


IN THE NEWS
**Olmert lauds
Bush on Zarqawi**

Ehud Olmert congratulated President Bush on the killing of the Al-Qaida chief in Iraq.

The Prime Minister's Office said Olmert called Bush on Thursday after receiving word of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike.

"The prime minister told the president that he serves as an example of the way in which terror must be fought," the office said in a statement.

The Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, Mahmoud Zahar, said in Islamabad, Pakistan, that the "assassination of any of the people who are resisting" will "not end the resistance."

**U.S., Israeli rabbis to
discuss conversion**

An association of Orthodox rabbis and Israel's Chief Rabbinate agreed to form a joint commission to investigate matters of conversion.

Thursday's decision follows word last month that the rabbinate, an Orthodox establishment that decides on matters of conversion, would recognize only Diaspora conversions by individuals on its short list of approved rabbis.

While the joint commission deliberates, conversions already completed and certified by the council or the Beth Din of America, as well as those now under way, will be accepted by the Chief Rabbinate, according to Rabbi Basil Herring, the executive vice president of the rabbinate.

**Abbas to announce
a referendum date**

Mahmoud Abbas reportedly is set to announce a referendum on coexistence with Israel.

The Palestinian Authority president will make the announcement over the weekend, Reuters reported Thursday.

The Cabinet, led by Hamas, opposed the referendum. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is ready to negotiate with Abbas.

WORLD REPORT

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My ritual bath overfloweth: Liberal mikvahs spring up in U.S.

By SUE FISHKOFF

NEWTON, Mass. (JTA) — Anita Diamant, a Jewish educator and best-selling author of "The Red Tent," remembers going to Boston's Orthodox mikvah, or ritual bath, years ago for her husband's conversion.

"We sat in a tiny foyer, with the sound of the washer and dryer going next door," she recalls. "After we signed the check, we were out in the parking lot, surrounded by broken glass. We took the rabbi out to lunch and that was it. I thought, it should be better than this. Wouldn't it be nice to have a place where people could raise a glass and say, 'Mazel tov?'"

Today, Diamant is founder and board president of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Education Center, a 2-year-old facility in this Boston suburb.

Built next-door to a Conservative synagogue, Mayyim Hayyim is a transdenominational mikvah available to men, women and children seeking to mark life transitions, observe the laws of family purity and create new rituals of healing and spiritual growth.

In its short life, it has become wildly popular. More than 500 conversions and 2,000 other immersions have taken place in its two ritual pools.

There are fresh flowers, a light and airy atrium, and a comfortable waiting area where friends and family can gather to celebrate.

The guest books are filled with descriptions such as "beautiful," "uplifting" and "wonderful," not words that liberal Jews have often associated with a ritual they so long rejected.

But along with other Jewish traditions that are being re-examined and reshaped by liberal Jews today, mikvah is experiencing a nationwide resurgence.



Courtesy of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters
A father holds his baby during a ritual immersion in Newton, Mass.

Mikvahs have traditionally been used by observant Jews who follow the laws of family purity, or niddah, which obligate women to immerse themselves monthly. And indeed, many Orthodox facilities boast an aesthetically pleasing environment and are designed to handle a steady stream of users. Mikvahs have also been used by Orthodox and a growing number of liberal Jews as part of the conversion process.

Since the first non-Orthodox mikvah opened at the Conservative movement's University of Judaism in Los Angeles 26 years ago, nearly two dozen others have popped up, almost all in the past five years.

Most liberal mikvahs, including that of the
Continued on page 2

■ An increasing number of Jews are taking the plunge into a traditional Jewish ritual

Continued from page 1

University of Judaism, were built because Conservative and Reform rabbis needed a place to perform conversions. An increasing number of Orthodox mikvahs, while open to all Jews for ritual immersion, have in recent years barred non-Orthodox conversions.

The list of liberal mikvahs is growing rapidly. Already they have been built in California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, New York and Ontario, to name a few, and others are being planned. Unlike Mayyim Hayyim, most are associated with a Reform or Conservative synagogue. All are open to the entire Jewish community, however, and the trend is more and more toward collaborative, interdenominational ventures.

"All over, more and more people are talking about mikvah," says Norman Cohen, provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. "It's part of a wider search for people trying to give concrete expression to the search for spiritual meaning. In most urban areas, if they don't already have a community mikvah, someone is thinking about it. And the return to tradition is only going to lead to more."

This week, 200 clergy and educators gathered at Mayyim Hayyim for "Reclaiming Mikveh," a three-day conference to share ideas, experiences and technical know-how.

Sponsored by the Union for Reform Judaism's Outreach Institute, and funded largely by the Combined Jewish Philan-

thropies of Greater Boston, this was believed to be the first national conference on a religious issue in which the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal movements all partnered.

How surprising, some participants opined, that the cause around which they chose to rally was mikvah.

"It's physical, it's emotional, it talks to all the senses," Cohen says. Referring to the back-in-the-womb feeling of safety many first-time mikvah-goers experience when they immerse themselves, he suggests, "it brings us back to the very beginning."

"We are creating a new Judaism, 'min-hag America,' a strong, healthy, creative American Judaism," says Diamant, using the Hebrew word for custom.

She hopes Mayyim Hayyim can serve as a model for others. And that already appears to be happening.

On the first afternoon of the conference, Neal Linson of Congregation Eilat in Mission Viejo, Calif., is busily taking notes at one of Mayyim Hayyim's two ritual pools.

Upstairs, he unrolls detailed architectural plans for the mikvah he is building at his southern California congregation, which is Conservative and serves about 280 families.

Ironically, Chabad is building a mikvah an hour away, as is the local Reform synagogue, "so Orange County will go from no mikvahs to three in one year," he says.

Although Linson himself is deeply committed to the project, which he is funding himself, he doubts whether his community is behind him.

"A number of people are against it, they think it's anti-woman," he says. "To men, it's a very feminine ritual that has been perverted. If it's made to be nice and wonderful, for men and women it can be a spiritually uplifting ritual that you carry with you for a long time."

Some liberal mikvahs are built by single donors like Linsom, who hope their passion for the ritual will generate community support.

But that doesn't always happen.

The 3-year-old Reform mikvah in Ithaca, N.Y., was funded by one generous woman, but volunteer attendant Marlaine Darfler

acknowledges that hardly anyone uses it.

"It's hugely underutilized, the education is not there," she says. The only regular visitors are Darfler and the other mikvah ladies, who use it to observe family purity laws.

If this non-Orthodox mikvah hadn't been built, Darfler wouldn't be observing this traditional ritual. She felt "uncomfortable" in the local Orthodox mikvah, she says. "Only when it felt comfortable and mine did I begin to use it regularly."

That often happens, others report. Once a liberal mikvah is built and Reform and Conservative rabbis start using it for conversions, they begin referring their congregants for

other reasons, particularly before marriage. It's also a good outreach tool.

"Mikvah attracts Jewish people who are not otherwise

connected," says Penelope Oppenheimer Kieffer, former head of the mikvah at the University of Judaism. "People come before their wedding, or because they've adopted children, and they don't belong to a congregation.

"That gives you an opening to invite them to a support group, or a class. It could be a staging ground for them to make their way into the larger Jewish community."

After they're built, interest increases, and conversions, which were expected to provide most of the customers, end up providing about half.

Growing numbers of visitors come to these mikvahs to celebrate life cycle events, provide comfort in times of tragedy or healing after recovery from disease or abuse. People are creating new mikvah rituals to mark the onset of menopause, the end of a marriage or going to college or Israel.

Even in small Jewish communities, the mikvah trend is taking hold.

Libby Bottero of Eugene, Ore., and her husband, Joseph, built their own mikvah four years ago, following directions given in the Artscroll book, "Mikvaot."

"It's great that there are places like Mayyim Hayyim, but even in a small community you can do this," Bottero says. "The more mikvahs the better, so everybody has a choice, and it can become a normative part of Jewish life." ■

'It's a very feminine ritual that has been perverted.'

Neal Linson
Congregation Eilat



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Candidate confronting a past with Farrakhan

By DAVID J. SILVERMAN

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A Minnesota Democrat is taking a Jewish detour in his bid to become the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress.

Keith Ellison, the party-backed candidate in a heavily Democratic Minneapolis district, seems to be in a strong position to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in November. He would replace Martin Sabo, a retiring Democrat with a solid pro-Israel record who has held the seat since 1978.

Ellison's major obstacle to making history could be his association a decade ago with the Nation of Islam, led by the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, notorious for his anti-Jewish statements.

Ellison, 42, is making a strong effort to put his past behind him.

"Young people get into things at certain times in their lives that they think will be helpful to their community," Ellison told JTA in a telephone interview. "I should have examined the message of Mr. Farrakhan closer."

In a May 28 letter to Stephen Silberfarb, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, Ellison expressed regret for his participation in the Nation of Islam. Among other things, he helped raise funds for the 1995 Million Man March on Washington, and once reportedly appeared at a fund-raiser with Khalid Muhammad, a Farrakhan deputy known for some of the most virulent anti-Jewish rhetoric in the Nation of Islam.

"I did not adequately scrutinize the positions and statements of the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan and Khalid Muhammad," he wrote of his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, which he said lasted for about 18 months in the mid-1990s.

"I wrongly dismissed concerns that they were anti-Semitic. They were and are anti-Semitic and I should have come to that conclusion earlier than I did."

Silberfarb said Ellison's apologies might not be enough for some Jews, who revile Farrakhan for calling Judaism a "gutter religion" and describing Jews as the pre-eminent oppressors of people of color.

The Minnesota race is important for the Democrats because Sabo's retirement announcement took many by surprise,

and Democrats need to preserve every seat they can if they hope to win back the House in November.

Ellison maintains that he does not harbor any anti-Semitic or racist beliefs.

"I saw in the Nation of Islam, and specifically the Million Man March, an effort to promote African-American self-sufficiency, personal responsibility and community economic development," he said in the letter.

Ellison told JTA he wrote the letter "to reassure friends and allies that the person they have come to know is really who I am."

Another major hurdle for Ellison is his writing when he attended the University of Minnesota Law School in the late 1980s.

Ellison confirmed to JTA that he was the author of two opinion articles, penned under the name Keith E. Hakim, in the university's Minnesota Daily. The articles appear on an anti-Democratic Web log, www.minnesotademocratsexposed.com.

In one article, Hakim calls for "back payment of the 'black tax,' which is the price hike that ghetto merchants and pawnbrokers charge black consumers," a reference some believe refer to Jews.

In another Minnesota Daily article discussing the legacy of Malcolm X, Hakim describes Arabs as "not devils" — meaning they were not oppressors of blacks — but says the same is not true of "the colonial masters and slavers of Western Europe, America, Australia, South Africa and Israel."

Ellison said the articles were only one element in a larger picture.

"I'm not gonna back away from it," he told JTA. "Hopefully people will look at the whole person, not just something they wrote 16 or 17 years ago."

Dan Rosen, a Minneapolis lawyer and board member of the JCRC, told JTA that the writings are critical.

"I'm concerned that while he was in law school he was publicly advocating bringing the message of Stokely Carmichael," a radical black separatist, "to the University of Minnesota," he said.

Rosen also dismissed Ellison's expla-

nation of his post-college association with Farrakhan as disingenuous.

"You cannot as an adult and as a lawyer have a lengthy association with an organization with the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam and deny that during that time you understood that the organization was anti-Semitic without either insulting the intelligence of the Jews or owning up to a distinct lack of intelligence on your own part," he said.

Others said they accepted the sincerity of Ellison's letter, and said it signified a more mature politician.

"I would tell the Jewish community not to worry," said Jay Benanav, a St. Paul city council member and board member of the JCRC.

"I'm usually hypersensitive about anti-Semitism," said Benanav, who was born in Israel to parents who were Holocaust survivors. "We all make decisions in our lives that we can't run away

from. I'm sure he will show that he regrets it when he gets elected to office."

State Rep. Frank Hornstein is urging his fellow Jews to judge Ellison based on his record and statements while serving in the state legislature.

"People certainly do grow and evolve, and I think that's certainly the case with Keith," said Hornstein, who has sat next to Ellison since the two were elected in 2002. "He's been nothing but a friend to the Jewish community."

Hornstein lauded Ellison for his work with Jews on housing and civil and human rights issues. He also noted Ellison's attendance at a lecture on anti-Semitism at a synagogue in Hornstein's hometown of Cincinnati last year.

Others counseled a closer look at Ellison. Mark Rotenberg, head of Minnesotans Against Terrorism, emphasized that Ellison's background must not be white-washed.

Ellison "certainly may have had a change of heart," but that doesn't give him "a right to be a congressman," Rotenberg said.

"What people will say during the heat of a campaign may or may not be an indicator of what they will do once they have a virtual lock on a seat in Congress." ■

I should have examined the message of Mr. Farrakhan closer.

Keith Ellison

Houston federation helps out after Katrina

By LARRY LUXNER

HOUSTON (JTA) — Vietnamese-born Chuong Hoang Nguyen was doing fine until Hurricane Katrina destroyed his thriving Louisiana shrimping business nine months ago.

“As soon as Katrina moved into the Gulf of Mexico, I evacuated my wife and four kids to Houston,” he recalled. “Our mobile home was torn away, and my \$70,000 fiberglass boat was destroyed.”

In desperation, Nguyen turned to Second Mile Mission Center, an evangelical Christian charity in suburban Stafford, Texas.

“They gave me food, clothes, household items and powdered milk for my baby,” he said. “I think they’re doing a good job. They’re helping people get everything they need.”

Likewise, Joyce Armstead lost her New Orleans house and everything in it after the levees broke in Katrina’s wake, flooding her home with 6 feet of water.

“We checked into the Radisson, thinking we’d go home in three days,” recalled Armstead, 69. “That Monday after the hurricane, the sun came out and people started leaving because they thought the worst was over. But the water was steadily rising. We ended up walking in the water up to our chests from the hotel to Tulane. My son had to carry his 5-month-old baby over his head.”

Eventually airlifted to Houston, Armstead ended up at an apartment complex whose lease is being paid by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“I cried every night when I first came here,” Armstead said. “This mission has helped me tremendously. They gave us food, toilet articles and a \$20 card for gasoline.”

Although none of the 60,000 hurricane victims whom the mission has helped are Jewish, Second Mile is thriving thanks in part to a \$75,000 grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston.

“This gift from the federation is very significant, because we needed additional funding,” said Karen Parker, the mission’s director of development. “We weren’t prepared for such substantial growth from one year to the next.”

The mission has 21,000 square feet of storage for canned and dry food, clothing,



Larry Luxner/JTA

Marc Levinson of the Neighborhood Centers social service agency points to a map of Houston that shows sites where Katrina evacuees are being helped by his organization.

kitchen utensils, furniture and bedding. It assists about 200 clients a day, 30 percent of them Katrina evacuees like Nguyen and Armstead. Its self-stated mission is “to provide an opportunity for people to hear and respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by first building a relationship that meets their physical needs.”

It’s one of 28 Houston-area agencies and organizations helped by the federation in Katrina’s aftermath. Eighteen of these

agencies serve the general community — including the Zip Code Assistance Ministries, the Houston Food Bank and Tyler County Hospital — while the remaining 10 assist only Jews.

The federation provided a \$2.2 million grant, of which \$1.5 million came from United Jewish Communities, and \$700,000 was raised by Houston’s Jewish community, said federation CEO Lee Wunsch.

While Houston itself wasn’t hit by Katrina, Texas’ largest city became even larger with the influx of nearly 300,000 evacuees from New Orleans, including 5,000 Jews.

That boosted Houston’s Jewish population to 50,000, though according to Wunsch, only 40 or so New Orleans Jews remain.

“Most of these people went wherever

they had either family or friends. Those who came to Houston just came here because it was the next closest big city driving from New Orleans,” he told JTA. “A lot of people had no place to go. You can’t get around Houston without a car, and for some families, that in itself was an issue.”

Sherri Tarr, who evacuated her home in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie, was evacuated first to Jackson, Miss., and then to Birmingham, Ala. She and her children eventually joined her husband, Matthew, in Houston, where the federation found the family a place to stay.

“We lived with a couple in their townhouse and had two bedrooms,” said Tarr, who returned to New Orleans last week. “My kids got enrolled in the Jewish day school there.

My husband got an office and lab space at Rice University. Thank God we’ve both been working this entire time. We never lost a paycheck.”

Other evacuees weren’t so lucky.

Jodi and Raul Zighelboim, their two children and dog fled New Orleans with little more than a suitcase. Their home was destroyed, and Raul Zighelboim — who is originally from Peru — spent months looking for a job. The family at least had the emotional support of the Houston Jewish community.

ONE
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KATRINA

Texas’ largest city became even larger with the influx of nearly 300,000 evacuees from New Orleans, including 5,000 Jews.

Post-Katrina, firm is still cleaning up

By LARRY LUXNER

NEW ORLEANS (JTA) — Anybody who watches TV for very long will inevitably see 82-year-old David Oreck pitching his “amazing Oreck XL 8-pound upright vacuum cleaner.”

What most viewers don't know is that Oreck, his brother Marshall and his son, Tom Oreck, chairman and CEO of Oreck Corp., head one of the most prominent Jewish families in Louisiana.

“The Orecks are major contributors, not only to the Jewish community but to the entire city,” said Roselle Ungar, interim executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans. “They not only write checks, but roll up their sleeves and get involved.”

Last year, the Oreck Corp. gained even more respect for promptly and generously helping hundreds of its desperate employees in Louisiana and Mississippi following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

“It's well-known that we're Jewish. It's not a secret,” Tom Oreck told JTA. “We're one of the top four or five locally owned companies in New Orleans.”

Tom Oreck, 54, is on the board of Touro Synagogue, a Reform house of worship.

“My great-grandfather was named Oreckovsky, but he thought that didn't sound American enough, so he shortened it to Oreck,” he said. “My dad founded the company in 1963 in his Connecticut warehouse, which was an empty rail car in the back of a building.”

Forty-three years after that humble beginning, Oreck — headquartered in the New Orleans suburb of Harahan — is today one of the largest U.S. manufacturers of upright vacuum cleaners.

At last count, Oreck had 1,200 employees, 500 retail outlets — including two in Israel — and annual sales of around \$300 million.

Tom Oreck is board member of Jewish Children's Regional Services, a sponsor of the New Orleans JCC Maccabi team and the father of four.

“As individuals and as a company, we've given to every synagogue and every sisterhood,” he said. “We've supplied the JCC with vacuum cleaners for the last 15 years. There isn't a Jewish organization in New Orleans that doesn't come to me for vacuum cleaners.”

Oreck Corp. also had a well-rehearsed disaster emergency plan — yet nothing could prepare the company for Hurricane Katrina, which struck last August with unprecedented fury, leveling buildings along the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast and triggering levee breaches in New Orleans that flooded the city for months.

Oreck said the emergency plan called for powering down the company's computer system and sending tapes to a backup site in Boulder, Colo. In addition, Oreck's call center was relocated from New Orleans to third-party call centers in Phoenix and Denver. Its 375,000-square-foot factory in Long Beach, Miss., was shut down in stages, and employees and their families evacuated to Dallas and elsewhere.

Oreck said he fled New Orleans “with three pairs of underwear, three shirts and three pairs of socks,” because he expected to be back in a matter of days.

“I evacuated my family to Houston,” he told JTA. “I'm a pilot, and brought them all out to the Lakefront Airport and flew to Houston. That airport later ended up under eight feet of water.”

Many of his employees weren't so lucky. Of Oreck's 750 workers in Louisiana and Mississippi, about 250 were “completely wiped out,” he said, losing their homes and possessions.

The company focused on bringing its Web site up and having a company-wide conference call to track the safety of its employees.

Once the skies had cleared, the scene in Mississippi was one of utter devastation.

The factory in Long Beach sustained “tens of millions of dollars in damage,” said Oreck.

Yet within 10 days, the vacuum cleaner plant was up and running again — making Oreck the first major employer on Mississippi's Gulf Coast to reopen following the storm.

“We purchased generators to run the factory, and mobile homes from all across the country. We set up a city nicknamed Oreckville on the parking lot to house our people, and we trucked in food and water.



Larry Luxner

Marshall Oreck, left, the co-founder of Oreck Corp., and CEO Tom Oreck.

We brought in trauma doctors, and insurance specialists to help our people make claims,” he said.

The company also set up a relief fund to help employees who had suffered significant losses. Oreck funded the charity with \$500,000 in seed money, and later raised another \$500,000.

“That money was distributed to our employees to help them rebuild,” Oreck explained. “Within five days

of the storm, we'd set up offices in Dallas. We never missed a payroll. We never paid attention to how much all this was costing, we just said ‘do it.’”

“Oreck has been great,” said Flor Guandique, a staff accountant at the company's New Orleans headquarters, in an article posted on the BRAF Web site. “In a time of great despair and uncertainty, I was reassured that I'd still have a job, that somehow my family could recover.”

Another employee, 17-year veteran Geralyn Mouille, said: “There just isn't a substitute for the loyalty and compassion this company has shown me.”

Sales jumped after the storm, and Oreck said January was his best month ever. The factory has long since returned to 100 percent of pre-Katrina production of about 3,000 vacuum cleaners a day.

ONE
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We've supplied the JCC with vacuum cleaners for the last 15 years.

Tom Oreck
Chairman and CEO, Oreck Corp.

Birtheright nixes woman with West Bank plans

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — This week, the birtheright israel program is celebrating the 100,000th participant on its free, 10-day trips to Israel. But one person who'd hoped to be among the thousands of young Jewish adults joining this summer's festivities won't be.

That's because the woman, a 26-year-old resident of California, was dropped from the program last week when birtheright officials learned that after participating in their program, she planned to join another group in a trip through the Palestinian territories.

Birtheright is standing unapologetically behind its decision on the woman, Sierra, who has denied interview requests and asked that her last name not be used.

Its program is meant to build Jewish identity, officials say, and if participants are using the trip for other purposes, birtheright reserves the right to turn them away.

But a co-founder of Birtheright Unplugged — the name of the program in the Palestinian territories, a clear dig at the birtheright israel brand — says that by denying Sierra a ticket to Israel, birtheright simply confirms the need for alternative programs.

But while Birtheright Unplugged launched a campaign to call attention to the incident, here's the kicker: birtheright learned about the woman's plans from her mother, who — apparently out of concern for her daughter's safety in the Mideast — forwarded them an e-mail in which her daughter details her itinerary and explains that if birtheright israel learned of her plans, she would be dropped from its upcoming trip.

The spat highlights some complex questions with which birtheright must contend: how to keep out those it does not see as its target audience while remaining open enough to meet its goals; and whether or not keeping out people like Sierra, who was seeking to explore the political issues in Israel as well as her Jewish identity, is the most effective way of furthering the program's goals.

Since birtheright's goal is to bring as many young Jewish adults to Israel as money will allow, as few applicants as possible are turned away, officials say.

This means that some who aren't birtheright's target audience can slip through the

cracks, including non-Jews and those who have previously taken part in a peer trip to Israel. Had birtheright not been contacted by this young woman's mother, its officials say, they'd never have known of her plans.

"This is the best possible policy that we decided to endorse, bearing in mind the need to be loyal to our partners and the goals that they set for us," said Gideon Mark, national director of marketing for the birtheright israel program.

These goals, he said, include strengthening participants' Jewish identities, their relationship with the State of Israel and Jewish solidarity worldwide.

Of Birtheright Unplugged, he said: "Theirs is a tiny organization which tries to build on a very successful brand, taking part of its name, trying to teach potential participants in Taglit-birtheright israel how to go to meet with Palestinians with a generous gift funded by the Jewish people. And when Taglit-birtheright israel does not cooperate, then they go to the public and complain."

But Birtheright Unplugged — which says it has hosted just more than 20 young Jews on its programs since its first trip last summer, and expects to bring an additional 15 or 16 this summer — denies the charge.

"We started this program to put trip participants in conversation with Palestinian civil society, to learn firsthand about the situation in Israel/Palestine, and to use their knowledge to make positive change in the world," said Hannah Mermelstein, co-founder of Unplugged.

"By denying Sierra the opportunity to have this educational experience, birtheright israel is further proving the need for our existence."

Birtheright Unplugged takes young Jewish adults through the West Bank to "try to get people to understand what it means to live under occupation," Mermelstein said. Some of those who've taken part in Unplugged have previously been on birtheright israel trips, she added; others have taken part while on their year abroad in college, or while visiting Israel with their families.

The program also takes young Palestin-

ians living in refugee camps to their ancestral homes in Israel.

The group's name, Mermelstein acknowledged, is a reference to birtheright israel, but also refers to something larger.

"We are against this concept of a Jewish birtheright to this place," said the Boston-based Mermelstein.

"We're not afraid of people going on birtheright israel, seeing what they have to say and then coming and seeing what we're showing them on our trip," she said. "It seems like birtheright israel is afraid of having people see things that would put into question the perspective they're trying to

give their participants, or provide information that isn't controlled by birtheright israel."

Birtheright israel officials say that its programs are not political, and that it employs no ideological litmus test for participants. When politics are discussed, they say, its bent has to do with individual tour

guides rather than with any official birtheright policy.

At least several birtheright participants have gone on from the program to work with the pro-Palestinian International Solidarity Movement in the territories. Birtheright did not know in advance of their plans. Although birtheright participants are interviewed before they're granted a spot, there is no uniform roster of questions, and information about post-trip plans is not always solicited, officials said.

For her part, Sierra, the child of an African-American mother and a Jewish father, said she had planned to take part fully in both programs in hopes of learning about "a conflict with people suffering on both sides."

"I simply want to learn about the conflict and learn about Israel," she said in a statement passed on to JTA by Mermelstein. "I do not believe this is mutually exclusive or a reason to remove me from birtheright israel's trip. I hope that I can continue my plans to participate with Birtheright Unplugged's tour and fulfill my dream to learn about my Jewish ancestry and learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

'We are against this concept of a Jewish birtheright to this place.'

Hannah Mermelstein

Co-founder, Birtheright Unplugged

Op-Ed

Send Congress to the Gulf Coast

By SAMMIE MOSHENBERG

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The June 1 start of the hurricane season is upon us, but in reality the 2005 hurricane season isn't over. And it won't be until our nation has made a real commitment to the restoration of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast from the devastation wrought by Katrina and Rita.

As the arguments continue as to how the flooding happened, how the evacuation became a disaster in itself, how New Orleans should be rebuilt and how the area's economy can be revived — one can sense the nation's eyes glazing over. What was clearly once perceived as a national debacle is receding into a merely regional problem.

This sinking feeling of abandonment was the inspiration for organizing Women of the Storm at the beginning of this year. A group of New Orleans and Gulf Coast women of widely diverse backgrounds banded together to save their homes. These women have begun a campaign to get every member of Congress to come to New Orleans and southern Louisiana to witness the impact of Katrina personally. They hope that a firsthand view will lead to a commitment to stay the course for the rebuilding of New Orleans, as well as the rest of the Gulf Coast.

The National Council of Jewish Women signed on to help with this effort.

Statistics just don't do it for grasping the magnitude of Katrina. That became clear to me on a visit more than eight months after the hurricane.

Incredibly, the senators of 21 states have still not made it to the Gulf Coast.

So by all means pitch in if you can. But first, pick up the phone and call your members of Congress. Ask them if they have been to Louisiana, and if they haven't, ask them why not. Or go online and send them an e-mail from www.ncjw.org to urge them to go. The victims of Katrina and Rita need more than a perfunctory vote for relief — they need a passionate commitment to restore their cities and towns, their neighborhoods and their lives. ■

Sammie Moshenberg is director of Washington operations for the National Council of Jewish Women.

Trump's almost-apprentice

By STEVEN I. WEISS

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Orthodox Jewish contestant who almost became Donald Trump's next apprentice isn't going to let his loss in this week's finale get him down.

"I feel great," said Lee Bienstock, the 23-year-old Jewish day-school graduate who was one win away from becoming Trump's next protege on "The Apprentice." Though Bienstock had by many accounts accumulated a stronger record over the course of the reality show's season than his fellow finalist, Sean Yazbeck, his performance in the finale likely cost him the job.

"As far as we're concerned, he won, he just didn't drive away with the car," said Bienstock's father, Mark. "But he already has a convertible, anyway."

Bienstock's appearance on the show, which included missing the tasks for two episodes to observe Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, has nevertheless been an inspiration to many.

"I get e-mails and phone calls from people of all different religions that are so happy that they have someone that's out there that's young who's serving as a role model... from pastors, from rabbis, just all different people from different religions," he told JTA in a phone interview. ■

Other than the holidays, no other element of Bienstock's religious observance made it onto the show, though he says that "any given episode" could have had a running theme: "Lee hasn't eaten the entire time."

Keeping kosher during the show wasn't easy for Bienstock, who said that he lost 20 pounds due to a scraped-together diet of instant soups, instant meals like the Labriute self-heating meals and, quite often, not much at all. "It was really, really tough keeping kosher," he said.

"They provided plenty of kosher food in the suite, but we spent so little time in the suite" in the Trump Tower, Bienstock said. "When you're spending 48 hours at a Wal-Mart, there's nothing to eat."

Many viewers noted that in trips to fancy New York restaurants as rewards for winning tasks, Bienstock was shown unhappily picking at salad or a piece of bread.

Even in the amply supplied suite, though, kosher food was occasionally hard to find when other contestants got too hungry.

"We had the bagels for me, it was marked 'pareve' and everybody was eating them," he said, adding that other contestants kept asking the production people if they could eat pareve

bagels. "They thought pareve was a brand name, and when I came back, all my kosher bagels were gone."

Pareve refers to food that is neither meat nor dairy.

Nevertheless, sometimes everyone was eating kosher. "If they didn't have any steak and we had kosher steak, I'd let them have my kosher steaks," Bienstock said.

While keeping kosher didn't cause any acrimony, his leaving two tasks for the holidays did.

"Some of the others fought about it, but we were always fighting because it's like you're family," he said. "I understood why they were upset, that I didn't

participate the way I'd have liked to on those tasks, and I wanted to make up for it," he said, by stepping up to be project manager on an unprecedented four tasks. ■

It was his willingness to step up and be a leader, he said, that he had hoped would make him a winner on Monday night, but Trump decided otherwise, and was immediately criticized for the decision. "My grandfather rushed the stage — he missed my bar mitzvah but he came in for this — and he ran up to Mr. Trump and said, 'You made a big mistake, mister,'" Bienstock recalled.

Despite the loss, Bienstock is already facing a range of new opportunities. "Mr. Trump told me to meet with him next week." He added that he had already received dozens of offers at an after-party following the show. "I'm going to be doing speaking engagements and writing a book," he said. ■

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

'My grandfather rushed the stage and he ran up to Mr. Trump and said, "You made a big mistake, mister."'

Lee Bienstock

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Abdullah urges negotiations

Jordan's King Abdullah II urged Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to negotiate a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Olmert, who met Abdullah on Thursday in Amman, is touring Arab and European capitals to present his plans for unilateral withdrawal from parts of the West Bank if there are no peace talks with the Palestinians. Abdullah urged Olmert to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas.

"A negotiated agreement that leads to a viable and contiguous independent Palestinian state, on Palestinian territory, will help to establish a just, comprehensive Middle East peace that provides security and stability to every Arab and Israeli, man, woman and child," Abdullah said after the meeting.

Four killed at Gaza border

Israeli forces killed four Palestinians near the Gaza Strip border fence. The incident took place Wednesday night at the part of the Gaza boundary near Kibbutz Nahal Oz, where an Israeli tank fired on suspicious figures approaching the fence from the other side.

According to Israel, the Palestinians were terrorists intent on planting a bomb near the border patrol road, an off-limits area. But the Palestinian Authority said they were a squad of policemen.

Pakistan to give Hamas \$3 million

Pakistan pledged \$3 million to the fledgling Hamas-led Palestinian government. The deal came Wednesday, as Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas official, arrived in Pakistan for meetings with high-ranking Pakistani officials.

The Palestinian government is facing international sanctions over Hamas' refusal to renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist. Pakistani officials met with Zahar to discuss "how Pakistan can assist the Palestinians," said Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Tasnim Aslam.

Pakistan does not maintain diplomatic ties with Israel and supports a separate homeland for Palestinians with Jerusalem as its capital.

Israeli spokesman goes home

A veteran spokesman for the Israeli government stepped down. Ra'anana Gissin, who was often the face of Israel on television, where he sparred with pro-Palestinian pundits, ended his tenure with the Prime Minister's Office this week.

A successor was not immediately named. Gissin was close to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. But current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is said to be looking for a fresher public face.

WORLD

IAEA: Iran still enriching

Iran's uranium enrichment is continuing while it considers an incentives package from world powers to suspend the activity, nuclear inspectors said. The U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency issued a report Thursday saying Iran is installing more equipment to expand enrichment.

Major powers have said Iran must suspend all enrichment activities before accepting the international incentives package and returning to multilateral talks.

The incentives package, offered by the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China reportedly includes international support for Tehran's effort to build a power plant running on nuclear energy.

Iranian's planned appearance sparks outrage

German Jewish leaders are outraged that a top Iranian official will attend the World Cup opening ceremonies in Munich on Friday. Given repeated Holocaust denial by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the participation of his vice president, Mohammed Aliabadi, "is a provocation and evidence of the political bankruptcy of German policy vis-a-vis Iran's Mullah regime," Stephan Kramer, general-secretary of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said in a statement Thursday.

The statement comes as Jewish leaders — including the newly elected council president, Charlotte Knobloch — suggest the Iranian president should not enjoy the traditional diplomatic immunity should he decide to come to Germany during the World Cup. Holocaust denial is illegal in Germany.

Several Jewish, pro-Israeli and Iranian opposition groups are planning to demonstrate against the current Iranian regime during the Iran-Mexico game in Nuremberg on Sunday.

Swiss hold seven in El Al plot

Swiss authorities said they were holding seven suspects in a plot to attack an El Al plane. The Attorney General's Office in Zurich announced the arrests Thursday, saying only that the suspects were of African origin and were believed to have planned an attack on the Israeli airline in Switzerland.

Yediot Achronot reported last month that Swiss and French intelligence had foiled a plot by Arab immigrants to shoot down an El Al jet over Geneva in December.

S. African union backs Israel boycott

A South African labor union backed a Canadian union's boycott of Israel. Yediot Achronot reported that the president of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, Willie Madisha, published a letter backing the Canadian Union of Public Employees' call for a boycott, which was made last month.

"As someone who lived in apartheid in South Africa and who has visited Palestine, I say with confidence that Israel is an apartheid state," Madisha wrote.

NORTH AMERICA

Officials urge tougher action against Syria

U.S. lawmakers urged the Bush administration to impose stiffer penalties on Syria for its support for terrorism. Members of Congress who initiated the Syria Accountability Act said in a hearing Wednesday that they are increasingly impatient with Syria's close ties to Iran and continuing support for terrorist groups.

According to the legislation passed two years ago, the president has the ability to impose economic sanctions and other punitive measures against Damascus.

However, the administration to date has not implemented some of the more severe steps. "The time has come to impose the full range of penalties envisioned in the act," said U.S. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY). "And if we don't do it in conjunction with other countries, we should absolutely do it alone, right now."

Israeli envoy to stay on in U.S.

Israel extended the term of its ambassador to the United States. Israeli sources said Thursday that Daniel Ayalon, who was to have wrapped up his four-year tenure in Washington this August, was asked by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to stay on for several more months.

Ayalon previously survived media-saturated feuds with Livni's predecessor, Silvan Shalom.