



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 233

Tuesday, December 29, 1998

81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Benny Begin enters race

A former member of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet announced plans to quit the Likud Party and run on a new right-wing ticket against the premier in Israel's upcoming elections.

Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who resigned as science minister in 1997 when Netanyahu agreed to turn over part of Hebron to Palestinian self-rule, could weaken the premier in the elections by splitting the right-wing vote. Israeli coalition and opposition members agreed to hold early elections on May 17, 1999.

Meanwhile, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said he would not run against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the leadership of the Likud Party. Olmert's decision removed a key hurdle to the premier's re-election bid. [Page 3]

Shamir, Peres urge change to law

Former Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres called on the Knesset to repeal before the next elections a law calling for the direct election of the prime minister. Advocates for repeal maintain that the fragile coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was a result of the double ballot, one for premier and one for Knesset, instituted in 1996.

Knesset votes on councils

Israel's Knesset approved a bill intended to circumvent a recent Supreme Court ruling that Conservative and Reform representatives be appointed to local religious councils. The bill, which still faces two more votes, calls in part for religious council members to accept the rulings of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. The Reform and Conservative movements are furious, saying the bill mocks the court and delegitimizes liberal Jewish streams in Israel and abroad.

Budget bill fails in Knesset

Israel's Knesset defeated economic legislation necessary to implement the 1999 budget. The Budgetary Arrangements Bill failed in the first of three legislative votes because several members of the governing coalition were absent during the vote.

If the budget and the arrangements bill fail to pass by Dec. 31, the 1998 budget framework will remain in effect for three more months.

THE EMERGING CANDIDATES

Dan Meridor's big challenge is overcoming puppet image

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For Dan Meridor, the biggest challenge facing him as he runs for prime minister may be a television puppet.

A veteran politician and Likud member, the soft-spoken Meridor announced last week that he is forming his own centrist party to run against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the upcoming elections.

But although he is well educated and highly respected across the political spectrum, Meridor will have to convince Israelis that he can lead.

This is where the televised puppet show comes in.

"Hartzufim," a weekly satire in which puppets play politicians, depicts Meridor as the ultimate wimp, incapable of standing up for himself or making decisions.

True or not, the image has been hard for him to shake off.

"He is more resolute and made of harder stuff than was presented on the show," says Gideon Samet, a columnist for the Israeli daily Ha'aretz and a friend of Meridor's.

"Dan Meridor is honest, intelligent and personable, with deep roots in the Israeli political system," says Samet. "My problem with him is that his record has shown so far that he is far more right of center than he would like the public to believe."

Shayke Ben-Porat, a veteran journalist and author of a recent book, "Talks With Dan Meridor," disagrees. He says Meridor has moderated his previous political stance and accepted the Oslo peace process.

Ben-Porat also says Meridor's puppet likeness is not completely mistaken. "He does have some difficulty making decisions, but that is because he is very intelligent and always tries to understand the other side of an argument," Ben-Porat says.

Meridor, 51, was born into a family steeped in Likud ideology. His father, Eliyahu, was an activist and Knesset member from the Herut Party, Likud's precursor.

A graduate of Hebrew University's Law School whose wife, Leora, is one of Israel's leading economists, Meridor was appointed Cabinet secretary in 1982 by then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

He won his first Knesset seat in 1984. Four years later, he became justice minister.

This was no easy job, because during his tenure at the Justice Ministry, the intifada, or Palestinian uprising, erupted, forcing Israel to deal with fundamental justice-related issues. In 1991, after a wave of Palestinian knifings in Israel, Meridor rejected public appeals to seal off the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"The nation's elected representatives are not supposed to echo and amplify public emotions," he said at the time in an interview with the Jerusalem Post. "We are here to guide the public, not to be led by it."

His relatively soft line contributed to his dovish image, but also cost him some support within the Likud Party.

In 1992, Meridor lost internal elections for the party leadership to Netanyahu, in what analysts say was the beginning of the rivalry between the two.

Meridor, one of the Likud "princes" who was being groomed to take over the leadership by the party's old guard, was angry that Netanyahu, who spent several years abroad, leapfrogged over the veteran players.

This frustration was clear when Meridor launched his campaign last week.

"A situation has been created in which a man who arrived in Israel 10 years ago has taken over the Likud — albeit democratically — and is preventing his replacement,"

MIDEAST FOCUS

Party pushing Golan bill

Members of Israel's Third Way Party said they would push for a bill that would make it more difficult for Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights.

Knesset member Yehuda Harel said his party was dissatisfied with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response to media reports that he and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak had reached a secret agreement on an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, which was captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. Netanyahu denied the reports during a Cabinet meeting.

Arafat: Elections a ploy

Israel's early elections are a ploy to avoid implementation of the Wye accord, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat charged. Meeting with members of the Arab League in Cairo, he asked whether Israel would "stop its deals with the United States" because of the elections.

Monitors blame Israel, Hezbollah

The international group officially monitoring the 1996 cease-fire in Lebanon blamed both Israel and Hezbollah for violating the agreement last week.

Israel has apologized for killing seven Lebanese civilians, an act that Hezbollah responded to by wounding some 16 Israelis in Katyusha rocket attacks. The monitoring group is made up of representatives from five countries, including the United States.

Hamas leader slams Clinton trip

The spiritual leader of Hamas called President Clinton's recent visit to the Middle East an attempt to destroy Palestinian unity.

Recently released from house arrest by the Palestinian Authority, Sheik Ahmed Yassin also criticized the Palestinian Authority for arresting Palestinian journalists during the recent bombing of Iraq and called on the group to release Hamas activists from its jails.



Daily News Bulletin

Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
Mark J. Jaffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*
Lisa Hostein, *Editor (on leave)*
Kenneth Bandler, *Managing Editor*
Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

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.

said Meridor. After the 1996 elections, Netanyahu appointed Meridor to head the powerful Finance Ministry. Their rivalry quickly resurfaced.

In June 1997, he resigned as finance minister after a bitter power struggle following a debate over foreign exchange policy that Meridor believed was politically motivated to squeeze him out of the government.

Since then, say political analysts, Meridor has been impatiently waiting to unleash his feelings about the prime minister.

"There is not one ounce of credibility left" in Netanyahu's leadership, Meridor said last week.

"The ministers do not believe the prime minister, nor do Knesset members, his enemies or friends, if he has any left."

Netanyahu quickly responded by branding Meridor a "leftist" driven only by personal ambition. But for Meridor, leaving Likud was not easy.

"He was born into right-wing ideology," says Samet of Ha'aretz. "For him to leave Likud was an extremely difficult step to take, but it seems to show how lousy the situation within Likud has become."

In the coming weeks, Israelis will be watching closely to see if Meridor is more than the puppeteers make him out to be.

"What you can definitely say about Meridor is that he is much more intelligent than his puppet," says Ofer Knispel, a political satirist who writes for the "Hartzufim" show. "We can't say that about most of our puppets." □

France protected Vichy officials who profited from Jewish assets

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — Members of France's pro-Nazi Vichy regime who profited from the sale of looted Jewish assets were protected from prosecution after World War II, according to documents from the French Finance Ministry's archives.

The daily newspaper Le Parisien, which obtained the files, reported that some Vichy administrators received a 10 percent commission from the sale of buildings and businesses confiscated as part of an effort to rid the French economy of Jewish influence.

The documents belonged to a man named as Professor Terroine, a former member of the Resistance appointed to run an office established after the liberation of France to deal with restitution.

The revelations came just after France was bitterly criticized at the conference on Holocaust-era assets held recently in Washington for moving too slowly on returning paintings and other artworks seized from Jewish families during the war.

Nearly 2,000 paintings sent back to France from Germany at the end of the war are still in the possession of state-run museums, and President Jacques Chirac said recently that the paintings must remain in France.

At the same time, a body appointed in 1996 by former Prime Minister Alain Juppe to investigate the whereabouts of seized Jewish assets is facing resistance from banks, insurance companies and other state agencies in handing over their archives from the period, sources said.

Jewish community leaders have voiced criticism that insufficient resources and the lack of cooperation by financial institutions are hindering the Matteoli commission from conducting its inquiry effectively.

"Civil servants are never in a rush. It all should go faster," said a source familiar with the situation. "A lot of negotiating has to be done."

The documents found by Le Parisien tell of Terroine's anger at pressure by local politicians to turn a blind eye to the wartime activities of property administrators.

"Everyone knows that the [commission] they received increased their wealth, which was often very modest at the beginning, by a considerable amount," Le Parisien quoted a note from Terroine as saying.

"Most of them accepted their responsibilities to make a profit and help the enemy," he went on. □

JEWISH WORLD

Yeltsin vows anti-racism program

Russian President Boris Yeltsin promised to launch a "major offensive" against anti-Semitic and extremist statements.

Yeltsin's statement came after Russia's Justice Ministry said earlier this month that it would send the draft of a new bill against political extremism and anti-Semitism to Parliament before the end of the year.

Experts believe that such a bill has little chance of passing the Communist- and nationalist-dominated Parliament.

But Yeltsin's statement could indicate that he intends to enact the law by presidential decree.

Wye accord makes A.P. list

The Wye agreement signed in late October by Israel and the Palestinian Authority was voted the 13th top news story of 1998 by 299 Associated Press newspaper editors and broadcast executives.

The Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal was voted the top story of the year.

U.S. lawmakers repudiate group

Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.), who recently spoke at a meeting of the Council of Conservative Citizens, said he found the views of the white supremacist group abhorrent.

Barr's statement came after Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), who has also spoken in front of the council, repudiated the views of the pro-segregationist group, which has its roots in the 1950s Citizens Councils of America.

Former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who is reportedly planning to run for the congressional seat of Rep. Bob Livingston (R-La.), is scheduled to speak in front of the group in Washington on Saturday.

Gdansk Jews regain property

The Jewish community in the Polish city of Gdansk regained possession of the site of a synagogue destroyed by the Nazis.

The leader of the 200-member community said a miniature of the Great Synagogue, which was built in the 1880s, would be erected on the site.

The property was returned as a result of a 1997 accord under which the Polish government agreed to return Jewish communal properties.

Wiesenthal opposes memorial

A leading Nazi-hunter said he opposed plans to create a national Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

Simon Wiesenthal said the memorial, which has been mired in controversy for more than 10 years, could never reflect the variety of European Jewish life that existed before World War II.

Begin quits Likud, declares candidacy for prime minister

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A former member of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet has announced plans to quit the Likud Party and spearhead a right-wing challenge to the premier.

Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who resigned as science minister in 1997 when Netanyahu agreed to turn over most of Hebron to Palestinian self-rule, could weaken the premier in the May 17 elections by splitting the right-wing vote.

Announcing his candidacy at a news conference Monday, Begin said the national camp needed a candidate who would protect its interests.

A geologist by training, Begin, 55, has represented the Likud in the Knesset since entering politics a decade ago.

The son of Likud founder Menachem Begin used the news conference to attack Netanyahu and his continuation of the Oslo peace process.

Begin said his candidacy is the "only alternative today to a way that would most certainly lead to the establishment of a PLO-and-Hamas state, which will bring neither peace nor security." Begin, whose father forged Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, a move that included Israel's return of the Sinai, warned that going down "Wye River" would only lead to ceding more land to "those hoodlums" — a reference to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

Right-wing reaction to Begin's announced candidacy was mixed.

Some leaders of the settler movement welcomed Begin's move. Others, including National Religious Party leader Yitzhak Levy, said it could split the right wing and play into the interests of the left.

With at least five people so far expected to try to unseat Netanyahu in the upcoming elections, it appears unlikely that any candidate will gain 50 percent in the first round of voting.

Begin was the second former member of Netanyahu's Cabinet to announce his candidacy.

Last week, after the Knesset approved, in the first of three votes, a bill to bring elections forward from the year 2000, former Finance Minister Dan Meridor announced he would run for premier as a centrist candidate.

The decision to dissolve Parliament and advance the date for elections came after far-right coalition members, angered by the government's land-for-security deal with the Palestinians, joined forces with opposition legislators who were frustrated with the freeze in the peace process.

Other contenders in the race for prime minister are Labor Party leader Ehud Barak; former army chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who has yet to formally declare but is expected to run on a centrist platform; and Uzi Landau, the hawkish chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, who announced this week he would challenge Netanyahu for the Likud leadership.

Netanyahu sought this week to rally the Likud rank and file around him, giving a fiery speech before the Likud Central Committee that was meant to appeal to hawkish sensitivities.

He said the "real task is not the election," but what will come after, when Israel will have to negotiate with the Palestinians, the Syrians and the Lebanese.

"It will not be easy," Netanyahu said, adding that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat is "talking about a Palestinian state along the lines of 1967, perhaps even a Palestinian state along the borders of 1947, with partition lines and the right of return to areas within the Green Line."

To counter the talk about those who were defecting from the Likud to run against him, Netanyahu singled out those assembled on the stage beside him, including Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai.

But Mordechai, who is rumored to be considering a defection, would not confirm Monday that his presence at the Likud Central Committee meeting was a sign of his intention to remain within the party. □

Christmas Eve is now time for Jewish singles to meet

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — 'Twas the night before Christmas — and more than 3,000 Jewish singles gathered at a Manhattan hot spot to socialize the night away.

They came from all of New York's boroughs, New Jersey and Connecticut, and from as far away as Toronto, and paid \$25 — \$20 if they had bought the tickets in advance — for an event called The Ball '98, where they could dance, drink and, perhaps, meet the mate of their dreams.

While the 20-somethings and 30-somethings practiced the dance of flirtation at Webster Hall, a young man in a corner, dressed all in black, spoke on his cell phone.

Just call it a hip attempt at Jewish continuity in the 1990s.

The gathering was sponsored by Utopia Events, a New York-based group that sponsors events "where Jewish professionals can meet other Jewish professionals," said Marni Schneider, a volunteer at The Ball, now in its fourth year.

Similar events, often referred to as "Matzah Balls," were held in other large cities across the United States last week. And there were probably at least 10 others in Manhattan alone.

Jeff Strank founded Utopia in 1995. Then a "dissatisfied attorney," he formed the company after he attended a Jewish singles event and found it both poorly organized and poorly attended. Utopia now sponsors events throughout the year.

His goal is simple: to create an "atmosphere not just about dancing and music, but where people could talk."

Well, the "quiet rooms" at Webster Hall, a club with several floors in downtown Manhattan, were loud, and the crowded rooms were virtually impassable. Some people, standing against the walls, looked decidedly uncomfortable.

But, as hundreds boogied on a huge dance floor lit by strobe lights and a pulsating beat, others talked. Some even flirted.

When asked why she approached Uri Hort, Rachel Nash of Brooklyn said, "He's the only one here with a large purple yarmulka. He told me that he worked at McDonald's." At this, Hort, who lives in New City, a suburb north of New York City, smiled and said he was really in the construction business.

Some even appeared to have found at least a temporary partner. Brenda Bloomstone, a corporate accounts manager for a computer training firm in Toronto who was in New York visiting a friend, complained that the party was "too overwhelming."

But she seemed quite comfortable with Ron Weisenberg, a lawyer from Hoboken, N.J., whom she had approached less than an hour earlier. Weisenberg, who said he recently got out of a relationship, liked the odds at The Ball. "Everyone knows why they're here. It's not like going to a bar. It's self-selective," he said. "Everyone's Jewish and looking for someone else."

The crowd appeared to be a fair cross-section of heterosexual Jewish singles aged 25-40 in New York. Fashion ranged from the formal — suits and ties for men, black spaghetti-strap dresses for women — to more casual clothes.

Nash's observation rang true: There were few yarmulkas in sight. A few snippets of Russian-accented English could be overheard, as well as a few people speaking Hebrew.

Webster Hall, one of Manhattan's largest clubs, was decorated in what might be called Christmas kitsch. Amid neon beer signs,

clips of newspaper articles and framed paintings, tinsel and ornaments hung from reindeer on the walls.

The event might trace its lineage to Eastern Europe, where Jews would often gather together on Christmas Eve and other Jewish holidays for a different, more serious purpose: to study together in order to protect themselves from pogroms.

The Christmas Eve events are only one aspect of the Jewish singles industry. Prayer services and Shabbat dinners catering to singles are common, as are weekend retreats and vacation tours. Most participants are motivated, at least subconsciously, by the Jewish desire to marry within the flock.

But Uri Hort inadvertently offered another explanation: "If my father knew that I was looking for a Jewish girl, he would buy me anything I wanted," he said. □

Serbs demand their 'share' of rare Sarajevo Haggadah

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A priceless Jewish artifact has become the object of a tug of war between Bosnian Serbs and Muslims.

The 1995 Dayton Accord ended the civil war that broke out in Bosnia in 1992, but long-simmering ethnic tensions remain — and now they are focused on a Jewish manuscript known as the Sarajevo Haggadah.

Written on bleached calfskin, the Haggadah dates back to the Jewish presence in Spain before the expulsion in 1492.

Citing the Dayton Accord, which divided Bosnia along ethnic lines, Bosnian Serbs — who make up about one-third of Bosnia's population, but control nearly half of the territory — are seeking a one-third share in the treasure.

While not asking for the Haggadah to be physically dismantled, they are demanding that it be exhibited every third year in Banja Luka, capital of the ministate carved out for Bosnian Serbs after the war.

The manuscript is currently held in the vault of the National Bank in Sarajevo, the seat of the Bosnian government.

According to the Bosnian Serb argument, the Haggadah should also be displayed every third year in Mostar, the unofficial Bosnian Croat capital.

Jakob Finci, who heads what remains of the Bosnian Jewry, believes the manuscript should stay where it is, saying the country's Serbian and Croatian populations showed no respect for each other's religious and cultural treasures during the civil war.

The Haggadah, which was carried by Spanish Jews to Italy after the expulsion of 1492, was subsequently brought by a rabbi to Bosnia, at the time a province of the Ottoman Empire.

The rabbi's family passed it down from generation to generation until a descendent sold it in 1894 to the National Museum in Sarajevo. During World War II, the Haggadah was in the hands of a Muslim preacher, who kept it hidden under the doorstep of a village mosque until the war's end.

The Haggadah was then returned to the National Museum, where it remained until the outbreak of civil war in 1992.

When Bosnian Serbs shelled Sarajevo in that year, the museum's Muslim director, along with members of the Jewish community, braved sniper fire to remove the Haggadah from the museum's vault and store it in its current sanctuary — the National Bank. □