

IN THE NEWS
Religious leaders want Mideast envoy

Nearly 30 religious leaders petitioned President Bush to dispatch an envoy to push Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Officials from Jewish, Muslim and Christian groups signed a letter to Bush urging him to appoint an envoy to the region now that PLO head Mahmoud Abbas, considered a relative moderate by Israel and the United States, has been elected Palestinian Authority president.

Several temporary Bush-appointed envoys have failed to bring the parties back to peace talks.

WJC to meet A.G.'s expectations

An adviser to the World Jewish Congress said the group will work to bring its finances in line with the expectations of New York's attorney general.

Robert Abrams, a former New York State attorney general who now serves as special counsel to the WJC, said he had been in contact with the office of the current attorney general, Eliot Spitzer, to indicate that the group would cooperate with an informal inquiry Spitzer launched into allegations of financial impropriety.

Abrams said he hoped to help "bring the World Jewish Congress up to the governance standards of an organization with its worldwide stature, and to meet the expectations of the attorney general's office."

Heil Harry! Prince shames royals

Britain's Prince Harry apologized after a newspaper published photographs of him dressed as a Nazi at a friend's costume party.

The 20-year-old son of the late Princess Diana, who is third in line to the throne, was photographed wearing a swastika armband and what appeared to be a German army desert uniform.

Reminder: The JTA World Report will not be published on Monday, Jan. 17.

WORLD REPORT

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IDF/BP Images

Israeli army officers hand over tsunami relief aid to Sri Lankan officials on Dec. 29 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Will Israel's tsunami aid efforts help it score diplomatic points?

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As the waters of biblical proportions recede, Israel and its American Jewish allies are delicately flying olive branches into tsunami-devastated regions.

Israel, by dint of its own experience with years of terrorism, has become a rescue and relief powerhouse. Working together with an array of U.S. Jewish groups, it is delivering its services to a region where it has long sought recognition and acceptance.

The prospect for contacts with Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim democracy,

is especially prized. Indonesia was also the country hardest hit by the Dec. 26 tsunami, claiming over two-thirds of the 153,000 dead.

An El Al airliner delivered 80 tons of aid to Indonesia this week, and Ron Prozor, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's director general, met with Indonesian officials while there.

"It's not the kind of opportunity we seek to further promote bilateral relations with Muslim countries, but I think it's a natural thing" to do so, Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to Washington, told JTA.

Ayalon appeared on a stage on Sunday with a senior Indonesian diplomat at a synagogue fund-raiser for tsunami relief in

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

■ Israel's tsunami relief effort may help ease tensions

Continued from page 1

Washington. It was a rare event for the representative of a nation that until now has shunned ties with the Jewish state.

Paul Wolfowitz, the Jewish undersecretary of defense who was ambassador to Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s and who has lobbied hard since to draw the Muslim nation into the fold of the West, also appeared at the fund-raiser.

"This kind of tragedy knows no religion," Wolfowitz said.

Wolfowitz said he would not read the traditional Hebrew mourning prayer *El Maleh Rachamim* — God is Filled with Mercy — saying he would mangle it, but he did deliver a credible reading of the Muslim Arabic equivalent, the *Fatiha*.

Such signs of warmth notwithstanding, it was significant that the Indonesian Embassy sent its second in command rather than its ambassador. And although Soehardjono Sastromihardjo thanked American Jews, he pointedly did not mention Israel.

In fact, several days later another Indonesian diplomat appearing at a Jewish event downplayed any diplomatic significance.

"That's not relevant," Sanga Panggabean, the first secretary of the Indonesian mission to the United Nations, said at a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on Wednesday, when asked about the political significance of Israel's aid.

Humanitarian assistance was "nonpolitical," he said.

Others suggested that it would be hard to separate the humanitarian from the political significance of the giving — a factor that probably is leading at least some Jewish donors to funnel their giving through Jewish organizations.

The American Jewish Committee, which organized Sunday's event at the Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, calculated the benefits for Israel into its actions; much of the money it raised went specifically to Israeli relief and medical emergency personnel who are in Thailand and Sri Lanka.

Thailand, India and Sri Lanka have diplomatic ties with Israel.

"We are trying to make these dollars go as far as they can and as effectively as they can in terms of relief, but also in terms of Israel's good will," said Jason Isaacson, the director of governmental and international affairs for the AJCommittee.

"It not only saves lives, but it has an important and political and cultural impact."

The AJCommittee had raised about \$500,000 from its donors.

So far, a coalition of Jewish groups has raised well over \$13 million, said Josh Berkman, a spokesman for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The JDC alone has raised nearly \$6.5 million dollars. The American Jewish World Service, which met with President Bush on relief efforts on Monday, has collected \$6 million so far.

Israel has sought support in the region since its birth, when founding Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion felt kinship with many of the new democracies in the Far East.

Egypt's domination of the non-aligned movement at the time and the large Muslim populations in the region scuttled those dreams.

But in the wake of the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians — and of the United States' emergence as the world's principal power — ties became closer.

Still, there are leftover sensitivities about the decades of distance, and these contributed to a misunderstanding about Israeli tsunami aid to Sri Lanka.

The island nation accepted one planeload of Israeli experts, but asked another, larger team to wait a few days while it organized infrastructure for relief workers.

That led to a stream of false stories that Sri Lanka had rejected Israeli aid, and the Sri Lankan Embassy in Washington scrambled to get the true story out. It flooded the media with a statement that "the generous assistance readily given by the government and people of Israel at this hour of need is highly appreciated by

the government and people of Sri Lanka."

Devinda Rohan Subasinghe, the Sri Lankan ambassador, said he was taken aback by the vehemence of the anger at what was a misconception. On the day he welcomed a reporter into his office, he was still fielding calls from conservative talk shows eager to play up the "ungrateful Third World" story.

If anything, Subasinghe said, Sri Lanka has been broadening its relationship with Israel since the two nations resumed formal ties in 2000. He cited Sri Lankan purchases from Israel's military industry.

The tsunami should open the door to Israel's developing a higher, friendlier profile in the region, he suggested, as nations and rivals grow closer because of the disaster.

"The silver lining is that the tsunami gives — internally, regionally and beyond — the opportunity to rise above ethnic and political differences," he said. "This can be a catalyst to fuse those differences."

For his part, Ayalon, the Israeli ambassador, said Israel was already thinking in the long-term — moving beyond immediate relief and to reconstruction and rehabilitation, an area in which Israel excelled in Africa and in the Far East during the 1950s and 1960s.

"As we help them now with medical teams and food, we are offering our expertise in rehabilitation and rebuilding their infrastructures," Ayalon said. ■

'It's not the kind of opportunity we seek to further promote bilateral relations with Muslim countries, but I think it's a natural thing.'

Daniel Ayalon
Israeli Ambassador

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New Israel Fund switches gears

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The New Israel Fund, long known for its promotion of democracy and the protection of civil rights in the Jewish state, is gearing up for new challenges posed by upheavals on the diplomatic and economic fronts.

Recent NIF funding ranges from programs to help Israel's growing number of poor to the Supreme Court case that altered the route of Israel's West Bank security fence.

The group, which long has focused mostly on seeding new projects, now also plays a role in longer-term financing through a five-year, \$20 million grant provided by the Ford Foundation.

The NIF board will meet Jan. 23-26 to consider this year's grant applications. Its own annual budget, separate from the Ford funds, is about \$20 million.

Larry Garber, the NIF's executive director and CEO, says the 25-year-old organization is closely monitoring Israel's plans to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank this year.

It's not the kind of event that traditionally has concerned the liberal philanthropy, which has focused more on Israel's internal development than its diplomacy.

But the momentousness of the withdrawal inevitably will reverberate internally, Garber said, noting the vehemence of resistance to the withdrawal threatened by some far-right groups.

"The macro challenge is disengagement and its impact on Israeli society," said Garber, who came to the job in mid-2004 from the U.S. Agency for International Development, where he was head of mission in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"What we might look at is, does disengagement pose a threat to the democratic process, to dialogue in Israel?" he said in a recent interview at NIF's Washington headquarters. "There may be some niche opportunities where peace process developments raise issues relevant for the New Israel Fund."

That's the thinking that led NIF to help fund last year's successful appeal to Israel's Supreme Court against the route of the security fence.

Garber cited with pride Justice Aharon Barak's ruling that when Israel deals with Palestinian civilian populations, its ethos requires Israel to consider its own

security with "one hand tied behind its back."

Barak laid down a red line for Israel's democratic norms, Garber suggested. "It was like he was writing for the law books," he said.

Garber's style is low-key and differs from the sometimes confrontational approach taken by Norman Rosenberg, his predecessor from 1990 until the end of 2003. NIF's annual income quintupled under Rosenberg.

Under Rosenberg's aegis, a series of lectures timed for Israel's 50th anniversary in 1998, with titles such as "The End of the Zionist Dream? The Rise of Post-Zionism," raised eyebrows.

NGO Monitor, a group that analyzes non-governmental organizations operating in Israel and that has criticized NIF in the past, says it has noted a shift away from overt political involvement back to NIF's core commitment to social justice and change.

"There don't seem to be new radical organizations being funded," said Gerald Steinberg, NGO Monitor's editor. "Radical political agendas had damaged NIF's reputation, as becoming political rather than social."

NIF officials say the falling away of organizations that might have offended NGO Monitor's sensibilities has less to do with any policy decision and more to do with the NIF's tendency to keep most of its involvements short-lived.

By contrast, the Ford Foundation's new \$20 million Peace and Social Justice fund — directed jointly by NIF and the Ford Foundation — cultivates long-term relationships with groups in Israel.

The Ford grant was announced one day before JTA published revelations about Ford's funding of radical Palestinian groups. That investigation led Ford to impose new guidelines for its grant recipients, prohibiting any grantees from engaging in violence, terrorism or bigotry.

"NIF has an unusually high scrutiny of its grant decisions," said Rosenberg, who now works with Parents Action for Children. "No one it works with is antithetical to the state. That's been its hallmark and it still is."

Garber said NIF would remain committed to the issues that have defined it for a quarter-century — advancing women's rights, civil liberties, Bedouin rights, the rights of the poor and of recent immigrants — and moving forward with what he called its "quiet revolution."

'There may be some niche opportunities where peace process developments raise issues relevant for the New Israel Fund.'

Larry Garber
New Israel Fund



Courtesy of New Israel Fund

Larry Garber is executive director and CEO of the New Israel Fund.

How close are blacks, Jews, this MLK Day?

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — The storied tale of Jewish Northerners heading South in the 1960s to fight for blacks' voting rights has taken its place as one of the most distinctive cross-cultural relationships in American history.

Until now, the 1964 murders of three civil-rights campaigners has been unresolved. The recent arrest of a suspect in the Mississippi murders of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — both Jews — and James Chaney, a black man, has refocused attention on a relationship once bound in blood.

As Jews prepare to mark Martin Luther King Day, however, to what extent have black-Jewish relations shifted from their historic marriage?

A long way, academics and Jewish community officials say.

The black-Jewish relationship began in the 1920s and 1930s as blacks moved into neighborhoods Jews were leaving. Still, Jewish businesses often remained, serving the black community.

A common bond rose in response to American anti-Semitism and racism, culminating in the civil rights movement. But black riots against Jewish-owned businesses in the mid-1960s and the rise of black nationalism, which carried undertones of anti-

Semitism, often polarized the groups.

But many of the flashpoints in the relationship, like Jesse Jackson's 1984 reference to New York as "Hymietown" and the 1991 Crown Heights riots — when blacks rioted against Jews after a Lubavitch-driven vehicle accidentally hit and killed a black child in Brooklyn — are in the past.

Reports of anti-Semitic remarks by black nationalists such as the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan also have tapered off.

Now a new phase has dawned as both groups focus their energies on internal issues, and quieter ties have emerged. Whether the new phase will lead to a new, strengthened relationship or a cooler approach to one another remains in question.

"We've passed through a period of hostility and animosity," says Murray Friedman, director of Temple University's Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Center for American Jewish History and author of "What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance."

"The black-Jewish alliance as it once was is dead," he said. But "it has moved in the direction that has been normal in American life, where groups join together on certain issues and break apart on certain issues."

Rabbi Marc Scheier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, and Russell Simmons, the foundation's

chairman, said in a statement that the recent arrest in the Mississippi murder case calls to mind the historic black-Jewish alliance and challenges members of both groups "to continue the ongoing struggle for human justice."

In fact, blacks and Jews continue to come together to advocate for political issues ranging from civil rights legislation to Israel.

"There isn't a day that goes by that the black and Jewish caucuses on Capitol Hill don't work together," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, who is also on the board of the NAACP.

Saperstein said young black NAACP board members also show an increasing interest in the Jewish community.

According to Saperstein, collaboration among blacks and Jews is strong across the country, and his own group's black-Jewish activities are as robust as he can remember.

Because of that, when tensions do arise "there's much greater disappointment and sometimes anger than when either of us has similar kinds of problems with other ethnic or religious minorities," Saperstein said.

Sherry Frank also says that in her 24 years as director of the Atlanta Chapter of the American Jewish Committee, black-Jewish relations have grown stronger.

A black-Jewish coalition initiated by the American Jewish Committee has a mailing list of some 400 people, with approximately equal numbers of blacks and Jews, she said.

Top black leaders in Atlanta invite local rabbis to speak at their pulpits, and Atlanta's black mayor has helped raise funds for the local Jewish federation's Super Sunday.

But Ann Schaffer, director of the AJCommittee's Belfer Center for American Pluralism, says national relations aren't so rosy.

In comparison to Jews' relations with other groups, "we're not seeing the kind of reciprocity that we would like to see in the relationship" with blacks, she said.

Many black leaders are consumed with internal issues, such as job discrimination and lifting their people out of poverty, she said.

In addition, the black community "is not forthcoming" in defending Israel and condemning anti-Semitism, she said.

In part, that's because blacks identify with the Palestinians, who they see as disenfranchised like themselves, she said.

In fact, an AJCommittee 2000 study

FOCUS ON ISSUES



American Jewish Committee

The American Jewish Committee's Sol Linowitz presents the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. with its American Liberties Medallion at its 58th annual meeting on May 20, 1965, as Vice President Hubert Humphrey looks on.

showed that few blacks feel much in common with Jews.

Yet anti-Semitism has never been as strong among blacks as among the mutual enemies of blacks and Jews, said Marshall Stevenson Jr., dean of social sciences and director of the national center for black-Jewish relations at Dillard University in New Orleans, a black college heavily endowed by Jews.

Anti-Semitism among black Muslims, for example, rarely is translated into action against Jews, he said.

Academics say the turning point in the black-Jewish relationship was the 1967 Six-Day War, which they say prompted Jews to turn inward and focus on Israel and the Jewish community's concerns.

In subsequent years, the Soviet Jewry movement occupied the energies of Jews who once had worked for civil rights, Friedman said.

Around that time came the rise of black nationalism, which as part of its quest for black empowerment aimed to muster internal strength and resources and rejected Jewish outreach.

"Would Jews allow blacks to run their organizations?" was the rationale of the time, Stevenson said.

Both groups largely turned inward, a trend that continues today.

The relationship is "more or less neutral today," Stevenson said.

It takes a common threat to revive the relationship, he said — citing, for example, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke's runs for the U.S. Senate and the Louisiana governorship.

"For there to be any kind of serious dialogue there would have to be a major kind of racial backlash in this country that would affect African-Americans and Jews," Stevenson said.

Renewed relations also could come about as a result of efforts to strengthen the Democratic party, he said.

In the 2004 presidential election, some 75 percent of Jews voted Democratic. Among blacks the proportion was even higher, 89 percent.

Friedman, who views the landscape of relations as a "return to normalcy," frames

Jews' civil rights agenda as a Jewish quest for identity.

Jewish civil rights workers would cite the Jewish values of social justice, but "they didn't know a blessed thing about Judaism."

Goodman and Schwerner were even buried as Unitarians, he said.

"We were finding our own identity by working through another group," says Friedman, who himself labored for civil rights until a

growing sense of Jewish identity landed him squarely in the field of Jewish studies.

Jewish groups also are less involved in race relations today than they once were, focusing now on buttressing Jewish causes and identities.

"I think we're worn out with crusades," he said.

Saperstein believes both agendas are intertwined.

"In America, the treatment of the black community remains a symbol of the hope for equality and justice for all people in America, and we who have been persecuted so often as a minority have a deep feeling that we have to stand by those who are persecuted more than we are today in America," he said.

"What we do on behalf of a group like the African-American community and with the African-American community is a test of whether or not we'll live up to the values and the lessons of our history." ■

The black-Jewish alliance as it once was is dead. But it has moved in the direction that has been normal in American life.

Murray Friedman

Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Center for American Jewish History

Sixty years later, U.K. students remember

By DANIELLA PELED

LONDON (JTA) — A new British-based project to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II aims to commemorate Holocaust victims through an innovative global Jewish learning initiative.

The program, 60 Days For 60 Years, centers on a book of the same title, made up of 60 essays by leading Jewish figures such as Nobel prize-winner Elie Wiesel, Britain's Orthodox Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and historian Sir Martin Gilbert.

Each essay aims to provide inspirational thoughts on concepts crucial to Judaism, addressing issues such as free will, Jewish survival, science and religion, with participants encouraged to study one topic a day in memory of those who perished.

Describing 60 Days For 60 Years as "a visionary project," Sacks said, "It seeks to respond to the tragedy of the Shoah by encouraging us to learn about our heritage and affirm our Jewish identity. It asks us to remember for the sake of life.

"Above all, it shows that 60 years after the unspeakable tragedy of the Shoah, the Jewish people lives."

The project, which launches Jan. 25 and runs until March 25, is being led by Tribe, the youth branch of Britain's United Synagogue, and emphasizes the plight of young Holocaust victims. United Synagogue represents 65 Orthodox shuls in Great Britain.

Each paperback is accompanied by a card bearing the name, picture and birthplace of a youngster who died in the Holocaust, with the idea that every participant will learn in memory of that child.

Synagogues will adopt a different European town or village to honor, symbolizing Jewish continuity in Europe 60 years after the Nazi destruction.

To encourage further investigation, each essay is accompanied by a bibliography and ideas for additional study;

some of the authors made their e-mail addresses available so readers can question them directly.

"The response from young members of the United Synagogue and organizations around the Jewish world has already been tremendous," said David Kaplan, Tribe's managing director, adding that advance orders of the book have already topped 20,000 copies.

The project is set to reach areas as diverse as North America, New Zealand and Denmark, with copies distributed to community members via schools, shuls and other groups.

Organizers hope the book will be translated into Hebrew, Spanish and Russian.

"We will be reaching out to hundreds of thousands of Jews all over the world. The project will bring them together as Jews," said Rabbi Andrew Shaw, Tribe's executive director. ■

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Disputes at Falash Mura compound escalate

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Ethiopian government has intervened in a political dispute roiling an Addis Ababa compound housing Falash Mura, Ethiopian descendants of Jews who are waiting to immigrate to Israel.

Ethiopia's justice minister was accompanied by police officers carrying firearms when he entered the compound Jan. 5, threatening to take away authority from the local community, sources close to the community said.

Ethiopians Getenet Mengesha — who joined the minister in the attempted takeover — and Yoseph Enyew say the compounds are run like sweatshops by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, the Jerusalem Post first reported.

"The government has made up its mind to kick out NACOEJ," Enyew told JTA. He also called NACOEJ a "mafia-like" organization and said the government plans to imprison the group's workers.

Ethiopian government officials could not be reached for comment.

Andrew Goldman, NACOEJ's Ethiopian representative, said he had heard that the justice minister claimed the group is operating illegally, but said neither NACOEJ nor its lawyer had received any notice to



In a compound in Gondar, Ethiopia, operated by NACOEJ, Falash Mura men attend services, held in Hebrew and Amharic, in this file photo.

that effect. He denied that NACOEJ had done anything illegal.

Last week's showdown was the latest in a series of battles for control over the fate of the 20,000 or so Falash Mura, descendants of Jews who converted to Christianity but now have returned to Jewish practice.

The Israeli Cabinet voted in February 2003 to look into Falash Mura emigration applicants immediately to see which among them are eligible to go to Israel by virtue of matrilineal Jewish descent.

Yet the process has pattered along, with Israel sometimes citing the high cost of absorbing the Falash Mura, given the tremendous social and cultural gap separating them from other Israelis.

Some 300 Falash Mura make aliyah each month, but pressure to open the gates wider is mounting.

Last month, about half of the 120 members of Israel's Knesset called on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to expedite Falash Mura immigration.

Falash Mura already in Israel are waging a court battle against the government to speed up the process. In response, Sharon is slated to meet Jan. 31 with Sallai Meridor, chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which has asked Israel to double the monthly Falash Mura aliyah rate.

Some local Jewish federations across North America have made the issue a priority and have pressed Sharon on the matter. Events on the ground also have escalated.

Ethiopian television last month aired the allegations of mismanagement against NACOEJ, which supervises the community-run compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar.

"They have been exploiting the people for the past 13 years" and have stopped distributing food in the past five months, Enyew said.

Additionally, he claimed that NACOEJ's Goldman beats up people, and that the group has photographed young girls' naked chests and posted the pictures on the Internet.

Goldman calls the accusations lies. The group says they stem from the frustration of teachers, many of whom are not Jewish but are married to Jews, who realize they won't be eligible for aliyah.

Other NACOEJ officials said they couldn't explain the actions of Enyew and Mengesha.

In September, 70 teachers at the Addis Ababa compound went on strike, made false accusations against NACOEJ and refused to work out an agreement, according to Goldman.

"I'm convinced that the whole thing

was just to make trouble," he said.

They then sued the school, which is under the control of local Falash Mura and supervised by NACOEJ, for severance pay.

Meanwhile, NACOEJ says that Enyew has claimed to have the backing of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which provides medical relief and supplemental feeding programs to Falash Mura in Ethiopia, in setting up a rival group to NACOEJ.

Enyew says he has no connection to the JDC and is not interested in setting up another organization, only in calling for the Jewish community to investigate NACOEJ.

In an e-mail to NACOEJ's executive director, Barbara Ribakove Gordon, JDC reported Executive Vice President Steven Schwager dismissed Enyew's claim as baseless.

According to Ricki Lieberman, NACOEJ's chief operating officer, the situation speaks to a mounting level of frustration among the Falash Mura.

"You know, there's a lot of tension. Some people are not going to go" to Israel, she said, "and we fully expect that they will make difficulties and be disruptive."

The "faster we get the eligible community out of there, the more we will reduce the opportunity for turmoil," she said, placing the onus on the American Jewish community to lobby Israeli officials and Israel to expedite the process.

Observers are inclined to take NACOEJ's side, but seem perplexed by the politics at play.

The 'faster we get the eligible community out of there, the more we will reduce the opportunity for turmoil.'

Ricki Lieberman
NACOEJ's Chief Operating Officer

ARTS & CULTURE

Happy birthday trees — We depend on you

By JANE ULMAN

ENCINO, Calif. (JTA) — Tu B'Shevat, the 15th day of the month of Shevat, marks the birthday of the trees.

"Trees don't eat chocolate-chip cookie cake," Danny, 13, says.

"No, but your dad does," I answer. And how convenient, for this year Tu B'Shevat, which falls on Jan. 25, also marks my husband Larry's birthday.

Yes, this year we will sing "Happy Birthday" to Larry and to the trees. And this double celebration makes us even more cognizant of the vital interconnectedness of humans and our deciduous and coniferous cohorts. "We literally can't live without trees. They give off oxygen," Gabe, 17, says. Trees also give us food and provide materials to build shelters. Additionally, they give us beauty, serenity and shade, and they harbor wildlife. And trees save lives. Just look at the people who were rescued by trees in the tsunami, desperately clinging to them to avoid being swept out to sea. Or found days after the catastrophe, afloat in a tangle of tree limbs.

But while trees have always been important in Judaism, they don't exist solely for our sake. In fact, God created trees and other vegetation on the third day, before either animals and human beings. Genesis 1:11 says, "Let the earth spout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind of earth that bear fruit with the seed in it."

And these fruit-bearing trees are so important that they cannot be destroyed, even in times of war. Deuteronomy 20:19 says, "When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy the trees, wielding the ax against them."

Trees and people need each other. And we need to find a balance between preserving and protecting nature, which ultimately belongs to God and not to man, and using natural resources to sustain life, which in Judaism always takes precedence.

And Tu B'Shevat, which has evolved into a kind of Jewish Earth Day, gives us the opportunity to reflect on this mutual dependence. ■

New Talmud translation done

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — You don't have to know Hebrew or Aramaic any more to become a talmudic scholar.

Indeed, say those behind the Schottenstein Artscroll English translation of the Talmud — whose 73rd and final volume will be published next month — some Jews have completed study of nearly the whole series of talmudic tractates without speaking a lick of either language.

"Many of them attribute the fact that they've been able to get through this to the Schottenstein text, to the fact that we've been able to remove the language barrier for them and elucidate the text in a way that is comprehensible and relevant," said Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, chairman of the Mesorah Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit group that funded the project.

The publication of the final volume of Tractate Yevamot marks the culmination of a 15-year, \$20 million effort that has seen as many as 80 scholars at a time working on the more than 35,000 pages in the series, in locations from New York to Baltimore to Cleveland to Jerusalem to Bnei Brak.

The project "introduces the Talmud to people who have never studied it," said Rabbi Nosson Scherman, general editor of Mesorah, the series' publisher. "It has never been done before in English with this depth and accuracy."

The Talmud comprises 36 tractates of rabbinic discussion and commentary on Jewish civil and religious law. Likely assembled between the first half of the third century C.E. and the year 499 C.E., it often expresses itself in a shorthand confusing to the uninitiated.

The Artscroll translation — Scherman prefers to call it an "elucidation" — overcomes this obstacle by offering a literal translation in bold type, interspersed with "connecting words" making clear the text's intent to less experienced readers.

"The literal translation of the Tal-

mud, word for word, would be virtually incomprehensible" to people unschooled in talmudic nuance, Scherman said. "The Talmud expects its readers to read between the lines."

The Schottenstein edition, which takes an Orthodox approach to Talmudic study, also offers extensive notes on the text and suggestions on further research.

"It is one of the greatest Jewish literary accomplishments in the past 100 years, opening up the sea of the Talmud to everyone," said Rabbi Stuart Grant, principal of Judaic studies at the North Shore Hebrew Academy High School on New York's Long Island. "The notes on the bottom open up a whole world of medieval and relatively contemporary commentaries, which are not necessarily found immediately on the page."

Still, Grant said, students at his yeshiva use the Artscroll as a reference in Talmud study, not as a primary text.

"It shouldn't become a crutch and

thus an impediment to being able to make one's own learning of the material in its original," he said.

Since the project's second year, Artscroll writers and editors have turned out one volume every nine weeks. An average of 20,000 copies of each volume have been printed, with more popular tractates getting runs of 50,000 to 60,000 copies.

Each volume, which includes the original Hebrew text facing English-language pages, cost Mesorah roughly \$250,000. On average, it takes four English pages to explain one Hebrew page.

Some non-Orthodox scholars have noted that Artscroll does not use archaeology or ancient languages to elucidate the text, nor does it consider the Greco-Roman culture that was influential at the time of the Talmud's composition.

"If we had known in the beginning how hard it would be and how much money it would have taken to do it, we never would have done it," Scherman said. "Thank God we didn't know." ■

'It is one of the greatest Jewish literary accomplishments in the past 100 years, opening up the sea of the Talmud to everyone.'

Rabbi Stuart Grant
North Shore Hebrew Academy High School

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza Strip simmers on

Israeli forces killed an unarmed Palestinian man and foiled a car-bombing in the Gaza Strip.

Troops searching the town of Beit Lahiya for terrorists before dawn Thursday opened fire on a car as it sped toward them, killing the driver.

It later emerged that he was a local man taking his pregnant neighbor to the hospital; she was unharmed.

Hours later, an Israeli helicopter gunshot rocketed a car that had been left outside the Kfar Darom settlement in southern Gaza.

The resulting explosion, fiercer than what a missile would cause, led military experts to conclude that the vehicle contained a bomb and was to have been used in an attack.

Abbas talks peace

Mahmoud Abbas reaffirmed the Palestinian commitment to the "road map" peace plan.

"There are mutual obligations in the road map and we're serious about starting to implement our obligations immediately," the Palestinian Authority president-elect told Christian clergy visiting his Ramallah headquarters Thursday.

"We hope the Israelis will implement their obligations as well."

The internationally backed plan seeks to establish a Palestinian state at the end of a three-year process of reciprocal steps.

However, Abbas has said he will not carry out the Palestinians' central obligation under the plan to dismantle terrorist groups, so Israel gave only a cautious welcome to his statements.

Sex and the assassin

Yitzhak Rabin's assassin was rapped for groping his fiancée during a jailhouse visit.

Israeli media quoted Prisons Service officials as saying Yigal Amir, who is serving a life sentence for shooting the Israeli prime minister in 1995, "got frisky" with fiancée Larissa Trimbobler when they met under guard Thursday.

According to regulations, inmates are allowed to give visitors a friendly kiss but no more. Amir had his visitation privileges suspended after Thursday's grope.

Israelis can vote in Iraq

Iraqi-born Israelis can vote in Iraq's upcoming elections. A spokeswoman for Iraq's out-of-country-voting office said that anyone with an original Iraqi birth certificate can cast a ballot in the Jan. 30 poll, Ha'aretz reported.

"There are no restrictions on Iraqis on the basis of religion, race or sex," Sarah Tosh said. "This definitely includes those who are Israeli citizens today."

Those born outside Iraq to an Iraqi father also will be permitted to vote.

Since its founding, Israel has taken in some 130,000 Jewish immigrants from Iraq, but turnout from Israel is not expected to be significant.

Radicals in the ranks?

Israeli settlers opposed to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan claim to have recruited sympathizers in the military.

"We have our people embedded within their ranks, and when it comes down to the operations, we know every single detail," a pro-settler activist told the Jerusalem Post on Thursday, referring to withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank slated for later this year.

According to the unnamed source, a "large number" of right-wing sympathizers in the military and border police will refuse orders to evacuate settlements when the time comes.

Wanted: King of Israel

A group of Jewish scholars attempted to recreate the ancient Sanhedrin tribunal in Jerusalem.

According to the Jerusalem Post, the 71 Orthodox scholars who convened this week believe not only that they can reconstitute the Second Temple-era Sanhedrin, but that one of their members, Rabbi Yosef Dayan, could qualify as a Jewish monarch because he can trace his lineage to King David.

The scholars, described as right-wing religious Zionists, admit that current political realities interfere with their hopes.

WORLD

Wallenberg petition launched

The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation launched a petition calling on the United Nations to solve the mystery of the Holocaust rescuer's disappearance.

Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, was last seen Jan. 17, 1945, when Soviet military officers escorted him to Red Army headquarters, alleging he was a U.S. spy.

To mark the 60th anniversary of his disappearance, the foundation is hoping to collect 100,000 signatures on a worldwide petition.

Wallenberg saved the lives of some 100,000 Jews when he worked as a diplomat in Budapest during World War II, forging documents that granted the Jews immunity.

Jew named Polish foreign minister

A Jewish man was appointed foreign minister of Poland. Adam Daniel Rotfeld, 67, was named to the post Jan. 5.

He previously served as deputy foreign minister.

NORTH AMERICA

State: Russia not selling Syria missiles

Russia has no plans to sell Syria missiles, the U.S. State Department said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell met with his Russian counterpart and discussed reports that Russia plans to sell advanced missiles to Syria, spokesman Richard Boucher said Thursday.

The United States opposes arms sales to Syria because of its support for terrorism.

"The Russians have said publicly that they're not selling missiles to Syria, so I think we'll just leave it at that for the moment," Boucher said.

AJCongress, Committee join Al-Manar ban effort

Two U.S. Jewish groups joined a coalition demanding greater restrictions on a Hezbollah-affiliated TV station.

A State Department order last month placing Al-Manar on an immigration watch list prompted a U.S. satellite carrier to drop the station, but the "Coalition against Terrorist Media" launched by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies — and including the American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress — wants additional measures, according to an announcement Thursday.

U.S. citizens and companies should be banned from working with Al-Manar, and the United States should encourage foreign satellite carriers to drop the station, the announcement said.