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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Four Israelis die in Lebanon

An Israeli general was among three soldiers killed by a roadside bomb planted by Hezbollah gunmen in the southern Lebanon security zone. A reporter for Israel Radio was also killed. The incident took place after two Katyusha rockets fired from Lebanon struck northern Israel. [Page 3]

Israel imposes Purim closures

Israel sealed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip amid warnings of possible terrorist attacks by Islamic militants during Purim.

Defense Minister Moshe Arens said Palestinian security forces were cooperating with Israel to prevent such attacks from taking place. In recent years, Israel has been the target of terror attacks on or near the Purim holiday.

Clinton vows to focus on Mideast

President Clinton promised to use his remaining time in office "to push for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, to encourage the Israelis and Palestinians to reach a just and final settlement, and to stand by our friends for peace, such as Jordan."

In a major foreign policy speech in California, Clinton said "time is precious," and the people of the Middle East "can't afford to waste any more of it."

Fourth Kurdish protester dies

A 26-year-old man died from wounds he sustained when he and other Kurdish demonstrators stormed the Israeli Consulate in Berlin on Feb. 17.

His death brought to four the total number of casualties from that incident, which also left 15 demonstrators wounded.

Israeli, Palestinian abuses cited

Israel and the Palestinian Authority are responsible for "serious human rights abuses," the U.S. State Department said in its annual human rights report.

Israel generally respects human rights, but abuses occur because of "policies and practices in the occupied territories and from its fight against terrorism," the department reported.

Two Palestinians died in the custody of the Palestinian Authority, the report said, noting "some improvements in the human rights situations" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jewish environmentalists find 'enormous source of inspiration'

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — They come from every corner of the country and from across denominational and generational lines.

Some are affiliated with the Jewish community, some are religious, others are not. But what they all have in common is an abiding respect for God's creations and an unrelenting commitment to environmental stewardship.

In recent years, a growing number of Jews have been developing a deeper connection to Judaism and the Jewish community through environmental activism. They are part of a larger movement of faith-based environmentalists who are seeking to reshape the environmental debate along theological lines.

Discovering links between their own spiritual and environmentalist roots and the religious mandate to care for creation, Jewish environmental activists have come to see the cause of environmental protection as nothing less than sacred.

"Judaism teaches us that above and beyond everything we have a responsibility to protect life, not only when we know for sure it's at risk, but when it may be at risk," said Mark Jacobs, director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, a national coordinating body for the Jewish environmental movement.

"Our work is creating an opportunity for people who care about the environment and are Jewish to exercise environmental commitment through a Jewish framework," he said.

COEJL grew out of the 1992 Consultation on the Environment and Jewish Life, convened by then-Sen. Al Gore and the late astronomer Carl Sagan.

Charged with integrating environmental education and action into the life and institutions of the American Jewish community, COEJL was initially conceived as a temporary project to jump-start Jewish environmental activity.

Six years later, Jewish officials now want to make it a permanent fixture in the Jewish organizational world and in American Jewish life.

The response to COEJL has in many ways exceeded expectations. Thousands of Jews around the country have participated in COEJL's conferences, campaigns and other outreach efforts.

The group, which now has 15 regional affiliates, is overwhelmed by requests from synagogues and federations seeking speakers and ways to integrate environmental themes into their activities.

Together with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, COEJL has been working to develop a distinctively Jewish response to pressing environmental issues, including clean water, nuclear waste, biological diversity, climate change and sustainable development. It has also sought to raise awareness about Israel's environmental problems.

Some 135 of the group's activists gathered in Washington last week for COEJL's fourth annual conference on environmental leadership training.

The gathering was held in conjunction with the annual plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, a Jewish umbrella group that works in partnership with COEJL.

The activists participated in a Shabbat retreat in Maryland to study Jewish texts on the connections between Judaism and ecology.

Most took part in a series of meetings and lobbying activities in Washington

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu, Abdullah meet

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after a meeting in Amman with Jordan's King Abdullah that relations between the two nations remain strong.

The meeting was overshadowed by remarks Netanyahu made last week in which he was quoted as saying that Jordan might renege on its 1994 peace treaty with Israel and side in the future with Iraq against the Jewish state.

Levy poised to join Labor list

Israel's Labor Party is expected to approve in the coming days a merger with the Geshet Party and Meimad, the moderate Orthodox movement. As part of the merger, a high-ranking spot on Labor's list of Knesset candidates would be reserved for Geshet leader and former Foreign Minister David Levy.

Barbed wire removed from village

Israeli bulldozers tore down barbed wire from a southern Lebanese village on the edge of the security zone. The Israeli army strung the wire around Arnoun two weeks ago, saying Hezbollah gunmen had been using the village to launch attacks against Israeli soldiers operating in Lebanon. The army's move had prompted protests, including one from Lebanon's prime minister, that Israel was seeking to expand its security zone.

Syria pays for embassy damages

Syria formally apologized and paid \$500,000 for damages caused by last December's attack on the U.S. Embassy and ambassador's residence in Damascus, according to the London-based Saudi newspaper al-Hayat. The paper quoted unnamed U.S. State Department officials as saying Syria's moves, coupled with a pledge that such episodes would not occur again, have "put an end to the diplomatic tension" between the two countries.

throughout last week. "The energy of the activists from all over the country affirmed my sense that Jewish environmentalism is an enormous, fecund source of inspiration and motivation and joy for people," Jacobs said.

The meetings with a number of high-level government officials, including Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner, served as a testament to the inroads the group has made.

In an interview, Browner said groups like COEJL play an integral role in efforts to preserve the environment and raise awareness.

"They involve people, they educate people, they hold our feet to the fire," she said. "It takes each and every one of us, and we couldn't do it without groups like this."

Evan Eisenberg of New York, author of "The Ecology of Eden," agreed that the religious perspective carries resonance in the environmental debate.

"The kind of passion that faith communities bring to the debate is very important, the kind of conviction, the sense that this is God's work — I think that's very powerful," said the 43-year-old Eisenberg.

For most Jewish environmentalists, the connection between Judaism and ecology comes naturally.

Adam Block, a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of New Hampshire, said he became involved in the environmental activist community on campus at the same time he was becoming involved with Hillel, "and as time progressed, they found their link."

"One of the most important things that we can take away from Judaism is the dedication to social justice," said Block. "In my life and in my experience, I've found that the best way I can channel my energies into social justice Jewishly is through environmental preservation."

Batya Kagan, a 39-year-old environmental activist from Santa Cruz, Calif., said the sense that "we are one, as God's creations, with not just each other but with all species" is "inherent in our nature as human beings."

Kagan traces the roots of her environmentalism to the Jewish summer camp she attended as a child in northern California, which she said was surrounded by redwood trees.

"Once I connected with being outside and praying, there was a much larger and beautiful feeling," she said.

"The combination of community and being in the outdoors was such a great feeling."

In her adult life, as she started going to services, she said she realized that Judaism had "something to offer as an environmental platform" with holidays like Sukkot to celebrate the harvest, Tu B'Shevat as Jewish Arbor Day, and even Shabbat as "a day to not drive our cars around or turn on house lights."

As Jewish environmentalists look to bring their message to others in the community, Eisenberg said there are two groups that activists need to reach out to.

"One is the alienated Jews who care about the environment and who are probably thirsting for this sort of Jewish wisdom," he said. "And then there are the Jews who drive to synagogue every Shabbas and do kiddush in the disposable cups and never give it a second thought."

"It's a lot easier to reach the first group," he added, because "it's just a matter of getting the information out there."

"The second group is a lot harder. It's a question of building on the things in the Bible and the liturgy and Jewish tradition" and "tying that to an understanding of what's going on ecologically."

For its part, the organized Jewish community is looking to COEJL to continue to foster environmental awareness in the community.

Toward that end, the JCPA plenum adopted a strategic plan that would create an ongoing relationship between COEJL and JCPA, with the idea that it will move toward becoming an independent agency in the next few years.

"There's a real desire to keep COEJL not only alive but growing," Jacobs said, adding that a national coalition remains the best way to provide visibility for Jewish environmentalism and a forum for Jews to continue expressing their environmental commitment. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Orthodox hold solidarity vigil

An estimated 18,000 Orthodox Jews gathered for a prayer vigil in downtown Manhattan to show solidarity with their counterparts in Israel.

The rain-soaked gathering, sponsored by Am Ehad, a coalition of American Orthodox leaders, was prompted by a series of recent decisions by Israeli courts giving increased influence to the Conservative and Reform movements there.

Yad Vashem honors British spy

Jews who were rescued from the Holocaust by a British spy in Berlin said they are delighted Israel has decided to honor the forgotten hero.

Frank Foley, who helped save at least 10,000 Jews, was posthumously awarded the title of "Righteous Among Nations" by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

WJC may try to block merger

The World Jewish Congress may seek to block the planned merger of two French banks, claiming they have not made enough progress in settling Holocaust-era claims.

Banque Paribas and Societe Generale have maintained an "uncooperative attitude" regarding compensation, charged the WJC's executive director, Elan Steinberg.

Baptist leader found guilty

The president of the National Baptist Convention was found guilty of fraud charges that included keeping \$244,000 that the Anti-Defamation League had given him to rebuild black churches that had been destroyed by arson. The verdict against Henry Edwards came after a monthlong trial in Florida.

Shul rededicated in Morocco

Top Moroccan governmental officials attended a ceremony last week commemorating the restoration of an 18th-century synagogue in Fez.

The restoration, part of UNESCO's effort to preserve the cultural legacy of Fez's Old City, comes as Morocco's Jewish population has dwindled from roughly 250,000 in 1948 to approximately 5,000 today.

Multiracial group to hear Megillah

A group of black and Hispanic teen-agers will join with their Israeli counterparts to attend a Megillah reading in New York on the Jewish holiday of Purim, which begins Monday night.

The event is part of a program organized by the Israeli Foreign and Education ministries to foster greater understanding between Israeli youth and their peers in other countries.

Israelis seeking new course as death toll mounts in Lebanon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Some Israelis believe the army should withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon.

Others say the fighting there should be expanded to include raids on Beirut.

But whatever their differences, most Israelis believe something has to be done to get Israel out of the Lebanese quagmire.

According to a recent poll, some two-thirds of Israeli respondents believe their government is not doing enough to end the fighting there.

The poll was given added urgency Sunday, when an Israeli general was among three soldiers killed by a roadside bomb planted by Hezbollah gunmen in the southern Lebanon security zone.

Brig. Gen. Erez Gerstein, 38, was the head of a liaison unit with the South Lebanon Army, Israel's ally in the region.

Killed along with him were Sgt. Imad Abu Rish, 34, and Staff Sgt. Omer Elkabetz, 22. A reporter for Israel Radio, Ilan Roeh, 32, was also killed in the bombing, which came after three Israeli officers were killed last week in a Hezbollah ambush.

Sunday's casualties — which brought the total number of Israeli deaths in Lebanon since the start of the year to seven — reignited the ongoing public debate regarding the wisdom of Israel's continued presence there.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted angrily to news of the latest fatalities.

"Israel cannot tolerate these kinds of repeated attacks on its territory, on its citizens, on its soldiers," he said.

Hinting at swift retaliation, he added that the Israeli army "will know what to do in response."

Retaliation appears to be the most likely course for Netanyahu to follow, given the ongoing Israeli election campaign, observers said.

Some members of his government have called for an expansion of the fighting to include targeting major infrastructure sites in and around Beirut as part of an effort to get the Lebanese government to back off from its stance that any withdrawal from the region be unilateral.

Last year, Lebanon and Syria, the leading power broker in the region, rejected an Israeli proposal, based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 425, calling for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon alongside security guarantees from Lebanon that attacks would not be launched on Israel from its soil.

While hawks are backing escalation, the steady toll of Israeli casualties in Lebanon prompted a demonstration Sunday by several dozen people outside the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv, where they demanded a unilateral Israeli withdrawal.

Gerstein was the highest-ranking Israeli casualty in Lebanon since 1982, when Israel launched an invasion there aimed at rooting out Palestinian terrorists.

In a radio interview last June, Gerstein warned that talk of a unilateral pullback endangered Israeli forces in the security zone by raising doubts among the South Lebanon Army about the depth of the Jewish state's commitment in the region.

"Discussion of a unilateral withdrawal causes us damage" with our allies there, he said at the time. "Someone who is afraid you will unilaterally pull out, leaving them behind, is not going to fully cooperate with the present effort."

Sunday's attack occurred when an army convoy was on its way to pay a condolence visit to the family of a South Lebanon Army officer killed in recent fighting. No other members of the convoy were injured by the mine blast.

The head of the Israeli army's northern command said an initial inquiry did not show that Hezbollah gunmen knew in advance that Gerstein was in the convoy.

Sunday's attack heated up an already-tense border.

Lebanese sources reported heavy exchanges of fire Sunday in the security zone, where Israeli jets and artillery hit suspected Hezbollah targets.

Earlier Sunday morning, two Katyusha rockets fired from Lebanon struck northern Israel, causing light property damage and sending one Israeli woman into shock. □

Breaking with tradition, group delves into debate on pluralism

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Every year, a mission of leaders of American Jewish organizations travels to Israel to survey the situation. Every year, they meet with leading political figures and various segments of the Israeli population. But this year, something was different.

For the first time, delegates from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations began to see the umbrella group as a forum for dialogue on issues that have been at the forefront of the debate on Jewish unity and Israel-Diaspora relations.

Conference members from all streams of Judaism agreed that this year's mission, which ended Feb. 22, was marked by unprecedented discussion of issues related to religious pluralism.

Orthodox and liberal representatives differed over why issues once considered taboo for the conference were such a focus of attention. However, they agreed that the group must continue to refrain from formulating positions on matters pertaining to Jewish law in order to maintain consensus among the group's diverse members.

"The Conference is made up of organizations from all four streams of Judaism," said Melvin Salberg, chairman of the Presidents Conference. "There will be no discussion of halachic content in the conference."

However, Salberg said that this year there had been a "change in the general environment" of the Presidents Conference regarding its role as a forum for dialogue.

"There is greater evidence that there is a problem within our community of tolerating differences, and there is a greater willingness to discuss this within our meetings," said Salberg.

According to Reform and Conservative leaders, these issues — including the debate over the Orthodox monopoly on religious services in Israel — played heavily in discussions because they are hotter than ever before on the Israeli public agenda.

"It is a revolution as far as Israel is concerned and as far as the Diaspora is concerned," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"An issue that was off the agenda in Israel 10 years ago has now moved to the center. The conference has realized that there is no way to discuss Israel-Diaspora relations without discussing pluralism and the religious question."

The three leading candidates for Israeli prime minister seem to realize this as well.

Ehud Barak, the opposition Labor Party's candidate for the premiership, pledged to work toward a "tolerant, open society" if elected. But his remarks against fervently Orthodox groups angered Orthodox delegates to the conference.

Barak told the delegates that his party would oppose any legislation that would delegitimize Reform and Conservative Jews, such as the controversial conversion bill, which would codify the lack of recognition of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel.

"We will block it, we will not let it pass, we will raise our hands against it period," he said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opened his address to the Presidents Conference saying that "no Jew or non-Jew" should be

illegitimate in the State of Israel. He said the only way to deal with divisive issues is "to adopt a series of compromises."

Non-Orthodox conference members, however, said the familiar message had no substance behind it, and Netanyahu has yet to show that he can turn his slogans into viable compromises with fervently Orthodox groups. But Reform and Conservative leaders reserved their heaviest fire for Yitzhak Mordechai, the prime ministerial candidate who is heading a new centrist party.

They were angry that Mordechai — whose party preaches unity — recently cast a vote in the Knesset in favor of an Orthodox-backed bill aimed at bypassing a Supreme Court ruling that said the Interior Ministry must allow liberal representatives to take their seats on local religious councils.

In general terms, Mordechai pledged to unite the Jewish people and to try to persuade influential Orthodox rabbis to "find a formula" for unity. He said his own vote in the Knesset was a "tactical" move to appease potential Orthodox supporters.

Although all the candidates discussed the pluralism issue, Orthodox delegates to the conference said they were not convinced that Israelis consider the issue to be a high priority.

"The reaction from Israelis seems to be that American Reform and Conservative Jews are trying to foist a system that Israelis don't understand," said Rabbi Emanuel Holzer of the Rabbinical Council of America.

Richard Stone, chairman of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, said he did not believe the pluralism issue was on the Israeli agenda. "But given the obsession of the Reform and Conservative movements to push the issue," he said, "it is impossible to keep it out of the question and answer sessions."

And Betty Ehrenberg, the O.U.'s director of international affairs, said the pluralism debate detracted from the mission's main goal. "I think it is unfortunate that the Reform and Conservative movements are giving the impression that this is the most important issue when in reality issues of Israel's security are really paramount," she said.

These comments surprised some non-Orthodox participants on the mission.

"There were 250,000 haredim recently demonstrating in Jerusalem and 65,000 secular Jews," Yoffie said, referring to recent protests. "To say it isn't on the agenda is an absurdity. Just read the newspapers."

Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, said the candidates brought up the issue on their own: "I think in some ways, my Orthodox friends continue to wear blinders on certain issues."

Meyers said the Orthodox groups refuse to recognize that there are small Conservative and Reform movements in Israel. "The question is not whether it is an American brand of Judaism, but whether it has a right to fair play in Israel."

Perceptions aside, Orthodox and liberal conference participants agreed that the emergence of the pluralism debate did not increase tensions in the group.

Discussions were carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect. And for the first time ever in a conference mission, rabbis from all the streams participated together in a discussion of the weekly Torah portion on Shabbat.

"It's a good sign," said Meyers of the Conservative movement. "But the ultimate test will be whether the religious movements will publicly sit together on the issues." □