

## IN THE NEWS

## Sharon, Abbas plan to meet in Egypt

Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas will meet in Egypt next week.

The Israeli prime minister's office said the Feb. 8 summit with the Palestinian Authority president in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheik was proposed by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the hopes of kick-starting the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan. Jordan's King Abdullah also is expected to attend.

It will be the highest-level meeting between Israeli and Palestinian officials since Sharon's predecessor, Ehud Barak, held talks with the late P.A. President Yasser Arafat in December 2000.

## Congress praises Palestinian elections

Resolutions in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives praising Palestinian Authority elections passed overwhelmingly.

Both resolutions were sponsored by leaders of both parties.

The Senate resolution, passed Tuesday by acclamation, recognized Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian Authority president and outlined expectations that Israel ease conditions for the Palestinians.

## Jewish circumcision may have led to death

New York City health officials are investigating whether a baby died after contracting herpes during a ritual circumcision.

The city officials believe at least three babies may have contracted herpes, and one died, after Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer performed a process known as metzizah bi peh, in which the mohel puts his lips to the wound on the penis and then sucks blood into his mouth to stop the bleeding.

Fischer is a well-known mohel in suburban Rockland County, N.Y., and city officials filed a legal complaint against him after he refused to stop the practice.

# WORLD REPORT

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## Syria steps up its charm offensive, but U.S. and Israel remain skeptical

By RON KAMPEAS

**W**ASHINGTON (JTA) — For more than four years, the big question about Syria has been whether President Bashar Assad has the strength, and the will, to make peace with Israel.

Yes, Syrian officials are saying emphatically. And they turn the question around: Do Israel and the United States have the will to seize the opportunity of a Syria that is eager and anxious to join the broadening pro-American circle in the Middle East?

"Israel has an historical opportunity to reach peace with its neighbors. The neighbors are willing," Imad Moustapha, Syria's ambassador to the United States, told JTA. "We have profound doubts about whether the government of Ariel Sharon is interested in peace."

Moustapha and his boss, Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa, are on a goodwill blitz, saying the Syrians are ready to trade full-fledged peace for the return of all the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau Israel captured in the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed in 1981.

Israel and the United States treat such offers with profound skepticism. If the Assad regime is ready for peace, why does it still back Hezbollah, Israel's terrorist nemesis in Lebanon? Why does it cozy up to Iran, the only regime Israel considers an existential threat? Why does it allow the funding and movement of anti-American insurgents in Iraq?

And why would anyone serious about peace simultaneously open talks with Russia about buying state-of-the-art missiles with only one conceivable target — Israel?

"There's no change," an Israeli official

told JTA about Syria's intentions, citing Syrian support for anti-Israel terrorists. "If the Syrians want to prove their seriousness, they know exactly what they need to do."

So far the Israelis have a sympathetic American ear, as President Bush has threatened to expand his implementation of punitive measures included in the Syrian Accountability Act.

Bush has limited the act's sanctions to mostly cosmetic limitations on diplomatic travel and some trade, but even those have inhibited European investment in Syria.

"I think the Syrian government is behaving in a way that could, unfortunately, lead to long-term bad relations with the United States," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said last month during her Senate confirmation hearings.

Should Syria not become a "constructive force," Rice said, the United States would have no choice but to mobilize stronger sanctions under the act.

Some have argued that Assad might have the desire to make changes but simply lacks the internal strength to confront Syrian extremists.

When he assumed power in 2000 at the tender age of 34, many assumed Assad lacked the credibility of his father, who had a military career. Bashar Assad, by contrast, was a London-educated ophthalmologist before he assumed power.

Now, for the first time, Syrian officials are bluntly telling diplomats from other countries that Assad can deliver the goods.

They say that if Syria wins all the Golan from Israel, it not only guarantees full-fledged

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BEHIND  
THE  
HEADLINES

## ■ Syria tries to lay on the charm; the jury's still out

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peace — as opposed to the no-ambassadors, no-tourists variety it offered in the 1990s — but that support for Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorists and the cross-border incursions into Iraq will cease. Peace with Lebanon also is presented as part of the package.

But recent reports that Syria is seeking to buy shoulder-launched missiles — which Israel fears could end up in the hands of Hezbollah terrorists aiming at Israeli population centers — lead many to question Assad's sincerity.

Russia has sent mixed signals about the rockets. The subject apparently was broached last month in a meeting between Assad and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

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In a meeting last week with Jack Rosen, the American Jewish Congress chairman, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov assured him Russia would not sell offensive missiles to Syria. Around the same time, Putin told the Jerusalem Post that his country would sell only “defensive” missiles to the Syrians — though terrorists often present their attacks as “defensive” measures to counter past or future Israeli “aggression.”

Syrian officials suggest the missiles are a card they must play to draw Israel into peace talks, as is the continued backing for Hezbollah and other terrorist groups.

Israel's leading Syria expert said that could well be the case.

“This is their card. They will deliver

once there is an agreement,” said Moshe Maoz, currently on a yearlong fellowship with the U.S. Institute of Peace. “There are no free lunches.”

Maoz believes the younger Assad can deliver.

“He is capable of doing it, and it's in the Syrian interest,” he said. “He's under siege, surrounded by pro-Western regimes. He wants the Golan back. The only option is to try and mend fences with the United States.”

Still, continuing to back terrorists poses real risks. Ratcheting up sanctions could have a serious impact on Syria's fledgling private economy.

If the Syrians do not take such threats seriously, it may be because now it's the Israelis and Americans who are sending mixed signals. Richard Armitage, the U.S. deputy secretary of state, said last month that the situation along Syria's border with Iraq is “much better,” despite Rice's testimony to the contrary.

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And just last week, William Burns, the State Department's top envoy to the Middle East, who was in the region to prepare for Rice's own visit next week, said the United

States would welcome a Syrian role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

On the Israeli side, Silvan Shalom, Israel's foreign minister, keeps sending positive signals to the Syrians, apparently at odds with Sharon's refusal to countenance talks now.

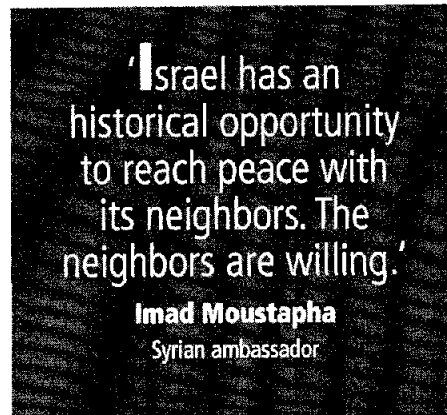
In December, Shalom said peace overtures from Syria “cannot be ignored,” and last week told CNN that the return of the body of Eli Cohen,

an Israeli spy caught and hanged in Damascus in 1965, would convince Israel that Syria is serious.

Another spur for Syria might be renewed Israeli-Palestinian talks, since Assad does not want to be the last Israeli enemy standing.

Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador, discounted such speculation. If anything, he said, Syria would draw reassurance from progress between Israel and the Palestinians.

“Each track will enhance, it will not be detrimental to the other track,” he said. “The Syrians will be more comfortable when they see the Israelis are serious about peace with the Palestinians.” ■



## Chocolate leads the way

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Torah portion and a love of Belgian chocolate inspired a Bat Mitzvah present from a girl in suburban Chicago.

Karly Brint and her family, members of the Am Shalom synagogue in Glencoe, Ill., donated the Torah to the International Jewish Center in Brussels in honor of Karly's Bat Mitzvah, scheduled for Feb. 26.

The Brints donated the Torah through the World Union for Progressive Judaism's Torah Gifting program, which gives Torah scrolls to international congregations.

“My Torah portion describes the Israelites carrying the Torah through the

desert, so I thought it would be a good idea to ‘carry’ a Torah to a foreign country,” Karly said.

When it came to choosing which synagogue to help, she selected the International Jewish Center in Brussels because of her love for chocolate.

Karly and her father, David, delivered the Torah personally to the IJC, which had been borrowing one from a congregation in Amsterdam.

“This gift of a Torah has given our congregation so much energy and will ensure our continuation for many years,” IJC President Lauren Nijkerk said.

The Brints plan to return to Belgium in the spring to donate a Torah ark. ■

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# Hopes high for Sharon, Abbas summit

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Call it the “Return of the ‘Road Map.’”

Almost two years after Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas stood on the shore of the Red Sea and launched the U.S.-led peace plan, the two leaders will meet again.

With Yasser Arafat now dead and Abbas already making his mark as the new Palestinian Authority president, next Tuesday’s summit in Egypt’s Sharm el-Sheikh could herald real progress.

Regional hopes for a breakthrough are running high.

The meeting will be hosted by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, attended by Jordan’s King Abdullah and blessed by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is due in the region next week on her first Middle East tour in her new position.

Israeli political sources said that at the summit Sharon will unveil a series of concessions to the Palestinian Authority, including Israeli troop withdrawals from West Bank cities, the release of hundreds of security prisoners and a de facto amnesty for terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip if they agree to disarm.

“This is our way of boosting Abu Mazen, who has done a lot to help us prepare the disengagement plan,” a Sharon confidant said, using Abbas’ nom de guerre. He

was referring to a calming of Palestinian attacks in the Gaza Strip.

Israel has presented its Gaza withdrawal plan as a way back into the road map, which has been tattered by violence. Israeli officials envision that Gaza and West Bank areas from which Israeli soldiers and settlers will withdraw will become a provisional Palestinian state where Abbas will have to prove his competency.

Though it has declined to crack down on terrorists, despite its road map obligation to do so, the Palestinian Authority insists the plan guarantees it full statehood in all of the West Bank and Gaza, and wants this recognized and implemented forthwith.

“We hope that this meeting, backed by Arab states, will make Israel fall in line” and “kick-start final-status talks,” P.A. Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei told reporters.

The demands have stirred concern in the Israeli political opposition, which recalled a similar asymmetry of expectations when the Oslo interim peace accords were signed in 1993.

“Again we will see a gala event, with the Palestinian chief getting everything,

with little in return,” Effi Eitam of the National Union bloc told Israel Radio, referring to reports that Israel already has agreed to curtail army missions to kill or capture terrorists if they lay down their arms.

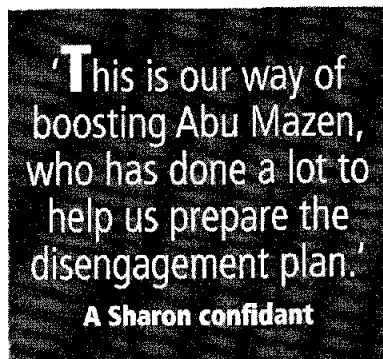
Egypt has been helping the indirect rapprochement by hosting talks in Cairo with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, aimed at getting the terrorist groups to abandon violence in Gaza. Egyptian security forces also are expected

to help their Palestinian counterparts prevent a power vacuum in the strip when Israel withdraws.

But Israeli suspicions of Egypt, the first Arab country to sign a peace deal with the Jewish state, linger.

Yuval Steinitz, chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, accused Cairo of playing a double game.

“Before the Egyptians offer help in calming the region, they should put an end to the smuggling of weapons from Sinai to the terrorists,” Steinitz said, referring to Gazans who bring in munitions through tunnels from Egypt. “It is a matter of practicing what you preach.” ■



## Federations lose top Washington lobbyist

By RON KAMPEAS and MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The departure of the Jewish federation system’s top Washington lobbyist creates a gap as the American Jewish community heads into a year in which the Bush administration is expected to push hard for budget cutbacks to domestic programs.

Lobbyist Charles Konigsberg is protesting his apparent dismissal last week after little more than a year as vice president for public policy of the United Jewish Communities and director of its Washington office.

In a letter to UJC’s compensation committee, obtained by JTA, Konigsberg, 46, noted his successes in bringing in millions of dollars for elder care, homeland security assistance and Medicaid.

He urged the panel to reconsider his dismissal, given “the momentous issues facing our Federations this year,” among other reasons.

Sources close to UJC management acknowledge some of

Konigsberg’s lobbying successes, but say a host of management problems that he refused to address left the group no choice but to fire him.

Officially, the UJC would not issue a statement beyond a terse release last Friday that Konigsberg had resigned — though Konigsberg’s private letter, written the same day, referred to his “termination.”

Privately, however, UJC leaders say Konigsberg had problems managing his staff, delegating authority and preserving morale.

Konigsberg, whose background is as a Senate aide on both sides of the aisle and as a lobbyist, said he improved employee morale during his brief tenure at the Washington office.

Konigsberg says his intense lobbying was key in a Senate vote last year that prevented \$11 billion in cuts to Medicaid. He also took credit for leading successful efforts last year to win \$25 million for homeland security assistance to nonprofit groups at risk, including many Jewish institutions. ■

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## NORTH AMERICA

### Rice boosts Abbas

The U.S. secretary of state offered U.S. help in training Palestinian Authority security forces.

"Obviously, the Palestinians are going to need help in terms of training and equipping their new security forces and I am sure there will be ways that we might be involved in that," Condoleezza Rice told reporters Tuesday before her trip to the Middle East next week.

She praised P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas for his efforts to rein in violence in the Gaza Strip by deploying police forces, though Israel and the United States want him to fulfill Palestinian obligations under the "road map" peace plan to crack down on terrorists.

### House Dems slam Bush for Kuropas

Eleven Jewish Democrats in Congress expressed their disappointment to President Bush for including a controversial Ukrainian-American in a delegation to Ukraine.

Myron Kuropas, said by Democrats to be a major Republican donor, accompanied the official U.S. delegation to last month's swearing-in of newly elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yushenko.

Kuropas has said that Ukrainians suffered more than Jews during World War II and has accused Jews of manipulating a "Holocaust industry."

"It is not just an embarrassment to the White House, but a shame for the American people that someone like Mr. Kuropas would be sent as an official U.S. emissary to a country where nearly one million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust," said the letter sent this week, signed by Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and nine others.

### New black, Hispanic, Jewish reps hosted

A foundation that brings Jews, Hispanics and blacks together welcomed new members of Congress.

The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding joined the World Jewish Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in hosting a breakfast Wednesday for new black, Hispanic and Jewish members of Congress.

Among those attending were Sen. Ken Salazar (D-Colo.), Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.) and Rep. Allyson Schwartz (D-Pa.).

### Old wine brings relief

A bottle of Thomas Jefferson's wine is being auctioned on eBay to raise money for a Jewish group providing tsunami relief. William Sokolin, a New York wine merchant, acquired Jefferson's bottle of Chateau Margaux 1787 when it was discovered in 1985.

Sokolin originally hoped to sell the bottle for approximately \$500,000.

Now, with the help of the American Jewish World Service, he is offering bidders the chance to own the bottle.

Though the bottle is damaged — a careless waiter at a 1989 dinner party nicked the bottle as it lay on display — it remains intact.

Bids can be made at [www.ajws.org/eBay](http://www.ajws.org/eBay) until 9:15 p.m. PST on Sunday.

## MIDDLE EAST

### Has nothing been learned?

On the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a German city council confirmed honors bestowed on a Nazi supporter. In 1991, Gerhard Heilfurt was granted honorary citizen status in the city of Schneeberg for his work as a German author, though his work during

World War II supported the Nazi cause, the Simon Wiesenthal Center said.

When the center learned about the honor, it challenged the city council to rescind the award. Council members refused on Jan. 27, Germany's Holocaust Memorial Day.

In a statement issued Monday, the center's Efraim Zuroff said the decision is a "blatant insult to the memory of the Holocaust and an obvious indication that the members of the Schneeberg city council have learnt nothing from this terrible tragedy."

### German anti-Semitism lurks

Germany's president, on a visit to Israel, said his country was still struggling with anti-Semitism.

"Xenophobia and anti-Semitism have not disappeared from Germany," Horst Koehler said in a Knesset speech Wednesday, referring to the rise of far-right German groups and polls that find most Germans see little difference between the Holocaust and Israeli policies against Palestinian terrorism. "Comparisons seeking to play down the Shoah are a scandal that we have to confront."

At least four lawmakers boycotted the speech because it was delivered in German, a mark of enduring resentment in the Jewish state founded on the ashes of the Nazi genocide.

But Koehler, whose four-day visit has been cast as a celebration of four decades of Israeli-German ties, struck an optimistic note.

"There can be no real normality between Germany and Israel. But who would have thought 40 years ago how good and friendly our relationship would become?" he said.

### Rabbinic student affects war crimes trial

A method developed by a rabbinic student helped convince an international tribunal that a former Bosnian military officer is competent to stand trial for war crimes.

The U.N. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia ruled Monday that Gen. Pavle Strugar is competent to stand trial, in part because of testimony from Dr. Bennett Blum, a forensic psychiatrist and student at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Los Angeles.

## WORLD

### Outposts becoming permanent

West Bank settlers are bolstering illegal outposts, an Israeli watchdog group said.

Peace Now said in a report issued Wednesday that 15 of 99 outposts erected without government permission in the West Bank were expanded last year, creating a de facto infrastructure for new settlements.

Under the U.S.-sponsored "road map" peace plan, Israel is obligated to dismantle the illegal outposts, but the evacuations have been inconsistent and often inconsequential and the clusters of hilltop caravans can easily be reassembled.

Military sources blamed court appeals lodged by the settlers for the delays in removing the outposts.

### Products to be labeled

Israeli products made in the West Bank and Gaza Strip now will bear a special label in Europe.

The move, which went into effect Tuesday, resolves a longstanding dispute between European countries and Israel.

The move will allow European countries to tax products made beyond Israel's pre-1967 boundaries, which account for a small percentage of Israel's exports to Europe.