



IN THE NEWS

Lawmakers oppose referendum on Gaza

Israeli lawmakers voted down a bill that would have authorized a referendum on the Gaza withdrawal plan.

The Knesset on Monday voted 72-39 against the bill, which called for a national vote on the plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank later this year.

Several members of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party, including Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, voted against the bill.

Israeli army arrests Jihadniks

Israeli soldiers arrested eight Islamic Jihad terrorists suspected of trying to make rockets.

The arrests were made Monday near the northern West Bank city of Jenin.

The terrorists were suspected of trying to make rockets similar to the Kassam rockets launched from the Gaza Strip into Jewish settlements.

The terrorists threw an explosive device at the soldiers during the operation, and one soldier was wounded.

Birthright Israel launches foundation

Birthright Israel launched a North American foundation.

Jay Golan will be the president of the foundation, Birthright announced Monday. Golan was senior director of Carnegie Hall since 2002 and has worked at the New York Public Library, the American Museum of Natural History and the Jewish Museum, all in New York City.

Golan will foster relationships with the Jewish federation system, expand fund raising and supervise programs for Birthright alumni.

The program, which offers free trips to Israel for young people from the Diaspora who have never visited the Jewish state on a peer tour, has struggled to secure funding from the federations and Israel, which, along with 14 philanthropists, provide financial backing for the program.

WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE • WWW.JTA.ORG

In maelstrom of Mideast studies, Brandeis opens non-partisan center

By RICHARD ASINOF

WALTHAM, Mass. (JTA) — Amid the struggle for hearts and minds in the Middle East, there's a small new patch of common ground in an unlikely place.

With its inaugural conference April 4-5, Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies will launch its quest to create a first-rate center of Middle East scholarship that avoids polemics, eschews advocacy and disavows political agendas.

According to its director, Shai Feldman, former head of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, the Crown Center will be a place where all Middle Eastern scholars — Arab, Israeli, Palestinian, Persian, Turkish and American — can engage in dialogue, research and scholarship.

"The center will seek to produce a discourse on the Middle East as dispassionate, objective and centrist as possible," Feldman told JTA in a recent interview.

The \$25 million center, underwritten in large part by the Crown family of Chicago and located at the Jewish-sponsored, non-sectarian university in a Boston suburb, has chairs in Islamic studies, Arab politics, Israel studies and Sephardic studies, and is looking to endow three more.

It will have a state-of-the-art television studio, enabling center experts "to react quickly to any developments, and allow any network to hook up to us directly," Feldman said.

Feldman's first appointments of senior

fellows demonstrate the center's intent to encompass the region's diversity. They are Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestine Center for Political and Survey Research in Ramallah, and Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo.

The two will participate in next week's conference and will begin teaching classes in the fall. Dennis Ross, who served as President Clinton's special envoy to the Middle East, also will serve as a visiting scholar next year.

"The Middle East is at the epicenter of our political world," Aly told JTA in a telephone interview from Cairo. "The challenge for the Crown Center is that the region is very much enigmatic. It's still understudied."

Aly, who hosts his own television show and serves as a political commentator on Orbit TV, believes regional economic cooperation can produce the kind of vibrant growth that some believe will change the nature of conflict resolution in the Middle East.

From Ramallah, Shikaki told JTA of his hope "that the Crown Center will contribute to the debate on the Middle East from a balanced and nonpartisan perspective."

One of the Crown Center's first study projects will be a look at the role of women in the Middle East, and Feldman envisions the center serving as a resource for the most prominent female scholars and thinkers.

According to Brandeis President Jehuda Reinharz, the major obstacle facing the center is "academic mediocrity" — because,

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in his view, so much of Middle Eastern scholarship has been superseded by politics.

"Too many of the centers that currently exist are so infused with ideology, so obsessed by the Israeli-Arab conflict, they have become less interested in scholarship and more interested in scoring political points," Reinharz told JTA.

Discussing his reasons for creating the center, Reinharz said he kept recalling the U.S. State Department's plea for help after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, "asking anyone who knows Arabic to please raise their hand."

The lack of competent scholarship in this country on such a crucial issue was "inexcusable," Reinharz said. The Crown Center's goal is to "create the next generation of first-rate Middle Eastern scholars."

The launch comes at a time of increased polarization over the way Israel and the Middle East are taught on American campuses.

In recent months, Columbia University has been rocked by charges of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel bias in its Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department. A short documentary prepared by the David Project, a Boston-based Israel-advocacy group, recounted how several Columbia students said they felt threatened academically for expressing pro-Israel viewpoints.

In turn, even public dialogue with a Palestinian scholar can prove controver-

sial and provoke outrage in the Jewish community. In December 2004, right-wing activists criticized three leading Jewish community groups in Boston for hosting a discussion on the post-Arafat Middle East that included Sari Nusseibeh, a visiting Palestinian scholar at Harvard University who is president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and has served as a PLO official.

Though Nusseibeh's public statements are more moderate than those of almost any other Palestinian official, his critics sought to portray him as an advocate of terrorism and asked that the session be cancelled.

Still, Reinharz said there has been "zero pushback" in the Jewish community about the development of a nonpartisan Middle East center.

"There has only been praise from all quarters," Reinharz said. "People have been really effusive in praise for what we are doing."

"I'm not interested in left-wing, right-wing or center-wing," Reinharz continued. "I want the students to be exposed to a variety of views. The students are going to have to make up their own minds."

The inaugural conference will feature the kind of "open, high-level discussion and debate" among scholars that Feldman advocates.

One session, "Israel's Disengagement

Plan: The Internal Debate," features Israel Harel, a former chairman of the Yesha Council of Israeli settlers.

The next session, "Palestinian-Israeli Relations: The Next Steps," features Yael Hirschfeld, one of the principal architects of the Oslo accords and a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa.

As Feldman notes, Harel and Hirschfeld "agree about absolutely nothing." But, he argues, "we should not be afraid to have students exposed to people with different ways of thinking, competing approaches and competing

narratives."

Other topics at the conference include "Futures for Iraq, Iran and Syria" and "Political Transformation in the Region." Panelists include Osman Faruk Logoglu, Turkey's ambassador to the United States; Hillary Mann from the U.S. State Department; Geoffrey Kemp from the Nixon Center in Washington; Flynt Leverett from the Saban Center for Middle Eastern Policy; Moroccan scholar Assia Bensala Alaoui; and Harvard scholar Barbara Bodine.

(Richard Asinof is an award-winning journalist whose work has been published by The New York Times Magazine, The Los Angeles Times and The National Law Journal among others. He is a former editor of The Jewish Advocate in Boston.)

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Jehuda Reinharz
President of Brandeis University

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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Jewish book awards announced

NEW YORK (JTA) — A memoir by Israeli writer Amos Oz won a Jewish book award.

"A Tale of Love and Darkness," which tells the story of a child's experience in 1940s Jerusalem, won the Koret Jewish Book Award for biography.

Robert Alter was recognized for his translation of the "Five Books of Moses."

Recognition also was given to Karen Hesse for "The Cats in Krasinski Square,"

a children's book; to Tony Eprile for "The Persistence of Memory," a fictional account of a South African Jew living through the end of apartheid; to Elisheva Baumgarten for "Mothers and Children: Jewish family Life in Medieval Europe"; and to Rabbi Steven Greenberg for "Wrestling With God and Men: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition."

The awards will be presented April 11 in San Francisco.

Israeli terror victims visit Irish Jews

By JON IHLE

DUBLIN (JTA) — When they heard that Ireland would be playing Israel in a qualifying match for soccer's World Cup, thousands of Irish soccer-lovers rushed to book their Easter holidays in Tel Aviv.

Ireland is one of Europe's wettest countries, so the thought of supporting the "boys in green" in a land of warmth and sunshine was too good for many residents to pass up.

The Irish enthusiasm for sun and soccer also turned out to be a bit of good luck for a group of Israeli terror victims.

When the small Jewish community in Dublin heard that tickets in the other direction on the fans' charter flights were very inexpensive, they made plans to bring 20 Israelis to Ireland to celebrate Purim. The Israelis are involved with the Chabad Terror Victims Project.

Rabbi Zalman Lent, Dublin's Chabad rabbi, said he received a phone call from the managing director of Regent Tours, an English-language Israeli tour operator.

The man "said he was sending an empty plane from Tel Aviv and he offered us a very good price as a mitzvah," said Lent, who works with visitors and young people. "We just had to raise the money and find host families."

The goal of the visit was twofold: Dublin's Jews hoped to give at least a small number of Israeli terror victims a short break in a peaceful environment, and they wanted to demonstrate support for Israel and its people.

That was a rare public gesture of solidarity with the Jewish state in an overwhelmingly Christian country, where Israel is often viewed with hostility and suspicion.

Indeed, in February, a Green Party representative to the Dail, Ireland's Parliament, called for Irish players and fans to boycott the match to protest Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Ireland's coach, Brian Kerr, rejected the idea.

The Israelis arrived in Ireland on March 23, the day before Purim, just before the Irish fans flew to Tel Aviv.

The next day, after a visit to the famous Guinness brewery at St. James's Gate in Dublin, the group toured the Wicklow Mountains and an ancient Christian monastic settlement at Glendalough.

There they were treated to the full range of Irish weather.

"There was 10 minutes of sun, then 10 minutes of rain, hail, sleet and snow," one visitor put it.

On March 24 the Israelis celebrated Purim with the Dublin Jewish community, which has been in slow decline for decades but turned out in great numbers and festive costumes to welcome the visitors.

"A lot of these people have no clue that there is a Jewish community here in Dublin," Lent said. "Many were shocked that people here care enough to make an effort. It was very moving for them. When you meet victims of terror, you realize they are very traumatized people."

Though the father of Chaim Herzog, Israel's sixth president, was from Ireland, there are only about 1,000 Jews left today in Dublin, and the community's means are limited. Despite their energy and enthusiasm, they could sponsor only a small number of visitors from Israel.

"We are in touch with about 2,000 families," said Rabbi Menachen Kuttner, director of activities of the Chabad Terror Victims Project. "We could have taken 1,000 to Ireland."

Instead, he continued, "I contacted those I knew would benefit most from a break."

That group included Avigail Levy, whose 17-year-old daughter, Rachel, was killed by a 16-year-old Palestinian female suicide bomber at a Jerusalem supermarket.

Avigail Levy wears a necklace with a silver heart bearing Rachel's image. In the three years since her daughter was buried, Levy has gone to the grave every day. Her trip to Ireland was the first break in that routine.

Idan Levy — who is not related to Avigail or Rachel — was another member of the Israeli group. He sustained burns over half his body when a suicide bomber from the United Kingdom attacked Mike's Place, a Tel Aviv bar, two years ago.

Levy was 18 years old then. Since that time he has had to wear prosthetic skin over his torso and arms.

Terror victims' stories generally reach Ireland only in abstract news reports, so meeting the Israelis was a moving experience for Dublin's Jews.

"There have been quite a few emotional moments over the last few days," Itai Pront of Dublin said.

A Shabbat reading by Dvil Kinarty, a 10-year-old who was hit by three bullets two years ago when the car he was traveling in was attacked on its way from Jerusalem to the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Ephraim, brought the congregation to tears.

"This is my first time outside Israel, if you don't count the Yom Kippur War," said Ya'akov Kinarty, Dvil's father. "For me it wasn't easy to decide to go, but I understood this as sort of a mission."

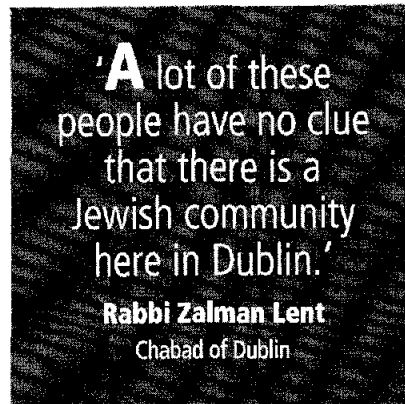
"It has given us a very warm feeling to meet them, and also to meet with these other Israelis. People in such agony need people to listen to them, especially other victims," he continued. "I hope coming here gave people a rest, but also gave those living here a feeling for our lives. As Jews, they're a part of the story too."

In an ironic twist, the group and their hosts were not able to watch the Ireland-Israel match live on television Saturday afternoon: The two-hour time difference between the countries meant the game was played while it was still Shabbat in Ireland.

The game ended as the Israelis tied the score on a dramatic last-minute goal by Abbas Suwan, an Arab Israeli.

"A good result for everyone!" Pront said. He clearly was relieved that nobody had to choose between Ireland and Israel.

The Dublin community already has begun working with the Israeli Embassy and the Chabad Terror Victims Group to bring another group to Ireland when the Israeli team comes to play there in June.



NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Turks pooh-pooh 'Mein Kampf' popularity

A Turkish official downplayed the popularity of Hitler's manifesto. "There is no racism in the country," government spokesman Cemil Cicek said Monday when asked to comment on news that "Mein Kampf" has been one of the top-10 best sellers in Turkey over the past two months, Reuters reported.

Observers say the popularity of the book, which outlines a case for German nationalism in addition to its fierce anti-Semitism, reflects rising nationalism in Turkey at a time when many Turks worry that their country is making too many concessions to the West in a bid to join the European Union.

Malaysian links Palestinians, South African fight

The world should launch a campaign against Israel similar to the one launched against South African apartheid, Malaysia's prime minister said.

Speaking Monday at the three-day Peace in Palestine forum in Malaysia, Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi said an international campaign against Israel was needed to force the emergence of a Palestinian state, but he didn't specifically call for a boycott of Israeli products, The Associated Press reported.

Poll: Some Berliners worry about Jewish influence

Some 16 percent of people in Berlin believe Jews have too much influence, according to a new poll.

The survey, released recently by the Free University of Berlin and the FORSA polling institute, also revealed that 10 percent of Berliners would consider voting for an extreme right-wing party, and about 6 percent have a right-wing extremist world view.

The survey was conducted over several months among 2,000 local residents.

Dump Fischer, Wiesenthal Center tells Iceland

The Simon Wiesenthal Center protested Iceland's decision to offer citizenship to former chess champion Bobby Fischer, who continues spouting anti-Semitic and anti-American rhetoric.

After being freed from prison in Japan for passport violation charges, Fischer arrived last Friday in Reykjavik, Iceland's capital. Fischer, fighting attempted extradition to his native United States, was granted citizenship by Iceland in recognition of the historic chess games he played there decades ago.

Fischer's mother was Jewish but his anti-Semitism is legendary. "The U.S. is evil," Fischer said at a news conference, where he accused the "Jew-controlled U.S. government" of ruining his life.

The Wiesenthal Center's Israel director, Efraim Zuroff, asked Iceland to reconsider its decision, saying Fischer already had run afoul of the country's laws against incitement based on hate speech.

NORTH AMERICA

Former congressman dies at 91

William Lehman, a Jewish congressman from Florida famed for his human-rights advocacy, died at 91.

A liberal Democrat who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1973-1993, Lehman died March 16 in Miami Beach.

The Alabama-born Lehman opened a car dealership in a black neighborhood in Miami in the 1930s, and was virtually the only dealer in the area who would finance black buyers in the 1940s and 1950s.

As a school board member in the 1960s, he fought to integrate Miami schools.

He controlled billions of dollars as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's transportation subcommittee. He also favored Israel and the cause of Soviet Jewry.

MIDDLE EAST

Sharon: Israel, U.S. to disagree on settlements

Israel can't expect America to agree explicitly to Israel's continued building in settlements, Ariel Sharon said.

The Israeli prime minister made his comments at Sunday's Cabinet meeting.

But he stressed that the major West Bank settlement areas "will remain in Israel's hands and will fall within the fence, and we made this position clear to the Americans.

"This is our position, even if they express reservations," Shem said, according to a report in Monday's Ha'aretz.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has criticized Israel's recent announcement that it will follow through on a decade-old plan to add 3,500 homes to the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim near Jerusalem.

Sharon and most Israeli lawmakers see Ma'aleh Adumim as part of Israel in any future peace deal.

Order to evict Gaza squatters

The Israeli government reportedly ordered the eviction of families who recently moved to the Gaza Strip.

The Housing Ministry ordered the removal of roughly 600 families who have moved to Gaza in recent weeks to demonstrate their opposition to the government's plan to withdraw from the area, Israel Radio said Monday.

About 8,500 Jewish settlers in Gaza and part of the northern West Bank are scheduled to be evacuated from their homes beginning in July.

Israel's lagging economy

Israel's economy is lagging behind most industrialized countries, a Bank of Israel report found.

According to the report, details of which were published in Monday's Yediot Achronot, Israel's per capita gross domestic product stands at \$17,000, less than half the American figure of \$39,100 and also short of the European Union average of \$27,700.

Israel's unemployment rate of 10.4 percent is higher than the U.S. unemployment rate of 5.5 percent or the E.U.'s average of 8.8 percent.

Israel's economy grew by 4.3 percent, just behind America's 4.4 percent and ahead of the E.U.'s 1.4 percent.

Israeli gay couples want recognition

Two gay Israeli couples who were married in Canada are seeking legal recognition of their marriages in Israel.

The couples seek to be registered as same-sex married couples, and have petitioned the High Court of Justice to protest the Interior Ministry's refusal to recognize their marriages.

Peace gets a chance on the radio

A bilingual Israeli and Palestinian peace song was played simultaneously on Israeli and Palestinian radio stations.

"In My Heart," performed by Israeli folk singer David Broza and Palestinian Wisam Murad, was broadcast Sunday on Israel's Army Radio and Voice of Palestine Radio.

The director of Voice of Palestine said the event heralds a new era. "During the uprising, no one would have thought of this because we lived in devastation," Bassem Abu Sumaya was quoted as saying in Israeli media.