



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 60

Tuesday, March 31, 1998

81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Ross returns empty-handed

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross held one last meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before returning to Washington.

Concluding his four-day shuttle, Ross reportedly failed to win approval from Israel or the Palestinian Authority for an American plan to advance the peace process.

Arafat to visit museum

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat was slated to visit the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam, according to his aides. During his visit to Holland, Arafat reiterated his call for international efforts to rescue the Middle East peace process.

Israel accepts conversion plan

The Israeli government adopted the recommendations of a committee dealing with issues related to the conversions of adopted children. The committee called for the creation of special rabbinical courts to deal with such conversions. [Page 4]

WJRO files papers

The World Jewish Restitution Organization recently filed papers in Romania to establish a foundation that will receive communal Jewish properties from the Romanian government, according to a WJRO official. Romania promised to return the properties, confiscated by the Nazis and the Communists, after the foundation was officially recognized, said Naphtali Lavie. A similar foundation is being established in Hungary for the return of communal property and looted artworks, Lavie added.

Swiss panel postpones report

An international panel of historians concluded its report on Swiss gold purchases from Nazi Germany, but publication of the report will be postponed beyond its previously scheduled date of April 6.

The Independent Commission of Experts said in a statement that the delay was due to the Swiss government's desire to have the report translated from German into French, Italian and English before it is released. But some Swiss observers suspect that the government fears that the report would adversely affect ongoing negotiations with Swiss banks for a global settlement of Holocaust-era related issues.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Proposal on gay marriage dividing Reform rabbinate

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Reform movement's rabbinical organization is gearing up for a controversial vote on whether to sanction religious marriage ceremonies for lesbians and gay men.

The issue is already creating deep and painful divisions within the Reform rabbinate, and some fear it could further alienate the Reform movement from other, more tradition-bound streams of Judaism.

"Everyone is hoping that this will be resolved and that it doesn't split the movement apart," said Rabbi Jerome Davidson, leader of Temple Beth-El in Great Neck, N.Y., and an advocate of same-sex Reform marriages.

Davidson made headlines when he offered a blessing at the commitment ceremony of his assistant rabbi and her partner in 1995.

Years of work by the Reform rabbinate to formulate a policy on gay marriage will come to a head in June, when the Central Conference of American Rabbis holds its annual meeting in Anaheim, Calif. At that meeting, a resolution supporting the idea of gay marriage within a Jewish context will be presented by the Central Conference's Human Sexuality Committee.

The careful wording of the resolution will not include the term "marriage," according to members of the committee, because it is considered too controversial.

But the resolution, which will come up for a vote before the Central Conference's entire membership of some 1,800 rabbis, will endorse the idea of a Reform Jewish ceremony designed to sanctify the unions of same-sex couples.

A draft was presented to the Central Conference's Executive Committee when it met in London last week and will likely undergo further tweaking, but no substantive changes, when the Human Sexuality Committee meets again at the end of April, members said.

But the committee's position on the issue is at odds with the stance being taken by another powerful body within the conference.

The organization's Responsa Committee recently issued a teshuvah, or religious ruling, stating that Reform rabbis should not officiate at same-sex ceremonies.

The committee was unable to reach consensus on the issue, because of "radically different perspectives on homosexuality and Judaism" among its members, according to the 35-page written opinion.

The same committee issued a short, unequivocal opinion against gay marriage in 1985.

Eight of the 10 rabbis on the committee this time around shared the view that it is impossible to include gay relationships under the rubric of those considered kiddushin, or sanctified, by Judaism.

They cited the Torah's classification of male homosexual relations as to'evah, or abominable, a category that also includes incest and adultery.

Though marriages involving lesbians or gay male couples may not be morally problematic, they are Jewishly troublesome, they wrote.

Those siding with the majority suggested that rabbis welcome lesbian and gay male couples as Jewish households, by having them celebrate their life together in the synagogue with a special kiddush or Oneg Shabbat, but not with any kind of ceremony that could be construed as a wedding. Reform rabbis in Israel have urged their

MIDEAST FOCUS

Arabs mark Land Day

Palestinians and Israeli Arabs held a series of marches in the West Bank and Israel to protest confiscations of Arab land.

Some of the marches in the West Bank turned into violent confrontations between Palestinian stone-throwers and Israeli troops.

The protests were held to mark Land Day, a tradition that began on March 30, 1976, when six Israeli Arabs were killed during a strike to protest land confiscations in the Galilee.

Protest tents at Har Homa

A group of former Kach activists set up a tent at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem to protest the lack of construction there. Police are investigating the legality of the protest.

The Palestinian Authority broke off negotiations with the Jewish state one year ago, when Israel broke ground for development of a new Jewish neighborhood there.

Suskin seeks reduced sentence

An Israeli woman sentenced to two years in prison for portraying the Islamic prophet Mohammed as a pig asked the Supreme Court to reduce her sentence.

An emigre from Russia in 1991, Tatyana Suskin, 26, was convicted of distributing the offending posters last June in the West Bank town of Hebron. Her action touched off days of clashes in Hebron and sparked outrage throughout the Arab world.

West Bank schools hold vote

Student council elections are being held this week in several Palestinian universities in the West Bank.

The elections, which pit candidates supporting Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's mainstream faction against Hamas supporters, are viewed as a barometer of Palestinian sentiment.

colleagues in North America to reach a conclusion on its own merits.

Still, the majority of rabbis on the committee were concerned that endorsement of gay marriage would only deepen the divide over religious pluralism by providing the Orthodox establishment with another example of the way the Reform movement has moved away from normative Judaism.

It "would break so sharply with the standards of religious practice maintained by virtually all Jewish communities as to wreak havoc upon our relationships with most of them," the rabbis wrote in their opinion.

It would "continue a trend, which many Reform rabbis find quite troubling, of pushing the Reform movement toward the margins of our people."

Two members dissented, relying on contemporary evidence that homosexuality has a biological basis and the fact that many same-sex couples now establish partnerships that mirror heterosexual marriage in their permanence, monogamy and, in some cases, in the fact that they are raising children.

The teshuvah also urged Central Conference members not to bring the proposed resolution to a vote because the differences dividing them on this issue run so deep.

"A resolution at this juncture would do little to bring us together. It would persuade no one; it would change no minds.

"On the contrary, it would stifle the possibility of genuine conversation among us, serving but to enrage and embarrass the adherents of the losing side," the Responsa Committee wrote.

Concerns about rabbis feeling pressure to vote one way or another are widespread within the Central Conference.

Some members of the conference have suggested that they take the unusual step of voting on the upcoming resolution by secret ballot, instead of the usual open floor vote, so that no rabbi feels pressured by "political correctness" to vote in favor of gay Jewish marriage.

As important as both the teshuvah and the impending resolution are within the Reform movement, neither binds any of its rabbis, congregations or congregants to either position.

Autonomy for rabbis and congregants undergirds all else within the Reform movement.

Debate over the issue between Reform rabbis comes against a backdrop of discussion within their organization since the mid-1970s, when the movement first began advocating for the civil rights of gays and lesbians.

The number of Reform rabbis who have officiated at commitment ceremonies or weddings of same-sex couples, while still a minority, is growing, according to members of the Central Conference. Among them is Rabbi Charles Kroloff, the rabbinical body's incoming president.

No one knows for sure how many Reform rabbis have performed such ceremonies, although it is thought to be fewer than the number of those who are willing to officiate at interfaith weddings.

The debate over gay religious marriage is happening against a backdrop of near-universal support by Reform rabbis for the right of same-sex couples to marry civilly.

A resolution advocating for the right of lesbian and gay male couples to form such legally recognized unions was adopted without much opposition at the Central Conference's annual meeting in 1996.

Why is there great disparity between the views of many Reform rabbis that same-sex couples should be able to marry civilly, but not religiously?

Currently rabbis "don't have to take on the responsibility of officiating at legally recognized gay weddings, so it's an easy thing for them to endorse," said Rabbi Lisa Edwards, leader of Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles' Reform gay and lesbian congregation, and a member of the Central Conference.

The debate in the Reform rabbinate also comes at a time that other religious groups are split over the same issue.

A minister in the United Methodist Church, one of the largest Protestant denominations, was recently brought before a church tribunal on charges that he broke its policy when he officiated at the commitment ceremony of two women last September.

He was acquitted when eight of the 13 tribunal panel ministers found him guilty. Nine votes were required to remove him from his job. □



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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JEWISH WORLD

Clinton backs immigrants' benefit

The Clinton administration said it would support legislation moving in Congress to restore food stamps to about 250,000 legal immigrants cut off by the 1996 welfare law. President Clinton initially sought benefits for 730,000 immigrants, but Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said the amount agreed to by House and Senate negotiators "would go a long way toward enacting the president's proposal." The legislation must still pass both chambers to get to the president.

AJCongress urges House panel

The American Jewish Congress urged a U.S. House of Representatives panel to extend new protections for religious liberty to replace the now-defunct Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Marc Stern, co-director of the AJCongress' legal department, told the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution that "some forms of government activity are just not important enough to justify imposing on religious faith."

Stern is working with a broad coalition of religious leaders in writing a second act similar to RFRA that would make it harder for government to interfere with the free practice of religion.

Students to march against abuse

Some 50 Jewish high school students from the Solomon Schechter Academy on Long Island, N.Y. are scheduled to lead a Jewish contingent of protesters marching in a Racial Justice Day rally Tuesday in New York City against abuse and violence by police.

The rally is also expected to include other Jews from city-area schools and synagogues who are being organized by a group known as Jews for Racial and Economic Justice.

Carter offered Arafat image help

Former President Jimmy Carter advised Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat how to reshape his image to win world sympathy for Palestinians, according to an upcoming book.

Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history, says in his book, "The Unfinished Presidency," that Arafat agreed to distance himself from radical elements in the Palestine Liberation Organization and that Carter advised him to tell the world of the Palestinians' situation in speeches designed "to secure maximum sympathy."

Papon trial resumes

The war crimes trial of Maurice Papon resumed after the wife of the former official in France's pro-Nazi Vichy regime died last week.

Papon's lawyer presented his summation in the trial, which is expected to conclude later this week.

Albright speaks of 'trouble,' Ross heads back to capital

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Just what did Madeleine Albright say to American Jewish organizational officials when she prevailed upon them to help convince Israel to take concrete steps forward?

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are in trouble here on this process. We need your support," the U.S. secretary of state said in a conference call last Friday with some two dozen Jewish officials.

"We need help in having the Israeli government understand that we are doing our very best to protect their security and that this, in our best judgment, is the best way to go about it," Albright said, according to an unofficial transcript obtained by JTA of the 30-minute conference call with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

The extraordinary plea to ask U.S. Jews to help convince Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept a U.S. peace plan came on the eve of a shuttle mission to the region by U.S. Special Middle East coordinator Dennis Ross.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, downplayed the significance of Albright's statement, stressing that it came in response to a question and not as part of her opening statement.

"She was not in any sense making a pitch for a reaction," Hoenlein said. "If a question had not been asked, she would have never said it."

Albright's comments received widespread media coverage and renewed speculation about whether the administration was ready to walk away from the Middle East.

In meetings with Netanyahu and Arafat, Ross failed to convince the two leaders to agree on a road map for an Israeli redeployment tied to specific Palestinian moves on security. Ross and Netanyahu reportedly never discussed the specific size of a redeployment because Arafat would not commit to moves on security. Israel has said a reported American proposal for a 13 percent pullback in the West Bank is unacceptable, while the Palestinians have insisted that they would accept nothing less than a further redeployment that would give them control over a third of the West Bank.

Netanyahu on Monday played down reports of growing American frustration with the stalemate in the peace process, saying that Israel and the United States were not headed for a confrontation.

Ross was scheduled to leave Israel on Tuesday and return to the State Department to brief Albright. Ross may return to the region in a couple of weeks depending on the outcome of a Middle East policy meeting with President Clinton scheduled for later this week. But the parties should understand, Albright had said on last Friday's conference call, that the United States would not stand by indefinitely while they refuse to make the hard decisions an agreement would require.

"I have to tell you, in all honesty, we are coming towards the end of the road here," said Albright, who has had several previous conference calls with Jewish leaders.

"I have to say that one of the options is to let them deal with each other and for us to walk away."

Albright, who at times sounded defensive of U.S. policy, attacked some members of the Jewish community, although not by name, for "portraying us as if we are shoving something down Israel's throat which we are not. We are trying to make this process move forward."

Last week, Howard Kohr, executive director of the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, criticized some in the State Department for "their idea of promulgating a so-called American plan and then using pressure tactics to try to coerce Israel into accepting it." In what some participants on the conference call perceived as a response to AIPAC, Albright said, "I am very disturbed by the sense of some people that we have somehow lost our rudder and have forgotten what is basic to all of us in the Clinton administration."

"Clearly from the president, the vice president and myself on down, we are dedicated to Israel's security and to the well-being of the Israeli people." □

Israel sets procedures for converting adoptees

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A piece of the controversy over conversions performed in Israel has likely been resolved.

The Israeli government this week approved the recommendations of a committee dealing with the conversions of children adopted abroad.

The committee, which is headed by Rabbi Haim Druckman, a former National Religious Party Knesset member, had called for the creation of special rabbinical courts to deal with such conversions.

It also said that the families of the adopted children would not be required to be religiously observant after the conversions and that there would be no rabbinic follow-up to ensure the religious observance of the children or the families.

Adoptive parents had complained that the Chief Rabbinate required them, in effect, to undertake a change of their own lifestyles before the religious courts would consent to convert the adopted children to Judaism.

Nearly a dozen of these parents sought help from Conservative rabbis in Israel, who converted the children in 1995 at the Conservative movement's Kibbutz Hannaton.

After the Interior Ministry refused to recognize the children as Jewish, several families took their dilemma to Israel's High Court of Justice in 1995.

Given the Cabinet's approval of the Druckman Committee's recommendations, it appears unlikely that the court will now rule on the issue.

In a related matter, a separate committee dealing with conversions and other issues related to the religious pluralism debate in Israel discussed the efforts by the Women of the Wall group to pray at the Western Wall.

No members of the Orthodox religious establishment who sit on the Ne'eman Committee took part in the discussion, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

The paper added that members of the committee, headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, took up the matter after it was referred to them by the High Court of Justice.

For the past nine years, the group has been attempting to hold services, including Torah readings, at the Western Wall plaza in Jerusalem.

Fervently Orthodox groups have protested their presence at the site.

Earlier this month, Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein told the Cabinet that he is looking into the possibility of setting up an alternative site in the plaza for the group, as well as for other non-Orthodox Jewish groups that have encountered difficulties in holding prayers at the Western Wall from fervently Orthodox protesters. □

Oldest synagogue discovered

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli archaeologists have uncovered remains of what is believed to be the world's oldest synagogue.

The remains, which are believed to date from the first century

B.C.E., were uncovered this week near the West Bank town of Jericho.

One of the relics discovered by the team of archaeologists was a u-shaped bench.

The bench was apparently used for ceremonial meals in ancient times.

The excavation provided the first physical evidence that such meals took place before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.

The team was headed by Ehud Netzer, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The remains were excavated near the site of a Hasmonean-era winter palace.

Perhaps the most famous Hasmonean leader was Judah Maccabee.

His triumph against the Seleucid kingdom in the second century B.C.E. is celebrated during Chanukah.

The previously oldest known synagogue was in the Golan Heights, according to Netzer.

That synagogue was built approximately 50 years later than this one. □

Report: Tickets to be waived

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Want to get rid of all your traffic tickets?

Perhaps it's time to make aliyah.

The vast majority of Israelis who would benefit from a general amnesty granted in honor of Israel's 50th anniversary are expected to be traffic offenders, a senior Justice Ministry source was quoted as saying.

According to the source, quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, about 800 to 1,000 individuals will receive an amnesty in the form of reduced fines for traffic violations and tickets and the reinstatement of revoked licenses.

In some cases, former prisoners will have their criminal records cleared.

A special committee formed to establish the criteria for granting amnesty met for the first time this week and is due to submit its proposals within 30 days.

Last week, the Knesset rejected three bills calling for a widespread prisoner amnesty as part of Israel's 50th anniversary commemoration.

The votes were held as part of a flurry of parliamentary activity aimed at wrapping up outstanding Knesset business before the body's Passover recess. □

Israelis to train with NASA

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's air force is expected to send two pilots to upcoming NASA training courses.

But given the timetable for the rigorous training process, it does not appear that an Israeli astronaut will make it to space during Israel's jubilee year. One of the Israeli pilots chosen to undergo NASA training is an air force colonel who previously headed the air force's division of weaponry. □