



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 56

Thursday, March 23, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Pope: End Palestinian 'torment'

Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass in Palestinian-ruled Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, and issued a plea for a Palestinian homeland.

The "torment" of the Palestinian people "has gone on too long," the pope said at a welcoming ceremony with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. [Page 3]

Mubarak: Israel-Syria peace near

Israel and Syria are close to a peace accord as a result of a series of secret contacts, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told *The Washington Post*.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa have maintained the contacts during the past two months by using "special envoys" and American and British go-betweens, Mubarak said.

Rabbi tapped for AIDS panel

President Clinton named a Minneapolis rabbi to serve on the presidential AIDS commission.

Joseph Edelheit, who was appointed to the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, has served as co-chairman of the Reform movement's national committee on HIV/AIDS and has written on the religious and ethical issues surrounding the disease.

At U.N., Israeli rues occupation

Israel's justice minister admitted to the U.N. Human Rights Commission that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip had gone wrong. "We tried to convince ourselves that our occupation was a benevolent one," said Yossi Beilin. "But we know from history that occupation is occupation is occupation." Beilin's comments to the commission were considered unusually frank because the panel is often critical of Israeli policy.

Austria to adopt German plan

Austria will follow Germany's lead when it comes to deciding how much to compensate Holocaust-era slave laborers, according to the Austrian official dealing with the issue.

If Germany pays \$7,400 to each laborer, Austria would do the same, Maria Schaumayer, the former governor Austria's central bank, said Tuesday in Washington. [Page 2]

Reform rabbis considering compromise on gay marriages

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — For over a month, Reform leaders have been predicting that a resolution affirming rabbinic officiation at gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies is almost certain to pass at the movement's annual rabbinic convention next week in Greensboro, N.C.

But 11th-hour negotiations this week could lead to a compromise version, one that makes clear the lack of consensus among Reform rabbis on one of the most controversial issues to hit the movement in years. However, the outcome of the debate — which some claim has been "McCarthyist" — is still far from certain.

At its core, the debate is not over whether Reform rabbis can or must officiate at same-sex ceremonies. Reform rabbis are autonomous to act according to their conscience on virtually all matters. Rather, it is on how strong a statement the movement should make on the issue.

Opponents uncomfortable with ceremonies that parallel wedding rituals claim that the current resolution does not adequately acknowledge the diversity of opinion in the movement and fear it could adversely affect perceptions of Reform Judaism among Israelis and members of other Jewish streams. But proponents believe it is important to "be at the forefront of important social change, both civilly and religiously," as one leader in the effort, Rabbi Shira Stern of South River, N.J., puts it.

The resolution, which was first introduced by the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Women's Rabbinic Network, of which Stern is co-president, states that "the relationship of a Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual." It does not compel rabbis to officiate.

If approved, it would mark the first time that "a major group of American clergy, as an organization, gives its blessing to those of its members who officiate at same-gender ceremonies," according to the CCAR.

Many Reform rabbis, as well as Reconstructionist ones — whose movement is already on record in support of the issue — already officiate at such ceremonies.

Even some of the opponents of the resolution say they would officiate at some same-sex commitment ceremonies as long as the rituals and language were distinct from those used at a wedding.

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, of Port Washington, N.Y., said he would hold a "chanukat bayit," or dedication of the home, for a same-sex couple, but would not call it a wedding or conduct a ceremony using a chupah or ketubah.

Whatever the outcome of the session, slated for March 29, the debate has been heated. Rabbis uncomfortable with the current resolution want it to state clearly there is a diversity of views on the topic and to refer to the 1995 majority opinion of the CCAR's Responsa Committee, which voted 7-2 against permitting officiation at commitment ceremonies. The current version only mentions the minority opinion.

Those involved in the discussions to reach a compromise wouldn't discuss details.

But Rabbi Charles Kroloff, CCAR's president and a proponent of the same-sex marriage resolution, said there are "always possibilities of some adjustment in it, but I wouldn't be comfortable commenting on any details right now."

Opponents of the resolution, many of whom claim they have been unfairly labeled as homophobes by their colleagues, are hoping the current resolution can still be modified enough to snag their support. But in case a compromise version cannot be reached, the opponents have submitted an alternate resolution, one that does not

MIDEAST FOCUS

U.N. envoy protests incitement

Israel protested to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan over what it called a recent "alarming campaign of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish incitement" in some Arab countries. "This propaganda campaign knows no bounds," Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Yehuda Lancry, said in a letter to Annan.

Rabbi's attack distributed

Audio cassettes of a fervently Orthodox leader comparing Israel's education minister to the villain of the Jewish holiday of Purim were distributed in an Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem, according to the Israeli daily *Yediot Achronot*.

The minister, Yossi Sarid, said Wednesday he is willing to accept Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's clarification of his comments on the tape, in which the rabbi said he had not intended to rally supporters to hurt Sarid.

But, Sarid added, members of his party are not willing to be as forgiving.

Report: Israel to help North Korea

Israel reportedly agreed to an American request to participate in an international assistance plan for North Korea. The plan seeks to persuade the Communist state to stop developing surface-to-surface missiles and nuclear weapons.

The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reported that Israel agreed to provide humanitarian aid, including infant food and agricultural equipment, in exchange for assurances that the United States will press North Korea to decrease its export of missiles to the Middle East.

Purim confuses tourists

Christian tourists in Israel are reportedly confused about the wearing of costumes for Purim. At first, "We thought it was just what kids do here, that it's the native way of having fun," Lee Anne Goddard told the *Jerusalem Post*.



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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explicitly oppose same-sex marriages but notes that "there is a diversity of views" within the Reform movement on "same-sex unions and the propriety within Judaism of their ritual sanctification." The alternate statement calls on Reform rabbis to create a welcoming atmosphere for gays and lesbians, "doing so in those ways that they deem ritually most appropriate."

Like the main resolution, it also calls upon rabbis to promote the civil rights of gays and lesbians. Asked about the possibility of a compromise version of the current resolution, Stern said compromises would likely be suggested on the debate floor, but that in the past year the resolution has already been modified extensively to take into account its opponents' concerns. As for the alternate resolution being proposed, Stern said, "Better we should have no resolution at all."

Whether their views are heard or not, several in the opposition complain their colleagues have handled the debate in a manner reminiscent of the McCarthy era, including one message posted — and later retracted — on a CCAR electronic bulletin board suggesting that younger rabbis avoid working under senior rabbis who do not officiate at same-sex weddings.

"I don't know what one must do to get out from under the charge of homophobia except outright surrender to the agenda of those who are routinely circulating that charge," said Rabbi Clifford Librach of Sharon, Mass., one of the rabbis who submitted the alternate resolution.

However, Stern said the rhetoric was no worse on either side of the issue.

"To accuse the resolution's proponents of carrying out a McCarthy-like attitude, it's beyond paranoid," she said. □

Jewish officials seek ways to force Austrian restitution

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish officials seeking restitution from Austria are in a bind.

On the one hand, they are unwilling to negotiate directly with the Austrian government because it includes members of the far-right Freedom Party.

But they also want to seek justice for Jews whose assets were looted by the Austrian government during World War II.

The Claims Conference, an umbrella group that handles restitution issues with Germany and Austria, made clear after a series of meetings last week in Jerusalem that it "will not negotiate with the present government of Austria." But at the same time, it said in a statement, the group will explore other means "to achieve its critical goals."

Given the officials' unwillingness to deal directly with Austria, achieving those goals will demand some "creative negotiating," according to a source familiar with the situation. At stake are some \$10 billion in heirless assets in Austria, according to Elan Steinberg, the executive director of the World Jewish Congress, a member of the Claims Conference. He based the figure on a 1953 U.S. State Department analysis.

The "creative negotiating" includes several options, Steinberg told JTA:

- Indirect negotiations using such go-betweens as U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat, the Clinton administration's point man on Holocaust issues, or European Union officials;
- Dealing with institutions in Austria not linked to the government, including that nation's president or members of its Parliament;
- A class-action lawsuit, which the WJC announced this week it may file to answer "all questions of restitution" involving Austria.

This week, the Austrian official dealing with the slave-labor issue said her nation would follow Germany's lead when it comes to deciding how much to pay to such workers. If Germany pays \$7,400 to each laborer, Austria would do the same, Maria Schamayer, the former governor of Austria's central bank, said Tuesday in Washington after meeting with Eizenstat.

But Austria's focus on slave laborers to the exclusion of property restitution "is not sufficient," said Steinberg. "It is not going to solve the problem." □

JEWISH WORLD

Czech cemetery decision delayed

The Czech government delayed a decision on resolving a building project in Prague that involves a 13th-century Jewish cemetery.

A spokesman for the government said it would hold discussions with the developers and Prague's Jewish community over a new proposal that would allow the construction to occur but not disturb the buried remains.

Germany OKs slave labor bill

Germany's Cabinet backed legislation to begin paying Nazi-era slave laborers.

The legislation, which the country's Parliament must still approve, calls for payments of some \$4 billion to the laborers, with other moneys going for property restitution and cultural projects, according to a draft of the bill obtained by Reuters.

Holland's Jews reach settlement

The Netherlands agreed to give its Jewish community \$180 million to compensate for injustices they suffered in Holland after returning from Nazi death camps.

"We are happy that this settlement has been reached," said Ronni Naftaniel, a spokesman for the Central Jewish Council, which negotiated the settlement with Finance Ministry officials.

Tuesday's settlement followed protests from Dutch Jews that an earlier offer of \$114 million would not cover looted Jewish assets.

Group names 'Hamanitarians'

Serb and Kosovar paramilitaries, Indonesian forces in East Timor and Hutu fighters in the Congo shared the "Haman of the Year" award presented during the B'nai B'rith's U.N. Office's annual purim-spiel.

Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel, who formed a coalition with Austrian extremist Jorg Haider's Freedom Party, won the King Ahashveraus Award for dumb actions. Texas Gov. George W. Bush was runner-up in this category for his appearance at the evangelical Christian Bob Jones University.

Group purges Soviet from name

An advocacy group for Jews in the former Soviet Union changed its name. The group formerly known as the National Conference on Soviet Jewry is now NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia.

The change "formalizes the organized American Jewish community's long-held public recognition that the successor states are independent and that the Soviet Union is dead," said the group's president, Dennis Braham.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Politics aside, most acknowledge historic significance of pope's trip

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Despite the political sensitivities surrounding Pope John Paul II's historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land, there is no doubt that the visit marks a pinnacle in relations between Israel and the Vatican.

In marked contrast to the last papal visit to Israel in 1964, when Pope Paul VI did not publicly mention Israel by name, Pope John Paul II was welcomed Tuesday with a full state ceremony at Ben-Gurion Airport.

Israel and the Vatican established diplomatic relations in 1993 — and that created an important difference between the two visits: This week the pope's itinerary included meetings with Israel's president, prime minister and chief rabbis, in addition to visits to Christian holy sites. But the pope has gone beyond the step of getting the Vatican to forge diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. He is viewed as doing more than any of his predecessors toward furthering reconciliation between Catholics and Jews.

In his initial remarks at Tuesday's welcoming ceremony, the pope issued a call for Jews and Christians to set aside all forms of prejudice.

The address came a week after the pope sought forgiveness for the historic wrongdoings of the Catholic Church against Jews and other groups.

Israel welcomed the pope's unprecedented apology, but expressed disappointment it did not include an explicit reference to the Holocaust.

Before the pope's arrival, some Israeli officials said they believe an explicit mention of the Holocaust would be appropriate — particularly during John Paul's planned visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial.

Among those hoping for such a comment was Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

"I personally, as the grandchild of Jews who perished in the Holocaust, as an Israeli and as the leader of a strong and free Israel, see special meaning in the plea for forgiveness and the pope's visit to Yad Vashem," Barak said.

The Vatican has repeatedly stressed the spiritual nature of the pope's millennium pilgrimage in the footsteps of Moses and Jesus.

But from the moment the pope arrived on a Royal Jordanian flight from Amman — where he began the weeklong millennium pilgrimage in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas — he was immersed in the politics of the region.

Like most states, the Vatican has never recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital. During his remarks, the pope made no reference to Jerusalem. On Wednesday, when the pope visited the Palestinian-ruled town of Bethlehem, where he celebrated Mass, John Paul made reference to the Palestinian people's right to a homeland.

The "torment" of the Palestinian people "has gone on too long," the pope said at a welcoming ceremony with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Palestinian officials were quick to take the pope's comments — and indeed his whole visit to the self-rule areas — as a specific endorsement of Palestinian statehood.

But when a Vatican spokesman was asked whether the pope's kissing of a pot of soil presented by a Palestinian child during a welcoming ceremony meant the Holy See acknowledged a Palestinian state, the spokesman said that it was natural for the pope to kiss the soil from Jesus' birthplace. Vatican policy on a Palestinian state would only be determined after an international decision on the matter, the spokesman added.

For their part, Israeli officials downplayed the pope's remarks acknowledging the Palestinians right to a national homeland.

"For whoever does not know, an agreement called Camp David was signed" in 1978, Cabinet minister Haim Ramon told Israel Radio. In that agreement, Israel "recognized the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."

The pope's visit to the Dehaisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem on Wednesday was equally sensitive. Palestinian refugees were hoping the visit would promote their demand for a right to return to Israel.

But the pope's comments fell short of the clear endorsement of the right of return that the Palestinians had hoped for. □

COMMENTARY

**Could Irving succeed in libel trial?
World awaits verdict from London***By Douglas Davis*

LONDON (JTA) — Emerging from the Royal Courts of Justice here on the evening of March 15 was like leaving a musty 17th-century ecclesiastical battle for the fresh air of the 21st century.

The proposition presented to the court by Holocaust revisionist David Irving in his libel suit against the American Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt throughout two months of often mind-numbing esoterica might just as easily have been that the world is flat.

Was Auschwitz really a death camp where Jews were systematically slaughtered en masse? Did the Holocaust really happen? Did Hitler order, still less know about, the destruction of European Jewry? No, no, no, thundered Irving.

Given the wealth of historical documentation, physical evidence and eyewitness testimonies, including those of former death camp commandants, the questions might have been redundant to most reasonable people. But not, apparently, to Irving.

To Irving, Auschwitz was an awful slave labor camp where most of the 100,000 Jewish inmates — his figure — died of natural causes. To Irving, the Holocaust was the sum total of all the casualties of World War II.

Who was to blame for the suffering of the Jews? Why, says Irving, the Jews themselves who, by their unspeakable behavior and insatiable greed, have invited the hatred and persecution of their hosts wherever they have lived over the past 3,000 years. By Irving's logic, the victims become the perpetrators.

Then, again, he has a penchant for turning facts on their head. While it was Irving who instigated the libel trial, he used his closing address to argue that if he lost, the real victims would be free speech and the pursuit of knowledge. The bottom line, he contended, was that his defeat would deny his type of historians the opportunity to question the narrative of the Holocaust.

In fact the opposite is true. If Irving loses, his reputation might suffer, but nothing will prevent him from continuing to propagate his crackpot views. If he wins, however, mainstream historians will have to think long and hard about the consequences of taking on the flat-earth brigade that Irving represents.

But the case that Irving brought against Emory University's imperturbable Lipstadt was not based on her contention that the earth is actually round; rather, that Lipstadt and her British publisher, Penguin Books, had accused him of deliberately ignoring the evidence that the earth is round.

Irving claims that Lipstadt's assertion that he is a Holocaust denier, a distorter of history, a Hitler partisan and, in the words of defense lawyer Richard Rampton, "a right-wing extremist, a racist and, in particular, a rabid anti-Semite" ruined his reputation and wrecked his career.

Could Irving succeed in his libel action? And what would that mean? A senior source deep inside the Lipstadt defense team was euphoric immediately after the closing statements last week. There was no doubt, he said, that the judgment — expected in about three weeks — would be in Lipstadt's favor.

Then again, Irving was equally confident: "That's a stupid

question," he replied tersely when I asked him whether he thought he would win.

British libel law is stacked in Irving's favor. The judge is not being asked to rule on whether the Holocaust happened, whether Hitler knew or approved of the extermination of Jews or whether Auschwitz was indeed the scene of systematic mass killing.

Instead, he must decide whether, as Lipstadt charged in her book, Irving deliberately distorted, misstated, misquoted and falsified historical evidence and manipulated historical documents in order to make them conform to his own ideological agenda. And he must decide whether Irving deliberately ignored evidence in order to exonerate Hitler for the persecution of the Jews.

The burden of proof fell on Lipstadt to show that Irving actually had evidence to support the conventional meaning of the Holocaust; he says he did not because it is a subject he finds "endlessly boring." So, too, was the burden on Lipstadt to show that Irving had evidence to link Hitler with an order to kill Jews; Irving maintains no such definitive document exists.

It is possible, on strictly technical grounds, that the judge will find in Irving's favor, and the effect of such a decision could be far-reaching.

To many who are not versed in British libel law, a victory for Irving — however narrow, however technical — will be perceived as a vindication of Holocaust denial and a blurring of the line between legitimate historical inquiry and partial "research" that is designed to aid right-wing extremism and fuel neo-Nazism.

Whatever the outcome, it would be entirely wrong to assume that Irving is a cardboard cut-out fascist or a raving lunatic. His public speeches might be intemperate, but his actions are carefully calculated. He is a prolific author, an articulate spokesman for his cause and he has a presence — physical and intellectual — that commands attention. In other circumstances, Irving might have been an academic, a political leader or an effective courtroom advocate. Instead, he has found a niche for himself as the jewel in the crown of right-wing extremism, its intellectual guiding star.

Adding to the contradictions that accompany Irving is that he is openly contemptuous of the neo-Nazi skinheads who proliferate at many of the 200-odd meetings he addresses each year, a disdain that possibly has more to do with class than ideological difference.

For two months, the standing-room-only crowd of lawyers, journalists and public who converged on Court 73 were treated to a guided tour of the Alice-in-Wonderland world that Irving inhabits, where nothing is ever quite what it seems to be.

He was at once the sycophantic schoolboy when addressing the judge, the overbearing bully when dealing with defense counsel and the bantering schoolyard chum when mixing with the media. He was always the child, a point underscored by his nostalgia for the days of his youth and his seeming obligatory reference to his father, whether in his curriculum vitae or in court.

Ultimately, Irving presented an image of an overindulged Bar Mitzvah boy, thoroughly enjoying the celebrity of the occasion, smug in his own cleverness, scowling when he is denied an extra helping of chopped liver.

Whether railing against the international Jewish conspiracy that he says has hounded him for 30 years, excoriating what he perceives to be the enemies of free speech — most major Jewish organizations — or lamenting the stream of countries that have deported him because they found his views too obnoxious, Irving is clearly a child who hates having his party ruined. □