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Book seeks to name modern Jewish sages

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The Jewish people have had traditional sages for hundreds, even thousands of years. Aryeh Rubin's book "Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People" seeks to update the concept of a Jewish sage, and identify those who would fit that role today.

"I have three kids who need heroes and leaders; who do we look up to?" Rubin, the book's editor, told The Jewish State in a phone interview Jan. 5. "They are people who inspire us, elevate us, and are people who live lives with a mission, purpose, and intent, and that we can emulate."

"Jewish Sages of Today" is a collection of profiles of 27 men and women from across all professions and denominations who have "inspired tons of people" through their careers. While rabbis and more traditional Jewish sages made it into the book, Rubin and the book's editorial board ensured that those in other fields, like singer Debbie Friedman or scientist Robert Pollack, received representation as modern-day sages.

Pollack, a molecular biologist at Columbia University who recently turned to Orthodox Judaism, told The Jewish State that being selected for the book placed a strong sense of responsibility on his shoulders to consciously think his decisions through before acting upon them.

"If they think I'm important, I'm glad to be judged that way," Pollack told The Jewish State in a phone interview Jan. 3. "There's a combination of taking care of yourself, worrying about others, and taking action that I have to think about from all three directions."

Pollack, who serves as the founder and director of Columbia's Center for the Study of Science and Religion as well as a professor and a former dean, sees the responsibility as a valuable learning -- and living -- tool for a Jewish life.

"What I get from America is a great gift of being a professor at a secular university," Pollack said. "It's an enormous freedom. In Jewish terms, I learn not to waste such a freedom."

While molecular biology may not be a Jewish subject academically, Aaron Lansky's work with preserving Yiddish literature revolves solely around Jewish life. Lansky founded the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., in 1980 after rescuing 5,000 Yiddish books from a New York City dumpster. Now, the collection is 1.5 million strong and in the midst of a digitizing process that will post the books' pages online for the world to enjoy. "From my point of view, saving 1 million books was just the beginning of the work," Lansky told The Jewish State. "The challenge is to share the content of the books with the world... in their pages lies an entire civilization that is waiting to get out. ... It has humor, it has passion, it has tragedy, it has it all."

Lansky believes that being a part of "Jewish Sages of Today" will help spotlight the importance of Yiddish in Jewish life.

"I think the genius of Jewish creativity has always been its seamlessness," Lansky said. "It's an intricate part of Jewish life, and the more cross-fertilization there is (between Yiddish and modern Jewish culture), the better off we're going to be."

Rubin said that some of the sages in the book have experienced a "redemption of their neshama" through their work and its relation to the Jewish world.

The selection process involved friends and co-workers' submissions for "Jewish Sages of Today," which was then processed by an editorial board that sorted the nominees into different categories. The process lasted five years, much longer than the originally predicted one-and-a-half years Rubin thought the project would take.

"We could have had 500 people in the book; there are a lot of good people out there," Rubin said. "It was an arduous process... even with so many different writers, there is a single voice to what you read."

At 45, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi is one of the younger, but no less accomplished, sages listed in the book. She served as an adviser to presidents, prime ministers, and political candidates for years before turning her attention to the Jewish community when she founded The Israel Project in 2002. The Israel Project is an advocacy program established to combat media bias against Israel by teaching people how to effectively advocate for the Jewish state.

"We're seven years old, but it's clear that what we did in terms of bringing the sophistication of campaign politics to the issue of improving Israel's image was very new," Laszlo-Mizrahi said. "Even though we're new, we've been blessed to make a difference simply by bringing modern technology to a problem that has existed for eons."

Laszlo-Mizrahi's creativity and concern for Jewish issues fits into a third era, a "targum shlishi," that Rubin learned about from his personal mentor, Yitz Greenberg, who is also one of the sages in "Jewish Sages of Today." Rubin said that this post-Holocaust era is marked by "redefining what it means to be Jewish," and being an ardent supporter of Israel can certainly fall in line with that redefinition.

In order to help other Jews relate to "Jewish Sages of Today," Rubin is currently working on an interactive Web site with pictures and videos from the 27 featured sages and is simultaneously co-developing a lesson plan with Alan Zelenetz, a former day school principal and current filmmaker, who Rubin asked to return to teaching to help develop the lesson plans.

"I saw three sample sage lessons, and it's fascinating stuff," Rubin said. "It's very creative. Students, teachers, and parents are going to love it. There will be a whole process when the kids get educated that we hope will reformulate their thinking into what really makes our heroes great."

"The void is that kids and adults today have new forms of 'idol' worship," Rubin continued. "Whether it's the football star, the movie star, the rock star, or the Bloomingdale's star, the activities become more important and the focus focuses away from their Jewish roots... but (all the sages) have the same thing in common: they're living their dream, Judaism is at its core, and they are people to be emulated."

"Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People" is published by Devora Publishing and can be purchased from major booksellers or at www.jewishsagesoftoday.com.