



Daily News Bulletin

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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Gaza settler murdered

Israel canceled a planned meeting with Palestinians and imposed a total closure on the Gaza Strip.

The move came after Jewish settler Roni Tsalah was found murdered Monday in an orange grove near Gaza's Kfar Yam settlement. To avenge his slaying, Jewish settlers later set fire to Palestinian homes, fields and greenhouses.

Reports vary on Wallenberg

Russian and Swedish officials do not agree on whether Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who aided Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust, died in 1947, according to separate reports released by the two countries.

Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson said there is inconclusive evidence that Wallenberg died in a Soviet prison, and the country will devote more resources to discovering Wallenberg's fate. [Page 3]

Palestinian collaborators killed

An organization representing Palestinians who provide information to Israeli security forces filed a petition asking that Israel cut off peace talks until the Palestinian Authority stops executing suspected collaborators, the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* reported.

The petition was filed after the Palestinian Authority executed two Palestinians for helping Israel target senior Palestinian militants involved in attacks against Israelis. The executions prompted an international outcry.

Also, three men killed a suspected Palestinian collaborator, Palestinian police said.

Jews mixed on Ashcroft

Jewish groups are mixed on whether the U.S. Senate should approve President-elect Bush's nomination of John Ashcroft to be U.S. attorney general.

Agudath Israel of America said Ashcroft, who has been criticized for his ties to the Christian Right and his alleged lack of support for civil rights laws, respects all people "irrespective of race or religion."

But Jewish Women International opposes Ashcroft, whose confirmation vote is expected to take place this week, for opposing laws that "attempted to thwart affirmative action, gun control, gun safety" and abortion. Meanwhile, the Republican Jewish Coalition began running ads backing Ashcroft's nomination.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Birthright youth brave falafels, fears to seek out Jewish roots

By Julie Wiener

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Leah Friedman, a petite college senior with a small silver stud in her nose, stood with a friend at the top of Masada, where, she had just learned, ancient Jews collectively committed suicide to prevent the Romans from killing, raping or enslaving them.

With the rest of Friedman's Birthright Israel group on the other side of the ruins and no other tourists in sight, the mountain they had climbed was strikingly tranquil that sunny Monday afternoon.

"At home when you watch the news, you imagine Israel is a desert like this," Friedman said, gesturing toward the peach-tinted Judean hills on one side and the blue-gray Dead Sea on the other, "but with people with guns everywhere."

Last winter, Birthright won headlines — and the admiration of previously skeptical Jewish officials — as thousands of young people, many of whom had little previous involvement in Jewish life, returned from their free 10-day trips talking earnestly about Israel and their search for spirituality and God.

This fall, it again captured headlines as many wondered whether the trips would even take place against a backdrop of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Birthright officials had planned this year to double the winter launch to 10,000 young Jews, including 7,500 from the United States.

But just as they were sending out acceptance letters, the Palestinians' "Al-Aksa Intifada" erupted, scaring away prospective Birthright participants and tourists from around the world.

In the end, despite thousands of dropouts — mostly from the United States — Birthright is bringing more people than last year: between 8,000 and 9,000 young people, of whom some 6,000 are American.

Another 1,500 are Canadian, with the rest from the former Soviet Union, Europe and Latin America.

The first trip departed in late December, and trips are running through February, with the bulk of travelers arriving in the past three weeks. Approximately 30 organizations are running tours under Birthright auspices. The programs are moving ahead with full travel itineraries, albeit with strategic alterations.

Despite rumors that Jerusalem's Old City and Ben-Yehuda pedestrian mall would be off-limits because of security concerns, most groups are going there, but with certain restrictions as to when and precisely which areas.

Routes are checked daily for safety with the Israeli Department of Education's "situation room."

Lengthy detours are often imposed. Groups that had planned to travel to the West Bank limited their schedule to Israel proper.

Some tour providers imposed strict sign-in policies for free time.

Dialogues with Palestinians — such as a meeting some Birthright participants held last year in Jericho with chief Palestinian negotiator Sa'eb Erekat — and visits with Israeli Arabs in the Galilee were quietly dropped or replaced by exchanges with Druse or Bedouin, who are considered less antagonistic toward Israel.

The changes could also be felt in the participants themselves. Almost all the American students that went — many of them taken from the 17,000-person waiting list, which ultimately was depleted — did so despite their own misgivings and warnings

MIDEAST FOCUS

Army pressed on religious issues

The Conservative movement in Israel called on the Israel Defense Force to grant full religious freedom to its members who serve in the army.

The request came after three female soldiers were barred from praying at a synagogue on an army base while wearing tefillin. The army said the move was taken to avoid offending male worshippers.

Peres tries to rein in backers

Cabinet minister Shimon Peres asked supporters to stop demanding that Prime Minister Ehud Barak step aside so Peres can run in his place in Feb. 6 elections.

Public opinion polls show that Peres is even with Likud leader Ariel Sharon, while Sharon would defeat Barak.

Israel helping quake victims

Israel is sending a medical team and supplies to help earthquake victims in El Salvador.

Volunteers have also been collecting humanitarian aid for the stricken area.

Health minister resigns

Israel's health minister resigned to protest Prime Minister Ehud Barak's conditional acceptance of President Clinton's proposals for a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

Roni Milo, a former Likud Party official who now belongs to the Center Party, believes Barak was willing to make too many concessions to the Palestinians.

Gilo resident attacked

A resident of Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood was lightly wounded in a stabbing attack by a Palestinian who fled to nearby Palestinian Authority territory. The southern Jerusalem neighborhood has been the target of frequent Palestinian shooting attacks since the outbreak of unrest nearly four months ago.

from family and friends. Like last year's participants, most have limited Jewish backgrounds, many are from interfaith families and many are dating non-Jews.

Like last year, there were spontaneous Bar Mitzvah celebrations — many had never had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah — and eruptions of tears at the Western Wall.

And like last year, participants say they are seeking spirituality and roots, talk of feeling "at home" in Israel, pledge to return for longer stays and describe the trip in superlatives. Like last year, they have a reverence for Birthright's founders, philanthropists Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman.

Yet those who came this year appear to be slightly more intrepid than their predecessors.

Many speak of a yen for adventure, and a desire, after hearing so much about the region in the news, to gain a better understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I'm pro-Israel, but trying to figure out at what expense," said Erik Rice, a 26-year-old high school teacher from suburban Detroit, as he munched on pita and tahina in a Bedouin camp.

Rachel Kleinman, a 26-year-old grant writer who was standing in a Gilo elementary school down the block from the site of Arab shooting attacks, said she had come to explore her Jewish roots but "also to learn about the situation here."

A few wondered whether Birthright is simply a propaganda effort to bolster support for Israel.

Rice mused that the donors might have an "ulterior motive." Sam Feldman, a sophomore at Oberlin College in Ohio, said some of his friends opted not to go "because they didn't agree with Israel's policies, and just coming here is making a statement."

But most said the programming was politically balanced, with speakers and tour guides from the left and right sides of Israeli politics.

Unlike last year's participants, who largely were ignored by the locals, this year's crop was welcomed by Israelis desperate for tourism and the kinship of other Jews.

The pilot on an El Al flight carrying hundreds of Birthright students made a special welcome announcement, suggesting that the new visitors "will maybe come back to make aliyah," using the Hebrew term for immigration to Israel.

At least half the souvenir shops on the Ben-Yehuda mall advertised 50 percent discounts for Birthright, or Taglit, as the program is called in Hebrew.

Heightening Birthright's local visibility is the fact that the Israeli government last year pledged to pay \$70 million — about one-third of the program's cost — over five years. Both candidates for prime minister in Feb. 6 elections spoke at Birthright events.

For some participants, including a number who sported nose rings, belly rings and tattoos, going on the trip carried a sense of bravado.

"I've been to almost every other country in the Middle East except Israel. So this wasn't a big deal to me," said Jordan Miller, a junior at the College of New Jersey who has served in the U.S. Navy.

"Machine guns are nothing new to me."

One woman on Miller's bus joked that after all the security warnings, she was eager "to see some bullets flying so I could say I was in a war zone."

Others acknowledged that they were nervous, but comforted themselves by saying that the media exaggerate conflict and the trip would have been canceled if it were truly dangerous.

In the end, many came because they didn't want to sacrifice "the chance of a lifetime."

Lauren Cohen, a double bass player studying at the Oberlin Conservatory, said she didn't know whether she would ever be able to afford a trip to Israel on her own.

Friedman, too, said she had considered canceling, especially since her father was "kind of pleading" with her and her Catholic fiancé "pulled up the State Department Web page and showed me the travel advisory." But one day at work, she said, "I thought how I would feel if I stayed at work."

"I needed to do this," she said. "This is the greatest gift of my life."

Of the scores of participants interviewed from a variety of programs, however, all said they felt safe once in Israel. □

Julie Wiener's trip to Israel was paid for by the Birthright Israel program.



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JEWISH WORLD

ADL criticizes West Bank rally

The Anti-Defamation League called on the Palestinian Authority to condemn the abuse of religious symbols at a weekend anti-Israel rally in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

During the rally, which was attended by representatives of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, a donkey was draped with a Jewish prayer shawl and paraded through the crowd.

Pieces of cloth with swastikas and stars of David were also wrapped around the donkey.

Birthright group cheers Sharon

Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon told 2,500 young, cheering Jews that the Israeli government does not have the right to divide Jerusalem because it belongs to all the world's Jews.

At a Jan. 13 "mega-event" for Birthright Israel participants making their first visit to the Jewish state, prime ministerial candidate Sharon urged the participants to move to Israel because "we need you here." Prime Minister Ehud Barak spoke at a similar event the previous week.

U.S. revokes extremist's visa

The U.S. State Department revoked the visa of an Israeli extremist.

The move against Baruch Marzel, a former leader of Kach, is part of a general U.S. crackdown against Jewish extremist groups linked to members of the slain Kahane family.

Leader decries German racism

The leader of German Jewry said his faith in the country has declined in the year since he took on his position.

"People are no longer shy about hurling their anti-Semitism directly into my face," Paul Spiegel, chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said in an interview with the Berliner Morgenpost newspaper.

Spiegel charged that German Jews are "being slandered as money-grubbing."

He also charged that a compensation fund for Holocaust-era slave laborers is "being portrayed as Jewish exploitation."

Activist Ben Zion Leuchter dies

Jewish activist and journalist Ben Zion Leuchter died Sunday after suffering from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Leuchter, who lived in Key Biscayne, Fla., was a former president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and a past chair of CLAL.

He also served as a longtime JTA director.

Commission reports do little to resolve mystery of Wallenberg's death

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Despite 10 years of study by a joint Russian-Swedish commission, the mystery surrounding Raoul Wallenberg remains unsolved.

The commission studying the case of the Swedish diplomat, who saved tens of thousands of Jews during World War II only to be arrested by Soviet agents in Budapest in 1945, issued two conflicting reports last Friday.

In the Russian version, Wallenberg, arrested at the age of 32, died in 1947 at the Lubyanka prison as a result of violence.

Soviet officials had long held that Wallenberg died of a heart attack. He was "rehabilitated" late last year after reports surfaced about the committee's findings.

Sources in Moscow said the official rehabilitation — an acknowledgment that Wallenberg was the victim of Soviet-era injustice — was initiated by President Vladimir Putin, who wanted to heal a wound in Russia's relations with the West and international Jewish groups. The Swedish report, however, cites evidence that Wallenberg may have died as late as 1989 in a psychiatric clinic near Moscow.

A strong argument in favor of this version, says the Swedish report, is the fact that in 1989 Soviet officials gave Wallenberg's relatives his personal belongings. Soviet prison regulations specify that this should be done within six months of a prisoner's death.

The Swedes also say they have documents and witness testimony from CIA archives that indicate Wallenberg was held at the psychiatric clinic in 1983.

Russian experts argue that these witnesses could have been KGB-controlled. The Soviet spy agency often used such agents to spread misleading information, Igor Sinitsin, a former Soviet intelligence officer who has become a Wallenberg expert, told JTA.

Wallenberg risked his diplomatic status to issue "protective letters" that saved Jews in Budapest during the war.

The Russian version is the one many Jews for years have believed to be true, but one U.S. Jewish group long involved in the Wallenberg effort does not find the Russian report conclusive.

"It is disappointing that after such exhaustive examination by the two panels that the mystery of Raoul Wallenberg has yet to be solved. We still don't have the answers to two fundamental questions: Why was he arrested in the first place; and second, what precisely happened to him after he was sent into the Soviet Gulag," said Kenneth Bandler, a spokesman for the American Jewish Committee.

The AJCommittee, which a year ago relaunched a campaign asking the U.S. government to press Russia for full disclosure on Wallenberg, plans to continue its efforts, particularly because Wallenberg worked for the U.S. War Refugee Board, according to Bandler.

The study did yield evidence that the Soviet government believed Wallenberg was a U.S. spy.

The intrigue surrounding the Wallenberg case is intensified by the fact that the KGB archives have once again been closed — even though Gennady Kuzovkin, a Moscow historian, says there are more documents there that might offer clues to Wallenberg's fate.

Meanwhile, Swedish newspapers have reported in the past few weeks that Sweden turned down opportunities to exchange Wallenberg for Soviet defectors or spies.

Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson, who says he is not even sure if Wallenberg is dead — if he is alive, he would be 87 years old — apologized at a news conference for Sweden's inability to solve the case.

"I promise that our efforts to obtain an answer on what really happened to Raoul Wallenberg will be continued," he said. □

Both reports are available on a Web site operated by the Swedish Foreign Ministry at www.ud.se.

(JTA staff writer Peter Ephross contributed to this report.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Orthodox groups welcome Bush, see room to cooperate on policy***By Sharon Samber*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As President-elect George W. Bush prepares to take office, Orthodox Jewish groups hope they will find a more sympathetic ear in the White House.

After eight difficult years trying to push their agenda with the Clinton administration, groups like Agudath Israel of America and the Orthodox Union are hopeful they'll have a better chance with Bush and his staff, who support a greater role for religion in public life.

The groups' early outreach to Bush highlights the domestic priorities of the organizations and their attempts to persuade Bush to include them in the policy circle, particularly on issues such as school vouchers and charitable choice.

"There is reason for optimism that the new administration will move in the direction that we have long been advocating," said David Zwiebel, Agudath Israel's executive vice president for government and public affairs.

Vouchers, which provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools, continues to be a divisive issue for Jewish organizations. But many Orthodox Jews, who send their children to yeshivas or Jewish day schools, support publicly financed tuition vouchers. Both Agudath Israel, a fervently Orthodox organization, and the O.U., a centrist Orthodox group, strongly support vouchers.

In an open letter this month from Agudath Israel to Bush, Zwiebel asks the president-elect to "enlist Jewish support for policies that expand parental options in education."

Last month, the O.U. sent a memo to Bush outlining its domestic policy priorities.

Agudath Israel recently filed a brief seeking to uphold a voucher program in Cleveland. The program was ruled unconstitutional last month, but the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to take on the voucher issue more directly in the coming term.

Last year, the court ruled that it is constitutional for religious schools to use taxpayer dollars to buy computers and other instructional materials. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, considered a swing vote on the voucher issue, joined the majority in that case, but indicated her reservations about unrestricted aid to religious schools.

Many Orthodox schools rely heavily on funding from Title VI or Chapter 2, federal programs designed to aid private religious education.

Zwiebel believes vouchers are one way to give parents meaningful educational options, and that non-Orthodox Jews also support the program.

He says there is a "growing groundswell" of parents enrolling their children in Jewish day schools, making Jews more receptive to governmental policies designed to promote educational choice.

Zwiebel is not suggesting that Bush will find a majority in the Jewish community supporting vouchers or charitable choice, which allows religious institutions to bid for government social service contracts.

Still, Zwiebel says, Bush will find "significant support" among Jews and should not write off the Jewish community. Rather, he

advised, Bush should see it as a group worth reaching out to, even though fewer than 20 percent of Jewish voters supported him in the 2000 presidential election.

The increased role of faith-based organizations is another area where Orthodox agendas dovetail with Bush's.

Faith-based initiatives have a tremendous amount of potential, and Bush hopes Jewish organizations will benefit, said Juliana Glover, a Bush spokesperson. Glover did not comment directly on the letter and memo the Orthodox groups sent Bush or on specific outreach attempts to Orthodox and other Jewish organizations.

Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, said he thinks the Bush administration will reach out to Orthodox Jews. The memo Diament sent to Bush last month noted that the Orthodox Jewish community supported a number of the policy initiatives Bush championed during his campaign.

One of them is charitable choice, which passed as part of the 1996 welfare reform.

"We are pleased that this is a central feature of your campaign's domestic agenda and urge you to expand the federal government's support for and partnership with faith-based social service providers," the O.U. memo said.

Bush has said he will establish a federal Office of Faith-Based Action to organize his charitable choice agenda.

Diament insists that the O.U. tries to advance a traditional Jewish agenda, not a liberal or conservative one, and therefore will disagree with Bush on issues such as the death penalty. □

Custody case spurs Italian court to allow blocking of Internet sites*By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Italy's highest appeals court has ruled that Italy can block access to foreign Web sites that violate the nation's anti-defamation laws.

The ruling handed down Jan. 10 stems from a case brought by Moshe Dulberg, an Israeli man living in Italy.

Dulberg accused Israeli, American and other foreign-based Web sites accessible in Italy of slandering him in their reports about a widely publicized battle with his former wife over custody of their two daughters.

Some of the sites he quoted accused him of kidnapping and brainwashing the girls.

The girls, now 15 and 11, are the daughters of Dulberg and his former wife, Tali Pikan-Rosenberg.

The couple was divorced in 1991, and a court awarded them joint custody of the children.

Pikan-Rosenberg eventually joined a Chasidic group and became Orthodox, after which Dulberg tried to gain full custody.

Pikan-Rosenberg spirited the girls out of Italy and returned to Israel, where she married a fervently Orthodox rabbi.

The girls lived with their mother in a fervently Orthodox community in Israel, until Israel's Supreme Court ordered them returned to Italy in 1999.

In Italy, a court ruling awarded custody to Dulberg and strictly limited Pikan-Rosenberg's contact with the girls.

The case, which is still pending, triggered widespread outrage, particularly in the Orthodox world. □