



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Jewish leaders balk at pressure

A delegation of American Jewish leaders on a mission to Israel objected to any attempt by the United States to pressure Israel as part of an effort to advance the peace process.

"We believe strongly that preconditions, or conditions imposed" will not be successful, said Melvin Salberg, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Conference of Presidents that Israel would reject any "imposed solution," which he described as "neither desirable nor viable."

Israel probes Syrian overtures

Aides to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met in Paris with a diplomat who had received peace feelers from Syria. Netanyahu's recent comments that he was not opposed to a withdrawal from Lebanon were seen as a response to Syrian overtures regarding the talks.

U.S., Israeli officials to confer

Senior Israeli officials are scheduled to arrive in Washington to meet with members of Congress to discuss a U.S. plan to jump-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

The plan, which is scheduled to be announced next week, is expected to ask the Israelis to redeploy from 13 percent more of the West Bank in exchange for increased Palestinian security cooperation.

Sheinbein agrees to U.S. trial

A Maryland teen-ager charged with a brutal murder agreed to return to the United States to stand trial on the condition that he be allowed to serve his sentence in Israel if he is convicted.

A Maryland prosecutor said he needs more time to study the proposal. Samuel Sheinbein fled to the Jewish state soon after the crime was committed last September, hoping to avoid the U.S. justice system.

Man arrested on arson charges

Jonathan Bashinsky was arrested on charges of setting fire to a synagogue in London, Ontario. Bashinsky was questioned and then released on suspicion he torched prayer books at an Orthodox synagogue in Phoenix, Ariz., in February. [Page 4]

Rabbi recounts woes amid new religious freedom effort

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Rabbi Chaim Rubin worries about what he is going to tell his congregants.

Several years ago, when his parents and other aging members of his Orthodox community began finding it difficult to make the long walk to synagogue on Shabbat, Rubin relocated his congregation to a more easily accessible location in the Hancock Park area of Los Angeles.

They have since been gathering twice a day — worshiping quietly under the threat of arrest and criminal prosecution.

Local zoning ordinances prohibit houses of worship in the idyllic residential setting, and city officials insist they are under no obligation to accommodate the community's religious needs. With a lawsuit pending against the city, Rubin worries what he might have to tell his young son, born with a disability and for whom a long walk is impossible, or what he will say to an 84-year-old survivor of Auschwitz who once risked his life gathering others to pray.

"Do I tell him that because he is old and weak and an amputee, that he must walk at least a mile and a half to pray, because to quietly gather down the block is illegal?"

Elsewhere around the country, in places such as Lawrence, N.Y., and Cleveland, Jewish and other religious institutions have encountered similar obstacles as a result of exclusionary zoning.

Rubin joined with 10 other religiously observant Americans to testify before Congress last week to help build a case for extending new protections for religious freedom in America.

Last year, the Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law that made it harder for government to interfere with the free practice of religion. In voiding the 1993 law, commonly known as RFRA, the high court said there was no clear record of how laws that are neutral toward religion could burden the free exercise of religion.

Despite the First Amendment guarantee of free religious exercise, conflicts between law and religion do arise. In addition to zoning issues, Jews can encounter conflicts between laws and Jewish religious observance in areas such as the Orthodox prohibition against autopsies and the practice of giving sacramental wine to minors.

Now, as lawmakers contemplate new federal legislation to restore the protections that existed under the short-lived RFRA, witnesses were brought forward to help create that record.

They were on Capitol Hill "to document in a real and material way the broad extent of the impact of not having these religious freedom protections," said Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department.

A broad coalition of religious leaders is helping to shape the new legislation.

A group led by Stern and Douglas Laycock, a University of Texas law professor, has drafted legislation that would make federal funding of state and local governments contingent upon compliance with RFRA-like rules.

Such legislation is expected to be introduced in Congress as early as this month.

Any federal fix, however, is not likely to amount to a panacea, and for that reason, Jewish activists and other members of the coalition have been working to enact statutes similar to RFRA on a state-by-state basis. RFRA-like legislation is now pending in more than a dozen state legislatures, while a couple of states already have similar

MIDEAST FOCUS

Presidential vote uncertain

Elections for Israel's president are scheduled to take place Wednesday in the Knesset. It remains unclear whether either candidate — incumbent Ezer Weizman or Likud Knesset member Shaul Amor — would be able to secure the majority in the 120-seat legislature required to win.

There are reports that eight to nine legislators from the Labor Party remain undecided, despite a party decision to back Weizman, while a similar number in the Likud were wavering, despite that party's support for Amor.

Hussein resumes security ties

Jordan's King Hussein called for renewed security cooperation with Israel after Mossad head Danny Yatom resigned, according to Israeli media reports.

Hussein ended the security cooperation after Mossad launched a failed attempt last September to assassinate a Hamas leader on Jordanian soil.

Settler population increases

The Jewish settler population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip increased by 9 percent in 1997, according to Israel's Interior Ministry.

A spokesman attributed the increased number of settlers — there are now more than 161,000 — to a high birthrate.

Murdered girls remembered

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai took part in a memorial ceremony for seven Israeli school girls murdered one year ago by a Jordanian soldier while they were on a school trip to the Israeli-Jordanian border.

The attack at the site known as "the Island of Peace" shocked Israel and prompted Jordan's King Hussein to make condolence visits to the families of the murdered students.

protective laws on the books. The witnesses who testified at last week's hearing of the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution detailed what they called hardships suffered in the absence of protection against laws interfering with their religious practice.

Their stories ranged from a religiously devout landlady in Chico, Calif., who was found in violation of the state's ban on housing discrimination when she refused to rent to unmarried couples, to a pastor in Tacoma, Wash., whom a judge ordered incarcerated when he refused to disclose confidential statements made to him during a confession.

The pastor, Rich Hamlin of the Evangelical Reformed Church, had listened to the confession of a young man under emotional duress who was arrested three days later.

A prosecutor, and later a judge, asked Hamlin to disclose the statements made to him, but Hamlin refused, saying he would not violate his own religious principles.

"To disclose matters entrusted to me as a minister would irreparably undermine the pastoral office," said Hamlin, who is appealing the incarceration order. "I must be able to provide spiritual counsel free from government intrusion or threat of government intrusion."

The pastor of Western Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, offered testimony about a victory attained with the help of RFRA.

When the congregation built a new church several blocks from its old site in 1994, the District of Columbia said it would not be allowed to continue feeding the homeless.

The city said the practice was neither a primary nor accessory use of a church and therefore required a zoning variance, which can be highly difficult to acquire if there is any community opposition.

The city barred the feeding program, but a federal judge later intervened, invoking the First Amendment and RFRA to allow it to continue.

"Without RFRA, I would be in jail because I have to follow the law of God, not the laws of the District of Columbia," said John Wimberly, pastor of the church.

"I simply could not have allowed a government to take a plate of food out of my hand that was intended for a hungry, homeless individual." Wimberly and others pointed to such instances as a pattern where local communities use zoning codes, historical landmark laws and other civil laws to hinder a religious institution's objectives.

Indeed, it was a landmark preservation dispute between a Roman Catholic church and the town of Boerne, Texas, that the Supreme Court used last year as its test case in weighing the constitutionality of RFRA.

"We presently have a totally unacceptable situation which threatens the religious vitality and diversity of our country," said Wimberly. □

Israel court postpones action on Pollard petition

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Lawyers for Jonathan Pollard have agreed to wait for two months before Israel's High Court of Justice holds further hearings regarding a petition demanding that Israel recognize the convicted spy as an agent for the Jewish state and work for his release.

The two-month delay was granted in order to give a ministerial committee time to work for Pollard's release.

The former U.S. navy intelligence analyst has been serving a life sentence since 1987 in an American prison for spying for Israel.

In recent months, Israeli Cabinet ministers Limor Livnat and Yuli Edelstein met with Pollard in a North Carolina federal prison. Pollard's wife responded angrily to the latest delay in the petition, which was first heard in October. She said the ministerial committee is the third such body to be formed by successive Israeli governments and termed the move a "stalling tactic."

When Israel "wants to bring an agent home, it knows how — look at the Mashaal affair, the Swiss affair," Esther Pollard said, referring to two incidents in the past six months in which Israel won the release of captured Mossad agents from Jordan and Switzerland. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Rightist reaches out to Jews

A leader of an Italian party with neo-fascist roots has been busy building bridges to the Jewish world.

At a three-day convention ending Sunday, Gianfranco Fini again sought to distance his National Alliance Party from its roots and make overtures to Israel and the Jewish world.

Finì, who formed the National Alliance out of the old neo-fascist Italian Social Movement in the mid-1990s, has been trying for years to shed his party's jackboot image and move his party toward the center.

The conference in the northern Italian city of Verona took these efforts a step further.

It was attended by a delegation from Israel's Likud Party, and Finì — who has long wanted to visit Israel as a demonstration of his rejection of the fascist past — gave a lengthy interview to Israeli television.

In the interview, he called the anti-Semitic laws "a horror."

Rome's chief rabbi, Elio Toaff, was quoted as saying he believed Finì's stance was sincere, and if Finì wanted to meet with him, the door to his office "is always open."

But Tullia Zevi, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, was more skeptical.

Finì "has sought various times to have contacts with our community in an attempt to legitimize his party," she said. "But the problem is within the National Alliance itself."

Prince Charles plans to visit shul

The heir to the British throne is scheduled to attend an Orthodox service at London's St John's Wood Synagogue next month to mark Israel's 50th anniversary.

While members of the British royal family have attended Jewish events, the visit by Prince Charles would be the first time that a senior member of the family has attended an Orthodox religious service.

Arson at Jewish school

A fire destroyed two classrooms at a Jewish elementary school in Sacramento, California.

The fire, which was set Saturday, has not been labeled a hate crime, according to the Sacramento Bee newspaper. Some 300 students attend the Shalom School.

Kennedy Center marks jubilee

An arts festival dedicated to Israel's jubilee began at the Kennedy Center in Washington over the weekend with a dance performance from an Israeli dance company.

The festival, which runs through March 9, includes theater, music, film and art exhibitions.

Arrest of Palestinian opens way for probe of U.S.- Hamas link

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — American prosecutors may finally have the chance to prove their accusations that Hamas uses money raised in the United States to facilitate terrorist attacks against Israel.

Israel over the weekend made public the December arrest of a Palestinian accused of channeling U.S. donations to families of Hamas suicide bombers.

Israeli authorities have accused Mohammed Anati, the director of the Holy Land Foundation in Israel, of funneling to Hamas members hundreds of thousands of dollars a month raised primarily in the United States by the American branch of the Holy Land Foundation, which is based in Texas.

Although many details remain unknown, the charges say Anati served as the foundation's director from 1993 until Israel banned the group in May 1997. Sources said Anati has traveled to the United States to supervise the transfer of funds.

According to an American counter-terrorism official, U.S. authorities have opened an investigation into the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation's relationship to Hamas.

U.S. law-enforcement officials are weighing the evidence with an eye toward prosecuting Holy Land Foundation officials under the 1996 anti-terrorism law that bans fund raising in the United States for known terrorist groups, including Hamas.

The Israelis staged a December raid on Anati's group near the West Bank town of Ramallah and seized a cache of documents that appear to link the U.S. group to its Israeli counterpart, sources said.

Israel timed the raid to coincide with a visit from officials of the U.S. Justice and Treasury departments, according to U.S. officials.

Omar Saleem, national programs director at the Holy Land Foundation in Texas, vehemently denied any direct involvement with Hamas or the Holy Land Foundation in Israel. "We're in the humanitarian business," Saleem said in a telephone interview.

"Our money goes to hospitals, orphanages and building mosques in troubled areas," including the Gaza Strip, West Bank and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

But "none of the money goes to a particular family of a martyr," he said.

He said that despite the similar names, the groups had separate boards of directors and that none of the almost \$4 million raised by the American group last year went to the Holy Land Foundation in Israel.

But journalist Steven Emerson testified last month in Congress that an appeal for donations by the group implicates the organization in raising money for "martyrs."

"Yes. I can and want to help needy families of Palestinian martyrs, prisoners and deportees," says the pledge card distributed to potential donors at a conference.

U.S. law does not distinguish between different branches of Hamas. Hamas officials claim their military wing, which has claimed responsibility for many suicide attacks against Israelis, is separate from their humanitarian operation.

While officials inside the U.S. government preached caution as U.S. law-enforcement personnel translate and analyze the documents found by Israel, some terrorism experts outside the government called the Israeli arrest a "smoking gun."

"The documents clearly show that the Holy Land Foundation was aware of where the money is going," said Emerson, who has tracked domestic terrorist groups. Sources said the documents included names of recipients, including families of suicide bombers.

While most observers said it is too early in the investigation to determine if charges will be brought against the Holy Land Foundation, many said the case seems to be a good test of the Clinton administration's will to enforce its anti-terrorism legislation.

"Providing monthly stipends for the families of these indiscriminate murderers encourages others to take similar actions in the future," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

The ADL worked with members of Congress on the legislation that bans domestic fund raising by overseas terrorist groups. "If these allegations prove true, those responsible at the Holy Land Foundation are in clear violation of U.S. law and should be prosecuted fully," Foxman said. □

Canadian Jew charged in synagogue arson attack

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — A Jewish man has been charged with an arson attack on a Canadian synagogue — days after he was interrogated in connection with fire damage at a synagogue in Phoenix.

Jonathan Bashinsky, 38, was arrested last Friday, two days after a fire caused minor damage to an exterior wall of the Conservative Or Shalom Synagogue in London, Ontario.

Minutes after dousing that fire, firefighters spotted smoke at the nearby Orthodox Beth Tefilah Synagogue and quickly extinguished a blaze that damaged a wooden fence.

Both fires were set on the morning of Feb. 25 by someone who ignited cardboard boxes filled with paper, twigs and a fire log.

"We're investigating the second fire to see if we have enough evidence to lay another charge of arson," said David Lucio, an inspector with the London City Police Force.

The London fires occurred only five days after Arizona police questioned Bashinsky as a prime suspect in a fire at the Orthodox Beth Joseph Synagogue in Phoenix in which some \$3,000 worth of prayer books were destroyed.

Bashinsky was questioned because he fit the description of man who had visited the synagogue the day before and asked if he could use the mikvah, the ritual cleansing bath, and then pray in the synagogue's sanctuary.

Rabbi Harris Cooperman said he approved the man's request because he was "dressed the part" of an Orthodox man.

But after a local Jewish attorney, Michael Freeman, intervened on behalf of Bashinsky, the police questioning was halted.

London police already had been alerted about Bashinsky.

According to Lucio, police in Phoenix had contacted the London City Police to verify the validity of the identity that Bashinsky had given them via an Ontario driver's license.

"They said, 'If he is who he says he is, we should perhaps take some steps because he seems to be an individual out of control,'" Lucio said.

Several days before the London fires were set, police notified the city's three congregations to be wary.

The Reform synagogue in the southern Ontario town was not attacked.

"This gentleman needs help," said Hillel Boroditsky, executive director of the London Jewish Federation. "It's possible that what he did was a cry for help." □

(The Jewish News of Greater Phoenix contributed to this report.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES

A new Orthodox dilemma: What to call a female 'rabbi'

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Rabbanit. Morateinu. Poseket. Congregational intern. Torahnot.

There's a whole new vocabulary evolving in the Orthodox world.

It's springing up around the increasing number of Orthodox women who are serving in positions — as teachers of men and women and as interpreters of Jewish law — that even a few years ago would have seemed unlikely, if not totally impossible.

And all of these experimental terms share one thing: They are not the word "rabbi."

Women, according to most Orthodox Jews' understanding of Jewish law, may not be rabbis.

At a conference held in New York last month on Orthodoxy and feminism, however, some prominent Orthodox rabbis, including Shlomo Riskin and Daniel Sperber, both of whom are based in Israel, articulated the theoretical possibility of women working as rabbis.

The reality is that women today are taking on some of the traditional roles of rabbis — and there isn't a widely accepted term to describe what they are doing.

Some of the terms are new — such as "poseket," which is the feminized version of "posek," the Hebrew word for an interpreter of Jewish law, and "morateinu," which is the feminine form in Hebrew for "our teacher."

Rabbi Avi Weiss, spiritual leader of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, N.Y., and a longtime advocate of expanding Orthodox women's roles as spiritual leaders within the parameters of Jewish law, uses the term morateinu and wants to see it in wider use.

"It is an honorific teacher's title," he said in an interview this week at the Second International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy in New York.

"It's unhelpful to use the term 'rabbi' because it implies the wrong things.

"We're spending too much time worrying about that. Let's spend it on carving out halachically permissible roles for these women," he said.

A part-time program run by Weiss, called Torat Miriam, began last September and is training 10 women to be Jewish communal leaders.

The term "Torahnot" was coined at the conference by Zev Brenner, who offered it during a discussion about the ordination of women.

Brenner, who produces and hosts Jewish radio and cable television shows, and is the husband of one of the conference presenters, Adena Berkowitz, shouted it out spontaneously.

Other terms are not so new.

Rabbanit, Hebrew for the Yiddish term rebbetzin, which has traditionally meant "rabbi's wife," is now being applied to women who are taking on these expanded roles, almost as a diminutive form of the word "rabbi."

Rabbanit Chana Henkin founded Nishmat, a center in Jerusalem where women engage in the advanced study of Jewish texts, in 1990.

She has long been known as rabbanit, since she is married to a well-known rabbi and has lived in Israel for many years. More recently, she has heard people address some of her learned students that way.

"We're moving toward a point where we're recognizing learning and the religious persona of women.

"It's appropriate to express this recognition if the person warrants it," said Henkin.

"But I'm more concerned with what the women are doing than what they're called," she added. □