

From Girls Latin School to Beit Ha-Nasi: Sara S. Lee on 25 Years at HUC-JIR

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Professor Sara S. Lee marked her 25th year as Director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education (RHSOE) in a remarkable way: by receiving the President's Award for Jewish Education in the Diaspora from Israel President Moshe Katsav, in recognition of her contributions to Jewish education and exemplary educational leadership. Lee's academic expertise in curriculum, organizational and sociological phenomena, and education leadership as they relate to Jewish education has made a significant contribution to the flourishing of the RHSOE. Her leadership of the RHSOE, along with the work of her fellow faculty members, Dr. Isa Aron and Dr. Michael Zeldin, has established the school's reputation in applied research in Jewish education and influenced the thinking about Jewish education in the Reform Movement and the Jewish community at large. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Lee (shown above with her students) shared her thoughts on this milestone occasion.

The daughter of an American-born mother and a Russian-born father and the elder sister to two brothers, Sara Lee grew up in Boston in a Jewish family affiliated with a Conservative synagogue, but not very engaged with Jewish life or Jewish practice. It was her public school education that had a most significant role in shaping her life. "The Boston public school system had a special school – Girls Latin School – for which admission was based on excellent elementary school grades. It provided an elite, classical, and highly challenging education to bright girls. If you didn't make the grade, you were sent back to your regular junior or senior high schools. When my class started, there were 270 girls. When I graduated, there were only 90 left." She studied Latin, German, and French, as well as the traditional subjects in rigorous studies that set the standards of excellence for education – standards that would influence her future professional goals in Jewish education.

Another formative experience was her involvement with Young Judaea, the Zionist Youth Movement of Hadassah, as a junior in high school. The group was led by Arnold Band, a doctoral student at Harvard who went on to become a leading scholar of Hebrew literature at UCLA. "We didn't just come and meet. We studied *Ahad Ha'Am*, *Herzl*, and had lots of intellectual discussions within this very intelligent group of high school students. We became fervent Zionists." Not only did Lee become a leader in the Young Judaea movement, she also met her future husband, David, there.

The valedictorian of her graduating class at Girls Latin, she was admitted to Radcliffe College. She encountered an entire school of valedictorians, "the brightest women you can imagine and very intimidating, I have to say." At this women's college, albeit with classes with Harvard, Lee had another formative experience. "Radcliffe really shaped me as a woman. The message from my education was 'You're smart, you can do anything.' This was not the normative way to think about women in the 1950s!"

She worked as a counselor at a Zionist Jewish summer camp, Camp Pembroke, outside of Boston during several summers –

another important educational experience. There she met up with the most significant mentor and role model in her life: Hadassah Blocker, the camp director, who had gone to Radcliffe and Boston Hebrew Teacher's College. "She was so educated Jewishly; I have this memory of her every *Shabbat*, all in white, getting up and chanting Torah in this unbelievable way."

During the second semester of her sophomore year, she took advantage of a Young Judaea scholarship enabling her to spend a year in Israel at the Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad sponsored by the Jewish Agency. "I asked Radcliffe for a leave of absence for a year, and they were so progressive. They said, 'Yes, this sounds like a very important learning opportunity,' but they would not give me credit for it." In Israel, she met with young Jews and new immigrants from throughout the Diaspora, and shared memorable experiences during these early, harsh years of Jewish statehood. "Hitchhiking was virtually the only form of transportation around the country and we would travel with any car or truck that would pick us up."

Lee recalls, "This was the real beginning of my serious Jewish education." The program was based in Jerusalem, with six months of intense studies in Hebrew, history, and Zionism, followed by several months on a religious *kibbutz*, a Young Judaea *kibbutz*, and then a *moshav*. The purpose of the program was to educate youth leaders who would go back to the Diaspora."

Upon her return, Hadassah Blocker assigned her to work with counselors in training at Camp Pembroke, and she eventually became the director of that program. "She had great expectations of all of us who were on staff, she pushed us, but at the same time, she nurtured us. She was an incredible role model for me as a woman who was a leader, accomplished, always striving for excellence, and pushing people to grow. At the end of the summer, she would have these one-on-one feedback sessions with each of the staff. She was a major part of my growth and development – and a role model I have emulated throughout my career." Years later, Blocker would train Lee's grandson for his

bar mitzvah, in a touching rounding up of the circle of life.

Lee was part of a transitional generation. After graduation from Radcliffe with a B.A. in Social Relations, when she thought she would go out and get a job to support her medical student husband, whom she had married at the end of her junior year, she was told to go to graduate school and that there were fellowships to help her. She supported her husband through medical school, working at the Hillel Foundation at Boston University. In the years after graduation they moved to Cleveland for his internship, Virginia and Arizona for his service in the Air Force, and eventually to California for his residency.

As soon as she and her family settled in California, two things happened: Lee immediately starting teaching in congregational



Israel President Moshe Katsav awarding Sarah Lee the President's Prize for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, presented jointly by the President of the State of Israel and the Jewish Agency.

schools and Hadassah found her. "The next thing I knew I was the regional youth activities chair. Over the course of the next seven years, I built the Young Judaea movement in the region, hired directors, created a regional camp, and drummed up the idea that there really ought to be a summer program for Young Judaeans in Israel while they are in

high school, to prepare them for leadership – a program that did not yet exist in the movement at that point." Her own children participated in all of these new programs and, years later, her high-risk obstetrician daughter said, "Mom, I'm telling you, everything good I learned in Young Judaea, everything that I know how to do!"

Just at the moment when she was being pushed into serving on the national board of Hadassah, David died, suddenly, of a massive heart attack. "That's when I totally redirected my life. Aviva was sixteen, Joseph was fourteen, and Josh was seven, and I was in my 40s." Years later, Lee takes pride in her children's accomplishments. "Two of my children have followed their father's path in medicine. Aviva is an obstetrician, serving as the Vice-Chair for Obstetrics at the Boston Medical Center, and Josh is an internist serving as a hospitalist and as Medical Director

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rabbis with the knowledge, skill, and understanding to be visionary about what their congregation should want, educationally.”

As part of her outreach within the College-Institute and the Reform Movement, Lee serves on the Editorial and Advisory Committee for the Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA), together with leading historians, and chairs the AJA’s educational advisory committee to help extend its national prominence in the education world. She also serves as the Vice-Chair from HUC-JIR to the URJ Commission on Lifelong Jewish Learning.

Lee has had the opportunity to influence leaders in other denominations of Judaism and the Jewish community at large. Her participation in the Mandel Commission led to her inclusion on the Council of Jewish Federations Continuity Commission. This Federation connection led to her team-teaching a summer training course for Federation professionals with Steve Hoffman of the United Jewish Communities and Cleveland Federation and Jonathan Woocher of JESNA. “Jewish educators are rarely invited to do that kind of teaching because they are not perceived as having a broad perspective on the American Jewish community. Somehow, through my work on these two Commissions, I was perceived as a person whose understanding of the sociology of the Jewish community was broad and pervasive and as a person who could make a contribution to the professional development of these communal professionals.” This stint led to other teaching opportunities at the Jewish Community Centers’ Leadership Institute and elsewhere.

As a member of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Committee for the past fifteen years, Lee has had the opportunity to encounters young Jews from every ideological orientation who are preparing to be rabbis, educators, cantors, communal professionals, and academics in Jewish studies. Not only has she had a role in selecting the Wexner Graduate Fellows, but she has had the opportunity to teach them at institutes. She believes that by so doing she is contributing to a deeper understanding of Reform Judaism by these fellows, and she has a window into the complex world of denominational Judaism that enriches her teaching at HUC-JIR.

Her interfaith work has offered memorable collaborations and experiences, primarily with Dr. Mary C. Boys of Union Theological

Sara Lee and the RHSOE class of 2005.

Seminary in New York; Lee has co-edited a special issue of *Religious Education* on “Religious Traditions in Conversation” with Boys. She also traveled with her to Hong Kong to consult on furthering religious pluralism at the Hong Kong International School, with 2500 students from a myriad of ethnic and faith traditions. “They were struggling with being both a Christian school, founded by a fundamentalist Lutheran denomination, and a pluralistic school. For a Catholic and a Jew to consult on this issue was a daunting challenge!” Lee and Boys have also served as co-directors of the Catholic-Jewish Colloquium, an experiment in interreligious learning supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, which also funded their study of “Particularism and

Pluralism in Religious Education.” Lee has served as chair of the Editorial Committee of the Religious Education Association and is a past president of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education. Lee and Boys are currently writing a book on their work for Skylight Path Publishers.

Observing the field of Jewish education, Lee muses on the change of terminology, from ‘principal’ and ‘director’ to ‘head’ of the day school. “That signifies an understanding of the breadth of the role. It’s not just ‘running the school’ – hiring teachers and making sure the curriculum is okay. It’s about fund raising, marketing, public relations in the community, recruitment, and retention. It’s about visioning for the school and recruiting and supporting excellent lay leadership for the school.”

The same applies to the educational directors in congregations. “It’s about being an educational leader who is going to be engaged with adult learning, early childhood programs, and family education. But the reality is that one person can’t do it all. That’s an issue that we are trying to get congregations to pay attention to – the need for someone to be in charge of lifelong Jewish learning, with others working with that person to actually direct the components of congregation-wide education. There are few congregations that are visionary enough to understand that model and many others who do not have the resources to implement such a model. The implications for staffing visionary congregational education are tremendous.” Acknowledging that there are not enough

educators with the sophisticated graduate training provided by the RHSOE and the New York School of Education, Lee feels an intense responsibility to enhance the qualifications for the many congregational educators currently in the field who do not have degrees or professional training in Jewish education. The need to provide additional knowledge and skills to these congregational educators is under discussion between HUC-JIR and the URJ. The stakes are great because “unless we have people in congregational education at that level of Jewish educational and organizational knowledge, we’re never going to be able to respond to those congregations aspiring to reimagine education and create a community of learners.”

The challenge, overall, is how to create the conditions that would bring more talented people into Jewish education and promote the idea that rigorous study and preparation is necessary to produce well-qualified Jewish educators. “Too many people, including lay leaders and the youth in our own Movement, see Jewish educators as underpaid, undervalued, and not requiring serious Jewish study. While such perceptions are not supported by reality, they demean the profession and impact on the numbers of people entering the field, or sustaining careers in the field. The resulting shortage presents a threat to Jewish continuity.” Lee asserts “Jewish education is fundamental to ensuring the Jewish future. In order to have Jews who are committed to Judaism in a substantial way, to have Jews who go from a biological identification as a Jew to a chosen identity as a Jew, they need Jewish learning. You can’t get from one kind of identification to the other without knowing something about the tradition and history and without having Jewish experiences.”

And why are Jewish education and Jewish educators so important? “We are trying to take people who are born Jews and help them become committed Jews. And we have to think of all of the ways in which we can connect them to Jewish learning and tradition, from family education to adult learning and beyond. Who creates those experiences and learning structures? For the most part Jewish educators do it and, in the best of circumstances, work in close collaboration with

their clergy colleagues and the lay people of their institutions.”

The challenges are daunting, since Jews for the most part no longer live in traditional Jewish environments. “The pervasive Jewish structure of my childhood neighborhood does not exist in the contemporary environment. So we need communities and structures to replace that natural or organic Jewish environment and extended family. Jews tend to have their Jewish experiences in the synagogue, in day schools, and in Jewish camps. We have to bring them into such Jewish communities, where they can see Jewish life lived, and they can experience it. We hope that we can empower them to take Judaism home with them. So the role of Jewish education and Jewish educators in creating those communities and those learn-

Sara Lee with Rabbi Ellenson in Jerusalem.

ing experiences, and empowering people to make their homes and lives more Jewish, is critically important. We need Jewish educators who can construct compelling Jewish communities, Jewish environments, and Jewish experiences.”

Lee describes the education field as an area of greater growth and diversity than years ago. “It’s not a field just of religious school principals and day school heads and teachers, but JCC educators, communal programming educators, family educators, and adult educators. There are so many jobs out there.” HUC-JIR’s education alumni are able to enjoy increasingly challenging and diverse careers, as they move from one venue to

another, using their finely honed and transferable leadership skills and knowledge. Implicit in all of this, of course, is the notion of lifelong continuing education for educators in the field.

Back in her office, surrounded with photos of all of her graduating classes, Lee maintains a close, mentoring relationship with her alumni – continuing to ask probing questions, analyzing situations, and suggesting solutions. Looking to the future, Lee’s energies are centered on several objectives: developing new programmatic initiatives for the RHSOE, working with the URJ on enhancing the qualification of educators, and strengthening the RHSOE alumni association and alumni continuing education. Her dream is to develop HUC-JIR’s Rhea Hirsch School of Education into a major research center for Jewish education, bringing together the best minds and practitioners to explore the most profound issues and questions.

Lee’s accomplishments to date have been recognized. She received the Samuel Rothberg Prize in Jewish Education from the Hebrew University in 1977 and the Doctor of Hebrew Letters, *honoris causa*, from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1999. When the RHSOE Alumni Association honored her 25th anniversary on December 25, 2004, 120 alumni and colleagues attended – “an accolade more meaningful than any other I’ve received,” she said. Upon bestowing her with the President’s Prize for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, presented jointly by the President of the State of Israel and the Jewish Agency, Israel President Moshe Katsav congratulated her “for her many years of activity in dialogue and studies in the field of religious education.” On February 22, 2005, the day of her President’s Award, the College-Institute’s tribute announcement said: “We honor Sara Lee’s twenty-five years of achievement as the teacher and mentor of generations of education, rabbinical, and communal service students, and for advancing the field of Jewish education through ground-breaking research projects that have transformed congregational schools, strengthened day schools, and inspired Jewish learners of all ages.” ■