

# JAC NewsBreak

VITAL NEWS & RESEARCH INFORMATION FOR JAC LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

July 22, 2010

## On my mind this month...



Gail Yamner

Poison Forward -- We open our emails and there it is, the message with an ominous title and a dire warning not to delete. It is sent by a trusted friend

who received it from a trusted friend who heard it from an inside source. Often, there is a long list of receivers and senders, but the original author is obscured.

Last month when we were in Washington, we heard from Zvika Krieger, Senior V.P at the Center for Middle East Peace, about false emails -- not merely as an aggravation, but as an obstacle to the peace process. At this prominent think tank, they are besieged by rumors about the US-Israel relationship and they waste valuable time disseminating the correct information. They understand, as many of us do not, that there is a hidden agenda behind these messages. Simply put, it is to promote a political party, candidate or cause. At this moment in our history, these emails are being used to make Israel a partisan issue in American politics. We cannot allow this to happen. Israel has the widespread support of both major parties and should not become a wedge issue.

It is so easy and mindless to hit the forward button. We send the message, continue our day but the damage is done. There is a better way. You can use JAC as a resource -- either by checking the Fact vs. Fiction section on our website or blog, or by contacting the JAC office for verification. If you inadvertently forward a false email, please send a correction to everyone on the list. There may be differing ideas about how best to achieve peace, but spreading false information is not one of them.

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## ✪ Israel

JAC joined with Jewish groups across the political and religious spectrum to condemn the controversial Rotem Conversion Bill that has been introduced in Israel. Letters have been sent to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Jewish members have met with Ambassador Oren and many around the world have voiced their dismay about the bill that would put power over conversions into the hands of Israel's Ultra Orthodox. The bill is on hold until after the High Holidays.

Prime Minister Netanyahu and Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky have joined together in expressing alarm over the bill that would affect people who convert to Judaism and whether they have the "right of return." Today, people who have converted in the Diaspora under Reform and Conservative rabbis are accepted into Israel as citizens. The new law would put these conversions in jeopardy for future generations concerning citizenship, marriage and burials.

Senator Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) has written a letter to Ambassador Oren outlining apprehensions over the language of the bill that will be circulated to other Jewish senators. Senator Carl Levin was quoted, "I am troubled by a proposal which I believe would make it more difficult for many people who want to convert to Judaism to do so." Although this is an Israeli government policy decision, American Jews are worried because the implications of the bill touch on the very essence of being Jewish and can lead to negative feelings at a time when Israel needs support from Jews all over the world.

The history of this bill started with MK David Rotem, a member of a secular, right wing party. He introduced this bill to pave the way for Russian immigrants in Israel to be considered Jewish even if they were not born "halachically" Jewish. As often happens in Israeli politics.

## 🇺🇸 United States

### CHOICE

Last week, the administration announced a ban on abortion coverage in insurance pools for high risk women unable to purchase health care on their own. Exceptions will be made in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's life is in danger -- the same exceptions that are currently allowed under federal law. Abortion rights supporters say the restrictions go too far. "[T]his is inexplicable and wrongheaded to us, and puts women's lives in jeopardy," said NARAL president Nancy Keenan.

Catholic bishops welcomed the new policy but continued to voice concern that other parts of the health care overhaul promote abortion. Abortion will be a big issue in the upcoming midterm elections. Democrats opposed to abortion rights feel the administration was on their side in this decision. "This is the first test, and it will show that there is no federal funding going to pay for abortion," said Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, (D-PA), a first-term member running for reelection from a Republican leaning district. The Preexisting Condition Insurance Plan, expected to begin August 1, will provide coverage to uninsured people turned down by private carriers. Premiums vary by state but are roughly comparable to those paid by healthy people. The high risk insurance pools are for some of the most medically vulnerable women in the country -- those with pre-existing conditions such as breast and ovarian cancer, diabetes and other conditions that make pregnancy dangerous. These women will be locked out of abortion coverage, even if they pay for it out of their own pockets.

Opponents of abortion are calling for the health care law to be overturned. In case that doesn't happen, many states are passing laws to ban abortion coverage from the health exchanges that states must create by 2014. Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee all passed measures that will deny malpractice insurance to doctors who perform certain elective abortions.

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## Research & Races

### Byrd Seat Filled

**West Virginia** -- Carte Goodwin (D) was sworn in July 20 as the interim replacement for the late Senator Robert Byrd (D). Governor Joe Manchin announced the appointment on Friday, the 16th. Goodwin will hold the seat until November, when a special election will be held. Governor Manchin plans to run for the seat.

### The Palin Factor

Former GOP Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin has been busy endorsing GOP primary candidates. Her organization, SarahPAC, filed its quarterly report last week. She raised \$866,000 and donated \$87,500. Some of that support went to women running for governor – Karen Handel in Georgia, Nikki Haley in North Carolina, Mary Fallin in Oklahoma – whom she refers to as “Mama Grizzlies.” In the Alaska Senate race, Palin is supporting GOP Senator Lisa Murkowski’s male opponent.

### SENATE RACES

**California** -- Senator **Barbara Boxer** (D-CA) raised \$4.6 million between April 1 and June 30, but she faces an

opponent with an unlimited personal campaign chest. Polls show Boxer with a slim lead over Carly Fiorina and the race is rated as a “toss-up.”

**Colorado** – There are primaries on both sides. JAC supports incumbent Democratic Senator **Michael Bennet** who faces former state House speaker Andrew Romanoff. Incumbency has very little advantage in this race. Bennet was appointed in 2009 so he has never run statewide and continues to battle the name recognition factor.

**Nevada** -- Senate Majority Leader **Harry Reid**’s fundraising machine is keeping him in this race. He has trailed in the polls for several months and remains the top target of the GOP. Former state assemblywoman and tea party favorite Sharron Angle proved to be a fundraising force since winning the primary and national money is flowing in to boost her coffers.

**Pennsylvania** -- Poll numbers show Democratic Rep. **Joe Sestak** tied with former three-term GOP Rep. Pat Toomey. New on the scene is a far right GOP pro-Israel group, the Emer-

gency Committee, that has attacked Sestak’s Israel record, in an effort to woo Jewish support to Toomey (who twice voted against foreign aid when he was a congressman). JAC supports Sestak whose voting record is positive.

**Washington** -- Three-term Democratic Senator **Patty Murray** has firmed up her support against three announced Republican challengers, but still finds herself neck-and-neck with businessman and unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate Dino Rossi if he wins the GOP primary, as expected. Murray leads him in the polls by 48 percent to 46 percent. Murray is part of the Democratic Senate leadership team, making her a top target right behind Senator Reid.

**Wisconsin** -- Senator **Russ Feingold** (D) drew a political neophyte challenger in Ron Johnson, who emerged from the state Republican convention in May with the party’s endorsement. He jumped into the race six days before the convention, pledging to spend millions on the campaign. Poll numbers still show Feingold leading Johnson, but not by a comfortable margin.

## Separation of Religion and State

When the Religious Studies Department at the University of Illinois was founded in 1971, an agreement was made with the Catholic Church that “Introduction to Catholicism” and “Modern Catholic Thought” would be taught in university classrooms. The church has maintained control over how Catholic theory is taught, selecting the instructors and paying their salaries.

The University has amended the agreement over the years to exercise more control, but the arrangement has left the Catholic studies curriculum in the hands of the church. Kenneth Howell, a university adjunct instructor, was

dismissed after making controversial remarks about homosexuality. Howell taught the Catholic courses but was on the payroll of the St. John’s Catholic Newman Center funded by the diocese of Peoria. Now, the university administration plans to review that policy to determine if it violates the separation of church and state. “I have very strong inclinations that this is where things went wrong in the first place,” said Nicholas Burbules, a member of the Faculty Senate’s General University Policy Committee. “This line is going to get blurred and was blurred repeatedly over a long period of time.” A separate committee will review How-

ell’s removal to determine if it violated his rights of free speech and academic freedom. Howell was removed last month after a student complained that the instructor’s explanation of the church’s moral opposition to homosexuality qualified as hate speech. David Price, a professor of religious studies, history and Jewish studies, said that this was not the first attempt “to teach orthodoxy as an absolute truth rather than just a position of the Catholic Church...the university needs to have complete control over who teaches.” Previous instructors have been let go or have not been approved by the university. (Chicago Tribune.com 7/18)

### *Israel, continued from page one*

other factions got hold of the bill and now the Orthodox rabbinate may have a monopoly on conversions in Israel. This internal political play risks alienating Reform and Conservative Jews who worry about the effects of this law.

The URJ has written, “for 2,000 years Judaism has treated Jews by choice the same as Jews by birth. This treatment

is rooted in the Talmudic teaching that “as soon as a convert emerges from the Mikvah she or he is Jewish for all purposes.” (Yevamot 47b) Since its founding 62 years ago, Israel, through the Law of Return, has welcomed Jews from around the world as citizens in the world’s only Jewish nation.

JAC, which does not normally get involved in internal Israeli politics, joins

with others to be sure that all religious streams in Judaism are treated fairly and equally and to ensure Israel lives up to its promise as Jewish and democratic. Prime Minister Netanyahu says he will oppose this conversion bill and will ask his coalition partners to vote against it. The Jewish community must remain vigilant to ensure that this bill never gets to be law.