

**IN THE NEWS**
**Abbas calls for referendum**

Mahmoud Abbas announced he would call for a Palestinian referendum on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The declaration came Monday evening, after talks with Hamas on accepting such a solution apparently failed.

The vote would be based on a plan drafted earlier this month by Palestinians jailed in Israel.

It calls for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and eastern Jerusalem, the areas Israel captured in the 1967 Six-Day War.

**Two slain in Gaza airstrike**

Israel killed two suspected Palestinian terrorists in an airstrike in the northern Gaza Strip.

Missiles fired by military aircraft killed the two men, believed to be members of the Popular Resistance Committees, in their car in the Jabaliya refugee camp Monday.

The attack also wounded three passers-by. Israeli security sources said the men were actively involved in cross-border rocket fire from Gaza into Israel.

**Americans to be Righteous Gentiles**

A Unitarian minister and his wife from the United States will be named Righteous Gentiles.

The Rev. Waitstill Sharp and his wife, Martha, who helped save hundreds from the Nazis in Czechoslovakia, will receive the designation from Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial later this month.

The couple, who were living in Wellesley Hills, Mass., left their own children behind as Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Nazis in 1939 and helped save Jews, including 29 children, and non-Jewish anti-fascists by smuggling them out of the country.

# WORLD REPORT

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## Jewish-gospel music celebration highlights help for storm's victims

By LARRY LUXNER

**N**ATCHEZ, Miss. (JTA) — It was an evening to remember: One hundred and seventeen Jewish high-school students from suburban Los Angeles — some of them wearing yarmulkes — singing, swaying and clapping their hands to gospel music at a black church in southern Mississippi.

Jewish music was on the concert program too, leading to a curious mix of melodies ranging from "Oseh Shalom" and "Kumbaya" to "Worship Him, Christ Our Lord."

The ecumenical event, which took place in early April, was led jointly by visiting Rabbi Robert Baruch and the Rev. Birdon Mitchell Jr. of Zion Chapel Station African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Natchez, a river port city founded in 1790.

"Very few white Jewish kids from Beverly Hills get to visit a Southern black church," said Kathy Stephens, president of the local United Way chapter, which helped organize the students' visit. "They could hardly shop at Wal-Mart without the townspeople stopping them and thanking them."

The "healing concert" was the city's way of thanking the young Jewish volunteers for helping in the wake of last year's Hurricane Katrina, which overwhelmed Natchez with stricken refugees from New Orleans.

It also highlighted continuing efforts by a variety of Jewish organizations to bring relief to local residents in the wake of the worst natural disaster in Mississippi history.

This summer, the Union for Reform

Judaism's Adult Mitzvah Corps as well as the National Federation of Temple Youth will send volunteers to the Magnolia State, as will Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and other groups.

Jonathan Cohen, director of Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Miss., said many of the Jewish volunteers likely to visit Mississippi this summer will be staying at Jacobs Camp, which immediately after Katrina helped distribute over three million pounds of relief supplies to needy families throughout the Gulf Coast.

"We've been getting a lot of calls from people in New Orleans over the last few weeks, asking if they could evacuate here," Cohen said.

"Our message is that once our camp season ends the second week of August, we'll be open as an evacuation center if duty calls," he said. "We'll be ready to take in people if that's what we need to do."

Liat Yardeni-Funk, director of Yozma, the social action initiative of the Los Angeles-based Milken Community High School, said her school's weeklong trip to Mississippi came in reaction to a challenge issued by principal Roger Fuller to help Katrina victims.

"A task force was established, and we investigated whether a trip to the region was feasible. We had been meeting three times a week for the last four months to decide what we could do to bring relief, healing and hope to this region," Yardeni-Funk said. "We were looking for a sister city that was not necessarily destroyed, because we were concerned about health hazards, but rather

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ONE  
YEAR AFTER  
KATRINA

## ■ More than 100 L.A. Jewish high-school students came to help the Mississippi city

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a place that had absorbed evacuees.”

When a humanitarian mission to Natchez was finally agreed upon, Yardeni-Funk said, “we expected 25 students would want to leave school and pay \$730 each to come out here. But within 10 days, 100 signed up — half 10th-graders and half 11th-graders. The trip was filled to capacity. We had to book three different flights just to get here.”

Although Natchez was spared the physical brunt of the killer hurricane, it suffered collateral damage in the form of economic disaster. As many as 32,000 refugees from New Orleans — many of them from the poverty-stricken lower Ninth Ward — flooded into Natchez after the New Orleans Times-Picayune listed the town as an evacuation site without local officials’ knowledge.

“People came here because they knew hotel rooms in Baton Rouge would be full,” Stephens said, recalling the disaster. “The convention center downtown was turned into a processing center for the Red Cross to give vouchers. In one week alone, they processed 10,800 families. These people were camped out for blocks along the river. We had a population explosion.

Gasoline was a problem, food was a problem. Thank God they weren’t shooting at us when the levees were breaking.”

Right after the storm, United Way converted Zion Chapel AME Church into a distribution center, closing the

Sunday school for six weeks. But that center quickly ran out of food, clothing and other essential items.

That’s where the Jewish high-school students helped out, spending \$50 each at a local Wal-Mart to restock the distribution center with everything ranging from diapers to baby food to shoes.

“We made sure each student got to pick what he or she would have wanted if everything they had got destroyed,” Yardeni-Funk said, adding that

the money came from \$10,000 the school had raised through a dozen or so fund-raising activities in Los Angeles.

In addition, the 117 Milken students and faculty visiting Natchez helped in simple construction work and painted a house now being finished by Habitat for Humanity. They also repainted the interior walls of the Natchez Children’s Home, one of the nation’s oldest orphanages.

“This was a very difficult time for us,” said Natchez Mayor Phillip West. “Many of those people left home intending to stay no more than a day or so. I had only been the mayor for one year, and I had no idea this was going to happen. But God has a way of working things out.”

Right before the church concert, townspeople prepared a kosher fried tilapia dinner for their Jewish guests — a challenge in itself, Stephens said.

“The most difficult thing was understanding exactly what kosher is, and how to cook it Southern-style,” said Stephens. “The school bought them pots, pans and utensils, and donated them to the church

afterwards. They also donated all the art supplies they had to the school system. The impact here was great.”

After the concert, West presented Rennie Wrubel, headmaster of Milken Community High School, with a key to the city.

“When we heard about Katrina, we knew we had to act, but we just didn’t know where we’d put our efforts. ‘Beshert’ means meant to be in Yiddish, and I believe this was beshert, that we were meant to

come to your community,” Wrubel told the mayor. “I couldn’t think of a place I’d rather be.”

Apparently, this is not the first time Jews have done something for the town.

“Back in the early 1900s, the Jewish merchants were the ones who saved Natchez when the boll weevil ate up all the cotton. We lost that industry, and the Jews kept the town going,” Stephens explained. “Interestingly enough, at the time the church was built, it was the height of Judaism here. There were 117 Jewish families in Natchez — which is exactly how many kids and staff we had here at church the other night.”

Stephens said that, with the 2006 hurricane season now under way, community leaders will soon conduct a drill to see how well Natchez responds to another crisis.

“We’re trying to sharpen our skills,” she said. “We’re a small community, so care-givers are extremely tired. We haven’t had a break, and now we’re going into another hurricane season. Our biggest question is: Can we all physically hold up if something happens?”

‘Each student got to pick what he or she would have wanted if everything they had got destroyed.’

**Liat Yardeni-Funk**  
Director, Yozma

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## New York parade salutes Israel

NEW YORK (JTA)—Tens of thousands of marchers and top local politicians participated in the Salute to Israel Parade in New York City.

Rally organizers estimated Sunday’s event attracted nearly 100,000 people, including New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (R-N.Y.), Sen. Hillary Clinton

(D-N.Y.) and Gov. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.). Tovah Feldshuh, an actress known for portraying Golda Meir in the Broadway play “Golda’s Balcony,” was the honorary grand marshal.

The parade, which featured floats, posters and marching bands, marked the 58th anniversary of Israeli independence. ■

# O.U. bears fruit in Ukrainian town

By VLADIMIR MATVEYEV

KHARKOV, Ukraine (JTA) — The Orthodox Union's kosher symbol — a "U" inside a circle — is probably the best-known kosher food designation in the world.

But the Orthodox Union itself is virtually unknown in the former Soviet Union. Unlike Chabad and the Reform movement, the umbrella organization of modern Orthodoxy has not made great efforts to bring its form of Jewish practice to the vast Russian-speaking world.

In fact, in the 16 years that the other two groups have expanded their congregations and trained Russian-speaking rabbis to serve in Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, the Orthodox Union has focused its efforts on just one city: Kharkov, Ukraine's second-largest city, home of the Joseph K. Miller Torah Center.

Rabbi Tzvi Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, says that when the Soviet Union opened its doors to foreign religious activity, a few O.U. lay leaders began pushing the group to start working there. The leadership's position, he recalls, was rather than launch an all-out effort throughout the former Soviet territory, "we decided we'd do one thing, and we'd do it well."

The group's president, Stephen Savitsky, says the Orthodox Union came to Kharkov in 1992 "to rebuild a Jewish community that was once one of the glories of the Jewish world."

Miller, a lay treasurer for the group, was a key figure in the project before he was killed in the 1988 plane crash in Lockerbie, Scotland. The center, which runs religious and educational programs focused on teaching Hebrew and Judaism, is named after him and is supervised by Rabbi Shlomo Asraf, the only O.U. rabbi working in the former Soviet Union. Asraf divides his time between Kharkov and his home in Israel.

Today, the Miller Center is home to the Sha'alavim School, with about 120 girls and boys from first through 11th grade. Those not from Kharkov live in the center's dormitory, along with three Israeli couples and a handful of counselors who teach in the school and run other educational programs. The couples, who act as dorm parents as well, stay for three years. The husbands, advanced yeshiva students who are

not yet rabbis, provide spiritual leadership. An estimated 400 to 600 people — mainly students and their family members — take part in O.U.-organized activities throughout the year.

The school and dorms are free. Students pay only for the bus that transports them to class.

This spring, Arik Wolf, the O.U. director in Kharkov, held five seders on the first two nights of Passover, which some 600 to 700 people attended each evening. A separate seder was held in a small city

near Kharkov.

The Sha'alavim school, which accepts only students with a Jewish mother, teaches Jewish history and practice from an Orthodox perspective.

"All of our students are from totally assimilated families," said Moshe Rosenbaum, an Israeli who teaches at the school. "But they began to understand and feel what does it mean to be a Jew."

The students — who almost exclusively come from non-observant and assimilated families — seem to enjoy the balance between religious and secular studies.

"I like learning Hebrew and Jewish tradition here," said one of the students, 15-year-old Oleg Lesaev. "And I like the teachers' attitude to us at school."

While the school offers a full standardized secular curriculum that is similar to that of other Ukrainian schools, "the main objective for us is to teach students to better understand better Judaism," Wolf said.

While those who go to the school or participate in other O.U. educational programs may indeed understand and appreciate Jewish tradition better than their parents, they hardly consider themselves Orthodox.

"I don't need this distinction between differ Orthodox and Reform Judaism," said Shimon Snurnikov, 21, who attends lectures at the O.U. Torah Center. "The main thing to me is to be a Jew and observe tradition."

The group's North American leadership says its goal is not to push young Ukrainian Jews to become more observant, but encourage them to move to Israel.

"The goal is aliyah, not religious indoctrination," Weinreb told JTA.

Those who work at the Miller Center sometimes feel as if they're waging a lonely battle. They wonder whether anyone in the larger Jewish world recognizes the efforts they're making to bring a modern form of Orthodox Judaism to Ukraine.

"The O.U. puts us off to the side," Wolf told JTA. "They don't give us publicity. We're like the black sheep in the O.U. family. I'm sure if they really knew what we do, that would change. We're doing holy work — these are lost souls here."

But Wolf estimates that 30 percent of each year's graduating class goes to Israel on a variety of organized programs, most of them to continue their religious studies.

"We help them go to the places we want,"

he says. "The boys we send to Kiryat Noar, and the girls to Beit Ulpana, both in Jerusalem."

Later, many stay on, and are eventually joined by their parents. According to O.U. representatives, some 1,000 young Kharkov Jews have

made aliyah through the group's efforts so far. The group runs a community center in Jerusalem where the ex-Kharkov Jewish youth can get together and preserve their social network.

"In Israel, we keep in contact," Wolf said. "We meet them at the airport, we get together each holiday, we run activities for them at our center. We are their family in Israel, their mama and papa."

Some Jewish leaders in Ukraine say the O.U. has not expanded beyond Kharkov because the Orthodox niche has already been successfully filled by Chabad in this part of the world.

But Asraf said this is not so.

"There is no competition with Chabad," he said. "We work in full cooperation with Chabad."

Chabad's leading official in Ukraine agreed.

"We are in cooperation, not in competition with the O.U.," said Meir Stambler, chairman of the council of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine, a Chabad umbrella organization. He added that this year, the two groups will launch a joint educational project in Ukraine. ■

ACROSS  
THE FORMER  
SOVIET  
UNION

'We're like the black  
sheep in the O.U. family.'

Arik Wolf  
O.U. director in Kharkov

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## NORTH AMERICA

**Minnesota Democrat sorry for Nation of Islam link**

A Democratic candidate for the U.S. Congress told Jews in Minnesota that he was wrong to dismiss concerns that the Rev. Louis Farrakhan is anti-Semitic. State Rep. Keith Ellison acknowledged in a May 28 letter to the local Jewish Community Relations Council that he failed to scrutinize the positions of the Nation of Islam and its leader, Farrakhan, during his association with the group for about 18 months in the mid-1990s.

Ellison, who is considered a favorite to win the congressional seat in November, would become the first Muslim ever elected to Congress. He said he "wrongly dismissed concerns that they were anti-Semitic. I should have come to that conclusion earlier than I did." Farrakhan has said that Judaism is a gutter religion, among other remarks.

**Minister opposes Israel divestment**

A Presbyterian minister in Boston denounced the Presbyterian Church USA's resolution to divest from companies that do business with Israel.

Speaking at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston's annual meeting last week, the Rev. Hurmon Hamilton of Roxbury Presbyterian Church and the president of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, said he would work within the church and with interfaith allies to rescind the national church's stance on divestment.

The Presbyterian Church USA is meeting in Birmingham, Ala., later this month to revisit the issue.

**Torah dedicated to bus crash victims**

A Torah was dedicated in New Jersey to the 12 victims of a bus crash in Chile.

Six of the 12 people killed in the March crash were members of the Jewish Congregation of Concordia in Monroe Township, N.J., where the Torah was dedicated.

More than 400 people attended the ceremony, the Newark Star-Ledger reported.

The victims were on a trip with a B'nai B'rith group when a bus they were traveling on plunged down a cliff.

**Liberal mikvahs growing**

The number of non-Orthodox Jewish ritual baths in North America is growing. Most of the 20 or so mikvahs are less than 5 years old, according to organizers of "Reclaiming Mikveh," a three-day conference of clergy and educators meeting this week in Newton, Mass. Almost all are affiliated with Reform and Conservative congregations, which often are blocked from using Orthodox-owned mikvahs.

The conference is sponsored by the Union for Reform Judaism's Northeast Council in partnership with 32 other local and national Jewish groups.

**Proposed JCC gets grant**

A planned JCC in California received a \$10 million grant. The grant was announced June 1 by the Jewish Community Endowment Fund of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, the San Jose Mercury-News reported.

The Taube-Koret Campus for Jewish Life, which still needs local government approval, would cover more than eight acres and include two swimming pools, a playing field, meeting rooms, a cafe and preschool, as well as nearly 200 living units for the elderly, reported the Mercury News. Construction, expected to last two years, could begin as early as spring 2007.

## WORLD

**Poll: Europeans cool on Palestinians**

Pro-Palestinian sentiment in Europe is waning, according to a top pollster. Stan Greenberg, a former pollster for President Clinton, recently conducted an opinion poll in Europe on behalf of The Israel Project.

He told The Jerusalem Post on Sunday that the results showed a "dramatic" shift away from previously widespread pro-Palestinian sympathy, especially in France.

Greenberg said many Europeans used to see the Palestinians as struggling against a "colonial" Israel, but that has changed. "Suddenly, it is the Palestinians who may be the extremists, or who are allied with extremists who threaten Europe's own society."

## MIDDLE EAST

**Five killed in Gaza shootout**

Five Palestinians died in a clash between Fatah and Hamas gunmen in the Gaza Strip. Sunday night's shootout in the town of Khan Yunis was the worst single incident of internal Palestinian violence since Hamas won Palestinian Authority elections in January.

Most of the fatalities appeared to be relatives of a local Hamas chief who were traveling with him when their vehicle came under fire.

The radical Islamist group vowed revenge. In a separate incident, a Hamas member in Gaza's Jabaliya refugee camp died when a blast tore through his home Monday. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

**Crackdown on 'observant' draft dodgers**

Israel is cracking down on women who shirk mandatory military service by falsely claiming to be religiously observant. Almost one in three Jewish women in Israel is exempted from military conscription on grounds of piety, but recent revelations that many of them — including several pop singers and actresses — lied about the depth of their spiritual commitment have prompted a backlash.

The Ministerial Legislation Committee this week approved an amendment to Israel's National Service Law under which the military would be empowered to revoke exemptions issued to women found to have falsely claimed to be religious.

**Israeli professor found guilty of slander**

An Israeli court found a Haifa University professor guilty of slandering a fellow Israeli academic. The court ordered Steven Plaut last Friday to pay \$17,000 plus expenses and legal fees.

Plaut, a business professor known for his hawkish views, had called Neve Gordon of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev a "Judenrat wannabe" and "fanatic anti-Semite."

**Power cut in Israel prompts outrage**

Israel's Electric Corporation came under fire for an unannounced power cut.

Electricity supplies were repeatedly, if briefly, suspended throughout Israel on Sunday and Monday in what authorities called a bid to offset high demand due to air-conditioning needs. The move meant lost work for countless Israelis who use computers, and massive traffic disruptions as traffic lights went out.

One teenage driver was killed after a truck rammed into his vehicle at a junction during one power cut. Firefighters had to be summoned to extract people from an estimated 80 elevators. The Electric Corporation, facing public outcry, pledged to find a way to avoid similar measures Tuesday despite the continuing heat wave.