



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 5

Monday, January 10, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

No breakthroughs in talks

There have been no breakthroughs in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations held in West Virginia, according to U.S. officials. The two sides have "enormous decisions" to make, said State Department spokesman James Rubin, who added that the United States does not "expect those decisions to be made in a matter of days."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa were expected to leave the negotiations early this week.

Palestinians plan new Parliament

The Palestinian Authority is reportedly building a Parliament building in an Arab suburb of Jerusalem. Construction at the site in Abu Dis began nearly two years ago, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Palestinian officials say the building is intended as a cultural center. In recent years, some Israelis have suggested that Abu Dis become the capital of a Palestinian state under a final peace accord.

Russian Jewish emigres double

The emigration of Jews from Russia to Israel more than doubled in 1999, according to Russia's Interfax news agency.

Citing figures of the Moscow office of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Interfax said 29,534 Russian Jews left for Israel last year, compared to 13,019 in 1998.

Supremacist admits shul arson

A man charged with killing a gay couple in California admitted setting fire to a California synagogue last summer.

Benjamin Matthew Williams told reporters during a jailhouse interview that he set the fire and planned attacks on two other Sacramento-area synagogues with the aid of other white supremacists. [Page 3]

CORRECTION: The Dec. 29 DAILY NEWS BULLETIN misidentified the name of one of the philanthropists involved with a new effort, known as STAR, to transform synagogue life in America. The philanthropist involved is Edgar Bronfman, not Charles Bronfman. Charles Bronfman is involved with Birthright Israel, which was also mentioned in the story.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Price tag of Israeli-Syrian deal could prove most controversial

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The price tag of an Israeli-Syrian deal could prove as controversial as any deal itself.

Even as an accord between Israel and Syria appears far from certain, Jewish supporters and opponents of the talks are gearing up for a bruising battle on Capitol Hill over the billions in funds that Israel would seek if a deal is reached.

With details of Israel's aid request beginning to emerge, pro-Israel activists are predicting that winning support for a package that early reports have put at \$17 billion will not be easy. Those familiar with the process say the early figure is a trial balloon intended to gauge reaction, and the final cost to the United States will remain unclear until an agreement is reached.

Still the issue is galvanizing Jewish activists, as well as U.S. administration officials, who say they understand that they need to involve Congress in the process.

Supporters of the negotiations say that even though most members of Congress are not expected to return from recess until later this month, they have begun educating lawmakers about the negotiations and the positive implications a deal would have for Israel, the Middle East and U.S. interests.

They know it won't be easy, given the difficulties they experienced in securing nearly \$2 billion in aid to implement the Israeli-Palestinian Wye agreement last fall.

"We have begun the process of educating the pro-Israel community about what Prime Minister Barak is attempting to achieve and talking to key members on the Hill and their staffs, telling them that the talks are serious and that it may require American assistance," said Howard Kohr, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby.

Opponents of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights are also planning to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill. Helen Freedman, executive director of Americans for a Safe Israel, said members of her group will begin lobbying lawmakers in early February to oppose any U.S. aid to support an Israeli-Syrian peace deal.

"We are going after the Congress," said Freedman, who, along with 40 members of her group, protested last week at the peace talks in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

She suggested that the potential price tag could reach \$100 billion and that by accepting such sums, Israel would become a "protectorate" of the United States while taking money from "Social Security checks" of senior citizens.

Other hard-line groups have made similar arguments in faxes and e-mails to lawmakers.

During last fall's budget battle, a number of Republican leaders accused President Clinton of wanting to take money away from domestic programs such as Social Security and use it for foreign aid. Even before the Israeli and Syrian negotiators got down to work in Shepherdstown last week, Israeli and American defense officials were discussing details of the aid package Israel will likely request from the United States to support a withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Late last month, the director general of Israel's Defense Ministry, Amos Yaron, and other defense officials met with top Pentagon officials to discuss the military equipment and cooperation Israel is seeking.

Yaron was expected to return to Washington this week for more meetings.

The talks have been described as preliminary, and Clinton said last week that the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak nominates Bank governor

Israel's Cabinet is expected to approve a new governor of the Bank of Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak last Friday nominated David Klein, the current deputy governor, despite opposition from his finance minister.

Klein is expected to continue the strict monetary policies of outgoing governor Jacob Frenkel.

Albright hosts Civil War tours

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave the leaders of Israel and Syria separate tours of historic sites linked to the Civil War era. On Sunday, before the resumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, she hosted Barak on a visit to the Antietam battlefield in Maryland.

A day earlier, she took Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa to Harper's Ferry, W.Va., where before the war John Brown led an unsuccessful slave revolt.

Arafat to Barak: Remember us

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat telephoned Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in West Virginia over the weekend to remind him that the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations should also get his attention. Arafat emphasized the importance of all the negotiating tracks, not just the Israeli-Syrian, according to a spokesman.

JNF says it owns land in Syria

The Jewish National Fund said it owns some 19 square miles of land in Syria. Last week, JNF Chairman Shlomo Gravetz said Israeli officials should use the land as a bargaining chip so that Israel could retain portions of the Golan Heights as part of a peace deal with Syria.

The land, purchased by Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was transferred to the JNF's possession after Israel was created.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.

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United States is "attempting to ascertain what the general outlines of the costs would be." But the Israel daily Ha'aretz reported last week, without citing sources, that Barak has asked the United States for \$17 billion in aid to beef up Israel's military and intelligence gathering operations. State Department spokesman James Rubin described the report as "wildly premature," but did not dispute its veracity.

The request includes funding for new Apache helicopters, a ground station for gathering information from U.S. satellites and Tomahawk cruise missiles, which would give Israel the ability to strike Syrian tanks, and funds to beef up missile and laser defense systems, such as the Arrow and Nautilus.

The aid request also includes funding to help transfer army camps from the Golan to Israel proper. But it does not include the cost of moving the 17,000 Israelis that currently live on the Golan Heights.

Jewish officials familiar with the request told JTA that the package is divided into three key areas:

- **Mobility costs:** This area covers moving existing bases on the Golan and rearranging bases within Israel to reflect the loss of the strategic heights. It also deals with costs associated with mobilizing Israel's civilian army in case of an attack from the north.

- **Compensation for loss of strategic depth:** To compensate for giving up its position on the Golan, Israel wants advanced satellite technology such as the AWACS radar system, which would provide it with an early warning of Syrian troop movements. The Tomahawk cruise missiles also fall under this category.

- **Regional defense:** Israeli officials still have major concerns about Iran and Iraq, which have not entered the peace process and are still hostile to the Jewish state. Israel wants to beef up its missile and laser defense systems to knock down Iranian and Iraqi missiles.

Jewish activists said details are being floated as a trial balloon, but nothing has been finalized and lobbying in more than a general way will be difficult until there is a deal.

"That might be a starting point for a request, but that might not be what the administration signs off on" and sends to Capitol Hill, said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director for public affairs for Americans for Peace Now.

Republican congressional leaders, who were upset that Clinton promised Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan \$1.9 billion during the 1998 Wye talks without discussing aid with them first, have urged him to consult with them before making any promises to Israel and Syria. Securing aid to Syria could be especially problematic because of its official status as a state sponsor of terrorism, a designation that precludes U.S. aid.

The administration appears to have received the message. When speaking about a possible U.S. aid package to support the deal, top officials from the president down have all promised to consult closely with Congress. Activists say it is too early to gauge support a big aid package would have in Congress, where members have long been told that Israel cannot give up the Golan Heights for security reasons.

But at least one key lawmaker who has bristled at foreign aid in the past has indicated he would support military aid that would bolster Israel's defenses.

Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-Ala.), chairman of the House Appropriations foreign operations subcommittee, told the Forward that although he questions why Israel would decide to withdraw from the Golan Heights, he would support military aid to Israel, but would oppose similar aid to Syria.

Callahan also told the paper that it is unlikely that an aid request for a peace deal would be rejected, saying "the Israeli lobby is too strong to deny."

Richard Haass, director of foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution, agrees. During a recent forum on the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, he dismissed the notion that members of Congress would be reluctant to fund a deal because of either their opposition to the president or to foreign aid.

"This will be as much or more Mr. Barak's peace as Mr. Clinton's," said Haass, who handled Middle East policy at the National Security Council under President Bush.

"I do not think that Congress would take the responsibility to pull the rug out from under this agreement if an Israeli prime minister stands up and says, 'This is good for Israel.' "

JEWISH WORLD

Birthright founders applauded

Some 4,000 participants in a program that aims to give young Jewish adults a free, first-time trip to Israel cheered the philanthropists who are funding the program.

Michael Steinhardt, who created the program along with Charles Bronfman, told the mostly unaffiliated Jews at a ceremony Saturday night in Jerusalem to rise to the task of "renewing Judaism."

Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who was in the United States talking peace with Syria, sent a videotaped message in which he promised the full participation of young Israelis in the Birthright program to enhance the bonds between them and their Diaspora peers.

German Jewish leader elected

A Holocaust survivor who works as a Dusseldorf theatrical agent was elected president of the German Jewish community.

Sunday's election of Paul Spiegel, 62, by the nine-member executive board of the Central Council of Jews in Germany came after his predecessor, Ignatz Bubis, died last August.

Also on Sunday, French Jewish leader Henri Hajdenberg was elected head of the European Jewish Congress, a post Bubis also held before his death.

Reform leaders to show support

American Reform leaders around the country plan to demonstrate their support for Israel's peace talks with Syria by meeting with Israeli diplomats based in the United States.

The meetings, scheduled to take place simultaneously Monday in several cities, are jointly sponsored by the Reform movement's Religious Action Center and ARZA/World Union.

Czech leader seeks denial law

A Czech Jewish leader is calling on his country to make Holocaust denial a crime. Tomas Kraus' comments to Czech Television came after a Czech prosecutor dropped charges against a far-right political leader who publicly questioned whether the Holocaust occurred.

The prosecutor said the comments of National Alliance leader Vladimir Skoupy could not be considered a crime because Holocaust denial is not punishable under Czech legislation.

Editor of Yiddish paper dies

The editor of what was believed to be the world's last daily Yiddish newspaper before it closed in 1996 died at the age of 88. Jacques Cypel, who was the editor in chief of the Paris-based *Our Word*, was born in the Ukraine and moved to France in 1938.

Alleged murderer admits role in California synagogue arsons

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A man charged with killing a gay couple in California has admitted to planning the arson attacks on three northern California synagogues last summer and to personally torching the largest one.

Benjamin Matthew Williams told reporters during a jailhouse interview that as many as eight other white supremacists joined in the June 18 arson spree in the Sacramento area.

Williams, 31, and his brother, James Tyler Williams, 29, are being held in a Northern California jail on first-degree murder charges in the slaying of a gay couple.

Prosecutors will seek the death penalty for the two men and stated earlier that they will buttress their case for capital punishment by citing the brothers' role in the arson attacks.

As if to strengthen the case against him, the older brother told two Sacramento Bee reporters Jan. 6 that the "success" of the firebombings emboldened him to slay the gay couple two weeks later in what he termed "homocides."

Williams said that four months before the synagogue attacks he attended a "Preparedness Expo" in Sacramento.

To attract the attention of other racists, he said, he carried a flier, published by the anti-Semitic National Alliance, pinned to his backpack, which declared, "The White Race, The Earth's Most Endangered Species."

The ploy worked when a man approached him and invited Williams to join his organization, which Williams declined to identify.

"To get into the organization, you had to get involved in a group activity to do something of significance for the movement," Williams said, adding that this is how the plan for the synagogue attacks evolved.

Williams said he personally assembled the gasoline and oil firebombs, which he earlier described as "Jewish cocktails," for all three attacks, and then broke into Congregation B'nai Israel, where he set the library ablaze.

"I was real nervous," Williams admitted, explaining that he was also feeling exhilarated.

"I knew I was crossing the Rubicon," he said. "It was the cusp of my life where I was putting faith in my beliefs."

At the same time, according to Williams, two other teams went to work setting fire to Congregation Beth Shalom and the Keneset Israel Torah Center.

Federal charges are expected to be filed shortly against the Williams brothers in the arson attacks.

But federal investigators, who are heading the probe into the synagogue fires as likely hate crimes, expressed skepticism about Williams' claim.

"The statements of a potential criminal defendant should always be viewed cautiously and in light of the personal and political views of the speaker," said Jim Maddock, the special agent in charge of the Sacramento FBI office.

Authorities believe the two brothers were also involved in setting fire to a Sacramento building housing an abortion clinic.

Williams refused to discuss this charge.

Hardest hit in last June's arson attacks was B'nai Israel in downtown Sacramento, whose gutted library lost 5,000 books, some hundreds of years old. Also destroyed were 300 videotapes on Jewish history, which the congregation had been collecting for its 150th anniversary celebration last October. Damages were estimated at \$800,000.

At Beth Shalom, vandals broke in through a side window and started a fire on the bimah, causing \$100,000 in damage. At Keneset Israel, it appeared that a Molotov cocktail was lobbed through a sliding glass door. Smoke damage was estimated at \$30,000.

The synagogue attacks, at locations up to 10 miles apart, occurred within a 35-minute time span, leading officials to assume that more than one person must have been involved. □

TEN YEARS AFTER THE WALL**Yeshiva a lone bastion of tradition amid assimilated Hungarian Jewry***By Michael J. Jordan*

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Mate Koves is proud that his great-great-grandfather and great-great-uncle were renowned Orthodox rabbis.

One day Koves' descendants may feel the same way.

The first Hungarian student at the year-old Chabad Lubavitch yeshiva in Budapest, Koves is on track to be the first Orthodox rabbi born and ordained in post-Holocaust Hungary.

Yet Koves, known among his fellow students by the Hebrew name Shlomo, is unimpressed by the achievement.

"Obviously, it's exciting to be the 'first,' but I'm much more excited about the work I'll be doing than the title," says Koves, a slightly built, scruffy-bearded 20-year-old.

"My big hope is to make Jews, especially young people, aware of Judaism. I want to be the spark that lights the candles of Jewish life."

He clearly has his work cut out for him. The Hungarian Jewish community, while the largest in Central Europe, is also the most assimilated.

Of those gradually rediscovering their Jewishness, the vast majority are drawn to a liberal stream of Judaism known here as "Neolog."

Still, if nothing else, the fact that Koves can study at a hometown yeshiva helps to put Budapest back on the Jewish map.

"A community that opens a yeshiva shows that there is a Jewish community there, whether or not the level of Jewish learning or identity is up to par," said Rabbi Shlomo Sherman of Los Angeles, who studied at the Chabad yeshiva in 1998 and returned as an instructor. "It's a source of pride for every Jew who lives in that area, because not every community can claim to have one."

Hungarian Jews are part of a community in recovery: Until the Holocaust, there were 70 yeshivas in Hungary, scattered across the country.

So, even as the launch of the Chabad yeshiva's second year is a cause for celebration, it is also a time for mourning.

In prewar Hungary, most of the 800,000 Jews lived in the countryside, in villages, towns and small cities. They were predominantly Orthodox.

Meanwhile, one-quarter of the Jews lived in the capital, Budapest. They were generally assimilated and affiliated with the Neolog movement.

The Holocaust turned those demographics upside down. In 1944, the Germans and their Hungarian collaborators unveiled a two-stage plan: First, clear the countryside of Jews — encircling the capital — then target the Jews of Budapest.

The first part went smoothly, as they deported 437,000 Jews in less than two months.

The second phase, though, was stymied by the Soviet Union, whose Red Army liberated Hungary during the winter of 1944 and 1945.

Virtually all Jewish survivors settled in Budapest.

The more than four decades of communism that followed drove Jews away from religion and toward assimilation.

Of the 100,000 or so Hungarian Jews today, the number of those affiliated with the community is estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000.

Very few have memories of black hats and peyos, of keeping kosher and lighting candles. For most Jews here, Neolog — not Orthodox — is "traditional."

The lasting symbol of this tradition is the historic 3,000-seat Dohany synagogue, what is believed to be the second largest shul in the world. For those now reconnecting to their Judaism, Orthodox — and especially fervently Orthodox — Jewry is too strict, too dramatic a shift.

At another point on the spectrum, some have chosen the path of the tiny Reform movement, known as Sim Shalom. It emphasizes a flexible learning of Jewish holidays, history and traditions.

That said, there is indeed a small core of young Hungarian Jews who eagerly absorb Orthodox Judaism.

For these seekers, Chabad Lubavitch and its yeshiva fill the vacuum. They are drawn not only by the depth of learning, but by the self-confidence of a community that is not afraid to walk the streets in black hats or to celebrate Jewish holidays in outdoor public spaces.

The yeshiva is the centerpiece of the work done by Baruch Oberlander, an American Lubavitch rabbi who has been based in Budapest since 1989.

The yeshiva, located downtown on a grimy side street that was a part of the Budapest ghetto, attracts plenty of foot traffic. An open house last October to herald the yeshiva's second year drew an overflow crowd.

The yeshiva students also command respect. Neolog rabbinical students — some from the newly accredited University of Jewish Studies in Budapest — drop by the yeshiva for discussions on the Talmud, Torah and Chasidism. Oberlander himself routinely fields questions via e-mail.

Koves is one of 13 full-time students — up from 11 last year — along with seven Americans, four Israelis and a Swiss.

The foreigners say they come for the numerous opportunities to do community outreach programs and to study in a "quieter" atmosphere.

Though their long days of study are marked by heated debates over Jewish law and philosophy, they say it pales beside the cacophony of yeshivas in other countries with 200 students crammed in a room.

Ten years into the post-Communist transition, the Orthodox community is now approaching a "critical mass" that warrants its having its own yeshiva, Oberlander says.

A handful of young Hungarian men, like Koves, were attracted to study at yeshivas in the United States or Israel. While Koves is the first to return, more are on their way, and Oberlander says there are also 50 part-time Hungarian students who attend various classes.

"Our choice was to either start a yeshiva earlier, and lower our standards to allow more Hungarians in, or lift the Hungarians to our normal standard. We chose the latter," says Oberlander, 33, who himself descends from a long line of Hungarian Orthodox rabbis.

"We had to build it up, stone on top of stone. We're never going to get back to where" Hungarian Jews were "before the Holocaust, but it'd be an injustice not to once again have a yeshiva here." □