

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** said he had no intention of stepping down in the wake of a police recommendation that he be charged with fraud and breach of public trust. The political scandal overshadowed U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross' diplomatic mission to the region. [Page 2]

■ **Chaim Herzog, Israel's sixth president, died of heart failure at 78.** Widely respected across the Israeli political spectrum, he was the first head of Israeli military intelligence, was a military attache in Washington and was Israel's ambassador to the United Nations. [Page 3]

■ **Israeli security forces defused a bomb found near the home of a Hamas terrorist in the village of Tsurif, near Hebron.** Meanwhile, Israeli forces began demolishing the homes of three members of a Hamas terrorist cell believed responsible for the murders of at least 11 Israelis.

■ **The chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary called on Israel to dismantle the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate.** In a letter to 1,500 U.S. Conservative rabbis and Jewish leaders, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch also called on Jews to stop funding Orthodox groups that oppose the recognition of non-Orthodox movements in Israel.

■ **The National Jewish Democratic Council said it was "saddened that Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell felt the need to share a podium with" Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.** Rendell, a Jewish Democrat, criticized Jewish leaders for not attending a rally earlier this week to which he had invited Farrakhan.

■ **Argentine President Carlos Menem established a commission to investigate the country's wartime role as a haven for Nazi war criminals.** The commission will also investigate claims that Nazi gold looted from Holocaust victims was secretly transferred to the country.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Man at center of Bar-On affair plays key role in policy-making***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The man at the center of the political scandal threatening to bring down the Israeli government is the leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party.

Aryeh Deri, on trial for bribery and fraud, was apparently intimately and powerfully involved in the short-lived appointment of Roni Bar-On as attorney general in January. Israel's state prosecutor is set to decide whether to bring criminal charges against any government officials — and against Deri himself — in connection with the Bar-On appointment.

But whatever the legal outcome of the Bar-On affair, the political fallout is likely to have far-reaching implications for the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Shas itself.

Netanyahu and his predecessors, from all parties, have countenanced Deri's undiminished political power for years.

Deri was forced by the High Court of Justice to step down in 1993 as interior minister because of the charges of financial misconduct that had first been brought against him several years earlier. But he continues as chairman of the fervently Orthodox Sephardi Shas Party, which continues to thrive and grow. And despite the charges against him, Deri continues to be active at the very core of national policy-making.

How has this situation evolved over the seven years since criminal allegations were first levied against Deri? And, perhaps more importantly, what are the chances of the situation changing now, in the wake of the Bar-On affair? Bar-On, a Likud activist, was allegedly appointed attorney general with the understanding that he would arrange a plea bargain for Deri.

Virtually unfettered power

The Shas leader faces further charges of misappropriating public funds for political purposes, for which he is due to stand trial when his current trial ends. On that charge, he stands accused of illegally transferring money from the Interior Ministry to Shas-sponsored institutions.

Deri's power over his party has been virtually unfettered ever since Shas came into being, in the early 1980s.

Deri was born in 1959 in Morocco, and came to Israel with his family as a young boy, spending his formative years in fervently Orthodox yeshivas. Despite his youth and inexperience, Deri impressed both of the original spiritual leaders of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and Rabbi Eliezer Shach, with his outstanding political and practical abilities.

He gained a foothold in the Yosef household when, as a student at the Hebron Yeshiva in Jerusalem, he was hired to coach one of the Sephardi chief rabbi's younger sons. "I had one ear on my pupil's learning and the other on the rabbi's activities in the next room," he recounted later. "All the problems of Sephardi Jewry, in Israel and abroad, passed through that room."

Shas evolved out of a strong sense of discrimination among young, fervently Orthodox, Sephardi yeshiva scholars.

Shach lent his support to the party as a way of expressing his own deep resentment of the Chasidic-dominated leadership of the fervently Orthodox Agudat Yisrael movement. Yosef was especially resentful at that time over legislation that required him and his Ashkenazi colleague to relinquish the Chief Rabbinate after a single 10-year term.

Later, Shach and Yosef split, and Shach formed his own separate fervently Orthodox Ashkenazi party, Degel Hatorah.

Shas' rise from nothing to four Knesset seats in the 1984 election took the Israeli political community by total surprise. At each subsequent election, Shas caused further surprises by surging ahead. Today, with 10 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, it is the third largest political party. Without its votes, the Netanyahu government could not long remain in power.

Over the years, Deri rose through the ranks of the Interior Ministry, with his influence extending far beyond the confines of the ministry. Insiders knew even back in the mid-1980s that this young man was the power behind Yosef's throne in Shas.

Prime Ministers Yitzhak Shamir, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin

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knew that this was the person they had to deal with in order to get things done, and done fast and efficiently.

Knesset arithmetic explains the Likud's tenacious cultivation of the Shas rabbis and politicians.

It also goes a long way toward explaining why both Likud and Labor politicians have, for so many years, turned a deliberately blind eye to the legal, ethical and political problems posed by Deri's continued high-profile leadership of the party despite his legal troubles.

For months during his trial, Deri would spend his mornings at the Jerusalem District Court and his afternoons at his political office or in the Knesset. Now he has been excused by the court from attending all its sessions.

On the face of it, the Bar-On affair has failed to elicit any manifestations of embarrassment within Shas itself. In fact, the party gave Deri and Yosef a rousing show of support at a recent mass meeting in Tel Aviv.

But one mass meeting, attended by thousands of loyalists, may not accurately reflect the feelings of tens of thousands of less committed Shas voters.

In the leadership echelon itself, moreover, there may be faint cracks beginning to appear in the facade of solidarity. The Shas Knesset faction, for instance, delicately balked at a proposal, presumably initiated by Deri, though articulated by one of his aides, that they all join in a high-profile protest against the police inquiry into the Bar-On affair.

Privately, key Shas figures bemoan the close connection between Deri and Yosef. They admit that in the long term, it could prove disastrous for their movement — especially if Deri is convicted in his bribery trial.

But they admit, too, that this unique bond between the elderly rabbi and the still-young "super-fixer" seems unassailable. Yosef, they say, is simply not prepared to hear bad things about Deri.

In public appearances, the rabbi is unstinting in his praise for Deri's successes in building up Shas' network of educational and welfare programs at the grass-roots level.

The number of Shas-inspired "hozrei b'teshuvah" — people who have taken on an Orthodox lifestyle — is itself impressive. But the phenomenon is broader than that: Many Sephardi Israelis who are not themselves observant nevertheless proudly concede that their lives have been touched by Shas activists in their own local communities.

In the day-to-day expansion of Shas' activities on this grass-roots level, Yosef sees Deri's energetic efficiency as vital, and he is loath even to contemplate carrying on without his acolyte.

Nevertheless, those who know the rabbi believe that slowly, but inexorably, he is realizing that the day may be approaching when Shas will have to crown a new leader — or risk losing the sympathy of ordinary Sephardi Israelis. That sympathy, after all, is the basis of its success — and the foundation of all its future political plans and religious aspirations. □

Israel's political crisis overshadows Ross' diplomacy

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A shuttle mission by U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross aimed at reviving Israeli-Palestinian negotiations was overshadowed this week by a political scandal in Israel that threatened to bring down Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Ross held separate talks with Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat in a bid to come up with a way to resume peace negotiations, broken off last month by the Palestinians after Israel broke ground for a new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

Ross called on each side to adopt con-

fidence-building gestures to restore an atmosphere of trust between the sides.

Israel has so far rejected American suggestions to freeze the building on Har Homa. But Israeli sources said this week that Jerusalem may announce a plan to build housing for Palestinians near the Har Homa site in Jerusalem.

As for the Palestinians, Ross called on Arafat to renew security cooperation with Israel. Israel has demanded that the Palestinians halt violence and crack down on terror as a condition for advancing the negotiations.

Despite the efforts to revive the peace talks, one Israeli official observed that it seemed unlikely that anything would be decided in the midst of the current political storm in Israel.

The upheaval erupted Wednesday with the disclosure that police investigators had recommended indicting Netanyahu on charges of fraud and breach of public trust.

The recommendation was centered on whether Netanyahu was aware of alleged external political and internal interests when he decided to appoint Jerusalem lawyer Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

Police had recommended indictments against three other principles named in connection to the affair: Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, Deri, and Avigdor Lieberman, director-general of the prime minister's office.

Signs of strain

In his first remarks since the recommendation involving the Bar-On Affair was made public, Netanyahu told Likud supporters at party headquarters in Tel Aviv that he had no intention of stepping down.

"The truth will win," he said. "We were elected to take a different path, and we are taking a different path."

But the resolve expressed by Netanyahu seemed less apparent in his coalition, which appeared to be showing signs of strain.

Members of the Third Way Party convened to discuss the ramifications of the police recommendations.

One member, Yehuda Harel, struck a cautious note, saying that the party had to wait for a decision from State Prosecutor Edna Arbel and Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein whether to proceed with an indictment against Netanyahu.

But Knesset member Alexander Lubotsky said the Third Way could not stand by even if they decided not to press charges. "If there is any indication of some kind of political deal, which damages the rule of law, even in a report, I don't see how we can stay in the government."

Members of the Likud Party accused the police of leaking the recommendation to bring down the government and called for patience until Arbel and Rubinstein issued their decision.

But some Likud members were less supportive of the prime minister.

At the Likud gathering where Netanyahu spoke, three party members — Communications Minister Limor Livnat, former Science Minister Ze'ev "Benny" Begin and Tel Aviv Mayor Ronni Milo — conspicuously left the room before the prime minister's address.

Opposition leaders, meanwhile, demanded Netanyahu's immediate resignation and called for new elections, regardless of whether an indictment is ultimately served.

The Meretz and Labor parties called for an emergency Knesset session during its Passover recess to discuss the matter.

Arbel and Rubinstein continued their consultations Thursday in an effort to draw up their decision before Passover. The two met at a conference center outside of Jerusalem in an effort to avoid the political limelight. □

Israel and Jewish world mourn death of Israel's sixth president

JTA Staff Report

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Former Israeli President Chaim Herzog, who played a major role in the founding of the Jewish state, died Thursday at Israel's Tel Hashomer Hospital from complications of pneumonia. He was 78.

An army general, jurist, diplomat and politician, the native of Ireland is being mourned and saluted by Israel and the Jewish world.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement, "Chaim Herzog endowed the presidency with majesty and nobility.

"We will remember Chaim Herzog as a shining diplomat and a soldier who made decisive contributions to the establishment of the State of Israel, both as a man and as a president."

President Ezer Weizman, in his tribute to Herzog, described him as "a true Zionist, a warrior, a scholar, and a good man.

"He got up each morning with one thought in his head," said Labor Party leader and former Premier Shimon Peres: "What's good for the State of Israel?"

American Jews were shocked and saddened by the news.

Some had worked closely with Herzog when he was the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations in the 1970s and was a key combatant in the fight against the U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism.

"A giant has fallen," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Israel and the world Jewish community have lost a dedicated and eloquent champion.

"He was a rare combination of someone with high principles and intellectual achievement, as well as a man of action when action was needed."

Said Jacob Stein, a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, "He brought the word and message of the Jewish state to the countries of the world with eloquence and elegance."

Only a few weeks ago, Herzog won a warm reception when he appeared in Washington before the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby.

"During all my years," he said in his speech, "I was inspired by my belief in the eternity of Israel and the compulsion to work towards it.

"Beyond every setback, I see the saga of remarkable achievements in every field of life. The tragedies that befell the Jewish people in my lifetime have no equal, but our victories and achievements have surpassed the dreams of generations. That is why one can dream, one should dream, one must dream."

Statesman, author and soldier

Born Vivian Herzog in Belfast, Ireland, on Sept. 17, 1918, Herzog was the second son of Yitzhak Herzog, who was later to become the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the State of Israel.

Herzog was Ireland's bantamweight boxing champion before immigrating to pre-state Palestine with his family in 1935.

He was an officer in the British army during World War II, took part in the Allied landing at Normandy and was present at the Nazi surrender in 1945.

Herzog fought in Israel's 1948 War of Independence and later became the first head of the intelligence branch of the Israeli army.

He rose to national and international prominence

during the 1967 Six-Day War, when as a reservist general, he provided articulate and credible military commentaries on the fighting for a worldwide radio and television audience.

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when he was retired from the army and in private life, Herzog took on the same role voluntarily.

After 1967, Herzog was military governor of the West Bank. In the 1970s, he served as the ambassador to the United Nations, where he drew international media attention in 1975, when, standing at the podium, he tore up the U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism.

Herzog was a Labor Party Knesset member in the 1980s, and, from 1983 to 1993, served as Israel's sixth president.

With tax expert Ya'acov Ne'eman and British-born attorney Michael Fox, Herzog formed the law firm Herzog, Fox, Ne'eman in the early 1970s. It is now one of Israel's leading law firms.

He wrote several books, including a history of the Six-Day War, "Israel's Finest Hour," and an account of the Yom Kippur War, "The War of Atonement."

He was feted a few weeks ago in New York by the Conference of Presidents for the publication of his latest book, a memoir.

The conference was slated to hold a memorial ceremony for Herzog on Friday.

"Because of his appreciation of the importance of the relationship with Diaspora communities, he created lasting bonds that transcended his years" as Israel's president, said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the conference.

Herzog wrote in "Living History," his new book, "When I disembark, I hope everything that my generation and I dreamed of and fought for will come true.

"I pray that my children and grandchildren will see a strong and vigorous Israel at peace with its neighbors and continuing to represent the traditions that have sustained our people throughout the ages.

"I wish for a world in which Israel vindicates its promise to be a 'light unto the nations.'"

The Israeli Embassy in Washington has opened up a book of condolences for the former president.

Herzog is survived by a wife, two sons and a daughter.

His widow, Ora, is the sister of Suzy Eban, who is the wife of veteran Israeli statesman Abba Eban. □

(JTA correspondents Naomi Segal and David Landau in Jerusalem and Cynthia Mann in New York contributed to this report.)

Court rejects hijacker's appeal

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court has rejected an appeal from an Iranian airline steward who hijacked a plane to Israel in 1995.

Last July, a Beersheba court sentenced Rafa Jabari to eight years in jail for air piracy.

The Supreme Court said this week it saw no reason to change that ruling. The justices noted that while Jabari's motives were not terrorist, he had endangered the passengers and crew of the plane.

In September 1995, the steward surrendered to Israeli authorities and requested asylum after hijacking a domestic Iranian Air flight to an air base in southern Israel.

The crew and all 176 passengers returned to Tehran some 36 hours after landing in Israel.

The steward said at the time that he had commandeered the plane because of what he described as the "unbearable situation" in his homeland. □

PASSOVER FEATURE**Christian, Messianic groups appropriate Passover seders***By Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Rev. James Stuart is getting ready to lead members of his flock at the Windham Presbyterian Church in a Passover seder.

But it is not a seder that Jews would find familiar.

“I’ll talk about how Jesus is our Passover lamb, that through his shed blood Jesus passed over our sins, and how it liberates us from our bondage to sin,” he said in an interview.

Afterward he will give communion to his congregants at the 250-member evangelical church in the Boston bedroom town of Windham, N.H. He will use matzah as the Eucharist.

“We wouldn’t do the seder if we weren’t going to give it a Christological overlay,” he said, adding that his congregation wants to “celebrate the various Jewish holidays and then show how we believe those holidays have been fulfilled through Christ.”

Stuart is one of a growing number of ministers and priests from nearly all denominations who are hosting Passover seders in their churches.

This trend reflects a deepening and expanding fascination with the Jewish origins of Jesus and the likelihood that a Passover seder was his Last Supper.

According to the Christian Bible, it was during that meal that Jesus foretold his death and instructed his disciples that the wine they drank was his blood, and that the unleavened bread they ate was his body.

There is a wide range of ways in which different Christians present the Passover seder, and there is disagreement among Christians, as well as among some Jews, as to how a seder should be handled in a Christian context.

Toward one end of the spectrum is Stuart’s approach, which has been adopted by most of the evangelical churches, such as some Presbyterians, which hold seders.

Most mainline Protestant denominations have member churches that define themselves as theologically conservative and evangelical, though the majority in those movements are not.

Matzah used to symbolize Christian trinity

The so-called Messianic groups, also known as Hebrew-Christians, are Jews who are theologically evangelical Christians and they put even more of a Christological slant on the Passover seder than Stuart.

Some Messianic seder leaders hold up a matzah, point to its holes and read from John’s Gospels how Jesus was pierced by the Roman soldiers, said Marvin Wilson, a professor of biblical and theological studies at Gordon College, an evangelical Christian college in Wenham, Mass.

That approach “may be reading too much into the seder,” said Wilson, because “there’s no clear New Testament validation for that interpretation.”

For Julius Ciss, executive director of Canadian Jews for Judaism, an anti-missionary group, “Pesach is probably the most accessible holiday for Christians to use as hooks for the Jew.”

Ciss, who was a “Messianic Jew” for five years, said he was always surprised at how many Jews attended seders at evangelical churches and “Messianic” congregations.

“Jews can find it very compelling, especially if they have experiences going back to childhood of the seder being conducted in Hebrew when no one at the table understood its meaning,” he said.

The church seders are condensed, in English, and led “by an enthusiastic orator with a lot of charisma.”

“The service is preceded by many Hebrew songs, the food is wonderful, and sometimes there is even Israeli dancing and people wearing tallesim (prayer shawls),” he said. “It makes it very seductive, so any guilt a Jew might have felt is totally assuaged when they feel like its more Jewish than ever to do it.”

Jews for Jesus, perhaps the best known of the “Messianic” evangelizing groups, visits churches across the country to demonstrate their Christological gloss on the Passover seder.

Tuvya Zaretsky, Jews for Jesus’ Southern California district leader, brings his interpretation of a seder to churches about 35 times a year, most of them during the Passover-Easter season.

Zaretsky said in a telephone interview that he uses a traditional Haggadah and teaches people about the traditional meaning of the seder symbols and rituals.

At the seders, which have an average attendance of about 80 people, he distributes a brochure that turns the traditional Jewish view of seder elements on its head, and suggests that practices in use by Jews today were adapted from the early Hebrew-Christian followers of Jesus.

Hebrew-Christians believe that the three matzot represent God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, “and that the afikomen, which is broken, buried and brought back dramatically, represents Jesus the Messiah,” the brochure states.

The Messianic orientation “completely distorts the meaning” of the seder, said Rabbi A. James Rudin, director of interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee. “They’ll say that their liberation is through Yehoshua the Moshiach” instead of through God, he said.

Catholics against ‘baptizing’ seders

The Catholic Church has been working to maintain respect for the integrity of the seder as a Jewish ritual while trying to get close to its own Messiah’s experience.

“It is becoming familiar in many parishes and Catholic homes to participate in a Passover seder during Holy Week,” states 1988 guidelines issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“It is wrong, however, to ‘baptize’ the seder by ending it with New Testament readings about the Last Supper or worse, turn it into a prologue to the Eucharist. Such mergings distort both traditions.”

The Catholics are not alone among Christians in this approach.

The Rev. Betty Gamble, the minister who leads the Pleasant Grove United Methodist Church just outside Covington, Ky., tries to recreate the biblical setting of Jesus’ Last Supper.

Her church of 150 members sets a low, U-shaped table akin to Roman times. Sitting on cushions piled on the floor, they dine on sop, an ancient type of lamb stew, using flat bread to scoop it up.

The whole evening is presented as a first-century experience precisely “because I don’t want to get into a Christological interpretation of the seder,” said Gamble. “That just violates the ritual of another faith, and violates a trust we have to treat each other with integrity.”

Yet no matter how hard a minister or priest works to make clear the separation between Jewish practice and Christian theology, said Wilson, “it’s a given in the church that there are going to be Christological interpretations when a seder is presented there.”

For that reason, Rudin, who runs a seder each year for foreign diplomats stationed in New York, feels strongly that seders should be conducted only by a rabbi, with Christians as guests. □