

IN THE NEWS

Senators urge Bush on Hamas

Seventy-three U.S. senators signed a letter urging President Bush to call on the Palestinian Authority to disarm Hamas before elections next month.

"If terrorist groups gain a substantial foothold in the Palestinian legislature, it will make it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for there to be any progress on the 'road map' or on the road to achieving a two-state solution," the letter, sent Wednesday, said, referring to an internationally backed peace plan.

The Bush administration opposes Hamas' inclusion in the Jan. 25 legislative elections, but prefers to leave the decision to the Palestinians.

Rocket hits Israeli military camp

A Palestinian rocket struck an Israeli army base, wounding five soldiers.

Thursday's launch against Camp Yiftah from the nearby Gaza Strip was the second such attack this week.

The casualties were hospitalized in stable condition. Israel retaliated with artillery fire.

The Palestinians said a farmer was killed in the shelling.

Playgrounds to help victims of tsunami

A Jewish group is opening the first of 85 playgrounds planned for areas of Sri Lanka devastated by last year's tsunami.

The ceremony for the playground, built by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Bush-Clinton Tsunami Fund and a Sri Lankan nonprofit group, will take place Dec. 26, the anniversary of the tsunami, which killed more than 200,000 people.

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JTA WORLD REPORT

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Brian Hendler

Israeli children walk to school in Jerusalem.

With troubled education system, Israel ranks low in the developed world

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — The environmental studies teacher kneels with a group of second-graders in a garden patch as they plant a row of cabbage seeds, digging just deeply enough to protect the plants they will become.

The seemingly ordinary activity is a first for the Gderot School in central Israel.

The money to hire Gderot's first environmental studies teacher is one of the benefits of being among 200 schools participating in the government's pilot program that aims to revitalize Israel's much-maligned school system.

"It's the beginning of a change," said Niza

Vider, principal of the Gderot elementary school, which serves a cluster of moshavim near Rehovot.

The pilot program was launched this year. It comes as Israel's schools are considered to be in dire straits. Students place near the bottom on international tests compared to their West-

ern counterparts. Students have to scramble for attention in large and crowded classes, and rates of school violence — mostly in the form of severe bullying — are high. Teachers are underpaid and,

in some cases, considered underqualified.

"The kids from Israel, for them school is like camp. There is no discipline or regulations. You do what you want," says Eitan

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STRUGGLING TO MAKE THE GRADE

Part 1

Israeli students rank near the bottom in the developed world

Continued from page 1

Stoller, 30, a civics and history teacher at Lady Davis Amal High School who was voted best teacher in Tel Aviv last year in a local magazine poll. He has enforced a strict code of conduct in his classes that has proven successful.

But in many of Israel's classrooms, an atmosphere of chaos reigns. Teachers struggle to control classes with as many as 40 students. Both parents and students complain that the school system has become a place less of intellectual stimulation than of boredom.

In what may be a case of self-fulfilling prophecy, low teacher expectations contribute to the downward spiral.

Zemira Mevarech, an education professor and vice rector of Bar-Ilan University, and two colleagues recently completed a study that found Israeli teachers to be among the least demanding in the developed world.

"It's amazing how little we demand," Mevarech said of teachers' expectations for students. Trying to ensure that students pass matriculation exams at the end of high school, teachers tend to spoon-feed information rather than challenge their students to think creatively and critically, she said.

Given the failure to push students, perhaps it's not surprising that an international survey in 2003 ranked Israel 33rd out of the top 41 developed countries in science, 31st in math and 30th in reading.

"It's really low. We were shocked to see it," Mevarech said.

Israel's academic elite warn that if the education system doesn't improve, it could

have catastrophic consequences for the country's ability to compete internationally. Technion professor Aaron Ciechanover, who shared the 2004 Nobel Prize in chemistry with an Israeli and an American colleague, said the educational system is plunging Israel into a "quiet crisis" that doesn't receive the attention it deserves.

"Unless rapidly corrected, this choking of brainpower will soon erase the admirable progress Israel has made in joining the First World. It will destroy the opportunities and the future that Israel's people deserve. It will also decimate the great source of pride Israel has bestowed on Jewish communities around the world," Ciechanover wrote in a recent essay.

"At this dangerous juncture, the government must make education a high national priority. Earmarked support from Jewish communities world-wide is now more crucial than ever," he continued. "Only if Israel will be able to supply the world's best-trained, most creative and knowledgeable workers will the nation's economic independence and social progress be assured."

Some educators say the Israeli school system has been on a downward slide for two decades, attributable to a range of factors from shrinking budgets to the challenges of teaching an especially diverse student body.

Low salaries make it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. Furthermore, the structure of the Education Ministry — which oversees several distinct bureaucracies because of divisions among secular, religious, Arab and alternative schools — has made it difficult to streamline educational management.

Compounding the problems, Israel has one of the largest gaps in the Western world between wealthy and poor students. Poorer students consistently perform below those who come from wealthier homes, and the gap between what rich and poor students achieve in school is greater in Israel than almost anywhere else in the world, researchers said.

"Poverty is linked with almost everything bad in education," said Tom Gumpel,

an education professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Virginia Commonwealth University whose expertise is school violence and special education. The single biggest predictor of whether a student will need special education is family income, he said.

Israel spends as much on education as many of developed countries do — about 8.6 percent of GDP — but results continue to fall short.

Student performance in the major cities is considered better than in towns and villages. Experts say that may

have more to do with the higher socioeconomic level of the urban students' parents than with the schools themselves.

In addition, teachers in urban areas often are wealthier and better educated than their counterparts in the periphery.

Israel maintains its image as a country of innovators thanks in part to its universities, all of which are research institutions. The research focus drives much of the innovation emerging from Israel, as the universities push students to excel academically.

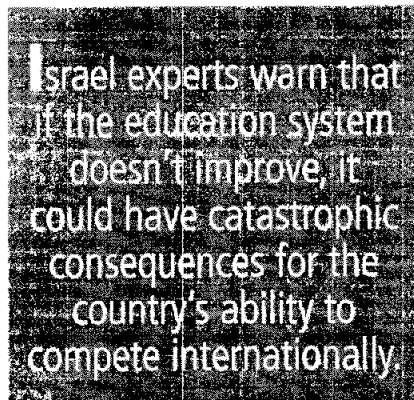
The army also is a major factor in Israel's status as a force in fields like high-tech. Many of the country's top technology entrepreneurs served in army units that focus on high-tech research and development.

The challenge facing the educational system today is to lay the necessary groundwork earlier, during the years of every child's regular schooling, experts say.

"In the classroom, what helps most is if the student is motivated and positive. When they have this spark in their eyes, we can really help them excel," said Hagit Gal, a science teacher at the Gderot School. Additional personal attention to students and a new range of subject matter, which the school is enjoying thanks to the pilot reform program, have helped engage students, she said.

Education Minister Limor Livnat began implementing the program in the autumn at dozens of schools, mostly in poorer parts of the country. The schools are to follow the recommendations of the Dovrat committee, which was charged with addressing the decline in Israeli schools, specifically low achievement in math, science and literacy on international tests.

At the Gderot School — where students



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come from a relatively high socioeconomic background compared to other schools participating in the pilot program — the reforms have been welcomed by most.

“As a principal I always have visions and dreams for what I want to do, and some of those dreams I have been able to realize this year,” said principal Vider, noting that teachers now have extra time and resources to focus on both gifted and struggling students.

She also is excited about the extra courses the school can offer, from a toy-making class based on principles of physics to music lessons and math enrichment for top students.

One reason for the decline in education is the inability to attract enough top young people to the teaching profession. Though salaries for teachers have never been high in Israel, the profession used to attract some of the brightest and most dynamic people. Especially during the early years of the state, there was an ideological focus on creating a well-educated younger generation. In addition, salaries in other fields were low then as well.

Now, however, bright university graduates have promising horizons in high-tech and other industries, and relatively few choose to go into teaching.

Starting teachers receive about \$666 a month. The Dovrat Committee recommended raising starting salaries to \$1,000 a month

The committee on reforms was headed by Shlomo Dovrat, a millionaire who made his fortune in high-tech. He and his committee members consulted with hundreds of experts over 15 months, but they drew fire from teachers’ organizations for not including teachers on the committee.

The Dovrat report is similar in some ways to President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” plan from 2001. That plan also tried to bring a business-like approach to the classroom, holding teachers and principals accountable for students’ success and making the entire educational system more results-oriented.

In addition to seeking a raise in salaries to attract and retain quality teachers, the Dovrat reforms recommend extending the school day, a controversial issue in Israel. They recommend changing the school week from its current six-day week of five hours per day to a five-day week of eight-hour days, arguing that a longer school day produces more focused and intensive learning.

The reform program also seeks to develop a core curriculum, requires closer surveillance of student performance and aims to reduce bureaucracy by giving schools and principals more autonomy in budget and personnel decisions.

Shmuel Har-Noy, the Education Ministry coordinator in charge of implementing the Dovrat recommendations, said he’s optimistic that gradual improvement is possible.

The reform program “gives answers to main problems,” he said.

The government refuses to reduce class size — it could cost millions of dollars — frustrating education experts who see large classes as a barrier to quality education. Hebrew University’s Gumpel, however, says the beneficial effect of smaller classes has yet to be proven by research.

Gumpel believes the most important change is to bring discipline back to the classroom. He said all teachers need to be trained in classroom and behavior management so that students know there will be repercussions for disruptive behavior.

Yael Shamir, 17, a student at Lady Davis Amal High School, spent two months last year on an exchange program with the Milken Jewish Community High School, a private Jewish day school in Los Angeles. She was taken aback by the discipline and rules the American students followed, and by how seriously they took their studies.

In Israel, she said, “people don’t invest in school for their future.”

Like Israeli society at large, Israeli schools have tended to be more relaxed than rule-heavy. In recent years, however, behavioral problems have intensified as parents have become more lax about discipline and authority at home, educational experts say.

In turn, some children come to school with less respect for the authority of adults, including teachers.

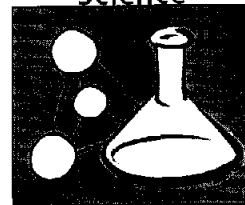
“Behavior is dictated by environment,

Reading



Rank	Country
1	Finland
2	Canada
3	New Zealand
4	Australia
5	Ireland
6	Hong Kong
7	South Korea
8	United Kingdom
9	Japan
10	Sweden
11	Austria
12	Belgium
13	Iceland
14	Norway
15	France
16	United States
17	Denmark
18	Switzerland
19	Spain
20	Czech Republic
21	Italy
22	Germany
23	Lichtenstein
24	Hungary
25	Poland
26	Greece
27	Portugal
28	Russia
29	Latvia
30	ISRAEL
31	Luxembourg
32	Thailand
33	Mexico
34	Argentina
35	Chile
36	Brazil
37	Macedonia
38	Indonesia
39	Albania
40	Peru

Science



Rank	Country
1	South Korea
2	Japan
3	Hong Kong
4	Finland
5	United Kingdom
6	Canada
7	New Zealand
8	Australia
9	Austria
10	Ireland
11	Sweden
12	Czech Republic
13	France
14	Norway
15	United States
16	Hungary
17	Iceland
18	Belgium
19	Switzerland
20	Spain
21	Germany
22	Poland
23	Denmark
24	Italy
25	Lichtenstein
26	Greece
27	Russia
28	Latvia
29	Portugal
30	Bulgaria
31	Luxembourg
32	Thailand
33	ISRAEL
34	Mexico
35	Chile
36	Macedonia
37	Argentina
38	Indonesia
39	Albania
40	Brazil
41	Peru

International rankings for 15-year-old students, compiled in 2003 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

so we need to modify the environment,” Gumpel said.

Violence in Israeli schools mostly entails students bullying each other in physical, emotional or sexual ways.

Startled by the violence and deterioration of the educational system, Stoller, the civics and history teacher in Tel Aviv, decided to adopt a “tough-love” style in his classroom.

Stoller gives recalcitrant students academic punishments, such as writing essays. He has suggested that metal detectors be installed in schools and that violent students be dealt with harshly, even with expulsion.

Students rule at democratic schools

By DINA KRAFT

HADERA, Israel (JTA) — Under a classroom's fluorescent lights, students and teachers scramble to find seats. An important "Parliament session" is under way as together they hammer out a plan for allocating the school's activities budget.

This is the Hadera Democratic School, where students take an equal role in deciding not only how and what to study, but how the school is run.

As they debate how to spend the \$27,000 activities budget, one student writes in neat letters at the top of the blackboard, "order of speakers." A debate soon breaks out over how much money to spend on the school's music department and whether it's worth purchasing additional acoustic equipment.

Next, the drama teacher asks for additional funds to allow students to see professional theater productions.

One by one, everyone in the room is heard. After much wrangling, a budget is produced for the 2005-2006 school year.

The Hadera Democratic School, which receives funding from both public and private sources, was the first of its kind in Israel. Since it was founded in 1987, 23 other schools have opened around the country, based on its model of democratic education in which student participation and choice is emphasized.

With its relatively large number of democratic schools, Israel is considered a ground breaker and leader in the field internationally.

There is growing interest in alternative schools in Israel, where the public school system is mired in a crisis born of poor teaching and disciplinary problems. The Hadera Democratic School has 350 students, with hundreds more on a waiting list.

Most of the students are secular, from a variety of economic backgrounds. Scholarships help students from poorer families pay the annual tuition of approximately \$1,200.

Among the school's most famous alumni is Gal Fridman, the windsurfer who won Israel's first Olympic gold medal in 2004.

Based on the idea that children are naturally curious and want to learn, the democratic schools focus on respecting the individual. There is close teacher-student interaction, and teachers — called "educators" by the students — mentor 15 students in addition to their classroom duties. With their elders' help, students guide their own education. The goal is to instill in children the notion that they're responsible for their choices.

There are no required classes, no grades or required tests. Staff and students are treated as equals and share in school decisions, sitting on a variety of committees that range from the school Parliament to a teacher-selection committee and a field-trip committee.

Avira Golan, who taught in a traditional school before coming to the Hadera Democratic School, no longer believes in conventional education.

"It's bankrupt, and I believe children only learn

from choice, not when they're forced," she says.

At traditional schools, she says, "I saw how I fought with kids instead of teaching them — the whole time telling them to be quiet. I believe kids need to move and play. It's where the real things happen for them."

Mike Moss, 17, came to the school as a disgruntled 11-year-old who was bored and restless in his regular school. He soon felt stimulated in the Hadera school and became active in the music and drama

departments.

"I feel I would not be doing half the things I am doing here — preparing for matriculation, the music, the friendships — if I had stayed at regular school," he says.

But the Hadera school isn't for everyone; students there need self-discipline and open minds, he says.

Chen Shoham, 17, says the school has taught her to take responsibility for her education and her life.

"It's about freedom as an individual and freedom of choice. I do what I want and what I need to do," she says. "I'm responsible for my life."

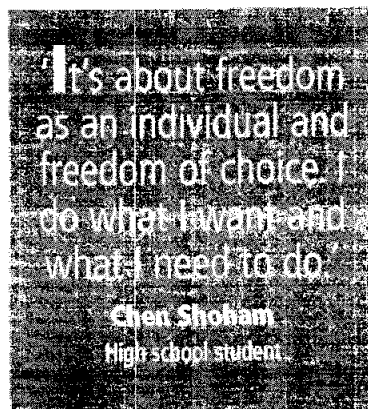
The school's principal, Rami Abramovich, says the students do well on the matriculation exam, but the school doesn't keep data on how many students pass because it doesn't consider the matriculation exam a proper measure of whether a student has been educated well.

In contrast to the mainstream Israeli school system, there's hardly any violence at the Hadera Democratic School.

"It's because kids don't feel the need to rebel against anything," Shoham says.

Parents say they're relieved to have found a setting where their children can thrive academically and socially.

"We think that regular public schools limit children," says Hadass Gertman, a performance artist whose 8-year-old daughter attends the Hadera Democratic School. "We heard of children going through very bad experiences in public school and we wanted her to enjoy learning, to enjoy school."



**STRUGGLING
TO MAKE
THE GRADE**



Brian Hendler

Kids at the Democratic School in Hadera, Israel, play cards just before the start of summer vacation.

An enriched school day for Israeli poor

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Rinat Tzur leans over the shoulder of her third-grade student's homework, correcting his grammar while gently explaining that he must do a better job of focusing the plot in an essay about a treasure hunt.

Three times a week, Tzur is paid extra to stay late and help her students with homework, giving them the individual attention often lacking during the regular school day.

"I can sit one-on-one with the children where I can strengthen them individually," Tzur says. "It gives me time to deepen my connection with them."

The extended school day at the Yarden School in Tel Aviv's working-class Shchunat Hatikvah neighborhood is possible because of a 3-year grant by the Sacta-Rashi Foundation, based in Ben Shemen, Israel.

In addition to the study sessions with their teachers, students are treated to extracurricular activities ranging from juggling to art design and chess. They also receive hot lunches, which for some may be their only substantial meal all day.

Started by a family of French philanthropists, the foundation assists Israel's underprivileged, focusing mostly on schoolchildren and special-needs populations, including substance abusers, the disabled and victims of domestic violence.

The foundation's main focus is education, and the extended school day — or "enriched" day, as it's known — is one of its flagship programs.

Some 60,000 students from kindergarten through high school take part in the program in 100 schools, mostly in outlying, poor areas or inner city neighborhoods like Shchunat Hatikvah. Many of the schools are in small, poor towns in the southern and northern reaches of the country, where students tend to perform at a lower level academically than their counterparts in the center of Israel.

The situation in these areas has grown more dire in wake of recent budget cuts

that hamper education and welfare services in parts of the country that need it most. Among children of Western countries, Israel's fall victim to some of the highest rates of poverty.

Hubert Leven, president of Sacta-

Rashi since its founding in 1984, said the foundation's goal is to invest as much and as efficiently as possible to create the largest possible impact.

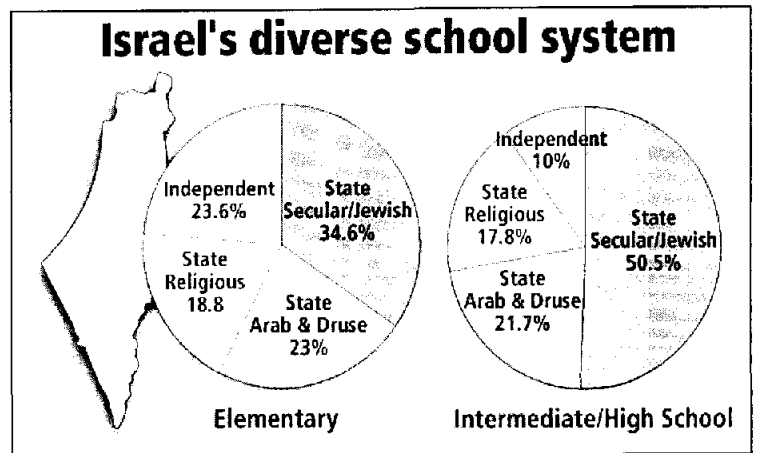
"Our objective is social mobility — to try to decrease the gaps between haves and have-nots," says Leven, a Paris businessman who has served as the CEO of a major French brokerage firm and an executive of Source Perrier.

Leven's family has long been involved in educationally focused Jewish philanthropy. His great-grandfather was among the founders of the Alliance school system, which served Jews in French-speaking countries.

Leven wants to see students whom his foundation helps make it all the way to university. The idea is to continue to push for excellence and let students and their families know that education offers a way out of poverty.

The fund runs several other educational programs in addition to the enriched school day program. One is called Tafnit, Hebrew for "turnaround," which provides intensive tutoring in math, Hebrew and English, to the lowest-achieving students, including potential high school dropouts.

Sacta-Rashi does not shoulder the entire budget for its programs; the Education Ministry and local authorities also contribute.



Data comes from the Israeli Ministry of Education.

The exact percentage each contributes depends on the program, but in the case of the extended school day program the ministry pays 50 percent. The remaining 50 percent is divided between the municipality and parents — who together contribute about two-thirds — while Sacta-Rashi and its partner pay the remaining third.

In the case of the Yarden School, the Los Angeles Jewish Federation also contributes money.

In the past the foundation has run a rather discreet operation and didn't advertise its involvement. But now it is searching for additional philanthropic partners and is launching matching-grant initiatives.

The foundation recently partnered with the New York-based Jewish Funders Network on a matching-grant initiative. That initiative raised more than \$2 million in new gifts for Israel, according to Mark Charendoff, president of the Jewish Funders Network.

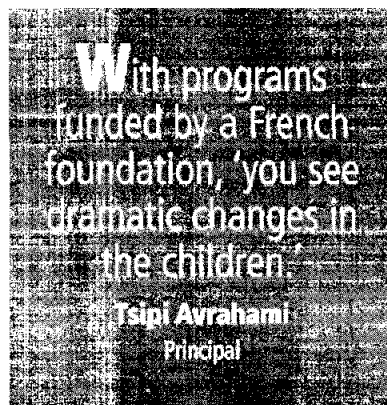
At the Yarden School, instead of going home in the early afternoon — often to homes where there is no adult supervision, only the pull of the television set or the streets — the students stay until 5:00 p.m.

The longer day "helps us with our homework," says Anna, 9. "Our parents are at work and cannot help us. Being here we learn more."

The principal, Tsipi Avrahami, says Sacta-Rashi's support has made a huge difference. She's especially thankful for the extra funding for drama and art-therapy classes, which have helped build students' confidence.

"You see dramatic changes in the children," she says.

STRUGGLING TO MAKE THE GRADE



Families celebrate both Christmas, Chanukah

By SUE FISHKOFF

NEW YORK (JTA) — While many intermarried families are struggling this month to juggle Christmas and Chanukah, the 60 children and parents singing carols and eating latkes one recent evening on Manhattan's Upper West Side have found a way: Celebrate both.

They're taking part in the annual Christmas-Chanukah celebration of the Interfaith Community, a New York-based nonprofit that offers support groups, children's and adult education and holiday events for mixed Jewish-Christian families.

Founded in 1987, the group has expanded to New York's Westchester and Orange/Rockland counties, helped a branch open in Denver and recently added a Long Island chapter.

The Interfaith Community and similar parent-run organizations in Chicago, Washington and the San Francisco Bay Area try to provide a safe, neutral space for interfaith families to navigate their way through prickly terrain. Hundreds of families, Christian and Jewish, are involved.

"Pretend you're a candle and stretch up tall, very tall," David Schildkrit, the New York group's Jewish educator, tells eight youngsters as their parents and older siblings listen to lectures and sing carols in a room down the hall. Each children's class, at this event and in the religious schools, is team taught by a Christian and a Jew.

"Now how would you look as you melt?" Schildkrit asks, and the children sink down slowly to the floor. Schildkrit discusses the meaning of candlelight.

"One of the great things we learn as Jews is there are many different numbers of candles," he says, sitting in a circle with them after the exercise. "Two for Shabbat, three at the end of Shabbat and how many for Chanukah?"

Four little hands go up.

"Eight!" shouts 5-year-old Gabriel Gendzier-Imperiali.

"But at the end, there's only one flame," Schildkrit points out. "It's important to know we're all lighting that same flame, even though we light different candles."

That's the Interfaith Community's main message: Christianity and Judaism are different yet equally valid paths to

God, and both faiths provide guidelines for living a moral life.

Sounds simple, but it's not, adults in the group admit. Tonight's celebration is one of the more festive aspects of what parents involved with the Interfaith Community describe as a very difficult — but unavoidable, for them — undertaking.

"I'm Catholic and Sam's Jewish," says Christina Polyak, who moved recently to New York with her husband and two young children. "We decided before marriage that we'd raise the children Jewish, but we want to honor both traditions. If people ask, they say they're Jewish, but they know that Mommy and Grandma and Grandpa celebrate other holidays."

"We make it work," adds Sam Polyak, who had a bar mitzvah and says he considers himself "culturally Jewish."

About 28 million American adults live in mixed-religion households, according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey. Most choose to raise their children in one religion, or in none.

But some are trying to give their children both heritages, either because two believing parents can't give up their respective faiths or because even when a couple has agreed to raise the kids in one faith, they want them to feel comfortable with relatives on the "other side."

Raymond Reichenberg, who's at the Christmas-Chanukah celebration in New York with his 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son, admits he couldn't bring himself to sing the Christmas carols earlier in the evening. But, he says, this is the only way his family can negotiate their dual-faith reality.

When he and his wife, a Roman Catholic, got married, they agreed to raise the children as Jews.

"But when the time came, she couldn't tolerate it," Reichenberg says. "The hardest thing was giving up my desire to have Jewish kids. We wouldn't have gotten through it without this place, and the exposure and tolerance they're learning."

Sheila Gordon, co-founder and president of the Interfaith Community, says

the group's goal is not to raise kids in two faiths but to educate them about both faiths, "to give them the tools to do with as they wish" when they're older.

The group neither encourages nor discourages members from affiliating with churches or synagogues. Parents range from weekly churchgoers to those who know little and practice less of their birth religion.

For some — 57 percent, according to a recent informal survey — the only services they attend and the only religious education their children get are at the Interfaith Community.

"We're not teaching dogma and we're not demanding belief," says Tracy Dunning, co-coordinator of the group's two-year-old Denver branch, which has six children in its religious school. The curriculum of all the schools teaches the values, rituals and Bible stories of Christianity and Judaism, focusing on universal moral lessons.

But some parents feel their kids are missing out on something real they got from their own faith communities.

No Jewish stream approves of raising children with two faiths.

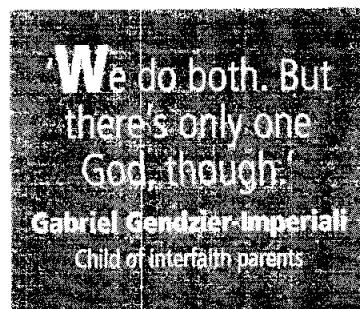
Even the Reform movement, more welcoming to intermarried couples than Conservative or Orthodox Judaism, discourages this choice strongly, and since 1995 has encouraged its religious schools to enroll only children who are not being educated simultaneously in another faith.

A child "recognizes at a very young age that he cannot be 'both,' and that he is being asked to choose between Mommy's religion and Daddy's religion," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, at the group's biennial convention last month.

In fact, none of the children interviewed this month in New York, or for previous JTA articles about the interfaith schools in Chicago and San Francisco, seemed confused.

"We do both," Gendzier-Imperiali said of his family's religious practice. "But there's only one God, though."

Added Charlie Cohen, 8, "the only way you find out is when you die."



FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

ARTS & CULTURE

Israeli spy vets question 'Munich' on the film's facts

By DAN BARON

THEL AVIV (JTA) — Fact may be stranger than fiction, but when it comes to espionage, fiction makes for better storytelling.

That was the conclusion drawn by many veterans of — and experts on — the Israeli intelligence service Mossad when they heard about Steven Spielberg's new thriller "Munich," which opens Friday in North America.

"The basis for this film has no relation to reality, though it may be a cracking tale," said Eitan Haber, a Mossad historian.

In his portrayal of the Mossad's retaliation for the Palestinian terrorist attack on its athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, Spielberg has drawn on the book "Vengeance," despite the fact it has been discredited in Israel and abroad.

What irks those few Israelis with direct knowledge of the top-secret missions is the way Spielberg's Mossad hit team functions, a depiction they say owes more to a romantic idea of the Zionist fighting ethos than to accurate historical research.

"The modus operandi is entirely wrong," said Gad Shimron, a former Mossad operative turned journalist.

Spielberg insists that he consulted with a former Israeli agent for "Munich," and he opens the film with the disclaimer that it was inspired by real events.

Like "Vengeance," Spielberg's film focuses on an Israeli assassin, Avner, who suffers a crisis of conscience over his country's reprisals policy.

For dramatic effect, the assassins are isolated in the field, left to their own devices by an Israeli high command. Such a set-up flies in the face of logic as well as logistics, according to Israelis-in-the-know.

When asked about the Mossad's criticism, Dennis Ross, the former U.S. Middle East envoy, characterized them as fair.

"This is a movie," said Ross, who served as a consultant to Spielberg on the film. "There's no claim that it's a documentary." ■

(JTA Staff Writer Chanan Tigay in New York contributed to this report.)

Iran worked with Nazis

By EDWIN BLACK

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Iran's president has shot to the forefront of Holocaust denial in recent days, but it may seem more like self-denial: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad need only look to his country's Hitler-era past to discover that Iran and Iranians were connected to the Holocaust and the Nazi regime, as was the larger Arab and Islamic world under the leadership of the mufti of Jerusalem.

Iran's links to the Third Reich began during the pre-World War II years when it welcomed Gestapo agents and other operatives to Tehran, allowing them to use it as a Middle East base for agitation against the British and the region's Jews.

Key among these Gestapo men was Fritz Grobba, Berlin's envoy to the Middle East, often called "the German Lawrence" because he promised a Pan-Arab state stretching from Casablanca to Tehran.

Relations between Berlin and Tehran were strong from the moment Hitler came to power in 1933, when Reza Shah Pahlavi's nation was still known as Persia.

The shah became a stalwart admirer of Hitler, Nazism and the concept of the Aryan master race. He also sought the Nazis' help in reducing British petro-political domination.

So intense was the shah's identification with the Third Reich that in 1935 he renamed his ancient country "Iran," which in Farsi means Aryan and refers to the Proto-Indo-European lineage that Nazi racial theorists and Persian ethnologists cherished.

The idea for the name change was suggested by the Iranian ambassador to Germany, who came under the influence of Hitler's trusted banker Hjalmar Schacht. From that point, all Iranians were constantly reminded that their country shared a bond with the Nazi regime.

Shortly after World War II began in 1939, the mufti of Jerusalem crafted a strategic alliance with Hitler to exchange Iraqi oil for active Arab and Islamic participation in the murder of Jews in the Mideast and Eastern Europe, predicated on support for a Pan-Arab state and Arab rule over Palestine.

During the war years, Iran became a haven and headquarters for Gestapo agents and German operatives. It was from Iran

that the seeds of the abortive 1941 pro-Nazi coup in Baghdad were planted.

After Churchill's forces booted the Nazis out of Iraq in June 1941, the German air crews supporting Nazi bombers escaped across the northern border back into Iran. Likewise, the mufti of Jerusalem was spirited across the border to Tehran, where he continued to call for the destruction of the Jews and the defeat of the British. His venomous rhetoric filled the newspapers and radio broadcasts of Tehran.

From Tehran and elsewhere, the mufti was a vocal and vigilant opponent of allowing Jewish refugees to be transported or ransomed into Palestine. Instead, he wanted them shipped to the gas chambers of Poland.

In the summer of 1941, with the support of key Iranian military and government leaders, the mufti advocated implementing in Iran what had failed months earlier in Iraq.

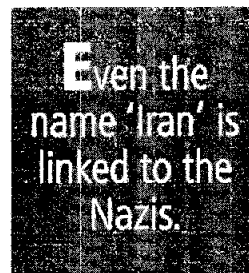
He called upon all Muslims to "kill the Jews wherever you see them." In Tehran's marketplace, it was common to see placards that declared, "In heaven, Allah is your master. On Earth, it is Adolf Hitler." ■

When the mufti organized three Islamic Waffen SS divisions to undertake operations in Bosnia, among the 30,000 killers were some volunteer contingents from Iran. Iranian Nazis, along with the other Muslim Waffen SS, operated under the direct supervision of Heinrich Himmler and were responsible for barbarous actions against Jews and others in Bosnia.

Iran and its leaders not only were aware of the Holocaust, they played both sides. The country offered overland escape routes for refugee Jews fleeing Nazi persecution to Israel but only in exchange for extortionary passage fees. Thousands of Jews made their way to Israel via Iran both during the Holocaust and after the fall of Hitler, when Arab leaders, especially in Iraq, tried to continue Germany's anti-Jewish program. Iran profited handsomely.

To play all sides of the Holocaust drama — and now to deny that the Holocaust even happened — should be very difficult in a nation named for Hitler's master race. ■

(Edwin Black is the author of "Banking on Baghdad," which revealed the extent of the Arab-Nazi alliance.)



NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Palestinian commander killed

Israeli troops killed three Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank. An army patrol searching Nablus for wanted fugitives Thursday exchanged fire with local gunmen.

Three were killed, including the local leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine faction.

Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aksa Brigade vowed to avenge the deaths.

Jordan, Egypt, Saudis to attend 'Quartet' meetings

Meetings of the diplomatic "Quartet" will be expanded to include Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, Kofi Annan said.

The U.N. secretary-general reviewed plans Wednesday for 2006, and said Israel-Palestinian peace would be a priority.

The peace process currently is guided by the Quartet, made up of the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia.

The three Arab nations would not be part of the Quartet, Annan said, but would attend its meetings.

"Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Jordan have played an important role in the situation in the Middle East, in fact on the reform of Palestinian security," Annan said.

Suspect held in Hadera bombing

A Palestinian is in Israeli custody on suspicion of complicity in the recent Hadera suicide bombing.

The 25-year-old man, who has permission to live in Israel with relatives who are citizens, was indicted Thursday by the Haifa District Court on charges of abetting a terrorist attack.

He is suspected of knowingly driving the West Bank terrorist who blew himself up in Hadera in October, killing six Israelis.

It was not immediately clear how the suspect would plead to the charges.

Egyptian Islamist denies Holocaust

An Islamist leader in Egypt called the Holocaust a myth.

"Western democracy has attacked everyone who does not share the vision of the sons of Zion as far as the myth of the Holocaust is concerned," Reuters quoted Mohamed Mahdi Akef, the leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, as saying in a statement.

Akef cited the cases of French intellectual Roger Garaudy, who was convicted in France in 1998 of questioning the Holocaust, and British historian David Irving, who faces similar charges in Austria.

The comments follow Holocaust-denial statements by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Terrorist's friend jailed

An Israeli woman was jailed for befriending a Palestinian terrorist.

Tel Aviv District Court sentenced Tali Fahima on Thursday to three years in prison under a plea bargain in which she confessed to illegal contacts with the enemy.

Fahima was arrested in 2003 after traveling to the West Bank city of Jenin, befriending the local leader of the Al-Aksa Brigade terrorist group, and vowing to shield him from Israeli troops.

Fahima, who has spent more than two years behind bars already, will go free in 10 months.

Jerusalem gets a 'peace field'

A "peace field" was inaugurated in an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem.

The soccer field, which features artificial turf, was built with funds from the South Korean government.

The field is a project of the Peres Center for Peace.

WORLD

Nazi doctor dies

Heinrich Gross, a former Nazi clinic doctor, died Dec. 15 at age 90. Gross worked at Vienna's Am Spiegelgrund clinic, where thousands of children were killed.

He was tried three times but the cases were dismissed.

Group meets to discuss North African Jews

A group that is pushing for restitution for Jews who fled Arab countries wants to preserve Jewish sites in the Muslim world.

Several members of the French branch of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, which met this week in Paris, said the group should focus on registering Jewish sites as historical sites with UNESCO.

European official vows to fight anti-Semitism

The president of the European Commission renewed pledges to fight anti-Semitism.

At a pre-Chanukah meeting this week with representatives of the Brussels-based Rabbinical Center of Europe, Jose Manuel Barroso said "fighting anti-Semitism, and intensifying interfaith and intercultural dialogue are a priority of my commission."

NORTH AMERICA

O.U. applauds hurricane package

The Orthodox Union applauded the Senate for a hurricane compensation package that could provide \$1.5 million to Jewish schools.

Compensation amounting to \$6,000 per displaced student will be paid to schools that absorbed Katrina refugees, whether or not they're public, according to the year's final appropriations package, passed Wednesday by the Senate.

The House of Representatives is expected to pass the package by the end of this week.

Civil libertarians said the package circumvented bans on funding for religious schools, but it had wide bipartisan support in the Senate.

Key sponsors were Sens. Michael Enzi (R-Wyo.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). The Anti-Defamation League opposed the package.

U.S. body slams Poland on compensation

The U.S. Helsinki Commission complained to Poland that it had yet to enact a comprehensive compensation law for victims of Nazism and Communism.

"Poland is the only country in Central Europe that has failed to adopt a general private property compensation or restitution law," the commission's chairman, Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), said in a letter this week to Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz. "When you are talking about victims of property confiscation, particularly from the Nazi occupation, you are talking about elderly people for whom every delay truly means justice denied."

Free Chanukah kits available

A program affiliated with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is providing Chanukah kits to help staff and volunteers in non-Jewish nursing homes, hospitals and assisted-living facilities run holiday celebrations for Jewish residents.

The kits provided by Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism include a guide to the rituals, transliteration of the Hebrew prayers, large-type handouts for participants and a CD recording of all the songs and blessings.

Hiddur staffers say it will enable people with no Jewish background to lead appropriate ceremonies, which is particularly important in places where there's no rabbi or Jewish professional to help.

Kits can be ordered at www.sacredseasons.org.