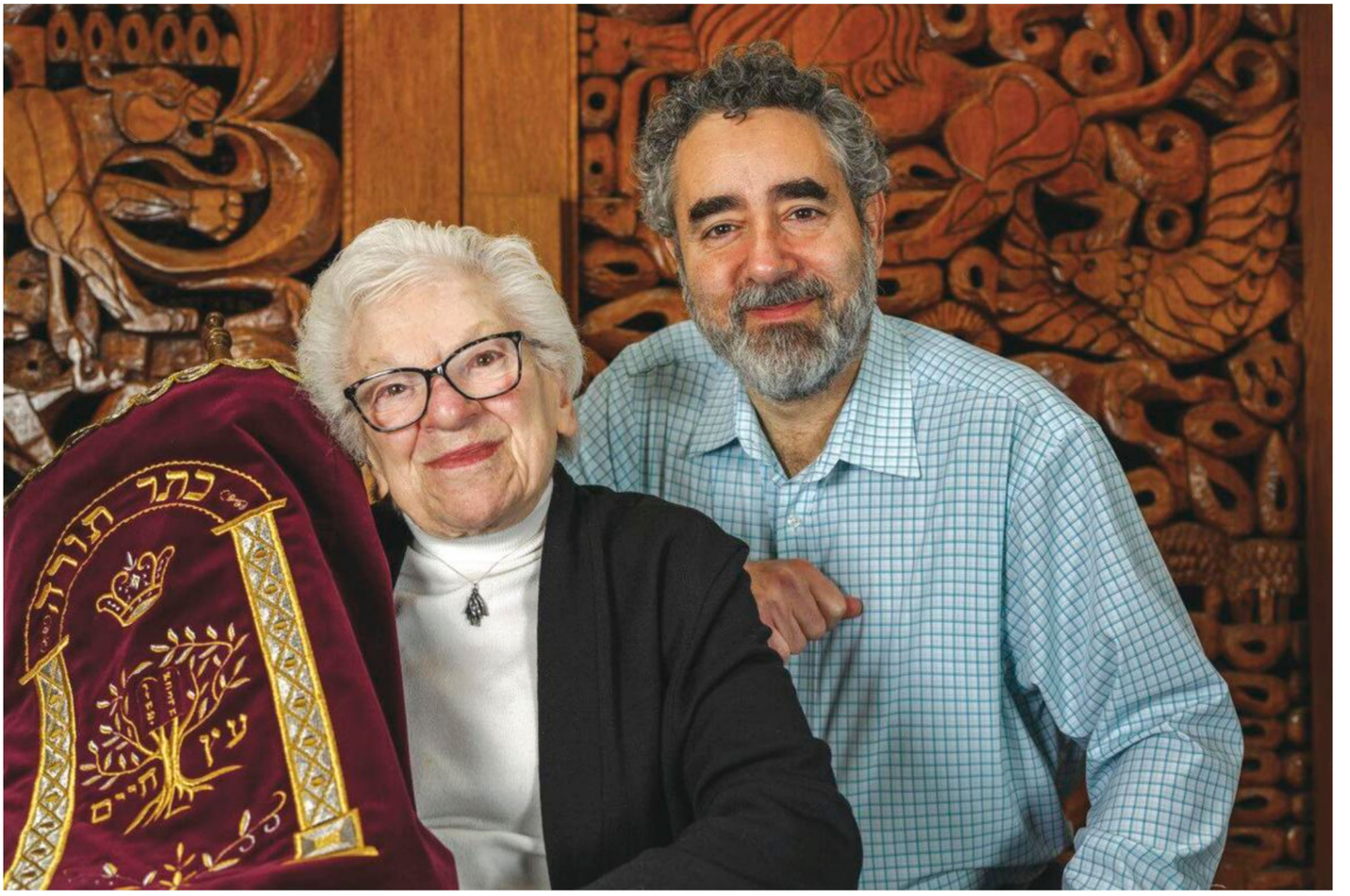
https://www.thejewishnews.com/culture/a-local-photographer-spotlights-a-generation-of-jews/article_8172a790-da4f-11ee-a3e4-9397eb49aa45.html

A Local Photographer Spotlights a Generation of Jews

Lynne Golodner | Special to the Jewish News
Mar 6, 2024



Ilene Rubin and Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

He's photographed 10 Meer residents thus far and has bookings through April, all of which he does at no cost.

When Ira Goldberg's retirement from teaching was nearing, he started developing a photography business to pivot his energies once he finished working at Berkley High School. And then, right around the time of retirement, his mother-in-law, Janet Pont, was honored as part of Jewish Senior Life's 8 Over 80 program.

"How can I use my skills to make somebody's life a little better?" — Ira Goldberg

"My mother-in-law's mission was all about volunteering," says Goldberg, a Farmington Hills resident and member of Congregation Beth Ahm. "She articulated that so well in the video at the 8 Over 80 luncheon. And I asked myself, 'How can I use my skills to make somebody's life a little better?'"

Because he was at JSL as these thoughts took shape, Goldberg wondered how he might create pieces of art to represent the beauty and uniqueness of Jewish seniors.

He connected with Tracey Proghovnick, a fellow Beth Ahm member and JSL's director of residential marketing and community relations, and became involved in a book project photographing JSL residents. That has morphed into an ongoing personal crusade to connect with seniors and create portraits that portray their personalities and values.

Goldberg photographed 40 seniors for the book and has met with more than a dozen more. He's photographed 10 Meer residents thus far and has bookings through April, all of which he does at no cost.

Before photographing seniors, Goldberg meets with them in their home to get to know them. They share stories about their lives, and he gains a sense of their values and interests, which inspire the photo session.

“It’s important to build a relationship,” he says. “I want them to feel comfortable in front of my camera. I want to hear their stories. I want to hear about their kids, where they grew up, all the special things in their past.”

Ilene Rubin

He’s met with veterans from the Korean War and World War II. He’s met with seniors who are pillars of the Detroit Jewish community — like Ilene Rubin, a Meer resident and fellow Beth Ahm member who wanted her portrait taken in the synagogue, with the Torah.

“I am a bat cohain (daughter of a Cohain),” Rubin says. “I often have the first aliyah, and I said it would mean so much to me to have my picture taken in the synagogue.”

Goldberg made all the arrangements and even picked Rubin up at Meer and drove her to the synagogue, where Rabbi Steven Rubenstein was waiting for them.

Rubin sat in front of the Aron Kodesh, the Holy Ark, and Goldberg took pictures of her holding the Torah. They even invited the rabbi to join Rubin for a few images.

“I can’t begin to tell you how thrilled I was,” Rubin says.

Growing up in Detroit and attending United Hebrew Schools, she was not allowed to have a bat mitzvah. “I still can’t read the Torah, but I can follow along in synagogue, and I do read Hebrew,” Rubin says.

The youngest of four daughters, Rubin is now the mother of three, grandmother of two and great-grandmother of one. Many of the children at synagogue call her “Bubbie.”

She's been a member of Beth Ahm since 1953, when it was called Beth Moses. "I feel I have a very charmed life," she says.

"Ira is honoring people by spending time getting to know them and crafting a photograph that says something about them and for them," says Rabbi Rubenstein. "We talk about the synagogue being a second home. For someone who's been a member as long as Ilene has been, it's great, not surprising and meaningful for her to take that photograph here."

Being photographed with the Torah is so symbolic of who she is, he adds.

"As a bat cohain, Ilene has spent a good amount of time up on the center bimah," he says. Cohanim and b'nei Cohanim are called for the first aliyah in a Torah reading. Taking her picture with the Torah is "appropriate because of her connection to the synagogue and her feelings about Jewish tradition," the rabbi says.

"There is beauty within everyone," Goldberg says. "Part of my job is to discover that beauty and convey it in the image I am creating."

He hopes the seniors he works with will enjoy the portraits created of them, and that their families will cherish them for generations to come.

"I've been told it's a really generous thing that I've done," he says. "But the reality is, they're enriching me more than I'm giving to them. It's a phenomenal thing to be invited into someone's life and have the privilege of hearing their story."

All of the portrait sessions are free to the seniors, and Goldberg produces one print for them, also free-of-charge.

Lynne Golodner is the author of nine books (including the novel WOMAN OF VALOR) and a Huntington Woods resident.