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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Helicopters strike Fatah targets

Israeli helicopters attacked Palestinian targets in the West Bank.

Several Palestinian injuries were reported in the rocket attacks late Wednesday night on the Arab town of Beit Jalla, the source of heavy shooting earlier in the day at the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo.

The Israel Defense Force also targeted Fatah offices in Jericho, Hebron, Tulkarm and Salfit.

A German man was killed when Israeli troops fired on Beit Jalla.

Harald Fischer, 68, was cut down by bullets late Wednesday night when he left his home to try to help wounded neighbors, said his Palestinian wife, Norma.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who is not related to the victim, said Thursday he was "shocked and horrified" by the killing and demanded that the Jewish state conduct an immediate investigation into the incident.

Barak downplays summit idea

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross held separate talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to try to end the ongoing violence.

After meeting with Ross, Arafat said he had not given up hope for a summit with Barak and President Clinton before the U.S. president leaves office in January.

But Barak was less optimistic, telling Israel's Army Radio, "we are not close" to a three-way summit. He also said Israelis should prepare for a long fight with the Palestinians.

Bishops' statement criticized

The American Jewish Committee said it is "deeply disappointed" with a U.S. Catholic bishops' resolution on the Middle East peace process because it did not call upon the Palestinians to "fully respect the religious liberties" of Jews.

The AJCommittee said Palestinians have desecrated Jewish holy sites and some Muslim religious leaders had urged "attacks on Jews worldwide."

In their resolution issued Wednesday, the bishops for the first time endorsed the "establishment of an internationally recognized Palestinian state."

It also supported Israel's right to exist within secure borders.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Are the Reconstructionists becoming more mainstream?

By Julie Wiener

PHILADELPHIA (JTA) — Gathered from around the country, the group noshed on bug juice and s'mores — melted marshmallows and chocolate on graham crackers — then sang Hebrew songs, led by a guitar-playing man dressed in shorts and a bright yellow T-shirt.

The revelers were not young campers, but rabbis and synagogue lay leaders. And they were not sitting around a campfire for the opening plenum of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's recent biennial convention, but a staid Philadelphia hotel conference hall.

Reconstructionism — which interprets Judaism as an "evolving civilization" — has long been known as American Judaism's youngest, smallest and quirkiest movement. But with many of its practices — such as making services more participatory and inclusive — now being adopted by established Conservative and Reform synagogues hungry for "renewal" and "transformation," Reconstructionism is going more mainstream.

At the same time, the 100-congregation movement, which has 20,000 member families, is adding the infrastructure of the more established streams:

- The number of Reconstructionist congregations has jumped from 90 in 1996 and 52 in 1986;
- Increasingly, Reconstructionist congregations — once predominantly lay-led havurot, or participatory groups, that met in people's homes or in borrowed space — are hiring rabbis and moving into their own buildings;
- The first Reconstructionist summer camp is scheduled to open in 2002 somewhere on the East Coast. The new camp, which leaders hope will spawn a whole network, was the impetus for the s'mores-and-bug-juice convention opening;
- Reconstructionist teens from around the country will gather in Florida in January to launch the movement's first youth group;
- In response to growing demand for rabbis, the movement's seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in suburban Philadelphia, recently increased the size of its incoming rabbinic classes from 10 to 18, while adding a cantorial program and master's in Judaic studies. This month it completed construction of a new library and classrooms; and

• The movement now offers its own complete set of prayerbooks, including a High Holidays Machzor published in 1999 and a Passover Haggadah released last spring.

The first Reconstructionist synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, was founded by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan in the early 1920s. Kaplan was the first to introduce the Bat Mitzvah and began counting women in a minyan in the late 1920s. Reconstructionism, which regards Jewish law as something to inform policy rather than to dictate it, was the first movement to ordain openly gay and lesbian Jews and to recognize patrilineal descent, the idea that the child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother can be considered Jewish.

Even as they become more institutionalized, Reconstructionist congregations are doing it in a distinctive way, putting their own left-leaning marks on programs such as fund raising and summer camps.

In a meeting at the biennial, before taking on such issues such as what level of kashrut to observe or the role of Hebrew, camp committee members talked about the

MIDEAST FOCUS

E.U. backs off mediation role

Arab officials are using a conference involving European and Mediterranean states to demand that the European Union take an active role to help end the Middle East crisis.

But E.U. officials at the Euro-Med conference in Marseilles, France, responded that they cannot replace the United States as the chief mediator between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

At the end of the two-day conference, French officials issued a statement saying E.U. countries want to see a Palestinian state established "in the near future, and preferably by negotiation" with Israel.

Arafat appears on Israeli TV

In a videotaped message broadcast on Israeli television, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat said the Palestinians are determined to continue the peace process.

His message Wednesday night was not broadcast on Palestinian television.

Panel named to probe killings

Israeli Supreme Court Justice Theodore Orr will head a state commission of inquiry into the recent killing of 13 Israeli Arabs during clashes with the Jewish state's police.

The deputy president of the Nazareth district court and Israel's former ambassador to Egypt and Jordan will also sit on the panel.

Israel slams fake IDF site

In the latest Internet battle linked to the current Middle East crisis, Israeli officials said they intend to seek the removal of a fake Israeli army Web site.

The site, www.israeldefenseforce.com, features a logo that is almost identical to the one carried by the army's real site, www.idf.il.

But it includes statements like, "We are happy to announce that we have killed five new babies."



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need to welcome children from lesbian and multiracial Jewish families.

As a growing number of congregations are taking on major expenses like buildings and staff, the movement has responded with a series of workshops on fund raising.

Called "The Torah of Money," the workshops urge congregations to explore traditional Jewish texts on money, while also encouraging them to try creative fund-raising approaches that allow all members, not just the major donors, to feel ownership in the synagogue.

Many congregants came to Reconstructionism because they were disenchanted with the synagogues they grew up with, finding them too focused on material trappings or giving too much clout — whether ubiquitous plaques or aliyot, blessings before the Torah — to the wealthiest members.

"Our movement has a strong anti-institutional orientation," Mark Seal, the JRF's executive vice president, said in a recent issue of the movement's newsletter.

"There's a sense of, 'How can we even think about intensive fund raising when one of the central motivating factors that led to the creation of our community was a rejection of the culture of fund raising within the broader Jewish community?'"

Reconstructionist congregations are taking a range of approaches, but most are making 100 percent participation, rather than total dollars raised, the major goal.

- At Havurah Shalom, in Portland, Ore., the capital campaign was completely anonymous. "We just asked people how much do you think you can give, and we got enough," said Layton Borkan, a synagogue member who is also leading a movement-wide social justice initiative. The congregation, which in its founding days held services in a local park, raised \$1.1 million from predominantly middle-class congregants.

- As its building goes up, Adat Shalom, in Rockville, Md., is debating whether to limit its dealings only to contractors who pay a "living wage."

"Dealing with money issues is one of the most taboo topics," Rabbi Toba Spitzer, who leads a congregation in Newton, Mass., said, adding that all the members felt strongly about "not having people have to humiliate themselves by asking for an abatement."

The anti-hierarchical approach to fund raising has its difficulties.

"There were times it would've been easier just to put up plaques," said Linda Jum, a member of B'nai Keshet in Montclair, N.J., and a JRF board member.

Her synagogue did not differentiate between different levels of gifts during its fund-raising campaign. It has a wall honoring all donors and is putting labels honoring specific contributors only on books. Other Reconstructionist congregations are avoiding the hassles and capital campaigns that buildings require, by opting to continue renting or borrowing space from other institutions.

Some say they prefer the interaction with other groups.

David Zinner, a member of the Columbia Jewish Congregation in Columbia, Md., said his fellow congregants prefer their current home in an interfaith center to having their own building. "A lot of synagogues see it as a major triumph when they get their own building," he said. "For us it might be a failure."

Not all the fund raising is alternative, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by critics within the movement. Allan Mendels, a JRF board member from Long Island, expressed concern at the convention that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College holds an annual \$500-per-plate fund-raising dinner that not all members can afford.

In the most recent issue of the movement's newsletter, Philip Weinreich of Irvine, Calif., criticized his congregation for building an edifice he deems "most expensive" and said that "a gradual chill filled the air as the budget grew and along came a stream of requests for money."

"Now that the movement has become like the other Jewish branches, our search will have to continue to find a non-materialistic truly egalitarian movement where money is not the key," he wrote.

But most Reconstructionist Jews at the convention had not lost their enthusiasm for the movement.

"I think we're finding our way to be an institution that will not forget its grass-roots beginnings," B'nai Keshet's Jum said. "The more mainstream we become the better off for us. I believe there are many Reconstructionists out there," she said. "They just haven't realized it." □

JEWISH WORLD

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Germans rally against racism, but comments stir some division

By Richard Chaim Schneider

BERLIN (JTA) — There were high expectations in Germany for the big rally held here last week to commemorate Kristallnacht, the Nov. 9-10, 1938, anti-Jewish riots that heralded the Holocaust.

But comments from a conservative politician and a Jewish leader caused some division during what had been billed as a time for the country to unite against racism.

This year, Nov. 9 was also an important date in the new Germany. A recent wave of right-wing attacks and killings of foreigners, mainly in the eastern part of the country, has prompted a public discussion about the right way to fight neo-Nazism.

In the last few weeks there have been attacks against synagogues in Erfurt, Berlin and Dusseldorf. At a news conference in Dusseldorf recently, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder called for an "uprising of the righteous" in Germany to fight Nazism.

Earlier, reacting to the arson of his synagogue and other anti-Semitic attacks, Paul Spiegel, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said, emotionally, "Maybe it was a mistake that we re-established Jewish communities in Germany after the war."

The Nov. 9 rally against racism was meant as a demonstration to the world that there is another Germany.

At the same time, though, conservative Parliament member Friedrich Merz started a controversial discussion about German immigration policy.

"The immigrants have to be integrated but they have to accept the 'primacy of German culture,'" he said. Other Parliament members attacked Merz for using that term, which they say could be used by members of the extreme right wing who are anti-immigrant.

Two hundred thousand people gathered at the Brandenburg Gate in the center of Berlin.

In a speech before the crowd, Jewish leader Spiegel attacked the discussion about "Leitkultur," accusing conservative politicians of inciting the public and asking, Is it the primacy of German culture "to persecute and kill foreigners and arson synagogues?"

Conservative politicians reacted angrily to the speech, accusing Spiegel of "provoking a polarization" in Germany's society.

"The Central Council will not withdraw its criticism," Spiegel told JTA. "We say clearly we do believe in German democracy, and we do understand and accept the necessity of a public discussion on immigration politics for Germany."

"There is no doubt that immigrants have to learn German and accept German law. But any kind of incitement of racism and xenophobia will not be accepted by us."

Michel Friedman, vice president of the Central Council, made it very clear what he thinks of the term. "I do not want anymore to be permitted ["gelitten"] or to be led ["geleitet"] by anyone," he said, using a wordplay on forms of the German word for "lead."

Anetta Kahane, head of the Amadeu-Antonio Foundation, an anti-neo-Nazi nongovernmental organization named after the first victim of racism after unification, accused the government of mainly paying lip service to fighting the far right.

"We have been warning for many years that we do know that right-extremist structures are getting more and more complex and stronger, but very often the politicians do not listen."

Meanwhile, as the political debate goes on, more incidents have been reported.

In Ueckermuende, a town in eastern Germany, a banner with anti-Semitic slogans was unfurled in the Jewish cemetery.

In Eberswalde, a stronghold of right-wing extremists, vandals desecrated a memorial for Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

And in the eastern German city of Weida, a group of skinheads beat up a 36-year-old Tunisian man. □

Israel backer loses chairmanship

Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) will have to step down from his role as chairman of the House International Relations Committee after Republican congressmen voted Wednesday to keep a six-year term limit on committee chairs.

Gilman, who is considered an influential advocate for Israel in Congress, had tried to seek a waiver against the term limits Republicans initiated when they won the House majority in 1994.

Russian governor apologizes

The newly elected governor of the Kursk region in central Russia publicly apologized for anti-Semitic statements he made last week, when he lashed out at a "Russian-Jewish conspiracy."

Alexander Mikhailov apologized Wednesday after he met with the regional representative of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The representative said he is "convinced Mikhailov is not going to repeat this mistake."

Meanwhile, according to Jewish sources in Kursk, local anti-Semites attempted Saturday to burst into the city's Jewish community center, where they shouted, "We are Mikhailov's supporters."

Diplomat-rescuers get TV focus

Four diplomats who risked their careers to save Jews during the Holocaust will be remembered in the documentary "Diplomats for the Damned," to air over the History Channel in the United States on Nov. 26.

Chroniced in the documentary are Hiram Bingham of the United States, Aristides de Sousa Mendes of Portugal, Charles Lutz of Switzerland and Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz of Germany.

Baltic court tries WWII case

A Lithuanian court is trying a suspected war criminal in absentia. Kazys Gimzauskas allegedly handed Jews over to death squads in the capital of Vilnius during World War II, when he was deputy head of the Nazi-sponsored Lithuanian security police.

Prague forum covers assets

An international conference on the wartime seizure of the property of Czech Jews by the Nazis was held in Prague. Scholars and lawyers from the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany attended the event.

Swiss paper reaches 100

The Jewish Weekly of Switzerland marked its 100th anniversary with a celebration at a Zurich hotel.

Among those honoring what is believed to be Western Europe's oldest Jewish newspaper was Swiss President Adolf Ogi, who told the audience Tuesday not to be disheartened by anti-Semitic incidents.

ARTS & CULTURE

Author injects himself into story of Lubavitch in Iowa

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Stephen Bloom admits that the first draft of his book about a Lubavitch enclave in rural Iowa lacked something: his own personal story.

In this early account, he wrote about the culture clash between members of the Chasidim group, who settled in Iowa beginning in the mid-1980s around a kosher slaughterhouse, and the longtime residents of the sleepy town of Postville. But Bloom de-emphasized his own encounters with the town's Christian residents and its Chasidic Jews.

So the Jewish professor of journalism at the University of Iowa, reworked it. In his new draft, he says, "I try to act as a tour guide who allows the reader to follow the narrator inside this extraordinary community."

The result: "Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America," a book that has already garnered much praise. It was featured as a Book of the Month Club selection in the United States.

But Bloom created something more. By weaving his own personal journey into the book, he created a classic tale of a struggle for an American Jewish identity, updated for the 21st century.

Bloom is the son Jewish parents want their daughter to bring home.

Handsome, with dark curly hair, he's both thoughtful and forceful in conversation.

He was an award-winning journalist who worked for several major newspapers before he uprooted his wife and young son to Iowa City, where he took a job at the university there.

A complex move for someone who grew up near New York and was accustomed to liberal, cosmopolitan San Francisco, the migration was made all the more difficult by the monolithic Christian culture he discovered in Iowa.

As he puts it, "On Easter, the big-city paper, the Cedar Rapids Gazette, ran a banner headline: 'HE HAS RISEN.' Other than being offensive and irrelevant to non-Christians, the headline broke all the rules of news judgment that I preached to my students. The event was neither breaking news nor could it be corroborated by two independent sources."

Bloom was raised in a nonobservant home, didn't have a Bar Mitzvah and was comfortable in non-Jewish circles. But he was still feeling uneasy in his new surroundings.

So when he read about a Lubavitch enclave in the tiny town of Postville, he was intrigued.

"If I was suffering a culture clash, they were in a place where there were 10 pigs for every person," he said in a recent interview with JTA.

The Lubavitch followers had migrated to Postville, more than 700 miles from their Brooklyn headquarters, because they wanted to operate a slaughterhouse close to where beef is produced — and because they found an inexpensive slaughterhouse that had been closed for several years.

Their Iowa slaughterhouse was immediately successful — and controversial.

The plant brought some jobs to the depressed town, even though most of the employees at the slaughterhouse were immigrants.

The population influx increased business, even though the Chasidim didn't always shop at the local stores, preferring to make major purchases back in Brooklyn.

Most longtime Postville residents were taken aback by these strange newcomers, with their beards, odd way of speaking and desire to remain apart.

At times, this mistrust manifests itself in the book as blatant anti-Semitism.

As one longtime Postville resident who Bloom meets with at a local coffee shop puts it, "They're all about the dollars. They do what they please whenever they want, and everyone else be damned!"

At the same time, the Chasidim aren't interested in becoming part of the local community.

As one member of the community tells him, admonishing him for saying hello to some non-Jewish residents of Postville on their way to synagogue one Shabbat morning, "The goyim will always be the goyim, no matter how nice they are to you. So what's the point?"

The tensions eventually come to a head when the town tries to annex the land where the slaughterhouse is located, which would force the Chasidim to pay taxes to the town. The Chasidim threaten to leave if the annexation passes.

Bloom uses the tension during the annexation battle to tell his story.

Along the way, he discovers some compelling stories: what happened at the deathbed of a longtime resident — a non-Chasidic Jewish doctor, and a murder committed by two young members of the Chasidic community.

But his own personal story and views emerge just as vividly as the battle in Postville.

Bloom is not on a personal search for religious meaning. He seems to be at ease with the spiritual life he has created for his family.

When asked about his Judaism, he emphasizes "tikkun olam," or repairing the world. He and his family belong to a Reform congregation in Iowa City, and his son will celebrate a Bar Mitzvah.

Like a good journalist, he doesn't pick any sides in the struggle over annexation.

He says he enjoyed sharing the same Yiddishkeit and sense of humor with the Chasidim — and he compliments their "wonderful belief."

But by the end of the book, he appears to prefer the local Iowa residents over the Lubavitch.

He feels more at ease in Iowa, writing that his family will "never become Iowans, but Iowa has become our home."

More controversially, he makes comparisons between the Lubavitch and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan — whom he covered for the Los Angeles Times — that are sure to rankle some readers.

When questioned about the comparisons, Bloom responds by making an analogy that appears to describe his journey.

"A black author could have gone to interview Farrakhan and done a story, and in many ways it would have been a fight for his soul." □