JTA Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel searches for U.S. officer

Israeli police are searching for a U.S. military officer who is missing from his base in Texas and believed to be in the Jewish state.

A woman claiming to be the girlfriend of Jeremiah Mattysse, who reportedly is a convert to Judaism, said the lieutenant colonel had spied for Israel. Israeli sources said Mattysse's disappearance — he did not return from scheduled leave on Aug. 7 — was more likely related to a romantic entanglement.

In media interviews, the woman, Rivka Nir, said Mattysse, 50, sent to her home bags of classified documents he had access to while serving as head of an intelligence unit at Camp Bullis in San Antonio.

Nir, 48, said Mattysse later removed the documents and deposited them in safe deposit boxes around the country.

Clashes break out in Hebron

Clashes broke out between Jewish settlers and Palestinians in Hebron on Saturday after a traffic accident in which a Palestinian taxi driver slightly injured a Jewish boy.

Israeli troops who intervened to quell the clashes were met with Palestinians throwing stones.

Three Palestinians and one Israeli soldier were hurt in the clashes. Also on Saturday, an Israeli Arab suspected of collaborating with Israel was reportedly shot in a West Bank barber shop.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian officials traded public barbs at each other as Dennis Ross continued to his tour of the Middle East to see if another Israeli-Palestinian summit is warranted.

On Saturday, Ross met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa in Alexandria, Egypt, where compromise proposals on Jerusalem were reportedly discussed.

Anti-Nazis march in Germany

Anti-Nazi activists marched throughout Germany on Saturday, a day after the German Cabinet approved $35 million in spending over three years to support youth programs that fight racism, anti-Semitism and hatred of foreigners.

Extremists in eastern Germany had marked the anniversary of the death of Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, by hanging from bridges and buildings banners and posters declaring Hess a "martyr for peace."

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jews pedal cross-country for environmental awareness

By Julie Wiener

CHICAGO (JTA) — As Americans are glued to television shows like "Survivor," in which strangers are thrown together on an island to contend with artificially imposed challenges, a far more idealistic group of strangers has been quietly surviving real challenges as they pedal across the country.

Unlike the "Survivor" crew, the participants in the first-ever Cross-USA Jewish Environmental Bike Ride aren't fretting over rat-eating: After all, rats aren't kosher and, anyway, most of the cyclists are vegetarians.

Wearing bright yellow biking jerseys emblazoned with groovy 1970s purple lettering, this small band of American and British Jews — ranging in age from 20 to 40-something — has been slowly making its way from Seattle to Washington, D.C.

The tanned and muscular riders are accompanied by an old van cluttered to capacity with camping gear and bike equipment. But wedged among the other supplies are a few tattered prayer books, velvet bags containing prayer shawls and two large boxes stuffed with tomes on Judaism and environmentalism.

The 10 riders have stopped at traditional biking destinations like Yellowstone National Park, but they have also visited a kosher slaughterhouse in Iowa and led Shabbat morning services in a South Dakota town that is home to five Jewish families.

Since they began their trip on June 11, the bikers have pedaled through the rural Northwest, national parks, affluent suburbs, the gleaming skyline of Chicago and the heavy industry of western Indiana.

The trip is the brainchild of Nigel Savage, a London native in his 30s who several years ago gave up a banking career to study at a yeshiva in Jerusalem. More recently, he became what he calls an "environmental ba'al teshuva," using the term for Jews who become more religiously observant to describe his newfound passion for protecting the earth. Last year, Savage moved to New York and founded Hazon, Hebrew for "vision," an organization he describes as a "venture capital house" for innovative Jewish projects. The first such project is the bike trip.

It was created partially to raise money, with each cyclist soliciting $3,600 — a dollar for each mile — in pledges for Jewish environmental groups.

Mostly, the ride aims to raise awareness among the cyclists and the many people they meet along the way.

"One of the chords we've really struck is that at some level American Jews are underchallenged," said Savage from his cell phone in rural Indiana.

In organized Jewish life, "If you're not a professional or wealthy, there isn't a lot for you to do," he said. In contrast, said Savage, the trip has energized hundreds of volunteers who hosted the cyclists and helped arrange local appearances.

The cyclists are religiously diverse, ranging from staunchly secular to fervently Orthodox. None are veteran bikers.

"Most of us were very out of shape when we got here," said Ilan Glazer, who two-thirds of the way through the trip had lost 30 pounds.

A Hollywood casting executive could easily reduce the group to stock characters.

There's Savage, an eccentric and highly energetic sort who seems to thrive on leading group meetings and rides a recumbent bicycle rather than a regular one because it's more comfortable for his "tushy."

Then there's Jo Sassienie, Savage's British girlfriend — they use the term "partner"

MIDEAST FOCUS

Measures hint at new elections

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced a number of possible bills aimed at Israeli secular voters.

The initiatives, which are being viewed as an indication that Barak is pessimistic about the possibility of bringing any religious parties back into his weakened governing coalition, include measures that would allow for the drafting of a constitution, create civil marriages and abolish the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Israeli nuke pictures published

New satellite pictures of Israel's nuclear reactor were published on the front page of Yediot Achronot.

Israel has never admitted manufacturing nuclear weapons at the reactor in the southern Negev, but the pictures, taken from the Federation of American Scientists' Web site, show the weapons facility.

Minister undergoes surgery

Israeli Knesset member David Levy underwent surgery for a blocked artery.

Levy, who was in satisfactory condition after the angioplasty, was admitted to Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital in Jerusalem over the weekend.

Palestinian Israelis are 'traitors'

Palestinian officials said Palestinians from eastern Jerusalem who have applied for Israeli citizenship are traitors to the Palestinian people and would not be allowed to live in an independent Palestinian state. The Palestinian Authority's radio station, Voice of Palestine, said that those who sought Israeli citizenship would be "tracked down."

Natural gas supply found

A natural gas reservoir was discovered off the southern Israeli coast. The reservoir near Ashdod is believed to contain quantities capable of supplying Israel's natural gas needs for some 20 years.

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— who complains fondly about his penchant for constantly hosting guests at their Manhattan apartment and bickers with him when they get lost on the road.

Daniel Morris is the group's Don Juan, adding females to his e-mail address book at every stop.

Elly Oberstein and Cecily Marbach, both in their early 20s and raised modern Orthodox, are the quiet ones, who read poetry to each other at night before retreating to their respective sleeping bags.

Glazer is an undergraduate at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and — at 20 — the group's baby.

Dan Furmansky, a 26-year-old free-lance writer and nutrition zealot, soured on his Conservative upbringing when, as a college student, he realized he was gay.

Tova Saul — who works as a tour guide and is passionate about environmental issues — wears a long skirt even when biking. A former social worker, the American-born Saul became deeply religious almost 20 years ago when she moved to Israel.

Differing levels of religious observance have fueled tensions at times and defeated some riders' hopes that the group could pray together or even share blessings before meals. But just as big a culprit in conflicts are more mundane issues, like the group's general inability to start its days on schedule and the challenge of fitting belongings into the van.

"Packing the van almost broke us as a community," Glazer said.

Nonetheless, the cyclists were still enthusiastic by the time they reached Chicago, speaking highly of the group, the learning and the exhilaration of meeting a physical challenge.

"We're like a little mishpochah," said Furmansky, using the Yiddish word for family. "Most of us have all these headstrong ideas about how things should be run, but somehow we all end up liking each other," said Saul.

Drawing on Jewish texts that call for people to respect the earth as God's creation, the riders are united in their belief that environmentalism needs to play a more central role in Jewish life.

Environmentalism, said Glazer, "brings people together and shows that despite all our differences we can be a religious community."

Saul dreams of using the knowledge and contacts from the trip to lead environmental-themed tours, ones that connect Orthodox Jews to nature and animals, as well as wilderness retreats that will connect assimilated Jews to Judaism.

The trip is part-yeshiva, part-Outward Bound. While they're camping or over Shabbat, the cyclists take turns leading discussions on the Jewish and environmental books on board

"Reading the books is part of your job, it's a priority that's just as important as cooking dinner or packing the van," said Marbach.

In major cities, cyclists have spoken at synagogues and coordinated programming — such as environmental fairs and community "fun rides" — with local Jews.

But, as a first-year effort that is not part of any mainstream Jewish organization, the publicity hasn't always caught up with them. In Chicago, the largest city the group has visited, events were sparsely attended. Nonetheless, the cyclists have had a powerful effect on the Jewish and non-Jewish individuals they encounter.

In Aberdeen, S.D., the cyclists helped form a minyan, enabling the local congregation to hold Saturday morning services for the first time in years. Miraculously — or coincidentally, depending on who is telling the story — when Glazer and Savage took out the Torah, it opened right to Balak, the portion of the day.

When Morris e-mailed guards at the Gary, Ind., airport to thank them for sheltering the group for several hours during a dramatic thunderstorm, he got a reply within hours: "I should be thanking you and the others. Not enough people nowadays do things to help their fellow man."

Janet Tatz, of Helena, Mont. — 85 miles from the nearest synagogue — hosted the cyclists at a potluck dinner and Torah discussion attended by members of the city's tiny Jewish community, as well as non-Jews interested in the environment and biking.

"The Hazon riders send me e-mail, and I send it out to the people who were here, so it's kind of this expanding community," said Tatz, adding that their visit was "a shot in the arm of Judaism." □

JEWISH WORLD

Disco near Auschwitz protested

A Jewish human rights organization protested the opening of a discotheque in a former southern Poland tannery where Auschwitz slave laborers died.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center said, "Auschwitz and its immediate environs must forever remain a place of silence and contemplation," and demanded immediate intervention from the Polish government.

'Dr. Laura' can't attend forum

A controversial Jewish radio personality who has been criticized by the Anti-Defamation League was uninvited from an international conference on Jewish medical ethics, according to the Jewish Bulletin of Northern California.

Laura Schlessinger, known as "Dr. Laura," was reportedly removed from the program — scheduled for February 2001 — because of controversy surrounding her comments that homosexuality is a "biological error" and deviant behavior.

Man linked to Argentine attacks

The United States arrested a Pakistani national who could be linked to the still-unsolved bombings at two Jewish sites in Argentina in the 1990s.

U.S. sources confirmed last Friday that it had arrested Mohammad Abbas Malik for being in the United States illegally.

Court upholds ruling on SS guard

A U.S. appeals court unanimously affirmed a 1999 lower court decision stripping an admitted SS concentration camp guard of his U.S. citizenship.

Romanian-born Michael Negele, 80, most recently of St. Peters, Mo., served at Sachsenhausen in Germany and at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia.

He entered the United States in 1950 using a visa obtained by concealing his Nazi past.

N.Y. hosts Maccabi Games

New York is hosting the Maccabi Games this week for the first time.

The four-day sporting event — sponsored by the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America and involving some 6,000 Jewish teens from around the world — began Sunday on Staten Island in New York and is also being held throughout the rest of the month in Florida, Virginia, Arizona and Ohio.

Jewish-Arab camps prosper

Two Jewish-Arab summer camps in Israel are increasing in popularity, according to the Jerusalem Post.

This summer, more than 320 children attended the camps, which were created to foster coexistence.

Many Jews nervous that Lieberman will bring anti-Semites out of closet

By Brian Seidman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Nervousness is tempering the initial euphoria over the selection of a Jew on the Democratic ticket for the White House.

"Here comes this event, and we're unable to celebrate unencumbered by anxiety," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

While he said the anxiety has not reached "panic proportion," the "buzz" reaching the ADL is that many Jews are worried about a rise in anti-Semitism after Sen. Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, was chosen as Al Gore's running mate.

Foxman said he was surprised at how insecure many in the Jewish community appeared. He said he had expected to see more confidence in the American people's acceptance of Jews.

"Anti-Semitism is there. It hasn't disappeared," Foxman said, but stressed that the rate of anti-Semitism is "the lowest it's ever been."

A 1998 ADL survey found that the number of Americans who held strong anti-Semitic views had dropped to 12 percent from 20 percent in 1992 — and from 29 percent in 1964.

But despite lower levels of anti-Semitism, hate groups have focused their vitriol on the Connecticut senator since his appointment. Before the advent of the Internet, many of these people would have been content to write anonymous letters to the editor of their local newspaper or confine their comments to like-minded people meeting in basements and barrooms. Now, they have an international audience.

"The idea of Orthodox Hebe Lieberman being a heartbeat away from the presidency makes me want to retch," wrote one contributor to the Internet message board of Stormfront, a white supremacist group.

"We already have a Zionist-occupied government, but now the Clinton-Gore administration has brought it out of the closet," wrote another in all capital letters.

Lieberman, addressing the issue of anti-Semitism, told CNN talk show host Larry King recently, "I'm sure there are some anti-Semites out there. But you know, this people, the American people, are so tolerant, they're so open, I'm just convinced that they're going to vote for me or against me not based on my religion, but based on how they judge me as a person and whether they think I can do this job, and I can't ask any more than that."

Foxman said he believes the American people will reject any injection of anti-Semitism into the presidential campaign.

"We will respond when it's serious, but I believe America has come of age. At the end of the day, Joe Lieberman will be judged as an individual and not by the fact that he goes to shul or doesn't go shul," Foxman said.

But in online message boards, the issue of how Lieberman practices his Judaism is argued even among Jews.

One contributor to the America Online Jewish Community message board wrote, "Had Lieberman been a Reform Jew I would say, great, run, the job is yours. However, as an Orthodox Jew he is absolutely not supposed to do various things that are going to crop up in his vice presidency.

"If he makes concessions, he is no longer Orthodox."

Some criticized what they see as hypocrisy on Lieberman's part, maintaining the importance of religion in his life, but attending meetings and other activities on Saturdays. Lieberman has addressed that issue, however, by saying that for the past 12 years in public life he has voted on Saturday as part of the Jewish tradition of pikuach nefesh, or saving people's lives.

The senator recently clarified his interpretation of that tradition to mean he may work on Shabbat, but only to promote "the respect and protection of human life and well-being." But the complexities of Lieberman's traditions embarrasses many Jews, Foxman said, who may be expected to explain the intricacies to their non-Jewish neighbors, and might not be able to.

"He's not like all of us, and this adds to their anxiety level," Foxman said. □

Reform Jews most aggressive in synagogue transformations

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — While all streams of Judaism are working on transforming their synagogues in some way, the Reform movement is investing more resources in the effort.

Redefining the Synagogue
Part 2 of a Series

Its seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, created the first systematic synagogue change program, the Experiment in Congregational Education, in 1992.

The program worked closely with 14 congregations over three years, helping them make Jewish learning central to all synagogue activities.

Now, the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations is helping 18 of its synagogues around the country participate in Synagogue 2000, a multiyear program similar to ECE that tries to make synagogues welcoming and prayer services meaningful.

In addition, 10 Reform temples are starting to work on a UAHC project called Creating Learning Congregations, and another 80 to 100 synagogues will participate in a less-intensive "worship change initiative" said Rabbi Daniel Freelander, the UAHC's director of programs.

"At the core of our philosophy is that how the synagogue does business is always going to be changing, but organizations move really slowly and unless you instigate change, it doesn't come automatically," Freelander said.

The synagogue transformation experiments come at a time when the Reform movement is rethinking the way it approaches worship, shifting away from what Freelander described as a "performance style of worship," in which congregants sit passively while the rabbi and cantor lead services from the front.

Increasingly, Reform congregations are incorporating more traditional Jewish rituals and practices.

In 1999, its rabbis urged Reform Jews to consider things the movement had once staunchly dismissed, like keeping kosher and observing Shabbat.

Although leaders of Judaism's other movements agree that synagogues need to think about adapting for today's American Jews, they are taking a more cautious approach to transformation efforts than Reform.

Individual Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations have participated in Synagogue 2000, but their national movements are not directly involved with the effort.

Mark Seal of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation said it is not clear whether Reconstructionist congregations need Synagogue 2000's approach.

"We didn't need a sense of davening and spirituality — we have that," he said, noting that as part of Judaism's youngest stream, Reconstructionist congregations tend to be fairly new and small, with most already offering the inclusive, participatory type of worship services Synagogue 2000 encourages.

Meanwhile, the Conservative movement is "trying to work with our congregants to help them figure out what transformation is," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Synagogue 2000 "is good for the synagogues prepared to invest significant human and financial resources, but most of our congregations are intimidated by that," Epstein said.

Instead, the Conservative movement is encouraging more modest projects like one called "Mentoring Months," in which congregations encourage members to pair up and share Jewish skills with each other.

For example, one member might teach another how to read Torah.

Talk of synagogue transformation has been less prevalent in the Orthodox world.

However, some leaders are calling for more change, particularly to bring in new people who were not raised Orthodox.

"There's less apparent need for transformation and renewal in Orthodox synagogues because on the surface of it everything looks good. People come in large numbers every week, often every day," said Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky of B'nai David-Judaea Congregation in Los Angeles.

But, he added, "my contention is there's so much more we could be doing if we see ourselves differently — not as serving a narrow swath, but serving as broad a swath as possible."

Toward that end, Kanfesky's shul implemented several strategies four years ago to make newcomers feel welcome: encouraging communal singing during services, announcing on which page in the siddur prayers are located, coordinating extensive social action projects and organizing members to host each other for holidays and Shabbat meals.

"People who are here for the first time get four or five Shabbat lunch invitations," said Kanefsky, who used to work with Rabbi Avi Weiss, an Orthodox rabbi known for his vibrant New York congregation and successful outreach to nonobservant Jews.

Professionals in the Orthodox Union say many Orthodox synagogues are involved in strategic planning efforts and are bringing in liturgical and other changes.

In the past year, 30 Orthodox congregations have sought planning advice from O.U. officials, said Rabbi Moshe Krupka, the organization's national director of synagogue services.

Several are trying to make prayer services more engaging, doing things like moving the bimah, or dais, to the center, rather than the front, of the synagogue and incorporating more singing, sometimes even dancing, into the service.

Rabbi Saul Berman, director of Edah, a modern Orthodox think tank, said that synagogues have "taken a back seat" to Jewish day schools in terms of Orthodox communal priorities.

However, he said, there are "certain stirrings, particularly from the younger rabbis" and that as transformation efforts become more prevalent "the Orthodox community will be deeply engaged in the same process." □

Large class opens Detroit school

NEW YORK (JTA) — A day high school in suburban Detroit is opening what is believed to be the largest founding class for a non-Orthodox North American Jewish high school.

The Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit, whose leadership is mainly Conservative, will have 50 to 60 students enrolled this fall — 75 percent of whom are graduates of Jewish day schools. □