

IN THE NEWS

Mofaz regrets Gaza settlements

Israel's defense minister said the country made a "historic mistake" in settling Jews in the Gaza Strip.

"The communities established inside the Gaza Strip were a historical mistake," sources quoted Shaul Mofaz as telling Likud Party supporters Sunday. "They are not part of the State of Israel's overall interests. The Gaza Strip is not the legacy of our forefathers. Whether or not there is a peace accord, the Gaza settlers will not be there in another five years."

Plans for Paris rally against anti-Semitism

France's main anti-racist organization called for a demonstration against anti-Semitism in Paris on Sunday.

Following a wave of attacks on Jewish targets in recent days, SOS Racisme, a group set up in the 1980s to combat the rise of the far-right National Front, said it is calling "on all citizens to march on Sunday in order to show that French society unequivocally says 'no' to anti-Semitism."

Moving on up to Jewish Katzir

An Israeli Arab couple won a nine-year battle to move to a Jewish town. On Sunday, the Israel Lands Authority ordered the municipality of Katzir, in the Galilee, to allow Adel and Iman Ka'adan to move in.

The Ka'adans, from the nearby town of Baka al-Gharbiya, petitioned the High Court of Justice after their 1995 application to buy a plot of land in Katzir was summarily rejected on what they said were racist grounds.

The High Court found in their favor in 2000, but it took another four years for the purchase to be arranged.

The Ka'adans, who have four daughters, told reporters they plan to begin building a home in Katzir immediately.

WORLD REPORT

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In Israel, pressure builds to find alternatives to Orthodox marriage

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — When Galit Weidman Sassoon got engaged last year, her thoughts turned to the kind of wedding ceremony she and her fiancé wanted — meaningful, egalitarian and Jewish.

As secular Jews, Weidman Sassoon said the couple felt alienated from Israel's Orthodox religious establishment and wanted a ceremony in which they both could participate fully — from drafting the ketubah to blessing each other while exchanging rings.

In Israel, however, the only Jewish weddings recognized by the state are Orthodox. There is no civil marriage in Israel, and Jews who choose to marry in Conservative and Reform ceremonies are not considered officially married.

In recent years, however, there has been a groundswell of couples seeking alternatives to Orthodox marriage. About one-fifth of Israeli couples now are marrying outside of the rabbinate, according to Freedom of Choice in Marriage, a Jerusalem-based umbrella organization of civil rights groups.

"I was not prepared to even think of having someone from the rabbinate marry us, because it binds me to a ceremony that discriminates against women," said Weidman Sassoon, 33, a doctoral student in linguistics at Tel Aviv University. "It's hard to comprehend in a democratic country that one of the most basic rights people have — that of marrying according to their beliefs — is denied."

Israel's main wedding season begins this week following Lag B'Omer. The debate over marriage is especially urgent given that an estimated half-million immigrants from the

former Soviet Union who are not considered Jewish according to halachah, or Jewish religious law, cannot marry in Israel.

Also affected are male Kohanim, descendants of the priestly caste, who are forbidden under halachah to marry divorced women. The halachah also places marriage restrictions on the children of adulterous unions.

Largely because of the conundrum posed by the immigrants, pressure is building on politicians and a Knesset committee that may pave the way toward civil marriage.

Many Israeli couples fly to Cyprus and marry in civil ceremonies now so common that they have become a booming business for the Cypriot economy. But such travel often is too expensive for young couples, and new immigrants in particular.

Civil ceremonies performed abroad are recognized in Israel, as are marriages performed by Conservative and Reform rabbis overseas.

Though marriages by non-Orthodox rabbis in Israel aren't legally recognized, courts often give the couples common-law status. Still, many Israelis, like Weidman Sassoon and her husband, choose to have two marriages: One in Israel with a non-Orthodox rabbi that is personally meaningful, and a civil ceremony abroad that is legally binding.

"It's absurd that a person married by a Reform rabbi has to then be married by a non-Jewish clerk abroad," said Rabbi Meier Azri, the senior rabbi at Beit Daniel, a large Reform synagogue in Tel Aviv.

But figures in the country's Orthodox establishment argue that because Israel is the Jewish state and sets the standard for Jewish

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ON
ISSUES

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observance around the world, only Orthodox Jewish ceremonies can be legally sanctioned here.

If other marriages are recognized by the state the way Orthodox marriages are, the state would be "conveying a distorted message in regard to Jewish law," said Jonathan Rosenblum, director of Am Echad, an Orthodox media resource group.

He said Conservative and Reform movements "may be movements made of Jews, but they are not Judaism as traditionally understood because of a lack of allegiance to Jewish law."

Some matters in Jewish law are not up for debate or interpretation, he said, citing marriage and prohibitions on driving on the Sabbath.

Azri, however, said he has seen a "revolution" in the demand for Reform marriages. His synagogue marries some 600 to 700 couples a year, and the numbers keep rising, he said.

The law doesn't affect only Jews. Only people of the same religion can marry each other in Israel, a legal practice that dates to the time of Turkish rule and then the British Mandate. Under both regimes, religious authorities — whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim — had sole jurisdiction over marriage.

To date it has been impossible to pass legislation endorsing freedom in marriage ceremonies, in part because of the clout of Israel's religious parties. In March, another such bill was solidly defeated on the Knesset floor, but one of its initiators said

advocates would not be deterred.

"We will keep pushing for our legislation, even if it has a slim chance of passing, because it gets the issue on the public agenda," said Zamira Segev, Freedom of Choice in Marriage's coordinator.

The issue was prominent on Shinui's platform last year, when the party won 15 Knesset seats.

Ronny Brison, Shinui's coordinator for issues of religion and state, now is on the Knesset committee seeking a solution for the marriage issues of some 300,000 to 400,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not Jewish according to halachah, or do not have documentation to prove their Jewishness.

"It's hard to change the Orthodox monopoly because it's enshrouded in much psychology and mysticism. Those who are against it are those who say it will end the Jewish nation, that it's breaking up the country," Brison said. "These are not arguments that stand the test of logic or law and a pluralistic democratic outlook,"

but they carry weight "in a country that struggles with how to define itself."

As alternatives to Orthodox weddings become more socially acceptable, so too do their place in popular culture. The women's magazine "L'Isha" featured information on ceremony options in its most recent issue, and information booths by civil rights organizations now are a standard feature of wedding fairs where couples shop for caterers and DJs.

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Masorti, or Conservative, movement in Israel, said couples are looking to inject meaning into ceremonies that in some cases have become afterthoughts.

"For most Israelis, the chupah takes place in a corner where some pay attention but most people are chatting, drinking, and smoking," Bandel said. "We are trying to bring the ceremony into the center of the evening and have the couple be active partners in shaping the character of the ceremony."

Information booths by civil rights groups have become a standard feature of wedding planning fairs.

Argentine president in Jewish spat

By FLORENCIA ARBISER

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — An internal communal squabble over the investigation of the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center here has broken out in full view of Argentina's president.

The American Jewish Committee decided to honor Argentine President Nestor Kirchner in Washington on May 6 for his commitment to the investigation of the AMIA bombing and his public inquiry into Argentina's history of harboring Nazis after World War II. But Argentina's main Jewish political umbrella group sent Kirchner a very different message.

In a news release May 5, the DAIA organization of Argentine Jews expressed its "deep concern for the stagnation that the investigation of the July 18, 1994, attack, suffers from."

Eighty-five people died when a bomb ripped through the AMIA, in Buenos Aires.

The DAIA said it was "aggravated by recent political decisions and deviations

produced by the oral court" investigating the involvement of local Argentines in the attack, which many community members believe was sponsored by the government of Iran. Jewish officials repeatedly have maintained that the investigation is seriously flawed.

The statement was seen as a political broadside at the president, whose government has taken pains to push the AMIA investigation forward.

The next day, Argentina's largest newspaper, Clarin, put the internal Jewish controversy on its front page. In the story, AMIA's current president, Abraham Kaul, defended Kirchner.

"Kirchner has nothing to do with the state of the investigation," Kaul was quoted as saying. "The president has done all he could for the investigation, even though some do not like this."

The next day the DAIA issued another news release called for a meeting between Kirchner and AJCommittee officials to discuss Jewish concerns about the probe. ■



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JCC group tries to make centers more relevant

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — They are the sleeping giant of American Jewish life.

JCCs reach 800,000 homes with 1.7 million Jews — a third of the entire U.S. Jewish community — surpassing even the burgeoning Reform movement's membership rolls, according to a new report for the JCC Association of North America.

Yet few Jews realize it.

"JCCs need to be seen as serious players impacting people's Jewish experiences," Allan Finkelstein, the JCCA's president, told JTA. "We know that, but I'm not sure everyone else knows."

The JCCA, which represents 350 JCCs, YMHAs and Jewish camps across the continent, is trying to change that perception. At its 150th biennial in Montreal this week, the group unveiled a new strategic plan dubbed "Hagshama: Inspiring Jewish Journeys" that calls for repositioning JCCs within the Jewish world.

"Hagshama," Hebrew for "fulfillment," urges JCCs to see themselves as one institutional stop on the road many American Jews follow to map out a complex identity.

"We want to help people on every journey they want to take," said Leonard Rubin, JCCA's executive vice president of program services.

In part, JCCs are being urged to blur the traditional lines of organizational life by forging closer ties with other Jew-

ish institutions in hopes of encouraging Jewish activity. The idea is to "promote collaboration with other Jewish institutions, like synagogues and federations," Rubin said.

That will be crucial in coming years, said Robert Hyfler, senior vice president of research and development for the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of North American Jewish federations. UJC is one JCC funder.

Hagshama also is urging JCCs to undergo a "re-branding" that plays up their Jewish content alongside their preschools and fitness centers.

The JCC should be a "community within a community" that encourages "the spiritual, emotional and physical development" of members through all stages of life, the plan states.

"We intend to build a strong image for the movement, a public statement about what we stand for Jewishly," Finkelstein said.

This isn't the first time the JCCA has attempted to raise its profile. Over the past century, JCCs evolved from urban settlement houses for immigrants and places for young men to play basketball, to gleaming suburban centers built around camps, preschools and gyms, much like YMCAs.

During the 1990s the JCCA tried to "put the J back in JCC," publicizing the fact

that they also offer adult Jewish education and Jewish cultural events.

But "the world has totally changed" since then, Finkelstein said.

First there was a 1999 shooting at a Los Angeles JCC, followed by the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Both events underlined the need for tighter security.

Then the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey came out, showing that nearly 20 percent of the 4.3 million most Jewishly active members of the community — out of some 5.2 million Jews in the United States — belonged to a JCC.

That study reaffirmed the notion that many Jews have stepped into a JCC in recent years, Finkelstein said. Working from the NJPS figures, the JCCA plan estimated that 28 percent of Jewish households — amounting to 1.7 million Jews, or one-third of American Jewry — either belong to a JCC or have participated in an activity at one.

The JCCA then hired a leading branding firm, Landor Associates of New York, to retool its image. The firm, which has led campaigns for Hewlett-Packard, Federal Express and the Department of Homeland Security, interviewed more than 100 educators, rabbis, Jewish communal professionals and others about JCCs.

The interviews showed that JCCs had a "fuzzy" image that needed more focus. ■

(JTA Correspondent Bram Eisenthal in Montreal contributed to this story.)

New museum shows Jewish past via lens of Polish present

By CAROLYN SLUTSKY

KRAKOW, Poland (JTA) — A new museum in Krakow hopes to fill a void in Jewish cultural sites in this city and offer a new perspective on the Jewish past.

The Galicia Jewish Museum in Kazimierz, Krakow's Jewish district, opened with an exhibit by Chris Schwartz, a British photojournalist who has worked in Poland since the early 1980s.

The 135 color photographs display scenes from contemporary Polish life that are connected with the Jewish past.

In five sections, the exhibit shows modern streets, farmers' fields, buildings, synagogues and graveyards that once were centers of Jewish life in Galicia, the eastern part of Poland. The structures that represented Galicia's Jewish life now are all in ruins or completely remodeled.

A book accompanying the exhibit, "Traces of Memory," published by the Littman Library and University of Indiana Press, will include 400 color photographs and more text by British professor Jonathan Webber. It will be out in the fall of 2005.

In the exhibit, one photo shows faint Yiddish writing next to a modern city street sign. Another depicts a ruined synagogue, the roof gone and trees sprouting from the top. A third photo shows a field in which a Jewish cemetery once stood; farmers have taken care to plow around the cemetery, leaving the site untouched.

The museum is located in an old furniture factory that has been transformed into a hip, new art space.

Schwartz said he and Webber focused their research on Galicia because it was the heart of Jewish Poland. "This was one of the most exciting, thriving areas of Jewish culture in the world," Schwartz said.

Gilad Roth, an Israeli musician living in Krakow, said he found the museum moving. He said he hopes the museum will give Jews visiting from Israel, North America and Western Europe an opportunity to see beneath the surface of contemporary Polish cities and towns to find the roots of their Jewish past.

"No one tries to understand what happened through contemporary photographs. This generation has to look at it and understand it for ourselves," Schwartz said. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Deadly river to be cleaned

Israel's government embarked on a \$100 million project to clean up a polluted Israeli river where four Australians died during the 1997 Maccabiah Games.

The decision followed the final settlement of all claims made by 67 of the 350 athletes who were affected by the collapse of a bridge over the Yarkon River at the games' opening ceremony.

The Australian branch of the Jewish National Fund has pledged to raise \$5 million for the project.

Three jailed in Jordan

Jordan jailed three people for plotting to attack U.S. and Israel tourists. One of three men jailed Monday is a nephew of a known Al-Qaida leader. The men were sentenced to three years in jail.

P.A. says it will hold elections

The Palestinian Authority said it would hold municipal elections within the next year.

Before Monday's announcement, the P.A. Cabinet always had linked elections to an Israeli withdrawal from West Bank cities.

Case closed on soldier's death?

Israeli police announced new arrests in the 2003 killing of a soldier after three Israeli Arabs held for the crime were released.

Police said Monday that an Israeli Arab shot dead by one of its patrols in the Galilee last month was behind the July 2003 killing of Cpl. Oleg Sheichat.

Gaza buildings razed

Israeli forces razed at least 10 buildings believed to have served as hiding places for Gaza gunmen.

The pre-dawn demolition of the Palestinian houses lining the Kissufim highway on Monday followed increasing complaints that settlers driving in cars were easy prey for snipers.

On Sunday, two Palestinians opened fire at settlers who gathered on the highway to remember an Israeli woman murdered there along with four of her daughters last week.

The two assailants were killed by troops.

Sniffer dog laid to rest

The Israeli army laid a bomb-sniffing dog to rest with a full military funeral.

The funeral Monday was for Toska, a 3-year-old sniffer dog, who was killed last Friday on the Lebanese border in an attack that killed one Israeli soldier and wounded eight others. Toska, a Malinois dog — a type of Belgian shepherd — was part of the Pups for Peace program, an American-Israeli initiative that has trained some 90 dogs to detect explosives and identify bombers in Israel.

NORTH AMERICA

Comic Alan King dead at 76

Alan King, an heir to the Borscht Belt tradition who was known for his one-liners, died Sunday of lung cancer at age 76.

King was known for his appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in the 1950s and 1960s, and for his guest-host appearances on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson."

He also appeared on film and stage, produced Broadway plays and wrote five books.

King was born Irwin Alan Kniberg in Brooklyn.

He said that he didn't want to slow down in his later years. "You only live once," he once said, "except for Shirley MacLaine."

The Alan King Award in American Jewish Humor is given annually by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Israeli film wins in N.Y.

An Israeli movie shared the Best Documentary award at the Tribeca Film Festival.

"Arna's Children," co-written by Juliano Mer Khamis and Israeli filmmaker Danniell Danniell, shared the documentary prize at the third annual film festival in New York City.

The film — one of some 250 films from 42 countries featured at the festival — tells the story of Mer Khamis' mother, Arna Mer, who led a theater group for Palestinian children in the West Bank city of Jenin.

WORLD

Soldier accused of killing British activist

An Israeli soldier went on trial for killing a British student in the Gaza Strip last year. Tom Hurndall was shot in the head while trying to help Palestinian children move out of the line of fire in April 2003.

The soldier accused of killing him, Sgt. Idier Wahid Taysir, is pleading not guilty to six counts, including manslaughter and obstruction of justice.

Israeli Embassy trial delayed

The trial in Australia of a man accused of plotting to bomb the Israeli Embassy was delayed for a week.

The trial of Jack Roche, a convert to Islam, was delayed Monday after several jurors read a newspaper article on the subject that defense lawyers argued would compromise their impartiality.

Australian sentenced for hate crime

An Australian man received a suspended sentence for making threats against the local Jewish community.

It is believed to be the first time a conviction has been recorded for a crime against Jews in the city of Melbourne. Stephen Kennedy, 44, was found guilty recently in Melbourne Magistrates Court of making a death threat and of using a telecommunications device for harassment. Kennedy left a six-minute recording on the answering machine of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, containing violent threats against Jews.

Slain Chechen leader reached out to Jews

Chechnya's assassinated president sought Jewish help last year in monitoring his election.

During a visit to the United States last September, Akhmad Kadyrov, who was killed Sunday by a bomb in the Chechen capital, met with Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, to ask for a delegation of three or four "Jewish leaders" to monitor October elections in his country.

Schneier turned Kadyrov down and advised him that Jewish participation was impossible since the election was slated for Yom Kippur.

Synagogue in FSU hit with arson

Arsonists attempted to set fire to a synagogue in Tiraspol, capital of an unrecognized republic that split off from Moldova.

According to local community leaders in the Transnistrian Republic, vandals on May 5 threw Molotov cocktails at the shul and spilled flammable liquid near its front door.

The fire was extinguished before it spread to the building itself. The incident took place weeks after some 70 tombstones were damaged in the Tiraspol Jewish cemetery.