



# Daily News Bulletin

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85th Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### After years of bickering, Lithuania releases hundreds of historic Torahs

By Adam B. Ellick

VILNIUS, Lithuania (JTA) — Lithuania has ended six years of controversy by deciding to turn over more than 350 Torah scrolls and thousands of holy books to world Jewry, JTA has learned.

The Lithuanian Cabinet was to approve the agreement on Jan. 25, according to an adviser to the Culture Ministry, Rolandas Kvietkauskas, and the Israeli ambassador to the Baltics, Avraham Benjamin.

The much-anticipated accord will be signed Jan. 30 at Lithuania's National Library in Vilnius, where the Torahs have been stored for years.

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior, is expected to attend, as are officials from international Jewish organizations.

Following the event, the books and Torahs — all from prewar Lithuanian synagogues — will be sent to Israel for evaluation.

"It's Lithuania's cultural heritage, but we understand the real importance of these Torahs for Jewish culture, so the Lithuanian government managed to complete this process by giving the scrolls to Jewish communities, which can use them for the purpose they were created for," Kvietkauskas said.

Today's decision culminates six years of negotiations for Jewish officials like Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

"There are numerous Jewish cultural assets in Eastern Europe, but none have the emotional resonance of Torah scrolls that were once used in vital congregations in a part of the world that probably pains Jews everywhere," Baker said from his Washington office. "There is an enormous symbolic value in seeing ritual objects returned to use elsewhere in the Jewish world."

Experts in Israel will determine how many of the scrolls remain complete after being confiscated by the Nazis and concealed for decades by the Soviets.

Rabbi Aba Dunner, executive director of the Conference of European Rabbis, studied the scrolls last year and reported that "at best, a few dozen" remain complete.

After the evaluation, the Torahs will be distributed to Jewish communities, organizations, libraries and museums around the world, mostly in Israel and the United States.

Those decisions will be made by a seven-member, ad-hoc committee headed by Melchior and representing seven Jewish organizations from Israel, America, England and Lithuania.

"These were never books with call numbers. They are books with a call to God," said Emanuelis Zingeris, a Lithuanian Jewish activist who sat on a Lithuanian Culture Ministry committee that examined the issue and will take part as well in the ad-hoc committee that will determine the scrolls' fate.

"When people read from these scrolls they will be united" against the "results of the Holocaust, against organized silence," Zingeris said. "We are uniting children with our history."

The Torahs served a Lithuanian Jewish community that numbered 250,000 before World War II.

Some 94 percent of these Jews were killed in the Holocaust.

When the Nazis occupied Lithuania in 1941, they oversaw the confiscation of all Torahs and Jewish religious books.

Thousands of religious objects were burned. But Antanas Ulpis, a non-Jewish Lithuanian librarian, and seven colleagues made daring journeys to the countryside to

### U.S.: Arafat confinement OK

The White House backed Israel's confinement of Yasser Arafat to a compound in Ramallah.

"The president understands the reason that Israel has taken the action that it takes, and it is up to Chairman Arafat to demonstrate the leadership to combat terrorism," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Thursday.

Israel has said Arafat will remain confined in Ramallah, where he has been under virtual house arrest since December, until he arrests the Palestinians who assassinated Israel's tourism minister, Rehavam Ze'evi, in October.

### Sharon to come to Washington

Ariel Sharon will meet with President Bush early next month.

The Israeli prime minister will head to Washington on Feb. 7 to meet with the president, according to the Israeli Government Press Office, which says the meeting comes at Bush's invitation.

### Religious leaders pray for peace

Religious leaders gathered at a meeting sponsored by the pope to pray for peace.

Pope John Paul II brought religious leaders together Thursday in the Italian city of Assisi to also vow never to support conflicts waged in God's name.

The gathering brought together some 200 religious leaders, including Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and African animists.

"We wish to do our part in fending off the dark clouds of terrorism, hatred, armed conflict, which in these last few months have grown particularly ominous on humanity's horizon," the pope said.

"The shadows will not be dissipated with weapons. Darkness is dispelled by sending out bright beams of light."

### Lithuania inks extradition pact

A new extradition treaty could allow for more effective prosecution of Nazi war criminals.

The treaty between Lithuania and the United States allows the extradition between the two countries of any accused felon.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center has issued a list of 97 Lithuanians suspected of Nazi collaboration, 37 of whom live in the United States.

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Violence hits West Bank, Gaza

Two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were killed in an explosion in the southern Gaza Strip. The cause of the blast was not immediately known, Israel Radio reported.

In Hebron, undercover Israeli troops kidnapped a Tanzim member suspected of preparing explosives used against Israeli soldiers and civilians.

In yet more violence, Palestinian officials accused Israeli troops of killing a Palestinian intelligence officer in Ramallah. Israel said he could have been shot during a gun battle between Israeli troops and Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank city Thursday.

### Sharon plans to visit Argentina

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon plans to visit Argentina soon to speed up aliyah from the crisis-ridden nation. Speaking Wednesday at an absorption center of the Jewish Agency for Israel, where he greeted new immigrants from Argentina, Sharon called immigration a prime objective of his administration.

### Lebanese militia leader killed

A former head of the militia behind the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre was killed in an explosion in Beirut.

Israel Radio reported that Elie Hobeika was killed Thursday when a bomb exploded in his car. An anti-Syrian group calling itself "Lebanese For a Free and Independent Lebanon" claimed responsibility, saying Hobeika was a Syrian agent who had betrayed his homeland.

Israel denied an accusation by a Lebanese minister that it was behind the explosion. The minister said he believes Israel may have killed Hobeika because he was ready to testify against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who faces lawsuits in Belgium accusing him of responsibility for massacre.

rescue holy objects, and secretly saved some. The books and scrolls were nationalized by the Soviets in 1945. For years they were thought to have been lost, until a 1996 New York Times article revealed that they were stored in a church annex used by Lithuania's national library.

The delay in deciding their fate can be attributed both to Jewish bickering and Lithuanian bureaucracy.

Lithuanian officials originally insisted that the scrolls were part of Lithuania's national heritage — in fact, they were placed on the National Culture Heritage Register — and could not be taken out of the country.

Under Western scrutiny, however, Lithuania — which aspires to join the European Union — slowly relaxed its stance.

"We raised this issue half a dozen years ago with several different prime ministers," the AJCommittee's Baker said. "It's taken a lot longer than anyone had imagined. I don't attribute it to any malicious or sinister motives. The legal process in Lithuania seems complicated and at times confusing to an outsider — and, I gather, even for those inside too."

In 1997 the government returned four Torahs to the tiny Jewish communities in Vilnius and in Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city. In accordance with Jewish law, the communities buried several damaged scrolls.

When word got out that the National Library held hundreds more scrolls — the oldest dating to the 15th century — international Jewish organizations fought to obtain them.

The Jewish infighting intensified in October 2000 when Zingeris, then a member of Lithuania's Parliament, pushed through a law mandating that the Torahs be given to Jewish communities around the world.

"As usual, when there's a war among Jews, you don't see success," says Arie Zuckerman, a senior adviser to Israel's Melchior. The issue "was frozen for a long time, and even Lithuania thought about just leaving the books there. The unity we achieved is a greater achievement than the restitution."

Last year the Lithuanian government received 19 applications for the scrolls, mostly from Israeli and American organizations. Acknowledging its ignorance of Jewish religious objects, the Culture Ministry formed a committee to approve the Jewish ad-hoc committee, which will distribute the Torahs to applicants.

"Israel has the capability and expertise to take care of the scrolls," said Moni Mordechai, a spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry. "It's a mitzvah to take care of the scrolls. We really appreciate that the Lithuanian government took this decision, and it's very important for us."

Zingeris says applicants will be culled, in part, based on their Lithuanian roots. For example, one likely recipient is a yeshiva of Lithuanian origin that now operates in Cleveland, he said.

He also hopes Torah recipients will help support Lithuania's small but cohesive Jewish community.

"We want them to send us librarians and academics to work with us, to make exhibitions and strengthen our social life and establish a normal kosher kitchen here," he says. "We have no financial magnets here. No Jewish people have money here."

And, Zingeris said, he hopes to name the ad-hoc committee after Ulpis, the librarian whose bravery during World War II made all this possible. □

### Rabbi's memorial may be completed soon

PRAGUE (JTA) — Work restarted in the Slovak capital on a memorial for a revered 19th-century European rabbi.

The work in Bratislava on the memorial for Chatam Sofer was able to resume after a U.S.-based group supporting the project paid off debts of more than \$100,000 owed to a construction company.

The project was slated for completion last month, but work stalled after an international committee committed to preserving Sofer's burial site halted payments due to an internal dispute.

The Bratislava Jewish Community said it hoped construction of the memorial now would be completed before the end of April. □



## Daily News Bulletin

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## JEWISH WORLD

### German neo-Nazis vow to run

Germany's extremist National Democratic Party vowed to run in September general elections. Thursday's announcement came one day after Germany's highest court said it would postpone a decision on banning the party, as the government has sought.

The court said it issued the postponement when it learned that one of the National Democrats most outspokenly anti-Semitic members, Wolfgang Frenz, had worked as an informant for Germany's domestic intelligence agency.

The decision created a major embarrassment for the German government, which likened the National Democrats to the Nazis.

On Thursday, party leader Udo Voigt accused the government of waging a "pogrom against Germany's nationalists."

### Guilty plea in fraud case

A man who fled to Israel after being accused of stealing from U.S. anti-poverty programs pleaded guilty to conspiracy and mail fraud. After being extradited from Israel last August, Chaim Berger, 76, admitted Wednesday in a New York court that he sought federal aid for schools and businesses that didn't exist or weren't qualified. Under a plea agreement, Berger could face up to six-and-a-half years in prison.

While Berger was fighting extradition last year, President Clinton reduced the prison sentences of four other leaders from the Chasidic community of New Square, N.Y., who had been convicted in the scheme. Federal prosecutors are investigating whether the commutations were linked to the community's overwhelming support for Hillary Clinton in New York's 2000 race for a Senate seat.

### Jews viewed favorably

Jews are viewed favorably by other ethnic groups, according to a new report.

Jews have a positive ethnic image, according to a report released Thursday by the American Jewish Committee. But less than a third of non-Jews report contact with Jews at work, school or in the community, the report says. While 58 percent of non-Jews say they know a Jew, only 28 percent feel close to one.

### Claims deadline extended

The deadline for filing Holocaust-era insurance claims was extended to Sept. 30.

The International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims extended the deadline to allow enough time to collect lists of policyholders from the companies, process them through Yad Vashem and publish the names on the commission's Web site. More information about filing is available at [www.icheic.org](http://www.icheic.org).

## AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

### Once suppressed, Jewish editors across Russia look to professionalize

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — During the Soviet era, Jewish newspapers not run by the state had to operate underground.

Now, these papers' existence is an accepted fact — and improving their quality appears to be the main task ahead.

Since 1988, however, the number of Jewish periodicals in Russia has proliferated.

There are, roughly estimated, 350 to 400 of them now in the former Soviet Union, and the figure is increasing every year by some 15 percent said Alexander Frenkel, a St. Petersburg-based journalist who also monitors the Jewish press in the region.

According to Frenkel, 75 percent of them are published in Russia and Ukraine; roughly 25 percent are run by organizations affiliated with the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee or the State of Israel.

Unfortunately, many of these papers are small, underfunded and suffer from a lack of professionalism.

"It is an unprofessional, provincial digest," said Mikhail Gorelik, a Moscow journalist, specializing in Jewish themes, scoffing at a weekly with the claimed record circulation of 28,000. "I don't read it. But my mother-in-law likes it. All our readership is the elder generation."

Gathering together three dozen Jewish journalists from across the former Soviet Union with American Jewish journalists, a conference last week in Moscow attempted to address some of the problems.

The conference featured sessions and workshops on such topics as the roles and responsibilities of the Jewish press, its relationship with the Jewish community, the changing nature of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union and the challenges facing the Jewish press.

At a session titled "Getting the Story Right," Milton Gralla, a retired publisher of trade magazines, shared his personal, time-tested tips for avoiding mistakes in reporting.

Other sessions focused on how to handle stories that are controversial or potentially embarrassing to the Jewish community. It was clear from participants' comments that most of these Jewish papers shy away from controversy — either to avoid upsetting their patrons or for fear of retribution.

Vera Perelgut, who publishes a small paper in the southern Russian town of Nalchik, not far from Chechnya, said she felt she could not even write about a recent anti-Semitic incident for fear of antagonizing the ethnic majority population.

And when some of the journalists were asked, hypothetically, what they would do if they got exclusive information that a Jewish leader in their communities had done something illegal, a majority said they would not write a story about it — preferring instead to alert the authorities.

The four American Jewish journalists who participated in the conference challenged their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts to be bold and to make their publications lively and interesting. And judging by the remarks of some of the participants, that message sunk in. "Our Jewish press is boring," Frenkel said. "We have to do something."

Doing something with the Jewish press in the former Soviet Union is part of a long-term strategy of Jerry Hochbaum, executive vice-president of the U.S.-based Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, who organized the conference.

Hochbaum, who has long been dedicated to the revival of the Russian Jewish community, tries to inject funds and energy into segments of the community that can serve as a catalyst for Jewish life.

"The time is ripe to invest in the Jewish journalism in the former Soviet Union. The press is not only a source of information but a very important tool for community-building," he said.

One of the suggested steps is a regular seminar featuring master classes organized by the Memorial Foundation and taught by leading U.S. journalists.

Diana Gantseva, the young editor of a community monthly tabloid in Yekaterinburg with a circulation of several hundred, is especially pleased with the idea.

"That is precisely what I need," she said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Intellectuals, rabbis, military men  
come together for Israeli Covenant***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In Israel, there is nothing like an attempt at national unity to stir up a national controversy.

The latest such controversy is a 10-article document, called "The Kinneret Covenant," designed to find common denominators among different segments in Israeli society — religious and secular Jews, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Israelis, right and left.

One element not included in the new national manifesto is the Israeli Arab community — and this is not by accident.

The Covenant was created last October, but released only recently. It was the first significant product of a group of Israeli intellectuals called "The Forum for National Responsibility," 60 individuals from all walks of life who decided that Israeli Jews should start talking with each other, instead of yelling at each other.

The infant charter had hardly left the presses, however, when it faced heavy criticism from right and left, religious and secular, Jew and Arab. Only the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, it seemed, largely ignored the document.

The driving force behind the initiative was Yisrael Harel, a West Bank settler and former chairman of the main settlers body. The money came from the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies in Tel Aviv.

The gallery of participants included former Absorption Minister Yuli Tamir, head of the Rabin Center and one of the founders of Peace Now; Reserve Gen. Ephraim Fein, who now is a hawkish National Religious Party activist; and Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan, head of the National Security Council and a candidate for army chief of staff.

Also participating was Uzi Arad, former political advisor to former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu; Noa Ben-Artzi, granddaughter of Yitzhak Rabin; Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, a leading settler rabbi; Arnon Soffer, a geographer at Haifa University; Rabbi Uri Regev of Israel's Reform movement; and Shabtai Shavit, former head of the Mossad.

The Covenant is phrased like the Declaration of Independence, the document read by David Ben-Gurion when he declared the State of Israel's independence on May 14, 1948. The Declaration of Independence laid out the general values of the fledgling state, and is considered the closest thing Israel has to a constitution.

The Covenant is an attempt to phrase a national consensus to questions every Israeli asks himself: Who are we? What are we doing here? What are we fighting for?

Precisely because the answers to those questions are so controversial, the new document tried to leave aside the most controversial issues. That meant that most of its conclusions were fairly bland.

The historic justification for the existence of the State of Israel is described as "a sublime existential need," based "on the devotion of the People of Israel to its heritage, its Torah, its language and its country."

There is no mention of the fact that Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, was a secular Jew, or that secular Zionism was the driving force behind the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel.

Were it not for the impressive gallery of signers, it is doubtful that the Covenant would have created the public stir it did. The charter was composed in a three-day marathon meeting in a hotel

on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and was distributed recently in the weekend editions of the three major newspapers.

The reaction was astounding — page after page of letters to the editor, supporting and opposing the very idea behind the document.

"The 'Kinneret Covenant' forum is pathetic and revolting," Yosef Rosenfeld of Bnei Brak wrote in Ha'aretz. "It encourages illusions" that the Jewish people can ever be unified, he wrote.

The Covenant states time and again that Israel is a Jewish and democratic country, and that the State of Israel manifests the Jews' right to "life, sovereignty and freedom."

"In order to continue the existence of a Jewish and democratic Israel, one should continue and maintain a significant Jewish majority," the drafters wrote. "Such majority shall only be preserved through moral means."

But what about the freedom of the other national group living in the Land of Israel?

"Israel will preserve the right of the Arab minority to preserve its linguistic, cultural and national identity," the Covenant declares.

The Covenant states that Israel does not want to rule another people. Many of Israel's Arab citizens — and even some of its Jewish ones — might question that statement. It is no coincidence, therefore, that representatives of the Arab sector were not invited to take part in the meeting to draft the document.

"The meeting for an internal Jewish dialogue was the result of the systematic campaign of Israel's Arabs, under the umbrella of the Israeli democracy, to see themselves committed first to the Arab-Palestinian nation and only then to the State of Israel," said Hava Pinhas-Cohen, one of the Covenant's signers.

Once the Jews clear the air among themselves, it will be time to incorporate Arab views into the charter, Pinhas-Cohen hinted. In other words, she seemed to be saying, the initiators of the charter believed that if the Arabs were to be included, there would be no charter.

"I signed the 'Kinneret Covenant' not because I accept every solution that it offers for every important issue," said Assa Kasher, a leading philosopher. "I did so because I identify with its general gist and the main points. It is always more important to help fill the cup than to stop it, because the cup is not yet full."

Shulamit Aloni, former education minister and Meretz Party leader, said the document only proved her argument that the Rabin Center had been captured by the Right.

In criticizing the Covenant, however, the arch-secular Aloni found herself in the same camp as fervently Orthodox rabbis incensed that the mayor of Bnei Brak, Mordechai Karelitz of United Torah Judaism, played a key role in drafting a document that seemingly gives equal merit to the lifestyles and beliefs of secular, liberal and Orthodox Jews.

Seeking to strike a balance between personal freedoms and the Jewish character of the state, the drafters wrote: "We believe that Jewish tradition should have an important place" in Israeli life, but "the state should not enforce religious norms on individuals."

Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, one of the most respected halachic scholars of the generation, was quoted as saying that the initiative would "certainly have a negative influence."

Despite the criticisms from many sectors, members of the forum have not given up, and plan to push their idea ahead.

A subcommittee headed by Reserve Gen. Herzl Bodinger, former commander of the Israeli Air Force, is putting together a document dealing with problems of education in Israel. Other papers will deal with issues such as ownership of state land and the Arab minority. □