



Daily News Bulletin

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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel, Iraq exchange messages

Israel sent a message to Baghdad that it would not launch a pre-emptive strike against Iraq, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent the message last week via Russia's ambassador to Israel, Michael Bogdanov, who in turn conveyed a message from Iraqi officials that Iraq would not strike Israel if attacked by the United States, the paper reported.

Hamas threatens Israel

Hamas militants threatened to strike at Israel if the United States launches an attack on Iraq.

The U.S. State Department condemned the threat to strike "deep into the Zionist entity," which Hamas distributed in a leaflet to news organizations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

High-level talks reported

Israeli and Palestinian officials would neither confirm nor deny a report that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met at his home with two top Palestinian negotiators in an effort to move the deadlocked peace process forward.

The reported meeting took place after the United States warned the two sides to make progress or Washington would make public its own formula, according to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot.

Another Maccabiah suit filed

The widow of an Australian athlete killed as a result of the bridge collapse at the start of last July's Maccabiah Games in Israel filed a \$3.5 million negligence suit against the Jewish state, the event's organizers and the builders of the bridge.

The suit, which was filed in the Jerusalem District Court on behalf of the husband of Elizabeth Sawicki, was the second to be filed in Israel by a relative of one of the Maccabiah victims.

2,000 join Orthodox conference

Some 2,000 women and men gathered for the Second International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy at a midtown Manhattan hotel.

Leading modern Orthodox rabbis and founders of the nascent Orthodox feminist movement focused on the nuts-and-bolts of advancing their cause at the gathering. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Complacent Israelis begin to think seriously about Iraq

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With a single offhand comment, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai has sent Israelis into a panic.

In a radio interview, Mordechai suggested that Israelis buy plastic sheeting and masking tape to be equipped if and when the order comes to prepare a "sealed room" to deal with an unconventional weapons assault from Iraq.

Within moments of the interview earlier this week, supermarkets and hardware stores throughout the Tel Aviv area — the principal target of Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles in the 1991 Persian Gulf War — were jammed with shoppers heeding the minister's advice.

The Israel Defense Force's distribution centers handed out thousands of gas masks to, and exchanged tens of thousands of gas masks for, citizens made all the more anxious by Mordechai's comment.

With U. S. forces now poised to possibly attack Iraq any day, the soft-spoken Mordechai has been at pains during the recent nerve-racking weeks to calm the Israeli public.

The probability of Scuds again raining down on Israel in the event of an American attack on Iraq is remote, he insists — an assessment that covers biological and chemical weapons as well as the conventional explosives that the Iraqi leader launched at Israel seven years ago.

But Saddam's defiance of the U.N. Security Council, escalating tensions between Washington and Baghdad, and Mordechai's latest comment on individual Israeli preparedness have now jolted the Israeli public from its apparent complacency about an Iraqi threat.

For seven years, Israelis have been urged to come to IDF distribution centers to exchange their gas mask kits for more advanced versions. But millions of citizens neglected to come.

The failure of Israelis to renew their civil defense equipment is part of a nationwide psychological phenomenon that can only be described as denial.

After weeks of sitting in sealed rooms — none of the Scuds carried biological or chemical warheads — millions of people tore off the tape that sealed these rooms in March 1991 and promptly proceeded to put the entire episode out of their minds.

Suddenly, thanks to Saddam and CNN, they are being forced to relive it.

And though Iraq has not threatened Israel as it did seven years ago, Mordechai has been explaining that the sealed room is still recommended by chemical warfare experts as the best protection against chemical and biological agents.

Underground air-raid shelters, if they are not equipped with sophisticated filtering systems, can become deathtraps in an unconventional attack since chemical or biological agents tend to sink and settle.

In a well-sealed room, on the other hand, residents with gas masks can live comfortably for several hours until the initial threat is over.

In 1991, Saddam did not fire any non-conventional weaponry — possibly because he was deterred from doing so by the explicit American, and implicit Israeli, threats of a devastating response.

This time, in the absence of the constraints imposed in 1991 by the need to maintain the U.S.-led international coalition against Saddam, Israel has broadly hinted that it will

MIDEAST FOCUS

Rabbinate council holds vote

Israel's Chief Rabbinate Council held elections after the High Court of Justice rejected a petition from the Na'amat women's organization demanding that women be allowed to participate in the vote.

Na'amat maintained that the lack of a single woman among the voters represented intentional discrimination.

Reform movement petitions court

The Reform movement in Israel petitioned the High Court of Justice to compel the religious council in Netanya to allow a Reform woman, Joyce Brenner, to sit on the council. The petitioners argued that the council has not met in order to avoid implementing the decision handed down by the court six months ago.

Palestinians march in Bethlehem

Hundreds of Palestinian students marched in the West Bank town of Bethlehem to express their support for Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

The students called the head of the Palestinian police a "coward and an agent of the Americans" after he issued a recent ban on such marches.

Bakshi-Doron goes to Morocco

Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi is attending an interfaith meeting in Morocco, where representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are scheduled to discuss how their religious leaders can help forge world peace. The meeting will "condemn all kinds of violence and extremism," said Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron.

Israel seeks Polish compliance

Israel called on Poland to uphold a \$1 billion contract for the Jewish state to upgrade Polish military aircraft.

Israeli officials claim that the new Polish government has refrained from implementing the pact signed by Warsaw's previous leaders.

respond if attacked, even if the attack is conventional. But is Israel prepared for a war with Iraq?

In recent weeks, Mordechai has been trying to explain why there are not enough masks and anti-chemical injections available, why there are long lines at IDF distribution centers and a lack of air-raid shelters.

He cannot blame Israeli public complacency for these conditions. Instead, Mordechai says that the government slashed civil defense expenditures two years ago — a decision that seemed reasonable at the time but suddenly seems short-sighted.

The IDF, without embarrassment, has scoured Europe and America to urgently replenish its depleted stores of gas masks and other civil defense equipment.

Mordechai says that in a matter of days everyone in Israel — citizen, tourist and illegal foreign worker — will have a protective kit. In an interview over the weekend with the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot, Mordechai suggested that the United States may delay its attack until Israel's civil defenses are in place.

"I am sure they will take our state of readiness into account," he said.

That would include calling up key reserves in civil defense units, and, presumably, deploying U.S.-produced Patriot anti-missile missile units at vital locations. One such unit has already been set up near the southern town of Arad in the Negev.

Of course, everyone here hopes that these preparations will prove unnecessary and that Israel will emerge unscathed from the present crisis.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday that Israel is not a party to the showdown — nor does it wish to be. It is also hoped that this present emergency will help Israelis, collectively and individually, work through the earlier, traumatic episode in terms of their mental resilience.

Just the same, many Israeli households have decided to ignore it all — to do nothing. No mask, no plastic, no tape. No CNN.

Indeed, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz recommended this posture in an editorial.

To set up sealed rooms again, the paper argued, would signal to Iraq that Israel's determination to strike back instantly and massively is not as absolute as its leaders intimate. One problem with this argument, however, is that it is based on the cool rationalism of deterrence. But the threat from Baghdad may come at a moment when Saddam is all but destroyed — and no longer amenable to reason or deterrence.

In other words, the danger that he may fling any chemical or biological warheads in his possession at the Jewish state may arise not at the beginning of a prolonged U.S. onslaught, but rather when he is defeated and desperate.

Whatever the outcome of the Iraq crisis, the threat of ballistic missiles and unconventional warheads is here to stay in what Netanyahu calls "the real Middle East."

Even if Iraq is neutralized, Netanyahu said this week, Iran and other sworn enemies of Israel are still plotting and assembling their own arsenals of mass destruction. □

Web site creates Saddam-O-Meter

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — An Israeli Web site has created a wry, up-to-the-minute way to capture the Israeli mood over the current crisis with Iraq: the Saddam-O-Meter.

The meter, which is part of the Virtual Jerusalem site, asks Israeli users to evaluate their mood regarding the crisis as calm, concerned, nervous or panic.

An arrow indicates how the votes have come in.

Quotations from world leaders or newspapers are also ranked — a quote on Monday from the Russian ambassador to Syria that "I believe there is Iraqi flexibility" elicited a rating somewhere between calm and concerned; a comment by the U.S. secretary of defense, William Cohen, that Iraq "has enough chemical and biological warfare to do considerable damage in the area" tipped the all-out panic line.

"Every official statement and news report elicit a response in the hair-trigger environment of the Middle East," said the president of Virtual Jerusalem, Avi Moskowitz. "Now our Internet users around the world can instantly track public response in Israel to the latest political babble."

Virtual Jerusalem — www.virtualjerusalem.com — also contains links to more than 300 Jewish sites, including JTA. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Jewish leader named to DNC

The Democratic National Committee named Philadelphia Jewish activist and lawyer Leonard Barrack as its finance chairman.

Barrack has maintained active relations with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the United Jewish Appeal and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

He succeeds Alan Solomont, another Jewish activist, and joins former AIPAC chairman Steve Grossman, now DNC national chair, in the Democratic Party's top echelons.

O.U. joins court brief

The Orthodox Union participated in a friend-of-the-court brief urging the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to reinstate a lawsuit brought by a Maryland college against the state for denying its application for education funds.

Columbia Union College, which is affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, had applied for state funding in 1990, but the state rejected the application, saying that the constitution prohibits funding of a "pervasively sectarian" institution.

The O.U., citing recent Supreme Court decisions, is arguing that religious institutions cannot be denied government funding as long as they meet the same religion-neutral criteria as non-sectarian institutions.

Papon witness gets death threat

A German prosecutor who was scheduled to give evidence against alleged Nazi collaborator Maurice Papon returned home after receiving a death threat.

Rolf Holfort, who has heart problems, was a state prosecutor at the 1980 trial of Kurt Lischka, the head of the Gestapo in occupied Paris.

Foundation: Camps need repairs

A German foundation responsible for maintaining two former Nazi concentration camps said it needs millions of dollars to carry out repairs.

The foundation, which preserves the Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück camps, said it would seek additional funds from Germany and was also considering applying to the European Union for support.

Jews sentenced by Paris court

Two militant Jews were sentenced by a Paris court to six months in jail for participating in an attack on Nazi sympathizers.

The two, who also received 30-month suspended sentences, were among some 30 members of the Betar group who attacked the Nazi sympathizers in 1991 with baseball bats and tear gas. Eleven mostly elderly people were injured, including a 77-year-old woman who was left paralyzed.

Survivors in Hungary receive Swiss Holocaust fund checks

By Michael J. Jordan

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Here in the Hungarian capital, there are thousands of sorrowful stories similar to that of Ilona Debreczeny.

Deported by Hungarian fascists at the age of 16, she suffered at four Nazi concentration camps between August 1944 and May 1945. Along the way, she came under Dr. Josef Mengele's knife at Auschwitz and her teeth were knocked out at Mauthausen. At a recent ceremony, the chairman of the Swiss Holocaust Memorial Fund directed his comments to survivors like Debreczeny, 71.

Rolf Bloch spoke here last week at an event marking the disbursement of \$400 payments from the fund — the \$190 million pool created a year ago by Switzerland's three largest banks to quiet the furor over Switzerland's financial ties to the Nazis — to Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivors.

"The Swiss fund is respectfully grateful to be able to bring some relief to Hungary," said Bloch, who heads both the Swiss Jewish community and the fund. "This is a sign of solidarity between the Swiss and you. Please take it as it is meant — it is not a compensation, it is not restitution, but a gesture of good will."

But there was no relief on the melancholic, lightly powdered face of Debreczeny or the other half-dozen survivors in attendance.

"This is a gesture of people who had the money and heart to help us a little bit," said Debreczeny. "But this money will not make the past be forgotten."

Still, with tens of thousands of indigent Holocaust survivors scattered across Eastern Europe, the cash will be put to quick use. During the more than four decades of the Cold War, virtually no compensation trickled to survivors in the Communist bloc. Now, Holocaust survivors here are finally getting their due.

The Hungarian government began last fall to pay monthly pensions ranging from \$50 to \$200, depending on a recipient's age, to the country's 20,000 survivors.

The Swiss fund's payments were distributed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to some 7,000 survivors in the two weeks before the Feb. 12 ceremony, and the others will soon receive their checks.

Germany is expected to follow suit later this year by making its first payments to survivors in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. As a result, a handful of survivors here have notified the Budapest office of the JDC — for decades the only agency providing assistance to them — that they no longer need its money.

In November, the first round of payments went to some 82 survivors in Latvia. Ultimately, each needy survivor in Eastern and Central Europe, including Latvia and Hungary, will receive total payments of \$1,000 from the Swiss fund.

That's little solace to elderly Jews like Hilda Barinkai. In August, she'll turn 100.

"It came too late for us," said Barinkai, echoing widespread sentiment. "At a certain age, people don't have dreams, don't have wishes. If it had come 30 years ago, when we still had something to do, something to spend it on, it would have been better. Now all I can do is take the taxi more often." □

Maccabi heads meet with Australians

SYDNEY (JTA) — Anger and tension marked the first meeting here between the leaders of the Maccabi World Union and Australian Jews on last summer's Maccabiah Games bridge tragedy.

Speaker after speaker criticized the organizers of the Maccabiah Games at the meeting, which was attended by close to 150 members of the Australian Maccabiah team, their families, friends and communal leaders. There were also calls for officials of the international sports body to resign — pending a judicial inquiry.

The union's president, Ronnie Bakalarz, and its chairman, Uzi Netanel, maintained that they bore no responsibility for last July's bridge collapse, in which four Australian members of the Maccabiah team died and dozens were injured. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Orthodox feminists move from fringes to mainstream*By Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

NEW YORK (JTA) — What a difference a year makes.

For the organizers of the Second International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy, the past year has seen major leaps forward in their primary areas of concern — Torah learning for Orthodox women and expanding the ways in which women can serve as religious leaders.

The year between the inaugural conference, which was fraught with trepidation and nervous excitement for organizers, and the second, which was held in Manhattan on Feb. 15 and 16, also marked a notable change in the way their issues are regarded in the Orthodox community.

At a time when Orthodox organizations and their leaders continue marching to the right on a panoply of issues — from pluralism to the peace process — Orthodox women's calls for empowerment seem to be less controversial than they were even a year ago. This time around, conference participants and organizers alike were no longer asking whether it was possible to reconcile Orthodoxy and feminism. This time, they were doing it.

"We're part of the mainstream now," said the conference's chairwoman, Blu Greenberg. "We are modern Orthodox, not troublemakers at the edge of the community. This was a very mainstream group."

But given that no major Orthodox organizations sponsored the event — and the one that did last year, Amit, pulled away this year — it was equally clear that this nascent movement is not fully embraced by the Orthodox establishment.

"It doesn't matter that we didn't have their sponsorship," Greenberg said. "There were plenty of women from Amit and Emunah at the conference," she said, referring to two Orthodox women's organizations. The president of Amit, Evelyn Blachor, agreed. "There were many more Amit members there, including myself, as individuals this year than last."

"As a social service organization which is about helping children in Israel, we didn't think it was part of our mission to sponsor the conference," she said, explaining her group's decision. "We did not want to offend any of our constituents and dilute or pollute our mission."

For his part, Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union, a large umbrella organization that certifies foods as kosher and represents Orthodox synagogues, said of the conference: "It's a real important area that we're interested in. I have no problem with it."

With 2,000 participants, the conference this year attracted a bigger crowd than most American Jewish religious gatherings. Only the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America and Reform movement conventions draw larger numbers.

Numbers tell much of the story of how the movement has grown — and how it is moving from being regarded as treif — non-kosher — or at least questionable, to much more acceptable.

Organizers expected about 400 people to attend last year's conference, 1,000 showed up. This year they expected 1,400 — and instead, had about 2,000 participants ranging from adolescents to septuagenarians.

Last year, organizers found it difficult to get "big-name" Orthodox rabbis and "mainstream" Orthodox women to participate, other than those who are most closely identified with the idea of promoting women as spiritual leaders within Orthodox Judaism.

This year, so many called the organizers wanting to participate that they had to turn some away, Bat Sheva Marcus, conference co-chairwoman, said during an interview as she nursed her newborn daughter in a room set aside for babies.

Last year, only a handful of men attended. This year, many more were visible — both in the audience and as speakers.

Prominent Orthodox rabbis speaking included New Yorkers Haskel Lookstein of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and Adam Mintz of Lincoln Square Synagogue, and Shlomo Riskin of the West Bank settlement of Efrat.

Also speaking at the conference this year were two members of the fervently Orthodox community — Lubavitcher Henna White, who spoke about "The Ultra-Orthodox Woman: Conceptions and Misconceptions," and Rabbi Yosef Henkin, a Jerusalem-based interpreter of Jewish law, who spoke about the ways in which traditional Jewish texts view the subject of modesty.

Last year, conference speakers were warned to stay away from applying the words "rabbinic ordination" to women. This year, there was a whole panel discussion devoted to the subject.

Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City recently became the first Orthodox synagogue to announce that it had hired a woman to work as a congregational intern, a sort of para-rabbinic role in which the intern performs those roles permitted to women.

The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, N.Y., was the second. Two more Orthodox synagogues, one in Oakland, Calif., and one in Stamford, Conn., are in the process of doing so, said Rabbi Avi Weiss, who spoke at the conference.

Sessions included those devoted to:

- Gender and traditional texts;
- Expanding women's religious roles;
- Reclaiming a mother's name in traditional ceremonies like brit milah;
- Pre- and post-nuptial agreements;
- Domestic violence;
- Creating a women's prayer group;
- The views of Rabbis Moshe Feinstein and Joseph Soloveitchik, two Orthodox religious leaders whose interpretations on women's prayer groups, pre-nuptial agreements and divorce have guided current developments in these areas.

Edith Gribetz, 73, of New York City said of her experience at the conference: "It's very exciting for my generation to see the level of scholarship here and the enthusiasm. Fifty years ago we didn't think such a thing was possible," said Gribetz, whose daughter, Beverly, is a prominent educator in Israel.

This year, like last, women also came from all over the world — from Australia and England, from Holland and Hong Kong and Israel.

"I came because I wanted to know where the zeitgeist is," said Sally Berkovic, who came to the conference from a suburb of London. "I also wanted to have my own feelings reaffirmed by other women, because I feel intellectually isolated in England, which is much more conservative on these issues," said Berkovic, author of "Under My Hat," a book about her experience as an Orthodox feminist. "And I have two young daughters," she said. "I want to know what place there will be for them in Orthodoxy." □