

## **SOUTH FLORIDA JEWISH JOURNAL**

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*Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People*, edited by Aryeh Rubin, Devorah Publishing Co. Jerusalem, Israel, 264 pages, \$16.95

#### **Reviewed by Rabbi Jack Riemer**

Do you ever get discouraged, as I sometimes do, about the state of Jewish life? If so, this is a book that you ought to keep handy and dip into whenever you need reassurance.

Aryeh Rubin is the founder and director of a foundation that is dedicated to discovering and supporting innovative projects that promote change in the Jewish world. And what he does in this book is introduce us to twenty seven of the brightest, most innovative, and most talented figures in Jewish life, here or in Israel, and tell us what they are doing to transform Jewish life.

They are a star studded cast that he has brought together in this collection. They include artists, architects, scientists, musicians, publishers, writers and teachers. They cut across all the denominational lines that so often separate us. Between them, these people have written dozens of books, created dozens of new institutions, and have won almost every prize out there, including the MacArthur Prize, the Israel Prize, and the Avi Chai Prize.

Some of the names in this book you will probably recognize, if you are at all involved in Jewish life. There is Adin Steinsaltz, who has done so much that you think he must be the name of a corporation. There is Debbie Friedman, who has transformed the way services are conducted in the Reform movement. There is Avivah Zornberg, who combines an enormous knowledge of western literature and psychoanalysis and brings these two disciplines to bear on the Tanach. There is Efraim Zuroff, who has devoted his life to tracking down Nazis and bringing them to justice. And there are Yits and Blu Greenberg, who have devoted their lives to making Orthodoxy respond to the new challenges of our time.

And then there are some names that you may not be as familiar with, such as Mira Brichto, who wanders the halls of dank, abandoned libraries in Russia and Eastern Europe in search of Jewish books to rescue, or Ruth Calderon in Israel who has created a school where secular Jews can study Talmud.

One could complain about some of the sages who did not make the cut. Shouldn't Danny Siegel, who has taught so many people why and how to appreciate tzedaka, have been included? Shouldn't Anatole Sharansky and Elie Wiesel have been in this book, or were they already so well known that it was not necessary to include them? Shouldn't Ruth Wisse, who teaches Yiddish at Harvard and her brother, David Roskies, who teaches Yiddish at the Jewish Theological Seminary, have been included? Shouldn't one of those who aroused the Jewish people on behalf of Soviet Jewry have been included?

The list could go on, but, instead of complaining about who was not included, we should rejoice in the number and the variety of those who were included. With all the talk of decline in Jewish life, it is heartening to know that there are people like the ones in this book who have fresh and innovative ideas and who are putting them into practice for the sake of the future of the Jewish people.

After reading this book, my fantasy is what would it be like to gather all these people together in one room? John F. Kennedy once said when he invited a number of famous intellectuals for dinner at the White House: “never before has there been so much intellectual brilliance in this room since Thomas Jefferson dined alone here.” In the same way, I would love to be a fly on the wall when these exciting, committed and creative people met—to watch the sparks fly, and to see what innovative ideas they come up with.

It is easy to become depressed about the state of Jewish life, and therefore, this book is a much-needed antidote. To read it is to realize how much talent and how much devotion does exist within the contemporary Jewish community. No one can finish this book without a sense of hope.

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