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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel to press Moscow on Iran

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon flew to Moscow for three days of talks on Iran's nuclear program. Defense officials accompanying Sharon on Sunday were also expected to seal Israel's deal to sell India Phalcon radar systems mounted on Russian Ilyushin aircraft.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, while friendly to the Jewish state, is seen as having done little to curtail Moscow's atomic assistance to Tehran.

Strike halts Israel flights

Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport was disrupted by a work stoppage in a precursor to a national labor strike, called for Monday morning.

Takeoffs were suspended for a few hours Sunday, and arriving flights were denied service by ground crews. Labor leaders said the action was a protest against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's departure for Moscow a day before a general strike was set to begin to protest public-spending cuts in the draft 2004 budget. Meanwhile, after the failure of 11th-hour talks, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought back-to-work orders against the strikers.

Bush seeks 'flexibility' on Syria

The Bush administration would appreciate more "flexibility" in the Syria Accountability Act, but will not oppose it, a senior U.S. official said.

Ambassador William Burns, Bush's top envoy to the Middle East, suggested that the administration had dropped its opposition to the sanctions bill, passed this month by the House of Representatives, because of Syria's failure to clamp down on terrorist groups.

Still, Burns told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the administration was pleased that the committee chairman, Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), hoped to make the act's language more flexible. Lugar predicted that the bill would pass the Senate easily.

100,000 rally for Rabin

About 100,000 people rallied in Tel Aviv to mark the eighth anniversary of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Saturday night's rally in Rabin Square passed peacefully. But a day earlier, vandals defaced a monument to the late Israeli prime minister with swastikas and the words "Kahane was right" — a reference to the late Rabbi Meir Kahane.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Reform approaches convention with mix of tradition and creativity

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — A little Hawaiian girl, a rabbi and his male companion, and a young black and white couple with their toddler all share more than a smile.

They're among the snapshots that grace a poster called "The face of Reform Judaism," printed to mark the 25th anniversary of outreach efforts by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform movement's synagogue arm.

The first movement to aggressively and officially reach out to unaffiliated Jews and their non-Jewish family members, the Reform movement will open its 67th biennial convention in Minneapolis next week as North America's largest Jewish denomination.

The movement claims 1.5 million members in 900 North American synagogues. According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, of the 40 percent of 4.3 million U.S. Jews affiliated with synagogues, the plurality — 39 percent — are Reform.

Heading into what should be one of the year's largest Jewish gatherings — some 5,000 people are expected to attend — Reform officials plan to maintain the momentum on outreach with such longtime efforts as the "Taste of Judaism" program, a national series of free introductory classes on Judaism.

"Our challenge going forward is to make sure that every person that comes forward to the movement is welcomed and made to feel like they have a place," says Dru Greenwood, director of UAHC's department of outreach and synagogue community. "Outreach and inclusion is a core principle of Reform Judaism."

Yet some outside the movement wonder what the numbers in the new population survey mean for the movement.

"I think they could come out of the NJPS with a sense of triumphalism, because of the numbers," says Rela Mintz Geffen, co-author of a book on the Conservative movement and president of the non-denominational Baltimore Hebrew University.

But, she says, the movement should more closely explore the religious and social dynamics behind Reform Judaism.

"Numbers aren't everything," she says. "How many are Reform from birth? How many left the Conservative movement? How many are interfaith?"

Perhaps one of the most contentious aspects of Reform outreach has been the success in including the non-Jewish spouses and family members of Jews.

Many agree that more interfaith couples affiliate with Reform than with other movements, but it is unclear just how many there are.

Some predicted that bringing non-Jews into the movement would "water down Judaism," Greenwood says, but "in many ways what's happened in outreach is counterintuitive."

Many non-Jews have become active in their synagogues, participating in adult Bar and Bat-Mitzvah programs, and "work to lovingly hand Jewish traditions to their children," she says. "It's inspiring."

The recent population survey found that the proportion of interfaith couples raising their children as Jews rose to 33 percent from 28 percent in 1990.

But scholars debate how important the finding is — and it's still far below the 96 percent of Jews married to Jews who raise their children as Jews.

The study also found an intermarriage rate of 47 percent, up 4 percent from the last survey a decade earlier.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of UAHC, bristles at questions about the character

MIDEAST FOCUS

Mofaz to meet with Palestinians

Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz is slated to meet Palestinian Authority officials this week for talks aimed at invigorating the "road map" for peace.

It is unclear which Palestinian officials will attend the meeting, which would be the first at the ministerial level since Ahmed Karia was appointed as the Palestinian Authority's prime minister.

Friday prayers pass peacefully

Muslim prayers on the first Friday of Ramadan passed peacefully on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Israeli police allowed only older, married Palestinians to enter the holy site Friday, which has been the scene of frequent Palestinian riots.

Several hundred Muslim worshipers were not allowed to pass through checkpoints in Bethlehem, causing a scuffle in which police used stun grenades.

ZOA sues over Jerusalem

A Jewish group is suing the State Department on behalf of a U.S. couple who want their son's passport to list his birthplace as Jerusalem, Israel.

The Zionist Organization of America, acting on behalf of Jocelyn and Dan Odenheimer, is taking the State Department to federal court to enforce legislation passed last year allowing U.S. citizens born in Jerusalem to list the city as being in Israel in their U.S. documents.

The Odenheimers' infant son, Ephraim, has only "Jerusalem" listed as his birthplace, with no country attached.

The lawsuit is the second such litigation on behalf of U.S. children born in the Israeli capital.

The Bush administration, like its predecessors, has been reluctant to recognize Israel's claim to Jerusalem, saying it does not want to prejudice the outcome of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over the capital city.

of congregants in the synagogues of the Reform movement.

"It's outrageous and stupid," he says. "Intermarriage is a reality," and no Jewish group "has found a way to prevent it. If the intention is to have Jewish homes, it makes no sense to write off those people who are intermarried. We're proud we're a movement that embraces these families."

The movement faces other challenges as well. In 1999, the Central Conference of American Rabbis signaled a new, more traditional direction for Reform, calling for more Hebrew prayer and greater tradition in congregational life.

That declaration, called the "Pittsburgh Platform" was a major break from the original vision the movement's founders enumerated in the 1885 "Pittsburgh Platform."

Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the movement's seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in New York, said the new "Pittsburgh Platform" encouraged Reform Jews to take Judaism "more seriously."

"Reform has always stood between tradition and modernity, and the challenge in creating an authentic Judaism is even greater" given those competing forces, he says.

The Reform movement has evolved from the start of the 20th century, when it was primarily a movement of assimilated German Jews who held church-like services led by choirs and featuring largely passive congregants.

For decades the movement has stressed creativity and participation.

Perhaps the latest sign of that is coming soon in the University Synagogue in the upscale Brentwood section of Los Angeles.

The 800-family congregation is set to stage its first "Great Shabbos," a lavish musical production featuring electric guitars, keyboards, saxophones, drums and a teen choir — not to mention the rabbi and cantor.

Sally Priesand, rabbi of the 360-member Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, N.J., says the movement faces longtime hurdles such as "talmud Torah and tikkun olam" — educating Jews about Judaism and teaching them how to improve the world.

"I think people think of doing things for the synagogue as volunteerism," she says. "But the synagogue is the storehouse of the Jewish spirit."

Priesand broke the gender barrier for the Reform and other liberal movements when she was ordained as the nation's first woman rabbi nearly 30 years ago. Since then, doors have opened to other types of Jews.

Last year, HUC admitted its first transgendered person — a woman becoming a man — and the school now includes a woman who could become the movement's first black rabbi.

In part to reflect the changing nature of the movement, the UAHC is likely to change its name at the biennial to the Union for Reform Judaism.

With its use of the term "American Hebrew," the UAHC reflected an old "apologetic" era, Yoffie says, but now the movement needs a strong and memorable moniker. "We're not Hebrews, we're Jews," he says. "We need an affirming, proud name." □

Jews praise refugee bill

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish leaders praised a House of Representatives bill calling for recognition of Jewish refugees who fled the Muslim world.

The bill, introduced last week by Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), recognizes some 900,000 Jewish refugees who fled Arab and Muslim countries around the time of Israel's creation in 1948, said Jennie McCue, press secretary for Rep. Jerome Nadler (D-N.Y.), who co-sponsored the bill with Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-N.J.).

"The resolution being put forth today touches on the very heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and will help to reverse many years of ignorance and misinformation, and rejects the constant attempts to rewrite history," said a statement from the World Jewish Congress, which has pushed the issue.

Jewish groups hope the issue will become a factor in future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, where the fate of Palestinian refugees is very controversial.

"There were far more Jews uprooted from Arab countries than there were Palestinians who became refugees as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict," the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations said in a statement praising the bill. □



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JEWISH WORLD

House condemns Mahathir

The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution condemning anti-Semitic comments by Malaysia's outgoing prime minister.

The lead sponsor of the bill, Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), said the vote "demonstrates the commitment of the United States to people of the Jewish faith, and the dedication of the United States Congress to further Middle East peace."

Mahathir, who retired last Friday, told the Organization of Islamic States earlier this month that "Jews rule the world by proxy" and that the Muslim world must unite to defeat them.

The vote passed 411-0, with one lawmaker, Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), voting present.

Asked if he had a last message to the world's Jews on his retirement, Mahathir said this week that the Holocaust was not an excuse for the Jews' to allegedly persecute Muslims today.

"They must never think they are the chosen people who cannot be criticized at all," Mahathir said.

Report rocks Slovakia

A political dispute erupted in Slovakia over an allegedly anti-Semitic report produced for the prime minister by the country's counter-intelligence service.

The classified report, which examines allegations that a covert group of Slovak businessmen have been working to destabilize the country, refers to the Jewish background of one of the alleged conspirators, according to the daily newspaper *Sme*.

Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda announced in August that a covert group was operating to "cause scandals and promote negative media campaigns against Slovakia" by discrediting the SIS counter-intelligence service and Dzurinda's Slovak Christian Democratic Union Party.

According to the newspaper, the intelligence report states that alleged conspirator Milos Ziak "is a Jew and his wife Marina is a Russian Jew with the maiden name of Meseznikova." The SIS denied the claim, arguing that it had never collected information on citizens according to their religion, origin, nationality or ethnicity.

French paper folds

France's oldest Jewish newspaper has been placed in official receivership.

Tribune Juive was founded in 1968 as a continuation of the Strasbourg-based "Bulletin of Our Communities" when the Bulletin decided to distribute nationally. Despite a recent attempt to develop a magazine-type format, the Tribune continued to decline and ceased publishing earlier this year.

That leaves French Jews with only one national weekly newspaper.

E.U. report pushes 'road map,' but Israel backers say report is biased

By Jonathan Fisk

BRUSSELS (JTA) — E.U. lawmakers sympathetic to Israel say a European Parliament report that urges Israel and the Palestinians to implement the "road map" peace plan is unbalanced.

The Parliament overwhelmingly adopted the report, entitled "Peace and Dignity in the Middle East," on Oct. 23.

Most E.U. lawmakers consider the report balanced. However, even after some anti-Israel language was watered down, some E.U. lawmakers who consider themselves friends of Israel have criticized the report.

The report starts by urging the Palestinian Authority to reorganize its security forces, establish public order and make concrete efforts to dismantle terrorist organizations. It also calls for free, fair and transparent elections in the Palestinian Authority as soon as possible.

Israel is urged to withdraw forces from Palestinian areas, stop targeted killings of terrorist leaders and freeze all settlement activities and construction of its security fence.

Parliament members said they condemn Israel's Oct. 5 airstrike on a terrorist training camp in Syria, considering it a violation of international law. The strike came a day after a suicide bombing in Haifa carried out by a terrorist group based in Syria.

The report opposes any attempt to deport, banish or kill P.A. President Yasser Arafat, but calls on Arafat to implement the road map.

Critics of the report have focused on how it deals with terrorism and on its suggestion for an international force for the region.

The report condemns Palestinian terrorism, mentioning an Oct. 15 attack on a U.S. diplomatic convoy in the Gaza Strip that killed three Americans. However, the next paragraph condemns "all acts of terrorism and military repression against civilians and the excessive use of military force by Israel."

That was galling to supporters of Israel.

"This paragraph is unacceptable because it puts Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli military 'repression' on equal footing," Belgian lawmaker Frederique Ries said.

French lawmaker Jean-Thomas Nordmann said, "I have the impression that, for some, the idea of Jews responding, instead of letting themselves be killed like in the good old days, is shocking and scandalous."

Simona Halperin, an Israeli official responsible for relations with the European Parliament, said the language creates an ambiguity that could harm Israel in the future.

"Many parliamentarians I have spoken to would not agree to place" Israel Defense Forces' "actions on equal footing with Palestinian terrorism," she said. "But unfortunately the text can be interpreted this way for those who do."

The report also says that if the road map collapses, an "international mandate" under the authority of the road map's authors — the diplomatic "Quartet" of the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia — should be established in Palestinian areas, with an international force.

Israel supporters say the report does have some positive elements.

"One of the major successes of this report is the issue of the 'right of return' for the Palestinian refugees," Halperin said, referring to the Palestinian demand that millions of refugees and their descendants from Israel's 1948 War of Independence be allowed to return to their former homes inside Israel.

The report says any such return should generally be confined to a future Palestinian state. Deputies have called on all Arab states concerned, especially Lebanon, to enable refugees to acquire citizenship where they currently live.

"This is the very first time that any E.U. body recognizes the delicate problem of the refugees in this light," said Halperin, who called the development a "major achievement."

"Back in the spring, this started out as a very anti-Israel report, but ended as an E.U. call for the parties to maintain the road map as the solution for peace," Halperin said. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

For crypto-Jews of Portugal, blend of tradition and local custom

By Jerome Socolovsky

BELMONTE, Portugal (JTA) — A crowd has gathered in the synagogue and the rabbi stands in front, trying to reassure the worshipers that the new prayer books he brought from Israel don't threaten this Jewish community's 500-year-old traditions.

"When Miguel or Don Rafael or I read aloud, we will read the Hebrew," announces Elisha Salas, the Chilean-born Orthodox rabbi from Israel. "But if you want to understand what we're saying, all you have to do is look at the translation, and you'll find the same exact thing in Portuguese."

Salas looks around the room at the dubious faces.

"Does that mean we're no longer going to use the other prayer books?" someone asks.

"You can use them if you want," Salas responds patiently, peppering his Spanish with a few Portuguese words he has picked up since he arrived in Belmonte several months ago. "But bit by bit we can also start using these."

Salas works for Amishav, a Jerusalem-based group that helps residents of communities with historical ties to Judaism return to the traditional Jewish fold. Amishav works in far-flung places like India, Brazil, the Spanish island of Mallorca and Portugal.

In Belmonte, Jews secretly practiced a hybrid form of Judaism for five centuries, saying Jewish prayers in Portuguese in their homes while celebrating "front" holidays, such as Ascension Thursday, to throw off Christian Inquisitors.

Belmonte's Jews descend from Sephardim who took refuge in these borderlands during the century of pogroms that erupted in the 1390s in nearby Spain. In 1492, the Spanish monarchy expelled all remaining Jews. Several years later, the king of Portugal followed suit, ordering the Jews in his realm to convert to Christianity.

But many secretly continued Jewish rituals, lighting Sabbath candles and baking a lumpy variation of matzah at Passover time.

There are pockets of crypto-Jews throughout northern Portugal, but the Jews of Belmonte are the largest community in the country known to have preserved their Judaism together.

They were discovered in the early 20th century by a Polish Jew. Since the end of Portugal's dictatorship in the 1970s, they have been free to practice Judaism openly and as they choose.

Salas — who, Amishav President Michael Freund says, was sent at the request of the Belmonte community — says he hasn't come to the Jews there to "change or modify any of their customs."

But Salas is the latest in a line of rabbis teaching Orthodox Judaism to Belmonte's Jews.

The efforts are raising questions about the proper way of dealing with religious customs developed during the Inquisition and maintained ever since, while at the same time trying to bring crypto-Jews here and elsewhere back to traditional Judaism.

Skeptics include Judith Cohen, a Canadian ethnomusicologist who has done seven years of fieldwork in Belmonte. Cohen says Orthodox rabbis are "scouring the countryside in Mallorca and in Portugal," doing "missionary" activity.

In Belmonte's Jewish quarter, Bet Eliahu is the synagogue that serves the community of about 150 Jews. A plaque on the wall says the building's construction was funded by Moroccan Jewish

businessman Salomon Azoulay, and its inauguration in 1996 was attended by Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio.

Sitting on Bet Eliahu's doorstep after evening prayers, Salas says he's come to experience what it's like to be a Jew in Belmonte. And, he says, "My intention is to conserve what can be conserved and what makes sense for each person," he says.

That's no easy task. Belmonte's Jews are still isolated and mistrustful. Centuries of endogamy have left many suffering from hereditary diseases. And while they are friendly to Jewish visitors, they are very secretive when asked about their religious practices.

Neighbors say there's no need for secrecy — or fear.

Marcos Alvez, 67, a non-Jew who lives near the synagogue, says everyone in Belmonte has long known about the Jews — and liked them anyway.

"They are our friends," Alvez says. "Now that they've built a synagogue they are more separate, but our good relations haven't changed a bit."

Along with the shul's construction, one of the most noteworthy Jewish events in Belmonte's recent Jewish history was a mass Orthodox conversion to Judaism of about 80 people in 1991. Amishav's founder, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, was one of those sent by Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi to oversee the conversions.

Freund, Amishav's president, says the conversion ceremony was done "just to be on the safe side" because too much time had passed to be certain about every individual's Jewish lineage.

Despite the developments in Belmonte in recent years, many Jews still cling to their centuries-old traditions of secrecy and unique religious practices.

Salas says he's not surprised by community members' resistance to change and their hesitancy about his kind of Judaism.

"They say, 'I'm Jewish, all my life I've been Jewish, my mother and father were Jewish and died as Jews — why do I have to do something to be Jewish?'" Salas says.

"They call the synagogue and our Judaism the 'new religion' because their religion is the Judaism of old," he says. "And I can't say they're wrong. I have to understand that mentality, because that's the Judaism they've received and which kept them going for 500 years."

Cohen, the ethnomusicologist, says that while she appreciates Salas' cultural sensitivity, Belmonte's Jews aren't being exposed to other varieties of Jewish life.

"If you live in Barcelona or Madrid and you're in a big city, you understand that even if you've only seen an Orthodox rabbi, there might be other ways of doing things," she says in a telephone interview from her home in Canada.

Cohen also says the work of Orthodox rabbis in Belmonte before Salas came destroyed much of what was unique to Belmonte Judaism, such as the leading role given to women.

Cohen says a more liberal brand of Judaism would suit Belmonte's Jews better than Orthodoxy. Perhaps a woman rabbi would be appropriate, she says.

Salas says he does everything he can within the bounds of halachah, Jewish law, to accommodate the "old religion" of Belmonte's Jews.

He even went to a funeral at a Christian cemetery because the deceased wanted to be buried alongside her spouse.

"My vision is not that they should forget everything that has helped them survive until now," Salas says. "My intention is to help them grow and develop and have a much broader worldview — that Judaism is not only Belmonte." □