



We must be witnesses to the truth

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After a long day of wall-to-wall Michael Jackson coverage and a long weekend of Sarah Palin speculation, I received an unexpected breath of intellectualism in the mail.

Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People, edited by Aryeh Rubin, is a profile of 27 modern Jewish sages. I was honored to see that I know a few of them, but more important, it reminded me that Judaism is always a respite from the vacuous secular culture we are surrounded by each day.

Some segments of Judaism declare that their adherents should not watch movies or television, listen to secular music, etc. Recent news reports focused on ultra-religious approved hotels that would prevent guests from going online or watching television in their rooms. Even away from their communities, their leaders want to be sure they are policed.

Living in Washington, perhaps the most educated population in the United States, it's easy to believe that everyone wants to save the world and spends his or her professional career or spare time doing so -- and that each person has the freedom to choose how he or she wants to use the Internet. Unfortunately, this is not so.

At the end of the day, the richness of Jewish heritage comes from being the people of the book, or many books, actually. I like to think it can teach us a lesson not to pray to the gods of the tabloid.

The modern sages in this book are working to help others remember the Holocaust and prevent future genocide; make the Israeli rabbinical courts more equitable to women; and bring solar power to Israel and more Jews to a Jewish life.

I once participated in a grant-writing workshop where each attendee received feedback from the group on our project. I was representing a Jewish organization. One of the participants very nicely suggested we ask foundations to fund a literacy program for Jewish children. He was sure this would be so compelling we would have no trouble raising lots of money for the cause.

I had to keep a straight face as he was trying to be helpful. When Jews hear "Jewish literacy," they think of Jews' knowledge-base or ability to learn about Judaism. The ability to read and write (sometimes in several languages) is so necessary to being Jewish, culturally and logistically, that it is taken for granted.

Some wonder why we need Jewish newspapers when the New York Times covers Jewish stories or stories of interest to Jews, like the Jewish origins of Punk music, a Jewish tour of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or the success of JDate -- and, you hear statements such as, "The New Yorker has such a Jewish sensibility É"

At the recent American Jewish Press Association conference in Chicago, local Rabbi Asher Lopatin (local to Chicago with two siblings local to D.C.) gave the crowd of journalists some inspiration and encouragement in the current media environment.

Journalists have a crucial job -- to be a witness for the Jewish people. "Journalists are here to give the pshat -- straightforward meaning. Pulpit rabbis are here to give drash, sermons, not always the straightforward interpretation. Our sermons are like your editorials, our classes are like your reporting.

"God says, 'Atem aidai.' 'You are my witnesses.' He's talking to the Jewish people, but really I think it's a responsibility that journalists, rabbis and for that matter all Jews, all human beings, really need to take on: the job of being a witness. Only if we can get out the truth to the world is this place going to be a place where something ethical can happen, something moral and righteous can happen, even something spiritual. Unless we are witnesses to the reality in this world we're not even going to get started on the path to morality and spirituality in this world."

Many people in this community tell me they don't subscribe to this paper because the paper speaks to everyone else but them. They're really

only interested in one or two organizations, or one way of being Jewish and they don't find enough of that coverage.

Do you really want to rely on the New York Times, of Jayson Blair fame, started by Jews, still with Jewish names but none of whom are even Jewish anymore, for your Jewish news? What about your local community? If you only want to hear about your shul, read the bulletin. If we know what others are doing, perhaps we'll find more ways to be Jewish together.

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