

U.S. Jewish news

Focus on issues

Youth group in financial limbo as B'nai B'rith cuts some corners

By JULIE WIENER
NEW YORK (JTA) - One of American Jewry's oldest - and most financially beleaguered - institutions is expected to slash funding for a program repeatedly described as its "jewel in the crown." B'nai B'rith, which has seen its membership and financial resources plummet in recent years, may stop subsidizing regional programming of its youth group, B'nai B'rith Youth Organization. No final decisions will be made until a May 18 board meeting of B'nai B'rith.

With an estimated 20,000 members, BBYO is one of the largest Jewish youth groups in the United States. Its regions currently receive approximately \$2 million U.S. from B'nai B'rith. The anticipated cuts come



A B'nai B'rith Youth Organization group of participants pose for a picture at a convention in Pennsylvania. The financially strapped B'nai B'rith is expected to slash funding to its youth programming. Photo courtesy B'nai B'rith.

as B'nai B'rith is decentralizing much of its operations and is expected to significantly cut funding for Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. Hillel, which until the early 1990s was funded almost entirely by

B'nai Brith, expects to receive \$50,000 U.S. from B'nai Brith in the 2002 fiscal year, down from \$300,000 U.S. this year.

Gary Saltzman, chairman of B'nai B'rith's national youth commission, sent an e-

mail to regional BBYO leaders last month, warning them that they may lose all B'nai B'rith funding by July 1. The memo "said that we should anticipate no money coming to any of the regions effective July 1 and should plan for it," said Robert Groman, chair of BBYO's Nassau/Suffolk region, in suburban New York. While

Saltzman's memo was not made available to JTA, several sources said it urged regional leaders to explore other sources of funding, such as Jewish federations, foundations and local B'nai B'rith chapters. BBYO's 39 regions vary considerably in their dependence on B'nai B'rith.

Some, like the New Jersey and Long Island ones, have received most of their budgets from the national office. Others, like the Michigan region, already supplement their B'nai B'rith allocations with money from their local federations. Some regions also have arrangements whereby they receive office space, staff and in-kind services from local Jewish community centers. It is possible that the national arm of the federation system and JCCs will step in to help BBYO.

In an April 12 memo to federation leaders and Jewish community centers, the executives of the federation umbrella organization - the United Jewish Communities - and the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America say they anticipate "important consultations regarding the future of BBYO," and are asking federations to implement a moratorium until May 31 on funding decisions concerning BBYO.

Yeshiva U. back in court soon for appeal on gay housing case

By JULIE WIENER
NEW YORK (JTA) - In a case that could have implications for other universities and institutions, gay medical students are returning to court this week to challenge Yeshiva University's policy of barring gay couples from its married student housing. Yeshiva University has argued that its policy is not discriminatory because it applies equally to unmarried heterosexual couples as it does to gay couples, who cannot legally marry. It has won the last two rounds in court.

The New York State Supreme Court sided with the Bronx-based medical school in 1999, stating in its opinion that the plaintiff's real dispute was not with Yeshiva University but with a state legislature that does not sanction same-sex marriages. The students' appeal to the appellate division of the New York State Supreme Court was denied last year. However, New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer backed the plaintiffs, and asked the New York Court of Appeals - New York state's highest court - to hear the case. The court agreed and will hear the students' appeal on April 25 in Albany. It is not expected to rule on the matter for several months.

The plaintiffs' case is being argued by the American Civil Liberties Union and has the support of numerous Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. Among the Jewish organizations filing friend of the court briefs are the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the National Council of Jewish Women, and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. In addition, several civil rights groups - including the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Asian American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund - collectively filed an amicus brief supporting the plaintiffs.

Gay and lesbian students are eligible for Yeshiva University housing, but their nonstudent partners are not. The students had claimed that requiring a marriage certificate for nonstudent partners is discriminatory because homosexual couples can not legally marry. According to the ACLU and its backers, the housing policy violates city laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and state laws that ban discrimination on the basis of marital status. Because gay couples cannot marry, they argue, the policy has a "disparate impact" on them.

According to the memo issued by the civil rights groups, "facially neutral practices that disproportionately deny opportunities to members of a protected class" are unlawful. Yeshiva University officials and their attorneys declined to comment on the case. No organizations are filing briefs on Yeshiva University's behalf. Yeshiva University is generally perceived as an Orthodox Jewish institution. It was founded under Jewish auspices, runs Jewish undergraduate colleges and a rabbinical school, and its president, Norman Lamm, is an Orthodox rabbi. However, Yeshiva University's graduate schools, including the Albert Einstein College of Medicine where the plaintiffs are enrolled, are nonsectarian and receive government funds - and thus must comply with all anti-discrimination laws.

At times, the nonsectarian status has put Yeshiva University in conflict with the religious sensibilities of Orthodox alumni and donors. In the mid-1990s, the university refused demands from some donors, alumni and others in the university community to ban gay student groups at the medical and law schools. According to the ACLU, American universities are almost evenly split between those that offer housing to same-sex couples and those that do not.

World Jewish news

Behind the headlines

Jews worry that Russia TV takeover is prelude to anti-Semitic crackdown

By LEV GORODETSKY
MOSCOW (JTA) - The takeover two weekends ago of Russia's only independent, nationwide television channel by the state-owned natural gas monopoly Gazprom is being seen here as a crackdown on free speech. The NTV channel had been the property of Vladimir



Counter-demonstrators hold anti-Semitic posters at rallies two weekends ago in Moscow that opposed the government takeover of the independent NTV television channel. Some Jews are worried that the takeover of the station, which had been operated by Russian Jewish tycoon Vladimir Goussinsky, could portend an anti-Semitic crackdown. Credit: Lev Gorodetsky/JTA.

Goussinsky, the former president of the Russian Jewish Congress - leading some Russian Jews, who flocked to

demonstrations in Moscow protesting Gazprom's "coup" against NTV, to worry that a crackdown on the

Jewish community might also be in the offing.

"I don't sympathize with the NTV fat cats, including Goussinsky," said Yevgenia Krukovskaya, a Jewish university student. "It is well-known that some of the top NTV people are former KGB officers." Krukovskaya said in a downtown Moscow square full of NTV supporters, expressing a widespread belief. "But I am going to this demonstration because I understand that if they are closing down this independent channel, they are closing down the freedom of speech and democracy - and after that, as usual, they will crack down on the Jews."

As if to support her misgivings, a group of middle-aged women a dozen steps from Krukovskaya carried posters reading "Close Down the Zhids' TV Box" and "NTV People - Servants of Israel." An elderly man harangued passersby with the argument that Jews have plundered Russia and that NTV is a platform for Zionists. Some of the thousands of pro-NTV demonstrators quickly tore down the anti-Semitic posters. But the small group probably reflected the feelings of many thousands of Russians who viewed NTV as a mouthpiece of Russian Jewry.

WORLD NEWS IN BRIEF

Germany looks into war crimes

NEW YORK (JTA) - German authorities opened an investigation into a 92-year-old man wanted in Italy for war crimes committed during World War II. In 1999, an Italian court found Friedrich Engel responsible for the deaths of at least 246 Italians in 1944 and 1945. Italian media have referred to the former Nazi SS officer as the "Butcher of Genoa."

Yahoo to back racial tolerance

NEW YORK (JTA) - Yahoo plans to donate millions of dollars in ads to five charitable causes, including one group promoting racial tolerance. The promise came after the Internet portal came under fire for running forums for racist groups.

Immigrant database goes online

NEW YORK (JTA) - A database of immigrant arrivals at New York's Ellis Island is slated to become available last week at www.ellislandrecords.org. The database contains passenger lists and information about millions of immigrants, including more than 1 million Jews who arrived at the U.S. immigration processing center between 1892 and 1924.

Czechs deport neo-Nazi

PRAGUE (JTA) - A suspected neo-Nazi from Slovakia was deported from the Czech Republic after he tried to attend a rock concert organized by extremists. Czech police had vowed to crack down on right-wing extremists following a neo-Nazi concert held earlier this month that angered Czech Jewish leaders and anti-racist groups.

U.S. again targets Demjanjuk

NEW YORK (JTA) - U.S. prosecutors are asking a judge to penalize alleged concentration camp guard John Demjanjuk after his lawyer failed to turn over documents they suspect implicate Demjanjuk, according to the Cleveland Jewish News. The move by the prosecutors from the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations comes as a second U.S. trial into Demjanjuk's wartime actions is scheduled to open May 29 in Cleveland.



Ukrainian and North American members of the Hillel Pesach Project leading a small communal seder in central Ukraine. Photo credit: Michael J. Jordan/JTA.

Young American, Ukrainian Jews join to spread Passover traditions

By MICHAEL J. JORDAN

KHMELNITSKI, Ukraine (JTA) - "And you shall tell your children..." (Exodus 13:8) It is the second night of Passover, and here in Ukraine it is the children who must tell their parents. After 75 years of repressive, anti-clerical communism, Jewish tradition has been flipped on its head, with the younger generations carrying the torch of Jewish observance.

In Khmelnytsky, a provincial hub in western Ukraine, a blue-on-white banner draped outside the main theater broadcasts the Jewish celebration: "Happy and Kosher Pesach," it reads in Cyrillic. Inside the glass and marble edifice, three communal seders are running simultaneously, in separate lobbies on separate floors. The previous night, rabbis and emissaries of Chabad Lubavitch ran all three.

Tonight, three Ukrainian Jewish students and three American students visiting from Israel are running one seder. At this seder, some 150 locals are gathered in a dimly lit, low-ceilinged hall. The excitement is palpable. The student teachers nervously take the podium and begin with a very American ice-breaking tactic: in-

structing the audience to introduce themselves to their neighbors. It works, and the tension subsides.

With the Ukrainian Jews leading, the students proceed to explain the meaning of the holiday, the seder plate, the candlelighting, the kiddush cup and the matzah. It goes smoothly, despite minor glitches: Many begin noshing from the seder plates before each item has been explained, for example. The evening hits its stride with the start of singing and clapping, and the students are thrilled with the results. "This is how it ought to be," says 20-year-old Michael Berkenwald of

Mercer Island, Wash., one of 25 North Americans visiting Ukraine while on a year abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"Once you get the kids engaged, they'll engage the parents," Irina Akselrud also exults. "I see a lot of people who are really trying to learn, trying to follow," says the 17-year-old student from the Ukrainian capital, Kiev.

The evening has indeed achieved the primary aim of the Hillel Pesach Project: to spread "Jewish joy" to Jews throughout the former Soviet Union (FSU), who in most cases have never experienced such joy.

Phew! Polish Jews get matzah - with last-minute help from officials

By RUTH E. GRUBER

ROME (JTA) - Some call it a Polish Passover miracle. This year's shipment of kosher-for-Passover food arrived just in time in Warsaw thanks to the direct intervention of Polish officials. "Due to the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Europe, our shipment was delayed for weeks at the Dutch port of Rotterdam," Jonah Bookstein, the director of the New York-based Ronald S. Lauder Foundation programs in Poland, said from Warsaw.

"Our container left there just three days before Passover by train to Poland," he said. "All the shipping agents said it would be impossible to get it before the holiday began. They also said it would be quarantined at the Polish border. "We contacted the Polish border crossing, the Polish customs agency, the Polish veterinary general, and the Polish president's office," he said.

The shipment contained a variety of Passover products - ranging from balsamic vinegar to cold cuts and hot dogs, from gefilte fish to salad dressing and toothpaste.

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