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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Shas rabbi causes outcry

The spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party prompted a public outcry for saying that the Jews murdered in the Holocaust were the reincarnated souls of sinners. During his weekly sermon on Saturday, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also referred to the Palestinians as "snakes." [Page 3]

Judaism said to hinder V.P. nod

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) would be a shoo-in to run as Al Gore's vice presidential running mate were it not for the fact that he is Jewish, according to the chairman of the National Democratic Committee.

"I don't think anyone can calculate the effect of having a Jew on the ticket," Ed Rendell said.

Calling Lieberman "maybe the finest person in politics," Rendell said that if "Lieberman was Episcopalian, I think he'd almost be a slam dunk."

Poland drops Auschwitz ban

Poland's Interior Ministry lifted a ban on the construction of a controversial shopping center across the street from the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

The president of the company developing the project was quoted as saying the center will be geared to serve the needs of hundreds of thousands of people who visit the museum and memorial at Auschwitz each year. [Page 4]

Israeli expert killed in Kyrgyzstan

An Israeli farming expert sent by the Foreign Ministry to Kyrgyzstan was stabbed to death during a robbery in the apartment he rented in the capital of Bishkek.

An official in Kyrgyzstan said there was no political motive to the Aug. 3 attack on Elazar Brosh, 60, of Ramat Hasharon.

U.N. candidate seen as anti-Israel

Jewish observers are worried that a candidate reportedly up for a U.N. adviser post is hostile to Israel and would undo recent steps to soothe relations between Israel and the United Nations.

The U.N. Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights is said to be on the verge of appointing Palestinian legal expert Mona Rishmawi as a "special adviser." [Page 4]

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Gay, lesbian, bisexual Jews are finding more acceptance

By Julie Wiener

WOODCLIFF LAKE, N.J. (JTA) — It looked like the Orthodox participants at the World Congress of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Jewish Organizations' conference would have to forgo Shabbat services.

There were only three Orthodox men attending the recent conference, seven short of a minyan.

But then a group of Orthodox Jews who happened to be vacationing in the hotel noticed a sign in the lobby listing the services and asked to join.

Bonnie Kantor, one of the conference co-chairs, said she immediately informed the newcomers "what kind of a group this is," expecting them to revoke their offer. Instead, they told her, "A Jew is a Jew and a Torah is a Torah."

Together, they were exactly 10 men.

"Without us they wouldn't have had a minyan and without them we wouldn't have had one," said Kantor.

It was an incident appropriate for the 20th anniversary of an organization that's enjoying unprecedented acceptance.

With 65 member organizations representing 14 countries, the World Congress has grown significantly since its early days when a handful of gay activists, who happened to be Jewish, came together to respond to a United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism.

In just the past few months, the gay and lesbian Jewish communities have seen two major victories.

The Reform movement affirmed its rabbis' right to officiate at same-sex unions, and Israel's high court ruled that both partners in a lesbian relationship could legally register as their children's mothers.

Many gay Jewish synagogues, once havens for the closeted, now enjoy close ties with other local Jewish institutions and boast that their inclusive atmospheres even attract some heterosexuals.

As these synagogues grow larger and more established, several are starting religious schools and buying cemetery space.

Since the early 1990s, both the Reform and Reconstructionist streams have ordained openly gay and lesbian rabbis, and a growing number of congregations are hiring gay clergy.

At a session in the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America's biennial this spring, the JCC of the Greater St. Paul Area, in Minnesota, suggested JCCs host gay film festivals and offer gay and lesbian couples family memberships.

In Albany, N.Y., and Boston, gay Jewish organizations are working closely with federations to make local Jewish institutions more welcoming to gays and lesbians.

Many gay congregations report they are now being invited to participate in community activities, like Israel parades.

In Israel, the openly lesbian Michal Eden now sits on the Tel Aviv city council. She plans to run for Knesset in the next election and if she wins, she would be Israel's first openly gay legislator.

But lesbian and gay Jews are far from winning full acceptance. Most Orthodox and many Conservative leaders consider homosexual acts to be prohibited in the Bible. Leviticus 18:22 states, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak welcomes peacekeepers

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak welcomed the deployment of U.N. forces along the border with Lebanon and said he expects a new period of economic development to begin in northern Israel. Following the latest deployment on Saturday, Lebanon said it would send 500 soldiers and 500 police on Monday.

Clinton willing to host summit

President Clinton is willing to host another summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

But Clinton first wants a clear outline presented to him that will lead to an agreement.

Rabbis to discuss Temple Mount

Israel's chief rabbis plan to discuss a proposal to build a synagogue on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

But a spokesman for the Chief Rabbinical Council said the group would likely reject the idea, which had been put forward by the chief rabbi of Haifa.

Article prompts Egyptian ire

Egyptian officials are angry at the United States because of a column that appeared in The New York Times, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The column by Thomas Friedman accused Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak of doing nothing to help President Clinton reach an agreement at the recent Camp David summit.

Poll: Israelis down on Barak

Most Israelis see Prime Minister Ehud Barak as a bad leader, according to a poll published in Israel's largest daily newspaper. Nearly two-thirds of those polled by Yediot Achronot gave Barak his lowest popularity rating since he assumed office. The newspaper said the public views Barak as arrogant, isolationist and unwilling to admit his mistakes.



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abomination." Biblical scholars, however, have argued over the meaning of this passage.

Neither the Orthodox nor the Conservative movement ordains openly gay or lesbian rabbis or sanctions same-sex weddings, although about 20 Conservative rabbis do officiate at such ceremonies and are not penalized.

Within the Reform movement, many congregations lag behind the statements of national leaders when it comes to welcoming gays and lesbians, said the CCAR's former president, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, in a speech to the conference.

Rabbi Greg Kanter, 35, who now leads a gay and lesbian synagogue in Fort Lauderdale, said that when he came out at a large Reform congregation in Minnesota six years ago, board members questioned whether he should be allowed to work with youth.

That congregation eliminated Kanter's position when his two-year contract was up.

Several people said their families have been less than accepting of them. In a keynote speech to the conference, Israel's Eden, 31, told of how her family threw her out of the house 11 years ago.

At a comedy session, comic Lisa Geduldig, of San Francisco, drew knowing laughter with jokes about Jewish parents for whom gay and lesbian offspring are "disappointments."

She opened her routine by asking if there were any "faygeles" in the audience, jokingly using the derogatory Yiddish term for gay.

A number of conference participants — including the leader of France's gay Jewish group — requested that their last names not be used in an article. However, they were far outnumbered by those eager to be interviewed.

That rising comfort level is spurring the formation of a networking group for gay, lesbian and bisexual Jewish communal professionals, 30 of whom showed up for a planning meeting.

While gay clergy informally networked in the past, they "were hard to find because so many were closeted," said Rabbi Debora Gordon, 37, a Reform rabbi at Congregation Berith Sholom in Troy, N.Y., and one of the co-chairs of the new group.

Amid the growing openness, some are questioning what role America's 41 gay and lesbian Jewish groups — most of them congregations and havurot — should play.

In a speech, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, rector of the Conservative movement's University of Judaism, urged gay and lesbian Jews not to segregate themselves from the larger Jewish community.

Dorff, who is heterosexual but a vocal advocate for the rights of gay Jews, later told JTA that he fully understands "why gays and lesbians would want congregations of their own."

However, he suggested they join both gay and mainstream congregations, since sticking to separate shuls "isolates them from the heterosexual community and makes their acceptance even harder."

Others agreed, but emphasized the ongoing need for gay and lesbian congregations.

Nachum Golan, 58, of Pittsburgh's 80-member Bet Tikvah, said several of his fellow congregants already have dual affiliations.

But things like gay and lesbian couples kissing after services or going up to the bimah to celebrate anniversaries, aren't always so welcome in mainstream congregations, he said.

Kanter, the rabbi who left a mainstream synagogue for a gay and lesbian congregation, said, "We're another choice for people."

Gordon, who leads a mainstream shul, said that as long as gays and lesbians have a distinctive culture, "there'll be a need for gay synagogues in the same way there's a need for Sephardic synagogues."

In addition, she said, gay synagogues provide a venue for gay Jews to find romantic partners — and "it's hard to imagine most mainstream synagogues being really comfortable with the guys getting dressed up in high heels and dresses for Purim."

The warmth radiating from the conference, where all 260 participants linked arms and sang for Havdalah and closing services, illustrated, however, the emotional power of a predominantly gay and lesbian environment.

"This is rejuvenating for me," said Golan. "It truly fills my heart with love." □

JEWISH WORLD

Maccabiah official resigns

The president of the Maccabiah World Union resigned more than three years after a bridge collapse at the Maccabiah Games killed four athletes and injured dozens of others.

Ronald Bakalarz resigned over the weekend after a report produced by a Knesset committee said Israel should not finance the 2001 Games if he did not quit.

Nazi-hunter to get top U.S. honor

Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal will be among 15 people who receive the highest U.S. civilian honor this week, the White House announced. President Clinton will award the Presidential Medals of Freedom at a White House ceremony Wednesday.

Berlin leader slams slow probe

The leader of Berlin's Jewish community criticized the police investigation into a recent bombing in Dusseldorf that injured six Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. "It's more than a week and they don't know. It's ridiculous," Andreas Nachama said.

Appeal planned on kosher laws

Orthodox Jewish advocates say they will appeal a U.S. judge's ruling that New York state's kosher laws violate the constitutional separation between church and state.

The judge ruled in favor of a Long Island butcher who claimed that the laws requiring items to be kosher according to Orthodox standards discriminate against his store, which is supervised by a Conservative rabbi.

Carter weighs in on Clinton tactic

Former President Jimmy Carter indicated that President Clinton made a mistake when he criticized Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat following the failed Camp David summit.

"This makes it very difficult to orchestrate future negotiation sessions where mutual confidence in the mediator is required," Carter wrote in an op-ed that appeared in *The New York Times*. He also wrote that the "possible movement of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would create an even greater impediment to further progress."

Mogul gives to jail that held him

A Russian Jewish media mogul who spent three days in prison in June on charges of embezzlement is donating money to improve conditions there.

Russian Jewish Congress President Vladimir Goussinsky gave \$15,000 for food and construction projects at the Butyrskaya Prison and has agreed to pay some bills for medicine, medical equipment, kitchenware and bedding.

Holocaust victims 'sinners'? One influential rabbi says so

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The spiritual leader of Israel's fervently Orthodox Shas Party is facing public condemnation and ridicule for saying that the Jews murdered in the Holocaust were the reincarnated souls of sinners.

During his weekly sermon on Saturday, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also referred to the Palestinians as "snakes."

Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who was also targeted in Yosef's remarks, said the statements were not fitting for a rabbi of his standing.

This is not the first time Yosef's comments have sparked controversy.

Last Purim, Yosef likened Yossi Sarid, the leader of the secular Meretz Party, to the evil Haman in the Book of Esther, and he called on supporters to wish for Sarid's destruction. In the latest incident, as in previous ones, Shas leaders said the rabbi's remarks were taken out of context.

"Don't take a monopoly on interpretation of the Holocaust," a Shas legislator told Army Radio. "The rabbi's commentary was based on Judaism."

Indeed, some people — including President Moshe Katsav and Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau — said the concept of reincarnation is a theological attempt to understand why the Holocaust happened.

But Lau, himself a Holocaust survivor, said that perhaps the pain of the tragedy of the Holocaust is still too acute for comments such as Yosef's.

He defended the Shas rabbi, saying Yosef has a very "emotional attitude" toward the Holocaust and that he did not say that the victims of the Holocaust were sinners.

"I did not hear the lesson, but certainly he would not accuse any of the 6 million," Lau told Israel Radio. "He tried to give further understanding to what happened there."

Katsav said he does not intend to go into the theological basis of Yosef's remarks, but said he regrets any statements that hurt people's feelings.

"At this time, we must make every effort to reduce tension and demonstrate more unity," said Katsav, who vowed to pursue tolerance and national unity when he was sworn in last week as Israel's eighth president.

The comments were interpreted by some political observers as an indication that Shas is not inclined to rejoin Barak's government after bolting the coalition on the eve of last month's failed Camp David summit.

Yosef's comments brought a stinging criticism from the head of the secular Shinui Party.

"It's slander from an old fool who is regretfully the spiritual leader of a large community in Israel," said Yosef "Tommy" Lapid.

Lapid accused Yosef of "confirming what Hitler said — that the Jews are people who sin."

During the weekly Cabinet meeting, Barak criticized the Shas Party as well as Yosef. "From a movement whose banner is emblazoned with the demand for unity and closeness, its leaders should speak in a manner that would strengthen this claim," Barak said.

Referring to Barak's efforts to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians at the Camp David summit, Yosef said, "Where are this man's brains?"

Addressing Barak, the rabbi added, "You bring snakes next to us. How can you make peace with a snake?"

Calling the Arabs "evildoers," Yosef said the Talmud teaches "that God is sorry he ever created those sons of Ishmael."

In the past, the Shas Party has supported the peace process, maintaining that giving land to the Palestinians could be justified because it would increase Israel's security and therefore save Jewish lives.

Yosef's remarks also drew criticisms from Palestinian officials.

Israeli Arab Knesset member Ahmed Tibi said his party would ask Israel's attorney general to consider pressing charges against Yosef. "It reminds me of what the Nazis said about the Jews," he was quoted as saying. □

Reported U.N. adviser candidate has anti-Israel bias, sources say

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish observers are worried that a candidate reportedly up for a U.N. adviser post is hostile to Israel and would undo recent steps to soothe relations between Israel and the United Nations.

The U.N. Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights is said to be on the verge of appointing Palestinian legal expert Mona Rishmawi as a "special adviser."

Israel already sees the human rights office itself, led by High Commissioner Mary Robinson, as an unfair critic of its treatment of Palestinians.

But relations with the U.N. office warm whenever Israel begins making concessions toward peace, like its May withdrawal from Lebanon.

"We want the relationship to continue to improve, and we don't want anything to hamper that relationship or to bring it back to where it was two years ago," said an Israeli source who requested anonymity.

But observers suggest rocky times may lie ahead if Rishmawi gains the ear of Robinson, the former president of Ireland.

While Rishmawi has earned praise for her work as the U.N.'s human rights monitor for Somalia, she is also director of the Center for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, an arm of the International Commission of Jurists, which Israel sees as one-sided in its assessments of the Middle East.

Rishmawi is also the former executive director of Al-Haq, an ICJ-affiliated Palestinian human rights group that focuses primarily on alleged Israeli violations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In writings obtained by JTA, Rishmawi accused Israel of "Judaization" and "colonial interests" in the West Bank.

In a 1989 article in the Palestinian Yearbook of International Law, Rishmawi compared Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with Nazi laws in the foreign lands Germany controlled during World War II.

Jewish observers contend that Rishmawi should not be disqualified simply because she is Palestinian. Rather, it's that she is an activist with a clear anti-Israel bias.

"I'm not getting into whether the human rights record of Israel is good or bad. I'm talking about whether this candidate is appropriate," said a source in Geneva, where the human rights commissioner is headquartered.

The U.N. office, said the source, "plays an important bully pulpit role," and what Robinson says "is taken seriously. Her voice is trumpeted around the world when she speaks to world leaders, and what she says to the general assembly of the U.N. sets the tone for human rights discourse.

"So how can you expect someone like Mona Rishmawi to be neutral, impartial and to possibly serve a mediating role? We're talking about someone with a track record of antagonism toward Israel."

The American Jewish Committee also has concerns about Rishmawi. "Given her background, mixed with the highly charged atmosphere" today between Israelis and Palestinians, "it is not the wisest choice to appoint to such a sensitive position someone with that political orientation," said AJCommittee spokesman Kenneth Bandler.

Rishmawi did not return phone calls to her home in Geneva. Her staff at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva said she was ill in France.

They also said they were surprised to hear of her possible appointment.

A spokesman for the high commissioner, Jose Diaz, would not confirm whether the appointment is imminent and whether Rishmawi is a candidate.

Israeli sources say word of Rishmawi's possible appointment has already spurred debate within diplomatic circles about if and what sort of action, if any, should be taken against it.

"We trust that the high commissioner, like the head of any other U.N. organization, when making any appointments will consider among their criteria possible bias," said the Israeli source.

High commissioner spokesman Diaz told JTA that such criteria would, as always, figure prominently.

"Any display of partiality or bias would be unacceptable," Diaz said.

To suspect that either the high commissioner or any special adviser would demonstrate anything less than impartiality, said Diaz. "I think that's not giving enough credit to either Ms. Robinson or Ms. Rishmawi." □

Poland will allow shopping center across the street from Auschwitz

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Poland will allow a controversial shopping center to be built across the street from the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

The president of the company developing the project in the southern Polish city of Oswiecim was quoted as saying the center will be geared to serve hundreds of thousands of people who visit the museum and memorial at Auschwitz each year.

"We have bowed to government requests and reoriented the project to serve visitors to the museum," Janusz Marszalek, president of the Maja company, told Reuters in Warsaw.

The plans, according to accounts made public in Warsaw, call for a restaurant, bank, post office and souvenir shop across the street from a large parking area that serves the museum at Auschwitz.

The refreshment stands and souvenir kiosks currently on the grounds of the museum would be removed.

Marszalek originally planned to build a mini-shopping center geared to serve local Oswiecim residents.

This project was halted in 1996 after Jews protested that it would desecrate the memory of the more than 1.5 million people killed there by the Nazis.

Ninety percent of Auschwitz victims were Jews, from across Europe.

The Polish government has established a protected zone around Auschwitz and has been drawing up a development plan for the surrounding area.

Citing the more than half-million visitors who pay homage to Holocaust victims at Auschwitz each year, Jewish leaders in Poland say the services offered in Marszalek's new plan are necessary.

Nonetheless, the Auschwitz Museum and others have expressed reservations about the plan. □