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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Gas depot bombing a terrorist act

An explosion at Israel's largest gas depot was caused by terrorists, police said. In Thursday's incident, a bomb exploded beneath a tanker truck that pulled into the Pi Gililot depot in Herzliya.

No one was hurt, and workers doused a small fire that erupted.

Police said traces of explosives were found on the underside of the tanker.

Remains of a cell phone were also found, raising suspicions it was used to remotely detonate the charge. Police officials said it is miraculous that no one was hurt.

Pi Gililot is located in a populated area and is the largest fuel and gas depot in the country. The attack renewed public debate over the risks posed by the depot's location.

Fire guts Israel's Paris embassy

A fire destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Paris on Thursday, but officials doubted it was arson. Israel's ambassador to France, Eli Bar-Navi, echoed the comments of fire officials who said that it was likely an accident.

The blaze started on the ground floor and spread quickly through the rest of the building. Five firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation.

Renovation work was recently started on the ground floor of the mission, which is located on a street that is under round-the-clock police guard.

Aid to Israel 'pork'?

Additional U.S. aid to Israel is facing obstacles in Congress.

As the U.S. House of Representatives debates an emergency spending bill, amendments designating \$200 million to Israel and \$50 million for Palestinian humanitarian aid are encountering some problems.

Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-Ala.) said Wednesday he would lead an effort to strip those provisions out of the bill because there was no request from the Bush administration or Israel for the funding and because someone decided to "get some pork in it for Israel."

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, May 27.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Hebrew immersion programs help young children learn language fast

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's 10:30 on a sunny spring morning at Ben Porat Yosef: The Sephardic Yeshiva of Bergen County, and the 3-year-olds are seated at low tables, nibbling on animal crackers.

Surrounded by books, toys and colorful laminated displays with Hebrew and English letters, the children at the Leonia, N.J., school chat among themselves in toddler English. When their teacher, Sara Pearl, walks by, a girl in red overalls requests, "Od mayim," Hebrew for "more water."

Another girl asks in Hebrew for oogiot, or cookies, and a boy in a red baseball cap announces, "Gamarti," Hebrew for "I finished."

The children, most of whom come from English-speaking families, are part of a new experiment in American Jewish education — Hebrew immersion nursery schools.

Amid a growing body of research showing the benefits of teaching foreign languages to young children, a small but growing movement is taking hold to offer intensive Hebrew education for the pre-kindergarten set. So far, the number of communities other than Leonia with full-fledged Hebrew immersion preschool programs can be counted on one hand — Baltimore, Washington, suburban Philadelphia and suburban Detroit.

The programs face great challenges, ranging from difficulty finding qualified instructors to the dearth of curricular materials to skepticism from parents worried that the programs will interfere with other learning.

Proponents of Hebrew immersion say the programs offer several advantages:

- They introduce Hebrew at an age when children readily absorb foreign languages, giving students a head start on Hebrew school and day school.
- They spark early connections to Israel.
- Recent research has shown that studying a foreign language early boosts a child's brainpower, vocabulary and self-esteem.
- Learning Hebrew does not seem to hinder children's English language development.

Immersion programs "deliver not only language, but also culture. It's a very powerful model," said Frieda Robins, early childhood project director at the Jewish Theological Seminary's William Davidson School of Jewish Education.

Robins, who is writing a doctoral dissertation on Hebrew immersion, has helped several Conservative synagogue preschools start such programs in the past few years.

At the Ben Porat Yosef program, which is Orthodox and began this fall, 3-year-olds spend about an hour each day speaking Hebrew. Administrators hope to gradually expand the Hebrew time as the children get older.

The school plans to add a grade each year and become a full day school that will be "ivrit b'ivrit," meaning that the Judaic curriculum will be taught entirely in Hebrew.

Rather than translating or using textbooks, as in traditional foreign language classes, immersion programs teach Hebrew using only Hebrew. Teachers use body language and context clues to convey the meaning, and most children pick it up quickly.

Pearl, Ben Porat Yosef's Hebrew teacher, uses songs and stories, and covers much of the typical preschool curriculum — such as colors, days of the week and weather — in Hebrew.

On a morning this spring, she led the class in an all-Hebrew discussion of the day's weather (sunny and windy), taught them songs about Purim and the Torah, and talked

MIDEAST FOCUS

Shas firings go into effect

The firings of Israeli Cabinet ministers from the fervently Orthodox Shas Party went into effect.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he would not allow Shas back into the coalition unless its 17 legislators vote in favor of an emergency economic package, which passed a preliminary vote in the Knesset on Wednesday.

Two additional votes necessary to pass the bill are expected to be held in the next two to three weeks.

Shas' spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, sent a conciliatory letter to Sharon on Wednesday night, expressing the hope that relations can be restored.

High security alert in Israel

Israeli security forces remain on high alert for possible terrorist attacks. Underscoring the terrorist threat, Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said Wednesday that Israel is about to face "waves" of male and female suicide bombers.

5 Israeli Arabs indicted

Five Israeli Arabs were indicted Thursday on charges of building bombs for possible use against Israeli police. The five made the bombs using instructions that were provided on a Saudi TV program, the charge sheet said.

The five allegedly planned to use the bombs against Israeli police if Israeli Arab rioting erupted again as it did at the start of the intifada.

P.A. condemns bombing

The Palestinian Authority denounced Wednesday's deadly suicide bombing in Rishon le-Zion.

The military wing of Arafat's Fatah movement claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed two Israelis and wounded more than 40 others. The two victims were identified as Gary Targinyanski, 65, and Elmar Dejavrjalov, 16, both of Rishon le-Zion.

about colors, passing out multicolored cutout paper butterflies. "Whoever sits nicely gets a butterfly," Pearl explained in Hebrew, quieting some of the more antsy children.

Later, the children played an Israeli game called "Knock, knock, who am I?" in which one child closed her eyes and had to guess which children were tapping her shoulder. Pearl speaks Hebrew with the children all day, even at lunch time and recess, when the other teachers speak English.

For a native Israeli who is a little homesick, it's an ideal job.

The children "use my 'reysh,'" Pearl says proudly, referring to a Hebrew letter that most Americans pronounce without the guttural element, as if it were the English letter "R."

"They say everything with an Israeli accent," she says.

Parents have been responding enthusiastically. The school currently enrolls 27 children, and has 30 more signed up for next year.

The other new Hebrew immersion programs also are reporting success.

Adat Shalom Synagogue in suburban Detroit started its program for 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds two years ago. Two other Detroit-area Conservative synagogues and the Jewish community center plan to open Hebrew immersion programs next year.

With half an hour of Hebrew a week for the 3-year-olds, five half-hour sessions a week for the 4-year-olds, and about seven hours of Hebrew a week for the 5-year-olds, Adat Shalom's program is somewhat less rigorous than Ben Porat Yosef's.

Nonetheless, teachers and parents say it is yielding powerful results. "The kids love it. It's fun. And the kids are really learning a lot," says Jordana Weiss, director of the synagogue's nursery school and kindergarten.

"When the program began, I remember meeting a couple of doubters wondering whether it was going to take away from their child learning English or other things," she says. "Everyone can tell you it has only enhanced things."

The Hebrew emphasis also is spurring parents to think more seriously about their ongoing Jewish education, Weiss says.

Adat Shalom is adding Hebrew enrichment to its religious school, and the local Conservative day school is exploring a more rigorous track for graduates of the immersion pre-school.

Ronnie Kempenich, who coordinates early childhood Hebrew immersion programs for the Board of Jewish Education in Washington, says the programs — which currently are in a handful of Washington synagogue schools — are "a very good way to teach about Israel." Kempenich is American, but lived in Israel for eight years.

Learning Hebrew as a living language with "songs and movies is so much more exciting, and it's something kids can relate to better than prayers," Kempenich says.

Hebrew education generally has looked at Hebrew as a language of prayer, rather than as a vibrant foreign language, she says.

"They're not tapping into all the information and all the research out there about teaching of foreign languages, and I think that's a shame," Kempenich says.

Like all avenues of Jewish education, however, the growth of Hebrew immersion programs has been somewhat stymied by staffing difficulties.

Most Jewish early childhood programs, which tend to offer relatively low salaries and no benefits, have difficulty finding qualified teachers with Judaic knowledge. Add Hebrew fluency — ideally that of a native speaker — and the pool of eligible candidates is even smaller.

"People who have the early childhood education skills don't necessarily have the Hebrew skills, and the people who have the Hebrew skills don't necessarily have the education background," Kempenich says.

However, Detroit and the JTS education school are exploring the possibility of working with the Jewish Agency for Israel and bringing in Israeli teachers to help staff the programs. So far, most parents seem happy with the immersion programs.

Norma Dorman, whose 5-year-old twins, Hershel and Pearl, are in the Adat Shalom nursery school, says their Hebrew already surpasses that of their older siblings, who are in day school.

"This program is the most awesome I've experienced or seen," Dorman says. "The two little ones are walking around the house speaking in Hebrew.

"They're just like little sponges," she adds. "The earlier you can catch them, the better you are." □



Daily News Bulletin

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JEWISH WORLD

Jewish sites put on alert

There is an increased risk that Jewish sites around the world will be targeted by terrorists, according to Israel's Mossad intelligence service.

Mossad changed its assessment of the threat following the recent attack on a synagogue in Tunisia, the head of the agency's research department on anti-Semitism disclosed Wednesday in a rare public lecture.

The official said information gathered from terrorists arrested in Europe revealed that they had planned to attack other Jewish targets as well, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported. The Mossad has termed the threat, which originates from extremist Islamic elements, as "world jihad."

Anti-Israel resolution expected

An anti-Israel resolution is expected to emerge from UNESCO's executive board meeting. Meeting this week in Paris, UNESCO's board will address what it describes as Israel's infringement of Palestinian culture and education, according to U.N. Watch.

In Paris to monitor the conference, leaders of the Anti-Defamation League have criticized UNESCO for previous one-sided resolutions against Israel and have called on the body to condemn Palestinian terrorism.

Report: Rabbi diverted funds

The senior rabbi of Seattle's largest Jewish congregation reportedly diverted synagogue funds for personal use.

Rabbi Earl Starr, who retired last year, diverted money given to the synagogue by a local foundation, Jon Rosen, president of Temple De Hirsch Sinai's board of trustees, was quoted as saying by The Seattle Times. Some members of the congregation said they had been told Starr diverted about \$100,000, the paper reported.

Starr was not available to comment on the charges, according to the report. Starr reached an agreement to pay back the money over several years, Rosen said. In return, no charges will be brought.

Chasidic leader sentenced

A man who illegally diverted funds to a Chasidic community in New York was sentenced to six years in jail. Chaim Berger, 76, was also ordered Wednesday to pay more than \$11 million for devising a scheme to illegally obtain millions of dollars in government funds. Berger, who apologized in court, had fled to Israel and fought extradition for three years before returning to the United States to face charges.

Before he left office, President Clinton reduced the sentences of four other leaders of the Chasidic community of New Square, N.Y., who had been convicted for participation in the scheme.

U.S. commission poised to address Europe's latest anti-Semitic scourge

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A U.S. commission may soon focus on escalating anti-Semitism in Europe.

Members of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, an independent government agency that monitors human rights in Europe, said they hope to hold a special session on anti-Semitism at a July meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The comments came at a meeting Wednesday that was held in response to a wave of anti-Semitic incidents that have swept across Europe, particularly in France, in recent months.

The commission, which has representatives from Congress and federal agencies, heard testimony from several Jewish groups on increasing anti-Semitism in France, Russia and other countries.

Jewish leaders who testified at the hearing said they are adamant about bringing the issue beyond vague condemnation and moving it toward the front of the agenda for European leaders.

Public statements by government leaders at every level are needed, said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has spoken out against extremism and intolerance but he and other European leaders must "transform their words into concrete deeds," Levin said.

Commission members criticized European leaders for being slow to speak out against the anti-Semitic violence.

"We hope we will begin to hear more than the deafening silence from European leaders," said Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.).

Clinton and other senators recently introduced a largely symbolic resolution in the Senate that calls on European governments to speak out against anti-Semitism, investigate and punish anti-Semitic violence and protect their Jewish citizens and institutions.

Jewish leaders said they are pleased that the commission is taking up the issue, but emphasized that more has to be done — both by European governments and by human rights organizations.

Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international affairs at the American Jewish Committee, said biased verbal attacks on Israel have contributed to a climate in which the Jewish state is demonized.

Baker and other Jewish leaders noted the hatred evident at a U.N. anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa, last year and the danger of keeping silent and thereby lending legitimacy to anti-Semites.

One of the human rights groups that did not respond to the anti-Semitism at the Durban conference, Jewish groups say, was Amnesty International, which has been critical of Israel and charged it with human rights violations against Palestinians.

Amnesty has also criticized armed Palestinian groups for their attacks on civilians.

At the hearing, Amnesty strongly condemned anti-Semitism, saying "criticism of specific Israeli actions and policies must not become the basis for violent attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions."

But nongovernmental organizations have to go farther than that, said Kenneth Jacobson, associate national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "We'd like to hear more NGOs criticize how Israel is portrayed in the media," he said.

Shimon Samuels, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's director for international liaison, said he has misgivings about the major human rights organizations and their responses to attacks on Israel.

As for the next step, Samuels believes the U.S. government and the American Jewish community must speak out.

The push must be American-driven because the Europeans have shown an inability to solve the problem on their own, he said.

"American pressure is the key," he said. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

5 months into Ben-Eliezer's tenure, the Labor Party remains in disarray

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Labor Party has an abundance of peace plans. It just doesn't have a clear leader to choose one.

For decades the near-hegemonic power in Israel, Labor has fallen into disarray. After winning a grueling battle to become party chairman just five months ago, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer faces a new challenge to his authority from Knesset member Haim Ramon. And several different Labor legislators have presented conflicting peace plans.

Some pundits believe Israelis would welcome a credible alternative to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of the Likud Party, but even so, few seem to be running to Labor.

If elections were held today, polls show that Labor would win just 12 seats in the 120-member Knesset — barely half of the 22 seats it held under its last leader, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and a far cry from the 46 it held under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a decade ago.

For the first 30 years of the Jewish state, Labor was nearly synonymous with Israel, controlling the government, the Histadrut Trade Union, the industrial base, the health care organization and the main supermarket chain. Now it barely has a stake in Sharon's national unity government, and strong voices within the party are urging it to give up even that.

Moreover, 15 months after Barak resigned, the party still has no established leader and no clear policy.

But Ramon, who intends to challenge Ben-Eliezer for party leadership in the fall, claims he has the electoral formula to turn things around.

His solution: Pull Israeli troops out of Palestinian areas and erect a physical border between Israel and the Palestinians.

Recent polls show that up to 74 percent of Israelis favor plans like Ramon's for "unilateral separation" from the Palestinians.

The idea is to withdraw from most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, redeploy behind a sophisticated electronic fence and wait until the Palestinians are ready to negotiate a permanent border. Some security experts say the fence could prevent up to 98 percent of suicide bombings.

In Ramon's version, the fence would run close to the pre-1967 border, but include the three large blocs of Jewish settlements around Ariel, Jerusalem and Gush Etzion. Isolated West Bank settlements would be evacuated, as would all the settlements in the Gaza Strip.

The plan offers clear benefits, Ramon argues: The Palestinians no longer could claim they were occupied; Israeli security would be enhanced; and Israel would offer the Palestinians a settlement along the lines of President Clinton's December 2000 proposals.

In vigorously outlining his plan to the Labor Party's Central Committee in mid-May, Ramon maintained that it was "electoral gold.

"It's there, lying on the streets and, incredibly, no one is stooping to pick it up," he declared. "We should pick it up."

More than anything, it is Palestinian violence that has brought Labor so low. Since the Oslo peace process collapsed under the weight of Palestinian terror, Labor has been unable to offer the public an attractive or relevant political alternative.

Oslo was the embodiment of the Labor thesis that peace is possible and provides the best long-term guarantee of Israel's security.

Coming just when peace seemed around the corner, the intifada shocked Israeli opinion, and seemed to prove the rival Likud thesis that the Middle East remains a dangerous and volatile place where true peace is not possible, and that Israel can survive only by being strong and holding on to key national assets.

Ramon now proposes a new Labor agenda based on the middle ground: Nullify the terror by withdrawing behind new lines, while keeping a viable political option open. In other words, he argues, Labor under his plan could fight terror better than the Likud — and could ultimately make peace, which the Likud can't.

Just because Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat is not ready to talk peace now, Ramon argues, Israel should not be trapped into spreading its forces too thin by guarding isolated settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel should not risk its soldiers' lives "for the avocados of Netzarim or the lettuce of Kfar Darom," Ramon said at the Central Committee meeting, referring to a settlement in Gaza.

But Ramon is not Labor's leader yet, nor has his plan or anything like it been adopted by the party.

Ben-Eliezer, the current leader, is pushing a very different strategy: A fence, yes, but no dismantling of settlements before peace talks.

That, says Ramon, means Israeli forces on both sides of the fence until Arafat or some other Palestinian leader deigns to talk peace. Ben-Eliezer this week promised residents of border communities that a fence would be built within six months.

At the Central Committee meeting, Ben-Eliezer emphasized his readiness to go back to the Clinton parameters, and even to give up Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism.

"Fine," Ramon chided, "but what do you do when there is no partner? And do you really think it is smart for us to argue now over how we would divide Jerusalem while the Palestinians are still killing us?"

The absence of a Palestinian peace partner has led others in Labor in a different direction. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, for example, argues that in lieu of a Palestinian partner, Israel should coordinate an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal with the international community.

Peres wants the "Quartet" — the United States, Europe, Russia and the United Nations — to endorse a plan for early Palestinian statehood, leading within two years to a final peace deal.

Peres' predecessor in the Foreign Ministry, Shlomo Ben-Ami, agrees that Israel should coordinate final-status parameters with the international community and then close a deal on that basis with the Palestinians at an international conference.

Failing that, Ben-Ami is ready to consider a separation plan, but only on the condition that it has international backing and that an international force takes charge in the Palestinian areas, guiding them to independence, as the United Nations did in East Timor.

All these plans and more likely will be submitted at the Labor Party Convention in early July. What the convention decides will become party policy, and could have an enormous bearing on who eventually is chosen in October as the party's leader and future candidate for prime minister. □

(Leslie Susser is a diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)