



Daily News Bulletin

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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Putin lauds Jews at JCC opening

Russian President Vladimir Putin praised the Russian Jewish community's revival at a ceremony dedicating a Lubavitch-sponsored Jewish Community Center, the first of its kind in the region.

During a speech Monday seen as an unprecedented demonstration of Kremlin support for Russia's Jewish community, Putin also praised the Lubavitch-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities as a "highly constructive and influential organization."

One of Israel's former chief rabbis, Mordechai Eliyahu, presented Putin with a shofar.

Soviet emigre swims to gold

A Jewish immigrant to the United States from the Soviet Union won a gold medal in the 100-meter backstroke at the Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

Lenny Krayzelburg set an Olympic record of 53.72 seconds in winning the race Monday.

"It's better than anything I've ever done in my life," said Krayzelburg, who emigrated from Odessa in what is now Ukraine in 1988.

Israel: Respect us on Jerusalem

Israel's acting foreign minister spoke of the centrality of Jerusalem to the Jewish people during an address to the U.N. General Assembly.

"Just as we do not question the sincerity of the sentiments of others toward their holy sites in Jerusalem, we expect that others will not question the Jewish people's deep, awesome attachment to Jerusalem and its holy sites," Shlomo Ben-Ami said Monday.

Foundations 'hemorrhage' funds

The funding patterns of Jewish family foundations represent a "massive hemorrhage of Jewish money flowing out of the Jewish community," said the provost of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

Jack Wertheimer is working on a study that has found these foundations give only 37 percent of their money to Jewish causes — 6 percent of which goes to Jewish day schools.

Wertheimer made his comments in suburban New York to a conference of about 300 major donors to day schools, where he urged day schools to tap this potential funding source.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Israel's new U.N. status: Will it make a difference?

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — As the curtain rose this month on the U.N. General Assembly's 55th session, it also ushered in what Jewish observers hope will be a new era for Israel.

But will the changes only be cosmetic?

Enemies of the Jewish state have long ganged up to portray it as the most reviled member of the United Nations.

Yet relations with the world body are clearly thawing, say Israeli and American Jewish observers, thanks in part to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in late May and the Camp David summit in July, after which the Israeli side was praised for displaying more flexibility than its Palestinian counterpart.

Most important, though, is Israel's official — albeit partial and temporary — entry into the Western European and Others Group, one of five regional U.N. groupings.

Prior to May, Israel had been the only one of 189 U.N. member states shut out of the regional grouping system — and therefore ineligible to serve on the Security Council and prominent U.N. agencies.

Israel's natural home is with the Asian grouping, but a slew of foes, including Iraq and Iran, have easily blocked Israel's membership.

So Israel turned to the 27-member grouping known as WEOG, which includes the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Years of lobbying finally overcame resistance from certain Europeans, some of whom were said to be under pressure from their Arab allies to exclude Israel. Others were concerned about increasing competition within WEOG for the posts allocated to each grouping for the commissions of every U.N. agency.

At a celebration of Israel's new status last week in New York, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Israel's Acting Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami both hailed the admission to WEOG and credited the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, for giving a crucial shove.

Albright described Israel's inclusion as "a turning point for the U.N., because some of its lowest moments are associated with unwarranted anti-Israel sentiments."

Speaking at the same gathering, sponsored by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, Ben-Ami added that membership would "enable us to adequately voice our ideas on issues of global importance and to contribute productively to the important work of these organizations."

Still, Ben-Ami continually referred to "WEOG New York," duly noting that Israel is still restricted from the assorted U.N. agencies in Geneva, Vienna, Rome and Nairobi that deal with health, labor, the environment, atomic energy and intellectual property rights, among many other issues.

Israel accepted heavily "conditioned" membership, whereby it would not run for any of the agency posts for two years.

Israel and its advocates say the Jewish state was content to have its foot in the door for now, rather than gamble and push for the unlikely prospect of full, unconditional membership.

Now the second phase of lobbying — for equal footing — has begun.

David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said his

MIDEAST FOCUS

'Iran 10' appeal ruling expected

An Iranian court will announce its decision in the next few days on the appeals filed by 10 Jews convicted on charges of spying for Israel, a judiciary official said.

"The appeals court will probably decide by Wednesday or Thursday at the latest," the official told Reuters, adding, "There is a possibility for the original sentences to be reduced."

Lawmaker seeks envoy's recall

A Likud legislator called upon Israeli Prime Minister Barak to demand that the United States recall its ambassador to Israel.

Uzi Landau issued the call after U.S. envoy Martin Indyk called for the sharing of Jerusalem when he spoke last week at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. "It is inconceivable that an ambassador would call for the partition of the capital in which he is serving," Landau said.

Rabbis change stance on ministry

Israel's chief rabbis withdrew their support of plans to dismantle the Religious Affairs Ministry.

Chief Sephardic Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron said the rabbis originally thought the plan was designed to improve the provision of religious services to local communities.

But in light of a series of other secular reforms proposed by Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Bakshi-Doron said it now appears to the rabbis that the plan is politically motivated.

Jordan sentences Islamists

A Jordanian court on Monday sentenced to death six Islamic militants for plotting attacks against Israeli and U.S. tourists. The six, four of whom are at large, were among 28 militants standing trial on charges that included supporting terrorist Osama bin Laden and plotting bombings during millennium celebrations in Jordan last December.

organization is currently canvassing the 26 other members of WEOG to nail down who is for, against or ambivalent about "normalization" of Israel's relations within the group's satellites, and what exactly the grievances are.

"This is a diplomatic and psychological breakthrough for Israel," said Harris, who is spending the year in the AJCommittee's office in Geneva.

"It begins to end the isolation of Israel in the world body," said Harris, who recently published "In the Trenches," a book about his career as a political activist.

"It begins to end the anomaly of Israel's unique status outside the five regional groupings.

"And it begins to mainstream Israel into the workings of the U.N. But it's only a start, and there's a long way to go."

Psychologically, it will be comforting for Israel to know it actually has "partners," WEOG members who might stick up for Israel when it comes under attack. And Israel will now be allowed to participate in WEOG discussions and to share information often inaccessible to non-members.

Beyond that, though, it's unclear what tangible results will come Israel's way.

Moreover, WEOG will vote again in four years on Israel's temporary membership, which essentially means Israel is on probation, said Michael Colson, executive director of U.N. Watch, a Geneva-based watchdog group.

"There's a practical element missing" to Israel's membership, said Colson. "Is it just symbolic, or are there any real teeth to it?"

One thing seems certain, however: Nothing will prevent the annual blizzard of anti-Israel resolutions at the world body.

Israel has long been the whipping post of the U.N.'s Arab and Muslim member states, which for years counted on the support of their allies in the Communist orbit and Third World.

The United Nations is a democracy, where each member has one vote. The United States has the same, equal vote as the world body's newest member, Tuvalu, a group of islands in the West Central Pacific.

The annual resolutions, for example, condemn the Jewish state for its policies regarding settlements, Palestinian refugees and the "occupation" of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The most infamous was the 1975 "Zionism Is Racism" resolution, which was repealed in 1991.

However, most of the resolutions are still on "automatic pilot," said Harris, and repeated each year.

Recently, though, Israel gained a key ally in U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Annan, in a speech to the AJCommittee in December 1999, observed that "the exclusion of Israel from the system of regional groupings; the intense focus given to some actions taken in Israel, while other situations sometimes fail to elicit similar outrage; these and other circumstances have given, regrettably, the impression of bias and one-sidedness."

For now, there will be no change, say observers. Israel simply doesn't have enough allies to overcome the Muslim-led voting bloc.

As for the future, Israel may see its WEOG negotiations stall — and the global good will it has engendered quickly evaporate — if the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak falls and is either replaced by Likud, or a Likud-Labor government of national unity.

Presumably, under either scenario, the Palestinians would be offered far less than they were at Camp David.

Since Israeli officials and Jewish advocates often complained that their efforts to join WEOG were unfairly linked to the Middle East peace process, some wonder if that would again translate into anti-Israel sentiment at the United Nations.

"I'd rather not speculate on what-if situations," said Harris.

"I would only say that Israel's standing in the United Nations should in no way be linked to the politics of the day.

"Iraq was not suddenly excluded from the Asian group when it invaded Kuwait. Rwanda was not excluded from the African group when genocide took place on its soil. No other country is subjected to this kind of scrutiny or unfair status." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Southern Jewry institute debuts

An institute of southern Jewry was officially unveiled in New Orleans on Saturday night.

The Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life will work in a 12-state region from Virginia to Texas, providing rabbinic and educational support to isolated rural Jewish communities, preserving neglected and abandoned Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, and coordinating cultural events.

Swiss firms seek protection

Thirty-seven Swiss companies sought protection from a U.S. court against lawsuits over the possible use of slave labor by their German subsidiaries during World War II.

Among the 37 firms were Nestle and two of Europe's largest pharmaceutical firms, Roche and Novartis. The companies filed for protection under a \$1.25 billion settlement involving Switzerland's largest banks that was recently approved by the court.

Sharansky: Emigres anti-Barak

Former Israeli Cabinet minister Natan Sharansky said Russian Israelis oppose Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak because he is ready to give the Palestinians part of Jerusalem. The former refusenik made his comments Sunday on a national Russian television channel.

Soviet exodus to be remembered

The 10th anniversary of the peak in the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union will be celebrated Wednesday in Washington. Jewish groups and members of Congress are expected to attend the reception recalling the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews who were finally allowed to leave their country.

The commemoration coincides with a photo exhibit about Soviet emigres in Israel, on display in the U.S. Senate this week.

Shabbat campaign wins award

The "Shabbat Across America" campaign that linked Jews across North America this year won an award from a public relations company.

Designed to introduce unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews to Sabbath observance, the campaign received the honor from the firm because it garnered significant media coverage and was deemed effective.

Swedish diplomat honored

Israel awarded honorary citizenship Monday to a Swedish diplomat who shielded thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Nazis. Per Anger, now 88, issued Swedish identity cards and documents designed to protect Jews after Germany invaded Hungary.

Gravesite of leading rabbi to be saved from trolley cars

By Magnus Bennett

PRAGUE (JTA) — The race is on to save and restore a cemetery that contains the remains of one of Judaism's most revered spiritual leaders of the 18th and 19th centuries.

For decades in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, the earthly remains of Rabbi Chatam Sofer and other leading Jewish figures have been shaken by the constant pounding of trolley cars passing directly overhead.

Because of the volume of traffic, local Jewish leaders feared that the cemetery could be damaged beyond repair.

But a \$2 million project has now been launched that will not only divert the trolley car tracks away from the site but convert Sofer's final resting place in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains into a permanent mausoleum and tourist attraction.

Sofer, whose given name was Moshe, enjoyed an unrivaled reputation in Orthodox circles as a spiritual leader until his death at 76 in 1839.

The Torah interpretations and halachic rulings of the former chief rabbi of Pressburg — now Bratislava, at the time the most important Jewish community in Hungary — are still revered and studied around the world.

Albert Einstein and U.S. first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton are those who have visited the tomb over the years to pay their respects.

His remains were buried in a tomb surrounded by the graves of other leading rabbis and Jewish community leaders. But his peace was shattered during World War II, when the Nazi-puppet Slovak state decided to level the entire Jewish cemetery in order to construct a road.

Local Jewish leaders successfully fought to save the rabbi's grave — but it required a lot of good luck, according to Dr. Tomas Stern, a Slovak who has documented historical Jewish monuments throughout Central Europe.

"The grave of Chatam Sofer and other important rabbis happened to be at the bottom of a valley, so the authorities agreed to build the road over that section of the cemetery," he said.

Only 23 graves and 31 tombstones were saved from the bulldozers and encased in a concrete bunker beneath the road.

Years of neglect by Czechoslovakia's Communist regime took its toll on Sofer's grave, as trams relentlessly shook his resting place.

But help eventually appeared in the form of New York City Council member Noach Dear, who with the support of the White House, formed an international delegation to visit Bratislava and save Sofer's tomb.

A deal was reached under which the Slovak government agreed to reroute the trolley cars at a total cost of \$1.1 million. For its part, the delegation, which included New York businessman George Karfunkel and descendants of Sofer, vowed to restore the cemetery — a move that could cost as much as \$1 million.

For Dear, an Orthodox Jew, the money will be well spent, whatever the cost.

"Chatam Sofer is someone everyone reveres," he said. "Every young child at a Hebrew school gets to know who Sofer was. You must preserve the gravesite of any great leader and rabbi like that."

But Dear and local Jewish leaders will have to wait longer than anticipated for the site to be preserved.

Bratislava's City Hall had hoped to complete the new section of trolley track by this summer, but it has put back the completion date to at least October.

"We have come across several problems which have taken some time to get rid of," said Vladimir Lunacek, director of the city's Transportation Department. "One significant problem was ensuring the financing of the work."

Other problems have include red tape. City Hall has had to secure 23 certificates from utility authorities in order to complete the project.

As a result, construction work on the mausoleum itself is now unlikely to start until the spring of next year, pushing back the completion date to next summer. □

Peace talks turn more intense as prospect for deal turn dimmer

By Lisa Hostein

NEW YORK (JTA) — Despite a flurry of diplomatic activity, Israeli and Palestinian leaders are sounding increasingly downbeat about the prospects for peace.

“No movement in the Palestinian position is perceptible, and therefore it is not yet clear if there is a partner on the other side who is ready” to reach an agreement, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said in a statement Monday.

For his part, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat returned the criticism, blaming “Israeli intransigence” for the current deadlock in the talks.

The exchange came as direct contacts between the two sides continued in the Middle East — and as U.S. officials concluded a week of high-level separate meetings with the two sides in New York and Washington.

The talks in the United States were aimed at putting into writing the ideas that were raised at the Camp David summit in July.

The intensified diplomatic activity is intended to determine if the gaps between the two sides — particularly over the future of Jerusalem — can be bridged.

The renewed intensity also confirms the sense that time is running out.

While other deadlines have come and gone, Israeli and American officials appear to be increasingly convinced, as Israel’s acting foreign minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami, put it, “This is the last shot.”

Ben-Ami, speaking to journalists in New York last week, said the next 10 days would be critical in determining whether any agreement is possible.

Ben-Ami acknowledged that not much has changed since Camp David, but said he hoped that the fact that “time is running out” would inject a sense of urgency into the discussions.

At the same time, the acting foreign minister, who met with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and others last week and addressed the U.N. General Assembly on Monday, refused to predict what would happen if no breakthrough occurred within this time frame.

“We’ve had too many apocalyptic prophesies in the Middle East,” said Ben-Ami. “I don’t want to add another one. We’d rather concentrate our energies on trying to reach a deal.”

The two sides have to reach agreement on a number of difficult issues, including final borders, refugees, Jewish settlements, security and Jerusalem.

Since Camp David, the focus of debate has centered on Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have demanded the eastern half as capital of a future state, including control over the Islamic and Christian holy sites.

For Israel, Jerusalem is its undivided capital.

And while Barak has reportedly said he would consider granting the Palestinians limited control over some parts, he has been unyielding in stressing that no Palestinian or Islamic sovereignty will be extended over the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site.

Israel has rejected a Palestinian proposal to give sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Islamic world’s Jerusalem Committee.

The site, known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, is home to two major mosques.

Barak reiterated his opposition to Arafat’s idea to his Cabinet on Monday.

Explaining the Israeli opposition to the idea Arafat recently presented to Clinton, Ben-Ami said, “We don’t see much of a difference” between Palestinian sovereignty and Muslim sovereignty.

He also noted that Iraq and Iran, archenemies of Israel, are members of that Jerusalem Committee.

Ben-Ami did say that Israel had not rejected an idea raised by Clinton at Camp David that the U.N. Security Council be involved in sovereignty over the area, but that the Palestinians had rejected it.

There is continuing speculation that in putting forth its own compromise proposals, the U.S. administration would revive the idea of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement that excluded the most difficult issues surrounding Jerusalem and refugees.

Arafat reportedly rejected such exclusions at Camp David, and Barak, too, is believed to need a full deal in order to sell it to the Israeli public.

The latest developments coincided with the publication this week by Newsweek magazine of what it said was the full text, minus two annexes, of a draft peace accord drawn up in secret talks five years ago by Israeli Yossi Beilin, now Israel’s justice minister, and Palestinian official Abu Mazen.

According to reports, many of the ideas emerging from the current talks are similar to those in the draft document. Clinton also reportedly used it as a basis for the discussions at Camp David in July.

The ideas in the secret understanding included:

- Creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state on over 90 percent of the West Bank, with Israeli annexation of large settlement blocs;
- A 12-year Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley as well as early warning stations;
- Agreement in principle of Jerusalem as a shared capital of two states, with municipal arrangements made to enable the functioning of the city until a final arrangement is reached; and
- Creation of a mechanism for compensation to Palestinian refugees.

At the time, Beilin advocated moving quickly toward a final settlement with the Palestinians, rather than let the interim period drag on.

The draft agreement had been reached at the beginning of November in 1995 and was to be presented to Arafat and then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

However, a few days later, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing nationalist opposed to his peace policies with the Palestinians.

Ben-Ami, however, downplayed the importance of the Beilin-Mazen document, telling journalists last week that “we don’t get the impression” that either Arafat or Abu Mazen still find it relevant. □

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