JTA Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 58 Friday, March 27, 1998 81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu denies reports

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denied reports that Israel has agreed to more than a 9 percent withdrawal from the West Bank.

Netanyahu said there had been discussions on "principles" but that no specific Israeli plan had been submitted to American officials. His comments came before the arrival in the Middle East of U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross.

Vatican may open archives

The Catholic Church's top representative to world Jewry recommended that the Vatican open its secret archives to a team of Jewish and Catholic scholars.

Jewish leaders, who have sought a full disclosure of the Vatican's wartime activities, hailed the recommendation by Cardinal Edward Cassidy.

Report: Survivor to get money

A Holocaust survivor living in Queens, N.Y., is reportedly on the verge of reaching a six-figure settlement with Credit Suisse bank.

Estelle Sapir, who has sought her father's bank account since the end of World War II, has maintained that the bank threw up one roadblock after another to prevent her from obtaining the money.

U.S., Swiss issue statement

The U.S. and Swiss governments issued a joint statement saying that American sanctions against Swiss banks would be counterproductive.

The statement was issued hours before a committee of U.S. public finance officials was slated to meet to discuss the extent to which Swiss banks have cooperated in dealing with Holocaust-era issues.

Pope meets interfaith group

Pope John Paul II met with an interfaith group of Jews and Catholics, but made no mention of the recent Vatican document about the church's role during the Holocaust.

Prize to Oz upheld

Israel's Supreme Court rejected an appeal to withhold the Israel Prize from author Amos Oz. A settler leader brought the appeal, saying Oz should not get the prize unless he retracted statements he made in an article that were critical of Jewish settlers.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Israel begins to implement proposed conversion solution

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) —The conversion crisis in Israel is well on its way to being resolved.

This was the assessment offered this week by the Israeli minister who heads a government-appointed committee that spent seven months seeking a compromise that would be acceptable to the three main streams of Judaism.

But according to non-Orthodox leaders, Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman is being overly optimistic — and it is unclear exactly how he intends to have his committee's recommendations implemented.

In late January, the Ne'eman Committee presented to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a proposal intended to give the non-Orthodox streams — who are seeking to break the Orthodox monopoly over conversions performed in Israel — a role in performing conversions that would be officially recognized by the Jewish state.

According to the proposal, an interdenominational conversion institute would be established under the auspices of the Jewish Agency for Israel, while leaving the actual conversion process under the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's control.

Speaking with reporters Monday in New York, Ne'eman said a team had been created to implement the committee's recommendations. He added that a budget was now being created for the team, which would work with the Jewish Agency to establish the conversion institute, and with the Chief Rabbinate to establish additional conversion courts. The committee's proposal has been endorsed by the Knesset.

But the rabbinate's stance has been far less clear.

The Chief Rabbinate Council, in a unanimous decision issued last month, pledged to set up more religious courts to handle conversions.

But the council declined to address the crucial part of the proposal — the creation of the joint institute to prepare candidates for conversion.

Ne'eman reiterated Monday that the Chief Rabbinate had not been asked to vote on the institute. And this presumably meant that implementation of the Ne'eman Committee's proposal could proceed without any hindrance. Indeed, Ne'eman's carefully chosen comments were those of a person seeking to prevent anyone from rocking the boat.

"Anyone who challenges [the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations] will be challenging the unity of the Jewish nation," the minister said, seeking to put an end to months of controversy. But non-Orthodox leaders are crying foul.

They are still irked by a Chief Rabbinate statement issued last month, which, without referring to the non-Orthodox movements explicitly, blasted "those who are trying to shake the foundations of the Jewish religion, causing rifts among the people and causing them to stray from the generations-old heritage."

"The sages of Israel have barred any cooperation with them and their methods, and no one should consider establishing joint institutions with them," the statement added.

To the non-Orthodox streams, this was a straightforward condemnation of the conversion institute — and they therefore wonder how the Ne'eman Committee's proposal can be implemented.

"It is an utter absurdity," Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said in an interview this week. "The Chief Rabbinate rejected the proposal at length. The notion that you can go ahead and implement the plan in the absence of the rabbinate makes no sense."

A similar viewpoint was offered by Conservative Rabbi Reuven Hammer, who

MIDEAST FOCUS

Annan leaves Middle East

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he believed his talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials were successful.

Before he wrapped up a trip to the Middle East, Annan canceled a visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount, citing scheduling restraints. Palestinian officials charged that the visit was called off because of Israeli pressure.

Safe-passage routes discussed

Israel raised a number of possible alternatives for a safe-passage route between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including an overpass or tunnel, a visiting German politician said.

But Gerhard Schroder, a Social Democrat who plans to run against Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Germany's upcoming elections, described the ideas presented to him by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "strange."

The safe-passage route is one of several unresolved issues from the 1995 Interim Agreement signed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Plan for Jerusalem boroughs

Officials with the Jerusalem municipality are drafting a plan for the city that would divide it into boroughs.

Some of the boroughs would include areas currently under the civilian control of the Palestinian Authority, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Earlier this week, reported plans to extend the city's boundaries westward drew opposition from the residents of suburbs that could be affected.

SLA members seek asylum

Four members of the Israel-backed South Lebanon Army asked for asylum in the Jewish state.

The four fear they will be treated as traitors if Israel withdraws its troops from southern Lebanon.

JTA Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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served on the Ne'eman Committee. He accused the committee of playing "let's pretend that the rabbinate did not reject" its proposal.

Meanwhile, Israel's High Court of Justice on Sunday postponed again a hearing on a petition to recognize Conservative conversions of adopted children.

The court accepted the state's argument that the Ne'eman Committee should be given time to implement its recommendations. The hearing was postponed until April 20.

In Yoffie's view, the court's postponement reflected the true agenda behind Ne'eman's claim that his committee's proposal would soon be implemented.

"They are using [the claim] in the courts to say, 'Don't rule because we are handling the matter ourselves,' " said Yoffie. □

Jerry Seinfeld makes wish come true for Israeli child

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — When 13-year-old Eyal Bir spent most of last year at an Israeli hospital for treatment of acute leukemia, the ordeal was brightened by regularly watching the "Seinfeld" show.

So when the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which fulfills the requests of children with life-threatening illnesses, asked Eyal for his biggest wish, the answer was easy: to meet Jerry Seinfeld and watch him tape a show.

On March 25, Bir's dream came true.

Accompanied by his parents and a sister, the young boy watched for more than three hours as the cast taped one of its last shows on the tightly guarded set. The climax came when Seinfeld himself walked over to the Bir family for a brief chat.

"It was great. I actually got to meet Jerry," Bir said later.

"I told him how much people in Israel liked his show and gave him a T-shirt which said, 'I Met Eyal Bir' in front and 'Jerry' on the back."

Seinfeld, in turn, marveled that Israelis spoke such accent-free English, explained by the fact that Bir's parents, Leo and Nettie, are both native New Yorkers who moved to Israel in 1975.

The Make-A-Wish Foundation in Israel, which scored a coup last summer when it arranged a meeting between young Yoni Dotan and President Clinton, almost despaired at the even tougher assignment of lining up Seinfeld.

However, by pulling the right Hollywood strings, Lori Schaefer Bacher, the organization's Israel coordinator, got the green light two days before the taping.

She notified the Bir family, then visiting relatives in New Jersey, and the following day they were on their way to Los Angeles.

They were picked up at the airport by a limousine, housed in a luxury hotel and even got to visit Disneyland, said Leo Bir, a dentist in Rehovot, which is near Tel Aviv.

Make-A-Wish is an international volunteer organization, active in 14 countries.

The Israel branch, known as Mishalat Lev, has fulfilled the requests of 43 children during its first year, Bacher said. □

German court upholds ban

FRANKFURT (JTA) — A German court has upheld a government ban on a right-wing extremist group known as the National Front.

The group was banned in 1992 by the Interior Ministry for its racist and anti-Semitic views and for its support of Nazi ideology.

German laws forbid organizations that propagate Nazi doctrine.

In the early 1990s, the German government banned several far right-wing organizations to stem a rise in right-wing violence.

Intelligence officials say neo-Nazis in Germany have a new structure of small, loosely organized cells that communicate via mobile telephones and computer Web sites. □

JEWISH WORLD

Lithuanian church to probe past

The Lithuanian Catholic Church announced that it is going to assess its role in the Holocaust. The secretary-general of the church's Conference of Bishops said a conference would be convened in October to assess the church's wartime past and to seek closer ties between the Baltic nation's Catholics and Jews.

Dutch refuse to return art

Dutch officials refused to return paintings that the widow of a Jewish art dealer was forced to sell during World War II.

The government claims that Desiree Goudstikker officially gave up all rights to the artworks in 1952 after unsuccessfully negotiating their return.

N.Y. synagogues support forest

Synagogues representing the three major streams in the New York area are establishing a "Unity Forest" in Israel to celebrate the Jewish state's 50th anniversary. Working under the aegis of the Jewish National Fund, 45 synagogues have committed $5000 apiece to plant a total of 1,000 trees in the Negev Desert. The campaign begun in February and is slated to end in September.

Breast cancer studies issued

Women with a breast cancer genetic defect are less likely to develop breast cancer than previously thought, according to two studies published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The BRCA1 and BRCA2 defects have been found to occur in a higher rate among Ashkenazi Jewish women than in the rest of the female population. Experts say that the results of the studies suggest that there should be no widespread testing of women for the BRCA defect.

Teens arrested at camp

German police arrested four teen-agers for giving the Nazi salute at the former concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. The teens later accosted a visitor who tried to photograph them.

Police said the four came from the Berlin area.

In February, employees at Sachsenhausen, located in eastern Germany, discovered right-wing slogans scrawled in the guest book of the memorial site. In 1992, an arson attack by right-wing extremists destroyed several of the barracks on the site.

Court rules on 'myth'

A German court ruled that a neo-Nazi who uses the term "Auschwitz myth" is not guilty of inciting public disorder or racial hatred.

The court in Hamburg said the word "myth" is not a synonym for "lie."

Another delay looming for German Holocaust memorial

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT (JTA) — The process of selecting a design for Germany's national Holocaust memorial may come to a grinding halt.

Opposition by several leading German politicians to the construction of the Berlin memorial could stop the selection process for a winning design.

As it is, the decision, which was expected this month, will probably be postponed, according to a spokesman for the Culture Ministry of Berlin. No date has been set for a final decision.

Meanwhile, meetings between government officials and private groups who are co-sponsoring planning for the memorial continue, according to the spokesman.

In past months, opposition to the memorial's location and design from German intellectuals and politicians has grown. Some have even questioned the wisdom of creating a memorial.

Last week, Berlin's mayor, Eberhard Diepgen, publicized his long-held reservations about the construction of a Holocaust monument.

"None of the winning designs demonstrates a clear enough concept to have meaning for future generations," he told the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Diepgen has in the past voiced opposition to a "monument mile," warning that Berlin must not be a "capital of regrets."

He also told the newspaper that the design currently favored to win the competition — a field of 4,000 stone pillars designed by Americans Richard Serra and Peter Eisenman — bears no clear relationship to the Holocaust.

The design was entered as part of a second competition in which 25 invited artists and architects submitted their conceptions.

In 1996, German chancellor Helmut Kohl rejected the winning design in the first round of the competition. That design envisioned a slanted block of stone covering an area the size of two football fields that would be engraved with the names of all the millions of Holocaust victims.

Diepgen's opposition could again halt the process of selecting a winning entry.

The city of Berlin, together with the federal government and the private groups backing the monument, must come to a consensus on the winner.

Diepgen's reservations were echoed last week by leading members of his party.

"I have come to the increasing realization that it won't work," said Nikolaus Sander, cultural spokesman for the Social Democrats. He said the enormity of the crime could not properly be reflected by a monument of massive dimensions.

German Jewish leaders generally agree that a monument should be built, but they are divided in their support of the current concept.

Ignatz Bubis, leader of Germany's Jewish community, says Kohl promised him that a Holocaust monument would be built in Berlin.

In the past, he has expressed concern that the monument would never be built if discussions about a design continued too long.

The head of Berlin's Jewish community, Andreas Nachama, has called for a suspension in negotiations because of the current controversy.

Nachama, a museum curator, says the opposition must be taken seriously.

During the recent ceremonies marking the opening of an American Jewish Committee office in Berlin, the group's executive director, David Harris, said the AJCommittee supported the construction of a monument in Berlin in order to keep memories of the past alive.

In February, a group of prominent German writers, including Gunter Grass and Walter Jens, said they no longer favored building a monument.

They believed that all designs so far submitted had failed because of the near impossibility of finding an artistic form to reflect such a monstrous event as the Holocaust. Instead, they urged that the money be spent on research on the history of German Jewry and on the maintenance of existing memorial sites at former concentration camps. □

Who is Kyle Broslofski? 'South Park' hits big time

By Rebecca Raphael
Jewish Student Press Service

NEW YORK (JTA) — As Seinfeld says his goodbyes to "Must-See TV," a foul-mouthed 8-year-old is crafting his takeover of the small screen.

Though he may not have Jerry's comic genius, receding hair line or outrageous salary, he's got the word "Jewish" stamped across his resume and he's ready to make it big.

From flaming farts to gay pets, Kyle and his pals will push TV's boundaries just as far as they damn well please. Welcome to "South Park," which is nestled in the Colorado Rockies and home to Kyle, Kenny, Cartman and Stan, four potty-mouthed third graders for whom the supernatural, extraordinary, unusual and insane are just part of growing up.

A backlash against political correctness, "South Park" is what can be called an equal opportunity offender. Between Kyle (the smart kid who's easily persuaded), Cartman (the fat kid who insists he's just "big-boned"), Stan (the leader of the group), and Kenny (the poor kid who dies in nearly every episode), everyone and everything is a target for mockery.

When not "ripping" on each other and those who cross their paths, the rascals are forced to deal with some real-life issues such as euthanasia, environmental concerns, world hunger, American gluttony and homophobia.

Their boyhood exploits have created a national phenomenon and earned instant cult status for "South Park," particularly on college campuses. With 4.5 million viewers tuning in each week, "South Park" is the most popular series in the history of Comedy Central, the only all-comedy cable network.

"South Park" began in 1995 when Brian Graden, then an executive at Fox, commissioned Matt Stone, 26, and Trey Parker, 28, to create a holiday video for him to send to friends and colleagues. The two former University of Colorado film students took on the project, and used construction paper cutouts and stop-action animation to produce "The Spirit of Christmas."

Their five-minute film, in which gutter-mouthed kids watch Jesus and Santa try to kill each other in a wrestling match, was passed around in Hollywood circles and ignited a buzz that made its way across the country. Before long, the word-of-mouth explosion landed Parker and Stone's material in a bidding war among the networks, and they signed a deal for 13 episodes of "South Park" with Comedy Central.

While the characters harass each other for practically any reason at all, Kyle is the only one whose ethnic background is not only defined but is also the source of ridicule. Despite his father, who wears a kipah, and his pushy mother who calls him "bubbe," Kyle is not totally in touch with his Jewishness.

In fact, he's not really sure what being Jewish even means. When his friends ask him, "Aren't you Jewish Kyle?" he responds, "Yeah, I think so." And when a school counselor says, "I understand you're Jewish," he answers, "Not on purpose!" As far as Kyle knows, being a Jew is simply grounds for mockery, a trait that sets him apart from his friends. Though eight nights of presents during Chanukah is appealing, Kyle feels particularly like an outcast during the holiday season.

The "South Park Christmas Special," which was the fourth-highest-rated cable program of the year, took a closer look at the real-life issues he confronts as the only Jewish kid at South Park Elementary School.

Kyle's embarrassment and isolation begin when his mother raises a raucous about his role in the school Christmas play's nativity scene. Never mind the onstage depiction of the actual birth of Jesus from between the legs of an 8-year-old (who is criticized for not making her labor pains sounds more believable); Kyle's mother is outraged that her son is playing Joseph.

"My family doesn't celebrate Christmas. We're Jewish," she shouts in front of Kyle's entire class, leaving him mortified by her outburst.

The bitter holiday standoff sparked by Kyle's mother results in a townwide effort to make Christmas non-offensive to any religious or minority group. After a politically-correct-crazed purge of Christmas trees (offensive to "tree-hugging" environmentalists), lights (at the request of epileptics) and all Christmas symbols (for non-Christians), the mayor asks for suggestions of a new holiday icon.

Kyle suggests "Mr. Hanky" — a talking piece of pooh that he claims "comes out of the toilet every year and gives gifts to everyone with high fiber in his diet."

After Kyle brings his buddy to school, where his classmates and administrators are disgusted by what they see as an inanimate piece of "doo-doo," Kyle ends up in a mental institution. There, his straight jacket and solitude leave him with little else to do but sing the Chanukah song endlessly.: "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel. . . second verse same as the first!!" Half an hour and a stomachache of laughs later, the town ends up not only believing in Mr. Hanky, but they are so inspired by this sprightly piece of human excrement that they declare him the new non-denominational holiday symbol. And while the town sings the Mr. Hanky song, the boys learn that "Jewish people are OK and that Chanukah can be cool, too."

References to Kyle's Jewishness have been plentiful in other episodes as well.

Most characters latch on to the fact that Kyle is Jewish; it is the trait that defines him.

"I can totally sympathize with Kyle," explained Stone. "I mean I'm pretty much him."

Stone not only does the voice-overs for Kyle, but he also chooses his story line, adventures, and is responsible for his personal profile.

Though Stone did not grow up wearing a green cap with earflaps, he knows exactly where Kyle is coming from.

"We're both reactionary, short-tempered and impatient," Stone said. Stone's mother is Jewish, his father Irish, and he, like Kyle, considers himself "ethnically Jewish, but that's about all."

It was his own annual experience during the holiday season that gave Stone the idea for the Christmas special. "On Christmas Day for my entire life I've had nothing to do."

Parker identifies most closely with Stan, but he draws on his own experiences to create Kyle's character as well.

"There was one Jewish person in my whole town and while the rest of us did Christmas stuff, she had to come out and do a Chanukah song," Parker said of Conifer, his Colorado hometown in the real county of South Park.

"She was totally just like the token Jewish person. I did not want to be her."

Besides, Stone said, "all the kids are good friends. Nobody is fat, Jewish, lonely, whatever; they're just all friends." □