

IN THE NEWS

Ariel Sharon suffers another stroke

Ariel Sharon was rushed to the hospital Wednesday night after suffering what doctors described as a "significant stroke."

This was the Israeli prime minister's second stroke in several weeks, though the first one was reported to be minor.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert took over Sharon's powers Wednesday night, Cabinet secretary Yisrael Maimon told reporters.

Iran: We'll resume nuclear research

Iran said it would resume nuclear research.

In Tuesday's announcement, the Islamic republic said it would resume research and development on its "peaceful" nuclear energy program that was suspended in late 2004.

The statement drew international criticism.

A confidential intelligence report says Iran has searched throughout Europe for parts to build nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles, the Guardian newspaper reported Wednesday.

Israeli officials say Iran may be only a few years away from producing a nuclear bomb.

Sharon scandal surfaces again

Ariel Sharon's family is suspected of receiving \$3 million in illicit foreign funds.

Police on Wednesday confirmed a Channel 10 television report that an investigation is under way into allegations that Austrian magnates funneled the money to the Sharon family, perhaps to help pay off contributions to the prime minister's 1999 run to head the Likud Party.

But there was no indication that Sharon himself might be implicated, and media reports said the new probe could take months or even years to complete — well after the March 28 general elections are over.



WORLD REPORT

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Once sleepy Florida suburb is center of Jewish population boom

By LARRY LUXNER

BOYNTON BEACH, Fla. (JTA) — Boynton Beach, once a sleepy and Christian town halfway between Boca Raton and West Palm Beach, has emerged as "ground zero" of a Jewish population explosion in South Florida.

Since 1999, the quiet suburb of 52,000 has seen its Jewish population jump by 63 percent, while nearby Lake Worth has experienced a 12 percent increase and Jewish households in the county's northern suburbs — such as Palm Beach Gardens, North Palm Beach and Jupiter — have grown by 45 percent.

Those are among the results of a study, released Wednesday by the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, which covers the northern half of the county, and the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, which serves Boca Raton and Delray Beach.

"Twenty-five years ago, I don't think there were even any Jews in Boynton Beach, let alone young Jewish families," said Judy Kuritz, early childhood director at the Boynton Beach Jewish Community Center, located on the edge of the Everglades.

"When I came here five and a half years ago, we had seven classrooms but they were building an additional six. We now have 211 pre-schoolers, and more on waiting lists because we can't accommodate the growing number of children," Kuritz said.

All those kids, and their aging grandparents, have helped push Palm Beach County's Jewish population to an estimated 255,000, meaning that at least one in five of the county's 1.2 million residents is Jewish.

That gives Palm Beach County a higher concentration of Jews than any metropolitan area in the world outside Israel, including New York City.

In southern Palm Beach County, the number of Jews younger than 17 has jumped by 103 percent in the past decade, far exceeding a 13 percent overall population rise there.

Jews are still a rarity in Belle Glade, Pahokee, South Bay and the remote farming towns of western Palm Beach County. But throughout the county's more densely populated eastern half, synagogues, bagel shops,

kosher pizza joints and Jewish retirement communities seem almost as numerous as palm trees.

The county has no less than 50 synagogues from Boca Raton in the south to Jupiter in the north.

These include Reform, Conservative and Orthodox shuls as well as a dozen or so Chabad congregations.

About 77 percent of the county's Jewish population lives in Boca Raton, Delray Beach, Boynton Beach or the Western unincorporated areas of these three cities.

The survey was conducted by University of Miami researcher Ira Sheskin, who prepared a similar study for the Greater Miami Jewish Federation.

"The study is likely to change people's perceptions of what the Palm Beach County Jewish community is like," said Sheskin, who already has conducted 38 major studies of Jewish communities throughout the country.

Among other things, Sheskin found that 78 percent of the county's 230,000 seniors,

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FOCUS ON
ISSUES

■ The median age of Jews in Palm Beach County is 70

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about 180,000 people, are Jewish.

In addition, the county's Jewish population continues to be the oldest in the nation.

Its median age of 70 compares to a median age of 59.4 in Broward County, 50.7 in Miami and a national Jewish median age of 38.8. Fifty-seven percent of the Palm Beach County Jewish population is 65 or older.

"My first reaction when I saw the numbers was, 'Wow, this really speaks to the need for a Jewish family service agency,'" said Jaclynn Faffer, executive director of the Ruth Rales Jewish Family Service of South Palm Beach County.

"But my second reaction was, 'How will we get the funding to support all that we're going to need to do?' We have a significant proportion of people 85 or older. JFS already had programs in place to support frail elderly people at home, but these numbers are so astounding that I know we're probably going to have to double our senior staff."

Faffer, whose \$5 million annual budget is funded by the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, said her agency is fortunate to be headquartered in Boca Raton, home to many Jewish millionaires and multimillionaires.

On the other hand, there also are poor Jews living in Boca trailer parks.

Jews have lived in Palm Beach County since 1900, when Jewish merchants thrived on Clematis Street in downtown West Palm Beach.

The county's first synagogue, Temple Israel, was established in 1923, but it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the influx really began, fueled by middle-class New Yorkers in their early 60s coming down to Florida to live out their golden years.

A case in point is Jules Grossberg, a retired insurance broker from the Bronx.

Nearly 20 years ago, Grossberg and his wife, Florence, a retired nurse, moved into Kings Point, a sprawling retirement community west of Delray Beach. The Grossbergs say they have no regrets.

"When we first came down here, there were only three shuls in our area — one Reform, one Conservative and one Orthodox. Now there are many more, plus Chabad," said Grossberg, who calls himself a cultural rather than an observant Jew. "And the area is being built up tremendously. Every piece of vacant land is being built on."

Grossberg, 84, estimates that at least 95 percent of Kings Point's 14,000 residents are Jewish.

In fact, there are no non-Jews in the 48 units of the building where the Grossbergs live.

The same is largely true of Century Village, a retirement community founded by developer H. Irwin Levy in the 1960s.

There are now three Century Villages in Palm Beach County — in West Palm Beach, Delray Beach and Boca Raton — as well as the newest Century Village in Broward County's Pembroke Pines.

"What's interesting — and we know this, based upon the Miami study — is that Miami-Dade's Jewish population is the youngest of the four federations in South Florida," says Richard Jacobs, vice president of community relations at the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County.

"Many people have this image of little old ladies on the boardwalk, but those little old ladies have died. There's been a northern migration of elderly people into this area for a while, mainly Dade and some Broward residents."

Yet Palm Beach County isn't attracting only retirees.

Bob Levitz, 55, moved to Boca Raton in 1989 because it was close to his former job at a newspaper in Lantana.

He now commutes south every day to Pembroke Pines, where he works as a copy editor at the Miami Herald, but has kept his house in Boca because it's affordable, and because he likes being surrounded by Jewish culture.

"Judaism is part of the fabric of everyday life here," says Levitz, a native of St. Paul, Minn., who isn't religious but attends High Holiday services each year at the Boca Raton Synagogue with his 15-year-old daughter Ashley.

As the area's Jewish population keeps growing, local Jewish institutions will need to expand their donor bases dramatically, warns Rabbi Alan Sherman, executive director of the Palm Beach County Board of Rabbis.

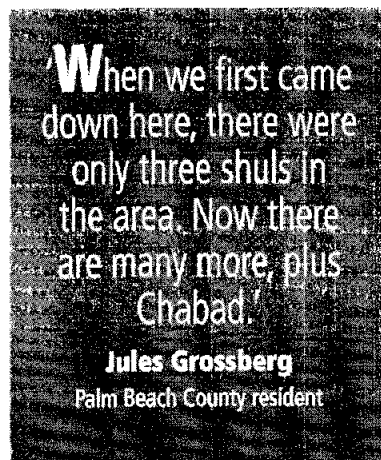
"This puts a tremendous responsibility on Jewish institutions for caring for all these newly transplanted people," he told JTA.

"A lot of people have their roots up north, and their donations go up north as well. But when they need a nursing home or senior services, they won't ask their former communities in New York, New Jersey or Pennsylvania; they'll come to us. So these people are putting a burden on us if they don't contribute locally."

Sherman, whose organization represents 70 rabbis, adds that "even though the demand for senior services is increasing, there are also younger people moving here, and we can't neglect them. We can't neglect Jewish education or teenagers."

That's keeping Kuritz and her early childhood development staff at the Boynton Beach JCC busy.

"What we're doing here is building the foundation for all our children to have Jewish memories — lighting Shabbas candles, blowing the shofar, singing Jewish songs," she explained as a noisy group of kindergarten kids trooped down the hall. "We're not a religious school, but we do try to teach Jewish values."



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Is Labor's Peretz up to the job?

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Amir Peretz's tenure as Labor leader started with a bang. Less than two months later, it's in danger of ending with a whimper.

In the two weeks after Peretz was installed as party chairman, polls showed Labor garnering around 28 of the 120 Knesset seats in the upcoming general elections, enough to have pundits suggesting that Peretz could become prime minister if he could build on that momentum.

In the seven weeks since, however, it has been all downhill.

The latest polls show Labor winning only 19 to 21 seats, about half the number forecast for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new Kadima Party.

In private conversations, some Labor politicians express fears that it will get worse, and the party could fall to its worst electoral performance ever.

Where did Peretz go wrong? And can he bounce back?

Commentators say the novice leader has made every mistake in the book. First he alienated Labor's two living former prime ministers, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak. Peres left in a huff for Kadima, and some pundits say he may have taken up to seven seats with him.

A late-December weekend poll in the Yediot Achronot newspaper shows that nearly 20 percent of people not voting Labor say they might have reconsidered if Peres were still in the party.

Barak does not have similar voter appeal, but if Peretz had brought him into a top leadership panel he could have provided the security and foreign policy gravitas that Peretz seems to lack.

Peretz's campaign strategy has been to focus on socio-economic issues such as the minimum wage, pensions, poverty and unemployment, hoping to steal the thunder from Sharon's perceived security and foreign policy strengths.

The strategy backfired. Instead of setting the agenda, Peretz's socio-economic bias created the impression of a one-dimensional candidate who lacked the most important credentials for an Israeli prime minister — security and foreign-policy expertise.

That situation was not helped when

Peretz emerged from a recent meeting with Sharon complaining that all the prime minister could talk about was security. Peretz meant that Sharon seemed indifferent to economic distress, but the overriding impression was that Peretz himself had a deficient grasp of security matters in a country still plagued by terrorism.

To give Peretz's candidacy more weight, some top Labor politicians are suggesting that he visit Washington, where high-profile meetings with American leaders would show that he can hold his own in the diplomatic arena.

However, Peretz says he has no intention of making the trip.

All this points to Peretz's biggest problem: Many Israelis won't vote for him because they just don't think he's cut out to be prime minister. According to the Yediot poll, 40 percent of those who won't vote Peretz say it's because he wouldn't be able to handle the top job. The corresponding figure for Sharon? Zero.

The slide in the polls is having a snowball effect. In the first flush of victory, Peretz was able to attract traditional Likud voters from agricultural settlements and from the Sephardi working class. Now his decline in the polls has eroded voter confidence, and many are going over to Sharon or back to the Likud.

Peretz also is faring badly among Ashkenazi pensioners who traditionally vote Labor, as Shimon Peres' move to Kadima has legitimized Laborite support for the new centrist party.

Another key area where Peretz has failed is among Russian immigrants who account for about 19 Knesset seats.

Pundits say it's because his thick black moustache may remind the Russians of Stalin, but the main reason again is Peretz's perceived lack of prime ministerial stature.

Among immigrants, 56 percent think Sharon is best qualified to serve as prime minister, 23 percent go for Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and only 3 percent

back Peretz. The Yediot poll gives Sharon's Kadima eight of the 19 Russian seats, and Labor less than one.

Labor's declining popularity is having an effect on party morale. Already there is bickering reminiscent of the days when then-Labor leader Amram Mitzna started his downward spiral before the last election in January 2003.

One of the Peretz campaign's most outspoken critics is Alon Pinkas, former consul general in New York and now a candidate for Labor's Knesset list.

"In Israel you cannot be elected prime minister on the minimum-wage issue," he chides. "How is it possible not to deal with state policy in Ben-Gurion's party?"

So can Peretz's free-fall be reversed? The main condition would be for him to develop a convincing prime ministerial persona. This can be done only by expanding the campaign agenda to include all relevant issues and — later — refocusing on the socio-economic agenda.

In-depth polls show a fairly wide consensus that Peretz is smart and has integrity and a strong character. He needs to find a way to parlay these qualities, which helped him win the Labor leadership race, into a credible prime ministerial candidacy.

Secondly, he may have to put more emphasis on a leadership team.

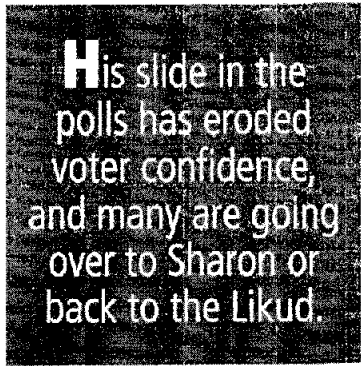
That will probably happen after Labor holds primaries Jan. 17 to set its Knesset list.

Once the slate is chosen, the party will be able to turn all its collective energies to campaigning.

Yoel Marcus, a senior Ha'aretz political commentator, thinks it's not too late for Peretz.

"If he comes up with a political program for demarcating permanent borders, dismantling settlements, ending the occupation and stopping the bloodshed, he may soar again. Poverty is not going to run away," Marcus writes.

But will Peretz and his campaign managers see it that way? In the meantime, the gap between him and Sharon is growing wider by the day.



His slide in the polls has eroded voter confidence, and many are going over to Sharon or back to the Likud.

NEWS
ANALYSIS

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Mofaz: Talks with Hamas possible

Israel's defense minister said negotiations with Hamas could happen if the Islamic terrorist group disarms.

Shaul Mofaz's remarks were made Wednesday in the run-up to Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections in which Hamas is expected to make significant gains.

"If Hamas is elected, it will have to disarm, to recognize Israel's right to exist, to become a political body," Mofaz said in a speech. "Only then will the basic conditions be created, if they are created, for a future dialogue."

Hamas refuses to disarm but its leaders have hinted that the faction's charter, calling for Israel's destruction, could be amended if future conditions are right.

Iranian leader: Comments part of strategy

Iran's president said his comments denying the Holocaust are part of a strategy aimed at winning young Muslim support.

"Some in Iran and abroad thought we were making these speeches without a specific plan and policy, but we have been pursuing a deliberate strategy in this regard," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told a group of young Islamic activists Tuesday, the Iran Focus Web site said, citing a Persian-language site.

The comments, widely condemned by the international community, have helped wake up Muslim youth, Ahmadinejad claims.

West Bank terrorist slain

Israeli troops killed a West Bank arms smuggler. The Palestinian was cornered in his hideout south of Hebron on Tuesday night, and died in the ensuing gunfight.

Magnate grilled in bank case

Israeli police questioned a billionaire Russian immigrant over money-laundering suspicions.

Arkady Gaydamak was grilled for seven hours Wednesday in connection with suspected money laundering in Israel's largest bank, Hapoalim. The magnate, who bought the Betar Jerusalem soccer club after he moved his operations to Israel last year, responded by announcing he would suspend all contributions to charities in the Jewish state.

He later backed off the threat, saying it was prompted by a false report in the Israeli media that the Jewish Agency for Israel would refuse to receive donations from him.

NORTH AMERICA

Jewish groups organize Georgetown

Jewish groups are helping to organize pro-Israel activism at Georgetown University ahead of a pro-Palestinian event there.

Previous conferences of the Palestinian Solidarity Movement have included virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and activism. This year's gathering will take place on the Washington campus Feb. 17-19.

The American Jewish Committee and the Washington Jewish Community Relations Council are assisting the Georgetown Israel Alliance in promoting Israel on the campus.

World's largest dreidel?

Jewish students in Montreal built what they say is the world's largest dreidel. The top built by the students at West Island Hillel last week was more than 22 feet tall.

WORLD

Israeli Holocaust fund short on cash

An Israeli fund for Holocaust survivors announced it lacked funds to continue assisting some of the neediest survivors.

Officials with the Foundation for the Benefit of Holocaust Victims blamed the Claims Conference on Monday for not providing additional funding to cover the increasing medical needs of aging survivors.

The Claims Conference funds the majority of the needs, but has not answered its request for an additional \$10 million that would cover the two programs in question, the foundation said.

The Claims Conference said it has increased its funding to the foundation every year since it was founded and expects to give it \$40 million in 2006.

Wolf Factor, an Auschwitz survivor who heads the fund, said more money needs to be channeled to needy Holocaust survivors instead of going to youth education and other projects.

"The Claims Conference finances most of the foundation's budget, but the priorities in distribution of that budget are completely illogical," he said. "It is important to send youth delegations to Poland. It is important to deal with commemoration. But all these can be done in a few years. We can save Holocaust survivors only today, not tomorrow."

A spokesman for the Claims Conference told JTA that "we hope that others in Israel will recognize the importance of these programs and will likewise ensure that additional significant funds are provided for these purposes."

Partial admission in wartime massacre

A former member of the Nazi SS partially admitted to participating in a wartime massacre in Italy.

Alfred Mathias Concina, 86, who lives in an old-age home in the German city of Freiberg, told the German radio broadcaster Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk that he was involved in the incident in the village of Sant'Anna di Stazzema in which 560 civilians — mostly children, women and older men — were murdered, but said he shot past the victims.

Concina had been convicted in absentia in an Italian court in June 2005 and sentenced to life in prison. Nine others also were found guilty in absentia: Germany did not hand over any of the accused.

Attorney Tomke Beddies told the broadcaster that it had been difficult to establish the actions and motivations of Concina and she doubted that he would be tried in a German court.

Donors shy on P.A. money

International donors are refusing to provide funds to the Palestinian Authority. The refusal, which is based on violations of the P.A.'s commitments not to increase salaries in the public sector and the resignation of the P.A.'s finance minister, Salam Fayyad, will lead to a \$950 million deficit for the Palestinians in 2006, the Israeli newspaper Globes reported.

French extremist found guilty

A former adviser to the far-right National Front Party in France was found guilty of crimes against humanity for denying the Holocaust.

In October 2004, Georges Theil, 65, called the Nazi gas chambers a "fantasy" on a French television station.

He was sentenced Tuesday to six months in prison and ordered to pay a fine of more than \$12,000. He also must pay approximately \$4,800 to each of the 11 civil parties who brought the suit against him.