



# Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 93

Thursday, May 17, 2001

84th Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### **Moscow synagogue gets new star**

Moscow Jews celebrated the restoration of a dome and gilded Star of David on the capital's main synagogue.

The dome and star had graced the Choral Synagogue for about a year until 1888.

That year, Czar Alexander III bent to the will of the Russian Orthodox Church and ordered them taken down.

At Wednesday's ceremony, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov also laid a cornerstone for a new Jewish community center, which will be located near the synagogue.

### **Israeli gunships fire on Gaza**

Israeli helicopters fired missiles at a Palestinian security post in the Gaza Strip.

Israel said it attacked the post, near the Jabalya refugee camp in northern Gaza, because strikes against Israeli targets were being carried out from the area.

### **U.S. aid to Egypt, P.A. questioned**

Several U.S. senators questioned the United States' \$2 billion in annual aid to Egypt and \$75 million in aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Speaking as U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared Tuesday before a Senate subcommittee considering the Bush administration's \$15.2 billion foreign operations request, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) asked why America should support Egypt when its state-supported press has been "spewing anti-Semitism at an all-time high."

McConnell also criticized the Palestinian Authority for walking away from a generous deal at Camp David.

### **E.U. rejects sanctions on Israel**

The European Union rejected suggestions that it impose economic sanctions on Israel after some E.U. officials charged the Jewish state with a disproportionate response to Palestinian violence.

Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh said Wednesday that Israel should return to the negotiating table and the Palestinian Authority should clamp down on "terrorist attacks" against Israel.

The Scandinavian country holds the E.U.'s rotating presidency.

## ARTS & CULTURE

### **For Miss Israel, beauty pageant is just a prelude to basic training**

By Michael S. Arnold

BAYAMON, Puerto Rico (JTA) — Most of the young women competing for the Miss Universe title had nice plans when they left Puerto Rico last weekend: modeling contracts, university studies, jobs, or vacations with their boyfriends.

Miss Israel Ilanit Levi, however, faced something a bit more grueling: basic training.

Like most Israeli women, Levi, 19, will have to do a stint in the army, a tour of duty she postponed for six months to prepare for last Friday's beauty pageant in Ruben Rodriguez Coliseum in this industrial suburb of San Juan.

Yet she didn't seem at all bothered by the prospect, clowning around with her fellow contestants in the days before the pageant as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Levi was all business when necessary, however, impressing the judges enough in the weeks of interviews, photo shoots and dance rehearsals leading up to the pageant to earn a spot as a semifinalist on pageant night.

After an initial pass by all 77 contestants in representative national costumes — and no, Levi didn't wear her famous bulletproof dress — the field was narrowed to the 10 semifinalists who dominated the rest of the show.

Levi didn't make it to the group of five finalists, however, hampered perhaps by the fact that she was significantly shorter than her competitors — a mere 5 feet 7 inches, next to amazons measuring close to 6 feet. In addition, her simple black dress seemed rather plain next to the elaborate evening gowns chosen by the other semifinalists.

Still, Levi's achievement marked the best finish by an Israeli since 1978, the end of a remarkable stretch beginning in 1958 when Miss Israel placed among the Miss Universe semifinalists or finalists in all but four years.

Israel has won the Miss Universe title only once, when Rina Messinger took the crown in 1976. It won the less prestigious Miss World pageant in 1999.

Unlike pageant powerhouses Venezuela and India — which invest years of training and thousands of plastic surgery dollars in promising beauty queens — pageants are not a big business in Israel. Perhaps as a result, the Israeli contestants often lack the polish and poise that make the difference among outstanding candidates.

For example, many of this year's contestants used an interview question about the most interesting event in their lives to mention prizes they had won or volunteer work in humanitarian causes. Levi, with typical Israeli bluntness, said she couldn't recall anything very interesting.

While it may not have helped her with the judges, her naturalness made Levi one of the more popular girls among the group at last Friday's pageant, won by hometown hero Denise Quinones of Puerto Rico.

As the contestants braced themselves for a final rehearsal that lasted from 1 p.m. to nearly midnight the day before the pageant, many slouched in their seats with bored looks on their faces.

Levi was a blur of activity, however, talking, snapping gum, answering her cell phone and teaching Miss Croatia, Maja Cecic-Vidos, the Israeli slang for excellent — "akhla." She then dragged Miss New Zealand, Kateao Nehua-Jackson, outside for a quick smoke.

Her family, meanwhile, admired Levi's rehearsal outfit: skin-tight black Spandex pants with silver flame designs on the flared legs and a sparkling silver halter top.

"Can you believe those pants cost only \$20?" Levi's sister, Nitza, asked a friend

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Israel apologizes for deaths

Israel apologized for the shooting deaths of five Palestinian policemen in a military operation this week, saying the incident was a case of mistaken identity.

The Palestinian policemen at an outpost near the West Bank city of Ramallah were killed Sunday night by Israeli troops. Israel originally had contended that the five were involved in attacks on Israeli targets.

### Palestinian killed in Gaza

A 14-year-old Palestinian was shot and killed during clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen Wednesday in the Gaza Strip.

In other violence, a mortar fired by Palestinian gunmen penetrated a house in the Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom in the Gaza Strip. It exploded Tuesday night in the bathroom, but caused no injury to family members sleeping in adjacent bedrooms.

Elsewhere, a small bomb in a plastic bag went off Wednesday outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, but no one was hurt.

### Bomb explodes on Galilee rail line

A bomb exploded on a rail line in the Galilee, according to the Jerusalem Post. The last car on a freight train sustained slight damage as it was traveling Wednesday between Zichron Ya'acov and Binyamina, but there were no casualties.

### Samsonesque soldier rebuked

Israeli model Haim Saban must cut his hair, like all other army inductees, the Israel Defense Force told the High Court of Justice.

The IDF was responding to a petition filed by the 18-year-old Saban, who claims that his locks are his livelihood and that forcing him to cut them is discriminatory, since female soldiers and reservists are not held to the same standard, the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* reported.



## Daily News Bulletin

Shoshana S. Cardin, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor (on leave)*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at [www.jta.org](http://www.jta.org).

© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

sitting with her in the audience. "Or was it \$21?"

After three weeks in Puerto Rico on a grueling schedule of rehearsals and photo shoots, Levi said she missed Haifa, where she grew up with her four siblings in a single bedroom.

"I'm dying to get home already," she told JTA as admirers tried to pull her away for photographs. "I want to be able to go where I want, when I want to."

That, sister Nitza said, is just like Ilanit.

"She's not one of those people to let this all go to her head," Nitza Levi said. "She's still the same Ilanit, one of those people who, no matter what happens, still likes their small, warm home."

Indeed, after the show, Levi seemed decidedly nonplussed by her strong finish.

"It was OK," she said. "Not something grandiose or extraordinary."

Her family, in fact, seemed more exuberant than Levi that she had been picked as one of the most beautiful women in the world.

"Ever since I was a kid, I knew my sister was the most beautiful woman," Levi's brother Asher said. "I've been around in the world, and there isn't anyone as beautiful as Ilanit."

On second thought, he admitted, the pageant's hosts — super models Elle MacPherson and Naomi Campbell — came pretty close.

But the family said they felt the judges had other considerations when choosing the next Miss Universe. "It doesn't just come down to beauty here," Nitza Levi said. "There are a lot of other factors, like politics and language."

Detractors, however, said politics had worked in Levi's favor.

Jase Choenni, manager for Miss Netherlands Reshma Roopram, sketched an elaborate conspiracy theory to explain why his beautiful charge — and fiancée — wasn't a semifinalist. Levi was chosen, he said, by judges who wanted to help Israel's international image at a time when most news from the region paints Israel as bloodthirsty and violent.

The national manager for Trinidad and Tobago noted the preponderance of Jewish names among the judges who picked the semifinalists.

Yet few people who laid eyes on Levi wouldn't do a double take. Her exotic features — she has olive skin and piercing eyes — reflects her international heritage: Her father made aliyah from Morocco, her mother from Libya.

Not all the images of Levi that made the local press were flattering, however. One paper used a huge picture of Levi looking angry and bored to depict the contestants' frustration with the preparations for the event.

Levi laughed it off as a chance and candid moment.

"Look, it's really hard work," Nitza Levi said. "They keep them going from morning to evening."

Still, it wasn't quite as challenging as, say, basic training. After the army, Levi hopes to study psychology and work as a children's therapist.

Given the recent months of Mideast violence, it was inevitable that Levi would be asked frequently about politics. As Israel's representative at the forum, she felt obligated to defend the country's image.

The other contestants "want to know how I live, what it's like," she said. "I want to make sure they know that what they read about in the paper, the war and the violence — it exists, but it doesn't dominate our lives."

Still, politics intrudes even into the world of beauty pageants. As in the 2000 pageant — which took place while Israel still occupied its security zone in southern Lebanon — Miss Israel 2001 got the cold shoulder from Miss Lebanon, who was under orders from her government to ignore Levi.

"Our countries are not at war, but" she and Levi "are not going to be friends, either," said Miss Lebanon, Sandra Rizk. "We just try to be businesslike."

Levi's closest friends among the contestants were Cecic-Vidos of Croatia, Miss Egypt Sarah Shaheen and Nehua-Jackson of New Zealand.

In fact, Levi admitted, the pageant turned out to be a lot more fun than she had imagined.

"I thought it would be like jail, all the time 'Don't do this, don't do that,'" she said. "But none of us here is really thinking about being Miss Universe; it's too overwhelming for us. So we just concentrate on enjoying ourselves." □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Powell, Arafat might meet

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat are trying to arrange a meeting during Powell's trip to Africa and Europe later this month, a U.S. official said Wednesday. The initiative follows a meeting Tuesday between Powell and Arafat deputy Mahmoud Abbas.

### Italian insurer accused of fraud

Italy's largest insurance company is facing a class-action lawsuit alleging that the firm is engaged in a scheme aimed at persuading Holocaust survivors to give up their legal right to seek a settlement from the company.

According to the complaint filed Wednesday in a Los Angeles court, Assicurazioni Generali is sending survivors living in California a deceptive form letter that tries to lure recipients into dropping damage claims against Generali under the state's Holocaust Victims Insurance Act.

### Museum gets 16 millionth visitor

The 16 millionth visitor came to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington on May 10, according to museum officials. The officials also said April was the museum's busiest month ever, with more than 275,000 visitors.

Nearly three-quarters of visitors to the museum, which opened eight years ago, are not Jewish.

### Study: Younger Jews learn, too

Younger adult Jews are just as involved in Jewish learning as their elders, according to a new study on adult Jewish education.

The Jewish Theological Seminary/Jewish Community Center Association survey of 1,302 American Jews also found that women tend to participate in Jewish learning activities more than men.

### Pole faces death camp charges

A 78-year-old Pole pleaded innocent to charges that he collaborated with the Nazis to help kill Jews in a death camp in Poland.

The defendant, identified only as Henryk M. of Szczecin, went on trial Tuesday in Poland. He is accused of taking part in acts of genocide at the Chelmo death camp between 1941 and 1943.

### RJC leader formally elected

An executive with a Russian oil company was formally elected president of the Russian Jewish Congress on Wednesday by the group's 149 delegates.

Leonid Nevzlin, deputy head of the Yukos oil company, replaces Vladimir Goussinsky, who fled Russia to evade attempts to prosecute him on charges that Goussinsky said were politically motivated.

## Gun control gains steam again as Jewish groups rediscover issue

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A year ago, gun control was an oft-repeated mantra for a number of Jewish groups, but with the election of a president supported by gun lobbyists it was thought to be an issue that would have to wait.

Now a new legislative push has started the issue rolling again, as a bipartisan compromise bill may prove to be a rallying point for organizations.

Introduced by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), the bill calls for background checks on individuals who buy firearms at gun shows.

The compromise bill is thought to have a better chance of passing than other legislation that contains stricter regulations.

Adding to the mix this week, President Bush announced a national initiative to combat gun violence. But the president reiterated his desire to work with existing gun laws rather than focusing on new legislation, as the Clinton White House had favored.

These developments could bring about a renewed focus on gun control, though it will not suddenly become a priority for many Jewish groups, according to Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

Gun control may have slipped from the radar screen for some Jewish groups, but the RAC has spent the past few months strategizing about how to pass gun safety legislation. The McCain-Lieberman bill would improve current law, Pelavin said, but he admitted the bill is not everything the RAC wants.

The bill aims to close the "gun show loophole" that allows people to buy guns at gun shows without a background check, a requirement for gun sales at stores.

Lieberman said he believes the bill will help people find common ground on the issue. At a news conference Tuesday, he noted that the bill had received the endorsement of the National Association of Police Organizations.

"We're on the verge of a breakthrough here," Lieberman said.

Part of the reason, perhaps, that Jewish groups were having trouble mobilizing around gun control was the lack of real movement on the issue in Congress.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), a longtime gun control advocate, said there had been no legislative progress since 1994, when the Brady Law was enacted. That law, which requires background checks in licensed gun stores, will be extended by the McCain-Lieberman bill, Schumer said.

Jewish groups have been involved in other ways on gun control over the past year. Both the RAC and the American Jewish Congress endorsed the Million Mom March, a march and rally last year in Washington that drew three-quarters of a million gun control supporters.

The American Jewish Congress also organized the "Stop the Guns: Protect Our Kids" campaign last year to send 1 million signatures to Congress demanding strict firearms laws. In light of the latest developments, the AJCongress will reinvigorate its campaign and get more involved on gun control, Baum said.

A number of Jewish groups favor strict gun control legislation, such as licensing of handgun owners, the registration of handguns, consumer product safety standards for guns and limits on gun purchases of no more than one a month.

Bush supports closing the gun show loophole and favors an instant background check at gun shows, but he focused his attention on the creation of local partnerships to enforce existing gun laws more effectively. "This nation must enforce the gun laws which exist on the books," Bush said Monday as he unveiled his plan.

Through Project Safe Neighborhoods, the Bush administration proposes to devote more than \$550 million over the next two years to hire new federal and state prosecutors, support investigators, provide training and develop and promote community outreach efforts. Bush's proposed 2002 budget includes nearly \$50 million in grants for states to hire new gun prosecutors, conduct community outreach and engage in other efforts to reduce gun violence.

The Justice Department's budget request also includes \$20 million for new state prosecutors and community task forces to combat juvenile gun crime and \$9 million for 94 new assistant U.S. attorneys who will focus on school gun violence and juvenile gun offenses. □

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

**Israel: Trips to Syria creating an Arab enemy within the state**

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — He has enough clients booking tours to make a travel agent envious.

But Knesset member Azmi Beshara's activities as a go-between for Israeli Arabs who want to visit Syria have little to do with the profit motive.

By reuniting his constituents with their relatives in Syria, Beshara said, he is performing a humanitarian act.

Israeli security officials, however, take a different view.

They are concerned that many of those making the trip are returning to Israel with greater loyalty to Syria — and are ready to act on that new loyalty in ways that will harm the security of the Jewish state.

Citing a law that bars Israeli citizens from traveling to enemy countries without permission from the Interior Ministry, Israeli police recently notified Beshara that he will soon be summoned as part of an investigation of the Syria trips.

Beshara said he welcomed the investigation, adding that he would be happy to see the case go to court.

An indictment would allow "thousands of elderly people to bear witness to how much they miss their relatives," he said.

Beshara also said he would turn the trial into a political indictment of Israel's security establishment.

Beshara, 45, is not one to shy from the political limelight.

Until his 11th-hour withdrawal from the 1999 race for prime minister, Beshara was the first Israeli Arab to seek the post — and this from a man who tells his constituents that they are Israelis by accident of geography, but are Palestinian in their hearts.

After earning a doctorate in philosophy from Humboldt University in what was then Communist East Berlin, he went on to become the popular head of the philosophy department at Bir Zeit University, the hotbed of Palestinian nationalism in the West Bank.

In 1996, he was elected to the Knesset on a joint ticket with the Communist Hadash Party.

Now serving in the Knesset as the sole member of the Balad Party, he is trying to establish himself as the main alternative to the growing influence of the Islamic Movement in Israeli Arab politics.

A longtime champion of equal rights for Israeli Arabs, Beshara wants Israel to grant the nearly 1 million-member community cultural autonomy.

Many of his political ideas have gained widespread acceptance within Israeli Arab society, and Beshara hopes he can parley that into more seats for his party in the next elections.

The trips he arranges to Syria are part of this political strategy.

Just as fellow Israeli Arab legislator Ahmed Tibi established a special relationship with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat — serving as Arafat's adviser on Israeli affairs until his election to the Knesset in 1999 — Beshara developed a special relationship with Syria's late President Hafez Assad.

"It was senior Egyptian journalist Mohammad Hasnin Heikal who convinced Assad to open his door for Beshara," recalled Israeli journalist Majdi Halabi. "Beshara helped Assad to better understand Israeli politics."

Beshara later used his contacts with Assad to allow small groups of Israeli Arabs to visit their families in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria.

Although it is unlawful to enter Syria, some 800 Israeli Arabs, mostly elderly people, have already gone on Beshara's tours since July last year.

Hundreds more Israeli Arabs — some say thousands — are waiting to make the trip. The next group is slated to go to Syria next week. The applicants register at Beshara's office in Nazareth. Beshara's staff goes over the lists.

"We must check whether the applicants truly have relatives in Syria," Beshara told JTA.

The lists are passed to Damascus with Beshara's recommendation, which is usually honored.

The groups go by bus to Jordan, from where they continue on to the Jaber border crossing with Syria.

Halabi, a Druse, returned from such a trip in January.

"No one checked us at the border," Halabi recalled. "A personal representative of the president welcomed us at the VIP room, and from then on the trip went as smoothly as one could expect."

Once the group arrived at Damascus' Central Station, each member of the group went separately to visit relatives, mostly in the refugee camps. Everyone involved benefits.

The Israeli Arabs get to meet their relatives; Syria can boast of its humanitarian generosity and deepen its influence over the Palestinians both inside Israel and in Syria; and Beshara scores points with the Israeli Arab electorate.

Only Israel may lose out.

Although no one has said so publicly, Israeli security authorities are concerned that the Syrian authorities use their growing ties with Israel's Arab population for intelligence purposes.

"I know more than the eye can see," Dan Meridor, chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, told JTA. "But since I cannot talk about what I know, I will not comment."

Beshara rejects insinuations that he may be acting against the security of the state.

"Who can say anything to an old woman who may have the last chance in her life to visit relatives she had not seen for 50 years?" he asked.

Beshara has not yet been interrogated by Israeli police, but his assistants, Mussa Diab and Ashraf Kurtam, have faced questioning.

Just the same, Beshara said he is determined to continue fostering his contacts in Damascus.

Last month, after Israeli jets struck Syrian targets in Lebanon in reprisal for Hezbollah attacks on Israeli soldiers, Beshara met with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa and with Abdullah Ahmar, secretary-general of Syria's ruling Ba'ath Party, to assess the situation.

The Israeli Arab community's unofficial ambassador to Damascus does not appear inclined to abandon the role. □

**U.S. denies Nakba gesture**

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. officials said flags flying at half-staff at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and the Consulate in Jerusalem had nothing to do with Palestinian observances of Al Nakba, the Arab term for the "catastrophe" of the creation of the State of Israel.

Embassy spokesman Larry Schwartz said Wednesday that flags at all U.S. missions abroad were flown at half mast Tuesday for Peace Officers Memorial Day, proclaimed by President Bush to show respect for U.S. law-enforcement officers who fell in the line of duty. □