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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Police want Mordechai charged

Israeli police are recommending that Transportation Minister Yitzhak Mordechai be charged with three counts of sexual assault. The charges could carry a seven-year sentence. [Page 4]

Catholic leaders apologize

The Catholic Church of Switzerland apologized for not doing enough to help Jews during World War II. Swiss Catholic bishops said the church had not tried to save refugees, particularly Jews, from the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, Lithuania's Catholic Church issued an apology for not doing enough to prevent the massacre of some 220,000 Jews during the 1941-44 Nazi occupation. "We are sorry the church did not show enough resistance in times when nationalist egoism was overtaking the values of the Bible," said a statement that was signed by the nation's archbishop.

Jewish leaders blast Egypt

A U.S. Jewish group blasted Egypt for denying reports that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had offered to intercede on behalf of 13 Jews being tried in Iran amid accusations that they had spied for Israel.

"Is this the Egyptian government's true colors?" the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations said in a statement, adding that it is "time for Egypt to be held to account."

After meeting with Mubarak last week, Israel's infrastructure minister, Eli Suissa, said the Egyptian leader had offered to help the 13.

Meanwhile, French President Jacques Chirac asked U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to warn Iran it risks harming ties with Europe if it convicts the 13.

Politician pushes U.N. on Israel

A U.S. congressman told the United Nations that delay in admitting Israel to a U.N. regional group could prevent America from paying its U.N. dues.

In a letter to U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.) said support that is building in Congress for paying the dues could "quickly dissipate" if Israel continues to be excluded.

Because of the Passover holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Friday, April 21.

Initial skepticism about Birthright turns into enthusiasm ... and cash

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — At a Jewish federation briefing last week about Birthright Israel, the emotional fervor surrounding the transformation of college students from unaffiliated to Jewishly involved almost resembled a religious revival.

The students were clearly not the only ones transformed by Birthright's launch this winter, in which 6,000 young adults went on free 10-day Israel trips.

The briefing closely followed the announcement that 76 federations, representing 83 percent of the North American Jewish community, have signed letters of support for Birthright and that their new umbrella group, the United Jewish Communities, is en route to becoming a partner in Birthright.

Assuming the UJC's plan passes at its board of trustees meeting in June, the federation system and its overseas partner, the Jewish Agency for Israel, will collectively contribute \$39 million to the initiative, signaling a clear departure from their initially lukewarm attitude toward Birthright. In addition, 14 donors have pledged a total of \$70 million to the project, and on April 12 the Israeli government signed a contract committing it to allocate \$70 million to Birthright over the next five years.

These developments mean Birthright's envisioned three-part funding partnership — among individual philanthropists, federations and the Israeli government — is almost entirely in place, whereas just a few months ago the project's financial future was still uncertain.

At last week's emotional briefing at the conclusion of a major UJC governance session in Washington, recent Queens College graduate Max Sivin enthusiastically described his Birthright-inspired metamorphosis from someone not interested in Judaism to an outreach worker for Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

"People came home from this trip and felt things they hadn't felt before," he said. "This trip gave them the opportunity to find something they didn't even know they were looking for."

The Birthright briefing was an optional session following two intensive days of heated discussions about the future of the UJC. But the crowd was standing-room-only, emotional and overwhelmingly pro-Birthright.

Sivin's and another student's testimonials were greeted with tears and applause. Ben Zinbarg, president of the Jewish Community Endowment Foundation of Stamford, Conn., stood up and thanked Birthright for, he said, spurring a donor to pledge the largest gift the federation has ever received. The gift has not yet been finalized, and federation leaders declined to specify the quantity or identify the donor.

Charles Bronfman, the UJC's chairman and one of the co-founders of Birthright, said he and his wife had received 1,000 letters from grateful participants, and he unveiled preliminary findings of a study on Birthright alumni.

Among the most surprising discoveries, said Bronfman, who initially had thought there should be a small charge for the trip, was that the overwhelming majority of students said their main reason for going on Birthright was because it was free.

The study, conducted by researchers at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, also found that the majority of participants think about the trip "at least once a day" and that two out of three Birthright participants now expect to return to Israel within the next three years.

Birthright was spearheaded with \$5 million donations each and lots of visionary talk from Bronfman and hedge-fund-manager-turned-philanthropist Michael Steinhart

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak may transfer land earlier

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak would consider granting the Palestinians a "territorial advance" on an upcoming withdrawal from the West Bank to underscore Israel's seriousness about negotiations, the premier was quoted as telling his Cabinet.

Barak also said Israel is not interested in annexing Palestinian areas surrounding Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Jewish settler leaders are vowing to launch demonstrations against Barak's government. The threats came in the wake of reports that Israel is offering the Palestinians 80 percent of the West Bank as part of a final peace deal.

Yeshiva draft plan criticized

A recommendation that fervently Orthodox yeshiva students in Israel decide for themselves whether they will serve in the army is being criticized for perpetuating a double standard.

Knesset member Ra'anana Cohen of the One Israel bloc said any solution must be based on equality, while Knesset member Yosef Lapid of the secular Shinui Party said he plans to submit a bill to draft all yeshiva students.

Israeli survivors to get payments

Some 150,000 Holocaust survivors in Israel received letters informing them that they will soon receive payments from a Swiss fund, Israel Radio reported. Of the \$180 million fund, an estimated \$59 million has been allocated for Holocaust survivors in Israel.

China backs Palestinian state

Chinese President Jiang Zemin voiced support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. His comment came during a one-day visit to the Palestinian self-rule areas. When he returned to Israel on Sunday, Jiang visited the Western Wall as well as Christian and Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem.



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about the impact Israel experiences have on Jewish identity.

The program, which will send 2,000 students to Israel this summer, has apparently cemented much of its support since its highly publicized launch this winter.

Twelve philanthropists — including Ronald Lauder, Leslie Wexner, Bronfman's brother, Edgar and Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America — recently matched Steinhart and Bronfman's contributions.

Assuming its board of trustees approves the proposed plan in June, the UJC will commit \$15 million, matched by \$15 million from individual federations and approximately \$9 million from the Jewish Agency.

Until recently, many in the federation world were skeptical about Birthright, even though it was touted by the chairman of their umbrella organization. Bronfman insists he has not abused his UJC role to push Birthright forward, noting that he leaves the room during official federation meetings on the topic.

When Birthright was first announced in 1998, federations felt they had not been consulted adequately beforehand.

Some feared Birthright would interfere with successful Israel programs they already sponsored, while others expressed concern that it have adequate follow-up programming so, as one federation executive said, "it's not a one-shot deal." But now most of the large federations are signing letters of intent, committing them to contribute to the program.

At last week's Birthright briefing, Barry Shrage, the executive vice president of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies, told the group he had "some initial doubts" about Birthright but now his community is "going to be of the strongest advocates." Shrage later told JTA that his community is considering investing \$90,000 a year in Birthright.

The fact that Hillel is playing a large role in the program — recruiting students, leading trips and staying in touch with participants afterwards — has allayed his initial worries that Birthright would lack follow-up.

Also, he added, "When kids come back and you meet with them, you can't help but get excited." □

Mossad said to be warning of attack on pope by militants

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Israeli intelligence officials have warned their Italian counterparts that Islamic extremists may attack the pope or the Vatican to derail the Middle East peace process, according to a Rome newspaper.

Il Messaggero reported that Italian police beefed up security around the Vatican, including placing metal detectors around St. Peter's Square, in response to the warnings from the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service.

The first big test of the new security measures came Sunday, when scores of thousands of pilgrims jammed St. Peter's Square and surrounding streets for Pope John Paul II's celebration of Palm Sunday Mass.

In recent weeks, Italian police had placed numerous airport-style screening devices — including walk-through metal detectors for people and conveyor-belt X-ray machines for bags — between the columns of the colonnade in the square.

Earlier this month, a Vatican spokesman said there had been no specific security threat. He said the measures were being taken because of the huge crowds expected for the Easter season. He added that Italian police had wanted to install the metal detectors for some time, but the Vatican had resisted.

The year 2000, which marks the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, is drawing millions of pilgrims to Rome. There had been earlier warnings of possible terrorism before Christmas and New Year's.

"The fact that the measures are being taken now, and not at the beginning of the Holy Year, is a sign of the alerts received since then," Il Messaggero reported.

The success of the pope's recent trip to the Holy Land was apparently one reason for the new warnings, the paper said. □

JEWISH WORLD

Hillary avoids potential minefield

First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton withdrew as honorary chairwoman of a charity dinner organized by an Arab-American group after learning that the organization refused to invite representatives of the Israeli Embassy.

The Jewish vote is believed to be critical for Clinton in her campaign against New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for a New York senate seat.

Red Cross mulls new symbol

The International Red Cross is considering adopting a new symbol of protection for civilians in war that could be used by Israel's Magen David Adom relief agency.

The international group has repeatedly denied membership to Israel because it does not recognize the Star of David emblem.

Panel to report on Vichy actions

A French panel is planning to issue a long-awaited report on Jewish assets seized under the nation's wartime Vichy regime.

The Matteoli Commission, a panel of prominent officials, historians and Jewish community representatives, was expected to hand over the 3,000-page report to Prime Minister Lionel Jospin on Monday.

Lithuania focuses on extremists

Lithuanian officials are discussing ways to prevent political extremism. According to sources in Vilnius, the officials discussed recent statements made by the head of a neo-Nazi group and by the newly elected mayor of the city of Kaunas, who referred to some Lithuanians who participated in wartime atrocities against Jews as "Lithuanian national heroes."

Russian officials arrest Israelis

Several Israeli citizens were recently arrested for their involvement in a ring that has transferred tens of millions of dollars in precious stones out of Russia, according to Russia's state security service. Israelis are the main financial backers for the group, and most of the gems were transferred to the Jewish state, according to the spokesman for the Federal Security Service.

Jews want thesis pulled

Jewish leaders in New Zealand are calling on a university to withdraw a 1993 master's thesis that questioned whether Jews were killed in gas chambers during the Holocaust.

The author of the thesis, Joel Hayward, recently sent a letter to the New Zealand Jewish Chronicle saying that his thesis' "conclusions are wrong" and that he now believes the Nazis did, indeed, kill 6 million Jews.

Bill to fight workplace bias may have a chance this year

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Members of the U.S. House of Representatives have again introduced the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, hoping a new set of supporters will help push it into law.

The bill, introduced April 11, is aimed at preventing workplace religious discrimination by forcing employers to accommodate religious needs.

The bill is no stranger to Congress. Several attempts to get it enacted into law have failed. This year, however, there appears to be more bipartisan support for the bill, and advocates say they're cautiously optimistic about its chances of success.

"It's about the strongest set of co-sponsors on the bill that we've ever had," said Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel for the American Jewish Committee.

The bill would clarify an amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed nearly 30 years ago that requires employers to "reasonably accommodate" the needs of religious employees unless they cause the employer "undue hardship."

Foltin, chairman of a coalition of religious and civil rights organizations working to pass the bill, said the Workplace Religious Freedom Act would restore to the Civil Rights Act amendment the weight that Congress originally intended.

"The Workplace Religious Freedom Act is crucial civil rights legislation meant to ensure that all members of society, whatever their religious beliefs and practices, are protected from this invidious form of discrimination."

Rep. Asa Hutchinson (R-Ark.) joined Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) in introducing the bill. A staff member for Hutchinson said the congressman decided to co-sponsor the bill after he received a number of letters from organizations describing religious discrimination on the job. Nadler, who has supported the bill in the past, sees the legislation as a way to obligate employers to accommodate their employees' religious practices and give employees the right to a fundamental protection.

For example, the legislation would help observant Jews and Seventh-day Adventists who have been forced to work on Saturdays, Muslim women who have been asked to remove their head scarves while at work and devout Christians who have been made to work on Sunday or Christmas.

The Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, which considers the Workplace Religious Freedom Act one of its top legislative priorities, says the bill's introduction is particularly timely in light of a recent settlement between the State of New York and Sears over the company's failure to accommodate the needs of Sabbath-observant workers. But the bill, which has the support of every leading Jewish organization, likely faces the same opposition it has in previous years, much of it from the business and labor communities.

In 1997, the federal government enacted guidelines to protect religious expression. The guidelines only applied to employees at all federal agencies, but the private sector often tries to apply the federal government's employment practices.

The current law has helped many people but it never really lived up to its original promise, said Abba Cohen, counsel for Agudath Israel of America, a fervently Orthodox Jewish organization that helped draft the legislation and has been active in the issue for more than 10 years.

"The standards and requirements are so low now that employers don't bother to accommodate employees, and employees don't bother asserting their rights," Cohen said. The new legislation will, Cohen hopes, bring about a greater religious understanding into the workplace.

Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said the guidelines were a good first step, but that the Workplace Religious Freedom Act is the next step.

While it is difficult to move legislation now because of the short legislative calendar, Pelavin left room for the bill's passage.

"It's possible people will view this as consensus legislation and use it as an election issue," he said. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Israeli law defies sexist culture, gets tough on sexual harassment***By Helen Schary Motro*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Sexual harassment hit the Israeli headlines with a jolt this week when police recommended that Transportation Minister Yitzhak Mordechai be charged with three counts of sexual assault.

Sunday's recommendation that prosecutors hand down an indictment against Mordechai came a week after another sexual harassment case ended in tragedy, when the accused victimizer committed suicide while in police custody.

Yehuda Naveh, head of the Tel Aviv branch of Kupat Holim, the largest health fund in Israel, hanged himself April 10 in his jail cell after being arrested at his office a day earlier.

The arrest came after a senior female employee in Naveh's office filed a complaint last week alleging a long series of sexual attacks.

In the course of their investigation, police secretly filmed a video that allegedly showed Naveh making explicit sexual advances, holding her paycheck in one hand and fondling her with the other, and persuading her not to cry out as he assaulted her.

At the request of Naveh's family, a Tel Aviv judge has ordered an investigation into the suicide.

This bombshell hit the country days before the police made their recommendation regarding Mordechai.

Last month, a young female employee in Mordechai's office accused the veteran army general and former candidate for prime minister of repeatedly assaulting her and making sexual propositions.

While headlines around the world focused at the time on possible breakthroughs in the peace process, the Mordechai scandal monopolized the Israeli media.

Radio stations broadcast verbatim the accuser's replies during her lie detector test, including explicit details of the alleged sexual attacks.

Several other women have since come forward to add their accusations about improper advances allegedly made by Mordechai during his long career in the army.

The accusations come against the backdrop of one of the most progressive sexual harassment laws in the world.

The 1998 Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law encompasses every sector of Israeli society — the workplace, military, educational and health systems — and provides for imprisonment, fines and punitive compensation for sexual harassment. It also allows civil suits for damages.

The law defines sexual harassment in the widest terms: as sexual contact, repeated unwanted sexual speech, propositions or innuendo, sexual blackmail or debasing references to a person's gender.

In cases involving minors, patients and those in which the harasser is in a position of direct authority over the victim, the conduct is prohibited even if consensual.

The law is gender-neutral, and it has been applied against a number of educators in cases of same-sex harassment involving pupils.

Because it places liability not only upon the harasser but the

institution where it takes place, the law's power is exponentially increased.

Every employer and institution is obliged to disseminate the law, to appoint a person responsible for complaints and to promptly investigate them. If not, they are as liable as the person implicated.

It is no secret that the Israeli military is a hothouse for exploitative sexual relationships, according to Dafna Izraeli, head of a new program in gender studies at Bar-Ilan University.

It has been common for pretty young female soldiers to become "trophies" of the commanders, says Izraeli, who adds that an aura of permissive license has traditionally permeated the military.

Last year, in a case that attracted intense attention, the Supreme Court blocked the army's promotion of Brig. Gen. Nir Galili, who had been accused by a 19-year-old recruit of engaging in intimate sexual relations with her while he was commander of her base.

The Galili verdict sent out a strong message that prompted the head of the military police to complain, "We've reached a state where I can't kiss a woman soldier on the cheek when she's discharged."

But recalling similar incidents that were never revealed, one female veteran said sadly, "There are dozens of Galilis."

Similar instances of coercion are believed prevalent in the workplace, which is overwhelmingly dominated by male managers.

The Israel Women's Network, which maintains a hotline and provides legal assistance, estimates that only one in 10 cases is reported.

Women in certain segments of society are especially vulnerable to unwanted advances.

Russian immigrants "absolutely desperate to keep their jobs would not dare to say no," says sociologist Larissa Remennick. "If there is a new law, it has made no difference to them. Foreign workers, with even less status, are the easiest prey."

Religious women are considered another easy target. They fear that filing a complaint could jeopardize their children's chances for marriage.

Arab women fear that raising the issue could backfire under their society's honor code. Criminologist Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian says that if Arab women complain, they put their lives on the line.

Esther Sivan, the Israel Women's Network's legal adviser, stresses that going public may damage the complainant's reputation and expose her to ridicule.

May Tzabor, an attorney for the women's organization Na'amat, agrees.

"Women still pay the price," she says. "Employers fail to protect women after they have spoken up. They are seen as troublemakers and themselves turn into the accused."

Despite such fears, the current social atmosphere contributes to judges' readiness to convict, according to Wafa Zoubi Fahoum, a Haifa lawyer whose practice includes defending those accused of harassment.

Ahuva Oren-Pines, administrator at the Herzlia Interdisciplinary Center, said there is "no doubt that the law makes men nervous. But the prevalence of harassment in society made it imperative that something be done." At the very least, writer Atara Ofek said last week, "sexual power games will have to be a lot more sophisticated from now on." □