

Peres to convene Jewish Davos

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JERUSALEM – More than 1000 leading politicians, scholars and scientists from around the world are set to convene in Jerusalem next month, with the lofty goal of outlining a blueprint for the future of Israel and the Jewish people.

The global leaders will gather in the Jewish State on May 13 for “Facing Tomorrow”, a three-day conference convened by Israeli President Shimon Peres to coincide with the country’s 60th-anniversary celebrations. The list of scheduled participants boasts an impressive variety of figures, including President George W Bush, Tony Blair, Mikhail Gorbachev, Google’s Sergey Brinn, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Barbra Streisand.

Against the backdrop of what are seen in Israel as dull and ordinary events celebrating Israel’s 60th, the conference stands out for its ambitious goals and its A-list invitees. The gathering is the brainchild of Peres,



Israeli President Shimon Peres ... bringing together world leaders for Israel’s 60th-anniversary celebrations. Photo: JTA

the last remaining leader from the generation that founded the state.

Peres has been ridiculed in the past for his grand visions of a new Middle East, but he is now setting out to take on nothing less than the future of the

Jewish people. And in typical Peres fashion, he wants to redefine the basic structure of relations among Israel, the Jewish people and the world.

“It is time to change the nature of the partnership between the various

parts of the Jewish people,” Peres said. “It needs to be less materialistic and more intellectual.”

The idea for the conference, dubbed a “Jewish Davos” after the famed annual meeting of world leaders at the eponymous Swiss ski resort, came from the 84-year-old Nobel laureate himself. The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, a Jerusalem-based think tank that for the past several years has brought together Jewish scholars and leaders to discuss the future of the Jewish people, will set the agenda.

The Israeli president hopes to steer Israel-Diaspora relations away from the cause that for decades has united the far-flung Jewish people: the fight against anti-Semitism.

“The Jews spend too much time being apologetic,” Peres said. “They spend too much time on issues like fighting anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is not a Jewish disease, so let the non-Jews treat it. It is their disease.”

THE FORWARD

Vatican attempts to patch Jewish relations

ROME – Ahead of a papal trip to the United States, the Vatican has expressed its respect and esteem for Jews, despite tension over a Good Friday prayer revived by Pope Benedict XVI.

In a statement, the Holy See tried to reassure Jews on Friday that a new prayer that some saw as a call for their conversion did not indicate a change in the Church’s high regard for Jews or its condemnation of anti-Semitism.

“The Holy See wishes to reassure that the new formulation of the prayer ... in no way intends to indicate a change in the Catholic Church’s regard for the Jews, which has evolved from the basis of the Second Vatican Council,” the statement said.

The Vatican issued the document a week before the German pope is scheduled to begin a landmark visit to the United States, which will include a visit to Park East syna-

agogue in New York and a meeting with leaders of the American Jewish community.

Some Jewish groups had said they were disappointed over the prayer because it had historically been used as an excuse for violence and discrimination against Jews.

Catholic and Jewish sources said the Vatican statement had been delivered to Israel’s chief rabbinate.

A major Jewish group, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), welcomed the Vatican statement.

“We welcome this reaffirmation of Nostra Aetate’s binding authority and its requirement of esteem for and solidarity with the Jewish people,” said Rabbi David Rosen, the AJC’s international director of interreligious affairs.

He said however that he had hoped for an explicit reference to proselytism.

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Arab to address Holocaust conference

JERUSALEM – For the first time in history, a representative of an Arab country will address an international conference on the Holocaust in Jerusalem.

Ahmed el-Abassi, Tunisia’s representative to the Palestinian Authority, will speak on the fate of the Jews of North Africa during World War II at the opening of a three-day conference to be held at the end of April.

“His presence expresses solidarity with the subject and recognition of the trouble and hardships of the Tunisian Jewish community under the German occupation,” a spokesman for Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, said.

Israel and Tunisia do not have diplomatic relations.

Last year, a Tunisian was nominated as the first Arab to be honoured as Righteous among the Nations, a title given to non-Jews who saved the lives of Jews from the Nazi’s during World War II.

Some 85,000 Jews lived in Tunisia on the eve of World War II; today there are only 2000.

Earlier this year, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum launched its Arabic-language website in a bid to promote awareness in the Arab world of the extermination of Jews by the Nazis and to combat Holocaust denial.

EUROPEAN JEWISH PRESS

An ‘anthem’ for Israel from the makers of Band Aid

LONDON – Almost 25 years ago, a diverse mix of pop and rock musicians filed into legendary record producer Trevor Horn’s SARM West studios in London to make the charity single *Do They Know It’s Christmas?*. That record, recorded under the name Band Aid, sold millions of copies to raise funds for Ethiopian famine relief, kickstarted the entire Live Aid phenomenon of musicians raising money to alleviate global crises, and helped remake the image of at least some members of the rock fraternity, from selfish hedonists to global do-gooders.

Later this month, Horn will host a very different group of musicians at SARM West to record a version of the prayer *Oseh Shalom Bimromav*, at the request of Britain’s Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks says he wants to come out with an “anthemic” recording and an accompanying video which he’ll post on Youtube, as part of his contribution to Israel’s 60th-birthday celebrations.

Rabbi Sacks, who has just turned 60 himself, has compiled songs on two CDs, interspersed with his own

readings, to highlight the tale of Jewish people’s survival and attachment to Israel. In the process, he also became acquainted with Horn (Horn’s wife, Jill Sinclair, is Jewish).

Some 200,000 copies of the CDs, entitled *Israel – Home of Hope*, are to be distributed worldwide in the coming weeks.

Rabbi Sacks, who was in Israel last week, said he had asked Horn, also a former pop star, to go back into the studio again to complete the project with *Oseh Shalom*.

In a note on the CDs, Horn, who goes to synagogue with his family, although he has not converted to Judaism, dedicates the CD to his wife, who has been in a coma for almost two years after being accidentally hit in the neck by their son with an air rifle pellet.

“She has always been a very vocal supporter of Israel and took me there 25 years ago for the first time,” writes Horn. “She is entirely responsible for my involvement. No man has had a better wife and I pray for her recovery.”

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Pope Benedict XVI examines a shofar during a visit to the Cologne Synagogue in Germany. Photo: AJN file

WORLD VIEW

WOMAN THREATENS SUICIDE OUTSIDE KNESSET

JERUSALEM – A woman who threatened to blow herself up outside the Knesset surrendered after three hours of negotiations. Reportedly she was infuriated by insufficient state aid for her two disabled children. The single mother from Ashkelon parked a van outside the Israeli parliament building on Sunday and told authorities the vehicle contained a gas canister that could blow up as part of a protest against government negligence. Witnesses said the woman had a girl with her in the car and that she held a knife to her own throat, threatening to commit suicide. Police and Knesset officials negotiated her surrender. **JTA**

CANDIDATES ON BOARD FOR ISRAEL AT 60

WASHINGTON DC – Each of the major US presidential candidates has joined a committee commemorating Israel’s 60th anniversary. Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice-chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations, the umbrella body coordinating the National Committee for Israel 60, announced on Friday that US Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain all would serve as vice-chairs of the committee. The news release was headlined: “Senators Clinton, McCain and Obama agree on one thing: Support for Israel.” **JTA**

CONGRESS RECOGNISES JEWISH REFUGEES

WASHINGTON DC – In a dramatic shift in US policy, the House of Representatives last week approved an unprecedented bipartisan resolution granting recognition to Jewish refugees from Arab countries who were forced to flee their homes in the aftermath of the creation of the State of Israel. As peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians gather steam, the House urged that the issue of Jewish refugees be part of any peace agreement. “Almost one million Jews have fled persecution in the Middle East,” said Democratic Congressman Joseph Crowley.

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UNPOPULARITY CONTEST: IRAN FIRST, ISRAEL SECOND

LONDON – Israel was second only to Iran in a survey of the world’s most unpopular nations. A BBC World Service annual survey of views on various countries found that the highest number of respondents, 54 per cent, voiced negative views about Iran’s influence on global affairs, with Israel next at 52 per cent. Israel was lambasted for its crackdowns on the Palestinians and the 2006 war in Lebanon. The poll of 17,457 respondents in 34 countries was conducted between October and January. **JTA**

DOVISH ALTERNATIVE TO AIPAC

WASHINGTON DC – Pro-Israel lobby American Israel Public Affairs Committee will soon have some competition. New organisation J-Street will offer a left-wing agenda, that includes endorsing congressional hopefuls who are willing to aggressively pursue the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The budding group hopes to start raising funds and wielding influence by the coming congressional elections in November. J-Street is trying to show the reality of diverse political views among the Jewish community in the US regarding possible solutions to the age-old conflict, claiming that for too long the Jewish voice in the US has been led by the radical right.

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