



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Egalitarian services recognized

Israel's new government agreed to provide "requisite services" for non-Orthodox Jews who want to pray at a specially designated area close to, but separate from, the main prayer plaza of the Western Wall.

The commitment, made in a letter from the Religious Affairs Ministry, marks the first time an Israeli government has officially recognized the right of non-Orthodox Jews to hold egalitarian services at the Kotel.

The Conservative movement in Israel then agreed, as a "one-time gesture," not to hold any mixed prayer services on Tisha B'Av, which began Wednesday night.

Such services have resulted in conflicts with Orthodox worshippers in the past.

Yitzhak Herzog, the Cabinet secretary, will meet next week with representatives of the Conservative movement and the Holy Sites Authority to iron out the details of the new agreement.

A small group of Reform worshippers, meanwhile, was expected to come as planned on Tisha B'Av to the area, known as Robinson's Arch, for a mixed prayer service.

Chasidim tied to drug scheme

Seven people were indicted in New York on charges of smuggling the drug ecstasy in a scheme that used Chasidic drug couriers to avoid detection by U.S. Customs agents.

Young men from Brooklyn's Williamsburg section and the upstate community of Monsey were offered a free trip to Europe and some \$1,500 in exchange for smuggling the drug, according to Tuesday's indictments.

The recruiters believed that the religious dress and appearance of the couriers would spare them searches by customs inspectors, the indictments added.

All but one of the seven have been arrested.

If convicted, they face a maximum of 20 years in prison and \$1 million in fines.

REMINDER: Because of Tisha B'Av, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Friday, July 23.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish lawmakers, groups differ on new religious liberty legislation

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — There have been few recent issues on which the organized Jewish community has been so firmly unified as the need to protect religious freedom in America.

Every major Jewish organization, joining together with a broad coalition of religious and civil liberties groups, had thrown its support behind legislation known as the Religious Liberty Protection Act, which sailed through the House of Representatives last week on a 306-118 vote. Which is why it came as a surprise when the majority of Jewish lawmakers voted against it.

Those who opposed the measure, including some Jewish lawmakers that initially supported it, made clear that they agreed with the principle of the bill — namely, that people must be allowed to practice their religion free from government intrusion.

But support among many Democrats broke down amid a dispute over whether religious liberty or civil rights laws should take precedence when the two come into conflict.

The measure approved by the House would prevent state and local governments from placing a "substantial burden" on an individual's free exercise of religion unless officials make a compelling case for doing so — and only then through the "least restrictive means."

The legislation seeks to remedy what supporters said were numerous cases in which laws have needlessly interfered with religious practices.

Supporters have pointed, among other things, to city ordinances that have prevented synagogues and other houses of worship from expanding, policies that prohibit Jewish children from wearing yarmulkas in schools and laws that conflict with the Orthodox prohibition against autopsies and the practice of giving sacramental wine to minors.

The legislation was crafted following a 1997 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down certain protections for religious practice. The justices ruled that Congress overstepped its bounds in 1993 when it passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act — a similar law that made it harder for government to interfere with religious practice — declaring the law unconstitutional.

Following that decision, the coalition began working with lawmakers to craft new legislation to restore the broadest possible protections for religious liberty.

They came up with what is known as RLPA, which relies on three technical powers of Congress — its ability to regulate spending, interstate commerce and the 14th Amendment's protection of citizenship rights — to extend new protections to religious freedom.

One of the chief proponents of the bill, Rep. Charles Canady (R-Fla.), said the bill is "designed to ensure that the free exercise of religion is not trampled on by the insensitive and heedless actions of the government."

Once thought to be relatively noncontroversial, the measure has come under fire from the American Civil Liberties Union and gay rights groups, which have argued it would make it easier to discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation or marital status.

Opponents, including lawmakers who voted against the measure, worry that the proposed legislation could be used to justify violations of state or local anti-discrimination laws. They point to recent court decisions they say have opened the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Clinton urges Arafat during call

President Clinton called Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat on Wednesday to report on his meetings this week with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Clinton said he "urged" Arafat to meet with Barak to "hear him out" and "think through" Barak's proposals to alter the Wye accord.

Barak, Blair meet in London

Britain should play a "leading role within the European Union in supporting the peace process," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said after a meeting with his British counterpart in London.

Tony Blair said he would offer "101 percent" support to Barak's efforts to seek peace.

'Immodest dress' cited in incident

Residents of a fervently Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem allegedly harassed some female employees of the Education Ministry for what they called their "immodest dress."

One of the employees attacked Tuesday said she was surrounded by a group of women who shouted at her, tried to cover her with a cloth and demanded that she leave the fervently Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, which is adjacent to the ministry's offices.

When police intervened, the residents threw stones at them. In response, Israeli Education Minister Yossi Sarid asked police to step up their presence around the ministry's offices.

Hamas member gets life

An Israeli military court gave a life sentence to a Palestinian for driving gunmen to a 1995 shooting that killed two Israelis and wounded five others.

Majed Juabi was found guilty Tuesday on 13 counts, including murder charges stemming from the help he gave fellow Hamas members, who opened fire on a bus near Hebron.

door to such claims. Under the proposed law, they argue for example, landlords and employers in states and cities with laws prohibiting discrimination against homosexuals could invoke their religious principles as a defense for refusing to rent to or hire gays and lesbians.

Most Jewish lawmakers, in speeches on the floor, addressed the civil rights concerns during the debate on the House floor July 15.

Of the 23 Jewish members of the House, 15 voted the same day against the bill, and one did not vote. Even one of the original sponsors of the bill, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), voted against the bill after an amendment he authored failed by a vote of 190-234. His amendment sought to ensure that existing civil rights laws would not be affected.

"We desperately need stronger religious protection in this country," Nadler said during the debate. "But this bill forces us to choose between religious freedom and civil rights. As an American and as a Jew — an individual whose heritage has suffered from the appalling ravages of intolerance — I must conclude that that is a false choice. We can do better."

"RLPA should be a shield for the religious liberty of all — not a sword against the civil rights of some," he added.

Canady said the problem with Nadler's amendment was that "it would establish as a matter of congressional policy that religious liberty would have second-class status."

Every Jewish lawmaker who voted supported Nadler's amendment. But after its defeat, only seven voted for final passage of the legislation.

Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) supported the bill in the end but acknowledged the difficult choice it presented.

"This was a very difficult balance that people had to strike," Weiner said in an interview. "If anything I'm disappointed that there wasn't greater accommodation on the part of the sponsors to try to find a way to achieve what we wanted to, which is to protect religious freedom while leaving no doubt that we were being respectful of civil rights as well."

Jewish groups across the gamut praised the House's action, noting that the bill passed by a larger margin than had been anticipated.

The opposition of Jewish lawmakers, however, clearly made the victory bittersweet.

"The decision of so many of the Jewish lawmakers to vote against it is troubling," said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, which has helped lead the coalition.

But he said "it's important to underscore that even the Jewish lawmakers who spoke against it on the floor, all made clear their strong support for the principle of the bill."

Marc Stern, a lawyer with the American Jewish Congress who helped draft the bill, said he disagreed that the legislation would create conflict with civil rights laws, particularly because it would be left to judges to decide the merits of individual cases.

Although most Jewish groups continue to support the legislation, that support may belie certain misgivings some feel about the bill. While most members of the coalition have not changed their position on the measure, some activists say they feel a conflict.

"Personally it tortures me, because I'm not sure I'm on the right side," said one coalition member who asked not to be identified.

The Clinton administration has signaled its "strong support" for the measure, but as the focus shifts to the Senate, the prospects for final passage of the bill are unclear. Jewish groups have indicated they intend to work with opponents of the legislation to reassure them that the bill would not undermine civil rights protections. □

Viagra perks up flowers

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The sexual impotency drug Viagra can help prolong the life of cut flowers, according to a group of Israeli researchers.

The leader of the team at Ben-Gurion University, which conducted the study along with a group of Australian scientists, said the pill should be diluted with water.

He added that the discovery may also apply to fruits and vegetables, but he does not recommend using Viagra for that purpose. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Report: Britain blocked rescue

The British government blocked a secret U.S. plan that would have saved thousands of Jews from Nazi concentration camps because Britain feared they would settle in Palestine, according to newly released British documents. The U.S. plan would have exchanged captive Jews in Germany and German-occupied territory who held South American passports for German nationals in Latin America.

House congratulates Barak

The U. S. House of Representatives passed a resolution congratulating Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on his election and reaffirming Congress' commitment to "advance the cause of peace" in the Middle East. "His visit has breathed new life into the peace process and enhanced U.S.-Israel relations," said Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), the measure's chief co-sponsor.

Jordan criticizes ZOA

Jordan's ambassador to the United States sent a letter to members of Congress on Monday that criticizes the Zionist Organization of America.

In the letter, Marwan Muasher said the ZOA had attempted to "tarnish Jordan's record and even question its commitment to peace" when it led a lobbying effort to secure the arrest of the mastermind of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. ZOA President Morton Klein said in response that Jordan did not arrest Abu Daoud when he was there and questioned Jordan's commitment to peace and fighting terror.

Memorial day set for AMIA blast

The city of Buenos Aires approved a law establishing July 18 as a memorial day for the victims of the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center there. During the holiday, flags in the Argentine capital will be flown at half mast and special texts will be read in city elementary and secondary schools.

Accused Nazi loses citizenship

A U.S. judge revoked the citizenship of a man accused of lying about his Nazi past when he applied to enter the United States after World War II.

Michael Negele, 79, who allegedly belonged to the Nazi SS, said he told immigration officials when he applied to immigrate in 1950 that he served in the Romanian and German armies during the war.

Begin to lecture at NYU

Former Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin will be a visiting lecturer at New York University next fall, an Israeli newspaper reported Wednesday.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz said Begin, a geologist by training, will lecture on the First Temple period.

Despite protests, Hadassah defends decision to give honor to Hillary Clinton

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — America's largest Zionist organization is slated to begin its annual convention in Washington on Sunday amid accusations from a small, but vocal, cadre of members that it has betrayed its pro-Israel principles.

Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, a 300,000-member organization best-known for its hospitals in Jerusalem, has come under fire for its decision to honor first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton for her work on behalf of women and children.

The campaign against honoring the first lady has not drawn widespread support, but it has generated concern at Hadassah.

In a July 14 demonstration organized by Americans for a Safe Israel, a 5,000-member group that opposes all land-for-peace agreements between Israel and its neighbors, approximately 25 people — many of them not Hadassah members — gathered outside Hadassah's New York headquarters to burn a replica of its membership card.

Carrying posters that read, "Just Say No to Hillary, supporter of Hamas" and "Hadassah, Hillary and Hamas — For Shame," the demonstrators described Clinton as an "Arabist" who has "done nothing for Israel or the Jewish people."

They also said it was inappropriate for a nonpartisan organization to honor a political candidate.

Clinton has not formally announced her candidacy for New York's 2000 Senate race, but has formed an exploratory committee.

Interviewed after the card-burning demonstration, Hadassah leaders stood by their selection of Clinton, who is receiving the organization's highest honor, named for Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold.

The award has been publicized as the high point of the Jewish organization's four-day convention, which will also include meetings with members of Congress, lectures on issues such as First Amendment religious rights and domestic violence, the installation of a new president and recognition of the five Jewish women members of Congress. Some 2,500 delegates are expected to attend.

According to Hadassah's outgoing president, Marlene Post, the organization received complaints from only 300 people, one-tenth of 1 percent of its members, over the Clinton award.

"I don't believe Hillary Clinton is an Arabist or anti-Zionist," Post said. "Do I believe that she wants to see a resolution in the Middle East and see the peace process continue? Absolutely. Is she against Israel or the Jewish people? No way, not at all."

Concerned about the controversy, Hadassah distributed "talking points" to reporters, regional presidents and concerned members. In the packet of material, Hadassah said it selected Clinton for the award before her campaign intentions were known, and quoted tax lawyer, D. Benson Tesdahl as saying, "The political campaign rules do not prohibit charities from giving humanitarian awards to candidates or potential candidates for public office."

Several of Hadassah's regional leaders said they had received only a handful of complaints about the award, and that the issue was not being raised at local meetings.

Although this is the first time anyone set a mock membership card aflame, Clinton is not the first Hadassah honoree to generate controversy, say Hadassah officials.

Many liberal members complained when Jeane Kirkpatrick, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was honored in 1983. And when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres were honored in 1995, the right-wing Women in Green protested.

Clinton, who according to a recent survey commissioned by the Israel Policy Forum enjoys a "favorable" rating from 72 percent of American Jews, has spoken at other Jewish organizational gatherings.

On the same night she receives the Szold award, Clinton will be the headline speaker at a reception for the National Jewish Democratic Council. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Religious-secular strife awaits Barak when he comes back home

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — While Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was busily engaged in high-profile diplomacy in the United States, religious-secular disputes brewing back home may force him to use his diplomatic skills on his own coalition partners.

Barak said in New York last weekend that synagogue-and-state issues in Israel would be kept off center stage while he focuses on the resumed peace process.

Barak called for unity among the Jewish people, adding that he wanted to be seen as the premier of all Jews, regardless of past political disputes or diverse religious or ideological affiliations.

Controversial religious questions in Israel would be frozen, he said, committing himself for the time being to maintaining the religious status quo, which gives the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate control over religious affairs in the Jewish state.

As Barak spoke, however, his coalition partners and the heterogeneous sectors of the community they represent were making it clear that they have their own plans — and that synagogue-and-state issues, far from being shunted to the side, will be front and center.

Shabbat observance, an endlessly fertile source of strife, served as a catalyst for the resumption of long-standing hostilities on two battlefields.

At Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, Druse inspectors dispatched by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs handed out tickets and fines last Saturday to shop owners and salespeople at one of the numerous minimalls around the country operating on kibbutz land and doing their best business on the Sabbath.

In Jerusalem on the same day, members of the fervently Orthodox, or haredi, community held the latest in a series of demonstrations against allowing traffic through their Jerusalem neighborhood on the Sabbath. Nine protesters were arrested for assaulting police and throwing rocks.

The protests were held even though an arrangement, endorsed by the High Court of Justice, has already been reached under which Bar-Ilan Street, a major artery in the north of the capital, is shut to traffic during Sabbath services and opened at other times.

Along with the Sabbath-related disputes, another source of long-simmering tensions surfaced when an Orthodox member of Barak's coalition wrote legislation that would give the Chief Rabbinate complete control over conversions.

Moshe Gafni, a member of the United Torah Judaism bloc, has crafted a bill stating that "legal standing will not be given to a conversion performed inside or outside of Israel unless approved by the Chief Rabbinate." The issue of conversions, which until now focused only on those performed in Israel, has been a major source of contention among Reform and Conservative Jews.

While the bill may never come to a Knesset vote and may reflect internal squabbling within UTJ, it nonetheless underscores the fact that Barak may be unable to keep religious questions off his agenda in the months ahead.

While the Gan Shmuel raid touched on Sabbath-related issues, it was not without its comic aspects.

The kibbutz is home to the minister of trade and industry, Ran

Cohen, a member of the secular Meretz Party.

He responded to the raid by threatening to send inspectors from his ministry — people of both sexes and "in eye-catching attire" — to haredi shops and places of business on weekdays, doling out fines and tickets for all manner of infractions.

Cohen also asked Labor Minister Eliyahu Yishai of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party why the inspectors had not visited kibbutz shopping malls on any Sabbaths during the two months of coalition negotiations, but appeared now that the coalition agreement had been signed.

Yishai responded that the inspectors were merely enforcing the nation's Day of Rest Law, which was, after all, a basic piece of social legislation that the leftist Meretz ought to support.

Cohen replied that the shop owners and employees want to work on Saturdays and take their day off on another day.

Yishai for his part received vigorous support from urban shops, which are kept closed under the law on the Sabbath and are finding their business threatened by the out-of-town malls.

Bar-Ilan Street also provided some laughs, with legislator Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, leader of the anti-haredi Shinui Party, lashing out at the Jerusalem police chief, Yair Yitzhaki, for kissing the hand of the spiritual leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

"I am the 'admor' [Chasidic rebbe] of the secular citizens of Jerusalem," said Lapid, a former broadcaster known for his outspokenness. "I want him to kiss my hand, too."

Yitzhaki explained that he was merely showing respect and that his job requires him to nurture a warm and courteous relationships with spiritual leaders of all faiths.

Lapid reserved his most withering tongue-lashing for Meretz.

"We warned them not to join the government alongside Shas," he said. His own party, though wooed by Barak, staunchly refused to join any government that also included Shas.

But beneath the smiles and political barbs there could be real trouble ahead for Barak's government.

The Shabbat-shopping controversy affects the interests and lifestyle of very large numbers of secular Israelis. These people, aware of trends across the Western world, demand the option of shopping at their leisure — and not just 9-to-5 on workdays.

Meanwhile, the kibbutz malls are turning over millions of dollars of goods and growing into a powerful lobby.

The haredi parties can elect to turn a blind eye to what is, after all, no change in the religious status quo, but rather the development of a new situation. By the same token, they can choose to make an issue of the malls, which would result in disharmony within Barak's leftist-religious coalition.

Yishai's inspectors could find themselves manhandled, or, perhaps worse, simply ignored.

Tisha B'Av, when the yeshivas break up for the summer vacation, traditionally marks the start of the demonstration season in the capital. Jerusalem could face a long, hot summer of weekly violence between haredim and police. To head off this prospect, the new minister of internal security, Shlomo Ben-Ami paid a high-profile visit to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef on Monday.

The spat with the inspectors and the rioting on the road must have seemed pretty picayune from the lofty heights of Barak's all-smiles trip to the United States.

But now the smiling is over and Barak may have to confront the possibility that these petty but potentially coalition-breaking disputes may yet be force themselves onto his agenda. □