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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Centers open amid Iraqi threat

Israel's army opened 65 gas mask distribution centers.

The number will soon be increased to 150 centers that will be open 24 hours a day. The move came as security officials concluded that an American strike on Iraq seems inevitable, as Iraq continues to resist efforts to allow United Nations teams to inspect suspected non-conventional weapons sites.

But even as the centers were being opened, the officials felt it is unlikely that Israel will be targeted for an Iraqi attack.

Israel seeks Har Homa bids

Israel invited bids for the construction of 1,025 housing units at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem. The step was viewed as an effort by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to placate domestic opposition after his Cabinet approved the Wye agreement.

Palestinian officials called the move a violation of the accord, saying it calls on the two sides to refrain from taking unilateral steps.

There was an 18-month-long deadlock in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations after Israel broke ground for new construction at the southeastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Homa in 1997.

Ross returning to check Wye

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is returning to the region to oversee implementation of the Wye accord. Ross' visit comes as Israel is slated to redeploy from 2 percent of the West Bank on Monday.

Insurers to set up fund

Six European insurance companies agreed to deposit a total of \$90 million in an escrow account as proof of their intent to settle claims by Holocaust victims and their heirs.

The decision to establish the fund, with \$30 million to be paid within the coming weeks and the remaining \$60 million by June 1999, came during a marathon 10-hour meeting in London of the newly established International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims.

The executive director of the World Jewish Congress, Elan Steinberg, called the a move a "historic achievement to the credit of the insurance companies."

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Livingston's record on Israel forecasts change in Congress

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israel's foreign aid is a "leadership issue," Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) thundered at a private meeting last year with Rep. Bob Livingston (R-La.).

When Gingrich finished dressing down the House Appropriations Committee chairman, Livingston ordered one of his lieutenants to release a hold on \$75.6 million in aid to Israel that had been placed after the Jewish state appeared to balk on a promise to give some of its aid to Jordan.

Livingston's threat at the time to "revisit the issue of aid to Israel" if an American Jewish teen-age murder suspect, Samuel Sheinbein, who had fled to Israel was not promptly extradited to the United States exacerbated tensions at the meeting.

By all accounts, Livingston got the message, and were it not for a hold placed by a Democrat on the same money Israel would have promptly received the aid.

Now that Gingrich is stepping down as the leader of the House and endorsing his long-time friend, episodes like this, although rare in Livingston's 22-year tenure in the House, could shed light on what type of speaker he will be if the Republican caucus supports him, as expected, in a secret ballot next week.

Livingston is set to assume the post at a time of great turmoil for his party. Coming off of a poor showing in last week's election, Livingston will run the House with a slim 223-211 majority — there is one independent member.

Despite his staunch conservative credentials, Livingston is a far cry from the Republican firebrands who took over the House in 1994.

While Livingston enjoys a 100 percent rating from the Christian Coalition, social issues have not been his passion.

"It's going to be hard to go more conservative," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the National Jewish Coalition, a Republican group.

"People may introduce things" like a school prayer constitutional amendment, "but the likelihood of passage this time is even more remote."

Gripping in the Jewish community about Livingston's belief in a tight fiscal policy stopped overnight, as activists adjusted to the reality that they will have to work with him.

"Any leader who can move the agenda forward and enable the Congress to move forward on a bipartisan basis is good for our community because we have business before the Congress," said Diana Aviv, director of the Council of Jewish Federations' Washington Action Office.

But a major shift in budgeting, which could result in deeper cuts in social service spending, could pit Livingston against the Jewish community early next year.

Livingston said he would offer as his first initiative a change in congressional budget rules that counts individual contributions to Social Security as government revenue. The change would result in a \$28 billion deficit, he said.

But for now, Livingston is drawing high marks from many in the Jewish community for his staunch opposition to the conservative caucus' tactic of attaching controversial policies to spending bills. An anti-abortion rider on the foreign aid bill has tied it in knots the past two years.

Livingston has also received praise from the Jewish community for his opposition to former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke, who said he would run for Livingston's seat

MIDEAST FOCUS

Election bill expected to pass

A bill to cancel Israel's law for the direct election of the prime minister is expected to pass a first vote when brought before the Knesset next week.

The prediction was made after the Labor and Likud parties gave their members freedom to vote as they choose.

The bill, whose passage requires a simple majority in the 120-seat Knesset, would then have to face two additional votes. Leading opponents of the bill include Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the first Israeli prime minister directly elected under the current electoral law.

Israeli, E.U. officials confer

Israeli and European Union officials discussed several possible solutions to a dispute over exports from Jewish settlements and Palestinian self-rule areas.

A delegation of officials from the E.U. is due to travel to Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas within two weeks in a bid to resolve the dispute.

Law sought to help renters

Israeli Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman proposed legislation to protect Israeli renters from sharp swings in the shekel's exchange rate with the U.S. dollar. Rents in Israel are quoted in dollars and paid in shekels. The recent decline in the shekel against the dollar has as a result driven up the rental costs.

Israeli bill knocks U.S. music

A law that would force Israeli radio stations to devote at least half of their music air time to Israeli songs recently passed the first of three Knesset votes.

The bill's author said the legislation is intended to "erect a protective wall" around Israeli music against the onslaught of foreign influences — particularly American rock 'n' roll, a favorite among Israeli teens.



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if he retired this year. After announcing retirement plans — which he later reversed — Livingston promised to give his entire \$650,000 campaign chest to Duke's primary opponent. He also pledged to support the Democratic candidate if Duke won the GOP nomination.

Unlike Gingrich, Livingston has not worked to build relations with the Jewish community in his district, according to local activists.

Meetings with Livingston, after he became Appropriations Committee chairman, "appear to have no impact on his thinking and it was very unclear whether he could understand the nature of our arguments as a minority community looking to have our interests protected," said Leslie Gerwin, chair of the community relations committee of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans.

This year marked the first time that groups such as B'nai B'rith and the Anti-Defamation League teamed up with Livingston on a policy issue.

The Jewish community lobbied Congress to support legislation that would encourage Western investment in Azerbaijan. Livingston singled out the Jewish groups on the House floor, thanking them for their support.

But it is Livingston's record on Israel-related issues that has attracted the most attention, activists say, in part because of the unusually close relationship between Gingrich and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

While many in the Jewish community vehemently disagreed with Gingrich on domestic issues, they hailed his pro-Israel advocacy.

"Newt truly is a significant figure on U.S.-Israel relations and he will be missed," said Howard Kohr, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Gingrich and Netanyahu frequently coordinated strategy to blunt Clinton administration pressure on the peace process. But that era is coming to an end.

"To the extent that the last Congress was used as a lever against White House pressure against Israel," said Marshall Breger, a former Reagan White House official, Livingston's House "is less likely to be a sword in the Israeli government's armor. But it's still a shield."

While Netanyahu is unlikely to enjoy as warm a relationship with Livingston as he did with Gingrich, there does appear to be room to work together.

Netanyahu and Livingston huddled for about 10 minutes in a discussion about missile defense at an Israeli Embassy dinner shortly after the premier's election.

As Appropriations Committee chairman, Livingston oversaw the allocation of hundreds of millions of dollars to the joint U.S.-Israel Arrow anti-missile system.

But some current and former Israeli officials in Washington, who refused to comment on the record for fear of alienating the next speaker, remain concerned about Livingston's rhetoric.

Livingston's threat to revisit aid to Israel in the wake of the Sheinbein case was an "off-the-cuff comment and if it's the worst thing that anyone can say about Bob Livingston, so be it," said Brooks of the NJC.

AIPAC also backed Livingston on the issue.

"He now understands the nuances of Israel's policy in this matter," Kohr said.

Livingston's critics point to a Jerusalem news conference last May during a visit to celebrate Israel's 50th anniversary — his second visit to the Jewish state — where he criticized Israel's reliance on U.S. economic aid.

"Israelis need to understand that they're not the 51st state, and they certainly don't want to be treated like America's stepchild. Continued economic assistance when they are doing quite well is demeaning," he said.

Livingston's record has Jewish Democrats crying foul.

"He has used his powerful House position as leverage to bully Israel. This is no way to treat a friend and ally," said Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council.

But Brooks just as strenuously disagrees.

"I will stake my professional reputation as a Jewish activist on this, that Bob Livingston is a strong friend and has been there when it counts."

Jewish activists will not have to wait long to see how Livingston reacts on an Israel issue. President Clinton promised as part of last month's peace agreement to seek more aid for Israel and the Palestinians in a separate foreign aid package. □

JEWISH WORLD

ADL office names winners

The Central and East European office of the Anti-Defamation League announced the winners of a national high school art contest held to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Kristallnacht.

First prize went to 17-year-old Alexandra Szeredi for a work that depicted a baby with a tiny swastika in its right eye. More than 500 high school students from all over Austria entered the contest, which was endorsed by the country's political and church leaders.

First book fair planned

Poland's first Jewish book fair will take place next week in Warsaw. Seven Polish publishers will display Jewish-themed books at individual stands, and there will be another stand for several other publishers.

The event is sponsored by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, a New York-based foundation dedicated to fostering Jewish education, and the Polish Jewish magazine *Midrasz*.

Memoir spotlights Holocaust

A new book sheds light on life in Germany during the Holocaust. "I Will Bear Witness" is the diary of the years 1933 to 1941 written by Victor Klemperer, a Jewish-born Protestant and professor at the Dresden Technical University.

Klemperer survived the 12 years of the Nazi regime in part because he was married to an "Aryan."

Frank case becomes musical

A new musical about the lynching of a Jewish businessman for a 1913 murder of an Atlanta teenager opens in New York.

"Parade" retells the story of Leo Frank, who was pulled out of jail and lynched by a mob after Georgia's governor commuted his sentence for the murder of Mary Phagan at a pencil factory. Frank was given a posthumous pardon in 1986.

Ellis Island exhibit opens

Ellis Island is the subject of a photography exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington.

The images by Larry Racioppo focus on the decaying buildings of the monument's hospital complex, rather than the newly restored main immigrant building. About 10 percent of the 12 million immigrants who came through Ellis Island were detained at the hospital before they were admitted into the United States.

Jewish bodybuilder takes crown

A British Jew recently captured the title of Mr. Universe. Simon Cohen defeated 27 other bodybuilders to capture the crown.

Insurance firms set up fund to settle Holocaust-era claims

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Six European insurers have agreed to deposit a total of \$90 million in an escrow account as proof of their intent to settle claims by Holocaust victims and their heirs.

The decision to establish the fund — with \$30 million to be paid within the coming weeks and the remaining \$60 million by June 1999 — came during a marathon 10-hour meeting Wednesday in London of the newly established International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims.

The commission's head, former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, listed the six insurers as Assicurazioni Generali of Italy; Germany's leading insurer, Allianz Holding; France's AXA Group; and the Winterthur, Zurich and Basel insurance firms in Switzerland. The commission — which was created as the result of a memorandum of agreement signed in August — includes representatives from the European insurers, the U.S. National Association of Insurance Commissioners, European insurance regulators, the World Jewish Congress and an Israeli official.

In a series of hearings conducted by U.S. state insurance regulators earlier this year, numerous witnesses charged that European insurance companies have been stalling for 50 years to avoid payment on policies taken out by Jews in prewar years.

The WJC's executive director, Elan Steinberg, called the insurers' decision to create the fund a "historic achievement to the credit of the insurance companies."

Based on preliminary assessments of the unpaid policies, the WJC has put their value at between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion in today's currency — 10 times their value in postwar dollars.

Bobby Brown, Diaspora affairs adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli representative on the commission, said Generali alone had issued 327,000 policies between 1918 and 1945, with some 100,000 — not necessarily all belonging to Holocaust victims — that have not been paid out.

Chairing the first meeting of the international commission, Eagleburger pledged to try to complete the work of settling claims before a prescribed two-year time limit.

He also volunteered to travel to various former Soviet-bloc states in an attempt to persuade governments and companies that may have responsibility for claims by Holocaust victims to "join the process."

Speaking to reporters after the commission met, Eagleburger was adamant that the \$90 million fund did not represent "a cap, a limit or a precedent for dealing with future claims."

The decision by the insurance companies to establish the fund, he stressed, was "a demonstration that they are prepared to deal seriously with the issue."

At the same time, however, he said had no idea how the \$90 million would be spent. "That will be dealt with by the commission in the coming weeks and months," he said.

In addition to creating the fund, he added, the insurance companies had agreed to pay the operating costs of the commission's first year, which he estimated at some \$10 million.

Eagleburger announced that five working groups, whose members will be designated by members of the commission, had been established during the London conference.

These groups include: an audit review committee that will ensure the companies produce a comprehensive list of unpaid policies; a claims resolution committee that will assess the validity of claims and, if necessary, establish an appeals procedure; a public access committee to publicize the list of claimants; a historical committee that will examine the background to the claims commission; and a budget working group that will oversee the commission's expenditures.

The commission, which will set up offices in Washington and London, is planning a claims outreach program, including a toll-free number to provide information to potential claimants. □

Observant American Jews portrayed in novels and on film

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Until recently, Jewish characters in popular culture came in two types: assimilated and invisible.

But in the past few years, observant Jewish characters — and observant Jewish themes — have begun to come out of the closet.

It's not a seismic shift: Many of the Jews portrayed in popular culture, particularly on television, still adhere to stereotypes, such as the shallow, shopaholic nanny or the wimpy, whining rabbi who appeared on a few "Seinfeld" episodes.

And it's not as if Jewish characters who keep kosher and Shabbat have suddenly flooded the nation's theaters and bookshelves.

But there appears to be little doubt: A new Jewish character has emerged.

To name just a few books, Pearl Abraham's recently released "Giving Up America" focuses on the dissolution of a marriage between a lapsed Chasidic woman and her Orthodox, but not Chasidic, husband; and Elizabeth Swados' "Flamboyant" examines a relationship between a prostitute and a female Orthodox teacher at a New York City public school.

For young adults, there's Sonia Levitin's "The Singing Mountain," a portrayal of two teen-agers who confront spirituality and coming-of-age in a story set in both America and Israel.

In the movie "Pi," which opened in theaters earlier this year to critical acclaim, Chasidic Jews compete with a Wall Street firm for a man whom they believe knows the mathematical number sequence that holds the key to explaining the universe.

Scholars who follow the way Jews are portrayed in popular culture say the new character type reflects one of the threads in contemporary American Jewry.

"We're living in a time when religion is not nearly as invisible as it once was," says Samuel Heilman, a professor of sociology and Jewish studies at the City University of New York.

Since the great immigration of Jews to the United States began in the late 19th century, Jews' involvement in American culture and arts has been out of proportion to their percentage of the population.

This involvement can be divided into three phases. Until World War II, Jews who were involved in mainstream culture put their Jewishness aside or worked explicitly in the Christian idiom — it was the son of a cantor, after all, Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline in Russia, who penned the lyrics to the American chestnut "White Christmas."

In the second, post-World War II wave, Jewish artists began to address their own concerns, but their fictional characters were often ambivalent Jews who either wanted to cast nostalgic glances at the culture that nurtured them or break away from their pasts entirely.

As Daphne Merkin wrote recently in her New York Times Book Review of Allegra Goodman's National Book Award-nominated "Kaaterskill Falls," which portrays the lives of a tight-knit community of Orthodox Jews centered around their rebbe and the upstate New York town where they summer: "Jewish writers, by and large, have tended to focus on the merely ethnic — the long grip of overbearing mothers, the enduring allure of shikshas, the gustatory limitations of gefilte fish," she wrote, acknowledging

exceptions such as Chaim Potok and Cynthia Ozick.

"Religion belonged on Sunday morning or Saturday morning. It didn't belong in the public sphere," Chaim Waxman, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University, says of the postwar period.

Now, Jewish representations in popular culture appear to have entered a third phase, which, say scholar and trend-watchers, stems from several factors.

The growing visibility of observant Jews, ranging from simply traditional Jews to the fervently Orthodox, says Heilman, has made them "part of the political and social landscape." Particularly in America's entertainment centers, New York and Los Angeles, "if you have writers looking for characters, they're rubbing shoulders with guys in black hats and black coats."

Popular culture's current infatuation with religion in general, and Judaism in particular — Madonna and Roseanne have been reported to be studying the Kabbalah — accounts for another piece of the puzzle.

In addition, according to a recent article in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, there are an increasing number of observant writers, directors and producers in Hollywood who are refusing to work on the Sabbath.

It's not as if portraying observant Jews means that the characters are always going to be on target.

In this year's film "A Price Above Rubies," a scene shows a Chasidic couple kissing while traveling in a car on a busy street: an unlikely display of public affection in what is a very modest community.

"Complex communities are turned into clichés as 'impossibly rigid' Orthodox Jews and the 'oversexed' secular world demonize one another," Sarah Blustein puts it in reviewing some of the new books written by and about Orthodox Jewish women in the upcoming issue of The Reporter, the magazine of Women's American ORT.

And subjects once considered taboo even within the Jewish community are fair game in pop culture as well.

In what is perhaps the funniest scene in the recent movie "The Big Lebowski," Dude, played by Jeff Bridges, and Donny are sitting in their favorite haunt, the bowling alley, when their friend Walter erupts in anger after he is told that their next match is scheduled for a Saturday.

"How come you don't roll on Saturday, Walter?" asks Donny, played by Steve Buscemi.

"I'm Shomer Shabbas," answers Walter, played by John Goodman.

"What's that, Walter?" asks Donny.

"Saturday, Donny, is Shabbas, the Jewish day of rest. That means I don't work, I don't drive a car, I don't handle money" and, Walter adds, using a string of profanities, that he certainly doesn't bowl on Shabbas.

What gives this an added twist is that Walter converted to Judaism to marry a woman from whom he was later divorced. He was born a Polish Catholic and has the accent and mannerisms of a stereotyped member of that group from, say, Chicago — picture "The Blues Brothers" without the sunglasses — with the added twist of being a Jew by choice.

But even characters that some may find offensive represent a certain maturity in Jewish portrayals, says Shimon Wincelberg, who has worked in Hollywood since the early 1950s.

"In the old days, you could never portray a sleazy character as a Jew. Nowadays, anything goes," he says. □