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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Clinton uses Yom Kippur liturgy

President Clinton read from the Yom Kippur liturgy as he offered his most repentant remarks to date on the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Speaking to religious leaders at the White House last Friday, Clinton read a passage from Gates of Repentance, the Reform movement's High Holiday prayer book. [Page 1]

Israelis, Palestinians clash

Israeli troops clashed with Palestinian protesters in the West Bank for a third straight day after the army killed two leaders of Hamas' military wing.

Israeli authorities tightened security across the country in the wake of threats from Hamas to retaliate for the killings of brothers Imad and Adel Awadallah. [Page 4]

Ross continues efforts

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross traveled to Egypt to brief Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on his efforts to advance the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. There were no indications that Ross had managed to break the impasse. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the talks with Ross are "not centering on the Israeli side of the equation, but on the need of the Palestinians to honor their commitments" regarding security issues.

Israelis demonstrate for peace

Some 50,000 Israelis gathered in the Tel Aviv square where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated to demand that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resign in order to save the peace process.

The rally, held on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the historic handshake between Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, was held under the slogan, "Netanyahu Go Home." [Page 4]

Pro-Oslo rally held in Washington

Martin Indyk expressed optimism about the prospects for Israel and the Palestinians reaching an agreement to jump-start the peace process. The U.S. official's comments came as more than 400 people gathered in Washington to mark the five-year anniversary of the Oslo accords. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's widow, Leah, joined Jewish leaders in urging for a continuation of the path to peace and for continued U.S. involvement in the peace process.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

President invokes Reform prayer in emotional confession to clergy

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Facing the gravest test of his presidency and personal life, President Clinton has turned to the Yom Kippur liturgy for what he hopes will be the right words of atonement.

With 106 clergy members gathered at the White House last Friday for a national prayer breakfast, Clinton opened up Gates of Repentance, the Reform movement's High Holidays prayer book, and read a passage about the challenges of penitence and changing one's ways.

Clinton invoked the Jewish concept of atonement as part of an unprecedented baring of his soul and his most extensive confessional to date regarding the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

His voice thick with emotion, Clinton said he had sinned and focused his remarks on what one rabbi described as the Jewish steps for repentance — acknowledging wrongdoing, apologizing to those you have wronged and taking steps to make sure you do not repeat the transgression.

"That was an incredible tie-in," said Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive vice president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform movement's rabbinic body, who sat at a table with Clinton in the ornate East Room of the White House.

The prayer breakfast took place just hours before the U.S. House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to make public the report of independent counsel Kenneth Starr, which provides vivid details of Clinton's affair with Lewinsky, a former White House intern, and alleged impeachable offenses. The White House issued a rebuttal of the Starr report over the weekend.

Clinton, a Southern Baptist, is known to be deeply religious and has frequently turned to scripture throughout his political career.

"It takes an act of will for us to make a turn," Clinton told the clergy as he read from the prayer book that he said was given to him by a friend, Miami attorney Ira Leesfield, whose home Clinton visited after a Democratic fund raiser last week.

"It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again, and this is always painful. It means saying: 'I am sorry.' It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."

The passage, coupled with other words of contrition, struck most of the rabbis in the room as appropriately poignant, particularly with Yom Kippur approaching at the end of the month.

"The power of the Jewish concept of repentance and the liturgical expressions of Yom Kippur do have a universal resonance," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center. "It was very touching at a moment of crisis to hear the president of the United States turn to the Jewish prayer book for inspiration." Saperstein was seated at the annual breakfast next to Hillary Clinton, who was visibly affected by her husband's words, her eyes welling up with tears.

Clinton's speech to the broad cross-section of religious leaders, including about 15 rabbis, came amid signs that his support among clergy members is beginning to erode. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary and a leading figure within the Conservative movement, last week urged Clinton to resign. Other prominent religious leaders, including Paige Patterson, the head of the Southern Baptist

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel releases terror totals

A total of 279 Israelis were killed by Palestinian militants since the peace process was launched five years ago at a White House ceremony, Israel announced.

Between 1978 and 1993, by comparison, 254 Israelis were killed.

Premier hopes Clinton survives

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he hopes that President Clinton survives the sex scandal plaguing the White House.

"He is a friend to Israel," said the Israeli premier, who was himself involved in a scandal when he admitted to cheating on his wife, Sara, in 1993.

Meanwhile, Israel's former ambassador to the United States, Itamar Rabinovich, wrote in an Israeli newspaper that the ongoing scandal could harm the Clinton administration's ability to move the Middle East peace process forward.

Israel concerned over Primakov

Israel is concerned about the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Russia's new prime minister, government sources said.

"His past activities and views about the Middle East gives us concern," said one source, referring to Primakov's past expressions of support for Iraq, Syria and Iran.

"We definitely hope we are wrong," the source said.

Lebanese arrested for spying

More than 20 Lebanese were recently arrested on suspicion of spying for Israel, a Beirut newspaper reported.

The arrests were made during a sweep of Beirut's southern suburbs.

The suspects allegedly provided information to Mossad agents based in Cyprus.



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Convention, and Bishop Richard Grein of the New York Episcopal Diocese, have also called for Clinton's resignation.

In an interview with The New York Times, Schorsch said Clinton's moral authority has been "destroyed" as a result of the scandal. He was unavailable for further comment.

Schorsch, regarded throughout the Jewish community and by senior Jewish Democrats as a great moral voice, traveled with Clinton to Israel for the Israeli-Jordanian peace signing and for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's funeral, both of which took place in 1994.

His call for Clinton's resignation, which came before the prayer breakfast, caught many off guard and did not appear to reflect a widely held sentiment among other rabbinical leaders as Starr's report made its way into public view and lawmakers tried to determine how to proceed.

Rabbi Menachem Genack of the Orthodox Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Englewood, N.J., said he thought Schorsch would have been "wise to wait for that judgment." Genack, a longtime Democratic supporter who attended the breakfast as a representative of the Orthodox Union, said he was airing his personal views.

"I only agree in the sense that (Clinton's) moral authority has been compromised," he said. "But that's what repentance is all about — it's retrieving that again."

In watching Clinton speak at the prayer breakfast, Genack said he saw a recognition that repentance is a process.

"He's beginning to internalize some of those values and transforming anger into contrition," he said.

Indeed, many of the religious leaders gathered at the White House said they had been won over by Clinton's apology, in which he spoke of reaching "rock bottom" and having a "broken spirit." Some of the rabbis in attendance said they intended to construct Yom Kippur sermons with the president's story as a modern parable.

But in the political realm, it remained unclear what impact Clinton's confession would have on rapidly unfolding events. Shortly after he spoke, his words quickly became lost amid the lurid details of the Starr report.

"I think it would have been better to have had all this come out months ago, but catharsis at any given point is helpful," said Orthodox Rabbi Arthur Schneier of Park East Synagogue in New York. □

Georgia celebrates 2,600 years of Jewish life in ex-Soviet state

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Israeli flags and other Jewish symbols adorned the streets of Tbilisi last week as part of a festival highlighting 2,600 years of Jewish life in Georgia.

An estimated 50,000 people attended the four-day event, which was mainly sponsored by the government of President Eduard Shevardnadze, which included concerts, theater performances and a Jewish film festival. The only event marring the festival in the Georgian capital was the inability of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to attend the event. Netanyahu had to cancel because of flu.

But among the dozens of foreign guests who attended the festivities were Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Katsav and Israel's chief Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis.

Speaking at a Tbilisi synagogue during the festival, Shevardnadze called the settlement of Jews in the country a "landmark in our history."

Local tradition says the first Jews arrived in Georgia after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C.E.

Throughout most of its history, Georgia's Jewish community has enjoyed relatively good relations with the Christian majority, and there have never been any pogroms or large-scale anti-Semitism, which is located in the Caucasus Mountains.

But Georgia's once-thriving Jewish community, which at its peak totaled 100,000, has now dwindled to 14,000. Some 10,000 of these live in Tbilisi.

Many Jews fled the country during the civil war and economic crisis that plagued Georgia from 1989 to 1995. □

JEWISH WORLD

Lawyers discuss Swiss audit

An audit of Swiss banks indicates that dormant accounts belonging to Holocaust victims total some \$51 million so far, according to lawyers processing claims for the accounts.

They said 3,300 claims have been accepted out of the 9,500 claims filed, with the remainder still being reviewed.

Paul Volcker, the former U.S. Federal Reserve chairman who heads the Claims Resolution Panel, said that "efforts are being made to speed up" the restitution process, which he said is fraught with difficulties.

Volkswagen creates fund

Volkswagen established an \$11.87 million fund to compensate Holocaust survivors who were forced to work as slave laborers during World War II.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres agreed to oversee the distribution of the money. Attorneys for the survivors said Volkswagen's announcement would not affect their class-action lawsuit against the company.

Austrian bank begins talks

Austria's Creditanstalt Bank said it began talks with Jewish groups to examine its alleged involvement with Nazi-looted gold. Bank officials said they wanted to reach a memorandum of understanding that would set up a mechanism for probing its wartime past and for making restitution.

The bank is included in an \$18 billion lawsuit filed by Holocaust survivors against Germany's Deutsche Bank and Dresdner Bank for knowingly trading in gold looted from concentration camp victims.

Center plans children's exhibit

The Simon Wiesenthal Center is building a children's version of its Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. The plans for the new building, which will house exhibits about the dangers of prejudice and bigotry for children under 12, come as the center celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Meanwhile, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the dean of the center, is scheduled to travel to Israel next month to discuss plans to build a version of the museum in Jerusalem that would seek to reduce religious and political tensions among Israelis.

Kosher supplier banned

London's kosher licensing authority banned England's largest supplier of processed kosher meats from selling its products in that country's capital city.

The move came after Gilbert's Kosher Foods decided to have its products approved by the kosher authorities in the city of Manchester, who were said to charge less than their London counterparts.

Florida Jewish Democrat gave Clinton idea for repentant prayer

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When Rabbi Jack Riemer wrote alternative High Holidays prayers in the 1970s, he never dreamed that his words would become the center of an American president's penitent plea.

But that's exactly what happened last week in the East Room of the White House when President Clinton opened the Reform Jewish movement's Yom Kippur prayer book to page 372 and read what he called Riemer's "incredible passage."

In a telephone interview from his Boca Raton, Fla., home Riemer said he was "deeply moved and flattered" when he found out that Clinton read the entire 204-word text of "On Turning."

"I'm moved that he found it and liked it," Riemer said of his prayer, which compares the changing of the seasons to the process that people go through to repent. "It's an obvious metaphor," he said of the prayer.

"Though written a number of years ago, it sounded like it was written for this occasion," said Riemer.

Clinton would have never known of Riemer's prayer if it were not for Ira Leesfield, a prominent Miami attorney and Democratic contributor who gave the president a copy of the Gates of Repentance prayer book at a private gathering last week in Florida.

In a telephone interview from his law office, Leesfield said he went to Temple Beth Shalom last week to meet with his rabbi to discuss his part in the Yom Kippur service and "serendipitously" opened the prayer book to Riemer's prayer.

"Obviously it's very appropriate to his own self-evaluation," Leesfield said of Clinton, so when the president came over to his house Sept. 9 to attend a small, late-night gathering of two dozen people, Leesfield gave him the prayer book with a note saying, "Mr. President, I think this is something you would appreciate looking at."

Reform Jewish officials estimate that more than 700,000 Gates of Remembrance prayer books, published in 1979, are being used in some 90 percent of Reform congregations in America.

When asked how he felt that Clinton read the passage, Leesfield said that he had "a strong feeling of helping" rather than a feeling of pride.

"I have a lot of pride in being Jewish. I have a lot of pride in our religion's feeling about forgiveness and atonement," he said.

He added that he took satisfaction that the president "found it important to share with the community."

While it remains to be seen if Clinton's words at the prayer breakfast will help him win the support of the American people, at least one fan has come back to the president.

Riemer's wife, Susan, who listened in on the telephone interview, offered that she was wavering in her support of the president but "now that he's read my husband's prayer, I'm all for him again."

The text of "On Turning" follows:

"Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.

"For leaves, birds, and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily.

"It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy. It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful. It means saying: I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

"These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways.

"Lord, help us to turn — from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith.

"Turn us around, O Lord, and bring us back toward You. Revive our lives, as at the beginning. And turn us toward each other, Lord, for in isolation there is no life." □

Israel braces for Hamas attacks after killing of 2 terrorist leaders

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is bracing for terror attacks after its troops killed two leading members of Hamas.

Threats to retaliate for the Sept. 10 killings of brothers Imad and Adel Awadallah have been taken seriously by Israeli officials, who beefed up security at public sites across the country.

Israel also imposed an indefinite closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip — its first in more than a year.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his Cabinet on Sunday that "there would be a harsh Israeli response" if Hamas carries out any attacks.

"Israel will not tolerate any attack against its citizens and will take swift action against the organizations of murderers," he said.

The killings came as U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, who arrived in the region last week, continued to prod Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reach an agreement that would advance their long-deadlocked negotiations.

Palestinian officials said Israel's killing of the Awadallah brothers was aimed at scuttling the peace process.

Netanyahu spokesman David Bar-Illan countered that Israel pursues suspected terrorists at all times, regardless of the possible repercussions.

The killings sparked several days of confrontations in the West Bank between Israeli troops and Palestinian demonstrators calling for revenge. The worst clashes were reported in El Bireh, the Awadallahs' home town, where thousands of protesters marching Saturday from nearby Ramallah threw stones and bottles at Israeli soldiers, who responded with rubber bullets.

Clashes also took place over the weekend in Hebron, Nablus and Bethlehem. Dozens of Palestinians were reported injured.

A day after the Awadallahs were killed in a shootout with Israeli troops near Hebron, Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin called for retaliation.

"We will not forget the blood of our martyrs," Yassin said.

Mahmoud Zahar, a top Hamas official in the Gaza Strip, also said last Friday, "Israel will pay a high price for this crime," adding that Hamas would retaliate with suicide bombings similar to those carried out after its chief bomb-maker, Yehiya Ayash, was assassinated in January 1996.

Known as "The Engineer" because of his expertise with explosives, Ayash was killed in Gaza by a booby-trapped cellular phone in an operation that Hamas attributed to Israel. Israeli authorities denied any involvement.

In February and March 1996, Israel was left reeling by a series of suicide attacks in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ashkelon that claimed 59 innocent lives and wounded some 220 others.

Last Friday, some 300 Hamas supporters participated in a rally where leaflets were distributed promising similar retaliation.

A day earlier, Israeli soldiers stormed a one-room house near Hebron, killing the Awadallahs, who were senior members of Izz a-Din al-Kassam, Hamas' military wing.

Troops found a weapons cache, including an Uzi submachine gun, grenades, two pistols and three wigs. A large banner reading "Izz a-Din al-Kassam" covered one wall.

Army officials said the brothers apparently had planned to kidnap Israelis or carry out a drive-by shooting.

The deaths of the two, and the subsequent threats of reprisals,

have prompted some debate in Israel about the value of the operation, given the cost it may have in terms of Israeli blood.

Israeli officials countered that the operation prevented a terror attack.

By killing two top Hamas militants, they added, Israel has also seriously crippled the militants' ability to plan and carry out additional attacks.

Israel believes that Adel Awadallah, commander of the Hamas military wing in the West Bank, masterminded several suicide bombings. He topped Israel's most-wanted list.

Imad Awadallah escaped last month from a Palestinian jail. He had been held on suspicion of involvement in the killing last March of another top Hamas member, Mohiyedine Sharif.

Hamas blamed Israel for Sharif's death, a charge promptly denied by Israeli officials. The Palestinian Authority said both brothers were responsible for that slaying.

Meanwhile, there were no indications that Ross, who is making his first visit to the region since May, is succeeding at breaking the impasse in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Netanyahu said the talks with Ross are "not centering on the Israeli side of the equation, but on the need of the Palestinians to honor their commitments" regarding security issues.

One of the main sticking points is Israel's demand to renegotiate an understanding on security cooperation worked out in December by Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. officials.

The understanding calls in part for a Palestinian crackdown on Hamas. Netanyahu has rejected the initial understanding as insufficient.

Meanwhile, some 50,000 Israelis gathered in the Tel Aviv square where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated nearly four years ago to demand that Netanyahu resign in order to save the peace process.

The Saturday night rally — held on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the historic handshake between Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn — was held under the slogan, "Netanyahu Go Home." □

Lithuania sets up commission

MOSCOW (JTA) — Lithuania has officially established an international commission to examine war crimes committed during the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the Baltic nation.

Julius Smulkstis, an adviser to Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus who was named government liaison to the Jewish community in June, was quoted as saying that the commission's main function is "to investigate the World War II period and its immediate aftermath in order to come up with answers to various questions concerning the Jewish and Lithuanian genocide."

But a top Jewish leader is skeptical.

Simonas Alperavicius, the chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish community, said he doubts that the commission will be successful in digging up the truth because the commission has too many people with different views on how to confront the country's past.

Some members of the commission have vowed to investigate both Lithuania's crimes against the Jews during the Nazi era and Jewish crimes against Lithuanians during the Soviet occupation of the country.

The commission will be co-chaired by Emanuelis Zingeris, the only Jewish member of the 141-seat Lithuanian Parliament. □