



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Local and federal authorities are investigating presumed arson attacks at two Los Angeles synagogues.** The attacks, which caused minor damage, came in the wake of desecrations of a publicly displayed menorah in suburban New York and an Islamic symbol displayed near the White House. [Page 4]

■ **An Israeli woman was convicted of pasting posters in the West Bank town of Hebron depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed as a pig.** [Page 4]

■ **More than 200 American participants in the 33rd World Zionist Congress signed a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, asking him to "reinvigorate the Oslo peace process."** The letter, organized by American Friends of Meretz, called for a "prompt and positive response" to U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's recent call for a significant further Israeli redeployment in the West Bank.

■ **Some Orthodox Jews have initiated an advertising campaign to "debunk the myths" of pluralism and encourage Jewish unity.** An advertisement that recently appeared in The New York Times and in Jewish weekly newspapers marked the first effort by the group Am Echad, One Nation. [Page 2]

■ **A joint German-Czech fund to aid victims of Nazism is slated to get off the ground Jan. 1.** Germany had said it would postpone the launch due to political upheaval in the Czech Republic, but pressure from Czech officials as well as local and international Jewish leaders prompted a change of heart. [Page 3]

■ **Israel absorbed 8 percent fewer immigrants in 1997 than in 1996, according to an Immigration Ministry spokesman.** The 66,000 immigrants, mainly from Russia and Ukraine, included 1,800 Ethiopian Jews. The Jewish Agency for Israel had predicted that 50,000 immigrants would move to Israel this year.

**REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Jan. 1 or Jan. 2.**

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### Israel's bruising budget battles foreshadow redeployment debate

By David Landau

JERUSALEM(JTA) — With two Israeli government ministers calling for early elections, the 19-month-old government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu teetered closer than ever this week to the brink of collapse.

The calls came amid raging debates in the Knesset and back-room negotiations as the prime minister sought to ensure support for the 1998 budget — and continued support for his government.

But the intense budget debate, as significant as it is, could be just a precursor to what lies ahead as talks on the further redeployment of Israeli forces from the West Bank approach the moment of decision.

Many political observers maintained that even if the budget bill squeaked past the seething Knesset by the year-end deadline, this escape would provide only a temporary respite for Netanyahu.

Seventeen coalition Knesset members have vowed to vote against the 10 percent pullback reported to be shaping up in behind-the-scenes diplomacy.

In the view of some political analysts here, the anticipation of that storm is what motivated the coalition partners to press Netanyahu and Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman for greater concessions in the budget.

According to this theory, several ministers, including Foreign Minister David Levy of Geshet and Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, threatened to withhold their support for the budget because they have concluded that the government is doomed.

Some on the far right, such as Likud Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who resigned from the Cabinet earlier in the year to protest the Hebron agreement, said they were opposing the budget as a way of forcing Netanyahu to postpone action on a redeployment.

Netanyahu is due to meet with President Clinton in Washington in January and is expected to present a concrete Israeli redeployment proposal at that time.

The United States had originally pressed for a proposal by mid-December, but gave Netanyahu several more weeks out of concern that hard-line coalition members would turn the budget vote into a no-confidence motion if the prime minister had already announced any specific plan for a pullback.

It was not clear whether the Clinton administration would be prepared to wait until March 31 for movement in the long-stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Under Israeli law, failure to pass a budget by Dec. 31 gives the government an automatic three-month probation period.

If it can manage to push the budget through by March 31, it survives. If not, it folds on that date and new elections are called.

### Netanyahu confident budget will pass

As Netanyahu led ministers earlier this week on a tour of the West Bank to survey which lands Israel might transfer to the Palestinians, Netanyahu proclaimed confidence that the budget would indeed be approved.

Budget time has traditionally been the high point of the year for the smaller parties in the governing coalition, a time when they can press more forcefully for their own special interests.

Ironically, these kinds of pressures were supposed to have been eliminated under Israel's new electoral system, introduced before last year's elections, which is based upon the direct election of the prime minister.

But to the consternation of the finance minister and others in the Cabinet, Netanyahu was mired in negotiations this week with rebellious coalition members and at least one party outside the coalition — the ultranationalist Moledet Party, which holds two Knesset seats.

Finance ministers — and Ne'eman is the latest in this tradition — always seek to limit the concessions granted by prime ministers to small parties. Ne'eman was reported to be considering resigning if the budget framework was broken.

The latest horse-trading also exposed the prime minister's lack of

credibility among some of his own ministers and political allies.

"We don't just want it in writing," Gesher Knesset member Maxim Levy, the foreign minister's brother, said of a prime ministerial promise. "We want it written into the budget legislation."

To the glee of the opposition, coalition figures did not conceal their skepticism about Netanyahu's commitments — even Health Minister Yehoshua Matza, a Netanyahu stalwart, discovered that promises made to him were not backed by the finance minister, who was supposed to find a way to honor them.

Amid the chaotic atmosphere surrounding the effort to pass a budget this week, two of Netanyahu's Cabinet members urged the prime minister to call for elections two years ahead of schedule rather than capitulate to what they termed the "extortionist" demands of some coalition partners.

Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani of The Third Way Party challenged other coalition faction leaders to agree to early elections.

"Let's see how tough you are; come out and face the electorate," he said.

Kahalani broke away from the Labor Party prior to the 1996 elections to launch The Third Way, which now holds four Knesset seats.

The Labor Party "didn't take me seriously then," said Kahalani.

"Don't make the same mistake again."

Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan immediately accepted the challenge.

He urged the prime minister to initiate elections before events forced him to do so, and he announced that his Tsomet Party, which ran jointly with Likud last year, would run on a separate ticket and that he would run for prime minister.

The two ministers found support for their call from a key Likud Knesset member, coalition chairman Meir Sheerit, whose job is to ensure that the government has sufficient support in the Knesset on any vote.

This week Sheerit found that some coalition members were either voting with the opposition or abstaining on pieces of the budget legislation.

For early elections to take place, a majority of the 120-member Knesset would have to approve legislation to dissolve the legislature.

The battles among the political parties themselves during the budget debate were perhaps the strongest pieces of evidence that elections are in the air.

Gesher, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the three Orthodox parties sought to impress upon their respective constituencies how much it had wrung from the budget for their benefit.

The battle was fiercest between Gesher and the Orthodox Shas Party — both eye essentially the same Sephardi, lower-income constituencies.

Both parties claimed credit for the finance minister's decision to cancel intended cuts to child welfare payments. □

## Orthodox ad campaign nixes pluralism, promotes education

By Faygie Levy

NEW YORK (JTA) — Frustrated by what they view as negative press as a result of the religious pluralism controversy in Israel, some Orthodox Jews have initiated an advertising campaign to "debunk the myths" of pluralism and encourage Jewish unity through "classical" Jewish education.

An advertisement that appeared in The New York

Times on Dec. 23 and in Jewish weekly newspapers over Chanukah marked the first effort by the organization Am Echad, One Nation, to reach out to Jews of other denominations.

Am Echad is a coalition of individuals from all streams of Orthodoxy who want people to know "pluralism is dangerous in Israel," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for Agudath Israel of America.

Am Echad was created after Agudath Israel's president, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, called for a campaign to counteract what he sees as the negative view of Orthodox Judaism fostered by the Reform and Conservative movements.

Despite its close ties to Agudath Israel, Am Echad is an independent organization and reflects the views of many Orthodox factions, not just Agudah's, Shafran said.

The ad campaign comes as the debate over religious pluralism in Israel has reached near-fever pitch.

A government-appointed committee of Orthodox, Reform and Conservative representatives is facing a Jan. 31 deadline to try to reach a compromise regarding the status of Reform and Conservative rabbis.

These rabbis currently have no legal authority in the Jewish state to perform conversions to Judaism, marriages or funerals.

The ad, which depicts three windows — one with a traditional menorah, one with an electric menorah and a third with no menorah — says, "No matter how we celebrate Chanukah, we are all Jews."

It goes on to say that "there's good reason" for the State of Israel to look "to halachah — traditional religious law — as its exclusive standard governing marriage, divorce and conversion. Halachah is the one unifying standard we have."

To introduce other standards in Israel "under the banner of 'religious pluralism' would cause an irreparable schism in the Jewish State," the ad continues.

Usher Cohen, an employee with the newly created group, said, "We can really get back to Jewish unity" when Jews, "no matter what denomination," know about their Judaism.

The ad urges people to call a toll-free number to find out about educational programs in their community.

Callers will also be sent a brochure that "debunks the myths of pluralism" as it has been reported in the media, Shafran said.

## Ad called misleading

But leaders from other streams of Judaism called the ad misleading.

Am Echad "talks about halachah as if there is one halachah," but Jewish law "has many variations, like civil law in this country," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

To have unity, you must "acknowledge diversity" in the way people practice Judaism, Epstein added.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said the advertisement glosses over the issues.

"There's an assumption here that American Jews believe that they are being told they are not Jews, but American Jews understand the issue is that in Israel their rabbis are not rabbis and their Judaism is not Judaism," Yoffie said.

Yoffie does not believe that the advertisement will "change anyone's mind."

In any event, people are responding.

Some 50 individuals called the hotline within hours of its appearance in the Times.

More ads are planned in the coming months. □

# BEHIND THE HEADLINES

## Being Jewish in Germany's army: Experience reflects neo-Nazi acts

By Regine Wosnitza

BERLIN (JTA) — When David Meyer asked whether he would be able to keep kosher and go on leave for the Jewish High Holidays while serving in the German army, the head of the recruiting board accused him of holding up the proceedings.

And the situation only worsened after the 19-year-old joined his unit in the army, known as the Bundeswehr.

Not only was no kosher or vegetarian food available, World War II helmets and photographs adorned some offices, and Meyer was punished when he asked to be excused from attending a Christian service.

"I really believed that the generational change had done away with Nazi attitudes and that the Bundeswehr could not afford such things to happen," he says. "But after the events of the past two months, my trust in the Bundeswehr has reached rock bottom."

Meyer's experience offers a personal lens on the recent neo-Nazi scandals that have rocked the German army.

Some 160 neo-Nazi events were reported this year in the German army, according to a parliamentary army ombudsman.

Among them:

- Several amateur videos appeared, filmed by German soldiers, showing other soldiers demonstrating pro-Nazi actions, including shouts of "Heil Hitler";

- A German magazine reported that recruits in army barracks regularly celebrate Hitler's birthday;

- A 21-year-old who just completed his army service, Christian Krause, told a German tabloid in December that soldiers routinely made comments such as "the Jews must be gassed."

Krause also claimed that it was easy in his unit to order right-wing propaganda material printed in Denmark and said some soldiers were involved in other right-wing activities;

- German Defense Ministry officials have confirmed that a well-known neo-Nazi, Manfred Roeder, delivered a lecture at a German army officers training school in 1995.

### Kohl supports investigation

With the support of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the ministry has launched an investigation into neo-Nazism in the army. After conducting an internal investigation into Krause's charges, the ministry said it had found that only a few soldiers out of those it interviewed backed up his claims.

The ministry has also maligned Krause for not coming forward sooner.

Defense Minister Volker Ruehe argues that "these mistakes reflect neither the spirit of the troops nor everyday life in our armed forces."

Opposition politicians have charged that the government, through its attacks on Krause, is trying to discourage other soldiers from reporting neo-Nazi incidents.

For Meyer, the situation peaked when he asked for leave to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, and an officer told him that he should throw the application away.

"I was so furious about the way he talked because I could have been told in a friendly way," Meyer says.

In response, his father, Hans, wrote a letter to the defense minister, asking him to grant "those minimum rights that a German of Jewish belief is entitled to."

While army officials investigated the matter, David

Meyer was summoned to two interrogations in which he was told to consider the future careers of his superiors and retract his accusations.

The ministry's investigation into the matter showed that the local recruiting office had never passed on the directive that accommodations should be made to help Meyer practice his religion.

Michael Fuerst, responsible for army matters within the Central Council of Jews in Germany, attributed Meyer's experience to "ignorance" on the part of superiors.

In a letter to the Defense Ministry, Fuerst said he regretted that discussions about the sensitivity needed to be shown Jews in the military "do not seem to have got down to lower ranks."

Still, Fuerst says: "You cannot say the Bundeswehr is anti-Semitic because we have anti-Semitic incidents."

Although Germany has a draft army, Jewish citizens are exempted from service if their parents or grandparents are Holocaust survivors.

However, with the recent surge in the German Jewish population and a growing sense that Jews will be able to live safely in Germany, some young German Jews are choosing army service.

The Jewish community is negotiating with the army about the possibility of offering recruits kosher meals as well as the services of an army chaplain.

Meanwhile, Meyer's request to be transferred to the military unit in his home town of Muenster was eventually granted, and he describes the situation there as more tolerant.

Nevertheless, he counts the days until April, when his military service will end. □

(JTA correspondent Deidre Berger in Frankfurt contributed to this report.)

## German reversal allows fund aiding Czech survivors to open

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — A sudden reversal by the German government has enabled a fund to aid victims of Nazism to begin operating as originally planned.

The Czech Republic and Germany agreed earlier this year to launch the Fund for the Future on Jan. 1, 1998.

But earlier this month Germany said it would postpone the launch due to political upheaval in the Czech Republic — the Czech government collapsed Nov. 30, a new prime minister was named Dec. 16 and the country is preparing for early elections.

Czech President Vaclav Havel and local Jewish leaders voiced anger at the announced delay, mainly because at least 500 Holocaust survivors in the Czech Republic have died since the agreement to set up the fund was signed early in 1997.

The fund will finance community projects for Czech victims of Nazism, but is not expected to provide individual compensation. There are now about 8,000 Czech survivors, 2,000 of whom are Jewish. Germany will give about \$76 million to the fund, and the Czech government will contribute about \$12.9 million.

Members of the Czech Jewish community attributed the German government's turnaround to internal criticism — from religious groups and political parties such as the German Social Democrats and the Green Party — and to pressure from abroad.

A major factor in the turnaround, they said, was pressure by Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, which sent a letter to the German government imploring it not to postpone the fund's launch date. □

## Jewish extremist convicted of hanging anti-Islamic posters

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli woman was tearful — but not regretful — after she was convicted this week of racism for plastering posters across a West Bank town depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed as a pig.

Tatyana Suskin, a 26-year-old Russian immigrant, was found guilty Tuesday of putting the posters up on storefronts June 27 in Hebron.

The verdict came as Muslims prepared to begin the holy month of Ramadan, and the same week two Jewish extremists were arrested for allegedly plotting to throw a pig on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Suskin's posters, which used an animal considered unclean in Islam to depict the founder of Islam, stirred angry reactions throughout the Muslim world and hampered already-stalled peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians — despite condemnations from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli President Ezer Weizman.

In announcing the verdict, the judge ruled that freedom of speech did not absolve Suskin, a supporter of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane's outlawed Kach movement.

When asked about the verdict, Suskin said she had no regrets and was quoted as saying, "I don't agree with what he decided."

She added, "It's a shame to see all the heavies" accused of criminal offenses get off, but "small people like me don't."

Suskin faces a maximum sentence of 26 years for her act.

She also faces possible jail time for throwing rocks at a car driven by a Palestinian a day after putting up the posters. □

## Authorities investigate fires set at two Los Angeles shuls

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A task force of federal and local officials is investigating fires, apparently set by arsonists, at two neighboring Orthodox synagogues here.

Although authorities have not ruled out the possibility of hate crimes, the absence of the usual anti-Semitic graffiti has led them to believe that the fires were set by one or more transients.

The two Sunday evening fires blackened and damaged the buildings of Congregation Kehillas Yaakov and Congregation Shaarei Tefilah, located in the city's traditionally Jewish Fairfax district.

A student arriving for a 9 p.m. Talmud class Sunday discovered the fire at Kehillas Yaakov, a congregation of 100 families. Damage to carpets, linoleum and ceilings is estimated at \$7,000 to \$10,000.

Aftereffects of the fire at Shaarei Tefilah, which apparently burned only briefly, were discovered Monday morning. Damage to the congregation of 271 families was put at several thousand dollars.

Despite the limited damages, authorities are taking the incidents seriously.

Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan expressed his shock and ordered increased police patrols in the area.

"Our police and fire departments, along with the FBI and federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms officers, have been on the scene and will investigate these fires thoroughly," Riordan said.

The federal and local law enforcement officials are members of the House of Worship Task Force, set up to probe the 1996 series of arson attacks on black churches in the South.

The team's preliminary investigations will be forwarded to Washington, where officials will determine whether to launch a full-scale civil rights inquiry.

The attacks came the same week as three arms were torn off a publicly displayed menorah in the New York suburb of Scarsdale, N.Y., and vandals spray-painted a swastika on an Islamic symbol displayed near the White House. □

## Extremist French leader Le Pen convicted for Holocaust remark

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen has been convicted for saying that the Nazi gas chambers were "a mere detail" of World War II.

Le Pen, 69, was not present when a court in a suburb of Paris ordered him to pay about \$50,000 to finance publication of the judgment in 16 newspapers. He was also ordered to pay symbolic amounts to 11 different human-rights and anti-racist organizations.

The charges stem from remarks Le Pen made in an address in the German city of Munich on Dec. 5.

"When you pick up a 1,000-page book on World War II, concentration camps take up two pages and gas chambers 10 to 15 lines — in other words, a detail," he said.

Le Pen, who denies that he is anti-Semitic, made the remarks while sharing a platform with Franz Schoenhuber, a former Waffen-SS officer and president of Germany's far-right Republican Party, who has just published a book in praise of Le Pen.

The charges against Le Pen, leader of the National Front Party, were brought under a 1990 French law that forbids the denial of crimes against humanity.

Similar remarks by Le Pen to French radio and TV interviewers in 1987 elicited strong public criticism and a fine of about \$1.5 million.

A recent opinion poll indicated that the anti-immigration National Front Party would win the support of 16 percent of French voters in next March's regional elections, which would be the highest percentage the party has received. □

## Illinois boy becomes youngest 'major donor' to Holocaust museum

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — A 9-year-old boy from Illinois has become the youngest "major donor" to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Daniel Obeler donated the money he won in an international art contest for children to the museum.

Obeler won one of the first prizes in the Northwest Airlines-sponsored contest for his artwork titled "The Windy City," which depicts Chicago's landscape.

The airline donated \$5,000 in the name of each winner to his or her favorite charity — and Obeler selected the Holocaust museum in Washington.

"I wanted to give my award to a good cause that dealt with humanitarian issues and the Jewish people. The Holocaust museum does both," he said.

He presented the money to the museum Monday, just before taking a private tour of the exhibits with a guide who was just a few years older than Obeler is now when she was deported to a concentration camp in 1944.

Obeler is helping "touch young people throughout the United States, only a few of whom share his intuitive understanding of the importance of our mission and message," said the museum's director of development, Marc Breslaw. □