



Daily News Bulletin

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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

State Dept. blasts shul vandals

The U.S. State Department deplored an act of vandalism at a synagogue in Russia and urged Russian leaders to speak out against anti-Semitism and extremism.

Wednesday's comment came after vandals threw Torahs and prayer books on the floor and scrawled swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti on the walls during a rampage earlier this week in the Novosibirsk synagogue in southern Siberia.

U.S. Jews protest Knesset moves

Leaders of the American Reform Zionist Association presented the speaker of the Knesset with more than 5,500 postcards from American Jews protesting recent Israeli laws they feel delegitimize the liberal streams of Judaism.

The messages were presented to Dan Tichon in a box labeled "We Are All Jews."

Report said to clear Barak

Israel's Labor Party candidate for prime minister was cleared of blame in a state inquiry into a 1992 army training accident that killed five commandos and left six others injured, according to Israel Radio.

While the report on Ehud Barak has not yet been made public, a legislator involved with the report said it absolves Barak from blame. [Page 3]

Gaza protest ends in bloodshed

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"They wanted a beauty queen, not a political queen." [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel's far right to join forces, boosting prospects for election

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The far right of Israel's political spectrum appears on the verge of merging its various feuding factions into a solid electoral bloc that has a good chance of scoring well in the upcoming elections.

Haunted by the memory of past failures to join forces at election time, leaders of the Herut, Moledet and Tekuma parties sat through almost 36 hours of haggling before announcing Tuesday that they had neared agreement on a common platform and a joint list of Knesset candidates.

Last-minute haggling over details could threaten the entire agreement, but that appeared unlikely.

The merger would be no small achievement, given the bad blood and ideological differences that have affected their self-styled nationalist camp in the recent past.

As an example of the differences that had to be overcome, Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, who is expected to become the new bloc's leader and candidate for prime minister, began his breakaway from the Likud two months ago with a pledge not to ally with the far-right Moledet Party under Rehavam Ze'evi, who has openly advocated the transfer of Palestinians from the Land of Israel.

Under the deal being worked out, Ze'evi will be Begin's No. 2 on the combined list.

And transferring the Arab population will not be part of the platform, but each party in the would-be bloc wants to reserve the right to vote its conscience on matters of principle.

There would be three parties in the bloc:

HERUT, led by Begin, revives the party founded by his father, former Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Benny Begin quit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet in January 1997 to protest the Hebron Agreement, under which Israel ceded most of the City of the Patriarchs to the Palestinian Authority.

Originally founded in 1948, the party in recent years had become part of the Likud bloc.

Since quitting Likud, Begin's strong personal and political antipathy to the prime minister has deepened.

Hence his decision not only to set up a separate party that is committed to Likud's original dogma of Greater Israel, but to run against Netanyahu in the May 17 race for prime minister.

Begin, like his close friend Dan Meridor — who also bolted Netanyahu's government and is now part of the new centrist party — sees Netanyahu's administration as a period of sustained erosion of the rule of law in Israel.

So profound is his dislike for the premier that even now Begin is not prepared to tell his prospective new partners in the far-right bloc that he will urge his supporters to vote for Netanyahu against Labor Party leader Ehud Barak — or centrist candidate Yitzhak Mordechai — if there is a runoff vote for premier on June 1, as most expect there will be.

Herut's second-in-command is Michael Kleiner, originally a member of David Levy's Geshet Party, who headed up the hawkish Land of Israel bloc in the outgoing Knesset.

MOLEDET, under Ze'evi and Binyamin Elon, the party's two representatives in

MIDEAST FOCUS

Vatican slams Israeli actions

Israeli actions against Palestinians in eastern Jerusalem will leave "nothing left to negotiate when the time comes for the issue of Jerusalem to be negotiated," the Vatican's foreign minister said, according to the American Committee on Jerusalem. Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran made the comments during a meeting in Washington this week with members of the committee, which represents the Arab American community on matters related to Jerusalem.

Lebanon said ready to deploy

The Lebanese army is ready to deploy to the border with Israel if and when the Israeli army withdraws from southern Lebanon, according to the Lebanese defense minister. But he maintains that any Israeli withdrawal must be unconditional.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that a withdrawal must be accompanied by guarantees that Lebanon would prevent attacks on Israel.

Abdullah meets Peace Now group

Jordan's King Abdullah asked a visiting delegation from Americans for Peace Now to support his country's international effort to convince European countries to forgive hundreds of millions of dollars in Jordanian debt. Abdullah reiterated his strong support for the peace process and urged the activists to work with him to convince Israel to lower trade barriers that prevent Jordanian goods from reaching the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel, Egypt near pipeline deal

Israel and Egypt are reportedly close to closing a deal under which Egypt would deliver natural gas to the Jewish state via sea and land pipelines.

Israel decided to move ahead with the deal after receiving assurances that the supply of natural gas would never be halted for political reasons.



Daily News Bulletin

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the outgoing legislature, has consistently articulated rightist opposition to the present government from the day Netanyahu assumed power, speaking and voting against the Hebron Agreement, the Wye accord reached in October — and indeed against the entire peace process.

Ze'evi, a former army general, is a personal friend of such previous Labor leaders as Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

But politically he went beyond the mainstream pale by embracing the racist doctrine of Arab population transfers first advocated by the late, militantly anti-Arab Rabbi Meir Kahane.

Successive Likud governments barred Ze'evi from joining them, though in 1990, when left with no other alternative except calling new elections, then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir brought him into the government.

Begin's supporters point to the absence of the population-transfer doctrine from the new bloc's platform as a measure of their leader's success in shaping the outcome of this week's three-way negotiations.

Others say the absence of these words does not — indeed cannot — erase the fact that the "transferists," shunned until now, appear to be firmly inside the far-right fold for the elections.

Ze'evi, meanwhile, contends that if the new bloc is offered one seat in a new Netanyahu government, he — Ze'evi — should be the minister, given his seniority and experience.

TEKUMA, led by legislators Hanan Porat and Zvi Handel, claims to represent the vast majority of the settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The two broke away from the National Religious Party last week after the NRP Central Committee voted to give them relatively low positions on the party's list of Knesset candidates in the upcoming elections.

Porat in particular, a founder of the Orthodox settlers movement Gush Emunim, is seen as an icon within that group.

His rebuff by the NRP was interpreted by some political pundits as signaling the party's desire to shed the far-right mantle that it has donned in recent years.

Reflecting that desire to change its image, the NRP slate contains such relative moderates as Yitzhak Langental and Zevulun Orlev.

These two men, unlike Porat and Handel, long ago made their peace with the Oslo process and with the fact that the mainstream right in the Jewish state, as represented by the Likud Party, is committed to continue the peace process with the Palestinian Authority.

This interpretation links the NRP's leftward shift to the challenge mounted against it by Meimad, the moderate Orthodox movement.

Last week, Meimad joined Barak's "One Israel" bloc, which will bring together Labor, Geshet and Meimad on one ticket.

One of the motivations behind the three far-right parties' decision to merge dates back to the 1992 election.

Depending on how one evaluates the figures, the failure of the far right to pull together may have contributed to the Labor Party's election victory and Rabin's pro-peace government, which he formed with the secularist Meretz Party and the fervently Orthodox Shas Party and which was supported in the Knesset by the Arab parties.

That election led to a new dynamic in Israeli-Palestinian relations and the Oslo accords, which are still regarded as an epic disaster by rightist Israelis.

Thousands of votes were wasted at that time on rightist parties, led by Rabbi Moshe Levinger of Hebron and by veteran firebrand Geula Cohen, that did not make it across the threshold — the minimum number of votes required by a party to secure Knesset representation.

That threshold is now set by law at 1.5 percent of the votes cast.

If the three far-right parties were to fight the May 17 election separately, any one of them could face the danger of falling below that figure.

Fighting together, they would be set, according to current opinion polls, to draw sufficient support for seven or eight Knesset seats — which could make them a force to contend with in the next legislature. □

JEWISH WORLD

Poland backs death-camps law

The Polish government backed a proposed law to create a 100-yard protection zone around the sites of former Nazi death camps in the country.

The measure, which is expected to be voted on by the Polish Parliament later this month, would restrict business construction and public gatherings at the sites. The government proposed the law after right-wing Catholic groups erected hundreds of crosses last year near Auschwitz.

Moves on Duke satisfy group

The American Jewish Congress said it was satisfied that the Republican National Committee had done everything it could to disavow David Duke.

The AJCongress had called on the Republican committee to expel the white supremacist, who is running to fill Rep. Bob Livingston's (R-La.) seat in Congress, after Duke called himself an elected official of the Republican Party in the New Orleans area. The RNC said it was powerless to remove Duke from the minor offices he held, but assured the AJCongress that party officials had taken steps to ensure that Duke received no assistance from the Republican Party.

Latvian holiday a 'mistake'

Plans to celebrate a national holiday next week to honor Latvian soldiers who died in World War II are a mistake, the country's president said.

Guntis Ulmanis made the comment after Latvian Jewish leaders said the March 16 holiday will focus on soldiers who fought for the Nazi cause. Ulmanis added that the holiday may be phased out next year.

Poland names Diaspora envoy

The Polish government named a former theater critic and Polish consul in Montreal as its new roving ambassador to the Jewish diaspora.

Malgorzata Dzieduszycka will replace Krzysztof Sliwinski, who was the first person to be appointed to the unprecedented Foreign Ministry post, created in 1995 in an attempt to improve often-troubled relations between Poland and the world's Jewish community.

Stanislaw Krajewski, a leader of the Jewish community in Poland, described Dzieduszycka as "a sensitive person" and said he considered her a "very good" choice for the post.

Claims group to work in Vienna

A Holocaust restitution group is planning to open an office next week in Vienna to coordinate activities with the Austrian Jewish community and monitor restitution issues.

The Claims Conference office will also oversee the group's social welfare projects for Holocaust survivors across Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Report said to absolve Barak in 1992 army training accident

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Findings in a report about the Labor Party candidate for prime minister may deprive his political foes of at least one piece of ammunition against him.

Ehud Barak was cleared of blame in a state inquiry into a 1992 army training accident that killed five commandos and left six others injured, according to Israel Radio. While the report on Barak, who was army chief of staff at the time of the incident, has not yet been made public, a Labor Party legislator involved with the report said it absolves Barak from blame.

Barak has been dogged by repeated allegations that he fled the scene of the accident without attempting to help the injured.

Barak had been observing an exercise at the Tse'elim military base when a missile prematurely fired, causing the fatalities. Foreign media reports later said the unit was training for a mission to assassinate Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Shortly before Barak ended his tenure as army chief, a newspaper report raised allegations that Barak had left the scene of the accident before all of the injured were evacuated. At the time, Barak staunchly denied the allegations.

An inquiry by the former state comptroller, Miriam Ben-Porat, also found no basis for the charges. Nevertheless, Barak's political foes seized upon the incident.

During one heated Knesset debate after Barak entered the Knesset, Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi dubbed him Ehud "Barach," Hebrew for "ran away."

"Barak Fleed" has been used by the Likud Party as a campaign slogan against the Labor candidate. □

Gaza protest ends in bloodshed after court issues death sentence

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A death sentence imposed by a Palestinian court has resulted in bloodshed on the streets of the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian police killed two Arab teen-agers when protests erupted Wednesday in the Gaza Strip after the court handed down the death sentence in a politically charged murder case.

The sentence was imposed on a member of one Palestinian security service who shot and killed an official from a rival service last month.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat has the final say on carrying out the death sentence imposed on Raed Attar for the Feb. 1 killing of policeman Rifat Joudeh.

Arafat, who rushed home Wednesday from a meeting in Amman with Jordan's King Abdullah to deal with the protests, ordered an inquiry into the shooting of the teens. Another defendant, Mohammed Abu Shamaleh was sentenced to life imprisonment, and a third co-defendant, Osamas Abu Taha, was given 15 years in jail.

Joudeh was killed while trying to arrest the three, and a Palestinian boy and girl were struck by cars and killed while police were pursuing the men, who turned themselves in after a 10-day manhunt.

After Joudeh's shooting death, the Palestinian Authority said the three — who were on Israel's wanted list — were Hamas members. But at the trial, police officials said they were members of a Palestinian security force.

There are at least eight different security agencies working for the Palestinian Authority, with members often belonging to rival clans.

Last year, two Palestinian security officials who killed two agents of another agency — and who belonged to a different clan — were executed, with Arafat's approval, after a trial that lasted only a few hours.

A Palestinian colonel who had been convicted of rape was executed last month by a firing squad on the night the sentence was issued. □

Rape case in Israeli army could block senior promotion

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A high-profile rape case involving a senior Israeli army officer is raising questions about how the army deals with questions of sexual harassment.

The case involving Brig. Gen. Nir Galili has prompted a petition before Israel's Supreme Court to block his promotion to major general. The petition was filed by a woman who was serving as a secretary in the office of Galili, commander of the Tse'elim military base, when the rape allegedly occurred three years ago.

The woman, then a soldier, claimed that when she refused to have intercourse with Galili, he forced himself on her.

The two have both admitted to having an affair, in contravention to army regulations barring fraternization between officers and soldiers under their command.

Galili denies the allegations.

In the aftermath of the incident, Galili was brought before the deputy chief of staff for a disciplinary hearing and was reprimanded for behavior unbecoming an officer. His promotion to major general was also delayed by two years.

With the postponement over, the woman has turned to the high court to block the promotion.

In a brief filed with the court, Galili said the petition was unjustified because so much time had passed since the incident. He noted that the woman had not sought to block other promotions he has received since the alleged incident.

Galili's attorney further argued that two previous chiefs of staff and defense ministers had supported Galili's advancement — even though they knew about the affair.

The high court has previously refrained from interfering in the promotions of Israeli officers. But in a dissenting opinion on a petition seeking to block the advancement of Brig. Gen. Efi Eitam because of his alleged role in abuse of Palestinians by troops under his command during the intifada, or Palestinian uprising, Justice Dalia Dorner wrote that promoting an individual involved in a questionable action could harm the rule of law. □

For first time, Israeli Arab is given Miss Israel crown

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Arab woman has been named Miss Israel for the first time in the nation's history.

"I am totally Israeli, and I do not think about whether I am an Arab or a Jew," 21-year-old Rana Raslan, from Haifa, said at Tuesday's 1999 pageant.

"They wanted a beauty queen, not a political queen," said Raslan, who works at an Israeli law firm.

Surrounded by a crush of contestants smothering her with kisses, Raslan said, "It does not matter if I am Jewish or Arab, I will represent Israel as best I can. We must live here in coexistence."

News of her victory made headlines across Israel.

An Israeli feminist criticized the notion that Raslan's victory marks a step forward for Israeli Arab women.

"An Arab beauty queen has been chosen, so I'm supposed to be terribly impressed about what a wonderful and equality-minded country we have because the Arab sector has joined in this ridiculous celebration?" said writer Irit Linor.

Raslan will receive a car, a modeling contract and the chance to represent Israel at this year's Miss World championships.

Meanwhile, the 1998 winner — and reigning Miss World — delivered a tearful, defiant speech at the pageant alluding to her allegations of rape against a travel agent. Linor Abargil has accused an Israeli travel agent of raping her in Italy last October — two months before she was crowned Miss World. The agent, who denies the charge, was arrested in Israel and faces trial here.

"To all of those who relate to beauty contests as meat markets: You should know we do with our bodies what we want," she said to applause. "Only what we want, and no one else."

In January, Abargil lifted a publication ban on the rape case in an effort to encourage rape victims to come forward.

"I've been through a lot this year," Abargil, 18, said at the end of the two-hour extravaganza broadcast live from a Tel Aviv theater. Through tears, she thanked "all of you at home for all the love you gave me." □

Wiesenthal Center pushes for accounting of Nazi SS accounts

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — Swiss officials are saying they will investigate allegations that Nazi SS accounts worth as much as \$700,000 were transferred to Swiss banks during the war.

The vow came after the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center publicized a wartime document about the money.

"This is SS money. SS money is all blood money," said Rabbi Marvin Hier, the center's dean. "It should go to the victims."

In a letter to Thomas Borer, the head of a Swiss task force dealing with Holocaust-era issues, Hier wrote that a Holocaust research group recently found among wartime documents at the U.S. National Archives a reference to possible SS transfers of funds to Swiss accounts.

Hier forwarded one document from the U.S. Army's postwar interrogation of Walter Schellenberg, the head of German intelligence during the war. In the document, Schellenberg gives an accounting of how he ordered Dutch bonds sent "to a neutral account in Switzerland" in late 1944.

Hier described the document as the first evidence pointing to an identifiable account held by a top Nazi. He added that it was possible there were hundreds more of these accounts, some of which may still lie dormant in Swiss banks.

"We would like to know what happened to those funds," Hier wrote to Borer.

In a related development, the Zurich-based newspaper Jewish Weekly of Switzerland reported this week that Schellenberg was given haven in Switzerland in 1951 by Lt. Col. Roger Masson, Switzerland's wartime head of military intelligence.

The Swiss Defense Ministry subsequently confirmed the report, but said Masson was no longer a member of the Swiss army at the time. Prior to his visit to Switzerland, Schellenberg had been sentenced to six years' imprisonment by the Nuremberg War Tribunal. □