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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Court rules on school funding

Taxpayer money can be used to buy computers and other instructional materials for religious schools, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled. Wednesday's 6-3 ruling overturned two high court decisions from the 1970s that banned such use of taxpayer funds.

The court also ruled Wednesday that the Boy Scouts have the right to exclude gays as troop leaders.

The 5-4 ruling upheld the right of private groups to set their own moral code.

Jewish groups filed briefs on both sides of the issue. [Page 3]

Albright finds deep divisions

Prospects for holding a Camp David-style summit any time soon dimmed after U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright heard from Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

After Albright met Wednesday with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in the West Bank, Palestinian officials said there would be no summit until after there is progress in lower-level negotiations, which they said would resume next week in Washington.

President Clinton told a news conference that he has not decided whether to invite Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Arafat to a summit.

Clinton also reiterated that he is "troubled" by Israel's planned sale of an airborne warning system to China.

He added that he and Barak have discussed the issue "extensively" and that "we're still working on that."

Congregation secedes from O.U.

A major Orthodox synagogue is seceding from the Orthodox Union amid accusations that the group ignored repeated allegations that a high-ranking employee sexually abused and molested scores of teen-agers.

According to the New York Jewish Week, Congregation Beth Aaron of Teaneck, N.J., voted to immediately withhold all dues to the O.U., the congregational body of centrist Orthodoxy, and its youth group, the National Conference of Synagogue Youth.

The employee, Rabbi Baruch Lanner, has resigned and O.U. officials say they are forming a commission to investigate its handling of the situation.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Letter criticizing Barak could affect peace deal

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — An open letter by 30 American Jewish leaders criticizing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for his peace negotiations with the Palestinians has sparked immediate fallout for at least one signator, but it is not yet clear what impact — if any — it will have on policy-makers in Jerusalem or Washington.

Some signatories describe the letter as an attempt to "promote dialogue" between Barak — who is viewed as keeping his negotiation strategy close to the vest — and concerned Jewish leaders.

Critics, though, suspect the letter aims to derail the peace process. Even if it doesn't have any direct effect in Jerusalem, they say, it could discourage U.S. lawmakers from bankrolling the billions of dollars in aid that would be needed to underwrite any final agreement.

The letter to Barak was first published June 23 as a full-page advertisement in two Israeli papers, The Jerusalem Post and Ha'aretz.

It is also slated to appear soon in The New York Times, a Russian-language daily in Israel and 15 major American Jewish papers, according to Morton Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, who spearheaded the effort.

The letter reiterates concerns recently expressed by the widely respected Israeli Cabinet member, Interior Minister Natan Sharansky, that Barak is "offering even more one-sided concessions to Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority."

The letter was signed by eight past or present figures affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby that states in its constitution its loyalty to any Israeli government, regardless of its political orientation.

One of the AIPAC signators, Gerald Charnoff, who was identified in the ad as an "officer of major national Jewish organizations," was forced to resign this week as chairman of AIPAC's executive committee as a result of the letter.

But he will remain a member of both the executive committee, the group's policy-making body, and AIPAC's national board of directors, said AIPAC spokesman Kenneth Bricker, who emphatically distanced AIPAC from the letter.

A non-AIPAC related signator, Julius Berman, said he signed the letter as a "wake-up call, a plea" to Barak to heed the concerns of leaders who consider themselves a centrist constituency.

"I've never been one to say, 'Never, not one inch of land,' for peace, said Berman, a past chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "But what's happening here, little by little, as Barak makes decisions and keeps quiet about what his 'red lines' are, there's a nervousness that he has no red lines," said Berman, also a former president of the Orthodox Union.

"If a man like Sharansky has a fear of what Barak is prepared to give up for peace, and verbalizes that fear to the world, and it goes unanswered, that in and of itself undermines the faith many of us have in Barak."

While the signatories included a wide range of Jewish figures, it was the inclusion of the affiliates of AIPAC that has created the greatest stir.

AIPAC, which is charged by the entire organized Jewish community to take the lead on lobbying on behalf of Israel, has an executive committee that includes 463 members spanning the political spectrum. Some say the names of Charnoff and others gave the impression that AIPAC supported the letter, which had AIPAC officials trying

MIDEAST FOCUS

Settlers: 'Albright, go home'

An estimated 3,000 Jewish settlers demonstrated across from the Jerusalem hotel where U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is staying.

The demonstrators shouted, "Albright, go home" and protested against a possible Mideast summit meeting in Washington.

Yeshiva draft plan proposed

Secular activists demonstrated outside the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem against a yeshiva student draft plan.

The Movement for Quality Government told Israel Radio that thousands of citizens had signed petitions against a government panel that recommended yeshiva students be allowed to defer army service until the age of 23, when they could take a year off to decide whether to declare Torah their work or be drafted.

Hezbollah leader: No attacks now

The leader of Hezbollah ordered the group's militants not to fire at Israeli targets for now. Sheik Hassan Nasrallah told the Lebanese newspaper A-Safir that the organization is focusing on internal issues.

But Nasrallah charged that Israel is repeatedly violating the border with Lebanon and that this could lead to an end to his group's cease-fire.

Albright lauds Algerian writers

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright praised a group of Algerian journalists for visiting Israel. "I think it's a very good idea you're here," she said during a joint news conference with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy.

In Algeria, which has no diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, the official Algerian news agency APS called the journalists "traitors" and said the visit is "a mark of disgrace."



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frantically to minimize any damage. "This is not our letter. We do not support it and we have not encouraged any of our members to sign it," said Bricker.

Without addressing the substance of the letter, Bricker said, "It is up to the people of Israel to decide whether or not they will support a peace deal with the Palestinians. It is their decision and their decision alone."

How enthusiastically the U.S. Congress will support the final decision is another matter.

According to Steven Rosen, director of foreign policy issues at AIPAC, any deal between Israel and the Palestinians is going to have to include American assistance "on an unprecedented scale."

Much of that aid — which could amount to billions of dollars — would not go to Israel, but rather to the Palestinians to help create a Palestinian state and to help solve the Palestinian refugee problem, Rosen told a gathering of the American Jewish Press Association last week in Washington.

AIPAC, which would be expected to lead the charge for a special package, just as it does for the annual foreign aid bill, already faces a difficult climate for aid on Capitol Hill, Rosen said.

Members of Congress, who already might not be inclined to support a special aid package, could point to the letter to Barak as justification for not supporting an eventual deal, say analysts.

And that is another debate that Klein, in organizing this letter, clearly seeks to influence.

"This ad complains that Barak has abandoned the principle of reciprocity, meaning that Arafat must fulfill his commitments," said Klein, asserting that Arafat, for example, has done nothing to prevent or fight terrorism or to curb official anti-Israel and anti-Semitic propaganda.

"We're trying to send a message to Congress and to the administration to pressure Arafat to honor his commitments to Oslo, and to stop pressuring Israel to make one-sided concessions to Arafat.

"If Arafat continues to promote pro-terror, anti-peace policies, he does not deserve, nor should he receive, any American tax dollars," Klein said in an interview from Israel.

Critics say this line of reasoning could in fact be a backdoor attempt to undermine the entire peace process.

Any peace deal could only work with aid to the Palestinians as well as to Israel, said Thomas Smerling, director of the Washington office of the Israel Policy Forum, which works to promote the peace process.

If anything, the timing of this letter — plus the implicit death threats from Israeli settlers, lobbying in Washington by opposition Knesset members and terrorist threats by Hamas — indicates that Israel and the Palestinians may be on the verge of a major agreement, Smerling said.

"We've seen this movie before, and if a summit is convened, we'll start to see these reruns daily," he said, referring to a possible upcoming Washington summit. "Every time the parties get close to an agreement and peace threatens to break out, the critics of the process on both sides escalate their efforts to derail the process," he said.

While some worry whether AIPAC will be compromised in its ability to successfully lobby for an aid package, Bricker said that when it comes time to financially support the deal, "Congress will be looking to the government in Israel and mainstream American Jewish organization like AIPAC" to know where the Jewish community stands. □

Falafel ingredient provides vital clue

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The chickpea, a staple of Middle East cuisine, holds a clue to the origins of agriculture, according to an article based on Israeli research that was published this month in *Science* magazine.

Chickpeas, wheat, barley, lentils and peas were grown in the Fertile Crescent some 10,000 years ago in what is today the border between Turkey and Syria.

Other scholars believe that plant domestication first took place in areas that are now part of Jordan and Israel. □

JEWISH WORLD

Iran sanctions may be eased

Republican leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives agreed to lift food and medicine sanctions against Iran as part of a deal that loosens the U.S. embargo on Cuba and other countries.

But American banks would be barred from providing financing to Iran, making it difficult for the country to buy goods.

Jewish groups are opposed to any further easing of sanctions on Iran because of the country's support of terrorism and its trial of 13 Iranian Jews accused of espionage.

The agreement reached in the House on Tuesday could be put to a vote in the House and Senate this week, and it is expected to pass.

Holocaust panel to ask U.S. help

An international panel probing Holocaust-era insurance claims plans to ask the United States to protect cooperating European insurers from lawsuits, the World Jewish Congress told Reuters.

The International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims will soon ask the U.S. government to write a statement that would be filed with courts handling lawsuits brought by Holocaust survivors.

Program focuses on rescuers

A foundation that provides financial assistance to Christians who helped Jews during the Holocaust is launching a national training program about these rescuers for middle- and high-school teachers.

As part of the program, the New York-based Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which aids 1,700 aged and needy Righteous Gentiles in 30 countries, recently offered a weeklong seminar in Massachusetts.

Firms to open Georgia offices

Six Israeli high-tech companies will soon open offices in Georgia, according to the governor of the state, Roy Barnes.

The moves would bring the number of Israeli firms with offices in the state to 40. Israeli start-ups are often pressured to open offices in the United States to be closer to customers and potential future investors.

Book focuses on labor history

Jewish workers and labor movement officials figure prominently in a new coffee-table book on the history of workers in New York City.

In "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: A Pictorial History of Working People in New York City," Debra E. Bernhardt and Rachel Bernstein also highlight the establishment of such Jewish labor organizations as the United Hebrew Trades and the Workmen's Circle.

High court says religious schools can buy material with public money

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Orthodox Jewish groups are hailing a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that it is constitutional for religious schools to use taxpayers' dollars to buy computers and other instructional materials.

Other Jewish groups warn, however, that the use of these materials could be diverted for religious purposes.

In a 6-3 ruling Wednesday, the last day of the court's term, the justices ruled that the government may continue to provide money for religious schools to buy instructional items. However, the material must be secular in content and not advance a religious point of view.

Orthodox Jewish groups, many of whom joined in a court brief in favor of parochial school aid, are applauding the decision.

"To prohibit parochial schools from receiving government support made available generally to all schoolchildren is nothing short of discrimination against religion," said Nathan Diament, public affairs director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs. "The constitution calls upon the state to be neutral toward religion, not hostile towards it." Diament, who said the ruling puts pressure on those who advocate strict church-state separation, believes the court made a "common-sense, middle-of-the-road" decision.

Abba Cohen, counsel for Agudath Israel of America, a fervently Orthodox organization, called the decision a strong endorsement of equal participation by private school students in federal education programs.

Many Orthodox schools rely heavily on Title VI or Chapter 2 funding, federal programs designed to aid private religious education. But other Jewish groups, like the Anti-Defamation League, say materials bought with government money, particularly computers, could be diverted for religious purposes.

In the majority opinion, written by Justice Clarence Thomas, the court recognized that risk, but concluded that "the evidence of actual diversion and the weakness of the safeguards against actual diversion are not relevant to the constitutional inquiry, whatever relevance they may have under the statute and regulations."

Whether Wednesday's decision could be used to strengthen the argument for school vouchers is unclear. Vouchers provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, considered to be the swing vote on the voucher issue, concurred in the decision, but indicated in a separate opinion her reservations about unrestricted aid to religious schools — and vouchers fall into this category.

The decision is a victory for the Clinton administration, which has proposed connecting every classroom to the Internet, including those in religious schools.

But the decision may create problems for many states, said Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department.

Stern noted that many states have restrictions on state funding for parochial schools, which will now be called into question.

To some, the court may appear to be sending mixed messages on church-state separation issues, since in a decision last week the court ruled that student-led prayers at high school football games are unconstitutional.

But school prayer and aid to parochial schools are "constitutionally and theoretically different issues," said Agudath Israel's Cohen. □

Poll: Bagel tops muffin, doughnut

NEW YORK (JTA) — The bagel is the most popular quick breakfast option in the United States, according to a new poll.

Some 48 percent of 1,202 respondents to the Zogby America poll said they choose a bagel, compared with 25 percent for muffins.

Doughnuts came in third at 23 percent. □

Groups react to abuse report, say their policies prevent problems

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — A newspaper report on allegations that a high-ranking Orthodox professional sexually molested and harassed scores of teen-agers is raising questions about sexual misconduct policies at Jewish youth groups.

But leaders of most groups say they are already vigilant about preventing sexual abuse and take complaints seriously.

In a June 23 article, the New York Jewish Week quoted sources saying that the Orthodox Union had for years ignored complaints of Rabbi Baruch Lanner's misconduct as a professional with the O.U.'s National Conference of Synagogue Youth.

The day after the article appeared, the O.U. announced that Lanner had resigned.

Officials with the organization say they are now forming an independent commission to investigate the handling of the matter.

"The commission will have carte blanche to do the investigation and carry it in the direction seen fit," said Sharyn Perlman, director of public relations for the O.U. The investigation, she said, will be of "the union's role in this, specifically who knew specifics, what they knew and what was done."

The commission will also issue recommendations about what to do to prevent such incidents, said Perlman.

Concerns about staff conduct come at a time when Jewish educational institutions — especially camps — are already having difficulty recruiting and retaining quality staff.

In the NCSY case, Lanner was known as a charismatic, talented educator who drew many teens closer to Judaism.

The Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations youth division, the Conservative movement's United Synagogue Youth, the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization and Young Judaea have in recent years drafted policies outlining appropriate and inappropriate conduct between staff and teens.

In particular, those organizations do not allow staff or volunteers to be alone in a non-public space with a child or teen.

At this year's convention of the North American Alliance of Jewish Youth Professionals, about 40 people — or about 15 percent of participants — attended a session on sexual ethics and proper staff conduct, said Doron Krakow, chair of the organization.

"There's been a heightened sensitivity," said Krakow, who is also national director of Young Judaea, which runs year-round youth groups, summer camps and Israel programs.

Young Judaea, like other youth groups, has dealt with a handful of complaints and "every allegation results in full investigation on our part and typically includes temporary suspension of activity on the part of the staff person until we've cleared up the matter," said Krakow.

Krakow and other youth professionals note that there has been far greater awareness of such matters in the past decade.

"In my early years with BBYO, I was not worried about hugging a youngster or having youngster alone in a room with me while we were planning programs," said Al Freedman, who is director of special projects for BBYO and has been with the organization for 33 years.

"Never would I do that now," he added. "We always make sure that whatever we do, we do in public or in the company of

other people so we don't place ourselves in a situation where we can be accused." Freedman said that while BBYO has never heard complaints about its professional staff, there have been "questions raised" about some of the group's volunteer advisers.

"We never disregard such an alert," he said. "We've never to my knowledge had an incident that's been sexual abuse, but we have had incidents where after talking to the adviser, we felt it would be best if they resigned."

Those cases involved inappropriate comments, gestures and "touchy-feely" behavior, said Freedman. Officials with the UAHC said there have been five to 10 complaints during the past 20 years, all of which were dealt with promptly and internally.

Allan Smith, director of the UAHC's youth division, said that "every couple of years we've been forced to take action of a very serious nature relative to either local or regional youth workers or camp workers." The UAHC conducts police checks of all staff hired to work with youth and asks about potential problems when checking references.

"If there seems to be anything in someone's background we're reluctant to risk putting a youngster in harm's way," said Smith.

Jules Gutin, national director of USY, said he knew of no complaints in USY, but that the group decided four years ago to set clear policies in writing anyway.

In Orthodox organizations, policies are less clear-cut.

Aliza Karp, a spokeswoman for Tzivos Hashem, a Lubavitch youth organization, said that she knew of no problems occurring but that "we choose staff who are aware of boundaries and have a reputation for not crossing them."

She added that by promoting "strong values of what is right and what is wrong" and maintaining "open lines of communication," her organization hopes "to keep children out of danger."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, which runs separate youth movements for girls and boys, said he didn't know of any such problems in his organization and hopes that the group's religious policy of separating the sexes would protect youth from unwanted heterosexual contact at least.

Jewish law "has in it the safeguards to avoid many such situations," said Shafran, but he added that "any such complaint would be treated with tremendous seriousness."

One downside of vigilance, say those working with youth, is that false allegations are sometimes made.

"But whatever the allegation, we'll investigate to understand if there's legitimacy to it, in which case we will make it impossible for someone to be under our employment," said Krakow. □

Web site explains burial site

PRAGUE (JTA) — Prague's Jewish community is using the Internet to explain the background of one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial sites, which has recently been the focus of controversy.

The community is using the Prague Jewish Museum's Web site to cover the history of negotiations regarding the cemetery on Vladislavova Street, owned by a Czech insurance company that is building an office at the site in the face of Jewish protests.

The news section of www.jewishmuseum.cz also features the community's past statements on the issue and an official archaeological report on the cemetery. □