass suicide, Masada was initially used as a refuge by the very people from whom the Jews later tried to escape.

King Herod, the Roman ruler of the region, built an enormous official palace on the rocky promontory in the year 40 B.C.E., when he took his family and fled Jerusalem to escape Mattathias Antigonus, who had been crowned king by the Parthians.

Herod built a fortress on the site as well, between 37 and 31 B.C.E., according to the Encyclopedia Judaica, and later used it for refuge from the Jewish people and from Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt.

After he died, a Roman garrison was stationed there from the years 6 to 66 C.E., when, at the outbreak of the Jewish war against the Romans, a Jewish zealot named Menachem captured it. After Menachem was murdered in Jerusalem by Jewish rivals, his nephew Eleazar ruled it until its fall in 73.

In the year 72, the Roman governor Flavius Silva marched against Masada, which was the last remaining zealot stronghold of 960 defenders, bringing thousands of troops as well as thousands of Jewish prisoners of war.

After a prolonged siege, the Romans breached the Jewish stronghold and, according to tradition, Eleazar persuaded his followers to kill themselves rather than fall into Roman hands. Two women and five children survived by hiding in a cave.

But the story of the Jews' final chapter, which is based largely on the writing of the historian Josephus — who himself was the only survivor of a Jewish mass suicide in the Galilee and later defected to the Roman side — is historically questionable, said Schorsch.

Nevertheless, it became a myth central to the national Jewish psyche only after the Holocaust, said Zerubavel, when Jews needed to reinvent their national self-image from a people led helplessly to Nazi slaughterhouses into a people ready to die in self-defense rather than be victimized.

Indeed, it is atop Masada's summit that Israel's Armored Corps recruits swear their oath of allegiance, that "Masada Shall Not Fall Again."

But the iconization of suicide as heroic has come under fire in Israel in recent years, Zerubavel said.

Gaining popularity is the notion that Jewish survival in and of itself is a form of resistance, she said.

"If Jews committed suicide during the Holocaust, many more Jews would have died. By their sheer survival, this is a form of resistance. Sanctifying life is very much in the spirit of Judaism." □

**Court orders Zhirinovsky to apologize**

*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Moscow court has ruled that Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky must apologize for calling a top Russian security official a CIA and Israeli secret service agent.

The Russian lawmaker made the statements more than two years ago during a session of the lower house of the Russian Parliament. In a November 1994 session, Zhirinovsky had accused Sergey Stepashin, then director of the Federal Counterintelligence Service, a successor to the KGB, of being an agent for the CIA and the Mossad. □