



Daily News Bulletin

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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Weizman re-elected

Ezer Weizman was elected to a second five-year term as president of Israel. Weizman received 63 votes in the secret Knesset ballot, and Likud Knesset member Shaul Amor got 49. Seven legislators abstained. After the results were announced, Weizman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who have had tense relations in the past, pledged to open a "new page" in their relations. [Page 3]

Albright calls on Egypt

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called on Egypt to follow Israel's lead and offer to take a cut in its \$2.1 billion in annual U.S. foreign aid.

In testimony to a House Appropriations subcommittee, Albright also welcomed Israel's recent proposal for the United States to gradually reduce foreign aid payments during the next 10 to 12 years. Albright voiced support for the plan, which would end the current \$1.2 billion in annual U.S. economic support while increasing each year's U.S. military aid to Israel from \$1.8 billion to \$2.4 billion.

Former Nazi arrested in Germany

A former Nazi officer who admitted to shooting 500 Jews at the Majdanek concentration camp was arrested in Germany. The man, identified by German security sources as Alfons Goetzfried, is also accused of being an accessory to 70,000 murders at Majdanek, located in what was then Polish territory.

Prayer amendment clears hurdle

The U.S. House Judiciary Committee passed a controversial school prayer amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The "Religious Freedom Amendment," sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) and now headed to the full House, would pave the way for government subsidy of prayer in schools and other forms of religious expression on public property. [Page 1]

B'nai B'rith leader to meet Pollard

B'nai B'rith President Tommy Baer is scheduled to meet Thursday with Jonathan Pollard at his Butner, N.C., prison. A former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst, Pollard is serving a life sentence for spying for Israel.

B'nai B'rith called on President Clinton to commute Pollard's sentence on humanitarian grounds.

NEWS ANALYSIS

House poised to debate school prayer amendment

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A coalition of religious groups and church-state watchdogs are stepping up their opposition to a controversial school prayer amendment to the U.S. Constitution as the measure moves to the House of Representatives for a vote.

The so-called Religious Freedom Amendment, sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.), would pave the way for government subsidy of religion, prayer in schools and other forms of religious expression on public property.

The House Judiciary Committee approved the measure in a 16-11 vote Wednesday. The committee split along party lines, with all the Republicans supporting the measure and all Democrats opposing it.

The full House is expected to take up the measure in the coming months.

While talk about such an amendment has been going on for a few years, this would mark the first time since the early 1970s that a school prayer amendment will be brought up for consideration by the entire House of Representatives.

"This is a cornucopia of the worst initiatives on church-state separation, and we will go to the mat to defeat it," said Michael Lieberman, Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League.

The ADL has joined with most Jewish groups in opposing the amendment. The National Jewish Coalition, a pro-Republican group, and Orthodox organizations are not taking a position.

Despite support from congressional Republicans and the House leadership, most observers believe the measure will fall well short of the two-thirds majority necessary for passage.

Nonetheless, a coalition of religious groups opposing the measure mounted a counteroffensive this week as clergy representing an array of religious denominations spoke out against the proposed amendment.

There is no movement in the Senate for such an amendment, further diminishing prospects that it will be approved by Congress and passed on to the states for the necessary three-fourths ratification.

Most observers see the House's action as an effort to put members of Congress on record on the issue during an election year — a goal sought by the Christian Coalition, which has made no secret of the fact that it wants to include each lawmaker's vote on the measure in its voter guides.

"I think they want the vote to take place whether or not they're likely to prevail," Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel of the American Jewish Committee, said of the proponents, adding that they appear to have made a "judgment that there's political capital to be made from it."

Church-state watchdogs, including most Jewish groups, have consistently derided the measure as unnecessary and dangerous, charging that it runs headlong into the wall separating church and state.

Oponents further emphasize that the First Amendment already protects religious expression, including voluntary prayer in public schools.

"We cannot improve on the Constitution," said David Harris, Washington director of the American Jewish Congress.

In a letter to members of the House Judiciary Committee, Rabbi David Saperstein,

MIDEAST FOCUS

New Mossad head appointed

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a former deputy chief of the Mossad to replace Danny Yatom as head of the foreign intelligence service.

Ephraim Halevy, who enjoys a good relationship with Jordan's King Hussein, helped restore ties between the two countries after a botched Mossad assassination attempt on Jordanian soil last September threatened Israeli-Jordanian relations.

Sharon meets Jewish leaders

Israeli Cabinet minister Ariel Sharon asked for American Jewish support against Clinton administration pressure on any agreement with the Palestinians.

The delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which also met with prime ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres, later left Israel for a four-day visit to Turkey at the invitation of that country's prime minister.

High court rules on detentions

Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the country has the right to detain foreign nationals who are being used as bargaining chips to secure the freedom of missing and captured Israeli soldiers.

The decision was handed down in connection with a petition which disclosed that Israel has been holding 10 Lebanese citizens, most of them Hezbollah members, for as long as four years.

Bedouin evictions blocked

Israel's High Court of Justice temporarily blocked the eviction of a Bedouin tribe from lands slated for development by the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim, located outside Jerusalem. An attorney for the Bedouin said the court would issue its final order after their case goes before a military committee. The Bedouin have maintained that an alternate site offered them is unfit for human habitation.



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director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said, "As American Jews, we strive to protect our religious liberty through effective prohibitions on the establishment of religion and we stand in firm opposition to any measure, including the Istook Amendment, that might alter our most treasured 'first freedom.'" □

Schools to use secular text in controversial Bible course

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A Florida school district has agreed to use a secular, university-level textbook to teach a Bible class as part of a settlement reached in a church-state dispute.

Seven parents, clergy and other community members — including the president of the local Jewish federation — had filed suit to block the high school Bible course in the Lee County school district, claiming that it teaches the Bible as historical fact and indoctrinates students to Christianity. The original two-part course would have covered what Christians call both the Old and New Testaments, but in January, a U.S. district judge issued an injunction stopping the school from implementing the New Testament phase of the class and also ordered the school board to try to settle the lawsuit.

Church-state watchdogs, who had been looking at Lee County as a critical front in the battle over religion in public schools, said the settlement marks a clear victory for the plaintiffs and First Amendment rights regarding the separation of church and state.

Ken Weiner, president of the Jewish Federation of Lee and Charlotte Counties and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, was more guarded, saying he had "mixed emotions" about the settlement. "My first choice would be no Bible in the public schools at all, but I recognize that it's legal to teach about religion," Weiner said in a telephone interview.

The settlement, which the school board agreed to unanimously, requires the schools to base the biblical history course on a textbook called "Introduction to the Bible." □

Vienna mayor gives go-ahead to disputed Holocaust memorial

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — When a controversial Holocaust monument is finally built in the heart of Vienna, it will be the city's first memorial dedicated solely to Jewish victims of the Shoah.

Vienna's mayor, Michael Haupl, announced Tuesday that the city, which is funding the project, would go ahead with construction on Judenplatz — Jews Square, the former center of the medieval Jewish ghetto. Haupl's announcement ended years of controversy about the monument, which was originally to have been unveiled Nov. 9, 1996 — the anniversary of Kristallnacht, when marauding bands of Nazis destroyed Jewish property and synagogues in Nazi-held territory in 1938.

"I am happy that things are finally proceeding," said Vienna Jewish community leader Paul Grosz.

Construction of the monument had been delayed both by the discovery of the remains of a medieval synagogue underneath Judenplatz and by criticism of the monument's design and location.

The design by British artist Rachel Whiteread, called "The Nameless Library," is a large cube of white concrete cast to convey the sense of a library turned inside out.

Some local people said the monument would be a security threat for the neighborhood. Other critics said the modern, stark concrete would be too sharp a contrast with the surrounding Baroque buildings. Some members of Vienna's 14,000-member Jewish community said they feared the memorial could become a target for anti-Semitic acts. Others said such a monument should not be in a such a prominent position — yet others said the remains of the synagogue should be monument enough.

Haupl announced that the site of the monument would be moved slightly from where it had been planned to allow for the complete excavation of the synagogue. □

JEWISH WORLD

Jewish activists lobby in capital

Some 150 Jewish activists from federations across the United States fanned out on Capitol Hill to lobby their congressmen and senators to end a ban on food stamps for legal immigrants and to support more funding for low-income elderly housing.

The group was also scheduled to meet with Vice President Al Gore. The annual gathering of Jewish activists, including social service providers, also issued a call on Congress and the White House to support increased funding for home health care.

Republican caucus backs ban

The Republican Israel Caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives is calling on President Clinton to act to ban all Russian cooperation with Iran's missile program.

In a letter to Clinton that is being circulated on Capitol Hill to gain more lawmakers' signatures, the group of pro-Israel Republicans is threatening congressional action to impose a U.S. boycott on Russian firms that have contacts with Iranian military programs. Vice President Al Gore is scheduled to address the issue at a meeting next week in Washington with Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Lileikis trial begins

The war crimes trial of a Lithuanian accused of being a Nazi collaborator began in the Baltic nation's capital of Vilnius. Aleksandras Lileikis, 91, is suspected of having handed Jews over to Nazi death squads during World War II. Lileikis' lawyer called for dropping the genocide charges, saying his client had not only never persecuted Jews but had rescued a Jewish woman during the war.

Sweden finds dormant accounts

A Swedish government-appointed commission said it had found some \$880,000 in 649 bank accounts that have remained dormant since the end of World War II, the Swedish news agency reported.

Jewish representatives on the commission said they believed some of the accounts belonged to Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

Papon calls trial 'grotesque'

Accused war criminal Maurice Papon told a French court that the proceedings against him were "grotesque" and "dishonest." Papon, who stands accused of ordering the arrest for deportation of 1,560 Jews from France during World War II, said he was being scapegoated for the behavior of France's wartime Vichy regime.

Death camp survivor Samuel Pisar testified against Papon, recounting the actions of other French officials who saved Jews from the Nazi deportations.

Ezer Weizman re-elected to five years as president

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — This week's Knesset ballot for Israel's president was viewed by the opposition as a test of the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

And when Israel's popular but outspoken president, Ezer Weizman, was re-elected Wednesday for a second five-year term — heading off a challenge from Likud Knesset member Shaul Amor — opposition leader Ehud Barak was quick to term the outcome a failure for Netanyahu.

Describing Weizman's win as a "victory for the whole people of Israel," Barak added during an interview with Israel Radio, "It is of course a defeat to Mr. Netanyahu."

The Israeli premier, in turn, rejected the Labor leader's spin on the outcome of the vote.

"We have a new president, a good one, that I and the people of Israel will work with," Netanyahu said after the vote.

In Wednesday's secret ballot, Weizman garnered 63 votes to Amor's 49, with seven abstentions.

One Knesset member absented himself from the vote.

Announcing the final tally, the Knesset's speaker, Dan Tichon, said Weizman would be formally sworn in at a ceremony May 18.

"I would like to thank the people of Israel, who supported me, and of course, the Knesset," Weizman said at a news conference at the presidential residence in the Israeli capital.

The election for the largely ceremonial post turned into a politically charged battle between coalition and opposition forces when the Likud's Knesset caucus threw its backing behind Amor and the Labor Party came out in support of Weizman.

Though widely popular, Weizman has managed to alienate figures on both ends of the political spectrum.

Following terrorist attacks during the Labor-led government of Yitzhak Rabin, Weizman called for Israel to put the brakes on the peace process.

During Netanyahu's tenure as premier, Weizman has been critical of the slow pace of the peace process.

His decision last year to invite Yasser Arafat to his home — at a time when the newly elected Netanyahu was still showing reluctance about meeting with the Palestinian leader — put a chill on his relations with the prime minister.

But during a conversation in a televised linkup after the Knesset vote, Weizman and Netanyahu pledged to open a "new page" in their relations.

Weizman's abrasive style and sharp tongue have plunged him into several controversies.

Remarks he made about the Bible, women and homosexuals were often followed by apologies — or by attempts to recast his comments.

At the same time, he comes from a formidable background.

The nephew of Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann — who spelled his last name differently — Weizman served as commander of Israel's air force and helped forge the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Among the well-wishers who called Weizman on Wednesday were Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

For his part, Amor, a Likud Party veteran relatively unknown in national circles, said he was not disappointed by the outcome.

Amor, 57, won the Likud backing for the presidency after Netanyahu reportedly passed him over for a number of appointments, including house speaker and a position in the Cabinet.

The Moroccan-born Amor served for 20 years as mayor of the northern town of Migdal Ha'emek, which he helped rid of high unemployment by attracting high-tech industry to the area. □

PROFILE

Intergroup dialogue instills passion in Templeton winner

By Rebecca Segall

NEW YORK (JTA) — He's the Hungarian-born British philanthropist who played a critical role in coaxing the Vatican to recognize the State of Israel.

He's the savvy businessman who helped convince a Polish cardinal many believed to be anti-Semitic to move a controversial Carmelite convent off the grounds of Auschwitz. He's a 77-year-old workaholic who organized the first-ever papal visit to a synagogue.

Outside of Great Britain and interfaith circles, he is not well known. But this week, as Sir Sigmund Sternberg became the 1998 winner of the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, the world is learning about the quiet but central role that he has played in groundbreaking diplomatic accomplishments in interfaith dialogue.

Sitting comfortably in a New York City hotel room this week, poised to receive the award, this small, dignified man cracks a smile: "Old people have to justify their existence; they have to work."

His hard work has paid off once again: As recipient of the Templeton Prize, he also receives \$1.23 million, believed to be the largest annual monetary award given.

Sternberg is the second Jewish person to win the award. The first was Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, the late Orthodox chief rabbi of Great Britain who received the award in 1991.

The prize, named for John Marks Templeton, a Wall Street magnate, is given to an individual who has "helped increase humankind's love of God."

"We all have different concepts of God," Sternberg said during an interview here on Monday. "You have to believe in something. We have to realize that our purpose here is to make the world a more tolerable place."

He says the money will go directly to the Sternberg Foundation, which funds his interreligious work.

Known to many as "Siggy," Sternberg recalls with pride his role in helping to resolve the crisis that erupted in the 1980s, when a small group of Carmelite nuns established a convent at the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

The convent prompted an international outcry by Jews and others. Quietly and not-so-quietly — activists led by New York Rabbi Avi Weiss even donned concentration camp uniforms to protest at the site — Jews demanded that the convent be removed from the place where so many had been exterminated.

The head of the church in Poland, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, was resisting efforts to remove the convent. As the controversy dragged on for years, Sternberg stepped in, contributing to the ultimate resolution of the problem and the convent's removal in 1993. "Glemp told me that Jews were all-powerful. So I told him, 'Well I think it's the right thing for you to give in then,'" he recalls.

Weeks later, Sternberg received a letter from Glemp declaring that the convent will move because "I have finally heard the voice of reason."

Sternberg, an active Reform Jew, is loved in many circles: the Catholics, the Muslims, and even after a recent fallout between Reform and Orthodox Jews in England last year, he is on good terms with Britain's chief rabbi, who is Orthodox.

"I don't know anyone that he does not know or anyone that he does not speak to," says a colleague who has worked closely with him for 20 years. "And whether it's a member of his staff or the head of state, the message is always the same — our shared, common humanity."

Sternberg says his childhood memories of interreligious strife in Hungary laid the foundation for his commitment to worldwide religious cooperation and understanding. He fled to England with his family in 1939, served in the Civil Defense Corps during World War II, then made his fortune in scrap metal and property.

Since then, two endeavors have consumed his time and his energies: the Reform movement and interfaith work, primarily through the International Council of Christians and Jews, an umbrella organization of 28 dialogue organizations worldwide that he chairs. In 1976 he was recruited to lead his first interreligious dialogue, which he says inspired his activism.

Although Orthodoxy is dominant in Britain, it is the Reform movement that boasts the largest Jewish educational and cultural center in Europe.

The seven-and-a-half-acre campus — which contains a primary school, a rabbinical training college, an art exhibition, a Jewish museum, an interfaith center and the administrative headquarters of the Reform movement — is appropriately named the Sternberg Center for Judaism.

With Sternberg as chairman of its board of trustees, the center receives visitors from major figures in the fields of religion, diplomacy and statecraft. "He is quite an extraordinary phenomenon," says a member of the staff of the center who asked not to be identified. "No one knows quite how he does it — how he commands the attention and respect of so many important people.

"But he has an enormous facility for making contacts and putting people together for the purpose of dialogue and understanding."

Twenty years after Sternberg arrived in Britain, the refugee-turned-magnate was honored with a knighthood by his adoptive — and, no doubt, grateful — country.

Since then, awards, medals and prizes have poured in from such disparate sources as the Vatican, the governments of Poland, Greece, Germany, Spain, Austria and his native Hungary.

To his detractors, Sternberg has developed too keen an appetite for such honors and the attendant publicity.

"Yes, he does enjoy the fact that his work is recognized," said a friend. "And there is scarcely a country in the world that has not honored him." Having achieved prodigious success in the area of relations between Jews and non-Jews, one colleague suggested that the challenge now was to establish a dialogue and build bridges between Jews and Jews.

"Siggy would love the Sternberg Center to be a point of contact — of coming together — for the entire Jewish community of Britain," he said. "Given his remarkable achievements, he might just be the man to do it."

But Sternberg, speaking in New York, says that it is not on his current agenda.

"I like to stick to what I understand, and to my skills. I may play a role in the background, though. The most important thing," he says, "is to visit all the various places of worship, Jewish and non-Jewish. Read about the different religions and meet them. We need each other." □

(JTA correspondent in London Douglas Davis contributed to this report.)