

The moment is now: Step up and lead

Laura Lauder, venture philanthropist and new board chair of San Francisco's Jewish Community Federation, speaks about family, Zionism, Jewish continuity, and Israel

• LISA SAMIN

As our Zoom conversation begins, Laura Lauder points to a framed letter on her desk, dated February 10, 1948. Signed by Henry Morgenthau, then-general chairman of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), it congratulates her grandfather, Paul Heller, on being elected president of the Jewish Welfare Fund (the precursor to today's Federation) in Canton, Ohio. The mission then was ambitious: to raise \$250 million for "a permanent solution of the tragic problems of homelessness and destitution that have so long been the heritage of our European brethren."

This letter is both a legacy and a reminder of the mission that drives Lauder's own commitment to Jewish life and Israel for more than four decades.

Growing up in Canton, Lauder saw Jewish leadership in action. Her father, a businessman who traveled the world promoting his wood barrels to age wine, was chairman of the Jewish Community Center. Her mother, who was ahead of her time, taught Jewish sexual ethics at the synagogue. Jewish involvement was part of Lauder's life.

"It was my Orthodox paternal grandparents who had a big influence on me," says Lauder. "I spent almost every afternoon with them, and their love for Judaism rubbed off on me the most."

After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1982 with a degree in international relations, Lauder was set to travel to Israel for the first time to be a tennis instructor at Israel Tennis Centers. "A week before my departure, there was a terrorist situation and I wasn't able to go," she explains. "I really wanted to get to know Israel. I was devastated."

She eventually made it to Israel when she joined an AIPAC Young Leaders Mission to the country after moving to San Francisco in 1983. "I can say in all honesty that this trip transformed my life," she says.

Determined to make a difference in Israel, Lauder began working with an Israeli start-up company. "This was the very early days of the Start-Up Nation, and it was very exciting," she continues.

After the transformative trip to Israel, she began her lifelong passion for philanthropy based on her deep commitment to Jewish values, focused in San Francisco.

"I was new in the city and thinking about who my people were. There was a strong Jewish community, but it seemed very insular," she recalls. "My pivotal moment was meeting Phyllis Cook, the endowment director at the San Francisco Jewish Federation. She saw something in me and convinced me to aspire to Jewish leadership. Four decades later, Phyllis is still my mentor and close friend."

Lauder became involved with the federation, and at age 28, with an entry-level salary, she made her first gift of \$5,000 to the federation. "This gift, quite



LAURA LAUDER: Jewish leadership in action. (Courtesy Laura Lauder)

beyond my means, meant the world to me," she says firmly.

In 1991, Lauder met her future husband, Gary Lauder, at a retreat in Big Sur. "We felt like such fish out of water at this retreat. We bonded immediately, and in 1994 we married."

"Gary's family were also strong Zionists and Jewish leaders. His mother's great-uncle was Gideon Hausner, attorney general of Israel and the chief prosecutor at the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961. We are deeply involved in the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto and very close with the family in Israel," says Lauder.

Together, the Lauders have broadened and diversified their philanthropy, focusing on strategic grant-making through the Laura and Gary Lauder Family Venture Philanthropy Fund.

HOW DOES she focus her giving? Lauder says that much of it is a result of personal experiences, passion, and meeting challenges facing the Jewish community and Israel. Three of her signature initiatives exemplify this.

Inspired by Teach for America, Lauder founded the DeLet program in 2002 when she saw how important it was to have apprentice teachers in Jewish day school settings. The program began in partnership with Brandeis University and is now part of Hebrew Union College. Its goal is to recruit and train Jewish college graduates and mid-career changers for teacher-leader positions at Jewish day schools.

"There are some 300-400 DeLet Fellows across the country," says Lauder proudly.

Never one to rest on her laurels, Lauder founded the DeLet Alumni Network in 2010 to harness the learn-



CANTON, OHIO: Old postcard of Market Street, public square's northwest corner. (Wikimedia Commons)

ing and leadership of the DeLet program by providing ongoing professional development and leadership opportunities.

In 2019, the Lauders founded Shomrim - The Center for Media and Democracy in Israel alongside board chairman Yoel Esteron. "I served on the board of National Public Radio and am passionate about investigative journalism," explains Lauder. "Yoel said that he would bring the people to make Shomrim work, and Gary and I provided the backing."

"Today, Shomrim is protecting Israeli democracy and civil society," she continues. "It is a nonprofit investigative news organization that shines a light of transparency on public institutions and the government, which sparks action and impact."

The Lauders raised their two children, Josh, 29, and Eliana, 27, with strong Jewish values and as proud Zionists. When Josh and his non-Jewish spouse, Katherine, participated in a NYC-based program on exploring Judaism before their wedding, Laura realized the importance of helping interfaith couples join cohorts to learn about Judaism in a meaningful way.

This led to the founding of Embark, an organization building community for interfaith couples in their 20s and 30s and exploring Jewish life together. Embark's growth has been meteoric. It has merged with Moishe House and partners with organizations like Honeymoon Israel and OneTable.

LAUDER FEELS the pain of the Jewish people after Oct. 7 and saw the devastation firsthand on a flak-jacket-wearing trip to Israel one month later. "This is the moment for stepping forward and taking on a leadership role," she says, "which is why I am so proud to take on the mantle of leadership at the San Francisco Jewish Federation."

"I have a responsibility to give back, and to do everything possible to make sure that the Jewish community is a safe place, and that it will be safe for our children and grandchildren. They will not take part in Jewish life if they are filled with fear."

"As a community, and as a people, we can help ensure that there are wonderful Jewish teachers, that PJ Library continues to flourish and provide Jewish books for our children, that families can access and connect with JCCs and Jewish life, and that visiting Israel is a priority."

"We need to create joyful, positive, and meaningful experiences for generations to come," she says with passion. "I feel honored and privileged to play a role in this historic mission, just as my grandfather did before me. *L'dor v'dor* (from generation to generation)."