

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Soldier vote changes Knesset

Israel's Likud Party and National Religious Party each won an additional Knesset seat after soldiers' votes were counted.

After the votes were counted Thursday night, Likud's total rose to 38 and the NRP's to 6.

Two seats on the left were lost, with the One Nation and Hadash parties both dropping from four to three seats.

### 5 Palestinians killed in clashes

Israeli soldiers killed two Palestinian gunmen, one of them a local leader of the Al-Aksa Brigade, while arresting terror suspects Thursday in the West Bank city of Tulkarm.

Fadi Jabber was a close associate of Raed Karmi, a commander of the terrorist group in Tulkarm who was killed by Israel forces in January 2002.

Jabber and an aide were killed and several others wounded in an exchange of fire with Israeli soldiers.

In Jenin, 17 Palestinian gunmen were wounded in clashes with Israeli troops. In the Gaza Strip, Israeli soldiers killed three Palestinians in the northern town of Beit Hanoun.

The three were shot as they were preparing to fire a rocket at an Israeli target in Gaza.

### Sharon to head back to D.C.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is expected to come to Washington in late March.

Sharon has accepted an invitation to attend the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, an Israeli official said, adding that Sharon would only make the trip if he is invited to meet with President Bush.

Sharon's schedule could change, however, if the United States is at war with Iraq at the time.

### Ukraine census totals in question

There are 105,500 Jews living in Ukraine, according to the controversial results of Ukraine's first post-Soviet census.

The census results have already sparked controversy among minorities, including some Jewish leaders, who claim their numbers were underreported. The last Soviet population census, conducted in 1989, counted 487,300 Jews.

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

### Conservatives may rethink stance on gays, but change won't be quick

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — On Sunday, the rabbi brought his boyfriend to the prom.

It's no mystery novel, but the real story of a young Conservative rabbi who took his Jewish partner to the big dance a few years ago at the Washington-area Jewish day school where he worked.

The rabbi had come out as gay since taking the job, so his date ruffled few feathers.

"For me to show up at the prom as a rabbi and as a teacher with my boyfriend was very gratifying for me," he says.

The rabbi and his date were openly accepted by his school, but he still shies from going public within the larger community.

His hesitancy reflects the Conservative movement's decade-old "don't ask, don't tell" ruling. That ruling embraced gays and lesbians as synagogue members but applied the biblical ban on homosexuality at seminaries, blocking openly gay and lesbian students from applying or from coming out at school, at the risk of expulsion.

Now, a clamor is growing among Conservative laity and the rabbinate to overturn that ruling — not only to fully accept gays and lesbians in synagogue life but to allow them to attend the University of Judaism's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and the movement's three other seminaries worldwide.

Some rabbis say they also want to perform same-sex commitment ceremonies, as their counterparts in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements do.

But those involved in the issue say change, which is opposed by powerful figures in the movement, is unlikely to come any time soon.

Still, momentum to fully accept gays and lesbians has been building since the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards issued a consensus statement on the matter in 1992, some say. "There is a clear ferment in the movement that this is an untenable policy, and that we need to move forward from here," says Rabbi Mark Diamond, a former pulpit rabbi in Oakland, Calif.

The Rabbinical Assembly is the Conservative movement's rabbinical arm.

However, not all rabbis see such a rush to modernize the movement's standards on gays and lesbians.

Rabbi Paul Plotkin, at Temple Beth Am of Margate-Coral Springs, Fla., says he hasn't seen calls for change from congregants or others.

"There is no groundswell on either side" of the controversy, Plotkin says.

Yet debate has flared since reports revealed that Judy Yudof, president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, which represents 800 Conservative congregations, intends to ask the Rabbinical Assembly's law committee to revisit the issue of homosexuality.

Contrary to reports that she is seeking a ruling on ordaining gays and lesbians, Yudof told JTA that she will ask the committee only to study whether homosexuality can be accepted under halachah, or Jewish religious law.

"Someone can learn to keep kosher, someone can learn to observe Shabbat, but I don't believe someone can learn to change their sexual orientation," Yudof says.

Yudof says she will submit her request by month's end. She began drafting it after hearing from many congregation leaders concerned about the marginalization of gays and lesbians, who she says "feel like second-class citizens" in the movement. Several

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Israel launches Hebron sweep

Israeli forces swept into Hebron on Thursday in a search for terrorists. Tanks and bulldozers blocked streets as troops conducted house-to-house searches, during which there were at least five arrests.

Troops also bulldozed a vegetable market and closed down local radio and television stations.

The army also closed three police stations, charging that Palestinian police were actively helping terrorists. The army said it carried out the operation in response to a series of ambushes in Hebron. Since mid-November, 18 Israelis have been killed in such attacks.

### Labor, Shinui discuss coalition

The leaders of Israel's Labor and Shinui parties met to discuss joining a coalition government.

Shinui leader Yosef "Tommy" Lapid suggested to Labor leader Amram Mitzna on Thursday that their parties enter into a coalition led by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Mitzna, who has vowed not to join such a coalition, is planning to meet with other Labor officials to solidify the party's position. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres has advised Mitzna not to reject the idea of unity government out of hand.

Peres told Mitzna on Wednesday that joining a Sharon-led government should depend on what the prime minister is willing to offer, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

### German arms on way to Israel

The German military on Wednesday loaded two anti-missile defense systems onto a ship bound for Israel. Israel had requested the systems to defend against a possible Iraqi attack if the United States launches a strike on Baghdad.

The cargo will arrive in Israel in about two weeks, German officials told The Associated Press.



## 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](http://www.jta.org).  
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rabbis say any change should move beyond equal treatment of gays and lesbians in synagogue life to include a law committee position paper, or teshuvah, allowing gay ordinations and same-sex commitment ceremonies.

"Much more important than 'Who is a rabbi' is 'Who is a Jew?'" says Rabbi Mark Loeb, of Beth El Congregation in Baltimore. "Right now, I don't want to hold all the gay people in America who are Jews hostage to the question of who is a rabbi."

Loeb is among those Conservative leaders who have publicly called for the movement to rethink its stance on homosexuality, and who backs such steps as commitment ceremonies. Loeb also belonged to the Rabbinical Assembly's special Commission on Human Sexuality, which in 1996 drafted a letter to laity and to the law committee urging the committee to rethink its stance on homosexuality.

In a paper called "This Is my Beloved, This Is My Friend: A Rabbinic Letter on Intimate Relations," the commission urged that homosexuality "no longer be considered an abomination," as the Book of Leviticus calls it, Loeb says.

But the law committee requires a petition, in the form of a question, in order to consider a matter for religious debate. Yudof's request would set that process in motion.

Once the 25-member committee receives such a question, it would go before its Subcommittee on Sexuality and Family Life, which would ask its own members or other rabbinic authorities to write a position paper, members say.

The current chairman of the law committee, Rabbi Kassel Abelson, has opposed any change in the movement's stance on gays and lesbians over the past decade. But the prospective incoming chairman, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, remains an outspoken advocate of change.

Dorff, rector of the University of Judaism, could step in after the assembly's annual convention in March. He says he would prefer to see the committee follow the same procedural course as it did a decade ago by producing several alternative positions, or "validated options," for congregations to follow.

Dorff says such options remain preferable to the kind of mandatory standards that the committee produced in 1972, when it forbid rabbis to officiate at interfaith marriages. A single mandate "would be a serious misreading of where the movement is right now," Dorff says. "The movement is very divided over this."

Plotkin of Florida agrees. He echoes the view of JTS' chancellor, Ismar Schorsch, who warns that a major debate about gays and lesbians would fracture the movement.

"Because we are a centrist movement, we have to preserve the middle by muting the poles," Plotkin says.

Meanwhile, it seems likely that change won't come quickly.

The law committee next meets in June. At that point, it could consider at least three position papers backing halachic reform on gays and lesbians that Dorff says he's "aware" of, though he adds there will likely be as many rejecting change.

In 1992, for instance, the committee received five different papers on homosexuality, rejected one and hammered out its final consensus statement.

That statement "tried to walk the line" by maintaining halacha while urging synagogues to be "more open" to individual gays and lesbians, says Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly.

Yet even some opponents concede that further debate within the halachic process would prove helpful. For one thing, Meyers admits, gays and lesbians could interpret the 1992 position as a "double message."

The vice chancellor of JTS, William Lebeau, says he welcomes a new debate. Jewish law always has been "driven by new scholarship and societal change," he told JTA. "Judaism cares very much about how people are treated," Lebeau adds, so the 1992 position "is something I hope will be reconsidered by the law committee."

Some rabbis hope a debate will help them deal with religious dilemmas that often arise around gay issues.

Conservative Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, who is not gay, is an assistant rabbi at New York's gay Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, which is not affiliated with any movement. Cohen says colleagues have asked about issues such as dealing with gay or lesbian couples who have babies, or how to act when a teen-age girl came out at a Florida Conservative day school.

Cohen believes the movement can find halachic solutions for "people to live their lives in ways that are reasonable and holy and Jewish." □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Israeli elections to be praised

Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.) is expected to introduce a resolution next week that would praise Israel's democratic elections.

Cantor, the only Republican Jew in the House of Representatives and the chief deputy whip, is writing the resolution, which would acknowledge the democratic process in Israel and reaffirm the friendship between the Jewish state and the United States.

It is not expected to specifically acknowledge the victory of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party in this week's elections.

Cantor's office says it is hoping the resolution will be voted on next week.

### Court rules against Slovak Jews

Slovak Jewish leaders expressed disappointment after an appeals court in Berlin rejected a compensation claim for Slovak Holocaust victims.

In a lawsuit that dates back to 2001, Slovakia's Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities sought to reclaim up to \$63.4 million for payments the pro-Nazi Slovak state made to the Third Reich to transport more than 57,000 Slovak Jews to death camps.

The group said the money to pay for the transport came from seized Jewish property and assets.

On Thursday, however, the appeals court rejected the Central Union's case and denied it the right of appeal to the German Supreme Court.

The Central Union's executive chairman, Fero Alexander, said the Berlin court had not issued an explanation for its ruling. The Central Union, he said, is now considering taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

### Photo catalog available online

A catalog of 17,000 photos of Jewish life in Eastern Europe is available online.

Based on photos in the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, "People of a Thousand Towns" provides a visual record of thousands of pre-World War II Jewish communities.

The pictures span the late 19th century to the early 1940s and document the lives of large Jewish centers, small towns and villages. The photos are available at <http://yivo1000towns.cjh.org>.

### Where's the soup?

A subway conductor won a matzah ball eating contest in New York. Eric Booker ate 21 matzah balls in five minutes and 25 seconds on Tuesday to win the sixth annual contest at Ben's Kosher Deli. The event is a fund-raiser for the Interfaith Nutrition Network, which operates soup kitchens and homeless shelters on Long Island and in New York City.

## French Jewish leader stirs anger with talk of anti-Semitic alliance

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — The annual dinner hosted by French Jewish leaders is generally a friendly affair.

That was the way it went this year — at least at the start of the Jan. 25 dinner sponsored by CRIF, the umbrella organization for secular Jewish institutions in France.

French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and leaders from across the political spectrum were enjoying last week what has traditionally been one of the more agreeable consensual events of the calendar.

But then CRIF President Roger Cukierman spoke about a new alliance threatening France's 500,000 Jews, linking neo-Nazis, environmentalists and left-wing groups.

Speaking of a "brown-green-red alliance," Cukierman warned of the danger faced by Jews from the bloc, which he described as "anti-globalization, anti-capitalist, anti-American and anti-Zionist."

Moreover, when he referred to — though did not mention by name — the spokesperson for France's peasant farmers and international anti-globalization activist Jose Bove as being a leading light in such an alliance, the national secretary of the Green Party, Gilles Lemaire, promptly stood up from his table and left the dinner.

Bove, together with other pro-Palestinian activists, broke through Israeli army barricades last year to stand alongside Yasser Arafat during the army's siege of the Palestinian leader's headquarters in Ramallah.

The anti-globalization campaigner also regularly used terms that equated Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with the Nazi persecution of European Jews. Last year, moreover, he accused the Mossad of being behind the wave of anti-Semitic attacks in France. "There is a nouvelle cuisine which is cooking up old fantasies with a fashionable sauce, anti-Zionism," Cukierman said at the CRIF dinner.

"This brown-green-red alliance gives us the shivers," Cukierman added.

This comment particularly enraged the Greens.

The atmosphere was not helped the following day by a report in the daily Liberation newspaper which capitalized the word "Verts" — French for Greens — thereby implying that Cukierman was referring specifically to the political party.

The CRIF president toned down his remarks later this week, saying in a statement that the organization wished to work with all democratic political parties in France, "including the Greens."

The Green Party candidate in last year's presidential election, Noel Mamère, criticized Cukierman's remarks, saying that "just because one attacks Ariel Sharon's settlement and humiliation policies does not mean that one is anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli."

The Greens, though, were not alone in condemning Cukierman's remarks — which France's Socialist Party described as "excessive."

The Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League, which Cukierman named in his speech and which received around 5 percent of the vote in last year's presidential election, called the remarks "intellectual terrorism that hides state terrorism."

However, Cukierman's views are widely held in the Jewish community, which believes that the left has not done enough to deal with anti-Semitism.

Such a view is rejected by the Greens, who fervently deny they are anti-Semitic.

Green spokesperson Marie-Helene Aubert told JTA that the movement is aware that "the situation in the Middle East was sensitive" and that "Greens and others should be extremely careful about how they express themselves."

Aubert, a former vice president of the National Assembly, said the possibility of war in Iraq as well as the left's defeat in recent elections had led to a greater radicalization in the movement, but that "we have to be very strict about remarks by some people."

"It is difficult to have total discipline in a movement such as the Greens, but there should be no doubt about the good faith of the Greens in condemning attacks against Israelis and against Jews in France," Aubert said. As for Bove, Aubert said she personally disliked the style of the anti-globalization campaigner and regretted that some Greens had a tendency to "over-romanticize" his actions. □

## ISRAEL VOTES 2003

## Pluralism fans salute gains for Shinui, but hard road lies ahead

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA)— After Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the biggest winner in Israel's election would appear to be Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, head of the staunchly secular Shinui Party.

In just its second election, Shinui more than doubled its strength Tuesday, jumping from six to 15 Knesset seats to become Israel's third largest party.

Advocates of religious pluralism in Israel, who hope Shinui will take aim at the Orthodox dominance of Jewish life in Israel, applauded the results.

The issue, long a sore spot between Israel and the Diaspora, has taken a back seat since the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada more than two years ago, but still engenders heated passions.

Diaspora Jews "are under the misperception that at this time of emergency Israelis are totally consumed by concern over security," said Rabbi Uri Regev, executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the international arm of the Reform movement. But Shinui's dramatic success shows that, even now, "the most compelling and acute agenda item is religious freedom."

Lapid's real challenge is just beginning, however.

A former regular on the talk-show circuit, Lapid until now has enjoyed the perks of notoriety without the responsibilities of power. Now that he heads such a large and powerful Knesset contingent, Shinui voters will demand results.

Unless Lapid joins Sharon's next coalition, he is unlikely to win Knesset approval for any of his proposed reforms, such as the military recruitment of fervently Orthodox yeshiva students, legalization of civil marriage and divorce and public transportation on the Sabbath.

On the other hand, if Lapid goes back on his word and joins a government with Shas and United Torah Judaism, two fervently Orthodox parties, he will harm his credibility with voters.

In other words, if forced to choose between the opposition and a coalition that includes Shas and United Torah Judaism, Lapid may well find himself in a no-win situation.

Given Labor Party Chairman Amram Mitzna's refusal to join a national unity government, and the pressures on Sharon to include Shas in his coalition, Lapid's dream of the first all-secular government in Israeli history seems to be quickly receding.

That would be a relief for many Orthodox Jews, who accuse Lapid of virtually declaring war on Judaism.

The fervently Orthodox "community has good cause to fear the evident popularity of Tommy Lapid's agenda, both in terms of what it augurs for the economic viability of the community's main institutions and for the Jewish character of the state," Orthodox columnist Jonathan Rosenblum wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*.

Lapid "goes far beyond his issues; he seeks to arouse a hatred of" fervently Orthodox Jews, or haredim, "and delights in expressing his contempt for Jewish tradition," Rosenblum wrote. "Lapid shamelessly traffics in the same stereotypes of haredim that anti-Semites once employed vis-a-vis all Jews."

But Lapid's vision of a secular coalition does have its advocates. Avi Bettelheim, deputy editor of Israel's *Ma'ariv* newspaper, calls it his "dream government."

With just four parties — Likud, Labor, Shinui and One Nation

— a secular coalition would have a solid majority of 75 members in the 120-seat Knesset.

Such a government, Bettelheim writes, could fight corruption, draft a constitution, change the electoral system, institute policies for economic growth, pass a responsible budget, renew negotiations with the Palestinians or carry out a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Not to speak of reforming secular-religious relations, one of the key issues in Israeli politics until the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000.

"The protest of the voters, and the sheer number of votes they gave Shinui, are the expression that the Israeli public" is fed up "with the Orthodox monopoly and religious coercion," said Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of Israel's Conservative movement. "A secular unity government will be very positive in terms of a new construction of the issue of religion and state in Israel. And sitting in the opposition will cause the Orthodox parties to wrestle with their responsibility for the state of religion in Israel."

The hitch is Mitzna's insistence that Labor and the left can only rebuild themselves from the opposition benches.

As for Sharon, he might not want to jeopardize the Likud's traditional political alliance with Shas by going for a coalition that not only excludes it, but attacks the benefits and programs Shas holds most dear.

Shinui's meteoric success stems largely from young, middle-class Ashkenazi voters' disillusionment with Labor and Likud.

Shinui also benefited from the crisis in the Israeli left after the Oslo peace process disintegrated under the weight of Palestinian terror attacks.

Many young Israelis serving in the army or doing reserve duty found the conciliatory messages from Labor and its left-wing ally, Meretz, detached from reality.

Shinui's proposal to defer peacemaking until Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat leaves the scene — focusing instead on domestic Israeli issues such as the religious-secular divide — attracted droves of secular young Israelis.

Shinui's campaign made much of the fact that secular Israeli youth serve in the army and then pay their own university tuition, while their fervently Orthodox contemporaries are exempt from military service and receive state subsidies for yeshiva study.

Lapid was able to paint a convincing picture of an imminent secular revolution in Israel: An all-secular coalition could draft yeshiva students alongside secular Israelis, he argued. Religious education budgets would depend on the introduction of a core curriculum of math, computer science, English and civil studies. Israelis would be able to marry in Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or civil ceremonies. The religious councils that regulate local religious life would be abolished.

In short, the Orthodox control of Judaism in Israel — and many aspects of Israelis' daily life — would be broken.

Orthodox politicians were outraged, saying Shinui's platform would be considered anti-Semitic in many other countries.

Given the likelihood of a coalition that includes the fervently Orthodox, will Shinui be able to make a significant mark on Israel's political and religious life? Or will it prove to be merely a passing phenomenon?

Past experience with centrist parties does not augur well. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the *Jerusalem Report*. JTA correspondent Matthew Gutman in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.)