

IN THE NEWS

Sharon's aide heads to Washington

Ariel Sharon sent his chief of staff to calm any Bush administration jitters about Israel's Gaza withdrawal plan.

Dov Weisglass flew to Washington on Monday for talks with President Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, and her top aides.

Israeli sources said Weisglass would use the meetings scheduled for Tuesday to shore up the Bush administration's support for Sharon's plan to withdraw Israeli soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip.

Israeli court rules for some converts

Those who convert to Judaism after immigrating to Israel can receive automatic citizenship, Israel's high court ruled. Monday's ruling by the High Court of Justice, which capped seven years of deliberations, was a victory for those who move to Israel for religious studies and then convert abroad, usually via Reform or Conservative rabbis. But the court stopped short of formally recognizing non-Orthodox conversions.

It gave the state 45 days to prepare its arguments for preserving the status quo, in which Israel's Interior Ministry accepts only Orthodox converts for immediate naturalization under the country's Law of Return.

Ariel Sharon postpones speech

Ariel Sharon postponed a Knesset speech in which he was expected to rebuff criticism of his Gaza withdrawal plan.

A Knesset spokeswoman said scheduling problems prevented the Israeli prime minister from delivering his address Monday evening. The decision outraged opposition parties, which had collected signatures of 40 lawmakers to compel Sharon to appear and address questions on the Gaza plan. Sharon's speech was rescheduled for June 8.



WORLD REPORT

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Synagogues try to reverse trend of the post-Bar Mitzvah dropout

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Afternoons this past school year often found teenager Ross Weissman tutoring sixth-graders in Hebrew or leading third-graders in prayer.

Weissman, 18, and many of his friends became mentors for younger children at Congregation Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, Pa., a Conservative synagogue whose religious school allows teens from eighth to 12th grades to earn high school credits or get paid for being "madrichim," or counselors, between their Bar and Bat Mitzvah and the end of high school.

"If you work toward the goal of a Bar Mitzvah, then that's it," Weissman says. "But after Bar Mitzvah you can still have that connection with your friends, and you're still part of the congregation. I was able to foster my connectedness with Judaism."

Weissman is the product of one of several campaigns in the Jewish community to combat, and even reverse, a longtime tendency among young people to drop off the Jewish radar after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

With studies showing about half of children in the non-Orthodox religious denominations forgo any formal religious education after Bar Mitzvah age, these efforts signal new hope that organized American Jewry may hold onto their young.

The issue has particular resonance at this time of year, because Shavuot, observed last week, is when many Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations hold confirmations for their 10th- or 11th-graders.

The confirmation ceremony, coming on the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, gives teenagers the opportunity to affirm their commitment to Jewish life.

Synagogues "cannot rely on the notion that kids will remain with us simply because their parents pressure them to or because they want to retain their Jewish education," says Rabbi David Wirtschafter, associate rabbi of Peninsula Temple Sholom in Burlingame, Calif.

"We have to create another reason beyond that."

Until recently few such choices existed

Though day school ranks have mushroomed in the past decade or so, to nearly 200,000 students, the majority of whom are Orthodox, the vast majority of Jewish youths involved in Jewish education faced one path — Hebrew school, now often called congregational or religious school.

The most recent National Jewish Population Survey found that a majority of Jewish children receive some type of Jewish education. At the same time, studies of the non-Orthodox streams show evidence of the post-Bar Mitzvah exodus.

A 2000 longitudinal study by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar called "Four Up," for the Ratner Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary, followed Conservative movement students since 1995 and found only half stayed in religious school through 12th grade.

Similarly, a representative sampling of Boston-area Jewish teens in Conservative,

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FOCUS ON
ISSUES

■ *Parental involvement is seen as key in keeping kids in Hebrew school*

Continued from page 1

Reform and Reconstructionist synagogue schools in 2000 by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University found that participation dropped as teens grew older.

According to the study, participation dropped from 86 percent in the seventh grade to 72 percent in the eighth and ninth grades, to 69 percent in the 10th and 11th grades, and to 56 percent by the 12th grade.

In addition, Reform movement surveys, conducted randomly and of communally active teens, found that within 18 months after Bar and Bat Mitzvah, 50 percent of those teenagers stop participating in educational programs, while by the end of high school only 15-20 percent of teens are involved, says Rabbi Andrew Davids, co-director of the youth division of the Union for Reform Judaism.

The Brandeis study suggested that parental influence plays a big role on that decline, and Davids agrees.

"So many parents had an unfulfilling experience, so they feel while the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is an obligation, once that obligation is fulfilled, they're released from any responsibility," Davids says.

Efforts to get young Jews to feel part of the community, however, seem to be bearing early fruit, though no one has yet researched their influence on a national scale.

Cyd Weissman, whose son participated in the Beth Am Israel's "madrichim" program, was for a decade director of the

suburban Philadelphia congregation's school and found that effort yielded an 85 percent retention rate from ages 13 on.

"Eight years ago we had two or three kids in a confirmation class; now we have 25," she says.

The idea was to take older students and have them help younger students in areas they excelled at, whether it was Torah or arts and crafts, she said. In the process, relationships sprung up between the generations, in a Jewish setting, and connections were made.

"The whole frame for Jewish education is, you have learning with meaning, in a nurturing, caring context; you start when kids are younger and you build on that when they're older," she says.

Now Weissman is working with some 20 non-Orthodox synagogues in the New York area on a project called "Re-Imagine," for the Experiment in Congregational Education. In it, each synagogue is asked questions such as what role family and community plays, and what's the connection between learning and living.

The Reform movement is also launching new, informal methods of Jewish education outside of congregational school classrooms and youth groups but inside synagogues. These "alternate doors" to Judaism include teen healing services; rap groups or Jewish theater, Davids says.

In one rural Northern California synagogue, students are overhauling an old car, then debating the Jewish view of tzedakah, with a view toward selling the car and donating the proceeds, or the car itself, to a charity, says Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, director of youth and informal education for the movement's

Pacific-Central-West region.

At Temple Shalom, just south of San Francisco, students since last fall have been taking Stanley Kaplan preparatory tests for the college board SAT exams.

They'd warm up by picking out key vocabulary words from each week's Torah portion, doing the movement's new "10 Minutes of Torah" study first.

The idea is to get teens involved in areas they already consider important, then envelop the activity in a Jewish setting in a form of "soft sell," Wirtschafter says.

"We're not going to throw hard-core Bible or Talmud or history studies at them. The first step is getting them back in the door," he says.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein, of the Conservative synagogue Valley Beth Shalom in the Los Angeles suburb of Encino, takes a different approach.

Feinstein, who wrote a book aimed at answering theological questions from a teen perspective, "Tough Questions Jews Ask," says "kids know when they're being sold something. They have a powerful nose for the phony."

His synagogue takes a tough tack with parents of teens entering their religious school. "We tell them that if they leave after Bar Mitzvah, it's a lie," he says.

Instead, the school practices "good teaching," he says. One teacher screens episodes of the classic TV show "Twilight Zone" and debates the Jewish ethical issues the shows raise. Another teaches a class that debates Jewish values arising from provocative court trials of issues such as assisted suicide.

"In the end, it's the question, 'Is this worth my time?'" he says of whether students will choose to stay on.

'The first step is getting them back in the door.'

David Wirtschafter
Rabbi, Burlingame, Calif.

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Blue and white, and in the red

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Almost half of Israelis are in debt, a survey found.

A weekend poll commission by Bank Otzar Hahayal found that 47 percent of Israeli adults have overdrawn bank accounts — and that one-quarter of them

are in the red by more than \$2,000.

According to media reports, Israel's Banks Authority is considering levies against banks that let more than a set number of account-holders slip into the red.

THIS WEEK**TUESDAY**

■ Jewish leaders from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements will join other religious officials in a meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The members of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative are expected to push Powell for high-level engagement in the Middle East and to restart the "road map" for peace. The leaders have not had much access to the Bush administration, and are likely to offer a dovish viewpoint.

WEDNESDAY

■ A coalition of activists from across New York who are interested in state legislation supporting stem cell research converge on Albany to meet with state legislators. Lobby Day 2004 is an initiative of the newly formed New Yorkers for the Advancement of Medical Research, a coalition that includes Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. The Democratic speaker of the state assembly, Sheldon Silver, introduced a pro-stem cell research bill that passed the assembly last year but stalled in the state Senate. Silver again has introduced the bill.

■ Lay and professional Jewish leaders from the western region of the United States discuss Jewish identity, education and communal issues at the United Jewish Communities' Hades Conference Wednesday and Thursday in Woodland Hills, Calif. Participants will focus on issues such as Jewish arts and culture, intermarriage, synagogue renewal and relations, and engaging young adults and families in the Jewish community. Sessions will feature research findings and presentations by federations about Jewish renaissance and renewal issues specific to the Western region.

THURSDAY

■ A memorial and museum will be dedicated in Poland at the site of the notorious Nazi death camp in Belzec, Poland. Polish, American, and Israeli officials will be joined by more than 200 Holocaust survivors and families of survivors. The Belzec Memorial Project, a joint effort of the American Jewish Committee and Poland, with support from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, is the first effort in 60 years to preserve the long-ignored death camp, where hundreds of thousands of Jews died. The evening before there will be a reception hosted by the prime minister of Poland.

SUNDAY

The Conservative movement's congregational arm, the United Synagogue, begins its annual board and leadership council meeting in New York. Topping the agenda is the synagogue union's annual budget.

Nazi-hunting effort seeks help

By TOBY AXELROD

BERLIN (JTA) — When the hot line in Vienna rings, Christine Schindler steels herself.

It could be a tip leading to an old Nazi who has escaped justice. More likely, it's another crank caller making anti-Semitic comments.

"Why don't you leave our grandparents alone? The Jews are guilty of everything," Schindler has heard.

"There is one Nazi murderer: Ariel Sharon," is another line, or, "Austrians have paid enough for the Jews."

"Although I expected such calls, I did not know how stressful it would be," said Schindler, a volunteer for the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Operation Last Chance. The program constitutes the center's last-ditch effort to find and prosecute Nazi war criminals before they die.

Schindler works at the Vienna-based Documentation Center for Austrian Resistance, and she has been answering the hot line for several months. The Wiesenthal Center rewards successful tips — those that lead to a conviction — with \$10,000.

Last Chance was launched in 2002 in the Baltics, was extended to Poland, Romania and Austria in 2003, and this June will expand to Germany, Hungary and Croatia. "We are about to start the biggest push ever, the last push," said Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal Center's Israel office and coordinator of Nazi war crimes research.

Zuroff launched the project together with the Targum Shlishi Foundation of Miami, founded by Aryeh Rubin, who had the idea for the program.

The project reflects the fact that the World War II generation is dying. Those behind the project say it aims to correct the injustice that perpetrators have gotten away with murder, while Holocaust survivors suffer a lifetime of anguish over their pain and the loss of loved ones.

Despite the obvious challenge, there have been some positive results.

So far, 198 leads have come in from Lithuania, 43 from Latvia, 6 from Estonia and 13 from Ukraine, where the program hasn't even officially begun. In all, 72 cases have

been submitted to prosecutors in Lithuania, Latvia and the United States, with nine murder investigations under way in Lithuania. In Poland, an ad campaign for the program will be launched in June.

"This is a fight against impunity," said Winfried Garscha, historian and archivist at the Documentation Center for Austrian Resistance.

"You can't say it is so long ago and the murder is no longer a murder if it happened 60 years ago," he said. "This is the wrong attitude for the societies that allowed those crimes to take place."

"We have an obligation to the victims," Zuroff said. "We are working against the clock."

The program was started in the Baltics because those countries had the highest rate of victims during the Holocaust. There also was an extremely large number of local collaborators and police units sent from other Baltic countries who actively participated in the mass murder of Jews, Wiesenthal center officials said.

As each new country was added to the program, the rewards were announced in news conferences and were followed by local ad campaigns.

"We try to work with the Jewish communities but they are not always open to cooperation," Zuroff said. In Germany, he said he was told, "This is not the time."

"Like it is going to be 'the time' five years from now," Zuroff said.

In Austria, the ad slogan was "The murderers are among us." In Lithuania, the ad campaign included a photograph taken by Nazis of a 1941 pogrom in Kovno, where local gangs murdered 50 Jews. Some were killed when fire hoses were forced into their mouths and the water was turned on.

"Their stomachs exploded," Zuroff said. "Women and children were among those who applauded at every murder, and then they took out an accordion and people sang Lithuanian songs."

The ad said, "Lithuanian Jewry did not disappear. They were brutally murdered," Zuroff said. "This is about your Jewish neighbors, the ones who were murdered nearby." ■

Volunteers at a Nazi-hunting hot line in Austria are used to a lot of crank callers.

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

BBC broadcasts Vanunu interview

The BBC broadcast what it called the first interview with Mordechai Vanunu since he was released from an Israeli prison in April. Vanunu said he revealed the details of Israel's nuclear program to a British newspaper in the mid-1980s to "save Israel from a new Holocaust" of nuclear war.

Banned from speaking to the foreign media, Vanunu spoke to an Israeli journalist, who had the tapes smuggled out of Israel. The British journalist who first broke the Vanunu story in 1986, Peter Hounam, who was also involved in the recent interview, was briefly detained in Israel while the program was being filmed.

Istanbul bombings trial suspended

The trial was suspended in the case of 69 members of an Islamic cell suspected to be behind suicide bombings last November in Istanbul.

The state security court judge ruled Monday that he did not have the authority to hear the case. Two synagogues were among the targets of the attacks, which killed 61 people. Turkey is expected to set up new courts to deal with terrorism cases, including this one.

Will Jews be allowed at the talk-fest?

A Vatican-sponsored interfaith conference ended with disagreement over whether Jews should take part next year.

A speaker delivering an address on behalf of the emir of Kuwait opened the conference in Qatar on May 27 by saying that Jewish representatives should be invited. But the mufti of Gaza and a Syrian representative disagreed, saying that dialogue with Jewish leaders is impossible before the Palestinians get a state.

Czech synagogue book garners another award

An award-winning book on Czech synagogue textiles picked up a second major prize.

"Textiles from Bohemian and Moravian Synagogues," which recently was named as the most beautiful Czech book of 2003, won first prize as the best Czech museum publication in a competition organized by the Czech Ministry of Culture and the Association of Museums and Galleries in the Czech Republic.

European halachic authority dies

Dayan Nissim Rebibo, one of Europe's leading halachic authorities, died Monday in Paris at age 58.

Rebibo was head of the Paris Beit Din and a senior executive member of the Conference of European Rabbis.

NORTH AMERICA

Strategic Israeli-U.S. talks

Israeli and American defense chiefs held strategic talks. The bilateral Defense Policy Advisory Group convened Sunday and Monday in Tel Aviv to explore strategic issues of common interest, a statement said.

Chaired by the director general of Israel's Defense Ministry, Amos Yaron, and a U.S. undersecretary of defense, Douglas Feith, the forum was expected to pay special attention to the impact on Israel of instability in Iraq.

U.S. credibility on the line?

U.S. credibility could be affected by the fate of Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan, Israel's ambassador to Washington said. Though he won the strong backing of President Bush, Israeli Prime Minister

Ariel Sharon is having difficulty mustering government support in Israel for a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

"Failure to approve the plan would mean, to some degree, compromising the standing of the United States in the international sphere," Daniel Ayalon told Israel's Army Radio on Monday.

Senators want action on 'Gold Train'

U.S. senators pressed Attorney General John Ashcroft to resolve the case of Holocaust survivors who lost assets on the "Gold Train."

A bipartisan letter written by Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and signed by more than 15 other senators urged the Justice Department to help return items taken from Hungarian Jews by the Nazis, which were seized by U.S. forces in May 1945 on a train in Austria.

Group collects aid for flood victims

The American Jewish World Service is collecting relief for flood victims in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Funds can be sent to the American Jewish World Service, Haiti/DR Flood Relief, 45 W. 36th St., 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018. Donations also can be made by phone, at 800-889-7146, or on the Web at www.ajws.org.

Walk for Israel attracts 20,000

More than 20,000 people joined Toronto's 34th annual Walk with Israel on Sunday.

The walk raised an estimated \$365,000 for the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's annual fund-raising campaign.

The walk also was intended to show concern over recent acts of anti-Semitism in the Toronto area and to express gratitude to the city for its support of the Jewish community.

MIDDLE EAST

Egypt eyes Gaza security

Egypt reportedly is willing to send up to 200 experts to train Palestinian security forces in the Gaza Strip.

The Cairo-based Middle East News Agency said Monday that the delegation, along with European advisers, would be sent to Gaza in the event of an Israeli pullback.

Israel has pressed for direct Egyptian involvement in securing the Gaza Strip after Israel withdraws, to prevent a takeover by Hamas.

Ethiopian leader visits Israel

Ethiopia's prime minister is slated to visit Israel. Meles Zeanwi will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israeli President Moshe Katsav and leading Israeli businessmen during his visit, which begins Tuesday. The visit is the first ever by an Ethiopian prime minister to Israel.

Ethiopia and Israel have had diplomatic relations since 1989.

Anti-gay posters hit Jerusalem

Anti-gay and -lesbian posters appeared in Jerusalem days before a gay pride rally.

The posters, which compared gays and lesbians to child molesters, appeared days before the city's third annual gay pride parade on Thursday.

Jordan U. in Israel?

A Jordanian university may open an Israeli branch. Officials with Rabat Ammon University met with Israel's education minister, Limor Livnat, and asked for permission to open the branch, the Jerusalem Post reported.