

The cover features a large, abstract, organic shape in a vibrant red color, set against a light grey, textured background. Within this red shape, there is a smaller, irregularly shaped area in a mustard yellow color. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative.

JEWISH SAGES OF TODAY

Profiles of Extraordinary People

EDITED BY ARYEH RUBIN

P R E F A C E

Our Sages: Making a Difference

A sage is more of an asset to a nation than its king.

– Maimonides, Commentary to *Mishna Horayot*

We need heroes. We need them today, more than ever. Heroes inspire us, elevate us, and motivate us to imagine and realize lives of intent and purpose. We're living in a time, in a culture, where mass opinion elevates sports stars, rock stars, actors and politicians. In this dominant celebrity culture, few seem to celebrate the real heroes – those whose lives are dedicated to making a positive difference in the world. We as Jews are no exception. Although they exist, we don't celebrate our heroes – sages who are accomplishing much that is noteworthy, living exemplary lives, espousing Jewish values, and who are willing to share their wisdom.

Many people, upon hearing of this project, have asked me to define what I mean by a contemporary sage, and have asked me how to recognize one. There is no recipe for a sage, no particular list of attributes to check off and thereby declare someone a sage. Historically, sages were people who helped guide us. In today's world, sages remain people who can help guide us, if only we would pay attention. Jewish sages are, quite simply, people who incorporate Judaism into their core, people who can serve as examples, as models, as teachers, as people for the entire community, from young children to grandparents, to look up to.

The people profiled in these pages are an eclectic group. They include: a world-renowned teacher and Jewish feminist whose doorway into Jewish knowledge has been Shakespeare; the last Nazi hunter; a rabbi whose life's work is to explain Judaism to Jews; a radio talk show host who explains Jews to the rest of the country; a scholar who explains the Holocaust to the world through museums, books and films; an internationally known, secular scientist turned

Orthodox Jew, who left the lab and now explores the nexus of science and religion; a philanthropist deeply committed to furthering Jewish knowledge, love of Israel, and to encouraging young Jews to meet, marry and procreate; a man who has spent his career rescuing and preserving Yiddish books; and a woman who left her high-powered political consulting firm to found a non-profit that advocates for Israel. These are just a few of the individuals profiled in *Jewish Sages of Today*.

Those profiled come from a wide range of professions, represent a spectrum of religious observance from Orthodox to Reform and from non-observant to secular, vary in terms of public acclaim from world famous to virtually unknown, range in age from their twenties to their eighties, and live across the U.S. and in Israel. They may appear, at first glance, to have little in common but, while the external facts of their lives differ markedly, all have motivations deeply rooted in improving the world, and all are making profound contributions to the quality of Jewish life. This book could easily have been twice, thrice, even ten times as long, and that in itself is cause for optimism in these difficult times.

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The erosion of the hero's place in Jewish life is an offshoot of the damaging and unfortunate splintering of the Jewish world into a dogmatic, "our own particular brand of Judaism" retreat to various territorial corners. Matters have been made worse by the challenges of modern life and the subsequent emphasis by some on the letter of the law rather than a driving spiritual awe, while others have countered by drifting too far afield, espousing universalist themes while discounting Jewish values.

This deterioration of the Jewish *gestalt* was commented on by the great thinker and writer Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), who lived in Warsaw between the two world wars. A child prodigy who became an activist, poet, scholar and writer, Zeitlin was a major figure in the intellectual ferment of the times. His philosophical outlook incorporated a mystical and poetic faith, but was mindful of and integrated

the perplexities of modernism. He rued traditional Judaism's descent into "religious behaviorism" with its lack of pathos, obsessions with minutiae, and intolerance of modernity. He believed that those who trod the path of modernity would be best served if they could nurture their inner soul to feel the majestic heritage of our people, if they could incorporate into their being the spark of Jewish heritage that would fill them with "awe and amazement."

What Zeitlin advocated almost a century ago is just as relevant today, if not more so. My aim, with *Jewish Sages of Today*, is to introduce the Jewish world and humanity at large to accomplished Jewish activists, thinkers, teachers, and the like, and to provide readers with insight as to how these individuals found "awe and amazement" in their own lives, how they accomplished their goals, how they achieved holiness. What drew these individuals to the particular work they do? What keeps them engaged, year after year? It is my hope that the examples of these remarkable people will inspire others, encourage innovative thinking, and spur the development of new ideas. I believe that we are capable of and receptive to learning from the example of others, but that in parts of the Jewish world this kind of learning has dropped out of favor.

While Zeitlin anticipated a deterioration in the Jewish gestalt, we are living that reality, a situation that has become more and more marked since the 1970s, with some responding to the upheavals of modernity by withdrawing from an interdenominational Jewish life, marking an end to even the veneer of Jewish unity. This deterioration has ushered in an era in which the letter of the law is all-important, and the long Jewish tradition of learning from others' examples has almost been obliterated. Until the early part of the twentieth century, Jewish tradition was mimetic in that it was not learned, but rather absorbed, as the brilliant scholar Rabbi Hayim Soloveitchik points out in his 1994 article in *Tradition*, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of American Orthodoxy."

The tradition was imbibed from parents and friends and, yes, from sages. Conduct regularly observed in the home and street, synagogue and school, was absorbed. However, rigid rules of behavior

were set forth in the early twentieth century with the widely accepted *Mishneh Brura* and other versions of the codes of law that formalized code and set these rules. That rigidity was partially responsible for the shift to the right and all the inherent problems that accompany it, including the elevation of leaders who are enclavist and do not pursue the interests of the wider berth of Jewry.

Other denominations contributed to the dissolution as well. Their fault lies in being too universalist, too politically correct, to the detriment of Jewish values. There cannot be an elevation of the Jewish gestalt without a focus on Jewish learning, and a stated goal of affecting one's entire being and personality Jewishly. The three times a year or one time a month religious experience, which is fleeting at best, and most often anti-climatic, will not do in keeping Jews Jewish.

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I have been privileged to have lived a fully Jewish life, one that blends a mosaic of beliefs and a wide spectrum of Jewish attitudes. Hailing from a Chasidic background, my parents, both refugees from Europe, raised their children in a modern traditional household in Crown Heights, in a synagogue whose members were primarily survivors and second generation traditional American Jews. I attended a Chasidic school in Bedford Stuyvesant until the fourth grade, then a Lithuanian yeshiva in Williamsburg, then Yeshiva University, with a one-year stint at the ultra-Zionist Mercaz Harav in Jerusalem. I was exposed to right-wing Jews defending synagogues in Brooklyn with baseball bats, and was active during the days of Oslo with an organization on the left. I have learned from the haredi Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky and from the compassionate Rabbi Yitz Greenberg (who is included in these pages), I have studied under the intense Rabbi Moshe Tendler and the moderate Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, and I have listened with admiration to the public lectures of the prescient Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and the encompassing Lubavitcher Rebbe.

While I consider myself post-denominational, I belong to an open-minded Chabad synagogue in Miami. My wife is the child of refugees from Hitler, who was raised in Colombia in a non-observant

environment. My three daughters have all attended Jewish day schools, but of different denominations – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, depending on the school that best fit each child’s style of learning. I have often described myself as having a traditional *neshama* (soul), a desire to attend an egalitarian *shtiebel* (prayer hall), and I am intrigued by sermons of relevance by the more liberal rabbis.

My own philosophy, then, espouses a Judaism that values all expressions, believes that we as a people function best when there is unity, and believes that the past fifty years have been an unproductive time of ideology gone wild, a dogmatic time when the word of the law has been elevated and the spirit of it degraded.

In many ways, *Jewish Sages of Today* is my response to the degradation of our spirit as individuals, and as a collective. I hope that this book will remind us of the value of the mimetic tradition, and that we will learn from the sages and their examples. I hope that we are all inspired to reflect on the lives of the sages portrayed here and motivated to realize a life lived according to our own values.

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This book will no doubt arouse controversy as to the choice of who was included and who was excluded. I’ve anticipated challenges as to the choice of sages, and questions as to how these particular twenty-seven individuals were selected from among the hundreds of worthy choices. The selection of these individuals was a collaborative effort, undertaken with the help of an editorial advisory board (the names and bios of the editorial advisory board members appear in the Contributors section). Names of likely candidates were solicited from friends, colleagues and the advisory board members. Extensive research was then conducted for the hundreds of nominees, and lists of “finalists” were submitted back to the editorial advisory board. Accomplished writers in the U.S. and Israel were then selected based on a strict screening process, and assigned profiles to write.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that while all of those profiled here graciously contributed their time to the project, there

were some objections to the label of “sages.” More than one individual asked if the title of the book could be changed, and Avivah Zornberg, in particular, generously agreed to be included in the collection but only with the caveat that we acknowledge her strenuous objection to being labeled a “sage.”

The individuals profiled were not informed of the others included in the book; thus, being profiled in these pages does not imply that those included are endorsing their fellow sages, an important point because of certain institutional/religious sanctions of affiliating with the other denominations. I hope that, in the future, we will arrive at a point where such a disclaimer will be unnecessary.

The rewards of working on this book have been many. I have had the opportunity to research and explore the work and learn about the lives of many people I have long admired. I have been challenged and inspired by their example. I have further explored the works of many of those profiled, and I hope that readers will do the same.

We, the Jewish people, have always believed that history has a purpose and that our lives have meaning. In an era in which globalization has distorted the concept of uniqueness and singularity, in which alienation and the search for meaning are the rule rather than the exception, in which the excesses of living a twenty-first century lifestyle have shifted our focus to materialism, and in which a virtual life has overshadowed the multifaceted pleasures of real human interaction, the sages profiled herein, some more than others, 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.

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Aventura, Florida
Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5769
February 25, 2009