

IN THE NEWS

Shaul Mofaz bolts Likud, joins Sharon's new party

Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz joined Ariel Sharon's new Kadima party.

In a surprise move, Mofaz quit the ruling Likud Party on Sunday for Kadima, despite vowing last week that he would stay put. Israel Radio said Sharon had offered Mofaz the defense portfolio should he win re-election in March.

Mofaz had been expected to lose a Likud primary next week to Benjamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister.

Netanyahu still faces competition from Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, as well as Yisrael Katz and Moshe Feiglin.

Yad Vashem asked to honor Ukrainian priest

Yad Vashem was asked to grant "Righteous Gentile" status to a Ukrainian priest.

The petition on behalf of Andrei Sheptytsky, who as the head of the Ukrainian church during World War II is credited with saving hundreds of Jews, was submitted by Holocaust survivors, Ha'aretz reported Sunday.

According to the newspaper, Yad Vashem had refused to recognize Sheptytsky as he initially supported the Nazi invasion of Ukraine.

But the memorial center said it would reconsider if asked by Holocaust survivors.

Gaza-Israel tunnel uncovered by troops

Israeli troops uncovered a tunnel they suspect was dug by terrorists from the Gaza Strip.

The secret passage, running from northern Gaza to a point near Kibbutz Erez in Israeli territory, was revealed by accident last Friday by a military bulldozer carrying out routine maintenance work.

Security officials said the tunnel, the first known to have been dug into Israel since the recent Gaza withdrawal, was meant to be used by terrorist infiltrators. Israel had received intelligence alerts about the project, and asked the Palestinian Authority to act against it, to no avail.

WORLD REPORT

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Adjusting to Israeli life a year after making aliyah

By DINA KRAFT

BEIT SHEMESH, Israel (JTA) — Sara Benuck, age 8, who immigrated to Israel with her family a little over a year ago from the United States, comes into the kitchen and thrusts a take-home science test in front of her mother. "What does this mean?" she asks, pointing out a long question in Hebrew about how electricity works.

Her mother, Marni, a trained psychologist, tries to make sense of the Hebrew but then passes the test on to her husband Mitchell, a doctor, who goes word by word through the question and helps translate it for Sara.

"Sometimes it's a very humiliating experience doing homework with the kids" says Marni, 35, a mother of four. "But we show them we struggle too but are not giving up. We will persist."

The Benucks made aliyah from their home in Passaic, N.J. They had good jobs, a spacious house and their children were happy in school. But they had always wanted to make their life in Israel, so they sold their home, packed up their books, the children's toys, the cherry wood dining room set and matching dark green leather couches and set off to live their dream.

Theirs is a story of planning, realistic expectations and happy landings.

Before they even made aliyah, the couple visited Israel on a pilot trip and chose a community — Beit Shemesh, a town in the Jerusalem foothills that has become an increasingly popular residence for American olim — and even decided which home they would buy — a two-story townhouse still under construction on the end of a quiet street.

There were delays and not everything went as planned. The townhouse, for example, was

supposed to be completed by last November, but the Benucks only received the keys in July.

But, Mitchell, 36, says, "We had realistic expectations that not everything would go well."

The couple's first goal was to find work — a process that proved easier than expected. Marni, who worked as a school psychologist at a Jewish day school in New Jersey, was offered a job through Beit Shemesh's municipality to work at two fervently Orthodox schools before they even arrived. The municipality noted her credentials through a posting sponsored by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Mitchell is one of a group of North American physicians who have immigrated to Israel with their families as an Applebaum Fellow. The program is in memory of Dr. David Applebaum, a Chicago-born Israeli doctor who served as head of emergency services at Jerusalem's Sha'arei Zedek Hospital until he and his daughter, Nava, were killed in a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem café in 2003, on the eve of her wedding. As an Applebaum Fellow of Nefesh B'Nefesh — a North American organization funded by private philanthropic sources, and the Jewish Agency for Israel — the Benucks receive financial and logistical support toward beginning anew in Israel.

According to a recent survey commissioned by JAFI of North American olim who just passed their one-year mark in Israel, 90 percent describe themselves as either "satisfied" or "quite satisfied" with their arrival into Israeli society. More than a quarter, however, have yet to find job.

Mitchell, a pediatrician, says he feels lucky to have found work in Beit Shemesh working at one of the national health funds. Before he could look for a job, however, he had

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■ *After moving to Israel from New Jersey, a family adapts to their new life*

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to get his Israeli medical license. There were some bureaucratic delays such as the Ministry of Health temporarily losing his American license, but fairly quickly a committee convened and determined he would have to do three months of work in an Israeli hospital emergency room before he could be accredited.

Now, medical license in hand, he spends his days working shifts at four different clinics of one of the national health funds in Beit Shemesh. Last week he could be found in a bright, airy office with dangling butterfly and zebra mobiles, stethoscope and Bugs Bunny tie around his neck, inquiring about the X-ray for a young boy.

The medicine he is practicing in Israel is very different from what he did as an attending physician at a major New Jersey hospital but that, he says, has more to do with the difference between working in a hospital environment and an outpatient clinic.

Two of the clinics service fervently Orthodox neighborhoods, the other two mixed neighborhoods of immigrants from North America, the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia and local Israeli-born residents.

When it comes to his and his wife's new jobs, there is a "significant difference in take-home salaries," said Mitchell, but there is one major expense they no longer have to worry about — tuition for their children at private Jewish day schools.

Last Tuesday he finished his morning shift at the clinic on Bar-Ilan Street and walked outside into the warm sunshine to pick up his two youngest children from day

care. Marveling at the weather, he smiled and said, "I hope to not lift a shovel again in my life."

Mitchell then walked a few blocks away to pick up the youngest member of the Benuck family and the only one to be born in Israel — Shoshana Meira — or Shani for short. She was born just two months after the Benucks made aliyah and was named for Marni's close friend, Shoshana Greenbaum, who had been the maid of honor at the couple's wedding. She was killed in the suicide bombing of the Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem in August 2001.

Once Shani is in hand, Mitchell walks another few blocks to collect Yonatan, age 5, from his nursery school. Most of Yonatan's classmates, like him, are the children of American immigrants.

"They are more polite and relaxed. Israeli-born children are more aggressive," says his teacher, Michal Hadad. Yonatan, after his 15 months in the country, speaks Hebrew without an accent.

"Abba, look at my picture," he says, pointing out his artwork of the day hanging on the wall.

Meanwhile his teacher thanks Mitchell for the referral to a good orthopedist who has been helping her with her back problems.

The oldest Benuck child, 10-year-old Eli, joins his father and two youngest siblings on the walk home. They pass newly planted palm trees in traffic circles and low stone walls that line the sidewalks.

When they reach their home on Gad Street, they wave to neighbors — most of them also recent American olim — and then push open the front door, walking past the dark wood side table covered with framed family photos. The table was originally part of a display cabinet that did not make the move when the family realized it would not fit in their new, slightly snuggler surroundings.

After lunch, the children settle down for an afternoon of homework with the help of first Mitchell and then Marni when she returns home from work.

Eli, wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap, sits in a corner of the Benuck home's combined living room and dining room and thumbs through a book in English, explaining that he still prefers to read in his native

tongue. But, he says, he is adjusting to reading books and doing schoolwork in Hebrew. He figures he only understands about two-thirds of what he reads in Hebrew.

One of Eli's new friends, a fellow immigrant from the United States who came a year before he did, is helping him and that, he says, is making a difference. Of America, says Eli, "I miss my friends. I kind of miss my school."

At his new school he is not an anomaly as an immigrant. Many of his classmates are the children of parents from English-speaking countries, and there are also children from France and Hungary.

And there are advantages to being a kid in Israel, he says. "You can play in the street on Shabbos, you can get a taxi without a grown-up and you can ride the public bus. Kids are more independent."

Another added plus: going to the center of town to eat pizza with friends without having your mother or father take you. Another addition to the Benucks' life that Eli is thrilled about is that one set of his grandparents — Marni's parents — now live just a few blocks away, instead of the 3,000 miles away when they all lived in America.

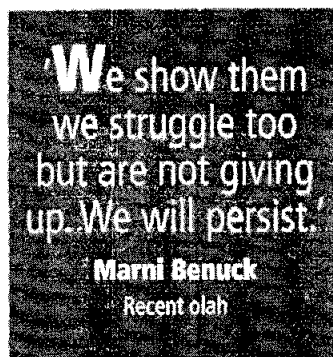
Marni's parents made aliyah three months ago from their home in Los Angeles, in large part to be near their grandchildren. They said they have met other grandparents like them who moved to Israel to be closer to their children and grandchildren.

"These are choices that are not easy to make," says Sharlene Balter, Marni's mother. "But when I walk down the street and see my grandson going to the park or my granddaughter coming over, this is why we are doing this."

In the backyard the Benuck children swing on their new swing set and laugh and play.

"I think there is less stress than people imagine there would be ... our life is day-to-day. We have jobs to go to, a supermarket to shop in. We've settled into a routine and it is here," says Mitchell, who is especially looking forward to voting in Israel in the upcoming elections.

And after break of over a year since they made aliyah, it's back to Tuesday night "grill night." It's time for hamburgers and a taste of America in their new Israeli backyard. ■



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Likudniks flow to new Sharon party

By DAN BARON

TEL AVIV (JTA) — When Ariel Sharon quit Israel's Likud Party last month to form a new faction, his rivals predicted it would be a political retreat of the center-left Labor Party.

But with Sharon's old colleagues bolting to follow him, the Kadima Party could in fact turn out to be "Likud, the Sequel."

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz on Sunday became the latest senior Likudnik to defect, deepening the disarray in an Israeli ruling party still trying to recover from

Sharon's departure.

"The combination of the prime minister and myself, which has so resoundingly proven itself over the past few years, is the right and proper combination to lead Israel over the next few years," Mofaz told reporters, adding that Sharon had promised Mofaz would keep the Defense portfolio should Kadima win the March 28 general election.

Victory seems almost assured, with surveys predicting that as many as 40 of the Knesset's 120 seats will go to Sharon, who is popular for the relative smoothness with which he engineered Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip this past summer.

Sharon also is bolstered by his alliance with Shimon Peres, who quit Labor after being voted out as its leader, and by the support of other former Likud stalwarts such as Tzachi Hanegbi, Tzipi Livni and Ehud Olmert.

Kadima is followed in the polls by Labor under Peres' successor, Amir Peretz, who for years was the head of Israel's largest labor union. Likud is trailing increasingly far behind.

Mofaz's walkout further improves the prospects for Benjamin Netanyahu, the front-runner in a Likud primary scheduled for next week. But in the general election, Netanyahu's more hardline stance on peace talks with the Palestinians looks doomed to fall on deaf ears, unless the Israeli security situation deteriorates drastically.

That scenario appeared to be suggested by the Hamas leader-in-exile, Khaled Meshaal, who foresaw redoubled terrorism

in the new year after a "truce" declared by Palestinian armed factions expires at the end of this month.

"I say it loudly: We will not enter a new truce and our people are preparing for a new round of conflict," Meshaal told a Damascus rally last Friday.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who persuaded Hamas and other terrorist groups to scale back their attacks under the cease-fire he and Sharon declared in February, moved to maintain calm.

"We have agreed on one truce," Abbas said in a Gaza speech. "Therefore, we should continue with it until security prevails, in order that our citizens should not feel threatened by planes and tanks."

The declaration by Abbas fell far short of the counterterrorist crackdown required by the U.S.-led peace "road map."

Israel, still smarting from Islamic Jihad's suicide bombing in Netanya on Dec. 5, said that unless Abbas takes real action it would consider converting the crossings on its boundary with Gaza to formal

border terminals, which would slow the flow of Palestinian trade.

Moving to distinguish himself diplomatically, Peretz pledged that if elected prime minister he would achieve peace.

"I will act to reach a permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians with the utmost speed," he told Yediot Achronot on Sunday. "By the end of our term, a permanent settlement must be behind us." ■

THIS WEEK

MONDAY

■ The Jewish Council for Public Affairs and the United Jewish Communities host a tour of Israel for U.S. Hispanic leaders. The 10 participants from Connecticut, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Ohio and Massachusetts are state legislators, charity heads and business people. The weeklong tour with Jewish community leaders from each region, runs through Dec. 18.

■ Jewish Women International honors its 10 "Women to Watch" at a Washington dinner. Honorees include Amy Harris, a producer of "Sex and the City;" Rachel Simmons, an expert on schoolgirl bullying; and Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, who made headlines when she confronted President Bush on his poverty policies at a Rosh Hashanah meeting in 2003.

THURSDAY

■ Moshe Ya'alon, who retired as Israel's military chief of staff this year, and Avi Dichter, a former head of the Shin Bet security service, consider the lessons of the Palestinian terrorist attacks on the 1972 Olympics in Munich as well as the Steven Spielberg film about the event and the Israeli response, to be released later this month. Dennis Ross, a former U.S. diplomat and a consultant on the film, also will attend the event at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

SATURDAY

■ Jewish Marketplace & Expo. takes place at the Jacob K. Javits Center in New York City through Monday. The event features more than 200 booths of products, goods and services targeting the Jewish community. The Israel Economic Mission will have its own exhibit on Professional Services from Israel.

SUNDAY

■ The Association for Jewish Studies launches its annual three-day conference in Washington. The keynote speaker is Dennis Ross, the former top U.S. envoy to Middle East peace talks. Topics include "New beginnings in Catholic-Jewish relations" and "Religion and the public sphere."

Surveys predict that as many as 40 of the Knesset's 120 seats will go to Ariel Sharon's newly formed Kadima Party.

Israel denies report on Iran plan

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Israel denied a British newspaper report that it had authorized a plan to attack Iran's nuclear sites.

"This is ridiculous," Deputy Premier Ehud Olmert told reporters when asked about the Sunday Times report that Israeli forces had been put on standby for a strike on Iranian uranium enrichment facilities in March.

But another official said that Israel, while endorsing foreign diplomatic efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program, would not

rule out military action as a last resort.

"It would not be correct for a country that faces such a threat to deny that it would ever consider another option," Amos Gilad, director of strategy planning in the Defense Ministry, told Israel Radio.

Israel has called on Iran to be brought up before the U.N. Security Council for sanctions before next March, because Israel fears that the Iranians are close to attaining the know-how to build nuclear weapons alone. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Abbas tries to preserve truce

Mahmoud Abbas urged Palestinian terrorist groups not to violate the cease-fire he signed with Israel.

"We have agreed on one truce," the Palestinian Authority president said in a Gaza speech Saturday, referring to his deal with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in February which Hamas, the Al-Aksa Brigade and other factions later agreed to honor. "Therefore, we should continue with it until security prevails, in order that our citizens should not feel threatened by planes and tanks."

The truce, under which the terrorists scaled back but never entirely ceased their attacks, is due to expire at the end of the month.

The Hamas chief in exile, Khaled Meshaal, predicted renewed terrorism in the new year. "I say it loudly: We will not enter a new truce and our people are preparing for a new round of conflict," he told a Damascus rally last Friday.

Peretz promises peace

Ariel Sharon's top challenger for the Israeli premiership pledged to secure a peace deal with the Palestinians.

"I will act to reach a permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians with the utmost speed," the new Labor Party leader, Amir Peretz, told Yediot Achronot on Sunday. "By the end of our term, a permanent settlement must be behind us."

Polls show Labor under Peretz trailing Sharon's new Kadima Party in the upcoming March 28 general election.

But political analysts speculate that Peretz, a former trade union chief, would be boosted should he manage to refocus the Israeli electorate on the country's economic woes.

Peretz has hinted he would order sweeping withdrawals from the West Bank as part of a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Hezbollah accuses Israel in blast

Hezbollah accused Israel of trying to assassinate one of its military planners.

A bomb wrecked the car of senior militiaman Hussein Assaf and a bodyguard shortly after they left it in Baalbek, a Hezbollah stronghold in east Lebanon on Dec. 9.

The militia, which has been the source of many terrorist attacks against Israel, accused Israel of involvement and said it would retaliate. Israel denied the charge.

Wall project approved

Israel plans to develop the Western Wall.

The Cabinet approved plans Sunday to make Judaism's most important prayer site, and its adjoining plaza, more accessible to worshipers and tourists.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the project would "lead to more families and young people visiting the Western Wall and connecting with our roots."

Approximately five million people visit the Western Wall every year. I would like to see a significant increase."

WORLD

Aumann gets his Nobel

Robert J. Aumann, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, received his Nobel Prize in economics.

Aumann, an expert on game theory and conflict resolution, was honored at the annual ceremony in Stockholm on Saturday along with co-winner Professor Thomas Schelling from the University of Maryland.

Thirty-six members of Aumann's family attended the ceremony. In his Nobel Prize lecture, delivered Dec. 8, Aumann said that in

order to further the cause of peace, one must first understand the nature of war.

The emphasis, he said, should shift from trying to resolve specific conflicts to the study of war in general.

"Wars and other conflicts are among the main sources of human misery," Aumann said, and they have been with us "ever since the dawn of civilization. Nothing has been more constant in history than war."

Widows preview "Munich"

The widows of two Israeli athletes slain by Palestinian terrorists at the Munich Olympics previewed Steven Spielberg's soon-to-be-released film on the tragedy.

Spielberg's producer and screenwriter flew to Tel Aviv last week to screen "Munich" for Ilana Romano and Ankie Spitzer, whose husbands were among 11 Israeli sportsmen killed in the 1972 attack.

The women voiced satisfaction with the film, despite controversy over the historical sources for its depiction of Israel's reprisal campaign against the Palestinians who masterminded the massacre. "For me, it was important that the film does no dishonor to the memory of the murdered athletes, nor to the image of the State of Israel. Both my criteria were satisfied," Romano said.

"Missing" Argentinian Jews remembered

Argentinian Jews who went "missing" during the last Argentine dictatorship were remembered.

A tribute to the estimated 1,900 Jews who went missing from 1976-1983 was held Dec. 7 at the AMIA Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, which co-sponsored the event along with the Argentine Missing Jews Relatives Association.

According to reports, Jews were among the groups that bore the brunt of particularly brutal treatment during that period.

NORTH AMERICA

New N.J. senator friendly to Israel

New Jersey's governor-elect, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine (D), named a congressman known for his friendliness to Israel and the Jewish community to take his seat in the U.S. Senate.

Rep. Robert Menendez, chairman of the Democratic caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives, traveled to Israel in August on a tour sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's educational arm.

In October, he co-authored a letter to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas with Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio), his Republican counterpart, calling on Abbas to keep Hamas and other terrorist groups from running in P.A. elections next month.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, founder of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, called Menendez a leader in promoting Hispanic-Jewish cooperation in Congress.

"He and his office have worked very closely with us in terms of strengthening relations among Jewish and Hispanic members of Congress," Schneier told JTA.

"Bob Menendez is one of the true leaders on issues of importance to the pro-Israel community," said Josh Block, spokesman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Menendez has addressed AIPAC policy conferences.

Jewish Agency names North American CEO

The Jewish Agency for Israel named Maxyne Finkelstein as its chief executive officer for North America.

A former executive vice president of the United Jewish Appeal Federations-Canada, Finkelstein will assume the post next summer.

The new post will be responsible for all Jewish Agency activities and relationships with federations in North America.