

## IN THE NEWS

**Ariel Sharon undergoes surgery**

Ariel Sharon underwent emergency surgery.

Saturday's operation, in which a section of the comatose Israeli prime minister's large intestine was removed, was ordered after a CT scan revealed serious damage to his digestive system.

Doctors initially said Sharon might not survive the procedure, but when it ended he was said to be in serious but stable condition.

**Religious rules relaxed at Air Force**

The U.S. Air Force softened its rules on religious practices.

After receiving criticism from evangelical Christians, the Air Force stepped back from interim rules it announced last summer.

The new rules allow superior officers to discuss faith with their subordinates, and say chaplains are not required to offer non-sectarian services.

"Voluntary participation in worship, prayer, study and discussion is integral to the free exercise of religion," the revised guidelines said.

**Paper: Gaza violence down**

Gaza Strip-related violence against Israelis has come down significantly since Israel quit the territory last year, according to new findings.

Yediot Achronot published statistics Sunday marking six months since the evacuation of settlers from the Gaza Strip, and comparing them to the comparable period before the withdrawal began.

More than 1,000 rockets were launched against Israeli targets by Palestinian terrorists in Gaza before the evacuations, but this came down to around 400 launches since.

The report noted, however, the other human cost of the withdrawal with hundreds of ex-settlers complaining of a lack of promised government support for their relocation in Israel.

# WORLD REPORT

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## Moscow's invitation to Hamas could lead to Europe's acceptance

By DAN BARON

**J**ERUSALEM (JTA) — Cracks are showing in the international demands on Hamas to recognize Israel and renounce terrorism before it takes over the Palestinian Authority.

Ignoring the preconditions, Russian President Vladimir Putin has offered to host leaders of the radical Islamic group in Moscow, prompting similar overtures from elsewhere in Europe.

"We believe that it is an initiative that can contribute to advancing our positions," French Foreign Ministry Spokesman Denis Simonneau was quoted as saying late last week in Ha'aretz. "We share with Russia the goal of leading Hamas toward positions that would allow for the goal of two states living in peace and security to be reached."

There was consternation in Israel, which had hoped to parlay Hamas' unexpected victory in last month's Palestinian Authority election into a chance to make the Palestinian terrorist group embrace a new political pragmatism.

While analysts wrote off Putin's move as bid to boost his diplomatic standing, many Israelis predicted it would spell the end of the "road map" to peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians, which had been co-sponsored by Russia.

"As far as Israel is concerned, the Quartet, which adopted the road map in 2003, now becomes a 'Trio' whose members are the United States, European Union and United Nations," analyst Ze'ev Schiff wrote in Haaretz.

Pending off a hailstorm of Israeli criti-

cism — as well as a possible showdown with Washington — Russia insisted it only wanted to help tame Hamas.

"We will ask Hamas to change their position according to the latest decisions of the Quartet, which are recognition of Israel, rejection of terrorism and execution of the Palestinian Authority's past agreements" with Israel, said Russia's Middle East envoy, Alexander Kalugin.

Such declarations did little to convince the Israeli foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, who has worked to convince the international community that Hamas reform must precede its recognition abroad.

"First they start with talks, after that they 'try to understand.' Then give money, then legitimacy. This is what we must act against," she told Israel Radio.

"This is a black-and-white situation," Livni said. "The biggest problem is that Hamas does not accept the terms of the Quartet."

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, the front-runner for Israel's March 28 general election, assumed a more resigned tone over the Russian move.

But he told his Cabinet that once the new Palestinian Authority Parliament is formed — beginning next weekend — "the rules of the game will change." The remarks were interpreted as a threat that Israel could sanction a future Hamas-led government by refusing to hand over taxes collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority.

Despite the pressure piled upon it, Hamas insists it has no plan to change its charter — calling for jihad against the Jewish state — or give up its weapons. At best, some Hamas leaders have offered Israel an

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extended truce — cold comfort given that the group's theosophy predicts Zionism's end by the early 2020s.

Some Israelis predict that Hamas will end up paying at least lip service to the idea of peace, which will be eagerly welcomed by an international community

embattled by the U.S.-led "war on terror" and the more recent Danish cartoon furor.

"Hamas will say something, out of the corner of its mouth, a hazy bit of mumbling with deliberate dissembling, in order to allow the world to establish ties with it, talk to it, and

recommend it to Israel as a negotiating partner," wrote Ma'ariv's editor in chief, Amnon Dankner, in a front-page commentary.

"Will the tensions between the Muslim world and the Western world lead Europe to appease the Muslims in Israeli coin?"

## Chabad group nabs 'Jewish slot' on Ukrainian television

By VLADIMIR MATVEYEV

KIEV (JTA) — Ukraine's state television will start a new weekly Jewish-themed show to replace a previous one that was canceled under controversial circumstances earlier this year.

The new show will be produced by journalists affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine, a Chabad-led group.

A few weeks ago, Ukraine's state television company, NKTU, decided to cancel the "Mazel Tov" show after five seasons. That show was produced by a company affiliated with Vadim Rabinovich, a Ukrainian business tycoon and the head of the of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress and the United Jewish Community of Ukraine.

The show is the latest evidence of competition between Rabinovich's groups and the Chabad-linked federation regarding which is the leading group representing the Jewish community.

Last month, Rabinovich suggested that

state television's decision to cancel "Mazel Tov" was politically motivated, a charge that state television officials denied.

Now some Jewish leaders, including Rabinovich himself, are questioning whether the Chabad federation could have influenced the earlier decision to cancel "Mazel Tov" in order to have state television run its own Jewish-themed show instead.

Chabad denies the accusation.

ACROSS THE  
FORMER  
SOVIET  
UNION

The conflict is not the first between Chabad and Rabinovich. In one incident, the dedication last year of a synagogue in the town of Sumy was marred after Rabinovich prevented a local Chabad rabbi from speaking, sending his "own" rabbi to the ceremony instead.

On Feb. 1, state television officials and leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities signed an agreement that allows Chabad to present its own 30-minute weekly Jewish-themed show to be aired over the state-owned UT-1 television channel.

The team in charge of the new show is headed by Oleg Rostovtsev, a Chabad spokesman in Ukraine based in the eastern city of Dnepropetrovsk, where for years he has served as producer and anchor of a local Jewish TV show, also released under the auspices of the Chabad federation.

Federation leaders said they would target a wide audience in order to "acquaint Ukrainian viewers — regardless of their ethnicity and faith — with the fascinating world of Jewish culture," said Rabbi Meir Stambler, head of the federation's board.

The federation said it invited all Jewish groups in Ukraine to support the new show. Many Jewish organizations received

letters from Stambler that tried to assure them the new show will not be used as a public relations tool serving only Chabad.

Stambler also wrote to Rabinovich: "We are open to discuss new ideas, forms of cooperation and creative solutions."

Rabinovich replied he would support any Jewish media project that "truly and honestly covers real life."

However, Rabinovich described the state television decision to change the team in charge of its Jewish show as "a victory" of one Jewish organization over another.

Some Jewish leaders echoed this view.

"This is not a good step on the part of the federation," said Rabbi Moshe Reuven Azman, a longtime supporter of Rabinovich. Azman suggested that the show's replacement "was probably planned by the federation beforehand."

Rostovtsev denied the accusation, saying his group first learned about "Mazel Tov" being canceled only when Rabinovich went pub-

lic about it last month.

"We then decided to save the show and produce a new Jewish media project," he said.

The Ukrainian Jewish community today has a dozen Jewish-themed weekly shows on local airwaves in the provinces, some 50 Jewish newspapers — mainly monthlies — and several radio shows.

But many leading figures in the country's Jewish community believe that the situation surrounding the Jewish show on Ukrainian national television reflects the lack of unity in Ukrainian Jewry.

"The situation with the controversial cancellation of one Jewish show and replacing it with another brightly mirrors the general situation in the community that now has several chief rabbis," said Mikhail Frenkel, the head of the Association of Jewish Media in Ukraine.

Some say the  
Chabad group  
planned a  
Jewish show's  
demise in order  
to claim its slot.

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# Sermons mingle with sex talk on Jewish blogs

By RACHEL SILVERMAN

PRINCETON, N.J. (JTA) — At times, the chatter between American Jews can seem hushed, even silent.

While questions about assimilation, Israeli politics and Jewish identity swirl overhead, many American Jews maintain an arms-length complacency about it all.

But a post, click and hyperlink away, the burgeoning blogosphere offers a forum for Jewish conversation.

Jewish blogs, or Web diaries, run the gamut from kosher cooking to Israeli advocacy. They include leftist rants, dating melodramas, rabbinic ruminations and secular musings from all corners of the globe.

Last year, the Pew Internet and American Life Project estimated that 8 million American adults had created blogs. Though the number of specifically Jewish blogs is unconfirmed, those with knowledge of the blogosphere say the pool is substantial.

"I'd estimate the number of active blogs at some several thousand," says Steven Weiss, who currently blogs about religion (<http://canonist.com>), food (<http://kosherbachelor.com>) and the Jewish college experience (<http://www.campusj.com>).

The Religious Action Committee of Reform Judaism launched a blog of its own last year at <http://rac.org>.

## THIS WEEK

### THURSDAY

■ More than 1,000 Chabad-Lubavitch female emissaries from around the world gather in Brooklyn for their annual international convention. The convention runs through Sunday.

### FRIDAY

■ Beach Hillel, SoCal Jewish Student Services and the blog Jewlicious.com present JTB2, a weekend of music, art, performance and discussion for Jewish students and recent graduates, in Long Beach, Calif..

### SUNDAY

■ The Orthodox Union sponsors the second part in its exploration of kosher food in New York City. "Part Two: The Pareve Mesorahs, A Halachic and Historical Perspective of Fish, Plants, and Color" follows up on the first tasting of kosher animals and birds.

"The Jewish community is more connected now than ever before, says Alexis Rice, the RAC's communications director.

"A rabbi used to give a sermon and it was heard by 200 people in services Friday night," Rice continues. "Now he puts the sermon on a blog, and thousands of people access it."

What exactly are these Jewish bloggers seeking on the Web?

Some say the blogosphere connects them to a larger, global Jewish community.

Alternatively, some blog to seek community with or build bridges to 'the other.'

Thanks to blogging, Rachel Barenblat, the theology student behind the Velveteen Rabbi blog (<http://www.velveteenrabbi.com>), has become close to a Buddhist nun in Korea and a Baptist minister in San Antonio.

"I've come to feel very much like these people are my friends," says the Massachusetts resident, 30. "That we're sitting around a virtual coffee table."

The blogosphere is not just a feel-good forum. In many instances, it's a place for real debate and democratic engagement.

"Blogging has saved the Web from its abysmal fate as just another corporate content delivery system," says Jerusalem blogger Dan Sieradski, 26. "Blogs provide public spaces — and safe spaces at that — for people to discuss what matters most to them."

Sieradski's Orthodox Anarchist site (<http://www.orthodoxanarchist.com>) illustrates his unconventional, off-the-cuff ideology. In one post, he explains that he's a committed Jew but he strongly opposes authority, religious dogma and nationalism.

In the blogosphere, this type of friction generates attention.

The No. 1 thread on Jewlicious (<http://www.jewlicious.com>), a group blog focusing on Judaism, Israel and pop culture, addresses premarital sex in the Orthodox community. It pulled in 676 comments.

Oftentimes, noisemakers walk a fine line between healthy debate and mud-slinging.

"There are definitely blogs where the conversation tends to be acrimonious," says Barenblat, who recently received anonymous hate mail. "People feel free to be obnoxious because it's just through a computer screen."

Fiery language also peppers the Jewlicious site, with posts often descending into vitriolic exchanges.

One thing's for sure — this wrangling free-for-all is not the mainstream media.

That's because blogs assume a vastly different tone and style than their journalistic counterparts, online communications expert Diane Schiano says.

"There is this loose, free-floating, casual, even intimate approach to writing blogs," explains Schiano, an adjunct professor at Stanford University. "It's like teenage angst is being poured out."

Some claim blogs still act like an insiders' club, however.

"The people who spend time to sit down and write on blogs have very strong opinions," explains Paul Golin, associate executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute. "You might have unaffiliated lurking on these Web sites, but they don't feel confident enough to

comment."

Others admit the blogosphere tends to attract wannabe journalists, who see the Web as a viable marketing tool.

"A lot of writers use them to test the waters for their writing," Schiano said. "It's a new form of publishing."

As a freelance writer who has gotten jobs from blogging, Esther Kustanowitz affirmed this.

"I'm not going to lie — it's also a place for self-promotion," Kustanowitz says. "It's doing P.R. work for me even when I'm not doing anything for me. That's the Internet for you."

Where exactly this blogging phenomenon is going remains unseen.

Schiano, for one, predicts a continuously evolving blogosphere.

"I think there will always be this room for grassroots voices on the net," she says.

And as long as rabbis continue to preach, advocates to crusade, singles to gripe and ideologues to spar, Jews will continue clicking — and posting — away. ■

The No. 1 thread on Jewlicious.com addresses premarital sex in the Orthodox community.

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## WORLD

### Groups protest 'Palestine' label at Oscars

Pro-Israel groups are reportedly lobbying for an Oscar-nominated film about Palestinian suicide bombers not to be presented as coming from "Palestine."

The Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles and local Jewish groups have received assurances from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that "Paradise Now," a candidate in the best foreign film category, will be given a different national provenance in time for next month's awards ceremony.

"The consulate had asked the academy members to conduct themselves with sensitivity on the matter, given that the Palestinian Authority has yet to be declared a state."

The Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem declined comment, and there was no immediate confirmation from the academy, whose Web site still lists the film as coming from "Palestine."

Its director and leading actors are Israeli Arabs, and its funding came mainly from Europe.

### Israeli military protested at Berlin festival

Amnesty International volunteers are using the Berlin Film Festival to criticize the Israel Defense Forces.

Berlin members of the human rights organization staked out screenings of two Israeli films this weekend, collecting signatures demanding that Israel "establish an alternative civilian service as it is granted worldwide in many countries."

Amnesty activist Sibylle Auer, campaigning at a screening of "Close to Home," a film about the emotional and political dilemmas facing a group of female soldiers in Israel, said the activists are trying to publicize the recent jailing of 18-year-old Uri Natan for refusing to serve.

### Jewish skater goes to Turin

U.S. figure skater Emily Hughes will be competing at the Winter Olympics, after Michelle Kwan withdrew due to injury.

Hughes, who is Jewish, was originally named as an alternate to the team competing in the Turin Games. Her sister Sarah won a gold medal in figure skating at the 2002 Games.

### London to get new Jewish school

A nondenominational Jewish secondary school is slated to be built in London with governmental help. The Jewish Community Secondary School is slated to open in the fall of 2009.

When it opens, the school would become what is believed to be the first nondenominational Jewish secondary school in England.

### Poll: Ethnic tolerance down in Lithuania

Thirty-one percent of Lithuanians don't want Jewish neighbors, a new poll found.

That figure was up from 18 percent in 1990, the Baltic Times reported. According to the survey, carried out by a Lithuanian market research company, 20 percent of respondents did not want people of other nationalities as their neighbors, up from 9 percent in 1990.

## MIDDLE EAST

### Spymaster turns politician

A former Mossad spymaster now heads a political party for Israeli senior citizens.

GIL, a Hebrew acronym for Israeli Pensioners to the Knesset, published a party list Sunday headed by Rafi Eitan. Now in his 80s, Eitan is best remembered as the Mossad operations chief who

masterminded the capture of Nazi fugitive Adolf Eichmann.

The main policy on GIL's platform is to increase state benefits for Israeli retirees.

### Mosque desecration probed

Israeli settlers in the West Bank are suspected of desecrating a Palestinian mosque.

Israeli police said Sunday a criminal investigation was under way after settlers were spotted spray-painting a Star of David and graffiti against the prophet Mohammed on the wall of the mosque in Nabi Ilyas, a Palestinian village near the West Bank boundary.

Palestinians responded to the vandalism by stoning Israeli cars and troops. At least two Palestinian rioters were hurt when soldiers used tear gas to disperse them. Israel is on high alert for any local escalation of Muslim protests linked to last year's publication in Denmark of cartoons satirizing Mohammed.

### Iran defames Holocaust suffering

Iran said the suffering of the Palestinians is worse than the Holocaust.

"I believe the crimes committed by the Zionist regime are greater than the Holocaust," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said Sunday. "Unfortunately, the Zionist regime is black-mailing the Europeans with the Holocaust."

It was the latest in a series of Iranian comments, including several by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, attempting to play down or deny Nazi Germany's murder of 6 million Jews.

Israel Radio quoted elder statesman Shimon Peres as saying Ahmadinejad's rhetoric showed that he was "half-insane."

### Israel issues Chabad stamp

Israel is issuing a stamp honoring the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

The stamp features an artist's rendering of concentric waves of light emanating from the Chasidic group's Brooklyn headquarters.

The three Hebrew words for wisdom, understanding and knowledge that make up the acronym for Chabad are on the stamp over the building. The stamp is slated to go on sale Feb. 28.

## NORTH AMERICA

### Jewish symbols approved in schools

A federal appeals court upheld New York City's policy of allowing symbols of Jewish and Muslim holiday scenes in school displays, but not Christian nativity scenes.

In a 2-1 ruling, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed Feb. 9 with a lower court judge who maintained that allowing secular symbols neither advanced nor inhibited religion.

The appeals court determined no objective observer would believe the city wanted to communicate to its students "any official endorsement of Judaism and Islam or any dismissal of Christianity."

Instead, the court held, the purpose was to use holidays to encourage respect for diverse cultural traditions. Dissenting Judge Chester Straub said the policy "utilizes religious symbols of certain religions, but bans the religious symbols of another."

### Evangelicals rally for Israel

A new organization united Christians in support of Israel.

About 400 evangelical leaders gathered in San Antonio last week for a conference entitled Christians United for Israel, with the aim of using resources in the movement to lobby for pro-Israel legislation.

The effort is led by televangelist John Hagee, a pastor who has held an Israel night for more than 25 years.