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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Hebron family buries infant

An Israeli infant killed by a Palestinian sniper in Hebron last week was buried Sunday in the Jewish cemetery in the West Bank city.

The parents of Shalhevet Pass agreed to hold the funeral after appeals from public figures, including Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The parents initially had refused to bury the baby, insisting that the Israeli army first recapture the Palestinian neighborhood from where the fatal shots were fired.

Israel threatens tougher stance

The United States dissociated itself from a new Israeli policy to take a tougher stand against Palestinian violence.

"There is no coordination between the United States and Israel with regard to their military actions against the Palestinians," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said last Friday.

His comments came after Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer announced that Israel is ready to take off the gloves in the conflict with the Palestinians.

Ben-Eliezer also said he would consider sending Israeli troops into areas under Palestinian control "if they try to misuse territory which we agreed in advance was theirs."

AJCongress denies Rich report

The American Jewish Congress denied a report published last week that financier Marc Rich offered the group a donation with the understanding that the group would write to President Clinton in support of a pardon. AJCongress Executive Director Phil Baum clarified Sunday that agents for Rich asked the organization to "intervene on Rich's behalf."

However, no mention was made of a pardon, said Baum, who declined to speculate on how the Congress interpreted the request.

In addition, though Rich's philanthropy in the Jewish community was well-known, no mention was made of a potential donation to the Congress, Baum said.

In the end, Baum said, he declined to help Rich, believing that his good works "didn't excuse the harm he had done in other contexts."

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Liberal Jews seek support, solutions in Central America

By Lauren Wolkoff

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (JTA) — Proving that Jewish solidarity can flourish in a most unlikely place, a little-known alliance of liberal Jewish congregations has emerged in Central America.

Eager to share their experiences, representatives from congregations throughout the region converged on Costa Rica's capital last month to participate in the annual meeting of the Union of Liberal Jewish Congregations from Central America and the Caribbean.

The union — whose liberal congregations correspond to the U.S. Reform movement and other alternatives to Orthodoxy — was formed with the goal of forging Jewish connections in countries where pockets of Jews are struggling for recognition and, in some cases, survival.

Despite differences in nationality and language, the participants shared a desire to discuss the issues confronting the progressive Jewish movement in this part of the world.

"We often feel like the poor, forgotten relative compared to some of the wealthy communities with such abundant resources," said Martha Lichtenstein, the union's incoming president, who hails from Aruba.

"This gives us a voice."

The union — which includes representatives from Aruba, Cuba, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama and Puerto Rico — has gained surprising momentum since its inception in Costa Rica four years ago.

What began as an informal meeting among four countries has blossomed into a weekend event involving hundreds of Latin American Jews, including native sons, transplants from other countries and a substantial number of converts.

"When this idea first got started, we thought how wonderful it would be to get to know all these little congregations from throughout the region. It just took off from there," said Marvin Sossin, the union's outgoing president and a member of Costa Rica's Reform Jewish congregation, B'nai Israel.

Four more Jewish communities — in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, the Bahamas and Bermuda — have expressed interest in sending representatives to next year's event, tentatively scheduled for Jamaica in January.

Blending cultural, academic and religious elements, this year's conference featured a series of workshops and discussions, interspersed with Friday night services, a Saturday night gala dinner and the election of a new board of directors.

Speakers and special guests included Israel's ambassador to Costa Rica, Daniel Gal, and rabbis from Central America and beyond.

The conference also drew a representative from the U.S. Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which the Latin American delegates considered an important step toward worldwide recognition.

According to Angela Sacher, the UAHC's Miami-based regional outreach director for the southeast United States, there are many similarities between Jewish life in Latin America and the region she normally handles.

"Some of the smaller communities that I work with struggle with the same issues that I have learned about in Costa Rica," said Sacher, who lent her perspective on topics such as Jewish outreach and assimilation during the conference.

The issues confronted by union members are as varied and intricate as those faced by small congregations anywhere else in the world.

Despite some common themes, the experiences of the union's individual

MIDEAST FOCUS

Six Palestinians killed in clashes

Six Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli troops during demonstrations last Friday to mark Land Day, the annual commemoration of 1976 riots in which six Israeli Arabs were killed by police. Large-scale protests swept the West Bank and Gaza Strip as thousands of Palestinians threw rocks at Israeli soldiers and burned Israeli and U.S. flags.

Disturbances continued over the weekend, with Palestinians firing on Israeli positions in the Gaza Strip and the Gilo neighborhood in southern Jerusalem. Israeli Arab demonstrations for Land Day passed without violence, though marchers burned the Israeli flag, waved Palestinian flags and praised Hezbollah.

Israel arrests Force 17 members

Israel said it arrested five members of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's elite Force 17 guard. Sunday's arrests near Ramallah came after Israel accused Arafat and Force 17 of coordinating terror attacks against Israel with Palestinian militants.

Poll: Israelis back separation

Seventy-four percent of Israelis polled say they favor "unilateral separation" from areas under Palestinian control, according to the Israeli daily *Yedioth Achronot*. The poll said 56 percent favor the evacuation of remote Jewish settlements in the event that Israel redraws its borders without negotiating with the Palestinian Authority.

Minister: Destroy Arafat's home

A far-right Israeli Cabinet member called on the government to destroy Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's home in the Gaza Strip, saying the move would force Arafat to reconsider whether to continue fighting Israel. Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi also said Sunday that every Palestinian act of violence should get a "Zionist response," such as "developing a settlement that was halted."



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congregations — each of which has its own unique social and economic context — are not easily generalized.

For example, El Salvador is reeling from three devastating earthquakes that hit within a month earlier this year, killing thousands and leaving millions homeless.

Responding to demands of *tikkun olam* — the Jewish mandate to "repair the world" — the Jewish community there is working to rebuild thousands of schools that were destroyed or suffered serious damage in the quakes.

"This is a major focus of ours now," said Claudio Kahn, president of San Salvador's Reform congregation.

The union's other member congregations are pitching in, conducting donation drives to bring money, clothes and food to Salvadorans left with nothing.

"We remember clearly how" Salvadoran Jews "and many others reached out to us after Hurricane Mitch," said Phillip Gelman, who hails from Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Other challenges facing the union are rooted in shared concerns about Jewish continuity in the region.

Some of the touchier topics — among them interfaith marriages, the role of non-Jews in the congregation and whether being "progressive" means permitting gay marriage — are familiar to Reform and liberal Jews throughout the world.

Other issues at the conference — such as networking via the Internet in places where technology is hard to come by — are unique to areas with severely limited resources.

A high point of this year's conference was a speech delivered by Rabbi Dow Marnier — a Polish-born Holocaust survivor who lives in Israel — on Jewish continuity in "the outposts of the Jewish world."

Marnier encouraged the struggling congregations to remain open to new members and ideas, even if they don't fit traditional Jewish conventions.

"Ironically, rejecting the traditional criteria over who is a Jew may be necessary for Jewish continuity," he said.

"Today, we must allow for maximum individual freedom while at the same time retaining the basic framework" of Judaism.

Some community representatives said the major hurdles they face are a lack of finances, inadequate resources for Jewish education and the inability to find or afford ordained rabbis.

Many of the congregations rely not on rabbis but on "spiritual leaders," whose ability to perform certain life-cycle ceremonies is sometimes questioned in the community.

As a result, many of the congregations are looking for rabbis.

For example, the Jamaican congregation — which has 200 members, 340 years of history and a century-old synagogue — "is actively seeking the services of a permanent rabbi," according to congregation president Tony Lindo.

The same goes for Puerto Rico's congregation, with just 34 years under its belt and about 65 member families.

Even Costa Rica's B'nai Israel, with an active and flourishing membership of about 70 families and a new temple, does not have a full-time rabbi.

Much of the conference was dedicated to problems and concerns about Judaism's ability to survive in these "outposts."

The overall feeling at the end of the weekend was one of accomplishment and optimism, Sossin said. "What we are doing is guaranteeing that we have a future," he said. "It doesn't matter what the numbers or demographers come up with — you can't calculate the human experience." □

The union is currently working on a Web site that will include a description of the organization and a brief history of each member congregation. For more information about the union, contact Martha Lichtenstein at vitiailana@hotmail.com.

Chess champion visits Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — World chess great Gary Kasparov traveled to Israel to attend the opening of a Jerusalem chess academy that bears his name.

As part of the events, Kasparov played against a number of Israeli chess enthusiasts, including Cabinet ministers Natan Sharansky and Avigdor Lieberman and Knesset member Yosef "Tommy" Lapid. □

JEWISH WORLD

New York university becoming 'swastika capital' of higher ed?

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Several months after a spate of anti-Semitic vandalism, Binghamton University in upstate New York has been hit again, this time with 23 swastikas in one day.

A state university, Binghamton has an estimated Jewish body of 3,000 to 4,000 students.

Scrawled with a felt-tip marker, the swastikas were found March 28 on various buildings, including the student union.

University officials alerted the FBI and local police to the new round of graffiti, and reported that university police believe the vandalism is the work of one individual. The swastikas were removed within hours.

In a public statement the day the swastikas were found, Binghamton's president, Lois DeFleur, denounced the vandalism and reiterated the offer of a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the perpetrator.

In an official statement, Richard Joel, the president and international director of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, described the pattern of anti-Semitic incidents at Binghamton as "deeply disturbing."

Joel praised the university for acting "swiftly at every level to confront this act of hatred."

Beginning in early September and continuing throughout the fall semester, swastikas appeared in several dormitories. In October, two mezuzahs were stolen from outside student dorm rooms.

In addition, anti-Israel activism flared this fall at Binghamton as violence broke out in the Middle East.

That included graffiti equating Israel's then-prime minister, Ehud Barak, with Adolf Hitler, said Jeffrey Ross, the Anti-Defamation League's director of campus/higher education affairs.

Anti-Israel demonstrations — many with anti-Semitic overtones — have taken place this year on campuses throughout North America, but the swastika outbreak is unique to Binghamton, Ross said.

Binghamton is "the swastika capital of higher education at the moment," he said.

Ross said the vandalism is "horrifying and troubling," but also has "brought the campus together in common purpose."

Shoshana Bruckheimer, co-president of Hillel: The Jewish Student Union, said that many Binghamton students unfortunately had grown "used to" the swastikas after last fall's vandalism.

However, the latest incident was "more shocking" than the previous ones because so many swastikas appeared at once, Bruckheimer said.

"I don't understand why this is happening," she said.

"The person doing it, if he's trying to get a rise out of us, he got a rise, but he didn't get us to fear being Jewish."

Hillel and the university have held several meetings in response to the ongoing vandalism, including two last week.

Hillel also has continued with regularly scheduled activities, such as holiday celebrations.

Last fall's vandalism spurred Hillel to sponsor a program commemorating Kristallnacht, the November 1938 anti-Jewish riots in Germany and Austria that heralded the Holocaust.

Ironically, the recent vandalism is leading to stronger relations between Hillel and the university's other cultural and ethnic groups, Bruckheimer said.

She noted that several presidents of other groups attended last week's meetings responding to the swastikas.

Binghamton's Jewish student organization — unlike those at most comparable-sized universities — is entirely student-run.

However, efforts are underway to raise money from New York-area philanthropists and Jewish federations to fund a Hillel staff person. □

Faith-based bill introduced

Legislation to expand the partnership between faith-based social service agencies and the government, a major initiative of the Bush administration, was introduced last week in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Critics of "charitable choice" say it will erode the separation of church and state. Advocates such as the Orthodox Union say it safeguards the rights of service beneficiaries and religious providers.

Agency finds Nazi-era document

A German document recently obtained by the Jewish Agency for Israel shows that Jews are owed \$270 million in today's currency to cover insurance claims for destruction caused during Kristallnacht. The destruction took place on the night of Nov. 9-10, 1938, when Nazi thugs ransacked Jewish-owned shops and torched synagogues across Germany and Austria.

Ex-Soviet aliyah declines

Some 10,094 new immigrants arrived in Israel during the first three months of the year, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel. Of these, 7,502 are from the former Soviet Union, a decrease of more than 40 percent from the same period last year.

School renews Israel program

California State University plans to reinstate its overseas study program in Israel this fall. Cal State came under considerable internal and external criticism last October when it abruptly notified 11 students — already enrolled at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University — that the program had been terminated, and urged them to come home because of violence in the region.

Muscovites back indie TV station

Some 10,000 people showed up at a demonstration in Moscow on Saturday to protest the government's attempts to muzzle Russia's only independent TV station, owned by media tycoon and Jewish leader Vladimir Goussinsky. Dozens of counterdemonstrators carried anti-Semitic signs such as, "Throw the Zhid's TV Into the Garbage Can."

Bush jokes about converting

President Bush joked that he would convert to Judaism so he could ease his work schedule.

At the Radio-Television Correspondents Dinner last week, an event where presidents often poke fun at themselves, Bush said he was so impressed by the fact that Orthodox Jewish Sen. Joseph Lieberman refrains from work on the Sabbath that he was considering conversion "so I don't have nothing to do from sundown Saturday to sundown Friday."

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Youths spark Romania revival, but their futures remain uncertain***By Ruth E. Gruber*

CLUJ, Romania (JTA) — When a national Romanian Jewish youth organization was launched in late 1999, many were skeptical.

"It was not at all clear whether the new programs would work, and whether the old leadership would accept a new infusion of active young people," said one source who has observed Romanian Jewry for years.

But the skeptics appear to have been wrong.

The establishment of OTER, as the group is called, has helped spark what some call a youth revolution in Romanian Jewry.

Young Romanian Jews increasingly are demanding that their own needs be served in the construction of a Romanian Jewish future. "It's really something new," said Sorana Radu, coordinator of the OTER branch in Cluj.

Radu, a lively 22-year-old with a pixie haircut, made aliyah to Israel several years ago but recently returned to Romania. "It's important to stay here and build something," she said. "Here you feel you are Jewish. In Israel, I was considered Romanian."

The new education and outreach projects represent a dramatic reversal of the way leaders of Romanian Jewry view the community. OTER was created as part of an ambitious program of youth and leadership development implemented as a last-ditch gamble to prevent the extinction of Romanian Jewry.

Backed by donors in the United States, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has poured tens of thousands of dollars into the project during the past 18 months and plans further investment in cooperation with the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities.

"If we are successful in all these programs — youth clubs, revitalization of Talmud Torahs, middle-generation programs and more — there will be a viable Jewish community five and 10 years from now," Zvi Feine, the JDC's country director for Romania, told the group's annual board meeting in New York in December.

For decades, local and international Jewish groups encouraged young people to make aliyah and, with the support of the JDC, worked to make sure that the elderly who stayed behind lived out their lives in dignity.

Even after the fall of communism, when Jewish communities in other Eastern and Central European countries began fostering Jewish education and championing communal development, little was done to break this mold. Almost every young Romanian Jew assumed that he or she would make aliyah after college.

Today, about 12,000 Jews are known to live in Romania. Only about 800 of these are between the ages of 15 and 35.

When the new youth programs were initiated in late 1999, JDC and federation leaders knew it would be their last chance to reach out. The experiment has more than fulfilled expectations, according to Romanian and JDC sources.

OTER clubs have been established in at least seven Romanian cities, and in October 81 young people from 25 Jewish communities took part in the first seminar to train youth club leaders and activists to plan and execute programs.

Last fall, OTER members published their own prayer book — in Hebrew, transliterated Hebrew and Romanian — that includes

annotations and teaching instructions for prayers and holiday observances. They also published a youth newspaper.

In addition, more than 400 Jews — mostly young people — in 37 cities and towns were signed up for long-distance "Jewish Education Through the Mail" courses. These courses were devised by Yosef Hirsch, a young American who was a JDC volunteer in Romania in 2000.

"When I first proposed JEM to the leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, they were skeptical about the idea," Hirsch said in a report. "I was told that JEM was unrealistic, and that people would not be interested."

Besides these programs, Romanian Jews with Internet access could utilize a new, Romanian-language Jewish education Web site — www.jen.ro — that offered a wide range of texts, links and educational material. Last year, for the first time, a busload of more than a dozen young people from OTER chapters in several cities took part in the "Hanukkiadah," the annual Chanukah tour by local Jewish leaders to Jewish communities around the country.

Chanukah ceremonies — including candle lightings, speeches and choir recitals — were held in the synagogues of a dozen scattered cities. During speeches from the bimah, Romania's chief rabbi, Menachem Hakohen, said religious leaders had to reach out to young people and learn to speak their language.

"If we don't understand the Internet, the young people will not understand us," he said.

Dorel Dorian, Romanian Jewry's representative in Parliament, underscored the significance of the young generation.

"We have about 800 Jewish cemeteries in Romania," he said. "And about 800 young Jews." Nonetheless, young Jews say they frequently encounter resistance from existing, often elderly, communal lay leaders who are not used to contending with an active and youthful Jewish presence.

Harry Curariu, a 22-year-old business administration student and OTER activist from the northern city of Iasi, put it more bluntly. "They don't understand us," he said. "They said that we young people want to destroy the symbols of the community, but we told them that the youth are the flame of the future and that they have to understand and support us."

It remains to be seen if the current momentum can be maintained against the backdrop of an economic and social crisis that has made Romania one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Throughout the country, unemployment is high and inflation mounting. Salaries can be well below \$100 a month, and as much as 40 percent of the population exists on \$1.50 a day.

Economic hardship and disgust with the corruption of mainstream politicians were among the reasons that nearly one-third of the population voted for ultranationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor in presidential elections late last year. That economic hardship, as well as a sense of political and social futility, have spurred hundreds of thousands of Romanians to leave the country in the past decade.

Many Romanians cannot leave because they cannot obtain visas. In this situation, Jews are considered fortunate because they can go to Israel — and that option remains a viable one for many young Jews, despite the success of OTER.

"I haven't decided what I am going to do yet," said David, a 20-year-old OTER member who is a sophomore at the University of Iasi. "I would like to stay in Romania, but frankly, what would my future be here? I am studying business and finance. I speak English. I want to fulfill my potential. Can I do it here?" □