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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. bars generals' visit

American officials instructed a group of retired U.S. generals visiting Israel that they should not participate in a tour of eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights because they are occupied territory, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

A spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv said Monday that the directive reflected standing U.S. policy.

The former American generals, many of whom now work in think tanks, are visiting Israel as guests of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Barak slams his accusers

Israel's Labor Party candidate for prime minister lashed out at his accusers after a state report cleared him of any blame stemming from a 1992 army training accident that killed five army commandos.

"I have no use for apologies from cynical politicians who think the blood of Israeli soldiers" can be used for "political mud-slinging," Ehud Barak said. [Page 4]

Sharansky signs tariff agreement

Israeli Trade Minister Natan Sharansky signed a trade agreement Monday with the United States and Jordan that will allow tariff-free exports to the United States from an industrial zone that straddles the Israeli-Jordanian border.

Sharansky also met with U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno during his two-day visit to Washington.

Swiss fund sets timetable

A Swiss fund for needy Holocaust victims will finish making payments within a year, according to the fund's head.

Rolf Bloch added last week that payments to some 150,000 survivors in Israel will be made within six months to a year.

The payments in the Jewish state have been delayed by a dispute over how the moneys will be distributed.

Bloch also said the Swiss government will not make any contributions to the approximately \$187 million fund, which was created in 1997 by Switzerland's leading private banks as part of the Alpine nation's effort to come to terms with its wartime past.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Will devotion to study lead to economic disaster for haredim?

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Rushing back to class along the twisting alleyways, a yeshiva student named Yishayahu breaks the midday quiet in Mea Shearim, Jerusalem's fervently Orthodox neighborhood.

Like most of his peers, the 24-year-old Yishayahu studies full time and does not work.

"None of the yeshiva students I know work," Yishayahu, the father of two, says, sporting an other-worldly smile behind his reddish beard and sidelocks.

"Making money in this world just isn't important to us. It's the world-to-come that really counts."

This sanguine attitude, shared by most in Israel's fervently Orthodox community, could lead to an economic crisis that may soon come crashing down on the serenity of a lifestyle devoted to tireless study.

Furthermore, say economists who have studied the fervently Orthodox, or haredi, community, the crisis could extend beyond the boundaries of Mea Shearim and similar sanctuaries to Israeli society as a whole, creating increasing poverty and a growing strain on local and national funds.

Many haredi reject the doomsday scenarios, confident that pursuing a life of study is the ideal.

In 1997, Ruth Klinov and Eli Berman, economists from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Boston University, respectively, shocked Israeli economic experts with a study on Israel's labor force that revealed alarming data on the haredi community.

According to the study, Israel — now often compared to developed markets — has the lowest rate of workforce participation in the developed world.

Non-participants are defined as people who either choose not to work or cannot work because of disabilities. They are not included in unemployment data, which only counts those who are actively seeking employment but cannot find a job.

Israel's rate of participation in the work force for men between the ages of 25 and 54 fell from 93.5 percent in 1970 to 85.7 percent in 1993. In Western Europe and the United States, the rate was about 94 percent in the early 1990s.

Klinov says the rapid growth of non-working yeshiva students accounts for about one-third of the decline. Indeed, other studies show that the number of haredi yeshiva students has doubled from 35,980 in 1990 to more than 72,000 in 1997 — 1.2 percent of Israel's population of 6 million.

The growth of the yeshivas coincides with the growing political power of the haredim and increased national funding for fervently Orthodox institutions.

It also comes as Israel is struggling to revive its economy after a 3-year slowdown. Economic officials say this can only be done by reducing the level of transfer payments, such as significant government support of yeshivas, and increasing public sector investment in infrastructure projects that create jobs.

Meanwhile, secular Israelis are angry that this largely non-working sector of society pays virtually no taxes or other dues to society. Exemptions from military service for yeshiva students, for example, have been a perpetual sticking point in religious-secular relations.

Klinov and Berman's study concluded that military exemptions are the main reason Israeli yeshiva students do not work, since the minute they start working, they lose

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel reduces water to Jordan

Israeli officials informed their Jordanian counterparts Monday that they are reducing water supplies to the Hashemite kingdom by 60 percent because of a regional drought.

Jordanian officials criticized the move, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the decision would not harm bilateral relations.

Arabs launch Jerusalem Fund

Arab officials meeting in Morocco launched a worldwide fund-raising campaign to support Arab inhabitants of eastern Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Fund will seek \$100 million in contributions to "confront Israel's policy of Judaizing Jerusalem and erasing its Arab, Muslim and Christian character," officials from Morocco, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority said in a statement last week at the conclusion of their two-day meeting.

Leah Rabin unveils memorial plan

The widow of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin unveiled plans for the establishment of Israel's official memorial to her husband.

At a briefing in New York, Leah Rabin said the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies will function as an educational center, archive and museum "in the grand tradition of American presidential libraries."

Launching the U.S. fund-raising drive for the center, she said a main garden at the facility will be dedicated to the memory of Jordan's King Hussein, who died last month.

Iran, Iraq to swap POWs

Iran and Iraq agreed to exchange in the coming days some 500 prisoners captured during their 1980-1988 war.

The POW issue is among the biggest obstacles to normalization of ties between the two countries, whose relations have improved significantly in recent months.



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*
Lisa Hostein, *Editor*
Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

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eligibility for a military exemption. "The problem is that ultra-Orthodox non-participation is not cyclical," says Klinov. "It is permanent and increasing at a geometric rate."

Indeed, in another study being discussed this week at a conference at Tel Aviv University, Berman says the proportion of fervently Orthodox men not working has climbed from 41 percent in 1980 to more than 60 percent in 1996. Israel's haredi community numbers some 350,000 today, or about 6 percent of the population.

Berman says the population of Israel's fervently Orthodox community will double every 17 years.

There is no sign of a change in these trends. In fact, even though birthrates in other sectors of Israeli society, including the fast-growing Arab community, are slowing down, haredi families are having more babies than ever before.

The average number of children per mother in the haredi community has climbed from 6.5 in the early 1980s to 7.6 in 1996.

But the average monthly income for the family of a full-time yeshiva student was \$1,150 below the poverty line and less than half the income of the average Israeli family. While taking care of the children, haredi women generated 17 percent of this income. Another 39 percent comes from yeshivas and 32 percent from government child allowances.

These allowances are paid to all Israelis, but are higher for haredim because they have more children. If these birthrates continue, as they are likely to, by 2010, 10 percent of Israeli children will have a father who is a yeshiva student and does not participate in the workforce, predict the economists.

"The rise of this community endangers its economic mode of existence because they have a much higher birthrate and they work less and less," says Berman. "Whatever the form of support, whether it is from the state or from contributions from abroad, there is a limit. The funding simply cannot double itself every 17 years."

In Berman's newest study, called "Sect, Subsidy and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews," he writes: "The ultra-Orthodox growth rate will make Israel's welfare system insolvent and bankrupt municipalities with large ultra-Orthodox populations." This is due to the large child subsidies, which are included in the welfare system. Jerusalem and Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv are the cities with the largest haredi populations.

Berman believes that if a secular government cuts off funding or an economic recession threatens funding from abroad, the community will not be able to immediately integrate itself into the work force. This could prove to be a social time bomb for the haredi community and for Israel.

Some haredim reject the gloomy projections.

"Many more haredim are working than the numbers suggest, since there is a thriving underground economy," says one haredi businessman, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The entire city of Bnei Brak is one big black economy."

In addition, the businessman says economic analyses of the haredi community do not calculate the lower costs to society incurred by the fervently Orthodox community. For example, he says, there are very few haredim in prisons or in drug rehabilitation programs.

Avraham Ravitz, a Knesset member from the United Torah Judaism bloc, and chairman of the parliamentary finance committee, says the economists have missed the mark, since most fervently Orthodox Jews simply do not need money.

"The ideal is to live modestly," says Ravitz. "They don't go out to coffee shops or to eat out, and they only buy the bare necessities."

Ravitz himself says he has been involved in initiatives to start vocational training programs for yeshiva students. He also believes that if they were forced to, most yeshiva students would probably go to work.

But although Ravitz says rabbis should allow students who want to leave yeshivas to find work, they shouldn't actively encourage employment.

And what about strategic planning to deal with the population boom? Ravitz's response resembles that of Yishayahu, the optimistic yeshiva student.

"There's no need to be sophisticated and plan for a scenario that will take place 17 years from now," says Ravitz. "This country is living with miracles." □

JEWISH WORLD

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Fervently Orthodox men join army, breaking taboo in Israeli community

By Avi Machlis

TEL AVIV (JTA) — At a lonely base in the northern Jordan Valley, a group of young devout men have replaced their black coats and Talmuds with army green and M-16 rifles.

Unlike the average Israeli trainee, they pray after the morning jog, have a daily Torah study session, eat in the army's only glatt kosher mess hall and serve on an all-male base. But since January, these young men — like all other Israeli draftees their age — are heeding the orders barked by their drill sergeants.

By choosing to serve instead of study the Torah full time, they have broken a taboo in the haredi, or fervently Orthodox, community on an issue that has been at the heart of religious-secular tensions for decades. And when their five-month training course ends, the haredi infantrymen will be deployed on active duty.

"This group will become the flag-bearers for their entire community," says Yehuda Duvdevani, head of the Defense Ministry's Nahal and National Missions Division, who founded the program. "They will show the community that those who are studying should study in yeshiva, but those who don't should join the army."

Since the haredi draftees prefer to remain anonymous, the Israel Defense Force does not allow journalists to visit the training camp. But in an interview with JTA, Duvdevani, 54, shared the story of how this historic group of soldiers was established.

He says the army is making a serious effort to understand the special needs of potential haredi soldiers and to create a framework that could bridge the widening religious-secular gulf.

The issue dates back to Israel's independence. Believing the fervently Orthodox community would wither away, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, agreed to exempt 400 yeshiva students from military service.

In subsequent decades, yeshivas have grown and now boast more than 72,000 students. Angry secular Israelis say they have become a haven for draft-dodgers.

In 1996, Yitzhak Mordechai, then-defense minister, appointed Duvdevani, a former senior officer, to head the Nahal Division and refocus it to confront challenges facing Israeli society.

After meeting haredi rabbis, Knesset members and yeshiva students, Duvdevani realized that hundreds of young fervently Orthodox men were not studying in yeshivas, but were hanging out on the streets. "I told the haredi leaders that at least, they should let those boys who don't study enlist in the army," said Duvdevani, a secular Jew.

After months of recruiting, a group of 30 young men recently agreed. The army chose a base, koshered the kitchen and barred women soldiers. Most of the staff who volunteered to train the haredim were modern Orthodox Jews who understood the group's special needs.

Still, a few problems arose. One soldier complained that it was difficult to concentrate on morning prayers after the morning run. Since some soldiers' parents don't even know they have volunteered, some of the recruits take off their uniforms before returning home for weekend leave.

Yet according to Duvdevani, the fervently Orthodox soldiers salute the Israeli flag — a symbol of the secular Jewish state scorned by their community — during morning and evening roll calls.

Despite this symbol of allegiance, the rabbis' worst fears have not materialized. "The rabbis were afraid" the recruits would "lose their religion if they join the army," said Duvdevani. "The irony is that some of them had stopped putting on tefillin before they were drafted, and now they are coming back to religion."

It is still too early to say whether the program will have a lasting impact on the haredi community, but Duvdevani is confident that it will slowly usher in an acceptance of the army as a legitimate alternative for young haredi men.

"I want to build a bridge between the religious and secular worlds," said Duvdevani. "What is at stake is the unity of Israel." □

Primakov to meet U.S. Jews

Russia's prime minister agreed to meet with representatives from the American Jewish community during a scheduled visit to Washington next week. The National Conference on Soviet Jewry, which arranged the meeting with Yevgeny Primakov, plans to discuss concerns about rising anti-Semitism in Russia.

Group backs Israel at U.N.

A major foreign-policy research organization is backing Israel's drive for equality at the United Nations. The 23,000-member United Nations Association of the United States of America passed a resolution last week instructing its board members to urge U.N. members to "swiftly ensure that every member state be assured access to a regional group."

Israel is the only country of the 185 in the United Nations excluded from a regional grouping, membership in which is a prerequisite for serving on the U.N. Security Council.

Candidate vows support for Israel

U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) promised to do all he can to ensure the return of Israeli soldiers who are missing in action. McCain, a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, made his remarks at a dinner Sunday where he received the Defender of Jerusalem Award from the National Council of Young Israel.

McCain, a candidate for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, also promised to support a unified Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "Never again should the Jewish people be prevented from praying at the Wall," he said.

Pataki puts pressure on banks

Foreign banks operating in New York that want to merge will have to prove they are committed to coming to terms with their behavior during the Holocaust era, New York's governor said. George Pataki's comments last Thursday came after the World Jewish Congress said it would oppose a bid by the French Banque Nationale de Paris to acquire two rivals.

AJCommittee meets Greek leader

A visiting delegation from the American Jewish Committee met last Friday with Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis and other governmental and church officials in Athens.

Discussions were aimed at "enhancing Israel's relations with Greece," which have "room for growth," said the AJCommittee's executive director, David Harris. Some of the talks focused on getting Athens to change a law that requires people to list religion on their ID cards.

The Greek Jewish community has protested the law.

Iranian Jews open first center at former 'Temple to the Stars'

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Once proudly known as the "Temple to the Stars," Hollywood Temple Beth El has been purchased by the Iranian Jewish community as its first regional center.

The transfer of ownership reflects the generational, geographical and ethnic changes in the constantly evolving Los Angeles Jewish community.

Beth El, founded 77 years ago, relocated to its present site near Sunset Boulevard in 1952. The Conservative congregation's membership roll included movie stars Edward G. Robinson and Carmel Myers, the Warner brothers, founders of the film studio that bears their name, and cosmetics mogul Max Factor.

As the congregants' children and grandchildren, as well as the studios, moved to other parts of the city and to outlying suburbs, Beth El's membership aged and dwindled. Last year, the 1,200-seat sanctuary attracted barely 50 worshipers, most in their 70s and 80s, and only one of 20 classrooms was still in use.

Around the same time as this decline, a trickle — and then a stream — of Iranian Jews fleeing the Islamic revolutionary regime arrived in Los Angeles. They now number an estimated 30,000, the largest such concentration in the United States.

The synagogue complex changed hands earlier this month upon payment of \$2.8 million and will now be known as the Hollywood Temple Beth El/Iranian American Jewish Center.

More than 600 weekly and 2,500 High Holiday Iranian worshipers are expected to attend traditional services in Persian and Hebrew, while a smaller auditorium will be available to the remaining members of the old Ashkenazi congregation.

Dr. Sanford Gaum, Beth El's immediate past president, said he was happy that the building would remain a synagogue, instead of being torn down to make way for condominiums or a parking structure. For Ezat Delijani, president of the Iranian American Jewish Federation, the new center fulfills "a dream of our community for many years." □

Barak comes out swinging after report clears his name

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 came out swinging Monday, lashing out at his accusers after a state report cleared him of charges involving a 1992 army training accident that killed five army commandos and left six others wounded.

"I have no use for apologies from cynical politicians who think the blood of Israeli soldiers" can be used for "political mud-slinging," Barak said.

During Israel's election campaign, political opponents have accused Barak, the army chief of staff at the time of the accident, of leaving the scene without attempting to help the injured.

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.

But the report by State Comptroller Eliezer Goldberg, most of which was released Monday, concluded that there was no basis to the allegations. The report noted that all of the injured were being cared for when Barak left the scene.

It did not take any position regarding allegations that Barak did not help the injured, citing contradictory versions about the events immediately following the accident.

Barak, who has staunchly denied any allegations of wrongdoing, welcomed the report's release, saying it brought the matter to a conclusive end.

Commenting on the report Monday, Hanegbi said the inquiry still left unanswered questions and had not "removed the stain" from Barak's reputation. For his part, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud called on the public to read the report and draw its own conclusions.

At a meeting this week, Likud ministers decided to stop using the Tse'elim incident as a campaign issue against Barak because opinion polls had shown it was not having much effect on the Israeli public. □

Netanyahu may be questioned in police probe of Ariel Sharon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be next in line for police questioning regarding alleged influence peddling by his foreign minister.

Israel's attorney general cleared the way for Netanyahu to be questioned about allegations that Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon bribed a former general to give false testimony in Sharon's libel trial against the Ha'aretz newspaper.

Netanyahu's office criticized the development, saying it had only learned about it from media reports.

Just the same, his spokesman said the premier would fully cooperate with a police request to submit testimony.

Sharon has denied the allegations that he included Avigdor Ben Gal in a delegation to Russia and pledged to help him obtain a natural gas deal there in exchange for Ben Gal's changing his testimony at the trial.

Several weeks after the trip, Ben Gal testified in the libel suit, which Sharon brought against the Israeli daily Ha'aretz for running an article charging that Sharon had misled the government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin about his plans to launch a full-scale invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Ben Gal's testimony contradicted his earlier statements that Sharon had concealed the invasion plan from Begin.

Sharon ultimately lost the suit.

The investigation into possible witness tampering was launched seven months ago at the request of Ha'aretz, whose attorney claimed that Sharon had bribed Ben Gal to change his testimony. Ben Gal's attorney countered that there had been no impropriety, adding that his client was included in the delegation to Russia at Netanyahu's recommendation.

Police are expected to try to verify whether this is true, and if so, whether Netanyahu knew Ben Gal was among the witnesses due to testify at the trial. □