



# Daily News Bulletin

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81<sup>st</sup> Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Museum head to step down

Miles Lerman, the chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's council, accepted the decision of the director of the museum to step down Mar. 31, two months before his contract is set to expire.

The director, Walter Reich, was attacked last month by Lerman and other museum officials for opposing a visit by Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

### Premier seeks U.S. Jews' support

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told an American Jewish Committee gathering in Jerusalem that as the elected government of Israel, "we expect the support of organized Jewry abroad."

Netanyahu has criticized the tepid support he has received at times from American Jewish groups. The AJCommittee also met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak while in the region.

### Jordan angry at Israel

Jordanian officials were angered by the release of a report this week by an Israeli commission regarding the failed Mossad attempt last fall on a Hamas official in the Jordanian capital. The report said Israel should continue to fight terrorists wherever they might be found — which led Jordanian leaders to say this was proof that the Jewish state could never be trusted.

### Hate crimes meeting convened

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno convened a Justice Department conference on combating hate crimes. Attorneys from around the United States gathered in Washington to discuss ways of coordinating law-enforcement efforts and using community outreach to improve hate crime reporting.

### Israeli 'social covenant' sought

Supporters of an initiative to draw up a new "social covenant" on the religious status quo in Israel presented their proposal to President Ezer Weizman. The initiative's backing in official religious circles is limited to the moderate National Religious Party.

The initiative tries to distinguish between cultural and commercial activities on the Sabbath, suggesting that places of entertainment remain open, while places of commerce, like shopping centers, be closed.

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

### Orthodox women learn that knowledge is power

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Knowledge is power — and Orthodox women are applying the maxim to their lives in unprecedented numbers.

Across the Orthodox world, women are turning to Judaism's most sacred texts to understand the foundations of their faith.

"It's all over, like poppies pushing up in a winter field," said Rabbanit Chana Henkin, who is given the title "rabbanit" to acknowledge her status as a respected teacher.

Henkin founded Nishmat in Jerusalem.

Nishmat is one of several institutes created in recent years to accommodate a burgeoning number of Orthodox women who want to learn Judaism's primary texts — the Bible and its codified commentaries.

An explosion of Jewish learning among women has created a mini-revolution in the modern Orthodox world.

But the phenomenon is sparking a backlash in those Orthodox communities most sheltered from the secular world.

Leaders in the most fervently traditional part of the Orthodox world know that access to Jewish texts is a powerful thing.

And they fear that such access might tempt their women to alter their time-honored roles as wives and as mothers.

But it's a different story in the modern Orthodox world, where Jews try to mesh their traditional religious and secular lives.

Many modern Orthodox women are now seeking the same level of sophistication in their Jewish learning that they are finding at universities, say some observers of this trend.

Some 60 Orthodox women's Torah institutes now exist in Israel, according to Rabbi Daniel Sperber, a professor of Talmud at Bar-Ilan University, which is located in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan.

He was among many speakers to address the issue of Jewish learning among women at the Second International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy, held Feb. 15 and 16 in New York City.

Several similar institutes currently exist in the United States as well, mostly in New York.

When Blu Greenberg, widely known as the mother of Orthodox feminism, said in a speech at the first Jewish feminist conference in 1973 that there should be places for women to study Torah full time — as there are for men — the idea seemed so far-fetched that people in the audience laughed, she recalled.

A decade later, she began noticing "an explosion of women's learning," she said.

Today, several thousand Orthodox women are studying the Torah as a full-time pursuit.

But those women who pursue such a high level of scholarship find themselves facing a variety of vexing challenges — from finding appropriate jobs to finding husbands.

"The open question is, Where will these women go from here, what will they be doing?" asked Greenberg.

While learned Orthodox men become interpreters and scholars of Jewish law,

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Knesset mulls gas mask plan

A Knesset committee called on the Israel Defense Force to let pharmacies throughout Israel take part in handing out gas mask kits and informing the public about precautions that should be taken in the event of an Iraqi attack.

Labor Knesset member Rafi Elul said pharmacies were located in more convenient places to reach the public than IDF distribution centers and pharmacists would be able to educate the public regarding which treatments to use in the event of a biological or chemical attack.

### Iraq denies Israeli a visa

Iraq's U.N. mission turned down a visa application from an Israeli journalist to cover Secretary-General Kofi Annan's peace mission to Baghdad.

The reporter for the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot was the only reporter on a list of more than 30 U.N. correspondents to be denied an Iraqi visa.

### Rabbis say airborne prayers

Jewish spiritual leaders circled Israel's borders by plane on a mission aimed at warding off an Iraqi missile attack on Israel.

The rabbis blew a shofar and recited prayers for the protection of the Jewish state. An organizer of the flight said a similar mission was undertaken prior to the 1991 Gulf War, when Iraq fired 39 Scud missiles at Israel.

### Lebanese skeptical about peace

More than 70 percent of Lebanese citizens interviewed in a recent poll believe that peace with the Jewish state cannot be achieved while Israel's current Likud government remains in power. Another portion of the survey carried out by the Beirut-based Center for Development Studies and Projects indicates that a majority of Lebanese do not want normalized relations with Israel even if a peace agreement is reached.



## Daily News Bulletin

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writers, teachers or pulpit rabbis, there has been no communally sanctioned place for women with similar levels of talent and knowledge.

Although there have been women in Jewish history recognized as great teachers — from Beruriah, the most learned woman mentioned in the Talmud, to the late Nechama Leibowitz, a biblical commentator and Hebrew University professor who died last year — they are rare exceptions.

Today some parts of the Orthodox community are trying to find a place for a new population of learned women.

Two Orthodox congregations in New York have hired female interns whose responsibilities include teaching and lecturing.

Two more in other parts of the United States appear to be on their way to doing the same.

Scholarly women are also working in other types of settings — yeshiva high schools, Jewish community centers and at universities.

Still, there are fewer positions than there are women capable of filling them.

A lot of the women in the most advanced program offered by the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, "wonder how they're ever going to get jobs," said one student who asked not to be named.

Meeting men who are undaunted by a learned woman or think at similarly sophisticated levels isn't easy, said others.

"Religiously educated girls have difficulty finding compatible partners," Shira Breuer, principal of the Pelech School, an Orthodox girls' high school in Jerusalem, said in a workshop at the feminism conference.

She cited a former student, now 22, who told her, "You have to do something with boys' education" to bring it up to the level that a growing number of girls are now receiving.

Learning at a sophisticated level remains controversial in many parts of the Orthodox community.

A set of 17-year-old twins attending the conference recalled how inviting classmates over to study Jewish literature on the night of the holiday of Shavuot got them into trouble.

A teacher told them that only men learn on the night of Shavuot, said one twin, and that girls are "supposed to get their beauty rest so they look pretty for their husbands."

The twins, students at a girls' yeshiva high school in Brooklyn, N.Y., attended the conference with an older sister and their mother, who asked that they not be identified for fear that they would "make waves" at the school.

"I never thought of myself as a feminist, but that's what they're calling us at school for asking questions about Gemarah, so maybe I am," one twin said, referring to the Talmud.

While it is a contentious matter in some parts of the Orthodox community, in others, learning Judaism's sacred texts is totally off limits.

Satmar girls in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, home of their Chasidic movement and a dozen or so affiliated sects, never study from a primary text in their 11 years of education.

Boys study Hebrew texts from the age of 3; girls never do.

Their prayer books are translated from Hebrew into Yiddish, the vernacular language in their homes and on their streets.

The founder of the Satmar sect, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, who died in 1979, "prohibited girls learning straight from the text," said Surie Basch, assistant to the principal at the community's high school for girls.

"It's a no-no," she said.

"The purpose of the girls' education is to be Chasidic housewives and mothers, pillars of the home," said Rabbi Hertz Frankel, dean of the Satmar girls' school system, which has 4,500 students.

"Our girls don't care about feminism, about reading the Torah, about getting an aliyah," Frankel said, referring to the honor of being called to bless the Torah before it is read.

"The people who are, aren't real Orthodox," he said, adding they are "beyond the pale." □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Conservative rabbis demand Chief Rabbinate's cooperation

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Conservative Jewish leader said he was "skeptical but hopeful" after hearing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's pledge to continue efforts to resolve the conversion crisis in Israel.

Rabbi Joel Meyers, the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative movement's rabbinical arm, made his comments Wednesday after hearing Netanyahu's address at the assembly's international convention in Jerusalem.

In his speech, Netanyahu urged the 350 rabbis attending not to give up hope on the recent proposal offered by an interdenominational committee headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman. "I think that with goodwill, this solution can be carried out," said Netanyahu. "I am not willing to give it up."

In a letter presented to the premier at the convention, the Rabbinical Assembly said the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations were meaningless "without the explicit cooperation of the Chief Rabbinate."

The Ne'eman Committee's proposal aimed to head off legislation that would enshrine in law the Orthodox monopoly over conversions in Israel. It recommended establishing a training institute for conversions that would involve Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis, but would leave the Orthodox in control of the conversions.

The proposal was dealt a blow after the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate failed to endorse it earlier this month. The rabbinate said it would establish more rabbinical courts to perform conversions, but would not participate in the proposed joint training institute. In its letter, the Rabbinical Assembly said it accepted the Ne'eman Committee's formula, but only "on the condition that the Chief Rabbinate agree to work together with us in a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance."

The Conservative movement said it hoped a compromise could be reached, but that meanwhile it would continue its struggle in the Supreme Court and the public arena.

Netanyahu angered the Conservative and Reform movements by praising the Chief Rabbinate's statement when it was issued. But on Wednesday he said he was pleased with certain parts of the rabbinate's decision and less pleased with other parts. "I think Netanyahu is trying very hard now to look at the positive aspects of what occurred when the Ne'eman Committee report was released," Meyers said. □

### Avi Weiss lawsuit begins

By Nancy Zuckerbrod  
Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Rabbi Avi Weiss' civil lawsuit against Howard University and one of its former security guards has gone to trial.

The Jewish activist is suing Howard for violating the District of Columbia's Human Rights Code, an anti-discrimination law. He accuses the guard, Robert Cyrus, of discrimination and battery. The charges date back to April 1994, when Weiss and three other Jewish activists say they were assaulted while protesting a speech at the predominantly black school by Nation of Islam official Khalid Muhammad.

Weiss testified this week that he staged the protest because of Muhammad's penchant for giving anti-Semitic speeches at universities.

Some of those alleged remarks were the basis for a sign held by Weiss during the protest. It read, "Kill the Women. Kill the Crippled. Kill the Faggots. Kill the Old Ones, Too," and was attributed to a speech Muhammad made in November 1993.

Lawyers for the university raised the possibility that the signs may have been misinterpreted as feelings held by Weiss, rather than Muhammad, and may have contributed to the rough treatment he received at the hands of a crowd that gathered around him.

Weiss says he and his fellow protesters were encircled by Muhammad supporters who spat at them and shouted slogans such as, "The Only Good Zionist is a Dead Zionist" and "One Bullet, one Zionist; Two bullets, Two Zionists." □

### Lileikis charges Jewish pressure

A suspected war criminal living in Lithuania charged that he is being brought to trial because the Baltic nation has caved into pressure from international Jewish groups.

Aleksandras Lileikis, 91, who made the comment in a television interview, is suspected of having handed Jews over to death squads in the capital of Vilnius during World War II, when he was deputy head of the Nazi-sponsored Lithuanian security police.

### Smithsonian under criticism

Ten members of Congress, led by U.S. Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), criticized the Smithsonian Institution's handling of a planned Israel at 50 celebration.

Under the threat of a congressional hearing and criticism from right-of-center Jewish groups, the Smithsonian dropped the New Israel Fund as a co-sponsor of the spring lecture series that would have taken a critical look at Israel's past and future. The Smithsonian, which said it will host the lecture without co-sponsors, has made no plans to do so.

### German army plans changes

The German army is planning to require that any soldier seeking promotion will be required to declare any links to extremist political groups. The move comes as the German army contends with accusations that it is being infiltrated by neo-Nazis seeking combat training and weapons.

Meanwhile, two German soldiers serving as peacekeepers in Bosnia shouted anti-Semitic and racist insults at Albanian troops serving in the region, according to a German television station.

"Adolf Hitler would have stuck you in the gas chamber," one of the soldiers was accused of saying.

### Neo-Nazi network targeted

Nine members of an international neo-Nazi network were arrested in France and Britain on suspicion of making death threats against leading Jewish personalities, including Simone Veil, a former French Cabinet minister.

According to a calendar it uses, the network lives in the year 109. The group marks the beginning of the world with Hitler's birth in 1889.

### Gypsies to seek compensation

About 2,000 Gypsies living in Poland will seek compensation from Germany for their suffering during the Holocaust, according to the leader of Poland's Gypsy community.

Gypsy survivors from around Europe are making similar demands of Germany, but have had difficulties pressing their claims because many were unregistered in their native lands.

## U.S. Congress heightens role in Holocaust restitution issue

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As the search for assets of Holocaust victims broadens to include pillaged artworks and confiscated insurance policies, the U.S. Congress is exerting pressure for restitution.

The two issues were the subject of a daylong congressional hearing last week at which 22 witnesses testified about the legal status of art objects seized by the Nazis and the way European insurance companies handled policies taken out by Holocaust victims.

Taken together, the total value of those assets is likely to far exceed the value of the more publicized dormant Holocaust-era bank accounts and personal gold plundered by the Nazis, according to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress.

Testifying before the House Banking Committee, Holocaust survivors and lawmakers accused European insurance companies of profiting at the expense of Holocaust victims.

The companies have been sued for billions of dollars by heirs of victims seeking to recover life insurance benefits seized by the Nazis.

"It is clear that the European insurance companies undertook a deliberate effort to target European Jews for profit, before the Nazis targeted them for destruction," Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) told the committee.

"These companies sought and obtained premiums up front, with no expectation of paying the claims in the end," D'Amato added.

D'Amato, who is the chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, proposed the creation of an independent commission, modeled after the Volcker Commission now investigating Swiss banks, to look into the insurance situation.

Rep. James Leach (R-Iowa), chairman of the House Banking Committee, endorsed that idea, as did the WJC.

D'Amato and the WJC also proposed that the insurers set up a humanitarian fund to benefit Holocaust survivors.

One of the dominant underwriters of policies sold to Jews in Eastern Europe, the Italian firm Assicurazioni Generali, said it would cooperate with the proposed independent panel.

The company's lead counsel also noted in testimony before the committee that Generali created a \$12 million humanitarian fund last year to assist needy Holocaust survivors.

On the issue of looted art, the directors of some of America's top art museums, responding to growing concerns that they may be displaying wartime plunder, pledged to fully research the ownership history of their holdings.

To that end, a 13-member task force formed by the Association of Art Museum Directors, which includes the heads of the 170 largest art museums in North America, has begun exploring the establishment of a database to identify the rightful owners of plundered art and developing guidelines to resolve individual ownership claims.

"We will not countenance the acquisition or display of stolen art, and we are committed to doing everything possible to ensure that our collections are untainted by the stigma of the Nazi past."

Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, told the committee.

Ronald Lauder, chairman of the WJC's Commission for Art Recovery, said he was satisfied with the action taken so far by the art community.

Speaking before the committee, he stressed that the legal obstacles to returning the art should be minimized given that survivors "have already suffered decades of frustration and should not be asked to sustain the ordeal of lengthy and costly lawsuits."

The Clinton administration is in the process of developing a policy on stolen art and is planning to convene an international conference in Washington in June to focus on artworks, insurance policies, books and other property stolen from Holocaust victims.

Several members of Congress, meanwhile, have either introduced or plan to offer new bills dealing with looted art and insurance claims.

Among the legislative proposals:

- Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) has introduced legislation that would prohibit European insurance companies and their American subsidiaries from conducting business in the United States unless these firms fully disclose how they handled Holocaust victims' policies.

The bill, known as the Comprehensive Holocaust Accountability in Insurance Measure, comes as California's insurance commissioner has threatened to pull Generali's license because the firm has not honored his requests to appear at several public hearings.

- Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) has introduced legislation that would force insurance companies to honor policies sold to Holocaust victims between 1920 and 1945.

The Holocaust Victims Insurance Act would require the companies to report how many policies were issued to victims of the Holocaust and direct them to pay victims or their descendants if they have not done so already.

- Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) said they intend to introduce a resolution stating that NATO should not expand to include Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic unless those nations agree to provide an accounting of insurance policies taken out by Holocaust victims. The White House and some Jewish groups oppose the tactic, saying the two issues should not be linked.

- Reprs. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) plan to introduce a measure that would provide \$15 million to help families find and recover their art. The bill would also direct the federal government to check its own collections to make sure all artwork it possesses has been rightfully purchased, while requiring buyers of artwork to conduct "background" checks to determine whether it was stolen.

- D'Amato said he is drafting legislation that would set up a federal commission to examine how valuable assets, including insurance policies, artwork, rare books and coins, should be returned to Holocaust victims and their heirs.

Both houses of Congress have already passed legislation authorizing the United States to contribute up to \$25 million to a new international fund to benefit Holocaust survivors.

The Holocaust Victims Redress Act, which was signed by President Clinton last Friday, also calls on all governments to take action to ensure that artworks confiscated by the Nazis — or by the Soviets in the aftermath of World War II — be returned to their rightful owners. □