

A Modern Approach to Mentorship

Jewish survival is not an abstraction to Leona Aronoff-Sadacca. Her parents and 18-month-old brother fled Nazi Germany in 1933 when warned of impending arrest by the Nazis and settled in France, where she was born in Tours in 1937. When the Nazis invaded France, her father joined the French Resistance, and she and her mother and brother were rescued by a Catholic farmer, who hid them on his farm in the countryside near Bellac.



(From left) Rabbi Ellenson; Barbara Friedman, Chair, Board of Governors; Leona Aronoff-Sadacca; Dr. Dvora Weisberg, incoming Director of the School of Rabbinical Studies; Rabbi Richard Levy, current Director of the School of Rabbinical Studies; and Dr. Steven Windmueller, Dean, HUC-JIR/Los Angeles.

In her memoir, Leona Aronoff-Sadacca recalls the extraordinary effort her religiously observant parents made for her brother, Lou, to become a *bar mitzvah*. Her father smuggled a small Torah from Limoges back to Bellac, where a young, frightened rabbi tutored Lou. The service took place in a bombed-out bakery. “Although we could have been discovered and perhaps killed for being Jewish, the *bar mitzvah* was an important part of our heritage and one that we felt compelled to acknowledge.”

She considers her family “lucky and grateful” to have survived and to have been able to build a new life in the United States. They settled in Los Angeles where Leona met and married Jack Aronoff, with whom she spent forty blessed years. They raised two sons, Barry, who is now involved in the family business of philanthropy, and Randy, who died of a congenital heart condition as a teenager. After Jack died, Leona successfully took over the family busi-

ness, Gate City Beverage, where her strategic vision and winning leadership style achieved record-high growth in revenues, facilities, and employees.

In 2002 Leona married Joe Sadacca, a business mentor who had been a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II. Today, she is the proud grandmother of three grandchildren and approaches life with energy and optimism. Her commitment to ensuring the Jewish future, shared by Joe, is a source of inspiration.

She was first introduced to HUC-JIR by Rabbi Hillel Cohn, her spiritual leader for over thirty years at Temple Emanu-El of San Bernardino. She honored Rabbi Cohn with an endowed rabbinical student scholarship at the College-Institute as part of a group gift of which she was the major donor. “As we raised our children, everything in our community revolved around the temple,” she recalls. “Today, I see Judaism at risk due to the things that are happening in the world. During difficult times, people gravitate back to their synagogues and rabbis. I want to make sure that rabbis are well prepared to further the Jewish religion. By supporting the teaching of Judaism’s values, traditions, and beliefs, I hope I can make a difference.”

To that end, she has donated \$1 million to endow the Leona Aronoff Rabbinic Mentoring Program at HUC-JIR, where she is a member of the Los Angeles Board of Overseers. As a highly accomplished business woman in an industry historically dominated by men, she understands the challenges of entering a new professional field and pursuing excellence – as well as the need for expert guidance to attain success. The Leona Aronoff Rabbinic Mentoring Program will convene faculty and rabbinical mentors to develop an interactive training program for rabbis serving as mentors. This program will focus on mentoring skills, professional development, supervision of field placements, and coaching – all linked to the rabbinical core curriculum, and integrate the benefits of technology in providing video demonstrations, reporting and evaluation, and other

resources. The goal is a cadre of 100 mentors for all of HUC-JIR's professional development activities, ranging from summer residencies, year-long internships, pastoral counseling, student pulpits, and post-ordination practice. Developed and tested initially in Los Angeles, the program will grow to encompass mentors serving all of HUC-JIR's stateside campuses.

"The Leona Aronoff Rabbinic Mentoring Program will enable us to transfer knowledge learned in the classroom to the very real issues that confront rabbis every day in their congregations, and will afford them the practical skills to address these issues with intelligence, sensitivity, and effectiveness," said Rabbi David Ellenson. "I believe that the integration of HUC-JIR's rabbinical curriculum with a serious and well-executed mentoring program provides a compelling resolution to the key contemporary concerns of widespread intermarriage, the growth of secularism, the loss of honesty and integrity in our society, and the threat of radical Islam. Rabbinical leadership must be capable of outreach to the intermarried and non-affiliated, well-versed in comparative religion, committed to social action and economic justice, and schooled in pastoral counseling and rabbinical practice."

The Wall Street Journal recently reported that "the traditional mentoring arrangement just doesn't work anymore." Organizational behavior experts advocate for the need to go beyond one-on-one relationships, and point to the added value of creating and cultivating ever-changing and growing networks of senior as well as peer mentors, and of building relationships both within and outside of a single environment. Such mentoring relationships offer reciprocal benefits to all involved, and result in enhanced performance, learning, innovation, and leadership capacity. The Leona Aronoff Rabbinic Mentoring Program will transform and strengthen Reform rabbinical leadership and help ensure the continuity of the Jewish faith that Leona Aronoff-Sadacca holds so dear.