

IN THE NEWS

Russia drops probe of Jewish group

Russian officials dropped a probe into a Russian Jewish group for publishing a Jewish religious book.

The Prosecutor's Office has dropped the probe against the Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Communities of Russia for publishing a short version of the Shulchan Aruch, a Jewish legal code, according to one of Russia's chief rabbis, Berel Lazar.

The probe was opened after an anti-Semitic letter was circulated earlier this year attacking the text of the Shulchan Aruch as extremist and anti-Christian.

Sharon to U.S. Jews: We want you here

Ariel Sharon said U.S. Jewish immigration is vital for Israel's survival as a Jewish homeland.

"The first step to ensuring a Jewish majority is aliyah — widespread and broad aliyah from the entire Jewish Diaspora, and particularly from North America. Aliyah ensures not only the future of the State of Israel, but also the future of the Jewish people," the Israeli prime minister said in a speech to the Jewish Agency for Israel's assembly in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

Court martials looming in Israel

Twenty-five Israeli soldiers have sought legal advice on refusing orders to carry out the looming Gaza Strip withdrawal, an attorney said.

Lawyer Shai Galili told Army Radio that 25 conscripts "from all sectors of the country" had contacted him in case they're court martialed for insubordination.

One of Galili's clients, Cpl. Avi Bieber, was arrested Sunday after refusing to help demolish a building in the Gaza Strip where settlers had barricaded themselves. On Tuesday, Bieber received 56 days in the stockade.

WORLD REPORT

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

Cash-strapped Conservatives let go head of Israeli movement

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Conservative movement in Israel has spent decades fighting for parity in a religious milieu dominated by the country's powerful Orthodox establishment.

But its ability to continue battling took a hit June 15 when movement leaders, facing pressing financial constraints, voted to eliminate the group's top professional position.

By doing away with the president's post held by Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the Masorti movement has thrown into question its ability to lobby effectively for official religious equity, insiders say.

Without a president, Masorti will have to rely on lay leaders and rabbis to perform public advocacy functions, including representing Conservative Judaism in the ongoing tug of war over recognition of non-Orthodox conversions and marriages in Israel.

The news comes just months after a decision of Israel's High Court granted full recognition to so-called "leaping converts," non-Orthodox converts who study in Reform or Conservative academies in Israel and complete their conversions abroad. Non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel have not been endorsed.

"We'll try to fill in some of the things that Rabbi Bandel did with volunteers, but I don't think it can be done," Irit Zmora, Masorti's chairwoman, told JTA.

The Reform movement also has pushed strongly for religious pluralism in Israel, and it's possible that advocacy undertaken by Reform's Religious Action Center will benefit the Conservative movement as well.

On its Web site, Masorti — the Hebrew word for "traditional" — says that "legal advocacy is one of the central roles of the movement, which represents the religious rights of Masorti and Conservative Judaism before the Israeli establishment, including government ministries, the Supreme Court and municipalities."

Leaders say the decision to cut the post that effectively served as the movement's public face reflects a dilemma for the cash-strapped group: Within its current budget, Masorti cannot continue public advocacy at full force while simultaneously supporting the movement's growing congregations and its successful youth and student groups.

"We had to make decisions about what functions we were going to continue to fund fully and which ones we were going to put on hold," said Rabbi Peretz Rodman, acting chairman of Masorti's public affairs committee and president of the Israel region of the Rabbinical Assembly, the movement's rabbinic arm.

"It was a very difficult decision," he added. "We're not at all happy to be parting ways with Ehud professionally."

Bandel, a native Israeli, said he was "very sorry about the mistaken decision that was taken by the leadership of the Masorti movement."

"But despite this, it is the one and only movement that is mine, and it will continue to be so, even when it makes mistaken decisions," he said.

Masorti also let go its spokeswoman, Inbal Cohen, and over the past year eliminated at least one other position.

Movement leaders, who stressed hopes

Continued on page 2

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

■ *The move is seen as a blow to pluralism efforts in Israel*

Continued from page 1

that the moves would prove temporary, say summer is always a difficult financial period for them: They must run the movement's three-week summer camp in Israel, an expensive endeavor, despite the fact that most of the group's cash does not arrive until year's end.

In addition, this year its bank is not extending Masorti the usual line of credit.

"We're not broke," Rodman said, just experiencing "short-term cash-flow problems."

Indeed, he said, the movement's annual budget of about \$2 million would be the same as last year. And the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel, the movement's U.S. fund-raising branch, says it's currently ahead of where it was last year at this time in terms of fund raising.

Even so, the decision to eliminate top positions doesn't indicate a movement with robust finances. Masorti's woes seem to be the result of a set of circumstances.

"We have spent a lot of time talking about issues affecting our equality in Israel, religious pluralism," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly. "That was important to do for the last several years; important to help our rabbis, important to help converts.

"What we have not done enough of is to speak our religious message, and I would hope that that now is what is going to be heard," he continued. "Because I think Israelis, like Americans, really will respond

more to a religious message than a message of political action."

Others say that the Masorti movement must become a truly Israeli endeavor in order to thrive.

"They have not managed to move out of being a little Anglo-Saxon movement with the same people who moved here 30 years ago," said Daniel Robinson, a writer in Tel Aviv and member of the city's Kehilat Sinai Masorti Synagogue. "And so, whereas there

is potential for a great deal of appeal for their halachic-but-moderate approach to Judaism, they have not managed to get out of their little Anglo-Saxon ghetto for the most part."

Masorti says 60 percent of its approximately 50,000 synagogue members and affiliates are native-born. Some 125,000 people, the movement says, take part in one or another of its national programs, from services to lectures to summer camp.

The group has some 50 synagogues in Israel, from Eilat to the Galilee, and has 23 paid rabbinic positions, which it subsidizes.

Some say the Conservative movement in the United States has been derelict in bolstering Masorti.

"I think not enough funding has come from the United States," Meyers said. "Those of us who are in the United States have to do much more than we have been doing to ensure that funding is at a level that enables the movement in Israel to sustain itself and to grow."

Bandel, for his part, said, "I only hope that the difficult situation that we are in will pass and will lead the Conservative Jews of North America to do some soul searching — and to a recognition that, without a strong Masorti movement in Israel, the future of the Conservative movement in America will also be in doubt."

It's a message that resonates among some Conservative rabbis in the United States. In his sermon last Shabbat, Rabbi Joshua Heller of Atlanta's Congregation

B'nai Torah appealed to congregants to support Masorti.

In today's Israel, he later told JTA, there is simultaneously an "increased secularization and the increased insularity of the ultra-Orthodox population."

"You find that there is less and less of a middle ground, of a common ground, and Masorti is fighting upstream to create that common ground," he said. "This is a situation where American Jews in the Conservative movement have to stand up and say, 'These

are ideals we believe are important.'"

The movement is funded by donations from abroad funneled through the New York-based Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel; the Jewish Agency for Israel; and membership dues and donations from Israelis.

In addition, members of the Rabbinical Assembly are asked to contribute to an annual campaign to support the movement's rabbinical schools — in the United States, Argentina and Israel — and the Masorti movement in Israel.

The foundation channels about \$1.2 million annually to the movement in Israel, according to David Lissy, the foundation's executive director and chief executive. Of this sum, about \$550,000 is "unrestricted and budget-relieving," he said.

The rest is money that specific synagogues raise for themselves in America, and which is channeled through the foundation.

The Jewish Agency kicks in \$780,000 under Israel's allocation to religious movements.

The move to focus on the movement's grass roots — its congregations and its youth and student groups — stems in part from the recognition that in Israel, unlike in the United States, congregations cannot raise enough money themselves to pay for a rabbi and sufficient programming.

Most Israelis don't have discretionary income to donate to their synagogues, Rodman said. Indeed, Zmora said, many members of Masorti shuls are South American immigrants, who moved to Israel to escape a faltering economy.

(JTA correspondent Dina Kraft in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.)

Conservative Judaism in Israel has 'not managed to move out of being a little Anglo-Saxon movement.'

Daniel Robinson

Tel Aviv writer

JTA
WORLD
REPORT

Howard E. Friedman
President

Mark J. Joffe
Executive Editor and Publisher

Lisa Hostein
Editor

Michael S. Arnold
Managing Editor

Lenore A. Silverstein
Finance and Administration Director

Noa Artzi-Weill
Marketing Director

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.

© JTA. Reproduction only with permission.

Ra'anana mayor elected Jewish Agency head

By DINA KRAFT

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A beaming Zeev Bielski took the stage in front of the assembly of the Jewish Agency for Israel, vowing to be their emissary to the Jewish people as they elected him in a unanimous show of hands.

The job to which he was elected Tuesday will bring the charismatic and popular Bielski, 58, mayor of Ra'anana for the past 16 years, full-circle professionally.

As a young man in 1977, Bielski was sent as a Jewish Agency emissary to South Africa, where he was in charge of aliyah efforts.

Later he helped found the Israel Forum, which builds ties between Israeli and Diaspora Jewish communities.

As mayor of Ra'anana, an Israeli city with large immigrant populations from the former Soviet Union and Western countries, including the United States and South Africa, Bielski has had a hands-on role in aliyah.

"First of all, I see myself as a shaliach," Bielski said in an interview with JTA, using the Hebrew word for emissary. "My door will always be open to every Jew, wherever he is."

■
A former player in Israel's national basketball league who is known to stop and shoot hoops with local Ra'anana youth, Bielski is something of a darling of the Jewish professional world. He is known as an energetic, disciplined administrator who gets things done, and with a smile.

Somewhat of an anomaly in Israeli political life, he seems to be universally liked.

"Everyone loves Zeevik," said Dov Barel, director general of the finance department of the World Zionist Organization, who grew up with Bielski in Jerusalem.

As chairman of the Jewish Agency, Bielski plans to focus on three major goals: to bring the remainder of the Falash Mura community from Ethiopia to Israel, to push "aliyah by choice" from Western countries and to help bridge the growing socioeconomic gap between rich and poor Israeli children.

Bielski said he is especially excited to begin work on the Jewish Agency's new Masa program, an initiative to bring some 20,000 Diaspora youth on long-term

programs to Israel over the next five years.

"This is a project with a vision, and there is no doubt that it will change the Jewish world," he said.

Bielski's election followed a tense showdown last week at the World Zionist Organization. The unusually heated election was between Bielski, the prime minister's candidate, and former Cabinet minister Natan Sharansky, the World Likud candidate.

The Jewish Agency and the government are supposed to work hand in hand, and the prime minister in past years has selected a candidate approved by his party. This year, however, World Likud accused Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of undermining the democratic process by choosing Bielski without the party's consent.

Observers say the real issue was political: Bielski is a supporter of the government's plan to evacuate settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank this summer, while Sharansky is a vocal opponent of it.

Last Friday, Sharansky bowed out of the race after the Jewish Agency's Advise and Consent Committee said it would not change its decision to support Bielski.

Replacing Sallai Meridor as the Jewish Agency's chairman, Bielski will oversee a budget of some \$350 million and head an organization that is seen as key in unifying Jewish people worldwide by promoting and overseeing aliyah and Zionist education programs.

■
The Jewish Agency's chairman also chairs the World Zionist Organization, which has a small budget but represents Diaspora and Israeli political parties and comprises half of the Jewish Agency's board of trustees.

The Jewish Agency's assembly was meeting in Jerusalem through Tuesday, to be followed by meetings of its board of governors through Thursday.

Carol Solomon, chairwoman of the

Jewish Agency's board of governors, said she thinks Bielski is particularly well suited to the job. She notes that he was a member of the board of governors and was involved in crafting its new strategic vision.

"We are ready for liftoff, and I think his energy and his track record will play a major role in moving us forward," she said.

Solomon said Bielski's experience in Ra'anana, which is known

as one of the most successful and best-run municipalities in Israel, will serve him well at the helm of the Jewish Agency.

"Ra'anana is a microcosm of how the Jewish community as a whole should be run — with understanding between the various communities, religious, secular and immigrant," said David Kowitz, an Israeli businessman who helped establish the Israel Forum with Bielski and who has also played an active role in the Jewish Agency.

The Reform movement publically endorsed Bielski early in last week's election wrangling. The endorsement came after a phone call from Sharon to Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, asking for the movement's help in pushing Bielski's candidacy, Yoffie wrote to union board members.

Rabbi Andrew Davids, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, said his faction of the Reform movement, together with the secular Shinui Party, endorsed Bielski because he understands their concerns about religious pluralism in Israel and is an excellent mediator between the Diaspora and Israel.

At a time when it's difficult to raise funds for Israel, Bielski is someone who "can provide a compelling case why important resources still need to come to Israel," Davids said.

A vote for Bielski is a vote for political moderation, he said.

"By supporting Bielski," Davids said, "we are strengthening the center." ■

**'My door will
always be open
to every Jew,
wherever he is.'**

Zeev Bielski

Chairman, Jewish Agency for Israel

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Student charged with planning Jihad

A Palestinian-American student accused of planning to engage in terrorist activities waived his right to a court hearing.

Arwah Jaber of Fayetteville, Ark., is charged with planning to travel to the West Bank to engage in jihad against Israel. His attorney announced the waiver Tuesday.

Explaining to a professor why he couldn't graduate on time, Jaber wrote, "I decided to take an honorable job in Palestine with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Organization to pursue a more noble cause — freedom, justice and peace for the Palestinians and to fight the Israeli terrorism."

Jaber was born in the West Bank town of Yamoun and attended Pittsburg State University in Kansas and Georgetown University before enrolling in doctoral studies at the University of Arkansas.

If convicted of offering support to a foreign terrorist organization, he could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison and fined up to \$250,000.

Miami Jewish population down

The Jewish population of Miami has declined by 15 percent since 1994, according to a new survey.

Some 31 percent of the 113,000 Jews in Miami-Dade County are foreign born, according to the survey, conducted for the Greater Miami Jewish Federation.

"While we are a smaller population in Miami-Dade County since the last study was conducted, the percentage of people who have lived here for 20 or more years has increased," said Michael Adler, president of the federation. "That speaks to the stability, deep roots and connectedness in Miami's Jewish community."

JTA wins Jewish media awards

JTA won two first-place Simon Rockower awards given out at the annual meeting of the American Jewish Press Association.

Reporter Uriel Heilman won in the comprehensive coverage and investigative reporting section for his multipart series on how the Claims Conference allocates Holocaust restitution money.

JTA's photographer in Israel, Brian Hender, won first- and second-place awards for photos of Israeli soldiers mourning at a funeral and protests against Israel's West Bank security barrier, respectively.

In addition, one of JTA's correspondents in Israel, Dina Kraft, took second place in the news category for her article on a Thai worker killed by a Palestinian mortar in the Gaza Strip.

The awards were given out at the AJPA conference last week in Boston.

WORLD

Group helps disadvantaged in former Yugoslavia

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is setting up a special loan fund to help disabled and disadvantaged people in part of the former Yugoslavia.

The fund will finance nonsectarian, nonprofit employment initiatives in the Bosnian Federation, the Muslim-Croat part of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Alfred Bader of Milwaukee donated the initial capital of \$100,000 to start the initiative, which was slated to be launched at a seminar on Wednesday.

The new fund will operate as part of Melaha, a broader loan fund administered by the Bosnian Jewish social welfare organization La Benevolencija.

It is similar to an initiative already in operation in the Republika Srpska, the Serbian-administered part of Bosnia.

MIDDLE EAST

Cool to be orange?

An Israeli parliamentary aide was rebuked for dyeing his hair orange, the rallying color of those opposed to the Gaza Strip withdrawal.

David Hermlin, assistant to Likud lawmaker Naomi Blumenthal, was turned away from the Knesset plenum Monday after arriving with his hair dyed orange.

"I was looking for an emphatic way of expressing my opposition to the disengagement," he told reporters, adding that he planned to fight the ban.

Orange, which appears on the municipal logo of the main settlement bloc in Gaza, Gush Katif, has become the color of choice for right-wing protests on flags, ribbons and clothes.

Threat against Halutz

Israel's top general received a death threat.

Security was boosted around Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz's home Tuesday after he received a letter reading, "If you value your family, don't follow the prime minister."

Police sources said the letter's author was believed to be an opponent of the looming Gaza Strip withdrawal.

Halutz goes out in public with several bodyguards, a system in place since the Shin Bet warned that his predecessor as Israeli army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, could be targeted by Palestinian assassins.

Remembering 'our man in Damascus'

Israel honored its most famous spy 40 years after Eli Cohen was executed in Syria.

"Even after 40 years, the wonder at the courage and operational accomplishments of Eli Cohen has remained," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in a speech at the Jerusalem memorial ceremony Monday. "Eli's death exposed him as one of the anonymous fighters of the State of Israel's intelligence community, who each performs tasks that should not be kept hidden — but should be glorified and receive the gratitude of the nation."

The Egyptian-born Cohen was recruited by the Mossad and planted in Syria, where he gathered information on the political and military echelons considered key to Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War.

But he never saw that success, as he was discovered and hanged in 1965.

Sharon told Cohen's widow, Nadia, that he considered the return of Cohen's remains important to the resumption of peace talks with Syria, which stalled in 2000.

Reports: Muslim clerics to boycott event

Some Muslim clerics reportedly are boycotting an interfaith forum in Qatar because Jews are invited.

Reuters reported that two Egyptian clerics would not attend the two-day event, scheduled to begin Wednesday.

Meanwhile, UPI said Jordanian clerics also would boycott the event.

Birth breaks ground

An Israeli gave birth after receiving transplanted ovarian tissue.

The 31-year-old woman had a healthy girl at Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer on Monday, despite having been rendered infertile by chemotherapy.

The solution, which was reported by the New England Journal of Medicine, was to implant her with healthy ovarian tissue that had been stored on ice since before she began her cancer treatment.

The procedure is still considered experimental.