

IN THE NEWS

**Erez raid
kills Israeli**

Palestinian terrorists raided Israel's main industrial zone on the Gaza boundary, killing a reserve soldier.

The Al-Aksa Brigade, the armed wing of Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, claimed responsibility for the raid Thursday morning at the Erez crossing point between Israel and Gaza.

Two other Israelis also were wounded.

Soldiers killed the two Palestinian gunmen.

**Denver church:
Jews killed Jesus**

A church in Denver posted a sign saying, "Jews Killed the Lord Jesus."

The Colorado Council of Churches and the local branch of the Anti-Defamation League criticized the sign, at the Lovingway United Pentecostal Church.

The church posted it Wednesday, the day Mel Gibson's controversial film "The Passion of the Christ" opened.

"Actually, all of us are guilty in some way if we reject Christ," said the church's pastor, the Rev. Maurice Gordon.

**CIA, FBI: Palestinian
terrorism 'formidable'**

Anti-Israel terrorist groups are a "formidable threat" to U.S. interests, the CIA and FBI chiefs said.

In Senate testimony on the terrorist threat this week, CIA Director George Tenet said Al-Qaida remained the principal threat, "but other terrorist organizations also threaten U.S. interests."

FBI Director Robert Mueller said the threat could reach U.S. soil.

"Groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestine Islamic Jihad warrant equal vigilance due to their ongoing capability to launch terrorist attacks within the United States," he said.

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WORLD REPORT

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Jaime Halegua

TERROR'S TOLL ON ISRAELI LIVES

Protesters from Christians for Israel hold up photos of Israelis killed by Palestinian terrorists at a pro-Israel demonstration on Feb. 23 at The Hague, near the International Court of Justice.

With U.S. deadlines coming up, Israel is short on detailed plans

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — It's conventional wisdom: In an election year, keep away from the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Middle East has helped drive incumbent presidents out of office, and many a candidate has lost his way in the Arab-Israeli morass.

Like much conventional wisdom, there's a grain of truth to the maxim. After all, the region is unstable enough to enable the kind of October surprise that could scuttle a presidential bid. Yet it is that instability that now is driving the Bush administration to turn the conventional wisdom on its head.

NEWS ANALYSIS

With the prospect of Palestinian-populated areas imploding — and the potential for spillover into U.S. efforts in Iraq, not to mention the U.S. presidential race — the Bush administration is renewing its efforts to bring peacemaking in the region forward.

"We fully understand that this conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis is the source of a great deal of the anti-American feelings that exist in that part of the world and does affect what we're doing in Iraq," U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Senate earlier this month.

"And I would do anything to find a magic bullet to solve this one."

Three of President Bush's most trusted

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■ *With U.S. deadlines coming up, Israel is short on detailed plans*

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advisers on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict went to Israel last week to make sure Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon hews to U.S. guidelines in his efforts to disengage from the Palestinians.

The envoys' Israeli counterparts will soon come to Washington to refine Sharon's disengagement plan, which includes a settlement withdrawal from Gaza. A Bush-Sharon summit is expected to follow after that, though a date has not been set.

Powell is making clear he wants a full and detailed report from the Israelis.

"We are following closely Mr. Sharon's proposals of recent weeks about evacuating the settlements in Gaza," he said. "And what we have said to the Israelis: That's interesting, we want the settlements closed, we want to know exactly how they're going to — how that's going to be done and where will those settlers go, and how does it affect settlement activity in the West Bank. We have to understand the total picture."

But the three envoys who went to Israel last week — Steve Hadley, the deputy national security adviser; Elliott Abrams, the top Middle East adviser on the National Security Council; and William Burns, the top State Department envoy to the region — are not getting the full picture.

According to Jewish organizational officials in the United States, the Americans are frustrated with Sharon's slow pace.

Sharon reportedly believes that the U.S. president has enough on his plate right now given the presidential contest in

November and the coming power transition in Iraq, slated for the end of June.

The embarrassing result is that the Israelis did not have much to report to Hadley, Abrams and Burns last week.

Sharon's government reportedly is not worried, encouraged by Bush and his aides continually laying principal blame for the crisis — and the negotiating stalemate — on the Palestinians.

"It is difficult for us to achieve this goal and to put this kind of pressure on the Israeli side as long as terrorism is seen as a legitimate political act on the part of Palestinians," Powell told a Princeton University gathering last Friday. "It is not — it can't be, not in this post-9/11 age."

That outlook encourages Israelis to believe that they have time to work things out.

Some Israeli officials are saying there will be no new developments with the Palestinians until the end of the year.

The problem is, as Powell suggested, that the Americans need progress by June 30, when Bush wants to transfer power in Iraq to an Iraqi provisional government. The United States is seeking Arab, European and U.N. support ahead of the transfer, and progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front would help.

Consequently, a senior administration official said, the pace of U.S. consultations on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is unlikely to flag.

Another factor spurring U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the danger inherent in any unilateral action, such as an Israeli pullout from Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority says it is ready to assume total control in Gaza — with, perhaps, some backing from European peacekeepers. But terrorist groups like Hamas have indicated that they might seek to take over there.

If the Israelis pull out earlier than expected and the Gaza Strip implode into a civil war, it could scuttle whatever credibility the Bush administration has in the region — another incentive for Americans to stay involved in the process.

Powell has made it clear that the Bush administration will oppose using depart-

ing Gaza settlers to expand settlements in the West Bank.

The administration already has prodded Israel into rerouting its West Bank security barrier to hew more closely to the pre-1967 Six-Day War borders.

Ehud Olmert, the Cabinet minister who has become a salesman for the Sharon disengagement plan, described U.S.-Israel differences as an "argument" that the Americans would win.

Israel might eventually have to evacuate not only Gaza settlements, but all settlements in

the West Bank outside the major Israeli settlement blocs, Olmert suggested in an interview with Israel Radio last Friday.

Some Israeli officials say there won't be any new developments with the Palestinians until 2005.

Bush says the Palestinians need enough contiguous land for a viable state. So the Americans are making it clear that backing Sharon's disengagement plan comes with a condition — that the plan is designed to motivate the Palestinians to fulfill their pledge to fight terrorism and rejoin negotiations. A plan that further isolates the Palestinians won't do that.

"We are anxious to see Prime Minister Sharon meet with Prime Minister Abu Ala to get this going," Powell said last Friday, using P.A. Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei's nom de guerre.

The Americans hope to soon see a Palestinian response to the Gaza withdrawal plan. Withdrawal from Gaza "is a step in the right direction," Richard Armitage, the U.S. deputy secretary of state, told the U.S.-run Arabic language Radio Salem in a recent interview.

"I hope it would be followed by the Palestinians in turn clamping down once and for all on the instruments of terror."

Meanwhile, in the absence of details from Sharon on his disengagement plan, Bush administration officials are looking elsewhere — including at unofficial peace proposals like last year's "Geneva accords" — for an alternative framework to move closer to a resolution of the conflict.

That puts pressure on Sharon — who reviles the Geneva proposal — to come up with details of his own.

With the Iraq deadline looming and U.S. presidential elections around the corner, Sharon doesn't have much time.

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'The Passion' premieres and debate continues

By JOE BERKOFSKY and
RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — For Maria Gaffney of Ramsey, N.J., watching "The Passion of the Christ" was witnessing "the truth."

"I felt like I was walking with Christ," Gaffney said after attending the movie's debut in her hometown theater, one of 3,006 cinemas nationwide where Hollywood star Mel Gibson's \$30 million epic premiered Wednesday.

After a yearlong furor over the movie's historical veracity and charges that it falsely accuses the Jews of spearheading the crucifixion, "The Passion" finally hit the silver screen. Millions of faithful — and the curious — streamed into theaters for an opening day that reportedly recouped \$20 million for the director.

The faithful, many still bearing Ash Wednesday markings, filled quiet suburban movie houses in towns like Ramsey, some weeping or hiding their faces as they watched sadistic Roman guards whipping Jesus.

■
Meanwhile, in noisy urban scenes in Manhattan, Jewish protesters faced defiant moviegoers. And even as the movie premiered, the storm over "The Passion" raged unabated.

While some Jewish groups continued to criticize the movie as anti-Semitic, others pledged to turn the furor into a path for new interfaith dialogue and said criticism had only aroused emotions around the film.

Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, a chief critic of the movie, called a news conference after seeing it to blast Gibson for distilling the New Testament into the toxic message that "the Jews killed Jesus" and for setting back Christian-Jewish ties half a century.

"How sad," Foxman said, that Gibson resurrected a debate "we thought we had resolved 50 years ago."

Groups from B'nai Brith Canada to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles to the tiny Jewish Defense Group in New York continued to swamp media outlets with news releases and commentaries.

Media coverage of the film had been building for weeks, leading many to declare Gibson a marketing wizard.

Newsweek ran a cover story "Who

Killed Jesus?"; The New York Times and USA Today ran front-page features; the New York Post blared it was running "shocking" movie photos.

Network and cable TV programs also led with the movie, producing a rare cottage industry for talking-head rabbis, ministers and priests.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, spoke on MSNBC's "Scarborough Country," while Rabbi James Rudin went on Fox News' "Hannity & Colmes."

Emotions over the movie spilled into a public spectacle in New York. Outside a theater in the heavily Jewish Upper West Side, Jewish activists clad in concentration-camp uniforms protested.

"The Passion" "casts Jews as being Jesus-killers," said Rabbi Avi Weiss, veteran activist and president of Amcha-The Coalition for Jewish Concerns. "This lie planted the seeds of the Holocaust."

There were clashes with passersby. "He died for our sins! Open your heart! See the movie!" shouted Floren Cabrera as he emerged from the theater. He said the movie simply showed that "Jews were instruments as much as the Romans were."

Cabrera also said the movie "opened my mind to Jesus," a reaction that Raymond Joseph "R.J." Runowski said he hoped he'd see repeated.

"The movie is a witnessing tool," he said. "It's hitting the secular world in ways that the Christian world never could penetrate."

■
The Lovingway United Pentecostal Church in Denver drew protests after unveiling a sign Wednesday that said, "Jews Killed the Lord Jesus." The sign added, "Settled!"

Danetter Seman, of Brooklyn, said that stirring antagonism over who killed Jesus misses the movie's message. "It's a love story about the most important love of my life," she said.

Some Jews who saw the movie said they couldn't quarrel with the movie's origins. "If people say that this film was anti-Semitic, then basically what they're saying is the Gospels were anti-Semitic," said Aryeh Leifert, an Orthodox rabbinical student.

The ADL's Foxman said he faulted Gibson not for his faith in the Gospels, but for having "cherry-picked" the New Testament and then "filled in" his own interpretations.

After seeing the film, Frank Purcell of Mahwah, N.J., agreed. He said some details from the Gospels were "projected backward" by authors generations after the fact. "We have all this ballyhoo about the crucifixion and forget the message" of Jesus' life, he said.

Darren Kleinberg, 27, another Orthodox rabbinical student in New York, said the movie made him feel compassionate toward Christians for their having to wrestle with the painful story.

"I wanted to hug everyone in the room," Kleinberg said. "In Judaism, we don't have that kind of weight."

As the passion and debate continues, Jewish organizations vowed to make the movie a focus in interfaith ties.

Jonathan Levine, the director of community services for the American Jewish Committee, said the group's 33 chapters nationwide were organizing screenings and discussions with Christian leaders.

The World Jewish Congress, meanwhile, which was leading a group of French Catholic bishops on a tour of Jewish sites in New York this week, issued a joint statement with Jean Marie Lustiger, the archbishop of Paris, saying "we will not be deterred" in pursuing interfaith ties.

Grass-roots interfaith moves cropped up as well.

In Barrington, R.I., Rabbi James Rosenberg of the Reform synagogue Temple Habonim said he will meet with a Catholic priest and several Protestant ministers to watch the movie and discuss it afterward.

The movie has "without a doubt" come to dominate interfaith dialogue in recent months, Levine said.

Others said Jewish groups that campaigned against the movie had waged an ill-conceived — and losing — battle.

"We have fought this and lost," said Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, who argued that Jews overreacted to the film. "The hysteria of the Jewish response was uncalled for." ■

'I wanted to hug everyone in the room.'

Darren Kleinberg
Orthodox rabbinical student

In Ariel, settlers ponder fence and their future

By DINA KRAFT

ARIEL, West Bank (JTA) — For now, the hills outside this sprawling Jewish West Bank city are quiet, absent the bulldozers that have been busy elsewhere laying the groundwork for Israel's West Bank security barrier.

SECOND IN A SERIES

But the question of whether or not they'll come here may yet make Ariel the center of a political firestorm.

Israelis, the U.S. administration, Palestinians and local residents all have their eyes on whether or not Israel's government will extend the security fence 13 miles into the West Bank to include this community of 18,000, one of Israel's largest settlements, and a few neighboring communities of Jews.

The open question — Israel has yet to make a decision on the matter — has become the focus of global attention.

Indeed, the controversy over the whole barrier was at the forefront of international debate this week, when the International Court of Justice at The Hague held hearings on the fence's legality.

Israel did not make arguments in the trial, saying The Hague has no jurisdiction in the matter.

The United States also did not participate in the proceedings, saying the international court was not the right forum to decide a political issue.

When the court opened its hearings, Holland turned into a staging ground for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as thousands of Israel supporters from across Europe, Israel and the United States descended upon The Hague to talk about the fence and Palestinian terrorism.

Inside Israel, the debate over the fence continues.

Extending the fence to include Ariel would cut off much of the northern West Bank from the rest of the West Bank, which Palestinians say would make the creation of a viable Palestinian state extremely difficult.

Palestinians say Israel is using the security fence as an excuse for a land grab, and that the barrier is separating Palestinians from each other, their property, their schools and their livelihoods.

Israeli officials say the fence — which

along most of its route is comprised of a sophisticated network of wire mesh fences built with electronic sensors, patrol roads, ditches, cameras and watchtowers — is the best solution to stopping suicide bombers from entering Israel via the West Bank.

Those attacks have left nearly 1,000 Israelis dead and thousands more injured.

Jewish residents of the West Bank fear that if they are not included in the route of the fence they will be isolated from Israel and at greater risk of Palestinian terrorist attacks. They are lobbying the government hard to build the barrier to include their communities, even those relatively far from the Green Line — the armistice line from Israel's 1948 War of Independence, which served as a de facto border between Israel and Jordan until the 1967 Six-Day War.

So far, the government has approved a horseshoe-shaped ring of fence to be built on the eastern edge of Ariel, as well as to the east of nearby settlements Kedumim and Emmanuel, both sizable West Bank Jewish population centers. In total, 45,000 Israelis live in the Ariel area.

It is not yet clear if those independent fences will be linked with Israel's main, contiguous West Bank security fence, or whether gaps would remain open to allow for contiguous Palestinian-controlled territory.

In this cookie-cutter city, with its windswept views, neat rows of white houses with red-tiled rooftops and mix of native Israelis and Russian-speaking immigrants, the fence is both an international problem and a local issue.

Residents say they support the idea of the fence but are not certain it will bring the security they seek.

"I think it's more important for the sense of security it would provide," says Shosh Levavi, a social worker who heads the settlement's social-services department.

"But I don't think the fence will solve the problem."

Levavi, originally from Haifa, moved to Ariel 25 years ago. She and her husband had been looking

for a good place to raise their children, a family-minded place where they could feel part of building a community.

She says she is angry that efforts to placate the U.S. government may determine how the fence is constructed in the Ariel area.

"What happens will depend on the Americans," she says. "The government is becoming more and more an American colony and

says is what will be."

Part of the plan to legitimize Ariel and increase its chances of one day becoming part of Israel proper was the construction of the city's College of Judea and Samaria, which now boasts a rapidly growing student body that now stands at 7,000.

Alexander Bligh is head of the college's political science department. He says that whether or not the Ariel area becomes part of the main fence is critical for establishing political facts on the ground — it could tip the scales in favor of Ariel's one day becoming part of Israel proper.

Israeli leaders have been careful to say that the fence is only a temporary response to present security needs and that it does not predetermine the future boundary between Israel and an independent Palestinian state.

Bligh dismissed such cautions.

"In spite of what our leaders say, the fence really is a political policy statement and therefore it is very significant where the exact line of the fence is," he says.

Meanwhile, Israel's defense ministry, which is building the fence along government guidelines, still does not know if Ariel will be included in the route of the fence.

According to senior Israeli security officials, that decision will be made at

'I think it's more important for the sense of security it will provide. But I don't think the fence will solve the problem.'

Shosh Levavi
Social worker for settlers

**ON THE
FENCE**

some unspecified future time.

They stress, however, that Ariel's security — a settlement considered among the most unlikely for evacuation given its relative size, its proximity to Tel Aviv and its population of suburban commuters — will be guaranteed one way or another.

Political observers say the government's apparent hedging on the Ariel issue is a way to buy time and stave off U.S. and international criticism.

After a spate of criticism of the West Bank fence last fall from within Israel and abroad, government officials said some changes would be made to the barrier's route. Then they announced the construction of the separate Ariel fence, leaving open the decision of whether or not ultimately to link it to the main West Bank barrier.

The U.S. administration reportedly has threatened to cut loan guarantees to Israel over the Ariel fence issue.

"The prime minister has made it clear there will have to be adjustments made in the fence and it could be that in retrospect it could have been planned differently," said David Baker, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. "The prime minister has yet to determine what changes will be made."

Sitting behind a wide wooden desk in his office, Ron Nachman, Ariel's outspoken mayor, says that as a general rule he is against fences of any kind. But, he says, he has lobbied the government to include the settlement he helped establish in 1978 inside the loop of the fence.

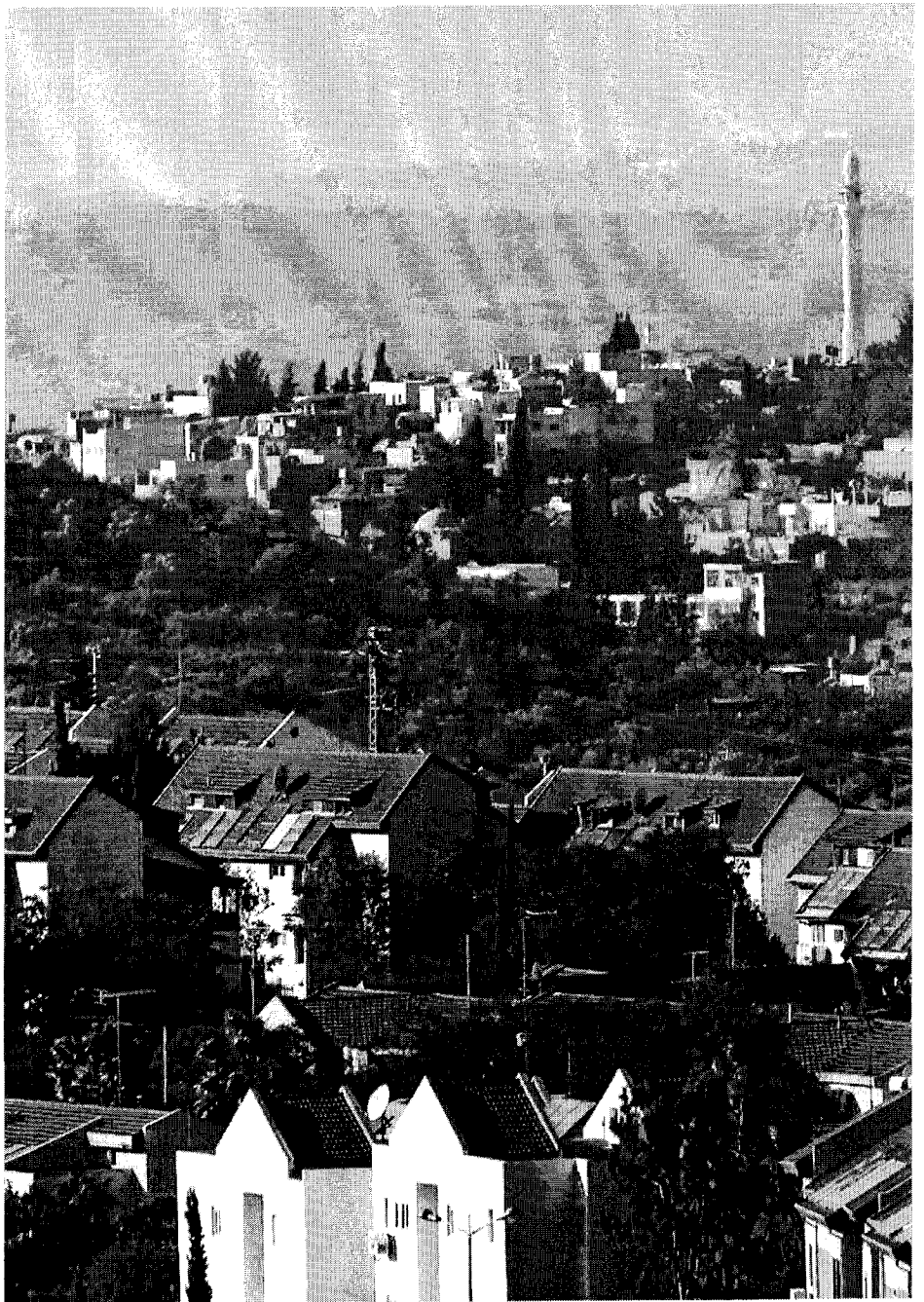
"In general the world is opening up and I'm not pro-fences. Every place you put it down it will have political aspects." But, Nachman says, "we need to defend ourselves."

Nachman blames the Palestinian Authority for the fence, saying that if the Palestinian leadership had done more to fight terrorism there would be no need for Israel to take such measures now for the defense of its citizens.

"Israel did not want the fence because we know it has political connotations," Nachman says. "The fence is not intended to set boundaries, but to safeguard against terror."

"I don't want the fence around Ariel, but the question is how to get to Tel Aviv and other settlements without being hurt along the way."

Palestinian Cabinet member Saeb Erekat sees things differently. He says to include Ariel on the Israeli side of the



Brian Hendler

The Arab village, top, seen from the Jewish settlement of Ariel, bottom, will be on the Palestinian side of Israel's West Bank security barrier.

fence means Israel is not serious about helping create a Palestinian state.

"Ariel is in the heart of the West Bank, and with all due respect to the wall and the security situation, if they want a wall why not build along the 1967 borders? Why build a wall that separates Palestinians from Palestinians?" Erekat says.

"If they want to maintain Ariel, it means they want to sabotage the idea of a two-state solution," he says. "Contiguity will be cut from the north and middle of the West Bank."

Within Israel, the fence also has critics.

In Ariel's quiet, suburban-style streets, residents follow the back-and-forth over whether or not they will or won't be part of the contiguous West Bank security fence network.

Among them is Yigal Orgad-Cohen, who served as finance minister under former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1984 and now is in the business of real estate management.

"Not only I do not know where the fence will be," says Orgad-Cohen. "I think the government does not know where it is going to be and if it is to be put up at all."

Ukrainian program uses a bus to feed youths

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

DNEPROPETROVSK, Ukraine (JTA) — The boy's pale swollen face is emotionless, his one eye is half-closed — the result of a recent street fight — and he answers questions reluctantly.

Vitalik has no parents and has lived most of his 18 years between the tough conditions of state-run orphanages and the dubious comforts of a runaway's street freedom.

Now too old for orphanages, during the day he takes odd jobs at a local farmer's market and spends the evenings in the company of other street kids. He says they "just spend time together" — this could mean various illegal activities: pickpocketing at a local train station, petty theft at the market, drug abuse.

Vitalik and his friends don't know anything about Jews, and in fact they do not care much. But twice a week they look for a white bus decorated with Hebrew, Russian and English words where they can get some food: a sandwich, some fruit and a can of juice, all packaged in a white plastic bag.

The 24-foot long bus that has cruised the night streets of Dnepropetrovsk for more than two years is believed to be one-of-a-kind Jewish-run operation in the former Soviet Union.

The idea for the Wheels for Life bus came from Adina Moskowitz of Great Neck, N.Y., while on a trip to Ukraine.

The bus was purchased and operates with funds raised from the Joseph Papp Memorial Fund, a project of Tzivos Hashem, an affiliate of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement that works with children. Most of the money comes from the American theater community.

■
In Dnepropetrovsk, Tzivos Hashem runs a hub for its activity in the former Soviet Union.

A plaque mounted on a wall inside the bus says the operation honors the memory of the Jewish children of Ukraine who perished during the Holocaust.

Yossi Glick, the young Australian-born rabbi who directs Tzivos Hashem operations in the region, says the needs are much greater than what his organization can provide.

Since the fall of communism, children in the former Soviet Union have suffered greatly as the region has undergone dras-

tic economic changes.

When the bus operation was started over two years ago, Glick and other Jewish officials in this community thought that it would help them to find Jewish youths among hundreds of street children who were believed to live on the streets of the third-largest city in Ukraine.

Those few children with Jewish roots who were located through the food-distribution operation were taken to the local Jewish home for children run by Tzivos Hashem.

But Glick said even with many thousands of families in the region that were hit hard by economic problems, drug abuse or alcoholism, Jewish children remain a rarity on the street.

"Perhaps one in every 400 street kids is Jewish," he said, adding that Jewish youths from problem homes rarely find themselves on the street even if they do not have a functional family any more. "They are usually picked up by older relatives," he said.

■
But there are a lot of non-Jewish children who are homeless.

About 60 percent of street kids in the city are believed to have drug problems — most often they abuse substances such as glue and other chemicals.

"Children sleep in sewers, boiler rooms, on train stations. Some don't go home often because their parents have alcohol problems," Glick said.

One recent evening, Tanya, 15, ate her food package inside the Wheels for Life bus. She has been on the street for more than a year, since she was raped by her alcoholic stepfather, she says.

Many of the street children are runaways from state-run orphanages that are infamous for bad living conditions, inadequate nutrition and hazing by older children and personnel.

As the state-run foster care system improves, city social workers have taken advantage of the Bus for Life program. Every time the bus goes out, it has two social workers on board whose task is to try to bring youths back to the institutions and to see if any of the youths require medical care.

"The city was very excited when we started this program," Glick says.

Among those who apparently welcomed the idea was the local police department. Police often patrol the streets, open-air markets and train stations for street kids.

"We reached a sort of agreement with the police that they don't touch the kids while they are in or near the bus," Glick said. A few months ago, the police broke their word and stormed inside the bus, taking some of the children to a police station.

Glick said it scared the kids away from the bus for many weeks, and there were nights when no children would come to the bus after the incident. Only recently have some of the children begun to return.

■
Glick believes there will be large demand for the bus operation in the years to come.

"The orphanage system is getting a lot better lately, though it is still not great. Even if it was great, children wouldn't go there. You can't smoke in the orphanage, you have to go to school and do your homework."

Those children who want to can eat their package on the bus — the bus has special perimeter bench seats to create a sense of coziness. But some youths prefer to grab their packages and leave. Glick said they would prefer if the youths eat everything on the bus, because older children sometimes take the food away from the younger ones on the street.

Valentina, a social worker with the municipality who went with the bus on a recent evening, said 20 to 40 children get food packages on the bus, which runs two evenings a week and makes stops at places known for large concentrations of street kids.

She said this was the only such charity effort in the entire city of 1.3 million and that she is not that surprised that the Jewish community started this project for non-Jews.

"They told us they were doing this to say thank you to those Ukrainians who saved Jews" during World War II, Valentina said.

The Jewish community started the project for non-Jews.

FIRST PERSON

Sexual double-standards are in Purim story

By JANE ULMAN

ENCINO, Calif. (JTA) — “Vashti’s the only one in the Purim story who should be congratulated,” my son Danny, 12, says.

You may recall that King Ahasuerus, who had been sumptuously drinking and feasting with his Shushan subjects for seven days, ordered his chamberlains “to bring Vashti the Queen before the King wearing the royal crown to show off to the people and the officials her beauty.”

But Vashti, whose self-respect would never allow her to participate in a “Girls Gone Wild” video or a Super Bowl half-time show, refused.

Ahasuerus “therefore became very incensed and his anger burned in him.” He consulted his legal experts who advised that “Vashti never again appear before King Ahasuerus.” This was interpreted to mean she was banished or beheaded.

And how was this courageous death rewarded? By total vilification by the tal-mudic rabbis, obvious adherents of the “no good deed goes unpunished” theory.

If you’re not outraged by Vashti’s bad rap, you’re not paying attention.

■

While Vashti is condemned for standing up for her beliefs, Mordechai is praised for defying Haman — never mind that his act of defiance so enrages Haman that he schemes to murder not just Mordechai but every Jew in the kingdom.

“But otherwise there wouldn’t be a story,” my ever-practical husband, Larry, says.

“Maybe there shouldn’t be a story,” I answer. Not for this holiday, which can’t decide if it’s a cartoon, a satire or another near-historical rendition of the near-annihilation of the Jews. This holiday that exhorts us to drink until we don’t know the difference between “blessed by Mordechai” and “cursed be Haman” and that applauds the murder of 75,000 innocent Persian citizens.

And, most disturbing to me, this holiday that promotes the belief that women should be soft-spoken and obedient. ■

Brazil’s first female rabbi takes praise — and surprise — in stride

By MARCUS MORAES

RIO DE JANEIRO (JTA) — When Sandra Kochmann took the post of assistant rabbi at Rio de Janeiro’s largest synagogue, becoming the first female rabbi in Brazil, many Brazilian Jews dismissed her derisively as a “Paraguayan.”

In Brazil, “Paraguayan” is commonly used to mean “fake” due to the prodigious amount of smuggled goods, many of them knock-offs, that cross the border from Paraguay into Brazil.

Kochmann readily admits she’s Paraguayan — she even keeps the flag of her home country’s soccer team on her desk — but there’s no mistaking that she’s for real.

“I am opening doors,” she says in an interview with JTA, speaking in Spanish-accented Portuguese.

Kochmann, 33, officially started her job as assistant rabbi at the 1,000-family Associacao Religiosa Israelita, or ARI, in late 2003. The synagogue is affiliated with both the Reform and Conservative movements.

The elegant and composed Kochmann attended the Marshall T. Meyer rabbinical seminary in Argentina and finished her rabbinic studies in Israel.

“We chose the most competent professional, the one who could best meet our congregation’s needs,” says Nelson Kuperman, ARI’s president.

Women long have struggled to achieve equality at ARI. It has been a gradual process, with women first granted the right to read the Haftarah and eventually being allowed to chant the Torah portion and lead services, Kuperman said. Today, women Torah readers and cantors are common at the synagogue.

But change has not always been easy for congregants.

A 68-year-old congregant, a lawyer who identified herself as Edite G., says she was taken aback when she first saw Kochmann on the bimah during Shabbat services.

Edite asked her granddaughter, “How will she get close to the Torah during

her menstruation period?” — referring to what many believe is a prohibition against menstruating women touching the Torah.

Like many of her responses, Kochmann has a quick answer for Edite.

“The Torah is so sacred that it wouldn’t get impure in any circumstance,” she says.

Kochmann says equality is rooted in the Bible: “God created man and woman at the same time in His image, but the next chapter’s story that tells that Eve came out of Adam’s ribs was the one imposed by our patriarchal system,” she explains.

Orthodox Jews in Brazil have been less accepting of Kochmann. Jewish journalist Arnaldo Bloch, writing in O Globo, Rio’s largest newspaper, recently wrote that for the Orthodox, “a woman rabbi is hard to swallow. Even more so without a beard.”

In her debut ceremony at ARI, Kochmann was warmly welcomed.

“ARI’s achievement makes us very proud,” says

Diane Kuperman, vice president of the Rio de Janeiro state Jewish Federation and wife of the synagogue’s president. “I can’t understand how women who are completely inserted in the community can accept a submissive role when it comes time to accomplish religious tasks.”

Sao Paulo has only one egalitarian synagogue like Rio’s ARI, called Congregacao Shalom. Rio’s Jewish community, while only half as large as Sao Paulo’s 60,000, has two: ARI and Congregacao Judaica do Brasil.

Kochmann’s hire has met with some criticism.

“Nothing is more degrading than a woman wearing a kippah and pink tallit and reading the Torah,” said Rabbi David Weitman, the Orthodox rabbi of Beit Chabad. “It’s not forbidden, but it’s a millenary custom that must not be changed.”

Not surprisingly, Kochmann disagrees. She says she is loyal to herself by “respecting the past and drinking from the traditions,” but not following regulations formulated in times when women spent most of their lives in the home. ■

‘A woman rabbi is hard to swallow. Even more so without a beard.’

Arnaldo Bloch
Jewish journalist

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Passion over 'The Passion'

Protestors got into a shouting match outside a Manhattan theater at the opening of "The Passion of the Christ."

"Open your hearts! See the movie," shouted Floren Cabrera to a group of about 25 Jews protesting the Mel Gibson movie.

Wednesday's demonstration was organized by Amcha. Some of the protesters wore the black-and-white-striped uniforms of concentration-camp inmates.

They said the movie, which depicts Jesus' final days, is anti-Semitic.

White House keeps faith-based plan

The White House says the Supreme Court's ruling on religious scholarships will not change its faith-based initiatives.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, Jim Towey, the director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Relations, said the Bush administration will continue to fund religiously affiliated social-service programs.

The Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday that states have the right to exclude theology majors from taxpayer-funded state scholarships.

"The court's decision was so carefully worded to apply to a very narrow case, which is the training of ministers," Towey said. "The faith-based initiatives is moving forward."

State plays down barrier

The U.S. State Department's annual human-rights report mentions Israel's security barrier only in passing.

Israel was worried that the report, released Wednesday, would harshly criticize the West Bank fence — which has been at the center of recent U.S.-Israel diplomatic differences.

Only one mention addressed the impact of the security fence as a whole. "Israel constructed parts of a large security barrier on land inside the West Bank isolating residents and limiting access to hospitals, schools, social services, and agricultural property," the report said.

But it also said, "At year's end, Israel was engaged in a process of reconsideration and reassessment of the routing and operation of the security barrier."

Football on Rosh Hashanah rescheduled

The Miami Hurricanes football team rescheduled two games because of the Rosh Hashanah holiday.

Following complaints over a home game against Louisville originally slated for Sept. 16, the first day of Rosh Hashanah, officials at both teams' schools and the Atlantic Coast Conference agreed to move the game to Oct. 14.

Because a Miami-Louisiana Tech match-up was scheduled for Oct. 16, that game will be played Sept. 18.

Purim packages for soldiers

Hundreds of shalach manot holiday food packages were sent to U.S. Jewish soldiers in Iraq for Purim.

The shalach manot, a Purim tradition, were assembled by the National Council of Young Israel and included hamantashen, granola bars, noisemakers and copies of the Purim story. The packages also had lip balm, lotion and hand sanitizer — all useful for troops serving in the desert.

Several U.S. Jewish groups are organizing Purim food packages for Israeli soldiers, including BasketstoIsrael.com. Food packages for Israeli terror victims can be ordered at www.Walk4Israel.com.

MIDDLE EAST

Three Palestinians die in clashes

Israeli forces killed two Palestinians during a riot to block construction of Israel's security barrier. A third Palestinian was killed after throwing a firebomb at Israeli troops stationed near Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah, news agencies reported.

In the riot at a village near the West Bank boundary, 10 Israeli security personnel were injured when hundreds of Palestinians began throwing rocks at police and soldiers.

Israeli authorities said they are investigating the reported deaths of the two Palestinians in the melee.

Peres meets Egyptian leader

Meeting with Israeli Labor Party leader Shimon Peres on Thursday, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Egypt would help with a withdrawal if Israel coordinated it with the Palestinian Authority, Ha'aretz reported.

Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip before Israel captured it in the 1967 Six-Day War. Mubarak had invited Peres to Egypt.

Settler petitions rejected

Israel's High Court rejected three petitions against the planned evacuation of West Bank settler outposts. The three-justice panel said Thursday that petitioners did not have a case against the evacuations ordered by the government last December.

The Yesha settler council asked the army to delay execution of the order, saying it would seek another High Court hearing with a larger panel of justices.

Peres: E.U. membership as incentive

Shimon Peres wants E.U. membership to be offered to the Palestinians, Jordanians and Israelis as an incentive to peace.

"Instead of the Palestinians hanging up on the Israeli economy or vice versa, and the Jordanians being all the time uncertain where does it lead, let's all of us adopt the rules and regulation of a continent that was united by economy though remained divided by heritage and politics," the Israeli Labor Party leader said during a visit to Washington this week.

WORLD

Jewish Agency targets aliyah

The Jewish Agency for Israel is making aliyah from Europe and North America a priority.

The subject was among the topics discussed at the Jerusalem meeting of the group's board of governors, which gathers three times a year.

Warsaw to aid Israeli terror victims for Purim

Warsaw will hold a Purim charity ball to raise money for victims of terrorist attacks in Israel. The March 6 event will include a lottery, an auction, food and music.

The ball, hosted by the Israeli Embassy and the Jewish Agency for Israel, is being organized by a group of local Jewish groups, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.

Papon can appeal sentence

Maurice Papon will be allowed to appeal his 10-year jail sentence, but his demand for a retrial was rejected. A court in Paris on Thursday allowed the appeal for Papon, a convicted Nazi war criminal convicted for crimes against humanity.