

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- **Israel issued an arrest warrant for a Palestinian official in connection to the recent murders of three Arab land dealers.** Earlier, Israel lodged a formal complaint with the Palestinian Authority, warning that its responsibility for the murders could imperil the revival of peace negotiations.
- **Israel's Labor Party members elected Knesset member Ehud Barak as the party's new head.** [Page 2]
- **The Clinton administration will continue to provide U.S. aid to the Palestinians despite corruption allegations.** State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns rejected claims that the Palestinian Authority had squandered U.S. money.
- **Arab employees in the eastern Jerusalem branch of the Israeli Interior Ministry returned to work after police reinforcements were stationed in the area to ensure their safety.** The workers had stayed away from the office for several days, saying their lives had been threatened.
- **Vandals desecrated former Prime Minister Menachem Begin's gravestone with a swastika.** The incident was being investigated, but Jerusalem police spokesman Shmuel Ben-Ruby said he did not believe Palestinians were responsible.
- **France's Jewish community applauded the weak showing of Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right National Front in parliamentary elections, but worried that the party would continue to gain influence.** While Le Pen's anti-immigrant party only gained one seat in the National Assembly, it tallied 15 percent in the first round of voting. [Page 3]
- **Allianz AG Holding, a German insurer, agreed to talk with France's Jewish community about possible compensation to descendants of victims deported to death camps during World War II.** The company's decision came on the heels of a U.S. lawsuit alleging that the German insurer had benefited from the Holocaust and a threatened boycott of the firm by an organization of families of French Jews sent to the camps.

Picture of beneficiaries emerges months after Swiss fund created

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Five months after Switzerland agreed to establish a memorial fund to benefit needy Holocaust survivors, a picture has begun to emerge of what the actual payments would look like.

The good news: Holocaust survivors may begin receiving checks as early as September.

The bad news: Payments may fall short of expectations.

Meeting in Jerusalem this week, representatives of the World Jewish Restitution Organization established a committee to report within a month on how to distribute the fund set up by Switzerland's three leading banks in January.

Although the WJRO did not announce any formal decisions about how the fund would be distributed, representatives of the WJRO said privately that eligibility will be determined by objective measures of need, rather than on subjective notions of suffering.

The WJRO is headed by World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman and includes the Jewish Agency for Israel and other international Jewish groups.

Officials stressed that they do not plan to get into the business of quantifying suffering or engaging in a selection process that distinguishes, for example, between survivors of concentration camps, ghettos or those who fled persecution.

One Jewish official close to the decision-making process said the WJRO would likely limit distributions to survivors whose incomes are below the poverty line. Based on that criteria, payments ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 may be disbursed to between 300,000 and 400,000 Holocaust survivors as early as September, the official said.

The top priority, officials decided this week, will be securing aid for survivors in former Communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe — the so-called "double victims" who never received reparations from the German government.

The WJRO also agreed that, at least to begin with, the fund should be distributed to individuals, rather than organizations or special projects that deal with survivors.

During the next month, the WJRO committee will dispatch task forces to gather data on the conditions facing Holocaust survivors in Europe, Israel and the West. These task forces will then make recommendations concerning allocations.

"The recommendations are simply going to flow from the facts on the ground," said the Jewish official, who asked not to be named.

He added: "Essentially we will know about how many survivors there actually are, what their socioeconomic profile is and what would be an appropriate kind of allocation that would make a practical difference in their lives."

Truly difficult task lies ahead

Once recommendations are made, they will be passed on to a seven-member executive board and an 18-member council appointed by the Swiss Federal Council to administer the fund. The process of disbursing the fund to survivors through existing infrastructures in Europe, Israel and the West is then expected to move quickly, the official said.

"Hopefully we're on schedule and we'll begin to make actual allocations by the end of the summer," the official said.

The emerging consensus about the mechanics of distributing the Holocaust fund comes after a series of delays in which both Jewish and Swiss officials accused each other of foot-dragging in appointing members to the Swiss fund council.

With most of the major obstacles standing between the fund and Holocaust survivors now cleared, the truly difficult task ahead has come into focus: deciding how to apportion a relatively small pool of funds in a way that would be meaningful to the largest possible number of recipients.

But some Jewish officials say that the reality is that there simply is not enough money to satisfy the profound need of survivors. With contribu-

With contributions from Swiss banks, industrial companies and insurance firms, the Holocaust Memorial Fund now stands at about \$120 million. An additional \$70 million pledge by the Swiss National Bank is awaiting parliamentary approval later this year.

"People talk about hundreds of millions of dollars and don't stop to think about what that means when you start dividing it between hundreds of thousands of people," said Sidney Clearfield, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith.

"The expectations of the survivors are enormous because there has been so much publicity about the gold," said Benjamin Meed, the president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors.

Both Clearfield and Meed were recently appointed by Switzerland to sit on the fund's 18-member council. Other Jewish members include:

Israel Singer, secretary general, World Jewish Congress; Avraham Burg, chairman, Jewish Agency for Israel; Charles Goodman, chairman, Jewish Agency's Board of Governors; Moshe Sanbar, president, Center of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors in Israel; Israel Miller, president, Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany; Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president, Agudath Israel World Organization; and Michael Schneider, executive vice president, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The council also includes representatives of organizations serving gays, Gypsies and Catholics. These groups, which were also victimized during the Holocaust, are expected to receive a portion of the fund's distributions.

Headlines throughout the past year have brought staggering revelations that up to \$400 million worth of gold — some of it looted by the Nazis from the central banks of countries they overran and some confiscated from Holocaust victims — made its way to Switzerland during World War II. At the same time, Jewish groups have charged that Swiss banks are holding up to \$7 billion in assets Jews deposited during the World War II era.

The issue of individual Jewish claims against Swiss banks, however, is a matter that remains separate from the Holocaust memorial fund.

Those multimillion dollar claims dealing with so-called heirless accounts will continue to be addressed separately, and Jewish officials stress that any payment a survivor receives from the memorial fund will not prejudice a survivor's further claim to money from the banks.

Five Swiss banks to be audited

A commission of international experts, headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, has already begun the work of sorting through individual bank claims.

At a special session of the Knesset Committee for the Restitution of Jewish Property this week in Jerusalem, the Volcker commission announced that five Swiss banks would soon be audited as part of the search for unclaimed bank accounts and other assets of victims of the Holocaust.

During the Knesset session, the Volcker commission also announced plans to establish a claims settlement procedure that would seek to match claims by Holocaust survivors or heirs with assets uncovered during the audits.

Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC, called this procedure "a conceptual breakthrough" that would allow individual claimants to bypass the Swiss bank ombudsman, who had previously charged a hefty fee to investigate a claim.

To facilitate the new process, the names listed on dormant accounts will be made public through the media and via the Internet. □

Labor Party members elect Ehud Barak as new chairman

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Members of the opposition Labor Party have overwhelmingly elected Knesset member Ehud Barak as the new party chairman.

Exit polls gave Barak 57 percent of the vote in Tuesday's primaries, according to Israel Television.

Knesset member Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords was expected to come in a distant second with 28 percent, followed by Knesset members Shlomo Ben-Ami and Ephraim Sneh.

Voter turnout exceeded 70 percent, dispelling initial speculation that few people would cast ballots on the assumption that Barak would win anyway.

Tuesday's voting by Labor's 167,000 registered members marked a milestone for the party, signaling a transfer of power, which was for more than two decades held by former Prime Ministers Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, to a younger generation.

Barak described himself this week as the heir to the warrior-turned-peacemaker Rabin. "I see myself as his follower and the one to continue his legacy," he told a news conference Monday.

Barak, a hawkish former Israel Defense Force chief of staff, is expected to square off in the national elections scheduled for the year 2000 against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Barak said he would soon convene the other three candidates and senior party officials from other camps to head off a "settling of scores" within the party.

During a Labor Party convention last month, Barak initially objected to the adoption of a party plank that would not rule out the creation of an independent Palestinian state with limited sovereignty.

Barak ultimately withdrew his objections, since the plank also stressed that the envisioned Palestinian state could not have an army or forge military pacts with other countries, and that it must keep its air space open to Israel's air force. □

Court in Haifa recognizes lesbian couple as family unit

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For the first time in Israel, a court has recognized a lesbian couple as a family unit.

The recognition came as a magistrates court considered the request of a woman for a restraining order to keep her partner away from the house.

The woman claimed that her partner was alcoholic, and would come home drunk late at night and then verbally abuse and threaten her. The court accepted the appeal and issued the restraining order.

The two women, who signed a nuptial agreement with a lawyer, are concurrently involved in proceedings to dissolve the union and divide their joint property.

The nuptial agreement they signed in November 1995 stated that they had been living together for three years, intended to maintain a permanent relationship and wanted to give formal expression to the love and friendship they shared for each other.

Haifa magistrates court Judge Avidan Glovinsky, who was asked to issue the restraining order as part of the law against domestic violence, said the fundamental question the court must answer is whether a same-sex couple should be considered a couple within the full extent of the law.

The court concluded that the term "couple" does apply to same-sex relationships. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

French elections fail to dispel fears over extreme-right party

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — French Jews are applauding the weak showing of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in this week's parliamentary election runoff, but they worry that the extreme-right party could continue to gain influence.

Sunday's vote gave France its sixth prime minister in as many years, a clear indication of the French people's frustration with the mainstream political parties and their inability to remedy a 12.8 percent unemployment rate.

Although Jean-Marie Le Chevallier, mayor of the southern town of Toulon, was the only National Front candidate who won a seat in the 577-member National Assembly, the party tallied 15 percent of the vote in the first round.

High unemployment has been a major factor contributing to the anti-immigrant party's growing popularity.

"The National Front's 15 percent score is a sign of a social malaise," Meir Waintrater, editor of the Jewish weekly review *l'Arche*, said in an interview.

"The people who vote for the National Front are not necessarily all fascists and anti-Semites, but they are not put off by voting for a party whose leaders are fascists and anti-Semites."

The question is "how can we prevent the current disarray in the political system from becoming a springboard for the extreme right," he said.

As a result of Sunday's poll, conservative President Jacques Chirac will be forced to share power with the Socialist Lionel Jospin as prime minister and a left-wing parliament.

The left won 279 seats to the center-right coalition's 242 seats.

But the Socialists will have to form an alliance with the Communist Party to govern with an absolute majority.

Le Pen seeking worst-case scenario

During the monthlong election campaign, Le Pen had called on his supporters to vote for the opposition Socialists in constituencies where the National Front candidate was eliminated in the first round of voting on May 25.

Le Pen himself did not stand in the election, saying that he was preparing to run in the next presidential contest.

Le Pen has been quoted as saying that he wanted to create gridlock between Chirac and the parliament, hoping that it would force the president to call for new elections within the next two years.

"The National Front's strategy was to go for the worst-case scenario," said Chaim Musikant, director of CRIF, France's umbrella group for secular Jewish organizations.

"Le Pen wanted the Socialists to win because he was sure they would fail," he said. "Then French voters would see that things weren't good" with either mainstream party in power "and they would turn to the National Front."

Le Pen was also betting that the conservatives, fragmented and traumatized by their stinging defeat, would eventually turn to his party for an alliance to ensure their own return to power in the next election.

Some members of the moderate right have already called for such an alliance.

"The fear exists that in this period of division and

settling accounts, part of the right may be tempted by such appeals," said Musikant.

Another concern is that the moderate right, as it reorganizes to recover from its humiliating setback, may move further rightward, which could also push it into the arms of the National Front.

In a misguided gamble, Chirac had called the election 10 months early in the hope of winning a vote of confidence for his next five years in power.

It is the first time a right-wing president will have to rule with a hostile government in what will be the third period of "cohabitation" in 11 years.

In the last two periods of "cohabitation," the late Socialist President Francois Mitterrand shared power with a conservative premier.

The National Front's showing aside, the election results are not likely to herald much change for France's Jews, who vote along the same lines as the rest of the country.

Even Chirac's pro-Arab policy in the Middle East, which had disturbed Jewish leaders in recent years, will not be tempered by a Socialist prime minister because foreign affairs are the prerogative of the president. □

Sharansky is Deep Blue's latest victim

By Faygie Levy

NEW YORK, June 3 (JTA) — In a chess battle between man and machine, the machine won — again.

This time it was Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister of trade and industry, who faced off against Deep Blue Jr., a scaled-down version of the supercomputer that beat world chess champion Gary Kasparov.

The latest match took place Monday at IBM's T.J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

The match, comprised of three games, lasted less than two hours. Deep Blue Jr. analyzed 20 million moves per second and won all three games.

"It was a pleasure to play against the impressive capabilities of the computer," Sharansky said in a statement after the match.

While at IBM, Sharansky got a preview of future technology, including the latest in weather forecasting and imaging and speech recognition.

Sharansky, who says he perfected his chess skills while a prisoner-of-conscience in the Soviet Union, is no stranger to challenging chess matches. Last year he beat Kasparov in a chess match in Israel. Kasparov was playing 25 games simultaneously at the time. □

Bank guard meets Spielberg

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Christoph Meili, the former Swiss bank security guard, visited with Steven Spielberg last week while touring the filmmaker's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, a spokeswoman for Spielberg has confirmed.

Meili has been under fire from many of his countrymen since January, when he found sensitive Holocaust-era documents in the shredding room of the Union Bank of Switzerland and turned them over to the Swiss Jewish community.

Meili has said he felt impelled to act a few months after watching Spielberg's "Schindler's List," so a meeting with the film's creator held special meaning for both men.

Spielberg apparently found Meili's story of great interest, but a spokeswoman for the director said there were no plans or discussions regarding a future film concentrating on Meili's action. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

'Bible code' book creates stir — and elicits fair share of criticism

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Imagine someone says he has empirical proof that a higher power authored the Bible.

He then writes a book, finds a publisher willing to devote big bucks to marketing it as well as a Hollywood studio to buy the movie rights and you have a huge sensation — not to mention a potential bestseller.

That's the way Michael Drosnin likes it.

Drosnin authored "The Bible Code," published last week by Simon & Schuster, which purports to prove that the Torah contains prophecies about contemporary events, including the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and a nuclear holocaust that will occur within the next nine years.

The findings — which have elicited significant criticism from scientists and theologians alike — have been scooped up by the major national media, from The New York Times to Newsweek to NBC's "Today" show.

In a telephone interview from his Manhattan office as he prepared to board a plane for Chicago, where he was slated to appear on Oprah, Drosnin said, "My book is tapping into the great hold that religion still has on the world."

Drosnin, who describes himself as a secular-atheistic Jew, said that he still does not believe in God, but that his application of a technique known as skip sequencing "proves that authorship of the Bible is quite intentional."

Among his many discoveries, Drosnin said he had found the words "Hitler," "Holocaust of Israel" and "world war" intersecting with one another among the 304,805 letters of the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses.

Mathematical analyses were first applied to the Bible by the Jewish mystics known as Kabbalists as early as the sixth and seventh centuries, according to Rabbi Shaul Magid.

He is an assistant professor of Jewish philosophy at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

They became very popular among the Kabbalist Isaac Luria and his followers in the 16th century, as they sought to uncover hidden meanings in the sacred text.

In the 1950s, an Orthodox rabbi living in suburban New York investigated letter sequences in the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses.

But these analyses were done by hand.

'A challenging puzzle'

About a decade ago, three Israeli scientists decided to use a computer to investigate the same thing and found what have come to be known as Torah codes.

The team, led by an internationally known Israeli mathematician, Eliyahu Rips, programmed a computer to read the book of Genesis as if it were one long string of letters, and "decode" words whose letters appear separated by a fixed number of other letters — a process known as equidistant letter sequences.

Their findings were published after peer review in 1994 in the journal *Statistical Science*.

Those findings were accompanied by a note from the editor that he was offering the work to his readers "as a challenging puzzle," and not necessarily as irrefutable fact.

Drosnin, an investigative journalist who has worked for The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, took up the challenge.

The author of "Citizen Hughes," a bestseller on

Howard Hughes, Drosnin had first heard about Rips in 1992 and met with him repeatedly.

The New York author has based his findings on his own application of the work of Rips, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In his book, Drosnin frequently cites and quotes Rips. But Rips is not pleased by how his work has been applied.

On May 28, the day the tome reached the bookstores, Rips issued a public statement distancing himself from Drosnin's work.

"The book gives the impression that I have done joint work with Mr. Drosnin.

"This is not true.

"I do not support Mr. Drosnin's work on the codes, nor the conclusions he derives," Rips said in a handwritten statement.

Rips said that after witnessing Drosnin's prediction of the Rabin assassination — which the author had shared with the prime minister — he had wondered whether "one can, from a scientific view," attempt to use the codes to predict future events.

"After much thought," Rips wrote in his statement, "my categorical answer is no."

'They are not a mere coincidence'

The only conclusion "that can be drawn from the scientific research regarding the Torah codes is that they exist and that they are not a mere coincidence."

Rips and the other chief developer of the Torah codes technique are so disturbed that they scheduled a news conference in Jerusalem on Wednesday to further denounce the book.

For his part, Drosnin said he is "simply the reporter, faithfully carrying out the work" and exploring the methodology of Rips.

Drosnin's critics focus not only on his methodology, but also on the predictive use of his findings.

Methodologically, he is faulted for allowing too many intervals between letters, as well as for zeroing in on related words that had different intervals between key letters.

Several critics said that by allowing an unlimited number of intervals between letters, the technique could be used to locate specific words in anything from the Bible to the daily newspaper to the telephone directory.

"By looking for random words I could prove to you that Mickey Mouse is the messiah," said Rabbi Daniel Mechanic, a Brooklyn-based teacher of Torah codes.

Mechanic is involved with the popular Discovery seminars run throughout North America by Aish HaTorah, a Jerusalem-based yeshiva and outreach organization.

Aish HaTorah uses Torah codes not as prophecy, but as a way to explain what has happened, and to provide "proof" of God's existence and the Torah's divine authorship.

When asked if he looked for other words in the text, like potato chip, as a control, Drosnin became angry, saying it was "an unintelligent question."

"If you're looking for nonsense in the Bible code you may find it, but why would anyone look for nonsense in the Bible?" he said.

Others decried this whole approach to the analysis of biblical texts.

"It's insulting to faith because belief in God is not predicated on empirical evidence, but on the inner eye, the disposition of heart and mind," said Rabbi David Wolpe, who teaches modern Jewish thought at JTS.

"To pretend that God gave this evidence of faith, but was waiting until we had Pentium chips to uncover it seems to me to be both simple-minded and wrong." □