

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Robert Aronson
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Charlotte Dubin
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5 SUBJECT MATTER: personal and family history, role
6 as executive director of Jewish
7 Federation, world scene of Jewish
8 philanthropy.

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10 MS. DUBIN: I'm Charlotte Dubin on behalf of the
11 Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives. I'm conducting
12 an oral history interview with Robert Aronson, chief executive
13 officer of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit.
14 It's July 28, 2005, and we're at the Max M. Fisher Federation
15 Building.

16 Mr. Aronson, do we have permission to use your words
17 and thoughts in the future for educational and historical
18 research and documentation?

19 MR. ARONSON: Yes.

20 MS. DUBIN: Let's start from the beginning. When
21 and where were you born?

22 MR. ARONSON: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in
23 1951, on my dad's lunch break, he keeps telling me, on October
24 9th at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Milwaukee.

25 MS. DUBIN: Do you know who you were named for?

1 **MR. ARONSON:** I think that time in the '50s except
2 for my sister Deanna, who was named for my grandmother, we
3 were given good American names, so there was a Steve, a Bob, a
4 Bill and a Sue. I don't think I was named for anybody. My
5 middle name is Paul, which I know nobody is related to. It
6 was the time of good American names.

7 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell me about your parents.

8 **MR. ARONSON:** My parents, Jerry and Debby, are,
9 thank God, still alive and doing well. My father grew up
10 before the Depression in Milwaukee. My mother grew up in
11 Janesville, Wisconsin, as part of a small Jewish community.
12 My dad really had no Jewish identity growing up at all. The
13 first time he experienced anything Jewish was when he attended
14 a Passover Seder during the Second World War in Belgium.
15 Somebody told him he should go to this religious event and he
16 went to the Seder. He was never bar mitzvahed, never been
17 inside a synagogue or temple his entire life. Grew up in a
18 broken family, starting working at a very young age, and
19 that's what he did, he worked. He became a CPA, the only
20 member of his family to go to the university. He did well in
21 his career and raised five children of which I am the second
22 oldest.

23 My mother is from a strong Zionist family from
24 Janesville, Wisconsin. They also didn't have much religion
25 but had more of a commitment to Zionism and the State of

1 Israel and she as one of five in the family. She was the
2 youngest, one brother and four sisters, all named for famous
3 women warriors in the Bible or women's suffragette leaders.
4 So they had wonderful names like Volterine, Mariam, Lillian
5 and Deborah, who is my mother.

6 After she went off to college at the University of
7 Wisconsin, my grandfather made aliyah and left the family and
8 moved to Israel for the rest of his life. He was a major
9 figure in all of our lives, especially in mine.

10 My parents are doing well and still living in
11 Milwaukee and still wondering what I do for a living.

12 **MS. DUBIN:** I'm curious about that Israel experience
13 that your grandparents had.

14 **MR. ARONSON:** Actually my grandmother, whose name
15 was Deanna, I have a sister named Deanna, died in 1949, and
16 when she died that was the same time my mother graduated from
17 university and got married, and that's when my grandfather Max
18 Feingold decided it was time for him to start a new life. He
19 made aliyah at that time to kibbutz in the Jezreal Valley in
20 central Israel and he wanted to live the socialist life.

21 He met a woman over there who he married whose name
22 was Hannah. She was the only grandmother I ever knew. They
23 were very committed to communal living, no private ownership
24 of anything. They felt that the kibbutz movement was really
25 about building community together. They left kibbutz in the

1 early '60s when they saw that the movement was now starting to
2 become more privatized. When they introduced what was called
3 a kum kum (ph. sp.), which as a hot water pot that you could
4 plug into the wall to boil water, when it was introduced into
5 the rooms in the kibbutz, they decided they'd had enough and
6 they left. They felt the dream was over. Turned out they were
7 right it was the beginning of the end, but nobody at the time
8 really saw it that way except for Max and Hannah.

9 They spent the rest of their lives in Israel,
10 renounced their American citizenship which was the stupidest
11 thing they could have possibly done because they ended up
12 living in poverty in Israel, and returned to America only
13 once, which was for the occasion of my bar mitzvah, which is
14 still in our family history a very famous time, because it was
15 the only time that all of Max Feingold's children and all 18
16 grandchildren were together in one place at one time.

17 **MS. DUBIN:** What do you remember about that bar
18 mitzvah?

19 **MR. ARONSON:** I remember it was not really about me.
20 I remember it was really about Max and Hannah coming back to
21 America. In those days to make a trip from Israel to America
22 was a huge occasion for the family to get together. Now you
23 can commute to Israel once a week if you'd like to. I
24 actually know people who basically do that. I think I've done
25 that it a few times. That was a great family event and I

1 remember certain parts of it with great love and fondness.
2 Max and Hannah were tremendous role models for me in terms of
3 my future life.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell me about life at school as you were
5 growing up. Your friends.

6 **MR. ARONSON:** Growing up in Milwaukee I lived in a
7 Jewish community, but it was unlike Detroit. Milwaukee didn't
8 have the same density of Jewish population. There were only
9 around maybe 20,000 Jews altogether in Milwaukee. Even though
10 I went to school with Jewish friends, most of my friends were
11 not Jewish. I went to a neighborhood elementary school called
12 Bay Side School, and then I went to the high school that had
13 the large Jewish population, which was called Nicholai High
14 School. Even in those schools if the Jewish population was 10
15 percent of the school, it was probably a lot. Very unlike
16 what we're accustomed to here with Central High or Mumford.
17 So I grew up in a kind of a homogenized white bread '50s,
18 '60s, a kind of Leave it to Beaver upbringing. I had four
19 brothers and sisters. Mom stayed home and dad worked. We had
20 a dog. It was pretty standard.

21 Now I do remember that I became involved in temple
22 youth group. We belonged to a reformed temple and at that
23 time Reform really meant Reform. No one was allowed to wear a
24 yarmulke or anything in the place. I always had a feeling for
25 leadership. I was a general in my neighborhood growing up and

1 organized defenses on the dead end on which we lived.
2 Ultimately we were brutally defeated by this group of older
3 girls who I think were third graders at the time, but I always
4 had this need to sort of be a general and to organize troops
5 and people. It came out very early on in my life.

6 So I moved from that to temple youth group where I
7 became president of the Temple Shalom youth group and also
8 became involved in ~~H~~abonim primarily because I got a crush on
9 one of the girls in the ~~H~~abonim dance troop. I joined that as
10 well.

11 So I didn't have any real Jewish background although
12 I was bar mitzvahed kind of in the classic '60s model of not
13 too much religion and I only had to read one sentence from the
14 Torah. I certainly didn't have to chant it, I just read it.
15 But already at that time I felt I wanted to do something in
16 the Jewish community, I just didn't know what it was.

17 **MS. DUBIN:** How about your schooling after that?

18 **MR. ARONSON:** It was kind of a tumultuous period
19 when I went to high school. It was the Viet Nam War years
20 when everything was heating up. I was never a radical anti-
21 war person, I never joined any group, but I did feel strongly
22 that students should hear about what was going on in the war.
23 When I was a freshman. I organized a moratorium at my high
24 school, which was quite large, where I asked my fellow
25 students to take the day off from school and come to Temple

1 Shalom to hear speakers, including Congressman Les Aspen, who
2 was from Racine and a member of the John Birch Society, who
3 spoke. I did a program there on the war and we called it a
4 moratorium. The school was basically empty. Almost everybody
5 came to this event.

6 Since then I was a marked young man in the high
7 school ending up not completing my high school education. I
8 left early to go to Israel to live on my grandparents' kibbutz
9 and to work. So I never formally went through the graduation
10 process.

11 In high school I was active in ~~H~~abonim. I loved
12 being a student, especially American Literature and history.
13 Those were always special areas of mine. But I didn't really
14 fit into the high school of that day. Those were strange
15 times in America.

16 MS. DUBIN: Tell me about that Israel experience
17 when you were 16.

18 MR. ARONSON: It was great. There was no Jewish
19 experience, no trip, no organized anything. It was simply go
20 to Kibbutz Ifad (ph. sp.), basically live in a hut, almost a
21 tent with a straw mattress and pick fruit starting at 4:30 in
22 the morning. I just fell in love with it. I thought it was
23 absolutely the greatest thing in the world. I loved getting
24 up early and staying up late at night.

25 I became friends with young people from all over the

1 world because in those days volunteers, what we'd call
2 midnaveem, would come to a place like Ifad by the hundreds to
3 pick fruit. At that time we had large pear and apple
4 orchards, cotton, chickens and places where we needed people.
5 No experience in Israel would be complete without falling in
6 love with a Swedish girl on the kibbutz at the time. Those
7 things had quite an impact on me. So that period when I had
8 left high school and lived on the kibbutz were wonderful
9 times, left great memories and feelings about wanting to
10 connect to Israel. I never felt closer to any place ever in
11 the world and still feel the same way.

12 **MS. DUBIN:** You came back and went to college.

13 **MR. ARONSON:** I started at Carnegie Mellon
14 University in painting and sculpture. I got a full four-year
15 scholarship through National Scholastic Magazine which had a
16 contest in art portfolio and I always loved being an artist.
17 I did intaglio, which is print making, from the time I was a
18 sophomore in high school. It was great, but I also realized
19 there were no academics whatsoever and I could end up going
20 there for four years and really knowing nothing. So I
21 transferred to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where I
22 was able to indulge my love for Emily Dickinson and 19th
23 century American literature. I finally ended up migrating to
24 the school of The Art Institute of Chicago, where I graduated
25 with a bachelor in fine arts in print making. It was a period

1 of my life where I really didn't know what I wanted or where I
2 wanted to be, whether it was Israel or here. I loved art, I
3 never gave a career a single thought. I had no idea what I
4 was going to do.

5 For me I think the seminal experience was the '73
6 war. I had gone through the '67 war when I was a sophomore in
7 high school and felt galvanized by what was going on, and I
8 made my first gift to the Federation. I still have the
9 original pledge card someplace at home. I think it was \$15,
10 which for me was a lot at the time. But it wasn't until the
11 '73 war in my early 20s that I felt it would impact my life
12 where I would make a career decision, a life-changing
13 decision. I decided that art was great and fun and all of
14 that, but it was irrelevant to accomplishing anything in the
15 world and I wanted to try to do something to help. At that
16 time I decided to leave art school and find some work in the
17 Jewish community. I had no idea what it was going to be. But
18 that was the major influence on me.

19 MS. DUBIN: And how did you act on it?

20 MR. ARONSON: I had close friends who I lived with
21 in kibbutz, French Catholics, actually. The husband went back
22 to the Kibbutz Ifad to take over the kibbutz during the war.
23 I went to stay with his wife up in Montreal. I started job
24 hunting and what I did in Montreal and later in New York was
25 knock on any door that had the word Jewish in it. I just sort

1 of wanted to work for the Jews. It was kind of weird. It
2 sounds funny to say it now, but that's really how I conducted
3 my career choice. Montreal has a lot of Jewish organizations,
4 but unfortunately it's all in Canada so that was not easy to
5 find work there.

6 I came back to Milwaukee after graduating the art
7 institute and made visits to New York and Chicago and tried to
8 get in the door someplace, and was told everywhere I went that
9 you have to pursue a professional degree before you can work
10 for a Jewish organization. I was sort of turned away at every
11 place.

12 MS. DUBIN: When you went to work in Milwaukee, did
13 you learn any particular lessons about working in the Jewish
14 community field?

15 MR. ARONSON: I learned a whole bunch of lessons. I
16 hardly know where to start. I remember that when I started
17 working, my Aunt Lil said to me, I said I'm working at the
18 Federation, I really didn't know what a Federation was either.
19 I was paid \$4,000 in my first year of work on a CITA grant
20 which was the director of the Federation at the time hired me
21 kind of as a secretary or aide *de* camp. I couldn't type, I
22 couldn't take dictation but they liked the idea of having a
23 male aide. CITA was a program for persons with physical
24 disabilities. I was paid through our local Jewish vocational
25 service for a year. I was thrilled that I had any kind of

1 job.

2 My aunt said she thought the Federation was staffed
3 by rabbis from the community who would come and volunteer
4 their time in the afternoon. That started my concept of what
5 a Federation was, and I took it from there. One of the
6 biggest lessons I learned having been an art student, I still
7 came to the office in jeans and often unshaven with long hair.
8 One day one of the young leadership guys came into my office
9 and he said I noticed that you didn't shave today. I said,
10 yeah I didn't shave, I don't shave all the time. He said,
11 well, go home and shave. That was an early lesson for me that
12 I was no longer able to do just as I pleased, I had to start
13 listening to other people. I learned a lot in that first
14 year.

15 MS. DUBIN: Where did you go from there?

16 MR. ARONSON: I worked in Milwaukee as a
17 delicatessen schlepper, where I would get sandwiches and
18 drinks for people and kind of learning about campaign. At
19 that time there was really no campaign person in our office
20 except a UJ field man who was drunk from about nine in the
21 morning until about ten at night. I actually learned a lot
22 from him. He used to play the horses and drink all day long.
23 He was one of these kind of wandering UJ field men. I learned
24 a lot of basic campaign stuff from him.

25 I did that for a year and a half until I learned

1 about the block program at a Wurzweiler School of Social Work
2 at Yeshiva University and at the urging of a woman who is a
3 dear friend and influence on my life whose name was Estherlee
4 Oritz (ph. sp.), aleha ha-shalom (of blessed memory) from
5 Milwaukee. She told me you have to go and get an education.
6 I said why, Estherlee, I'm making \$20,000 a year, I had an
7 office, I could pay for my own lunch. Why should I possibly
8 go back to school. She said you have to go back to school.
9 You have a future, you have to be trained.

10 I was accepted in to the block program, went off to
11 school and got my masters in social work in the summers while
12 I worked for the Federation during the year. I spent about
13 six years at the Federation doing that.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** You became campaign director.

15 **MR. ARONSON:** I did at the age of 24 and thoroughly
16 enjoyed it. I found I really loved asking for money. In
17 those years we were not supposed to ask for money as Jewish
18 professionals. You kind of had to do it surreptitiously. You
19 couldn't be caught directly asking for money. I managed to
20 work my way around that rule and to start to develop
21 relationships with people and to talk with them about why
22 supporting Federation was important. I early on started
23 taking missions to Israel and found that I had a knack for it.

24 I did that until the time I was married and then
25 Laura and I moved to New York and I took a job as a community

1 consultant for the Council of Jewish Federations in New York.
2 They assigned me to only the smallest of the smallest of
3 southern cities, from Richmond south to Jacksonville and west
4 to Memphis. For three years that was my beat, representing
5 the Council of Jewish Federations in small Jewish communities
6 in the South.

7 MS. DUBIN: For a Civil War buff that must have been
8 fun.

9 MR. ARONSON: I just loved it. Whenever I would go
10 to a city, I would try to sneak out and visit the closest
11 battlefield that I could. I got a chance to see a few of
12 them.

13 The other thing is I was really perceived as a
14 Yankee and a carpetbagger by most of the southern Jews, so I
15 had to overcome -- I developed a love for the Confederacy
16 because it was one of the only ways I could ingratiate myself
17 with the communities. When you cover towns like Augusta,
18 Georgia, or Savannah or Chattanooga, Tennessee, if you didn't
19 have a strong appreciation of the role the South played, that
20 was just as important as their Jewish identity. I enjoyed it.
21 My job was to convince them that I wasn't a carpetbagger from
22 New York representing some alien organization but I was really
23 one of them. It was good training in salesmanship.

24 MS. DUBIN: That talent you developed for fund-
25 raising, how do you do it?

1 **MR. ARONSON:** How do you fund-raise? I think first
2 of all you have to love what you're doing. If somebody asked
3 me to go out tomorrow and raise money for something important
4 but not really dear to my heart, I don't think I would be a
5 good fund-raiser. If I was to raise money for a major
6 cultural institution, I don't know whether I would be that
7 good. I'm good at it because, number one, you must be honest,
8 have integrity and trust with the other person. The person
9 you're talking to cannot sense in any way that you are
10 insincere or taking advantage of them. You have to know how
11 to listen and communicate at the same time. Maybe most
12 importantly you have to also be able to subsume your own
13 personality to somebody else's in a real conversation about
14 giving. It's not about me it's really about the person, the
15 family, the individual, what they want, how they, through the
16 act of giving, can achieve some goal, a Jewish goal, a
17 communal goal, and that they can be better people for having
18 given.

19 So part of the real act of charity and being an
20 instrument of charitable giving is to feel good about what
21 you're doing, not defensive, not to personalize, and to be
22 able to communicate and let the other person really make the
23 decision. Doesn't always work, but I've had some wonderful
24 experiences over the years doing it and it's what I feel
25 committed to. More and more these days as a professional,

1 unless you do have fund-raising ability, you really can't be
2 successful.

3 MS. DUBIN: What are some of those fund-raising
4 achievements that you're most proud of.

5 MR. ARONSON: The one that immediately comes to mind
6 involved a man in Detroit named Milton Shiffman, aleha ha-
7 shalom (of blessed memory). When we first talked about and
8 conceived the millennium campaign, which was really to
9 encourage families to create minimum million dollar endowments
10 to endow certain areas of Jewish life in Detroit for the
11 future, this man ,who was not that active in the community,
12 called me after he had seen my original paper and heard me
13 speak about it and he sat down and said I want to talk about
14 how to support the millennium campaign. At that time he made
15 the first major gift to create the Shiffman Millennium Fund
16 for Jewish day-school education. It was something we worked
17 on together.

18 He loved it and lived long enough to see this fund
19 put in place to involve his children in the fund. It was
20 aimed to making sure that regardless of income, especially
21 middle income students, would have an opportunity to attend
22 the day school of their choice. He was a visionary who saw
23 all of the day schools together. He didn't pick out just
24 Hillel or the yeshiva or this one or that one. He wanted
25 everyone to have an equal opportunity to attend the day

1 school.

2 He died way too young of an illness and deprived the
3 community and his family of so much. After Milton died, his
4 son Gary, who's active with us now, came to see me one day.
5 He said, I have a little present for you from our family. He
6 gave me a set of cufflinks that his mother Lois had given to
7 Milt on his 50th birthday. He said, our family wanted you to
8 have these because of the opportunity that you gave our dad to
9 participate in the community. That's a great story because it
10 really is about what we should be doing. We should be
11 creative enough and imaginative enough and sometimes daring
12 enough to give people the opportunities to give.

13 **MS. DUBIN:** What's the Detroit Legacy Fund?

14 **MR. ARONSON:** The Legacy Fund is really an endowment
15 fund. It's a testamentary campaign, where people can leave
16 money in their will for the unrestricted endowment to the
17 community. It's a cut and dried endowment, unrestricted
18 endowment campaign. What makes it different is that very few
19 communities have a campaign for testamentary endowments and
20 very rarely ask people to make these gifts before they die.
21 We've learned the hard way that unless you ask, you don't get.
22 It's not easy to sit down with somebody and say I'd like to
23 talk to you about putting the unrestricted endowment of the
24 Federation in your will so that you will make a gift after
25 your death. But that's the way we have to do it.

1 We have great families in this community. We hope
2 we have another generation and beyond of great families. Many
3 of them now that have built this community are passing from
4 the scene. What's important is to try to talk to the heads of
5 those families now, before they leave us, to gift unrestricted
6 funds to the community for the future. This time and this
7 chance to endow the future of the community will not come
8 again. That's why it's an urgent appeal, even though it's not
9 today's dollars.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** Going back to your personal history, you
11 came to Detroit in?

12 **MR. ARONSON:** 1989. Devil's Night. My parents told
13 me, don't drive on Devil's Night. They were horrified at the
14 thought that we were going to Detroit in the first place.
15 First of all, why would anyone want to leave Milwaukee? I
16 could think of a lot of reasons, but Detroit was really viewed
17 as the wilderness.

18 **MS. DUBIN:** You better explain what Devil's Night is
19 for future generations.

20 **MR. ARONSON:** Devil's Night at the time was
21 basically the night before Halloween where youth in the city
22 of Detroit would go around and burn down abandoned houses. It
23 hasn't happened a lot lately because they've been patrolling
24 the streets and so on, but there was a couple years there
25 where a good part of the city appeared to be burning down. It

1 was not good for the city's reputation. That story went all
2 over the country and we in Milwaukee thought that was pretty
3 horrible.

4 I really didn't know Detroit. I'd only been here
5 once in my life when I attended the general assembly of the
6 Council of Jewish Federations back in 1980, which took place
7 in Detroit, and was really one of the more horrifying general
8 assemblies I ever attended. It took place in the Westin
9 Hotel. One of these round hotels which were in vogue at the
10 time where you literally had no idea where you were going,
11 what level you were on, where the bathrooms were, couldn't
12 find the meeting rooms. You could starve to death in that
13 place. That was my only experience in Detroit. It was
14 horrifying.

15 The other thing is when I came to interview here the
16 search committee kept me locked up in a hotel in a place I
17 didn't know where I was. I would look out my window and all I
18 could see was exit and entry ramps to highways. That was a
19 new phenomenon for me. If you wanted to take a stroll, there
20 was nowhere to go. Turned out it was in the Town Center in
21 Southfield. All the interviews were in the club connected to
22 the hotel. I don't think I went outside for three days. I
23 kept asking in the interviews where the office was and nobody
24 would tell me. They'd say, don't worry it's downtown. I knew
25 something was funny because nobody would take me to see it.

1 I never thought twice about taking the job. I was
2 ready to leave. I had heard that Detroit was a great
3 community long before I got here, and that's one of the
4 reasons I came. I like to think it's been a love affair for
5 the last 17 years. I did find hotels that aren't on the
6 highway in Detroit, but that was my first experience.

7 MS. DUBIN: When you came, there were a number of
8 challenges that Federation was facing.

9 MR. ARONSON: Certainly were.

10 MS. DUBIN: What were some of them?

11 MR. ARONSON: The biggest one was the office, that
12 nobody was giving enough thought to where the Federation
13 belonged. It was downtown. No one ever came into the
14 building. We had a fully staffed kitchen with homemade
15 gefilte fish and chefs and people working there. The idea of
16 having volunteers walk into the building was something they
17 were totally unprepared for.

18 I knew from the moment I walked in that we had to
19 move. The first thing I worked on was engineering the move to
20 where we are now on Telegraph Road in the heart of the
21 community. It was a touch political issue because some of the
22 major decision makers in Federation were downtown lawyers and
23 business people who would have been embarrassed by moving the
24 Federation out of the city. It was a symbol. But we really
25 had no contact with the population at all.

1 With the help of a number of extraordinary people
2 here we found this wonderful building we're sitting in right
3 now and turned it into offices and meeting rooms. The
4 Federation's never been the same. I think it really started
5 to see itself differently, define itself differently once we
6 moved here. Without Max Fisher, aleha ha-shalom (of blessed
7 memory), who was my great dear friend and mentor all my years
8 in Detroit and who's with me every day even though he's no
9 longer on this earth, when I was able to convince Max to let
10 us name the building for him, that made all of the opposition
11 go away. Took me a few years to figure out how to relate to
12 Max and how to talk to him and understand what was going on
13 here, but after a couple years, I think I got the hang of it.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell me more about Max Fisher and your
15 relationship with him.

16 **MR. ARONSON:** He just was a very special teacher and
17 friend. What makes Detroit great was the wonderful quality of
18 the leadership here. Max was in a class by himself. He would
19 always take the time to see me. He would always fill me in on
20 what was going on in the community. He always wanted to know
21 what was going on nationally.

22 There were times I wanted to withdraw from the
23 national scene and he would tell me why it was important for
24 me to hang in there. He would give me advice on how to talk
25 with people. One of my favorite stories that says it all for

1 me, I was attending in my early years a Fisher meeting, which
2 is our major fund-raising meeting, and Max introduced me to a
3 particularly intimidating man who was attending, who was a
4 good friend of his. Max said to this gentleman, I want you to
5 meet Bob Aronson, our new executive, and this man basically
6 kept walking and didn't acknowledge me. Max stopped him, held
7 him by the arm and said, this is the new executive, his name
8 is Bob Aronson. I want you to take his calls whenever he
9 calls you. He's an important man for our community and
10 deserves your respect. That's exactly what he said. That was
11 an example of the man. He valued the professional.

12 We ended up becoming very close friends also, and
13 talking to each other almost on a daily basis or weekly basis
14 for a good part of his life. I never did anything big without
15 consulting Max, including personally. He always made me feel
16 that I could come to see him any time and that I was a special
17 friend. To have a relationship like that was very important
18 to me. It's why we do what we do.

19 There are other greats here. I can't begin to name
20 them all. But obviously, David Hermelin, aleha ha-shalom (of
21 blessed memory), who was a indefectible fund-raiser and
22 entertainer and kind of motivator of the immediate world. He
23 also taught me an important lesson about solicitation,
24 community life, and that is be sure you make people feel good
25 when you ask them for money, when you engage them in the

1 community. If they don't feel good, they're not going to do
2 it. He made people feel wonderful. He could mobilize people
3 like nobody's business because they felt wonderful, because
4 they wanted to be around him. He had the personality for it.

5 I tend to be a lot more quiet and isolated normally.
6 I don't like going to events unless I absolutely have to. But
7 I learned that from him. There are so many greats in this
8 community who have contributed so much and enriched my life by
9 knowing them. Those men were two very important people.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** What are the qualities of leadership
11 that are necessary?

12 **MR. ARONSON:** Judgment, leading by example, by
13 doing, by showing people first that you are doing it. Max
14 Fisher used to say to me, if you're going to be a general, be
15 sure to turn around and see that your troops are following you
16 and they're not back in the trenches. That's another
17 important quality of leadership is knowing when to lead and
18 when to slow up, to make sure that you have people with you.

19 Leadership in the Jewish community I think is also
20 all about empowering other people and not empowering only
21 yourself. You can be perceived as a Jewish leader in America.
22 If you have billions of dollars, you can be as eccentric and
23 crazy and non-leader-like as you want, and people will call
24 you a leader. That's not what real leadership is. It's not
25 about how much money you have, those are not our values in

1 terms of Jewish community. Yes, you want people who could
2 support the community at a high level, but leadership is
3 really about inspiring and motivating others and getting them
4 to buy into a bigger picture, a bigger dream, bigger vision.

5 For instance, when it comes to showing leadership on
6 Israel, real leaders don't just go to Israel, meet with the
7 prime minister, come back and telling everybody sitting in
8 Detroit, I met with the prime minister. It's saying, come
9 with me, we're going to Israel, we're going to meet with the
10 prime minister, we're going to see what the needs in Israel
11 are. The value is turn people on, get other people involved.
12 Real leaders do that. That is a tradition that has been
13 handed down from generation to generation here.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** Another of those leaders would be Bill
15 Davidson. I understand you are charitable gift advisor to Mr.
16 Davidson and some others.

17 **MR. ARONSON:** Also Michael Steinhart in New York who
18 is a major philanthropist. I have really enjoyed working with
19 Bill Davidson. He is very humble, quiet, un-prepossessing man
20 who knows what he wants and does it. He is not somebody who
21 would seek public leadership or recognition. He's much more
22 comfortable behind the scenes. In his own way he's really one
23 of the most extraordinary philanthropists of our time in the
24 country. Bill is effective along with his wife Karen,
25 primarily because he seeks no recognition. He knows what he

1 wants to get done, he does it. I just get to kind of help him
2 along, help him do it, but it's all really coming from him.
3 Bill also shares a wonderful history in this community.
4 President of Shaarey Zedek, president of the campaign.

5 People ask me what's different about Detroit and if
6 I could have a chance on this interview to talk a little about
7 the greatness of Detroit, it really is that the values that
8 the Jewish society here hold dear and prizes above all others,
9 are the values of service and leadership to the community.
10 Just to pick on a city for a moment, if you live in Las Vegas,
11 you may be prized for how big your house or your car is or how
12 big the hotel you own. That is not the case here. You cannot
13 in this Jewish community be viewed as truly important or truly
14 valued unless you follow a tradition of service to the
15 community.

16 That was taught here to Max Fisher, to Fred Butzel
17 who taught it to Max Fisher. If you talk to any of the great
18 leaders of this community today, Sam Frankel, Bill Berman,
19 Joel Tauber and others, they will all have a story for you
20 about somebody who tapped them on the shoulder from Detroit
21 and said you should follow me. You will be a leader some day.
22 They modeled themselves after these people. That's really
23 what this community is about.

24 Hopefully if I've accomplished anything in these
25 crazy 17 years, it is to begin to identify and develop a new

1 generation who will model themselves after our foremothers and
2 forefathers in this community.

3 **MS. DUBIN:** Historically Federation was a secular
4 institution. You have by your own interests, both
5 professionally and personally, you have a great interest in
6 Jewish values and Jewish study. I think you've carried this
7 along through Federation's relationships with various
8 religious institutions. Can you talk a bit about that?

9 **MR. ARONSON:** All Federations I think have gone
10 through a period. American Jewish Federations went through
11 three distinct periods in their history, which is now over 100
12 years. The first period was the period of settlement, which
13 lasted up until basically the creation of the State of Israel,
14 where Jews took care of other Jews who needed help just
15 getting settled and also saw their role as being good citizens
16 of a general society. Those were really the years of the
17 greatest sort of secular aspect of Federation. There was a
18 complete wall between synagogues and Jewish education and
19 Federations and the two never met at all. It would have been
20 inconceivable to have a Orthodox person become a Federation
21 director. That would have just been horrifying. They were
22 left to synagogues and those Orthodox synagogues were very far
23 away from Federations.

24 Then we went through phase two, which was basically
25 the creation of the State of Israel and the establishment of

1 Federations as true community organizations, where thousands
2 of people started giving who had not given before to a
3 community as a result of the creation of the state, the wars
4 of the State of Israel. Those were the years of growth for
5 Federation, when new people became involved and not just the
6 old German Jews or old original founders of the community.
7 That lasted through roughly after Entebbe is when things
8 changed. That would be the kind of turning point for me where
9 the charismatic response to Israel, the unqualified love for
10 Israel, where you used to be able to raise money simply by
11 dressing somebody up as an Israeli general and having him walk
12 into a room was an automatic fund-raiser. Some time after the
13 movement into Lebanon after Entebbe and the first incursion
14 into Lebanon, that dream, that relationship changed.

15 Now we're in phase three. That's one in which
16 Jewish Federations and communities are realizing, including
17 this one, that Jewish education is absolutely fundamental to
18 our future, period. It's important that we educate our
19 children, our young people, our adults about Jewish life and
20 tradition, Hebrew language, connection to Jews overseas,
21 everything that makes us Jewish, we must learn about and give
22 our children a chance to be exposed to. That's the era of
23 Jewish education, and really what's happening is the
24 traditional social welfare and even the traditional Israel
25 agenda are giving away to this new approach. We had to get

1 out in front of the curb and reach out to the synagogues and
2 other Jewish learning institutions to say, how do we help, how
3 do we collaborate, how do we get together, what can we do.

4 We've had some success with that here in Detroit.
5 It's not easy, but I believe that most rabbis in this
6 community, if you ask them how they felt about Federation,
7 they would be very supportive of the work that Federation has
8 done to build Jewish education here. That's a new phenomenon
9 in organized life. I believe very strongly in it.

10 MS. DUBIN: You've undertaken Jewish studies for
11 yourself.

12 MR. ARONSON: I've driven a few rabbis more than
13 crazy asking them questions about why do we do this and why do
14 we do that. One of the perks of the job I like to say is you
15 have rabbis on call 24 hours a day. If you ever need a rabbi,
16 you can always get a rabbi, plus you get you get a free
17 lulovetrog, you get inedible matzoh at Passover, schmor
18 matzoh, and other things.

19 I actually started studying in Milwaukee and came
20 here and continued that. I haven't done it for the last
21 several years because I've been unfortunately too busy, but
22 I'd like to get back to it. It comes back to the role of the
23 professional and what we do here, which is unless you know who
24 you are and where you came from and why our Jewish tradition
25 is important, it's very hard to actually carry on and do it

1 out in the world. We need the Jewish knowledge. I call it my
2 Jewish gyroscope. When you study, you have a sense of who you
3 are, what makes you work, why the sacrifice is worth it,
4 because it is a sacrifice to work for a community.

5 **MS. DUBIN:** If you'd like to hear some of your own
6 words, you once referred to the privilege, the challenge and
7 the art of the Jewish professional.

8 **MR. ARONSON:** That's really kind of a marvelous way
9 to describe it. I don't remember saying it. It's a challenge
10 always because no matter how proficient you are, there's
11 always a new challenge because it's all about people. It's
12 about organizing, mobilizing, directing people. And with that
13 comes an incredible challenge, which is to get people to help
14 people engage with a thing called a Jewish community, that's
15 intangible, that's so important, but can't be taken for
16 granted any more.

17 It used to be automatic, especially when you're
18 talking to Holocaust survivors and people who had been around
19 during the creation of the State of Israel, It was almost
20 easy to get them involved. These days it's a greater
21 challenge. It's a privilege because you get to wake up every
22 morning and you get to help people, you get to help accomplish
23 God's plan on earth. I'm not a religious person but I believe
24 there is a plan, I believe there is a God, and I believe we
25 can be part of accomplishing that plan, and I believe there's

1 no better place to do it, if you're Jewish, than in your own
2 community.

3 This is why it is such a privilege because you get
4 to go home at night even though you're exhausted, too tired to
5 eat or say hello to anybody. There's a deep abiding sense of
6 satisfaction from serving the Jewish people. I've always felt
7 that way. It's an art. It's very hard to teach. Some people
8 have it and some don't. You still have to teach them, but the
9 thing that's art is how you handle different people and you
10 handle the challenges differently and still stay on your feet
11 and still have a sense of grace and wonder at the world and a
12 sense of humility in the world, and also the strength to go
13 on. I definitely think it's an art form.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** You've been outspoken about the need for
15 professionals among the young people. You're teaching at the
16 University of Michigan. Tell us about the Drachler program.

17 **MR. ARONSON:** Well, I was fortunate to be able to
18 help establish a program which carries the name of one of my
19 predecessors, Sol Drachler, who I respect most in the world,
20 who is to me a model almost to a fault -- Sol, if you're
21 listening to me -- of the person who totally sacrifices any
22 personal reward or payoff to serve his community. That's what
23 Sol Drachler was and is to this community.

24 We had the privilege, myself and others in the
25 community, to create a chair at the University of Michigan to

1 teach Jewish communal service to social workers at the School
2 of Social Work. We have trained some wonderful young
3 professionals, but nationally our ability nationwide to
4 attract and train professionals is in a great crisis. We are
5 not attracting enough young people to our schools, we're not
6 offering the degrees, the scholarships, the incentives to
7 attract the kind of young people who we need to attract to run
8 today's Jewish organizations. They can't be just social
9 workers anymore. They have to be business people, they have
10 to be not-for-profit management types, they have to be
11 marketers, and they have to be development professionals.
12 Plus they have to be Jewishly knowledgeable. Where are we
13 going to find these people? We're not going to find them
14 going to traditional schools of social work.

15 I've been fortunate to be a founder of a program
16 called the Professional Leaders Project, which is based in Los
17 Angeles. The program's job really is to create a talent pool
18 of 20-somethings from around the country who want to get
19 together and network and talk about and we will give
20 incentives to join the field, whether it's Jewish education,
21 Federation, centers, Jewish foundations, arts organizations.
22 There's a whole world of Jewish organizations out there that
23 we should be motivating young people to want to join. It
24 should not be a field for schleppers any more, which is really
25 the group that I've been part of. I feel privileged to be a

1 Jewish schlepper but that's what I am. We need to find people
2 to invest in a new kind of Jewish professional and to offer
3 new programs.

4 At the University of Michigan now we're talking to
5 the business school. We have opened programs at UCLA and at
6 NYU that are masters degrees in public social policy and
7 Judaic studies, not just in social work or communal service,
8 because those are the kinds of people we have to attract in
9 the future.

10 As the greats, what I'll call the greats, pass
11 beyond us to the next world, where they're experiencing their
12 own reward I am sure, but as they leave us and we are left
13 instead with people who are not as Jewishly educated or not as
14 committed to social service, we have to build better
15 organizations that attract a different kind of person. We can
16 no longer rely on one gigantic figure to organize everything.
17 This requires a new kind of professional, a new kind of lay
18 person, voluntary leadership. We have to identify them, train
19 them, because without great Jewish professionals, you cannot
20 have good Jewish organizations any more. There may have been
21 a time where you didn't need great Jewish professionals
22 because you had these huge larger than life Jewish lay
23 leaders. Those times are largely past and now we need good
24 Jewish organizations.

25 **MS. DUBIN:** Speaking of 20-somethings, tell me about

1 Birthright Israel.

2 **MR. ARONSON:** I was privileged to be the acting
3 president of Birthright Israel for the last year and I've been
4 an advisor to it. It's a great program, a great idea, which
5 is basically giving every college age student between 18 and
6 26 around the world an opportunity to take a free trip to
7 Israel, fully paid by a partnership including the government,
8 group of Jewish philanthropists and Federations. As we sit
9 here more than 88,000 people have gone in the first five
10 years. It has had a remarkable impact on American Jewry.

11 To this after five years of the program it's still
12 very much a question mark whether it will survive for another
13 round of trips this winter or next summer. The program is
14 living hand to mouth. My job was really to establish a board,
15 a full-time director, an office, a consistent fund-raising
16 approach to keep the trips coming. Because what we have found
17 is that untold numbers of young people, especially
18 unaffiliated young people of that age want to go on these
19 trips to Israel, that it changes their lives. I personally
20 can't think of anything better than this program, and yet it's
21 suffering from lack of funding and controversy and
22 dysfunctional relationships. Unfortunately, it's kind of an
23 example of what I was talking about before that unless you
24 have good organizations run by good professionals, it doesn't
25 matter how good the cause is. So we're hoping we can turn it

1 around. It's a great program.

2 MS. DUBIN: Looking back on your experience in
3 Federation, would you say that you would have done anything
4 differently?

5 MR. ARONSON: I'm sure there were many things I
6 should have done differently. This is the kind of job where
7 it would be impossible to say I did everything right. The
8 Federation is not a Frank Sinatra song. It is a process of
9 trial and error and learning from mistakes. I guess what I
10 may have done differently is have a different career path that
11 would have taken me to other places. But I've been so happy
12 and feel good about working in Milwaukee, New York and now in
13 Detroit, that I can't really imagine that another career path
14 would have been better. Overall I'm very happy with my career
15 choice, even though I fell into it and lurched into it. I
16 wouldn't want to be doing anything else.

17 MS. DUBIN: You said earlier that you would like a
18 chance to be able to say what Detroit means in terms of a
19 wonderful community.

20 MR. ARONSON: Detroit is really one of the great
21 Jewish communities in the world, not just America. It's
22 because it puts together a lot of great things. Physical
23 beauty and enjoyment outdoors is not one of them.

24 I sometimes refer to Detroit as the land between the
25 highways. I go to other places. By the way, I think there's

1 a direct correlation between what the city looks like and how
2 good your Federation is because people here just have always
3 taken community seriously. We have been blessed with great
4 leaders. That's what makes a community is the people. You
5 can't go anywhere in the world ever and not see the impact
6 that Jewish Detroit has made on Jewish community around the
7 world.

8 I'm tremendously proud that I've been associated
9 with the people here and the community, not that there isn't a
10 bunch of stuff we could do differently. Detroit itself as a
11 city may suffer around the world with its image but you could
12 be in Jerusalem or Kiev or Tokyo or Los Angeles and ask about
13 the Jewish community of Detroit, and you'll hear the rave
14 reviews about what this community has accomplished. They're
15 all true.

16 **MS. DUBIN:** I'd like you to tell me briefly about
17 your children and what legacy you would want to leave for the
18 next generation.

19 **MR. ARONSON:** I have three children. Max, who's 20
20 and goes to Indiana University, my daughter Natasha just
21 turned 18 and is attending University of Michigan this fall,
22 and my son Isaac, who's 11 and is in the sixth grade at Hillel
23 Day School in Detroit. I guess if I could say a word to them
24 and talk a little bit about what I would like to leave them, I
25 guess it is to value service to people as being the most

1 important value and to do it in the Jewish community for the
2 Jewish people first and foremost, not only, but the idea of
3 helping people and giving of yourself is the most important
4 legacy. If I have done that well, that's the legacy I would
5 like to leave for my children. That I was able to help
6 improve Jewish life in my way, in my time. To positively
7 affect people's Jewish identities, to build Jewish identity
8 for the future and help people in need. And that that was an
9 ultimate value in my life and therefore in my children's
10 lives.

11 I would not want to leave a legacy of how to be a
12 great father because I love my children and I know they love
13 me and I'm working at being a better father, but when you work
14 for the Jewish community, you sometimes neglect your own
15 family and your family responsibilities. I hope they do
16 better on that score than I did.

17 MS. DUBIN: Will you promise us another visit
18 because there's lots of issues we'd like to go over.

19 MR. ARONSON: Sure. Yes. Thank you very much.