

IN THE NEWS
Latest Israeli strike kills 2 Palestinians

An Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip killed at least two Palestinians, but failed to kill the targeted Hamas leader.

Sharaf Farwana survived Thursday night's strike, but his 25-year-old brother and an 8-year-old girl reportedly were killed. Also Thursday, Hamas' military wing vowed revenge for an operation earlier Thursday in the Gaza Strip that killed six Palestinians.

Iran warned by N. Korea action

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations said Iran's leaders should take note of the Security Council's treatment of North Korea.

"I am sure they're watching in Tehran what we do on this North Korea resolution," John Bolton told reporters Thursday at U.N. headquarters in New York. "And I hope they watch closely." Bolton's comments came amid Security Council discussions on a resolution responding to North Korea's claim to have tested a nuclear device earlier this week.

Poll: Netanyahu would win election

Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party would win if elections were held in Israel today, a survey found.

The Yediot Achronot poll published Thursday found that the hawkish Likud would take enough votes today to win 22 of the Knesset's 120 seats, almost twice its current showing.

Avigdor Lieberman's right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu Party would place second with 20 seats, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's centrist Kadima Party would come in third with 15 seats, almost half of its current 29.

Reminder:

The JTA World Report will not be published on Monday, Oct. 16.

WORLD REPORT

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Emergency drive tops \$320 million; shifts toward rebuilding Israel's North

By JACOB BERKMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — Since the early days of Israel's war with Hezbollah, the North American federation system has garnered some \$320 million in pledges from the Jewish community.

The Israel Emergency Campaign of the United Jewish Communities and local federations already has collected more than \$100 million in cash. Of that \$100 million, \$94 million has been allocated and \$54 million has been paid out, according to an allocations report released by UJC last Friday.

When it began in July, the campaign was meant to take care of the immediate needs of those in Israel's battered North — outfitting bomb shelters with air conditioners, lighting and televisions, moving some 40,000 Jewish and non-Jewish children to summer camps out of the range of Hezbollah's rockets and providing psychological help for those directly affected by the attacks.

Now that the rocket fire has ended, the fund-raising campaign is continuing. The focus now, say officials involved, is to make the northern region more inhabitable and actually draw people back to the area.

"When the bullets and the bombs and rockets were flying, the imperative was getting kids out of harm's way, and I think we did a pretty damned good job of that," the UJC's president and chief executive officer, Howard Rieger, told JTA.

"But the fact of life is that" people have

Activity	Number of Beneficiaries	Allocation (\$)	Paid so far (\$)
Support to non-Jewish children in community centers	5,000	3,300,000	1,474,601
Community center - emergency outreach programs	146,676 activity days	3,000,000	2,095,850
Preparation for school for Jewish children	42,248	3,960,000	3,617,931
Summer camp for kids	40,000	17,300,000	17,239,000
Basic educational intervention - Ethiopian community		5,600,000	
Funds for victims of terror		4,300,000	0
Small business grants	6,000	4,000,000	2,559,598
Student scholarships in the North		5,000,000	
Students recruited to IDF grants		6,000,000	
Meals at home for elderly	7,655	3,000,000	3,000,000
Rebuilding damaged absorption centers	6 absorption centers	3,500,000	229,926
All conditioning for shelters	1,800	3,642,000	3,642,000

Emergency Funds spending, based on UJC data.

left the North, he said. Given that the area is heavily populated by non-Jewish residents, he said, "you need to do what you need to do to not lose a balance in the North. We will address some of the longer term needs."

As the UJC gets set to announce a second round of allocations next week, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee — the UJC's nongovernmental partners in Israel — stand to see significant increases in their budgets this year.

The JDC has already seen a boost of \$25 million, according to its executive vice president, Steve Schwager, and it could see a doubling of its roughly \$100 million budget

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**FOCUS
ON
ISSUES**

■ *The focus now of federation fund-raising is to draw people back to the region*

Continued from page 1

for Israel next year, he said.

The new allocations will be decided by a professional and lay committee made up of representatives from small, medium and large federations from across North America based on proposals from Israeli agencies and the government, officials say.

The new allocations will go to improving the education system in the North and to help rebuild the area's economy, Doron Krakow, the UJC's senior vice president for Israel and overseas, told JTA.

The allocations report released last week indicated that some \$4 million had been designated for small business loans.

The Jewish Agency is seeking funds to give scholarships to Israelis to draw them to universities in the North, said the chairwoman of its board of governors, Carole Solomon.

■
And the JDC has been working to improve several schools in the North, bringing in consultants to help teachers and administration, and to help with structural improvements. The JDC is now asking for \$8 million of emergency campaign money to expand the program to more than 50 schools.

Some of these initiatives do not appear to be directly war-related, but those involved draw a link. "This war revealed that the North needed strengthening and needed to upgrade the level of services it could provide," Schwager said. "We would not have recognized these weaknesses. All of the dollars are going to be targeted for improvements of the North, not only to rebuild but

to make the North a better place to live."

A portion of the funds are being allocated to help Ethiopian Jews.

In 2005, the UJC launched Operation Promise, a three-year campaign to raise \$160 million to help frail and elderly Jews still living in the former Soviet Union, to help bring over to Israel the remaining Falash Mura living in Ethiopia and to help with the continuing settlement in Israel of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

But that campaign ran into trouble. It stagnated, according to UJC's Krakow, when Israel's government declined to double the number of Falash Mura it was bringing into the country to 600 per month.

Now, roughly \$10 million of the emergency campaign funds has been allocated to the Ethiopian National Project, which was designed to help the absorption of Ethiopian Jews. Of that, according to the UJC report, \$5.6 million will go to build youth centers and provide support for parents, \$2.9 million will go to expanding such programs in seven new cities, \$1.3 million will go to providing domestic violence workshops and Amharic-speaking social workers.

■
Roughly \$5 million of the emergency campaign money that has been allocated to Ethiopian causes would have been covered under Operation Promise, Krakow said. He said that the Ethiopian cause is now a postwar cause because it is a population on the lower rungs of Israeli society and was therefore harder hit than some others.

"The fact is that the Ethiopian community is already suffering from the impact of the war," said Krakow, noting that domestic violence in that community has been exacerbated by the war.

In addition, six absorption centers were damaged during the war, according to the UJC report, for which \$229,926 was given for immediate repairs — and another \$3.2 million has been allocated for improvements.

The UJC's Rieger said that the scope of the emergency campaign — which he said does not have a specific dollar goal in mind — has not changed since its inception over the summer. He dismissed critics who say the federation system is trying to use the war to fill in fund-raising gaps.

Some debated whether JAFI and JDC

should work with banks and obtain loan guarantees instead of relying on the broader Jewish community if they were going to be working on continuing projects that weren't necessarily just for repair, said Stephen Hoffman, president of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland and former CEO of the UJC.

But Rieger said it was not going to fall solely upon the North American Jewish community to build a better northern Israel. Whatever dollars the UJC raises will be

leveraged by Israel's government and by Israeli philanthropists, he said.

"I agree with what they did," Hoffman said of the expanded initiatives. "The rationale is that when we told the story about what Israel would need because of the war, we did not say we are only going to build housing in the North and jobs. We talked very distinctly about helping Israel deal with vulnerable populations when budget sources would be tight."

The campaign did come under fire last week, after a mass e-mail circulated by Helen Freedman, the former executive director of American Friends for a Safe Israel, a group that opposed Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip last year. She insinuated that 30 percent of the money the UJC allocated was going to support Arab causes.

■
Her letter, which prompted an e-mail campaign directed at the UJC, was based on reports in Israeli newspapers, she told JTA.

"All of this while the Jews from Gush Katif are getting nothing," she said, referring to Jews who were forced to leave Gaza. "The mainstream Jewish organizations have ignored them completely. This is what made me furious."

In its report released last week, the UJC rejected the allegations, saying the actual allocation to non-Jewish causes was 3 percent.

"It's really outrageous," Steven Nasatir, the president of the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, said of the criticism.

"It's irresponsible. I was in Israel during the war. I saw the devastation in the North. And I am proud that we can support those in need, Jew and non-Jew alike, even if it wasn't 33 percent." ■

**Domestic violence
in the Ethiopian
community has been
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WORLD REPORT

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Cautious optimism for likely U.N. head

By BEN HARRIS

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish officials are greeting the likely selection of Ban Ki-moon as the next U.N. secretary-general with cautious optimism, hopeful that the South Korean foreign minister will use the office to push for fairer treatment of Israel and more equitable application of international human rights standards.

The Security Council endorsed Ban, 62, by acclamation Monday, choosing him from a field of seven candidates. He is expected to be approved by the General Assembly by week's end.

"If the selection process is any indicator, then the journey of his tenure might be smoother than what we've seen until now," said Rabbi Levi Shemtov, director of American Friends of Lubavitch and Chabad's chief envoy in Washington, who met with Ban and other U.N. candidates.

"There's something smooth, quiet, yet effective about him, and as we get to know him better, I hope it's going to bring us closer to a better and more peaceful world," he said.

Ban will replace Kofi Annan of Ghana, who has a mixed record on issues of Jewish concern. U.N. observers say it's difficult to predict whether Ban will fare any better, particularly given his reputation as a moderate who prizes consensus-building.

Hillel Neuer, executive director of the Geneva-based U.N. Watch, says powerful groups like the Non-Aligned Movement — an alliance of developing countries that includes the 56-member Muslim bloc — could obstruct any significant changes Ban seeks to implement.

"It would be naive to expect radical change," Neuer said.

"The most important decisions are made by members states which are organized into certain powerful alliances," he added.

If the Non-Aligned Movement "wants to play the spoiler role, the secretary-general is limited in what he can accomplish," he said.

Neuer's skepticism echoes criticism aimed at Ban ahead of his selection. Some said he was too weak for the U.N.'s top job, chosen more for his inoffensive-

ness than his potential to reform an organization still tarnished by the oil-for-food scandal and allegations of sexual misconduct by U.N. peacekeepers.

As Ban emerged as front-runner, U.N. staff reportedly worried that the career diplomat lacked the mettle to take the organization out from under the cloud of controversy that has marred Annan's second term.

Annan will step down as secretary-general Dec. 31.

Ban earned a B.A. in international relations from Seoul National University in 1970, and holds a master's degree

in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Often described as soft-spoken and lacking charisma, Ban rose steadily through the ranks of South Korea's Foreign Ministry, becoming foreign minister in January 2004. His previous postings include New Delhi, Washington, Vienna and New York.

In 2005 he became the first South Korean foreign minister to visit Israel.

"He seems to be a good man and has all the necessary qualifications to be a good secretary-general," said Aaron Jacob, associate director of international affairs for the American Jewish Committee, who met with Ban in late September.

At the meeting, Ban was noncommittal in response to AJCommittee concerns about Iran, human rights and reports that U.N. peacekeepers in southern Lebanon are narrowly interpreting their mandate.

Given the Security Council's imminent vote on his nomination, however, that reticence was to be expected, Jacob said.

"He said that he understood our concerns, but understandably did not go into details," Jacob said.

Ban has said he would make reforming the United Nations — a cause close to the hearts of Jewish organizations who say the world body treats Israel unfairly — a top priority.

He also has pledged to try to broker a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The U.N. Charter "was crafted to give the member states ample flexibility in adapting the U.N. machinery to respond to novel threats in a changing world," Ban told world leaders in September at the opening of the U.N. General Assembly in New York. "But our tools need sharpening."

Unlike Neuer, who would like the new secretary-general to take a bold stance

on key issues, many of those who have met Ban believe a more subdued approach — unlike the very public pronouncements that have been a hallmark of Annan's tenure — may be more effective in achieving long-term change.

"Although he doesn't come

across as a high-profile champion of causes, he does have a human-rights background and has been able to advance some of those issues behind the scenes," said Shai Franklin, director of international organizations for the World Jewish Congress.

"It would be a mistake to dismiss his low-key public style as a lack of interest or resolve on human rights or other issues that we as Jews take very seriously."

"I think he's going to surprise the skeptics," agreed Michael Landau, who heads the Coalition of Orthodox Jewish Organizations of the West Side, a Manhattan-based umbrella group representing 27 groups, and who attended the AJCommittee meeting with Ban. We see Kofi Annan "as being more vocal a leader than Ban Ki-moon, who will speak less and do a lot."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

'It would be a mistake to dismiss his low-key public style as a lack of interest or resolve on human rights or other issues that we as Jews take very seriously.'

Shai Franklin

Director, International Organizations,
World Jewish Congress

The enemy of my enemy

By URIEL HEILMAN

AMMAN, Jordan (JTA) — As one of the Arab world's poorest and most vulnerable countries, Jordan is in a tough spot.

It shares borders with Iraq, an anarchic state that has become a battlefield for terrorists and Islamic extremists; Syria, an illicit arms trafficker and close ally of Iran; and Israel, the regional pariah whose Palestinian problem is an omnipresent threat to Jordanian stability. The country has an estimated 25 percent unemployment rate, no oil wealth and friends in the West the rest of its neighbors love to hate.

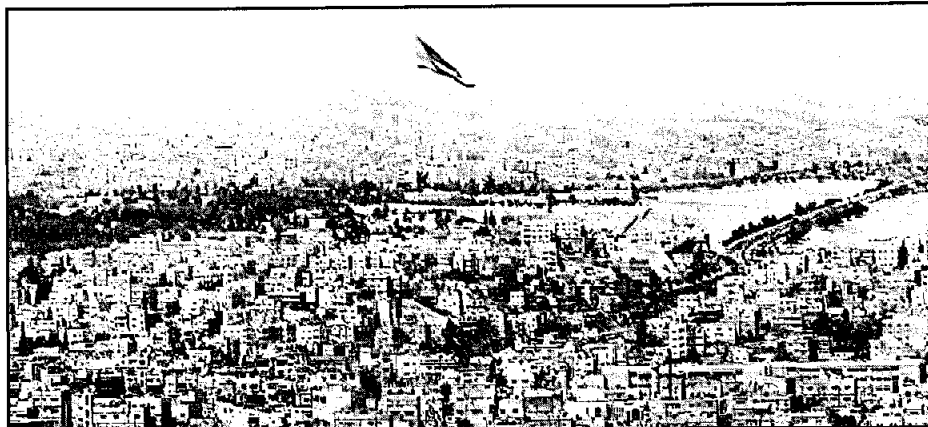
Perhaps ironically, these perils are precisely what make Jordan's relationship with Israel so indispensable.

"Jordan's strategic support is Israel," said David Hacham, an Arab affairs expert at the Israeli Defense Ministry. "We are the factor that enables the survival of the regime in Jordan." Jordan's relationship with Israel provides the Hashemite kingdom with the Western security blanket it needs to keep its economy strong and fend off enemies both foreign and domestic, critics and supporters of the regime say.

For its part, Israel benefits from close security cooperation and intelligence sharing with Jordan. In April, for example, Jordanian officials arrested a domestic Hamas cell and seized a cache of missiles, explosives and other weapons they said was smuggled into the kingdom. In addition, Jordan's peace with Israel gives the Jewish state the benefit of not having to worry about attacks along its longest border, a span of more than 200 miles. Jordan also represents a buffer against invasion of Israel by hostile armies to the east, such as those of Iraq, Iran or the Persian Gulf states.

"Israel sees in its relationship with Jordan a valuable strategic partnership," said Yacov Hadas, Israel's former ambassador to Jordan and the vice general director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry's division for Middle East affairs. "We are two neighbors with a wide range of interests and common problems."

As a result, relations between Jordan and Israel have deepened in the last few years — even though during that same period Jordan's King Abdullah II has issued harsh public condemnations of Israeli military actions, including this summer's



Uriel Heilman

A Jordanian flag flies near King Abdullah's palace in Amman.

war in Lebanon and Israel's handling of the Palestinian intifada.

Jordan and Israel face some of the same key threats: Iran's rising power, an anti-Western regime in Damascus, restive Palestinians and Islamic terrorists.

"We've been surrounded by bullies for many decades," King Abdullah said of Jordan in a recent interview with Time magazine. "We are averaging nine to 12 months between crises and they are getting worse and worse. All of us in the area, including the Israelis, are feeling more and more insecure. Nobody knows where this is tak-

ing us. The peace camp needs to turn the boat around in the other direction. If not, we sink — all of us."

"We're in the same boat with Jordan," observed an Israeli diplomatic source, noting that two members of President

Bush's so-called axis of evil border Jordan. This source spoke to JTA on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of his position vis-a-vis the Arab world.

"The greater the external threat, the closer Jordan and Israel will be," he said. "Jordan is a true friend. It's not a cold peace like with Egypt. Ties — but with strings attached."

Through its peace with Israel, Jordan has been able to strengthen its alliance with the United States, resulting in significant increases in military and economic assistance from the world's superpower.

As with Egypt, Jordan became one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid after it signed its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. Jordan gets approximately \$450 million per year in U.S. aid, enjoys special free-trade status with the United States and was forgiven \$700 million in debt to America after the 1994 treaty was signed.

Some critics in Jordan, however, bemoan the regime's close ties with Israel and the United States. They charge that rather than cultivating support among the Jordanian public through popular policies, the regime cements its hold on power by other means. It relies excessively on U.S. and Israeli support, excludes the country's large Palestinian population from the political and military elite through unofficial discrimination and suppresses viable political opposition by blocking genuine democratic reform.

Jordanian government officials declined to be interviewed for this story.

The king also depends on his intelligence forces to quash internal political opposition, according to Foad Al-Khalafat, an ex-official from the Muslim Brotherhood, the pan-Arab movement that seeks global Islamic domination through the establishment of Islamic regimes.

"The king is not a politician," observed Khalafat, who chairs a political research center called Rum for Studyings & Publishing. "When you are not a politician, you rely on security because you are afraid. A mafia is running the state and King Abdullah is one of the head mafiosos."

A RIVER
RUNS
THROUGH
THEM

'We've been surrounded
by bullies for many
decades.'
King Abdullah of Jordan

Anti-Israel sentiment in Jordan

By URIEL HEILMAN

AMMAN, Jordan (JTA) — Near the Shariah Islamic law department at the University of Jordan there is a blue Star of David spray-painted on a concrete path between the pine trees. The crudely drawn image is there so that students at the university, Jordan's largest and most prestigious, can trample the symbol of the Jewish state.

Just across the street, in a picturesque building with a limestone facade and an antique-filled, newly restored interior, researchers produce some of the most widely respected scholarship in Jordan on geopolitics and conflicts in the Middle East, at the Center for Strategic Studies.

The center's director, Mustafa Hamarneh, frequently rubs elbows with Israeli academics at conferences in Europe and North America. He has visited Israel, met Israeli government officials, and even hosted Jews from America in his home.

After the war between Israel and Hezbollah, this is what Hamarneh had to say about Israel's actions: "It reminded us of what the Nazis did in Europe — they would demolish entire quarters."

Explaining that there were men in Israel's Knesset whom he considered "the other side of Osama bin Laden," Hamarneh singled out Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for special opprobrium.

"Israel produces parochial men who still think they're in some ghetto in Central Europe, emboldened by American

Jews and an American administration that is outside history," Hamarneh said.

"Our problem really is American Jewry. They are the cause of all the misery in the region," he said. "Organized American Jewry blindly adopts Israeli policies."

"Israel is probably the last openly bigoted racist country today," Hamarneh concluded.

This is the voice of moderation in Jordan today.

It is also a poignant illustration of how wide the gulf is between popular Jordanian sentiment toward Israel and the Hashemite regime's relationship with the Jewish state. The two governments have developed close strategic ties since their leaders signed a historic peace treaty 12 years ago, but acceptance of Israel among rank-and-file Jordanians remains abysmally low.

"The peace is between governments, not the people," said Hani Hourani, director general of the Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center, in Amman. "It is not even between the elites. It is not even between NGOs."

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that 100 percent of those polled in Jordan have "unfavorable" views of Jews — even more than Lebanon's 99 percent. This may owe in part to widespread disaffection with Jordan's

peace treaty with the Jewish state.

"Israel is not a country. It is a terrorist organization founded by the British government in 1948," said one student at the University of Jordan, Omar Al-Hinfi, expressing a commonly held view in his country. "Israel is not justified. It is something put in the whole Arab world to serve the colonial powers."

To be sure, there are some Jordanians who support their country's peace treaty with Israel, and others who do business in Israel or with Israelis. But very few Jordanians advertise their ties to Israel, and with good reason.

The country has a powerful lobby led by Islamists, professionals and leftists that vigorously opposes normalizing ties with the Jewish state. This anti-normalization movement controls Jordan's professional associations and enforces a boycott against Israel that blacklists any members who violate the policy. Sometimes, violators'

families are threatened.

"Extremists threatened to kill me for going to Israel," said Faisal Al-Rfouh, vice dean at the University of Jordan and Jordan's former minister of culture. Though a former colonel in the Jordanian army, Rfouh said he feared for the lives of the wife and children he left behind in Amman when he visited the Jewish state.

As a consequence of such policies, few Jordanian lawyers are willing to do business with Israel, doctors from Jordan walk out of international medical conferences when their Israeli colleagues get up to speak, and legislators in Jordan regularly call for cutting ties with Israel and expelling Israel's ambassador from the Hashemite Kingdom.

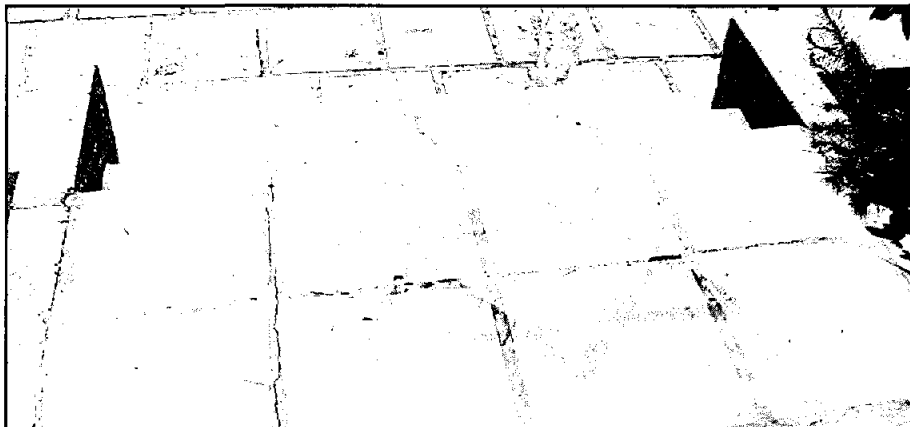
One notable success story in the Jordan-Israel relationship has been the Qualified Industrial Zones in Jordan, where goods produced with 8 percent Israeli labor or Israeli parts may be exported to the United States free of tariffs or U.S. Customs Service import quotas.

These special cooperative projects have generated some 19,000 jobs in Jordan and sent Jordanian exports to the United States soaring to about \$1 billion per year, making the United States Jordan's biggest export partner.

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**'The peace is between
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A Star of David was spray-painted on a path near the University of Jordan's Shariah Islamic Law Department so students can trample on the symbol of the Jewish state.

Well-known figure tapped for top Israeli post in D.C.

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) – One of Sallai Meridor's first acts as chairman-elect of the Jewish Agency for Israel was to deliver relief to a Muslim country, Albania.

The delivery of food and medicine to refugees from the Kosovo crisis in April 1999 was a first for the organization best known for rescuing Jews — and was a sign that the scion of one of Israel's founding families had a perpetual yearning for a wider diplomatic role.

A little more than a year after Meridor shocked the Jewish world by quitting the agency before his term ended, telling friends he hankered for a diplomatic role, his wish is about to come true: Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni nominated him recently to be Israel's next ambassador to Washington.

The one-sentence statement from the Prime Minister's Office simply said Olmert and Livni "decided that Mr. Sallai Meridor will be appointed as Israel's ambassador to Washington in place of Danny Ayalon, who is completing his four-year term."

Meridor, 51, still faces confirmation by the Cabinet and must be cleared by the Foreign Ministry's legal team. But with Livni and Olmert in agreement his appointment is a sure thing.

Sources said he is set to start in January.

Meridor's appointment comes at a critical time. The U.S.-Israel relationship has arguably never been stronger, but the path to Israeli-Palestinian peace that both countries had embraced has been crumbling amid chaos among the Palestinians and growing regional threats from Iran and Iraq.

It also comes after Olmert's political fortunes were severely hampered by the damage Israel suffered this summer during its war with Hezbollah on the Israel-Lebanon border. The Israeli prime minister is hoping to revive talks with the Palestinians.

Traditionally, Israel's ambassador to Washington goes beyond the role of intermediary between Jerusalem and Washington, with the ambassador often involved in helping to set Israeli policy.

Meridor had already been seen as a shoo-in because of his decades-old friendship with Olmert.

Both men are "princes" of the Likud Party establishment who have moderated their hawkish views. Olmert now leads the

centrist Kadima Party, which broke away from the Likud last year.

That friendship is probably the critical element explaining Meridor's appointment, according to Jewish leaders who have known both men for decades.

"The most important thing for an ambassador to the United States is to have the confidence of the prime minister, and they go back many years," said Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Meridor also has a reputation for integrity, rolling back the Jewish Agency's notoriety for patronage during his 1999-2005 term, and cutting its expenses.

The Jewish Agency, involved in the rescue and absorption of Jewish immigrants to Israel as well as Jewish education around the world, is the primary overseas recipient of North American federation funds.

As head of the agency, he pushed for the accelerated immigration of the Falash Mura community from Ethiopia, and the establishing of MASA — a program to bring thousands of Diaspora youth to Israel for long-term study and visits. He advocated aliyah from Western countries and established a partnership with Nefesh B'Nefesh, which helped boost immigration to Israel.

He is well-known — and praised by American Jewish officials of both political and philanthropic organizations.

"Sallai has a tremendous intellect and the capacity to multitask at the highest level of detail," said Jay Sarver, the chairman of the agency's budget and finance committee. "He has a deep, deep Jewish identity and neshama, and a deep belief in Zionist action."

Stephen Hoffman, the president of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland and the former president of the United Jewish Communities, worked with him during his term at the agency.

"He is a good listener and he is articulate in English as well as Hebrew," Hoffman said. "He thinks strategically and looks at a lot of different angles, is cautious and gathers a lot of opinions

before he makes a move."

Friends say that the more recent role at the helm of the Jewish Agency obscures his talents as a diplomat. As an adviser to Moshe Arens, who served as foreign minister and defense minister in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he cultivated a friendship with James Baker. That was exceptional because Baker, the secretary of state to the first President Bush, was not known for friendly relations with Israel.

"Sallai Meridor has a long and distinguished career in the service of the state of Israel," said Josh Block, the spokesman for the American Israel Public Affairs Com-

mittee, the pro-Israel lobby.

"He is a highly effective advocate, is well-acquainted with the ways of Washington, D.C., and will surely bring his considerable talents to bear in his new post."

Meridor has often straddled two worlds — as a West Bank settler who lives in Kfar Adumim, a settlement near Jericho likely to be dismantled in the withdrawals that Olmert has advocated.

His dual majors at Hebrew University were in the history of Islamic peoples and the history of the Jews. He speaks Arabic.

"Sallai has the ability to take people, to appeal to people from the right and the left and make people feel comfortable whether he agrees with their opinions or not," said Morton Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, who admires Meridor despite their disagreements on last year's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Klein noted Meridor's profound affection for the whole biblical land of Israel, including the West Bank and Gaza.

"A number of times, he took me in his car all over Judea and Samaria," Klein recalled, using the biblical names for the West Bank, "and he knew every inch, he knew the biblical significance of each area. This is someone who understands the holiness of that land, unlike others in government. He supported the Gaza withdrawal, but his heart broke."

(JTA correspondent Dina Kraft in Tel Aviv and staff writer Jacob Berkman in New York contributed to this report.)

Meridor had been seen as a shoo-in because of his decades-old friendship with Olmert.

VIRTUAL JEWS

Needed: 600,000

By MENACHEM WECKER

NEW YORK (JTA) — Are 600,000 virtual Jews just as good as the real thing?

Yeshiva University senior Evan Lyman says yes, sort of, but his quest to create an online community has raised halachic questions that were inconceivable before the Digital Age.

Lyman, 21, of Livingston, N.J., created the online Facebook group, "600,000 Jews." Facebook is a popular social networking site for college students that allows them to create searchable personal profiles, befriend other members and unite around common interest groups.

Lyman created the group Oct. 1 to round up the 600,000 Jews needed, according to the Talmud, to recite the blessing "chacham ha'razim," or "knower of secrets." The blessing suggests that even with a multitude of 600,000 people, God knows each one.

Lyman initially invited 150 of his Facebook "friends" to join the group, which grew to 1,421 members within three days.

While many groups struggle to achieve membership numbers in the thousands simple demographics may put Lyman's goal out of reach.

"I'm Jewish and proud of it, but this group is way out of hand," Marc Goldsmith of Hofstra University wrote on the group's message board, questioning whether there are even 600,000 Jews on Facebook.

Lyman knows his goal may be unrealistic, but he remains optimistic even while a debate rages on one of the group's message boards about who is a Jew and who should be counted as part of the 600,000.

The discussion boards have raised other questions of Jewish law. For instance, Perry Sasson, a Facebook user from Los Angeles, wondered whether all 600,000 had to be physically together for the blessing to be recited, and whether it could be recited before the Messianic age.

"I didn't want to have it on my shoulders that people were making blessings they weren't allowed to make," he says. ■

New film tackles Purim story

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — "'Christian money makes Jewish film' — that's the headline I'd like to see above your article," Matthew Crouch, producer of "One Night with the King," suggested in an interview.

The film, based on the Book of Esther from the Purim holiday, "brims with adventure, intrigue, romance and wonder," said Crouch, the son of mega-televangelists Paul and Jan Crouch. "Its vision is to inspire a generation to embrace the destiny God has for them."

"A pumped-up Purim story," observed a rather less enthusiastic Rabbi Richard Levy, Los Angeles director of the School of Rabbinic Studies at Hebrew Union College.

"A Night with the King" — which, despite its somewhat titillating title, contains nary a hint of sexual abandon or even cleavage, opens Friday at nearly 1,000 theaters across the United States.

As a warm-up to the premiere, Crouch and his co-producer and wife Laurie barnstormed 21 cities in 16 days, pitching the film and its message to clergy of all faiths.

The movie has aroused considerable advance interest in Hollywood and elsewhere, particularly as a major entry in the burgeoning genre of Christian-produced films aimed at "faith families," including some 75 million evangelists in the United States.

Crouch himself is one of the pioneers in the field, who mortgaged his house to make the 1999 "Omega Code." Launched without the usual mass-marketing campaign, the film found an astonishingly large audience among churchgoers.

But what really rang Hollywood's bell was the phenomenal box office success in 2004 of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

"It took Hollywood a few years to catch up," said Kris Fuhr, vice president of Provident Films, but "Passion's" \$612 million worldwide gross did wonders to speed up the process.

Fuhr's own company has just released

"Facing the Giants," billed as an inspirational film about a small town high school football team whose six-year losing streak is reversed by faith in God.

"Giants" was made for \$100,000 by an all-amateur company of writers, cast and crew from a Baptist church in Georgia, but expects to find an audience by mobilizing a national network of pastors.

The first major studio to finally get the message is 20th Century Fox, which has created FoxFaith, a new division that

plans to produce about a dozen Christian-themed movies this year.

Significantly, major studios and distributors are joining up with the independent producers of faith movies, with Samuel Goldwyn Films partnering with "Giants" and Rupert Murdoch's Fox studio handling DVD sales for "One Night."

Jewish organizations by and large haven't weighed in on the rapid growth of the Christian film phenomenon.

On the other hand, Rabbi Daniel Lapin, president of Toward Tradition, thinks

"One Night" will have a "positive impact" and urges potential Jewish critics to "stop being so prickly."

Lapin, a Seattle-based ally of Christian conservatives, said he was consulted by the filmmakers on whether certain depictions in "One Night" might upset Jewish sensitivities.

"One Night" was shot at an old majestic palace in Rajasthan, India, and made on a \$20 million budget. That's not a great deal by Hollywood blockbuster standards, but is the most expensive of Crouch's productions, with an added \$6 million for marketing and advertising.

The movie's publicity makes much of "stars" Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif, who get their names above the title — and may lead some to expect a reprisal of their masterful collaboration in "Lawrence of Arabia" — but it's a bit misleading. Sharif has a substantial though not leading role as an adviser to the king, but O'Toole gets only about 15 seconds of exposure in a prologue as the Prophet Samuel. ■

ARTS & CULTURE

The box office success of Gibson's 'Passion' sped up the acceptance of faith-based films.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel endorses U.N. moves on Iran

Israel endorsed a decision to discuss Iran's nuclear program at the U.N. Security Council. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert convened top Cabinet colleagues and Israeli military and intelligence chiefs Thursday for a top-secret discussion of how to handle Iranian atomic ambitions, especially in the wake of North Korea's declared nuclear test.

A statement issued by Olmert's office after the meeting suggested Israel is content to continue to support Western efforts to pressure Tehran through the threat of sanctions.

On Wednesday, representatives of the permanent members of the Security Council decided the body would handle the Iranian dossier at sessions to begin this week or next.

Israel's Technion gets new institute

A biomedical engineer and philanthropist agreed to establish a research institute in Israel.

The life sciences/biomedical institute, to be established by Alfred Mann at the Technion — Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, will be the first of 12 institutes Mann plans to set up outside the United States. Mann will provide \$4 million for the operating expenses of the institute.

Israeli baseball gets first players

Israel's professional baseball league signed its first two players. Infielder/outfielder Dan Rootenberg, a New Yorker born in Israel, and Adam Crabb, of Australia, signed contracts, The Associated Press reported.

The league hopes to begin next summer with six teams playing 48-game schedules.

NORTH AMERICA

Rice pledges Palestinian entry support

Condoleezza Rice pledged to fight for fair treatment of Palestinian American travelers to Israel and the Palestinian areas. "I will continue to do everything in my power to support your good work, and to ensure that all American travelers receive fair and equal treatment," the U.S. secretary of state said Wednesday night at the inaugural gala dinner for the American Task Force on Palestine.

Arab American groups estimate that as many as 120,000 U.S. citizens are affected by Israeli strictures on Palestinians with dual citizenship. Israeli officials say agreements mandate prior approval for arrivals from the Palestinian Authority; but since March, Israel has refused any contact with the P.A.'s Hamas-led government.

Report: Mexico probes suspected Hezbollah funders

Agents in Mexico and the United States are investigating a group in Mexico believed to be funding Hezbollah.

Mexico launched the investigation several months ago after a request by U.S. officials, the newspaper El Universal reported.

Comments on Israel harm Canadian pol

A leading Canadian politician is under fire after calling an Israeli bombing of a Lebanese town this summer a war crime.

The co-chairwoman of the Toronto campaign of Michael Ignatieff, a candidate to head the Liberal Party, withdrew her support after Ignatieff recently commented on the bombing of Kana.

"I was a professor of human rights, and I am also a professor of the laws of war, and what happened in Kana was a war crime," Ignatieff said.

Some in the international community say the attack, which killed

many civilians, violated international law, but Israel says Hezbollah was launching rockets from Kana before the attack.

Initial accounts said some 56 people were killed in the attack, but the number was later halved.

WORLD

Hamas chief proud of abduction

The supreme leader of Hamas said he had no regrets about ordering the abduction of an Israeli soldier to the Gaza Strip.

"I am proud of this brave operation," Khaled Meshaal told the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper Thursday, referring to the June 25 border raid in which Cpl. Gilad Shalit was captured and two other Israeli soldiers were killed.

The move prompted Israel to reinvade Gaza for the first time since it quit the coastal territory last year.

Hamas has demanded that Israel release Palestinian prisoners en masse in exchange for Shalit, something Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has ruled out.

The Hamas leader, who lives in Syria, declined to say if he knows where Shalit is being held.

ADL presses pope on Iran

The leader of the Anti-Defamation League asked Pope Benedict XVI to help protect Jews from Iranian threats. Abraham Foxman, the ADL's president, made the comments Thursday in a meeting the pope held in Rome with an ADL delegation.

The pope told the delegation that the church condemns anti-Semitism, but did not make any specific reference to Iran, Reuters reported.

Eugenics exhibit opens in Germany

An exhibit on Nazi racial theories and murder opened Thursday in Germany in an institution that once promoted a gruesome eugenics program.

"Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race," the first exhibit of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to appear outside North America, will be at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden through June 24. The exhibit of some 400 items focuses on how theories of racial superiority became a tool for murder in the hands of Nazi scientists.

Wiesel to be knighted

Elie Wiesel is to receive an honorary knighthood.

The Nov. 30 honor will be presented to the Nobel Peace Prize winner for his contributions to Holocaust education in Britain.

Ex-Nazi member freed temporarily

A German court freed a former Nazi SS member from custody pending a ruling on his extradition.

The judge who freed Soeren Kam on Thursday said he is not considered a flight risk. Kam, who was recently arrested, is wanted for his role in the murder of a Danish journalist in Denmark during World War II.

Swiss Jews, Muslims want private burials

Jews and Muslims in Geneva want private religious burials. The groups are pressing to change a cemetery law in the city that requires all people to be buried in public ceremonies as part of efforts to build tolerance, The Associated Press reported.

Jews have long gotten around the issue by burying their dead in a cemetery that has an entryway in Switzerland and graves in France, but that cemetery is filling up, the AP reported.