

IN THE NEWS

The calm before the cease-fire?

Palestinian terrorist groups conditioned a cease-fire on Israel stopping its military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Thirteen armed factions that met in Cairo this week at the behest of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas issued a statement Thursday saying they had "agreed to maintain the recent calm in exchange for Israel's commitment to stop all forms of attack and release" security prisoners.

But the factions, led by Hamas, stopped short of formally endorsing a truce declared by Abbas with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon last month.

Israeli Embassy bombing marked

The 13th annual commemoration of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires reflected an increased optimism that the case might be solved.

Jewish school groups, Jewish leaders and government officials met Thursday around the concrete square where the embassy once stood.

"I think the current Argentine president has given trust to the world Jewish community by opening state secret files to be investigated to find the truth in the terrorist attacks," Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, told JTA at the ceremony in Buenos Aires.

Twenty-nine people were killed in the March 17, 1992, attack.

E.U. blocks Hezbollah channel

The European Union blocked Hezbollah's television channel from satellites in Europe.

On Thursday, E.U. broadcasting regulators agreed to block Al-Manar from the satellites.

The network has aired controversial programs, including one that accused "Zionists" of spreading AIDS throughout the Arab world.

■ **MORE NEWS, Pg. 8**



WORLD REPORT

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GPO/BP Images

Former state prosecutor Talia Sasson hands over a government-sponsored study to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in his Jerusalem office on March 8.

Dilemma on outposts underscores a bigger challenge — disengagement

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — On the face of it, nothing illustrates Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's political odyssey from settlement builder to settlement dismantler better than a recently published report on West Bank outposts.

The report details how government ministers and officials broke the law and circumvented regulations in building and funding dozens of unauthorized settler outposts in the West Bank.

Sharon, once one of the greatest culprits, was the man who, in his new incarnation,

commissioned what he knew would be a scathing indictment.

But it's not that simple. Sharon commissioned the report under intense American pressure to take down the outposts. And so far, despite the report's findings and recommendations, the Americans are not convinced he intends to act.

The response to the report highlighted another key issue. It shows just how difficult it will be to implement Sharon's plan to disengage from Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank.

Israeli officials are expecting such massive resistance to the disengagement that they

Continued on page 2

NEWS
ANALYSIS

The problem with outposts highlights Israel's disengagement dilemma

Continued from page 1

have developed a detailed plan of operation to carry it out.

After adopting the report's findings, the government deferred dismantling the 24 outposts it had long promised the Americans to remove. That led some politicians and pundits to ask how, if it backs away from taking down tiny outposts, the government will dismantle 25 full-fledged settlements in Gaza and the northern West Bank when the time comes this summer?

Sharon commissioned the report to demonstrate good faith and carry out commitments he made to the Bush administration last April. After promising the Americans to dismantle unauthorized outposts built since March 2001, he found he did not know the genesis and precise legal status of each one. Similarly, under pressure not to expand full-fledged, authorized settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, he found he lacked accurate information on their precise borders.

So he set up two teams: One, under lawyer Talia Sasson, was to clarify the legal status and history of the unauthorized outposts. The other, under reserve Brig. Gen. Baruch Spiegel, was to demarcate the physical boundaries of all existing settlements.

But the Americans remain unimpressed.

American officials note that although Sharon had shown good faith, they still do not have a list of unauthorized settlements or a timetable for their evacuation. Nor has Spiegel yet produced the required border documentation.

The report by former chief prosecutor Sasson, released last week, charged that ministers and senior aides, some of them settlers, had systematically turned a blind eye to the law.

It also charged that budgets were funneled clandestinely through the Housing Ministry and building permission was covertly granted by the Defense Ministry. There was a system of saying one thing in public and doing the opposite behind the scenes, and Likud and Labor administrations were equally at fault.

"The picture that is revealed is one of crass violation of the law by state institutions, public authorities, regional councils in Judea, Samaria and Gaza and settlers, all by creating the false impression of an organized system operating according to law," Sasson wrote. The most important thing now, she said, was to regulate the procedures and stop the double talk.

In response, the government set up a committee under Justice Minister Tzipi Livni to root out the covert practices by laying down clear regulations for authorizing and financing outposts and initiating new legislation if necessary.

At a Cabinet meeting Sunday, Sharon was adamant about the need to dismantle the 24 outposts established since March 2001. That was an Israeli commitment in the internationally approved Israeli-Palestinian peace "road map," he explained. But he did not propose any timetable.

That brought deep differences between Likud and Labor ministers to the fore. The Labor ministers wanted to see immediate action; the Likud ministers were in favor of waiting until after the disengagement plan was implemented.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz of the Likud argued that disengagement from Gaza and parts of the West Bank was Israel's top policy priority, and the government could not afford to be sidetracked by other issues. And, he added, it would be a mistake to create more antagonisms in the already tense pre-disengagement atmosphere.

To that end, 18,000 police officers — three-quarters of the entire Israeli police force — and two army divisions have been

assigned to the job, and already they are gearing up to meet a wide range of settler and extremist threats.

Extreme right-wingers reportedly are planning to stop the disengagement process through a cataclysmic event that changes the course of history. There are rumors, for example, that extremists are plotting to assassinate the prime minister or blow up Muslim holy places on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

In response, Shin Bet protection of the prime minister is unprecedented, police have stepped up de-

fenses around the Temple Mount and the Justice Ministry has set up a special legal team to help police and Shin Bet agents who are fighting political incitement and violence.

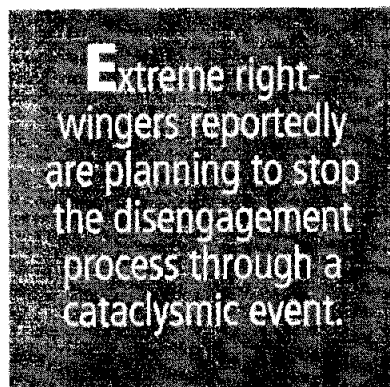
The biggest police and IDF worry, though, is evacuation day itself, when hundreds of thousands of settlers and their supporters from all over the country threaten to descend on settlements slated for evacuation, making it impossible for police and soldiers to remove the local settlers from their homes.

To prevent this scenario, which they are taking very seriously, the army and police are planning a massive logistical operation. To stop the outsiders from getting through, the plan is to ring the settlements with five circles of police and soldiers. The outer circle will be in Israel proper. Anyone getting through that will have to penetrate the fourth circle, then the third and so on.

Only when this huge operation is complete, Sharon and Mofaz say, will they focus on the outposts that the Sasson report, American pressure and Israel's road map commitments demand they take down.

Whether the United States and the rest of the international community have the patience to go along with this policy remains to be seen.

The fact that Sharon seems to have made such an about-face in his attitude to the settlements and the outposts probably will see him through until the end of the summer. Then, once the disengagement is over, he will have to act or face a possible showdown with Washington.



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'Gold Train' survivors get apology, little else

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After four years of battling the U.S. government over reparations, Hungarian Holocaust survivors are settling for an apology and extra care for the more destitute among them.

Plaintiffs in the "Gold Train" case settled last week for \$25.5 million, the bulk of which will go to welfare programs for Hungarian Holocaust survivors in need.

The key for plaintiffs in settling the case was the U.S. Justice Department's pledge to acknowledge wrongdoing, said Alex Moskovich, one of the plaintiffs in the class-action lawsuit.

"We expected much more, but we needed closure," said Moskovich, a retired ABC sports editor who now lives in Hobe Sound, Fla. "The funds are not as important as closure and an apology from the U.S. government that it was wrong."

In October 1945, U.S. forces seized 24 boxcars of Hungarian Jewish property that had been looted by the Nazis. Almost none of the property was returned to its owners. Some went to governments, some apparently went to the wrong people and some was requisitioned by high-ranking U.S. troops entranced by art masterpieces and expensive housewares.

The fate of the Gold Train property was uncovered in a 1999 report issued by the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States.

Moskovich was 14 in 1945 when he returned to his hometown of Sobrance in what is now Slovakia, the sole survivor of a wealthy family. His house was trashed,

and he had no idea what had happened to its belongings.

According to attorneys for the plaintiffs, a key element in the decision to accept the offered figure was evidence suggesting that earlier estimates — which reached \$200 million in 1945 dollars or \$2 billion in today's dollars — were exaggerated. The Nazis had removed some of the most valuable items before U.S. troops got the train, experts for both sides said.

In the end, U.S. authorities probably controlled between \$6.5 million to \$13 million worth of property — or \$65 million to \$130 million in today's dollars.

The plaintiffs originally sought \$300 million.

Moskovich said the aging of the Holocaust survivor community was also a factor in the decision not to fight for a full reckoning.

"If we don't settle now, it goes back to court and start from square one," he said. "What about those survivors who need help now?"

The U.S. role in defeating the Nazis also contributed to the decision to end proceedings now, said Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Claims Conference, which will coordinate the distribution of the funds.

"Ultimately, the United States saved thousands upon thousands of Jews," he

said. "This was a small chapter in the history of that time. It deserves recognition but the whole history should be remembered."

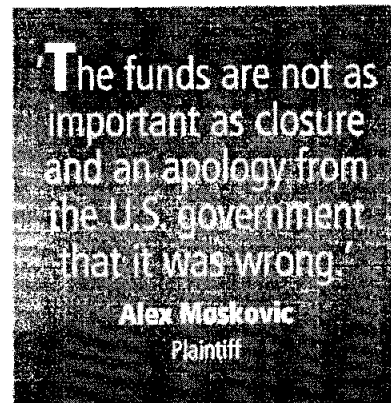
The Claims Conference will distribute at least \$21 million of the money around the world, split up according to the number of Hungarian Jewish survivors. More than 40 percent of the money will go to Israel; another 42 percent will be split between American and Hungarian Jewish communities; and the rest will be split between Canada, Australia and other countries.

The Claims Conference will consult on

projects for needy survivors with a committee set up by the plaintiffs.

Lawyers' fees are capped at \$3.8 million, or 15 percent — half the usual 30 percent take in class action lawsuits. Heirs do not have any claim, but are represented in \$500,000 to be set aside for an archive commemorating the Gold Train. Another \$150,000 will go to individual plaintiffs who gave up time for the case; no more than \$5,000 will be paid to any one of those plaintiffs.

Disbursement will begin some time after Oct. 3, the deadline for the settlement's final approval by the federal court in Miami, where the case was filed. The U.S. apology is expected to come after that deadline as well.



Poland's foreign minister is Jewish, but few people care

By CAROLYN SLUTSKY

KRAKOW, Poland (JTA) — Adam Daniel Rotfeld, who replaced Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz as Poland's foreign minister earlier this year, was born to a large Jewish family in the eastern part of the country, near what is now the Ukrainian city of Lvov.

In an interview Rotfeld gave to Polityka, a Polish magazine, he said he spent the years between 1941 and 1948 hiding in a monastery, and then he lived in a children's home in Krakow. He was one of two family members to survive the Holocaust.

After the war, Rotfeld studied international law and diplomacy in Warsaw and Krakow. He mostly ignored his Jewish background. That's typical of people in his situation, according to Stanislaw Krajewski, a Jewish leader in Poland and the American Jewish Committee's consultant on that country.

He is open about being Jewish, but he makes no attempt to join the Jewish community, and community leaders respect that position.

"There is nothing the organized Jewish community can reasonably do in such a case," said Krajewski. "And if anything was done he would feel, I guess, extremely embarrassed. This certainly does say at least as much about Poland as it does about him."

Rotfeld's future is less likely to be affected by his background than by the unpopularity of his political party, the Democratic Left Alliance, or SLD. The government is now in the middle of a major upheaval, Kwasniewski's second five-year term ends this year, and elections are due in a few months. The chance that Rotfeld will retain his office as a more right-wing government takes the stage is slim.

Michael Schudrich, Poland's chief rabbi, said, "The political tide against SLD is far more important than what your religion is."

Conservative leaders consider their identity

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Is Conservative Judaism a united movement, or is it more of a coalition of approaches to Jewish observance?

That's a question some Conservative rabbis are asking after taking a long, hard look at the state of their stream during a convention last week in Houston.

"I think that we're forever looking for that magic ideology, and the thing is, we're not necessarily united by a common ideology — but we are united by common values," said Rabbi Perry Raphael Rank, president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the movement's rabbinic arm.

"Maybe we need to look for a slightly new language in the way we describe ourselves," he added. "I think a better way of looking at who we are as a movement is that we're a coalition of different approaches to Torah, God and Israel."

Since its inception, the Conservative movement has walked a fine line between adhering to halachah, or Jewish law, and embracing modernity and a modern approach to religious observance. Its legal scholars have in some instances hewed strictly to traditional interpretations of the legal code and in others have adapted it to more current thinking.

The movement, for example, has said that driving an automobile on the Sabbath, prohibited according to a strict halachic reading, is permissible in order to attend worship services at a synagogue. On the other hand, the movement voted in 1992 against ordaining openly gay rabbis and officiating at same-sex marriages, although those positions also are being debated.

With its numbers in decline and its population aging, some observers outside the Conservative fold have predicted the movement's ultimate demise. And while Conservative leaders strongly dispute such dire prognostications, there seems to be a growing consensus among them that the stream needs a serious shot in the arm if it hopes to thrive alongside its revitalized Reform and Orthodox counterparts.

"I see that this is a call to action rather than a cause for alarm," said Judy Yudof, international president of the United

Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement's congregational arm.

"Conservative Judaism resonates, I feel, with a majority of Jews. We just haven't been very good marketers for our message."

Denominational leaders are now indicating that they would like the movement's disparate arms to work more closely together in articulating a vision.

"Because our movement is not hierarchical, it

requires a different method of working together when we all sit and plan," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, the R.A.'s executive vice president. "I think that's what is meant by 'more of a coalition.'"

"The question before us always is, 'How do we all get on the same page, focused in the same direction?'"

"It would be good to have what in contemporary jargon would be called a 'strategic plan' for the movement in which we all have a clear role and a clear plan of action," he added.

According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, only 33 percent of 4.3 million affiliated American Jews identified as Conservative. That represented a drop of 10 percentage points over the past decade — a period during which Reform and Orthodox ranks swelled. This finding represented the first time since the inception of such surveys in 1971 that Reform Jews outnumbered Conservative Jews.

Further, the report found, nearly half of all adult Jews who were raised Conservative no longer consider themselves to be Conservative.

But leaders insist it's not all downhill for the movement. They cite an increasing number of day schools and day-school students as a sign of strength.

In addition, a large New Jersey synagogue recently decided to appoint a woman to its senior rabbinic position, the first time a woman has held a job at a Conservative shul with more than 500 families. Leaders called the move "groundbreaking."

Indeed, said Rank, "the statistics only



FOCUS ON ISSUES



Courtesy of the Rabbinical Assembly

Rabbi Perry Raphael Rank, president of the Rabbinical Assembly, left, and Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly.

tell partial truths.”

“There is this corpus of anecdotal evidence and some statistical evidence as well” that the core of “serious” Conservative Jews is increasing, said Rank, also the spiritual leader of Midway Jewish Center in Syosset, N.Y.

Still, in an address that spurred much discussion at the assembly’s convention in Houston last week, the leader of the Conservative movement’s flagship Jewish Theological Seminary said that despite successes in the educational realm, many Jews raised in the Conservative movement are “often off at Orthodox shuls.”

Much of the substance “in our shuls is geared towards ‘entry-level’ Jews and not ‘advanced’ Jews,” Rabbi Ismar Schorsch said on March 6, according to a spokeswoman for the Rabbinical Assembly. And while these “advanced” Jews remain intellectually Conservative, they have trouble finding satisfaction at Conservative shuls, he said.

Yudof said the Conservative movement suffers from a problem that the other denominations do not face.

“We do such a good job of inculcating the values of the Conservative movement in our young people through our organizational youth groups, that frequently they return to homes and synagogue communities that don’t support the values they have come to embrace,” she said.

Perhaps this is what Schorsch was referring to when he spoke of a significant “disconnect” between Jewish education in the movement — which he said was vibrant and strong — and its synagogues. He suggested several remedies for revitalizing this realm of Jewish life.

Among them, he stressed the need to reaffirm the validity of halachic boundaries. He also cited both Chabad and Reform in saying that the American Jewish community is hungry for charismatic leadership and ideas.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, immediate past president of the assembly, also stressed the importance of community in retaining Jews in the Conservative movement.

“You can’t lead an observant life all by yourself,” he said. “There has to be a community. I think that it’s important for synagogues to increase the level of their adult education programs so that we have more and more people who are really Jewishly knowledgeable in our congregations.”

Jonathan Sarna, a professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University who delivered a plenary address at the convention,

said that Conservative Judaism, which once was supposed to be an inclusive tent representing most Jews to the right of Reform, has become narrower and more constricted in recent decades, leading to its shrinking appeal.

“In religion, a centrist movement, if it seeks to remain healthy and grow, needs constantly to widen its circle of adherents,” Sarna said in his address. “Tragically, the Conservative movement’s circle over the past four decades has, instead, narrowed and constricted.”

Sarna cited break-off movements such as Reconstructionism and the havurah movement as evidence of Conservative’s narrowing appeal. He also mentioned the explosion of nondenominational minyanim — many founded and run by people from the Conservative movement — that in recent years have begun to attract young Jews in droves.

Sarna also said that the movement could take heart from the resurgence of

Reform and Orthodox Judaism, both of which were able to effect turnarounds after years of declining vitality.

Rabbi Jeffrey A. Wohlberg, senior rabbi of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., said that the Orthodox movement’s growth has to do in part with the high birthrate in that community.

A substantial portion of the Reform movement’s growth, he said in an interview, can be traced to that movement’s decision to accept as members non-Jews who have married Jews, along with people who are not Jewish according to a strict interpretation of halachah.

“That has given energy to the Reform movement and that is something that we have to recognize. But we, the Conservative movement, don’t agree with it,” said Wohlberg, who is an officer of the assembly.

“People have always said that it’s easier to live on the right or the left — the middle requires a lot more thought and more analysis,” he added.

Many Reform Jews oppose Bush policies

By ERIC FINGERHUT
Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush was a hot topic of conversation at this week’s Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism’s Consultation on Conscience, but many of the 450 delegates were not singing “Hail to the Chief.”

Reform Jews from around the United States voiced strong support for a change in Bush’s policy on stem-cell research and gave a polite but chilly reception to a White House official presenting the president’s priorities as the three-day conference kicked off on Sunday.

“Many people in attendance are unhappy with the direction of Bush’s agenda,” said Anne Fishkin, 66, of South Charleston, W.Va. There are “a lot of issues in domestic and social policy we don’t see eye to eye on,” said Jeffrey Roth, 42, of Kendall Park, N.J.

High on that agenda is opposition to Bush’s restrictions on embryonic stem-cell research. Actor Michael J. Fox was among those urging Bush to change his position on Sunday evening at the District’s Washington Hebrew Congregation.

Fox, best known for his roles on the television sitcoms “Family Ties” and “Spin City,” was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 1991. In recent years, he

has curtailed his acting career to raise money for Parkinson’s research and to deal with his condition, which was noticeable in his slightly slurred speech.

The actor, who is not Jewish but is a member of the Reform Central Synagogue in New York with his wife, “Family Ties” co-star Tracy Pollan, who is Jewish, and their four children, told the approximately 2,000-person crowd that the president’s “current policy serves to dampen” research that could help sufferers of Parkinson’s, diabetes and other diseases.

The federal government allows research only on the 13 stem-cell lines that existed when Bush announced his policy in August 2001, and spends just \$20 million of the \$28 billion National Institutes of Health budget on embryonic stem-cell research. That’s less, Fox quipped, “than we fund on erectile dysfunction.”

“Stem-cell research may or may not live up to its potential, but it will only be a false hope if we do not act upon it,” Fox said, noting that in the next four years, more than 4 million people could die from diseases that could possibly be cured by embryonic stem cells.

Fox and Rabbi Susan Talve of Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis also criticized those who oppose such research.

Observers brace for Israel-bashing at U.N. meeting

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — Springtime in Europe feels less than carefree for Jewish observers at the annual U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.

The six-week session traditionally devotes more resolutions to Israel than any other country, condemning the Jewish state year after year.

Events had suggested that this meeting, which began Monday, might be different. But as its opening day grew closer, pro-Israel observers began to worry that this year would resemble years past.

The progress toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians since the election of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, followed by conciliatory gestures from both Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, seemed as if it might affect the meeting's tone.

And this is the first commission under the watch of Louise Arbour, a former member of Canada's Supreme Court, who recently told Israel's minister of Diaspora affairs, Natan Sharansky, that she was hoping for more balance on Israel.

Jews also have a serious ally in former U.S. Sen. Rudy Boschwitz, the new U.S. ambassador to the Human Rights Commission. Boschwitz is Jewish, his family immigrated to America in the 1930s to flee Nazi persecution in Germany and he is a board member of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Finally, in an internal report on widespread U.N. reform, the United Nations blasted the commission.



Eskinder Debebe/UN

Louise Arbour, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The commission's capacity to perform its tasks "has been undermined by eroding credibility and professionalism. Standard-setting to reinforce human rights cannot be performed by States that lack a demonstrated commitment to their promotion and protection. We are concerned that in recent years States have sought membership of the Commission not to strengthen human rights but to protect themselves against criticism or to criticize others. The Commission cannot be credible if it is seen to be maintaining double standards."

The report also defined terrorism in terms that pleased Jewish leaders.

Yet despite these favorable signs for Israel, Jewish officials don't expect much to change this year. "The secretary-general has taken significant steps, but they're just steps. It's up to the member-states to take greater responsibility," said Felice Gaer, director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights at the American Jewish Committee.

And that movement has yet to take shape. "There was some hope that the Palestinians would moderate given the enormous developments on the ground, but anyone who had these hopes was naive. After Oslo, the U.N. didn't change one iota," said Hillel Neuer, executive director of U.N. Watch in Geneva. "The U.N. is on autopilot. It doesn't reflect what is happening on the ground." Instead, "the campaign to delegitimize Israel continues unabated."

In fact, according to Amy Goldstein, director of U.N. affairs for B'nai B'rith International, "Whenever anything positive happens in the region, the rhetoric in the United Nations gets worse."

Meanwhile, continued efforts to consolidate about five anti-Is-

rael resolutions relating to Palestinian self-determination and Israeli occupation into one balanced resolution on the Middle East remain unlikely.

Efforts for reform also will take time to bear fruit. And not all of the recommendations are considered salutary: A suggestion for universal membership is opposed by many human rights groups that say membership should be limited to countries that prove their human rights bona fides.

More attention may be focused on the United States this session because of its occupation

of Iraq and questions surrounding its treatment of prisoners. That's unlikely to shift attention away from Israel, though, because member states often link the two countries together. In any case, criticism of the United States indirectly hurts Israel because of the countries' deep alliance.

Some of the key moments Jewish officials will be watching:

- A resolution calling on the government of Sudan, a member of the commission, to stop the killings perpetrated by the janjaweed, a government-backed militia.
- Resolutions that include condemnation of anti-Semitism along with Christianophobia and Islamophobia.

Last year, such condemnations were delivered in three separate resolutions. This year, condemnations of anti-Semitism may come in two resolutions blasting religious intolerance and racism.

A group of Quakers and Lutherans have called on the commission to remove any reference to a specific religion, however, because they claim it creates a hierarchy of religion.

Goldstein's organization and others are lobbying to keep those references intact, given the rise in anti-Semitic acts around the world.

• An agenda item on the occupation of Arab territories. While this resolution typically is a forum for anti-Israel resolutions, last year Neuer used the opportunity for a statement by U.N. Watch about Syrian-occupied Lebanon, for which he was ridiculed. This year, he plans to offer another statement and expects the written backing of several nongovernmental organizations. ■

'The U.N. is on autopilot. It doesn't reflect what is happening on the ground.'
Hillel Neuer
 U.N. Watch executive director

PURIM FEATURE

Older adults benefit from Purim sights, smells, memories

By JANE ULMAN

ENCINO, Calif. (JTA) — Offering the chance to parade in costume as Queen Esther or King Ahasuerus, shake groggers at the mention of Haman's name and feast on hamantashen, Purim is the perfect holiday — for our kids' grandparents and great-grandparents.

At every age, we must be connected to life's fun side, and Purim, the boisterous and tumultuous holiday that begins this year at sundown on March 24 and celebrates the triumph of the Jews in ancient Persia over enemies determined to destroy them, gives us that opportunity.

But far more than the kids, today's elders — many of whom are contending with the death of a spouse, poor health, loneliness and dwindling finances — need the frivolity that Purim brings. Of the 35 million Americans who are 65 and older, up to 7 million suffer from some form of depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. That age group also claims the nation's highest suicide rate, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

"Laughter is the best medicine," says Faye Sharabi, activity director for Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles' Valley Storefront, an adult day health-care center in North Hollywood, Calif. For the entire month leading up to Purim, Sharabi provides a variety of fun-filled activities, all part of the five-day-a-week program of physical and occupational therapy and socialization for the Storefront's elderly, physically disabled and/or memory-impaired clients, who range in age from 40 to 99.

"The Megillah is a fascinating story that is not just for kids," says Sharabi, who stresses Queen Esther's positive outlook and ability to inspire the Jewish people. She arranges a Queen Esther "makeover" for the female participants as well as a beauty pageant, with everyone designated a queen. "When you're elderly, you're still beautiful," she says.

Poll: Americans like Israel

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — Publicizing Israel's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip may hold the key to winning public support for the Jewish state, according to a new survey.

In the post-Yasser Arafat era, Americans generally still side with Israel, considered a like-minded ally, and show hostility toward the Palestinians, according to The Israel Project, a group working to promote Israel's image.

In the survey, 58 percent said they had "warm" feelings toward Israel, with 11 percent expressing "cool" feelings. The comparative numbers for the Palestinians were 35 percent and 24 percent, respectively.

Also, some 40 percent of Americans sided with Israel over the Palestinians. Only 10 percent took the Palestinians side, and 50 percent would not choose a side.

But perceptions of the Palestinians under new leadership have improved drastically — and Americans think Israel should compromise to advance the peace process, according to The Israel Project, a group working to promote Israel's image.

The Palestinian Authority's president, Mahmoud Abbas, "has a suit, a smile and a snappy soundbite," said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, president of The Israel Project. "In a world where people want to hear a message of peace, he's giving one."

At the same time, "we cannot underestimate enough how special this moment in the peace process is, as Israel is doing exactly what Americans want it to do — make compromises for peace," says the report, released Monday in a briefing to Jewish officials in New York.

"There is a clear opportunity, right now, to build support through a significant education campaign" about how Israel, a democracy, is taking risks for peace.

The group plans to pitch that message to the part of the media, such as CNN, that appeal to liberal viewers. To media seen as having more conservative viewers, such as Fox News, the group will steer clear of discussing disengagement, focusing instead on the values shared by Israel and the United States.

The situation in Britain is slightly different. There, a focus group of educated professionals put the onus for peacemaking squarely on Israel, which it considered the oppressor. When group members were told about Israel's plans to withdraw from Gaza, their opinion of Israel improved.

The message in Britain, according to the report, should focus on progress on peace talks, concern for the Palestinians and the need to improve the lives of average people on both sides.

The studies were based on focus groups and polling conducted by political pollsters Stan Greenberg and Neil Newhouse.

In February, a sampling of 800 Americans were polled, and focus groups of 30- to 70-year-olds were tested. In Philadelphia, Jews and "opinion elites" — highly educated, engaged professionals — were interviewed; in Baltimore the groups were made up of white women and white liberals.

In Britain, the group also conducted focus groups. Muslim men from 16 to 22 years old were interviewed, along with non-Jewish "opinion formers," 30- to 50-year-old management-level professionals who

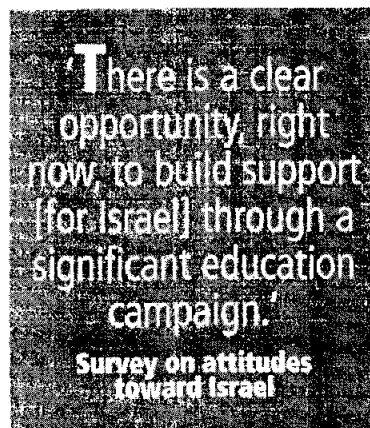
follow foreign affairs.

The extent of public ignorance about Israel's disengagement plan came as a surprise to many Jewish officials, who are deeply involved in the plan's details, Mizrahi said.

She ascribes that ignorance to a "very cluttered media environment." The subject of Israel and the ongoing intifada have moved deep inside the newspapers, away from page one, and thus capture less public interest, she said.

It is not yet clear how Jewish organizations will make use of the new study, but The Israel Project already is preparing to put the data to work.

The group plans to continue running focus groups to determine how best to publicize disengagement. And it aims to educate the 1,400 American reporters who cover Israel about the Jewish state's initiatives for peace through direct mail and by setting up meetings for them with Israeli officials.



NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Jewish officials look for restitution from Poland

Negotiations are intensifying for Polish restitution of Jewish private property originally seized by the Nazis.

In the coming days, the government is expected to send a draft version of a bill on the issue to Kalman Sultanik, the president of the Federation of the Polish Jews of the United States.

Sultanik and other Jewish leaders told Polish government officials that the legislation, which provides for 15 percent in cash of the value of the properties, is insufficient.

Europeans in the clear

The European Union was cleared of Israeli allegations that it knowingly bankrolled Palestinian terrorism.

The findings released Thursday by an independent two-year investigation said there was no conclusive evidence that E.U. funds were diverted to terrorism, but neither did it rule out possible misuse of funds by the Palestinian Authority.

Annan's mixed message gets mixed response

Kofi Annan's visit to Yasser Arafat's grave has outraged some politicians.

The U.N. secretary-general laid a wreath at the grave of the Palestinian Authority president on a trip to the region, where he spoke at the opening ceremony of a new Holocaust museum in Israel.

"It is almost grotesque to travel to Israel to pay tribute to the 6 million Jews massacred in the Shoah and use the opportunity to pay tribute to a terrorist who is responsible for murdering thousands more," said Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), whose sentiments were echoed by other New York officials, according to the New York Sun.

"You can go without laying a wreath," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

At the same time, Jewish leaders applauded Annan for a speech at a state dinner in which he called for Israel's inclusion in the United Nation's Western European and Others group.

Israel, a conditional member of WEOG, is the only U.N. member not a permanent member of one of the five regional groupings.

Jews jeer at London mayor's gesture

Jewish groups derided the decision by London's controversial mayor to publish a guide to Jewish sites in the capital.

Ken Livingstone, who caused widespread anger after comparing a Jewish journalist to a concentration camp guard last month, said the 26-page booklet showed "the enormous contributions of generation after generation of Jewish people across all fields of social, political, cultural and economic life."

But community groups said the pamphlet, which provides details of museums, synagogues, films, live music and walking tours, was an insincere gesture following a string of incidents that have outraged British Jews.

Controversial Ukrainian paper honored

Ukraine's president honored a paper that published an anti-Semitic article.

Jewish groups criticized the honor Viktor Yuschenko gave last week to Siiski Visti, which last year published an article asserting that 400,000 Jews joined the S.S. during the Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941.

Josef Zissels, a Ukrainian Jewish leader, told The Associated Press that the award was particularly disturbing because the newspaper has failed to apologize for the article.

The award is being seen as gratitude for the paper's role in opposing the rule of former President Leonid Kuchma.

MIDDLE EAST

Egyptian envoy arrives in Israel

Egypt returned its ambassador to Israel after a four-year absence.

"I am very proud that President Hosni Mubarak granted me the responsibility for representing Egypt in Israel," Ambassador Mohamed Assem told reporters when he landed in Tel Aviv on Thursday.

Assem's predecessor was withdrawn soon after Israeli-Palestinian fighting erupted in 2000, and the new appointment is part of Mubarak's recent efforts to orchestrate a regional rapprochement with the Jewish state.

Settlement assault probed

Israeli settlers are suspected of assaulting Palestinian construction workers.

Eight Palestinians who were building a house at Nahliel settlement were set upon by dozens of students from the local yeshiva Thursday, witnesses said.

Five of the victims were admitted to the hospital.

Bombing plot suspects indicted

Five Palestinians are suspected of planning to bomb the Knesset in an attempt to impress Al-Qaida.

According to an indictment filed at Jerusalem District Court on Thursday, the alleged terror cell's leader surfed Al-Qaida Web sites to gather information on bomb-making, hoping to attack Israel's Parliament building.

The five are also accused of planning to kill Israelis by putting poison on the doors of their cars.

NORTH AMERICA

Jewish groups hail religious freedom bill

American Jewish groups praised the re-introduction into Congress of a bill aimed at guaranteeing religious freedom in the workplace.

The Workplace Religious Freedom Act, introduced into both the Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday, would give employees freedom to wear religious clothing at work and be accommodated on religious holidays.

Abba Cohen, the director of the Agudath Israel of America's Washington office, said the bill is an "important step toward providing the full measure of protection federal law was intended to offer the religiously observant employee."

The bill, which has languished for years in Congress, was introduced in the Senate by Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Rick Santorum (R-Pa.).

Reps. Mark Souder (R-Ind.) and Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.) introduced the legislation in the House.

Florida museum to probe art

The Norton Museum of Art will investigate the ownership history of 59 paintings that changed hands during Nazi control of Germany.

The museum, in West Palm Beach, Fla., received a \$50,000 grant from the Max and Iris Stern Museums Legacy Program to research the provenance of the paintings, Old Master works by lesser-known artists, The Palm Beach Post reported.

Report: Internet hate rising

Web sites that promote hate and terrorism increased by 22 percent over the past year, according to the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

The group made the announcement this week as it released Digital Terrorism + Hate 2005, a report on Internet-based hate.