


IN THE NEWS
Abbas wants referendum on Israel

Mahmoud Abbas told Hamas that it has 10 days to accept a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or accept a Palestinian referendum on a two-state plan.

Speaking Thursday in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority president said he would seek to hold the referendum within 40 days. Hamas officials were quoted as saying they back the idea of a referendum.

The vote would be based on a plan drafted earlier this month by Palestinians jailed in Israel. Islamic Jihad said it opposes the referendum.

Meeting slated to discuss Iran

Leading countries plan to meet next week in Europe to discuss Iran.

The five members of the U.N. Security Council with veto power — United States, France, Britain, Russia and China — as well as Germany, will finalize incentives to get Iran to cooperate with nuclear inspectors, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

Israeli weapons to guard Abbas

Israel agreed to transfer a limited amount of weapons to help guard Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

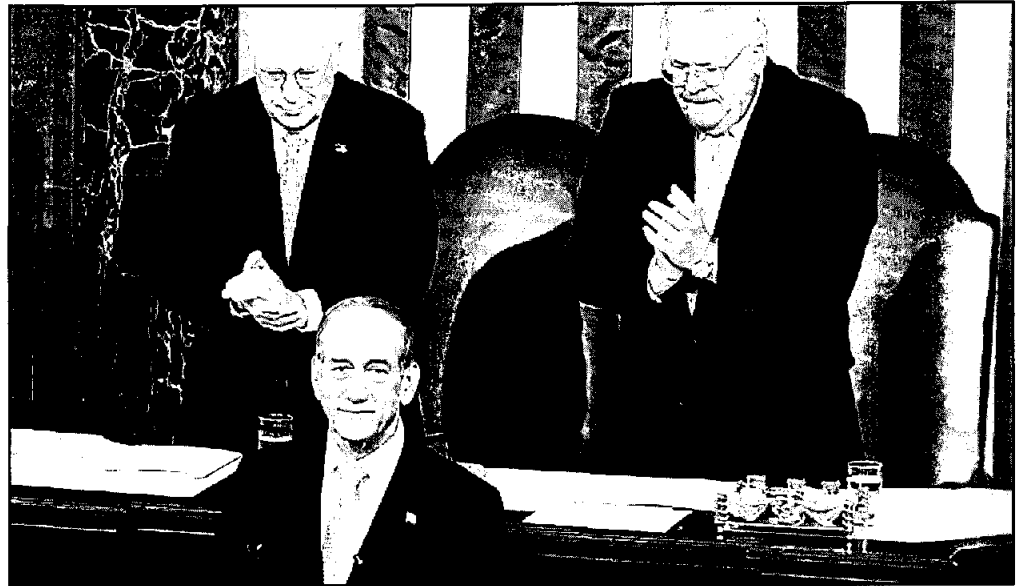
The decision by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz came earlier this week, amid growing threats on Abbas' life.

The weapons are expected to be delivered to Abbas' presidential guard via a third party, likely Egypt or Jordan, Israeli media reported.

Reminder:
The JTA World Report will not be published on Monday, May 29.

WORLD REPORT

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Ron Sachs/CNP/JTA

Vice President Dick Cheney, left, and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, right, applaud a point made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during his speech to Congress on May 24.

Olmert celebrates 'grand slam' and prepares for a diplomatic tour

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Ehud Olmert reversed the time-honored formula of a thousand showmen before him: He's made it in the big time, and now he's taking the show on the road.

Triumphant after a Washington tour that exceeded expectations, the Israeli prime minister plans to spend the next several weeks traveling Arab and European capitals to sell his plan for an Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank, with or without Palestinian agreement.

Addressing to Hebrew-speaking reporters Tuesday evening after his marathon session with President Bush, Olmert announced plans to meet in coming weeks with

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah II, followed by meetings with the British, French and German leaders.

"I'll have a meeting every week," Olmert said, until early July, when he is scheduled to end his tour with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Olmert left Washington on Wednesday evening.

Olmert wants to persuade Arab and European leaders to sustain the pressure on the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority government, which refuses to recognize Israel or renounce terrorism.

The united Western front against Hamas, in place since the terrorist group's landslide victory in January elections, is already

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ANALYSIS

■ *Olmert's next diplomatic stops include Jordan, Egypt, Britain, France and Germany*

Continued from page 1

showing signs of strain. The European Union announced a \$43 million aid package to the Palestinians this week, breaking an earlier agreement to coordinate such assistance through the Quartet, the grouping of the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia that guides the Middle East peace process.

Additionally, the Europeans are eager to pay P.A. wages as a way of propping up the foundering economy. Olmert said Bush told him the United States agreed with Israel that such a step is out of the question.

"There is a basic understanding not to pay salaries" for some 160,000 P.A. employees, Olmert told reporters, but Israel and the United States might consider paying the salaries of 8,000 health workers.

Olmert made it clear he would be dependent on international support if he concludes, in coming months, that he has exhausted every possibility to negotiate with the Palestinians, and instead goes ahead with a unilateral West Bank withdrawal.

"Our deepest wish is to build a better future for our region, hand in hand with a Palestinian partner," Olmert said. "But if not, we will move forward, but not alone. We could never have implemented the disengagement plan without your firm support."

He referred to last year's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which Israel undertook with strong backing

from the Bush administration.

Olmert was basking in his success, according to Jewish leaders who met him after his first trip to Washington as prime minister.

"He was on a high," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "He said, 'I feel relaxed and relieved.' There's always the anticipation of the unknown — you never know how deep and how intense the friendship is until the first meeting."

The first meeting Bush and Olmert have had in their capacities as leaders of their countries could hardly have gone better. Harold Tanner, president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, described it as a "grand slam" when he introduced Olmert at the meeting with Jewish leaders.

After spending an hour or so with their respective teams, Bush decided the two men should meet without their advisers. Bush, Olmert and Olmert's wife, Aliza, spent about two hours on the White House's Truman balcony facing the Washington Monument.

"I found a friendly, focused, warm, intelligent man," Olmert told reporters, adding that he was "flattered" by Bush's attention.

In their press conference, Bush described Olmert's plan to pull out of parts of the West bank as "bold ideas," a term that evolved over a week of negotiations of Olmert's advance team and White House officials.

The good feelings extended to his speech in Congress on Wednesday, which lasted almost an hour and earned more than 40 bursts of applause. Olmert scored points for his eloquence in outlining his vision of coexistence in the region, especially when he called on Palestinians to end incitement against Israel.

"Let us today call out to all peoples of the Middle East: Replace the culture of hate with an outlook of hope," he said to a standing ovation.

Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), the minor-

ity leader in the Senate, said "The prime minister's speech was the one I was inspired by the most" in his 25 years in Congress.

The speech had special meaning for Jewish members of Congress, who met with Olmert afterward.

"My heart was bursting with pride as a Jew, as an American, as a member of Congress," said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), who wept during portions of the speech. "I never felt more privileged to represent my community in Congress as I did today."

Olmert asked the family of Daniel Wultz, a 16-year-old American killed in a terrorist attack in Israel last month, to attend the speech. Members of Congress gave the boy's mother, father and sister, who live in Wasserman Schultz's south Florida district, a standing ovation.

Olmert's quid pro quo for the welcome he got was an agreement to renew efforts to bolster

P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas, a relative moderate who heads Hamas' rival, the Fatah Party. Until Sunday, Olmert said Abbas was an ineffectual partner.

"From this podium today I extend my hand in peace to Mahmoud Abbas, the elected president of the Palestinian Authority," he said to applause.

Olmert told reporters he was seeking ways to bolster Abbas' position as opposed to Hamas, though he would not elaborate.

In his speech to Congress, Olmert commended the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act, just passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, which effectively cuts off assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

Members of Congress said they would tweak the act to help bolster Abbas if they get a signal to do so from Olmert.

"The legislation can always be modified at some future time if in fact Olmert and the Israeli government's position is that we have to modify this to support a moderate element on the Palestinian side," Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), the minority whip in the House, told JTA. ■

'My heart was bursting with pride as a Jew, as an American, as a member of Congress.'

Debbie Wasserman Schultz
U.S. Representative (D-Fla.)

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How Barbie builds Jewish identity

By SUE FISHKOFF

LOS GATOS, Calif. (JTA) — San Francisco filmmaker Tiffany Shlain stood before 140 women and asked how many had ever been told they “don’t look Jewish.”

Nearly half raised their hands.

Shlain smiled — that’s exactly her point.

“Imagine how I felt growing up, a blond, blue-eyed girl named Tiffany,” she deadpanned in front of the audience at a Silicon Valley Jewish federation meeting one recent evening. “I heard a lot of anti-Semitic things from people who didn’t know I was Jewish.”

It’s also one of the points raised in “The Tribe,” Shlain’s smart, snappy documentary that uses Barbie, and all she represents, to explore what it means to be young, Jewish and American at the dawn of the 21st century.

Anyone who makes a film about Barbie — especially one like “The Tribe,” which combines fast-moving graphics, a post-modern aesthetic and self-deprecating irony — is pretty much guaranteed a lot of ink.

The all-American doll with the impossible curves is wildly popular — producer Mattel claims three Barbies are sold every second — and widely lambasted, the unwitting proponent of outdated values and unattainable fantasies. People love to love her, hate her and poke fun at her.

Barbie is also Jewish, born in 1959 to a Jewish American mother-inventor. The iconic insider, developed by a Jew — the quintessential outsider — Barbie is the perfect hook for a film that looks at Jewish history through an anthropologist’s lens, focusing on the Jewish people’s status as outsiders trying to be insiders.

It’s an interesting take. Few films would dare, as this one does, to outline Jewish history without mentioning a single Jewish leader since Moses. But by focusing on big, universal themes — the nature of tribes, self-identity and social integration — and by avoiding prescriptions or pat answers while raising plenty of questions, “The Tribe” manages to be smart and appealing.

“I could really relate to it,” said Ruti Cogan, 14, who came to the event with her mother. “I learned there are a lot of sub-tribes, a billion different kinds. And the Jewish stereotypes, I could relate to them.”

“The Tribe” has received plenty of at-

tention since its official premiere this spring at the Sundance film festival. It’s won awards at film festivals in Nashville, Ann Arbor and San Francisco, and will be the centerpiece of a September event at the 92nd St. Y in New York.

But Shlain didn’t make this film for the big screen: At just 18 minutes, “The Tribe” won’t be shown at many suburban multiplexes.

From the beginning, Shlain says, she and husband Ken Goldberg, her co-writer, intended it to provoke conversations about Jewish identity. Barbie, who appears

only briefly, is primarily a good-looking decoy.

“I can’t tell you how many people want to see the film because it’s about Barbie,” Shlain says. But “the whole point is to use the film for discussion. We’re really interested in starting a dialogue for Jews wrestling with their Jewish identity.”

“The idea is to bring it to dinner parties, have a discussion with your friends,” Goldberg says.

The DVD is sold with a discussion

guide and playing cards, so people can buy it for their personal use. And hundreds have, according to Shlain, who runs a Web site (www.tribethefilm.com), where people can order and discuss the film.

“The response has been overwhelming, from Jews and non-Jews,” she says. “I had people come up to me at Sundance with tears in their eyes, saying ‘I finally understand Israel.’”

She says that more than 27,000 people viewed it for free on the Sundance Web site, along with another 5,000 or so who have seen it at group discussions like the event in Los Gatos.

Hillels, religious schools, interfaith organizations and other groups have ordered the kit for educational showings, which carry a much higher price tag than the \$40 ordinary folks are charged. Proceeds are plowed back into a non-profit run by Shlain and Goldberg, who are currently developing a curriculum for classroom use.

ARTS & CULTURE

‘I had people come up to me at Sundance with tears in their eyes, saying “I finally understand Israel.”’

Tiffany Shlain
Filmmaker

Rabbi Julie Pelc showed the film to her high-school religious studies group in Los Angeles.

The students were “really responsive,” she reports. “They talked about their own identities, especially as they related to the ‘bad Jew’ in the movie.” That allowed her to “open a discussion about, is there such a thing as a ‘bad Jew?’”

Even the Navy is interested. Rabbi Irving Nelson, deputy command chaplain at the U.S. Naval Academy, plans to show the film to his students this fall.

“It’s a fascinating movie, something our midshipmen would benefit from,” he says.

Shlain has spent most of the past six months shepherding the film around the country, leading group discussions. At Sundance, she and Goldberg rented a hall and

served everyone homemade chicken soup. One of the first Jewish groups she showed it to was Jewlicious@TheBeach.2, a four-day gathering of young Jews sponsored by Hillel of Long Beach, Calif.

Shlain, 36, grew up Reform in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, in a largely secular home where Judaism was expressed “culturally and

intellectually.”

Recently she and her husband have begun celebrating Shabbat, although they haven’t yet found a synagogue where they feel comfortable.

And in contrast to her grandparents, who tried to assimilate as quickly as possible when they immigrated here from Russia 100 years ago, Shlain and her husband named their first daughter Odessa, after the city both families came from. That’s part of the new Jewish pride of her generation, Shlain says, which is stronger than the Jewish establishment realizes.

“They’re so worried about this generation and intermarriage and losing Jews,” she told the federation women in Los Gatos. “But I’m not worried. I believe all you need is a conversation, and that will trigger much more.”

“Jews are so connected, all around the world. The fact that we’re reinventing and reinterpreting, it’s all about evolving. And that’s how Jews have survived.”

In search of Ethiopia's Jewish heritage

By MICHAEL S. ARNOLD

TIS ABAY, Ethiopia (JTA) — The ferry ride across the river is brief, two or three minutes in a small wooden dinghy with a plastic awning that barely fends off the midday sun. With three foreigners, a rangy pilot and his youthful assistant, our craft is relatively empty — at least, compared to the adjacent boat that perches perilously low in the water under the weight of at least a dozen locals.

The Blue Nile is gentle and slow-moving here. Along the riverbank, amid the reeds, young women kneel to fill their water jugs. The Blue Nile supplies most of the water that flows down into Egypt's Nile Valley, and it's not hard to imagine one such young woman, kneeling in the reeds miles further down this same stream, finding a basket holding a frightened infant, and taking the young Moses to safety and his destiny.

The Nile also was a natural migratory artery, and it's likely that over the centuries Jews moved up the river from biblical communities in Egypt and fed into an existing Jewish community to form, over the centuries, the Beta Israel, known to their neighbors as "Falashas" — strangers.

The day before, we had seen the remnants of this Ethiopian Jewish community — the Falash Mura, Jews who converted to Christianity over the years but who now have returned to the faith.

Sustained by a compound in the city of Gondar run by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, or NA-COEJ, they are learning Jewish rituals, basic Hebrew and some rudimentary job skills in anticipation of moving to Israel.

Shortly after daybreak, hundreds of Falash Mura crowd into the compound for Shacharit prayers. The men's visages are hidden by their prayer shawls, and they sway and mumble as a knowledgeable handful of the community leads prayers onstage. The women ululate as the Torah is removed from the ark.

Next door, pregnant mothers and women with small children wolf down the meals provided — staples like eggs, grains and vegetables — while older children who attend school receive beans to bring home to their families. In another



Michael Arnold/JTA

Ethiopians cross the Blue Nile near the village of Tis Abay. This area near the source of the river historically was an area of heavy Jewish settlement.

TRAVEL

area students take Hebrew lessons, and in a third portion of the compound men beat slowly on pieces of iron, learning to make crude farming implements such as sickles and plows that, even in the 21st century, are the mainstay for Ethiopian farmers.

A day later and we're hiking through fields toward the Blue Nile Falls, passing herds of lean cattle led by boys dressed in rags or by sinewy men with walking sticks balanced across their shoulders. On the other side of the river a crocodile suns itself on the bank; the timid beast slides slowly into the stream as we approach with our cameras drawn.

A hydroelectric dam has reduced the Blue Nile Falls to a shadow of its former self, but it remains an impressive sight, dropping nearly 150 feet over a broad shelf and dousing visitors with spray long before they reach the pool.

It was in search of the sources of the Nile, near Lake Tana, that Scottish

explorer James Bruce came in 1769, bringing the existence of the Beta Israel to the attention of the wider world, including their Jewish brethren. Centuries of persecution and conversion, followed by the modern-day aliyah to Israel, have emptied the area between Gondar and Lake Tana of Jews, but historically this region was an arc of settlement for a Jewish community that has existed in

Ethiopia since the First Temple period.

Ethiopia itself has only recently opened to the outside world, following the fall of the Communist government in 1991 and enervating border wars with Eritrea

throughout the 1990s. Now this nation of 75 million in the Horn of Africa is hoping that its stunning nature, rich history and cultural complexity will attract tourists and help a country that exports little beyond coffee pull itself out of grinding poverty.

Combine that with a Jewish connection unparalleled in sub-Saharan African, the emergence of the Falash Mura as a hot-button issue for the American

On the other side of the river a crocodile suns itself on the bank; the timid beast slides slowly into the stream as we approach.

Jewish federation system and the presence of thousands of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and some tourism officials believe Ethiopia may be ripe for Jewish heritage tourism.

If Jews "want to really see what Ethiopia is, where Ethiopians Jews lived, where the Queen of Sheba walked, then going to Ethiopia and going to Kenya have different purposes," said Mekonnen Abebe, Ethiopian Airlines' American director. "Those who are interested in history should go to Ethiopia."

Given the level of tourist services outside the capital of Addis Ababa, it may be too early to expect significant numbers of Jews to head for Ethiopia unless they're prepared to sacrifice creature comforts.

"Going to Ethiopia isn't something you do on a moment's notice. The poverty is very, very, very distressing, you have to get a lot of shots in order to protect your health and you have to be extremely careful about what you eat, where you eat and what you drink," said NACOEJ director Barbara Ribakove Gordon, who has been to the Gondar area some two dozen times. "But I think it's a very worthwhile trip. Never having really been colonized, the Ethiopians have no resentment against white foreigners and in general are beautiful, friendly people."

With the North American federation system trying to raise \$100 million to expedite Falash Mura aliyah, the United Jewish Communities sponsored one mission to Ethiopia in February and was planning another one this spring.

Participants bring back word that Ethiopia that "is something to see, something to behold," said Vicki Agron, UJC's senior vice president for development. "It's a place out of time and space. I felt we were walking through National Geographic."

Eileen Hart, vice president of marketing for Isram, an operator of Jewish heritage tours, said Ethiopia is not on the radar yet — but it's not far-fetched.

"If the possibility presented itself — and, more to the point, if the facilities reached a certain level — then certainly we would consider it," she said.

Ethiopia's Jewish history is concentrated in the north, a tourist circuit served by daily Ethiopian Airlines flights. We made the circuit flying short hops of 30 to 60 minutes each in propeller planes that deposited us in relatively modern airports at the edge of the bush.

Visitors can spend several days scrambling up and down the mountain paths from church to church, each of which has its own distinctive cross, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant and impressive religious murals. Ethiopian Christianity has retained vestiges of ancient Judaism, preserving rituals such as circumcision, a form of Sabbath observance and — a relief for "kosher-style" travelers — a prohibition on eating pork.

The only place for visitors to see Ethiopian Jews today is Gondar, where the Falash Mura wait while Israeli officials assess their claims of Jewishness. That's not an easy task in a country where the memories of village elders often substitute for official records, and where a claim of Jewishness can be a ticket from the Third World to the First. American Jews who want to visit the Gondar compound can do so by prior arrangement with the New York-based NACOEJ.

A visit to the compound may not be every tourist's idea of a vacation, but it's undeniably powerful and it can be inspiring — and at least it offers the prospect of meeting actual Ethiopian Jews. That's more than can be said for the nearby village of Waleka, which is trying desperately to wring a living from the memory of its former Jewish residents. Tourists are greeted by girls selling figurines of vaguely Jewish figures, the Ethiopian equivalent of "Fiddler on the Roof"-style kitsch. A sign on the side of a hut reads "Welcome to Felasha Village," above cartoonish figures of smiling Jews.

Still, one can see both the hut that formerly served as Waleka's synagogue

and, a short walk from the village itself, a cemetery where Ethiopian Israelis come to erect gravestones for fallen relatives.

Another hop, skip and a jump via propeller plane brings you to Bahir Dar, a lovely town perched on the southern shore of Lake Tana, where the Blue Nile exits. Whatever the veracity of the Queen of Sheba legend, it's likely that various influxes of Jews fed into the Beta Israel community, including some who migrated up the Nile during biblical times and settled around Lake Tana.

According to material from NACOEJ, some believe the Beta Israel are descended largely from members of the Tribe of Dan who left the Promised Land during the schism between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and kept going until they reached the biblical land of Cush, in present-day Sudan and Ethiopia. Indeed, that connection was the basis for the landmark 1973 decision by Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, accepting the Beta Israel's claim of Jewish origin and paving the way for the Ethiopian aliyah.

From Bahir Dar our group returned to Addis to catch the long flight home. While conditions in Ethiopia make a vacation there less relaxing than in places closer to the beaten track, visitors who are willing to rough it a bit will find Ethiopia a warm, welcoming, even dazzling country, with a unique Jewish tie.

"You have to be prepared for an experience, an adventure, even if you've already been to Third World countries before," NACOEJ's Gordon said. "But it's a place people fall in love with."



Michael Arnold/JTA

Men pray in a Jewish prayer service at the Falash Mura compound in Gondar, Ethiopia.

Peru's Jews watch election closely

By JOE GOLDMAN

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Peru's Jewish community is closely watching the country's presidential runoff election, especially a controversial candidate, Ollanta Humala.

Jewish businessmen and intellectuals are especially concerned that Peru, under a nationalist like Humala, could turn into a hotbed of anti-American and anti-European attitudes similar to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela and Evo Morales' Bolivia, said Guillermo Bronstein, leading rabbi of Lima's largest synagogue, Asociacion Judia 1870.

Humala, a retired army colonel who was dismissed after leading a failed coup in 2000, won the first round of voting April 9, but his 31 percent fell short of the 50 percent needed for outright victory.

After a drawn-out recount, the former president Alan Garcia, a center-left candidate, will face Humala in the June 4 runoff. Garcia edged a center-right candidate, Lourdes Flores, by 24.4 percent to 23.6 percent.

Bronstein is quick to note that his statements on the election are merely his own perspective. That hints at the divisions in Peru's Jewish community, which is small — some 3,000 in a country of 24 million — but economically and politically powerful.

"Nobody has the right to speak or give opinions as if they were representative of the Peruvian Jewish community," Bronstein said.

Bronstein says support for Humala from an important Jewish community leader — "not in our congregation, mind you" — has made a difficult situation even worse.

He was referring to Luis Mekler, president of the Peruvian Jewish Association. Mekler used to be one of Humala's major critics for alleged anti-Semitism and xenophobia, but has become one of his most ardent supporters as a candidate for Congress on Humala's slate.

In December 2005, Mekler called Humala "a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing" and claimed he was hiding his anti-Semitism as part of his election strategy. Mekler said Humala and his brother, who were trying to organize an indigenous nationalist movement, used anti-Semitic language and showed a "deep-rooted

hatred toward Jews" at the start of their campaign.

Later that month, however, Mekler said Humala had "convinced me that he was not anti-Semitic," and he joined his slate for April elections.

Attempts to reach Mekler for comment were unsuccessful.

"There is fear in our community over what will happen to Peruvian-Israeli relations if Humala is elected, and we are a Jewish community with strong ties to Israel," Bronstein said.

Still, most of the Jewish community has not publicly stated its preferences, "although one could certainly say that Garcia has more friends within the Jewish community," Bronstein said.

Garcia also carries some baggage. During his 1985-1990 presidency, Peru suffered hyperinflation and violence from the Shining Path, a Marxist guerrilla group. His administration also was hounded by charges of corruption.

The formerly radical Garcia claims to have developed a more moderate stance,

market-friendly and not hostile to Washington. Some observers say he has been helped by verbal sparring in the media with Chavez, as well as the latter's open support for Humala.

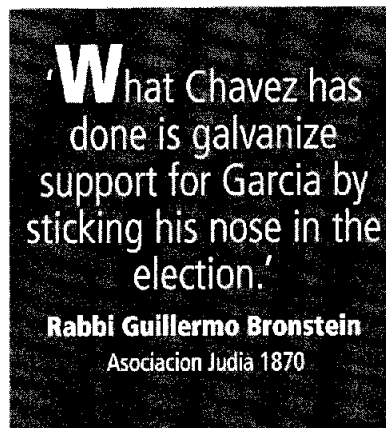
Polls give Garcia a 10- to 12-point lead, though Bronstein believes the polls could be deceptive.

"Those numbers really don't mean much historically in Peru when you realize that 35 or 40 percent of the electorate doesn't decide who they will vote for until the moment they cast their ballot," Bronstein said.

Chavez has irked many Peruvians by publicly supporting Humala and ridiculing Garcia.

"What Chavez has done is galvanize support

for Garcia by sticking his nose in the election," said Bronstein, who believes Garcia's expected advantage is due in great part to popular reaction against Chavez's comments. "Garcia has completely distanced himself from Chavez's policies." ■



Florida Judaica store vandalized

HOLLYWOOD, Fla. (JTA) — Florida police announced this week that a suspect has been identified but not yet arrested in an anti-Semitic vandalism.

Four painted swastikas and a message saying "Burn the Jews" were discovered by a Palm Beach County sheriff's deputy at the Yiddishkeit Judaica book and gift shop in Boca Raton on Sunday morning. The sheriff's office spokeswoman, Teri Barbera, reported that similar messages were found on a Chrysler Voyager minivan in the center's parking lot. The minivan belonged to a non-Jewish florist who was out of town when the graffiti was painted early Sunday.

Local television stations gave the incident heavy coverage throughout the day Sunday and Monday.

Owner Joseph Brooks said that in early March, vandals painted a small swastika on one of his store windows.

"This is the second time this year that

I've been a target of hateful graffiti," Brooks said. "I'm shocked and worried because before it was a little thing and now it's on the entire storefront. I can't know if the two incidents are related but I'm concerned about the escalation of this."

Bill Gralnick, regional director of the American Jewish Committee, suspects that schoolchildren committed the vandalism which he says increases as the end of the school year approaches. The last day for most students this year will be May 31.

Brooks praised both the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County and the Anti-Defamation League for their immediate involvement and concern.

"These acts serve one purpose, and one purpose only, and that is to threaten, to intimidate and to harass the entire community," said Rabbi Andrew Rosenkranz, Florida regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. ■

FIRST PERSON

The joys and sorrows of aliyah

By JONATHAN UDREN

EFRAT, West Bank (JTA) — When I think back on my pre-aliyah Israeli experiences, there were several that influenced my decision to immigrate. One of those palpable memories was marching around the Old City walls during the Jerusalem Day parade.

Instead of Jordanian snipers perched on the tops of the Old City walls, as was the case before 1967, Israeli soldiers smiling with pride waved down to the thousands below. Israeli flags flooded my vision as the crowd circled the east gates of the Old City dancing and singing together, celebrating a modern-day miracle.

The passion at the parade was contagious; after so long Jerusalem was again in Jewish hands, and I was determined to become a part of that miracle, to be another brick in the wall of the rebuilt city.

Now, after living as an Israeli resident for more than two years, I see that the beauty of the wall is also its greatest challenge. Immigrants from France, the former Soviet Union, the United States, Ethiopia and South America all come together here, each representing a brick in the new walls of Jerusalem. And we all come with our own vision of Jerusalem and the greater State of Israel. But we also come with our own cultures and habits.

We come with our favorite foods and our idea of good manners. And many times, those visions stand in stark contrast to one another.

Sometimes, it's hard to see what we are all building. From up close, the wall looks so flawed and grotesque. But when I step back, I see that everyone's piece is coming together toward part of a miraculous greater whole.

Yes, the building is a slow and tiring process, and sometimes we lose direction.

But there is nothing greater for me than being actively involved in that process. ■

Jonathan Udren is a freelance journalist and editor from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He made aliyah in 2003.

Choir offers harmonious community

By RACHEL SILVERMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — When you're 15 or 16 years old, you might not choose words like "awesome" or "cool" to describe being Jewish.

But HaZamir, an international choir for Jewish teens, refuses to buy into the post-bar mitzvah fatigue.

By infusing music, friendship and fun into the Jewish experience, HaZamir helps make Judaism more palatable to the high-school demographic.

The choir, which started 13 years ago with an ensemble in Manhattan, today boasts 16 chapters around the world. Montreal, London, Tel Aviv, St. Louis, New Brunswick, N.J., and Los Angeles are part of HaZamir's network, which has churned out more than 1,000 graduates over the years.

Seven more cities are slated to open chapters in the coming year.

Meeting on a weekly basis, participants study a repertoire of Hebrew, English, Yiddish and Ladino songs. Once a year, they gather to stage a giant choral festival, this year's at New York City's Lincoln Center on Sunday.

Matthew Lazar, founder and director of the choir, said the hours of group rehearsal and backstage fraternizing create a deep sense of Jewish community among singers.

"When kids go on summer trips to Israel, the whole methodology is that by the end, kids should understand what a community is," Lazar said.

"Well, our kids get it in the beginning," he continued. "We're modeling community here." ■

Lazar praised HaZamir for its trans-denominational composition. For Jewish teens "wary of entering synagogues," he said, HaZamir is "the safest way for kids to identify" with their religion.

"The only group they want to be part of is our soprano section," he joked. "This makes them say, 'I feel proud of being Jew-

ish, and boy do I love to sing.'"

Rachel Rothberg, an eighth-grade student from Los Angeles, hailed HaZamir as one of her main vehicles for "doing Jewish" these days.

"I used to go to Jewish day school and I kind of lost that when I went to secular school," said Rothberg, who transferred last year. "Now I feel reconnected."

Of course, the choir doesn't exclude those with a stronger Jewish background.

"HaZamir has kids who know pages and pages of Gemara by

heart singing with kids who don't know the words to Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, Lazar said.

That diversity is one of the things Max Buckler, 17, likes best about the choir. Through HaZamir he has met Jews from all walks of life from across New Jersey.

"In this situation, there's very little difference between us," said Buckler, who joined the group six months ago. "But a lot of us never see each other except for HaZamir."

Lazar, who studied in a Brooklyn-based yeshiva growing up, makes it a point to educate all his singers Jewishly. Before the Lincoln Center concert, he reviewed

Hebrew pronunciation with his students and emphasized the many contributions — from biblical times to contemporary figures like Irving Berlin — that Jews have made musically.

"I believe in making the Jews more musical, and the musicians more knowledgeably Jewish," he explained. ■

Lazar, who calls HaZamir more of a "movement" than a choir, believes these are lessons kids will keep throughout their lives.

HaZamir graduates often go on to study musicology or form Jewish a capella groups in college, Lazar said. They also continue the tradition with other Zamir Choral Foundation experiences, which include an adult choir, an annual performance festival, jaunts to Israel and an endowment fund for new choral works. ■

ARTS & CULTURE

'HaZamir has kids who know pages and pages of Gemara by heart singing with kids who don't know the words to Hatikvah.'

Matthew Lazar
Founder, HaZamir

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Olmert to go to Europe

Ehud Olmert is scheduled to visit London and Paris next month. The Prime Minister's Office announced the June 11-15 tour Thursday after Olmert returned from his first trip to the United States as prime minister.

According to Israeli officials, Olmert will assess bilateral ties in Paris and London, as well as Europe's role in diplomatic efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program.

Israeli court changes mind on admitting lawyer

An Israeli court reversed itself and barred a British human-rights lawyer from entering Israel.

Israeli judge Avraham Tal reversed his ruling made earlier Thursday when he said the Interior Ministry could not bar Kate Maynard from Israel, where she wanted to attend a human rights conference. Tal did ask the ministry to allow Maynard to enter Israel, but the ministry refused to do so.

Maynard was involved in last year's filing of a private war-crimes suit against Doron Almog, a retired Israeli army general, in connection with a counterterrorist action in the Gaza Strip.

Israel eyes Hebron annexation

Israel plans to expand and annex the Jewish settlements in and around Hebron, one of Ehud Olmert's confidants said. "Hebron and Kiryat Arba are supposed to be part of the Israeli state," Otniel Schneller told The Associated Press on Thursday, referring to a Jewish enclave inside the biblical city and a major settlement on its periphery.

Schneller, a senior member of the ruling Kadima Party who is helping the Israeli prime minister formulate his West Bank withdrawal plan, also said "the Jewish neighborhood in Hebron will grow" and be linked to Kiryat Arba.

Israelis honor Jerusalem

Israelis celebrated Jerusalem Day. Thousands flocked to Israel's capital Thursday for events marking 39 years since its reunification in the Six-Day War.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, en route back from his maiden Washington trip, was to deliver an evening address at the famous 1967 battle site of Ammunition Hill.

But there were tensions on the Temple Mount, site of Islam's Al-Aksa Mosque.

After police issued a permit for members of the religious Jewish group Temple Mount Faithful to visit the site, Israel's Islamic Movement called on hundreds of Muslims to turn out and "defend Al-Aksa."

Two Israelis tackle Everest

Two Israelis climbed Mount Everest as part of an international peace mission. David "Dudu" Yifrah became the second Israeli ever to reach the summit earlier this month. Several hours after Yifrah, Micha Yaniv became the third.

A Palestinian climber, Ali Bushnaq, also attempted the climb but had to turn back due to pneumonia.

First female Israeli air force pilot dies

The first female Israeli air force pilot died. Yael Rom, who flew on military operations and for Israel's civilian airline Arkia, passed away Thursday at her home in Haifa from an undisclosed condition.

She was 74.

NORTH AMERICA

Congressman asked Bush to press Israel on Christians

A congressman asked President Bush to take up the plight of West Bank Christians with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), the chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives' International Relations Committee, wrote Bush last week, saying: "I cannot be blind when Israeli actions seem to go beyond the realm of legitimate security concerns and have negative consequences on communities and lands under their occupation."

According to columnist Robert Novak, who reported the letter Thursday, Hyde attached a five-page single-space report by the latter's staff. It says the "Christian community is being crushed in the mill of the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and charges that Israel's security barrier and settlements "are irreversibly damaging the dwindling Christian community."

Novak says Bush's staff was "unsympathetic" to Hyde's concerns. It is not clear if Bush raised the issue with Olmert when they met this week.

Stamp to honor wartime rescuer

The United States Postal Service will issue a stamp next week honoring an American diplomat who helped Jews escape the Holocaust. The stamp will honor Hiram Bingham IV, who provided fake visas to journalist and scholar Varian Fry, who helped Jews pass into safety.

Bingham also hid Jews in his home after he was posted in southern France in 1940.

After German and French officials complained of his activities, Bingham was transferred to Argentina.

In 1946, he resigned from the U.S. Foreign Service in protest over the U.S. refusal to investigate how war criminals were being given safe haven in the South American country.

Jewish teens distribute funds

A group of Jewish teenagers in Chicago distributed money to social service organizations.

The teens distributed the \$31,750 to programs in Chicago, Israel and Africa as part of the Voices program sponsored by the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

The federation provided \$25,000 for the program, which was supplemented by the teens.

WORLD

Pope fails to bless Righteous Gentiles

On the first day of his trip to Poland, Pope Benedict XVI failed to bless 41 Poles who helped Jews during the Holocaust, as had been expected.

Organizers of the pope's four-day visit had agreed his vehicle would slow down to bless the Righteous Gentiles at the Warsaw Ghetto Monument to deliver the blessing, but that did not occur. The reason for the change in his plan is not yet known.

On Sunday, the pope is scheduled to visit Auschwitz.

Parley focuses on Latin American Jews

Latin American Jews met recently to discuss how to build Jewish life among young adult Jews. More than 1,000 people attended the meeting earlier this month in Mar del Plata, Argentina.

To have more than 1,000 people attend from a region with just 500,000 Jews shows the meeting's importance, said Alejandro Kladniew, the Latin American/Caribbean director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which organized the event.