

IN THE NEWS

Sharon rebuffs Syrian overture

Ariel Sharon said Israel would not resume peace talks with Syria until it stops sponsoring terrorism.

In a newspaper interview Wednesday, Sharon said Syrian President Bashar Assad's offers to resume negotiations that stalled in 2000 were merely a bid to win over American public opinion.

"The call for negotiations cannot be just a declaration," it has to be accompanied by action, Sharon told the Jerusalem Post.

Survivors to get more compensation

Austrian Holocaust survivors are to receive additional compensation funds.

Austrian victims of Nazi persecution will receive an additional \$1,200 for confiscated rental apartments, household belongings and personal items, according to an agreement reached Wednesday in Vienna by the Austrian National Fund, which represents some 18,000 survivors.

"It is a very good gesture to make sure that at least some of the survivors get this money while they are still alive," Ariel Muzicant, head of the Austrian Jewish community, told JTA.

Still held up are payments from the General Settlement Fund, established in 2001 to compensate Austrian survivors and their heirs for real estate, liquidated businesses, bank accounts, securities, mortgages, insurance policies, personal effects and the loss of education and jobs.

The funds have not been released because of U.S. lawsuits against Austrian businesses.

Hillel works to rock the vote

Hillel is working with Rock the Vote to encourage Jewish college students to register to vote.

Hillel of Broward and Palm Beach, Fla., has launched a "Dude, Where's My Vote" project that will culminate later this month with an effort to register 5,000 new voters.

WORLD REPORT

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Celebrities popularize Kabbalah, but serious interest also on the rise

By URIEL HEILMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — In another era, it might have been hard to imagine the likes of Madonna, Ashton Kutcher and Britney Spears spearheading a revival of ancient Jewish mystical traditions.

But what began not so long ago as a celebrity fad that turned Kabbalah into the latest Hollywood fashion statement may be translating into a genuine revival of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism in mainstream Jewish institutions.

At the dawn of a new academic year, it seems Kabbalah is hotter than ever at Jewish schools, JCCs, rabbinical seminaries and universities.

"There's no question that enrollment in courses on Kabbalah is going up," said Arthur Green, an expert on Jewish mysticism at Brandeis University and dean of the new, non-denominational rabbinical school at Hebrew College in Massachusetts. "The numbers are growing for courses on Kabbalah in universities, no doubt influenced by the popular interest in Kabbalah."

At JCCs and other community organizations, even a cursory glance at class offerings immediately demonstrates the prevalence of Kabbalah. By many accounts, classes can hardly keep pace with growing demand.

"Unknowingly, Madonna's interest has generated a huge interest among Jewish people to find out what's in their own backyard," said Yossi Offenberg, Jewish program manager at the JCC of San Francisco. "The interest is spreading."

When the San Francisco JCC first started offering a Kabbalah class seven years ago, fewer than 10 students signed up. Now the

JCC has two weekly classes in Kabbalah, one on Jewish texts and one on meditation, and more than 60 people are enrolled.

Rabbis, too, have been seeking out Jewish mysticism.

Green, author of "Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow," noted that a recent national convention of Reform rabbis invited him to keynote a session on the Zohar — the central work of Kabbalistic literature and perhaps the foremost work of Jewish mysticism.

"That would have been unthinkable in Reform Judaism a decade ago," he said.

At his own rabbinical school in Massachusetts, Green said, "there's clamor from students and a sense that there's a need to teach Kabbalah as part of a rabbinic education. All rabbinical seminaries are looking for faculty to teach Kabbalah."

At the Siegel College of Judaic Studies in Cleveland, Yakov Travis has started a new, non-degree-bound, one-year program in Jewish spirituality in response to demand among his students and local Jews generally.

"This is a very important cultural moment in America, in Jewish history," Travis said, referring to the popular fascination with Kabbalah. "The way it happened is by the Kabbalah Centre opening up in L.A. and attracting stars."

"On the one hand, it is so superficial and misrepresents a very deep tradition," he said. "On the other hand, it gives people some kind of connection to this deep, sophisticated tradition."

Both critics and acolytes of the Kabbalah Centre credit the institution's activities with reviving Jewish interest in the Jewish mysti-

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cal tradition generally — though some say the interest is in part an effort to reclaim Kabbalah for Jews in the wake of what they call the universalization, distortion and dilution of the subject by the Kabbalah Centre.

The Kabbalah Centre, which markets its version of Kabbalah to non-Jews as well as Jews — and has attracted the interest and support of numerous celebrities — has disseminated more than 3.5 million books and tapes on Kabbalah, teaches the subject to tens of thousands of students every week and runs a Web site that gets more than 150,000 unique visitors, according to Rabbi Michael Berg, the center's co-director.

"We make Kabbalah accessible," Berg told JTA. "We are the largest organization in the world dedicated to teaching this wisdom. Certainly the fact that non-Jews now have a desire to study Kabbalah, that expanded the universe of people who have access to it."

Rick Ross, an expert on cults and executive director of the Ross Institute in New Jersey, says the center is run like a cult and is interested only in enriching itself and the Berg family, not teaching Jewish philosophy.

Berg maintains that the center is a non-profit organization and that all the money it generates goes to support the center's activities and growth.

Numerous Jewish scholars have described the center's teachings as cosmetic and superficial, if not misrepresentative of Jewish mysticism.

Berg rejects that notion. He says the

revival of interest in the subject at Jewish institutions results from the Kabbalah Centre's work.

"Today every synagogue has a class on Kabbalah," Berg said. "Twenty years ago none had. A lot of that has to do with the work that we're doing."

Doubtless, much of the public interest in Kabbalah has been cosmetic. Paris Hilton may wear a bendel — a red string bracelet meant to ward off the evil eye — but she hardly is a student of Jewish philosophy.

Jonathan Dauber, professor of Jewish studies at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Va., says Kabbalah has no meaning if divorced from the system of Jewish law on which it's based.

"Quite frankly, selling magic strings is far away from an intellectually honest way of translating Kabbalah to a wider public," Dauber said. "That's peddling in folk magic, not in deep philosophical mysteries."

As far as institutions that teach Kabbalah to the general public, Dauber said, "It's somewhat absurd to even begin to teach Kabbalah to people without also giving them training in non-Kabbalistic Jewish texts. It's a bizarre enterprise."

He explained, "In general, the concerns of Kabbalah are particularly Jewish. They deal with Jewish people and Jewish law. Arguably, the most fundamental form of Kabbalah is texts that deal with

explaining the reasons for the commandments along Kabbalistic lines. How does one teach that divorced of knowledge of Jewish law?"

Regardless of how one feels about the Kabbalah Centre, the heated debate and angst it has generated among Jews has helped put Jewish mysticism back on the Jewish community's agenda.

Ross, the cult expert, acknowledged as much.

"Chabad has been talking about Kabbalah. Bureaus of Jewish education are beginning to offer alternatives through courses endorsed by the mainstream," he said. "Kabbalah has been supercharged by these celebrities, and

that's brought more attention to established Jewish institutions, and I think that's not a bad thing."

Seekers of Kabbalah should not be dismissed merely as celebrity-worshipping consumers, scholars cautioned.

"This is all part of a much broader search. Lots of Westerners have been seeking some deeper truth," Green said.

"You look at all these popular phenomena," he said, noting the Western interest in Buddhism before the current popularization of Kabbalah. "A lot of it was faddish or superficial. But some serious people started there and then delved more deeply. The same will be true of Kabbalah, I'm sure." ■

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Jonathan Dauber

Jewish Studies Professor, Virginia Wesleyan College

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No pillow talk for Rabin's killer

By DAN BARON

In a bid to win permission to marry in prison, Yitzhak Rabin's assassin proposed that authorities eavesdrop on the consummation. At a High Court of Justice hearing Wednesday on the wedding request, a lawyer for Yigal Amir raised the idea of bugging his bed.

The Prisons Service opposes letting Amir, who shot the Israeli prime minister after a 1995 peace rally, be alone with his bride, arguing that he could use the time

away from 24-hour surveillance to pass her far-right propaganda. "I am prepared for them to listen in on the consummation," said attorney Shmuel Kaspar. "Let them plant microphones in the pillow and bed sheets, but without filming them. These are religious people who observe the laws of modesty. They will not talk, they will make love quietly."

Last week, Amir's intended bride, Larissa Trimbobler, announced that they had married by proxy after a relative of Amir smuggled out a ring to her. ■

Russia, Israel move closer on counterterror

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has a new, if somewhat reluctant, partner in the war on terror: Russia.

Reeling from the loss of at least 335 of its citizens, roughly half of them children, at the hands of Chechen terrorists, Moscow signed a security cooperation memorandum with Jerusalem on Monday despite a lingering diplomatic dispute on how terrorism should be defined.

"The terrorism that struck Russia is exactly the same kind of terrorism that strikes us," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said, referring to last week's siege of a school in the disputed Russian region of North Ossetia.

Visiting Russian Minister Sergei Lavrov said contacts were already under way between the two countries' security agencies and thanked Israel for its help, but demurred at the bid by Sharon to establish a sense of common cause.

Although he called terrorism a "uni-

versal evil," Lavrov suggested that the Palestinians could be seen as resisting Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while the Muslim separatist cause based in Chechnya is illegitimate.

Russia, a member of the Middle East "Quartet" that pushed the now-moribund "road map" peace plan, was also at pains to make clear that it would not neglect the Arab world.

"I believe the key to the solution of the problem is to bring all countries to fight terror and I can assure you that in addition to our very close counterterrorist cooperation with Israel we have similar counterterrorist cooperation with Arab countries," Lavrov said during his one-day visit as part of a Middle East tour.

It was not clear what form the new Israeli-Russian cooperation would take.

Yet, for many in Jerusalem, just the declaration of empathy from a major European player was an achievement. Israeli media quickly called the outrage at the

school in Beslan "Russia's 9/11," hinting that it could bring Moscow more into line with the U.S. war on terror launched following the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacking attacks.

"The Soviet Union was notoriously pro-Arab, and the sense in Israel is that Russia has not quite gotten over that," a Sharon confidant said. "It was important that Russia understand, even the hard way, the sort of terrorism we have endured for decades, and especially over the last four years."

Despite killing more than 100,000 Chechens in its 13-year crackdown on the restive region, Russia has regularly censured Israel for its handling of the Palestinian intifada.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom put the new security pact to its first test by calling on Russia to oppose anti-Israel moves by the Palestinians and their Arab backers at the United Nations. In the last 21 U.N. resolutions on Israel, Russia has voted against the Jewish state 17 times and abstained on the others.

Russia did not immediately respond. ■

Dovish U.S. Jewish groups call for Mideast envoy

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — Left-leaning American Jews and Jewish groups are asking the next U.S. president, whoever he may be, to make resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a top priority.

"As American Jews who strongly support Israel, we call on you to commit our nation to vigorous and persistent engagement in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," states the letter, whose lead signatories include Americans for Peace Now, Meretz USA, actor Theodore Bikel and feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin.

"We ask that within the first hundred days of your administration you appoint an internationally respected envoy at the highest level to signal your intentions to pursue full implementation of the disengagement plan and a renewal of negotiations leading to a final status accord."

Timed for the homestretch of the presidential campaign, the Open Letter Campaign runs through Nov. 2 — election day — and is based on the notion that U.S. engagement is critical for bringing peace to Israelis and Palestinians.

The argument has broad appeal for American Jews, says Hannah Rosenthal, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

"I think most mainstream American Jews want to see movement toward peace, and it's not going to happen without an increased sustained engagement by the U.S.," she said.

The initiative comes as many American Jews have become more hawkish since the Palestinian intifada began four years ago. Many laud President Bush for supporting Israel during tough times and for marginalizing Palestinian Authority Presi-

dent Yasser Arafat. But the petition offers another voice from the community — a plea for the United States to bring the parties back to the negotiating table to end the conflict.

"There is a different center of gravity in the American Jewish mind and heart than is often perceived by political and diplomatic leaders," said Stephen P. Cohen, a signatory to the petition and national scholar for the Israel Policy Forum, a group that seeks heightened U.S. involvement in the peace process.

Cohen said the petition was driven by a perception among politicians that the American Jewish community is "an obstacle" to U.S. peace initiatives in the Middle East.

"We want the new president to know that there is a strong view among a wide variety of Jews that the best thing for Israel and for the United States is to make a serious attempt at trying to solve this problem and not letting it languish," he said.

Some Jewish officials noted that the Bush administration already has sent various envoys to the Middle East, but they weren't able to get a peace process on track. At least one American Jewish official was angered by the petition.

"I think it's wrong for these left-wing groups who were all wrong about Oslo and Arafat to demand American pressure" for steps the Israeli government hasn't approved, said Morton Klein, national president of the Zionist Organization of America, which insists that peace commitments must be kept.

But Letty Cottin Pogrebin, past president of Americans for Peace Now and founder of Ms. magazine, said: "I feel that the American interest in the region is such that it justifies that sort of intervention — not pressure, but support, encouragement and urgency." ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Groups praise ruling on abortion ban

Jewish women's groups hailed a ruling from a U.S. court declaring the "partial-birth abortion" ban illegal.

A Nebraska court ruled Wednesday that the ban, which passed Congress last year, is illegal, following similar rulings this summer by federal courts in San Francisco and New York.

Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women opposed the law.

"This ruling reaffirms that any law that would put a woman's life at risk is unconstitutional, echoing the Supreme Court's decision in *Stenberg v. Carhart* in 2000," said Marsha Atkind, NCJW's president.

Jewish female activists bash Bush

A group of Jewish women activists launched a campaign against President Bush's re-election.

Jewish Women Watching is sending around postcards and buttons reading, "We Are the Jewish vote."

The group's Web site, jewishwomenwatching.com, states the group's opposition to Bush administration policy on abortion and the Middle East, among other issues.

In the past, the group, which does not identify its leaders or members, has focused on the lack of women in top positions in the Jewish world and the politics of Jewish groups.

ADL: Right-wing militias rearming

Right-wing militias in the United States are growing and reorganizing, the Anti-Defamation League says.

A new ADL report shows that militia groups were re-energized by conspiracy theories after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and have been networking and joining forces around the country.

"The militias are testing the waters in the post-9/11 world to see whether they can continue to operate just below the radar of law enforcement and the media," ADL National Director Abraham Foxman said.

New publication for Jewish high schoolers

There's a new publication to arm Jewish high school students with information on Israel and Jewish concerns.

The Israel HighWay, which will be distributed via e-mail, will be published once a week beginning Thursday.

The publication will be prepared for the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, with money from the Avi Chai Foundation.

MIDDLE EAST

Employee turns terrorist

A Palestinian was arrested for planning a suicide bombing in the Israeli cafe where he worked.

The Bethlehem man, 20, was coerced into agreeing to attack Jerusalem's Filter cafe when a group of Palestinian terrorists accused him of being an Israeli collaborator, the Shin Bet said Wednesday.

The suspect, who had a Jerusalem identity card that allowed him to work at Filter, belonged to Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, and was arrested last month.

Sinai warning issued

Israelis were warned not to spend the High Holidays in the Sinai. The Counterterrorism Center in the Prime Minister's Office said Wednesday that intelligence suggested pro-Palestinian terrorists in Egypt could target some of the tens of thousands of Israeli tourists who flock to Sinai's beaches every holiday season.

"Recently, a concrete possibility of terrorists trying to strike at tourist sites in Egypt, and especially Sinai, has been determined," the center said in an advisory.

Israel returned the Sinai as part of the Camp David peace deal with Egypt.

Car bomb foiled

A Palestinian car bomber blew up in the West Bank before reaching his target.

Only the driver was killed in Wednesday's blast near the checkpoint of Baka al-Gharbiya.

The Al-Aksa Brigade, the terrorist wing of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, claimed responsibility for the attempted attack.

It was not immediately clear if the car bomb was intended for the checkpoint or a target in Israel proper.

Rocket crews defy clampdown

Terrorists in the Gaza Strip fired five rockets into Israel despite a military crackdown.

The five Hamas-made Kassam rockets landed harmlessly in the western Negev on Wednesday, hours after Israeli tanks and troops rolled into northern Gaza, taking up positions outside the Jabalya refugee camp and the town of Beit Hanoun.

The two areas are favored by Hamas and other terrorist groups for launching rockets over the nearby boundary with Israel.

Military sources said the Israeli incursion was open-ended.

Immigrant children in Israel get supplies

Office Depot and the Jewish Agency for Israel are providing school supplies for children of new immigrants in Israel.

The supplies will be made available for the 2004-2005 school year to some 4,000 immigrant children living in absorption centers.

WORLD

Group collects for Russian terror victims

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is collecting donations to help in the aftermath of a terrorist attack at a Russian school.

The JDC is developing a program that will include sending a team of Israeli post-trauma experts to Beslan, where at least 335 people were taken hostage last week in a school and then killed by Muslim separatists. The group also will send a team to the 30,000-person city to evaluate what other needs exist beyond trauma relief.

Contributions can be made by credit card via JDC's Web site: www.jdc.org; by phone: 212-687-6200 ext. 889; or by check payable to: JDC-Russia Victims of Terror Assistance, Box 321, 847A Second Ave., New York, N.Y., 10017.

Synagogues get funding

A wooden synagogue in Latvia with its interior furnishings intact is among Jewish heritage sites that received funding for improvements.

The Green Synagogue in Rezekne, built in 1845, is one of 10 synagogues in nine countries to receive funding totaling \$188,600 this year from the World Monuments Fund and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.

Beckham visits Auschwitz

English soccer players visited Auschwitz before their World Cup qualifying game against Poland.

Team captain David Beckham was among the players and coaching staff who toured the infamous concentration camp Tuesday.

Several team members had asked coach Sven Goran Eriksson to ensure their schedule in Poland included a trip to the site where more than 1.5 million people, 90 percent of them Jews, died during World War II.