



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 77, No. 90

Friday, May 14, 1999

82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel to admit more refugees

Israel's Cabinet decided Wednesday to admit 100 refugees from Kosovo for a period of six months. This comes in addition to the 100 refugees taken in last month.

Because of the worsening situation of the refugees, the United States asked Israel, among other countries, to give temporary shelter to additional refugees.

Mordechai refusing to drop out

Israel's Center Party candidate for prime minister angrily resisted pressure by party leaders to drop out of the race before Monday's vote.

"Whoever wants to leave, let him get up and go," Yitzhak Mordechai was quoted as saying Thursday by the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot after meeting with the three other Centrist Party leaders. [Page 3]

Slave labor talks inconclusive

U.S.-led talks aimed at compensating Holocaust survivors who worked as slave and forced laborers for Nazi Germany concluded Wednesday with many thorny issues still unresolved.

At a meeting at the U.S. State Department, representatives of German firms and of Holocaust victims agreed to establish two working groups that will try to hammer out differences by a Sept. 1 deadline.

U.S. Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat said the issues still to be resolved include determining who should be the beneficiaries of compensation funds, how the fund would be operated and how to achieve legal closure of the issue.

Israelis mark Jerusalem Day

Tens of thousands of people marched through the streets of Jerusalem to the Western Wall on Thursday to mark the 32nd anniversary of the reunification of the city.

Among the special events scheduled for Jerusalem Day was a parade through the downtown area featuring flag-bearing marchers from around the world and a memorial ceremony at Mt. Herzl military cemetery for those killed in the battle for Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Increased numbers of police were stationed around the eastern half of the city to maintain order.

THE ROAD TO ISRAEL'S ELECTIONS

Campaign has a Russian accent as immigrants flex their muscle

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It took only five minutes and seven moves for Natan Sharansky, head of the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrant rights party, to checkmate Labor Party leader Ehud Barak when the two faced off at Israel's national chess championships this week.

But as the elections draw near, Barak is fighting much harder to win the votes of Sharansky's supporters.

At the same time, Sharansky is carefully calculating his next moves on the Israeli political chessboard, knowing that the nation's approximately 500,000 Russian immigrant voters may be kingmakers in the upcoming elections.

"The key community in this election is the Russians," said Hanoch Smith, founder of Smith Research Center, an Israeli polling institute. "It was the Russians who determined the results of the last two elections, and they will probably determine the results of this one."

Although they played a decisive role in the past, this year's increased awareness of their political power is having a big impact on the campaign.

For the first time, almost every party includes Russian subtitles in its election advertisements.

Some are even airing Russian-language commercials.

In addition, Russian-speaking candidates from nonimmigrant parties are being pushed under the spotlight.

As the campaign winds to a close, Barak and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are stepping up appearances in Russian immigrant communities.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah created a commotion over its ads, which featured personal stories of immigrants who said they had been harassed by the Shas-controlled Interior Ministry in their quests for citizenship.

The ads were punctuated with the slogan: "Shas Control? Nyet! Nash Control!" (Shas Control? No! Our Control!)

They called for Yisrael Ba'Aliyah to take over the powerful ministry in the next government.

Shas countered that Yisrael Ba'Aliyah wants control over the ministry so that "shops that sell pork won't be closed" and so "call girls" and others will have an easier time entering Israel illegally.

Netanyahu, fearing potential electoral damage resulting from a miniwar between Shas and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah — both of whom are in his governing coalition — orchestrated a highly publicized peacemaking session.

Sharansky himself has been basking under the spotlight. The short, balding, former Soviet dissident jokes that the attention makes him feel like a tall, handsome man with curly hair.

"I think all the attention shows how right we were [to create a party]," Yuli Edelstein, a member of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah who serves as minister of absorption, said in a telephone interview with JTA.

"Our numbers were very impressive in 1992 and 1996, but there was not this kind of dance around the immigrants.

"Since the immigrants got political representation and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah was created, the rules of the game changed," he said. "They are no longer a needy

MIDEAST FOCUS

West Bank clashes erupt

Israeli security forces clashed with Palestinian demonstrators in several incidents in the West Bank on Thursday. Near Hebron, six Palestinians were wounded by rubber bullets fired by Israeli troops to disperse demonstrations against the construction of an industrial zone there.

Three Israeli border police were also wounded. In a separate incident, Palestinians stoned Israelis laying foundations for mobile homes near a settlement.

Settlers grab more land

Jewish settler leaders in Israel said Thursday they are occupying more land in the West Bank out of fear that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will lose in next week's election. Israeli peace activists say settlers have taken control of 20 outposts in the West Bank since the Wye agreement was signed last October.

Hezbollah kills six civilians

Fighting in southern Lebanon claimed the lives of six Lebanese civilians and two members of Hezbollah on Thursday.

Five of the Lebanese civilians were killed by a roadside bomb planted by the radical Islamic group, and one by Hezbollah shelling that had been aimed at Israeli Army posts in Lebanon. The two Hezbollah fighters were killed and a third wounded in Israeli air force strikes north of Israel's security zone.

On Tuesday, a Hezbollah mine killed a member of the Israel-allied South Lebanon Army. The blast, which occurred in Israel's security zone in southern Lebanon, also wounded two SLA soldiers.

Yiddish opera debuts in Israel

An opera believed to be the first original, full-length Yiddish-language opera in the world recently opened to a standing-room-only crowd in Israel. "The Dybbuk" is based on the well-known play by the Russian Jewish writer S. An-Ski in the 1920s.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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population that candidates can come and throw candies at.

"The immigrants have real needs and have to be addressed as real people."

While other ethnic parties have contributed to ethnic tensions, Edelstein said, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah has promoted the integration of immigrants.

"The party is a way to contribute to Israeli society," Edelstein added.

"Once we bring out the potential of new immigrants, they make direct contributions in all fields."

Recent opinion polls suggest Yisrael Ba'Aliyah will maintain its seven seats in the 120-seat Knesset.

In addition, Israel, Our Home, an immigrant-based party headed by Netanyahu's former chief of staff, Avigdor Lieberman, may get three seats.

Israel, Our Home exploded onto the political scene when Lieberman unleashed a scathing criticism of the Israeli judiciary and police.

His tough anti-establishment talk has sparked a police investigation into alleged incitement.

The party is widely seen as a satellite set up by Netanyahu to capture more Russian votes.

An unfazed Yisrael Ba'Aliyah decided not to battle Lieberman, and Edelstein insists his party will remain neutral and not endorse a prime ministerial candidate. This allows the party to keep all its coalition options open after elections.

Yet remaining neutral and not helping Netanyahu, who is trailing in the polls by as much as 12 percent, is not easy for Sharansky.

Despite political tension between the two during the past three years, Netanyahu actively worked for Sharansky's release when he languished in a Soviet prison during the 1970s and 1980s.

Neutral or not, nobody is ignoring the Russian voters. Pollster Smith's research shows that in 1992, 60 percent of the Russian immigrants — then 10 percent of the electorate — voted for Labor and secured its victory. In 1996, 60 percent voted for Netanyahu, helping him gain power.

However, according to an internal Likud poll recently cited in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, Russian immigrant support for Netanyahu has fallen from 63 percent in 1996 to 55.2 percent during the past few weeks.

Russian immigrants make up about 14 percent of the Jewish state's electorate today.

"If Netanyahu does not get 60 percent of the Russian vote, he's in trouble," said Smith, warning that Israeli opinion polls are often unreliable. "A shift in the Russian vote could be the decisive factor."

The candidates are keenly aware that there is fertile ground for such a shift.

Smith explains that unlike most Israelis who consistently vote for the same political party in a "tribal" fashion, Russian immigrants have no loyalty toward any party or candidate.

Edelstein says Barak has "greatly improved" his situation among immigrant voters with a sophisticated campaign tailored to them.

"I will vote for Yitzhak Mordechai, but all my friends are voting Barak," said Anastasia, a 19-year-old Russian immigrant who prefers not to give her full name. "They think Bibi is giving too much money to the haredim," or fervently Orthodox, "and Barak will give more money for mortgages and university."

Barak's advances in the immigrant community are particularly significant, said a Yisrael Ba'Aliyah official, speaking on condition of anonymity, because the Russian-language press in Israel is overtly right wing regarding the peace process.

"A month ago, young Russians thought that Barak was a boring, left-wing socialist party leader who does not look good on TV and mumbles a lot," said the official. "Today they see him as a high-ranking Israeli general who knows how to play the piano. The Russian immigrants like strong, cultured people."

Nobody, however, is celebrating victory yet.

The Labor Party knows Netanyahu is still fighting hard for every Russian vote.

To hammer that point home, a day after the Barak-Sharansky match, Netanyahu faced off in a chess match of his own with Sharansky.

The two played to a stalemate. □

JEWISH WORLD

Panel examines religion bill

The House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution held a hearing Wednesday to examine legislation aimed at protecting religious practice from government intrusion. Lawmakers are hoping that the Religious Liberty Protection Act can fill the void created when the Supreme Court struck down the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1997.

Group supports ground troops

NATO ground troops are necessary to end Yugoslavia's actions against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, an ad hoc coalition including some Jewish officials said in an advertisement in Thursday's *New York Times*.

Among those signing the ad, which also called for the indictment of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic for war crimes, were Rabbi David Saperstein, the director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center; Hyman Bookbinder, director emeritus of the American Jewish Committee's Washington office and a member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Committee on Conscience; and Morris Abram, who heads U.N. Watch.

Bill to stop benefits to ex-Nazis

Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) and Rep. Bob Franks (R-N.J.) introduced legislation on Wednesday to stop Social Security payments to Nazi war criminals. The lawmakers say that for years the federal government has been paying such benefits to Nazi persecutors who have fled the United States in order to avoid deportation.

U.S. Jews mixed on Jerusalem

Some 42 percent of American Jews think "Israel should be willing to compromise on Jerusalem's current status as a united city under Israeli jurisdiction," according to a survey released by the American Jewish Committee.

But 66 percent agreed that the "goal of the Arabs is not the return of the Occupied Territories, but rather the destruction of Israel," according to the survey, in which 1,000 American Jews were polled.

Swiss leader addresses Jews

Switzerland should always remember the lessons it learned from the controversy generated by its actions during the Holocaust, the country's first Jewish president said Wednesday.

"Switzerland isn't some extraordinary country which managed more than any other both to look after the security of its own people and to carry out impeccable humanitarian actions," Ruth Dreifuss told an assembly of the Swiss Confederation of Hebrew Congregations. "But it would also be wrong to say that Switzerland actively supported Nazi Germany."

THE ROAD TO ISRAEL'S ELECTIONS

Ignoring negative opinion polls, Netanyahu promises he will win

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Days before Israel's national elections, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is dismissing opinion polls and declaring he will emerge the winner in Monday's vote.

Addressing supporters Thursday, Netanyahu lashed out at the media, which he accused of rallying behind Labor Party leader Ehud Barak.

"They are afraid. And what are they afraid of? They are terribly afraid that the same thing will happen to them now as last time.

"The polls say the left will win," the premier said, adding that when the votes are counted, "their world will be overturned. It happened in 1996, and it will happen in 1999."

In 1996, the Likud leader scored a razor-thin victory over the Labor Party's Shimon Peres, whom exit polls had predicted as the winner.

Earlier this week, Netanyahu vehemently denied media reports that he had privately acknowledged his impending defeat.

Increased interest is meanwhile focusing on the Center Party candidate for prime minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, who continues to angrily resist pressure from party leaders to drop out of the race before Monday's vote.

"Whoever wants to leave, let him get up and go," Yitzhak Mordechai was quoted as saying Thursday by the Israeli daily *Yediot Achronot* after meeting with the three other Centrist Party leaders. "My decision won't change."

If Mordechai stays in the race, he will likely force a June 1 runoff between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak.

A poll released Thursday by Channel Two Television showed Barak taking 46 percent of the vote next week to 34 percent for Netanyahu. In a June 1 runoff, Barak would get 53 percent to 39 percent for the premier, the poll said.

Israeli media reported of growing consternation within the prime minister's Likud Party over the poll figures.

According to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and Communications Minister Limor Livnat have put out feelers to former party members Dan Meridor and Roni Milo, now of the Center Party, to consider a post-election reunion to oust Netanyahu as Likud leader in the event of his defeat next week.

The paper said senior party members are considering extending a similar call to Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, currently running as the prime ministerial candidate for the National Unity Party.

Officials in Barak's camp were meanwhile buoyed by the poll results, and Labor Knesset member Shlomo Ben-Ami was reportedly already drawing up working plans for the first three months of a new government.

Meanwhile, the first Israeli Arab to run for prime minister, Knesset member Azmi Beshara, said Thursday he will make a decision over the weekend as to whether to drop out of the race. Sources within the Israeli Arab list he heads were quoted as saying that Beshara had to consider the risk of siphoning off crucial Arab votes that could help Barak earn a first-round victory.

Both Netanyahu and Barak, meanwhile, continued courting crucial voting sectors, including the religious and Russian immigrant communities.

Israeli media reported Thursday that leaders of the United Torah Judaism bloc decided to endorse Netanyahu in next week's elections. The move by the fervently Orthodox bloc, which includes the *Degel HaTorah* and *Agudat Yisrael* parties, comes in the wake of a similar move by the fervently Orthodox *Shas* Party.

Meanwhile, Barak, who reportedly wrote off the haredi vote because of his earlier stance that yeshiva students should be drafted, has been courting the national religious camp. In a two-page letter filled with biblical references that is slated to be distributed in synagogues on Friday, Barak calls for a renaissance of the historic union between Labor and the national religious camp. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Israeli voters face unprecedented choices in the upcoming elections***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel appears poised to embark on a two-week period unprecedented in its political history.

As befits a political culture drawing at least part of its mode of discourse from the Talmud, hypotheses regarding what will happen during those two weeks run the gamut of speculation.

When Israelis go to the polls next week, they will cast two ballots — one for the incoming Knesset and one for prime minister.

One of those votes, for the candidates who will fill the 120 seats in the 15th Knesset, will result in a list of clear winners soon after the balloting.

But with five candidates running for prime minister, it appears that none of them will win the requisite 50 percent of the vote to be immediately proclaimed the next premier.

Instead, the results will necessitate a June 1 runoff between the two top vote-getters, who all the polls agree will be incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak.

A runoff may not be needed if one or more of the other three candidates, as has been widely rumored, drop out of the race before Monday's elections.

But Center Party leader Yitzhak Mordechai so far has resisted pressure from Barak supporters and from prominent members of his own party to step aside — a move, polls show, that could give the Labor Party leader a first-round victory over his Likud Party opponent.

The two other candidates for the premiership — the head of the right-wing National Unity bloc, Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, and the first Israeli Arab to run for the premiership, Azmi Beshara — were conditioning their withdrawal on Mordechai's decision.

The likelihood of a runoff prompts the question that Israel has never confronted before: How will the election of the Knesset on May 17 affect the election of the prime minister on June 1?

It is important to note that the Israeli prime minister is far more answerable to the Parliament than, for example, the president of the United States is to Congress.

While Israel reformed its formerly British-based system to allow for the direct election of the prime minister for the first time in the 1996 elections, it has still retained much of the British doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty.

The prime minister needs a working majority in the Knesset in order to set up and sustain a stable government — and this could well affect voters' decisions if and when they cast their June 1 ballots.

There are those pundits who argue that if the leftist One Israel does well in the Knesset election, that will trigger a contrary reaction among the electorate and create better prospects for Netanyahu.

The logic here is that most people crave consensus, unity and moderation.

They will reason to themselves — not consciously, but instinctively — that the best way of balancing a leftist victory in the Knesset is to elect a rightist premier, and then sit back while he

goes about the thankless task of cobbling together a working coalition.

But the opposite thesis is articulated with just as much conviction.

This point of view holds that if, in the same example, Israel's voters find they have elected a left-leaning Knesset, they will follow suit with the left-leaning candidate for prime minister, Barak, since they will reason to themselves that the alternative spells paralysis — and eventually the new government's collapse and early elections.

Quite possibly, both theses, though opposed to each other, will be in play among the voting public during those critical two weeks between the two rounds of voting.

The two candidates will each, in their campaign propaganda, press the thesis that best suits his own circumstances in the wake of next week's results.

Whatever logic they try to articulate in easily digestible sound bites, there is no doubt that they will spend that period immersed in ceaseless and frenetic politicking.

The special-interest parties — especially the Orthodox, the Arabs and, to a lesser extent, the immigrants — will seek to offer their support to either of the two candidates, their leaders claiming that they can deliver large blocs of voters in return for specific promises of Cabinet portfolios and other positions of importance in the next government.

But are these vaunted promises of delivering blocs of votes credible?

This is a question on which the June 1 election could very well hinge.

Can the rabbis or the sheiks or the immigrant leaders truly guarantee a high turnout among their constituencies when their respective parties are no longer on the ballots as they were for the May 17 Knesset vote?

Earlier in the campaign, it was believed that the Israeli Arab turnout in a runoff would be relatively low — which would hurt Barak, who is depending on their support for a victory.

Later the theory was floated that the Russian immigrants turnout, too, would be low — and that this would hurt the Likud's Netanyahu.

Even later, it turned out that the immigrants were not nearly as overwhelmingly for Netanyahu as perhaps the premier himself had believed.

Which prompts the question of which candidate would be hurt if they do indeed register a low second-round turnout?

Similarly, regarding fervently Orthodox voters, observers are wondering whether they will turn out in force on June 1 to vote for the avowedly non-religious Netanyahu, however supportive he has been toward the Orthodox parties during his tenure.

The leaders of the Orthodox parties will be studying the arithmetic of the Knesset election results with the utmost care after May 17 to discern whether a coalition is likely to shape up without their participation.

Shas, the National Religious Party and the United Torah Judaism bloc have all benefitted enormously from their years in government and are loath to contemplate retiring now to the opposition benches.

That calculation may feature prominently in their rabbis' decision on whom to support in the second round, and how vigorously to support him. □