



Daily News Bulletin

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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush praises Sharon

President Bush praised Ariel Sharon's speech on solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Speaking to Israel's Yediot Achronot newspaper, Bush lauded Sharon's Dec. 18 remarks pledging his support for the "road map" peace plan.

But White House officials have not commented on Sharon's pledge to impose unilateral borders on the Palestinians if prospects for peace don't improve in six months.

Israel lauds Libya on weapons

Israel praised Libya's decision to completely destroy its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons capability.

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the breakthrough last Friday, after nine months of negotiating with the Libyans. Meanwhile, Arab nations called on Israel to follow Libya's example.

Menorah lit at Saddam's palace

A Chanukah menorah is being lit at Saddam Hussein's former palace.

The menorah, 14 inches high with candle holders that look like pomegranates, was made by Oded Halahmy, a Baghdad-born artist who now splits his time between Israel and New York.

The menorah was brought to Baghdad after a request from a U.S. Army chaplain, Col. Frank Wismer.

Wismer wrote Halahmy that personnel working at the palace "are experiencing something akin to what the Jews must have experienced when the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem and put an end to the pagan worship that had desecrated the temple," according to the New York Jewish Week.

Sharon coming to Washington

Ariel Sharon reportedly will come to Washington next month to discuss his plan for "disengagement" from the Palestinians.

The Israeli prime minister is assembling a crew to consolidate the disengagement plan and devise the new deployment in the territories, according to the vision he set forth in a major policy speech Thursday.

Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, the incoming head of Israel's National Security Council, is the leading candidate to orchestrate the plan, Ha'aretz reported.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

In rare rebuke, Conservative rabbis say the movement lacks leadership

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — In unprecedented public criticism, Conservative rabbis are saying the movement is suffering from a crisis in leadership at a time of declining membership.

Charges that Conservative leaders have failed to map a clear path for the movement's future and that the movement's seminaries and professional bodies do not coordinate policy surfaced recently during a Rabbinical Assembly meeting called to discuss the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01.

"As I speak to colleagues of mine, I don't have a sense that any of us really feel that there's a great global vision of where we are going as a movement," Rabbi Joshua Finkelstein, of Temple Emanuel of North Jersey in Patterson and Oakland, N.J., told JTA after the meeting.

Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, of Washington's Adas Israel Congregation, agreed.

"We are in a period now where there is not one single vision for the movement, nor is there one person regarded as the only one articulating the movement's message," Wohlberg said.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the movement's flagship institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, did not return calls seeking comment.

But Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, said such complaints have long dogged the centrist movement.

"Because of its diversity, the Conservative movement does not have a pointed ideology that one can, in two words, define the movement," Meyers said. "Not having a clear definition, the response is we don't have clear leadership."

But Wohlberg and Finkelstein's complaints, which echoed others expressed at the meeting, came not long after the latest Jewish population survey showed that the once-dominant centrist American Jewish denomination is losing many adherents.

While such criticism rarely has gone public, movement insiders say there have been rumblings for years about a lack of cohesion between the movement's congregational and rabbinical bodies and its main seminaries.

Then came the NJPS, which showed that only 33 percent of Jews who say they belong to a synagogue identify as Conservative. That's down from 38 percent a decade ago and from nearly 50 percent in the previous survey, in 1970.

Some scholars warn that the studies counted Jews differently and so direct comparisons may be misleading. But rabbis at the meeting, which took place at JTS in New York, said the exact figures are less important than the larger questions the survey raised about Conservative Judaism.

"Instead of looking back at the last century, we should look forward to the new century," Finkelstein said. "NJPS just underscored the challenges that lie ahead of us."

Such calls were a reference to a recent remark last month by Schorsch in which he said it had been a "mistake" for the movement to sanction driving on Shabbat some four decades ago because the move had eroded the observance of Jewish law, or halachah, as some had warned at the time.

"Do we still discuss whether to ride to shul on Shabbat?" one participant wondered.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of United Synagogue, the Conservative movement's congregational arm, acknowledged the growing malaise over leadership. "What would be helpful in the movement is if we looked more strongly to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Beilin: Sharon rewards terror

Ariel Sharon's promise to withdraw unilaterally from parts of the West Bank is a "prize for terror," Yossi Beilin said.

The Israeli prime minister warned the Palestinians on Thursday that if they don't begin cracking down on terrorism and return to peace talks within a few months, he will dismantle some Israeli settlements and redraw borders, giving the Palestinians less than what they could have had through negotiations.

But Beilin, who recently negotiated the unofficial "Geneva accord" peace initiative, said Sharon's plan would give the Palestinians something for nothing.

Mofaz talks to Iran

Israel would aim to avoid collateral damage in any action against Iran's nuclear facilities, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said.

"If there is a need to destroy Iran's nuclear capability, the necessary steps will be taken so Iranian civilians are not hurt," the Iranian-born Mofaz told Israel Radio in Farsi last week.

The special broadcasts are closely monitored in Tehran.

According to Ha'aretz, it was the most explicit Israeli threat so far against Iran's suspected efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Iran has recently agreed to an investigation of its nuclear weapons program.

Nablus sweep deepens

Israeli soldiers reportedly killed a Palestinian boy and arrested a Hamas spokesman during an ongoing West Bank sweep.

The 5-year-old boy was hit by Israeli gunfire in the Balata refugee camp on Sunday.

An Israeli Defense Forces' spokesman said the death was being investigated, but confirmed a separate report on the capture of Hamas' West Bank spokesman, Adnan Asfour, in nearby Nablus.

the top and worked more in concert at the top to hash out policy decisions and to try to articulate them," Epstein said.

But Epstein and other Conservative leaders maintained that the movement's historical divisions over the extent of Jewish law one must follow signal a healthy, diverse movement. "There is a difference between centrism and timidity," said Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean and vice president of the Ziegler School of Rabbinical Studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. "Our movement needs to continue to be bold in its advocacy for a dynamic halachah, and for a strong relationship with God and for an engagement with the world," he said.

At the movement's most recent biennial in Dallas in October, Epstein repeated earlier calls for members to recommit to halachah. Epstein announced that he would form a commission of rabbis, educators, and lay people to spark new passion for "living the evolving halachah."

Referring to criticism about a vacuum at the movement's top, Epstein said, "We are trying to provide that leadership."

But the debate over whether the movement should focus on halachah or move in other directions continues to divide members.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, author of the Jewish Catalog series, Jewish primers that helped catalyze the independent-minded chavurah movement, said he holds a "counter-counterrevolutionary" theory that the Conservative leadership does signal a direction — "an emphasis that we need to take stands, or we're not going to be taken seriously."

But Strassfeld said halachah does not remain the "starting point" for most Conservative Jews. Instead, most are seeking "something of meaning and value" that could drive them to greater observance.

Whether or not the debate over halachah is driving Conservatives away, Epstein and Artson, among others, also have said that the movement's size relative to the Orthodox, Reform and Reconstructionist movements — all of which grew during the past decade — remains less important than the devotion of its core members.

"Conservative Judaism is still a very large presence and a very dynamic presence," Artson said. "I am not going to get into this sort of little boy war about whose is bigger."

Yet Meyers said he is concerned about the movement's numbers. Some people at the "margins" may be moving toward Orthodoxy, and assimilation and intermarriage may be pulling others toward the Reform movement or the secular world, Meyers said.

Part of the problem in counting Conservative Jews is that many resist being identified as such.

"There's an old joke in the movement, that when someone says they're 'just Jewish,' you say, 'I'm Conservative too,'" Meyers said.

Some at the meeting said the differences among denominations as revealed in the population survey augur well for Conservatives because they show greater attachment to Judaism among Conservative Jews.

Rela Mintz Geffen, president of Baltimore Hebrew University, said the NJPS also showed that religion often plays a greater role in the lives of Conservative Jews than for Jews in the more liberal denominations.

For example, 81 percent of Orthodox Jews said religion was "very important" in their lives and 41 percent of Conservative Jews said so, compared with 24 percent of Reform Jews and 14 percent of secular Jews, she said.

Additionally, 72 percent of Orthodox said they "strongly agree" that they look to Judaism in making important life decisions, compared to 32 percent of Conservative respondents, 16 percent of Reform and 10 percent of secular Jews.

Mintz Geffen also cited the intermarriage rate compared with other denominations as a sign of the movement's strength.

While 47 percent of all Jews who married between 1996 and 2002 wed non-Jews, only 18 percent of those who identified as Conservative Jews did, and only 5 percent of Conservative synagogue-goers did — a gap she attributed to a lack of younger, marriage-age synagogue members.

Others argued that despite the alleged leadership gap, elements of the Conservative movement are thriving. But rabbis voiced a growing frustration that they do not know what, at least officially, comes next for the movement.

"There doesn't seem to be any direction for the movement, and we're yearning for one," said Rabbi Tsafi Lev, of the Pinebrook Jewish Center, in Montville, N.J. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Bush sends Chanukah greetings

President Bush sent Chanukah greetings to U.S. Jews.

Recalling the miracle of the oil in the time of the Maccabees, Bush said in his message Friday, the eve of the holiday, "Today, the lighting of the Menorah represents this ancient miracle and brings a message of hope and freedom to the Jewish people. As families and friends share in the joyous traditions of Chanukah, we recognize the power of faith to accomplish miracles and bring light from the darkness."

The White House will mark Chanukah on Monday with a candle-lighting ceremony and a meeting with rabbis. Bush also will light candles at the White House's bookstore room. An assortment of Jewish officials also will attend a Chanukah party at the White House on Monday evening.

Turks: Bomb plotter in custody

Turkish authorities have arrested a Turkish citizen on suspicion of plotting last month's Istanbul synagogue bombings.

Adnan Ersoz was arrested after he arrived in Istanbul by plane on Monday, a Turkish intelligence official told The Associated Press. Turkish officials say Ersoz had met with Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and confessed to setting up a division of the terrorist group in Turkey. He said the group blew up synagogues and British targets after concluding that their original target, the Turkish military, was too secure.

Fence hearing date set

The International Court of Justice said it would begin hearings on Israel's security fence, beginning Feb. 23.

The court set a deadline of Jan. 30 for countries to submit opinions on the case. The court made its announcement after the U.N. General Assembly asked the court to hear arguments on the matter.

Putin lights tolerance candle

Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged in a Chanukah meeting with Jewish leaders to fight anti-Semitism.

In a meeting last Friday with Berel Lazar, one of the country's two chief rabbis, and local leader Alexander Boroda, Putin vowed to treat Russia's diversity "with care and, when necessary," protect it.

British chief rabbi asked to quit

A leading British Jew called on the country's chief Orthodox rabbi to resign.

Sir Stanley Kalms wrote in the London Jewish Chronicle that Jonathan Sacks should quit because he has not provided leadership to the community and has failed to lead the way in supporting Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Canada's new justice minister, Irwin Cotler, is no shrinking violet

By Bram Eisenthal

MONTREAL (JTA) — Irwin Cotler, Canada's newly appointed justice minister and attorney general, is not shy when it comes to speaking his mind.

Directed in support of Israel, that outspokenness has won the famed human rights lawyer accolades from Canada's Jews, but it has not endeared Cotler to Canada's pro-Arab camp.

While Cotler has been applauded widely for his work representing such renowned figures as Nelson Mandela, Andrei Sakharov, Natan Sharansky and Jacobo Timmerman, his outspoken views on Israel and civil liberties have generated some criticism.

Since his election to the Canadian Parliament in 1999, some have accused Cotler of a pro-Israel bias. His Montreal district has a large Jewish population and a rapidly burgeoning Arab one.

Cotler frequently speaks out against what he sees as his government's lackluster criticism of anti-Israel terrorists. He makes regular appearances at pro-Israel rallies and breaks ranks with his own Liberal Party when necessary.

When Canada voted on Oct. 7, 2000, in favor of a Malaysian-sponsored U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Israel to use restraint in dealing with Palestinian protesters, Cotler criticized his own foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy, and his own party.

"This kind of resolution, which singled out Israel for discriminatory and differential treatment and appeared to exonerate the Palestinians for their violence," Cotler said, "would tend to encourage those who violently oppose the peace process as well as those who still seek the destruction of Israel."

Cotler's condemnation prompted five Liberal lawmakers to issue a joint statement against Cotler's public criticism — and a sixth criticized him before 3,000 pro-Palestinian demonstrators in front of the Israeli Consulate in downtown Toronto.

Israel is not the only issue Cotler cares about. Democracy, specifically civil liberties, is dear to Cotler's heart.

When former Prime Minister Jean Chretien pushed an anti-terrorism bill through Parliament after the Sept. 11 attacks, Cotler, then chairman of the government's civil liberties committee, ensured that six of his 10 amendments to the bill protecting civil liberties were adopted.

Civil libertarians said Cotler did not go far enough, but Cotler responded he would "rather have an imperfect law than no law at all."

Cotler is well-respected by members of Canada's Jewish community.

Cotler's appointment by new Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin is an "inspired choice," said Jack Silverstone, longtime national executive director and legal counsel of the Canadian Jewish Congress, in Ottawa. "At this juncture in our country's legal history, I can't think of anyone better qualified."

Silverstone has had many opportunities to work and socialize with the man often referred to as the "Canadian Alan Dershowitz."

"Speaking from personal knowledge, as he was one of my law professors at McGill University, he was highly respected by his students and colleagues," Silverstone said. "He tangibly influenced and inspired many of those around him, including me."

Some pro-Palestinian activists are not thrilled with Cotler.

In 2002, several Jewish and Palestinian protesters occupied Cotler's Montreal office to protest Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and to demand that Canada take a tougher stand against Israel. They also said they wanted to see Cotler champion human rights when it came to the Palestinians.

The four men and three women, all in their 20s, were arrested and charged with trespassing after barricading themselves in Cotler's office.

Cotler blasted the takeover of his office, calling it an "illegal occupation" and accusing the protesters of intimidating his staff. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Growing mob violence in Israel gets some government attention

By Dina Kraft

TEL AVIV (JTA) — The word “danger” is scrawled in white paint on the scorched metal doors of the currency-exchange shop where a bomb recently exploded in a botched hit on an alleged Israeli mobster.

The explosion killed three innocent bystanders and woke the country up to the reach of Israel’s underworld.

The apparent target — Ze’ev Rosenstein, a casino owner who is suspected of being the leader of one Israel’s largest crime rings — walked away with only slight injuries to his hand and leg.

“Jews killing Jews in this country — now that is not a good situation,” said Oded Shoshani, who owns an electronics store near the scene of the foiled assassination.

The violence Israel has experienced in recent years, especially as a result of the Palestinian intifada, has both cultivated a more violent society and diminished the police force’s ability to crack down on crime, experts say.

The violence is “contagious,” said Shlomo Giora Shoham, a professor of criminology at Tel Aviv University. “People now see violence as a kind of legitimate way of solving conflicts.”

Indeed, 10 innocent bystanders have been killed in violence between warring crime families in the past year.

Crime families involved in gambling, prostitution, extortion, and drug dealing long have existed in Israel, but, according to Shoham, their activities have boomed during the intifada.

The crime families, he said, have now broken an unspoken understanding between them and the police that their violent rivalries would not go beyond the boundaries of the underworld itself.

“Criminals are doing things they were not doing before,” said national police spokesman Gil Kleiman. “We feel we are in a more violent society” and that “criminals are doing things with total disregard for innocent people,” he said.

Organized crime syndicates in Israel have swelled with immigration from the former Soviet Union.

Trafficking in prostitution and money laundering largely are the domain of criminals from that region, while gambling and extortion are the main focus of Israeli-born crime families.

In the last decade, Israeli crime syndicates have become major players in international organized crime.

Israeli underworld figure Meir Abarjil was arrested last week in Austria on suspicion that he trafficked five kilograms of heroin. Abarjil’s two brothers also are involved in crime — Yitzhak Abarjil is living abroad after striking a deal with Israeli authorities, and Abie Abarjil, believed to have plotted to import drugs from South America, currently is being held by Israeli police.

On Yehuda Halevy Street, where the bomb went off Dec. 11, workers repaired damaged storefronts and passers-by pointed out the singed walls and crumbling awning of the money-changing shop.

A store owner who still hears ringing in his ears from the blast lashed out against the police for not doing a better job of protecting the community and for not giving the same attention to battling organized crime as it does to fighting terrorism.

“I’m angry,” said the shop owner, who asked that his name not be used. “Why are they not treating us like terror victims? Terror is terror. If it comes from Muslims it is considered terrorism, and if comes from Jews it is not?”

The same fear of terrorism that keeps people away from cafes and public places now keeps members out of the upscale Herzliya gym where Rosenstein works out.

Some members said they were wary of going there, fearing they might be the next victims of rival gang crossfire.

The Tel Aviv bombing was the sixth attempt on Rosenstein’s life in an underworld war that has revolved around assassination attempts of the heads of rival gangs.

Kleiman, the national police spokesman, said the police had been directed by the government to make fighting terrorism their top priority since the intifada began more than three years ago.

“The main effort was to fight terror and that came at the expense of anti-crime work,” he said.

But that might be changing.

In the aftermath of the bombing in Tel Aviv, the Israeli government announced that fighting crime organizations was now one of the nation’s main priorities.

Public Security Minister Tzachi Hanegbi was quoted as vowing “an all-out police offensive” against crime organizations.

Within the month, police are planning to submit a \$116 million plan to the government that police officials say would allow them to move effectively against crime organizations.

But even if that plan is approved, it might take some time for its effects to trickle down.

The lights in Rahamim Naftali’s tailor shop, two doors down from the money-changing shop, all fell and shattered from the force of the recent explosion. His awning also has partially collapsed. He said he feels helpless.

He said, “Who is taking care of the criminals?”

An older couple, regular customers of Naftali’s, stepped into the shop to say they were relieved to see Naftali well and working.

“What a world we live in,” the man said.

“Yes, what a world,” Naftali answered sadly, nodding his head. □

Israel issues travel warning

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel’s Foreign Ministry warned Israeli tourists to avoid large Christmas celebrations because they present targets for terrorists.

British media have reported that British intelligence believes Al-Qaida is planning to attack stores in London, a popular shopping destination for Israelis.

The ministry advised tourists to avoid certain spots in Thailand, including a main tourist strip in Bangkok and the Phuket and Pattaya resorts. □

Moroccan envoy marks Chanukah

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Moroccan Embassy in Washington is hosting a Chanukah party.

The Monday night party, to be co-hosted by the American Jewish Committee, is the first ever by an Arab embassy in Washington, the AJCommittee says. □