WASHINGTON JEWISH WEEK

Modern Jewish 'sages'?

Wednesday, July 29, 2009

Jewish Sages of Today: Profiles of Extraordinary People edited by Aryeh Rubin. New York: Devora Publishing, 2009. 258 pp. $16.95.

by Aaron Leibel

Arts Editor

One, a former editor at Washington Jewish Week, promotes knowledge about the Holocaust. Another -- an Annapolis resident -- works to foster a positive image of Israel. A third, who lives in D.C. and commutes to her New York office, battles for justice and equality for Jewish women.

The three are among the 25 American and Israeli "sages" profiled in Aryeh Rubin's Jewish Sages of Today. (Three of the book's essay writers also are local: Denise Couture and Harvey Simon of the District and Francesca Lunzer Kritz who lives in Silver Spring.)

Michael Berenbaum, 63, a Holocaust expert, worked on planning for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and later was project director. In the 1980s, his jobs included executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington and opinion page editor and acting editor for WJW.

Today, he is a Holocaust consultant to museums and other groups, author -- he has written or edited 17 books and oversaw the new (2006) edition of the Encyclopedia Judaica -- and is the head of a Los Angeles think tank, the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust.

Asked in Jewish Sages why he continues to speak about the Holocaust, Berenbaum says, "People are asking that [why it is important to continue teaching about the Shoah] less and less.

"Thirty years ago people asked why the Holocaust was relevant. The world is such that now they do understand why. ... It happened. It is the definitive event of twentieth-century humanity. We have to learn from it."

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, who lives in Annapolis, was a media and political consultant before 2002 when she started The Israel Project, a Washington, D.C. nonprofit, dedicated to making Jews safer. Its primary function is educating journalists about Israel.

Watching TV after the birth of her first child, Mizrahi says she saw an inaccurate image of the Jewish state being portrayed. When she and her husband looked around for an organization that was "doing smart, proactive, strategic work to strengthen Israel's image," they came up empty and she decided to start an organization that would do just that. She founded TIP in 2002.

Today, TIP has 50,000 journalists worldwide on its e-mail list and estimates that 2,000 reporters a week use the organization's services. "Sometimes that just means opening an e-mail from us, sometimes coming to a briefing with an Israeli official, sometimes they come to us for research," she says.

One factor motivating Mizrahi is a desire that her son not go through what her father did. Her father was living in Vienna during the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria into the Nazi German Third Reich in 1938. Then 5, he wanted to join the Brown Shirts, because the media "made it so socially acceptable and so cool and so hip," she says.

She sees a similar powerful anti-Semitic media campaign in the Arab world today. "What we see today in terms of propaganda in the Arab world about Jews is worse in many cases than what the Nazis had. And if you don't stop it before it's deadly then it's too late."

Susan Weidman Schneider, 62, founder of Lilith, a magazine of Jewish feminism, showed an interest in writing from an early age, editing B'nai B'rith Girls as a teen in Canada and, at 8, working on a newspaper in a summer camp.

Lilith was born in 1976 for women who felt excluded from both Judaism and the women's movement, she says. Jewish women were thought to be too privileged to need help from the women's movement and, at the same time, were prohibited from reading from the Torah, or being counted as part of a

minyan. Baby-naming ceremonies for girls were rare, and the first American female rabbi, Sally Priesand, had been ordained by the Reform movement just four years earlier. And all Jewish magazines were edited by men.

Some people were asking what such a tradition had to offer women, but Schneider says, "It's a tradition with a great deal to offer women as well as men, and I felt what's needed is some retooling, perhaps, but certainly not anything that comes close to outright rejection."

Schneider has used Lilith as a soapbox to fight for what she believes, although sometimes she says she is pressured not to publish stories that show Jews in a bad light, for example, in doing stories about domestic violence.

"We need to, of course, be worried about protecting Jews and this is why I'm concerned about violence in Jewish homes," the editor says. "Where does this leave the victim if what we're worried about is the reputation of the Jews as a whole?"

These are three remarkable people -- as are the others profiled in the book, including Aaron Lansky, who has rescued 1.5 million Yiddish books; Alice Shalvi, a groundbreaking Israeli feminist; Michael Steinhardt, whose Birthright Israel program has brought many young Jews back to their people and religion; and Debbie Friedman, singer/songwriter, who revitalized Jewish music.

Every person in the book would seem to fit in with editor Rubin's reason for writing it: 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 accomplished their goals, how they achieved holiness. It is my hope that the examples of these remarkable people will inspire others, encourage innovative thinking, and spur the development of new ideas."

The problem is calling them sages. When I -- and I suspect most Jews -- think of "sages," the names Baal Shem Tov who lived 400 years ago; Maimonides, who lived in the 12th century; and Hillel, most of whose life took place before the Common Era, are among those who spring to mind.

With all due respect to those featured in this book, their words and deeds most likely will be remembered not much beyond their lifetimes. (If anyone in this book were arrogant enough to think of him or herself as a sage, that would, in my mind, disqualify that person from inclusion.)

This is not simply a matter of semantics. Calling them sages is hyperbole, which when exposed, could well disillusion the very young people that the book was meant to inspire.

So, maybe a more appropriate name for the book might have been Jewish Role Models of Today. It would sell fewer books, but would be a much more honest description of its contents.
