



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Suicide bomber wounds two

A Palestinian suicide bomber lightly wounded two Israeli soldiers. Hamas claimed responsibility for Monday's attack at the Erez Crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

The suicide bomber left behind a note saying he was avenging the deaths of five Palestinian children last week and Israel's killing last Friday of Hamas military leader Mahmoud Abu Hanoud.

Israeli authorities responded to the attack by ordering 3,000 workers out of the Erez industrial zone, where the bomber had worked.

Squad wanted to kill Sharon

Terrorists from Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement said they tried to kill Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Members of the Al-Akso Brigade vowed to continue trying to assassinate Sharon.

The group issued a leaflet Monday in Ramallah confirming that they tried to kill Sharon outside his home in Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter, according to Israel Radio.

The group said a five-member death squad had staked out the area near Sharon's home, waiting for a chance to ambush the prime minister, who rarely visits the residence.

One of the terrorists lived next door to Sharon and allegedly attempted to recruit Arab residents of eastern Jerusalem to join the group.

Three of the five cell members were caught by Israeli security officials and are awaiting trial, but the group said it would not let this stop them.

U.S. envoys arrive in Mideast

A new team of U.S. peace envoys arrived in Israel. The U.S. mediators, Gen. Anthony Zinni and Assistant Secretary of State William Burns, met with Israeli security officials upon their arrival Monday at Ben-Gurion Airport.

The two heard from Shin Bet head Avi Dichter and the leader of military intelligence, Gen. Amos Malka, on the state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The envoys, who are accompanied on the mission by U.S. diplomat Aaron Miller, are slated to meet with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Tuesday and with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat on Wednesday.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Arab riot commission grinds forward, but many Israelis wondering what for

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It has been nearly a year since a panel began investigating the police killing of 13 Israeli Arabs during riots in October 2000, and many here are questioning whether the effort will amount to anything.

Last week, the two Israelis who stood at the top of the political pyramid at the time of the riots testified before the government-appointed Orr Commission — former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the former minister of public security, Shlomo Ben-Ami.

Their testimony left many observers more suspicious than ever.

Israeli Arabs are concerned that the commission will wind up whitewashing the events.

Top police officials are worried that political leaders will shrug off responsibility. The public wonders whether the commission's findings will help improve relations between Israel's Jewish and Arab communities.

And some Israeli Jews are wondering if the commission will have the temerity to investigate Israeli Arab leaders' role in inciting their community to violence that ultimately boomeranged.

Neither Ben-Ami nor Barak said much to explain why the 13 Arab citizens of Israel were killed during the riots, which erupted in sympathy with the nascent Palestinian uprising.

Ben-Ami was only a part-time minister of public security at the time of the October riots.

He testified that he did not know what was going on because police officials kept important information from him.

Barak testified that police had acted by the book, but should have acted with greater sensitivity and sensibility. He also said the government had received no warnings from intelligence officials of possible riots by the Israeli Arab community.

The state inquiry commission, headed by Supreme Court Justice Theodore Orr, has the power to subpoena witnesses and can recommend legal proceedings against individuals.

The panel is expected to issue its findings within the next six months. It is expected to deal with some key issues:

- Could the 13 deaths have been prevented?
- Were the rioters to blame, or were police at fault?
- If police were to blame, at what level does responsibility lie?
- Should any political leaders be blamed?

"I don't know which way they are heading," said Aida Touma-Suleiman, director general of the Women's Association Against Violence. "But I can tell you one thing: I sure hope the commission will not be used to whitewash what happened."

The commission was set up by the Barak government at a time when the former premier needed the support of Israeli Arabs to be re-elected.

The Israeli Arab boycott of the polls last February is seen as a major reason that Barak lost to Ariel Sharon.

The present government, however, has little commitment to the commission. In fact, a number of Sharon's ministers have spoken out against the creation of the commission, viewing it as a sign of weakness in the face of hostility from segments of the Israeli Arab community.

The Sharon government will not shed tears if the commission comes up with

MIDEAST FOCUS

Sharon appoints peace team

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon appointed the team that will work with a U.S. envoy seeking to end Israeli-Palestinian violence. Reserve Maj.-Gen. Meir Dagan, a counter-terrorism expert, will head the team working with Gen. Anthony Zinni.

Sharon's diplomatic adviser, Danny Ayalon, and a former Israeli ambassador to the United States, Dore Gold, also will be part of the team.

Sharon has proposed that he, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer serve as a steering committee overseeing Dagan's team.

Palestinians fire on Gilo

Palestinian gunmen fired on the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo. Israeli soldiers returned fire Monday at the nearby Arab town of Beit Jalla.

In the past, Israel responded to shooting on Gilo by sending troops into parts of Beit Jalla. Monday's attack on Gilo was the second in two days.

Three Israelis killed in crash

Two Israeli doctors and one economist were killed in Saturday's Crossair plane crash. The 97-seat plane crashed in a Swiss forest while attempting to land at Zurich Airport late Saturday night.

The two doctors were identified as Dr. Ya'acov Matzner, dean of faculty at the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical Center, and Dr. Amiram Eldor, head of the hematology department at Ichilov Hospital. The third man was Avishai Berkman, a senior Tel Aviv municipal official.

Railroad bidders sought

Israel is seeking bids from companies to build a light-rail line. The \$1 billion line serving the greater Tel Aviv area would be Israel's first. The line will be some 14 miles long.

panel rules that police could not have prevented the bloodshed. Under neither administration has the commission appeared inclined to question Israeli Arab leaders over their responsibility for radicalizing their community and planting the idea of violence against symbols of the Israeli state.

Whatever the commission's findings, the government will be left with the problem of mending relations between Israeli Arabs and Jews.

"The problem is not between Jews and Arabs in this country," said Touma-Suleiman, "but rather between the Arab population and the political establishment."

The commission has a mandate to investigate the October 2000 riots and report its findings.

But it will not come up with suggestions on how to improve relations with the Arab population.

That will be the government's job.

In his testimony last week, Barak spoke of the difficulty of this factor.

"A democratic, Zionist, Jewish entity cannot accept the vision of a totally different collective identity," Barak said, referring to growing expressions of Palestinian nationalism among Israeli Arabs.

Part of those expressions are feelings of inequality that have simmered for decades. Part, too, is a growing feeling of identification with the Palestinians since the Oslo peace process led to partial Palestinian self-rule in the adjacent West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"The riots began over the Temple Mount," Professor Yosef Ginat of Haifa University told JTA. "But they soon turned into an outlet of frustration over continued feelings of inequality."

In an attempt to deal with such feelings, the Barak government committed some \$1 billion over four years to help improve Israeli Arabs' standard of living. That came on top of major investments in the Israeli Arab community over the past decade, intended to rectify past inequities.

But Barak's commitment was put on hold as the Palestinian intifada forced Israel to increase spending on security.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Arab community is facing difficult times.

Unemployment recently reached 10 percent nationwide, but is as high as 30 percent in some Israeli Arab villages. Unemployment among Arab women is somewhere around 70 percent.

In attempting to remedy the situation, the Sharon government will face some political constraints.

Sharon may have to prepare himself in coming months for a fight with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for leadership of the Likud Party.

Out to protect his right flank from Netanyahu, Sharon will be playing to party hawks.

That will make it difficult for the prime minister to appear soft on the Israeli Arab issue.

In addition, Arab Knesset members who have become increasingly strident in their anti-Israel message show little remorse over how this alienates their constituents from the state.

It appears that reconciliation between the nation's Jews and Arabs will have to wait for another, more opportune, time. □

Israel accused of using torture

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Amnesty International has accused Israel of increasingly using torture against Palestinian suspects.

In a report last week to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, the London-based human rights group cited "strong evidence" that Israeli security forces were using illegal methods, including painful handcuffing and sleep deprivation.

The report was issued as the U.N. committee began examining Israel's record at its semiannual two-week meeting in Geneva.

Israeli ambassador Ya'akov Levy defended his country's record, saying moderate force was used "in isolated cases."

Levy said Israel is trying to strike a balance between protecting the rights of detainees and citizens, who are targeted by "indiscriminate terrorist attacks." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Muslim press gets failing grade

The Muslim press has featured even more anti-Semitic and anti-Israel reports since the Sept. 11 attacks, a new report says.

The report, issued by the Anti-Defamation League, says such reports contribute to a climate that "foments anger and hatred."

Abraham Foxman, the ADL's national director, said, "At a time when Arab and Muslim nations are pledging their cooperation in the coalition against terrorism, there is a clear disconnect between what is being said by governments and what is being said in the media and heard on the street."

Conference studies Islam's image

A conference opened in Cairo to discuss how to improve Westerners' image of Muslims. Hosted by the Arab League, the conference is dealing with the world's alleged readiness to equate Islam with terrorism.

The League's secretary-general, Amre Moussa, asked delegates whether they themselves were responsible for some of these negative attitudes. "Did we try to explain our culture, our civilization to others?" he asked. Moussa added that the League had started a fund with an initial \$1 million donation from the United Arab Emirates to finance publications promoting dialogue among civilizations.

Poles to learn about Jews

Polish teachers will attend a seminar next month dealing with the fate of Polish Jews during and after the Holocaust. Organized by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Dec. 8-9 seminar is designed for history, religion and Polish-language teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Teachers from Warsaw and elsewhere have been invited to the seminar, "The Disappearance of Jews from the Polish Landscape: 1941-1970." The program includes Holocaust issues but focuses primarily on the postwar period, including the emigration of Jewish survivors from Poland, the Communist government's anti-Semitic campaign in 1968 and the consequences on Poland of the annihilation of its Jews.

South Africa's top judge named

A Jew who serves as president of South Africa's Constitutional Court was appointed South Africa's new chief justice.

Last week's appointment of Judge Arthur Chaskalson ended seven years of uncertainty about who would serve as the most senior judge in the country, following the adoption of South Africa's democratic constitution. Two others of the 11 Constitutional Court judges, Richard Goldstone and Judge Albie Sachs, also are Jewish.

Rancor replaces harmony as British interfaith effort falters

By Tamar Shiloh

LONDON (JTA) — A pledge intended to promote religious tolerance and understanding has become a source of interfaith tensions.

The pledge to British Muslims was made in conjunction with Islamic Awareness Week, a high-profile event organized earlier this month by the Islamic Society of Britain. The pledge condemns attacks against the Muslim community in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks in New York and Washington, and includes a vow to work together toward greater interfaith understanding.

Among the many people signing the pledge — along with Prime Minister Tony Blair and other political leaders — were Rabbi Charles Middleburgh, the director of the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, and Rabbi Tony Bayfield, director of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain. Both men are active promoters of interfaith dialogue. But the rabbis are considering withdrawing their signatures after learning that articles offensive to Jews were published by a magazine connected to the Islamic Society.

The offensive material appeared in several different articles over a number of years in Trends magazine, Middleburgh said. Trends, the mouthpiece of one of the Islamic Society's youth organizations, Young Muslims, is temporarily out of publication.

"There were allegations of Zionist domination of the American government, references to something that seemed to question the Holocaust" and articles "calling Israel — actually 'the Zionists' — barbarians and inhuman savages," Middleburgh said.

Middleburgh said that he and Bayfield were planning to meet with the organizers of Islamic Awareness Week to discuss their concerns "both in the general and the specific."

"What we've said is that we find this stuff totally unacceptable," Middleburgh said. "But they can't cancel out material that has been published for some time. The most we feel they can do is to agree not to publish any similar things in the future. If they give us that assurance, then we may be satisfied."

If the Islamic Society does not agree to do so, or says it cannot control the contents of its publications, Middleburgh said, he and Bayfield will have to discuss withdrawing their signatures from the pledge.

Middleburgh said there actually was "a great deal of interfaith dialogue in London," through a number of forums, and that as someone personally involved in promoting such dialogue he was especially taken aback by the articles in Trends.

Ajmal Masroor of the Islamic Society of London says the articles in Trends expressed the writers' opinions and not the official view of the organization.

"Everybody has a right to express their opinion. This does not mean this is an official policy of the Islamic Society," Masroor said.

He cited an article that appeared in London's Daily Express, which said the Koran was a bloodthirsty book, and said another article criticizing Islam appeared in the Daily Mail. "The editors have apologized if the views have offended anyone," he said, but printed the articles nevertheless.

Masroor also said the Islamic Society is an independent organization with no official links to any other organization. England's chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, refused to sign the pledge, as did the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey.

A spokesman for the chief rabbi said did not sign the pledge for two reasons. One is that, as a matter of policy, senior religious leaders generally don't sign such petitions, since they prefer to express opinions in their own words.

A second reason is that although the chief rabbi agrees with the content of the pledge, he had been informed that the Islamic Society of Britain allegedly has links to radical groups, such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, said Jeremy Newmark, director of communications for Sacks.

"We sought clarification from the Islamic Society about what the nature of these links were, but unfortunately these clarifications were not forthcoming," Newmark said.

A senior security spokesman for Britain's Jewish community said the Islamic Society of Britain had pressured leaders to sign the pledge without properly identifying itself. □

ARTS & CULTURE

Film about gay Orthodox Jews makes waves as it makes rounds

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Sandi Simcha DuBowski's documentary about gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews already has opened some eyes.

Now he hopes to change some minds.

"Trembling Before G-d," which was shown to much acclaim earlier this year at the Berlin and Sundance film festivals, among others, broke opening-day box office records at Manhattan's Film Forum when it opened last month.

The film "latches on to a provocative subject and invests it with a compelling tenderness," reviewer Elvis Mitchell wrote in *The New York Times*.

DuBowski, who is gay, is pleased with the success of his film, especially since it was seven years in the making.

"I call this the Mt. Everest of documentaries because it was so difficult to make," he says.

Aside from the financial challenges that most documentary filmmakers face, DuBowski had to convince his subjects to come out of the closet and speak on camera — although several still wouldn't let their real names or faces be used.

But he eventually persuaded several gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews, in the United States and Israel, to talk about their struggles to merge their sexual identities with their desires for Jewish observance and community.

Among them are:

- Mark, a gay man kicked out of several yeshivas in England and Israel for his homosexual practices;
- A lesbian couple in Miami who met at a girls yeshiva in Brooklyn; and
- David, who confronts a Chasidic rabbi who 20 years ago recommended that David see a therapist to change his homosexual leanings.

DuBowski intersperses their stories with comments from Orthodox rabbis and psychotherapists.

"When you put a human face on what has until now been a very abstract issue, it creates a dilemma. But that's what I feel the halachic process is about," he says, referring to Jewish law.

Part of the film's strength derives from its compassion. While sympathetic to the gays and lesbians who are the film's focus, "Trembling Before G-d" also depicts the Orthodox world with admiration, even love.

The rabbi who meets with David is shown struggling between his love for David as a Jew and his desire to adhere to the Torah.

"There's a great passion and a great truth in Orthodoxy," says DuBowski, who grew up in a Conservative Jewish home in Brooklyn and has studied Jewish texts for two years with a gay Orthodox rabbi.

"Every community is capable of change, and if I didn't believe so, I don't think I could have done the film. To think that the Orthodox community, unlike other communities, isn't capable of change is to demonize and dehumanize" them, he says.

Armed with grants from Steven Spielberg's Righthousers Foundation and other philanthropies, DuBowski is developing a project to help catalyze that change. He's taking the film on the road, showing it to as many members of the Orthodox community

as possible. At the heart of the issue is a passage in Leviticus that states the traditional Jewish position clearly: "It is an abomination for a man to lie with a man as he lies with a woman."

Given that bluntness, it's unclear what room there is for change. A recent screening at an Orthodox synagogue in the Bronx shows the obstacles DuBowski faces.

The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, known for creating high-level synagogue positions for women in roles traditionally reserved for men, is considered to be one of the more liberal Orthodox congregations in the country.

More than 500 people — most of them middle-aged — attended the screening.

The audience members clearly knew American Jewish life. The crowd murmured when a lesbian couple in the movie says they met at Bais Yaakov, a girls yeshiva in Brooklyn.

During a post-film discussion, panelists went to great lengths to emphasize the need for discussion and tolerance. "The mandate of the Orthodox community is to welcome homosexuals to our shuls. One of our real challenges is that heretofore we have not been that welcoming," the Hebrew Institute's rabbi, Avi Weiss, said, though he added that he did not condone homosexuality.

Many audience members spoke sympathetically about gays and lesbians, saying the Orthodox community must be flexible.

Near the end of the evening, however, one older man threw some cold water on the love fest. "To me, a rabbi who eats hazer," or pork, "can't be called Orthodox," he said. "Yet we have in this film — and throughout this room — that a rabbi who is homosexual can be called Orthodox."

Later, one panel member praised "conversion therapy," which aims to change a homosexual into a heterosexual.

Even the Hebrew Institute's assistant rabbi, Shmuel Herzfeld, who organized the screening and discussion, admitted there's only so far he'll go. He is open to discussion on the issue, Herzfeld said, but he emphasized, "Rabbinic Judaism is the rule that I follow. And Rabbinic Judaism is clear on homosexuality."

Herzfeld isn't the only member of the Orthodox community to have problems accepting homosexuality.

A spokesman for Agudath Israel of America, a fervently Orthodox organization, disseminated an Op-Ed criticizing "Trembling Before G-d."

In the article, spokesman Rabbi Avi Shafran writes that the film fails to take seriously the achievements of conversion therapy.

DuBowski, however, says many gays and lesbians who tried to change their orientation have failed, and now are trapped in unhappy heterosexual marriages.

But DuBowski doesn't mind the controversy; if anything, he seems to relish it. After the panel discussion, he lamented that it hadn't been as lively as a recent showing of the film in Borough Park, a fervently Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn.

He prefers to focus on his successes. One of the people portrayed in "Trembling Before G-d," Rabbi Steve Greenberg, came out of the closet while the film was being made. Another, Mark, returned to yeshiva study.

In San Francisco, an Orthodox rabbi appeared at a panel after a screening and apologized to David — one of the characters in the film — for the way the community had treated him.

Meanwhile, the world of homosexual Orthodox Jewish support groups — such as the OrthoDykes — is growing, DuBowski says. As the word gets out, he says, "you can see that world getting bigger." □