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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Syrian paper warns of war

The Syrian state-run Al-Ba'ath newspaper blamed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for the failure of Sunday's summit between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad and warned of war.

Meanwhile, Barak is leaving the door open for another effort to renew negotiations with Syria, but he told his Cabinet there is little chance of reaching an agreement in the near future.

Mubarak: I may meet with Barak

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he may meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak soon to help bring peace to the Middle East. Speaking after meeting Tuesday with President Clinton at the White House, Mubarak said he is not pessimistic after Clinton's summit with Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Immigrants won't get benefits

Jewish immigrants and refugees who entered the United States after 1996 and who have yet to become citizens will continue to be ineligible for welfare benefits.

The Supreme Court refused to hear a challenge Monday to laws that limit such benefits to U.S. citizens.

Jewish groups called the court's refusal a major disappointment.

Schorsch: Welcome intermarrieds

The Conservative movement should redouble efforts to welcome the non-Jewish spouses of Jewish partners and children of intermarried couples, said the leader of the movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch made his comments at the 100th anniversary meeting of the movement's Rabbinical Assembly in Philadelphia.

"We are the only branch of Judaism that carries out serious conversion practices," said Schorsch. "We do not offer conversions like you apply for a credit card or country club membership."

Police want Netanyahu indicted

Israeli police are recommending that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, be indicted. The couple was investigated for official gifts they allegedly took with them when Netanyahu left office and for services they received from a Jerusalem contractor.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Amid tension over Falash Mura, Israel says it needs \$50 million

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel is seeking \$50 million from American Jewry to resettle thousands of Ethiopians seeking to immigrate to the Jewish state.

Tension over the handling of Ethiopia's so-called Falash Mura has escalated between American Jewish leaders and Israelis in recent months, as an estimated 18,000 people wait in difficult conditions in Addis Ababa and Gander, in hopes that they will be allowed to immigrate to Israel.

Falash Mura are descendants of Jews who converted to Christianity. While some have embraced Judaism, all say they want to be reunited with relatives in Israel. Those in Addis Ababa and Gander have left their homes and sources of income in smaller villages because they believe it is the only way their applications to immigrate to Israel will be processed.

That tension increased a notch last week when Israel's minister of absorption, Yuli Tamir, said that there would be no effort to speed up what critics have called a slow immigration process without the financial commitment from U.S. Jewry.

For their part, officials of Jewish organizations say there is support for aiding the Ethiopian immigrants, but they first want Israel to commit to speeding up the process.

In a sign of the increased concern among Americans, the Israel and Overseas Pillar of the United Jewish Communities — the newly formed umbrella organization of North American Jewish federations — recently created a small fact-finding committee that will meet with players on all sides of the issue, travel to Ethiopia and draft a report by July.

Asked his reaction to Israel's request for \$50 million, the committee's head, Bob Reitman of Cleveland, said, "I like to put the horse before the cart. The first thing we have to do is understand the facts. Then we can engage on the question of should there be special funding options, or what other options exist."

However Reitman noted that "one of the things world Jewry can take pride in is the fact that when we've identified problems that demanded solutions, we've provided."

Ironically the debate over the Falash Mura comes at a time when American Jewish interest in Israel and overseas aid is said to be waning. Although Israel expects the absorption of additional Ethiopians to be expensive, the conflict appears to be more about the eligibility of the Falash Mura than the costs of their absorption.

Unlike the 14,000 Ethiopian Jews who were brought to Israel in the early 1990s under Operation Solomon, there is a lack of consensus about the status of the Falash Mura.

Israel does not recognize the Falash Muras' claims to Judaism, but instead is determining their eligibility under the Law of Return. That law allows immigration for anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, along with his or her spouse, children, grandchildren and their spouses.

Israeli officials are reviewing applications on a case-by-case basis. Israel is also concerned that the Falash Mura could bring an endless stream of impoverished, non-Jewish relatives into Israel. Fewer than 200 Falash Mura have been brought to Israel since the beginning of the year.

Living conditions are poor at the compounds in Ethiopia where the would-be immigrants have gathered. While some humanitarian aid is offered by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the North American Conference on Ethiopian

MIDEAST FOCUS

Lebanon pullback prompts fears

Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy is slated to meet U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan later this week to discuss Israel's planned withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

U.S. officials are reportedly concerned that Syria will encourage violence by Lebanon-based Islamic groups against Israel after the withdrawal.

Begin's grandson missing

The son of former Knesset member Ze'ev "Benny" Begin and grandson of the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin is missing after the F-16 plane he was piloting during a training flight was believed to have crashed into the Mediterranean.

Searches continued off the coast of northern Israel for Yonatan Begin and navigator Lior Harrari.

Peace talks to resume next week

A weeklong round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Washington ended Tuesday without any breakthroughs.

The talks will resume Monday, according to the U.S. State Department, which noted that there are "remaining gaps" on the issues facing the two sides.

Police arrest armed Palestinians

Israeli border police arrested three Palestinian youths armed with homemade weapons and bullets in downtown Jerusalem. The three, from a West Bank village near Ramallah, told investigators they intended to attack a Jewish settler.

Israel to return land to Arab town

Israel plans to return lands confiscated from an Israeli Arab village decades ago for a neighboring Jewish town. The decision to give the land back to Kafr Kasim was made "to strengthen the democratic character of the State of Israel," Interior Minister Natan Sharansky said Monday.

Jewry, advocates say it is inadequate. However the JDC has said that providing better services would simply attract more Ethiopians to the compounds.

Federations around North America have raised the possibility of providing direct funding to address the humanitarian needs of those in Ethiopia.

But now Israel is directly asking American Jewry to help absorb the costs of resettling those who do qualify for entry.

At a meeting last week with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations — one week after the umbrella group held a closed-door session on the issue with Israel's consul general in New York and its former ambassador to Ethiopia — Tamir, Israel's minister of absorption, told American Jewish leaders that the government is divided over how to handle the matter.

She said the issue will be discussed "as soon as we can get to it," but that the government is currently preoccupied with the peace process.

Tamir said she would speak with the JDC about the possibility of the organization providing more humanitarian assistance to those waiting in the compounds.

However Asher Ostrin, the JDC professional responsible for operations in Ethiopia, told JTA that he did not anticipate changing its services in response to such a request.

"At this point in time, we think we're doing what should be done," he said, adding that the solution lies less in humanitarian aid and more in Israel speeding up its processing so that Ethiopians know whether or not they can immigrate.

"The notion of pouring more resources in and creating a generation of people dependent on handouts from American organizations — where does it end?" asked Ostrin. The death rate among the Falash Mura living in Gondar and Addis Ababa has decreased in recent months and is lower than among the general population in Ethiopia, according to the JDC.

Tamir told the Conference of Presidents that without funding commitments from American Jewry, she is reluctant to press her government colleagues to expedite the processing of the Falash Mura.

"Unless there's a substantial commitment from abroad, I honestly don't know where to put" the new immigrants, she said, adding "If I bring them to Israel, I bring them to caravan sites and doom them to misery. Caravan sites are better than conditions in Addis Ababa and Gondar, but not much."

Jewish organizational officials, however, returned the ball to Israel's court, saying that while Israel should not be burdened with all the costs of absorption, until Israel expedites the process and decides who it will allow to immigrate, American Jews cannot mobilize a fund-raising campaign.

"I think American Jews would feel pride to help. But it has to come from Israel," said Lawrence Rubin, executive vice chairman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "The perception is that there are those in Israel saying no, put this aside."

Many who heard Tamir's speech at the March 22 meeting of the Conference of Presidents, which also touched on other challenges in absorption, sensed a shift in attitude of a minister who had previously expressed sympathy for the Falash Mura, and an indication that Ethiopians are being treated differently than others seeking to immigrate to Israel.

"She clearly gave the impression that she would be reluctant to bring them to Israel," Ted Friedman, a board member of Americans for Peace Now, said after the meeting. "American support is not a precondition for anyone coming from the former Soviet Union, and it wasn't a precondition for the Yemenites before them."

Lisa Schachner, North American coordinator for American Friends of South Wing to Zion, a group pressing Israel to bring over the Falash Mura, said she was disappointed with Tamir's comments, seeing them as a change from earlier statements.

Schachner questioned whether it was fair to say the compounds in Ethiopia, one of the world's poorest countries, are no worse than temporary caravan sites in Israel.

"In Israel there's hope. In Ethiopia they're languishing and sitting in limbo," she said.

"We're getting mixed messages from Israel and as long as that goes on American Jews will stay frozen," she said. "If Israel says we're processing them, please give them humanitarian relief and help us with absorption, then I think American Jews will open their pockets." □



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JEWISH WORLD

UJC pushes health care bill

Ten members of Congress agreed to co-sponsor legislation guaranteeing certain health care rights to older managed care enrollees, an issue of growing concern in the U.S. Jewish community.

Officials from the United Jewish Communities, who engaged in lobbying efforts last week, said the lawmakers agreed to support legislation to ensure that enrollees, many of whom reside in Jewish nursing homes, can return to their home communities after hospitalization to receive specialized care.

Court rules against LaRouche

The Democratic Party acted lawfully when it refused to count votes cast for a political extremist in the 1996 presidential primaries, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled.

In January 1996, the Democratic National Committee sent letters to state party leaders saying Lyndon LaRouche was "not a bona fide Democrat" because his beliefs were "explicitly racist and anti-Semitic."

Reform movement presses Putin

The international Reform movement is asking Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin to "react forcefully" to anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

ARZA/World Union is one of many groups to express concern over the issue, particularly after an anti-Semitic ad ran on the state-controlled television channel in the closing days of Russia's presidential campaign.

Center planned for Hitler's town

Officials in the Austrian town where Hitler was born announced plans to turn his birthplace into a "center of international understanding."

The officials at Braunau am Inn said they took the move because they were stung by international criticism over the recent inclusion of the right-wing Freedom Party in Austria's government.

Lawyer jailed for bilking survivor

A London court jailed a lawyer for 15 months after he was found guilty of embezzling some \$250,000 from an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor. Anna Goldman died penniless in a retirement home in 1997. Her lawyer, Norman Latimer, told the court he stole the money after experiencing financial difficulties following his divorce in 1991.

Poll: Jews top Internet shoppers

American Jews are the most frequent Internet shoppers in the United States, according to a poll. In a survey of nearly 4,000 people conducted by Zogby Culture Polls, 42.3 percent of U.S. Jews said they shop online. Asian Americans were next at 39.8 percent.

March of the Living starts to focus on present-day Poland, not just past

By Brianne Korn

NEW YORK (JTA) — The trail leading from Auschwitz to Birkenau is laden with the memories of Jews who were marched to their deaths on Polish soil during World War II.

For many who retrace those steps as part of a student program designed to fulfill the mantra "never forget," their focus will be on the past. Thanks to an initiative sponsored by the New York chapter of the American Jewish Committee, however, some students will march down that trail looking toward the future.

Working in conjunction with the Polish government and the March of the Living, an educational program that shuttles 6,000 students to Poland and then Israel in a demonstration of the persecution and independence that marked Jewish history during the 20th century, the AJCommittee is implementing a program to acquaint students with present-day Poland before the trip.

The goal, the AJCommittee says, is to show how much Poland has changed since the Holocaust and contribute to greater understanding and cooperation in the future.

"The focus was never on Poland today," said Cheryl Fishbein, an AJCommittee board member and the vice president of the New York Board of Education. "It was always on pre-Holocaust," she said. "We wanted to show a different face to Jews coming to Poland."

This year, three Polish officials representing Polish and Jewish interests met with students from the New York area before the trip begins April 29 to discuss present-day issues involving Jews and anti-Semitism in Poland.

It is a program that, according to its creators and the Polish government, the March of the Living itinerary has lacked for too long.

More than 200 students from New York are participating in this year's march. Students fly to Poland and tour the remnants of concentration camps and Jewish cities. Students from around the world then gather to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau.

The trip culminates with a celebration of Jewish independence as the students are flown to Israel.

"MOL is a problem for some Poles because the trip only sees one side of Poland," said Deborah Sklar, director of international programs in the New York chapter of the AJCommittee, and creator of the new initiative.

"I had a feeling the whole idea of March of the Living is to show Poland is nothing but concentration camps," said Piotr Kadlcik, vice president of the Jewish Congregations in Poland, an umbrella group.

Once in Poland, MOL directors hope to coordinate interactive activities between students on the trip and Polish teens.

"It's a good idea to come in contact with the Polish people more," said Emily Goldstein, a junior at Hunter College High School who attended the conference. Now, she says, "I'll try and be more open-minded."

"There's a tremendous amount of suspicion," said Fishbein of the attitudes with which students are embarking on the trip. There's the impression that "Poles are raised on their mothers' milk to be anti-Semitic." But, said Fishbein, "if you can get to the point where you can show mutual respect — that's an important lesson." □

Nursing home opens in Bulgaria

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish leaders attended opening ceremonies for a Jewish nursing home in the Bulgarian capital.

The home, which will serve 40 patients, was the result of a joint venture involving the Claims Conference, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and a local community group in Sofia known as Shalom. Two-thirds of the \$600,000 needed to open the facility came from the Claims Conference, which used the proceeds from the sale of heirless Jewish property in the former East Germany, according to the group's associate executive vice president, Moshe Jahoda. □

Jewish papers duped by ad for Jesus movie

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — An advertisement that appeared in 80 American Jewish newspapers last week looks fairly innocuous.

The title of a film, "The Rabbi," appears in Hebrew-style lettering, above a close-up shot of a bearded, yarmulka-wearing man praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

"The unforgettable story of an Israeli rabbi and his struggles in modern society," the ad says. "The drama of this family relationship will move and inspire you."

What it does not mention is that "The Rabbi," a one-hour made-for-television film broadcast on stations throughout the country last weekend, is about a "messianic Jew" who gradually convinces his Orthodox family that he did not abandon Judaism when he took "Yeshua" into his heart — the name "messianic Jews" use for Jesus.

Also omitted from the advertisement is the fact that "The Rabbi" was produced by Morris Cerullo, a San Diego-based Christian missionary who describes himself as a "servant of God."

With this misleading ad and a Jewish-owned firm as his unwitting accomplice, Cerullo managed to infiltrate a world generally beyond the grips of "messianic Jews" and missionaries: the Jewish press. Jewish newspapers do not promote "messianic Jewish" activities or print advertisements from them.

Cerullo did not return phone calls from JTA. His strategy of going through the Jewish media indicates a departure from missionaries' traditional focus on Jews on the fringes and instead a desire to reach a highly affiliated group of Jews. The movie — whose production values and acting resemble daytime soap operas — conveys the idea, rejected by all streams of Judaism, that one can remain a committed Jew while believing in Jesus.

It shows the yarmulka-wearing "messianic Jewish" son, Yochanan, enjoying a Passover seder with his family, where his young son, Ya'akov, sings the Four Questions and talks about attending synagogue. Yochanan cites texts from the Hebrew bible that he claims prove Jesus is the messiah, and his reasoning wins over his atheist Holocaust survivor uncle, his sister and even his rabbi father.

"I couldn't blindly accept the rabbis' interpretation," says Yochanan, later, noting "the moment Yeshua came into my heart I stopped hating."

At the end of the film, Cerullo appears on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem explaining that "the purpose of this drama is to demonstrate why we need to trust Yeshua as the messiah. We're not betraying our Jewishness, but we're becoming a better Jew."

Cerullo signs off with a "Shalom," and the program is followed by a special offer, promoted in a Yiddish-accented voiceover, for a free blessing plaque.

Alerted on March 23 to the content of the film, the Joseph Jacobs firm — which links prospective advertisers to Jewish publications — said it was contacting all the newspapers to let them know about it, but that by the time it learned the truth about "The Rabbi," most of the papers had already been printed.

"In the future, if something comes through a little like this we will delve into it a bit further," said Eli Rosenfeld, vice president of sales for the New York firm.

Rosenfeld said that the ad had come through an agency, Walter Bennett Communications in suburban Philadelphia, which had said the client wished to remain anonymous, something that is "not entirely unusual" in the industry.

"Nothing in the ad screams missionary," said Rosenfeld, adding that had he known the content of the film, "the ads would never have gotten past our office."

Richard Jacobs, the chairman of Joseph Jacobs, said that he had specifically asked Walter Bennett Communications whether "The Rabbi" was a proselytizing program and was told it was not.

He had been suspicious of the firm because it was not listed in an official directory of advertising agencies, would not disclose the identity of its client and did not submit the advertisement itself until the last minute.

In retrospect, Jacobs said, he suspects the firm deliberately submitted the advertisement close to deadline so that it would not be closely scrutinized. "We feel very bad about this," said Jacobs.

Robert Strayton, the account executive at Walter Bennett, declined to comment.

"It's very much a Trojan horse," said Richard Friedman, executive vice president of the Syracuse Jewish Federation in Syracuse, N.Y., the first community to notify Joseph Jacobs about the movie. "You come into our community and advertise this, but what you're really looking to do is destroy our community.

"If you truly believe in your message of Christianity, then why aren't you open and above board?" asked Friedman.

"The Rabbi" was broadcast March 22 in Syracuse, which has 9,000 Jews. Immediately 15 people complained to the federation, which quickly sent out letters to the community and — with the local interreligious council — drafted an op-ed piece for the local paper denouncing the movie and its advertising strategy.

How could a Christian missionary, whose Web site includes "Jewish" as part of his "Seven Point Master Plan for World Evangelism," so easily dupe so many at once?

"This was stealthy and well thought out and lots of knowledge of the Jewish world went into it," said Friedman, noting, "The Jewish newspapers have been dealing with Joseph Jacobs forever, so everyone trusts the person they got it from."

One publisher of a major Jewish paper who did not want to be quoted by name said "the fact that this came from Joseph Jacobs lulled us into complacency."

At the Forward in New York, managing editor Ira Stoll said that it's up to the newspaper to screen the ads it runs.

"We have a policy of not running ads from Christian missionary groups," Stoll said. "In this case, no one realized this ad was from a missionary group until after we published it."

For its part, Joseph Jacobs does not yet have any specific plans for preventing similar errors in the future.

"Our operation is not big enough to say we'll have hundreds of people alerted or we need to do a training course," said Rosenfeld. "In the future, we'll attempt to be a little sharper, but this guy knew what he was doing."

Syracuse's Friedman said, "I don't know if you can ever fully protect against things like this," but suggested "you have to be vigilant, review procedures and maybe tighten them up."

"These aren't good days for Mr. Jacobs' operation," Friedman added. □

(JTA intern Brianne Korn in New York contributed to this report.)