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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Coalition talks set to begin

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak plans to begin coalition negotiations this week by inviting representatives from all parties in the Knesset to describe their vision of what the goals and composition of the next government should be, the head of Barak's negotiating team said Sunday.

David Libai, justice minister in the former Labor government, said party representatives would be invited in order of their size in the incoming Knesset, starting with those parties that supported or were neutral on Barak's bid for prime minister.

AIPAC changes statehood stance

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee dropped its long-standing opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

During the first day of its annual policy conference in Washington, the pro-Israel lobby instead adopted a position Sunday opposing a unilateral declaration of statehood.

At the same time, the group endorsed a "political solution" that would "permit the exercise of Palestinian self-government while excluding those powers that would endanger the security of Israel."

There are some 900 delegates and 600 students attending the conference.

Haredim target prayer service

Israeli police detained four fervently Orthodox Jews who tried to disrupt a mixed prayer service that some 200 members of the Conservative movement held last Friday at the Western Wall. [Page 2]

U.N. asked to press Israel

The Palestinian observer at the United Nations asked the U.N. Security Council to press Israel to stop construction for Jewish housing at two sites in Jerusalem.

The Security Council should take "immediate action" to stop the building begun last week at Har Homa and Ras al-Amud, Nasser al-Kidwa wrote in a May 20 letter.

On Saturday, the Palestinian Authority appealed to Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak to stop the construction, approved by outgoing Premier Benjamin Netanyahu days before elections were held last week in Israel.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Jewish leaders wary as tycoons restore their influence in Russia

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Just a few weeks ago, a group of once-influential Russian tycoons and young political reformers, some of whom have Jewish roots, had hit rock bottom. Indeed, two of them were the subject of criminal investigations.

But since Russian President Boris Yeltsin dismissed the government of Yevgeny Primakov and appointed Sergei Stepashin as prime minister earlier this month, these tycoons, who despite varying levels of identification with the Jewish community are associated in the public's eye with Judaism, have leapt back into Russia's chaotic political fray — and onto the radar screens of the country's newspapers and televisions.

Jewish leaders, wary of an anti-Semitic backlash, are carefully watching the oligarchs' return to their powerful, behind-the-political-scenes role.

The names appearing most often in the media are Boris Berezovsky, a controversial tycoon with allegedly close ties to Yeltsin's family, and Anatoly Chubais, leader of the young reformers and a former first deputy prime minister who is now head of the state electrical utility monopoly. Berezovsky, who has reportedly converted to Christianity, is open about his Jewish roots; Chubais is not.

The change in Berezovsky's status has been particularly noticeable. Only one month ago, the man often referred to as Russia's "modern-day Rasputin" narrowly escaped arrest on corruption charges and was forced to stay out of the country. A warrant for his arrest was later lifted. Another figure whose name often appeared on front-page articles in the past two weeks is Vladimir Goussinsky, a media mogul and the president of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Goussinsky traditionally keeps a low profile, yet he is believed to have recently formed an alliance with Berezovsky to have his business interests represented by some of the key figures in the new government.

Stepashin, 47, a staunch ally of Yeltsin, was responsible for much of the military operation in Russian's southern breakaway republic of Chechnya, in which Russia lost tens of thousands of its citizens.

Stepashin said he would preserve the backbone of the previous government, but he is likely to dismiss the Communist ministers brought in by Primakov.

Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov was quoted as saying he would not like to see Stepashin surround himself with "cawing predators who are still stealing from the country as they did before," a veiled reference to the oligarchs and the young reformers.

In the past, the oligarchs have been frequent targets of anti-Semitic propaganda, much of it coming from the Communists. After the lower house of Parliament, which is dominated by the Communists, approved his nomination last week, Stepashin said his government would fight economic crime and vowed to take bold steps to implement economic reforms and to fight the crime and corruption that have plagued Russia since the collapse of communism.

A tough-talking, round-faced man who does not belong to any party, Stepashin has been in the politics since 1990. He was first deputy prime minister and interior minister under Primakov.

Some analysts here argue that he is merely a transitional figure, while others say Yeltsin has picked him to be his political heir in the 2000 presidential elections.

According to some, Berezovsky's influence is already being felt.

On Saturday, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Rushailo to the key post of interior

MIDEAST FOCUS

Likud officials mull options

Israeli legislators from the Likud Party were unable to agree on whether to consider joining a coalition headed by Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak.

Absent from Sunday's meeting was outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who resigned as party leader after last week's electoral defeat.

He may also relinquish his Knesset seat in the coming days, Israeli media reports say.

Palestinians arrest militants

Palestinian police arrested a senior Hamas militant who has been on Israel's most-wanted list for seven years, a Palestinian security official said Sunday.

Police arrested Sa'ad al-Arabeed, an aide to Mohammed Deif, the fugitive leader of the Hamas military wing who tops Israel's most-wanted list.

Another Islamic militant, Khalil al-Sakani, was detained along with al-Arabeed, the official said.

Shamir lambastes Netanyahu

Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ruined the Likud Party, his predecessor as party head said over the weekend.

"It will take some time for the Likud to rise again and return to what it was," former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir told Army Radio.

Shamir added that he had cast a blank ballot in last week's election rather than give his vote to Netanyahu.

Couple splits over elections

Last week's Israeli elections ended a marriage of 52 years, an elderly couple told Israel Radio.

Esther Yaron said her husband threatened to leave her after she voted for Labor Party leader Ehud Barak.

Her husband, Shamai, said he decided to move to an old age home after Barak was elected. "I'll find another woman there," he added.

minister. Russian media have described both Rushailo and newly appointed First Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Akhysyonenko as "tools" of Berezovsky. Rushailo has denied having any links with Berezovsky, and Stepashin denies any outside forces influenced him in his choices.

Among those ministers who retained their jobs in the new Cabinet is Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov. Stepashin must finalize the lineup in the coming days.

Meanwhile, Jewish leaders are maintaining a low profile on the issue. But they note that Stepashin visited the Choral Synagogue, Moscow's main synagogue, last year to discuss the restitution of Jewish property, most importantly, the fate of the dozens of Torah scrolls, which are now stored in state archives and museums.

"We have been in constant contact with Stepashin and his ministry over the restitution issue," says Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's chief rabbi.

As interior minister, Russia's top police official, Stepashin also had to deal with the issues of rising political extremism and anti-Semitism that became especially prominent in the wake of the last year's crisis.

Two months ago, a visiting delegation of the Anti-Defamation League met with Stepashin to discuss the issue.

He told the delegation he was strongly behind enforcing the laws against anti-Semitism in Russia. Abraham Foxman, the ADL's national director, described Stepashin after the Moscow meeting as "someone who understands the problem of anti-Semitism and wants to do something about it."

But some Russian Jewish leaders see a different silver lining in Stepashin's appointment.

"It's good to see that after two tries Russia has finally found a prime minister who is not Jewish," said Goldschmidt, referring to the fact that both previous heads of Cabinet dismissed by Yeltsin in the past 14 months — Sergei Kiriyenko and Primakov — had Jewish roots.

"It is good for the Jewish community because people tend to blame the entire community for the mistakes of individuals." □

Conservative Jews are pelted with bottles at the Western Wall

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Police held back fervently Orthodox Jews who tried to disrupt 200 members of the Israeli Conservative movement who held mixed-gender Shavuot services at the Western Wall Plaza last Friday.

In the wake of the demonstrations, Israel's two chief rabbis met with Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak Sunday to discuss religious tensions. Israel Radio reported that the two spiritual leaders proposed that Barak put a hold on some of the major legislative initiatives pending in the Knesset, including a bill that would codify into law the Orthodox monopoly over conversions performed in Israel.

The demonstrators hurled plastic drink bottles at the Conservative worshipers, lightly injuring one woman. Police, who were deployed in two large circles around the group, prevented direct confrontations between the sides, enabling the services to conclude and the Conservative worshipers to disperse without incident.

Four Orthodox protesters were detained by police.

Conservative leaders praised the police's actions, comparing last Friday's events to a service held two years ago when the worshipers were escorted out of the plaza under a hail of garbage from the windows of a nearby Orthodox yeshiva.

"Two years ago, the police led us away and left the rock-throwers. This year they protected us and led away the people who were breaking laws," said Rabbi Andy Sachs, of Masorti, as the Conservative movement is known in Israel.

Shimon Malcha, a spokesman for Israel's Religious Affairs Ministry, blamed the Conservative service for the unrest.

"It was deliberately planned to coincide with days when there is crowding at the plaza. We regret that the Israel police allowed the provocation," he said.

Mixed-gender services during Jewish holidays at the Western Wall Plaza have in recent years been a source of tensions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. □



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JEWISH WORLD

CCAR to vote on statement

The Reform movement's rabbinic body in the United States is convening this week in Pittsburgh to vote on a statement of principles to guide members of the movement.

The document coming before the Central Conference of American Rabbis is expected to affirm the importance of studying Hebrew and of engaging in lifelong Jewish learning.

German exhibit prompts clashes

Clashes erupted Saturday between German rightists and leftists over an exhibit in Cologne that depicts members of the German army committing atrocities during World War II.

Police said 26 people were arrested during the protest and counterprotest. The exhibit, which has traveled throughout Germany since it first opened in 1997, has been the target of numerous protests, some of them violent.

Ex-president joins bank board

Credit Suisse, Switzerland's second largest bank, recently named former Swiss President Flavio Cotti chairman of its international board of directors.

Last year, when Switzerland was coming under mounting pressure to settle Holocaust-era claims, Cotti urged President Clinton to block threatened boycotts of Swiss banks.

Finnish Jews voice concerns

Finnish Jews are concerned about government-subsidized plans to commemorate Finns who fought alongside the Nazi SS during World War II.

The government money would help build a monument at a site in Ukraine, where some 150 Finnish SS members were killed.

A government official recently defended the plans, saying there is no evidence that Finish SS members were involved in wartime atrocities.

Argentine panel finds Nazi links

A government-created panel in Argentina recently uncovered evidence that the nation's central bank served as a repository for Nazi gold after Hitler's fall. In recent weeks, Argentine researchers found three letters from the 1950s, including one implicating the Swiss central bank, that they say prove Argentina served as a hub for laundering Nazi-looted gold.

Israeli film grad wins at Cannes

A graduate of the film school at Tel Aviv University won second prize at a student film competition at the Cannes Film Festival.

The 30-minute film by Dover Kosashvili was chosen from 18 finalists.

Federal law on hate crimes gains momentum, but still faces hurdles

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Recent public outrage over well-publicized hate crimes has prompted lawmakers to push for a tougher federal hate crimes statute.

But it remains unclear whether a lobbying effort by Jewish and civil rights activists will be enough to overcome opposition in Congress.

The Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish groups have been urging lawmakers to pass the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which would give the federal government more authority to investigate and prosecute hate-driven violence, while broadening existing law to include crimes committed because of a person's gender, disability or sexual orientation.

Current federal law applies only to crimes motivated by race, color, religion or national origin.

"Tragically, the silence of Congress on this basic issue has been deafening, and it is unacceptable," Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), the lead sponsor of the bill, said during a recent Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the issue.

"We must stop acting like we don't care — that somehow this fundamental issue is just a state and local problem.

"It isn't. It's a national problem, and for too long, Congress has been AWOL," said Kennedy.

The bill has bipartisan support, including backing from President Clinton, but Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) has raised concerns over whether the proposal is constitutional and what the federal government's role should be in investigating and prosecuting hate crimes at the state level.

Other lawmakers oppose the provision dealing with sexual orientation.

In fact, that provision may be the key sticking point that kills the bill, as was the case when a similar bill died recently in the Texas legislature.

That state's Senate, which has a one-seat Republican majority, blocked a proposed hate crimes law that included homosexuals as a protected category.

Although the bill — dubbed the James Byrd Jr. Act in memory of the black man dragged to his death in Texas last year in a racially motivated crime — had widespread support, conservative Republicans opposed it because of the sexual orientation provision.

The defeat of the bill, moreover, was viewed as an attempt to spare Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the Republican presidential front-runner, the difficult choice of vetoing a popular measure or signing a bill that would have alienated an important part of his constituency.

Jewish activists, for their part, hope the bill pending in Congress does not meet that fate.

"Any time a hate crimes bill is held hostage or used as a political football it is unfortunate," said Michael Lieberman, the ADL's Washington counsel.

Lieberman added that consideration of hate crimes legislation should be "above politics."

At the same time, some congressional observers say that the high profile gay-rights activists have given to the issue could cause the legislation to founder.

One source, noting opposition among some Republican leaders, said flatly that the bill "is not going to pass this Congress because of the gay rights issue."

Aside from broadening the categories that qualify as hate crimes, the legislation would make it easier for the federal government to investigate and prosecute hate crimes by extending the Justice Department's jurisdiction.

Under current law, the Justice Department's authority is limited to crimes that occur in conjunction with a federally protected activity, such as voting or going to school.

The proposed bill would eliminate that limitation, making it easier for the federal government to prosecute cases like the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish student from Australia, during the 1991 Crown Heights riots in New York. □

15 parties, dozens of new faces promise drama for new Knesset

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — When the gavel sounds on June 7 to convene the 15th Knesset, there will be a record 15 political parties represented, promising a new season of raucous debate in the always contentious legislature.

There will be 15 women sworn in — also a record — when President Ezer Weizman convenes the opening session, to be chaired by the most senior Knesset member, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

Female representation in the 120-member Knesset will rise by more than 50 percent from the outgoing legislature, which had nine. The previous record was set in 1955, when there were 12 female Knesset members.

The new Knesset will also have dozens of new faces, including:

- **Dalia Rabin-Philosof**, daughter of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In her first venture into politics, she ran as a member of the Center Party, which is likely to be part of the government of Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak. Her mother, Leah, stated last week that she would make a good education minister.

- **Uri Savir**, a member of the Center Party who served as director general of the Foreign Ministry in the Rabin government. He was a member of the Israeli negotiating team that met secretly in 1993 with PLO representatives in Norway to hammer out what later became known as the Oslo accords.

- **Dr. Ahmed Tibi**, the former adviser on Israeli affairs to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. He resigned the advisory role after his Knesset candidacy sparked controversy because of his ties to Arafat. He was elected along with Azmi Beshara, the head of the National Democratic Alliance — Balad. Until his 11th-hour withdrawal, Beshara was the first Israeli Arab to run for prime minister.

- **Rabbi Michael Melchior**, a Danish-born former chief rabbi of Norway. A religious moderate, he ran as part of the One Israel bloc headed by Barak. He favors land for peace agreements with Israel's Arab neighbors and wants to end military deferments for fervently Orthodox yeshiva students.

- **Avigdor "Yvette" Lieberman**, head of the Israel, Our Home Party representing Russian immigrants. A former aide to outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he was the recent target of an investigation by police officials, who recommended shortly before last week's election that he be charged with slander for his attacks on the judicial system. It is unclear whether there will be any follow-up to that recommendation because he is now protected by parliamentary immunity.

- **Husnia Jabara**, a member of the leftist Meretz Party who will serve as Israel's first female Arab legislator. Winning a seat after final election results gave Meretz 10 seats instead of the previously projected nine, she plans to focus on social, economic and cultural issues affecting Jewish and Arab Israelis alike. Forty percent of Meretz's representatives in the incoming Knesset are women, more than any other party.

- **Yosef "Tommy" Lapid**, head of the revitalized Shinui Party, which scored six Knesset seats with its platform calling for the exclusion of all fervently Orthodox parties from the next government. A former tough-talking political commentator on television

talk shows, he has been described as Israel's Archie Bunker for his strong conservative views on such issues as women's rights, religion and homosexuality.

- **Danny Naveh**, a member of the Likud Party who served as Netanyahu's Cabinet secretary until new elections were called last December. He also served as spokesman for then-Defense Minister Moshe Arens during the government of Yitzhak Shamir.

In last week's elections, 16 parties failed to get enough votes for Knesset representation. Among them were the Casino Party, which sought to legalize gambling in Israel, and the Green Leaf Party, which called for the legalization of marijuana for medicinal purposes.

The Pnina Rosenblum Party, named for the cosmetics magnate who headed it, looked likely to get two seats according to preliminary voting results, but was shut out of the Knesset when final tallies were issued last week.

In addition, two parties in the outgoing Knesset failed to cross the threshold of votes needed for inclusion in the new legislature:

- **The Third Way**, which objected to any Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and was headed by Avigdor Kahalani, public security minister in the outgoing Netanyahu government;

- **Tsomet**, the right-wing party that ran as part of a Likud coalition in the 1996 elections, but ran on its own this time around. Television cameras following Knesset proceedings will no longer be able to focus on the arms-folded, no-compromise stance of party head Rafael Eitan, a former army chief of staff known for his anti-Arab views. □

New German president active in interreligious dialogue groups

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — Johannes Rau has been elected Germany's eighth postwar president in elections that coincided with the 50th anniversary of West Germany's Constitution.

In his acceptance speech, he said he saw it as his "personal duty from this day on to be president for all Germans and a voice for all those who live and work here without a German passport."

Rau promised to uphold the values of not only Germans, but of "humanity."

Rau, 68 — a member of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic Party — will replace the Christian Democratic Union Party's incumbent, Roman Herzog, on July 1.

Herzog, 65, who in his five-year term earned the respect of Jewish organizations worldwide, this month received a humanitarian award from the Anti-Defamation League in New York for fighting bigotry, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Germany.

Rau also has demonstrated support for Jewish causes. Though the position of president is largely ceremonial, it carries moral weight and has been described as the voice of Germany's conscience.

Rau, the son of a Protestant minister, has been "very active for much of his life in Jewish-Christian dialogue and has lots of contact in the Jewish community," said Joel Levy, Germany chairman of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and former senior diplomat at the United States Embassy in Berlin.

"It is assumed that he will be a very positive force from the Jewish point of view," Levy said. Rau has been the state premier of North Rhine-Westphalia for 20 years. □