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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel's joint conversion institute debuts amid charges, uncertainty

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Representatives of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Judaism in Israel have launched the country's first interdenominational conversion institute in the northern Galilee town of Carmiel.

But this latest development in the ongoing battle over religious pluralism in the Jewish state debuted under a cloud of charges and uncertainty, raising questions about how successful the institute will be in resolving the debate that has divided many Jews.

Leaders of the liberal streams said the institute — originally devised as a compromise to end a two-year controversy over whether conversions they perform in Israel should be recognized by the state — did not solve any problems because the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate has not officially agreed to recognize the institute's graduates.

The Institute for Judaic Studies, founded by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Israeli government, started its first program Monday with 37 students, all emigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many of the immigrants are non-Jews married to Jews, who had been eligible to immigrate under the Law of Return, which grants automatic citizenship to all Jews when they move to Israel.

They will study Judaism for 440 hours — three times a week during a one-year period — supervised by a staff of about 25 teachers drawn from the three main streams of Judaism.

"Teachers will deliver courses based on their expertise," said Tsila Kraskin, executive coordinator of the institute for the Jewish Agency. "Panel discussions will include members of all streams."

According to Kraskin, Israel's chief rabbis, while not explicitly endorsing the institute, hinted at a recent meeting that Orthodox rabbinical courts would consider graduates of the new institute eligible for conversions.

"The chief rabbis told us that they don't convert institutes, they convert people," said Kraskin. "They said if the institute's graduates will meet their criteria, they will have no problem."

A spokesman for the Chief Rabbinate, Tzvi Rosen, confirmed that this is the chief rabbis' position.

"They will be tested according to the halachah," he said of the candidates for conversion. "It doesn't matter whether they come from this or that institute."

But Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center in Israel, called the statement a bluff.

He said several Reform and Conservative conversion candidates were recently sent to a moderate Orthodox rabbi to complete their conversion courses.

But even this rabbi only agreed to carry out the conversion if the candidates agreed to observe Shabbat, keep kosher and give their children an Orthodox education, he said.

"They were left with two options," said Regev. "Either to lie — and some did — to get an Orthodox conversion, or, for those who were not willing to lie, to accept that they cannot convert." This, said Regev, is probably the meaning of the rabbinate's willingness to consider the institute's graduates.

"Their statement only proves that the institute is totally irrelevant to them," said Regev. In addition, he said, the institute's launch does not change the fact that the Ne'eman Committee has failed.

The committee, headed by former Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, was created

Israel expects papal visit

Pope John Paul II plans to visit the Holy Land in March 2000 to mark the start of Christianity's third millennium, Israel's Tourism Ministry said Monday.

A ministry official announced the plans for the historic visit following talks in Jerusalem between Tourism Minister Moshe Katzav and Vatican official Cardinal Roger Etchegaray.

During the historic three-day trip, the pontiff is expected to visit sites in Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Arafat, Clinton to meet

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat was slated to meet with President Clinton on Tuesday. During his 48-hour visit to the United States, where he is expected to plead his case for Palestinian statehood, Arafat is also scheduled to meet Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and senior members of Congress.

Primakov criticizes anti-Semitism

Russia's prime minister spoke out against anti-Semitism in his country during a meeting with Jewish officials.

Hours before leaving Moscow for a four-day visit to the United States, Yevgeny Primakov expressed his strong opposition to any manifestations of Russian nationalism, including anti-Semitism, according to Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, who participated in the meeting along with leaders of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Meanwhile, Primakov and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to cooperate to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

"Relations between Israel and Russia are excellent," Netanyahu said after meeting Monday in Moscow with his Russian counterpart.

Sheinbein charged in Israel

Israeli prosecutors charged a Maryland teen-ager with first-degree murder in a 1997 dismemberment killing.

Monday's indictment of Samuel Sheinbein came one day after a Supreme Court judge issued a final ruling preventing him from being extradited to the United States to face similar charges. [Page 2]

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jordan seeks U.S. help

Jordan appealed to the United States to help resolve a dispute with Israel after Israeli officials said last week they are planning to reduce the amount of water they deliver to Jordan because of a regional drought. An expert on water issues from the U.S. State Department arrived in Israel on Monday and is expected to participate in talks between the two sides.

Israel denies militia arrests

Israeli officials confirmed that they had arrested a group of Lebanese civilians on suspicion of helping Hezbollah gunmen.

But the officials denied reports that any of those arrested were intelligence officials with the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army. They also denied that any of the suspects were involved in a recent roadside bombing in southern Lebanon that killed four Israelis, including a general.

The fatal blast had prompted speculation that information about Israeli movements had been leaked to Hezbollah, possibly by a source within the SLA.

Court backs Bedouin expulsions

The Israeli army can go ahead with a plan to expel some 600 Bedouin who fled Egypt last week, Israel's Supreme Court ruled Monday.

The tribesmen had fled across the Sinai to escape a feud with another clan, but the Negev regional council later called on the army to expel them, saying it did not have the resources to care for them.

Egyptian officials said Monday that the issue would not affect Israeli-Egyptian relations.

Former Rabin official charged

Israeli prosecutors filed bribery charges against the former director general of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's office. Shimon Sheves, who was charged, among other things, with accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes, denied the allegations.



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
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Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

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two years ago by the government to seek a compromise to the conversion issue.

"Ne'eman sold us peace in the Jewish people, and this means there was supposed to be give and take," he said. "In reality, there is no dialogue, no cooperation, no recognition."

It was the Ne'eman Committee that proposed the interdenominational institute as a compromise solution to the conversion issue.

The three major streams of Judaism would be involved in preparing candidates for conversion, while only Orthodox rabbis would be allowed to perform the conversions.

The compromise was suggested to head off a crisis sparked when Orthodox parties in the Knesset tried to pass a conversion bill that would have codified into law the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's authority over all conversions conducted in Israel.

Orthodox parties blamed the liberal movements for the crisis, saying they were trying to break the decades-old status quo by seeking court rulings favorable to their cause. Many American Jews, most of whom identify with Reform and Conservative Judaism, were angered by the Orthodox legislative drive, which they felt delegitimized their Jewishness.

Israeli liberal Jewish movements have fought the proposed legislation in Israeli courts, which recently ruled that their conversions must be recognized by the state.

Responding to the concerns, Professor Binyamin Ish-Shalom, the institute's Orthodox chairman, urged all sides to give the institute a chance.

"I think we need to give it time, and ultimately, the test will be in the field, when our graduates will stand before the rabbinical courts," he said. □

U.S. teen-ager who fled to Israel faces first-degree murder charge

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli prosecutors have charged a Maryland teen-ager with first-degree murder in a 1997 dismemberment killing.

Monday's indictment of Samuel Sheinbein came one day after the Supreme Court ruled out any possibility for his extradition to the United States to stand trial on similar charges. In its ruling, the high court rejected a special request from the attorney general to reconsider its 3-2 decision in February that a law protecting Israeli citizens from being extradited for crimes committed abroad applies to Sheinbein.

Sheinbein, 18, fled to Israel three days after the mutilated corpse of his former friend, 19-year-old Alfred Tello, was found in September 1997.

Another suspect in the murder, Aaron Benjamin Needle, 18, hanged himself in his jail cell following his arrest. Needle and Sheinbein were classmates at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in suburban Washington. After his arrival in Israel, Sheinbein successfully fought extradition to the United States, claiming Israeli citizenship through his father, who was born in pre-state Palestine and left as a child.

American calls for extradition came from the highest levels. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was personally involved in urging Israel to hand him over.

Israeli prosecutor Hadassah Naor said Monday that Sheinbein would be tried based on Israeli law.

"The court cannot sentence him to anything more severe than what he would be given in the United States, where the crime was committed," she said.

Naor said that had Sheinbein been tried in the United States, prosecutors there would not have sought the death penalty because he was a minor at the time of the murder. Dozens of witnesses, including FBI investigators, are expected to be flown to Israel from the United States to testify at the trial.

Sheinbein's Israeli lawyer, David Libai, said it is unlikely prosecutors will agree to a plea bargain, given the high profile of the case.

"In light of the political and emotional sensitivities this case raises, I don't see a real possibility that prosecutors will concede on anything or compromise on anything," Libai told reporters. He did not say how his client would plead.

At Monday's hearing, Sheinbein was ordered held until April 19, when the court is scheduled to hear a prosecution request to keep him in jail until the trial's end. □

JEWISH WORLD

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Last Oscar night of the century has numerous Jewish moments

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Oscar didn't quite wear a yarmulka, but rarely have Jewish talent and Jewish themes received as much recognition as at the last Academy Awards of this century.

"Life Is Beautiful," the tragicomic fable set partially in a concentration camp, earned best actor and best foreign film Oscars for its star and director, Roberto Benigni.

The irrepressible Italian actor-director, who leaped over rows of seats to reach the stage, dedicated the foreign film award to those "who gave their lives so we can say life is beautiful."

Benigni was the first filmmaker to direct his own Oscar-winning performance since 1948, when Laurence Olivier won the acting award for "Hamlet," which he also directed.

The best actress award went to the heroine of "Shakespeare in Love," Gwyneth Paltrow, who counts 33 rabbis among her ancestors on her father's side. The rabbis were members of the Paltrowitch dynasty, which originated in southwest Russia.

Steven Spielberg was named best director for the graphic World War II saga, "Saving Private Ryan."

"The film is really an extension of my earlier 'Schindler's List,'" Spielberg told JTA in a recent interview. "It honors the men whose bravery ended the war in 1945 rather than in 1947, when no Jew would have been left alive in Europe."

The biggest non-Jewish winner at Sunday's ceremony was the Bard of Avon. "Shakespeare in Love" won best picture and picked up six other Oscars.

"Saving Private Ryan," with five awards, and "Life Is Beautiful," which scored in three categories were not far behind.

In a somewhat less glamorous category, "The Last Days," which presents the testimony of five Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivors, took honors as the best documentary feature.

The film was produced by Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which has videotaped the testimony of more than 50,000 survivors.

In the documentary short subject division, the winner was "The Personals: Improvisations on Romance in the Golden Years."

In her acceptance speech, producer Keiko Ibi expressed her wonder that a film on the lives of Jewish senior citizens by a Japanese woman could garner an Oscar.

Ibi, a New York University film school student, met her cast on New York's Lower East Side, where they were members of the Alliance Stage theater group.

"I think she clearly touched a chord in the seniors, who clearly touched a chord in her," said Alan Goodman, executive director of the Educational Alliance, a Jewish social service agency that has worked with immigrant populations for over a century.

"The seniors are a generation of immigrants from many years ago, and the director is somebody who's new," said Goodman, whose agency is a constituent of United Jewish Appeal-Federation of New York.

"But the feelings are still the same — the same emotions, the same struggles and aspirations. I think that some of that kind of language, that emotional language is universal."

"The Prince of Egypt," the animated version of the life of Moses, picked up a single award for best original song with "When You Believe." The Stephen Schwartz tune is sung triumphantly by the departing Jews during the Exodus.

Two Jewish men who influenced the movie industry in different ways — the late director Stanley Kubrick and film critic Gene Siskel — were commemorated in special tributes.

In the final acceptance speech of the evening, Harvey Weinstein, head of Miramax Films, which produced "Shakespeare in Love," ended his list of thanks with a tribute to his mother — "who makes Jewish mothers look good." □

(JTA staff writer Julia Goldman in New York contributed to this report.)

Meeting with spy's backers nixed

President Clinton's chief attorney rejected a meeting requested by representatives of the organized Jewish community who want to plead for the release of Jonathan Pollard.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations was instead invited to present a written argument to Charles Ruff on Pollard's behalf. During last October's Wye peace talks, Clinton agreed to review Pollard's life sentence, which was imposed for spying on the United States for Israel.

Czech leader vows cooperation

Czech President Václav Havel promised former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger that Czech archives would remain open to an international commission probing Holocaust-era insurance claims.

Eagleburger, who visited Prague last week in his capacity as the commission's chairman, praised the Czech Republic for establishing a government panel to deal with outstanding Holocaust-era issues. The commission, which was created last year, is investigating allegations that European insurers refused to pay claims filed by the heirs of Holocaust victims.

Fund to help Righteous Gentiles

Destitute non-Jews in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union who risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust are slated to receive financial assistance from a humanitarian fund set up by Switzerland.

Some 1,000 gentiles named by Israel as "Righteous Among Nations" will receive payments from the nearly \$200 million fund, which has already made payments to needy survivors around the world.

Suit targets IG Farben

Former slave laborers filed a class-action suit against the German firm IG Farben seeking compensation for their work during World War II, according to a German newspaper.

The three Polish-born Israelis are asking a German court to award them damages and back wages from the company, which manufactured Zyklon B gas during the war. The suit comes as the company, which recently agreed that it would liquidate its assets, is scheduled to vote this week on creating a compensation fund for slave laborers.

Book: Use two tablets for love

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is following up on his best-selling book, "Kosher Sex," with a guide to dating based on the Ten Commandments. The message in "Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments," to be published next month in London, is that the biblical code contains sound practical advice for lovers.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Under glare of media spotlight, yeshiva star pursues hoop dreams***By Peter Ephross*

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's unlikely that the annual high school basketball tournament at Yeshiva University has ever experienced anything like the kind of media attention it got this year.

Reporters from The Wall Street Journal, "60 Minutes II" and the New York tabloids flocked to Y.U.'s campus in Manhattan over the weekend to cover the competition — as did a record number of 1,100 fans.

"We're not used to this," said Richard Zerneck, Y.U.'s athletic director. "It's a phenomenon."

Just one player created all the frenzy: Tamir Goodman.

Goodman, a gangly, 6-foot-3-inch junior who plays for the Talmudical Academy of Baltimore, is one of *the* major sports stories of the year. Not in Jewish sports, or in high school sports, but in sports. Period.

An Orthodox Jew who plays wearing a yarmulka, Goodman, nicknamed the "Jewish Jordan," has given a verbal commitment to play for the University of Maryland basketball team after he graduates in the spring of 2000.

The university has told Goodman, who has short red hair and wears wire-rimmed glasses for reading, that it will try to create a miracle: During Goodman's tenure, the high-powered school would play no games from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday to avoid any conflict with Goodman's observance of Shabbat. If not, Goodman has made it clear that he will skip those games.

Goodman, 17, one of seven sons, has already come under a lot of pressure to perform on the court, even more than the average high school phenom.

After all, how many of them have had a four-page spread in Sports Illustrated headlined, "An Unorthodox Player," as Goodman did in the magazine's Feb. 1 issue?

In the tournament in New York, he lives up to his star billing. He averages 45 points a game in his team's first two games — a win against Shalhevet and an overtime loss to Valley Torah, both of which are in Los Angeles.

In a game against a Long Island school, Hebrew Academy of Five Towns and Rockaway, on Sunday, the crowd monitors his every move. Some are loudly in his corner, groaning when he misses shots or commits a turnover; others appear to be relishing his every mistake.

Unfortunately for the Great Orthodox Hope, there are more than his usual share on Sunday.

Goodman is heavily guarded all game long. As a result, he must rely on his teammates, who are unable to come to the fore — his squad's other standout has a broken leg.

He still scores a game-high 13 points, including six straight early in the fourth quarter, and gives his team a chance to tie in the final seconds when he finds an open teammate under the basket for a game-tying lay-up. The shot is missed, and Talmudical Academy goes down to defeat.

But the pressure that Goodman experiences as a star player is just part of his burden: As the lone savior of the Orthodox sports world, he has also become a role model for Orthodox kids.

When he travels, says a family friend, Jewish children sometimes accompany him to shul to watch him daven, or pray.

Goodman shows that you "can be good at basketball and religious at the same time," says Evy Evron, 14, a local fan. "It's good to feel so much pride for 'our team,' the Jews."

Competitor Hillie Goldman, 18, says that "as long he stays true to Judaism and he doesn't sell out to the NBA and remains a kiddush hashem, that's all that matters." Goldman refers to the term for sanctifying God's name just minutes after his team, HAFTR, defeats Talmudical Academy.

It's a burden that Goodman has admitted wears on him at times, but at a news conference after Sunday's game, he said he welcomes it.

"I realize I'm a role model for Jewish kids. If during a game like today, I curse a lot, that's not very Jewish," he said. "God gave me these talents and if I use them in the wrong way, he could take them away from me."

Some rabbis at his school, concerned about an over-emphasis on secular success and idol worship, are wary of Goodman's role-model status. But his coach, Harold Katz, isn't concerned. Learning Torah, Katz said at the news conference, is paramount, but after that, "don't give up doing what you want to do."

Goodman, who's not concerned that he will be tempted by outside influences at Maryland, appears to be doing just that.

During the second quarter of Sunday's game, Goodman makes a move that he later calls "instinctual."

His kipah falls off his head during a scramble for a rebound, and before dribbling the ball up court, he pauses to bend down and puts it back on his head.

The crowd roars its approval.

It's moves like these that lead one fan, Fredda Finkelstein, a teacher for another school playing in the tournament, Hillel Community Day School of Florida, to say the words a mother loves to hear, "He plays like a mensch." □

In attempt to please shoppers, chain offers 'Jewish' cross buns*By Douglas Davis*

LONDON (JTA) — Britain's largest supermarket chain has heeded appeals from some of its Jewish clients and launched a line of "Jewish" hot cross buns for Easter.

But the supermarket chain Tesco is likely to find that in this case, at least, the customer is not always right.

The chain's new-look buns — which replace the traditional cross, intended to symbolize the crucifixion of Jesus, with a Star of David — has been greeted with incredulity by both Jews and Christians.

A Church of England spokesman said the idea was "a complete waste of time. The point of hot cross buns is that they mark Good Friday when Christ was crucified. Hence the cross. You cannot put a star in its place."

The Jewish education adviser to the interfaith group Council for Christians and Jews, Jonathan Gorsky, said "it seems to me that the buns are part of Christian life.

"To pretend otherwise is totally absurd. They have no relevance to Jews and I can see no reason to do such a thing."

The supermarket chain is likely to face another obstacle to its new line: In the largely traditional British Jewish community, there is likely to be little demand for the "Jewish" buns during Easter, which this year falls during the eight days of Passover. □