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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Weizman won't step aside

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Barak refuses Syrian demand

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told his Cabinet he has no intention of agreeing to a Syrian demand that he give Damascus a written commitment on final Golan Heights borders before negotiations resume.

Barak said Israel would commit to a final border only after a full picture emerges on other relevant issues, including security arrangements, water rights and normalization.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Syrian experts were due to travel to Washington for separate talks this week with American officials on a U.S. proposal aimed at breaking the deadlock in negotiations. Israel dispatched the head of the negotiating team with Syria, Uri Saguy, and the Defense Ministry's legal adviser, Moshe Kochanovsky.

Indyk sworn in as envoy to Israel

Martin Indyk was sworn in last Friday as U.S. ambassador to Israel. Indyk, who served as ambassador in Israel from 1995 to 1997, has served since then as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Indyk, who flew to Israel over the weekend, is the first Jew to serve as U.S. ambassador to Israel.

Schools to close on Good Friday

The U.S. Supreme Court rejected a challenge to a Maryland law requiring public schools to close on Good Friday.

The court last week upheld a lower court's ruling that the law does not infringe on the separation of church and state called for in the First Amendment. The case was brought by a former teacher who is Jewish.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Can haredi rabbis rein in temptations of the Internet?

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When Dov Heller was a young Chasidic boy, he remembers being unable to resist the urge to play computer games at his father's print shop.

Today, a clean-shaven but still fervently Orthodox 23-year-old, Heller owns PC Plus, the only computer store in Jerusalem's haredi neighborhood of Geula.

Just beside the stairs leading up to his store, devout shoppers pass by four huge posters signed by a battery of 29 rabbinical sages, declaring the Internet to be the greatest menace ever to face Jewish culture.

The decree, says Heller, has not hurt business since most customers comply with the ruling and use computers and the Internet strictly for business.

However, Heller is well aware of the Internet's lure and does not think the ban can be enforced.

"They could enforce prohibitions on television because you cannot hide an antenna on your roof, but this cannot be stopped," says Heller, who with his hip blazer and black kippah looks like a cross between an entrepreneur from Silicon Valley and yeshiva student.

"Put a 16-year-old in front of the Internet, and you know where he will go. It could change an entire generation."

Judging by the severity of the Internet ruling, the rabbis seem to agree about the potential impact of the Internet on the traditional lifestyle of the insular Orthodox community.

The ruling urged Jews to do anything possible to prevent connecting to the Internet. It warned of a "terrible threat" to Jewish sanctity.

It also declared that computer games are off limits.

At PC Plus, there are some games on the shelves.

But none of the highly graphic and often violent titles that are popular with secular children are there.

Instead, customers can choose from an array of Torah software products, as well as specially designed multimedia CDs with Chasidic music and rabbinic tales bearing titles such as "The Psalms That Saved Dad."

The notices also include a number for the special Beit Din, or Jewish court, on computer related issues, which has received hundreds of calls after the ruling was released.

Established a few months ago, the court's jurisdiction is to decide what is prohibited and permitted, said Micha Rothschild, the court's general secretary, but not to enforce the decree.

"We do not invade people's privacy," he said. "But we do advise institutions how to behave."

Some sages, including Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, did not sign the ruling.

Some observers speculate he may have realized that the Internet is unstoppable, while others expect Yosef to sign a separate order soon.

Nevertheless, the ruling clearly marks the latest attempt of the haredi leadership to resist technological change.

In the 1940s, rabbis banned the radio but eventually recanted. They had more

MIDEAST FOCUS

Summit with Clinton disputed

Israel and the Palestinian Authority disagree over whether President Clinton is planning to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat during an international conference this weekend in Switzerland.

Palestinian officials say the meeting was firmed up when Arafat met with Clinton last week in Washington, but a source close to Barak said no such meeting had been set.

Arafat, Clinton discussed state

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat said he did not discuss with President Clinton whether he plans to declare Palestinian statehood if a final peace deal with Israel is not reached by Sept. 13.

However, Arafat said he did discuss the Palestinians' "right" to declare a state on that date if the deadline is not met. Arafat said he backed away from his threat to declare a state on May 4, 1999, because he did not want to affect the Israeli elections.

Hezbollah says airman is dead

Israel reacted cautiously to reports that Hezbollah has begun looking for the site where a captured Israeli airman is buried. In an interview with the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said he is sure Ron Arad is dead.

Israeli media quoted defense sources as saying Israel's assumption that Arad is still alive would not change unless it receives concrete evidence to the contrary. Arad's plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986.

Palestinians plan Jericho airport

The Palestinian Authority is preparing to build an international airport in the West Bank town of Jericho. The head of the Palestinian Civil Aviation Authority said plans were under way despite Israeli opposition to the move.



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success with later prohibitions on television and cinema, since these are things that can be publicly monitored.

"The big change for the rabbis is the privacy of the Internet," says Menachem Friedman, professor of sociology at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv and an expert on religious Jews.

"The loss of supervision and the inability to know what people are doing is frightening for them — and the most dangerous thing for haredi society."

Out on the streets of Geula, most people appear to agree with the rabbis, even though many have never used the Internet.

"Our goal is to remain a holy and special nation," says Pesach Berman, 42, who owns a chain of shoe stores.

"The moment we are exposed to the Internet, we will be exposed to all sorts of things that the goyim do and we will start to deteriorate."

Meanwhile, Orthodox groups in Israel and abroad realize the Internet can be harnessed to help preserve tradition, and have built a plethora of Web sites for precisely this reason.

But cyberspace is a very dangerous place for the devout and balancing between desirable and undesirable content can be tricky.

For example, the Internet domain name tora.net has been snatched up by pornographers.

Some religious groups have already created innovative solutions to these problems.

The KosherNet, for example, is a Brooklyn-based Internet site that filters content in the same way that parents protect their children using popular tools such as Net Nanny.

The problem is that filters are not foolproof.

This is why Michael Malach, a haredi software programmer from Jerusalem, is working on a product that will work in the opposite way.

Instead of filtering out kosher content from everything on the Web, it will only allow access to a small number of specific, rabbinically approved Web sites.

"I want to create the technical solution that will allow religious people to use the Web, but of course, I will first ask for the rabbis' approval," Malach says.

He realizes that a ban on the Internet is unenforceable, but also thinks that most haredim want to obey the rabbis.

"We do not live in Iran, and anyway, people do what they like in the privacy of their homes," he says. "The ruling of the rabbis is based upon an appeal to the inner morals of the public."

Shabsi, a 25-year-old former yeshiva student who prefers not to give his last name, feels uncomfortable about contradicting the rabbis — but has no regrets about logging on.

The week the rabbis issued their ruling, Shabsi joined an Internet service provider so he could access the Net from his office computer at a cellular phone store in Geula. The access icon is hidden deep in the bowels of his PC where nobody, he hopes, can find it.

Shabsi says he wants to learn how to use the Internet because he believes it will be an important tool for business in the future.

"I do not agree with the fact that they put a total ban on the Internet like television," he says.

"On television, everything is bad, but here there are good things as well.

A religious Jewish boy "has to have somewhere to let himself out," he adds.

Raymond, a yeshiva student from New Jersey who also asks that his last name be omitted, has used the Internet several times but only after asking his rabbi and getting a study partner to come along as a chaperone to ensure he does not wander off into forbidden cyberterritory.

He also believes the rabbinical ruling from Israel will be taken very seriously by fervently Orthodox communities in the Diaspora.

"Perhaps they cannot enforce the ruling," he says. "But we can say that if you want to be part of our community then you must stick to our rules. It will put us in a technological ghetto, but Jews did not have opportunities of other nations for thousands of years and we are still around." □

JEWISH WORLD

Court rules on refugee's claim

Switzerland's highest court rejected a wartime Jewish refugee's claim for compensation for his expulsion from the country in 1943.

But the court also ruled last Friday to give Joseph Spring some \$63,000 for the time and effort it took him to bring the case — exactly the amount he had sought for compensation.

Spring was sent to a Nazi death camp along with two cousins after Switzerland refused to give them asylum during the war. His cousins later died at Auschwitz.

Austria may hold new vote

Austria's far-right Freedom Party could have its political fortunes improve after two other parties failed to form a coalition.

The inability of the Social Democrats and the People's Party to form a government could lead to new elections, which may provide another electoral success for the Freedom Party, led by Jorg Haider. Haider's party came in second in parliamentary elections last October.

Panel to review Holocaust issues

The House Banking Committee is scheduled to hold two days of hearings in February to examine Holocaust restitution efforts.

The Feb. 9-10 hearings will focus on whether European insurers cheated Holocaust survivors by refusing to honor prewar policies and how settlements with Swiss and Austrian banks are progressing.

Insurers may face sanctions

Eight European insurers may face sanctions in the United States because they have not accounted for how they handled claims from Holocaust survivors, according to an international panel probing the claims.

The panel, led by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, cited Aegon, CGU, Gerling, Munich Re, Sorema, Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance Group, Swiss Life, and Prudential Insurance.

WJC to honor Wallenberg

The World Jewish Congress plans to honor wartime Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg this week in Stockholm. The premiers of Israel and Sweden are expected to attend the ceremony honoring Wallenberg, who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Nazis.

Tuesday's event takes place on the eve of a conference on Holocaust education being hosted by Sweden. Rabbi Michael Melchior, minister for Israeli society and world Jewish communities, will lead the Israeli delegation at the conference, which is expected to draw officials from more than 40 countries.

Israel's president defiantly refuses to step aside while he's investigated

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli President Ezer Weizman has announced he has no intention of stepping down, even though he has become the nation's first head of state to face a criminal investigation.

In a special televised address to the nation Sunday, Weizman refused to resign or take a leave of absence pending the outcome of a police inquiry into whether he illegally accepted large sums of money from a French millionaire friend.

"I have never abandoned a battle, nor will I abandon this one," the former air force commander and fighter pilot said as he proclaimed his innocence.

Resigning or taking a voluntary leave from the largely ceremonial post would be akin to an admission of guilt, Weizman said.

"I have two ways to go, and in my opinion there is no middle ground," Weizman added, reading from a prepared statement. "One way is to fight for the truth to the end and the other is to resign. I have no intention of resigning. I repeat: I have no intention of resigning."

He also said that going on leave is "not a solution."

Weizman, Israel's seventh president, has acknowledged accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts from Sudan-born businessman Edouard Saroussi from 1988 to 1993, when he served as a legislator and Cabinet minister.

But he has insisted they were personal gifts that he was not required to declare.

In his brief statement, Weizman said he consulted with a lawyer who repeatedly told him his actions were legal and involved no improprieties.

"If I made a mistake, it was a human error and unintentional," Weizman said. "I have tried all my life to act with honesty and integrity."

An initial police probe into whether Weizman had properly reported the gifts turned into a criminal investigation Sunday after police reportedly discovered a business relationship between Weizman and Saroussi.

Since the allegations about the cash gift from Saroussi were first disclosed by an Israeli journalist several weeks ago, there have been growing calls from politicians that Weizman step aside while the investigation is conducted.

The allegations against the president include a charge raised by the journalist who first disclosed the affair that Weizman indirectly accepted a \$3 million bribe in 1984 to keep his now-defunct Yahad Party out of a right-wing government.

Even before the scandal erupted, right-wing politicians were angered by Weizman's support of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's peace policies. Such support violates the largely symbolic post of the presidency, they charged.

In the wake of Weizman's speech to the nation, Deputy Education Minister Shaul Yahalom of the National Religious Party said Weizman's decision to remain in the post is damaging to the presidency.

"Unfortunately, I think the president made another mistake," Yahalom told Channel Two television. "The norm in Israel must be for every public figure, that if a criminal investigation is launched against him, he must suspend himself. It would be respectful to the nation and to the post."

Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, who last Friday called on Weizman to take a leave of absence, said after Weizman's speech that he respected the president's decision.

But Beilin urged Weizman to refrain from filling any of his judicial duties, such as granting pardons or swearing in judges, while the inquiry is under way.

A veteran public figure who held key posts in the military and politics before becoming president, the 75-year-old Weizman is now in the second term of his presidency, which has spanned both left- and right-wing governments.

The outspoken Weizman has frequently been a counterbalance to government policy, pushing for progress when the peace process faltered and urging a slowdown during waves of terrorist attacks.

Most recently, he gave his unequivocal support to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in order to reach peace with Syria. □

Jewish cuisine revived near old Warsaw Ghetto

By Ruth E. Gruber

WARSAW (JTA) — “Wicked people make wicked things, good people should make good things,” said Ehud Brunicki. “That’s what my mother used to tell me.”

Brunicki’s mother and father were both Polish survivors of the Holocaust who lost their families, including their spouses, in the Shoah. They met and married in Poland after the war and made aliyah to Israel in 1957, when their son was 10 years old.

This month, Brunicki, now an Israeli businessman, launched what he hopes will be a very good thing in his native city: an Israeli/Polish/Jewish restaurant.

Called *Warszawa-Jerozolima* — Warsaw-Jerusalem in Polish — the restaurant is located in the area of the prewar Jewish quarter, the once-vibrant district that the Nazis turned into the notorious Warsaw Ghetto.

Poland was the cradle of European Jewish life before World War II, and Warsaw was the most important Jewish center in Europe. Its 350,000 Jews made up one-third of the local population. Out of all the cities in the world, only New York had a bigger Jewish population.

Some 3 million out of Poland’s 3.5 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. The Jewish quarter of Warsaw, like most of the rest of the city, was reduced to a pile of smoldering rubble. Only about 300 Jews remained alive in Warsaw when it was liberated on Jan. 17, 1945.

For Brunicki, the restaurant is a labor of love that reflects his attachment both to Israel and to his native city.

It was conceived, he said, as a way to pay tribute to Poland’s destroyed Jewish past, as well as a way to bring Poles, Israelis and other Jews closer together. The logo depicts Warsaw’s Royal Palace, and Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock and Western Wall as if they were part of one city.

“I decided I wanted to commemorate things in a living way,” Brunicki told JTA. “I decided to make a nice place where people can come, enjoy themselves, see views of Israel, listen to Jewish music and taste both the delicious food that was served in Warsaw before the war as well as Israeli Middle Eastern cuisine,” he said.

“Many people in Warsaw have a lot of feeling for the Jews, who lived in Poland for 1,000 years,” he added. “Many people now come here from Jerusalem to seek their own lost roots. I want to make it easier; to make Warsaw closer to Jerusalem and Jerusalem closer to Warsaw.”

Brunicki’s family history makes him feel this closeness in a particular way.

His mother and her small son survived the war on fake papers. She herself helped Polish Catholics escape from a Nazi camp. Her son survived with the help of Polish priests, although the little boy was killed by a drunken driver soon after the war.

“One of the priests who hid my mother’s child is still alive, a very old man,” said Brunicki. “I have met him.”

The decor and the menu of Warsaw-Jerusalem pay tribute both to Israel and the 1,000-year history of Polish Jewry.

The restaurant is located in a basement setting, but it seems light and airy. One section of the restaurant is enclosed by murals of the desert, so that it resembles a Bedouin encampment, and

diners are encouraged to linger after the meal and play chess or backgammon. Chef Alex Geller presides over a kitchen equipped with a special pita oven and also an oven to bake fresh challah. Geller, like Brunicki an Israeli, is the retired owner of a restaurant in Tel Aviv.

The menu features Middle Eastern specialties such as falafel, tahina, humus and kebabs, plus traditional Eastern European Jewish cooking — from gefilte fish and chicken soup to stuffed chicken necks and tzimmes. Polish specialties are also served.

The restaurant is non-dairy, but not kosher. This, Brunicki said, is because there is no permanent ritual slaughterer, in Poland, so it is not possible to obtain the necessary quantity of kosher meat.

But he and Geller have set aside one part of the establishment for kosher diners, and can provide sealed, strictly kosher meals, prepared and packaged in Israel — making it the only restaurant in Warsaw where kosher food is available. There is also an ample selection of vegetarian or fish dishes.

Warsaw-Jerusalem is located on Smocza Street — a street in the Jewish quarter immortalized in the haunting “My Sister Khaye,” sung by popular Israeli singer Chava Alberstein and the Klezmatics on their recent CD “The Well.” Brunicki’s eyes filled with tears as he played the song, which recalls the lost world of Warsaw Jewry, on the restaurant sound system.

“You know,” he said, “when they rebuilt Warsaw after the war, they didn’t remove the rubble first. So, when you are sitting here in this basement restaurant, you know that behind these walls are the ruins of the ghetto.”

He was silent for a moment.

Then a patron opened the door, and a burst of other music filled the room. The song the restaurant played on loudspeakers outside its door to welcome its guests: “Am Yisroel Chai.” □

Citing dangers to free speech, Britain to reject Holocaust law

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The British government has rejected plans to make Holocaust denial a criminal offense, the country’s home office minister told Parliament.

Mike O’Brien said last week that such legislation, which had been supported by Prime Minister Tony Blair, could not easily “strike a balance between outlawing such offensive statements while ensuring that freedom of speech is not unduly restricted.”

“Therefore, while the government is following carefully the current debates on this issue within the Jewish community and elsewhere, we have no immediate plan to introduce legislation.”

The announcement came during a trial involving Holocaust revisionist David Irving, who is suing U.S. historian Deborah Lipstadt for libel in a British court for labeling him a Holocaust denier. Holocaust denial is an offense in several European countries, including Germany, Austria and Lithuania.

In Britain, it is an offense under the 1986 Public Order Act to incite racial hatred, but Jewish groups say that the law has proved ineffective and has provoked very few prosecutions.

The decision not to legislate against Holocaust denial came just one week before Britain is expected to announce plans to institute a Holocaust memorial day on Jan. 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, beginning in 2001. □