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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Ramon memorial service held

A state memorial service for Israel's first astronaut was held at an air force base near Ben-Gurion Airport.

A plane carrying Col. Ilan Ramon's remains from the United States landed Monday and was taken to the base for the ceremony. Israeli President Moshe Katsav and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were among those participating in the service.

"Your pain is the pain of the whole nation," Sharon told the Ramon family at the service. A private burial service, attended by Ramon's family and close friends, will be held Tuesday at Nahalal, a moshav in northern Israel located near an air base where Ramon served. [Page 3]

Israeli coalition talks start

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party officially launched coalition negotiations.

The Shinui, Shas and National Union parties were expected to hold separate talks with the Likud negotiating team Monday.

The Labor Party rebuffed Sharon's invitation to join the government and refused to send a negotiation team to the Tel Aviv-area hotel where the talks are taking place.

Labor leader Amram Mitzna said there is no point in taking part in the talks after he and Sharon failed to find common ground for forming a government when they met last week.

New Jewish emergency guide

A guide to help Jewish groups deal with emergency situations is set for release next month. New York's Jewish Community Relations Council is working with the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group of North American Jewish federations, and a panel of professors in emergency preparedness at John Jay College of Criminal Justice to produce an emergency planning manual for Jewish organizations.

The manual will advise agencies on how to respond to all kinds of worst-case scenarios, from hurricanes to a "sniper scenario" such as the one outside Washington last fall, said David Pollock, associate executive director of the JCRC.

The guide is expected to be distributed in CD format to all North America federations, synagogues and Jewish schools.

CRISIS IN IRAQ

Iraq home to glorious Jewish past but to a lonely and fragile present

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Joseph Dabby was caught amid the winds of change.

An Iraqi Jew, he was twice tossed into the country's jails on trumped-up charges of spying for Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War. Dabby now remembers being blindfolded by Iraqi officials, marched outside and frozen by the sounds of gunfire around him.

Eventually, Dabby was released with the help of influential connections and money.

"I was lucky," he says, recalling what befell his uncle, who was tied to a spinning ceiling fan and jolted with electrical shocks for the same bogus charge at that time.

While Iraq is a bitter memory for Dabby — now 57, and a developer living in Los Angeles — he identifies with the Jewish community in his homeland, where only about 50 Jews remain.

As America prepares for a possible war in the Persian Gulf, Iraqi Jewish expatriates are wary of the repercussions of war in general, and on their former country in particular.

Just the same, they largely support it, say Dabby and others interviewed for this article.

"I'm scared of what this crazy man can do," Dabby says, referring to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"I think we're embarking on the right way," he adds, calling America's initiative "courageous."

As for the few Jews left in Iraq — about half of whom are elderly and said to be seeking haven in the last remaining synagogue in Baghdad — their situation is fragile.

"They are a tiny, vulnerable group and current rhetoric from the Iraqi government increase their fears and ours," according to Steven Schwager, executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"As soon as circumstances allow, JDC will do whatever is humanly possible to help them."

The Jewish presence in what is now Iraq is a tale of one of the longest surviving Jewish communities, dating back to 722 B.C.E, when the northern tribes of Israel were defeated by Assyria and taken into captivity there, according to Lawrence Schiffman, the Edelman professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University.

But most of the Jews came to what is now Iraq in 586 B.C.E., when it was Babylon. The southern tribes of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians, who destroyed the First Temple, and enslaved the Jews in their land.

That's why Jews from the area often refer to themselves as "Babylonian Jews," emphasizing their historical connection to the "Fertile Crescent," a land that was dominated at different times by peoples including the Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols and Turks.

As Dabby puts it, "We consider ourselves biblical Jews. We go back to the slaves that were brought by Nebuchadnezzar from the destruction of the First Temple."

From the seventh century to the 11th century, the region was the center of world Jewry and is credited with some of the greatest advances in Jewish history, like the creation of the Babylonian Talmud, completed between 500 and 700 C.E.

It was home to major Jewish institutions and pre-eminent scholars. Even in modern

MIDEAST FOCUS

Troops kill two Palestinians

Israeli troops arrested three would-be suicide bombers in the West Bank on Monday. One of the terrorists was arrested in Ramallah with a 44-pound bomb that was ready for use.

In another incident in Nablus, Israeli troops shot and killed a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who the army accused of planning terror attacks. And in the Gaza Strip, Israeli troops killed one Palestinian and arrested another who were trying to plant bombs along a major road.

Ros-Lehtinen traveling to Israel

The newly appointed head of a congressional panel on the Middle East is expected to travel to Israel this week.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), chairwoman of the House International Relations Committee's Middle East subcommittee, will lead a congressional delegation to the Jewish state. Plans call for the group to meet with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, among others.

Foreign airlines still fly to Israel

Despite tensions over the Iraqi crisis, foreign airlines have not made any plans to suspend service to Israel. A few of the leading foreign carriers in Israel, including Continental Airlines, British Airways and Alitalia are still flying their normal flight schedules, the Jerusalem Post reported.

In the event of a war in Iraq, foreign carriers are expected to suspend service due to insurance costs, as they did during the 1991 Gulf War.

Patriot missiles arrive in Israel

Two Patriot missile batteries arrived in Israel on Monday after being shipped from Germany.

The missiles will be used for defense in case of a possible attack by Iraq.

times, several recent chief rabbis of Israel have come from Iraq.

At their modern-day height — the 1940s — the Iraqi Jewish community numbered 130,000, flourishing in government, commerce, medicine and the arts. Most of them lived in Baghdad, with the second largest population in the port city of Basra.

In the years before World War II, more than half of Iraq's importers and exporters were Jewish, according to Itamar Levin, the author of "Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries."

Through their contacts in trade, some communities of Iraqi Jews settled in countries such as India, Singapore and Indonesia.

Iraq, which became a nation-state in 1932, also boasted four major Jewish schools in Baghdad, which groomed students in English, Arabic, French and Hebrew.

Jews "were the educated, elite group," says Albert Nassim, trustee of the American Sephardi Federation and president of the Babylonian Jewish Center, a synagogue in Great Neck, N.Y.

But life changed for Iraq's Jews around the turn of the century with the rise of Arab nationalism and, with it, anti-Semitism.

With the birth of Israel in 1948 came increased anti-Semitism and Israel's own Zionist promotional campaign.

State-sponsored persecution forced all but 7,000 of them to flee. Most went to Israel, and Iraq froze the assets of anyone who went there.

Iraq allowed the Jews to leave due to international pressure, the desire to take over Jewish assets and the sense that the pressure of immigration on the young Jewish state might force it to collapse, according to Levin.

Today, one of Iraq's wealthiest Jewish families, which once owned the land of Saddam Hussein's presidential compound, is almost penniless, Levin wrote. Confiscated Jewish assets in Iraq are valued at more than \$4 billion in today's terms, according to Levin.

Similar circumstances occurred in many other Arab countries.

Recently, Israel and the American Sephardi Federation began collecting claims of assets looted by Arab states. The goal: to counter Palestinian claims for lost property during Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

The claims of Jews for their looted properties are expected to be used in any future political negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians.

In Iraq, the years after the 1967 Six-Day War saw arrests and disappearances of Jews, who fled to Iran — the only open border at the time — shrinking the population of the Iraqi Jewish community to 100.

Now, about 250,000 Jews of Iraqi descent are spread throughout the world, the bulk of them living in Israel, according to Nassim.

He estimates that 45,000 live in London, 10,000 in Los Angeles and 3,500 in both Montreal and New York.

Iraqi Jews have a more "open" culture than other Sephardic Jews, says Rabbi Haim Ovadia of the largest Iraqi congregation in Los Angeles, Kahal Joseph, which has 400 families.

Ovadia believes a liberal mind-set may have brought higher assimilation rates to Iraqi Jews than their Sephardic counterparts.

There are more opportunities for women in Iraqi congregations, which allow Bat Mitzvahs and have women recite all the blessings, he says.

Iraqi Jews also emphasize life cycle events, Ovadia adds. One such custom is the festivity the night before the brit milah, or circumcision, in which the chair where the baby will be circumcised is tied with branches of myrtle. Ovadia suspects myrtle was chosen because the plant's name in Arabic is el-yas, reminiscent of the prophet Eliyahu, who he says is associated with circumcision.

For now, Iraqi Jewish traditions appear to have their best shot at survival in the Western world. What's left of the Jewish community in Iraq prays at a synagogue with no rabbi and celebrates Jewish holidays discreetly to avoid attention.

"They are often attacked by the media, by politicians, and are prevented from earning their livelihoods," according to an internal JDC document. "Jews cannot turn to the state for protection and cannot contact foreign Jewish communities for assistance." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Jewish figure barred from rally

A dovish editor and rabbi is being prevented from speaking at an anti-war rally planned for Saturday in San Francisco. Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun Magazine* and a frequent critic of Israeli policy, was barred from the rally by one of the sponsors, known by the initials A.N.S.W.E.R., because Lerner has criticized the way the group used past rallies to put forward anti-Israel propaganda.

A spokesperson for A.N.S.W.E.R. was quoted as saying that the group would not agree to have a "pro-Israel" speaker at their rally.

Spain tough on looted art

Spain is refusing to discuss claims that an Impressionist painting hanging in one of the country's museums was stolen during the Holocaust era.

Spanish authorities have told lawyers assisting the claim on the work by Camille Pissarro that they should pursue the matter in court, even though Spain has signed on to four agreements that attempt to restore looted artworks to their rightful owners. Claude Cassirer, 81, says "Rue St.-Honore, Apres-Midi, Effet de Pluie," hung in his grandmother's apartment in Germany until it was seized by Nazi officials.

Canada's refugee policy scored

Former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney criticized past Canadian leaders who barred Jewish refugees during the Holocaust era. "To this day I cannot watch footage of the faces of Jewish mothers, fathers and children consigned to the gas chambers without, as a Canadian, feeling a great sense of sorrow, loss and guilt," said Mulroney, who opened a two-day conference on anti-Semitism at the University of Toronto.

Jewish group rallies for elder care

The UJA-Federation of New York joined U.S. lawmakers to urge passage of the Elder Justice Act. Monday's event in Washington, sponsored by the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and featuring Sens. John Breaux (D-La.) and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), called for passage of the bill, which would help protect seniors from abuse, neglect and exploitation. It establishes Offices of Elder Justice in the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services.

Dictionary publisher alters entry

The publisher of a *Scrabble* dictionary agreed to alter its definition of "Jew," used as a verb, following a complaint by a leading British Jewish group.

The Board of Deputies welcomed the decision to replace "to cheat or get the better of" with "old offensive word meaning to haggle."

As family and officials grieve, Ilan Ramon memorialized in Israel

By Matthew Gutman

TEL AVIV (JTA) — In a short but moving ceremony, Israel's leaders gathered this week at Lod Air Force base near here to pay their last respects to Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon, a man who has come to symbolize Israel at its best.

Security was tight Monday as the Shin Bet security services guarded the safety of the upper echelons of the Israeli political and military establishments, past and present, who arrived to hear Ramon eulogized.

The memorial for a man whose death colored almost every newscast early last week was broadcast live on all three of Israel's networks, and on most of its radio stations. In his speech, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon put Israel's fascination with Ramon's life and death succinctly: "His image, projected from above, was the reflection of Israel at its best — Israel as we would have liked to see it — the Israel we love."

Ramon was killed along with the six other members of the Columbia crew Feb. 1 when the shuttle shattered as it re-entered the atmosphere.

President Moshe Katsav added that had Ramon not fulfilled his duty so perfectly in bombing the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 — long before he reached the status of national icon — Israel and indeed the world might have been a far worse place.

"He knew how to unify the nation," continued Katsav, noting in a quavering voice Ramon's reciting of the Shema as the shuttle passed over Jerusalem, his decision to take along a miniature Torah scroll saved during the Holocaust and his proud bearing of the Israeli Air Force badge.

Throughout the ceremony the American-Israeli bond was oft-reiterated. "The Star of David, the 'blue and white' of our flag, were interwoven with the American Stars and Stripes, and the common fate of the team poignantly strengthened the staunch partnership between our nations," Sharon said.

Among the recipients of that sentiment were 15 NASA representatives who had escorted Ramon's body back to Israel. Sharon, like the others who eulogized Ramon, including Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz, insisted that Israel's participation in space was far from over.

Ramon's wife, Rona, sat stoically in the front row beside her children, each draped in a NASA bomber jacket. When a man who had served under Ramon played on his saxophone the melody of a love poem Rona sent her husband aboard the Columbia, she winced but did not weep.

Ramon's four children looked haggard and stunned. A wide-eyed Noa, 5, stared out from her mother's arms at the dignitaries around her, apparently already used to the sight of dozens of security guards from previous memorial ceremonies.

The family broke down when a chorus of young children began singing a mournful version of "Watch Over the World, Child." Rona, arms folded across her chest, gazed down and away. Her eldest son, Assaf, gathered younger brother Tal under his arm.

The family arrived just a few hours before the ceremony. But the seemingly endless chain of memorial services they have attended was slated to end Tuesday when Ramon is buried near the grave site of Israeli commander Moshe Dayan in Nahalal.

After the ceremony, an honor guard of eight air force colonels bore Ramon's casket to a waiting truck that flew the body to Ramat David Air Force Base near Nahalal.

The final speakers during the ceremony were Assaf and Rona Ramon. Patched on the right shoulder of 14-year-old Assaf's NASA bomber jacket was the Israeli flag, on the left the insignia of the doomed STS 107. Rona and Assaf walked slowly to the podium, making a wide arc around the coffin.

They read aloud a letter written to them by Ramon's crew mate and friend Dave Brown on the second-to-last day of the flight.

"The most moving moment of the flight came when Ilan read a letter he brought from a Holocaust survivor who talks about his 7-year-old daughter who did not survive," Assaf read in English as Rona Ramon translated into Hebrew. "How could such a beautiful planet survive? It is such a beautiful thing. It makes me want to enjoy every bit of the earth for how great it is," read the impassive mother and son, as if they did not really believe what they were saying. □

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

In Russia, asking about Hillel is a way to ask, 'Are you Jewish'?

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — When Marina Drouz was taking a college entry exam a few years ago, she found herself sitting next to a girl who she thought could be Jewish.

Not sure how to satisfy her curiosity, Drouz asked if the girl had ever been to the local Hillel.

"I haven't, but I could have," the girl responded.

"I thought the word 'Hillel' would be a convenient test word for finding out if the person was Jewish," explains Drouz, a 20-year-old economics student from St. Petersburg. "I just realized that someone my age would have known the word had she been Jewish — even if she never goes there."

While it's not the only group with a focus on Jewish youth, Hillel is arguably one of the most successful organizations of its kind in the former Soviet Union.

Eight and a half years after the first Hillel center opened in Moscow, the movement boasts a network of 27 full-time centers and a dozen additional affiliated youth groups devoted to bringing Judaism and Jewish experiences to young and mostly assimilated Jews in nine of the former Soviet republics.

More than 10,000 students regularly take part in various Hillel activities in the former Soviet Union.

But there are obstacles to overcome.

Drouz, who spends most of her free time at Hillel as a volunteer coordinator responsible for recruiting new members and running programs, recalls how her group in St. Petersburg once tried to set up a program on one of the campuses.

"It turned out that many students didn't want to be open about their Judaism inside the school — some of those who helped to organize the event changed their mind in the last minute and didn't even show up," she says.

Hillel activities may include English-language lessons, psychology classes, writing workshops and various performing arts. Some Hillel groups publish their own newspapers.

Lisa Gudina, an activist in Odessa, Ukraine, says local Hillel leaders have to be resourceful to ensure an ongoing flow of new members.

Her group recently attracted some new members when it launched a brand-new program — an Irish step dance studio — after a tour by a professional step dance group launched this fad among local students.

Hillel in the former Soviet Union was established and operates with the support of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

Unlike in the United States, where most Hillel chapters work with Jewish students on a particular campus, Hillel in the former Soviet Union operates community-based centers that reach out to a broader student population from various colleges.

More than 300 Jewish students gathered recently at a retreat near Moscow for the fifth annual Hillel Congress.

The six-day program of the conference, titled "Am Echad — One People," featured lectures on community building, leadership skills classes and discussions on Judaism and Soviet Jewish history.

Like many other Hillel activists, Ilya Rapoport, a 22-year-old medical student from Moscow, is familiar with other groups wooing younger Jews.

He says Hillel places more emphasis on Jewish tradition than the other groups.

"Being Jewish to me means to have a certain amount of knowledge on Jewish tradition.

"That's what I found in Hillel and couldn't have in another Jewish youth club I go to," Rapoport says.

In addition to classes in basic Judaism, Hillel groups celebrate Shabbat, lead holiday celebrations in their communities and conduct Passover seders throughout the former Soviet Union, offering many participants their first encounter with traditional Passover customs.

In the post-Communist Jewish reality, Hillel groups often play a crucial role in community building and ensuring Jewish continuity. This is especially true in some smaller communities, where Jewish life is not as rich as in Moscow or Kiev.

Yevgeny Rybalko, a 23-year-old Jewish student leader in the Siberian city of Tomsk, says his youth club conducts celebrations for the entire Jewish community, which numbers approximately 400 people.

"Otherwise we will continue to have a majority" of Jews "who feel quite comfortable without any Jewish knowledge or attachment to tradition," he says.

In fact, some of those familiar with Hillel operations on U.S. campuses say Russian students who are active in Hillel have a stronger sense of community among themselves and are often more serious about their Judaism than their American counterparts, even if they are sometimes less knowledgeable.

Marina Teremets, a Brooklyn College senior who emigrated from Ukraine six years ago, was among a group of Soviet-born American Hillel students who participated in the conference.

She says the Hillel group on her campus is "more like a club, similar in a way to some other clubs you may join when at school.

"What we saw here is more like a full-time community."

Peter Greben, a recent university graduate from Moscow, says this focus on Judaism is what makes his involvement with the local Hillel especially meaningful to him.

"This is ironic, but when I lived in Jerusalem I had no interest in Judaism, I even developed a certain immunity against religion — like many Russians in Israel," says Greben, 26, who made aliyah to Israel but later returned to Russia to attend college. "Having lived in Israel for four years, I had my first Shabbat experience, my first Passover seder in Moscow Hillel. My encounter with Judaism at Hillel was so accommodating that now I feel my Jewish life really began here." □

Journalist who backed Israel dies

ROME (JTA) — Robert St. John, a journalist, author and tireless supporter of Israel, died Feb. 6 near Washington at 100.

During a 75-year career in which he worked on five continents, St. John clashed with Al Capone, chronicled World War II and befriended Israel's founding fathers.

An eloquent non-Jewish spokesman for Jewish causes, he maintained close ties with the Jewish state and was honored by Jewish and Israeli institutions.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, called him "our goyisher Zionist." □