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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Reform movement hails outreach as 'most distinctive achievement'

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — The great rabbis Hillel and Shammai, it is said, considered a question familiar to Jews today: whether would-be converts to Judaism should be welcomed or discouraged by the Jewish community.

For the next 1,978 years, the general reaction among Jews followed the example of Shammai — would-be converts were discouraged in a test of their sincerity — or the question was pushed aside.

Then, in 1978, the Reform movement took a firm step in line with Hillel. In a groundbreaking speech, the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations launched an organized, movement-wide program of aggressive outreach to converts and the partners of mixed marriages.

"We must remove the 'not wanted' signs from our hearts," Rabbi Alexander Schindler said to a national board meeting of the UAHC in Houston.

"We are opposed to intermarriage, but we cannot reject the intermarried."

Welcoming "the stranger" would remove the stigma associated with conversion, Schindler said. An attitude of openness would increase the potential for non-Jewish partners to convert or to commit to raising their children as Jews. Twenty years later, the precise demographic effect of the Reform Jewish outreach is not clear.

The movement's leaders say that it has brought tens of thousands of new congregants to its synagogues. Critics say that contrary to its goals, outreach has legitimized or even encouraged intermarriage.

What is clear is that Schindler's proposal brought into the open a discussion that had been simmering under the surface of American Jewish life for years.

Last week, the Reform movement celebrated two decades of "keruv" — Hebrew for "bringing closer" — with a three-day symposium titled "Expanding the Covenant: Fulfilling the Mitzvah of Keruv."

Speaking April 18 to about two-thirds of the 150 delegates, the UAHC's current president said that more needed to be accomplished in terms of drawing in unaffiliated Jews and the non-Jewish spouses and children of mixed marriages. Still, Rabbi Eric Yoffie called the movement's outreach work "nothing less than a triumph."

"The easiest way to measure the extent of our impact is to ask, 'What would have happened if that speech in Houston had not been given?'" he said. "We all know the answer."

In the absence of outreach, he said, intermarried couples "would be forever lost to the Jewish people"; "innumerable Jews who marry non-Jews would be denied all but the slimmest hope of a Jewish future"; and there would be fewer Jews by choice.

"I see our work with the intermarried as our most distinctive achievement," Yoffie said, standing at the pulpit of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

In the years following Schindler's speech, the UAHC joined with the movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis to create an outreach commission.

Lydia Kukoff, the commission's first director, said the biggest initial challenge was "to bring people beyond the point of denial" about the reality of intermarriage.

According to a 1990 survey of the American Jewish population, more than half of all marrying Jews were choosing non-Jewish partners.

Revised estimates put that number closer to 40 percent, but few Jews have not been

Palestinians delay statehood

The Palestinian Central Council voted Wednesday to delay a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state.

Amid heavy international pressure to put off such a move, the council, the mini-Parliament of the Palestine Liberation Organization, overwhelmingly voted to resume the discussion in June, after Israel's elections. [Page 2]

Report: Sharon to be indicted

Israeli police recommended that Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and a business associate be charged with alleged bribery, fraud, breach of trust and obstruction of justice, according to Israeli media. [Page 3]

Politician's video creates hubbub

Israeli prosecutors are considering opening a criminal investigation into those responsible for producing a videotape in which convicted politician Aryeh Deri compares the treatment he received during his trial to that of Nazi criminals.

Deri, who was sentenced earlier this month to four years in jail for bribe-taking, fraud and breach of trust while serving in Israel's Interior Ministry, claims he was framed in an attempt to "destroy" him and his party, whose supporters are primarily of Sephardi background. In the videotape, Deri notes that the only trials whose verdicts were aired live, in addition to his, were the Nazi trials of Adolf Eichmann and John Demjanjuk.

The videotape calls on voters to cast ballots for the Shas Party in a show of defiance against the "elite establishment." [Page 4]

Hungarian survivors file suit

A U.S. lawyer for Hungarian Holocaust victims filed two class-action lawsuits Thursday, seeking compensation for slave labor at some of Germany's largest firms during World War II.

Ed Fagan said the cases were the first legal attempts to unify Hungarian slave-labor claims.

The firms targeted include German-U.S. auto giant DaimlerChrysler, the legal successor to the wartime munitions firm AEG.

Fagan said he filed the cases now to put more pressure on the German government and companies to settle issues blocking the creation of a compensation fund for former slave laborers.

MIDEAST FOCUS

U.S. relaxes sanctions

The United States relaxed sanctions, allowing American firms to sell food and medicine to Iran, Libya and Sudan.

All three countries continue to face a host of economic and military sanctions under U.S. anti-terrorism laws. Wednesday's move, described by Clinton administration officials as a major shift in policy, should not be taken as a gesture of goodwill and will not "enhance a nation's military capability or ability to support terrorism," said U.S. Undersecretary of State for Economics Stuart Eizenstat.

Report: Israel negotiating for spy

Israel has been holding secret contacts with Egypt for several months in an effort to secure the release of an Israeli Druse sentenced to prison in 1997 for spying, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The Israeli Prime Minister's Office would not comment on the report regarding Azam Azam.

Azam, who was a mechanic at an Israeli-Egyptian textile plant in Cairo, is serving 15 years with hard labor.

Israel to take part in mines parley

Israeli representatives are expected to participate in an upcoming international conference against the use of anti-personnel mines, despite Israel's refusal to sign a treaty on the matter.

The conference, which will take place in Mozambique next month, will attempt to expedite the implementation of the treaty and provide aid to countries seeking to dismantle the mines.

Some 135 countries have signed the treaty, which took effect in March. The treaty bars the use, storage and transport of the mines, and also requires countries to destroy all such devices in their possessions.

Other countries that have not signed the treaty include Finland, Turkey, Russia, China and the United States.



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affected by the phenomenon. Still, Kukoff said in an interview at the symposium's end, "Elevating the level of discourse was no small feat."

An outreach department developed a range of programs to sensitize American Jews to the issues surrounding intermarriage and conversion and to introduce unaffiliated and would-be Jews to Jewish religious life.

In 1994, the UAHC launched a "Taste of Judaism" program in which 17,000 students have enrolled, according to Dru Greenwood, the current director of outreach and synagogue affiliation.

Greenwood could not say how many new congregants or eventual converts the class and other programs have brought in, but delegates at the symposium attested to the effect the movement's outreach has had in their local congregations.

But the outreach effort has attracted a great deal of criticism as well, most of it asserting that outreach does not adequately discourage mixed marriages.

Steven Bayme, the American Jewish Committee's director of Jewish communal affairs, commends the Reform movement for "restoring the issue of conversion to the Jewish communal agenda." But, he said in a recent telephone interview, the more open environment has created a "cultural transformation" that makes discouraging mixed marriage "politically incorrect."

"I would argue that the Jewish community has never been neutral toward intermarriage," he said.

He cited an actual decrease in conversion rates during the past two decades.

Moreover, he said, studies show that most intermarried couples are not interested in Jewish life, leading him to question whether outreach represented a "misplaced set of priorities in terms of Jewish communal resources."

Yoffie addressed this concern in his remarks last week.

He urged outreach volunteers and professionals boldly, but sensitively, to encourage conversion—an area, he admitted, in which outreach has met with "partial failure."

But Yoffie and others at the conference proudly pointed out a significant by-product of outreach: that keruv efforts also bring in born Jews who had lost their Jewish connection.

"We have many years of work to do before we can declare victory for our principles of inclusion," Yoffie said.

"At the same time, the fact that outreach and inreach efforts so frequently converge should serve to strengthen our claim on community resources and attention." □

Palestinians vote to delay state declaration

JERUSALEM (JTA) — PLO leaders last Wednesday voted to delay unilaterally declaring a Palestinian state amid heavy international pressure to put off the move.

On the third day of deliberations in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Central Council, the mini-Parliament of the PLO, overwhelmingly voted to put off the declaration until after Israel's elections.

At the same time, it arranged for subcommittees to work on various aspects of statehood, including drawing up a draft constitution. Salim Za'anoun, chairman of the council, said the body would reconvene at the beginning of June.

The U.S. State Department welcomed the decision.

"We have said that we think it is very important for neither the Palestinians, nor the Israelis, to pursue unilateral acts or declarations," said State Department James Rubin.

"The only realistic way for the Palestinians to achieve their aspirations is through a negotiated outcome."

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat had long pledged to declare an independent state on May 4, the date the interim period ends under the terms of the Oslo accords, if no final-status arrangement with Israel was concluded.

The United States, Europe and Arab states had strongly urged Arafat to delay a declaration because it could harm efforts to resume the long-stalled peace negotiations.

N Netanyahu had warned the Palestinians that Israel would respond to a statehood declaration by annexing parts of the West Bank. □

JEWISH WORLD

Israeli police recommend indictment of Ariel Sharon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police have recommended that Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and a business associate be charged with alleged bribery, fraud, breach of trust and obstruction of justice, Israeli media reported this week.

Sharon, who denied the allegations against him, called on the state attorney to decide before the May 17 elections whether to indict him.

Sharon's lawyer, Ya'acov Weinrot, said that from his discussions with the state attorney, Edna Arbel, it did not appear that the recommendation for charges to be filed was unequivocal.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who submitted testimony to police as part of the inquiry, said he had full confidence in Sharon and in his innocence, Israel Television reported.

The police probe was launched last summer at the request of the Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz. The paper claimed that Sharon had bribed a witness in an unsuccessful libel suit the minister had brought against Ha'aretz over an article it published regarding Sharon's role in the 1982 Lebanon War.

Sharon had included his business associate, Avigdor Ben Gal, in a delegation he led as minister of infrastructure to Russia in June 1997. According to the allegations, Sharon promised to include Ben Gal in a lucrative natural gas deal under consideration in exchange for his altering his testimony.

Ben Gal was called as a witness because he is a retired general who was a senior commander during the war.

Two weeks after returning from Russia, Ben Gal testified in court.

His testimony contradicted remarks he had made in a university lecture a decade earlier that Sharon — as defense minister in 1982 — had concealed from then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin plans he had for a far-reaching military operation into Lebanon. Ben Gal also did not disclose that his last contact with Sharon had been during the business trip to Russia.

Israel Radio, citing sources close to the police investigation, reported that the probe had uncovered evidence substantiating some of the allegations. □

Man stands trial in Germany for role in wartime massacre

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — A Ukrainian-born man of German descent is standing trial in Germany for assisting in the murder of 17,000 Jews in Poland 56 years ago.

Alfons Goetzfried, 79, is charged with having played a role in the murder of Jews in the infamous "Harvest Festival" action of Nov. 3-4, 1943, at the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland.

More than 2,000 local members of the SS and police units were assigned to this task. Goetzfried is alleged to have shot 500 people himself. According to the prosecution, Goetzfried already admitted to these murders when he served as a witness in previous cases. But in court this week he said all he did was "load the machine guns with magazines and loaded other pistols. But that was it. I cannot remember shooting anyone myself."

Goetzfried was captured after the war on May 9, 1945, and held in a Soviet prison near Prague. In 1947, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. In 1991, he left the Soviet Union for Germany, where he was arrested in March 1998.

Goetzfried is also reportedly still under investigation for his alleged role in more than 40,000 murders near Lvov, Ukraine, and Lublin, Poland.

If convicted, Goetzfried faces a maximum 15-year sentence. But lawyers said the court would probably take into consideration his 13 years in a Soviet labor camp and his past year in custody in Germany. □

Decision on gay rabbis delayed

The Conservative movement's rabbinical arm ended its 99th annual convention this week without a formal discussion of its stance on the placement and ordination of openly gay and lesbian rabbis.

In a closed-door session, the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Joel Meyers, clarified the group's policy that all members in good standing are entitled to placement into a congregation.

The R.A.'s executive council is expected to address the issue at a meeting in June.

The issue has heated up in recent months as a group of rabbis prepared a draft resolution requesting a clarification of the policy and a group of students at the movement's Jewish Theological Seminary lobbied for the admission of openly gay students to its rabbinical and cantorial schools.

Pope calls for overcoming past

Pope John Paul on Wednesday called on Jews and Christians to use the year 2000 to "look forward to a new future of brotherhood."

During weekly public remarks, the pope said, "Together, we look back, but only so that we can look forward to a new future of brotherhood, when the sorrows of other times will be overcome," he said during weekly remarks.

The year 2000 has been designated a Holy Year by the Roman Catholic Church, and the pope has made clear that he believes the church should use the opportunity to reflect and seek forgiveness for past sins.

L.A. rabbi goes to Yugoslavia

A Los Angeles-area rabbi traveled to Yugoslavia Wednesday with a delegation of religious leaders hoping to secure the release of three captured U.S. soldiers there.

Rabbi Steven Jacobs joined Muslim and Christian leaders on the trip, which is being led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, founder and president of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, and the Rev. Joan Campbell, general-secretary of the National Council of Churches.

The group is expected to meet with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and other leaders.

Museum crisis erupts in Canada

Canadian Jewish officials are concerned that a new proposal for a national museum commemorating genocide in the 20th century will disrupt the government's plans for a national Holocaust museum.

Jewish leaders charge that the leader of the coalition advocating the genocide museum, which includes some 20 Canadian ethnic groups, is fanning ethnic prejudice in an attempt to stymie the proposed Holocaust museum.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Deri's conviction changes how Netanyahu, Barak go after votes*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The four-year jail sentence imposed earlier this month on Shas leader Aryeh Deri for taking bribes has forced Israel's candidates for prime minister to re-examine their vote-getting tactics.

Deri's political power is undisputed: He was responsible for the evolution of the 15-year-old fervently Orthodox Shas Party into a political force that, with 10 seats, is the third-largest party in the outgoing Knesset.

That power has also given Shas control over the Interior Ministry portfolio not only in the present Likud government, but in the Labor government that preceded it.

In the wake of Deri's conviction and sentencing, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, wanting Deri's numerous supporters firmly in his camp for the May 17 voting, has decided that he would be willing to negotiate with Deri to discuss a future coalition if he were re-elected premier.

After much deliberation, Labor Party leader Ehud Barak went the other way, announcing that he would not hold coalition negotiations with Deri if elected prime minister — and that he would not agree to give Shas the Interior Ministry again.

In effect writing off Shas support with that announcement, Barak has instead turned his attention on another powerful voting segment of the Israeli population, immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres won close to 40 percent of the immigrant vote in the 1996 election. The polls show Barak faring worse than that in his current campaign.

Barak is attempting to rally immigrant anger against Shas, maintaining that there were too many cases in which the Shas-led Interior Ministry harshly treated members of the immigrant community who were not classified by religious law as Jewish.

That anger was evident this week, when the Russian immigrant-rights Yisrael B'Aliyah Party aired political advertisements declaring that the party should take over the Interior Ministry from Shas. Party leader Natan Sharansky later told campaign coordinators to tone down the ads.

Barak wanted to see the ministry in the hands of a party that "would treat every person entitled to make aliyah under the Law of Return as equal," he said, referring to the law that entitles relatives of Jews to make aliyah even if they themselves are not halachically Jewish.

Barak recounted the story of a young soldier he had hosted at a Passover seder whose mother, halachically non-Jewish, had been deported by order of the Interior Ministry.

Shas' reaction to Barak's stance was swift.

The rabbis of the party, said Deri, would "doubtless take Barak's positions into account" when they decided which of the prime ministerial candidates they would call on their followers to support.

The announcements from Netanyahu and Barak did not come easily, given the legal issues emerging from Deri's conviction. After a trial that lasted four years, Deri was convicted of pocketing \$155,000 while holding several positions in the Interior Ministry

in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The question of Deri's possible role in post-election coalition negotiations has become, in the days since his sentence was handed down, the focus of much public debate.

In their initial reactions to the court's decision, Netanyahu, Barak and Yitzhak Mordechai, the Center Party candidate for premier, all waffled, almost in unison.

All expressed sympathy for Deri and for his family. All voiced support for the rule of law and the decisions of the courts.

All steered carefully clear, however, of saying they would not deal with Deri if he led his party in coalition negotiations after the elections. Barak initially said that question was hypothetical and therefore need not be addressed.

A fourth prime ministerial candidate, rightist coalition leader Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, was the sole person in the race to pledge firmly and unequivocally that he would not negotiate with Deri — because the Shas leader now has the status of a convicted criminal.

As a result of the court's verdict, Deri no longer enjoys a presumption of innocence, Begin argued.

This was also the stance adopted by virtually the entire legal and judicial community in the wake of the verdict.

This near-unanimous sentiment of the nation's lawyers and judges was given powerful expression over the weekend by Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein, the government's top legal adviser.

He lambasted the three candidates for premier, describing their failure to eschew any further political dealing with Deri as a "silence of the lambs."

Rubinstein also decried Deri's own behavior as a perversion of the spirit of the law, which required, the attorney general said, that a man convicted of such serious crimes and sentenced to jail "betake himself to a corner" and stop playing a role in public life.

Netanyahu insisted that Deri remains a legitimate political partner, pending a verdict on his appeal to the Supreme Court.

Indeed, the Jerusalem District Court has accepted Deri's plea for a stay of sentence pending his appeal. He has 45 days in which to submit the appeal. And legal sources expect it will take more than a year until the appeal is heard and a decision reached.

Under the strict letter of the law, Deri need not resign his parliamentary seat.

A law providing that convicted criminals must quit the Knesset was passed in 1995 — but Deri's crimes were committed before then.

By the same token, Deri can legally run for re-election and represent his party in coalition negotiations after the election.

He will also stay out of jail pending the outcome of appeals. Netanyahu was quick to cite these legalities this week.

"The law is that Deri can stay in the Knesset," Netanyahu said Monday. "That is the legal import of the court's decision. I respect the law and the courts."

Observers expect that the prime minister will tighten his alliance with Shas and with the other Orthodox parties in the few weeks remaining before the May 17 elections.

As part of his strategy, Netanyahu is hoping that if a runoff vote is needed on June 1, Orthodox supporters will turn out in strength on their rabbis' orders to vote for him, while sections of Barak's constituency — Israeli Arabs and liberal immigrants, whom he views as less disciplined and more apathetic — will prefer a day at the beach or picnicking in the countryside. □