

IN THE NEWS
Israeli shelling kills girl in Gaza

Israeli shelling killed an 8-year-old girl in the Gaza Strip. Hadil Ghraben was killed Monday after Israeli artillery struck her house in Beit Lahiya.

Thirteen other Palestinians were wounded Monday. Israel has been shelling Gaza in an attempt to stop Palestinians firing rockets into southern Israel.

Envoys from Arab nations met Monday at the United Nations to discuss whether to bring the Israeli strikes to the U.N. Security Council for possible censure.

European leaders meet on Iranian nukes

European foreign ministers met Monday to discuss sanctions options against Iran.

But Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, said sanctions against the Islamic republic for its nuclear activity are not imminent.

Possible sanctions reportedly include travel bans on Iranian officials and restrictions on Iranians studying sensitive technologies in Europe.

France denies visas to Hamas legislators

France denied visas to two Hamas lawmakers. The Hamas members were invited to talks with the Council of Europe, a leading European human rights group.

The group last month invited members of the Israeli Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council, including the Hamas members, to its headquarters in Strasbourg for a meeting promoting dialogue.

The European Union, of which France is a member, has declared Hamas a terrorist organization.

Due to Passover, the JTA World Report will not be published on Friday, April 14.

WORLD REPORT

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Conservatives tap dynamic scholar, not rabbi, to head theological school

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — With Conservative Judaism at a crossroads, the movement's flagship institution has chosen a scholar of American Jewry to guide it.

No white smoke emerged from the Jewish Theological Seminary's red-brick tower Monday when Arnold Eisen's selection was approved by JTS' board. But the move put to bed months of rumors and speculation swirling around the secretive process by which the list of potential candidates for chancellor was winnowed to one.

A Jewish studies professor and chairman of Stanford University's Religious Studies Department, Eisen will succeed Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, who steps down after some 20 years at the helm of the Conservative movement seminary.

Eisen's ascent was greeted with excitement and relief by many Conservative Jews who had hoped the JTS search committee would select a dynamic leader to steward the ship as it faces a series of challenges and questions.

The news also was met with a few raised eyebrows because Eisen, 54, is not a rabbi. He has spent his professional career in academia, not working in the movement.

Though he is a practicing Conservative Jew, Eisen, a tall man with an easy smile, will be just the second non-rabbi of the seven people to hold JTS' top post, after Cyrus Adler led the school from 1915-1940. Coincidentally, both Adler and Eisen grew up in Philadelphia and attended the University of Pennsylvania.

"The appointment of Prof. Eisen comes at a moment of transition for the Conservative Movement," said Gershon Kekst, chairman of

JTS' Board of Trustees and co-chairman of the search committee. "There is no doubt that the days and years ahead will be exciting, demanding and inspiring. I am delighted that we have been able to bring Prof. Eisen to JTS and confident that he is the right person, with the vision and leadership to ensure the vibrancy of JTS, the Conservative Movement and the Jewish people."

Once the dominant religious stream on the U.S. Jewish scene, the Conservative movement faces dwindling numbers as it struggles to articulate a coherent message. It has been losing ground to the Reform movement and sometimes has seemed feckless in the face of an energized Orthodoxy.

It also is being roiled by a battle over the place of gays and lesbians in the movement and by an identity crisis that has led some Conservative leaders to ask whether the group is a movement or just a coalition of approaches to Judaism.

The search for chancellor reflects a larger struggle that has dogged the movement for years: Since its inception, Conservative Judaism has been pulled between those who would adhere more strictly to halachah, or traditional Jewish law, and those who are more willing to change tenets of religious observance to fit modern living.

The choice of chancellor was seen as a barometer of which approach the movement would take as it moves forward.

Eisen's views on these issues are not well known, but many in the movement say that given the seriousness of the challenges, Eisen is the right man at the right time for JTS.

"I just think they hit a home run," said Jonathan Sarna, a Jewish studies professor at

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Eisen will be the second non-rabbi of seven people to hold the top JTS post

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Brandeis University. "Arnie Eisen is one of the most respected Jewish scholars in America. He is exceptionally broad in his knowledge, able to speak learnedly about the Bible and rabbinics even as his specialty is modern Jewish thought."

Others trumpeted Eisen's qualities as a leader and scholar but weren't as sure what the selection would mean for Conservative Jewry's future, particularly with regard to the complex social issues the movement is confronting.

Unlike other candidates who were considered for the job, Eisen — who at one point is said to have taken himself out of the running — has not played a role in the movement's halachic discussions, and his positions on these matters are not well-known.

"I can't say what halachic effect it will have," said Rela Mintz Geffen, president of Baltimore Hebrew University. "He's not a halachist, he's not a rabbinic scholar. He's the kind of person who would be careful about making pronouncements in a field that was not his own."

Others speculated that it was precisely because Eisen is, halachically speaking, an open book that he was so attractive to the search committee. Because his focus as an academic is broader than that of some movement insiders who were considered for the post, he may be able to shift the movement's focus.

"He may move away from some of the debates over social issues that have bedeviled the seminary, and he will address the

larger issues of what it means to be a Jew in America," Sarna said. "I think that the very fact that he's not a rabbi will turn out to be an asset."

In his first interview with the Jewish media shortly after being officially named as the next chancellor, Eisen told JTA he favors allowing gays and lesbians to become rabbis.

"I would like to see these processes end up with the ordination of gays and lesbians," he said.

Still, Eisen said, despite pressures to resolve the issue, a change cannot simply be imposed from above.

"There's got to be halachic process," he said. "You have to preserve the integrity, the authenticity of halachah."

Further, Eisen advocated a robust discussion on homosexuality's place in the Conservative movement among the seminary's faculty. He pointed out that it was just such a discussion that preceded the seminary's decision to ordain women in 1983.

Steven Zipperstein, director of the Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford, who has known Eisen since the 1970s, called it "an incredibly creative choice to bring in someone slightly on the outside, but someone who very publicly shares the views of Conservative theology."

Not everyone is so sure.

"I think that a huge taboo was broken with it not being a rabbi," said one congregational rabbi from New York, who asked not to be named because the interview was conducted before the appointment was made official. "He doesn't have a long background of movement insidership," the rabbi added. "That means he won't have as many contacts, have built-up loyalties, which is a problem."

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, said that he does not "think it makes a difference that he's not a rabbi."

"The fact that he's not a rabbi means that halachic issues and issues of spiritual leadership will not distract him," Epstein said. "The Rabbinical Assembly has great spiritual leadership and

that's really the role of the Rabbinical Assembly."

Eisen will serve as chancellor-designate for the first year while he fulfills his teaching commitments to Stanford. He will assume the chancellorship on July 1, 2007.

Under Schorsch, the seminary was perhaps the leading institution of the Conservative movement. Schorsch himself was outspoken on issues of halachah, often taking a conservative approach to matters such as the place of homosexuality in the movement.

He also urged Conservative Jews to adhere more strongly to tradition, even suggesting that the movement's decision to allow driving to synagogues on Shabbat had been a mistake.

With the choice of Eisen, some are wondering whether the traditional role the chancellor has played when it comes to halachah — some have likened the position to the de facto Chief Rabbinate of the movement — may shift to someone else. Such a role could fall instead to the head of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement's synagogue arm; the head of the Rabbinical Assembly, the rabbinical arm; or perhaps to a newly created position like a mara d'atra, a local halachic authority, some suggest.

For his part, Eisen said, "This chancellor is not going to play that role on halachic issues."

Still, some observers privately wonder whether Eisen's resume has prepared him for the administrative, fund-raising and management requirements of a university head.

Some observers say that as a social scientist, Eisen will bring a new perspective to the chancellor's office, which traditionally has been filled by experts in history and rabbinics.

Eisen said the major challenge facing the movement is getting unconnected Conservative Jews involved.

"How do you get them to be part of Jewish communities? How do you connect them?" he asks. "There's a membership crisis" in the Conservative movement, which in recent years has been overtaken numerically by the Reform movement. "But to me, with Jews in general everybody worries about the declining number — but half the Jews we have are not connected."

I would like to see these processes end up with the ordination of gays and lesbians.

Arnold Eisen

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Federation leader trades hurricane-hit areas

By LARRY LUXNER

NEW ORLEANS (JTA) — Eric Stillman is trading one hurricane-battered region for another.

As executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, Stillman helped guide the city's Jewish community through Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster in modern U.S. history.

Now he's preparing to move to Broward County, Fla., which is still cleaning up from last year's Hurricane Wilma.

Effective May 1, Stillman, 40, will take over as president and chief executive officer of the United Jewish Community of Broward County, filling a position that has been vacant for two years. In the meantime, a search committee has been appointed to find a replacement for Stillman in New Orleans, where he headed the federation since 2000.

"We are grateful to Eric for his dedicated professional leadership of our federation, especially for the leadership he provided our entire Jewish community through the devastation and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina," Allan Bissinger, president of the New Orleans Federation, said in a recent e-mail announcing Stillman's departure.

Stillman says Katrina taught him "two profound lessons" that he hopes to take to his new job.

"The first is the importance of disaster preparation and planning, which certainly applies for hurricanes as well as potential terrorist attacks," he told JTA in an interview in New Orleans last week. "The second lesson is being able to communicate with members of the Jewish community, both in times of crisis as well as every day."

Born in Pontiac, Mich., and raised in Milwaukee, Stillman is no stranger to South Florida. He worked in the campaign department at the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County from 1989 to 1992, and has held executive positions with federations in Washington and Providence, R.I.

Stillman earned a bachelor's degree from Clark University in Worcester, Mass., where he majored in economics and government. He also has two master's degrees — one in community planning and organization from the University of Maryland, the other in modern Jewish history from Baltimore Hebrew University.

Yet nothing in Stillman's resume could

have prepared him for Katrina's onslaught last Aug. 29.

"My family and I evacuated on Saturday night prior to the hurricane," he said. The Stillman's house in Metairie, a New Orleans suburb where many Jews live, suffered wind and water damage.

Like thousands of other Jewish families, Stillman, his wife Jayne and their two sons — Zachary, 11, and Jacob, 10 — rode out the storm in Houston. He says around 62 percent of the city's 9,500 Jews have returned, though Jewish communal life in New Orleans may never return to its pre-Katrina vibrancy.

Stillman had been in discussions with the Broward federation "prior to Katrina, but withdrew my name from consideration after the hurricane because I felt I needed to focus my energies on restoring the local Jewish community," he said. "It was only in the past three months that I came to see that my children wouldn't be able to get a Jewish education here in New Orleans."

Stillman's sons had been attending the city's communal Jewish day school, which has not reopened more than seven months after Katrina. When it does reopen, he said, it will no longer offer middle school, and "my wife and I are not prepared to live under such conditions."

Aside from their vulnerability to hurricanes, the Jewish communities of New Orleans and Broward County could hardly be more different.

For starters, the Jews of New Orleans

constitute a small, tight-knit group in which people tend to know each other because their families have lived there for generations. The metro area's pre-Katrina Jewish population — which includes many children and young adults — represents less than 1 percent of the overall total.

By contrast, Broward's 270,000 or so Jews comprise more than 15 percent of the county's population. Unlike in New Orleans, the vast majority of Broward's Jews

were born somewhere else — mainly New York, New Jersey or Latin America — and most of them are elderly.

Stillman also will be operating a much larger institution.

The current operating budget of the Broward UJC is \$2.9 million, dwarfing the pre-Katrina budget of \$722,000 approved by the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans.

Stillman says he's prepared for the challenge.

"Thankfully, prior to Katrina the Jewish community had a lot of points of connection. That helped us a lot, so when Katrina hit, we didn't have to start introducing each other," he said.

"Certainly, the challenges that I foresee include unifying the Jews of Broward County, because there are so many of them, and because they're spread out among 30 different municipalities," he said. "It's important that no matter where they live, they'll have a sense of identification with the federation."

Stillman, his wife and two sons rode out the hurricane in Houston.

Move against Russian rabbi blasted

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russian Jewish leaders are criticizing a lawmaker's motion aimed at investigating how one of Russia's chief rabbis received Russian citizenship.

The development concerns Berel Lazar, the chief Lubavitch emissary in the former Soviet Union and head of the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities, the region's largest Jewish group.

Last Friday, the Duma, Russia's lower house of Parliament, authorized a committee to file an inquiry with the authorities to clarify why Lazar, an Italian-born U.S.

citizen, was made a Russian citizen without undergoing required naturalization procedures.

The motion was proposed by Boris Vinogradov, a member of the nationalist Motherland Party.

On Monday, the party disassociated itself from the development by saying it never authorized Vinogradov to raise the issue in the Duma.

"Such an inquiry has one single goal — to offend to Jewish community," said Boruch Gorin, a spokesman for the Federation of Jewish Communities.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Olmert speaks of Bush 'bond'

Ehud Olmert said he enjoys a "very strong emotional bond" with President Bush.

"I've spoken to him maybe three times since I became prime minister," the Israeli prime minister-elect told Time magazine.

"There is a very strong emotional bond between the two of us, every time we speak we both feel it deeply.

I know how he feels and he knows how I feel."

Olmert said the rapport began on a visit Bush made to Jerusalem while Olmert was the city's mayor.

He also credited Bush with changing the Middle East for the better, and called him a "natural partner" for fighting terrorism.

Olmert hopes to get U.S. endorsement for his plan to include major West Bank settlement blocs within Israel's border.

Likud won't join government

The Likud Party said it would not join Israel's coalition government under Ehud Olmert.

The Likud, which was drubbed in last month's general election but remains a formidable Knesset faction, formally announced Monday it was shunning coalition talks.

Party officials cited objections to plans by Olmert, the prime minister-elect, to carry out further unilateral West Bank withdrawals.

The decision was widely expected, given the longtime personal rivalry between Olmert and Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israelis, Palestinians to meet in Morocco

Israeli and Palestinian public figures will hold informal peace negotiations next month in Morocco.

Senior Labor Party lawmaker Ami Ayalon will lead Israel's delegation to the talks in Casablanca, scheduled to begin in the first week of May.

He faces a delegation led by former Palestinian Authority Cabinet minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, one of the architects of the informal "Geneva Accord" peace proposal.

The talks, which will be hosted by Morocco's King Mohammed VI, aim to establish a dialogue on prospects for coexistence in the absence of formal ties between Israel and the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

According to political sources, Ayalon — whose party looks likely to enter Israel's coalition government — has the blessing of Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert because no Hamas members will take part.

Jordanian journalists threatened

The Jordanian Press Association threatened to punish journalists who plan to travel to Israel for a conference.

The association made the announcement after reports that 40 Jordanian journalists planned to attend a three-week training course at Haifa University designed as an attempt to spread "peace culture," the AFP news agency reported.

Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, but many parts of Jordanian civil society oppose the treaty.

Poll: Israelis tied to Jewish tradition

More than half of Israeli Jews profess some level of religious observance, according to government data.

A Central Bureau of Statistics survey covering 2002-2004 found that 27 percent of Israeli Jews older than age 20 define themselves as caring about Jewish tradition, 12 percent say they observe Jew-

ish ritual and 17 percent consider themselves Orthodox.

By contrast, 44 percent of Israeli Jews identify as secular, according to the findings.

Secularism in Israel is significantly higher among Ashkenazim than among Sephardim.

Of Israel's population of 7 million, 81 percent are Jewish and most of the remainder Arab.

WORLD

European Jews discuss anti-Semitism, Iran

Leaders of Europe's principal Jewish advocacy and educational organizations met to discuss strategy on anti-Semitism and other issues.

The rise of Hamas to lead the Palestinian Authority and Iran's nuclear ambitions were also discussed at Sunday's meeting, a joint initiative of the European Jewish Congress, European Council of Jewish Communities and Conference of European Rabbis.

Czech Jews sue for return of properties

A Jewish community in the Czech Republic is suing the government for two pieces of property it has been trying to get back from the state since 1990.

One property in the city of Brno is the former Jewish Town Hall; the other was a tennis court for the local Jewish sports club, and now is used by the Interior Ministry as a tennis club for police.

The empty town hall is slated for use by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The case is rather unusual in the Czech Republic, a country that returned most property to the 10 Jewish communities in the country.

Tomas Kraus, head of the Czech Federation of Jewish Communities, said the fact that the state has been so reluctant to return the properties, nationalized after World War II by the Communists, could hurt the country's positive image in Jewish circles.

"This is the only stain on the white shirt," Kraus said.

U.S. official, Russian Jews discuss preservation

Cemetery restoration was among topics discussed by a U.S. preservation official and leaders of the St. Petersburg Jewish community.

Warren Miller, chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, met Sunday with leaders of the St. Petersburg Jewish community to discuss a working partnership between the preservation commission and Russia's Jewish communities.

The commission is a government agency involved in identifying and protecting cultural properties throughout Europe that are of relevance to American heritage.

The commission is looking to expand its work in Russia.

NORTH AMERICA

Nazi item removed from auction

A body marker from a Nazi concentration camp was removed from an auction in Los Angeles after complaints from a Jewish group.

Los Angeles County removed the item from Dachau from a public-estate auction following complaints from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which was alerted to the item by a woman who saw it listed on an auction Web site.

The item reportedly was in a collection that also included pre-World War II Prussian uniforms and Soviet-era statues of Lenin.