



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's Diaspora affairs adviser to the prime minister flew to New York to hold sensitive meetings with leaders of the religious movements. The meetings with Bobby Brown reflect the Israeli government's efforts to resolve heated controversy over legislation in the Knesset that would formalize exclusive Orthodox control over conversions in Israel.

■ Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met secretly overnight, but failed to make any progress in attempts to renew negotiations. The talks came as American officials called on the two sides to rebuild the core of trust that was the basis of the Oslo process.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected a U.S. government report concluding that one quarter of the homes in West Bank Jewish settlements are vacant. Netanyahu said the figures in the report far overstates the reality. [Page 4]

■ Benjamin Meed, president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, is expected to be appointed to the executive board of a Swiss fund to aid needy Holocaust survivors. The appointment comes after Elie Wiesel turned down an invitation to serve on the seven-member board of the Holocaust Memorial Fund.

■ Argentina's Supreme Court is reportedly considering halting its investigation into the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy. The explosion, which killed 29 people, remains unsolved.

■ Newly released British World War II documents reportedly indicate that as many as 7 million Jews may have died during the Holocaust. The documents show that German police in the occupied countries coordinated executions with the SS.

■ The Anti-Defamation League called on the Citadel, a U.S. military college, to investigate allegations that Nazi symbols were treated as badges of honor. Two former cadets gave the FBI photos and videotapes showing Nazi symbols at the school.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Slogans, ballots and intrigue: Time for another Zionist Congress

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — "In one very important election concerning Israel, only Americans can vote," blares the blue-and-white form in bold black letters. "Send for your ballot today."

The race is on.

All across the country, rabbis are calling on their congregants to vote in the upcoming election of representatives to the 33rd World Zionist Congress.

But what's at stake depends on whom you talk to.

If the Zionist arms of the Reform and Conservative movements have their way, the Zionist Congress election will be a referendum on religious pluralism in Israel.

Whether they succeed, however, will depend on the strength of a recently mobilized opposition, including the American affiliate of Israel's Likud Party and the Orthodox Zionist organizations.

They argue that religious pluralism has no place at the table of the congress of the World Zionist Organization. While some want to advance an agenda tied to the peace process, others want to see a more traditional focus on aliyah and Jewish identity.

The political intrigue surrounding the elections exploded in the wake of a recent unconfirmed Israeli newspaper report that Likud was seeking a secret deal to garner support from the non-Zionist Lubavitch movement in its efforts to prevent a Reform and Conservative landslide in the U.S. elections.

In the last election 10 years ago, the Reform and Conservative organizations came in second and third, edged out only by Hadassah, the international Zionist women's organization, which has taken itself out of the running this year.

One hundred years ago, Theodor Herzl, Zionism's founder, convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It was hailed as the first international parliament of the Jewish people. The State of Israel was only a dream and the hall was filled with memorable and passionate debate on Jewish destiny.

Today, with Israel a fait accompli, the task of rousing masses of Jews to participate in that debate is a daunting challenge.

Most American Jews have little understanding of the role or the workings of the WZO, and even if they do understand it, many believe it is irrelevant to contemporary Jewish life.

But that has not stymied the Reform movement's Association of Reform Zionists of America or the Conservative movement's Mercaz. Both are using the elections as a battleground on which to wage their fight against the official Orthodox monopoly of religious life in the Jewish state.

These organizations say the election provides a chance to seat people in positions of power who will allocate more of world Jewry's resources to Conservative and Reform institutions and programs in Israel.

Conversion legislation a boost to non-Orthodox campaign

Probably the biggest boost to their campaign to date was the Israeli Knesset's recent preliminary passage of legislation to codify exclusive Orthodox control over conversions performed in Israel.

The Knesset initiative has hit a nerve among non-Orthodox Jews throughout the country — and some are responding through the election process.

Registration forms are streaming into a Westwood, N.J., post office box at a rate of about 15,000 a week now. From there, a computer service is creating a central registry of voters in the election, which is being administered by the American Zionist Movement, a federation of about 20 organizations.

Any Jew over 18 who says he or she believes in basic Zionist principles, such as the centrality of Israel in Jewish life, is eligible to register, receive a ballot and cast a vote by mail in the fall. It costs \$2.

But unless the current registration deadline of June 1 is extended, the total is unlikely to top 75,000.

One person campaigning hard under the pluralism banner is Rabbi Amy Memis, of the Reform Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim, in Glenview, Ill., which sent out mailings to all of its roughly 1,000 member-households.

Memis, a member of the national ARZA board, said many of her congregants see the election as a chance to respond to the conversion legislation, which would formally delegitimize Reform and Conservative conversions in Israel.

"There is a sense that we need our voices heard," she said. Her congregants believe this is an opportunity to say, "Yes, we are Jews."

The pluralism message also has galvanized three generations of a Massachusetts family.

Amy Sands is a Jewish family educator at Temple Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Natick, Mass., which sent out 700 election mailings to its members.

At Sands' urging, her businessman father, Morton Grossman, sent out 350 additional mailings.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to demonstrate what we believe in for Israel," pleaded Grossman in a personal note accompanying the mailing. "Vote as if it is your vote and it is your country."

The WZO, said Sands, provides "an opportunity for Jews all over the world to have a say in worldwide decisions" about Jewish identity, Israel-Diaspora relations and aliyah.

"Without pluralistic representation," she said, "this election will put a wedge between Israel and the Diaspora."

"With the vote," she added, "we're trying to make a statement that the Knesset will listen to."

Sands' son, 23-year-old Joshua Narva, described himself as intensely invested in the election as a Conservative Jew.

"This is an issue that strikes at the core of how a Jew is defined," he said.

The Zionist Congress, scheduled for December in Jerusalem, will select the leadership of the WZO and will help set its policies and priorities.

Jewish-Zionist education budgets at stake

The WZO has the power to implement those priorities with its joint authority over the \$400 million budget of its partner, the Jewish Agency for Israel.

That \$400 million is contributed by the central Jewish fund-raising establishments around the world. The lion's share is spent for the resettlement and absorption of immigrants. Much of the rest is spent for Jewish-Zionist education.

About \$1 million is allocated each to projects of the Conservative and Reform movements and about \$500,000 to those of the modern Orthodox.

However, proposals for sharply stepped-up funding have been discussed in recent weeks between the United Jewish Appeal and Conservative and Reform leaders.

But despite the unusual opportunity the election provides for democratic expression in the Jewish world, political infighting persists.

Several of the Zionist organizations, most in opposition to ARZA and Mercaz, are pushing for an extension of the June 1 registration deadline so they can have more time to rally their ranks. A decision is expected soon.

Meanwhile, rumors about an alleged Likud-Lubavitch deal are intensifying the election drama.

Lubavitch denied last week's reports of the deal in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Still, it sparked protest in the two non-Orthodox movements, at the same time that they seized on it as a

tool to mobilize their own constituents. They also exploded at Hadassah, which the story suggested was in cahoots with the anti-pluralistic Lubavitch.

For her part, Hadassah President Marlene Post cried foul and vehemently denied the charges. Close to 90 percent of her members are Reform and Conservative, she pointed out, adding that many had called her to express concern about the alleged Lubavitch alliance.

Hadassah, the international women's organization, remains a powerful entity in the WZO, but has opted out of the elections process, charging it is divisive and a waste of money.

Nonetheless, their mandates were being used to influence the elections process by a coalition allied with Likud against the interests of ARZA and Mercaz. Hence, the charges of a Lubavitch connection.

Rabbi Robert Golub, executive director of Mercaz, said of Likud's purported decision to turn to the non-Zionist Chasidim: "It shows how desperate they feel and what a mockery they make of Zionism."

Rabbi Abraham Shemtov, chairman of the executive committee of Agudas Chasidei Chabad, the Lubavitch community's world umbrella organization, said he had issued a written denial to Ha'aretz because there was no basis of truth to the report. And in a telephone interview this week, he said he stood by that denial.

For their part, Likud leaders denied any deal with any movement, but acknowledged their eagerness to cooperate with "all Jews."

As the campaign has gotten underway, "a whole bunch of Orthodox of all stripes are coming to us, finding our banner most comfortable," Rodney Sanders, director general of the World Likud movement, said in a telephone interview from Tel Aviv.

The party is "trying to get as many Jews as possible to vote," he said, adding that Likud's campaign is based on what he described as the most important issue facing world Jewry today — protecting Jerusalem's united, Jewish status.

And he echoed the view of other, more veteran Zionist parties, when he said he does not believe that religious pluralism belongs on the world Zionist agenda.

"Likud is not anti-Reform," he said, "but the WZO is not the stage for the issue."

This infuriated Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of ARZA, who said this indicated "how out of touch they are with world Jewry."

"The WZO, along with the Jewish Agency, is the primary body engaged in Israel-Diaspora relations," he said.

"That makes it a place for American Jews to have a say and a role, and what American Jews care about now is pluralism." □

Police: Licenses illegally purchased

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police this week arrested driving instructors and examiners who allegedly took bribes in exchange for issuing drivers licenses.

Police suspect that thousands of licenses were issued in this manner by a corruption ring centered in the northern region of the country.

Police said that some people who had obtained licenses through bribes were later involved in traffic accidents, some of them fatal.

Labor Knesset member Elie Goldschmidt, who chairs the body's economic committee, said driving examiners and instructors charged in connection to the corruption ring should also be charged with attempted manslaughter. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish women and breast cancer: Do special studies really matter?

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — A new study indicates that people with certain genetic predispositions to breast and ovarian cancers — which have been identified in Jews of Ashkenazi descent — may have a somewhat lower risk of developing those diseases than previously thought.

Despite the seemingly good news, the latest study on Jewish women and breast cancer, published last week, has sparked objections among some Jewish women to the focus on the so-called “Jewish genes.”

These are the markers for the breast cancer genes BRCA1 and BRCA2.

The studies provide no basis of comparison with the general population, they say. Furthermore, they leave women wondering what to do once they find out that they have these mutations.

It would be more important, they say, to fund research for a cure for cancer.

When the two genetic markers were discovered last year, “suddenly we were singled out” in a way some Jews found disconcerting, said Dale Mintz, a certified health educator and national director of health education for Hadassah, the women’s Zionist organization headquartered in New York.

“There’s nothing really Jewish about this because no other groups have been tested” for the genetic markers for these cancers, said Nancy Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston.

“Why are we being targeted?”

Not everyone shares these concerns, however.

“Jews have an understandable wariness and concern” about being singled out for medical research, given the Nazi era when Jews were selected for medical experimentation and extermination, said Lois Waldman, director of the American Jewish Congress’ Commission on Women’s Equality.

Nonetheless, Jews are being targeted “for good scientific reasons because it facilitates the research,” Waldman said. She said that by focusing on the relatively small Jewish population, scientists are able to come up with useful data.

Earlier studies showed higher rates

The latest study of the risk of breast and ovarian cancers among Ashkenazi Jews found that a person with the genetic mutations has a 56 percent chance of getting breast cancer, and a 17 percent chance of ovarian cancer by the age of 70, no matter what her family history of the diseases.

Earlier estimates were that as many as 85 percent of women with the genetic mutation would develop breast cancer, and that 60 percent would develop ovarian cancer by age 70.

The genes predisposing a woman to breast cancer are found in as many as 2 percent of the Ashkenazi Jewish population whose ancestors hailed from Eastern or Central Europe.

An estimated 8 percent of women in the general U.S. population will develop breast cancer, and 2 percent will likely develop ovarian cancer, according to reporting on the subject.

Dr. Jeffrey Streuwing, the chief author of the new National Cancer Institute study, and his colleagues studied 5,318 Jewish women and men in the Washington, D.C., area by taking blood samples at synagogues and Jewish community centers.

The scientists analyzed the samples as well as detailed family histories of the volunteers.

Other scientists working on studies of breast cancer among Ashkenazi Jews faulted the Streuwing study for relying heavily on family memories of ancestors who may have had breast or ovarian cancer to determine their descendants’ risk of developing the same diseases.

The critics include Dr. Mary-Claire King, who is working on her own study of breast and ovarian cancer risk among 1,000 Jewish women in the New York area.

She was quoted as saying that relying on the memories of family members is unreliable since cancer was rarely discussed in earlier generations.

King was one of the lead investigators in the original research that produced information about the cancer-causing genes in Ashkenazi Jews.

Streuwing’s was one of four studies on breast cancer whose results were published in the New England Journal of Medicine last week. He was not available for an interview.

The studies have drawn considerable attention in the Jewish community.

Both Hadassah and the AJCongress’ Commission on Women’s Equality have held seminars on the issue.

In Boston, some 800 people attended a meeting at a synagogue in January to address concerns over the news of the first study, Kaufman said.

That meeting gave way to a Boston Jewish Women’s Breast Cancer Coalition, which now meets monthly.

Many women of Ashkenazi descent were being told by their doctors that if they have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer, they should be tested.

“The concern is once they’re tested, then what? The ‘what’ is not clear yet,” she said.

Some are concerned that there will be a rush of women seeking prophylactic removal of their breasts and ovaries.

Those radical procedures, according to another study published at the same time as Streuwing’s in the New England Journal of Medicine, reduce the risk of developing breast cancer by 85 percent and the risk of developing ovarian cancer by 50 percent.

What everyone in the Jewish community does seem to agree on is that there needs to be some guarantee that information from genetic testing for breast and ovarian cancers, or other diseases, will not be used by insurance companies or potential employers to discriminate against carriers.

“We really need to protect women from opening them up against that discrimination,” said Hadassah’s Mintz. □

Ex-SS guard in Pennsylvania to be deported to Romania

NEW YORK (JTA) — A U.S. immigration judge has ordered the deportation of a Pennsylvania man who served as an armed Nazi SS guard during World War II.

Nikolaus Schiffer, 78, worked at several concentration camps as a member of the SS Death’s Head Battalions.

He will be deported to Romania.

Schiffer testified that as a guard, he participated in death marches from the Hersbruck concentration camp to Auschwitz, where weakened prisoners were shot or left to die if they could not continue.

He also served at the Sachsenhausen and Madjanek concentration camps.

Schiffer’s naturalized U.S. citizenship was revoked in February 1995. □

Israel criticizes U.S. report on vacancies at settlements*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected a U.S. study that found that a quarter of the homes in West Bank Jewish settlements were vacant.

"I can't give you precise figures," Netanyahu told reporters Tuesday during a tour of settlements in the West Bank. But he called the report "false by an order of magnitude."

"It's a fraction of that, a very small fraction."

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross presented the survey to Israeli leaders last week during his shuttle mission to the region, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, which published data from the survey.

The report was apparently intended to refute Israel's argument that it needs to expand Jewish settlements.

According to the report, 26 percent of the houses in West Bank Jewish settlements, and 56 percent in the Gaza Strip, are unoccupied.

The report said some 2,000 houses in Ariel and some 1,000 in Shilo, both in the West Bank, are vacant. More than 1,000 houses in Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip are uninhabited.

Settlement leaders refuted the figures, saying they were totally inaccurate.

Pinchas Wallerstein, the head of the council of Jewish communities in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, said there are no empty houses in settlements close to the center of the country.

In Ariel there are only about 2,000 houses altogether, making it impossible for the U.S. figures to be correct, he said.

U.S. sources confirmed the Ha'aretz report that the study was completed in February, and was the continuation of a survey begun last August. The statistics were gathered through a number of means, including satellite photos, Ha'aretz reported.

Ross raised the issue of empty houses when he met last week with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials at the home of the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk.

The meeting was aimed at finding a way to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, stalled since mid-March, when Israel broke ground for Jewish housing in southeastern Jerusalem.

According to sources quoted by Ha'aretz, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who participated in the meeting, defended Israel's decision to continue building in Jewish settlements, citing natural growth.

American officials rejected this argument, pointing to the findings of the study.

"There is no need to expand settlements" one senior American official was quoted as saying. "The whole idea of expanding the settlements is just a ploy to please the prime minister's coalition partners." □

3 nations honor missing Israeli airman*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Parliamentarians from Israel, Britain and Germany jointly marked captured Israeli air navigator Ron Arad's 39th birthday this week and issued an appeal for his release.

Members of Arad's family also took part in Tuesday's special gathering, which linked the participants through a satellite hook-up, and was simultaneously broadcast on the Internet.

Tuesday marked Arad's 3,869th day in captivity.

His plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986. Israel has held Iran responsible for his fate, though Tehran has denied having any knowledge of Arad's whereabouts.

The deputy secretary of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah, Sheik Naim Kassam, said in an interview with a Lebanese newspaper that the fundamentalist group never held Arad, and, if it had, it would have tried to arrange a prisoner swap for him. □

Israeli envoy retracts resignation*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM, (JTA) — Israel's ambassador to Jordan has retracted his resignation and will remain in Amman.

Oded Eran submitted his resignation last week, barely a week after taking up his post as Israel's second ambassador to Jordan.

He complained at the time that he was never informed about a secret meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and King Hussein, and only learned about it through the media.

The meeting in the Jordanian port city of Aqaba had been hastily arranged to resolve a dispute between the countries over water allocation.

After meeting Tuesday with senior Israeli Foreign Ministry officials, Eran said he was assured that he would not be left out of important political developments. □

Israeli planes to use Aqaba airport*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli planes will soon be allowed to land at the Jordanian port city of Aqaba.

Jordan and Israel have been discussing the possibility of expanding the existing Aqaba airport to also serve the nearby southern Israeli resort town of Eilat.

Permitting Israeli planes to use the Aqaba airport would be part of a feasibility study on whether to establish a joint airport serving the two Red Sea resort communities.

Jawad Anani, a Jordanian deputy minister for development, said that the planes would be able to land within three months, after experts from both sides finalize the arrangement. □

Israel marks Arab culture month*By Michele Chabin*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A large book fair and heritage exhibition are two of the events taking place during Arab Culture Month, which kicked off on Sunday.

The annual event, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, the Committee of Local Arab Councils and others interested in promoting Israeli Arab culture, is being held at the Beit Hagefen Arab-Jewish Culture Center in Haifa.

The book fair, which is featuring books from Israel and Arab countries, will run through June 6. The heritage exhibition, displaying thousands of items of clothing, pottery and housewares, will close on May 31.

An Arab folklore carnival is scheduled for Friday, and a national exhibition of Arab artists is slated for Sunday. There will be a marathon of Arab film from May 26 to 28.

On June 17, a sculpture garden for peace and co-existence, featuring works by Israeli and Palestinian artists, will be inaugurated in the village of Kawkab Abu El Hija.

Throughout the month, hundreds of cultural programs and events are scheduled in 35 towns and villages around the country. □