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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Five arrested for car bombings

Israeli police arrested five people suspected of involvement in two car bomb attacks that occurred Sunday in Tiberias and Haifa. Police officials have indicated that Israeli Arabs may have been involved in the attacks.

A gag order issued by the courts barred publication of details regarding the investigation, and police cautioned against unjustly stigmatizing an entire population.

In Sunday's near-simultaneous attacks, the bombs apparently exploded prematurely, killing the three occupants of the two cars and seriously injuring one Israeli woman.

Settlers see withdrawal maps

Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh met Monday with Jewish settler leaders to show them maps indicating the portions of the West Bank that Israel will withdraw from in the first of three redeployments called for under the latest Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

The accord, signed Saturday night at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheik, calls for Israel to relinquish another 11 percent of West Bank lands to Palestinian control and to release 350 Palestinian prisoners jailed for security offenses. The accord also calls for the two sides to reach a final peace agreement by September of next year. [Page 4]

Mubarak assailant shot dead

Hosni Mubarak's bodyguards shot dead a man who attacked the Egyptian president with a sharp weapon on Monday. The attacker rushed toward Mubarak's limousine on the streets of Port Said and injured him on the hand before being killed on the spot, according to a government statement.

Bush outlines schools strategy

Republican presidential front-runner George W. Bush outlined a strategy to address the problem of failing public schools that includes a proposal to give parents federal money to send their children to alternative schools, including private ones.

Although Bush did not use the word "vouchers" to describe the plan, it includes many of the same elements of the controversial idea that has sharply divided the Jewish community in recent years.

TRANSFORMING A COMMUNITY [Part 2 of a Series]

Liberal mikvahs spring up in response to growing need

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The conversion controversy is not just an issue in Israel. It is playing out a lot closer to home in conflicts across the United States over access to mikvahs.

Immersion in a ritual bath is a critical step in the process of converting to Judaism. It is required among Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and is increasingly encouraged by the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. Non-Orthodox rabbis who once had access to ritual baths are increasingly being shut out. In response, an unprecedented number of Conservative and Reform synagogues are building their own.

Being able to access mikvahs is important for many converts, just as it is important for those seeking to use it for other rituals. Many adoptive parents seeking to bring their child into the Jewish community find themselves, as one mother put it, "caught in the 'Who Is a Jew' wars," using the expression often used to depict the conflict over conversion and the rabbis who perform them.

Observant Jewish women follow the law of family purity by monthly immersion in a mikvah after their menstrual periods and before they resume sexual contact with their husbands. Some Orthodox men go before the start of Yom Kippur and before Shabbat.

The baths are also being increasingly used by non-Orthodox women and men before marriage and to mark the conclusion of traumatic events, from miscarriage to rape, from the end of chemotherapy to the end of a ritual period of mourning for a parent.

There was a time, in decades past, when most of the country's mikvahs were supported by — and available to — the entire Jewish community.

That is no longer true. As community mikvahs have aged and fallen into disrepair, they have often been replaced by new mikvahs built by Orthodox communities, which use mikvahs the most.

Though these newer mikvahs remain open to non-Orthodox women who observe the mitzvah of family purity, many of them are closed to non-Orthodox rabbis seeking access for the purpose of conversions.

Rabbi Steven Dworken, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, which is Orthodox, says that many communities want the mikvah "solely for the use of the Orthodox community and don't want to perpetuate what they see as non-halachic conversions."

In the past, he says, "many people were Orthodox-affiliated but not practitioners. Today, thank God, people live by Torah law and are more conscious of observance and all of its ramifications, even as the liberal community has gone further to the left. The lines of demarcation are much stronger."

In response to the denial of access, some non-Orthodox synagogues are taking the unusual step of building their own mikvahs.

About 10 ritual baths have recently been built or are in the process of being created in Conservative synagogues all over North America, according to Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of that movement's Rabbinical Assembly.

And even though the Reform movement does not require immersion in a mikvah for conversion and most Reform Jews do not engage in mikvah rituals, two temples — one in the Philadelphia area, one in Detroit — have recently built their own mikvahs.

The Philadelphia area, home to more than 200,000 Jews, has one of the most vibrant liberal Jewish communities in the nation. It also hosts the headquarters of the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel, Syria said unready to talk

Israel and Syria are not yet ready to resume negotiations that would lead to a peace accord, according to U.S. officials.

Summing up Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's talks in Jerusalem and Damascus over the weekend, the American officials concluded that while both sides are interested in reaching an accord, sharp differences still exist over the basis for renewing negotiations.

High court rules against Shin Bet

Israel's High Court of Justice on Monday barred the Shin Bet domestic security service from using physical force during interrogations. The landmark decision was hailed by human rights groups as putting an end to methods they claim are tantamount to torture.

The court's unanimous ruling came 12 years after a government-appointed panel permitted the Shin Bet to use "moderate physical pressure" when questioning Palestinian detainees suspected of terrorist activity against Israel.

UTJ quits Barak government

Israel's fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism bloc said it is quitting the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

The party, which holds five Knesset seats, cited what it called the government's violations of the Sabbath for its decision. UTJ's move leaves Barak with a 68-seat majority in the 120-seat Knesset.

Sharon wins Likud leadership

Former Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon was confirmed as leader of the Likud Party last Friday.

Sharon, 71, easily defeated challenges by Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and former Finance Minister Meir Sheerit, winning 52 percent of votes by party members.



Daily News Bulletin

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Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal movements.

Even so, babies adopted by Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform or Renewal-affiliated Jewish parents do not have access to any of the several Orthodox-sponsored mikvahs in the region. Until a few years ago they went to nearby Cherry Hill, N.J., but the mikvah there began restricting its use to two days a year, when the children attending the adjoining Orthodox school wouldn't see them, according to one area rabbi who asked that his name not be used.

The result was that 15 or 20 people would be lined up to use it on each of those days, said the rabbi, which meant that no one had privacy.

Since then Philadelphia rabbis and the converts under their tutelage, as well as parents converting their newly adopted children, have had to drive 90 minutes each way to Allentown, Pa., to find a mikvah.

Rabbi Elliot Strom of Congregation Shir Ami, a temple in the Philadelphia suburb of Newtown, Pa., returned one day from the Allentown mikvah thinking there had to be a better way.

He spent a year convincing his 950-member Reform congregation to embark on building their own.

"They felt it was the epitome of Orthodoxy, that it flew in the face of being modern, that it's archaic," Strom says of his congregants. But eventually he won their confidence.

Since the \$30,000 mikvah opened in mid-February, "I've been getting calls from everywhere," Strom says. "I've heard from 20 or 30 rabbis who want to use it. There's a huge pent-up demand in Philadelphia."

In the Philadelphia suburb of Wynnewood, Congregation Beth Hillel-Beth El has been raising the \$250,000 it anticipates needing to complete its own mikvah, says Rabbi Neil Cooper of the Conservative synagogue.

Cooper, who describes the plans as "luxurious and spa-like," says they hope to break ground in about a year.

A mikvah is open at an Orthodox day school just a mile away, but while a few of his female congregants use it on a monthly basis, he cannot use it for conversions, Cooper said.

"We need access to a mikvah, so we're building our own," he said. "We in the Conservative movement need to take ownership of things we have ceded to the Orthodox community, like mikvah and kashrut."

The problem in the Cleveland area has been even more acute.

Liberal rabbis there used a community mikvah until a couple of years ago, when it became so decrepit that its roof caved in. They don't have access to the several other baths in the area, which is home to a thriving Orthodox community.

Instead, they drive to Youngstown, two hours away, to use a mikvah in a building shared jointly by a Conservative and Orthodox congregation.

"With respect to matters of Jewish status there is so little cooperation and agreement that this is just a symptom" of the problems between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox movements, said Rabbi Gary Robuck of Conservative Congregation Shaaray Tikvah, in Beachwood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland.

The message non-Orthodox Jews are getting is a strong one.

One Cleveland couple who adopted a child about a year ago are Conservative Jews but want to convert their son in an Orthodox ceremony, so, his mother says, "he is covered and no one can say, 10 years from now, that he needs an Orthodox conversion."

The couple asked that their names not be used because they didn't want to embarrass their Orthodox relatives in the Cleveland area.

They have been trying for more than nine months to find a way to have his conversion supervised by an Orthodox rabbi at a local mikvah, but haven't succeeded, delaying an experience that they fear will now be traumatic for their toddler son.

Someone suggested they join an Orthodox synagogue for a year, but "we don't want to be dishonest," says the mother, adding, "We do keep a kosher home and attend synagogue every week, and I'm sure that there are plenty in the Orthodox community who don't even do that."

"It's bad enough that you go through the court hearings and thousands of papers with adoption," she says. "If the Jewish community can't help us embrace a new member of the Jewish people, then we have a real problem." □

JEWISH WORLD

Reform, Conservative radio message will get Israeli air time, with changes

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Reform and Conservative movements have reached a compromise with Israel Radio, paving the way for the more-liberal streams of Judaism to run commercials on public airwaves.

Last week, Israel Radio refused to air a series of commercials in which Reform and Conservative rabbis invited secular Israelis to learn about their movements and come to their egalitarian services on the High Holidays.

Israel Radio, which is under the auspices of the Israel Broadcast Authority, said that as a public network its advertising regulations prohibited airing any commercials that were "ideologically controversial."

The Reform and Conservative movements petitioned the Supreme Court, which last Friday gave the Israel Broadcast Authority two weeks to explain why it would not run the ads. The main slogan of the campaign and the radio advertisements is "there is more than one way to be Jewish." A spokesman for the Broadcast Authority said it considered the ad controversial because Orthodox Jews believe there is only one way to Jewish. According to the compromise reached Sunday, the Reform and Conservative movements will replace the main slogan with "this is our way — you only have to choose."

Although the movements still reject the radio's decision not to run the original ads, they withdrew their Supreme Court petition on Monday after the radio agreed to air the ads with the minor changes. "We had no problem making these small changes because the main content remained in the ads," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center.

They also agreed to delete another line in one of the commercials that said the movements provide a Jewish experience even for secular Jews "who were not born with a prayer book in their hands." The Broadcast Authority said the phrase may have offended religious Jews. Following the compromise, the first radio commercials were scheduled to be aired on Tuesday. □

After Bay Area Jews lead battle, a synagogue is dedicated in Russia

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Sometimes it pays to speak up.

That's the lesson the tiny Jewish community in the Russian town of Borovichi learned last month when it reaped the harvest of a campaign triggered in 1998, when Jewish officials there reported an increase in neo-Nazi activities.

Local Jews, town officials and a group of American Jews participated in the consecration of the town's new synagogue, its first in 70 years. It came as a result of an international campaign launched by San Francisco Jews.

Last year, Borovichi officials received hundreds of messages from all over the world, part of the campaign launched by the Bay Area Council for Jewish Rescue and Renewal, urging them to protect Borovichi's 300 Jews. In response, authorities granted a space in the town's central square for the synagogue, banned neo-Nazi activities and initiated a seminar to counter anti-Semitic and hate propaganda among the town's youth.

Rabbi Steven Kaplan of Temple Beth Torah in Fremont, Calif., officiated at the ceremony. The California delegation presented the Jewish community in Borovichi with a Torah scroll, a gift from Reform synagogue Beth David in Miami.

The Bay Area group provided funds for the new Jewish center. In addition to the synagogue — which is named Beth Torah after its sister congregation in the Bay Area — the center also houses a Jewish social club with a library, a welfare organization and human rights offices. "After so many years, we now have a place of our own where we can pray and get together as Jews at any time," said Edward Alexeev, leader of the Borovichi Jewish community. □

Argentina seeks Hezbollah leader

Argentina's Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant for Imad Mughniyah for the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires. Mughniyah is a leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement and one of the world's most wanted terrorists.

The warrant was issued after authorities gathered what they called "conclusive evidence" that Hezbollah was behind the bombing, which killed 29 people and injured more than 200 others. U.S. officials suspect Mughniyah of plotting or participating in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the 1995 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 from Athens to Rome.

Extremists win in German vote

An extreme right-wing party won seats in the Parliament of the eastern German state of Brandenburg in statewide elections Sunday.

Jewish leaders and liberal activists say it is a disaster that the German People's Party will have an official platform for its xenophobic rhetoric in Brandenburg, a state that has suffered a steady rise in unemployment and right-wing extremism since the reunification of East and West Germany 10 years ago. Last year, the party won seats in the neighboring state of Sachsen-Anhalt.

Shell found near day school

A mortar shell that apparently went undetected since World War II was discovered Sept. 2 near a Jewish day school in the Russian capital. The shell was taken away from the site and defused at a location outside the city.

Grigory Lipman, principal of Moscow's Jewish Day School No. 1311, said the incident did not disrupt the school's daily routine.

Child survivors meet in Prague

Hundreds of child survivors of the Holocaust gathered in Prague to attend their 12th annual conference.

There were some 700 attendees at the four days of sessions, some of which were held at the site of the former Theresienstadt ghetto.

Slave labor settlement urged

Time is running out to reach a deal to compensate former Holocaust-era slave laborers, according to the German government's negotiator to the talks.

"The people involved are getting older and older," Otto Lambsdorff said Sept. 1, the 60th anniversary of Germany's invasion of Poland and the day the fund was supposed to be launched. German companies and Jewish representatives remain far apart on the size of the fund.

NEWS ANALYSIS**Arafat and Barak prove tough;
final-status talks will be tougher**

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Glittering ceremonies and lofty rhetoric are the essential byproducts of every milestone in Middle East peacemaking.

And Saturday night's gala at Sharm el-Sheik — significantly, on territory that Israel had withdrawn from in the context of an earlier peace agreement with Egypt — was no exception.

Saturday's signing ceremony was a party with a purpose, designed to deliver a raft of political messages: It signaled that the United States continues to perform a critical diplomatic role; that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is a major player in the peace process; and that the new Jordanian King Abdullah, like his late father, Hussein, takes a close interest in Israeli-Palestinian developments.

Not least, it provided an important platform for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

For Barak, it was an opportunity to demonstrate that he is not only serious about peace in general, but that he is in earnest about accelerating the pace of negotiations with the Palestinians in particular.

For Arafat, the occasion assumed a more complex and nuanced significance. On one level, the assembled dignitaries — notably Mubarak and Abdullah — provided him with an essential umbrella of Arab legitimacy for his latest agreement.

On another level, Arafat achieved a slew of tactical objectives by creating a last-minute crisis — over the number of Palestinian security prisoners Israel would release — and deliberately delaying the high-profile signing ceremony from its Sept. 2 scheduled date to Saturday evening.

First, the on-again off-again talks preceding the agreement provided Arafat with an exercise in diplomatic arm-wrestling with the new Israeli premier.

Barak, he knew, is a tough one-on-one negotiator, and when Arafat tested him under pressure over the issue of prisoner releases, the new Israeli leader did not blink.

Second, the pre-signing standoff allowed Arafat to demonstrate to his domestic constituency — particularly over the prisoner-release issue — that he is a tenacious, if not always successful, negotiator.

Third, it ensured that the Palestinian track continued to command attention throughout the side-visit to Syria and Lebanon on Saturday by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Fourth, and most important of all, it ensured that Albright played a role — however marginal — in the negotiations; that she was not the mere “handmaiden” of the peace process, as she and Barak would have preferred.

Looking down the long and bumpy road of final-status talks — and the truly formidable issues that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators will confront on the way toward a final peace agreement — Arafat was anxious to halt Washington's retreat from the role of intrusive mediator it adopted during the less-propitious tenure of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Arafat, the veteran Palestinian campaigner who plays political

chess two or three moves ahead of everyone else, knows that no other party can come close to matching the array of carrots and sticks that Washington would be able to deploy in the face of a reluctant Israel.

He was determined to establish the principle of continued U.S. involvement by Washington in the negotiations themselves, to lock American officials inside the negotiating room, where they can lean on Israel when the issues become intractable.

The ceremony at Sharm el-Sheik went far beyond the mundane business of celebrating another step on the path to peace: it provided an Arab imprimatur for the agreement, it set a time line for further progress and it created the contours for future negotiations.

Under the agreement, Israel is committed to withdrawing from a further 7 percent of West Bank territory within days and to conduct two more withdrawals, on Nov. 15 and Jan. 20.

Israel will also release 350 Palestinian prisoners, including 150 who have been in Israeli jails since before the 1993 launch of the Oslo peace process, but none who have been convicted of taking Israeli lives.

In addition, Israel has also agreed to establish two so-called safe passage routes for Palestinians traveling between the Gaza Strip with the West Bank, and to permit the Palestinian Authority to begin building a Gaza seaport.

The agreement also commits the two sides to establishing negotiating teams in the coming weeks that will intensively address the difficult final-status issues, which include the status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees, the future of Jewish settlements, water, security, borders and the question of Palestinian statehood.

The accord sets a target date of Sept. 13, 2000, for an agreement on these final-status issues.

No doubt, Albright and her State Department officials are savoring the prospect of another glittering occasion close to that date as a fitting farewell gift — and lasting legacy — for a departing President Clinton.

How realistic is the target date for concluding the final-status negotiations? It might be more appropriate to ask how realistic it is to reach an agreement on the issues at all.

Technical solutions may be found for water, settlements, security, borders and statehood.

But the issues of the refugees and Jerusalem go to the heart of the dispute, transcending rational, technical arrangements.

Both are non-negotiable and no amount of sweet reason will be able to resolve them without a major concession coming from one side or the other.

While Israeli leaders of all political hues declare Jerusalem to be the undivided, eternal capital of Israel under Israeli sovereignty, Arafat insists with equal vehemence that Jerusalem will be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

And while all Israeli leaders have declared that the return of the refugees will pose a mortal demographic threat to the existence of the Jewish state, it will be politically hazardous for Arafat to abandon them to a future in exile.

The sort of creative, flexible diplomacy to which Albright alluded in her address at Sharm el-Sheik on Saturday may, perhaps, leave those issues “open for further discussion” — after, as now seems likely, the Palestinians run their standard up the flagpole on Sept. 13, 2000. □