

IN THE NEWS

Sharon: Israel won't rattle sabers

Ariel Sharon played down speculation that Israel could attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

"Israel is not leading this struggle," the Israeli prime minister told Fox News on Wednesday after meeting U.S. officials in Washington. "And though I hear from time to time that Israel is planning to hit Iran, that's not what we think about. Of course we take all precautions and all the steps to defend ourselves. But it's not that Israel should give the answer to the international problem."

He called on the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran if it doesn't come clean on its nuclear program.

Sharon also met Wednesday with a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and told them that Israel would never take the lead against Iran.

He also said Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan remain agreements among leaders, not among peoples.

Caterpillar resolution fails

A resolution to investigate Israel's use of Caterpillar bulldozers to demolish Palestinian homes failed.

The vote took place Wednesday at a Caterpillar shareholders' meeting in Peoria, Ill.

The resolution drew 3 percent support, failing to meet a 6 percent threshold necessary to have it reintroduced next year.

Israel uses the bulldozers to destroy the homes of suspected Palestinian terrorists and their families.

Tehran's speaker asks for tolerance

Iran's parliamentary speaker criticized anti-Semitism in the state media.

"I caution" state media "to respect the rights of religious minorities in the programs they produce," Gholamali Haddadadel said Wednesday after Maurice Motamed, a Jewish representative in Iran's Parliament, complained about anti-Semitic television broadcasts.

WORLD REPORT

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Mormon leaders renew pledge to stop baptizing Jews posthumously

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — They live in different theological universes, but when a group of Mormon leaders sat face to face with a group of Jews to address a church practice the Jews considered insulting, some in the room felt a divine spark uniting them.

A delegation of five Jews met Sunday and Monday in Salt Lake City with church leaders and historians and agreed to form a committee to explore issues related to proxy baptisms — the Mormon practice of posthumously baptizing non-Mormons, including Holocaust victims and other Jews.

"We walked in assuming that we were going to be embattled and walked out realizing that we were on the same side of the table," said David Elcott, U.S. director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee. Indeed, despite the two sides' religious differences, Elcott spoke of "experiencing the holy in the encounter."

The process is a rite Mormons believe helps clear the baptized person's path into heaven.

While members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view the practice as a gift, it has proven hard for many Jews to swallow, especially when applied to Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

Ernest Michel, chairman of the New York-based World Gathering of Jewish Holo-

caust Survivors and a member of the Jewish delegation, told JTA that concerned Jews had considered launching a widespread publicity campaign against the practice and even had contemplated legal action.

But the groups reached detente at Monday's meeting, participants said. They agreed to convene the committee by June 1. At the same time, the church recommitted itself to putting a stop to baptizing dead Jews, except if they were related to Mormons.

In 1995, church leaders agreed to halt the proxy baptisms of Jews, but Michel said he and his group had traveled to Utah armed with 5,000 pages of documentation proving that the ceremonies had continued, possibly as recently as this year.

"According to our information they have not lived up to that agreement," he said.

In the new agreement, the church agreed not to list the names of Holocaust victims in its databases, and the recently

created Yad Vashem database, which holds the names of 3 million Holocaust victims, will not be mined and posted on Mormon databases, Michel said.

The International Genealogical Index, the Mormons' primary database, now lists some 1 billion people who have been baptized posthumously. The church also publicizes several other databases — including one listing immigrants who passed through Ellis Island — with another approximately 1

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'We continue to emphasize to our members that their focus should be on only those who are their own ancestors.'

D. Todd Christofferson

Member, Presidency of the Seventy

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billion names, for whom proxy baptisms have not necessarily been performed.

The recent accord, said Michel — whose own parents died in the Holocaust and were baptized posthumously — is “an honest effort by the church.”

“I have cautious optimism,” he continued. “They are good people. I have known them now for 10 years. We have a very warm relationship. They are decent people.”

In proxy baptisms, living members of the Mormon church are immersed in water and baptized as stand-ins for dead people. Among those for whom such rites are reported to have been undertaken are Anne Frank and most popes.

According to Mormon practice, the faithful are only to proxy baptize their own dead relatives. According to the new agreement, Mormons with dead Jewish relatives may continue to baptize them.

“We continue to emphasize to our members that their focus should be on only those who are their own ancestors,” D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the church’s Presidency of the Seventy and a member of the Mormon contingent at the meeting, told JTA.

“There are some of our current members who have Jewish ancestors and I think we’re all in agreement that it’s quite appropriate that they would fulfill that religious obligation,” he continued. “But those who do not have Jewish an-

cestors should not be forwarding names of deceased Jews, especially Holocaust victims, for proxy baptisms.”

Elcott said that “we would never question” a Mormon’s right to baptize a dead Jewish relative.

But Michel said that because Jews sometimes have last names that do not sound Jewish, and some non-Jews have Jewish-sounding names, some Jews still could be found on the database and baptized.

“It will not be fail-safe, I have to admit,” he said. “You sometimes have a Jew by the name of McGillicutty and you have a non-Jew named Isadore. Therefore it will not be fail-safe. But there is an intent for them” to avoid baptizing Jews, “and that’s what counts.” ■

Rivalry in Prague leads to violence on Shabbat

By DINAH SPRITZER

PRAGUE (JTA) — A long-simmering dispute in the Prague Jewish community over the leadership of one of the city’s most prestigious synagogues has resulted in a violent altercation and the shul’s temporary closure.

The rabbi of the famed Old-New Synagogue, Manis Barash, was conducting Shabbat services Saturday when the synagogue’s gabbai offered an aliyah to Karol Sidon, chief rabbi for the Czech Federation of Jewish Communities.

According to observers, Barash was

not pleased, and made that displeasure known. He pointed out that he, not Sidon, who had been fired as chief rabbi of Prague last summer, should be reading from the Torah, said the gabbai, Jakub Svab.

Soon the confrontation erupted into violence, leaving several people injured, and at least one is considering pressing charges.

The background to the incident was laid last summer. The Prague community erupted in a furor when then-chairman Tomas Jelinek fired Sidon, claiming the rabbi was not performing his duties properly and had misplaced ceremonial objects.

But Jelinek admitted that the larger problem was an interpersonal conflict over the direction of the community. Sidon is Orthodox and Jelinek is secular. Jelinek wanted to open the community to more foreign and liberal elements, and claims Sidon was too closed to such ideas.

Sidon claimed that Jelinek wanted unfettered power.

When Jelinek dismissed Sidon he installed Barash, the former head of Prague’s Chabad House, who is not fluent in Czech, as the Old-New Synagogue’s chief rabbi.

The move was highly controversial, because Sidon’s congregation had been worshipping at the shul with him since at least the mid 1990s, and Chabad wasn’t part of the official Czech Jewish community.

Sidon moved his congregation to the more contemporary High Synagogue.

On Saturday, however, the 30 or so worshipers who usually go to services at the High Synagogue turned up at the Old-New Synagogue. Sidon was with them.

It seemed like an attempt to “take the synagogue back in some way. It was like the army had marched in,” said Rafael Ohana, an Israeli tour guide who has lived in Prague for five years and regularly attends Barash’s services.

The dispute turned heated when Barash refused to allow Sidon to have an aliyah. Sidon told the congregation that they should move to the High Synagogue. Most of them left, witnesses say.

Shortly after, violence broke out in the Old-New Synagogue’s entrance hall.

Much has happened in the community since Sidon was fired last year. Jelinek was ousted as chairman last November in a community vote that was attended mostly by Sidon supporters. He has challenged the vote, and a new community election is expected to take place next month.

Two months ago, in response to an earlier request by Jelinek, a rabbinical judge in Israel issued a ruling recognizing Barash as the official rabbi of the Old-New Synagogue.

Svab, the gabbai, said Barash must have been surprised to see Sidon’s supporters enter the shul on Saturday.

“As far as I know, the only people who attended his services were Israelis and tourists,” he said of Barash. ■

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Poll: Jews, other Americans support Sharon

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — Ariel Sharon's popularity has reached a new high among Americans, and most American Jews support the Israeli prime minister's Gaza withdrawal plan, according to new polls.

It's a "very, very good moment for the Sharon government," said John Marttila, president of the Marttila Communications Group, which conducted the Anti-Defamation League's 2005 Survey of American Attitudes Toward Israel and the Middle East, which was released Monday.

Forty-two percent of Americans have a favorable impression of Sharon, up from 36 percent two years ago.

And a record 71 percent of Americans say Israel can be counted on as a loyal U.S. ally. That number had bounced between 60 percent and 64 percent in the four earlier national surveys Marttila conducted for the ADL since 1992.

Israel's Gaza withdrawal plan is seen as a bold step for peace by 67 percent of Americans, according to the ADL poll, which was conducted last month among 1,600 people and had a margin of error of 2.8 percent.

The ADL survey corroborates the findings of other recent polls. A survey of American Jewry by the Ameinu organization, also released Monday, found that 62 percent of American Jews support the disengagement plan.

In the context of a peace agreement, 42 percent thought Israel should be willing to withdraw from most Jewish settlements in the West Bank — even though only 24 percent believe most Palestinians are willing to live in peace next to the Jewish state, and 70 percent believe the Palestinians will continue terrorist attacks even if a peace agreement is reached, the Ameinu survey found.

"Like Israelis today, American Jews strongly support the disengagement plan out of the hope that it might produce a lasting peace," said Hebrew University pollster Steven M. Cohen, who conducted the poll for Ameinu, formerly known as the Labor Zionist Alliance. "At the same time, they harbor no illusions about a portion of the Palestinians, believing that they are committed to pursuing terrorism, even with the disengagement and even with a signed peace agreement."

The survey was conducted among 501 American Jews and had a margin of error of 5 percent.

Taken together, the polls fuel the Anti-Defamation League's longstanding initiative to galvanize support for Gaza withdrawal. One of the reasons for the ADL's survey was to reveal the broad consensus for Israel's withdrawal, National Director Abraham Foxman said.

"I think it's important that the Israeli public, in these difficult times ahead, understands and knows that the overwhelming majority of Americans support what they're engaged in," Foxman said.

Last month, The Israel Project, a group that aims to polish Israel's image in the

media, released a survey showing that four times as many Americans support Israel as the Palestinians. But the poll found that Americans think Israel should compromise to advance the peace process.

The group plans to work to promote Israel's withdrawal plan among media outlets, such as CNN, that attract liberal viewers.

Foxman argues that the organized Jewish community hasn't done enough to reflect American Jewry's support for the Gaza withdrawal, Foxman said. The group had balked when the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations issued a response on the matter that fell short of an outright endorsement last fall.

During a winter mission in Israel, the Presidents Conference publicly endorsed the disengagement plan.

Foxman recommended convening "leadership assemblies," conferences of hundreds of American Jewish officials, to show solidarity with Israel as it prepares for withdrawal.

The ADL is placing ads in Jewish and general-interest newspapers and on cable television noting that many Americans see Israel's withdrawal as a bold step for peace.

"Prime Minister Sharon, we support you and so do the American people," the ad says. "We salute your vision and your courage as you work to build a safer Israel and a more peaceful and democratic Middle East."

The group also will send its findings to members of Congress to show American support for Sharon and President Bush.

Foxman noted the poll's reflection of

Sharon's rising popularity.

"Diplomatically, he became a persona grata," Foxman said.

In recent years Americans had said, "We love Israel; we don't like Sharon,"

Foxman said. Today, in light of the Gaza withdrawal plan, Americans say, "We're comfortable: We like Israel; we like Sharon."

That change provides more leeway for the Sharon government and has boosted his credibility in Israel, Foxman said.

Goodwill toward Israel has grown in part because of Israel's loyalty to the United States, which has felt criticized

by many countries in the years since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Marttila said.

"The heart and the guts of Americans are with Israelis," Marttila said.

However, they also feel the United States should reach out to Arab countries, he said. Some 40 percent said it was important for the United States to work with such countries as Egypt and Jordan, even if it means weakening ties with Israel, while 36 percent said the U.S.-Israel relationship must remain strong even at the cost of weakening ties with the Arab world.

Americans also believe the parties feel optimistic about peace in the region, with 39 percent saying the prospects for peace have improved.

Seventy-five percent think Sharon is serious about seeking peace, and 64 percent think Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is too.

The survey also came a week after the ADL released a poll showing that American attitudes toward Jews have improved. However, that poll also showed that one in three Americans believe American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States.

"That loyalty question haunts me," Foxman said.

But even though 68 percent of Americans think the U.S.-Israel alliance puts America at greater risk of terrorist attack, 61 percent say the United States should continue supporting the Jewish state, the new ADL poll found.

That helps offset the concerns about dual loyalty raised in the previous survey, Foxman said.

'American Jews strongly support the disengagement plan out of the hope that it might produce a lasting peace.'

Steven M. Cohen
Hebrew University

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Mayors make peace

Israeli and Palestinian mayors met in a gesture of peacemaking.

Thirty mayors met Wednesday in the West Bank city of Jericho and pledged to push their leaders to end more than four years of fighting.

"We want an end to the suffering. We are brothers," said Eli

Moyal, mayor of the Israeli town of Sderot, which has suffered rocket attacks from Palestinians firing from the Gaza Strip.

Jericho Mayor Hassan Saleh added, "Neighborly relations cannot exist with occupation or checkpoints, nor can it exist with a killing, rocket or explosion here or there."

The mayors plan a follow-up meeting in Sderot.

Withdrawal opponents confront top officials

Opponents of Israel's upcoming Gaza Strip withdrawal faced off against the military chief of staff and the country's attorney general.

As Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon was honoring new army officers in Latrun on Wednesday, two far-right activists clambered onto the stage behind him, waving signs against the government.

They were hustled away by Ya'alon's bodyguards.

In the West Bank city of Hebron, a tour of the Jewish quarter by Attorney General Menachem Mazuz was interrupted when he was set upon by hecklers.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, a leader of the outlawed Kach group, was arrested.

Ex-Mossad chief urges dialogue

A former head of Israel's Mossad spy agency called on the Israeli government to mend fences with right-wingers. Efraim Halevy, who received the Chaim Herzog Prize on Wednesday for his lifetime contribution to the Jewish state, told reporters that the upcoming Gaza Strip withdrawal risked creating an irreparable rift in Israeli society.

"It is incumbent upon us all, and especially on the government, to do everything possible to fulfil the mission of preventing a civil war," said Halevy, who served briefly as Israel's national security adviser after retiring from the Mossad in 2002.

Israeli cop talks security in Jordan

Israel's police chief was invited to secret talks in Jordan on security threats against Muslim shrines on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Security sources confirmed a report Wednesday in the Ha'aretz newspaper that the police inspector general, Moshe Karadi, was to fly to Amman for talks with Jordanian counterparts.

Jordan is the official patron of the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Omar, major Muslim shrines on the Temple Mount, which Israeli officials fear could be targeted by Jewish extremists.

Security at the site has been doubled in recent weeks.

Victory for Israeli single mothers

Israeli social service agencies no longer will automatically revoke allowances for single mothers if they are found to be in a relationship with a man or own a car.

A new agreement, reported Tuesday, follows an appeal to the High Court by Itach, an organization that promotes the rights of female workers in Israel.

In an out-of-court deal, Itach and the National Insurance Institute agreed that women would be allowed to have a hearing before a decision is made about whether to continue the special funding they receive as single mothers.

The agreement is experimental and will be reviewed after a year.

Subsidies to single mothers have been cut in the past year as part of overall budget cuts in Israeli social spending.

NORTH AMERICA

Poll: Americans back anti-Iran action

Slightly more than 50 percent of Americans support U.S. and Israeli military action to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, according to a new poll.

Some 53 percent of the 1,600 American adults surveyed in the poll conducted for the Anti-Defamation League supported American action against Iran to keep it from getting nuclear weapons, while 37 percent were against the idea.

Respondents supported Israeli action by a margin of 51 percent to 34 percent.

Group wants aboriginal leader to resign

B'nai Brith Canada called for the resignation of an aboriginal leader who made anti-Jewish comments.

Terrance Nelson, chief of Manitoba's Roseau River Anishinabe Reserve, said media coverage of the trial of David Ahenakew, a former aboriginal leader being tried for his controversial comments against Jews, "will surely cause natives to hate Jews even more than some of them do now, and what Jews fear the most — active promotion of hatred against Jews in Canada — will only rise dramatically among natives as they make a martyr out of an old man."

Nelson made his comments to the Winnipeg Free Press.

Humanistic Jews to honor Einstein

Secular humanistic Jewish congregations across North America will light memorial candles marking the 50th anniversary of Albert Einstein's death.

The candle-lighting ceremony this weekend will honor Einstein, who died on April 18, 1955.

Humanistic congregations embrace a human-centered philosophy that celebrates Jewish culture and identity.

WORLD

Survey: Belgians oppose religious ban

Belgians oppose legislation banning religious symbols in the workplace.

The findings were from an unscientific survey of workers in hospitals, schools, the media, public administration and private businesses, conducted by the Center for Equal Opportunities.

The survey comes after France banned religious symbols in schools.

The debate in Belgium "is not as vehement as it is in France," said Julian Klener, president of the Consistoire, an umbrella group of Belgian Jewish institutions.

New take on Hitler

A German film showing Adolf Hitler in a new, more sympathetic light found an Israeli distributor.

Nurit Shani, owner of the Lev Cinema chain, said she decided to accept "Downfall" after 91 percent of a test audience approved of showing it in Israel.

The 2004 film, which was nominated for an Academy Award in the foreign film category, shows Hitler descending into suicidal madness during his last 12 days in a Berlin bunker.

While the film dwells on the horrors of World War II, there is scant mention of the Holocaust, and in Germany many critics were disturbed by scenes in which Hitler is shown dealing tenderly with his staff and mistress.