

IN THE NEWS

Hospital sends Sharon back home

Ariel Sharon was discharged from the hospital.

The Israeli prime minister walked out of Hadassah-University Hospital in Jerusalem's Ein Kerem neighborhood on Tuesday after less than 48 hours of treatment for a mild stroke.

"It seems you've missed me. Now I must quickly get back to work and move 'forward,'" Sharon told reporters, punning on the Hebrew meaning of his new centrist party, Kadima.

Chanukah help in New Orleans

Scores of Jewish volunteers are heading to help clean up homes and provide services in areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Students on a Chabad Lubavitch-organized trip are in New Orleans, cleaning homes, synagogues and schools.

A dozen Jewish communities also are donating more than 500 menorahs and dreidels to area families, and the American Jewish Committee plans to donate \$575,000 this week from its Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund to four institutions.

Israelis back Kadima despite Sharon's stroke

Despite his health problems, Ariel Sharon's lead in polls ahead of Israel's March election is stronger than ever.

According to Tuesday's survey in Ma'ariv, the prime minister's new Kadima Party will take 42 of the Knesset's 120 seats in the March 28 ballot, an unprecedentedly robust showing for new party.

The Labor Party was predicted to take 22 seats, while the Likud, which elected Benjamin Netanyahu as its new leader Monday, was predicted to take 13 seats.

The findings ran counter to speculation that the mild stroke Sharon suffered Sunday would hurt Kadima's prospects.



WORLD REPORT

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Banning of 'intelligent design' more significant than 'Christmas wars'

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — While Jewish organizations reacted predictably to a court ruling banning mention of "intelligent design" from Pennsylvania public school classes, observers and legal scholars said the decision was more significant than other recent battles over church-state separation.

The more liberal groups celebrated Tuesday's decision, in which a federal judge ruled that a Pennsylvania school board had acted unconstitutionally when it ordered inclusion of "intelligent design" in its schools' science curricula. Orthodox groups were less sanguine.

Still, most acknowledged that in the context of the "Christmas wars," in which politicians, pundits and television personalities are arguing over how religious Christmas should be in the United States, this decision is more consequential.

"This looms much larger — much larger," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs at Agudath Israel of America, a fervently Orthodox group. The display of trees and the like, he said, "are essentially symbolic displays of religion."

Intelligent design "goes to the essence of society: how we educate our children," said Shafran, lamenting the decision. "Belief in the creator is probably the most important aspect of any ethical, moral-minded parent's concern in educating his children."

The school board's claim that the move was meant to bolster science education through inclusion of alternate theories to evolution was simply a cover for its religious

motives, U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III said in his closely watched decision.

"We find that the secular purposes claimed by the Board amount to a pretext for the Board's real purpose, which was to promote religion in the public school classroom," he wrote.

Nathan Lewin, a Washington attorney who has argued 27 cases before the Supreme Court, said he finds the basis for the judge's ruling to be "nonsense."

"I think it's dangerous to encourage litigation the outcome of which will depend on the motive of government officials," said Lewin, who often represents Orthodox interests.

The judge, in other words, should not be taking into account the intentions behind the school board member's actions.

"Either the result is OK or its not OK," he said. "That's what ought to be the standard."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said that the so-called "Christmas wars" and the intelligent design case have a common thread. Both, he said, represent the effort of the religious right in the United States to shift their politics to focus on symbolic issues that are more acceptable to mainstream America.

The shift, he said, follows three decades in which the right lost key political battles on some of their key priorities, from abortion to school prayer.

The decision, Saperstein said, has "enormous significance in terms of the legal doctrine on church-state separation."

In the lead-up to this case, many Jewish

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

Jews weigh consequences of 'intelligent design' case

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groups made an argument similar to that made by Jones in his ruling: The notion that the universe is so immensely complex that it must have been created by some intelligent force, they said, was simply creationism cloaked in secular language.

Phyllis Snyder, president of the National Council of Jewish Women, echoed the view of several Jewish organizations when she called Tuesday's decision a "resounding victory for religious and academic freedom."

It "should once and for all end the nationally orchestrated effort to insert religion into science classes. The place for teaching religious beliefs is in our homes and religious institutions, not the publicly funded classroom."

In October 2004, the Dover Area School Board in Dover, Pa., ordered that, prior to ninth-grade classes on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, a statement be read labeling evolution as "not a fact" and referring students to another book on intelligent design to learn more. Several families opposed to the move filed a lawsuit.

Since then, the school board that proposed the inclusion of intelligent design was kicked out of office, but the case still

went ahead.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, a centrist Orthodox organization, said he was "disturbed" that the judge ruled the mention of intelligent design unconstitutional.

"I would much rather have seen something that is left up to individual science departments in schools," he said. Nevertheless, Weinreb said, he believes that "science should be taught as science and religion should be taught as religion" — and that the judge

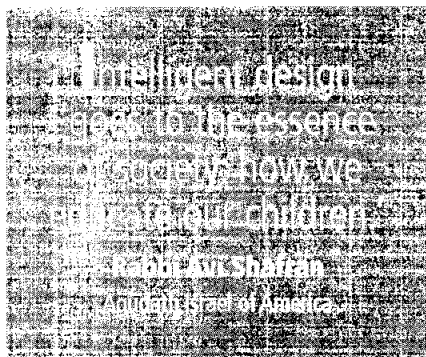
was not off base in labeling intelligent design a religiously based idea.

"The Bible is not meant to be a scientific textbook," he said.

As for the import of the decision, Weinreb said that "the Christmas tree controversy is almost silly. Intelligent design is at least a serious discussion."

The Pennsylvania case is one of several evolution cases that have emerged in the last year. After a federal judge ordered a Georgia school district to remove stickers from textbooks that labeled evolution a "theory, not a fact," a federal appeals court there recently heard arguments on the stickers' constitutionality.

Last month, Kansas education authorities adopted a new set of principles questioning evolution for their science departments.



German Jews celebrate new Torah center

By TOBY AXELROD

LEIPZIG, Germany (JTA) — It was a rare scene for this city and for Germany: a crowd of Jews, dancing with a Torah under a canopy.

Lohr Street glistened under a light snowfall as a chorus line of men wearing yarmulkes, arms linked, celebrated.

The event marked the dedication of a new Torah center in this former East Germany city, where Jews of all ages will be able to deepen their knowledge of Judaism, says Rabbi Josh Spinner, a vice president of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, which is co-funding the center together with an anonymous donor.

Members of the Jewish community clapped and cheered as the procession — including Rabbi Chanoch Ehrentreu, head of the Rabbinical Court of London — made its way toward the new Ohel Yehoshua Beis Medrash Torah Center. The center's first guests will be a group of Jewish youth from Germany, who will spend the first night of Chanukah learning and celebrating the holiday here.

"I wanted to give" the Torah "to a place that really needed it," said Joshua "Shoei" Rogosnitzky of London, who donated the scroll to the center together with his family and his partner in the watch-making business, Naftali Bollag of Zurich. The new center is named in Rogosnitzky's honor.

"I thought the community was completely destroyed, and to see a rebirth" is "an incredible thing," said Shoei's father, Moishe Rogosnitzky, a London dealer in antique Jewish books. His own grandfather, Leipzig's last rabbinical judge, and his father, an assistant judge, fled Germany for England in 1938.

The Torah center is one of two new Jewish venues in Leipzig, said Kuef Kaufmann, head of the 1,200-member Jewish community. A Chabad kindergarten opened a few months ago. Most community members are recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Germany's Jewish population has quadrupled to more than 106,000 since 1990 due to a massive influx of former Soviet Jews.

"Jewish life in Leipzig has developed," Kaufmann told JTA. "It's not just a museum piece or an obligation of the state. It's true Jewish life."

Leipzig's Torah center is the second such program sponsored by the American Jewish philanthropist Ronald Lauder. The first one opened in Hamburg several years ago.

The foundation also operates a house of learning, the Beit Midrash of Berlin, for men, and a similar program for women in Frankfurt.

A director of the new Leipzig Jewish educational program will be appointed soon, Spinner said.

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Palestinians' electoral choices could affect Israelis

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA)— Hamas' runaway success in recent Palestinian municipal elections is raising fears of a possible victory for the terrorist group in parliamentary elections in January, dampening the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace-making and possibly leading to a renewal of the intifada.

Several key players are making last-ditch attempts to block Hamas' rise. Israel and the United States have been trying to pressure Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to bar Hamas from the January vote. More significantly, activists in Abbas' own Fatah movement are threatening to sabotage the election and even to turn their guns on Hamas militiamen.

Volatility on the Palestinian side could affect Israel's own elections in March: A strong Hamas likely would hurt the left and strengthen the right, while a victory by Fatah — either at the ballot box or in street battles with Hamas — could create conditions for peace talks, helping Israeli parties on the left and center.

Hamas' electoral strength in Gaza came as no surprise. But the fundamentalists also won sweeping victories in the West Bank, which left them in control of major cities such as Nablus, Jenin, El-Bireh, Kalkilya and Tulkarm.

More than 1 million of the 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip now live under local councils controlled by Hamas. But will the group's strength in local politics translate into power on the national stage?

Hamas' cause is helped by a generational rift in Fatah, the secular ruling party. Unhappy with the list of Fatah candidates for Parliament drawn up by Abbas, young Fatah members broke away last week to form a new party called al-Mustaqbal — "the future" — and submitted a list of candidates of their own, headed by jailed activist Marwan Barghouti.

Abbas' ruling group in Fatah — most of which returned to Palestinian areas from Tunis with PLO chief Yasser Arafat in the mid-1990s, after the Oslo accords — are known as "Fatah-Tunis," or the "outsiders." The young generation led by Barghouti is made up of "insiders," Palestinians who grew up under Israeli occupation.

"Fatah-Tunis," which has held sway in

the territories for more than a decade, now faces a double challenge — from Hamas and from its own young, insider generation. Both accuse the Tunis leadership of mismanagement and corruption. But whereas Hamas rules out any accommodation with Israel, the young Fatah leaders do not.

If it gains a large share of power, Hamas' dilemma will be whether to press its social agenda or to emphasize its rejection of Israel. Hamas' popularity on the local level is based largely on its welfare work and its lack of financial corruption.

Pressing for wider adoption of its 1988 charter — which denies Israel's right to exist — and for a total economic boycott of the Jewish state could prove less popular. Polls show that 60 percent to 70 percent of Palestinians support the current relative lull in violence and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which Hamas rejects.

The key question is whether the exigencies of power will moderate Hamas, or whether Hamas in power will radicalize the Palestinians.

The Arab affairs expert for Ha'aretz, Danny Rubinstein, maintains that Hamas is not yet ready to make the choice, since it currently enjoys the best of both worlds.

Hamas "can preach reform, while leaving P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah colleagues the dirty work of making agreements and compromises with Israel," Rubinstein writes.

In power, however, Hamas may be forced to make ideological concessions or any hope of peace between Israel and the Palestinians could be lost — and the Palestinians could forfeit economic support from the United States and European Union, as well as thousands of jobs in Israel.

To pre-empt this, some young Fatah activists are saying that Hamas must be stopped soon. They're threatening to use force to prevent the elections from taking place, and warn that they're ready for an armed showdown with Hamas.

"We didn't fight 40 years to hand Hamas power on a platter," Fatah activists told the Hebrew daily Yediot Achronot.

Israel also is worried, and is urging Abbas to disqualify Hamas from the elections.

Israeli officials note that the Oslo agreements stipulate that parties that maintain armed militias or that don't recognize the State of Israel can't participate in elections.

"Elections without Hamas means choosing a leadership for peace talks; elections with Hamas means making an alliance with terror," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom declared.

The United States and European Union are threatening to withhold funds

from the Palestinians if Hamas joins the government. The U.S. Congress last week overwhelmingly passed a resolution stating that "terrorist organizations like Hamas should not be permitted to participate in Palestinian elections until such organizations recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, cease incitement, condemn terrorism, and permanently disarm and dismantle their terrorist infrastructure."

But P.A. officials aren't bowing.

"The democratic right to participate is guaranteed by law. We cannot exclude anybody," P.A. spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh declared.

An exit strategy for the Palestinians could be to postpone the elections, and more and more Palestinians are advocating this course.

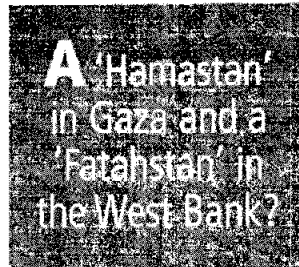
Abbas, however, says he's determined to proceed in January. If the ballot goes ahead, and Hamas does well, it could impact Israeli elections in March.

A good showing by Hamas would play into the hands of the Israeli right, which could argue that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's summer withdrawal from Gaza harmed Israel.

Sharon could fall back on a policy of further unilateral moves, arguing that Hamas' participation in Palestinian government means that Israel has no peace partner, and thus needs to set defensible borders on its own.

Worst hit by a Hamas victory would be the Israeli left, as its push for a peace treaty would seem irrelevant or naive.

Hamas' impact on the Israeli election would be multiplied if it's followed by a new eruption of Palestinian violence, which Israeli security chiefs say is a likely scenario. Israel's military intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Aharon Farkash-Ze'evi, even speaks of the emergence of "Hamastan" in Gaza and "Fatahstan" in the West Bank.



NEWS
ANALYSIS

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Bush wishes Sharon well

President Bush urged Ariel Sharon to improve his diet.

Bush telephoned Sharon on Tuesday, two days after the Israeli prime minister was hospitalized after suffering a minor stroke.

Bush said he is "very concerned" about Sharon's health and suggested he watch his diet, exercise and cut down on working hours, a Sharon spokesman said in a statement.

Bush added that he hoped to see a healthier Sharon when the two meet again in approximately two months. Bush "said that when the prime minister had previously told him how many hours he worked per day, he got tired just hearing about it, and urged him to be careful," the spokesman said.

The two leaders also discussed developments in the Middle East. "I need you to be healthy," Bush told Sharon. "People love strong leadership that is built on principles, and you have proven this."

Senate passes Iran condemnation

The U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning anti-Israel statements from Iran's president, but without provisions calling for the Iranian people to exercise self-determination.

The Senate passed the measure by unanimous consent last Friday, condemning Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent calls for the destruction of Israel and his denial of the Holocaust.

But Democrats required two other statements — seeking self-determination by the people of Iran and seeking a national referendum there — to be withdrawn.

Jewish official meets Japanese leader

A U.S. Jewish leader met with the prime minister of Japan.

Tuesday's meeting between Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Junichiro Koizumi covered such topics as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anti-Semitism and Iran, Hoenlein's office said.

ADL condemns anti-Semitic television

The Anti-Defamation League asked Lebanon to denounce a television program calling for Jews to be burned and killed.

Al-Manar television, operated by the Hezbollah terrorist organization, aired a university symposium calling for Israel's destruction.

In a letter to the Lebanese ambassador to the United States, the ADL's national director, Abraham Foxman, said Tuesday that Lebanon should "immediately make clear that such events and sentiments are intolerable and in no way reflective of Lebanese policy."

WORLD

Report: Czechs talk nukes with Iran

Czech government officials secretly negotiated with Iran on possible cooperation with the Islamic regime's nuclear program, according to a Czech newspaper.

Industry and Trade Minister Milan Urban said he discussed aiding Iran's civilian nuclear aims during trade talks in early December, and top Czech politicians — including Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek — secretly negotiated with Iranian deputies on possible cooperation shortly before Iran's president called for the destruction of Israel, Respekt reported.

Urban and Paroubek's actions were condemned by the newspaper and by Jana Hybaskova, a pro-Israel Czech member of the

European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, and Josef Jarab, head of the Czech Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee.

Jarab was one of several legislators who refused to meet with their Iranian counterparts.

Tomas Kraus, head of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, expressed astonishment at the prospect of any Czech official discussing a commercial nuclear deal with Iran.

Paroubek admitted to Respekt that as Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued making outrageous anti-Israel statements, "maybe doing business" with Iran on nuclear power "would be a problem right now."

Player suspended for fascist salute

An Italian soccer player was given a one-game suspension for repeating a fascist salute on the field.

Lazio's Paolo Di Canio was banned after he raised his arm during a game this weekend. He made the same salute in a game last week and once last year.

Di Canio could face additional suspensions.

Australian sentenced for hate attacks

An Australian white supremacist who was involved in defacing a Jewish grocery store was sentenced to jail.

Damon Paul Blaxall was given a 12-month sentence for being part of the Australian Nationalist Movement, which carried out the attack on the Jewish grocery and another on a Chinese restaurant, Australian media reported.

Blaxall previously pleaded guilty to defacing a synagogue.

MIDDLE EAST

Militiaman's right to sue upheld

An Israeli court upheld the lawsuit of a former Lebanese prisoner of war who said he was sexually abused while in custody.

The Tel Aviv District Court on Tuesday rejected a petition by the state to throw out the \$1.3 million damages claim by Mustafa Dirani, a Shi'ite militiaman released from an Israeli jail last year as part of a prisoner swap with Hezbollah.

Dirani alleged that he was sodomized with a stick by jailers as part of interrogations meant to determine whether he knew the whereabouts of missing Israeli air force navigator Ron Arad, who bailed out over Lebanon in 1986 and was taken captive by militiamen.

The district court said that if Dirani wins his lawsuit, laws against funding enemy agents should be invoked to avoid the compensation money being used for Lebanese attacks on Israel.

The Israeli government has denied Dirani's charges that he was abused and said he made up the allegations to justify giving Israel information.

Signs to be standardized

Israel's trilingual road signs will be standardized. Under legislation passed Monday by the Knesset, the Public Works Authority must ensure that English and Arabic translations of place names on road signs have uniform spellings.

The move follows complaints by Israeli Arabs and foreign tourists that the translations are sometimes phonetic, sometimes biblical and sometimes just plain wrong.

The experts of Israel's Hebrew Language Academy have been enlisted to advise the Public Works Authority.

To avoid a budgetary burden, the new law will be enforced only when the time comes to change signs due to wear and tear or renovations.