



# Daily News Bulletin

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## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Israel sends messages to Syria

Syria is undermining peace in the Middle East by encouraging terrorist organizations, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said.

Shalom made his remarks Monday after meeting with Turkey's foreign minister in Ankara. Meanwhile, Israel is planning to issue a list of demands to Syria via the United States, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said in remarks published Monday. Mofaz said they include demanding that Syria dismantle Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

He made the remarks in an interview with the daily *Ma'ariv*. The remarks come as the United States is increasing its pressure on Syria to halt its support for terrorism.

Meanwhile, Syria is warning that Israel will pay if the United States attacks Damascus. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa said Monday that Israel is behind increasing American pressure on Syria in recent days over Syrian support for Iraq in the current U.S.-led war, but he doesn't believe the United States will attack Syria.

### Soldiers to get tax breaks

American soldiers stationed in Israel are expected to receive the same tax breaks as others serving in the Middle East.

The Pentagon is expected to rule soon that the close to 800 soldiers manning Patriot missile batteries in Israel are participating in U.S. military action against Iraq, and therefore eligible for wartime tax breaks for servicemen.

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) lobbied for the change in status after visiting with soldiers in Israel who said they were the only troops deployed for the war who still are having their military salaries taxed.

### 'Passover bombers' sentenced

An Israeli court sentenced four terrorists to life sentences for helping to carry out last year's "Passover Massacre" bombing in Netanya.

A military court found Monday that the four residents of the West Bank had helped a Hamas member in the attack.

The suicide bombing killed 29 people as they were sitting down to a Passover seder.

The sentences were handed down two days before the start of Passover this year.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### Is he serious or bluffing, pundits ask as Sharon talks of peace prospects

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It's customary for Israeli prime ministers to express their wishes for peace on the eve of the major Jewish holidays.

But with speculation rife about how the war in Iraq will affect the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, a mid-April interview with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon — notable more for Sharon's inflection than for any startlingly original messages — has thrown Israel's political establishment into a frenzy.

After the initial furor, however, few on the left or right believed Sharon would be able to make significant progress toward peace with the Palestinians because of the list of tough demands he is making.

The most controversial is Sharon's new insistence that the Palestinians give up the "right of return" for millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, even before negotiations begin based on the "road map" toward peace.

In the interview with the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Sharon injected a new time element: He said after the war in Iraq, new opportunities had opened up for a settlement with the Palestinians and that agreement could be reached "faster than people think."

He also expressed moral and economic concerns related to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"I do not think we should rule over another people and run their lives," he declared. "I don't think we have the strength for that. It's a very heavy burden on the public, and it raises ethical problems and heavy economic problems."

For the first time, Sharon mentioned names of settlements that Israel might have to give up in a peace deal.

"Our whole history is bound up with some of these places: Bethlehem, Shiloh, Beit El," Sharon said. "And I know we will have to part with some of these places. There will be a parting from places that are connected to the whole course of our history."

Some right wingers threatened to leave the government over Sharon's comments. Left wingers said that if the right wingers jump ship, they would consider joining.

Arye Eldad of the far-right National Union said his party's executive would meet soon to table its red lines and then would present Sharon with a list of conditions for staying in the government.

"We intend to do all we can to stop Sharon from facilitating the establishment of a Palestinian state," Eldad said. "We will mobilize all the support we can in the government, the Knesset, public opinion at home and abroad. And if we have to leave the government to do so, we will."

Housing Minister Effi Eitam, leader of the hawkish National Religious Party, was less apprehensive.

Sharon's statement was worrying, Eitam said, "because it is the first time he has talked about dismantling specific settlements like Shilo and Beit El." Yet Eitam implied that nothing along those lines was likely to happen, precisely because of the hawkish composition of the Sharon government.

"Sharon chose to form a coalition with the NRP and National Union," he said, "and it's obvious that the government in its present form will not part with Beit El and Shiloh."

Left wingers questioned Sharon's sincerity. The secretary-general of the Labor Party, Ophir Pines, accused Sharon of putting on "his familiar mask of moderation,"

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Afghan-Israel ties in the offing?

Israeli officials say that Afghanistan is interested in normalizing relations.

The Afghani foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, recently sent a message to Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. Afghanistan has never had diplomatic relations with Israel. But interim Afghani President Hamid Karzai reportedly said in June that talks on establishing relations are possible only after Afghanistan holds elections in 2004.

### Saudi: U.S. war timed to Purim

The U.S.-led war on Iraq was timed to coincide with the Jewish holiday of Purim, a Saudi scholar reportedly said.

Umayma Jalahama made the comments last week in a public lecture at a think tank affiliated with the Arab League, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute. Jalahama previously has written about the Jews' alleged use of Gentile blood in making holiday pastries.

### Holocaust-era lawsuit filed

Holocaust survivors filed a class-action lawsuit in Israel against Germany.

Based on newly opened archives in Germany, the lawsuit claims restitution of property seized from Jewish citizens by the Nazi government. Attorney Abraham Sofer, speaking for the Tel Aviv-based law firm of Lipa Meir, said four former German citizens filed the suit on April 10 in a Jerusalem district court.

### Suspected bomb found at school

A suspected bomb was found on the campus of an Israeli college in central Israel. A bag containing a can connected to a cellular phone was discovered Monday on the fence of the Beit Berl college, Israel Radio reported. Bomb experts closed off the area to examine the object.



## Daily News Bulletin

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trying to please the Americans after the war in Iraq.

"On the one hand he backs the road map for peace with the Palestinians, while on the other he sends AIPAC" — the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the main pro-Israel lobby in Washington — "to Congress to lobby against it," Pines charged.

Legislators from the dovish Meretz Party were equally skeptical.

"For three years we've been hearing about painful concessions — and it really is painful, because during all these years not a single concession has been made," Meretz leader Yossi Sarid quipped.

Still, Labor leaders say they would be ready to join Sharon's coalition if he is serious about making peace.

But, Pines said, "the litmus test of his seriousness will be dumping the hawkish right-wing parties, the National Union and the NRP, because as long as they are in the government, no progress will be possible."

Pundits don't expect this to happen. In the speech, Sharon continued to insist on demands that the new Palestinian Authority prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, will find difficult to meet.

Progress, Sharon said, "depends first and foremost on the Arabs."

The Palestinians, he said, would have to install a new leadership, fight terrorism, carry out reforms, stop incitement, dismantle terrorist organizations and "recognize the Jewish people's right to a homeland and the existence of an independent Jewish state in the homeland of the Jewish people."

Moreover, Sharon intimated, before Israel even started implementing the road map, the Palestinians would have to give up the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

Only that and recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state could provide the basis for an end to the conflict, he said.

Many Israelis feel the Palestinian insistence on the right of return — which could swamp Israel with millions of Arabs, ending Israel as a Jewish state — is code for the destruction of Israel.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer warned during an early-April visit to Israel that demanding a concession on the right of return from the outset would kill negotiations before they even start.

Some Israeli pundits agreed.

"Now Sharon is conditioning his agreement to Palestinian statehood on their giving up the 'right of return,' which even the moderate Palestinians see as their main bargaining chip in negotiations for a final settlement," Yediot Achronot's veteran diplomatic analyst, Nahum Barnea, wrote. "Trying to make this a precondition is a sure way to torpedo the talks or the road map before they get underway."

Israel now is trying to get the "right of return first" idea incorporated in the road map.

Given Fischer's reaction, the chances of success are probably nil. Yet if the United States and the other players who helped draft the road map — Russia, the European Union and the United Nations — present the road map as is, Sharon probably will have trouble getting it through his right-leaning government.

That means that if Sharon is as serious as he says he is about peacemaking, he may have to consider shuffling the coalition deck somewhere down the road.

Indeed, on this score, his interview — and the reactions to it — may have been a taste of things to come. □

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

## Nazi drama wins British award

LONDON (JTA) — A television drama recreating the conference where the Nazis decided to slaughter Europe's Jews won the British equivalent of an Emmy on Sunday. "Conspiracy," starring Kenneth Branagh as Hitler deputy Reinhard Heydrich, won the Bafta from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts on Sunday for best single drama.

The documentary "Young, Nazi and Proud," about the far-right British National Party, won an award for best news and current affairs journalism. □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Resolution seen as anti-Israel

The U.N. Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution affirming Palestinian "self-determination."

The resolution, which passed 51-1 on Monday, with America opposing and Guatemala abstaining, was the first of five anti-Israel resolutions that pass annually at the six-week commission, according to Andrew Srulevitch, director of U.N. Watch, an affiliate of the American Jewish Committee.

In contesting the resolution before the commission's vote, Ya'akov Levy, Israel's U.N. ambassador in Geneva, said Israel respects the right of her neighbors to self-determination, but that it must be achieved "through direct, peaceful negotiations between the two sides directly involved."

The resolution "reaffirms the inalienable, permanent and unqualified right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including their right to establish their sovereign and independent Palestinian state."

### Workplace religion bill introduced

The Senate introduced a bill that would give new protections for displays of religion in the workplace.

The Workplace Religious Freedom Act, introduced last Friday, would require employers to accommodate the religious observances of their staff, such as observation of religious holidays and the wearing of religious garb.

The law would amend federal civil rights laws to reinstate protections for religious employees in their workplaces that have been undermined by adverse court rulings.

### Loan provisions praised

Americans for Peace Now praised Congress for placing conditions on loan guarantees to Israel.

The group says Congress' decision to give \$9 billion in loan guarantees to Israel in annual installments of \$3 billion, instead of in a single lump sum, will allow for deductions for Israeli spending on settlements, as both the U.S. and Israeli government have agreed.

### Crown Heights retrial to start

A retrial in the Crown Heights riots is slated to get under way this week.

Lemrick Nelson faces a new civil trial after a judge ruled last year that a judge in the 1997 federal trial had improperly manipulated the selection of jurors based on their race and religion.

Nelson is accused of violating Yankel Rosenbaum's civil rights when he killed the yeshiva student in 1991, setting off riots in the Brooklyn neighborhood. The riots came after an African American child was killed by a vehicle in the motorcade of the late Lubavitch Rebbe Menachem Schneerson.

## AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

### With Belgian case against Sharon dropped, Belgian Jews are relieved

By Jonathan Fisk

BRUSSELS (JTA) — Belgian Jews are breathing a sigh of relief after the country revised a controversial law that allowed Belgian courts to try foreigners for alleged crimes against humanity.

"Belgium has come to its senses. It has realized that its position was becoming awkward because of international reactions to this law," said Julien Klener of the Consistoire Central Israelite de Belgique, the official body representing Belgian Jews. "Let's hope that the negative criticism Belgium is facing will calm down."

The amendments to the law, passed April 5, bring an end to the lawsuit filed against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon by a group of Palestinians over his alleged role in the 1982 massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christian militias in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

The law, which aims to prosecute war crimes and genocide wherever they occur, remains unique for its principle of "universal jurisdiction."

That extends the reach of Belgian courts to complaints against people with no direct link to the country.

The recent changes, however, will allow the judiciary to reject complaints in which there are no victims of Belgian nationality or in which the plaintiffs have lived in Belgium for fewer than three years.

The government also will be able to reject cases in which the accused comes from a democratic country where he or she can receive a serious trial.

High-profile cases were becoming increasingly embarrassing to Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt's government.

The Sharon case, for example, soured relations between Belgium and Israel, and even led to the recall of the Israeli ambassador.

The final straw came last month when a group of Iraqis used the law to file a complaint against the first President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf.

The complaint accuses the U.S. officials of war crimes during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

The lawsuit infuriated the current Bush administration and woke Belgian lawmakers to the dangers of the law.

But Belgian Jews are especially relieved by the dismissal of the case against Sharon.

On the one hand, Belgian Jews were concerned by the deterioration of relations between Israel and Belgium.

On the other, they wanted to ensure that the law did not strain their dialogue with Belgian authorities.

"The crisis in the Middle East creates so much confusion in this country already that we do not want to mix things up even more," said Michele Szwarcourt, president of the Centre Communautaire Laic Juif, the secular Jewish community in Brussels.

Szwarcourt said she believes that the law is misunderstood.

"It stems from a generous feeling to fight war crimes," she explained. "But it is unjust to try Sharon. Israel is a democratic country and can try its own nationals. This law would be perfectly acceptable if it were only applied to nondemocratic states."

Belgian Jewish officials said they believed they had made a difference on the issue.

"Our role here is to ease tensions that have risen between Belgium and the State of Israel," said Philippe Markiewicz, head of the Coordinating Committee of Belgian Jewish Organizations.

"But we have absolutely no problem with the authorities," he insisted. "Belgium's international role on the political stage has been saved."

Israel has said that it will return its ambassador, Yehudi Kinar, to Belgium after Passover.

Kinar was recalled to Jerusalem last February after Belgium's Supreme Court declined to invalidate the law, leaving the door open for Sharon to be prosecuted when he leaves office and loses his diplomatic immunity. □

## JEWELRY ALONG THE SIBERIAN RAILROAD

# Matzah given to Siberian Jews, but it's no longer baked there

By Adam B. Ellick

IRKUTSK, Russia (JTA) — When it comes to matzah in Siberia, religious freedom is bittersweet.

Throughout Russia, this seemingly limitless nation that spans seven time zones and is bigger than the United States and Western Europe combined, the arrival of Passover and matzah is an annual reminder of religious freedoms enjoyed by Russian Jews since communism's collapse 13 years earlier.

In the eastern Russian city of Yekaterinberg, matzah boxes sent fresh from a Moscow bakery are stacked so high they nearly graze the ceiling in a rabbi's office. Come Passover, some 3,000 Jews will happily eat the unleavened bread in the city's largest venue, the circus grounds.

But for Jews in Irkutsk, a provincial Siberian city of 675,000 that holds Siberia's oldest synagogue, the beginning of Passover is a disheartening reminder of a lost local art: baking matzah.

While the Soviets managed to drain Jewish identity across Russia, the authorities somehow forgot about the Irkutsk synagogue, where this aspect of Jewish tradition prevailed.

For more than a century, local Jews ran a thriving matzah-baking operation here. The 6-foot-high oven, the size of a parking space, was destroyed in 1999 after a century of usage caused its large red bricks to deteriorate.

Until then, Yacob Levkovitch, 72, had spent two months every spring as a volunteer matzah man. The fur hat-wearing Siberian offers proof: a stash of bumpy matzot churned out just weeks before the oven was shut down in 1999. The flaky crackers are surprisingly fresh and far thinner than the boxed version that international Jewish groups will distribute across Russia next week.

"The whole process is reorganized with international organizations today, but before the Revolution this was our Jewish tradition. In other cities they don't even know how to bake matzah. We had orders from" the neighboring cities of "Ulan Ude, Chita and Angarsk," says Levkovitch.

Political exiles from Poland began to settle in Irkutsk at the end of the 19th century. Others came from the Pale of Settlement, the band of the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live during czarist times. They took up the fur trade, a profession that transformed them into wealthy merchants — their wooden, ornate houses still stand today. In 1881, local moneys were donated to erect the Irkutsk Synagogue and its matzah oven. The two-story sky blue building is believed to be the only synagogue that functioned east of Moscow during Soviet rule.

Today it's home to a lively Orthodox community led by Rabbi Dovid Dorokhov, an Irkutsk native and convert to Judaism.

The leniency during Communist times of local authorities in Irkutsk, compared to other cities where Jews fell victim to severe repressions, can be attributed to the economic success of the Jews, who gained a unique level of respect among Russian authorities, say local observers.

"The Jewish voice couldn't be ignored," says Eugene Solomon, a local historian. "They were gold miners, landlords, shop owners, and they paid heavy taxes."

In Soviet times, matzah was often the last link to Jewish tradition, and Jewish life in Irkutsk has deep roots compared to

many other Siberian cities, where Jews didn't arrive until after the Communists seized power.

Still, Jewish life in Irkutsk had its limits. Authorities in civilian clothes constantly monitored the synagogue, which was closed several times before Stalin's death in 1953.

During the Soviet era, Passover celebrations began on the eve of the holiday and lasted three days. Jews would flock to the synagogue to pick up their matzah. The daring ones prayed during the day. Matzah was eaten at home, usually dipped in honey.

"But you also have to bake the honey, until it turns red," Levkovitch says.

"Jews were shy of expressing attitudes but they came for Pesach. They probably didn't even know other holidays. It's just a tradition. We don't know why. Maybe because it's a holiday of survival and Siberians are true survivors," says Olga Sosna, manager of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee-funded Jewish Community Center, located in the synagogue's lower level.

Faiga Novisova, 81, who was wed in the synagogue in 1946 and who helped bake matzah for decades, remembers that the bricks retained an extraordinary amount of heat as the unit's chimneys effectively exhaled the fumes.

After the synagogue was closed down by the authorities in 1934, local Jews were forced to bake matzah at home. But the operation revived in 1946 when the state returned the second floor of the building to Jewish hands.

In most years, the official Irkutsk Jewish Religious Society purchased flour for the community from local warehouses. However, during postwar food shortages, when flour was tough to find, Jews would bring their own flour, usually slightly less than two pounds, and wait nearly three hours for their batch to bake.

In an ambitious move during the 1960s, the society asked a local metal plant for electric devices to thin the matzah. Thanks to a Jewish plant manager, the synagogue acquired two roller-like devices with needles that poked holes in the dough. These machines are still in the synagogue today.

Irkutsk Jews are now focusing on another communal effort: preserving their synagogue. From 1995 to 2000, the dilapidated building underwent substantial repairs such as a new roof, a new staircase and whitewashed ceilings. Leaders say they don't know the cost of these repairs.

But they do know a crisis is on the horizon. A recent assessment by a municipal architect responsible for cultural monuments reports the walls and ceiling, which show fissures, are in desperate need of repair.

So scared is the feisty synagogue president, Uzbek-born Zhora Failavayev, 56, that he doesn't plan to advertise the upcoming Passover festivities because the building isn't supposed to house more than 200 people.

Failavayev believes this round of repairs will cost some \$32,000. Despite pledges from local authorities and the JDC, he still requires more sponsors, a task so daunting he's considering moving to Israel instead of watching his sacred home crumble.

"In the early 1980s, the old religious men died," he shouts. "The oldest was 104. They told me to keep it alive because no one else believed in God. So I've been coming here for 32 years, before any international Jewish organizations.

"I was the rabbi, the leader, the plumber, the toilet cleaner, and the driver. I did it all perfectly and all for free. Now if we have a God, our shul will be reconstructed." □