



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Despite efforts to reach a compromise on conversions performed in Israel, the Orthodox parties said they intend to push ahead with legislation on conversion performed in Israel as well as a law barring non-Orthodox representation on religious councils. [Page 1]

■ The chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives committee responsible for foreign aid placed an informal hold on \$75.6 million in economic aid to Israel that was due to be sent next week. Washington insiders said the hold is related to the case of the Maryland teenager who fled to Israel after allegedly committing a murder. [Page 4]

■ President Clinton is expected to invite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington in November. There is speculation that he will invite Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat as well.

■ Israel's Supreme Court overturned the conviction of Simcha Dinitz, the former chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Dinitz, who was Israel's ambassador to the United States from 1973 to 1978, was suspended from his job in 1994 amid charges that he used the agency's credit card for personal purposes. [Page 3]

■ California has halted its dealings with Swiss banks as it awaits full disclosure of dormant accounts from the Holocaust era. The move comes a week after New York City refused to let the Union Bank of Switzerland take part in a billion-dollar bond offering.

■ The Swiss Bankers Association placed an advertisement in newspapers around the world detailing its commitment to resolve the issue of dormant World War II-era accounts. Swiss banks will publish a list of accounts held by Swiss citizens later this month, along with 4,000 accounts held by non-Swiss citizens, the ad said.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Friday, Oct. 17.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Effort to solve conversion crisis near collapse after new threats

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Efforts in Israel to reconcile the three major streams of Judaism appear to have collapsed.

With the Knesset due to reconvene Oct. 27, the Orthodox parties threw down the gauntlet this week, saying they intend to push ahead with legislation on two issues — conversions and religious councils — that would codify Orthodox control over religious life in Israel.

If the bills are not passed, the parties threatened to bolt the governing coalition and bring down the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Reform and Conservative movements, responding to the Orthodox rejection of proposed solutions to the conversion crisis, vowed to return to the courts to seek recognition for non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel.

The issues of conversion and religious councils have come to the fore during the past year in the battle over religious pluralism in the Jewish state, a conflict that has created a deep schism between Israel and the predominantly non-Orthodox Jewish community in the United States.

The latest developments in the crisis come just weeks before the annual meeting of the Council of Jewish Federations as well as national conventions of the Reform and Conservative movements.

Netanyahu is scheduled to address the CJF General Assembly in Indianapolis next month, and he could come under sharp criticism for not blocking the conversion bill and for giving a green light to religious councils legislation.

The Orthodox threat, conveyed Tuesday in a hastily arranged meeting with the premier, came after Israel's Chief Rabbinate rejected a possible solution to the conversion crisis proposed by a committee headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman.

While the Ne'eman Committee is not formally dead, it appeared that this week's events seriously imperiled its ability to function.

The Reform and Conservative movements, in a joint statement Tuesday, made it clear that in their view the Orthodox stance had relieved them of an earlier pledge to desist from pursuing legal action to gain recognition for non-Orthodox conversions.

"The Chief Rabbinate's position leaves us no alternative but to pursue the legal recourse which we have delayed for five months," said the statement, referring to a compromise reached earlier this year that was the basis for the Ne'eman Committee's creation.

That compromise called for a suspension by the Orthodox parties of their campaign to pass conversion legislation and a suspension of conversion litigation by the non-Orthodox movements.

Prime Minister's Office holds out hope

After these steps were taken, the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform members of the Ne'eman Committee began seeking a solution acceptable to the three major streams.

Netanyahu created the committee after the Knesset took a first step in April toward passing legislation that would codify Orthodox control over conversions performed in Israel.

It has been clear for months that if the committee was unable to find a solution, the non-Orthodox movements would pursue their conversion-related court cases — and the Orthodox parties would pursue the conversion bill, which requires two more Knesset votes before it can become law.

But this week's actions by the Orthodox, and the response by the Reform and Conservative movements, seemed to preclude any definitive conclusion to the work of the committee, which had been expected to make its recommendations to the coalition before the Knesset recess ends.

The Prime Minister's Office, meanwhile, continued to hold out hope for a compromise from the Ne'eman Committee.

"We still believe there is a way to solve problems by Jews talking to Jews," said Bobby Brown, the premier's adviser on Diaspora affairs. "I

believe that no political or religious faction wants to create a major rift with the Jewish people."

After Netanyahu met with the Orthodox Knesset members, the Prime Minister's Office announced that the Ne'eman Committee would continue its work.

"We are extremely close to coming up with recommendations which we believe would preserve halachah and create a situation in which no stream of Judaism would find itself disenfranchised," said Brown.

In their statement, the Reform and Conservative movements praised Ne'eman for his efforts and said they would continue to work with the committee.

On the religious councils issue, which has not yet come before the Knesset, the prime minister appeared Tuesday to give the go-ahead to his Orthodox coalition partners to pursue the legislative track. At their meeting, Netanyahu and the Orthodox Knesset members agreed that during the Sukkot holiday a government committee would convene to draft legislation on religious councils.

The Orthodox parties want the Knesset to pass a law that would bar non-Orthodox representatives from local religious councils, an action that would supersede a series of High Court of Justice rulings upholding the right of Reform and Conservative Jews to serve on the councils.

The court is expected to rule later this month on the right of Reform and Conservative Jews to sit on religious councils in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Kiryat Tivon.

The councils, supervised by the Religious Affairs Ministry, have exclusive jurisdiction over marriage, kashrut, burial and other religious matters for all Jews living in Israel.

The breakdown in efforts to resolve the conversion crisis came after Ne'eman presented his committee's preliminary recommendations to the two chief rabbis in a closed meeting.

Under the terms of the proposal, a joint body of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis would select and prepare candidates for conversions, but only Orthodox rabbis would actually perform them. The joint body would be under the auspices of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

'Such converts would not be real converts'

In addition, the committee was recommending that Reform and Conservative rabbis would be permitted to perform weddings in Israel, provided that two Orthodox rabbis served as witnesses.

A source close to the Ne'eman Committee said the finance minister was testing the waters to see whether the chief rabbis would endorse a solution that included roles for Reform and Conservative rabbis.

But the two chief rabbis balked.

"Under no circumstance is this an acceptable situation," Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron said of the conversion proposal. "Such converts would not be real converts."

The chief rabbis, who had already scheduled an emergency meeting Monday with the Orthodox legislators to discuss ways to circumvent the pending High Court ruling on non-Orthodox representation on religious councils, reportedly presented the Ne'eman Committee recommendations to the Knesset members.

If the prime minister does not support the Orthodox parties on both pieces of legislation, and they carry out their threat to leave the coalition, they could then attempt to bring down the government in a Knesset no-confidence vote.

But the Orthodox parties' 23 Knesset members would need the backing of the opposition in such a vote.

Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg urged Labor Party leader Ehud Barak and other opposition

Knesset members to provide a "parliamentary safety net" for the Netanyahu government "that would foil the attempts of the Orthodox parties to bring down the government" over religious pluralism issues.

Burg appealed to Barak to refrain from supporting a vote of no confidence over religious issues. □

Swiss bankers discover more dormant Holocaust-era accounts

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — Swiss banks have found as many as 4,000 more dormant accounts opened by non-Swiss citizens during the Holocaust era, according to the Swiss Bankers Association.

Those accounts, worth a total of \$4.1 million, are more than twice the number of accounts published by the association in July. But the majority of these newly found accounts are likely quite small.

By comparison, the July list of some 1,800 dormant accounts, published in major newspapers around the world and on the Internet, involved accounts that were estimated at the time to have a total value of some \$42 million.

In addition to the just-disclosed 4,000 accounts opened by non-Swiss citizens, the Swiss banks' ongoing search of their records has turned up an additional 10,000 accounts opened by Swiss citizens, according to association spokeswoman Silvia Matile. Those accounts, valued at between \$6.9 million to \$8.3 million, were possibly opened on behalf of non-Swiss citizens, and may have included Holocaust victims seeking a safe haven for their funds.

The Swiss Bankers Association plans to publish a new list on Oct. 29 of some 14,000 Holocaust-era dormant accounts. The list will combine the 4,000 accounts opened by non-Swiss citizens and another 10,000 accounts opened by people with Swiss citizenship.

But as many as 70,000 accounts containing less than 100 Swiss francs — about \$70 — will not be published, Matile said.

In an advertisement published Tuesday in newspapers around the world, the Bankers Association provides contact addresses and telephone numbers for those seeking additional information. The ad, which details the commitment of the Swiss banks to resolve the issue of dormant World War II accounts, comes as part of ongoing Swiss attempts to demonstrate that the country is confronting its wartime past.

The Swiss banks last year began their investigation of dormant accounts from World War II after being criticized by Jewish leaders for serving as the Nazis' bankers and for refusing to turn over accounts opened by Jews fleeing the Holocaust.

The more their investigation proceeds, the more accounts are turned up by the Swiss banks, as their own recent disclosures have shown.

In testimony last fall before a U.S. congressional panel, Swiss Bankers Association representatives said they could only locate 775 accounts worth about \$32 million.

Jewish groups have charged that Swiss banks are holding up to \$7 billion in assets deposited by Jews during the World War II era.

Anyone seeking information about dormant accounts needs to request an information kit, which includes a claim form to be filed to the accounting firm of Ernst & Young. The firm has set up offices in New York, Tel Aviv, Basel, Budapest and Sydney to handle requests.

The list of accounts and the information kit are available via the Internet at www.dormantaccounts.ch

Anyone who has questions about an account can call (800) 662-7708. □

Rabbis and intermarriage: Survey finds a 'greater accommodation'

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Leaders of two of Judaism's religious streams are questioning some of the results of a just-published study that tracked rabbis' attitudes toward interfaith marriages.

The survey, sponsored by the Jewish Outreach Institute under the direction of Jewish sociologist Egon Mayer, asked rabbis from the four streams of Judaism questions about their attitudes.

Of 650 rabbis sent the questionnaire, 325 returned the survey, which is believed to be the first interdenominational study of how rabbis feel about intermarriage.

"The major significance of the survey is that we did get a sense of change toward greater accommodation to interfaith families," said Mayer.

Among the survey's findings:

- More than half of Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis believe their synagogues have more to gain than lose by accommodating the needs of interfaith couples;

- Nearly half of the respondents said their attitudes had changed since the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which reported that half of all Jews marrying since 1985 had intermarried, with 43 percent of the respondents saying they have become more accepting of interfaith couples;

- A majority of rabbis polled — 76 percent — offer outreach to couples in their congregation or community;

- Thirty-six percent of Reform rabbis said they would officiate at interfaith weddings, and 62 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis said they would officiate at such marriages;

- While none of the Conservative or Orthodox rabbis who responded to the survey said they would officiate at interfaith ceremonies, 32 percent of Conservative rabbis and 11 percent of Orthodox rabbis said they would refer interfaith couples to other rabbis who do.

It is these latter two results that are creating the most controversy.

'We were as careful as we could be'

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, the executive director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, took issue with the survey's finding that 62 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis said they would officiate at an intermarriage.

Liebling said many Reconstructionist rabbis answered affirmatively to the question, "Would you in any circumstances perform at an interfaith marriage," because Reconstructionist rabbis treat each couple individually and would not want to rule out any possibility.

Mayer stood by his findings.

"I think our findings are solid and our methods are solid. We were as careful as we could be," he said of the survey, which was conducted by the Center for Jewish Studies of the City University of New York.

The center used two focus groups of interdenominational rabbis and sample selected from a recent directory of each movement's association. Mayer did say the relatively small numbers of Reconstructionist — 23 — and Orthodox — 31 — rabbis who were represented in the survey could lead to large margins of error.

Liebling also worried that the results exaggerated the differences between the various streams of Judaism.

"I don't want the Orthodox to think they don't live in the same world we do," he said.

Steven Dworken, the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, which represents

centrist Orthodox rabbis, said he was mystified by the finding that 11 percent of Orthodox rabbis who said that while they would not officiate at interfaith marriages, they would refer an interfaith couple to a rabbi who did.

"It's an aberration. I don't understand it," said Dworken. "Having a so-called rabbi officiate at such a ceremony is much worse than having a civil ceremony," said Dworken.

Mayer had a different explanation. "What this survey tells us is that their congregations have a much more diverse set of needs than what is covered by the official ideology of each movement," he said. "Given the demographic pressure and the desire to keep the Jewish community intact, rabbis are trying to make what is in their judgment a reasonable accommodation."

"Rabbis who are referring people [to other rabbis] aren't approving of intermarriage, but at the same time they're dealing with specific human beings who have specific human needs. Their practice is a pluralistic practice."

People interested in the full report can access the institute's Web site at: www.joi.org □

High court overturns conviction of former Jewish Agency leader

JERUSALEM(JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court has overturned the 1996 conviction of a former chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

The court ruled 2-1 in favor of an appeal brought by Simcha Dinitz, saying the charges against him had not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Dinitz, 68, expressed relief Monday at the court's verdict, telling Army Radio that it has not been easy "being cut off from public work over something that I knew I did not do."

He was convicted in April 1996 of committing fraud and abusing the public trust for purchasing personal items at the agency's expense.

Dinitz, who called those purchases an oversight, always maintained that he was framed for political reasons.

In a somber tone, Dinitz told reporters Tuesday evening that he had received more phone calls from ostensible friends during the four hours since the verdict was reached than he had received in the years since charges were first brought against him.

"There have been disappointments," he said, "though there were also many friends who carried on believing in me."

Sources in the prosecutors office criticized the verdict, which they described as the latest in a string of acquittals of public figures prosecuted in recent years for white-collar crimes.

The Jerusalem District Court found Dinitz guilty last year of charging \$6,700 worth of personal merchandise on his own charge card at Syms, a clothing store, and then allowing the agency to pay for it. The court fined him some \$11,000, but spared him a jail term on the grounds that he had already suffered enough.

A Tel Aviv native, Dinitz was director-general of Prime Minister Golda Meir's office from 1969 to 1973.

A former Israeli ambassador to the United States from 1973 to 1978, Dinitz assumed his agency post in December 1987. He was forced to take a leave of absence from the agency in February 1994 when the allegations against him surfaced. He resigned the chairmanship in January 1995.

At the time of Dinitz's conviction, Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg vowed that the agency would impose a strict monitoring system for travel and expenditures by employees and emissaries. □

Congress steps up pressure on Israel to extradite suspect

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congressional Republicans are tightening the financial screws on Israel in an effort to win the extradition of a suburban Washington teen-ager accused of murder.

Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-Ala.), the chairman of the House committee responsible for foreign aid, this week placed a hold on \$75.6 million in U.S. economic aid to Israel.

Callahan said through a spokesman that the hold was "not necessarily related" to the case of Samuel Sheinbein, the 17-year-old who fled the United States to Israel last month after police named him the chief suspect in the dismemberment and burning of his 19-year-old friend.

Rather, Callahan's spokesman said, the hold was connected to the larger question of how funding to Middle East nations is divided.

However, Republican congressional sources and a State Department official said the hold was aimed at sending a message to the Israelis as they complete their investigation into Sheinbein's claim of Israeli citizenship.

Sheinbein has claimed dual U.S.-Israeli citizenship in an effort to avoid the American justice system.

If Sheinbein's Israeli citizenship claim is upheld, he cannot be extradited under Israeli law. His father was born in British-mandate Palestine and received Israeli citizenship — which, under Israeli law, extends to his children.

Since Congress has not yet passed the foreign aid bill, Israel, which usually receives its full \$3 billion in aid in October, was instead scheduled to receive a partial payment of \$75.6 million next week under a temporary spending measure.

U.S. and Israeli officials are examining the application for citizenship from Sheinbein's relatives when they first came to the United States in the late 1940s to determine if they renounced their Israeli citizenship.

In a letter to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would not extradite Sheinbein if his citizenship claim is valid.

The Israeli law barring extradition of an Israeli citizen has infuriated U.S. lawmakers and prosecutors. They have accused Sheinbein, who has never lived in Israel, of fleeing to escape justice.

A former classmate of Sheinbein's at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, Aaron Benjamin Needle, surrendered to police days after the Sept. 18 attack.

Permanent cut in U.S. aid threatened

Israel has vowed to put Sheinbein on trial and has offered to pay for the estimated \$2 million it would cost prosecutors to try the case in Israel.

But if found guilty, Sheinbein is likely to receive a lighter sentence than he would in the United States. A decision on his extradition is expected next week.

Against this deadline, Callahan has teamed up with the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Robert Livingston (R-La.), to threaten a permanent cut in U.S. aid if Sheinbein is not extradited to the United States.

When asked on NBC's "Today" show this week about withholding aid to Israel, Livingston said that if Sheinbein is not back in the United States, "we will definitely consider" cutting Israel's aid.

He also hinted that short of cutting Israel's aid altogether, he would propose eliminating a provision known as early disbursement that enables Israel to receive the aid within 30 days after the foreign aid bill becomes law.

Without this preference, Israel would lose tens of

millions of dollars in interest on the \$1.2 billion in economic assistance — and perhaps much more if the Jewish state cannot meet its financial obligation on military contracts paid through the \$1.8 billion in military aid.

Faced with growing pressures from Congress, Israel is trying to mobilize Jewish groups to support their decision if they do not extradite Sheinbein.

Two senior Israeli Embassy officials called on Jewish groups to lobby Callahan and Livingston to allow Israel's aid to flow. The officials also asked 15 Jewish representatives at an embassy briefing Tuesday to work with other members of Congress to persuade Callahan and Livingston to back down.

While some groups are backing Israel's legal position, others, including the American Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League, are urging Israel to extradite Sheinbein.

Phil Baum, executive director of the AJCongress, said in a statement that it would be a "travesty" if Israeli law "were to be construed as affording sanctuary and protection to every Jew who invokes these provisions for the unabashed, naked purpose of avoiding accountability for an alleged crime." □

Health Ministry's test casts doubt on Yemeni family's claim

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After an Israeli woman from Yemen was reunited with her biological daughter in August, newly performed genetic tests have cast doubt over whether the two women are related.

Tests performed this week by Israel's Ministry of Health refute earlier DNA tests showing that Tzila Levine is the long-lost daughter of Margalit Omassi, who immigrated to Israel from Yemen in the late 1940s.

Levine rejected the ministry's findings and vowed to sue the Health Ministry for breach of confidentiality.

"We will take them to court," Levine said in a telephone interview from her home in Sacramento, Calif. Levine said she had signed an agreement with the ministry that its test results would be kept in absolute confidence and shown only to the family.

A ministry geneticist interviewed on Israel Radio denied that his lab had released the findings, but said that "the family" had ordered the latest test.

The government tests directly contradict tests performed earlier this summer by Hebrew University geneticist Hasan Khatib that reportedly showed — with 99.9 percent certainty — that the two are mother and daughter.

The well-publicized reunion of Levine and Omassi had fueled allegations by members of the Yemenite community that hundreds of children were kidnapped and sold for illegal adoption during the early years of the Jewish state.

Levine, 49, who currently lives in California, was adopted as an infant by an Ashkenazi couple living on a kibbutz. Convinced that she was one of the "missing Yemenite children," she made an all-out search for her birth parents.

Omassi, whose infant daughter disappeared under mysterious circumstances 48 years ago, read about Levine in an Israeli newspaper, and a meeting was arranged.

While the Ministry of Health says that its test on mitochondrial DNA is the most sophisticated in the world, geneticist Khatib stands by his results, which will be presented to the Cohen Commission, which has been investigating the allegations. □

(JTA correspondent Tom Tugend in Los Angeles contributed to this report.)