

IN THE NEWS
Friendly fire wounds Israeli soldiers

Five Israeli soldiers were hurt by friendly fire during a clash with Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip.

Palestinians shot at anti-withdrawal activists encamped in the Kfar Darom settlement Sunday, causing no casualties but prompting the army to send forces in pursuit.

A tank fired two shells at the terrorists' hideout, and shrapnel from one of them accidentally struck an armored vehicle carrying Israeli soldiers.

Their commander was seriously wounded, and four other soldiers were hospitalized in good condition.

General: Pullout not a combat mission

The Gaza Strip withdrawal should not be carried out like a combat mission, Israel's army chief said.

"We are not going into battle," Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz told officers Sunday in a final briefing before withdrawals from Gaza and the northern West Bank get under way. "It is important that everyone, to the last soldier, understands this. There is no war here. We just want to extend a hand to our brothers."

Settler leaders rejected Halutz's comments, saying there was no change to their plan to resist the looming evacuations.

Fund to purchase hothouses in Gaza

A private international fund has agreed to pay Jewish farmers in Gaza \$14 million to buy most of the hothouses they will leave behind.

Representatives for the Gaza farmers signed the deal last Friday with the Economic Cooperation Foundation, the Jerusalem Post reported.

The foundation, which organized the collection of private donations to fund the project, will transfer the hothouses to a Palestinian Authority company.

WORLD REPORT

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

Settlers in Gaza lament withdrawal as they mark a holy day of mourning

By DINA KRAFT

NEVESH DEKALIM, Gaza Strip (JTA) — The rabbi's voice rose and fell in a haunting trill over the hundreds gathered around him.

Mothers cradled babies as young men with guns by their sides swayed in prayer and recitation.

Above them a half moon glowed an eerie orange.

"We see this not just as the sacrifice of the Temple but the sacrifice of our land," says Shlomit Landau, 20, who had come to Neveh Dekalim from Jerusalem. "It feels much more meaningful."

Tisha B'Av in Neveh Dekalim, the largest of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, took on an especially mournful tone as it was observed from sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday.

Both residents and the hundreds of outsiders who came from across Israel and the West Bank to reinforce the settlement ahead of the government-ordered evacuation of Gaza, which is scheduled to begin this week, saw special significance in this Tisha B'Av.

The fast day marks the destruction in Jerusalem of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. and the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Religious Jews, such as those who live in Neveh Dekalim, observe the day by sitting on the floor chanting the biblical book called Lamentations.

On Tisha B'Av, many Jews around the world mourn not only the loss of the Temples but other tragedies throughout Jewish history. The Jews gathered here see the evacuation of 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four more in the northern West Bank as a monumental tragedy.

"It makes us wait even more fervently for the coming of the Messiah," says Narkiss Netanyahu, 20, as she finds a place on the sprawling pebble and cement plaza outside the main synagogue complex in Neveh Dekalim, where clusters of worshippers are gathered in large circles.

Netanya is one of many people this week in Neveh Dekalim — part of the main Jewish settlement bloc, Gush Katif — who illegally entered Gaza even after it was declared a closed military zone by the army.

Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, estimated Sunday that as many as 5,000 anti-withdrawal activists have slipped into Gaza in recent weeks. The government refers to them as infiltrators; the settlers call them their guests.

Whatever one calls them, they could prove to be an obstacle to Israel's plans to withdraw from Gaza. Forced evacuations of those settlers who refuse to leave three of the settlements — Morag, Kfar Darom and Netzarim — were slated to take place Wednesday; no date has been set for withdrawal from the other settlements, although Neveh Dekalim is among the second round of settlements to be evacuated, according to government plans.

Shmuel Levy, 17, who grew up in Neveh Dekalim, has been hosting several outsiders at his family's home. He still holds out hope for the elusive "miracle" that might prevent this settlement and the others from being evacuated. Speculation about an 11th-hour miracle is rife in the community.

People are even inviting each other to feasts of thanksgiving to be held should the

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**THE
DISENGAGEMENT
SUMMER**

■ Gaza settlers lament withdrawal as they mark Jewish day of mourning

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withdrawal be averted by a divine act.

"We believe that just as in Purim, everything could change at the last minute," says Levy, who said he was discouraged to see eight out of the 10 families on his block move out in recent days.

His family has followed their rabbi's instructions to pack only their religious books. Everything else remains untouched in the home. The decision to not pack up one's belongings and furnishings has become a badge of protest throughout the settlements.

Levy said that seeing so many people from outside flock to Gush Katif gave him renewed strength. However, he acknowledged the end could indeed be near.

"If it really is to be the last Tisha B'Av" in Neveh Dekalim, he said pausing, "that would be really sad."

Adiel Gehassi sits outside on the wooden benches removed from the Yeminite synagogue in Neveh Dekalim to make room for worshippers sitting on the ground. He says this Tisha B'Av feels extremely personal. He moved here when he was just 2 years old and remembers no other home or community.

"This is much more difficult than a regular Tisha B'Av. You think more about your own home than the Temple," Gehassi said. "What makes it especially sad is that this is Jews who are doing this. It is very hard to grasp that this is all happening."

Of course, based on a complicated financial formula, the Israeli government is paying compensation — estimated at between \$200,000 and \$300,000 — to those

families who leave voluntarily.

Despite this, the estimated 9,000 Jewish settlers have been reacting to the approaching deadline in various ways.

Some staunchly refuse to pack out of defiance; others hired moving vans and made their way to their new homes inside Israel. Some, like the Issak family in the settlement of Morag, southeast of Neveh Dekalim, chose the middle ground: They packed their belongings into army-issued shipping containers but vow to stay in their home until evacuation day.

As Gabi Issak, 48, packed up his airy two-story home with the help of his four children, he said that he was preparing for the move — painful as it was for him — because he could not bring himself to break the law. "This is the law. We have to honor the law," said the farmer who has been growing tomatoes, peppers and eggplant in hothouses on the settlement for the past 20 years. "Without laws, this country would cease to exist."

His wife, Nurit, 45, a nursery-school teacher, said the family of six would remain in their empty house as a sign of protest but when the time came to leave they would go peacefully.

"We are waiting for the knock on the door, but then we will go quietly," she said, explaining that she did not want to

traumatize her children by making them witness soldiers and police dragging her and her husband out of their home.

The family plans to move to Nitsan, where the government has set up temporary housing: trailer homes by the beach near the coastal city of Ashkelon.

Meanwhile, at the edge of Gadit, another settlement, Ariel Porath, 46, a round-faced man with a dark beard who owns dozens of acres of greenhouses, is hedging his bets.

On one side of his property, Nepalese workers squint into the sun and dismantle the metal rods that support the greenhouses. On the other side of his land, dozens of Israeli teenagers who are among the anti-withdrawal activists illegally in Gaza, plant tomato seedlings and scallions in the sandy ground.

"I am being strategic," he says with a sad smile.

On Sunday as part of their commemoration of Tisha B'Av, relatives prayed by the gravesides of loved ones at the cemetery on the outskirts of Neveh Dekalim, some placing stones painted orange — the color of the anti-withdrawal movement — on the graves.

The sun blared in the midday heat as people cried and wailed, coming to terms with what may be the last Tisha B'Av in Gush Katif. ■

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Adiel Gehassi
Neveh Dekalim resident

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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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Holy water network

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Archaeologists uncovered an ancient water system outside Jerusalem.

Two months of digging at Kibbutz Tzuba ended recently when the rock-hewn conduction network, dating to the time of King Hezekiah in the eighth century B.C.E., was unearthed.

Last year the site received worldwide attention with the discovery of a cave said to have been used by John the Baptist and his followers for baptism.

It was a monumental enterprise with a vertical shaft, an open horizontal corridor, a flight of stone steps above a tunnel

and three external plastered pools, all of which was on a slope above an underground reservoir.

Archaeologists say the new discoveries shed light on why this cave would have been chosen, out of the many thousands in the hills of Judah, for bathing rituals.

"What baptizers wanted was a place, distant from nearby villages, large enough to contain groups of people coming to be immersed, and ancient enough so that the cultic side of the rituals was put into a context linking them to the time of the Israelite prophets," said the dig's leader, Shimon Gibson. ■

Ukrainian shul dispute threatens Jewish pilgrimage

By VLADIMIR MATVEYEV

UMAN, Ukraine (JTA) — A dispute over a Ukrainian synagogue that welcomes thousands of Chasidic pilgrims from around the world each year may impede the traditional High Holidays pilgrimage to the site.

The synagogue in Uman, where Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav is buried, was temporarily closed by court order earlier this month because of an ongoing dispute between a private contractor and a Chasidic group.

The synagogue was reopened a day later after the local governor and a Kiev rabbi intervened, but many issues related to the annual pilgrimage to Uman remain unresolved, those familiar with the situation said.

THIS WEEK

MONDAY

- Israel begins its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the West Bank. On Wednesday, Israel will begin forcibly removing any settlers who refuse to leave several of the Gaza settlements.

- Excellence in congregational and community learning is the theme of this year's Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education. The group's 30th annual conference takes place in Seattle through Thursday. Mornings are devoted to text study, with afternoons and evenings focused on lectures and workshops about childhood and adult Jewish education.

TUESDAY

- Two former staffers of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee are expected to plead not guilty to charges of conspiracy to disseminate classified information. Steve Rosen, AIPAC's former policy director, and Keith Weissman, a former AIPAC Iran expert, are due in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., to answer the charges, along with Larry Franklin, the Pentagon official accused of giving them the information. Much of the case against Rosen and Weissman has been outlined, but the hearing is likely to set a trial date and may uncover new details.

- Opponents of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip gather near the United Nations in New York to protest the move. The rally is sponsored by the Israel Concert in the Park Committee in association with the Zionist Organization of America. Organizers are expecting thousands to attend.

- Hundreds of Hillel campus activists gather at Camp Ramah Darom in Georgia for the Charles Schusterman International Student Leaders Assembly. Participants in the six-day conference will take part in sessions focusing on leadership, learning, program sharing and networking.

A city of almost 100,000 people some 120 miles south of Kiev, Uman receives 8,000 to 12,000 Jewish pilgrims every year at Rosh Hashanah and Purim. All come to visit Nahman's tomb and the adjacent synagogue and mikvah, or ritual basin, and all need a place to stay.

According to the Rabbi Nahman Foundation, 10,697 Chasidim from 19 countries made the pilgrimage last year. A kosher hotel has opened in the city, and local residents rent out their homes to the pilgrims.

But the synagogue and the pilgrimage appear to have gotten caught up in the corruption plaguing post-communist Ukrainian society.

Dedicated in 1998, the synagogue in Uman, a city that is home to only a few hundred Jews, can hold up to 5,000 worshipers and is regarded as the largest Jewish prayer house in Europe.

About two years ago, a Bratslaver foundation that oversees community facilities in Uman contracted the Chance company to reconstruct the shul. Managers of Chance say they locked the synagogue Aug. 4 because the Bratslaver group did not pay for work already completed.

"The construction is not finished yet," Stanislav Mazurak, Chance's general manager, told JTA. "We did our part of the project but the Rabbi Nahman Foundation did not pay us."

During an encounter near the synagogue, Mazurak was less diplomatic.

"You should solve problems in your Israel. Here you should live by Ukrainian laws," he shouted at a Kiev rabbi and a group of Bratslavers who gathered near the shul recently.

Chance filed a complaint with the regional economic court last December, hoping to collect the sum it says his company is due. The court then ordered the Rabbi Nahman Foundation to pay about \$3 million.

In June, following a number of appeals by the foundation, the court ruled that Chance was entitled to the rights to the shul and the Rabbi Nahman Pantheon in Uman, the main holy place for Bratslavers around the world, because of nonpayment.

Adding to the controversy is the fact

that Chance may have received favorable treatment because it is controlled by Pyotr Kuzmenko, a businessman and member of Ukraine's Parliament. Kuzmenko's office did not respond to JTA calls for comment.

Jews said the court decision resulted from a flawed contract that Igor Lifshitz, a former representative of the Bratslaver group in Uman, signed with Chance. Lifshitz was later fired by the foundation.

A Bratslaver leader told JTA that the court should have invalidated the agreement

with Chance because it contradicted the foundation's basic interests by offering the property up as collateral.

"Mr. Lifshitz misused the power of attorney which was given to him and signed an agreement with a builder without our knowledge," Rabbi Nasan Maimon, of the Breslov World Center, told JTA. "Lawyers who looked through the contract said that nobody would ever agree to sign such an agreement with draconian conditions."

The Jewish side claims Chance did not actually do any work on the property and only used the agreement to extort money from the Bratslavers.

"They didn't submit any project or any technical documentation, and in six months since the beginning of the project no progress had been made by the firm," said Artur Kazaryan, the representative of the Rabbi Nahman Foundation in Ukraine. "When the foundation started to think of an alternative contractor, Chance brought their suit to court."

In the meantime, local authorities are trying to dampen the conflict ahead of the annual pilgrimage, which is due to begin next month.

In a recent meeting with Chasidic leaders in Uman, Nikolay Ovcharenko, the deputy governor of Ukraine's Cherkassy region, said the region was committed to letting the pilgrimage go ahead unimpeded.

At the same time, Ovcharenko said, he expected the Jewish group to satisfy Chance's financial claims, which were reduced by the court to some \$116,000 — the amount Chance's owners said they actually spent on the synagogue reconstruction. ■

The synagogue and the pilgrimage appear to have gotten caught up in the corruption plaguing post-communist Ukrainian society.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Peres boosts troops

Shimon Peres called Israel's security forces a bulwark for democracy in the Jewish state.

The vice prime minister visited soldiers and police in southern Israel on Sunday to boost their morale ahead of the Gaza Strip withdrawal. "I came to say thank you in my name, as well as in the name of the fathers, mothers, and children of all of Israel," he said. "The State of Israel is a Jewish democratic country and loyalty to the country needs to be above all, without connection to personal stands."

Soldiers' bodies located

Israel located the remains of eight soldiers killed in its 1948 War of Independence.

The army announced Sunday eight of the bodies had been identified, thanks to historical research into mass graves in which soldiers killed while fighting Syrian and Jordanian forces were buried.

Of 6,000 servicemen and women lost in the war, around 150 are still believed to be buried in unmarked graves.

Israel said to hold Holocaust assets

Israel holds some 1,000 pieces of real estate owned by Jews who perished in the Holocaust, Israel's custodian general said.

The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported Tuesday that Shlomo Shahar told a subcommittee of the Israeli government's Law and Constitution Committee that Israel also has some 500 other assets and 3,500 bank accounts of Holocaust victims.

The committee was discussing a bill that seeks to create a public corporation or a government authority to coordinate restitution to the properties' legal heirs.

NORTH AMERICA

Church condemns Israel's barrier

A Protestant church condemned Israel's West Bank security barrier.

The proposal passed Saturday by the Evangelical Lutheran Church's assembly denounced the barrier for causing hardships for Palestinians, and also called on the denomination to play a role in "stewarding financial resources — both U.S. tax dollars and private funds — in ways that support the quest for a just peace in the Holy Land," The Associated Press reported.

But it did not specifically mention divestment from Israel or companies that do business with Israel.

The vote is the latest taken by Protestant churches to protest Israel's security barrier.

Election to be held on Rosh Hashanah

Jews in Albuquerque, New Mexico, are upset because city elections will be held on Rosh Hashanah.

The estimated 10,000 Jews in the city will have to vote early — residents can vote beginning Sept. 14 — or by absentee ballot if their religious observances on Oct. 4 will keep them from voting on election day, the Albuquerque Tribune reported.

City officials say the city's charter mandates that the election will be held on the first Tuesday in October.

"Holding an election on one of the holiest days of the years for thousands of Albuquerque residents is neither sensitive or inclusive," Sam Sokolove, the executive director of the Jewish federation of Greater Albuquerque, told the Tribune.

Church-state case settled

A school board in Louisiana settled a church-state separation case with a Jewish family.

The settlement reached last Friday ends a case launched in April 2004, when the family complained about a Nativity scene in the school library during the Christmas season and a group called Stalions for Christ that met at recess.

The settlement clarifies that religious expression is allowed, but outlines a grievance process if children feel pressure for religious reasons.

The family has since moved out of state.

Oy, Mr. Tallyman

Harry Belafonte retracted his recent statement that Jews were "high up in the Third Reich."

But the singer and political activist told the Jerusalem Post that Jews had contributed to Nazism.

"Was it rampant? Absolutely not," Belafonte told the Post. "But these things happen and people are not exempt from their behavior."

To support his contention, Belafonte referred to "Hitler's Jewish Soldiers," a book that detailed how some Germans of partial Jewish descent served in the Nazi army during World War II.

WORLD

U.S. group trains tsunami victims

The American Jewish Committee will construct a new vocational center in a southern Indian city devastated by last winter's tsunami.

"We want to contribute to the long-term needs of this multi-ethnic community," Priya Tandon, the AJCommittee's representative in India, said of the center in Chennai.

"The American Jewish Committee Vocational Center will make a long-lasting impact, strengthening the local community while deepening the special bonds of American Jews and India."

Groundbreaking for the center is set for Monday, India's Independence Day, with the participation of Chennai's mayor; Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Catholic religious leaders; and AJCommittee representatives.

The vocational center will house a community hall and three classrooms, one of which will be equipped for computer-training classes, while others will be used for courses in nursing, boat building and English.

Also planned is a women's bank to be run by Chennai business women.

The AJCommittee's Tsunami Relief Fund already has provided more than \$600,000 to organizations tending to the immediate needs of tsunami victims in India and Sri Lanka.

It's dry in the desert

One in two Israelis avoids alcohol, a government study found.

According to Health Ministry dietary data released this week, 50 percent of Israelis do not drink, making for a low average national alcohol consumption of 20 ml per person per day.

While general eating habits are acceptable, with the average Israeli taking in more than 2,000 calories a day only on weekends, the report found that most diets are too high in cholesterol and too low in calcium.

Citizens of citrus-rich Israel also consume too much Vitamin C and therefore run the risk of developing kidney problems, the report warned.

Singer re-elected to IJIC

Rabbi Israel Singer was re-elected chairman of the most prominent Jewish group dealing with international interfaith affairs.

Singer, chairman of the World Jewish Congress, was re-elected to an unprecedented third consecutive term as chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.

IJIC represents organized world Jewry in its relations with other world religious bodies, such as the Vatican.