



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 240

Wednesday, December 25, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel withdraws from Bethlehem

Israel's army redeployed its troops to the outskirts of Bethlehem to allow Christmas celebrations to take place in the city.

For the second year running, Israel barred Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, a Muslim, from traveling from Ramallah to Bethlehem to attend Christmas Mass. [Page 3]

U.S. releases 10 Iranian Jews

Ten Iranian Jews holding Israeli citizenship were released on bail after being detained by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service for several days.

The 10 men, together with an unknown number of other Iranian Jews and hundreds of Muslims, were arrested under the USA Patriot Act, which mandates the registration of boys and men from five Muslim countries who are in the United States on temporary visas.

Zvi Vapni, the deputy consul general at the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles, said Monday that the 10 Israelis were told they might be deported to their "country of origin" — meaning Iran.

UJC gives \$18 million to Israel

The United Jewish Communities allocated \$18 million from its Israel Emergency Campaign to help the Jewish state. The money was allocated for rescue vehicles, firefighting equipment, chemical warfare protections masks and suits and emergency equipment for hospitals.

Hamas men planned kidnappings

Two Hamas members arrested by Israel after they infiltrated from Egypt said they planned to kidnap soldiers to use them as bargaining chips for the release of Palestinian prisoners. The two, who were arrested last week, admitted during questioning that they received their orders from the Hamas command in the Gaza Strip, Israel Radio reported Tuesday. The suspects were armed with a grenade and a pistol when they were arrested by Israeli troops.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Thurs., Dec. 26.

ARTS & CULTURE

From celluloid to synagogue: Do film fests build Jewish identity?

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — One recent Sunday, 1,200 people at the vintage Coolidge Corner Cinema in Brookline, Mass., nibbled barbecued wings.

Film screenings sandwiched around the chicken, coleslaw and cornbread included "Shalom, Y'all," and "Kinky Friedman: Proud to be an Asshole From El Paso."

Those two documentaries about Jews and the South were among dozens of offerings at the 13th annual Boston Jewish Film Festival in November.

Though not exactly glatt kosher, the films — and meat — were "a fun way to do something more" at the festival, Executive Director Sara Rubin says.

Perhaps much more, when it comes to filling Jews' appetite for greater identity, according to a new report by the Jewish Outreach Institute in New York.

The study, "Can Watching a Movie Lead to Greater Jewish Affiliation?" insists that the burgeoning Jewish film festival scene holds not only big box-office potential but the possibility of moving unaffiliated Jews "along the continuum of Jewish involvement."

The institute examined 46 festivals. One-quarter of them are independently run, while the others have some kind of sponsorship from Jewish institutions or organizations, such as Jewish community centers or federations.

"Film festivals serve as an entryway into the Jewish community," institute spokesman Paul Golin says.

For no Jewish obligation or commitment stricter than the price of admission — and the report urges discounts — any Jew can explore new Jewish worlds in the anonymity of a darkened movie theater. Hannah Greenstein, the Jewish Outreach Institute's program officer and co-author of the film festival report, says festivals should view their audiences the way advertisers would target buyers.

"Jewish film festivals must have an outreach goal, they must seek out marketing opportunities to the unaffiliated or the disengaged," she says.

The pioneering Jewish film fest, launched in 1980 in San Francisco, has spawned more than 60 similar events annually in the United States, from Fairbanks to Philadelphia. Another half dozen are held in Canada, and about two dozen globally, from London to Hong Kong to Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The National Foundation for Jewish Culture sponsors an annual Jewish Film Festival conference. The third, set for San Diego this February, will explore issues such as curating films about Israel in the Diaspora. The foundation also receives up to 70 applicants for the \$150,000 it awards annually for Jewish documentary film making.

Jewish "film festivals are one signal of a Jewish renaissance" culturally, says Richard Siegel, the foundation's executive director.

The box office is heating up too, opening the doors to even wider Jewish involvement, the report says. San Francisco has grown into the biggest event, attracting 34,700 people watching nearly 50 films in 2002. Toronto is next with some 15,000 people seeing over 60 films, while Boston drew a record 13,000 people this year, up 18 percent from the previous year.

Among the larger festivals, Boston has grown from 10 films at its inception to this year's edition, which featured 43 films from 14 countries and a \$500,000 budget.

The Boston film festival also hosts Jewish films throughout the rest of the year that attract some 10,000 viewers.

Officially, the Boston festival aims to showcase the best contemporary films from

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barghouti aide convicted

Palestinian militia leader Marwan Barghouti's deputy was convicted Tuesday of murdering seven Israelis in terrorist attacks.

A Jerusalem court also found Nasser Abu-Hamed guilty of 12 counts of attempted murder. He was sentenced to seven life terms plus 50 years.

Abu-Hamed said his actions were a legitimate resistance to the Israeli presence in Palestinian areas, Israel Radio reported.

Barghouti is currently facing a separate trial in Israel on charges of involvement in the killings of dozens of Israelis in terrorist attacks.

Candidate struck from Likud list

Israel's Central Election Commission struck a far-right candidate from the Likud Party list.

The commission ruled against Moshe Feiglin, citing a law that bans candidates from serving in the Knesset for seven years if they have served at least three months in jail for a crime involving moral turpitude.

Feiglin served a six-month jail sentence after he was convicted in 1997 of sedition.

Feiglin formerly was the leader of the Zo Artzeinu movement, which advocated civil disobedience to oppose Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's peace moves with the Palestinians.

Rabbi warns Israeli Jews

Israel's Ashkenazi chief rabbi lambasted Israeli Jews who have Christmas trees and other Christmas trappings in their homes.

"These phenomena, which increase year by year among Jews, are evidence of a society which has no moral, cultural, or national backbone," Yisrael Meir Lau said.

"If we were afraid of assimilation in the Diaspora, we have now brought it into our homes."



Daily News Bulletin

Norman H. Lipoff, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Finance and Administration Director*

Paula Simmonds, *Marketing and Development Director*

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.
© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

around the world dealing with Jewish themes. But Rubin says the festival also "pushes the envelope on what is Jewish" and hopes to spark debate about Jewish themes.

This year's barbecue, at a hip art house, echoed the kind of nontraditional twist that the Jewish Outreach Institute applauds as a creative way to promote Jewish interest. But Gail Quets, the institute's director of research and co-author of the study, says people don't walk out of such events with a new Jewish identity.

The institute's report urges fests to program "next steps" to greater Jewish activity. Ideas include information tables, panels of experts around film topics or even crossover events to other communities featured in some of the films.

Synagogue affiliation or ties to organized Jewry might come later. But Siegel says traditional notions of Jewish affiliation — such as synagogue membership or federation donations — must be expanded as well.

What's more, the film-going experience — a collective act that is experienced individually — is "essentially what the prayer experience is," he says.

If Jewish film festivals are becoming the spiritual realm of the barely initiated, then film topics run a gamut almost as wide as the great Jewish texts.

From gay Chasidic Jews ("Trembling Before G-d") to the toxic effects of vinyl siding on Jewish suburbia ("Blue Vinyl") to Tel Aviv 20-somethings ("Giraffes"), Jewish film making is blossoming, in part to meet the demands of the festival scene.

In San Francisco, for example, festival officials screen 240 films a year, selecting about 50 for the annual event, Executive Director Janis Plotkin says. In Boston, Rubin says festival officials screened 450 films before picking this year's selections.

But Sharon Pucker Rivo, executive director of the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University and an associate professor of Jewish film, sees a downside to the Jewish film explosion. The center, which with more than 200 titles is the world's largest distributor of Jewish film and video, represents 108 filmmakers seeking distribution through the Jewish festivals.

Whether such festivals can raise Jewish consciousness remains an "amorphous" equation, says Pucker Rivo, who doubts that 40 good Jewish films are produced each year. Jewish film festivals often show films "that didn't make it commercially: Either they're really lousy films or they're inaccurate, historically," she says. "But the imprimatur of a film festival gives it legitimacy."

Just what makes a good Jewish film remains a matter of dispute: Plotkin, for instance, gave a thumbs down to the film "Schmelvis: Searching for the King's Jewish Roots," while Toronto's 10th annual festival hosted the film's world premiere.

Quality aside, Pucker Rivo also remains skeptical about the Jewish film festival phenomenon. Today's festivals, she says, are the successors to yesterday's "film series."

Whether film festivals can raise Jewish consciousness depends on where they're held, she contends.

The most effective use of Jewish films as a hook for Jewish involvement is to show them in venues "that have an ongoing mission which is not just entertainment but life cycle, whether a synagogue, or a Jewish community center, or a university," she says.

But some disagree. Plotkin says independently run festivals like San Francisco's are accountable only to their board of directors rather than some outside agency sponsor, and so have "complete curatorial" freedom.

Not all Jewish film festivals even list "outreach" as part of their picture. But San Francisco's, among others, seeks not only to celebrate Jewish "diversity" but to "reach out to the young and unaffiliated," Plotkin says.

In fact, she was "thrilled" by the outreach report, which "validated" her festival experience.

An audience survey at this year's San Francisco festival found that nearly 60 percent of the 34,000 patrons said they were returning for the third straight year. Five percent said they had been returning each year for a decade. Some 30 percent were newcomers, according to a 2001 survey.

Those results reflected what other festival officials sensed: They're attracting old and new audiences who are prime outreach targets. In San Francisco, for instance, the 2001 survey found 80 percent of film-goers were Jews, while 64 percent were married to non-Jews.

"Secular Jews," Plotkin says, "come to the Jewish film festival as if it were their high holiday." □

JEWISH WORLD

Jews back new Senate leader

U.S. Jewish groups applauded the Republican Party's decision to select Sen. Bill Frist of Tennessee as Senate majority leader.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee called Frist "a true leader and a proven friend of the pro-Israel community."

The president of B'nai B'rith International, Joel Kaplan, sent Frist a letter congratulating him on his election.

"I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at a mutually convenient date to discuss combating terrorism; maintaining strong U.S.-Israel relations; fighting anti-Semitism, abroad and in the United States; promoting bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements; and other issues of concern," Kaplan wrote.

Nazi-looted Picasso sought

The Jewish heir to a Picasso stolen by the Nazis urged a Los Angeles court to order the painting's return or have him paid \$10 million.

Thomas Bennigson, the sole heir of German-Jewish war refugee Carlota Landsberg, is seeking the return of a 1922 Picasso, "Woman in White."

The current owner, Marilyn Alsdorf of Chicago, had sent the painting to a Los Angeles art gallery in hopes of selling it, the Los Angeles Times reported.

The Nazis looted the painting from a Parisian art dealer to whom Landsberg had sent the work for safekeeping during the war, the Times said, citing the London-based Art Loss Register, a group that tracks Nazi-looted artworks.

Jews plan Carnival participation

A Brazilian Jewish group touched off a controversy with its decision to spend \$1 million to sponsor a presentation at Carnival celebrations in February.

Last week, the Jewish Culture Center in Sao Paulo launched a partnership with a local samba school with an eye toward a Ten Commandments presentation at the Rio de Janeiro Carnival.

Some Jewish activists blasted the center for being willing to spend so much, charging that the money could be better spent on helping financially strapped Jewish institutions.

But the Jewish center defended its decision on the investment.

"The samba parade in Rio is the largest popular culture expression in the world. This is an opportunity for the Jewish community to promote its values," David Feffer, president of the center's board, said in an open letter to the Jewish community.

The Rio Carnival is an annual two-day event that draws some 200,000 spectators and is broadcast to more than 200 countries worldwide.

Israel withdraws from town center as Bethlehem marks grim Christmas

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli soldiers withdrew from the center of Bethlehem this week, when Christmas was marked beneath gray skies and a gray mood.

The army withdrew to the outskirts of Bethlehem on Tuesday to allow Christmas celebrations to take place in the city without tanks nearby.

The army said it would allow into Bethlehem all Israeli Arab Christians and Christian residents of the West Bank who have special permits, as well as foreign residents, tourists and journalists. Israel also announced it would provide free public transportation to any Christian Arab from the region who wants to travel to Bethlehem in the coming days.

Although soldiers were not in the center of Bethlehem, local leaders canceled all Christmas festivities except religious observances to protest the continued Israeli presence there. As a result, there was no light-festooned Christmas tree in Manger Square, no bells, no music — and few pilgrims.

Israeli troops took control of the city earlier this year following a series of Palestinian terror attacks launched from the area. The troops then withdrew under a plan to turn over security arrangements in Bethlehem and other West Bank areas to the Palestinians. The troops returned after another Palestinian from the Bethlehem area carried out a deadly attack aboard a Jerusalem bus in late November.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has devastated the tourist industry of Bethlehem, which according to Christian tradition is the birthplace of Jesus.

Bethlehem Mayor Hanna Nasser called this year's holiday a "sad Christmas."

The only way to end suffering on both sides, he said, is to create an independent Palestinian state.

For the second year running, Israel barred Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, a Muslim, from traveling from Ramallah to attend midnight Mass in Bethlehem.

Until last year, Arafat had attended every Christmas Eve Mass in Bethlehem since 1995, the year the Palestinian Authority took control of the city. Critics said he had turned a Christian religious celebration into a political event designed to promote Palestinian nationalism.

Speaking to a Christian delegation at his Ramallah headquarters on Monday, Arafat condemned the Israeli ban.

A senior Israeli army official defended it, saying the Palestinian leader has done nothing to halt terrorism.

"Arafat is the one who harms Christians the most with his campaign of killings and terror," the coordinator of government activities in the territories, Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, said on Army Radio.

Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the Catholic Church's highest official in the Holy Land, made the traditional procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Tuesday afternoon. He was accompanied by mounted Palestinian police.

Hundreds of people gathered to greet him, including a group of several dozen international demonstrators — joined by some Israelis and Palestinians — who held banners protesting the Israeli presence in Bethlehem.

Bassam Bannoura, pastor of the Shepherd's Field Baptist Church in neighboring Beit Sahour, told The Associated Press that Christians are leaving the Holy Land for two main reasons: the hardships caused by the Israeli military and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. □

Vet designs masks for pets

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli vet developed masks to protect domestic pets from chemical or biological attack.

Rafi Kishon said the masks will be available in a number of sizes to fit cats and dogs, and will cost between \$12 and \$18, Reuters reported.

He said the masks are not intended for long-term use, but rather to evacuate a pet to safety through an area contaminated by biological or chemical agents. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Past glory, present disrepair: Jewish sites in Turkey fading

By Yigal Schleifer

ISTANBUL, Turkey (JTA) — The small city of Edirne, situated in northwestern Turkey, once was the center of Jewish life in the region. But that is a thing of the past.

Located near the borders of Greece and Bulgaria, the city exudes the distinct air of faded glory. Once a bustling and cosmopolitan provincial capital, the city today is a sleepy pit stop on the highway that connects Istanbul to the rest of Europe.

A walk around the city's old town, once the hub of Edirne's Jewish life, finds a neighborhood of dilapidated and crumbling two-story wooden houses.

Edirne's Great Synagogue, an architectural gem built in 1907, is now almost in complete ruins. Its roof is caved in and only a few bits of its brilliantly colored, frescoed ceiling are left intact.

In 1914, the city was home to almost 30,000 Jews. Now, only three remain.

Speaking in the office of the Goodyear tire dealership he owns, Joseph Romano recalls a time when the streets of Edirne's old town were lined with Jewish homes and businesses. On Saturday afternoons in the spring and summer a nearby park would be filled with Jewish families having Shabbat picnic lunches.

"I long for that life. I miss those times," says Romano, 65, who today spends his weekends with his daughters in Istanbul.

The Edirne Jewish community is not the only one in Turkey to have vanished. In the beginning of the 20th century, Turkey's Jewish population numbered more than 100,000, with sizable Jewish communities ranging from the country's Anatolian heartland to its Aegean coast and its border with Syria.

Today, Turkey's 25,000 Jews live almost exclusively in Istanbul. Driven away by political and economic turbulence and lured by the possibility of living in Israel, Turkish Jews left the country in great waves starting in the late 1940s. They left behind Jewish communities that — with the exception of Istanbul, and to a lesser extent Izmir, which has a Jewish population of around 2,000 — are either struggling to survive or have ceased to exist altogether.

"You had all these communities all over the place, and in a matter of a few years they almost all disappeared," says Rifat Bali, a Jewish historian in Istanbul.

"From the Turkish point of view, this has reinforced the idea that Jews only live in Istanbul, that they were not Anatolian, not real Turks, only traders. Which is not true."

The communities remaining outside Istanbul are very small. In Ankara, Turkey's capital, the Jewish community numbers 100.

In Antakya, near the Syrian border, only 50 Jews remain from a community that can trace its roots back to biblical times.

In Bursa, a textile center south of Istanbul, 70 Jews are left, carefully tending to two exquisite 500-year-old synagogues.

The long-term survival of these communities is doubtful, since most young Jews leave for Istanbul.

For the Jews left behind in the small communities, life mostly revolves around the synagogue, with religious services provided by the Turkish Chief Rabbinate, based in Istanbul.

"In essence, unfortunately, this community is able to provide

services only in terms of religious needs," says Lina Filiba, executive vice president of the Turkish Jewish community. "We haven't had the right structure to train people who will act as social workers" to help the needy. "I hope we will be able to."

Some of these outlying communities are today engaged in the difficult task of maintaining the legacy of Jewish life in their area, making sure synagogues and other communal properties are used regularly and looked after.

Some of this work comes in reaction to Turkish law, which states that any property belonging to minority communities that is unused for 10 years becomes state property.

This law has led to the loss of countless Jewish communal properties throughout the country.

"We have lost what we have lost up to now, and unfortunately we can't get them back because of the law," says one Jewish community leader. "What we are trying to do with what we still have is keep them as active as we can by holding regular elections and using them regularly."

A good example of this is the synagogue in Canakkale, a town near the World War I battlefields of Gallipoli that was another center of Jewish life in western Turkey.

Although no Jews live there today, a group of Jews from the city who now live in Istanbul make an annual pilgrimage to the city's remaining synagogue to pray there and help with its upkeep.

In Bursa, the tight-knit community of 70 splits its religious and social activities between the two remaining synagogues in the city's old Jewish quarter in an effort to keep both in the hands of the Jewish community.

The quarter, a cobblestoned neighborhood of pastel-colored wooden houses, has become a popular entertainment area, with many of the old homes converted into pubs and fish restaurants.

Although Bursa's Jews no longer live in the quarter, they still own many of the area's buildings, and the rents from those properties have provided the community with the funds to maintain and renovate their synagogues.

"We are in good shape because of the buildings that were left to us by our grandparents," says the community's leader, Izra Venturero, 63, who owns a clothing store in Bursa's bazaar.

Four years ago, the Bursa community — which numbered around 1,500 at its height — was able to renovate the derelict Mayor Synagogue, a 500-year-old domed house of worship that was originally built by Jews who came to the Ottoman Empire from the Spanish island of Mallorca.

Sitting on a blue velvet cushion inside the synagogue's lovingly restored main sanctuary, which is decorated with large crystal chandeliers and whose ark is covered with an intricately embroidered antique teal-colored curtain, Venturero assesses the condition of Bursa's Jewish community.

"All the young people don't want to stay here," Venturero says, speaking in a combination of Hebrew and Turkish. "After university they don't come back, including my children.

"In 50 years there probably won't be Jews in Bursa, but we want to show that there was once a big, strong Jewish community in Bursa. That's why we renovated this synagogue."

In places like Edirne, it is probably too late for a mission like that. But in other small Turkish Jewish communities, like Bursa, that is probably all the remaining Jews can really do.

"In 50 years, there won't be any Jews," Venturero says, "but the places of the Jews will still be." □