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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Women's prayers at Wall OK'd

Israel's High Court of Justice ruled that women could pray at Judaism's holiest site, the Western Wall, while wearing prayer shawls.

The ruling marks a major victory in an 11-year effort by the group Women of the Wall.

Some religious Knesset members denounced the decision and said they would move immediately to pass legislation to circumvent the ruling. [Page 1]

Three Iranians deny spy charges

The final three of the 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel denied any role in the alleged spy ring.

American Jewish observers predicted earlier that the trio, who had been the only suspects out on bail, would be found innocent. Verdicts for all 13 are expected by the end of the month. [Page 3]

Barak, Bush address AIPAC

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak asked pro-Israel activists to lobby U.S. legislators and the American Jewish community on behalf of his peace efforts. "The risks and price of peace are high, but the risks and price of war are unthinkable," Barak said, speaking via satellite to participants of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference in Washington.

Also addressing the conference, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush said America would not interfere in Israel's democratic process if he is elected president. Bush also promised that he would move the U.S. ambassador to Jerusalem.

Some 900 participants and 650 students opened the AIPAC conference on Sunday. As part of their three-day gathering, the group was expected to lobby congressional leaders on such issues as the peace process, foreign aid to Israel and continuing sanctions against Iraq. [Page 4]

Israelis sent to bomb shelters

Israel sent residents of the country's northern communities into bomb shelters Monday.

It was unclear why the action was taken, but in the past, the army has given the order after Israeli strikes in Lebanon have caused civilian casualties, raising fears of attacks on Israeli civilians from Hezbollah.

Religious pluralism advocates hail 'victories' for prayer at Kotel

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Advocates of religious pluralism in Israel are hailing what they are calling two major breakthroughs in efforts to enable all Jews to pray as they see fit at Judaism's holiest site.

In a landmark ruling Monday that caps an 11-year legal battle, Israel's High Court of Justice recognized the right of Women of the Wall to hold women's prayer services — using the Torah and with women wearing prayer shawls — at Jerusalem's Western Wall.

The court gave the government six months to make the necessary arrangements for the services and awarded the women — who are Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, but use Orthodox liturgy — \$4,800 in damages.

In a separate development, the Conservative movement reached an understanding with the Israeli government allowing it to hold mixed-gender prayer services at Robinson's Arch, at the southern end of the wall.

While officially part of the Kotel, as the Western Wall is known, the arch has not traditionally been a site of prayer and is separated from the main part of the wall by a ramp leading to the Dome of the Rock.

For more than a decade, Reform and Conservative Jews, and women from a variety of Jewish streams, have fought for the right to hold services at the wall.

The Kotel has separate sections for men and women, and efforts to hold non-Orthodox services or those led by women, have often led to ejection by Israeli police and harassment — sometimes violent — by fervently Orthodox worshippers.

"This is a great day for the advancement of the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel," the president of Israel's Conservative movement, Rabbi Ehud Bandel, said in a statement Monday.

It's a day, he said, when both the Israeli government and the High Court "accept the principle that all Jews have the right to pray at the holiest place of the Jewish people, according to their traditions."

Activists for the Women of the Wall in Israel and the United States welcomed today's ruling, which noted that nothing in the group's prayer services — in which women pray separately from men, use Orthodox liturgy and do not say any prayers that would require the presence of a minyan of 10 men — violates Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law.

Some Orthodox Jews object to the fact that the women raise their voices in prayer, contravening the prohibition against men hearing a woman's voice, lest he be distracted from his worship.

"Eleven years of struggle have reached a conclusion," one of the Women of the Wall petitioners, Anat Hoffman of Jerusalem, said in response to the ruling by the high court.

"We've come out of the Middle Ages, and we will soon hold the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony at the Kotel," she said.

But fervently Orthodox legislators denounced the decision and vowed to initiate legislation that would circumvent the ruling.

And in the United States, Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for Agudath Israel of America, said, "It is particularly sad that at a time like this, when our Jewish brothers and sisters in the Holy Land are suffering violence and threats from sworn enemies of our people and are in such special need of divine protection, that the Jewish state's High

MIDEAST FOCUS

Annan seeks more peacekeepers

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended increasing the U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon. In a written report to the Security Council on Monday, he called for increasing the force from 4,500 to about 5,600 to confirm that Israel's withdrawal takes place, and then to about 7,900 after the withdrawal.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Lebanese, accompanied by Hezbollah fighters, reclaimed villages they left during the past 20 years. The mass return came after the Israel-allied South Lebanon Army soldiers abandoned posts near the villages.

In another development, reports said crowds of Lebanese, many of them SLA soldiers and their families, gathered at the border to Israel to enter the Jewish state.

Calm restored in territories

The West Bank and Gaza Strip were relatively calm after more than a week of violence. The calm came after Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, who was to travel to Yemen this week, promised to leave instructions to restore order in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Israel Radio reported that the Palestinian Authority prevented an ad from being published that would have called for more demonstrations.

Housing in Abu Dis approved

The Jerusalem planning board approved a plan to build Jewish housing in the Arab village of Abu Dis, but still within Jerusalem's jurisdictional boundaries. The plan in the village, which is to be handed over to Palestinian rule, calls for the construction of 200 housing units.

Israel Radio said the plots are owned by interests that promote an Israeli presence in eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank, including the Ateret Cohanim group and Miami developer Irving Moskowitz.



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Court would arrogate to itself the mission of undermining the Jewish religious tradition."

In Jerusalem, Cabinet Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior, who is spearheading government efforts to resolve religious pluralism conflicts, said he disagreed with it.

Calling the decision a "mistake of the court," Melchior said, "We cannot resolve the central problems of our society through forcing one side on another.

"I think we can resolve the problems only through joint dialogue to reach understanding," Melchior told Israel Radio. "It will lead to a terrible and violent disagreement instead of trying to find a compromise on the matter."

While most celebrated the ruling, some Women of the Wall activists questioned whether the ruling would be enforced and suggested that it did not make any significant advances over a 1994 ruling in their favor, which was not enforced.

"This does not mean we can go tomorrow with Torah and tallit [prayer shawls] and have service in the women's section," said Miriam Benson, a board member of the International Committee for Women of the Wall, who lives in New Haven, Conn., and has been with the group since its founding in 1989.

Benson said the ruling throws implementation into the hands of the Israeli government. "There's a strict deadline of six months, but there have been strict deadlines in the past that were ignored," she said.

While her group felt "an initial euphoria" when the ruling was first announced, on closer examination she decided it's "just in line" with the 1994 ruling and "doesn't impose a remedy," said Benson.

But another member of the group, Rivka Haut of Riverdale, N.Y., said the ruling is a step forward in that it requires the government to protect the group when they pray at the wall.

"We have a major lobbying job. Already there is a movement in the political arena to throw monkey wrenches in, and we're beginning to strategize about how to deal with that," she said. "We made it to the top of Everest. We may slip. But we're going to try to get back up there or stay there, depending on what they do to us."

Under the Conservative agreement reached Monday, meanwhile, the Israeli government will protect the right of Conservative Jews to hold services at Robinson's Arch and will provide the movement with space to store prayer books and prayer shawls.

The two sides agreed to a 12-month trial period during which time the Conservative movement will be able to hold morning services at the site once a week, during Tisha B'Av, and other special times with prior coordination.

Services will start on Shavuot, at the beginning of next month, a holiday where mixed gender services in recent years have resulted in violence.

Conservative leaders described the agreement, under which they will pray in an area they were already officially permitted to pray in, as a "first step" and a "compromise," rather than a victory.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, also in New York, said, "We got less than we wanted but more than they were prepared to give a few years ago. It's a short step forward in the struggle for a pluralistic Israel."

But Reform leaders in America, while supportive of Women of the Wall's victory, were less impressed with the Conservative arrangement, saying they are still determined to gain access to the main part of the Wall.

"We don't see this as a victory," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"Our principles on this are clearly stated and remain the same. This is a sacred site, the most sacred site to the Jewish people and it belongs to all Jewish people."

"If the southern part of the wall is really the wall, let the Orthodox groups pray there," said Yoffie. "In terms of our struggle, this really doesn't change anything."

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Reform movement's ARZA World Union, agreed, but sounded a more optimistic note. "Slowly, slowly progress is sure and noticeable," he said. "There is a general breaking down of the ultra-Orthodox notion that the wall belongs to them as an ultra-Orthodox synagogue." □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

Putin to visit Israel

Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to visit Israel sometime next month or the beginning of July. The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that Putin will discuss possible cooperation to upgrade Russian fighter planes.

Polish primate offers apology

The leader of Poland's Roman Catholic Church apologized for anti-Semitism among its priests. Josef Glemp's comments came in Warsaw as part of Pope John Paul II's promised reconciliation for the church's historical errors.

Study: Women's courses increase

The number of university courses that focus on Jewish women is increasing, according to a recent study.

But half the courses are offered irregularly and by visiting or adjunct professors, according to the study by Brandeis University's Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women.

The study found that 188 Jewish women's studies courses — ranging from "Changing Roles of Jewish Women" to "Gender, the Body and Sexuality in Judaism" — are taught at 85 universities in North America. The study recommended that schools with large Jewish populations increase their support for Jewish women's studies courses.

Goussinsky faces new TV attack

Russia's main television channel, ORT, accused the leader of the Russian Jewish Congress of being controlled by the U.S. Congress and international Jewry.

ORT attacked Vladimir Goussinsky on Sunday for helping to bring Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to power because "it was in the interests of the American administration."

Le Pen visits Ukraine

European far-rightists should unite against America's global domination and the last vestiges of communism, said France's leading extremist.

France's Jean-Marie Le Pen, on a visit to Ukraine, urged nationalists to mobilize because "we have the same enemy."

Passion Play opens in Germany

A German town launched performances of a play Sunday about the last days of Jesus that has been staged since 1634 — but with substantial changes.

The play, which is expected to be seen by half a million people over the summer, was rewritten after input from Jewish leaders to tone down its anti-Semitic content.

New Iranian charges revive fears of execution for Jews

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The ongoing trial of 13 Iranian Jews charged with espionage for Israel took an ominous turn this week when four of the defendants were also accused of spying for Iraq.

The four — all prominent religious figures in the Jewish community — allegedly spied for Iraq during its bloody war with Iran from 1980-88, according to two French human rights lawyers quoted by the French news agency, Agence France-Presse.

The two lawyers have been the only foreigners permitted access — albeit much restricted access — to the court. The charge came as the last three of the 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel proclaimed their innocence in court on Monday.

The charge of spying for Iraq renews fears that some of the Jews may face execution, a fear Iranian judiciary officials tried to dispel last week. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, 17 Jews have been executed, many of them for spying.

"It's disturbing because it shows the Iranians are willing to charge them with anything," said Pooya Dayanim, a spokesman for the Los Angeles-based Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations.

"It's a sign from Iran that they could still get the death penalty, because they were committing espionage at a time of war. It also shows that the fate of the Jews is completely in their hands, changing from day to day, on a whim."

Indeed, Iranian authorities initially accused the "Iran 13" of spying for the United States and Israel. But when the trial began May 1, only Israel was mentioned. And now Iraq has been added to the mix.

The four also accused of spying for Iraq are Asher Zadmehr, 49, the top religious leader of the fervently Orthodox Jews of Shiraz, where the trial is taking place, and religion teachers Nasser Levi-Haim, 46; Shahrokh Paknahad, 30; and Faramarz Kashi, 35. A verdict is expected by the end of the month.

The trio who faced the closed-door Revolutionary Court on Monday were the only three free on bail. They are a student, Navid Balazadeh, 17; his uncle, Nejat Broukhim, 36; and Omid Tefileen, 26, whose older brother, Hamid "Dani" Tefileen, was the first to publicly "confess" to spying.

The others have been behind bars for more than 15 months.

American Jewish observers had expected that the three would be found not guilty, since the Iranian judge had assured them they would not need lawyers.

The fate of the remaining 10, though, remains unclear. Eight have made clear "confessions" of wrongdoing, while a ninth admitted to some activities but not spying. The tenth has denied the charges. However, Dayanim and fellow advocates for the 13 have maintained their absolute innocence throughout the trial.

The court has yet to produce evidence against the Jews, said Dayanim, who has closely monitored the trial. The judge, who also acts as prosecutor, is armed only with the confessions, which the lawyers say is not enough to convict the suspects.

The lawyers, therefore, have demanded that the judge produce evidence and give their clients an opportunity to confront all alleged eyewitnesses. That wish may be granted on Wednesday, according to news reports.

Paradoxically, this, too, is a troubling development, said Dayanim. Iran does not hold itself to Western-style democratic standards, and its officials have no qualms about taking steps that violate the country's own laws or constitution, he said.

The judiciary "can easily manufacture evidence and provide witnesses," Dayanim said. "They'll do anything to try to win back respect for this shameful trial."

Some fear the move may in fact be a ruse by the lawyers — who are said to have been court approved, if not court appointed — to lend credibility to the ultimate court verdict.

"The lawyers have never defended the 13 as if they were innocent, but as if they were guilty of some crime, just not espionage," Dayanim said. "They agree the Jews collaborated with a foreign state, but did not pass along sensitive information. This would still assure the Jews of jail sentences." □

Bush hits hot-button issues during speech at AIPAC meeting

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Receiving a standing ovation from a Jewish audience while giving a talk about Israel should make a Republican presidential candidate often criticized for his lack of foreign policy experience feel pretty good.

Indeed, Texas Gov. George W. Bush looked pleased as he promised participants at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference in Washington that he would move the U.S. ambassador in Israel to Jerusalem.

The Bush campaign reportedly said the governor meant to say the embassy as well.

Bush also reiterated the Republican stance that the United States must not interfere with Israel's democratic process, intimating that the Clinton administration pushes Israel too much on various issues.

"In recent times, Washington has tried to make Israel conform to its own plans and timetables," Bush told more than 1,700 conference attendees.

"But that is not the path to peace."

In a rare foreign policy address, Bush touched on a number of hot-button topics for the American Jewish community.

Bush said the 13 Jews facing espionage charges in Iran are unjustly imprisoned.

"The leaders of Iran should know that America will judge them by their conduct and treatment of those 13," he said.

Bush also said the special relationship between the United States and Israel would continue no matter what the outcome of the peace process, and that economic cooperation between the two countries strengthens the relationship.

Conference participant Stephen Tanner of West Virginia said Bush sounded pro-Israel, but most politicians do.

"If he does what he says, then we're OK," Tanner said. He said that either Vice President Al Gore or Bush would be a good president, as far as their policies on Israel are concerned.

But Tanner still prefers Bush.

Tanner is not worried about Bush's lack of foreign policy experience because, he said, every president is led around by advisers.

But Ariel Rubin, a 19-year-old Dartmouth student, is concerned about what he views as the governor's foreign policy inexperience.

"It's easy to make promises," Rubin said, but Bush should be more "realistic."

This year is the first time AIPAC will host both presidential candidates at the policy gathering.

Gore is scheduled to speak before the conference Tuesday morning.

Bush failed to win over everyone in the audience.

Elaine Levine of Delray Beach, Fla., said she found Bush's speech to be "poor."

A Gore supporter, Levine believes Bush is not very smart and she would not trust him as president.

"He would not be good on Israel," Levine said.

Eyal Raviv said he was open to what Bush had to say but was disappointed by his speech.

An avid Gore supporter who proudly says he has a Gore poster in his room, Raviv said Bush's promise to move the ambassador to Jerusalem is just symbolic.

"But I don't get the feeling that his ideas are his own," said Raviv, who is a 24-year-old student at Teacher's College of Columbia University. □

U.S. prevents isolation of Israel at U.N. conference

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel was expected to escape the first conference on nuclear weapons in five years with only a mention of its status as the lone state in the Middle East to have not signed a global nonproliferation treaty.

Egypt had been lobbying behind the scenes at the conference, which ended Saturday, for the final statement to denounce and isolate Israel — as well as the only other nonsignatories: India, Pakistan and Cuba.

The statement was scheduled to have been released Monday night.

Israel did not participate in the month-long conference, nor did it send an observer, because it had not signed the treaty.

However, with the United States intervening on its behalf, Israel also avoided being forced to submit to inspections by a United Nations envoy or diplomatic mission.

Israel has never confirmed whether it possesses nuclear weapons.

Rather, officials say the mystery works as a deterrent to countries like Iraq and Iran, which have vowed to annihilate the Jewish state.

"Israel's position is very clear: We have never objected to the principle of nuclear nonproliferation," said an Israeli diplomat at the United Nations, who requested anonymity.

"But we believe this treaty is not the right tool for us to deal with our situation.

"The only solution should be on a regional basis, with direct discussions between parties themselves, as part of the peace process."

"Agreement should come after peaceful relations are established, when nobody is threatening us or declaring its intent to destroy our country."

In fact, the conference is said to have been the impetus for the announcement earlier this month that Egypt and Israel will soon hold their first-ever direct talks about nonproliferation.

The United States could not fully defend Israel from mention, as it has in the past, because U.S. officials reportedly wanted to exert pressure on India and Pakistan, both of whom recently successfully tested nuclear weapons.

In a compromise with Egypt, the United States also agreed to tone down its criticism of Iraq.

It is expected that the final statement will only mention the "uncertainty" of Iraq's fulfilling its nuclear nonproliferation commitment.

Overall, the document will recognize the pledge of an "unequivocal undertaking" by the five main nuclear powers — the United States, France, China, Russia and Great Britain — to one day eliminate their atomic arsenals. □