

**NEWS AT A GLANCE**

■ **Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat said there was no prospect of a summit meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.** Arafat spoke to reporters after being briefed on Tuesday's summit between Netanyahu and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

■ **The American Jewish Committee is sponsoring a full-page ad in an Israeli newspaper to rouse Israeli public opinion against the pending conversion legislation.** The ad urges Israelis to oppose any "measures and rhetoric that question the legitimacy of the religious life of the overwhelming majority of American Jews." [Page 2]

■ **Israel began channeling fresh water to Jordan under a deal aimed at resolving a dispute over water rights.** Jordan's King Hussein opened the floodgates to pump water to Jordan's northern town of Adassiya from the Sea of Galilee. [Page 3]

■ **A committee appointed to examine the privatization of Israel's national airline, El Al, proposed that all of its stocks be sold on the Tel Aviv stock exchange.**

■ **An Israeli human rights group said that over 800 Palestinians were placed under Israeli administrative detention during the past four years without charges being brought against them or being put on trial.** In a report released this week, B'tselem said some 249 Palestinians remain in detention, and demanded their immediate release or trial.

■ **Representatives from donor countries to the Palestinian Authority are to meet next week in the United States to discuss an audit which found that self-rule officials had misused some \$326 million in public funds.** Norway, the head of the donor nations group, has asked Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat for details of the report.

■ **The deadline for returning registration forms for the U.S. election of delegates to the upcoming World Zionist Congress has been extended from June 1 to June 22 in a compromise between opposing camps.**

**AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD****50 years after secret struggle, volunteers recall their voyages**

By Michele Chabin

ATLIT, Israel (JTA) — For as long as they can remember, Max and Leah Meltzer have been hearing their grandfather recount stories of how he helped smuggle Jewish Holocaust victims into pre-state Israel.

But this week, during the 50th anniversary reunion of the North Americans who participated in Aliyah Bet — the Hebrew term used to describe the clandestine immigration of Jews to then-Palestine — Max, 16, and Leah, 14, say they have gained new respect for their still energetic granddad, Irving.

"Until coming here, I didn't really understand what a big role [North] Americans played in getting Jews to Palestine after the Holocaust," Max says during the group's visit to Atlit, where a former British internment camp that once housed thousands of Jewish refugees has been turned into a museum.

Max and Leah are not alone.

With the exception of the Leon Uris novel "Exodus," which volunteers say is full of factual errors, and a handful of books on the clandestine immigration movement, "there's very little mention of the part we played," says Eli Bergman, one of the reunion organizers.

Even the Clandestine Immigration Museum in Haifa, "makes almost no mention of our involvement."

Between 1946 and 1948, the most active years of the Aliyah Bet movement that began in 1934, 10 American ships paid for by American Jews and manned predominantly by 250 North American volunteers transported 32,000 refugees to Palestine, which was then ruled by the British.

Bowing to Arab demands and fearful that a large influx of Jews would weaken their hold over Palestine, the British had imposed a quota allowing just 2,000 Jews to immigrate each month. This despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors were languishing in displaced persons camps in Europe.

In all, more than 100,000 Jews tried to enter Palestine "illegally" on dozens of Aliyah Bet ships. Due to the British blockade, however, the vast majority of the vessels were intercepted at sea, and the refugees were sent to internment camps either in Palestine or nearby Cyprus.

**They would do it all over again**

By all accounts, the postwar Aliyah Bet movement was instrumental in forcing the British to relinquish control of Palestine in May 1948.

"The sight of wretched Holocaust survivors being prevented from reaching their homeland elicited a great deal of world sympathy and, in my opinion, helped force out the British," says Uzi Narkiss, a decorated retired army officer.

"Members of the U.N. committee sent to Palestine to research the prospects of partitioning the country watched the 'Exodus' struggle unfold from their balconies in Haifa. I'm certain much of their decision to establish a Jewish state came out of that experience."

Today, five decades after they risked sea mines, tempestuous storms and the wrath of the mighty British navy, the volunteers say they would do it all over again. "I still remember the faces of the Holocaust survivors," says Jack Yeriel, a native New Yorker who served on the ship "The Jewish State" before immigrating to Israel in 1947.

"What struck me was their courage. I remember this young couple that broke into a smile from ear to ear when they boarded the ship.

"I thought, 'This is why I'm on this ship, this is why we need to build a Jewish country.' I thought, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'"

Canadian-born Eddy Kaplansky, who served on the same ship, says he will "never forget the sight of the 2,700 refugees we picked up in Bulgaria. It was a terrible sight, these poor people in pitiful clothes, just like we see in Rwanda today. There were mothers with new babies, young orphans. Our non-Jewish captain burst into tears."

Kaplansky, who like most of the North Americans saw military action in World War II, recalls that there was a woman named Zelma Rosenfeld

who had just given birth before boarding, and she was bleeding internally.

"The doctor had warned her that the voyage would be long and hard and that she might not survive the trip," he remembers.

"She said that she would rather die on her way to Palestine than stay in Europe.

"Zelma was so grateful to Irving Meltzer, our American radio officer who assisted her, that she named her son Mordechai, after Meltzer's late father. It's ironic that she survived the voyage, only to be killed by a British policeman's stray bullet four months later."

Standing just out of earshot of his grandchildren, Irving Meltzer shrugs off any suggestion that his service on the ship was something out of the ordinary.

"After living through what they lived through, the refugees had to know that someone cared," says Meltzer. For them, just the fact that we were there was important."

Unlike the majority of those at the reunion, Isaac "Ike" Arane says he has no desire for more recognition.

Portrayed by Paul Newman in the film version of "Exodus," Arane says a lot has happened since then. "My life didn't begin and end on that voyage."

To this day, Arane, a European who made Aliyah as a child, is peeved by the mere mention of the movie and the Leon Uris novel that spawned it.

"Leon Uris rewrote history, and one should never do that," says the spry septuagenarian. "In the novel, the Haganah (the secret army of pre-state Israel) smuggles a bunch of youngsters aboard the Exodus and they go on a hunger strike. Ultimately, the British are forced to allow them into Palestine.

"In real life," Arane says, the British "rammed into us, boarded us, and clubbed to death Bill Bernstein, one of the crew. Then they placed 4,500 Holocaust survivors on three ships and sent them back to France. The passengers refused to disembark for three weeks, so they were sent to Germany.

"The Exodus was famous long before Leon Uris wrote his book," Arane asserts. "If you're going to write about an historical event, get the facts straight." □

## **American Jewish group urges Israelis to oppose conversion bill**

*By Michele Chabin*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In an attempt to rouse the Israeli public against a pending conversion bill, an American Jewish organization is taking out a full-page advertisement in the country's largest-circulation daily newspaper.

This Friday, Yediot Achronot will carry a Hebrew-language ad, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, urging Israelis to actively oppose any "measures and rhetoric that question the legitimacy of the religious life of the overwhelming majority of American Jews."

The bill would cement in law exclusive Orthodox authority over conversions performed in Israel. Its passage was a condition of the religious parties when they joined the government coalition a year ago.

The legislation has sparked the ire of many American Jews, most of whom identify as Reform or Conservative.

The bill passed April 1 in the first of three Knesset votes known as readings.

But this week Israel's justice minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, said the bill would be brought to the Knesset for final action next month if no compromise is reached.

Unless the bill is stopped, the ad states, "the attempts to imprison religious expression in Israel within the confines of a state-imposed Orthodoxy will not only

engender conflict among Israelis, but will alienate the Diaspora, making Israel — however large its population and sacred its soil — progressively less relevant to Jews everywhere else."

AJCommittee's Israel director, Yossi Alpher, said the ad is an attempt "to reach as many Israelis as possible."

In Alpher's view, the conversion bill's potential to "alienate large segments of the American Jewish community by bringing it to a position where it no longer has an interest in supporting Israel is not well enough understood by the Israeli public."

In another development on the conversion front, the Israeli government has agreed to expand the existing network of Orthodox conversion classes for new immigrants.

Absorption Minister Yuli Edelstein, a leader in the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrant-rights party, was the moving force behind the measure, which was worked out between the Absorption Ministry, the Religious Affairs Ministry, the Education Ministry, the Chief Rabbinate and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

An Absorption Ministry spokesman said that between 100,000 and 200,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union are not halachically Jewish, adding that the agreement "will enable those who wish to convert many more options."

He estimated that approximately 10,000 immigrants are "very interested" in converting to Judaism.

"Many have been reluctant to enroll before, due to the long bureaucratic process," he said. "We believe this will shorten the process considerably."

But Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, said, "What is being described as a major step forward will help only a negligible amount of people."

Regev asserted that "the real issue has still not been addressed."

Will the standards dictated by the Orthodox Rabbinate "be relaxed?" he asked. "Will the Rabbinate begin to waive their demand?"

A source close to the committee, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said in an interview that the Chief Rabbinate may be willing to drop its demand that all potential converts maintain an Orthodox lifestyle.

But a spokesman for Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron said: "The standards haven't changed. All immigrants will have to undergo a proper conversion." □

## **Eastern Jerusalem: Split populace**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Jewish and Arab populations in areas of Jerusalem that were annexed by Israel in 1967 are nearly equal, according to a statistical study released this week.

According to the annual study on Jerusalem, which was prepared jointly by the municipality and the Jerusalem Center for Israel Research, Arabs make up 52 percent of eastern Jerusalem, while Jews make up 48 percent.

According to the study, Jerusalem continues to be the most densely populated Israeli city.

The total population of the city in 1996 was 603,000 people, 422,000 of which were Jews, and 180,000 were Arabs and others. Projections for the year 2010 put the city's population at 817,500 — with 251,000 Arabs and 214,000 fervently Orthodox Jews.

The city also continued to lead in urban poverty. In 1995, 37 percent of children living in Jerusalem were under the poverty line, compared to 23.2 percent for all of Israel. □

## **Colin Powell apologizes to Jews as he encourages new volunteerism**

*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Gen. Colin Powell invited representatives of Jewish organizations to a private meeting last week to personally apologize for holding last month's summit on volunteerism on the Passover holiday.

While the scheduling conflict prevented Jewish groups from participating in the highly publicized event in Philadelphia, it has not kept them from supporting Powell's efforts.

President Clinton tapped Powell to lead an initiative aimed at recruiting American volunteers from all walks of life. He has found an attentive ear among Jewish activists.

"A number of factors have come together during the past year to facilitate volunteer efforts," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"There is more of a willingness of people to volunteer," stemming in part from the recent spate of church burnings and changes in the welfare and immigration laws, said Saperstein, who also serves as a religious co-chair of Powell's campaign, known as Promise America.

At a meeting last Friday with five Jewish leaders, Powell said he "was especially embarrassed and troubled" that the summit was held during the last days of Passover, which are celebrated as Jewish holidays, Saperstein said.

But now the Jewish community is concentrating on how to move forward with its own volunteer efforts.

Hadassah has joined up with the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations in an effort to recruit 100,000 reading tutors for an initiative spearheaded by the Department of Education.

"We're all going to work together to get these 100,000 volunteers," said Marlene Post, Hadassah president. □

## **Knesset discusses assaults on Israeli national symbols**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Knesset discussed this week recent incidents of fervently Orthodox violence against national symbols.

A number of Knesset members introduced urgent calls for the discussion after several instances were reported among fervently Orthodox, or haredi, communities over the weekend when the Israeli flag was burned at bonfires that are traditional on the Lag B'Omer holiday.

Jerusalem police launched an investigation after the Israeli daily Ma'ariv published a photograph on its front page of a haredi youth burning an Israeli flag during celebrations in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood.

A spokesman for the firefighters association said similar flag-burning incidents also took place in the haredi neighborhood of Bnei Brak.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he viewed the matter as very grave, and Knesset speaker Dan Tichon also condemned flag burning, which is an offense that can carry a one-year prison conviction. □

## **Right-wing Israelis offer aid to Arabs who sell land to Jews**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Right-wing Knesset members and Jewish settlers have launched a hot line to help Palestinians who have sold property to Jews.

The move came last week in the wake of a Pales-

tinian Authority declaration that such sales were offenses punishable by death.

The bodies of two Arab land dealers suspected of selling land to Jews were found in Ramallah earlier this month.

While Palestinian officials have denied any involvement in the killings, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat has justified the death penalty, saying Palestinians who sold land to Jews were traitors.

Palestinian security forces have arrested four residents of Hebron and two residents of villages in the Hebron area on suspicion of selling land to Jews, Khaled Al-Kidra, the Palestinian Authority attorney general, said last week.

A spokesman for the Council of Jewish Communities in Judea, Samaria and Gaza said the line was intended to help Arabs who felt threatened, and who sought financial assistance or physical protection.

The spokesman, Yechiel Leiter, told Israel Radio that some Arabs had turned informally to Jewish settlers for help.

He said that all information would be passed on to Israeli security forces. □

## **Israel, Jordan to establish rail links**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — First you could drive, then you could fly. Now it won't be long before you can train it from Israel to Jordan.

Ariel Sharon, Israel's national infrastructure minister, said this week that the rail links would be built in the Dead Sea area, and between the Red Sea cities of Aqaba and Eilat.

International firms interested in building the rail lines are participating in the negotiations.

News of the future rail connection came as Israel approved a plan to divert about 1.7 million cubic feet of water to Jordan each year.

The water will be provided through a desalination project that is expected to take three years to build.

The plan was agreed upon in principle at a meeting earlier this month between Jordan's King Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

They met in Aqaba to resolve a mini-crisis over interpretation of an agreement on water-sharing that is part of the 1994 peace treaty between the two countries.

Until the desalination plant is built, Israel will provide Jordan with 875 million cubic feet of drinking water. The transfer began this week.

The water is in addition to some 1 billion cubic feet of water Israel already supplies to Jordan annually under the first phase of their water agreement. □

## **Iraq may seek Israeli trade**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A large Iraqi firm has reportedly approached Israel with the knowledge of the Baghdad authorities to explore trade possibilities with the Jewish state.

Contacts were made through the Israel-Arab Friendship Association in order to pave the way for the imports of large quantities of Israeli food products, medicines and car parts in exchange for Iraqi fuel, Israel Radio reported Tuesday.

Israeli officials were examining whether such a deal would be possible under the terms of United Nations regulations that allow Baghdad to sell limited amounts of oil in exchange for necessary food and medical supplies, according to Israel Radio. □

**Italian Jews raising funds from income tax payments***By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Italy's Jewish community has launched a fund-raising campaign aimed at capitalizing on a new tax law.

An ad campaign has been urging Italians to take advantage of a new law that for the first time allows them to allocate a tiny percentage of their income tax payments to the Union of Italian Jewish Communities.

This option long has existed for other religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church.

"It has a great civic value and doesn't cost anything," read a full-page advertisement in an Italian magazine this month.

Such contributions would "give new breath to a culture and a heritage that belongs to everyone, to strengthen the defense of minorities against intolerance and prejudice," said the ad, which was sponsored by the Jewish umbrella group.

The ad states that Italy's 30,000 Jews comprise a minority that is too small "to care for the great patrimony of monuments, libraries, works of art and historic archives that form part of Italy's cultural heritage.

Tullia Zevi, president of the union, also issued an open letter to the Italian public urging them to contribute to the Jewish community as a means of fighting racism and fostering democracy and pluralism in the country.

Zevi said the initial response to the appeal had been "very positive," but other Jewish observers said there was no way of knowing how much the unprecedented appeal would raise. □

**Achille Lauro hijacker faces trial for escape from prison***By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Youssef Magied al-Molqi, a Palestinian convicted of hijacking the Achille Lauro cruise ship in 1985, will go on trial in September for escaping last year from the Rome prison where he was serving a 30-year jail term.

Sources said two other Palestinians would be tried as accomplices in the escape.

Molqi, who was jailed for participating in the hijacking and for killing wheelchair-bound passenger Leon Klinghoffer, failed to return to Rome's Rebibbia Prison after a 12-day good conduct leave in February 1996.

He was eventually arrested in Spain and was extradited to Italy last December. □

**Domestic violence campaign launched***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a public awareness campaign against domestic violence this week.

He said the only difference between the battle against family violence and terror is that the former is hidden and fought within the home.

Netanyahu said the only way to fight violence in the family is for the victim to decide to stop being one.

He called on women to take their fate into their own hands and seek help.

Some 200,000 Israeli women, or one out of seven, are physically abused, but only 18,000 complaints are filed with police each year, according to government statistics.

The campaign will include televised public service messages, with a hot line number for women seeking help.

"It is hard to exact figures, because much domestic

violence is hidden," said Ronit Lev Ari, head of the department against family violence in the women's organization Na'amat.

Lev Ari said the first step was to build awareness, and then government ministries, police and the legal system would work together to stop offenders. □

**Extremists fete birthday of Yitzhak Rabin's assassin***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Nine right-wing extremists celebrated the birthday of Yitzhak Rabin's assassin by gathering last week outside his Beersheba jail bearing flowers, champagne and a cake.

One of the activists, Avigdor Eskin, said it was reprehensible that Yigal Amir should be behind bars on his birthday.

"This week we marked the birthday of Ron Arad," he said, referring to the captured Israeli air navigator.

"Unfortunately, here in Israel, one of our own, Yigal Amir, must remain behind bars, alone, on his birthday."

Amir is serving a life sentence for shooting Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November, 1995, as Rabin was leaving a peace rally in Tel Aviv.

A right-wing activist who opposed Rabin's policies of peace-making with the Palestinians, Amir has never expressed regret for his actions.

The nine demonstrators were not allowed to enter the jail. They dispersed when Eskin assaulted a cab driver after he spontaneously denounced the gathering. □

**Palestinian warns against Israeli gum***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Palestinian Authority official has accused Israel of exporting to the autonomous areas chewing gum laced with aphrodisiacs and sterility-inducing drugs.

Saleh Abdul-Aal, director of inspection and monitoring for the Palestinian Authority, said Tuesday that inspectors had found Israeli-made gum with sexual pictures on the wrapping during routine market inspections.

He said the gum was sent for laboratory tests, which indicated that it contained sexually stimulating hormones as well as drugs that may generate sterility in men and women.

The Israeli manufacturer of the gum did this "in order to create internal problems in our community and to kill our Islamic and national values," Abdul-Aal said.

He did not name the brand of the gum, nor the quantity that had been shipped into the Palestinian self-rule areas.

An Israeli official called the accusations "outrageous." □

**Israeli airlines to ban smoking***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Transport Ministry has decided to ban smoking on Israeli airline flights of less than five hours.

The ban will affect most flights from Israel to Europe.

Similar sanctions are already in effect on flights of less than two hours.

The three Israeli airlines — El Al, Arkia and Sun D'Or — have 90 days to respond to the proposal, before it goes into effect for a year-long trial period. □