

## IN THE NEWS

## Iraq panel urges Israeli-Arab talks

The Iraq Study Group urged the United States to re-engage with Iran and Syria and renew efforts to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The congressionally mandated study group, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton, said in a report issued Wednesday that there were disincentives and incentives available to the United States to prod Iran and Syria into a more constructive role in Iraq, but they were not outlined in the executive summary made available to reporters.

It also said "there must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria and President Bush's June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine."

## Israeli hostages said to be wounded

Two Israeli soldiers held by Hezbollah since July were seriously wounded during their capture, security sources said.

Israeli security sources on Wednesday quoted a declassified military report.

The security sources said that bloodstains and other evidence gathered at the site of the July 12 border raid in which Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev were seized showed the hostages were seriously wounded.

To survive, the sources said, the two army reservists would have required immediate medical attention.

Hezbollah has refused to provide information on the captives' condition.

Hezbollah said it would only release them as part of a swap for Arabs held in Israeli jails.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has ruled out a swap on Hezbollah's terms unless the militia provides information on the soldiers' health.



# WORLD REPORT

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## Conflicting Conservative opinions expected to open the way for gays

By BEN HARRIS

**N**EW YORK (JTA) — Even before the ink was dry on the Conservative movement's decision to accept gay rabbis and allow same-sex commitment ceremonies, its impact was already being felt.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement's congregational arm, immediately announced that he was recommending a change in the organization's hiring practices, which had required employees to be observant of Jewish law — effectively barring gay men and lesbians.

"I see no reason why we should not revise our hiring policies so we may consider applicants for United Synagogue jobs no matter what their sexual orientation may be," Epstein said in a statement. "United Synagogue's leadership will discuss the issue at our next scheduled meeting."

With advocates on both sides of the issue warning that Wednesday's decisions by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards could irreparably fracture the movement, the two-day meeting was closely monitored around the Jewish world.

In the end, the committee endorsed three separate teshuvot, or responsa, on the issue. One, by Rabbi Joel Roth, affirmed the movement's traditional ban on gay rabbis and commitment ceremonies. Another, by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins and Avram Reisner, reversed those positions while upholding the biblical prohibition on male intercourse. Both papers earned 13 votes, a majority of the 25-member committee.

A third opinion, by Rabbi Leonard Levy, also affirmed the movement's traditional position on homosexuality while rejecting the now-common view that homosexuality is an orientation one cannot control. Levy's position earned the minimum six votes required for acceptance.

Roth and Levy, along with Rabbis Mayer Rabinowitz and Joseph Prouser, resigned from the law committee to protest its endorsement of the liberal Dorff paper.

At the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, leaders long have made clear their intention to ordain gay rabbis if the law committee allowed it. At Wednesday's meeting, Dorff, rector of U.J.'s Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, said he expects the seminary to announce a final decision within weeks.

In New York, the Jewish Theological Seminary has been less forthcoming. Though he has said publicly that he supports gay ordination, incoming Chancellor Arnold Eisen promised to consult with faculty, students and the community before making a decision he emphasizes is not halachic in nature.

A survey of opinion within the movement is to be conducted before reaching a final decision.

"We are going to consider what we think best serves the Conservative movement and larger American Jewish community," Eisen wrote in an e-mail following the decision. "We know that the implications of the decision before us are immense. We fully recognize what is at stake."

Momentum has been building for years for a more permissive Conservative attitude

*Continued on page 2*

BEHIND  
THE  
HEADLINES

■ *Neither advocates nor opponents of change will feel compelled to adjust their positions*

*Continued from page 1*

toward homosexuality. Despite the committee's 1992 decision upholding the ban on gay rabbis and commitment ceremonies, a number of Conservative rabbis do perform such ceremonies.

That number is expected to grow now that rabbis have received halachic sanction from the movement's highest legal body.

"I think there will be a significant change," said Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, a JTS graduate and leader of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a Manhattan synagogue for lesbians and gay men.

An outspoken proponent of changing the traditional prohibition on homosexuality, Cohen performed commitment ceremonies for gay couples even before the committee's decision. She said opponents of change no longer will be able to use the law committee's 1992 statement on homosexuality as an excuse to continue excluding gay men and lesbians from the movement.

"According to the current position of the movement, gay men and women are lesser human beings than heterosexuals," Cohen said. "Gay people can be kept out of every level of lay leadership in our movement. Until now, rabbis have been able to say, 'There's nothing I can do. My hands are tied.'"

But by deciding that continuing the ban on gay ordination and commitment ceremonies also is a legitimate position, the committee has ensured that local rabbis who oppose a change in policy will have a halachic authority to cite in making their case.

There is considerably less ambiguity at the movement's seminaries, where much of the agitation to change policy has originated.

KeshetJTS, a student advocacy group, says a survey showed that eight out of 10 members of the JTS community would support ordaining gay rabbis.

"I think that congregants are ahead of their rabbis on many issues, and this is one of them," said Rabbi Steve Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi and senior teaching fellow at CLAL—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. "I can tell you that there are people who have wanted to go to the seminary to become a rabbi and have chosen to go elsewhere, and will be thrilled that that option will now be open to them."

One such person is Aaron Weininger, an openly gay senior at Washington University in St. Louis and a lifelong member of the Conservative movement. His decision on where to apply to rabbinical school hinged on the law committee's decision.

"I would like to be able to apply to a Conservative seminary, and for both ethical and personal reasons right now that's not an option," Weininger told JTA before the vote.

Weininger said he would apply to the University of Judaism, but would also consider JTS if that became an option.

Like other advocates of liberalization, Weininger said what's at stake is not just the status of lesbian and gay men in Conservative Judaism but the movement's entire approach to interpreting halacha.

He hopes the decision will lead to great

er clarity in the way movement authorities negotiate the line between fidelity to tradition and the demands of contemporary life.

"Morality is at the very core of law, and that law really drives us toward our aspira-

tion of holiness and justice," Weininger said. "And so if we in turn interpret law to exclude people, we really violate the intent of the law."

Rabbi Alan LaPayover, one of very few openly gay rabbis who has served as the spiritual leader of a Conservative synagogue — he was ordained by the Reconstructionist

Rabbinical College — called the decision "a very big step."

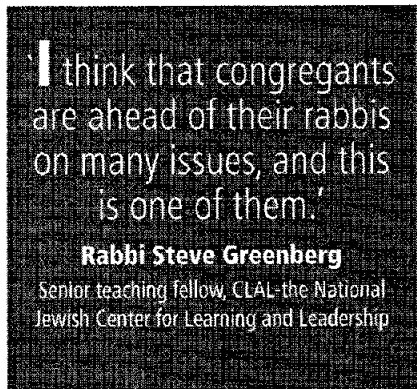
Given the nature of the Conservative movement's process, "they did the best they were able to do," said LaPayover, the former rabbi at Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, Pa.

Given the multiple opinions allowed by the law committee, neither advocates nor opponents of change will feel compelled to adjust their positions.

Still, many observers are hopeful that the decision will open a vital discussion within a movement that once was America's largest Jewish denomination.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor, a leading advocate for change within the movement, said Eisen's use of the committee debate as an opportunity for discussion at JTS is a step in the right direction.

"That's a revolution," Creditor said. "It might be quiet, but I think it's going to change things on the ground because rabbis can't ignore the inclusion of whichever teshuvot will be accepted. We can't ignore it. There's no hiding it. It's transparent." ■



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**Intermarrieds still have December dilemma**

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA)—Intermarried couples who are raising their children as Jews still negotiate a tug of war between Christmas and Chanukah, a survey concluded.

The third annual December holiday survey conducted by [InterfaithFamily.com](http://InterfaithFamily.com) focused on 342 intermarried couples who chose Jewish paths for their children. Nine-tenths plan to celebrate Chanukah

and 89 percent plan to celebrate Christmas; 44 percent plan to decorate a Christmas tree at home; and 93 percent plan to give gifts for Chanukah, compared to 71 percent who will give Christmas gifts outside their home and 44 percent who will give Christmas gifts at home. Many of these couples deal with the interfaith question by focusing on the religious aspects of Chanukah while celebrating Christmas as a secular holiday. ■

# Budget failure threatens Dems' agenda

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Republicans' failure to fund government before they hand over Congress to the Democrats will have little effect on Israel, but domestic welfare programs Jews care about will suffer, community officials said.

In an extraordinary comment posted last week on its Web site, the United Jewish Communities' Washington office fumed that the lame-duck Congress' failure to pass most of its budget "is considered to be a politically motivated distraction for the newly installed Democratic Congressional leadership, preventing them from tackling their incoming agenda for the 110th Congress."

The UJC, which generally abjures sharp criticism of either party, said retirement community and elderly-care programs would be affected by the delay.

Thomas Kahn, who doubles as the Democrats' top budget official in the U.S. House of Representatives and as president of the American Jewish Committee's Washington chapter, cited a "range" of issues of Jewish concern that will be affected, "from child care to education to environmental protection."

"The bottom line is because the Congress failed to do its job and is going home for Christmas vacation, it means a number of critical domestic services will be underfunded" until Feb. 15 at the earliest, he said.

Spending that affects Israel is not impacted. Foreign operations, which accounts for the \$2.8 billion Israel receives annually, is going ahead at 2006 levels, which differ little from levels promised for 2007. The Defense Appropriations Act, which affects collaborative U.S.-Israel programs such as the Arrow anti-missile program, is one of only two that were passed before the midterm elections.

Democrats are concerned that the domestic agenda they touted, and which helped them win back Congress, will be delayed as the new Congress deals with unfinished business.

House Democrats within three weeks pledged to pass legislation funding embryonic stem-cell research; raising the minimum wage; reforming ethics; re-

forming health care to open up bidding on federal purchases of pharmaceuticals; balancing the budget; funding research on energy alternatives; reducing interest on student loans; and implementing the Sept. 11 commission's recommendations.

An array of Jewish groups was looking forward to the renewed stem-cell funding effort; a number of other groups, led by the Reform movement, also back the Democrats' pledge to raise the minimum wage. Other groups, including the American Jewish Congress and AJCommittee, are looking forward to examining Democratic proposals for energy independence.

"We'll have to figure out for the security of the nation how we fund those things" while passing appropriations, a senior Democratic staffer told JTA.

Both houses have passed versions of the appropriations bills. At issue are the versions of the bills that emerge after the Senate and House conference, and which must be passed on a second reading.

Congress rarely meets the Oct. 1 deadline for passing appropriations bills, and this year only Defense and Homeland Security appropriations packages passed, leaving another nine appropriations bills waiting for the lame-duck session.

In past years Congress returned after midterm elections to pass the remaining appropriations during the lame-duck session. This year, however, after losing the midterms and ending 12 years of dominance in the U.S. House of Representatives, Republicans decided to punt the remaining

appropriations to the next Congress.

Instead they are passing "continuing resolutions" that allow the budget to go ahead at minimum 2006 levels with no add-ons.

Conservative Republicans, who are leading the effort to pass the continuing resolutions, deny they are playing politics with Democrats, saying it's part of their recent efforts — which predate the elections — to strip earmarks, or "pork," from spending bills. They've said they would be happy to pass "clean" budget bills, not the omnibus bills that typify appropriations.

Naturally occurring retirement communities, pioneered by UJC, are currently funded solely through earmarks, though there are plans for a federally funded program. The NORC programs help keep the elderly semi-independent and living close to family.

Another UJC-favored earmark is a new family caregiver support program that streamlines access to community services for people who are responsible for caring for their elderly relatives.

The UJC said the delay would affect 19 NORC programs, as well as pioneer caregiver support programs in Durham, N.C., and New Haven, Conn.

William Daroff, UJC's policy vice president and director of its Washington office, predicted that the earmarks would be back in place by February. After that, he said, UJC would work to make NORCs permanent.

"One of our goals in the next Congress is funding for the Older Americans Act, which made NORCs permanent," he said.

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FOCUS  
ON  
ISSUES

United Jewish  
Communities said  
retirement community  
and elderly-care  
programs would be  
affected by the delay.

## Meet Bibi the blogger

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Benjamin Netanyahu has launched a blog.

The Israeli Likud Party and parliamentary opposition leader went online this week at [www.netanyahu.co.il](http://www.netanyahu.co.il), which features commentaries, video clips of his recent speeches and media appearances, and reader feedback.

It's currently only in Hebrew.

Netanyahu, a former prime minister who has made no secret of his desire to win back the top office, wrote that he launched the blog in response to requests by supporters who want to hear his opinions on current affairs in Israel.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### NORTH AMERICA

#### Carter fellow resigns over book

A Middle East expert resigned from Emory University's Carter Center over former President Carter's new book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid." In a letter to the media Tuesday, Ken Stein distanced himself from Carter and the center's recent activities, and emphasized that he "had nothing to do with the research, preparation, writing, or review of President Carter's recent publication.

Any material which he used from the book we did together in 1984, 'The Blood of Abraham,' he used unilaterally." Carter's new book "is replete with factual errors, copied materials not cited, superficialities, glaring omissions, and simply invented segments. Aside from the one-sided nature of the book, meant to provoke, there are recollections cited from meetings where I was the third person in the room, and my notes of those meetings show little similarity to points claimed in the book," Stein wrote.

"Having little access to Arabic and Hebrew sources, I believe, clearly handicapped his understanding and analyses of how history has unfolded over the last decade." Stein, who was associated with the center for 23 years, will keep his positions in Emory's history and political science departments and his directorship of the university's Institute for the Study of Modern Israel.

#### U.N. to seek \$450 million for Palestinians

The United Nations reportedly will ask donor countries for \$450 million in Palestinian aid.

The Associated Press quoted U.N. officials Wednesday as saying that three-quarters of the requested \$453 million would go toward job creation, cash assistance and food aid.

Other funds would be earmarked for the Palestinian health and education systems. The United Nations plans to make the request on Thursday. International funding for the Palestinian Authority was cut following the election of Hamas, a terrorist group, last winter.

#### House protects new red 'crystal'

The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation copyrighting the Red Crystal, the symbol that allows Magen David Adom to join international Red Cross bodies.

Israel's first-responder organization was admitted to the societies in June after the "crystal" — a diamond — was accepted as a compromise for non-Christian and non-Muslim countries that preferred not to use the red cross or red crescent. The copyright protection legislation, passed unanimously Tuesday, is a critical step in ensuring proper use of the new emblem.

#### APN meets Syrian envoy

Americans for Peace Now met with Syria's ambassador to the United States.

The meeting last week between the dovish pro-Israel group and Imad Moustapha did not produce any breakthroughs. Moustapha repeated Syria's call for a resumption of talks with no pre-conditions; APN reiterated U.S. and Israeli demands that Syria end its support for terrorist groups.

However, a meeting between a Syrian official and a group with roots in Israel is unusual. APN and its sister organization, Peace Now, want Israel to explore recent Syrian calls to restart peace talks.

### MIDDLE EAST

#### Peres shrugs off P.A. unity talks

Shimon Peres dismissed the idea that a Palestinian Authority coalition government would seek to make peace with Israel. The

Israeli vice premier said Wednesday that long-running talks between the governing P.A. faction Hamas and the rival Fatah movement on a possible unity government was intended only to coax the international community into renewing aid to the Palestinian Authority.

"Hamas doesn't want peace, even if we give them 1967 borders," Peres told Israel Radio, referring to territories where Fatah has said it wants to found a Palestinian state alongside Israel. "Hamas wants to use Fatah as a cover, a facade, so they can get money."

Israeli officials previously had voiced cautious approval for the unity talks, but insisted that the West not abandon its demands that any future P.A. government renounce terrorism and recognize Israel's right to exist.

#### Iran to host Holocaust revisionism conference

Iran plans to host an international Holocaust revisionism conference next week.

An Iranian newspaper on Wednesday quoted a Foreign Ministry official as saying that 67 "scholars" from 30 countries will convene in Tehran next week to discuss several issues regarding the fate of the Jews during World War II, including whether the Nazis used gas chambers for mass executions.

The conference, dubbed "Holocaust, World Prospect," will run Monday and Tuesday. Iran's president has drawn international censure for calling the Nazi genocide a myth.

#### Israeli troops wound Gazans

Israeli soldiers wounded two Palestinians at the Gaza Strip's boundary fence. Wednesday's shootings marked the first Israeli fire into Gaza since a Nov. 26 truce declared by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Military sources said that in two separate incidents, Palestinians approached the Gaza fence in apparent attempts to plant bombs or spy on troop movements.

After the Palestinians ignored orders to move away, the troops shot and wounded them.

### WORLD

#### Chirac to Israel: Stop Lebanon overflights

French President Jacques Chirac told Israel to stop its air force flights over Lebanon.

Chirac made the demand in talks Wednesday with visiting Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, his spokesman said.

France also reiterated its stand that Hezbollah must immediately release two Israeli soldiers whose abduction July 12 sparked a monthlong war this summer.

Livni told reporters in response that Israel needs the Lebanon overflights to monitor continued arms smuggling to Hezbollah, a violation of the U.N.-brokered truce that ended the war. Israeli overflights are also prohibited by the truce.

#### Auschwitz Museum plans to update

The International Auschwitz Council accepted a plan by the Auschwitz Museum to update its exhibitions. The displays of thousands of victims' belongings has not been changed dramatically for more than five decades.

The council also agreed to prevent what remains of the former camp's gas chambers from deteriorating further. More than 1.1 million people, mostly Jews, were murdered at Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp in German-occupied Poland. The move to maintain the site and change the exhibitions has proven controversial among some Holocaust survivors, who do not want to see the camp sanitized for the sake of tourism.