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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak sworn in as 10th premier

Israel's Knesset confirmed Ehud Barak as the nation's prime minister. Barak's 18-member Cabinet, which includes representatives of seven parties, was also sworn in during Tuesday's session.

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who stepped down as Likud leader following his election defeat seven weeks ago, submitted his resignation from the Knesset before the new government was sworn in. [Page 3]

ADL seeks probe of hate group

The Anti-Defamation League urged the U.S. Department of Justice to launch an immediate investigation into a white supremacist group linked to last weekend's shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana.

In a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno, the ADL said the attack by Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, a member of the World Church of the Creator, was only the latest in a series of violent crimes linked to the group.

Earlier this year, the group's leader, Matthew Hale named Smith "Creator of the Month" and encouraged other members to emulate Smith's "activism." [Page 4]

U.S. issues warning to Russia

The U.S. State Department warned Russia that it could be denied American assistance if it concludes a new weapons deal with Syria.

Tuesday's warning came as Syrian President Hafez Assad is making a two-day visit to Moscow. Damascus wants to purchase modern Russian SU-27 fighter jets to replace its outdated Soviet-made MIGs, as well as tanks, anti-aircraft systems and anti-tank missiles.

Barak assures Clinton on Wye

Israel's new leader assured President Clinton during a telephone call that he intends to implement the Wye agreement with the Palestinians. At the same time, Ehud Barak informed Clinton on Monday that he wants to move rapidly into final-status negotiations.

The two agreed to meet soon, but did not set a date. Before that meeting, Barak said he wants to hold talks with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Formation of new Israeli government dampens hopes for religious pluralism

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — The post-election optimism among advocates of religious pluralism in Israel has dampened somewhat with the inclusion of three Orthodox parties in Israel's new government.

Reform and Conservative leaders — who have been lobbying for years to have their rabbis, institutions and practices recognized in the Jewish state — do not expect the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak to usher in an era of change.

However, they say the elections have brought about some encouraging developments, including potentially sympathetic ears in key ministries and an increase in the Knesset in the number of supporters of religious pluralism.

While Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel speak of returning to the court system to fight for religious equality, their counterparts in the United States seem more willing to give Barak a chance to address his primary goal — peace with Syria and the Palestinians — before pressuring him about pluralism concerns.

For their part, Orthodox leaders in the United States say they are taking a "wait-and-see" approach to the new Israeli government.

They say the religious pluralism issue is of little concern to the average Israeli and assert that most Israelis are satisfied with the status quo, which gives the Orthodox rabbinate control over matters such as marriage, divorce and conversion.

Currently, weddings and conversions performed by non-Orthodox rabbis are not recognized by Israeli authorities, and there are no civil marriages.

While the lack of recognition for Reform and Conservative Judaism has galvanized American Jews, non-Orthodox Israeli Jews — most of whom identify as secular rather than Reform or Conservative — have been more concerned about the lack of civil marriages as well as long-standing draft deferrals for Orthodox yeshiva students.

During his campaign, Barak promised he would never support the controversial conversion bill, which lies at the heart of the pluralism conflict.

The bill, which would anchor in law the longstanding de facto Orthodox control over conversions in Israel, was proposed by those concerned that the Supreme Court was trying to change the status quo. Barak also promised that under his administration, no Jew of any stream would feel like a second-class Jew in Israel.

In Jerusalem, Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Masorti movement, as the Conservative movement is known in Israel, said the liberal movements would be watching closely to see if Barak keeps his campaign promises.

"This was certainly not the change we were anticipating," said Bandel, referring to the inclusion of three Orthodox blocs in Barak's coalition. The groups are the Shas and the National Religious parties, and the United Torah Judaism bloc.

"We realize that there will be no significant change, at least on the constitutional level," Bandel said. "That will mean we will have to continue to fight for our legal rights and recognition in the legal arena."

In recent years, the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel have petitioned the Israeli courts on a number of issues, including recognition of their converts and the right to participate in local religious councils.

Concerned that these streams were making headway in the courts, the Orthodox parties sought Knesset legislation to block any change in the status quo.

Both Bandel and Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Religious

MIDEAST FOCUS

More Kwara Jews make aliyah

The aliyah of Kwara Jews continued Tuesday with the arrival of 132 immigrants aboard an Ethiopian Airlines flight. A Jewish Agency for Israel spokesman confirmed that another 165 Jews are expected to land on Thursday.

The spokesman said another 500 Jews are stuck in Kwara and will not be able to leave Ethiopia because of the rainy season.

Burg elected Knesset speaker

A man who recently stepped down as chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel was elected speaker of the Knesset.

Avraham Burg's election to the powerful post during Tuesday's legislative session was virtually assured the night before, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's candidate for the job, Shalom Simchon, was rejected by Barak's own party.

Building begins in Arab area

Construction began Monday in a predominantly Arab neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem.

The building in Ras al-Amud, which was authorized by the outgoing government of Benjamin Netanyahu, was criticized Tuesday by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's minister in charge of Jerusalem affairs, Haim Ramon, who said the "various quarters in the city should be respected, and not mixed."

Vanunu requests Arab cellmates

A man convicted of selling Israeli nuclear secrets to a British newspaper asked to be moved to a cell with Arab security prisoners.

Mordechai Vanunu's petition to a Beersheba court follows a recent decision allowing him to leave solitary confinement and mix with other prisoners during the day. Vanunu, a convert to Christianity, claims that Israel's General Security Service is sending Jewish prisoners in to "bother" him.



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Action Center in Jerusalem, said they were encouraged by an increase in the number of members elected to the new Knesset who are vocally sympathetic to their cause.

"But this is balanced by a coalition agreement which on the face of it surrenders to the status quo on matters of religion and state," he said.

Coalition agreements Barak signed with the National Religious Party and Shas implied that the Orthodox parties may still attempt to revive the conversion bill legislation, although the possibility of a new committee to discuss compromises was also mentioned.

"The bottom line is that our work is not going to be done for us by Barak," Regev said. "Our work will be as critical as ever, both in terms of mobilizing public opinion in Israel and throughout the Jewish world, and through addressing concrete issues by launching legal challenges."

In New York, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of ARZA — Association of Reform Zionists of America, emphasized that the Reform movement wants to give Barak's government the opportunity to accomplish its primary goal of attaining peace with Syria and the Palestinians.

"To a certain degree, we're giving him the benefit of the doubt," Hirsch said, noting that "all in all we feel better with this government than the past government on matters of importance to us. It's not perfect, but it's better than it was."

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Conservative movement's New York-based Jewish Theological Seminary, agreed that peace should be Barak's top priority, adding that "absence of peace exacerbates the religious-secular rift."

Schorsch, like others in the liberal Judaism camp, pointed to the role that potentially sympathetic leaders in the ministries of Education and Interior, formerly headed by Orthodox parties, may play in advancing religious pluralism.

The Education Ministry is now headed by Yossi Sarid, of the leftist Meretz Party, and the Interior Ministry — which controls crucial issues of citizenship and immigration — is now headed by Natan Sharansky, of the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrants party.

"On the ground, on a daily basis there will be great deal of relief in the religious pluralism area," Schorsch said.

"This will mean less friction on a daily basis and with less friction, then there will be less turning to the Israeli Supreme Court."

Also, he said this government "is more committed to being equitable in the distribution of funds."

Orthodox leaders in the United States said they do not expect — and do not want to see — major changes in Israel on the religious pluralism front.

The Orthodox Union, led by Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, recently formed an international Orthodox group that will present a united response on the part of Orthodox Diaspora Jewry to issues that concern Israel.

"We intend to speak out, be pro-active and articulate positions to ensure the Torah standards that have guided the people of Israel for thousands of years, including one standard for conversion, marriage and divorce supported by Israel's Chief Rabbinate," said Ganchrow.

The new organization will issue statements and arrange for delegations to meet with the government leaders and the press.

Ganchrow and Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, said the religious pluralism issue is of little concern to most Israelis.

"Whether the new government will bode well or ill for the religious community is entirely up in the air, and we'll have to wait and see and be hopeful," said Shafran.

Noting that one-fourth of the Jewish vote in Israel went to a religious party, Shafran said, "It's not at all hyperbole to say a full quarter of the Jewish population, if not more, considers what in America we call Orthodoxy to be the authentic expression of Jewish religion."

"Even if they don't choose to be observant, they know that when it comes to defining conversion or if something is kosher, there is only one standard," said Shafran, who also is director of Am Echad, an organization that aims to present the Orthodox perspective to the Jewish public.

"Radically changing that single standard — which is what the Reform and Conservative movements want — is a dangerous thing to do," he said. □

JEWISH WORLD

Barak pledges to be peacemaker as he takes prime minister's oath

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ehud Barak has been sworn in as Israel's 10th prime minister, following a special Knesset session in which he pledged peacemaking as his government's top priority.

Following Barak's address and nearly five hours of speeches by other legislators Tuesday, the new Israeli government and policy guidelines were approved by the Knesset.

The swearing-in ceremony formalized the creation of the 28th government of Israel, which includes seven political parties representing 75 of the Knesset's 120 legislators.

The parties represented in his government include his own One Israel bloc (with 26 Knesset seats), Shas (17), Meretz (10), Yisrael Ba'Aliyah (6), Center (6), National Religious Party (5) and the United Torah Judaism bloc (5). In his speech outlining the government guidelines, Barak called on regional leaders to pursue peace.

"The government's objective is to simultaneously work toward advancing peace on all fronts, without compromising on any security needs or essential Israeli interests," Barak said, as Israel's president, top army officials and other dignitaries looked on from the visitors gallery.

"I call on all leaders of the region to stretch out their hand to our outstretched hand, and bring about a peace of the brave in the region."

Forging peace with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon are of equal importance to Israel, Barak said. His comments were viewed as an attempt to quell Palestinian fears that he will give priority to peace with Syria.

The 57-year-old former army chief made a direct appeal to Syrian President Hafez Assad to resume negotiations with Israel.

"We were difficult and bitter foes on the battlefield. The time has come for a secure and brave peace," Barak said.

Barak reiterated his campaign promise to pull Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon within a year. He also pledged to work with the Palestinian Authority to reach an agreement that would allow for "co-existence, freedom, prosperity and good neighborly relations."

In the campaign prior to his overwhelming election victory in May, Barak had run a relentless campaign attacking Benjamin Netanyahu's performance in office.

But his remarks to the outgoing premier on Tuesday struck a conciliatory note, touching on their shared past in an elite army commando unit, in which Netanyahu had served under Barak.

"As someone who accompanied the Netanyahu family over the years, and this includes Benjamin Netanyahu, I hope and believe that we will learn to be friends one day in the future," Barak said.

Netanyahu, who stepped down as Likud leader following his defeat, resigned from the Knesset before Barak was sworn in. In his parting remarks, Netanyahu wished his successor and the opposition leader "success in each of your roles."

In the ensuing Knesset speeches, Barak got a taste of the opposition awaiting him.

Ariel Sharon, who assumed the Likud leadership until party elections are held in September, was quick to take on the role of opposition leader and assailed the new Israeli prime minister. He accused Barak of being propelled by personal political interests during the seven weeks of coalition negotiations and cautioned the new leader against reverting to the policies of the previous Labor-led government.

Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, head of the secular Shinui Party, also attacked Barak, likening his coalition building to a bidding auction. He also assailed Meretz leader Yossi Sarid, the newly designated education minister, accusing him of renegeing on his declaration not to be part of a government that also includes fervently Orthodox parties.

Barak plans to prepare legislation to expand his Cabinet from 18 to 24 ministers as one of his first initiatives after taking office. The basic law on the government presently allows a maximum of 18 Cabinet members, but Barak is expected to win Knesset passage of the bill. □

Pope opposed Jewish state

The controversial World War II-era pope warned against creating a Jewish state in Palestine, according to recently discovered documents.

The documents, found in archives at the Library of Congress, indicate that a Vatican spokesman wrote President Roosevelt to emphasize that the pope's help in moving 4,000 Slovak Jewish children to Palestine during the war did not indicate his support for a Jewish state.

JTS gets \$8 million gift

The Jewish Theological Seminary's William Davidson Graduate School of Education recently received an unexpected multimillion-dollar cash gift from its namesake.

The Detroit-area businessman and Detroit Pistons basketball team owner, who in 1994 put up the \$15 million endowment to found the program at the New York-based Conservative seminary, changed an existing \$5 million bequest to an immediate gift of \$8 million last week.

The money will go toward expanding the school's enrollment, faculty and course offerings, said officials at the seminary.

Hitler watercolors held in Iran

An Iranian museum is housing two paintings by Adolf Hitler that were given by the Nazi leader to an Iranian diplomat, according to an Iran's official news agency.

A spokesman for the government-run museum in Tehran said it has no plans to sell the watercolors, which depict scenes in Vienna.

German insurer accused

German insurer Munich Re is the latest European financial institution to be accused of blocking Holocaust victims from collecting on life and property insurance policies.

Five other European insurers are participating in an international commission to settle claims. But Munich Re, one of the world's largest insurers, has so far declined to participate.

The World Jewish Congress accused the company of evading its responsibility.

Bahai studies initiated

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem recently dedicated what it says is the world's first academic chair in Bahai studies.

Bahai, which originated in 19th-century Persia and has no clergy or fixed rituals, stresses the oneness of God, of religion and of humanity.

With some 6 million followers worldwide, the Bahai faith maintains its world center in Haifa.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Hate group linked to shootings is one of fastest growing in U.S.***By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The white supremacist who allegedly went on a shooting spree against minorities over the weekend belonged to an overtly racist and anti-Semitic group that advocates a racial holy war.

It is also a group whose leader found some unlikely Jewish supporters earlier this year in his battle to gain a license to practice law. Matthew Hale, an unabashed anti-Semite who heads the World Church of the Creator, has twice been denied a license by an Illinois state panel that evaluates the "character and fitness" of prospective attorneys because he espouses racial hatred.

But Alan Dershowitz, a prominent Jewish attorney, came to Hale's defense after the initial denial, arguing he had a right to free speech and a right to practice law, no matter how objectionable his views. The Anti-Defamation League, while calling Hale's views "abhorrent," said that denying him a law license "sets a dangerous precedent."

"At another time, in another place," the ADL said in a statement last February, "we could envision a circumstance in which another Committee on Character and Fitness could follow this lead to reject a candidate because that candidate has expressed support for abortion, opposition to school prayer or other moral views contrary to the majority of his or her community."

The controversy gained Hale nationwide attention and launched him onto the talk show circuit.

The World Church of the Creator, founded in 1973 in Florida, has experienced a resurgence in recent years under Hale's leadership and is now what law enforcement and other officials call one of the fastest-growing hate groups in the country. The group teaches that Jews and non-whites are subhuman "mud people" who threaten the survival of the "white race." It sees a "racial holy war" as inevitable in its quest to build "a whiter and brighter world."

The group's Web site, which Hale runs, proclaims, among other things, that Hitler had the right idea, but should have promoted the supremacy of all whites, rather than just Germans.

Although the group claims not to condone violence, the July 2 shooting spree carried out by Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, a 21-year-old follower of Hale's, was only the latest in a string of violent attacks associated with the group.

Smith's rampage, which left two men dead and at least seven others — including six Jews — injured, ended late Sunday night when the alleged gunman took his own life.

Federal agents are still investigating the World Church of the Creator in connection with last month's bombing attacks on three Sacramento synagogues. World Church fliers were left at one of the three torched sites prior to the attacks, according to the ADL.

The group's predecessor, the Church of the Creator, was also linked to the 1991 murder of a black sailor in Florida returning from the Persian Gulf War and to foiled plots to assassinate black and Jewish leaders and bomb black and Jewish agencies, as well as houses of worship. In the last year, three members of the group have been accused of pistol-whipping and robbing a Jewish video store owner in Florida, purportedly to raise money for "the revolution."

Smith, meanwhile, had already come to the attention of students and administrators at both the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which he attended from 1997 to 1998, and Indiana University, where he was enrolled at the time of the shootings. At both schools, police say, he distributed hate literature.

It was while he was a student there that he joined Hale's World Church of the Creator, according to the Center for New Community, an organization that works to counter hate group activity. The organization says that Smith became a "rising star" in the church and in January 1999 was named "Creator of the Year," its highest honor.

The June 1999 issue of *The Struggle*, the church's newsletter, announced that Smith had relocated to central Illinois "to assist" Hale at "world headquarters," according to the Center for New Community. Though now the group's leader, the 27-year-old Hale was not its founder.

Hale discovered the racist organization while he was attending Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., where he had already organized a campus group called the American White Supremacist Party.

The group's founder, Ben Klassen, committed suicide in 1993, and the group foundered until 1995, when Hale — who had been active in various white supremacist and neo-Nazi organizations for close to a decade — took over and launched a new recruitment effort. He now claims that the group has 7,000 members, although the ADL estimates the figure at closer to 2,000.

The Center for New Community says that Hale has taken the group "from the brink of extinction to prominence within the racist movement," increasing the number of chapters nationwide from eight in 1995 to 31 today. Hale said this week that Smith's rampage might have come in response to that action and "to what he saw as an incredible injustice."

Hale, who works out of his parents' home in East Peoria, Ill., where an Israeli flag serves as a doormat and swastikas adorn the walls, insisted in an interview with the Associated Press this week that members of his church follow the law.

"I've always encouraged our members to be legal. I've certainly never encouraged violence," he said. "People have their own free will. They do what they please."

Blaming Smith's shootings on the church, Hale added, is "the same as people accusing the Pope of being behind all those abortion clinic bombings."

Harlan Loeb, Midwest civil rights counsel for the Anti-Defamation League, said Hale's assertion that he bears no responsibility for the attacks defies common sense, "as if holding a match next to a gasoline tank has no connection to the ensuing fire."

"He has set in motion a process to which he's inextricably wedded," Loeb said.

On Monday, the ADL called on the Justice Department to launch an immediate investigation into the World Church of the Creator. Asked if the ADL regretted issuing a statement earlier this year on the denial of Hale's law license, Loeb said, "As an agency that is a strong supporter of the First Amendment, we stand by our commitment that viewpoint discrimination is murky territory."

But now that "we've made our statement on the free speech and free expression issue," he said, his group "will devote all of our energy to exposing Matt Hale for what he is." □

(Pauline Dubkin Yearwood of the Chicago Jewish News contributed to this report.)