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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Compensation pact reached

Germany reached an agreement in principle to set up a compensation fund for Holocaust survivors living in Eastern Europe.

The Bonn government will pay about \$27 million a year for the next four years into the fund as a result of the agreement reached between German officials and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The agreement, which still has to be approved by the Claims Conference executive committee, would mean that impoverished survivors living in Eastern Europe would finally receive at least token compensation for their persecution by the Nazis.

German and Jewish negotiators reportedly agreed that pensions would only be paid to survivors who have received no other financial compensation and who need financial help.

A German legislator who has campaigned for years in favor of compensation payments for Eastern European survivors, said it was unacceptable that one-time payments of between \$273 and \$1,092 already given to some victims in Poland and the former Soviet Union should disqualify them from receiving monthly pensions.

Germany paid more than \$54 billion in compensation to Holocaust survivors since World War II. But those living in Soviet-bloc countries were unable to apply for compensation during the Cold War.

Settlement plans criticized

Israel drew international criticism for reported plans to build 30,000 apartments in the West Bank during the next 20 years.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, wrapping up a four-day visit to the region aimed at boosting stalled peace talks, said any actions to expand settlements would not help the peace process. Britain, which holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, said it was "disturbed" by the reported expansion plans. [Page 3]

Arafat speaks of 'last chance'

Palestinian officials described U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross' four-day visit to the region as a failure.

A spokesman for Yasser Arafat said that the Palestinian Authority chairman considers his meeting with President Clinton later this month a "last chance" to save the peace process. [Page 3]

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Israel not making the grade in educating Ethiopian youth

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The rescue of Ethiopian Jewry stands as an enduring source of pride for the Jewish community — a heroic undertaking that exemplified what Israel and Zionism are all about.

Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991 brought tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, where the promise of a better life awaited them.

But while the government's absorption efforts have achieved important successes in helping Ethiopian immigrants find affordable homes and jobs, Israel's educational system has, by all accounts, failed to meet the community's special needs.

Some Jewish leaders view it as nothing short of a crisis that threatens to tear at the fabric of Israeli society.

"The last thing that Israel needs is to have the development over the next generation of a black underclass," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"It would be disastrous for Israel, for all of us who took such pride in the extraordinary rescue of the Ethiopian community."

Now, a coalition of Jewish organizations in Israel and the United States is stepping up its efforts to convince the Israeli government to take decisive action.

Specifically, advocates are urging the government to allocate funding for a plan that calls for intervention in 10 key communities with a high concentration of Ethiopian immigrants.

Without an immediate and targeted expansion of educational programs, they warn, the Ethiopian community will only grow further alienated from Israeli society.

Indeed, many Ethiopian youths are beginning to identify more as Africans than as Jews, experts say.

The coalition's efforts to convince the Israeli government to allocate the necessary resources, however, have so far failed to yield concrete results.

It is not the government's commitment to addressing the problem that advocates question, but its willingness to make the issue a top priority.

"We're on the same side. This is one of those issues in which there is no ideological difference whatsoever," said Martin Raffel, associate executive vice chairman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

"All of us just have to reach a little bit deeper into our pockets and into our energies to make something good happen here."

There are about 60,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel, most of whom came from an agrarian environment and had little or no education.

Seventy-five percent of the community's adults arrived in Israel illiterate even in their native Amharic.

About 60 percent of the Ethiopians are younger than 18, with some 28,000 in formal educational settings.

From the beginning, experts say, the deck is stacked against these children, as indicated by these findings:

- Only 50 percent of Ethiopian children attend preschool at age three, compared to 90 percent of other Israelis;
- Ethiopian children quickly fall behind in elementary school in acquiring basic academic skills;
- In high school, 75 percent of Ethiopian students are channeled into non-academic vocational tracks;
- Only 10 percent matriculate from high school, compared to 40 percent among the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Yad Vashem revokes honor

One of Israel's most prominent artists compared the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial to Disneyland after the institution's governing board revoked a decision to award him a prize.

Yigal Tumarkin, who has called God "a tragedy for the world and the Jews," had been slated to receive Yad Vashem's \$5,000 Zusman Prize for his life's work. But officials reversed their decision after a newspaper reported that Tumarkin had been quoted as saying in 1989 that "when you look at the ultra-Orthodox Jews, you understand the Holocaust."

Poll shows separation favored

A large majority of Israelis and Palestinians are in favor of a complete separation between the two populations, according to a recent survey conducted jointly by Tel Aviv University and a Palestinian research institute.

The poll showed that 81 percent of the Israeli respondents and 63 percent of the Palestinians interviewed support a closed border.

Court backs Shin Bet methods

Israel's High Court of Justice ruled that the Shin Bet domestic security service could continue to apply physical pressure to a suspected Hamas terrorist until an expanded panel of justices issues a ruling on a petition filed by several Palestinian prisoners who complained of being tortured during their interrogations.

A ruling is expected in the coming weeks.

Israelis arrested in insurance plot

An Israeli police officer and two other Israelis have been arrested on suspicion of involvement in a plan to blow up four Greek ships in order to get an insurance payment, according to Israeli media reports.

The suspects have denied the charges against them.

general population, and the number of dropouts is steadily increasing; and

- Ethiopian parents have little or no contact with their children's schools.

"For those of us who spent a lot of time in the [Ethiopian] villages in the 1980s and saw these same children walking barefoot five miles each way to get to a one-room school, I can't tell you how heartbreaking it is to see them failing to become educated in Israel," said Barbara Ribakove Gordon, executive director of the New York-based North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry.

"It is just unacceptable because we know that the potential is there," she said.

The effort to address the absorption crisis is being undertaken on two fronts.

Led by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Israel operation, an Israeli coalition of key government ministries, educational organizations and advocacy groups for the Ethiopian community has been developing and implementing programs to raise the achievement levels of Ethiopian children.

An American counterpart group, spearheaded by the JDC and consisting of several mainstream Jewish groups, has been playing an advocacy role in trying to convince the Israeli government to make the issue a higher priority and back up its commitment to Ethiopian integration with the necessary resources.

Together, the advocates have developed and endorsed a "Ten-City Plan for Integration in Israeli Society."

It calls on the government to allocate \$12 million to programs ranging from early childhood to youth-at-risk in 10 communities that are home to 60 percent of all the country's Ethiopians.

After the first year, the program would then be expanded to 20 other towns and cities with sizable Ethiopian populations.

Projected costs would rise to \$18 million per year.

Although some American Jewish individuals have been working to raise funds to help meet some of the costs of the program, organizational officials here stress that only the Israeli government has the means to intervene in a way that would bring immediate and sustained results.

The government, for its part, has maintained that Ethiopian absorption is a high priority that has been assigned unprecedented resources.

So far the Ministry of Education has responded favorably to the initiative and to the education campaign, according to Jewish officials here.

In a recent letter to Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League and co-chairman of the American coalition, Israeli Education Minister Zevulun Hammer commended "the most welcome and worthy activities" undertaken by the coalition.

However, the government has yet to officially endorse the specific plan or allocate funding.

Although the 1998 budget recently approved by the Knesset does not contain funding specifically earmarked for the program, as advocates had urged, they remain hopeful that the government might draw on discretionary education funds to begin funding the plan in the current year.

Given some of Israel's other preoccupations — the peace process, terrorism, religious pluralism — focusing attention on the Ethiopian situation remains all the more difficult.

But unlike so many of the intractable issues confronting the country, advocates stress that the problem of Ethiopian educational integration is both finite and manageable.

"The problems are new, the numbers of people involved are small, the goodwill is still there, and this is the time to solve them," said Gordon of the North American Conference.

Jewish officials, meanwhile, emphasize that time is of the essence.

"Every day that a kid falls behind can impact on the rest of his life," Foxman said.

The loss, he added, is detrimental not only to the children, but to the Jewish community, to Israel and to history.

"This is this little jewel that we all carried and said, 'Look at what Israel is, look at what the Jewish people are about, look at what Zionism is,'" Foxman said. "If we don't deal with it now it will haunt us and it will mar the promise of Israel and all that it represents." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Greek Jews voice gratitude

The Greek Jewish community issued a statement expressing its gratitude to the government and the Greek Orthodox Church for helping save Jews during the Holocaust.

The statement came after Turkey, under fire from Athens for its treatment of its Kurdish minority, accused Greece of turning Jews over to the Nazis.

During the war, the Greek people "protected and helped fugitive Greek Jews as much as possible, putting their own lives in danger," according to the statement issued last Friday by the Central Jewish Board of Greece, an umbrella organization of all Greek Jewish communities.

Unlike the Vatican, which has been criticized for its silence during the Holocaust, the Greek Orthodox Church issued a strongly worded letter to the German authorities protesting the deportation of Jews.

Nor was this the only instance of the Orthodox church's support for Jews. When the Nazis called on the bishop of the Greek island of Zakynthos to submit a list of all the Jews living there, the bishop delivered a list with only one name on it — his own.

Turkish-Greek tensions were heightened recently when Greece successfully blocked Turkey's request to become a member of the European Union.

Chirac blasts Dreyfus Affair

French President Jacques Chirac described his country's treatment of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus as a "dark spot" on his country's history.

Chirac made the comment in a letter issued 100 years after Emile Zola penned his famous "J'accuse" in defense of Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer wrongfully convicted on charges of spying for Germany.

Insurer may have helped Nazis

Executives of the German insurance firm Allianz AG Holding worked closely with Nazi officials to seize policies held by Jews, according to documents uncovered in Austrian state archives.

The Nazi-era documents, revealed by Terrell Hunt, president of Risk International, a Houston-based insurance research firm, show that the firm also allegedly rejected claims for property destroyed by Nazi soldiers.

Cameraman keeps filming

Three Israeli soldiers and a cameraman for an Israeli television station were reported in improved condition after they were wounded last week in a roadside explosion in southern Lebanon set off by Hezbollah gunmen.

A crew member working with the cameraman said his wounded colleague continued to film even after he was being evacuated on a stretcher.

U.S. criticizes reported plan to expand Israeli settlements

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has drawn international criticism for its reported plans to build 30,000 apartments in the West Bank during the next 20 years.

The settlement expansion plans, which were reported to be in various stages of approval by the Israeli government, appeared last Friday in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz as U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross was wrapping up a four-day shuttle to the region.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denied the report during a Cabinet meeting Sunday, but was criticized by hawkish Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon, who said the premier should not feel he has to issue such a denial.

Commenting on the Ha'aretz report, Ross said any actions to expand settlements would not help the peace process. Britain, which holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, said it was "disturbed" by the reported expansion plans.

Israeli officials said the expansion was meant to accommodate natural population growth in the coming years.

The Ha'aretz report appeared a day after the United States criticized Israel's approval of plans to expand by several hundred homes the West Bank settlement of Efrat. Such construction does not "create the environment required for successful negotiations," James Rubin, State Department spokesman, said last week in Washington.

Meanwhile, Palestinian officials described Ross' visit to the region as a failure.

A spokesman for Yasser Arafat said that the Palestinian Authority chairman considers his meeting with President Clinton next week a "last chance" to save the peace process.

Reflecting the increased tensions in the absence of any substantive progress during Ross' visit, Palestinians clashed with Israeli troops Saturday in the West Bank town of Hebron.

Seven Arabs and one Israeli border policeman were injured during the protest, sparked by Palestinian denunciations of Israeli settlement plans and the slow pace of the peace process.

During its meeting Sunday, the Israeli Cabinet discussed the extent of a further redeployment of Israeli troops from the West Bank.

Netanyahu said last week that he was considering only one further redeployment before moving directly to the final-status negotiations, but there were reports Sunday that he was backing away from that position.

Israel was to make three redeployments under the terms of the Oslo accords, and Washington is said to be pressing Netanyahu to live up to that commitment.

Ha'aretz cited American officials as saying Clinton is expected to be publicly critical of Netanyahu if the prime minister brings with him a proposal for a further redeployment that falls short of American expectations for at least a 10 percent transfer.

Netanyahu told coalition members last week that a decision on the scope of the redeployment would be made before his departure for Washington, where he is scheduled to meet with Clinton on Jan. 20. But he added that it would be implemented several months later, after the Palestinians had demonstrated that they were ready to fulfill their commitments under already signed accords.

The Cabinet focused much of its discussion Sunday on the Palestinian conditions which must be met before a redeployment is carried out. Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh presented four main areas, drawn up as a result of consultations with the defense establishment and the attorney general, in which the Palestinians must act:

canceling of those sections of the Palestinian national covenant that call for Israel's destruction;

- taking action against terrorism and preventing the outbreak of violence;
- limiting the size of the Palestinian police force; and
- restricting the activities of the Palestinian Authority to those areas under its control.

Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi proposed that the extradition to Israel of suspected Palestinian terrorists be added to the list. □

Rabbinical court helps to free women denied religious divorce

By Eric J. Greenberg
New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — On a cloudy Wednesday afternoon, the sidewalks of lower Fifth Avenue in Manhattan are bustling with last-minute holiday shoppers.

But two flights up, in a nondescript building, a half-dozen rabbis and laypeople are concerned only with the liberation of Jewish women.

They comprise a controversial new rabbinical court, or *beit din*, which is granting speedy, affordable divorces to *agunot* — known as “woman in chains” — whose husbands refuse to grant them a religious divorce, or *get*.

The court is embroiled in an international controversy, with a major Israeli rabbi condemning it as unqualified.

At home, a group of rabbis in the New York borough of Queens has threatened to excommunicate the court's rabbinic authority.

The court convenes in a small room dominated by a rectangular table and a few framed pictures of Israel.

Bracha, a dark-skinned Israeli, enters the room, head slightly bowed and nervous.

She softly says she fears for her life from her estranged husband and took out an order of protection against him.

The 30-something mother of three recounts the episodes where he physically abused her — and threatened to kill her.

She has a civil divorce but her husband, who pays no child support, won't give her a *get*, which is required by *halachah*, or Jewish law, in order for her to remarry or have relations with another man.

“I feel sick because of this,” she tells the court. “I have children to care for. I can't live like this.”

Rachel, wearing a blue head covering and long skirt, painfully recounts learning about her husband's secret addictions, his angry threats against her and her children, his violations of religious law and how several Brooklyn rabbis totally ignored her repeated pleas for help.

Saying that the mainstream Orthodox rabbinical courts have failed them, and that they cannot take the physical and psychological abuse anymore, these women, whose names have been changed, recently turned to the *beit din* of Rabbis Moshe Morgenstern and Emanuel Rackman.

Morgenstern, a 67-year-old accountant, is determined to liberate these women from what he calls their dead marriages. He is joined in what he considers a sacred duty by Rackman, the 80-year-old chancellor emeritus of Israel's Bar-Ilan University.

“That these situations cry out for justice is obvious,” says Rackman. “We are morally obligated to relieve them of the threats and fear.”

The idea seems to be catching on: Since it was established in June, the court has granted nearly 60 *gets* to women from across the United States.

In essence, Morgenstern finds legal loopholes to invalidate the marriage and grant a *get* or an annulment.

For example, he will find technical flaws in the original marriage ceremony, like declaring that the witnesses were invalid because they were not Sabbath observers.

More likely, in the case of physical abuse of the wives or addictions of the husbands, Morgenstern declares those problems to be pre-existing conditions the husband hid at the time of marriage. In other words, he rules that the men perpetrated a fraud, thus voiding the marriage.

But several leading experts on Jewish divorce law say that the new *beit din* is “totally without foundation.”

“Their fundamental approach is profoundly flawed,” says one Orthodox expert on Jewish marital law who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

“They are engaging in a profound misunderstanding motivated by their profound love for Jewish women.”

But Morgenstern says he studied for years with the late Torah sage Rabbi Moshe Feinstein to gain the knowledge and authority to rule on these cases. He says the process he is employing was performed by rabbis as far back as 1,000 years ago.

Without a *get*, women are in Jewish limbo. If they date or remarry, they are considered adulteresses, and any resulting children are classified as bastards for religious purposes.

In Rachel's case, Morgenstern ruled that the husband's alcoholism and sex addictions were pre-existing conditions, and would grant an annulment.

Following questions about the alleged brutality, her children, her past and her future plans, the court also agrees to grant Bracha an annulment. Morgenstern then writes the *get*, which the court keeps. Bracha gets a certificate.

“I feel like I've been let out of jail,” Bracha confides to an observer after she receives the *get*.

But a rabbinic expert with a major Orthodox group says the Morgenstern *beit din* is profoundly misinterpreting Jewish law.

He says the *beit din* wrongly includes in its definition of fraud instances where it cannot be proven that the problem was pre-existing and that the husband knew about it.

As to whether a physically abused woman should be quickly given a *get*, the rabbi says, “The fact he's [her husband's] beating her doesn't mean the marriage is void.”

The *beit din* and Morgenstern's methods have also incurred the wrath of Orthodox rabbis from Jerusalem to New York.

Former Israeli Chief Sephardi Rabbi Ovadia Yosef recently denounced the *beit din* as unqualified.

A rabbinic group, Rabbanei Kew Garden Hills in Queens, wrote a letter of censure warning Morgenstern to stop granting *gets* “or we will take steps against you.”

Morgenstern says that beside theology, what lies at the heart of his critics is economics, because his court is a financial threat to rival rabbinical courts who charge as much as \$600 a session. He says 99 percent of women are not charged for his *beit din*'s services.

Asked why more rabbis are not considering joining the *beit din*, Susan Aranoff, co-founder of Agunah Inc., a women's advocacy group, says, “It's the same question about why the rabbis haven't done more for *agunot* all the years. It's misogyny and cowardice.”

It remains to be seen how the new *beit din* will affect the Orthodox community. Morgenstern says women should have no problems remarrying.

Indeed, he says some potential suitors who have questioned the veracity of the *get*, including several from the fervently Orthodox community, were satisfied after his explanation of the sources. “I tell them if you love her, come to me and I'll explain that this was the only way she could achieve her freedom.” □