



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 81, No. 12

Friday, January 17, 2003

86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli astronaut blasts off

Israel's first astronaut blasted off Thursday morning on the U.S. space shuttle Columbia.

Col. Ilan Ramon and his fellow crew members are due to carry out a number of experiments in weightless conditions during the 16-day NASA mission.

Though a secular Israeli, Ramon asked for kosher food during his mission and said he would try to mark the Sabbath in a show of respect to observant Jews around the world. [Page 1]

Rabbi sentenced to life

A New Jersey rabbi was sentenced to life in prison for hiring two men to kill his wife.

Capping a nine-year drama, the sentence was handed down Thursday after Fred Neulander was convicted last November of murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the death of his wife, Carol.

Wearing a waist shackle, handcuffs and bright orange prison overalls, Neulander sat silently Thursday as Carol Neulander's three siblings took turns describing him as a cold, narcissistic, selfish killer of a loving and caring person, according to Court TV.

Two of Neulander's adult children, in letters read aloud in the packed courtroom, said they wanted nothing to do with the man they described as "evil" and "maniacal."

Likud lead growing

Support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party is growing again, according to polls published Thursday.

Surveys showed the Likud winning 30 to 33 seats in the Knesset, compared with a low of 27 in a poll published last week, after corruption allegations surfaced against both the Likud Party and Sharon's family.

In contrast, Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna's announcement this week that he would not enter into a Likud-led unity government failed to boost his party's support.

Surveys showed Labor winning 19 or 20 seats—the same or lower than previous forecasts.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Jan. 20.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

First Israeli astronaut blasts off, carrying country's pride into space

By Irene Brown

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (JTA)— Israelis are known as avid world travelers, but now one has gone out of this world.

Israeli Air Force Col. Ilan Ramon, the son of a Holocaust survivor, joined six shuttle astronauts for a ride into space on Thursday, becoming the first Israeli to see his country in global perspective.

After months of delays, even Florida's fickle weather was cooperative, providing a deep blue background for the twin pillars of white smoke that trailed the Columbia shuttle during its 8 ½-minute climb to orbit.

"These are our national colors, you know," Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the United States, pointed out.

Ayalon and about 300 guests of the embassy, many of whom had traveled from Israel, watched Ramon's launch from a special viewing area at the Kennedy Space Center here. Among the guests were two former commanders of the Israeli air force.

"In two generations, we've moved from the lowest ebb, the darkest point of our history, to a very great moment of excellence and achievement," Ayalon said.

In Israel, officials kvelled over the milestone. President Moshe Katsav said Ramon's liftoff "fills us with pride."

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said the event signaled that "the sky is not the limit."

Israeli newspapers gave the countdown front-page coverage, while radio and television carried live broadcasts of the liftoff. "One giant leap for Israel," Yediot Achronot said, while Ma'ariv said Ramon "touches the skies."

Ma'ariv said the event marked a significant step in Israel's participation in space research, with implications for the country's technological progress and security. Though the Israel Space Agency was established only in 1982, Israel is one of only eight countries that can launch satellites.

A married father of four, Ramon, 48, is a former fighter pilot and weapons specialist who fought in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and in the 1982 Lebanon War. In 1981, he took part in the Israeli air raid that destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak.

Though Ramon comes from a secular background, he said he hoped during the mission to show respect for all Jews around the world.

He asked NASA for kosher food for the mission and consulted with rabbis on how to observe the Sabbath while whizzing above the earth. He is taking with him a microfiche Bible presented by Katsav, mezuzahs and a dollar bill from the late Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Ramon also was taking a drawing lent by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, titled "Lunar landscape." The drawing was made in the Teresienstadt Ghetto by Peter Ginz, a 14-year-old Czech Jew who was a fan of Jules Verne.

Yad Vashem officials said the picture "connects the dream of one Jewish boy who is a symbol of the talent lost in the Holocaust, to the journey of one Jewish astronaut, who is a symbol of our revival."

Ramon also was taking four songs from his wife and letters from his brother and son. Ramon's son wouldn't reveal the contents of the letter, except to say that he told his father "how much I love him, how proud I am of him, and that he's the best dad in the world."

Despite the presence of an Israeli astronaut, NASA says its security measures were

MIDEAST FOCUS

Belgian bill could target Sharon

Belgium's prime minister says he is not opposed to amending the country's laws to allow Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to be indicted for war crimes. Guy Verhofstadt's statement came after the nation's Senate gave preliminary approval to a bill that would enable the prosecution of war crimes regardless of where the defendant lives.

Sharon was sued in Belgium by Palestinians and Lebanese who accused him of responsibility for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon, which was carried out by Lebanese Christian militias allied with Israel. Last June, the courts in Belgium dismissed the case against Sharon because he is not living there.

The lawsuit against Sharon was brought under a 1993 law on "universal jurisdiction," which enables Belgian courts to judge atrocities committed elsewhere, regardless of whether or not they involved Belgians.

Use of children for terror blasted

"Nothing can justify" Palestinian terrorists' use of children in the conflict with Israel, a U.N. official said.

Speaking at a U.N. Security Council debate on measures to protect children in armed conflict, Under Secretary-General Olara Otunnu called "on the Palestinian authorities to do everything within their powers to stop all participation by children in this conflict."

Tu B'Shevat observed

Israelis began marking Tu B'Shevat, the new year for trees, with plantings and other events. Because the holiday takes place on the Sabbath this week, many events in Israel were held Thursday.

Among the programs, the Jewish Agency for Israel organized tree plantings for immigrants and students.

The Jewish National Fund organized a roadside project, encouraging drivers to pull over, plant a tree and continue on their way.



Daily News Bulletin

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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.
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the same as they have been since Sept. 11. However, restrictive zones were set up around the Cocoa Beach, Fla., hotel where most of the Israeli guests were staying.

The crowd, which included several American Jews from local and national organizations, waved Israeli flags and sang "Oseh shalom bimromav" — "make peace in the heavens" — as the shuttle faded from view.

The mission is scheduled to last 16 days.

Ayalon hailed Ramon's flight as "a testament to Israeli achievements in science and technology."

"We're very happy and proud to share and pull together with our best friend and ally, the United States," he said. "Cooperation is great; it's another dimension that we've taken into space, and it's a great beginning of many more opportunities to come."

Others watching the blastoff were more down to earth.

"I thought it was tremendous," said Danny Doron, 57, a friend of Ramon's from Haifa who now lives in Houston. "I'm very proud."

"All you hear about Israel now is that there are problems, war, terrorism," added Doron's wife, Rachel. "For a change we have something else to look to."

Ramon and his crew mates will work on more than 80 science experiments, including one designed by a group of Israeli students.

Ramon's main role will be to use a camera designed to study sandstorms in the Middle East and their impact on global warming.

The study, designed at Tel Aviv University, is intended to provide information on how dust affects rainfall.

"For the younger generation, this stands for what we really want to promote: excellence, involvement and contributing and helping all humankind," Ayalon said.

Ramon has been training at the Space Center in Houston for his role as a payload specialist since 1998.

The shuttle mission had been postponed several times over the past two years. Most recently, it was pushed back six months because of repairs to the shuttle and because of space station assembly missions that were considered higher priority.

"If there's ever a time to use the phrase 'All good things come to people who wait,' this is it," launch director Michael Leinbach said. "Good luck and Godspeed." □

(JTA correspondents Naomi Segal in Jerusalem and Magnus Bennett in Prague, and J.D. Gallop of Florida Today, contributed to this report.)

Activists press for charges against Russian far-right leader

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — An extremist Russian political party has disavowed anti-Semitic statements by one of its leaders — but Jewish activists are unimpressed.

Following the Russian authorities' threat of a ban on its registration as a political party, the leaders of the National Great Power Party, known as NDPR, said this week on their Web site that views expressed by Boris Mironov, one of the party's co-chairs, were not cleared with the group's leadership and are not found in the party's official documents.

In an interview with the Moscow News weekly last month, Mironov called for restrictions to be imposed on Russian minorities, including stripping some of these minorities, including Jews, of voting rights — on the grounds that they are "genetically disloyal."

Under Russian legislation on political parties, a party can have its registration annulled if it fails to disavow an extremist statement made by a member of its leadership.

Despite the disavowal, Jewish leaders are demanding close scrutiny of the party's activities.

"This is demagoguery. They issued this statement only because they were facing a ban," Alexander Brod, director of the Moscow bureau for the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, told JTA.

Brod said the party has widely used Mironov's anti-Semitic statements in its own newspaper, the Russian Front, and in the leaflets distributed by the NDPR's regional branches. □

JEWISH WORLD

Iranian student wins asylum

A Yeshiva University student who fled Iran because of anti-Semitism has won asylum in the United States.

The 20-year-old student, whose identity is being kept private for fear that relatives still in Iran would face persecution, recently won political asylum, according to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. The student arrived in the United States as a tourist with his family in 1998, but remained when they returned home.

His parents faced increasing anti-Semitism at a time when 13 Iranian Jews were accused of spying for Israel, and HIAS helped the other family members flee to Vienna.

Prayer amendment opposed

A U.S. Jewish group spoke out against a proposed constitutional amendment allowing school prayer.

"As a religious community, we know that prayer has deep value and power," Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center, said at an event Thursday in Washington marking National Religious Freedom Day. "As members of a religious minority, however, we are all too aware of the danger of amending the Constitution to sanction government-sponsored prayer."

Pelavin said a school prayer initiative introduced in the new Congress by Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.) would interfere with parents' right to raise their children according to their own religious beliefs, and would trigger numerous questions about the bounds of religious prayer in school. At the same event, Richard Foltin, legislative director of the American Jewish Committee, urged passage of the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would require employers to accommodate the needs of observant employees.

ADL: Rallies may preach hate

Antiwar protest rallies scheduled for this weekend may employ anti-Israel and anti-Jewish rhetoric, the Anti-Defamation League warned.

Organizers of the Jan. 18 rallies in Washington and San Francisco have previously embraced statements supporting Palestinian terrorism, equating Zionism with Nazism and calling for the destruction of the Jewish state, the ADL said.

Pro-Israel ad features MLK

A new pro-Israel TV ad features the words of slain civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The ad, sponsored by the Washington-based Center for Security Policy, features King saying, "Israel must exist."

It ends with a voice-over: "Martin Luther King understood courage. Stand with Israel."

Monthlong project aims to make Israel central to Jewish education

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — In the poster, a girl wearing a peace sign necklace shouts during a rock concert, a boy in baggy jeans skateboards and a sullen-looking teen with a partly shaven head wears his headphones askew.

Over these black-and-white images run blue, white and yellow lines like some kind of video test pattern. The phrase "tune in" splashes across the scene, alongside some high tech-looking icons.

Focus on the icons, though, and they reveal images such as a palm tree, a camel and a map of Israel.

The poster isn't advertising some music video; it's for Israel Education Month.

The campaign, which runs from Jan. 19 to Feb. 16, involves an unprecedented array of Jewish and Israeli organizations who hope to return study about Israel to the center of the American Jewish educational agenda.

The program is aimed at young American Jews, whom organizers consider the future of Israel-Diaspora relations. "We want to hard-wire kids about Israel and Israel's place in Jewish life," said Benita Gayle-Almeleh, director of the Renaissance and Renewal Alliance of the United Jewish Communities federation umbrella and of the Jewish Education Service of North America.

Beyond the goal of winning young Jewish hearts and minds with a hip package, the campaign — led by the UJC, JESNA and the Jewish Agency for Israel — is designed to integrate teaching about Israel into "the educational life of institutions and individuals," said JESNA's President, Jonathan Woocher.

In the past, there have been isolated efforts by individual schools and federations to boost Israel education.

But the monthlong smorgasbord of teaching plans, curriculum ideas, Web resources and events caters to educational settings as diverse as Hebrew and synagogue schools, Jewish day schools and youth groups such as Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

While earlier efforts came in response to specific threats such as the Palestinian intifada, Israel Education Month hopefully will "create a new framework" that makes a lasting educational impact, said Marion Blumenthal, chair of the UJC's Task Force on Educational Involvement With Israel.

Israel once took center stage in American Jewish classrooms, but organizers of Israel Education Month say programs emphasizing Israel's centrality to Jewish life have fallen victim to social and historical forces.

As historic turning points such as the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War have receded into memory, teaching about the Zionist enterprise has taken a back seat to lessons about Jewish religion and culture.

In addition, less Jewish history is now taught in Jewish schools, reflecting a shift away from history lessons in general education, initiative organizers said.

In fact, "there was a sense among educators that Israel has never received the central place it deserved in the totality of the educational process," said Elan Ezrachi, an official with the Jewish Agency's Department of Zionist Education.

In recent years, programs such as Birthright Israel have tried to promote Zionism by bringing young people to Israel on free trips. Some U.S. Jewish summer camps also focus on Israel programs.

Over the past year, those behind Israel Education Month began meeting to discuss ways to renew classroom focus on Israel. They eventually designed the month-long menu of programs.

Among the offerings:

- Israeli educators from the Jewish Agency and from the MELITZamerica program will make "house calls" on educational professionals, lay leaders and students to discuss issues about Israel and develop classroom materials; and

- Educators from Kibbutz Gezer's Pinat Shorashim Jewish theme park will visit U.S. classrooms to discuss how to create an interpretation based on a biblical story about the Land of Israel. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

French immigration to Israel up — especially among the younger set

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — Julie Tahar's return here from Israel was only temporary.

"People thought I'd come back to France" to stay, she said, adding that her decision to remain in Israel "was very strange for my family."

In December 2001, Tahar was spending a year in Jerusalem with the Bnei Akiva youth movement when she was injured by a suicide bombing on the city's Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall.

Now, Tahar, 19, back in Paris for a short visit, is eager for others to follow her to Israel.

Despite her brush with terror, she never doubted that she would stay in Israel, she said. By the time she finished her Bnei Akiva program last year, she had enrolled for a year of national service.

She spends her time at a religious academy for girls in Jerusalem, where she is in charge of a group of French students, who are spending a year in Israel before returning to France to complete their studies.

Tahar is typical of French olim, whose numbers have more than doubled in the past year. Like the majority of French immigrants to Israel, she is young and committed to her Jewish identity. But like many others attending a recent aliyah fair in Paris, she has no complaints about France.

"It was good for me in France," she said. "My family is here and we have money. There were no problems whatsoever."

The fact that so many French Jews are enjoying the good life has created problems for Menachem Gourary, who runs the Paris office of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

"It's harder to persuade people here to make aliyah, particularly those who have not faced anti-Semitism," he said. "People live well here, and in general, they do not have economic problems."

Gourary is quick to state that last year's figure of 2,566 olim — out of a French Jewish community that totals more than 500,000 — hardly represents a tidal wave of aliyah.

Just the same, he points to what he regards as a positive trend.

"There was a survey done in 1988 by the United Jewish Social Funds here in France, which showed that 3 percent of French Jews intended to emigrate to Israel in the near future.

"They didn't exactly define what 'near future' meant, but since that date, more than 15,000" — some 3 percent of the community — "have made aliyah" he said.

The funds — an umbrella organization responsible for the vast network of social and welfare projects run by the community — completed another survey last year. This time, 6 percent said they were seriously contemplating aliyah.

For Gourary, aliyah is part of a long-term decision and isn't affected by short-term considerations.

"My job is simply to reduce the time scale," he said.

In recent months Gourary has stepped up Jewish Agency activities, with extra staff drafted to work in Paris and a new office opening in Lyon, France's second city.

Last year, the agency's Aliyah Department focused on France, Argentina and South Africa as potential sources of increased immigration to Israel. France was chosen after Jews and Jewish institutions here were targeted in a rising number of hate crimes,

apparently spurred by Israeli-Palestinian violence. Gourary doubts that last year's aliyah total was related to those incidents.

"There are of course many catalysts, but this is not an aliyah that comes from political or economic distress," he said. "These people plan and prepare themselves over many years. Our role is to give them the maximum information, to enable people to reduce their time of preparation, to make their decision concrete."

The Sebban family, from Paris' heavily Jewish 19th District, is a case in point.

Eric Sebban said his family had always thought about moving to Israel, but the time has now come.

"We're young and we have young kids. Now is the time to make the decision," he said.

The Sebbans, who are soon to have their fourth child, are aiming to move in the summer. Eric Sebban said he has no problems in France and has not personally experienced anti-Semitism. Nor does the current violence in Israel bother him.

"OK, there's a war on, but if we wait, there'll be another war. There's always some reason not to do it," he said. "We should just go and not look at the situation. What's happening there can just as well happen here."

The Sebbans are looking to settle in Ashdod, where Eric's sister moved last year. The city has a large French-speaking community, which Eric thinks will ease his family's integration into Israeli society.

Eric could have walked straight out of the funds' survey, so perfectly does he fit the mold of French olim. He sends all his children to Jewish schools, has close family in Israel and describes himself as "traditional" in terms of his religious practice.

Joseph and Sophie Zrihen, who also live in the 19th District, said they are happy in France. They came to the fair with their son Emmanuel, 17, who has chosen to study pharmacy next year in Israel for what he calls "ideological reasons."

Sophie Zrihen is the director of a Jewish school and her husband is a doctor.

"We live the typical rhythm of French Jews," Joseph Zrihen said. "I am a French citizen of the Jewish faith. I have no problems of double identity.

"But you know," he added, "it's always been a part of me, that desire to join our people, our country."

For now, Emmanuel's parents have no immediate plans to follow him to Israel — though Sophie said it remains a possibility when all their children reach university age. □

School says it wasn't ready for riot

MONTREAL (JTA) — Montreal-based Concordia University said it was unprepared for the violent protest last September that forced the cancellation of a speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The university put students, faculty and staff in danger by failing to properly secure the building where the speech was scheduled to take place, the school's rector said in a report Wednesday. "The level of violence that we saw was unprecedented on this issue in Montreal and contrary to all the advance intelligence," the report said.

Pro-Palestinian protesters got inside the building before the speech was scheduled to begin and smashed furniture and windows.

Police responded with batons and pepper spray, and the speech was canceled. □