



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The Reform and Conservative movements agreed to suspend their court actions in Israel on religious matters. Knesset action on two pieces of legislation that would codify Orthodox control over religious life was subsequently postponed for three months. [Page 1]

■ A U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee passed a "Religious Freedom Amendment" that would allow government subsidy of religion, prayer in schools and other forms of religious expression on public property. [Page 3]

■ Fourteen Jewish community federations were included on an annual list of America's 400 largest charities. The top Jewish charity was the Jewish Communal Fund, a sister philanthropy to the UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, which ranked 29th, with \$160.4 million in private donations in fiscal 1996.

■ The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago formally endorsed a resolution by the National Jewish Day School Scholarship Committee to place a new emphasis on Jewish day-school education. The resolution reaffirms the Jewish community's commitment to make "a quality day school education available to all Jewish children whose families desire it."

■ U.S. Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.) agreed to lift his hold on \$75.6 million in economic aid to Israel. Obey took the action after receiving assurances from Israel that it would return \$50 million to the United States. That money would then be sent to Jordan.

■ Ned Walker, President Clinton's nominee to become U.S. ambassador to Israel, breezed through his Senate confirmation hearing. He is expected to be confirmed as early as next week.

■ U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright phoned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to urge him back to talks with the Palestinians. Talks between Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Palestinian Authority official Mahmoud Abbas were canceled after Levy postponed his trip, saying he wanted instructions from Netanyahu.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Key players in religious pluralism step back from brink, avert crisis

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Like two sides threatened by a debilitating labor strike, the key players in the religious pluralism morass have stepped back from the brink.

As a result, the committee seeking a way out has three more months to find a solution to the crisis that has created a deep rift between Israel and much of American Jewry.

There is still no guarantee of success — the committee headed by Israeli Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman has already labored for months — but with the situation spiraling out of control, all sides recognized that more time is needed to negotiate the complex and divisive issues involved.

The pullback capped a week of intensive discussions, warnings and acrimony that threatened to destroy the months-long effort to resolve issues relating to the recognition of non-Orthodox movements in Israel.

In what appeared to be a significant breakthrough in the acrimonious debate, a senior official from the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate sat down early Tuesday morning with Reform and Conservative leaders, a meeting that helped breathe new life into the Ne'eman Committee's effort.

The crisis came to a head this week as the Knesset reconvened after its summer recess.

Two bills that would codify Orthodox control over religious life in Israel — one related to conversions, another related to representation on local religious councils — appeared to be headed for a fast legislative track on Monday after the non-Orthodox movements rejected a "cease-fire" proposal made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The proposal had earlier been accepted by the Orthodox political parties. But in a dramatic reversal Tuesday, after a day of enduring the wrath of Knesset members across the political spectrum, the Reform and Conservative movements accepted the cease-fire.

As a result, the non-Orthodox movements suspended their court actions on religious matters and the Knesset delayed action on the conversion and religious council bills.

'A change in the Orthodox camp'

Knesset member Alexander Lubotsky of The Third Way Party, who helped engineer the reversal, said the two non-Orthodox streams shifted for two reasons. "They failed to understand the overriding opinion of almost all the Knesset members who support the Ne'eman Committee process," Lubotsky said in an interview.

"They didn't realize that there has been a change in the Orthodox camp — that there are more and more Orthodox people who support the committee and believe that a historical breakthrough can come out of it."

The second reason, he said, was that the Reform and Conservative leaders "were looking for a real Orthodox partner from the rabbinate."

On Tuesday, it seems, they found their partner. The previous evening, Lubotsky and other government officials convinced the Chief Rabbinate to send a representative to speak with the non-Orthodox leaders.

Rabbi Yisrael Rosen, who heads the rabbinate's Office of Conversions, met with Reform and Conservative representatives Tuesday morning at the Jerusalem residence of Israeli President Ezer Weizman.

That meeting took place just hours before the Knesset was scheduled to debate a new bill that would bar non-Orthodox representatives from serving on local religious councils.

Rabbi Uri Regev, head of the Reform movement in Israel, insisted that it was Rosen's presence — and not political pressure — that prompted him and his colleagues to change their minds.

"There was an assessment on our part that now that there is an official representative of the rabbinate endorsing the process rather than rejecting it, we could agree to a timeout," Regev said in an interview. "We were seeking such a partner all along, and if this had been forthcoming last week or last month, there might not have been this stalemate."

In Dallas, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's

Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said the most important factor was a personal plea by Weizman.

"He asked us for one more shot at this, and we had to give it to him," Yoffie said in a telephone interview from Texas, where he was preparing for the opening of the Reform movement's biennial convention.

But the political fallout from the non-Orthodox movements' initial rejection could not be ignored.

"We did not anticipate the level of the erosion in public support," Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Conservative/Masorti movement in Israel, said in an interview. "Without public support and the support of the Knesset, we cannot do what we have always wanted to do: enhance Jewish unity."

In retrospect, Bandel added, the decision to reject the prime minister's cease-fire proposal "was counterproductive to our cause."

Monday's rejection came during a whirlwind visit of a dozen U.S. Reform rabbis to Israel. They met with Netanyahu and other government officials to lobby against the two bills.

Netanyahu, livid at the non-Orthodox stance, singled out the Reform movement for criticism.

"The Reform Jews chose the path of confrontation rather than discussion and compromise," Netanyahu said Monday in a statement. "The rejection of the compromise by the Reform Jews raises the suspicion that political factors were involved in their decision, which are deepening the division within the Jewish people and in the State of Israel."

The leaders of The Third Way and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah parties, members of the governing coalition thought to have been reconsidering their original support for the religious legislation, were among the more vocal Knesset members criticizing the non-Orthodox stance.

Knesset member Avraham Ravitz of the Orthodox United Torah Judaism Party took a similar tone, stating that "the militants in the Reform movement don't want to make a compromise; they don't want to succeed. They want to fight to strengthen their movements."

However, Reform and Conservative leaders charged that the chief rabbis were responsible for the breakdown because they had rejected initial proposals by the Ne'eman Committee.

Committee broadens its focus

In a letter sent Monday to Ne'eman, the leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel explained that their decision to reject the cease-fire came with great difficulty.

Ne'eman himself voiced personal regret after the non-Orthodox rejected the cease-fire. In a letter faxed to federations and national Jewish organizations in the United States, Ne'eman said he was "deeply shocked" to hear that the Reform and Conservative movements had decided not to accept the formula suggested by the prime minister.

"This tragic decision will cause a major split between the Jews of the Diaspora and Israel, a split which I believe can be avoided," he said.

"Time permitting, I have every reason to believe that this committee can bring about a historic shalom bayit (peace in the house) which would be a blessing to the Jewish people."

While the Ne'eman Committee was initially mandated to find a solution to the conversion crisis, Ne'eman said in his letter that its mandate had been expanded to include other issues on the religious pluralism agenda, including prayer at the Western Wall, marriage ceremonies and religious councils.

It was the first public acknowledgement that, indeed, the committee had broadened its focus.

The willingness of the Chief Rabbinate to discuss the issue with the non-Orthodox movements has given some hope that a solution to the crisis may be attainable.

In New York, Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Conservative movement's umbrella organization, said that while the Ne'eman Committee is made up of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox leaders, the Orthodox members of the committee "don't represent anybody."

No representative of the Orthodox political parties or the Chief Rabbinate is on the committee.

But, in many ways, this week's developments have returned the sides to square one.

The cease-fire was identical to the agreement earlier this year to freeze such actions, which was the basis for the creation of the Ne'eman Committee.

Despite the decision to plod ahead, the leader of the Reform movement is not optimistic.

The Ne'eman Committee process "requires goodwill and flexibility on all sides," said Yoffie, noting he was "pessimistic" that a solution could be found.

"Whether such flexibility will be forthcoming from the rabbinate, we're not sure."

"The burden is now on the Orthodox," Yoffie said. "Either they're going to work with us or they're not. Either we're going to have relations of mutual respect or we're not. Otherwise, we'll go back to court." □

(JTA staff writer Debra Nussbaum Cohen in New York contributed to this report.)

Israeli stock prices close down in reaction to Wall Street plunge

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As goes Wall Street, so goes Tel Aviv.

This was the operative phrase after share prices on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange dropped sharply Tuesday in a shake-up touched off by the previous day's stock plunge on Wall Street.

The Tel Aviv exchange's two main indexes closed the day down by just under 9 percent.

Earlier in the day, trading was automatically suspended after the blue-chip Maof Index fell by more than 8 percent. Business resumed 45 minutes later.

Some stock analysts said the slide was a temporary reaction to the record drop on Wall Street, where the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped by more than 550 points Monday, its steepest one-day point decline.

"Clearly, this is much more in the realm of a psychological than a real economic explanation," said Nadine Trajtenburg of Bank Hapoalim.

"If there would have been a panic, we would have seen more running out of the market into dollars. But we haven't seen that at all. The shekel exchange rate has been relatively quiet today."

After falling sharply against the dollar in early trading Tuesday, the shekel regained ground by the afternoon. The new rate for the U.S. dollar was put at 3.5520 shekels.

Analysts further noted that it would still take some time to see the impact of the heavy selling.

One indicator would be the performance of Israeli high-tech companies in foreign trading, primarily on the NASDAQ market.

The drop on the Tel Aviv exchange came a day after Monday's announcement by the Bank of Israel that it is leaving interest rates unchanged at 13.4 percent.

Despite pressure from manufacturers, Bank of Israel Governor Jacob Frenkel has refrained from cutting interest rates, saying to do so would be inflationary. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

School prayer amendment faces uphill battle despite a first vote

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A controversial school prayer amendment to the Constitution continues to face an uphill battle in Congress despite a House panel's vote to support the legislation.

In a party-line vote, the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution voted this week to alter the law of the land through a "Religious Freedom Amendment."

The amendment would give the go-ahead to government subsidy of religion, prayer in schools and other forms of religious expression on public property.

The House panel's vote marks the first time Congress has taken legislative action on a school prayer amendment.

Republicans made a similar bid to amend the Constitution during the last Congress, but the effort became mired in disputes over language.

The amendment that is now before Congress has the support of the House leadership and nearly 150 cosponsors.

But most observers believe that the measure will fall far short of the two-thirds majority necessary for its passage.

There is no movement in the Senate for such an amendment.

The Christian Coalition has advocated passage of the Religious Freedom Amendment throughout the past year, and some Capitol Hill observers said Tuesday's vote fulfilled a pledge by Republicans to take action on the amendment before Congress recesses for the year in November.

The measure, sponsored by Reps. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) and Sanford Bishop (D-Ga.), has been advanced as a means of reversing what its proponents see as 30 years of wrong-headed judicial decisions that have suppressed religious expression.

"Court rulings have turned 'separation of church and state' into hostility toward religion," said Rep. Charles Canady (R-Fla.), who chairs the subcommittee.

The amendment, said House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), will allow people of faith to "resume their place in society not as second-class citizens, but as full Americans."

Both lawmakers voted in favor of the amendment.

'It's a catch-all problematic initiative'

Church-state watchdogs, including most Jewish groups, have consistently derided the measure as unnecessary and dangerous, charging that it runs headlong into the wall separating church and state.

"It's a catch-all problematic initiative that would mean vouchers and prayer in school with teacher participation and religious symbols at the heart of government," said Michael Lieberman, Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League.

Opponents further emphasize that the First Amendment already protects religious expression, including voluntary prayer in public schools.

"What would be codified here is the most narrow and revisionist view of what the Establishment Clause is all about," said Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel for the American Jewish Committee, referring to the First Amendment's prohibition against any government establishment of religion.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), who voted against the measure, said it would "allow the use of the power of

government to advance the religious goals of the majority against all minorities."

The proposed amendment would add the following language to the Constitution:

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: Neither the United States nor any State shall establish any official religion, but the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed.

"Neither the United States nor any State shall require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, prescribe school prayers, discriminate against religion, or deny equal access to a benefit on account of religion."

Most Jewish organizations, meanwhile, say defeat of the initiative will continue to be a top legislative priority.

"We're going to put on a full-court press to educate members of Congress on the radical nature of this amendment and in the process try and educate broadly on a full range of church-state issues," Lieberman said.

The Orthodox Union, however, has decided not to take a position on the amendment.

"We're sort of caught in the middle," said Nathan Diamant, director of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs, which opposed the school prayer amendment introduced in the last Congress.

"While we don't like the concept of constitutionalized, organized school prayer, we are in favor of the concept of school vouchers or other government programs being available on an equal basis to religious institutions and individuals."

Tuesday's debate and vote on the amendment was originally scheduled to take place Oct. 23, but Canady agreed to postpone it until this week after Jewish groups protested that it coincided with the Jewish holidays of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

"When the subcommittee considers matters of religious freedom and governmental respect for the religious rights of all Americans, it should not do so on a day which would necessarily exclude the voices of Jewish Americans," Nadler, who is Jewish, wrote in a letter to Canady. □

Israel releases Temple Mount shooter

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has released a U.S.-born Israeli who was convicted of killing a Palestinian during a 1982 shooting spree on the Temple Mount.

Alan Goodman, who killed a mosque guard and wounded eight Muslim worshipers when he opened fire on the Temple Mount, was released from an Israeli prison Sunday after serving 16 years of a life sentence that had been reduced to 24 years.

Another Palestinian was killed by Israeli police in ensuing protests.

Goodman had claimed at the time that he was fighting for the return of the Temple Mount to the Jewish people.

He was transferred to Ben-Gurion Airport, where he boarded a flight to the United States.

Israeli officials agreed to release him on the condition that he spend the next eight years in the United States.

Goodman, 53, was quoted Monday in the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot as saying that he did not regret his shooting spree.

But he said he hoped "to live the rest of my life in quiet and peace." □

Pollard accuses Israel of hypocrisy after agents in Hamas fiasco freed

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Jonathan Pollard believes that Israel has a double standard when it comes to rescuing captured agents and spies.

Pollard, the former U.S. Navy civilian intelligence analyst who is serving a life sentence in an American prison for spying for Israel, this week compared his situation with that of two Mossad agents recently arrested — and released — in Jordan.

Israel's quick response in obtaining the release of the agents, he said, is proof that the Israeli government has not done what it can to release him from the prison in Butner, N.C., where he has served 13 years of his sentence.

Pollard's tape-recorded remarks were played for reporters this week by his wife, Esther, who came to Israel to attend a hearing scheduled for this week at which the High Court of Justice will hear a petition calling on the Israeli government to recognize that Pollard was an agent for Israel.

Israeli officials have maintained that Pollard turned over intelligence documents without official sanction.

In the tape recording, Pollard refers to the bungled Sept. 25 attempt by Mossad agents to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in the Jordanian capital of Amman.

Two agents were apprehended by Jordanian police, but they were released after Israel agreed to free Hamas co-founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin and dozens of other Palestinian prisoners.

"Clearly, the Mashaal affair shows that the government knows how to get its agents out," Pollard said.

"It got them out in a couple of days, these guys, these two agents. They didn't have to rot for years in foreign prisons," he said, adding that several people had told him, "Gee, it seems that when your government wants to rescue an agent, they sure know how to do the right thing."

Pollard was arrested in 1985 outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

He pleaded guilty in 1986 to stealing secrets for the Israeli government and, in 1987, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

'He is human, not a concept'

President Clinton rejected a clemency plea by Pollard in July 1996, citing the gravity of his crime, his lack of remorse and the damage he caused to American security.

Esther Pollard said she made the tape public because she "realized it was time for the nation of Israel to hear Jonathan's voice."

"It is important for people to understand that he is human, not a concept."

Pollard said she believed that if the court orders the government to accept responsibility for her husband's spying, it could ease efforts to negotiate his release.

The petition also asks the court to order the government to release classified documents which she said would prove that her husband's activities were overseen by senior Israeli authorities.

Pollard said the current government has done almost nothing to free her husband.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking to reporters Tuesday, denied that he had abandoned Jonathan Pollard's cause, adding that he had raised the matter three times in discussions with Clinton.

Pollard was granted Israeli citizenship in 1996, a move he had hoped would bolster his chances for obtaining his freedom. □

Hungarian ambassador to Canada resigns in wake of flap with Nazi

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — Hungary's ambassador to Canada has resigned after a birthday letter he sent to a Nazi collaborator was published in a Hungarian-language newspaper in Canada.

Karoly Gedai submitted his resignation after his letter to Imre Finta, an 85-year-old former Hungarian police captain who ordered the deportation of thousands of Jews to death camps, was published in the Toronto newspaper *Kanadai Magyarasag* at Finta's behest.

Gedai told a Hungarian radio station that he resigned because "he did not want this incident to reflect on Hungary or on its foreign policy."

Hungary was offered membership in NATO in July.

Gedai also said in the interview that he was unaware of Finta's past.

Gustav Zoltai, the executive director of the Hungarian Jewish community, said he was shocked and amazed by Gedai's claim.

Laszlo Varkonyi, a senior officer in the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, agreed.

"It is difficult to believe that the ambassador did not know about Finta's past," he said.

Finta was convicted by a Hungarian court in 1948 of forcibly confining more than 8,500 Jewish residents from the town of Szeged in 1944. The detainees were later deported to Auschwitz and other camps, where most perished.

Finta fled to Canada in 1951.

A Canadian court acquitted him of war crimes in 1990, and the Canadian Supreme Court upheld the verdict in 1994.

The acquittal has been highly criticized by Canadian Jewish officials.

"This was not a case of mistaken identity, and Finta did not say, 'I didn't do it,'" said Bernie Farber, an official with the Canadian Jewish Congress.

"This is a man who should not be glorified," Farber added. "To have done so was unacceptable not just to Jews, but also those veterans who fought during World War II."

It was unclear whether Gedai would be offered another post within Hungary's Foreign Ministry. □

(JTA correspondent Agnes Bohm in Budapest contributed to this report.)

Jewish school opposed in Belarus

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A group of teen-agers have protested the presence of a Jewish Sunday school in a Belarussian town near the capital of Minsk.

The demonstrators at the recent rally in Borisov — most of whom were high school students — attempted to prevent the Jewish students from attending classes.

Some of the protesters held banners reading, "No to a Jewish School" and "Stop Jude."

Police were called in to halt the demonstration.

The Jewish school, which rents classroom space, has 30 students aged 5 to 13.

The school is sponsored by the Israeli Embassy in Minsk.

Protesters reportedly told police they were members of an ultranationalist group called White Power that "fights for the purity of the Belarussian people."

The former Soviet republic of Belarus has a Jewish population of about 100,000. □