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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak opposes new settlements

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak opposes the construction of new Jewish settlements in the West Bank, but would allow the natural growth of existing ones, according to guidelines he has drawn up.

Representatives from Likud, the National Religious Party and Meretz gave their preliminary approval to the guidelines during coalition negotiations this week with Barak.

U.S. criticizes expansion plan

An Israeli plan to extend the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim four miles westward to Jerusalem is a "provocative act by an outgoing government," the U.S. State Department said last Friday.

The statement came one day after outgoing Defense Minister Moshe Arens announced the expansion. The Palestinian Cabinet had said the plan was "destroying the peace process" and appealed for U.S. intervention. Meanwhile, Palestinian officials have designated Thursday as a "Day of Anger" to protest the planned expansion.

In another development, a leading Palestinian official in Jerusalem urged the United States not to move its Israeli Embassy to Jerusalem. Faisal Hussein said Monday that such a move would be a "blow to the peace process" and to U.S. credibility as a mediator.

Russian aliyah increases

Russian immigration to Israel is up by 116 percent during the first quarter of 1999, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Some 7,933 Russian Jews immigrated to Israel in the first three months of the year, compared with 3,673 during the same period in 1998.

Some 31 percent of 1,054 immigrants surveyed by the Jewish Agency cited anti-Semitism as one of the main reasons for their move, an increase from 9 percent in a similar survey conducted before Russia's economic crisis began last August. Overall, 16,389 immigrants from the former Soviet Union arrived in the Jewish state in the first quarter. Some 13,336 did so during the same period in 1998.

Netanyahu confirms Syrian talks

Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed Sunday that his administration had engaged in indirect negotiations with Syria. [Page 3]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Schools, social service network help propel Shas' political power

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — At the Talmud Torah Habayit Hayehudi, an elementary school run by the Shas Party in downtown Jerusalem, 24 first-graders in black kipot and curly sidelocks chant the traditional grace after meals in unison upon returning from their lunch break.

Their parents, says Rabbi Shlomo Sharabi, the school's 30-year-old principal, also voted with one voice in Israel's elections last month to help boost the fervently Orthodox party's power base from 10 seats to 17 in Israel's 120-seat Knesset.

"We do not recruit children to get votes. We want them to become devout, observant Jews," says Sharabi, noting that most of his students' parents have become haredi, or fervently Orthodox, over the past few years. "Once they become haredi, their families know by themselves to vote for Shas."

Since Shas was created in 1984 and won its first four Knesset seats, the party has gained acclaim for its shrewd political dealings. Outside Israel, it is less known that Shas has built an extensive network of educational and social welfare institutions, filling a vacuum in services that the government never addressed. Today, this network is one of the biggest sources of Shas' political power.

According to political analysts, Shas was also given a boost in the elections by the establishment of the secular Shinui Party, which won six Knesset seats on an anti-Orthodox platform and, ironically, helped galvanize support for Shas at the polls.

Shas was also helped when its leader, Aryeh Deri, was convicted of corruption just weeks before the election. Even though the presiding judge in the case was an Orthodox Sephardi Jew, the conviction bolstered the feeling among many Sephardim that Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated establishment has systematically discriminated against them since Israel was founded in 1948.

Deri recently resigned from the Knesset in a move seen as an effort to convince Ehud Barak, Israel's prime minister-elect, to bring Shas into his coalition — but Deri remained chairman of the Shas movement. Since the group's social welfare and political organs are intricately interwoven, Barak insists that Deri divorce himself completely from Shas as a condition for entry into the government.

Shas' social network is made up of six divisions offering an array of assistance and activities, including health services, Sephardi cultural enrichment, Torah seminars and even financial assistance for farmers.

But the movement's biggest and most important unit is Ma'ayan Hahinuch Hatorani, or Torah Education Spring. Shas says this educational network includes 100 day care centers, 750 kindergartens and 177 schools that provide services for more than 52,000 children of all ages at 360 different locations throughout the country.

Shas' strategy is to start up a school and then receive Ministry of Education approval and funding afterward.

Many of these institutions are located in peripheral areas and working-class towns, and many of the children are poor. Each year, as school registration deadlines approach, older yeshiva students are dispatched to conduct door-to-door recruitment campaigns.

Although 30 percent of Shas schoolchildren are strictly haredi, most are either traditional or even secular. This percentage mirrors that of the party's supporters. All of its leaders are fervently Orthodox, but most of its voters are not.

Shas' school curricula include secular classes, but schools with a strictly haredi

MIDEAST FOCUS

Dialogue with Reform rejected

Israel's Orthodox establishment will not recognize Reform Judaism despite a set of principles U.S. Reform rabbis passed last week endorsing the movement's adoption of some traditional practices.

Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau said May 26 that there is "no basis for dialogue" between the Reform movement and the Chief Rabbinate, which has a monopoly over life-cycle events in the Jewish state, until Reform Jews adopt the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law.

At the same time, Lau said the move by the Reform movement "should be welcomed."

Deri launches his appeal

The leader of Israel's fervently Orthodox Shas Party on Sunday filed an appeal with the Supreme Court to overturn his conviction and four-year jail sentence for accepting bribes while serving in the Interior Ministry.

Aryeh Deri argued that the judges who convicted him were biased and had based their verdict on circumstantial evidence.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak reiterated his desire to include Shas in his governing coalition, but Shas officials continue to resist his demand that the party disassociate itself from Deri.

Christian militia to withdraw

The Israel-allied South Lebanon Army will this week begin withdrawing from an enclave in the north of the security zone, the leader of the SLA said Monday.

Gen. Antoine Lahad said the withdrawal from the Christian enclave of Jezzine would take about two weeks and called on the Lebanese army to ensure the safety of the area's residents.

He warned that if Jezzine becomes a launching pad for Hezbollah attacks, the Israeli military would respond forcefully.

student body place more emphasis on Judaic studies. The common denominator in all schools is to keep a close watch on the children, even when they are not in school.

"We take care of the children day and night, in and out of their homes, and that is one of the secrets of our success," says Yitzhak Kakon, spokesman for the Shas education network. "We are in very close contact with parents. We check if the children have enough to eat or if there is domestic violence. Sometimes we send in psychologists to help."

"We are making a big contribution to the state and saving people from crime and drugs," Kakon says. "We can't understand why everyone is out to get us."

But Naomi Hazan, a member of Knesset from the liberal Meretz Party, says there is more to Shas than meets the eye. Its schools, she says, enjoy state funding but do not permit Ministry of Education inspectors to supervise educational content.

Sharabi, the Talmud Torah principal, rejected the criticism and showed JTA an official Education Ministry license that states his school is supervised. The ministry says there is supervision by Orthodox inspectors.

Inspectors or not, what worries many secular Israelis is what the children are being taught behind closed doors.

This is a special concern, Hazan says, because the movement has been persistently challenging the legitimacy of the institutions of Israeli civil society.

"The most important and fundamental issue is clearly the issue of rule of law," Hazan says. "There is a clash of worldviews. Shas is unwilling to accept the supremacy of civil law and to accept that argument undermines the entire foundation of democratic government in this society."

Indeed, according to the Yediot Achronot newspaper, a Shas pirate radio station this week called on its listeners to take to the streets and launch a violent struggle against Shas' secular enemies. "If we must slaughter, we will slaughter," said broadcaster Boaz Arnon, warning Supreme Court judges that God would kill them.

Sharabi says his students are not taught citizenship classes like in other schools. "But they are taught that Jewish law gives legitimacy to a government to make order in society — so long as there is no conflict with the halachah," or Jewish law, he says. "When there is a conflict with secular law, such as our objection to allowing Reform conversions in Israel, our students know that the halachah will always prevail."

What also bothers Hazan is that Shas institutions use funding methods that allow it to enjoy support from several ministries and offer services at far lower costs than elsewhere. Shas claims its schools are provided proportionally less funds than secular and modern Orthodox state schools.

"Shas is an organization that breeds on poverty and perpetuates that poverty in order to increase their political power," Hazan says. "Fundamentalist organizations such as Hamas do exactly the same thing — they build educational institutions and provide cradle to grave services that people cannot afford."

Experts say the proliferation of Shas' education and welfare network is the result of government failure.

"The enormous growth of Shas marks the failure of the 'melting pot' concept of Israeli society," says Moshe Lissak, a professor emeritus of sociology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The problem stems from the widespread perception among Sephardim that they were treated as second-class citizens by the Labor Party's Ashkenazi-dominated elite during Israel's early years. Lissak points out that although Likud was in power for most of the past 22 years, and the party was considered more sympathetic toward the Sephardim, it failed to make the right investments to bridge the socioeconomic gaps.

This was an invitation for an organization like Shas to fill the vacuum. "It was particularly successful," explains Lissak, because of the combination of a respected spiritual leader like Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and a talented political leader like Deri, who both disseminated a fundamentalist message of a Sephardi cultural renaissance.

Tapping into ethnic frustration, the needs of the poor and a thirst for Judaism has allowed Shas to flourish.

"For us, the party is a means toward fulfilling a bigger agenda. For other groups, the party is the goal," says Kakon, the Shas education spokesman. "This is why Shas cannot be crushed." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Polish police remove crosses

Polish police removed some 300 crosses last Friday from outside the former Auschwitz death camp. Despite a yearlong protest by Israel and Jewish groups, a 26-foot cross will remain.

The police action came a week before Pope John Paul II begins a trip to his homeland during which he will stress religious tolerance.

Ohio court backs vouchers

Ohio's Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of school vouchers for parochial schools, saying a program in Cleveland does not violate the separation of church and state.

However, the court struck down the program over budget issues.

The Orthodox Union, which had filed a friend-of-the-court brief in favor of the program, welcomed the May 27 ruling and said it expects proponents to craft a program that satisfies the court's problems with how the state legislature paid for the vouchers.

Zhirinovskiy loses election bid

A Russian ultranationalist known for his anti-Semitic rhetoric lost an election for governor in a rural region in southwestern Russia.

Returns from Sunday's vote in the Belgorod region gave Vladimir Zhirinovskiy less than 18 percent of the vote, which placed him third in the race won by the region's incumbent governor.

Recent opinion polls show that Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party may not reach the 5 percent threshold necessary to gain representation in the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, in elections scheduled for December. The party currently has 51 deputies in the 450-seat house.

Berlin police beef up protection

Berlin police stepped up security Monday around Jewish and Israeli sites in the city to coincide with the start of the trial against Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey.

The police are providing special protection for all countries suspected of involvement in Ocalan's extradition from Kenya last winter. Israel has repeatedly denied that it was involved in Ocalan's capture.

Europe's Jews hold huge parley

Holocaust restitution and the role of Israel in forming a new European Jewish identity were among the issues discussed over the weekend at the first General Assembly of the European Council of Jewish Communities.

Nearly 600 Jewish community leaders and representatives from 39 European countries attended the meeting in the French resort town of Nice.

Netanyahu admits secret contacts with Syria over Golan Heights issue

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli-Syrian negotiating track has not been as silent as previously believed.

Outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed Sunday that Israel held clandestine, indirect talks with Syria for more than a year during his tenure.

Speaking at a Cabinet meeting — the first since his defeat in the May 17 elections — Netanyahu said his administration had held talks with Syria using several intermediaries.

His comments came after the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported last Friday that Israel and Syria were close to signing a peace agreement that would have included a significant Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

The two sides came close to establishing disarmament zones on the Golan and replacing Israeli forces there with foreign troops, the paper said.

According to the paper, the talks began in late 1997 and mediators included Oman's foreign minister, the European Union's Middle East envoy and Ronald Lauder, a Netanyahu confidant who is reported to have traveled to Syria seven or eight times for high-level meetings, including one with President Hafez Assad.

Lauder this week begins a term as chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, an umbrella organization representing U.S. Jewish groups.

A Cabinet communique issued after Sunday's meeting said the talks "did not lead to any agreement, since Israel did not consent to Syria's territorial demands."

But the talks "constitute an accomplishment since they represent a retreat from the Syrian position that negotiations will not be conducted until Israel first agrees to a comprehensive withdrawal from the Golan Heights," the communique added. □

Israel lacks technology to raise the remains of sunken submarine

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is unlikely to try to raise the wreckage of a submarine discovered on the floor of the Mediterranean last week by a U.S. team 30 years after the vessel disappeared on its maiden voyage from Britain.

The commander of the Israeli navy, Maj. Gen. Alex Tal, told the families of the 69 officers and crew who were aboard the submarine that naval forces lack the technology to carry out a deep sea retrieval of the Dakar.

Nevertheless, Defense Minister Moshe Arens said this week that if such technology is found, cost would not be an obstacle.

An Israeli team this week positively identified the submarine based on undersea photographs of the vessel taken by the U.S. team.

The submarine was found less than two miles beneath the surface southeast of Crete at a point along the vessel's original route.

The site of the sinking was not far from the submarine's location during its last communication in January 1969.

Taken from the vantage point of the break in the hull, the photographs show the vessel's compass, a spool of yellow nylon cable used by the crew members for work outside the ship and a storage area with two sealed ammunition cases fully intact.

The photographs did not reveal any human remains, said Reserve Col. Doron Amir, who was part of the Israeli team.

The discovery did not immediately yield any information on what caused the submarine to sink.

Four possibilities have been raised: technical error, human error, a collision with another vessel or an attack. But naval experts have downplayed the possibility of an attack. □

Gay Orthodox rabbi hopes to be a model for other observant Jews

By Julie Gruenbaum Fax

Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Rabbi Steven Greenberg usually kept quiet through the gay jokes.

After all, he had been in the closet in the Orthodox community for 20 years, so he was used to smiling through the ridicule, through tirades against same-sex marriage. But not that day last year around the Shavuot table.

His friend and teacher, also an Orthodox rabbi, held up a ketubah with an illustration of two men at the top and launched into a comedy routine about what the "reformers" were doing to sacred tradition. Greenberg stood and ordered his teacher to sit down.

"Those two people who are just cartoon figures to you actually in real life are human beings," he said, "and they probably looked long and hard and suffered a great deal to find love in their lives. And now the finding of that love is so precious, you can't imagine how precious it is.

"You don't understand how difficult it is to fight against a cultural weight of self-hatred. And likely you can't grasp this because no one has ever said to you, 'Rabbi, I'm gay.' So let me be the first. Rabbi, I am gay."

Sitting in his brother's Los Angeles-area backyard one gray morning last week, Greenberg imitates the faces at that Shavuot table, dropping his strong, clean-shaven jaw, frowning his heavy gray brows, opening his bright brown eyes wide.

Then, as if uttering a punch line, he delivers the rabbi's response: "Stevie, have you gotten help?"

Now that Greenberg, 42, has made a very public point of being the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, this kind of story is a little less painful than it used to be. And it illustrates what he thinks needs to happen in the Orthodox community.

He is convinced that if traditional Jews open their ears, and their hearts, to homosexuals, if they listen to the pain, loneliness, confusion and self-hatred that often comes along with being gay in the Orthodox community, they will be forced to rethink the rejection they have thus far offered up to the homosexuals among them.

Greenberg, a teaching fellow at the New York-based CLAL — The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is intellectual, articulate and thorough.

He's been around long enough to know that he will not be considered Orthodox by most people who are. And he is not naive enough to believe that, in one decisive moment, he can convince the world that male homosexual sex is within the confines of halachic Judaism.

But he does believe he can open the door just wide enough so that homosexuality can become a legitimate topic for discussion. He believes his coming out will give others the strength to do the same.

And once the personal testimony of their sons and nieces, brothers and best friends is heard, Greenberg says, the authorities who interpret halachah may be moved to creatively rethink the prohibitions that appear to be black and white.

Though to many this might appear to be a losing battle,

Greenberg has a powerful weapon in his arsenal: his personal story, a compelling tale of fighting his own identity until he could no longer deny that being gay was an essential part of his soul, that it was the only way to bring romantic love into his life.

Though Greenberg can't pinpoint when he knew he was gay, he remembers his childhood and teen-age years being spotted with confusing emotions and sensations.

He detailed some of his journey in an article in *Tikkun* magazine in 1993, written under the pseudonym of Rabbi Yaakov Levado, Hebrew for "alone."

When he was about 15, Greenberg, whose family is Conservative, began studying with an Orthodox rabbi and found himself enthralled by the rich texts and traditions.

He attended Yeshiva University as an undergraduate and then as a rabbinical student.

When he was 20, he studied at the prestigious Yeshiva Har Etzion outside of Jerusalem, where he was attracted to a fellow student. Concluding he was bisexual, Greenberg decided to approach Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashuv in Jerusalem.

"Rabbi," he told the elderly man, "I am attracted to both men and women." To Greenberg's amazement, the rabbi responded, "You have twice the power of love. Use it carefully."

While living in Israel the past two years, Greenberg decided to come out publicly in the national daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*. He timed the article to coincide with the opening of the Jerusalem Open House, the first community center for gays and lesbians in Jerusalem, which he helped found.

Greenberg says many Orthodox youth who think they are gay are encouraged to marry anyway, at least to start a family, even if it ends in divorce.

"The cruelty in that is unthinkable to me," Greenberg says. Others are encouraged to hide their gayness or remain celibate, condemning them to a life of lovelessness, he laments. In some cases, gay youths are simply told to leave the family, for their presence in the community is just too jarring.

But often families unwilling to abandon their children are willing to accept a compromised level of halachic observance, just as they sometimes are in other areas of halachah.

Rabbi Elazar Muskin of Young Israel of Century City, Calif., says he, like most other rabbis, has counseled gay congregants and their families. He says he has listened with compassion, but makes clear that halachah forbids homosexual sex.

"They have to come to terms with the fact that not everything we want and desire is permitted," Muskin says.

Using an argument often heard in Orthodox circles, Muskin says he treats homosexuals as he would treat anyone who is violating a mitzvah.

Muskin would certainly not expect an observant Jew to proudly proclaim that he or she cheats on her tax returns or regularly eats cheeseburgers.

But Greenberg says the cheeseburger analogy just doesn't work.

"People can live deep, emotional, committed, loving, wonderful lives and not eat cheeseburgers," he says, apparently having heard the argument one too many times.

"But to tell a person that to be a member of this group you have to live a life without self-expression and love and commitment and intimacy and daily touching and caring and holding, that would be an unbearable burden for most people." □