

IN THE NEWS
Olmert, Putin discuss Iran nukes

Ehud Olmert said Russia understands the need to curb Iran's nuclear program.

The Israeli prime minister met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Wednesday and raised the threats posed by Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.

"I come out of this meeting with a feeling that Putin understands that upcoming danger from Iran, if it indeed succeeds in fulfilling its purpose of arming itself with a nuclear weapon," Olmert told reporters after the summit.

Israeli troops kill two in tunnel hunt

Israeli troops killed two Palestinian gunmen while hunting for arms-smuggling tunnels in the Gaza Strip.

The gunmen were shot dead early Wednesday as they approached Israeli soldiers and engineers operating near Rafah, a town straddling Gaza's southern border with Egypt.

Security sources said that during the operation, Israeli forces discovered two 40-foot-deep passages used by Palestinian terrorists to smuggle arms and bypass the European Union-manned border terminal at Rafah.

U.S. frees ex-camp guard

The United States freed a former Nazi concentration camp guard because it couldn't find a country to take him.

Johann Leprich was released Monday because Romania, Hungary and Germany all refused to take him, the Detroit Free Press reported.

Leprich, 81, was stripped of his U.S. citizenship earlier this year for lying about his participation in the Nazi Waffen SS and at Mauthausen when he immigrated to the United States in 1958.

WORLD REPORT

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Who's silencing whom? Debate heats up after speeches canceled

By BEN HARRIS

NEW YORK (JTA) — Columbia University's recent decision to limit attendance at a controversial lecture on the Arab-Israeli conflict is the latest in a string of flaps concerning free speech and the Middle East that have led to claims that debate is being stifled.

The university chaplain's office revoked as many as 115 invitations hours before a speech by Walid Shoebat, a former PLO terrorist turned evangelical Christian and author of the book, "Why I Left Jihad."

Shoebat went on to address a group of some 150 students and 20 outside guests selected by the Columbia University College Republicans, the student group that organized the event. The university says Shoebat's appearance was not scheduled as a public event.

The Columbia incident comes on the heels of the Polish Consulate in New York's cancellation of an Oct. 3 speech by Tony Judt, a New York University historian and frequent critic of Israel, following phone calls from two prominent Jewish groups.

The following week, a French Embassy office in New York scrapped a party in honor of Australian author Carmen Callil after complaints that she equated Jewish suffering under the Vichy government with Israel's alleged oppression of Palestinians.

These latest controversies may quickly fade, but the questions they raise will not. Coming months after the publication of a paper alleging that a vast "Israel lobby" methodically stifles debate on the Middle East,

claims that certain views aren't getting a fair hearing have taken on a more sinister hue. Israel supporters now are wary of appearing to act in precisely the manner the paper's authors, scholars Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, have said they do.

"This is the classical conundrum of the Jews when they face defamation," said

Charles Jacobs, president of the pro-Israel David Project Center for Jewish Leadership and a veteran of the Israel-free speech conflict on campus. "If there's a radical anti-Jewish, anti-Israel event, if I take strong action to oppose it, I

give them a platform they might not have had. And if I don't, I allow them to build up their base drop by drop so they will become a major threat."

Judt, who appeared last month on a panel with Mearsheimer to defend the lobby thesis, has wrapped his cause in the banner of free speech, claiming that Jewish groups exerted pressure on the Polish consulate to cancel his appearance.

"I think there is a concerted effort to prevent certain kinds of discussion," Judt said.

For Jacobs, the notion that it's about free speech is a sham. The question isn't whether one or another speaker can find a venue, he says, but which questions are considered worthy of being debated at the nation's universities.

"The whole thing is agenda-setting," Jacobs said. "Why are we not talking about whether Islamic fundamentalism is religious apartheid?"

Shoebat, whose talks do focus on the

Continued on page 2

**FOCUS
ON
ISSUES**

■ *There has recently been a string of flaps concerning free speech and the Middle East*

Continued from page 1

anti-Israel and anti-Semitic indoctrination he received as a youth in Palestinian society, says equally powerful forces are interfering with his ability to be heard.

"People with different views than what this school stands for are not allowed at this school," he told JTA, referring to Columbia.

Still, for all the claims of being silenced, neither side really has much trouble getting its argument out: Shoebat's lecture went on for a slightly smaller audience, while Judt is a published author whose views on Israel have been widely known since a 2003 essay in the New York Review of Books in which he argued for a binational state of Israelis and Palestinians. Callil's comments were made in a book, "Bad Faith," which arrived in bookstores last month.

Still, all three see themselves as victims of a concerted campaign to suppress unpopular views. Judt lashed out at the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, which placed phone calls to the Polish Consulate before the lecture was canceled; Callil blamed "fundamentalist Jews" for her event being canceled.

Both those claims appear overblown. Representatives of the ADL, AJCommittee and the Polish Consulate all agree that no one asked the consulate to cancel the event.

Marek Skulimowski, Poland's deputy consul general, told JTA that the consulate is "not an appropriate place for

expressing controversial views, because it means that the Polish government is supporting that.

"We would like to avoid uncomfortable situations for Poland," he said.

Shoebat also acknowledges that the Columbia situation was unusual: With the exception of an event at Princeton University that was canceled last December, Shoebat has spoken at numerous U.S. universities without incident.

Both Israel's supporters and critics agree implicitly that part of the issue is venue.

Shoebat has been warmly welcomed at synagogues and churches, while Judt acknowledges that there is considerably more sympathy for the Palestinian posi-

tion in academia than among the broader American public, something he'd like to change.

In that, he's hardly alone: Many agree that for all the bluster about freedom of speech, there's remarkably little constructive dialogue taking place.

"For purposes of Israel education, we need in fact more exposure in the Jewish community to views which challenge our own," said Steven Cohen, a professor of

Jewish social policy at Hebrew Union College in New York.

"We need more opportunities for people, especially young people, to explore their views on Israel, some of which many of us may find uncomfortable." ■

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Charles Jacobs

President, David Project Center for Jewish Leadership

Argentina museum drops Nazi from title

By FLORENCIA ARBISER

Buenos Aires, Oct. 18 (JTA) — An Argentine museum has stripped its namesake from its title following the revelation of his Nazi past.

The former Menghin Archaeological Museum is located in Chivilcoy, 100 miles northwest of Buenos Aires. It was opened in October 1973, shortly after Oswald Menghin's death.

Born in 1888 in Austria, the archaeologist Menghin was the head of the Vienna Prehistorical University during the Nazi occupation.

Menghin was Austria's education minister for a short time during World War II and was responsible for limiting the number of Jewish professors and students in universities.

He was one of the signatories of Sigmund Freud's university expulsion.

The collaborator moved to Argentina in 1948.

He ended a long stint at the Buenos Aires University as an emeritus professor.

After his daughter married a Chivil-

coy businessman, he moved to that city in his later years, where he died in 1973.

In 2005, university professor and U.N. consultant Marcelino Fontan published the book "Oswald Menghin: Science and Nazism," in which he describes Menghin's role as part of the "cultural Nazi operative."

Fontan, who studied with the Nazi collaborator at the Buenos Aires University, wrote that Menghin continued to express his racist ideology there.

Despite Fontan's book, the museum name wasn't touched until last month, when the Buenos Aires magazine "Veintitres," or 23, published the story of Menghin's past.

Under public pressure, Chivilcoy legislative authorities voted unanimously Sept. 28 to eliminate Menghin's name from the museum. A new name is to be chosen.

Chivilcoy government official Antonio Vega said the city's residents had always seen Menghin as a respectable academic.

"We never suspected about his Nazi past," he said. ■



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Seeing Torah through women's eyes

By JACOB BERKMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — How many people know that when the Torah describes Abraham mourning the death of Sarah, it's the only time in the entire text that a man mourns a woman?

Or that Adam and Eve were equal partners in crime? Or that women most likely were instrumental in constructing the Temple?

Too few. That's why the Reform movement will soon publish a commentary on the Torah that gives the woman's perspective.

"The Torah: A Women's Commentary," a project of Women of Reform Judaism, the movement's women's division, is a collaboration of 80 biblical scholars, archaeologists, rabbis, cantors, theologians and poets from across the religious spectrum — all of them women — who came together to present a new perspective on the Bible.

"The goal of this is to bring women's voices to the forefront," WRJ's executive director, Shelley Lindauer, told JTA. "History has been written by men, men were the ones who wrote the history of the Torah, and women's voices got pushed to the background. We want to hear more about what the matriarchs said, some more about the women characters in the Torah."

The volume won't be released until the WRJ Assembly and the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial conferences in San Diego in December 2007, but the Reform movement will introduce a chapter of the book this November.

During the week of Nov. 18, when Parshat Chayei Sarah is read, some 250 Reform congregations — some 5,000 people in all — will participate in a study program based on the "Women's Commentary."

WRJ and URJ Press, which is publishing the book, have released the chapter from the 1,500-page volume for congregations to use during Shabbat services or other study sessions, along with a list of suggested talking points, to give a taste of what the commentary will offer, said Rabbi Hara Person, URJ Press' managing editor.

The commentary will be laid out differently than many others. Each chapter will offer an overview, followed by Hebrew text and a linear translation, along with a central commentary from one of the 80 contributors.

After the central commentary, another woman will give a short countercommentary offering a different viewpoint on each chapter. Then another woman will give a post-biblical interpretation, and another a contemporary reflection on the parshah, or weekly portion.

Each parshah also will be followed by a selection of creative writing, most often poetry, that reflects the themes that

were just read.

More than traditional commentaries, the new volume will focus on women when they're in the text of the Torah — and also when they're glaringly absent, editor Tamara Cohn Eskenazi said.

For instance, Chayei Sarah deals with the death of Sarah and the courting of Rebecca. Abraham's slave finds Rebecca at a well, where she offers him water, and he asks her family if he can take her back to Canaan to wed Abraham's son.

The women's commentary is careful to point out that Rebecca gives her consent. Rebecca is an active, not passive, character from her very introduction in the Torah, the commentary says.

Though he hasn't seen the book, the notion of a women's commentary garnered praise from Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

"Commentators have traditionally been male, so I think the women's voice and perspective certainly can help to add and interpret and bring the message of the Torah in a way that may be different than a male's voice," Epstein said.

But he was a little wary of an exclusively female commentary, just as said he would be wary of an exclusively male commentary today.

"We need commentaries that speak to all people and that have male and female voices blended together," he said.

Differences between the women's com-

mentary and traditional commentaries start at the very beginning, with the story of creation.

The creation of woman is one of the most misinterpreted passages in the Bible and is fraught with cultural bias, Eskenazi explains in her interpretation, which will be published in the "Women's Commentary."

While the description of Eve being created from Adam's rib is commonly taken as a sign of Eve's inferiority, it's more a statement of their equality, she says. They're described in Genesis 1:26-28 as being of the same flesh, both "created in God's image and blessed with fertility and power."

They later are described as partners.

And when they sin by eating the apple, they do so together — yet it's Eve who often is perceived as the evildoer and the one who was the impetus for the expulsion from Eden.

An essay by Elizabeth Bloch-Smith in the volume discusses Parshat Trumah, which describes the building of the Mishkan, the portable temple the Jews built in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. Al-

though the gender of the artisans who built the Mishkan isn't clear, it's often assumed that they were male.

But based on archaeological evidence from the time that shows women heavily involved in weaving and spinning, Bloch-Smith suggests it was women who provided the yarn for the temple's Tent of Meeting, according to Rabbi Andrea Weiss, the commentary's associate editor.

Weiss, an assistant professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, said she's now teaching a class based on the "Women's Commentary." The volume has been in the works for 13 years, since Sarah Sager, a cantor, challenged the movement to undertake the project in a speech to the WRJ assembly in 1993.

"We're not trying to make this midrash. We're not trying to make the text say something that it didn't say," Weiss said. "We're trying to read it closely and to pay more attention to parts not found in other texts." ■

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NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel: Iran targeting us with drugs

Israel accused Iran of trying to flood it with drugs via Lebanon. Yediot Achronot reported Wednesday that Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter, during talks this week with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, warned of the links between terrorism and contraband.

"Drugs are a strategic threat against societies and nations. The war against terror and the war against crime are two sides of the same coin," he was quoted as telling American officials. "Iran is trying to flood Israel with drugs via Hezbollah."

A main conduit for such trafficking apparently has been Ghajar, a town straddling the Israeli-Lebanese border that is monitored closely by Hezbollah.

During the recent war in Lebanon, Israeli forces occupied the northern part of Ghajar and have conditioned their departure on tighter security arrangements by U.N. peacekeepers.

Israelis want Katsav out

Two in three Israelis believe embattled President Moshe Katsav should resign, a newspaper survey found.

Sixty-six percent of respondents in the Yediot Achronot poll published Wednesday said that Katsav, who faces possible prosecution on rape charges, should step down now.

Twenty-four percent said he should not, while 10 percent were undecided.

Katsav, who is accused of raping and sexually harassing several former female employees, has denied wrongdoing.

His seven-year term in office ends next year.

Yediot found that, out of several Israeli notables tapped as potential Katsav successors, Vice Premier Shimon Peres is the most popular, with 42 percent support.

Peres ran for president in 2000 but was beaten by Katsav in a Knesset ballot.

Olmert denies Wiesel report

Ehud Olmert denied a newspaper report that he was considering Elie Wiesel as a candidate for Israel's presidency.

Ma'ariv reported Wednesday that members of the prime minister's "inner circle" believe Wiesel, the Nobel prize-winning Holocaust survivor, was a leading candidate to replace President Moshe Katsav if he steps down. Olmert, who was on a trip to Russia, denied this.

"I can think of one man in the political establishment who is very appropriate for the job," he told reporters. "His name, as it happens, is Shimon Peres."

Though Wiesel is not Israeli, the idea of him becoming the Jewish state's president would not be unprecedented: Albert Einstein, who also was not an Israeli citizen, was offered the job in 1952, but he declined.

Jordan, Syria discuss river rights

Jordan and Syria are negotiating water rights from the Yarmouk River, a water source Israel also claims. Jordanian spokesmen denied a "crisis" this week in how Jordan and Syria share the Yarmouk's water, but acknowledged that there were "problems."

Syria shares the water during heavy rains, but what to do during periods of light rainfall requires further talks.

"The two sides will meet regularly in order to resolve all problems so as to reach a final agreement on all water issues," Jordanian government spokesman Nasser Judeh was quoted as saying by the Jordan Times.

Sharing the Yarmouk's waters is a central aspect of the 1994

Jordan-Israel peace treaty. The river runs through Syria and the Golan Heights and forms part of the Jordan-Israel border.

Saddam plays Zionist card

Saddam Hussein accused prosecution witnesses of sowing division among Iraqis to help Israel.

"The Zionists are the only ones who will benefit from the differences among Iraqis," the former Iraqi leader said Tuesday at his trial.

Saddam made the comments after Kurdish witnesses testified they were forcibly kept in a camp in 1998 where hundreds died of malnutrition.

NORTH AMERICA

Court upholds terror designation

A U.S. court upheld the State Department's designation of the Jewish group Kahane Chai and its affiliates as terrorist groups.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled Tuesday that the State Department's decision in 2003 to renew its 1997 decision had "substantial support," noting that the group "was known to approve of terrorist tactics, including the mass murder of Arab worshippers."

Kahane Chai, a group that preaches the anti-Arab teachings of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, argued that it was a legitimate Jewish activist group that did not support terrorism.

The group's Web site, kahane.org, also was declared a terrorist entity.

Canadian politician's trip to Israel delayed

A Canadian Jewish group postponed a trip to Israel by a leading politician who recently made controversial comments about Israel.

The Canada-Israel Committee delayed the trip by Michael Ignatieff, who is running for Liberal Party leader.

"It serves no one's purpose to undertake such an initiative in so highly charged a political environment," the group said in a statement.

Ignatieff recently called Israel's bombing in the Lebanese village of Kana this summer a war crime; he later said both Israel and Hezbollah may have committed war crimes during the war.

Zionist group slams Rice

The Zionist Organization of America condemned Condoleezza Rice for what it called "the most pro-Palestinian speech in memory."

The ZOA was referring to the U.S. secretary of state's speech last week to the American Task Force on Palestine.

The ZOA statement particularly criticized Rice for saying that Palestinians should be "forever free of the daily humiliation of occupation."

"For Rice to say that Palestinians deserve a life free of occupation misstates the facts, ignores Palestinian culpability for their present situation and confers legitimacy on PLO and Hamas victimhood propaganda," the statement said.

WORLD

Editor beaten in Bangladesh

A pro-Israeli editor reportedly was beaten in Bangladesh.

The Jerusalem Post reported that Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, editor of the English-language Weekly Blitz newspaper, was beaten when 40 people stormed his offices earlier this month.

Among the protesters were lower-level officials of the ruling Bangladeshi National Party, the Post reported.

Choudhury faces sedition charges for advocating ties with Israel.