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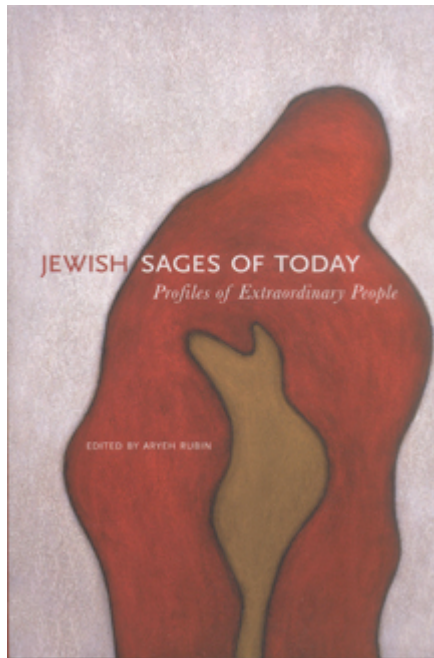
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Ordinary people doing extraordinary Jewish things in 'Sages'

by howard selznick , correspondent

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A group of 27 people who share a passion for Judaism and a desire to change the world — but who express that devotion in myriad and diverse ways — are modern-day “sages” in a recent book profiling their work.



Edited by Aryeh Rubin, director of the foundation Targum Shlishi, which supports projects that seek to promote change in the Jewish world, “Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People” lists the subjects alphabetically by last name rather than grouping them by profession or their areas of accomplishments. Yet many of those portrayed have things in common:

- Aaron Lansky and Hankus Netsky deal with Yiddish books and music. Netsky and Debbie Friedman are accomplished musicians, albeit in different genres.
- Yosef Abramowitz, Rachel Azaria and Blu Greenberg are involved in social action. Susan Weidman Schneider, Greenberg, and Alice Shalvi bring their brands of Jewish feminism into their work.

- Ruth Calderon, Sholom Lipskar, Yitz Greenberg, Nessa Rapoport and Tobi Kahn offer outreach programs to secular Jews. Gary Rosenblatt, Joseph Telushkin and Schneider are writers, editors or publishers whose work can be considered outreach.

- Shalvi and Avivah Zornberg are both teachers of English literature. One wonders if they knew each other at Hebrew University.

Each chapter consists of a seven- to 12-page profile by a different writer. The writers cover the subject's current work; offer enough biographical background to understand why he/she is a "sage" and describe the person's future plans. The editor notes that some of those profiled did not want to be called sages. That's understandable; few are exactly household names.

The 27 run the gamut of professions and avocations: activists, architects, writers, teachers, rabbis, musicians and journalists. Politicians are conspicuously absent. No major denomination is left out; Reform, Conservative and Orthodox are covered.

Among those profiled are a scientist who became Orthodox and now explores the intersection of science and religion; a Nazi hunter; a philanthropist committed to expanding Jewish knowledge and supporting Israel; and a man who rescues and preserves Yiddish books and publications.

"Jewish Sages" joins a crowded field of other who's who-type books about Jewish personalities in various fields: "Great Jewish Men" and "Great Jewish Women" (Elinor Slater), "Great Jews in the Performing Arts," "The Jewish Comedy Catalog" and "Great Jews in Music" (Darryl Lyman), "Great Jews in Sports" (Robert Slater) and "The Congressional Minyan" (Kurt F. Stone).

Abigail Pogrebin profiled entertainment celebrities in "Stars of David," but for most of them, being Jewish had little impact on their lives. In a majority of the books, in fact, the focus is on secular accomplishments. In "Jewish Sages," Judaism is the focus and the central aspect of the subjects' lives.

It would have been easy to portray the subjects in terms of the three pillars of Judaism (Pirkei Avot 1:2): prayer, service and good deeds. Fussy readers might kvetch about who was included and who was left out.

However, what makes this volume work is how these special people — including the ones you've never heard of — can inspire us to reach for higher levels of Jewishness.

"Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People" edited by Aryeh Rubin (264 pages, Devora Publishing, \$16.95)