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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Knesset makeup changes slightly

The makeup of the Knesset changed slightly from previous estimates, according to the final tally from Israel's 7,021 polling stations released Wednesday by Israel's Central Election Committee.

Following the counting of ballots cast by soldiers, prisoners, hospital patients and diplomats abroad, Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak's One Israel list dropped one seat, to 26. The left-wing Meretz Party increased its representation to 10, opening a spot for Israel's first female Arab legislator, Husnia Jabara.

The Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrants rights party lost a seat; the far-right National Unity Party gained one.

In the race for prime minister, the final results show Barak winning 56 percent of the vote and incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu getting 44 percent.

Knesset breakdown

Following is the official number of seats each party will have in the Knesset elected Monday, with comparisons to the previous Knesset.

PARTY	New	Old
Labor's One Israel	26	34
Likud	19	32
Shas	17	10
Meretz	10	9
Yisrael Ba'Aliyah	6	7
Shinui	6	0
Center	6	0
Natl. Religious Party	5	9
United Torah Judaism	5	4
United Arab List	5	4
Israel, Our Home	4	0
National Unity	4	0
Hadash	3	5
Natl. Dem. Alliance	2	0
One Nation	2	0

Jews of all denominations come together to study, pray on Shavuot

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — After the religious-secular tensions that marked Israel's recent election campaign, the idea of all Jews standing together as a people to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai may seem a distant dream.

But each spring, Jews celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, which began at sundown Thursday. The festival commemorates the moment when the Israelites became a community of 600,000 living according to one sacred text.

In an effort to recreate that event, a group of young rabbis affiliated with CLAL — The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership — organized the first National Unity Shavuot and an accompanying Web site. This series of interdenominational gatherings in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Miami builds on the traditional Shavuot practice of staying up all night to study in groups.

One of CLAL's aims is to bring together rabbis of all Jewish outlooks to study, sing and engage in open dialogue, overcoming differences in denomination and gender.

Several times a year, the New York-based organization invites small groups of up-and-coming rabbis from across the country on retreats, where secluded settings foster the building of mutual understanding and some unusual compromises.

Rabbi Carol Levithan, who works at a Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, recalled a recent retreat in Newport, R.I., at which the rabbis "worked out a remarkable compromise" so that they could pray together. The women sat on one side, men on the other, with a line of chairs between them. Men who were comfortable sitting with the women were free to do so, and women read from the Torah.

"It required some give on both sides," Levithan said. "The beauty of the experience was that that was accomplished."

Inspired by such experiences at the retreats, the National Unity Shavuot organizers sought to bring the same pluralistic spirit to the community at large.

"Movements are just labels we use to define ourselves," said Rabbi David Kalb of Westport, Conn. Such labeling is "ludicrous" and divisive, Kalb said, with an arm-waving flourish. "Why don't we just come back to the text?"

In New York on Monday evening, about 300 people checked political discussions about that day's election at the door of the Pope Auditorium at Fordham University in Manhattan. Sitting in circles in groups of 12, they took up a selection of texts culled from the Bible, rabbinic sources, contemporary writings and the Book of Ruth, which is usually read on Shavuot.

CLAL-affiliated rabbis and invited scholars led discussions on the theme of "Jewish Journeys" — from the patriarch Abraham to Lena Romanoff, an author and contemporary convert to Judaism — as the participants leaned in to hear above the volley of voices in the large hall.

Stephen Dubner, the best-selling author of "Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family," also spoke about his own spiritual path to the birth religion of his parents, who converted and raised him as a Catholic.

The event was co-sponsored by four local synagogues and the JCC on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The diversity of the crowd was evident from the array of kipot, flowing tresses, buns, toupees and balding pates. But differences in age, denomination and level of Jewish knowledge did not seem to hinder the free flow of conversation.

"The nature of the discussion and the subject matter lent itself to centrality and

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak mulls new government

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak is holding consultations with close advisers over the future composition of his governing coalition.

Barak said Thursday he first plans to establish the basic guidelines of his government and would then be open to dialogue with any party ready to accept those principles.

Barak, who has pledged to try to form a broad-based coalition to overcome rifts in Israeli society, told Israel Radio he would consider enlarging the Cabinet in order to accommodate more political parties in the coalition.

Barak said Wednesday that he plans to head the Defense Ministry during the first two years of his term and then re-evaluate the decision.

Syria described as eager for talks

Syria believes it can achieve peace with Israel within a year, according to the European Union's Middle East envoy.

The Syrian leadership is "extremely ready and anxious" to resume negotiations with Israel, Miguel Moratinos said during a visit to Israel Thursday after a stop-off in Damascus.

Russia, Syria sign nuclear pact

Russia and Syria signed a 10-year pact this week calling for cooperation in nuclear energy, according to Russian media reports. The agreement calls for scientific, technical and economic cooperation in the peaceful application of nuclear energy.

Jerusalem housing sparks row

Israeli peace activists demonstrated against ongoing construction of Jewish housing in the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Ras al-Amud.

Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the go-ahead for construction to begin there in the days before Israel's May 17 election.



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
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universal issues," said Judy Eiger of Staten Island, N.Y., who was there with her husband and son.

Art Wernicke, a member of a study group, or havurah, in Greenwich, Conn., came to the event that evening at Kalb's invitation.

"Most people today think there is a gulf" between Jews of different denominations, Wernicke said. But his Reform havurah was "more impressed by the commonality than by the differences" in the Orthodox rabbi's approach.

"The cross-fertilization was terrific," added Barbara Kasman, another member of the Greenwich havurah.

To promote a similar exchange of ideas, CLAL put together its Shavuot Web site — www.shavuot.org — so that Jews across the country could take part in the study and discussion.

"The Web is the form where we have the potential to break down boundaries," said Rabbi Daniel Brenner, a Reconstructionist rabbi who works for CLAL and organized the Shavuot event and Web site.

The Internet medium is "perfect to advance the idea that there are many Judaisms," Brenner said.

There could be hundreds or thousands, he said, depending on how one understands "what the tradition means and how to balance it with contemporary life."

Mutual understanding is the key to Jewish unity, he said, citing an Orthodox colleague, Rabbi Joshua Lookstein, whom he met through CLAL.

Brenner recalled Lookstein telling him, "If this really works, then I can imagine" even those Jews who "oppose us will see there is one Jewish people, and we can get beyond classifying each other." □

Police in Russia defuse bomb near Jewish theater in Moscow

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russian police and security officials have defused a bomb discovered at the Shalom Jewish Theater in Moscow.

The device, which was found Tuesday, contained more than one pound of explosives and a timing mechanism. Had it gone off it could have caused massive damage, police said.

The bomb was found less than three weeks after two bombs went off near Moscow's two largest synagogues.

Police said there could be a link between the three events.

Jewish community leaders reacted to the incident with renewed calls to tighten security in and around Jewish sites.

An unusual set of circumstances led to the discovery of the explosive.

One of the theater employees said she found a bag on May 10. Hoping that someone would come to pick it up, the employee said she took the bag out of the building and left it outside without checking its contents. Days later, a passer-by took the bag and left its contents — a cylinder-shaped device — at the theater's entrance.

On Tuesday night, an actor who needed to repair his car in front of the theater unscrewed the bolts on the device, which he thought might help him fix his car.

The actor called the police, who with the help of Russia's Federal Security Service bomb team, defused the device.

The theater also rents space to several Jewish organizations, including the Va'ad, an umbrella group, and the Moscow Jewish Community House.

In January, responding to a request from the Russian Jewish Congress, which is concerned about the rise in anti-Semitism, Russian police promised to provide special security measures for Jewish institutions in the Moscow area.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov promised that Jewish institutions in the Russian capital, including the four functioning synagogues, Jewish schools, Moscow's Jewish theater and the office of a weekly Jewish newspaper, would be patrolled around the clock. Still, most institutions — the theater, for example — do not have any security at all. □

JEWISH WORLD

Barak rejects AIPAC invite

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak decided to reject an invitation to speak to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference, which begins this weekend in Washington, according to sources close to Barak. Barak instead plans to send the pro-Israel lobby a letter.

While tensions between Barak's Labor Party and AIPAC have festered for years over charges that the pro-Israel lobby has not done enough to support the peace process, Barak's decision came because he is not ready to give a policy speech and is overwhelmed trying to form a coalition, the sources said.

An AIPAC official said the group is still talking directly to the newly elected premier and expressed the hope that Barak would speak to the group Sunday via satellite.

Ex-Gestapo agent convicted

A 79-year-old former Gestapo agent was convicted Thursday in a German court on charges of helping murder 17,000 people, most of them Jews, at the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland.

The court sentenced Alfons Goetzfrid to 10 years in prison, bringing to a close what could be the last major war crimes trial in Germany. A court spokesman said Goetzfrid will not serve time in a German jail because of the 13 years he had already spent in Soviet prison camps.

Clinton hails Jewish stance

President Clinton hailed American Jews for their support of the NATO attacks against Yugoslavia. "It's amazing to me how many American Jews have told me they support what we are doing for Kosovar Muslims," Clinton said Wednesday at a Democratic National Committee fund-raiser in New York.

Russian neo-Nazis, police clash

Members of a far-right nationalist group clashed this week with Russian police preventing them from rallying outside the Kremlin to commemorate the birthday of Russia's last czar, Nicholas II.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov banned the event a few hours in advance after learning that the rally by the Pamyat movement would feature neo-Nazi symbols.

Abdullah to address Conference

Jordan's King Abdullah is scheduled to speak Monday to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Abdullah, who is on his first trip to the United States since assuming the throne in February, has expressed his support for Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak and is seeking more economic aid for his country.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Carville and company credit Barak, not themselves, for win

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — So confident was James Carville of Ehud Barak's victory in Israel's elections that the American political consultant flew home to his Virginia farm three days before Israelis cast their ballots.

The only thing that surprised Carville and his partners, Stanley Greenberg and Robert Shrum — who have been credited with engineering Barak's landslide win over Benjamin Netanyahu in the race for prime minister — was the margin of victory.

"We need to remind ourselves that we were supposed to lose this election," Greenberg, President Clinton's former pollster, said at a news conference here on Thursday.

The political strategists brought American-style politicking to Israel, reshaped Barak's image, hammered home a simple message — "It's about change, stupid" — and quickly gained celebrity status.

Their winning formula, which transformed Barak from an underdog to prime minister-elect with an overwhelming victory, included stressing not only security but the economy, and avoiding personal attack ads on Netanyahu.

"By addressing the security issue effectively, by opening up the possibility of socioeconomic change and taking a very clear position on the role of civic equality, we freed people to vote for peace," Greenberg said.

But for all their celebrity, the consultants credited Barak for the success of the campaign.

"Ehud Barak is one of the most disciplined, coolest, calmest people I've ever known," said Shrum, who was in charge of television advertising.

"He literally had more plans than there were problems, he had more backups in terms of the ideas he had about how he could deal with a situation than ever could have occurred."

The way Barak handled the campaign, he added, bodes well for his success as prime minister.

Although the three strategists are now recognizable to many Israelis for their role in the campaign, they may not have been the only team of American political consultants working to get Barak elected.

CNN reported this week that a second tier of consultants, including Doug Schoen, who has done polling work for Clinton, and political strategist Zev Furst, served as unofficial advisers to Barak, supplying him with polls to reassure him that the ones he was getting from Greenberg were accurate.

Shrum said he knew nothing about a second polling team for Barak and assumed Schoen was doing work for the Center Party, headed by Yitzhak Mordechai, who pulled out of the race for prime minister at the last minute.

Netanyahu also used his own American consultant, Arthur Finkelstein, who had helped him eke out a narrow victory in Israel's last election.

Carville and Greenberg, former members of Clinton's famed 1992 "war room," meanwhile, denied they were sent to aid Barak's campaign at Clinton's behest. Carville said Clinton only learned of his involvement in the campaign after Netanyahu told him about it.

For Carville, campaigning in Israel proved somewhat refreshing.

He said he was struck by the intensity with which people followed the race, which he said stands in contrast to the relatively short attention span of the American electorate.

"We're never going to have that kind of interest here — maybe if we'd been at war with Canada and Mexico for the last 25 years," he said.

Ultimately, however, Carville said that certain political truisms held firm.

"If you think about it, in the end it was like many elections in America," he quipped.

"Who won came down to who got that all-important Jewish vote." □

ISRAELIS DECIDE THEIR FUTURE**Israeli Arabs, reluctant voters for Barak, lose clout in Knesset***By Gil Sedan*

NAZARETH, Israel (JTA) — At times one could have mistaken Paulus Street, the main street of downtown Nazareth, for downtown Gaza City or Nablus.

It was the national Palestinian flag of black, white, green and red on top of many cars that broke the monotony of election day. The flags were Palestinian, but the cars running up and down the streets of this scenic capital of the Galilee worked in the service of a party in the Israeli Knesset: Azmi Beshara's National Democratic Alliance — Balad.

"What's the surprise about?" asked Ahmad Zuabi, the driver of one car decorated with Palestinian flags.

"You wouldn't ask the question had I put up an American flag, would you?"

Dr. As'ad Ghanem, of the Givat Haviva Peace Research Center, explained the reasons for displaying Palestinian flags in Israeli territory.

"This is simply an indication for the need of local Arabs for a national symbol to identify with," Ghanem said. "People are no longer afraid to express their Palestinian sentiments."

Beshara's main election slogan was to turn Israel into "a state of all its citizens" and to take away its definition as a Jewish state. However, this platform failed to rally the Arab masses behind him.

Of the 400,000 Israeli Arabs who went to the polls, only 62,000 voted for Beshara's National Democratic Alliance, giving it two Knesset seats — one for Beshara and the other for his old-time rival, Dr. Ahmed Tibi, a former adviser to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Arafat himself rushed to congratulate Barak on his landslide victory and said he hoped the change in leadership would revive the stalled Middle East peace process.

Balad is the smallest of the three Arab parties. Hadash, the former Communist Party, earned three Knesset seats.

The big surprise among the Arab vote was the United Arab List, dominated by Israel's Islamic movement, which won five Knesset seats.

For the first time in the history of the Jewish state, an Islamic party has become a force in Israeli politics.

The Islamic movement was "simply better organized than the others," Ghanem told JTA.

However, he added, this does not mean that their gains should be perceived as the Arab equivalent to Shas, the fervently Orthodox party that increased its representation from 10 to 17 seats in the election.

"They have developed a local brand" of political Islam that aspires to "integrate into Israeli society and not work against it."

There was more to it. The Arab parties and Ehud Barak's Labor Party had reached a tacit understanding: Labor would not compete with the Arab parties for the Knesset vote, while the Arab parties would ensure that their voters support Barak for prime minister.

The deal seemed to have worked best in the strongholds of the Islamic movement.

Indeed, some 94 percent of the Arab electorate cast their votes

for Barak, approximately the same rate of support that Shimon Peres had enjoyed in 1996 — which was not enough to defeat Netanyahu.

In contrast, Yitzhak Rabin owed his 1992 victory to the Arab vote and relied on the support of the Arab parties throughout his tenure. Rabin drew extensive criticism for having secured the majority for the Oslo accords in the Knesset only with the help of Arab legislators.

This time, however, Barak would have won even without Arab support — and he could form a coalition without the Arab parties.

"We have missed out," complained Arab journalist Riad Ali. "We were important for Barak as long as he believed he needed us to win the elections.

"But now that he has won in the first round, we once again find ourselves at the political margins."

However, this does not mean Barak owes nothing to the Arabs. It was Beshara's withdrawal from the prime ministerial race Saturday night — followed by Yitzhak Mordechai and Ze'ev "Benny" Begin's withdrawals — that paved the way for Barak's first-round victory.

"Beshara created a domino effect, and we do not know what could have happened had he stayed in the race, forcing a second round of elections," Ghanem said.

In the eyes of some observers, Arab voters were forced into voting for Barak.

They did not like him. They did not like the way he projected his military image during the campaign.

But they voted for him because they knew his election was the only way to topple Netanyahu.

"I still hope that this is a golden opportunity for Barak to hit the peace track," said Arab writer Salem Jubran.

"Never before has there been a more suitable coalition of forces to do so."

Indeed, initial Arab reactions, including those from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah of Jordan, have been favorable.

Marwan Barghuti, secretary-general of the Fatah Party in the West Bank said, "Everyone is pleased with the fall of Netanyahu. His fall renews the hope that we can once again prepare ourselves for peace."

In remarks published Monday in the USA Today newspaper, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of the militant Islamic movement Hamas, offered mixed signals.

Yassin suggested for the first time that he might recognize Israel's right to exist.

"Let's end this conflict by declaring a temporary cease-fire," Yassin said.

But Yassin did not completely change his militant rhetoric. In an interview the same day with the Reuters news agency, he said continued terror attacks would not "depend on whether Likud or Labor are in power."

But political analysts like Ghanem said it was unlikely that Hamas would resume its terrorists attacks.

"Yasser Arafat's control of the situation in the territories is effective enough to prevent such attacks," Ghanem said.

Knesset Member Abdul Malek Dahamshe, leader of the United Arab List, said he's convinced that Hamas has no interest in immediately resuming terrorist attacks.

"They, too, will wait and see." □