

IN THE NEWS

Thousands rally for disengagement

Some 10,000 Israelis marched through Tel Aviv to support Israel's planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. [Story, Pg. 3]

AIPAC staffers placed on leave

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has placed two officials who have been at the center of a federal investigation on paid leave.

JTA has learned that Steve Rosen, director of foreign policy issues for AIPAC, and Keith Weissman, an Iran specialist, are no longer working at its headquarters, though it is not clear for how long that has been true.

AIPAC said it does not comment on personnel matters.

Little is known about the status of the FBI investigation into the two men, although reports suggest it is focused on the leaking of classified Pentagon information.

Rosen and Weissman were placed on paid leave after an FBI raid last August but soon returned to work.

There was another raid in December, and four top AIPAC staffers were asked to appear before a grand jury.

Reform rabbinical group missing money

The Reform movement's rabbinic arm is making major budget cuts after discovering that it is missing \$1 million.

The money was apparently taken from specially designated accounts by the former comptroller for the Central Conference of American Rabbis and used for other CCAR expenses, the New York Jewish Week reported.

There is "no reason to suspect" that the missing money was used for anything but "legitimate CCAR expenses," Rabbi Paul Menitoff, the group's executive vice president, told the Jewish Week.

Still, Menitoff said an independent accountant had been hired to look into the matter.

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U.S. Jewish inmates have stake in case before Supreme Court

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When Brandl Rifka was serving time in a Florida prison, she asked for a special meal to break the Yom Kippur fast. She was given ham.

"They did it purposefully," she recalls angrily.

Brandl Rifka, who asked that she be identified by her Hebrew name because she is on probation, said she became more religiously observant during the two years she spent in Florida prisons after being convicted of fraud.

In a telephone interview from Florida, she said she faced anti-Semitism on a daily basis from prisoners and guards who, she says, inhibited her attempts to practice her religion, and by others who suggested she accept Jesus.

"It's beyond punishment," she said. "If you're a Jewish prisoner, you're ostracized in many ways."

The question of inmates' ability to practice their religion will come before the U.S. Supreme Court on Monday. The court will hear oral arguments in the case of Cutter v. Wilkinson, an Ohio case that is challenging the constitutionality of a law passed by Congress in 2000 that was intended to expand religious freedom in prison.

That legislation, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, said prisons should not impose substantial burdens on religious expression, unless there was a compelling government interest. It also said prisons should use the "least restric-

tive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest."

The court's decision could have implications beyond the prison issue. The legislation requires a compelling reason for the government to deny religious organizations reasonable land use. If the court strikes down the existing law, the land use provision would be defeated as well.

The case before the court stems from complaints by members of several fringe religions — Wicca, Asatru and the Church of Jesus Christ — who filed lawsuits after being denied the ability to worship and purchase religious books and ceremonial items.

Experts say that some inmates become closer to God and religion while they are imprisoned, partially because they are seeking understanding and forgiveness for their misdeeds.

But just as Jews and other minorities are becoming more connected to their faith, they face serious difficulties in expressing it.

"Prisons these days are much more punitive and restrictive than ever," said chaplain Gary Friedman, chairman of Jewish Prisoner Services International, a Washington state-based group that advocates for prisoners' religious freedom and provides services and materials.

"Corrections people are feeling the people's mandate to punish, and that means restricting everything, and it extends to religious practice."

Prisoner advocates say that even though the situation continues to be difficult for Jews, the 2000 law has been instrumental in

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ Supreme Court case to examine prisoners' rights to religious expression

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aiding their fight for Jewish expression.

It is unclear how many Jews are in prison, because the government does not keep statistics on inmates' religion. Friedman said his organization is in touch with 5,500 inmates, but estimates the number of Jews in prison could be double that.

The situation for Jews and other religious inmates varies from state to state.

Some prisons prevent all religious expression, concerned that prisoners will use religion as a way to get increased privileges. Indeed, some Jewish prisoners interviewed admitted they were drawn to worship services in part because it got them out of their cells each week.

But other prisons allow some religions to flourish while stifling religious minorities.

In some states, such as Colorado, the chaplain service is run by evangelical Christians who do not advocate for rights for Jewish prisoners, Friedman said.

And most states do not provide adequate kosher food, forcing observant prisoners to eat vegetarian meals, which may lead them to stop keeping kosher, he said.

Richard Dobelle, who spent more than 12 years in federal prisons for trafficking cocaine, recalled in a phone interview from Florida that he told the chaplain at one federal prison that he couldn't have grain products on his tray during Pass-

over, but the Christian chaplain didn't tell the kitchen staff.

"He wouldn't do it," said Dobelle. "He said they couldn't do it, but the kitchen told me something different."

Dobelle, who was released last December, said some prisons allowed him to wear tefillin regularly but others did not, considering them a potential weapon.

At one prison, he had to petition up the chain of command to keep his tefillin in his room but the request was denied. He was told to go to the chaplain every day to retrieve them; eventually, he sneaked them in.

Friedman said prisons are scared of tefillin because the straps could be used as a weapon or a tool for suicide. That, he said, is why many penitentiaries do not permit their use.

At the heart of the court struggle is an effort to get prison officials to think about ways to let religious materials in, Friedman said.

Instead, their tendency is to exclude anything if it could possibly pose a threat.

A U.S. District Court in Ohio ruled for the plaintiffs in 2001, saying the Religious Land Use Act did not violate the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, because government is allowed to alleviate governmental interference with religion.

The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati reversed the decision in 2003, arguing the legislation advanced religion by "giving greater protection to religious rights than to other constitutionally protected rights."

The Bush administration is defending the law, arguing that it does not afford religious beliefs a new status, but ensures that religious freedoms are evenly extended.

A wide consortium of Jewish groups are parties to a brief, filed by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, that says the law has the purpose of protecting the free exercise of religion from unnecessary government interference.

For its part, the Ohio government has

argued that religious accommodations compromise prison security, and that the law would lead to a dramatic enhancement of prisoner rights, disrupting prison operations.

"It is a powerful tool that prisoners advancing religious claims can use to obtain accommodations," said the respondent's brief. "And the standard Congress mandates — strict scrutiny — is the most demanding test known to constitutional law."

They also argue that the law exceeds Congress' powers.

In 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a broader version of the legislation, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, ruling that Congress did not have the authority to enact such a law, which, the court said, infringed on states' rights.

The new law, meant to address some of those concerns, cites federal grants to state prisons as justification for the measure.

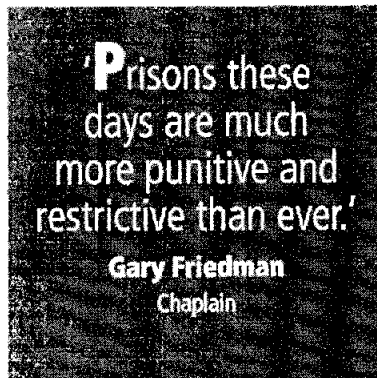
Meanwhile, experts and former prisoners say Jews are at a disadvantage because there are only a handful of them at each penitentiary, as opposed to many Christians and Muslims.

"It's like Tonto and the Lone Ranger riding alone, with all the Indians around them," said Robert Burns, a former inmate who is now director of prisoner services at the Aleph Institute, a Chabad organization that reaches out to Jews in prison.

While some Jews embrace their religion in prison, others assimilate for fear of anti-Semitism.

Brandl Rifka tried to get other Jewish prisoners to celebrate Rosh Hashanah with her. She bought tuna fish and potato chips from the commissary — her definition of a "special meal" at the time — and went to bring it to her peers. An officer stopped her, called her a profanity, threw the meal on the ground, and with a foot on her back, made her pick it off the floor.

"I was discouraged from being a Jew," she said. "I understood at that point if I didn't embrace my Judaism, that is how it gets lost for everybody."





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At rally, leftists hold noses, support Sharon

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Amnon Horev walked tall through the crowd of marchers rallying in support of Israel's planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. His young grandsons stood on either side of him, small hands clasped in his large weathered ones.

Horev, 70, a former paratrooper, fought under the command of Ariel Sharon, now Israel's prime minister, in the 1950s. In 1967 he led his own soldiers as a company commander during the battle for east Jerusalem. He thought that the end of that war would bring with it the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

THIS WEEK

MONDAY

■ Polish-Jewish issues will be part of the focus of a trip by U.S. congressional representatives to Poland. Reps. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-Fla.), Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) and Ted Strickland (D-Ohio) will make the three-day trip, which is being sponsored by the North American Council of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. As part of the trip, the delegation will meet with Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and visit the site of the Auschwitz death camp.

■ A discussion on applying the legacies of the Holocaust to the current situation in the Sudan will take place as the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. B'nai B'rith International and the U.S. Holocaust are sponsoring the event. Jewish groups have spearheaded efforts to motivate the international community to act in the Sudan, where government-sponsored militias have killed tens of thousands in what some have labeled a genocide.

SUNDAY

■ Members of the Reform Movement's rabbinic arm will discuss post-denominationalism, the successes and challenges of progressive Judaism, trends in biblical translation and other topics at the 116th annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Houston. Attendees at the gathering, being held through Wednesday, will also take part in a closed-door discussion about the recently reported revelation that the group was missing \$1 million and was therefore making significant cuts to its budget.

Among his former soldiers are some of the leaders of today's settlement movement.

"They got confused," said Horev of those former comrades.

Horev, a farmer in northern Israel, said he thinks religious Zionists were frustrated by their lack of a role in creating the state of Israel and so seized the opportunity in 1967 to do something "big."

Unfortunately, he said, their designs go against the original Zionist precepts of secularism and self-determination for all peoples.

But he is confident, especially, he says, because he knows Sharon personally. He is sure the prime minister will have the power and fortitude to carry out what Horev believes must be done

— to oversee the Israeli military withdrawal and the evacuation of some 8,500 Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and part of the northern West Bank.

Horev and his grandsons made their way through the streets of central Tel Aviv on Saturday along with some 10,000 other protesters from around the country who rallied under the banner "Israel Is Leaving Gaza."

The turnout was considered low for what had been planned as a huge rally by a coalition of peace groups and left-wing political parties. The organizers failed to secure the support or participation of those who support Sharon's disengagement plan but are not aligned with the peace camp. That group includes government ministers from Sharon's Likud Party.

Settler leaders dismissed the rally as an "embarrassing failure," pointing out that they had managed to hold a demonstration in Jerusalem last month that drew tens of thousands of participants.

Those who came to the rally Saturday said they wanted to take back the

Israeli street, to let people know that the majority of Israelis do support the withdrawal.

"There are voices fighting the disengagement because they are fighting for their homes," said Ela Orr, 25, an educator from Kibbutz Sde Boker in the Negev. "But we are also fighting for our home, and you don't hear enough from us."

She said she thought part of the reason for the low turnout was the ambivalence many Israelis on the left feel about coming out in support of Sharon.

"For so many years we have been against Sharon, calling him a war criminal," Orr said. "It is easier to support his plan than to support Sharon."

Yariv Oppenheimer, the secretary-general of Peace Now, had harsh words for the settler movement, which has threatened to thwart the withdrawal, scheduled to begin in July.

"Those who invite a civil war should know that we are ready for battle," he said, to the cheers of the protesters.

Interior Minister Ofir Paz-Pines struck a more conciliatory tone. The majority of Israelis want the disengagement he said, adding, "We want a normal, Jewish democratic nation." He cautioned against division between settlers and other Israelis.

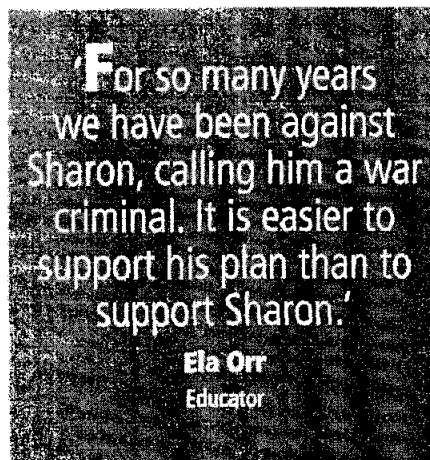
"We do not hate you. Do not hate us. After disengagement we want to be one free nation in its land," Paz-Pines said.

Horev's grandson, 10-year-old Nathan Berger, said he, too, is sure that disengagement was the right thing for Israel.

He said he hopes it will lead to a Palestinian state, saying that if the Palestinians have a state they will have less reason to fight Israel.

He said he hopes it will lead to a Palestinian state, saying that if the Palestinians have a state they will have less reason to fight Israel.

"Until now everything has been all talk," Nathan said. "It's about time that something start happening."



NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Ambush wounds troops

Four Israeli soldiers and a Palestinian were hurt in West Bank clashes. Unidentified gunmen ambushed troops who were helping police search for stolen Israeli cars south of Ramallah Sunday, wounding three of them.

A policeman also was hurt.

Tulkarm handover seen

Israel plans to give the Palestinian Authority security control over a second West Bank city on Monday.

"We expect to transfer Tulkarm to Palestinian responsibility tomorrow," Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told reporters Sunday.

Under last month's cease-fire declaration between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, five West Bank cities are to be handed over.

Jericho went last week, and Kalkilya is expected to follow shortly after the Tulkarm transfer.

No date has been set for handing over the last two cities on the list, Ramallah and Bethlehem.

Saudi plan returns

The Arab League reissued a comprehensive 2002 peace offer to Israel. Arab foreign ministers meeting in Algiers over the weekend agreed to a Jordanian proposal to extend the offer but stopped short of accepting Jordan's bid to scale back the conditions.

In order to win over Israeli public opinion, Jordan's King Abdullah had suggested dropping the Saudi call for the Jewish state to withdraw from all land captured in 1967 in exchange for full normalization with the Arab world.

But the ministers meeting in Algiers insisted on this condition, as well as the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees.

Israeli officials declined comment, but noted that there is no change expected in Jerusalem's insistence that it will never return to the pre-1967 lines under any peace deal.

You mean, you'd let Israel win?

Lebanon pulled out of the Eurovision song contest to avoid the possible embarrassment of broadcasting an Israeli victory.

"According to Lebanese national legislation, Tele-Liban is not permitted to broadcast the performance of the Israeli participant, thereby breaching the rules of the Eurovision Song Contest 2005," said a statement posted last Friday on Eurovision's Web site.

The station will pay a fine.

"Lebanon is in a state of war with Israel," Ibrahim Khoury, Tele-Liban's director, told The Associated Press. "If the Israeli contestant wins, we would have to show the celebrations."

Israel has won the popular European contest three times. This would have been the first time Lebanon participated.

Ukraine hosts the contest — set for May — this year.

WORLD

Ukraine admits missile sale to Iran

Ukraine sold Iran missiles capable of reaching Israel. Ukraine acknowledged the illegal sale in 2001 of 12 of the Soviet era long-range missiles, according to a report in last Friday's Financial Times.

It arrested a Ukrainian businessman last year and he is undergoing a secret trial, the report said.

Warrants are out for two Russian businessmen in the sale; one is being held in the Czech Republic.

The X-55 missiles have a range of 3,000 kilometers.

Auschwitz awareness spikes in U.K.

British awareness of the Holocaust jumped sharply after commemorations of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

A recent BBC poll showed 94 percent of respondents were aware of the death camp, up from 55 percent last year.

Coverage of the 60th anniversary commemorations in January blanketed the media.

Kiev synagogue defaced

A synagogue in Kiev was vandalized.

On March 17, vandals painted a large swastika on the wall of the Brodsky Synagogue in the second act of vandalism in three months against Kiev's central shul.

In early December, several of the historic building's windows were shattered.

The synagogue became a focus of wide public and media attention late last year, when it provided food and shelter to participants in the mass protests in the Ukrainian capital that resulted in the revote in the country's presidential election.

NORTH AMERICA

L.A. endorsements denied

Six Jewish leaders in Los Angeles said their signatures on cards backing the re-election of the city's mayor were forged.

In a story first reported in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal, the six men said they didn't sign the cards, which originally were provided by Joseph Klein, an L.A. Jewish community leader and supporter of Mayor James Hahn. Klein died last year.

"In your first campaign for mayor, some of us did support you on the reputation of a now dear departed mutual friend, Joe Klein," the six said in a letter to Hahn. "However, that was 3 1/2 years ago, and there was no follow-up call to re-solicit support from us for your current campaign."

Last month, the men's names were listed in an ad backing Hahn that ran in local Jewish newspapers.

Hahn faces a tough race in the May 17 runoff against Antonio Villaraigosa.

Russian Jewish group joins American Zionists

A U.S.-based Russian Jewish group joined the American Zionist Movement.

Russian American Jews for Israel will be the only group representing the Russian American Jewish community in the AZM, which is made up of American Zionist groups across the political spectrum.

Membership on the AZM allows a group to be elected to the 750-seat World Zionist Congress.

The congress convenes every four to five years to negotiate the policy of the World Zionist Organization, which makes up half the decision-making power of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

That means influence over the agency's \$350 million budget, which focuses on immigration and absorption, as well as worldwide religious, political and educational programs.

Brandeis opens Middle East center

Brandeis University opened a center for Middle East studies.

The Crown Center for Middle East Studies is dedicated to producing independent scholarship on the Middle East conflict.

There are endowed chairs in Israel studies, Islamic studies and Arab politics.

The opening of the center, which will be dedicated next month, comes amid a controversy about the politicization of Middle Eastern studies departments, particularly at Columbia University.