

IN THE NEWS
Federation plans for Hurricane Rita

Several Houston-area synagogues will be shut down this Shabbat ahead of Hurricane Rita.

The local Jewish federation made sure that home-bound elderly are in safe places or can be brought to safe places, the chief executive officer of the federation, Lee Wunsch, told JTA.

With the help of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of North American federations, Houston-area Jews were given a list of other federations in Texas to help them find homes to host them.

Web site launched for Jewish security

A Jewish security network launched a Web site with information on addressing potential terrorist threats to Jewish institutions.

The Security Community Network, created last fall, went online Monday with its site, www.scnus.org.

The site includes best security practices in areas ranging from handling mail to understanding the terrorist threat against the Jewish community, as well as links to other security sites.

The network's high-speed alert system allows it to quickly disseminate information on threats to some 55 national Jewish organizations.

Kohl, Feingold back Roberts' bid

Two Jewish senators helped send John Roberts' nomination to the full Senate.

Sens. Russell Feingold and Herb Kohl, both Democrats from Wisconsin, said Thursday that Roberts' pledge to adhere to legal precedent motivated them to back Roberts.

The Senate Judiciary Committee approved Roberts' nomination as chief justice of the United States by a 13-5 vote.

Among those opposed were two Jewish Democrats, Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.).

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WORLD REPORT

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BP Images/Pool

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, right, and then-Cabinet Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, attend a Cabinet meeting in 2002.

Back from triumphant U.N. turn, Sharon faces key Likud showdown

By **LESLIE SUSSER**

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After weeks of bitter sparring, what could be the decisive first round of the big fight between Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu for leadership of the Likud Party and the country is set to take place.

If pollsters are to be believed, Sharon will struggle to hold onto power in the party in next week's key showdown.

The images of settlers being evacuated from their homes in Gaza and the northern West Bank did not play well in the Likud. And though the prime minister has been fighting back, he still trails Netanyahu, who resigned last month as Sharon's finance

minister, in the Likud's Central Committee, where the clash will take place.

Sharon's fate — and the future shape of Israeli politics — could be decided on a seemingly minor procedural issue. On Sept. 26, the 3,000 members of the Central Committee will determine whether to hold a party lead-

ership primary in November or, as scheduled, next April.

Sharon's main rivals for the top spot, Netanyahu and the leader of the hawkish "Likud rebels," Uzi Landau, both want the earlier date, hoping to exploit the post-Gaza backlash in the Likud against Sharon, which is reflected in a slew of recent opinion polls on the leadership issue.

Sharon wants more time to consolidate

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NEWS ANALYSIS

■ Sharon increased his popularity abroad, but the Likud Party is a different matter

Continued from page 1

his support, and is calling a vote for an early primary as an attempt to “expel” a serving prime minister, a year and a quarter before the end of his term.

Both sides see the Central Committee ballot as a vote of confidence in the party leader. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, one of Sharon’s closest political allies, describes the impending vote as “the most important by a party-political body in Israel in a decade.”

The outcome could determine who the next prime minister will be, whether Likud remains the party of power or splits in two, whether a totally new Israeli political map emerges and whether there is a follow-up to the Gaza withdrawal.

Latest polls show the Netanyahu-Landau axis leading by between 2 percent to 6 percent. According to Yediot Achroton, 47 percent of the Central Committee is for early primaries and 45 percent is against; Ma’ariv puts it at 48 percent to 42 percent.

Sharon’s Sept. 15 speech at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, in which he indicated readiness for further concessions, did not help his cause in the Likud.

“The Palestinians will always be our neighbors. We respect them and have no aspirations to rule over them. They are also entitled to liberty and to a sovereign national existence in a state of their own,” he declared.

Some pundits argued that the speech

showed that Sharon has made up his mind to leave the Likud.

“This is not the way people in the Likud talk,” political analyst Aluf Benn wrote in Ha’aretz. “This way leads toward the center, toward a public that wants peace and quiet and is willing to give up more territory.”

Yediot’s Sever Plotzker, in a piece headlined “Divorce from the Likud,” wrote that “Sharon’s balanced, moving and excellent speech in Hebrew was aimed exclusively at center-left voters. There was not a single word calculated to please his traditional constituency: the members of the Likud Central Committee and Likud Party members.”

Sharon, however, says he is determined to stay and win in the Likud. On the plane back from New York, the prime minister declared that he had founded the Likud and wouldn’t leave it to found another party.

Sharon knows that that’s what many of his potential supporters in the Central Committee want to hear. But he also knows that the veiled threat to leave the party if he loses is his strongest weapon: Many Central Committee members may support him simply to prevent a split in the party, which could end up with Likud losing power in the next national elections.

So Sharon’s camp is deliberately putting out an ambivalent message: Sharon says he won’t leave, while close aides say he will if he loses.

Ma’ariv columnist Ben Caspit summed up the situation: “Sharon,” he wrote, “already has one leg outside the Likud, but the other leg is still in and kicking.”

Netanyahu’s tack has been to depict Sharon as a man who has abandoned Likud principles and is therefore no longer fit to lead the party. In a joint letter to each of the 3,000 Central Committee members, Netanyahu and Landau describe Sharon as “a subcontractor for the policies of the left,” and say that if he’s going to leave the party, it’s better that he do so sooner rather than later. The greater the lag

between the time Sharon founds a new party and the next elections, the more the new party will lose its luster, they argue.

Insiders say about 900 of the committee members will vote against Sharon on any issue, and that another 900 or so will support him. The battle is over the remaining 1,200.

Yitzhak Regev, a leading Sharon activist and influential member of the

Central Committee, says turnout will be key.

“If there is a high turnout, as I am sure there will be, Sharon will not only beat Netanyahu, he will destroy him,” Regev told JTA. “The media have placed the issue at the top of the national agenda. Everybody understands its importance, and they will all turn out for the vote.”

But it’s more complicated than that for Sharon. One of his chief concerns is that even if he wins in the Central Committee and goes on to win the party primary and the next general election as Likud leader, he is likely to have an even more hawkish and oppositional Likud faction than the one that has constantly tried to tie his hands in the present Knesset.

He knows that could make his job as prime minister impossible — and he also knows polls indicate he would win the premiership as leader of a centrist party, with or without an electoral alliance with left-leaning Labor or centrist Shinui.

These two factors could well lead him to break away from Likud at a later date, even if he wins the Central Committee vote.

If Sharon loses, there’s no question: Pundits unanimously predict that he’ll argue that the Likud has changed, that it’s no longer the same party he founded and that, since it clearly doesn’t want him, he will leave to head a new party against Netanyahu’s more hawkish Likud.

Either way, the Central Committee vote could be a catalyst for major changes in Israeli politics, which could have a strong effect on the big picture in the Middle East. ■

Sharon has ‘one leg outside the Likud, but the other leg is still in and kicking.’

Ben Caspit

Ma’ariv columnist

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How long will post-Gaza glow last?

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — As he sat in a holding area just off the U.N. General Assembly's historic meeting hall — the same General Assembly that condemns Israel about 20 times each year — Ariel Sharon discovered that he had far more friends at the United Nations than he might have known.

In the minutes before the Israeli prime minister's speech, aides to some 15 world leaders approached Sharon's entourage and asked if their bosses — presidents and prime ministers from around the globe — could shake his hand.

For Sharon, long snubbed by many U.N. member states, it was a reception that would have been unthinkable just two or three years ago, according to those who follow Israel's treatment at the United Nations.

But in the glow of Israel's recent withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, a controversial and politically contentious move at home, Sharon found he had become popular in U.N. halls.

With some 170 international leaders in New York for the U.N.'s three-day World Summit last week, even some moderate Muslim nations opened their arms a bit wider to Israel and the Jewish community.

"I never talked so much as I did this week here," Sharon said Sunday in a meeting with Jewish leaders. The pullout, he added, "changed in many aspects the opinion of the world."

While top Israeli officials insist the withdrawal was not undertaken for P.R. purposes — Sharon confidante Dov Weisglass told JTA that "Gaza was not given away to please the world or not to please the world" — it was clear that the world was paying close attention.

With the withdrawal complete and the excitement of the U.N. summit fading into memory, some Middle East observers now ask whether the unusually warm reception for Israel is likely to last.

"Israeli leaders get rewarded for giving things away — and then, within a short period of time, the question is, 'What do you do next?'" said Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum think tank. "You can get a nice reception at the U.N. but harm your long-term war efforts."

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, concurred.

"The superficially positive feeling that

countries show toward Israel will dissipate rapidly as soon as Israel stops making extraordinary one-sided concessions," he said.

Israel, for its part, seems to believe the new openness could be long-lasting.

"These are optimistic times in the Middle East," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told the General Assembly on Tuesday. "The iron wall that has defined Israel's relations with most of the Arab and Muslim world for generations is coming down. Israel's contacts with Arab and Muslim states are growing at a rate never seen before."

While in New York, Sharon met with, among others, President Bush; Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Jordanian King Abdullah II; Russian President Vladimir Putin; British Prime Minister Tony Blair; Australian Prime Minister John Howard; Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin; U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan; representatives of the European Union leadership; and American Jewish leaders.

He also exchanged pleasantries in a U.N. hallway with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who later in the week addressed American Jewish officials.

In addition to taking part in many of the Sharon meetings, Shalom met with the E.U.'s high representative, Javier Solana; U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; and the foreign ministers of Mexico, the Netherlands, Ghana and Qatar.

Shalom also said he had met with representatives of more than 10 Muslim and Arab countries over the last week in New York, and planned to visit Tunisia.

Still, even Shalom acknowledged that the world will not be satisfied if Israel gives up nothing beyond Gaza.

"For the long-term, Israel will be asked to make more concessions," he told a group of Jewish journalists Monday.

Nevertheless, both Israeli government insiders and American Jewish leaders say the pullout has provided cover for moderate Muslim nations to inch closer to Israel and the American Jewish community.

"The withdrawal from Gaza gave us a

good opportunity, but it's a better opportunity for the Muslim side," said Ilan Ostfeld, senior adviser to Shalom. "They wanted always to do it undercover, but now they can say, 'There has been a result.'"

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said the Muslim move toward Israel already had been slowly under way.

"This process began before disengagement," he said. "I think many

of them are tired of being exploited by the Palestinians" into making political moves that are costly to them.

Jewish organizations met and are continuing to meet dozens of world leaders, including the presidents of Senegal, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Poland, among others.

Groups also met with the prime ministers of Turkey and India, among other places, and the foreign ministers of Egypt, Cyprus, France, Azerbaijan, Tunisia, Spain and Russia.

Members of the American Jewish Committee had meetings planned with leaders from nearly 70 countries. Among them were about half the members of the Arab League, according to David Harris, the AJCommittee's executive director.

Other groups who took part in meetings include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Claims Conference and NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia.

Perhaps the most prominent of the encounters was Musharraf's address to American Jewish leaders at an event sponsored by the American Jewish Congress' Council for World Jewry.

Musharraf said Pakistan could not open full diplomatic relations with Israel until the Palestinians had a state, and blamed a significant portion of world terrorism on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But he also praised Sharon for the Gaza pullout and insisted that terrorism "cannot be condoned for any cause."

His mere presence before a Jewish audience, broadcast on Pakistani television, earned praise from both Jews and Pakistanis who attended Saturday night's event. ■

'I never talked so much as I did this week here.'

Ariel Sharon
Israeli Prime Minister

NEWS
ANALYSIS

Mexican cardinal works on interfaith ties

By LARRY LUXNER

MEXICO CITY (JTA) — With centuries of anti-Semitism weighing on the Roman Catholic Church, some might consider Mexico City's 338-year-old Metropolitan Cathedral — an imposing symbol of Christianity with a vast interior crammed with crucifixes and religious icons — an unusual place to find sympathy for the Jewish people.

Indeed, less than a block away, street vendors hawk Spanish translations of such anti-Semitic tracts as "The International Jew," "Mein Kampf" and "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Yet Cardinal Norberto Rivera says those vendors are hopelessly out of touch with the Mexican mainstream, and adds that the vast majority of Mexico's 95 million or so Catholics have nothing against their 40,000 Jewish brethren.

"Disgracefully, we still have isolated expressions of anti-Semitism, but the influence of such books is not great and the Mexican people don't accept this," Rivera said. "We must promote a dialogue of tolerance, accept those who are different and fight all classes of discrimination."

As archbishop of Mexico City, Rivera, 63, is the most powerful Catholic in the world's most populous Catholic country after Brazil. The cardinal spoke to JTA one recent Sunday morning as he prepared his weekly sermon, which is heard by hundreds of Catholics gathered in the cathedral and broadcast throughout Mexico to a weekly radio audience of several hundred thousand.

"The average Mexican knows little about the lives and thoughts of the Jewish community," said Rivera, who originally is from the state of Durango and was named to his current post in 1998. "I think this is a community we must get to know better, because that would allow us to accept them and reject false stereotypes."

In late June, Rivera led seven other Spanish-speaking bishops on an 11-day

organization's co-sponsorship of a highly successful 1999 visit to the two countries by 16 Mexican academics.

"We want to transmit the idea that Jews and Catholics can live with each other, learning about their differences but respecting each other," Dayan-Shabot said. She noted that while Mexican synagogues have never been bombed or vandalized, "what we have are newspaper articles criticizing Israel or

talking badly about Jews. We know there's anti-Semitism. We don't fool ourselves into assuming everybody loves us."

Earlier this year, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Tribuna Israelita published a second book with the help of Mexico's National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination. "Auschwitz: Reflections in the Mexican Press" consists of several dozen articles and illustrations on the subject by leading local journalists.

Joining Rivera on the spiritual journey to Israel and Poland were bishops from smaller Mexican cities such as Durango, Texcoco and Guadalajara, as well as three bishops from border communities in Texas.

"The purpose of the trip was to unite in a closer bond — via our Judeo-Christian roots — the Spanish-speaking Jewish communities of Mexico and the United States with the Catholic Spanish-speaking hierarchy in both countries," said Rev. James Tamayo, bishop of Laredo, Texas.

At the moment, the most pressing issue for Tamayo is the plight of Mexican immigrants in the United States. American Jews traditionally have been sympathetic to immigrants, and Hispanic leaders hope their Jewish colleagues in Washington will raise influential voices to protest vigilante killings along the U.S.-Mexico border and what they consider inhumane treatment of illegal aliens.

"We get wonderful support from our local Jewish community," Tamayo told JTA. "When we had a Mass in honor of the pope's passing, Congregation Agudas Achim donated the flowers for the altar and sent us a letter of condolence. I think there's an opportunity here for us as a new Catholic diocese to grow as an interfaith community." ■

'The average Mexican knows little about the lives and thoughts of the Jewish community.'
Cardinal Norberto Rivera
 Archbishop of Mexico City

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

trip to Poland and Israel. Co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the Mexican Jewish community, the visit was an effort to educate the country's Catholic leadership about the Jewish people and particularly about the Holocaust.

The group spent four days in Poland, visiting the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Belzec and Majdanek, as well as an important Catholic shrine, the Basilica of Our Lady of Czestochowa.

During their week in Israel, the eight bishops toured key Jewish and Christian holy sites, dined with representatives of the Holy See and spoke with a range of Israeli Arabs and Jews.

"Six years ago, I went to Israel with the Jewish community of Mexico, but this trip was extraordinary," Rivera told JTA.

"There was particularly a lot of interest in the Holocaust. Seeing the concentration camps gave me a much deeper impression than visiting Yad Vashem, because this was really an attack against human dignity that we must never allow to be repeated."

Renee Dayan-Shabot is director of Tribuna Israelita, the political affairs agency of the Mexican Jewish community. She said the idea of inviting the bishops to Israel and Poland grew out of her



Marcos Metta

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, right, the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, greets Cardinal Norberto Rivera, the archbishop of Mexico City, in Jerusalem in June.

Anti-Semitism gains a hold in Mexico

By DAVID LIDA

MEXICO CITY (JTA) — At the Lagunilla flea market, a longtime Sunday staple in Mexico City, you can buy antique furniture, musical instruments, post cards, cameras, dishes and movie stills — and, at one stall that bears a swastika flag, books with titles such as “The Anti-Christian Conspiracy” and “The Holocaust Under the Magnifying Glass.”

The latter, by Jurgen Graf, purports to debunk the “myth” of the diary of Anne Frank, insisting that it’s a fictional story written by American-Jewish novelist Meyer Levin.

The five young men working the stand say they can provide Spanish translations of “Mein Kampf,” “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and “The International Jew” — but buyers better come early, because they sell out fast.

“The Holocaust didn’t happen,” says one of the men, who gives his name as Adolfo. “The numbers are greatly exaggerated.

There couldn’t possibly have been 6 million Jews who died.”

Two stalls down, a man named Manuel sells Nazi paraphernalia. Vintage swastika pins fetch the equivalent of \$150 to \$250, while an Iron Cross in its original case is worth \$1,500.

“Whether the Holocaust happened or not isn’t my concern,” Manuel says. “Probably it happened and it’s a tragedy. But you know what? I’ve got my own problems.”

One of those problems is the Jews who periodically come to his stall, shouting insults.

“I tell them, ‘If you want to burn that Nazi flag, go ahead. It costs 2,000 pesos. Give me the 2,000 pesos and you can burn it right here.’”

There may be few anti-Semitic incidents in Mexico City, but anti-Semitic sentiments are expressed freely and readily accepted among the intellectual and educated classes.

The left-wing newspaper La Jornada published a supplement that included the myth that there were no Jews in the World Trade Center on the day of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Days after the bombing of Madrid train lines in March 2004, conversation at one gathering turned to the fact that the U.S. stock market fell once it became clear that the attack had been the work of Al-Qaida.

“The gringos are just like the Jews,” a Chilean artist sniffed. “They think they’re the only ones who have suffered. If one of them dies they think it’s worth 10 of anyone else.”

Most of the guests agreed with her — including the host, a Jewish photographer.

But Mauricio Lulka, director of the Central Committee of the Jewish Community of Mexico, downplays such remarks, considering them declarations of prejudice and stereotypes rather than outright anti-Semitism.

“It’s one thing to express an opinion, quite another to turn that into a public manifestation — a rally, defacing property with graffiti, or aggressive behavior,” he says. “In Mexico, as in any other country, there are people who express negative, as well as positive, stereotypes about the Jews.”

There are only 40,000 Jews in this country with a population of 104 million, of whom more than 90 percent are Catholic.

Both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews have been encouraged to immigrate to Mexico at various points, but Jews also have felt their position to be tenuous here at times.

In 1948, Mexico abstained from the U.N. vote that led to the creation of the State of Israel, and in 1975 voted in favor of the U.N. resolution denigrating Zionism as racism.

But Lulka points out that there have been very few serious anti-Semitic incidents in Mexican history.

Still, if Jews perceive Mexico as ambiguous in its position toward them, Mexican Jews are widely seen as being only partly assimilated into the wider society. Most Jews here send their children to exclusive Jewish schools, and intermarriage is rare.



Larry Luxner

Spanish translations of anti-Semitic books are on sale at a book market in Mexico City.

Some have little contact with non-Jews other than store employees, university or work colleagues and servants.

The Jews’ affluence relative to the majority of the population is another source of tension.

Compounding the problem is Mexican Jewry’s steadfast support of the State of Israel in a country whose intellectual elite is staunchly pro-Palestinian. Gloria Carreno, technical coordinator for the Research and Document Center of the Ashkenazi Community,

acknowledges that among intellectuals and academics it’s not nice to be perceived as pro-Israel.

On the other hand, it isn’t nice to be perceived as anti-Semitic either, so “some people disguise their anti-Semitism as anti-Zionism,” she says.

Lulka looks at the part of the glass that’s full, pointing out that in 2003 Mexico passed a federal law against

discrimination that specifies, among other things, a repudiation of anti-Semitism. Various Mexican bishops, as well as Cardinal Norberto Rivera, recently toured Poland and Israel with Jewish groups.

Still, Carreno says, “symbols can harm us. People form doctrines that can be dangerous.”

Mexican anti-Semitism may be minor-league, she says, “but you have to cut each seed. Once they grow, there’s no way to dig them up.”

FOCUS ON ISSUES

‘Whether the Holocaust happened or not isn’t my concern. Probably it happened and it’s a tragedy. But you know what? I’ve got my own problems.’

Manuel

Mexico City vendor

On two continents, parties court Jews

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In two different countries, national political leaders were expressing very similar thoughts on the future of the Middle East and seeking inroads to the American Jewish community.

Though it's not a presidential or congressional election year, both Democrats and Republicans appear to be redoubling efforts to court American Jewish voters. President Bush attended three Jewish events within eight days, and Howard Dean, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, made his second visit to Israel.

Both men spoke at length about their commitment to Israel and praised Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for Israel's recent Gaza Strip withdrawal. They also both put the onus on the Palestinian Authority to reform, and sought increased help from Arab states in pressuring the Palestinians to make changes.

The outreach shows both parties' continuing interest in garnering American Jewish support and suggests that attempts to reach out to the Jewish community will continue throughout the political cycle.

It also shows that both parties continue to view their records on Israel and the greater Middle East as the strongest avenue to garner Jewish votes.

Bush's appearance Wednesday at the Republican Jewish Coalition's 20th anniversary lunch was an acknowledgment of the group's strong support for the



Jim Hollander/EPA

Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean visits the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem on Sunday.

president's re-election last year.

"The RJC has been a powerful voice for the values of limited government, free enterprise and a strong national defense," Bush said. "Because of your efforts, I really believe America is a stronger and better place."

Bush raised his profile among Jews in 2004, garnering 25 percent of the American Jewish vote nationwide, compared to 19 percent in 2000. The RJC helped the Republicans make inroads in key swing states with large Jewish populations like Pennsylvania, Florida and Ohio.

A week earlier, Bush toured Washington's Sixth and I Historic Synagogue and spoke at a dinner commemorating 350 years of American Jewish life.

Wednesday's speech was billed as a major policy address, garnering national media attention, though Bush introduced no new initiatives. But he did touch on many of the issues that have helped him win American Jewish supporters, such as fighting international anti-Semitism and Middle East policy.

Bush also went out of his way to acknowledge the work American Jewish groups have done for victims of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast region. He specifically touted the work of Tulane University's Chabad.

"They helped rescue stranded people, they distributed bottled water and self-heating kosher meals," Bush said. "They cleaned up and helped salvage homes. They provided spiritual support for those who had lost loved ones. And one of those rescued from New Orleans put it this way: 'In the days after Katrina hit, Chabad saved lives.'"

Bush also touted the \$17 million the Jewish community has raised for hurricane relief; White House officials say it amounts to more than 10 percent of all private donations.

While the timing of the three events was coincidental, White House officials say there's a continued interest in reaching out to Jewish voters.

"This president and his policies have cracked the foundation that was the Democratic support in the Jewish community," said one official, who spoke on condition of

anonymity. "There is a recognition that this is a community that is changing, and we are reaching out to them the same way we are

reaching out to African-Americans and other groups that are having a sea change right now."

Democrats also are courting the Jewish vote this week. Dean traveled with several state party chairmen and the National Jewish Democratic Council, meeting Israeli and Palestinian

officials and talking about Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which he called one of the "biggest steps for peace we've seen in my lifetime."

"It's a huge step forward," Dean told JTA by telephone Tuesday. "Americans, even Jewish Americans, have struggled to understand what Israel has done to move the peace process forward."

Dean said the U.S. government should do everything possible to help P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas exert control, and said Bush needed to pressure Saudi Arabia to help in that respect.

The trip is significant given that Dean faced concerns from some Jewish voters last year, when he sought the Democratic nomination for president. Dean said he supported a more "even-handed" approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which many Jews believe implies more support for the Palestinians and less for Israel.

It also comes at a time that many single-issue voters who focus on Israel have embraced Bush. But Dean said the trip had nothing to do with that.

"What went on in the campaign was principally gamesmanship," Dean said. He also said Democrats traditionally have been the ones to bring Israelis and Palestinians together.

Democratic officials say it's traditional for the party chairman to visit Israel soon after taking office. Dean also is to address the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations next month as part of the effort to elicit Jewish support.

The fact that both parties seem to be speaking from the same script stems largely from the situation on the ground. But it also shows that grabbing additional American Jewish support is more valuable than taking political shots at the other party, even three years before the next White House race. ■

President Bush and Howard Dean both intensify efforts to court Jewish voters.

**BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES**

ARTS & CULTURE

Shimon Peres talks to students and MTV viewers

By SUE FISHKOFF

NEW YORK (JTA) — Shimon Peres, a former Israeli prime minister, has been called many things in his long and distinguished career — visionary, peacenik, Francophile, dreamer, even schemer.

But “hip” has rarely been among the adjectives attached to his name.

That didn't stop MTV, that arbiter of taste and fashion among the world's youth, from choosing Israel's vice prime minister for a stint as a “stand-in” professor on mtvU, the channel's 24-hour college network.

Instead of the scheduled lecture on the Ottoman Empire, when New York University students walked into their “International Politics of the Middle East” class Sept. 15 they were greeted by MTV cameras and a surprise visit from Peres, the longtime Labor Party leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Peres outlined his vision for Middle East peace and then fielded questions from students, who never quite lost their bewildered expressions.

Peres was in New York for the Clinton Global Initiative, a three-day conference on poverty, and MTV invited him to take part in the series. Once he confirmed, they contacted NYU to find an appropriate class.

Peres walked quietly into the NYU auditorium, smiling broadly, and began speaking in soft, measured tones about “the new Middle East,” where peace must be sought through patient negotiation and where new ways of thinking must replace old models.

Couching his description of the peace process in characteristically optimistic terms, he hailed Israel's recent withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. “For the first time, Palestinians will be completely in charge of a piece of land of their own,” he said, where they will be able to “live in freedom, dignity and prosperity.”

One student asked what Peres felt when he first saw a Palestinian, and then a Hamas, flag flying over former Jewish settlements in Gaza.

“I don't mind if the Palestinians are happy,” Peres said. “Their joy is not my pain. But I wish they wouldn't exaggerate. They shouldn't burn. They shouldn't shoot.” ■

JCC officials meet, greet

By DINA KRAFT

HAIFA, Israel (JTA) — In Bombay, Leora Ezekiel works to bring the Jewish community together from across the crowded, sprawling city. In Buenos Aires, Rabbi Fabian Skornik helps distribute food and medicine to Jewish families struggling in the aftermath of Argentina's economic crash.

The two Jewish community center directors were among 250 participants from 35 countries attending the three-day World Conference of Jewish Community Centers, which began Monday in Haifa. The conference usually is held every four years.

The local challenges JCCs face may differ depending on the country and the continent, but the overall challenge of keeping Jews Jewish is common to them all as they grapple with how to make Jewish life an intriguing and viable option, especially to the younger generation.

The JCC directors and leaders are happy to have a chance to come together.

“For us it is a great opportunity to hear what other communities are trying and were successful in offering, and to give examples of our work,” said Abraham Lehrer, president of the Federation Jewish Welfare Organization of Germany.

Lehrer is from Cologne, where the Jewish population has surged from 1,200 to 5,000 in the past 15 years, since Germany began absorbing large numbers of Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Many of the Jews from the former Soviet Union arrive with little knowledge or background in Jewish life after decades living under Communist rule, making outreach to them a special challenge.

Lehrer, a lay leader who runs a software company, has been trading ideas with directors of community centers in the former Soviet Union who face similar issues.

There are more than 1,000 JCCs across the world, if one includes centers in Israel. The former Soviet Union, with 180 centers, now ranks third behind Israel and the United States.

The theme of partnerships and helping one another was reinforced at the conference.

“It lets people know that we're only part of the global Jewish village,” said Jerry Spitzer, president of the worldwide JCC group.

Five new JCCs recently opened — in Poland, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova.

Wearing a scarlet-colored sari, Ezekiel of Bombay and several colleagues from Bulgaria, the United States, and elsewhere toured the Reform movement's Leo Baeck Education Center on Tuesday. The center is a combination of a community center, high school, synagogue and education center.

Through its social action programs, the center works with thousands of Haifa families, including Arabs, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

As she walked through the center, with its glistening swimming pool and views of Haifa, Ezekiel spoke of the challenges of working in Bombay, where 4,000 Jews live in the city and its suburbs.

Because the city is so large, she said, the community is “too fragmented. We need to bring everyone together under one roof.”

Intermarriage and anti-Semitism are not major issues in India, but keeping the community active and interested is. The Bombay JCC offers Sunday school, day camps and youth groups.

Across the globe in Buenos Aires, Skornik, a Conservative rabbi, tries to bring more young Jews into the JCC he runs, which is both a synagogue and a community center offering sports facilities, informal education courses and activities for the elderly.

Much of the focus is reaching out to families trying to get by financially after Argentina's economic crash of 2001-2002.

The advantage of JCCs is that they're seen as welcoming, open places that can forge community in an easy, natural way, advocates say.

“JCCs are an opening gate for many Jews,” said Smadar Bar Akiva, executive director of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers. “It's where they feel comfortable just walking in.” ■

‘JCCs are an opening gate for many Jews. It's where they feel comfortable just walking in.’

Smadar Bar Akiva

Executive director, World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Israel seeks Security Council spot

Israel is planning to seek a spot on the United Nations Security Council.

The move, announced by Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom in a speech this week to the U.N. General Assembly, comes in response to the relatively warm reception Israel has received since its recent withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, a spokesman for Israel's U.N. mission told JTA.

The formal request could come as soon as next week.

Congressmen urge Swiss on 'Red Diamond'

Two Jewish congressmen are circulating a "Dear Colleague" letter urging the Swiss government to designate a neutral emergency symbol in addition to the red cross and red crescent.

Reps. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) and Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) say the Swiss proposal for a neutral red diamond would allow Israel's Magen David Adom, and other agencies that reject the cross and crescent for religious reasons, to obtain protections guaranteed by the Geneva Convention to bearers of those symbols.

NORTH AMERICA

Bush asks Abdullah to mediate

President Bush asked Jordan's king to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians.

"He's graciously agreed to go," Bush said Thursday after asking Abdullah II to shuttle between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Turning to Abdullah after their White House meeting, Bush said, "I want to thank you, sir, for taking a leadership role; it will be very helpful to have your voice of reason there to talk to both leaders."

Bush is seeking ways to accelerate a return to peace talks now that Israel has withdrawn from the Gaza Strip.

U.S.: No dealing with Hamas

The United States will not deal with Hamas, whatever the outcome of Palestinian legislative elections, a senior official said.

"There is an American law, we can't deal with them," David Welch, the State Department's top envoy to the Middle East, told Congress on Wednesday. "So between now and January," when the elections take place, "or after January, I don't think they're going to change this law, and we would continue to observe that law."

Hamas, running on a platform opposing Palestinian Authority corruption, stands to win a substantial number of seats.

Store owner found guilty of aiding terrorism

A U.S. court convicted the owner of an ice cream shop of funneling millions of dollars to terrorist groups, including Hamas.

Abad Elfgeeh, 50, an immigrant from Yemen, faces 15 years in federal prison after being found guilty of funneling \$21.9 million from bank accounts linked to his store in a Brooklyn neighborhood.

Jewish school president testifies on Katrina

The president of a Memphis Jewish school was invited to testify before a Senate committee considering compensation for schools absorbing Hurricane Katrina refugees.

Michael Stein, president of Margolin Hebrew Academy, was to testify before the Senate, Health and Education Committee on the needs of parochial schools that take in displaced children.

"Our school adopted a policy of 'doing whatever it takes,' even though there was no way of knowing the cost and where the money would come from," Stein said in prepared remarks distributed by the Orthodox Union before his testimony Thursday afternoon.

"During the week of August 28th, our school enrolled 24 students ranging in age from three years to 17, increasing our school's current population by 10 percent."

The Orthodox Union wants the government to compensate parochial schools. Some Democrats oppose such funding, saying it violates church-state separation.

Circumcision controversy goes to Jewish court

The City of New York agreed to allow a Jewish court to handle the case of a ritual circumcision practice that may have caused an infant's death.

Metzitzah b'peh, a circumcision method used only in some fervently Orthodox communities, involves the mohel placing his mouth directly on the wound. Rabbi Yitzchok Fisher's use of metzitzah b'peh allegedly led to the death of a baby who contracted herpes.

Fisher has agreed to suspend the practice while the beit din studies the issue, the New York Jewish Week reported.

The city's decision reportedly came after fervently Orthodox rabbis persuaded Mayor Michael Bloomberg that the rabbinical court is the best place to resolve the issue.

Genetic testing recommendations issued

A U.S. government task force recommended that Ashkenazi Jewish women and those whose close relatives have breast or ovarian cancer consider genetic screening.

The recommendation by the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force does not recommend screening for the general population.

The specific recommendation for Ashkenazi Jewish women was made because of the BRCA genetic mutations, carried by some 2 percent of Ashkenazi Jews, which has been linked to the cancers.

Hadassah said it supports the recommendations made by the task force, but is particularly wary of job and insurance discrimination based on genetic information.

MIDDLE EAST

Passover massacre mastermind convicted

A Palestinian terrorist was found guilty of planning a deadly suicide bombing against Israelis.

Abbas Al-Sayed was convicted in a Tel Aviv District Court on Thursday of dispatching the terrorist who blew himself up in a Netanyahu hotel on Passover eve in 2002, killing 30 other people.

Sayed, a Hamas chief in the West Bank city of Tulkarm, was also found guilty of masterminding a similar attack in Netanya in 2001 which killed five people.

He is expected to receive several consecutive life prison sentences.

U.S. facilitates P.A. equipment transfer

The United States has transferred more than \$2 million worth of nonlethal military equipment to Palestinian Authority security forces, top officials said.

Gen. William Ward, the top U.S. security envoy to the Middle East, said he had distributed \$2.3 million in equipment and training, some of it donated from European countries, including radios, riot control equipment and vehicles, delivered on the eve of Israel's pullout from the Gaza Strip last month.