

Words of the wise

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Jewish Sages of Today

Edited by Aryeh Rubin | Devora | 264 pages | \$16.95

If all the people whose biographies appear in *Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People* were in the same room, it would be quite an impressive gathering, a venerable "who's who" of today's American Jewish and Israeli world. But fame and renown are not what editor Aryeh Rubin was looking at in the people whom he chose to profile. Rubin, a successful businessman, philanthropist and scholar, was not looking for "stars" but "sages."

Perhaps this title indicates that he was trying to conceptualize what a modern-day Sanhedrin might look like, a group of leaders whose work is based on action rather than personal gain, a collection of souls who look out on the Jewish people with care and dedication and are not afraid to take bold and daring action to improve the world. These were his criteria, and that is what emerged.

"Those profiled," writes Rubin in the introduction, "all have motivations deeply rooted in improving the world, and all are making profound contributions to the quality of Jewish life."

They are, in Rubin's view, not only sages, but also "heroes" who dedicate their lives to courageous action on behalf of the Jewish people by incorporating "into their being the spark of Jewish heritage that would fill them with 'awe and amazement.'"

Rubin's goal is to use their stories to inspire us by example. The "sages" in this book, he writes, "have experienced a redemption of their neshama, have found personal meaning through their bond with their work, their spirit and their Judaism. Their lives have purpose and meaning; knowing their ways can only enrich us."

The result of this effort is stirring. The collection of personalities crosses denominations, backgrounds and geographies. It includes artists, architects, curators, scientists, musicians, publishers, Nazi hunters, political consultants and many writers and teachers. Together, these "sages" have written dozens of books and hundreds of articles, have been instrumental in building dozens of institutions, have raised hundreds

of millions of dollars for different causes and have won almost every major prize out there, including the MacArthur Prize, the Israel Prize and the Avi Chai Prize.

These achievements, however, are not nearly as astounding as the underlying behaviors guiding them. Those profiled often shun the spotlight, preferring instead to make real change. Musician Debbie Friedman, for example, whose career spans over a quarter of a century and whose music has indelibly changed the way prayer is experienced in synagogues and informal settings across America, said, "I'm not in this work for fame. Fame is an illusion. It's meaningless. Conquering the world is not our job. Our job is to be the best that you can be."

The best that Friedman can be is pretty extraordinary. "When I die," she added, "I want to be remembered not for all the many songs I wrote, but for helping people to feel and be empowered, to know their strengths and to know that special thing about themselves, that they are the most significant and holy being in the world, and that the person next to them is, too."

This enormous care about the Jewish collective, combined with passionate, energetic, tireless activism, characterize most of those profiled. Yet, in some ways, the stories are a study in contrast. They are scholars who refuse to take a passive seat in an ivory tower. They win awards but shun the spotlight. They raise millions of dollars but often live with little themselves - such as Aaron Lansky, the "Jewish Indiana Jones," founder of the National Yiddish Book Club, who singlehandedly rescued 5,000 books from a dumpster in the rain with merely \$60 in his pocket, and eventually saved 1.5 million Yiddish books from destruction, often working for free.

They are great saviors of the past - whether Yiddish, Holocaust or talmudic scholarship - but work vigorously to preserve the future. They are fiercely independent-minded, individualistic and nonconformist, yet are committed to the collective and, moreover, belong to a vibrant group of Jewish leaders who are designing the character of the Jewish people - yet we may not have recognized them as a group had Rubin not pointed it out.

The narratives are each unique, some reading like a curriculum vitae and others like a condensed memoir. The chapter on Rabbi Irving and Blu Greenberg explores half a century of independent achievements interwoven with their family life and personal milestones - and tragedies. The chapter on Israel Prize winner Prof. Alice Shalvi explores not only her work on feminism and education for which she is most well-known, but also her love of Shakespeare and the ways in which this love infused her family life.

The chapter on Judith Hauptman looked not only at her talmudic scholarship but at her incredible decision, 25 years after receiving her doctorate, to become a rabbi, and her compassionate work with the aged. The chapters also include interviews with people close to the profiled, adding a depth and texture to the descriptions.

Other captivating chapters profile Yossi Abramowitz, Ruth Calderon, Adin Steinsaltz, Gary Rosenblatt, Avivah Zornberg, Dennis Prager, Efraim Zuroff, Joseph Telushkin and Michael Berenbaum. The fact that the stories do not get tiresome is also a testament to the various writers who were recruited for this job, such as Debra Nussbaum Cohen, Jane Ulman, Ilene R. Prusher and Stephen Hazan Aranoff.

This book can potentially be a valuable educational tool. The narratives have the power to speak to readers of different ages, who may see in the stories a reflection of themselves, and might even find the inspiration to dream about their own contribution to a better world.