



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu survived a no-confidence motion in the Knesset despite the walkout of key members of his governing coalition. [Page 3]

■ Reform rabbis meeting in Miami were expected to adopt an unprecedented platform dedicated solely to the link between Reform Judaism and Israel. The platform, marking the centennial of the first World Zionist Congress, encourages aliyah and closer links to the Jewish state.

■ The U.S. Department of Education said it would prepare guidelines for school districts to ensure that remedial instruction programs in parochial schools remain wholly secular. The announcement followed Monday's Supreme Court ruling allowing public school teachers to offer special needs instruction at religious schools. It served to reassure the American Jewish Congress, which earlier had requested such guidelines.

■ Lithuanian prosecutors said they intend to try a man alleged to have handed over Jews to death squads during World War II. But the prosecutor's office said the poor health of the 90-year-old Aleksandras Lileikis would delay any further action for three months.

■ Texas officials rejected an offer from the Ku Klux Klan to participate in the state's "adopt-a-highway" anti-litter program. A spokesman for the state's attorney general said putting the group's name on the adopt-a-highway sign might give it "some semblance of respectability that it does not deserve."

■ Russia's lower house of parliament approved a bill on religious association that critics say is discriminatory. The bill imposes new curbs on religious activity by foreign groups. Judaism is excluded.

■ Delegates to the Jewish Agency Assembly are traveling to seven destinations in the former Soviet Union en route to their annual meeting in Jerusalem. They are inspecting the agency's work in support of Jewish communities in the region.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Solution to conversion crisis still faces significant hurdles

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Now that the Israeli government has reached agreement with the Conservative and Reform movements on a process to resolve the conversion controversy, is a solution really attainable?

Reform and Conservative leaders appear confident that last week's widely touted accord establishing an interdenominational committee will lead to a compromise in the stalemate over the recognition of conversions in Israel.

But if comments by Orthodox Knesset members are any indication, the prospects of achieving a mutually satisfactory understanding may be dim.

If Reform and Conservative "converts say they want to be equal with Orthodox converts, the answer is 'no,'" said Knesset member Avraham Ravitz of United Torah Judaism, one of the religious parties in Israel's governing coalition that would have to sign off on any deal.

Said Knesset member Shaul Yahalom of the National Religious Party: "We accept the formation of a committee because it is not a compromise.

"The committee buys us time, and its conclusions will come to everyone and we'll see if we're satisfied," he said. "We are not opposed to the process."

To pave the way for the agreement, Reform and Conservative leaders last week agreed to freeze their court petitions on behalf of non-Orthodox Israeli converts.

In exchange, the coalition agreed to freeze a pending bill, which would codify the Orthodox Rabbinate's monopoly on conversions performed in the Jewish state.

The lingering question is whether this interim agreement has done more than just buy time.

Recognition of non-Orthodox movements

For the non-Orthodox movements, the establishment of the seven-member committee, which will include representatives of the three main religious streams, is a significant breakthrough.

"Probably for the first time in Israel's history, the government has recognized the Conservative and Reform movements by putting their representatives on the committee," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

"We have a commitment by the prime minister there will be no plan that is not acceptable to the Reform and Conservative movements," Epstein said upon his return to New York.

Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, said he expects that a solution worked out by the committee that meets "our satisfaction will either be 'sold' to the religious parties or else the prime minister will carry it out in spite of their reluctance."

The conversion crisis erupted a year ago after religious parties secured a commitment from newly elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to seek conversion legislation.

The Knesset passed the first reading of the bill in April, and final action on the measure was expected by the end of this month.

But Reform and Conservative Jews, both in Israel and the United States, went to work vigorously opposing the measure, saying that it would delegitimize the non-Orthodox movements.

Last week's agreement came after more than two months of talks between coalition representatives and Reform and Conservative leaders, including last-minute marathon talks here that involved the prime minister himself.

Under the agreement worked out last week, the committee will present its recommendations to the coalition by Aug. 15.

If the coalition, which includes the 23 Knesset members from the religious parties, adopts the recommendations, the Knesset would likely pass legislation in September.

But interviews with members of the religious parties, whose support for any compromise will be critical, suggest that such support remains

doubtful. The NRP is opposed to any solution "that would put non-Orthodox converts on the same legal level as Orthodox converts," said Yahalom, who chairs the Knesset Law Committee.

One compromise proposal on the committee's agenda would list the first letter of a person's religion, such as the letter "J," instead of the word "Jewish" on Israeli identity cards.

For converts, the Interior Ministry would record in its population registry the type of conversion.

Yahalom appeared to reject this proposal, maintaining that by identifying all converts, regardless of how they were converted, by the letter "J," the government would be giving equal status to Israelis converted by Reform and Conservative rabbis.

"For nearly 50 years, the laws of marriage and divorce and conversion, and the religious councils, have fallen under the purview of the Rabbinate, and that must continue," he said.

Although he rejects any proposal that would "equalize" Orthodox and non-Orthodox converts on identity cards or other public documents, Yahalom said he is willing to work with non-Orthodox Jews on educating prospective converts.

Yahalom said he might consider a proposal based on what he called the "Denver Model."

Although the arrangement is no longer in effect, several years ago, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis in Denver formulated a set of mutually acceptable conversion criteria.

Prospective converts from all streams of Judaism went before a joint committee, which in turn referred appropriate candidates to the Orthodox religious court.

"The idea is that all streams will agree on two institutions, the *beit din* [rabbinical court] and an educational body," Yahalom said.

"In addition to accepting the authority of the Orthodox *beit din*, the streams will establish an institution that will deal with all conversion candidates and teach them about Judaism."

One non-Orthodox insider said this week that the Denver model was too politically volatile to be considered a credible solution in the short term.

Ravitz of United Torah Judaism said he would also consider an educational role for the non-Orthodox movements within a strictly Orthodox conversion process.

Ravitz added, however, that he would never sanction a conversion process that does not require complete adherence to the commandments.

"The first thing a convert must say is, 'I want to accept the Torah, I want to be a part of you, the Jewish people.'"

"True, a lot of Jews don't keep the *mitzvot*, but converts must be held to a higher standard," he said.

Orthodox parties reject pluralism

Like Yahalom, Ravitz flatly rejected any compromise based on the concept of religious pluralism.

"The Jewish religion is a religion of absolute truths. Everyone can provide their interpretation of the Jewish religion, but if we accept pluralism they will say, 'Accept us as one color or one part of pluralistic Jewishness.'"

By agreeing to a multihued Judaism, Ravitz said, "we are agreeing that Israel will be open to different expressions of Judaism.

"How can this be, when we view the Reform movement not as a religious movement at all?"

In contrast to the Orthodox parties, Reform and Conservative leaders say their committee representatives will push for full equality under the law.

"Under the ideal solution, the government will treat all streams of Judaism equally," said Philip Meltzer, president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

"Conversions will be recognized regardless of whether they're performed by a Reform, Conservative or Orthodox rabbi."

Despite the wide gaps between the Orthodox and liberal movements, the Reform and Conservative leaders are looking forward to the upcoming dialogue.

The members of the committee were expected to be appointed by the end of this week, and the group is slated to begin its work next week.

"We don't have a specific preference as to a specific compromise, but we'd like to sit down and dialogue with our Orthodox colleagues," Meltzer said.

The fact that an Orthodox representative will sit on the seven-person committee is already a step in the right direction, according to those close to the conversion issue.

The formation of the committee "was not done without consultations with the Orthodox leadership," said Bobby Brown, the prime minister's adviser on Diaspora affairs.

"We delayed an explosion and hopefully created a possible framework with which to sort problems out now, and possibly in the future," said Brown, who was a key participant in the negotiations with the non-Orthodox movements.

While he was unwilling to predict whether a mutually acceptable solution could be found, Brown said he believes that the spirit of cooperation that occurred after the crisis bodes well for the future.

"We've hopefully begun a period during which Jews will be speaking to Jews," Brown said.

"That has been one of the greatest victories," he said.

"People will be talking to each other." □

Cable on meeting with Albright prompts flap for Israeli diplomat

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A leaked Israeli diplomatic cable has opened a row between Israel's ambassador to the United States and the State Department.

Yediot Achronot, Israel's largest-circulation daily newspaper, published a top-secret cable from Eliahu Ben-Elissar to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister David Levy detailing a June 10 meeting with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

"I'm the last person who will defend Arafat," Albright said according to the cable. "He's done a few things lately that are really unforgivable. But what's the alternative?"

In the cable, Ben-Elissar wrote: "And in the end I told the secretary, 'Both Arafat and you know the truth that we're not erecting settlements at all and aren't even expanding them.'"

"Here Albright gave me a sideways look with a smile as if to say, 'Come on, really;' I withdrew a little from that formulation and said, 'Almost not.' In fact I don't know how much we're really building and expanding," Yediot reported.

State Department officials were furious that the cable was leaked and at the tone of the report.

This flap comes only two months after Ben-Elissar drew the wrath of U.S. Special Middle East Envoy Dennis Ross for telling Israeli reporters about the details of one of their conversations. Yediot quoted a U.S. official saying that Albright would think twice before meeting again with Ben-Elissar. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Israel's prime minister fights erosion of coalition support***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is battling a crisis of confidence, and his main opponents are sitting around his Cabinet table.

The failure of Netanyahu and his longtime friend Natan Sharansky to meet this week to sign an agreement resolving their political differences spoke volumes about the crisis.

They left it to their lieutenants: Likud Knesset member Michael Eitan, the coalition chairman, and Knesset member Roman Bronfman, the faction chairman of Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party.

Netanyahu and Sharansky's failure confirmed that their friendship has evaporated, perhaps permanently, and all that is left are political interests.

As a result, the prime minister was left more isolated than ever at the head of his discordant Cabinet. That isolation was evident this week when Foreign Minister David Levy and eight other coalition members demonstratively walked out of the Knesset before a critical no-confidence vote.

While Netanyahu survived Tuesday's vote, such high-profile defections from the coalition ranks are a serious blow to the government's prestige, and, ultimately, to its staying power.

Netanyahu's image, beyond any specific issue, has now become the focus of Israeli political debate.

"It is a crisis of confidence," Sharansky, the minister of trade and industry, declared earlier this week. "Confidence in the prime minister."

The two men's personal relationship goes back to the dark days of Sharansky's incarceration in the Soviet gulag, and his wife Avital's dogged efforts to secure his release. Netanyahu, a young Israeli diplomat in the United States, was one of her staunchest allies.

Trust in Netanyahu not restored

Now, as the two parties quarreled over budgets for immigrant absorption and diplomatic appointments in the former Soviet Union, Sharansky repeatedly made it clear that the real issue for him was Netanyahu's personality.

While Yisrael Ba'Aliyah's immediate grievances were assuaged in the agreement signed Monday, the party's trust in the prime minister, and especially Sharansky's own faith in him, has not been restored.

The premier's successful engineering last week of Finance Minister Dan Meridor's resignation exacerbated the crisis surrounding his leadership and led the opposition to introduce the no-confidence motion.

Joining Meridor in proclaiming that they no longer had confidence in Netanyahu were former Likud premier Yitzhak Shamir, Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who resigned from the Cabinet in January, Uzi Landau, the Likud chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and David Magen, the recently resigned deputy finance minister.

Shamir told television viewers Monday night that he was actively seeking an alternative candidate for Likud leader who could run for the premiership in the next elections.

Netanyahu's close aides appeared to have gotten the message.

Responding to the opposition's no-confidence motions Tuesday, Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi dwelt on the image of Labor leader Ehud Barak.

Despite vociferous jeers from the opposition, and evident discomfort within his own Likud ranks, Hanegbi

read sections of an Israeli newspaper account of Barak's alleged hasty withdrawal from the scene of a military training accident in 1990, when, as chief of staff, he witnessed the deaths of five members of a crack army unit.

As a parliamentary gimmick, Hanegbi's speech succeeded in shifting the immediate spotlight from the coalition's crumbling confidence in the premier.

While Netanyahu survived the no-confidence vote because the opposition could not muster the 61 votes needed — a 55-50 vote defeated the motion — nine coalition members displayed their displeasure with the prime minister's governance by not voting.

Levy was joined by the other four members of his Geshet faction, and Likud Knesset members Meridor, Begin, Landau and David Re'em in not voting.

Other parties check public opinion

A campaign by Begin and Meridor could erode Netanyahu's popularity with the Likud rank-and-file.

Both Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the Orthodox Shas Party were carefully surveying public opinion within their own clearly defined constituencies to determine whether they might benefit from early elections.

Potentially more ominous for Netanyahu, two of his three most senior ministers were reported to be deeply concerned over the premier's handling of affairs of state.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and David Levy both declined to comment on a Ma'ariv report that they met alone Saturday night to review the peace process and security issues.

"Catastrophe ahead" was one of the phrases reportedly employed by these two senior ministers. Presumably they were referring to a series of recent intelligence assessments predicting massive Palestinian violence in the territories if the peace process remains deadlocked.

Some of these assessments forecast the downfall of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat as a result of violence and extremism among the Palestinians.

Levy and Mordechai, considered moderate in Washington and in European capitals, are said to be disturbed by Ariel Sharon's imminent advent to the ranks of senior ministers.

Sharon, who was due to assume the finance portfolio, still speaks of Arafat as a "war criminal" who should be arrested and tried, not a negotiating partner.

As finance minister, Sharon says he would insist on a role in defense and foreign policy decision-making.

Levy and Mordechai are said to feel that any efforts to resume the stalled peace process would become harder with Sharon's influence elevated.

Ironically, Netanyahu did all he could to keep Sharon out of his coalition, and it was Levy who eventually forced him to bring the Likud hard-liner in as minister for national infrastructure, a post created for Sharon.

But after a year of presiding over Israel's waning position on the international stage, Levy is now anxious that the government be seen as moving forward in the peace process.

Meanwhile, Mordechai, whose growing popularity, confirmed in public opinion polls, is said to rankle the beleaguered prime minister, could be the next target of Netanyahu's axe.

Other coalition members, however, may welcome Sharon's elevated status.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah ministers Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein are regarded as hard-liners on the Palestinian issue and, therefore, would not balk at Sharon's push for a tougher approach on peace process issues.

But as recent actions by Shamir and Begin show, when confidence in the leader breaks down, even ideological affinity is no guarantee of long-term support. □

New radio show in Italy plays international Jewish melodies

By Ruth E. Gruber

MILAN, Italy (JTA) — Francesco Spagnolo was selecting music for his prime-time program on Radio Popolare, one of Italy's foremost independent radio stations.

"I want the show this week to be about ghettos," the bearded 28-year-old said.

He considered the possibilities:

Classical music that was composed in the World War II ghetto of Theresienstadt. Baroque music by the 17th-century Italian Jewish composer Salamone Rossi, who lived and worked in Mantua at a time when Jews there were confined to a ghetto.

A track by the Jewish rappers The Beastie Boys. A song about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by the South African rock group Johnny Clegg and Savuka.

Maybe a piece by the Yiddish bard Mordechai Gebirtig, who was killed by the Nazis in Poland.

Spagnolo's weekly, hourlong show, "Yuval: Jewish Music and Cultures," which was launched in March, is the only regular Jewish music program on Italian radio.

Broadcast Sunday evenings on a station that reaches most of northern Italy as well as other parts of the country, the program showcases a wide variety of Jewish music, from classical to klezmer, and includes interviews with Jewish cultural figures and discussions of Jewish traditions.

Jews have lived in Italy for more than 2,000 years, making the community one of the oldest in the Diaspora. Only 30,000 to 35,000 Jews in Italy today.

Spagnolo sees his radio show as a unique way of teaching about Jews and Judaism to listeners who know little about Jewish traditions.

A song about potatoes

One week, for example, he played songs about food. These included a Sephardi song whose lyrics described ways to cook eggplant with a variety of exotic spices and a Yiddish song about a monotonous diet of potatoes.

The songs led to a discussion of Jewish dietary laws and culinary traditions, as well as the contrasts between Sephardi and Ashkenazi traditions and experiences.

"I think we should add a new mitzvah here in Europe," he said. "We should tell about ourselves to others so that they know that we don't have tails, but are a people with our own culture, food, songs."

Helping the show's success is a wave of interest in Jewish culture among many Italians.

"Part of it has to do with a general search for identity," said Marcello Lorrain, the musical director of Radio Popolare, who commissioned Spagnolo to do the radio show.

"People are trying to find their identities, and they see Jews as a model of how you can retain an identity and remain yourself throughout different circumstances."

The radio program, in fact, is an outgrowth of a new center Spagnolo set up earlier this year devoted to the study of Jewish music in Italy.

Spagnolo hopes Yuval Italia will become an international center for research and information on Jewish music in Italy. He hopes it will help broaden knowledge about Italian Jewish culture and traditions, which remain largely unknown.

"It's very important to let people know how rich Italian Jewish culture is," he said.

"Music is a good channel for this," he said. "I'm trying to create a center that is the main place for Jewish music in Italy."

Spagnolo, who studied with the Jewish ethnomusicologist Israel Adler, established Yuval in February in the building housing Milan's main synagogue complex.

The first facility of its kind in Italy, the center operates in collaboration with the Jewish Music Research Center of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which Adler founded and currently directs.

Spagnolo is assembling an archive of Jewish music. He set up a Yuval Web site and has been corresponding with musicians and others interested in Jewish culture around the world.

"We're already exchanging Internet links with various other sites," he said. "Groups from all over the world have been sending me their CDs."

He is also drawing up plans for specific projects.

These include activities aimed specifically at recording and documenting both religious and secular music that is particular to a Jewish community in just one Italian city, or to communities of different origins.

One project, for example, will record Jewish melodies from the Tuscan town of Pitigliano — once an important Jewish center — sung by a 93-year-old man who is one of the few Jews who knows the tunes.

Another venture, to be carried out in cooperation with the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, will collect and catalog the extensive field recordings of Italian Jewish music made by Leo Levi in the 1950s and 1960s.

Three main Jewish rites coexist in the country — Ashkenazi, Sephardi and the local Italian rite, whose origins date back 2,000 years.

In addition, some individual Italian Jewish communities were influenced centuries ago by Jewish settlers who came from France, and these communities developed their own prayer melodies.

"Italy has been a cultural crossroads," Spagnolo said. "To this spectrum we must add the influence of the waves of Jewish immigration to Italy in the past 50 years."

This, he noted, was particularly visible in Milan, where, in a community of about 10,000 Jews, a score of synagogues and prayer rooms serve congregations of Jews from more than two dozen geographic origins, including Lebanon, Syria, Iran, the Balkans, Turkey and Eastern Europe.

"Some people who listen to the radio show just want to hear klezmer music," he said. "But I won't do that. I make sure to play the wide variety of Jewish music, to give the full scope." □

Australia cancels Arafat invitation

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY (JTA) — Australia is withdrawing an invitation to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer, who invited Arafat during their meeting in March in Bethlehem, said that he had withdrawn the invitation after the prime minister decided a visit to Australia was "inappropriate."

Fischer did not say whether he had obtained the prime minister's agreement prior to issuing Arafat the invitation.

Ali Kazak, the Palestinian representative in Australia, said the government's action was "undignified, contradictory, unprofessional and unfriendly."

He charged that the government had succumbed to pressure from Australian Jews.

Jewish community officials said no pressure had been placed on the government to cancel the invitation. □