

IN THE NEWS

Soldiers, settlers scuffle

Israeli soldiers clashed with settlers as the soldiers dismantled an illegal outpost in the Gaza Strip.

Some 19 settlers were arrested during Monday's clashes, which came amid warnings that some settlers would refuse to abide by Israel's plans to evacuate the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank later this year.

About a dozen people, both security personnel and protesters, were wounded during the clashes at Givat Shalhevet, the Jerusalem Post reported.

Sharon threatens to call new elections

Israel's prime minister said he could call new elections if efforts to rebuild his government fail.

"If I don't have a majority this week, then maybe we'll have to go to elections," Ariel Sharon said in a New York Times interview published Monday, referring to a bid to persuade the United Torah Judaism faction to join his coalition.

Sharon fired two coalition partners last year, losing the parliamentary majority he needs to push through his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

WJC faces informal probe

New York's attorney general has launched a preliminary inquiry into allegations that the World Jewish Congress mishandled its finances.

In a statement, the group said it promised to cooperate with the informal probe launched recently by Eliot Spitzer.

Officials with the group have said issues of financial transparency will be laid to rest at a meeting next week in Brussels.

At the meeting, Stephen Herbits is expected to be nominated to the post of secretary-general, and the organization's president, Edgar Bronfman, is expected to be re-elected.

WORLD REPORT

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Jews make way at prep schools, historically bastions of blue blood

By PETER EPHROSS

MIDDLEBURY, Conn. (JTA)—Muffy and Biff aren't exactly making way for Hannah and Shlomo at America's prep schools, but Jewish life is making its presence felt at these long-standing bastions of WASP-dom.

Sometimes it just happens in odd ways.

Matthew Feldberg launched the Jewish club at the Stevenson School in Pebble Beach, Calif., as a joke.

Annoyed that a Christian club at his school was "getting all the glam," Feldberg, 17, and another student founded the Federation of Jewish Intellectuals two years ago.

Then a funny thing happened: Other students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, showed interest.

Now 20-25 students are involved in the Jewish group at the school, says Feldberg, a senior.

The group gets together occasionally to learn about Jewish holidays. There are also e-mail communications and, most recently, a matzah-ball soup sale.

"I don't want to be as serious as the Christian group," Feldberg says.

Welcome to the uneven nature of Jewish life at America's prep schools.

The student bodies of New England's exclusive prep schools, once virtually devoid of Jews, today are 5 percent to 20 percent Jewish, with a higher percentage at some schools in the New York City area.

Efforts to build Jewish identity at these schools are increasing, in part due to an organization known as the Curriculum Initiative, which was founded in 1996 expressly for this purpose and which now has relationships

with about 50 U.S. private schools.

Among its activities, the group organizes an annual Jewbilee weekend for Jewish prep schools. This year the event will be held at the end of January at Connecticut's Choate Rosemary Hall, which, like many of the schools discussed in this article, has a mixture of boarding and day students.

At some schools — like Choate and Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, each of which has at least 100 Jewish students — Jewish life is vibrant.

At the Taft School, also in Connecticut, there's even a Torah scroll originally from Uzbekistan.

But attempts to build Jewish life at prep schools often run into obstacles, such as students' overloaded academic and extracurricular sched-

ules, which often include Saturday classes.

"These kids are really busy," says Rachel Bashevkin, the Jewish adviser at the Westover School in Middlebury, Conn. "They have more required things in their lives than college kids do."

Building Jewish identity also flies in the face of long-standing school traditions that either foster Protestantism or ignore religion altogether. Often founded as outposts of Protestant denominations, these institutions historically did not encourage Jewish identity and have been slow to change.

"We had weekly chapel and hymns," says Marya Levenson, who attended the Chaffee School in Windsor, Conn., from 1957-1960. "It was clearly Christian. There wasn't a sense of multicultural respect for different religions."

Until recently, the few Jewish students who attended the schools were not, well, par-

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ON
ISSUES

■ Jewish life makes inroads at a Protestant bastion

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ticularly Jewish. They enrolled because they or their parents were attracted by a school's reputation for turning out young scholars or artists.

At some schools, however, times have changed.

Perhaps nowhere is this more true than at the all-girls Westover School, and much of the credit is due to Bashevkin, a Jew who is the school's assistant director of studies.

■

During Chanukah, Jewish items adorn Bashevkin's office. A green, blue and white needlepoint "Shalom" hangs on her office door, a clock with Hebrew letters sits on the small table near her computer and menorahs hang in both of her office windows, which look out onto the school courtyard.

There are only about 15 Jewish students among the school's population of 200, but the Jewish Club — the "Jew Crew," as they call themselves — is an active presence.

There's an all-school seder and an annual Chanukah party, and the faculty does a yearly spiel, or humorous performance, for Purim.

"We try to make a big deal out of it here," senior Gabrielle Sirkin says of the club's Jewish activities over a dinner of pizza and salad in the cafeteria.

As at many prep schools these days, chapel services at Westover are "non-denominational," though they feature Protestant hymns.

Bashevkin, who has been at the school since 1981, still has the youthful energy of a camp counselor.

When new students apply, Bashevkin

has to do some checking to find out who's Jewish, since the school doesn't ask questions about religion on application forms. She then makes sure all the Jewish girls have places to go for the High Holidays.

Since Bashevkin is active in the local Jewish community, Jewish parents feel comfortable sending their daughters to Westover. Two children of local Jewish federation staffers recently graduated from the school.

At a morning Westover assembly on a cold December day, several Jewish students, dressed in homemade yellow T-shirts, do a step-dancing routine popularized by black fraternities.

The goal of the "Jews in Step" show: advertising the school's annual Chanukah party.

The results can be seen that night, when more than 150 people, mainly students, show up for the party, which features a klezmer band and latkes, in addition to brownies and other food.

As students and Bashevkin do Israeli dancing to the band's music, it could be a Chanukah celebration almost anywhere — except that most of the participants aren't Jewish.

That's not surprising: Jewish activities at prep schools often have an ecumenical flavor.

Indeed, student leaders of Choate's Christian fellowship are regulars at the Hillel club's meetings, which on Friday nights include Shabbat prayers in addition to discussions about "the world and whatever comes up," says Abigail Tufts, 15, a sophomore at the Connecticut private school.

Tufts, who describes herself as a Conservative Jew, doesn't see anything odd about non-Jewish participation in the Jewish group's meetings. After all, she goes to the school's Christian meetings.

"It's basically the same thing, except that they talk about Christianity," she says.

■

It makes sense that Christian students would attend Jewish events, says Eileen Gress, executive director of the Curriculum Initiative: Jews make up only a small percentage of students at these prep schools, and teenagers still developing their own identities are curious about other cultures.

Still, many U.S. prep schools today lack

the kind of active Jewish communities found at Westover and Choate.

Jewish students elsewhere agree.

"There are so many Jewish students at our school, but they're all closeted," says Greg Friedman, a senior at the Cambridge School in Weston, Mass., whose family lives in Baltimore.

The Curriculum Initiative tries to persuade these students to come out of the closet, but it's tough going.

There's no doubt that the organization has had some successes. Most of the schools it works with are in New York and New England, but it recently has expanded to schools in New Orleans

and California.

The initiative, which receives funding from such heavy hitters as the Samuel Bronfman Foundation and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, also runs a professional development program for educators. During the week-long summer program, texts culled from various religions are studied, often in the Jewish tradition of chevrotas, or pairs.

Students who attend Jewbilee — a mixture of spiritual activities, Israel discussions and schmoozing — often are turned on to Judaism. Friedman, for one, has made forming a Jewish student organization his senior project.

Junior Meg Kochiss, 17, says her experience at Westover has brought her closer to Judaism. The product of a mixed marriage, she's now thinking of having a Bat Mitzvah.

But even supporters of Jewish life at the prep schools admit the project faces an uphill battle.

It's difficult to attract students to the Jewbilee, and only 50 or 60 students attend each year, Gress says.

Even at Choate, Tufts says, "there are a lot of people who'll tell you they're Jewish, but a lot of them don't want to be part of Hillel because it takes away part of your weekend."

Plus, she adds, "some people won't come because they think it isn't a cool thing to do."

Gress understands the obstacles. But building Jewish life at private schools is worth it, she says, if "every student leaves knowing a little more about their background, willing to open another door." ■

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Greg Friedman
Cambridge School Student

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Vote nearing, Abbas navigates political mine field

By GIL SEDAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In his campaign for Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas hasn't so much been sprinting to the finish line as walking carefully along the political tightrope leading to Election Day.

Abbas, the PLO chief and former prime minister who is all but certain to win Sunday's election, has been working hard to appease the radically Islamist, and rather popular, Hamas, while at the same time not provoking Israel.

On a recent campaign swing through the Gaza Strip, Abbas — who is favored as a relative moderate by both Israel and the United States — criticized Hamas rocket attacks on Jews as “useless” but pledged not to forcefully disarm the terrorists who fired them.

In a BBC interview, Abbas, 69, said that instead he would seek to persuade terrorist groups to agree to a cease-fire with Israel. He said that fighting among Palestinians was a “red line” that must not be crossed.

“Everything can be settled by dialogue,” he said — although under the “road map” peace plan, the Palestinian Authority

agreed to confront, disarm and dismantle the terror organizations.

Abbas has urged his people to halt violence against Israel, but at the same time has spoken out in favor of the Palestinians demand for a refugee “right of return” to lands within Israel proper — a move Israel views as demographic suicide.

Abbas' carefully calibrated campaign has gone more smoothly than was anticipated at its outset six weeks ago. When Abbas visited the mourners' tent for late P.A. President Yasser Arafat in Gaza, a group of armed men opened fire, killing a bodyguard and a P.A. security officer.

The mid-November attack raised fears that Abbas was in for a violent campaign. Since then, he has strived not to provoke any of the Palestinian factions.

But just to be on the safe side, Abbas also left Gaza for the last leg of his election tour.

Abbas' campaign strategy appears to be working: His popularity has risen slowly but steadily as the candidate of the dominant Fatah faction and the heir apparent to Arafat, who died Nov. 11.

According to the latest polling by the Palestinian Policy Institute, Abbas enjoys the support of 65 percent of voters, compared to 22 percent for Mustafa Barghouti, his nearest competitor.

Hamas, the main opposition party, isn't opposing the elections but also didn't present a candidate of its own because the Palestinian Authority is an outgrowth of the Oslo peace accords, which the group rejects.

Hamas claims it will have a veto on any future policy decision regarding peace negotiations with Israel.

Hamas won nine of 26 municipal elections in the West Bank on Dec. 24, suggesting stronger support for the terrorist group than was expected. The elections were in communities considered strongholds of Fatah, which won 14 elections. Joint Hamas/Fatah slates won two seats.

Recent polls predict 85 percent turnout in the Jan. 9 elections. Abbas believes a

high turnout will bolster his legitimacy, giving him leverage in seeking peace talks with Israel and reforming Palestinian government.

Two major factors have contributed to Abbas' rise in popularity: The fact that many Palestinians are tired of the fighting, and the fact that there is no real alternative.

When Abbas visited Rafah last week, he was given a hero's welcome by thousands of people carrying his portrait and another of Arafat. Militants from the Al-Aksa Brigade, Fatah's terrorist cadres, carried Abbas through the crowd on their shoulders, firing guns in the air in celebration.

Abbas denounced Israel's counterterrorist operations in Gaza, telling the crowd that “the incursions, the assassinations, the destruction of houses will not break” the Palestinian residents.

The Israeli army lifted roadblocks to allow Abbas to travel through the territory unhindered, but reinstated them after he had passed.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, for his part, is taking pains to avoid missteps that occurred during Abbas' short term as prime minister in 2003, when Sharon met with Abbas but made only some of the concessions Abbas demanded to boost his political status.

This time around the two leaders have not met at all, since an embrace by Israel can spell political doom for a Palestinian politician.

Israel has said it will do its utmost to facilitate the elections, despite the ongoing military confrontation in Gaza. On the eve of the elections, Israeli forces will withdraw from a wide swath of Palestinian areas to permit unimpeded voting.

Abbas has accused Israel of deliberately trying to undermine the election by launching military operations in the Gaza Strip.

“It is true that there are some issues regarding rockets, which are useless, but in return there is a grave, a very grave Israeli escalation,” he said.

He declared that the Palestinians would not back down until a Palestinian state had been created with Jerusalem as its capital. ■

NEWS ANALYSIS

Abbas has worked hard to appease the radically Islamist Hamas, trying at the same time not to provoke Israel.

THIS WEEK

TUESDAY

■ The 108th U.S. Senate convenes. Five Jewish senators will be sworn in to new six-year terms, but no substantive work is expected to begin until President Bush is inaugurated Jan. 20. The U.S. House of Representatives will open later in the month.

■ One hundred Muslim and Jewish religious leaders continue their meeting in Belgium for the First World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace. The gathering, which runs through Thursday, is designed to create a partnership between Islam and Judaism.

■ The Knesset Forum on the Middle East will convene its inaugural public hearing in the Knesset. This non-partisan forum will address the educational curriculum of the Palestinian Authority and examine the content of Palestinian textbooks.

SUNDAY

■ Elections are held for a successor to the late Yasser Arafat as Palestinian Authority president. PLO chief Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's longtime No. 2, is expected to win easily.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Powell talks tough

Colin Powell said the international community expects the next Palestinian Authority president to fight terror.

"We need reformed Palestinian leadership that deals with this terrorist threat," the U.S. secretary of state told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

He noted with dismay that the frontrunner to succeed the late Yasser Arafat in Jan. 9 presidential elections, Mahmoud Abbas, was embraced by Fatah gunmen in the West Bank last week.

Abbas "may have to undertake operations against the terrorists," Powell said. "If he does that, and shows a real commitment to end terror, I think he will find an Israeli partner ready to work with him, and he will certainly find the international community, and especially the United States, ready to play an important role."

MIDDLE EAST

Disengagement schedule in doubt

Palestinian attacks could delay Israeli withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Israel's prime minister said.

"If there is terror, the disengagement will be postponed," Ariel Sharon told his Cabinet on Sunday, but added that the delay would be a matter of weeks only.

The Cabinet is set to approve the withdrawal plan this month, and Sharon hopes to complete the removal of all Jewish settlements in Gaza and four from the West Bank by September.

Sharon said the situation would be assessed in June, to judge whether the level of Palestinian attacks allowed for orderly withdrawals.

Abbas win seen

Mahmoud Abbas can expect to win next week's Palestinian Authority presidential election by a landslide, a survey found.

According to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research poll released Sunday, Abbas, the dominant Fatah faction's candidate to succeed the late Yasser Arafat in the Jan. 9 election, enjoys 65 percent support among voters in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The runner-up, human-rights activist Mustafa Barghouti, has the support of 22 percent of voters, while another 5 percent is divided among the remaining five candidates.

Eight percent of the 1,319 Palestinian respondents said they were undecided on how to vote in what will be the first election in the West Bank and Gaza since 1996.

IDF buses Palestinian pilgrims to Egypt

The Israeli army began busing Palestinians pilgrims to Egypt, the first stage of their religious journey to the Saudi city of Mecca.

Some 800 Palestinian pilgrims were transported Sunday in Israel Defense Forces buses because a Hamas bombing last month damaged the Israeli side of the crossing between Gaza and Egypt, The Associated Press reported.

The army said it had made preparations to bus 4,500 Palestinians to Egypt by Friday, after which they will board flights for Saudi Arabia.

The hajj, or pilgrimage to Islam's holiest shrine in Mecca, takes place annually, drawing hundreds of thousands of Muslims. It is scheduled this year for Jan. 22.

No Palestinian crackdown

Palestinian Authority presidential hopeful Mahmoud Abbas ruled out a crackdown on terrorist groups as required by the "road

map" peace plan.

The terrorists are "freedom fighters and should live a dignified and safe life," Abbas said Monday during a campaign visit to the Gaza Strip. "Palestinians taking up arms against each other will not happen."

But Abbas, favored to succeed the late Yasser Arafat in next week's presidential elections, drew fire from Hamas and other terrorist groups by condemning their rocket attacks from Gaza on Israeli targets.

"There is no use to firing these rockets, and I will not apologize. These rockets hit nobody but our people," Abbas said, referring to Israeli retaliatory raids on Gaza.

Spy agency wants more money

The Mossad wants the Israeli government to double its budget.

The spy agency lodged the request Monday with the Knesset subcommittee on secret services, citing difficulties in keeping track of Al-Qaida and Iran's nuclear program.

According to security sources, the Mossad budget currently stands at some \$350 million a year, a fraction of that received by its counterpart, military intelligence.

Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service, has received substantial budget boosts to deal with Palestinian terrorism.

Selling students on Israel

The Jewish Agency for Israel held a day of activities to encourage foreign Jews studying in Israel to come back on longer-term programs.

Some of the 1,200 students spent Sunday visiting the sites of long-term programs throughout the country in the framework of a new initiative called MASA, sponsored jointly by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

WORLD

Synagogue near Moscow catches fire

A wooden synagogue in a Moscow suburb caught fire in the early hours of Jan. 1 in a suspected arson attack. No one was hurt in the incident in the town of Saltykovka.

The building suffered only moderate damage because neighbors and local Jews were able to contain the fire, Isidor Vaizer, a community leader, told JTA.

He said it was too early to speculate on who was responsible for the fire, but indicated that earlier he had received a warning from security officials of a possible attack.

The community numbers about 500 people, Vaizer said.

Brazilian city honors Arafat

The mayor of a Brazilian city inaugurated a statue of Yasser Arafat. At 11:59 p.m. on Dec. 31, the mayor of Paraiba do Sul, Rogerio Onofre, inaugurated the statue of the late Palestinian Authority president.

According to Onofre, the city hall of the 39,000-person municipality received death threats and some 300 e-mails protesting the statue. But the mayor defended it.

"The monument defends peace. Some say Arafat was a terrorist. But if we analyze the matter, we'll see that also Ariel Sharon is a terrorist. If someday he reached peace with the Palestinians, I'll defend a statue of him as well," Onofre said.

The nearly 6-foot-tall statue is part of an open-air memorial that includes a marble map and a Palestinian flag.