



# Daily News Bulletin

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82<sup>nd</sup> Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Gore to address G.A.

U.S. Vice President Al Gore will keynote the opening of the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities.

His speech Wednesday afternoon in Atlanta required last-minute rescheduling by the UJC because he had originally said he would not attend.

Gore's Democratic rival, Bill Bradley, independently arranged a separate meeting with Jewish leaders later that day in Atlanta.

### Iranian Jew dies in custody

An Iranian Jew from Los Angeles died under mysterious circumstances last week while in the custody of Iranian authorities.

Sources close to the family of Sepehr Ebn Yamin, 44, said the cause of his death is still unclear and that Iranian officials said at first that Yamin had died of a heart attack. They later said that he had committed suicide.

The death is believed to be unrelated to the arrests of 13 Iranian Jews being held on charges of spying for Israel.

### U.S. eyes Iran oil deal

The U.S. State Department said it is examining an \$800 million agreement between Royal Dutch/Shell and Iranian National Oil Co. to see if the United States could impose sanctions on the British-Dutch firm under a 1996 law.

The 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, lobbied for by Jewish groups, allows the president to impose sanctions on companies that invest \$40 million or more a year in the oil or gas industries of Iran and Libya.

### Peace envoy refuses to intervene

The U.S. Middle East peace envoy refused to intervene in a dispute between Israel and the Palestinians over the next West Bank withdrawal. [Page 3]

### Barak, Clinton to meet

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak plans to meet with President Clinton on Wednesday in Istanbul.

The two leaders will be in the Turkish capital to attend a 54-nation security summit.

Barak is slated to arrive Wednesday in Istanbul for a two-day visit before flying to the United States and Britain to meet Jewish leaders.

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

### Rabbi Melchior to Diaspora Jews: Only dialogue can resolve the issues

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Since his appointment as minister of Diaspora affairs, Rabbi Michael Melchior has become the Israeli government's point man on a host of Israel-Diaspora issues.

He is appearing in Atlanta at the opening plenary of the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities, which brings together officials of Jewish federations and organizations from around the country for the first gathering of the organized community's new central fund-raising structure.

Melchior's appearance comes at a critical juncture for what may be the most pressing issue on his agenda — the ongoing question of "Who Is a Jew" and the debate over Israeli recognition of non-Orthodox conversions.

Reform and Conservative leaders have rejected the outcome of the previous government's conversion committee headed by Ya'acov Ne'eman.

That committee endorsed the establishment of a joint conversion institute, where conversion candidates would be taught by Orthodox, Conservative and Reform educators, but the actual conversions would be performed only by Orthodox rabbis.

Although the institute is up and running, the Orthodox rabbinate never signed on to the deal, and it is still unclear whether the rabbinate will approve the institute's graduates. Reform and Conservative leaders now want to return to a "technical" solution, such as eliminating the nationality clause on Israeli identity cards, meaning the state would not have to rule on who is a Jew.

Natan Sharansky, Israel's interior minister, wants the Reform and Conservative movements to reconsider the already-functioning joint institute as a way to influence potentially thousands of Russian immigrants.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court recently delayed a hearing on Conservative conversions but agreed to include all outstanding conversion cases next April in a potentially precedential ruling. The delay has given Melchior's committee room to work. Recently Melchior spoke to JTA's correspondent Avi Machlis in Jerusalem at the Prime Minister's Office about these and other issues. The following is an edited transcript of the interview:

**JTA:** What is your reaction to the Supreme Court's decision?

**Rabbi Melchior:** I'm very pleased that they delayed the hearing for two reasons: One, because I sincerely believe that this is an issue which has to be solved by dialogue. The second reason is it gives us the possibility to work in the ministerial committee.

I very much understand that some of the people in the Conservative and Reform movements are impatient, and they've been asked so many times to delay. They know that I for one am very sincere in going into this. We are going to work hard to try and solve things which haven't been solved for 50 years.

**JTA:** What assurances can you give the Diaspora that your committee will make progress?

**RM:** I can only give them the assurance of my own sincerity. We are in a certain political environment. The committee consists of ministers both from [the fervently Orthodox] Shas and from [the liberal] Meretz. I would love to find a solution which is acceptable to everybody, a package. Everybody has to give up something for there to be an overall solution. I can't guarantee that it's possible.

**JTA:** Why should your committee be successful after other committees failed?

**RM:** The Ne'eman commission was appointed to deal specifically with preventing

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Beijing denies deal with Israel

Beijing is denying it is strengthening military cooperation with Israel through a series of high-technology arms purchases.

Chinese officials, contradicting earlier statements from Israel, said they had not purchased an airborne radar system from the Jewish state.

### Israel doubts Palestinian motives

Israel reportedly asked the United States to reduce the assistance it provides to Palestinian security forces to combat terrorism. The daily Ha'aretz reported that Israel is worried that sensitive information on technologies and methods of fighting terrorism could be leaked from the Palestinian Authority to terrorists.

### Iraqis seek asylum in Israel

Three Iraqi nationals who said they are seeking political asylum in Israel were apprehended north of the Dead Sea, Israel Radio reported.

The three, who crossed into Israel from Jordan, said they are wanted in Iraq for opposing Saddam Hussein's regime.

### Colette Avital gets Knesset seat

A former Israeli consul general in New York is one of two people getting Knesset seats being vacated by two Cabinet members.

Colette Avital, along with Eli Ben Menachem, are becoming legislators after ministers Yossi Beilin and Matan Vilnai resigned from the Knesset.

### Probe of Netanyahu sought

Eleven Israeli Knesset members submitted a bill that would require the attorney general to open a criminal investigation into former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The initiative comes on the heels of the fraud investigation currently under way of Netanyahu and his wife, Sara.

the conversion law. The commission succeeded in launching a dialogue between the streams.

But my committee is a ministerial committee and is authorized to deal with several issues. I believe I have the confidence of all the streams in Judaism to try and formulate agreements that will be acceptable.

**JTA:** Sharansky wants the joint institute to be the solution, but this has been rejected by the Conservative and Reform movements.

**RM:** I don't understand why they are rejecting this because they very much supported it. That is no doubt the substantive way to progress.

**JTA:** They would prefer going back to a technical solution. Which direction would you like to see the committee go?

**RM:** I can't say that because I think it wouldn't be fair at this stage. I've always been positive also toward the technical solution.

I have a problem with it if the technical solution comes instead of the substantive solution. The cooperation between the different streams of Judaism inside the framework of the Institute for Judaic Studies [the name of the joint institute], between the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, is working much better than everybody had thought. We can have tens of thousands of students going through this and learning Judaism.

**JTA:** Are you coordinated with Sharansky's office on these issues?

**RM:** I think that Sharansky is very close to our opinion. Somehow I think that his opinions in the Israeli press were distorted, saying that he only supports Shas conversions.

**JTA:** What is the state of affairs now with the Jewish Agency regarding Birthright [the program which aims to provide a free, first-time trip to Israel for every Jewish youth]?

**RM:** We are very close to an agreement.

**JTA:** Can you outline the details?

**RM:** There will be a steering committee for Birthright with four equal partners: the government of the State of Israel, the Jewish Agency, the philanthropists and the federations. Everything in principle will be decided in the steering committee. Then a company will be created which will do the actual work here under the guidelines of the steering committee.

I think it's a wonderful program. The Israeli government looks at this as a pilot project for taking upon itself a commitment for the future of Jewish life in the world.

**JTA:** What are the sticking points with the Jewish Agency?

**RM:** I think there are many questions involved which don't have anything to do with Birthright.

**JTA:** Can you be more specific?

**RM:** Nobody knows what kind of new framework is coming up for North American Jewry. The whole United Jewish Communities concept, what does it mean? What does it mean for the future of the Jewish Agency? What kind of funds will be transferred? Will there be more funds? Will there be less funds? What kind of cooperation will we have? Because of all these questions Birthright has been thrown in.

When it comes to Birthright, there has been a general agreement. I hope also that the government will live up to it. I know that the prime minister looks at this as a very important part of his policy.

**JTA:** So you don't see any problem getting [final] government approval for the \$70 million funding for five years at this stage?

**RM:** I didn't say that. I said I hope.

**JTA:** What is your message to the U.S. Jewish community on this trip?

**RM:** The government for the first time has appointed a minister whose responsibility is not only Israeli society but also the world Jewish community. I want to first of all combine the two parts of my department, but also to bring this as a message to North American Jewry and to ask them really that we start setting an agenda together.

I think we in the Israeli government and society have a lot to offer to world Jewry in many areas and we want to actively [pursue] this but without destroying the autonomy of the [American Jewish] society. We are at their disposal. This is my basic approach. □



## Daily News Bulletin

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## JEWISH WORLD

### France creates claims committee

France created a new commission to process the claims of Jews whose assets were looted by the nation's pro-Nazi Vichy regime.

Pierre Drai, the honorary president of France's highest court and head of the commission, said his panel has already received more than 1,000 requests from Jews living in Israel. He estimates it would take the commission about six months to handle each case.

### Jews meet German president

Representatives of several Jewish organizations met with the president of Germany to discuss ways in which the country can deal with the legacy of the Holocaust.

Among those meeting with Johannes Rau are Israel Singer, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, and Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Both groups are participating in discussions that resumed Tuesday in Bonn about creating a compensation fund for Nazi-era slave laborers.

### Family fined for erecting sukkah

A condominium association in Connecticut fined a Jewish family \$675 for putting up a hut near its house in September to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot.

The directors of the association say allowing the sukkah would violate its law banning outdoor decorations. Susha Alperowitz said her family had yet to decide whether to pay the fine.

### Jeb Bush seeks more trade

Florida's governor visited Israel to promote trade ties between Israel and his state. The 30-member trade delegation headed by Republican Gov. Jeb Bush placed a special focus on encouraging Israeli firms to expand their high-tech businesses in Florida.

The delegation participated in a Tel Aviv seminar organized by Enterprise Florida, the state's government-business agency, and the Israel Manufacturers Association. Commerce between Israel and Florida totaled \$318 million last year, or about 2 percent of total trade between Israel and the United States.

### Donor wanted by U.S. officials

The U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Edward Walker Jr., failed to show up for a reception honoring the new wing at the Tel Aviv Museum after aides learned that a fugitive helped pay for it.

Charges are pending in the United States against Marc Rich, who is wanted for tax evasion and doing business with Iran in the face of U.S. sanctions. Both Israel and Spain, where he has citizenship, refuse to extradite him. Rich is reportedly the single biggest contributor to the arts in Israel.

## Dennis Ross gets embroiled in dispute during his two-day visit to the Mideast

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The U.S. Middle East peace envoy came to the region to help Israel and the Palestinian Authority make progress toward a final peace agreement.

Instead, he spent his two-day visit mired in a dispute over a withdrawal Israel was slated to make this week from an additional 5 percent of the West Bank.

The dispute began over the weekend, when Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat refused to sign off on maps outlining the Israeli withdrawal.

When negotiators for the two sides subsequently failed to overcome their differences about the redeployment maps, Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak held a surprise meeting Sunday night — but they, too, were unable to reach agreement.

On Monday, Israel postponed the redeployment.

Enter Ross, who arrived in the region that same day.

Israeli officials were quoted as saying they believe the Palestinian Authority may have delayed agreement in hopes of securing a better arrangement with American intervention. But by Tuesday, after Ross held separate talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials, it was clear that he was not taking sides.

"The best place to sort out problems is by the parties themselves," he said, adding that it is Israel's responsibility to carry out the pullback.

At issue is whether the Palestinian Authority has any say in which lands are turned over by Israel. Israeli officials are maintaining that, under the terms of already signed accords, they alone make that decision.

"We have an agreement, and it would be better not to get smart or play games for it is the decision of the government that counts," Foreign Minister David Levy said Tuesday.

Palestinian officials are meanwhile claiming that no clause in the land-for-security agreement signed September in Egypt bars them from participating in determining which lands will be handed over. In an effort to break the deadlock, Ross called on the two sides "to find ways to continue to move ahead."

He was slated to be back in Washington by early Wednesday. □

## Drive along dangerous route in Chechnya delivers Jewish Agency to war's orphans

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The Jewish Agency for Israel is working to help those isolated by the war between Russia and Muslim insurgents in Chechnya.

After a news report last week about the plight of orphans of different nationalities, including some Jews, who had fled Chechnya for neighboring Ingushetia because of the war, the head of the Jewish Agency's office in Russia, Alla Levy, immediately traveled to the Caucasus Mountains region. After flying to the city of Pyatigorsk, she and two co-workers traveled by car on a harrowing journey along the Chechen border.

More than 1,000 people are being currently held by Chechen gangsters looking for ransom money. Jews, especially Israeli citizens, are the most desirable prey because it's widely believed that Israel, or the international Jewish community, will pay high ransoms for them.

As a result, Levy and her colleagues had to be escorted by a second car with three people in it, one of them an ethnic Chechen.

"The escorts wouldn't let us out of the car even for a minute," said Levy.

Levy and her co-workers were struck by the children's poor living conditions.

"The kids sleep together in their clothes to warm each other, there are no heaters and no hot water. More important, the kids are living to the accompaniment of bombs and shell explosions, and nobody knows how long they have to live here."

She said the Jewish Agency is already working to help the children. The agency is also looking into reports of elderly and disabled Jews stranded by the war. □

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

**Birthright Israel experiencing labor pains as delivery approaches***By Julia Goldman*

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Greek goddess Athena sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus, but Birthright Israel, the brainchild of two Jewish philanthropists announced with a flourish last November, is being created according to a more mortal trajectory.

A year ago in Jerusalem, Seagram Company executive Charles Bronfman announced the plan he and Wall Street mogul Michael Steinhardt had hatched to make a trip to Israel as commonplace as the Bar and Bat Mitzvah in Diaspora Jewish life. The announcement came during the annual General Assembly of North America's umbrella fund-raising and social service organization, a group now known as the United Jewish Communities.

Bronfman is currently the chairman of UJC's board.

At this year's G.A., as the annual meeting is known, taking place this week in Atlanta, Birthright Israel was sure to be a topic discussed in conference rooms and hallways by delegates from the UJC's more than 189 constituent Jewish federations and independent communities. Although widely hailed as a bold, new initiative, the exact details of how the program will run and with whose input is complicating what at first seemed a simple scheme.

The initiative — which aims to cover the cost of 10 days of educational programming on a first trip to Israel for Jews aged 15 to 26 — was originally envisioned as a three-way \$300 million partnership of Jewish philanthropists, the Israeli government and Jewish communities around the world.

The effort was meant to enhance Jewish identity at a time when the community as a whole is concerned about the future connection of Jewish youth. So far several philanthropists have put their financial heft behind the idea, and the Israeli government under Ehud Barak has promised \$70 million over five years, fulfilling most of the \$100 million pledge made by the former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

But to date, the UJC and local federations have yet to sign on to match the other partners' commitments and to link their existing Israel trips for teen-agers and young adults with the ambitious plan.

The first wave of trips, for 6,000 college students, is scheduled to begin in December, although future trips for college and high school students are still under development.

For the past few months, representatives of Birthright Israel North America, the international organization's New York-based franchise, have been crisscrossing the continent to find out what federations want and expect.

"Long before we get to the point of solidifying our thinking, we want to do a reality check with federations to see how we can make this work best for them," said Mark Charendoff, vice president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, who represents their interests in Birthright Israel.

With the first trips filling up within weeks and the Israeli government making a clear show of its support, the tone among federations has changed from skepticism, Charendoff said, "to 'how do we make this work.'" Representatives of Birthright Israel North America said that "discussions are ongoing" and that they would take the federations' input into account.

In North America, the challenge may boil down to making room at the table for federations to contribute to the program's

evolution. "You cannot have a national program without the federations being partners in it," said Marvin Lender, a former United Jewish Appeal chairman from New Haven, who is also vice chair of the board of Birthright Israel North America.

The reasons for federations' reluctance to embrace the program without reservation are manifold and vary from community to community. Most federations already sponsor and subsidize trips to Israel and are reluctant to alter or abandon their programs.

"We're satisfied with it, we want to expand it and we want Birthright Israel to help us implement what we're already doing," Robert Aronson, the executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, said, summing up a common federation position.

The bottom line, he said, was that "there has to be an ongoing dialogue with federations to figure out how to do this right."

Birthright Israel's initial announcement last year was sprung without much preparation, leaving the community groups smarting and confused.

Like many of his colleagues, Max Kleinman, the executive vice president of New Jersey's United Jewish Federation of MetroWest, expressed support for the Birthright Israel initiative as a whole, but voiced a common concern: that there be appropriate follow-up programming, "so it's not a one-shot deal."

Some federation officials questioned whether Israel should be involved in subsidizing Jewish identity-building programs for Diaspora youth.

"My personal concern is the Israeli government's providing money" for the trips at a time when its resources could be spent on Israeli children's education, said Stephen Hoffman, the executive vice president of the Cleveland federation.

Other issues raised by federation executives who participated in the recent discussions included whether the trips should focus on high school- or college-aged students and whether 10 days was enough to form the basis of a meaningful connection to Israel.

Moreover, federations now running their own Israel experience programs do not want their efforts and successes to be superceded by a global structure. Boston, as well as Washington and Los Angeles, among other federations, have successful savings incentive programs that encourage long-term engagement with Jewish institutions and the idea of going to Israel.

"We're concerned that Birthright Israel should supplement what we do. It shouldn't be competitive," said John Fishel, the executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

Barry Shrage, the president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, said, "It's not going to be the giant monolithic thing they thought.

"Somehow or other," he added, "we believe that we can find a way to individualize it and personalize" the global initiative.

Steven Noble, senior vice president for community relations at Birthright Israel North America, said maintaining the integrity of existing programs is important. "Certainly the intent of Birthright Israel is not to change" these programs, he said.

But no one interviewed by JTA expressed any doubt about the benefits of a national program on the scale planned for Birthright Israel. The success of the college trips bodes well for demand, many people believe, and Hoffman of Cleveland believes in the savvy of Birthright Israel's marketing campaign.

Attracting kids is the key, Hoffman said. If Birthright can "help us understand the market, then we're all for that." □