



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israel's Orthodox political parties agreed to defer until January action on legislation that would bar non-Orthodox participation on local religious councils and codify the Orthodox monopoly on conversions performed in the Jewish state if the Reform and Conservative movements suspended litigation on these issues.** A delegation of U.S. Reform Jewish leaders who arrived in Israel on Sunday to lobby against the legislation met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other government officials.

■ **Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov denied in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Russia is helping Iran acquire ballistic missiles.** The denial came as Primakov was in Israel for two days of meetings with Israeli government officials as part of a tour of the Middle East designed to increase Russia's role in the region.

■ **Hungary's ambassador to Canada resigned after receiving criticism for sending a birthday card to an alleged Hungarian Nazi collaborator now living in Canada.** A 1993 case against Imre Finta, who fled to Canada in 1948, was dropped for lack of evidence.

■ **Russia has begun issuing identity papers that do not list an individual's nationality.** This practice, which was introduced by Stalin in 1932, was a symbol of Soviet discrimination against minorities, including Jews.

■ **A draft of a U.S. government document says almost all Nazi gold sent by the Nazis to neutral nations such as Sweden and Portugal during World War II went through Switzerland.** A final copy of the document, which is being prepared by Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat, is slated to be released later this year.

■ **Israeli Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan said he would run for prime minister in the next elections.** Eitan, who was the army's chief of staff during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and is the head of the Tsomet Party, would likely draw right-wing support.

PROFILE

Leading Israeli feminist embraces Conservative Judaism

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Most people are contemplating retirement at the age of 70, but Alice Shalvi isn't most people.

Just shy of her 71st birthday, Shalvi has become the rector of the Beit Midrash, the Conservative/Masorti movement's seminary of Judaic studies in Israel.

Honored numerous times for her achievements in the fields of feminism and religious education, Shalvi, who describes herself as "religiously observant," has been perceived as a maverick in Orthodox circles.

Her latest career move is viewed as a powerful endorsement of the Conservative movement at a time when the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism are fighting for recognition in Israel.

Rabbi Benjamin Segal, director of the Beit Midrash, says Shalvi "brings a combination of academic excellence and religious sensitivity that uniquely qualify her to help us achieve our goals. She is a proven leader."

Many would say a rebellious leader.

Known as a pioneer of the Israeli feminist movement, Shalvi has been blazing trails for nearly five decades. A university professor for most of her career, she co-founded the Israel Women's Network in 1984, and has been battling the male-dominated political and religious establishments ever since.

It was Shalvi who first organized protests in front of the Chief Rabbinate's office demanding a solution to the problem of agunot — women whose husbands cannot or will not grant their wives a religious divorce, or get.

Under her leadership, the network has fought for greater women's representation in the Knesset, the Israel Defense Force, and at the highest rungs of the business ladder.

Working on the principle that "no area should be closed to you because you are a female," Shalvi has also fought for better Jewish education for Orthodox girls and women.

In 1975, while working as an English professor at the Hebrew University, Shalvi became the volunteer principal of the Pelech High School in Jerusalem, a progressive school for Orthodox girls.

At Shalvi's initiative, the school introduced a controversial curriculum that included Talmud study and a three-year course on family studies that addressed such sensitive issues as birth control and premarital sex.

'I'm in favor of choice'

The curriculum and Shalvi's political activism — among other things, she invited Palestinian teens to meet their Jewish counterparts — angered members of the National Religious Party which, through the Council for State Religious Education, exercises significant control over the state religious school system.

In 1990, after years of threats, the state religious system promised to withdraw its support and accreditation of the Pelech school if Shalvi did not quit.

She reluctantly stepped down and began to devote even more time to the network and its causes.

Despite her avowed intention to reduce her schedule and spend more time with her husband, Moshe, and 18 grandchildren, Shalvi says she couldn't pass up the offer to join the Beit Midrash.

"I hadn't expected to take on more work responsibilities at this late stage of my life, but I believe in what the Beit Midrash is doing," she says in an interview.

"I'm in favor of choice, of alternatives, and the Masorti movement offers the possibility of [women's] personal involvement in ritual and study."

Raised in England in a religiously observant home — her parents moved from Germany to Britain in 1934 — Shalvi first encountered non-Orthodox Jewish ritual in the late 1970s.

"I first attended a Bat Mitzvah in the Masorti movement in America in 1977 and witnessed a most beautiful ceremony," she says.

"The mother and grandmother had an aliyah and read a portion of

the Torah. I was intensely moved and felt how right and beautiful it was."

It was not until 1979, during another trip to the United States, however, that Shalvi took an active part in a women's prayer service.

"I was at a Masorti Sisterhood Shabbat and the women asked if I'd like an aliyah, and since it was an all-women's group and there were no halachic prohibitions, I said the brachah and looked — for the first time in my life, at the age of 53 — directly at a Torah scroll.

"I burst into tears. It was an overwhelming experience that still moves me," she recalls.

Shalvi, after many years of religious exploration, now defines herself as a "Masorti Jew who keeps the mitzvot."

She believes that the Conservative movement, with its evolving interpretation of halachah, plays the role once played by the Orthodox movement.

In the past, she says, "the great rabbis, the poskim who gave responsa, engaged in a reinterpretation in light of changing social norms. The trouble with the Orthodox establishment in Israel, and many of the Orthodox rabbis, is that they have ceased to a very large extent to engage in this process.

"The result has been that halachah has been frozen and is, in many cases, irrelevant to Jewish life."

By refusing to bend, Shalvi asserts, the Orthodox movement is doing an injustice to women.

"Perhaps the greatest revolution of the last century has been the emancipation of women," she says. "In a country where there are three women on the Supreme Court, it's ridiculous that we can't have women sitting on religious courts."

In her new role as rector of the Beit Midrash, Shalvi intends to devote most of her energies to outreach.

"The Israeli public doesn't realize that the Masorti movement is continuing the tradition of ongoing halachic interpretation in the light of modernity," she says. "I will try to share this message." □

Swiss firms impeding probe of wartime dealings with Nazis

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — Officials with the international panel of historians probing Switzerland's wartime past are complaining that some Swiss companies are refusing access to records dating back to the Nazi years.

The companies are "refusing to open their archives because they are afraid of compensation claims," according to one member of the Independent Commission of Experts, also known as the Bergier Commission, after its chairman, historian Jean-Francois Bergier.

The international panel of historians was created by Switzerland last December to study the extent of the country's financial dealings with the Nazis.

Difficulties arose, according to members of the panel, when they attempted to investigate the operations of Swiss subsidiaries that operated in Nazi Germany. Some Swiss companies, they said, maintained that the commission had no legal authority to investigate the companies' subsidiaries.

Panel members cited the chocolate manufacturer Nestle as an example, saying the company refused to cooperate when the commission sought records about its Maggi subsidiary, which employed thousands of war prisoners and Jewish slave laborers at its factory located in Germany near the Swiss border.

"We are in a very delicate situation," said Linus von Castelmur, a historian who serves as secretary-general of the commission.

"These records are absolutely necessary to investigate our history."

In a related development, some Swiss legislators are seeking to block parliamentary approval to provide additional funding for the commission's activities.

The Federal Council, as the Swiss cabinet is known, has called on Parliament to approve \$11.5 million to cover the commission's operating costs during the next four years.

But some legislators want to block this funding, a move that would force the Bergier Commission to stop its activities by end of the year. □

Morocco cancels conference to avoid Israeli participation

By Joseph Kopel

BRUSSELS (JTA) — The faltering Israeli-Palestinian peace process has apparently led to the abrupt cancellation of an economic conference by a country that has long been regarded as a friend of the Jewish state.

Moroccan officials canceled this week a meeting between ministers of the European Union and 12 Mediterranean countries.

According to well-informed sources, the move came in order to avoid the participation of an Israeli delegation.

"Israel's participation would put Morocco in a difficult position within the Arab world," a Moroccan government source was quoted as saying.

The meeting, scheduled to take place Thursday and Friday in Marrakech, was expected to discuss industrial cooperation between the Mediterranean countries and the 15 E.U. member states.

The decision to cancel the meeting was made in a communique issued by the Moroccan Trade and Industry Ministry. No official reason was given.

The meeting was to be a follow-up to a conference held in November 1995 in Barcelona that launched the so-called Euro-Med partnership aimed at creating a free-trade area by the year 2010 and a program of European investment in the participating Mediterranean countries.

The partnership was a result of the progress in the peace process.

The recent stalemate between the Israelis and the Palestinians has clouded prospects for another economic conference involving Middle East and North African states that is scheduled to be held in November in the Persian Gulf state of Qatar. □

Papon's illness forces delay in trial

PARIS (JTA) — The trial of former Vichy official Maurice Papon was temporarily halted Oct. 23 after he was hospitalized with bronchitis.

Papon's trial for crimes against humanity was slated to resume this week only if he was well enough to appear in court.

Papon went on trial Oct. 8 in the southwestern French city of Bordeaux for allegedly ordering the arrest and deportation of 1,560 Jews during World War II. The proceedings are expected to last until Dec. 23.

U.S. historian Robert Paxton, one of several scholars of the period who will speak at the trial, was scheduled to testify this week about the Vichy administration's cooperation with the Nazi occupiers.

Papon, who is 87 and underwent triple bypass surgery last year, has already been hospitalized twice during the trial.

After feeling ill on the trial's second day, he spent one night in a nearby hospital. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Ruling on Orthodox synagogue could impact German Jewish life

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT (JTA) — A ruling by a German federal court has the potential to change the way the Berlin Jewish community operates.

It could also have considerable significance for the growing number of liberal groups that are forming throughout the country.

The court ruled that the Orthodox congregation in Berlin, Adas Israel, founded in the 19th century, continued to exist even though it was officially dissolved by the Nazis in 1938.

The ruling gives the congregation the legal status to claim property it owned before World War II and opens the way for Adas Israel, which was revived as a religious community in 1985, to claim access to public funds.

It also means that for the first time since the war, there are two officially recognized Jewish communities in the same German city.

The ruling came after a five-year legal fight and an even longer battle of wills among Adas Israel, the established Jewish Berlin community and the city of Berlin.

The debate was marked by acrimonious personal encounters and hefty mudslinging.

Like other religions, Germany's approximately 60,000 registered Jews pay a religion tax to the government, which in turn dispenses funds to local communities.

The court's ruling could lead to a competition for public funds between Adas Israel and the already-established Jewish community in Berlin.

The established Jewish community in Berlin also saw Adas Israel's claim as an infringement upon the single community principle, which it believes is the most effective way to consolidate resources and funding.

Long-standing conflict defused

Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there were fewer than 30,000 Jews in Germany.

An influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union since then has more than doubled Germany's Jewish community. The Berlin community is the country's largest, with some 11,000 members.

Adas Israel has reached out to the more than 5,000 Russian Jewish immigrants in Berlin, winning new congregants and establishing a network of social services.

The long-standing conflict within the Jewish community over Adas Israel was recently defused at a meeting between the newly elected head of the established Berlin community, Andreas Nachama, and Adas Israel leader Mario Offenberger.

The meeting ended with the two issuing a statement that they had agreed to establish a new relationship on the basis of respect, equality and cooperation.

In practice, most German Jewish communities are run along moderate Orthodox lines, offering no form of worship for Jews seeking liberal Judaism.

But the court ruling could have a dramatic impact on the growing numbers of Reform and Conservative groups that are forming.

Germany's official Jewish communities have done little to support the new liberal religious efforts, warning that the establishment of new congregations could divide and weaken existing communal structures.

Micha Brumlik, chairman of the newly formed Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, said the ruling means that the German courts now recognize the principle of different communities operating in the same city.

Liberal congregations are currently striving to become part of the existing Jewish communities, he said, but if they are systematically denied access to funding, the court decision would make it easier to establish new congregations.

Brumlik said the situation is developing differently in various cities.

In Frankfurt and Berlin, he said, there are signs that the existing Jewish community is taking steps to accommodate liberal groups.

But in Munich, where the largest of the newly formed liberal congregations is located, there is a possibility that the congregation will establish itself as a separate Jewish community. □

Eizenstat slams California for moves against Swiss banks

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The U.S. State Department has asked California's treasurer to reverse his state's sanctions against Swiss banks, claiming that such "punitive measures" undermine the Swiss government's efforts to carry out its commitments to Holocaust survivors.

California Treasurer Matt Fong recently announced that he had imposed a moratorium on state investments and deposits in three major Swiss banks until speedier progress is made in settling Holocaust-era accounts.

The California moratorium actually went into effect, without public notice, in August.

Since then, California has liquidated \$2 billion held in the Swiss banks, and "we now have zero dollars in direct investments" in Switzerland, said Fong's spokesman, Roger Wildermuth.

Following Fong's public announcement, U.S. Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat phoned the state treasurer and urged him to lift the moratorium, spelling out his objections in a follow-up letter.

Eizenstat earlier directed an in-depth study by 11 U.S. government agencies on the disposition of Nazi gold during and after World War II.

In his two-page letter to Fong, Eizenstat cited efforts by Swiss banks to identify dormant World War II accounts and to establish a fund of some \$200 million to aid Holocaust survivors, as well as the Swiss president's pledge to conduct a "merciless search for the truth" about his country's past.

Eizenstat warned that sanctions, such as those taken by Fong, "have led to a negative reaction in Switzerland, creating the impression among the Swiss population that they are under unfair attack.

"This impression undermines the Swiss government's ability to complete those initiatives that are subject to a direct vote of the people in referenda," Eizenstat wrote.

He was referring to a referendum in which the Swiss public will vote on a government proposal to establish a \$4.7 billion Solidarity Fund, some of which would be earmarked for Holocaust survivors.

In a carefully non-committal response, Fong spokesman Wildermuth said, "We are reviewing Mr. Eizenstat's concerns and appreciate having the benefit of his views."

The State Department earlier criticized as "counterproductive" the action of New York City in not allowing the Union Bank of Switzerland to take part in a billion-dollar bond offering.

New York's state comptroller has also said he would not give Swiss banks any new business, and Massachusetts has said it would cut its line of credit with Union Bank of Switzerland. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Lubavitch, JDC jointly return brit milah to Russia's capital city

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Yeshaya Shafit is a man with a mission.

Shafit, a Russian-born Orthodox Jew who emigrated to Israel in 1992, has returned to his native country with the goal of ensuring that all Russian Jewish males are circumcised.

"The Torah says that a Jewish soul can't enter the body if it's uncircumcised," he said.

He has a lot of work ahead of him.

Until the Russian Revolution of 1917, Jewish boys here were circumcised at the age of 8 days, as they are around the world, to fulfill the commandment of brit milah found in the Book of Genesis.

But under the Soviet regime, this practice, like other Jewish, Christian or Muslim rituals, was an offense that might draw a visit from the secret police.

By World War II, the ritual was almost extinct. Only Jews in the predominantly Muslim regions of the Caucasus Mountains and Central Asia remained faithful to the custom. Muslims also circumcise their male children.

Like the majority of Soviet Jews, Shafit grew up ignorant of Judaism. In the early 1990s, driven by curiosity, he began to go to the synagogue in his hometown of Nizhny Novgorod, which is located some 300 miles east of Moscow. The synagogue, long home to a factory, had just been reclaimed by the Lubavitch.

In 1992, Shafit, now a graduate of medical school and an observant Jew, left for Israel. Initially, he pursued a career in traumatology — a sub-field of surgery — but was persuaded to undertake the six-month training as a mohel. Realizing that his services were needed in Russia, he returned to his native country in 1995. The 31-year-old is now in charge of the recently opened Brit Yosef Yitzhak circumcision center, which is located in Moscow's Chabad Lubavitch synagogue.

He is one of only three or four mohels in Russia.

Most patients have been children

Since he returned, Shafit has performed hundreds of circumcisions. He has been summoned as far east as Birobidzhan and as far south as Odessa, Ukraine.

He recently performed ceremonies in St. Petersburg, Astrakhan in southern Russia and Kharkov in eastern Ukraine, where he circumcised 14 teen-agers in a Lubavitch-run summer camp.

Most of Shafit's patients have been children in summer camps or adults who have decided to emigrate to Israel.

Despite his efforts, however, few Jewish families choose to circumcise their newborn sons.

"People here are strongly prejudiced against circumcision," said Shafit.

"Even Jews — they might have heard that it's something Jews do, but they don't know that it's the law."

Part of his job, therefore, is one of persuasion. Some people might require a lesson in the Torah.

Others are simply scared, he said, having been frightened by tales of shaky hands and dirty instruments.

Most circumcisions around the country are still performed in state-run hospitals or in homes on simple tables "covered with bed sheets and blankets," Shafit added.

The operating room of the new Moscow center was designed especially for circumcisions. It is the only such facility in the former Soviet Union.

The center is co-sponsored by a Jerusalem-based

Lubavitch affiliate that sends mohels to communities in both Israel and the Diaspora. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provides about half of the center's funding.

There is also a mohel in St. Petersburg who was sent there by the Lubavitch, and other organizations occasionally sponsor mohels to visit smaller communities. Earlier this month, a mohel sent by the Agudath Israel World Organization to the city of Saratov circumcised 16 Jews there — from teen-agers to pensioners.

On a recent Moscow day, 12-year-old Ilya looks a bit scared after the ritual is performed. But his parents, who plan to emigrate to Israel, smile proudly. "Now, he's a 'real' Jew," said Ilya's father of his son. □

Slovenian shul rededicated 500 years after ejection of Jews

By Ruth E. Gruber

MARIBOR, Slovenia (JTA) — Five hundred years after Jews were expelled from what today is Slovenia, ceremonies were held here to rededicate the local synagogue.

A mezuzah was nailed to the synagogue door post during a small ceremony earlier this month that was held after a two-day international symposium titled, "Medieval Jewish Communities in Central Europe and their Cultural Heritage."

"In the name of the Jewish community of Slovenia, I want to express thanks that we have lived to see this day and that we will work together with the city of Maribor and all people who are trying to preserve this synagogue as a living monument," said Mladen Svarc, coordinator of the Slovenian Jewish community, which numbers less than 100.

With work still to be completed on the synagogue, the mezuzah was taken down after the blessing was recited.

"It's just temporary and symbolic for now, as the synagogue is currently undergoing restoration, but we hope that when the work is complete, the mezuzah will be affixed here permanently," said Washington-based lawyer Mark Cohen, who brought the mezuzah to Maribor, which is located near the northern border of this former Yugoslav republic.

Cohen, who taught law at Maribor University several years ago, brought the mezuzah on behalf of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, and Preserving Tolerance Inc., a private foundation.

The commission documents and preserves Jewish and other cultural heritage sites in Europe. Last year, in accordance with an agreement with the Slovenian government, it carried out a survey of all Jewish monuments in Slovenia.

The Maribor synagogue dates back to the 13th century and is one of the oldest buildings in the town.

Jews flourished in Maribor in the Middle Ages, and Maribor Rabbi Israel Isserlein was renowned throughout Central Europe in the 15th century.

Jews were expelled from Maribor in 1497, and the synagogue was turned into a church in 1501. In the 19th century it was used as a warehouse and later as a dwelling.

City officials want to restore the synagogue for use as a cultural center that would include an information center on local Jewish history.

The symposium was the first full-scale international conference on a Jewish topic to be held in the town and was considered a prestigious local event. Scholars and experts from Slovenia, Israel, Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary and the United States presented papers. Few of the participants in the symposium were Jewish. □