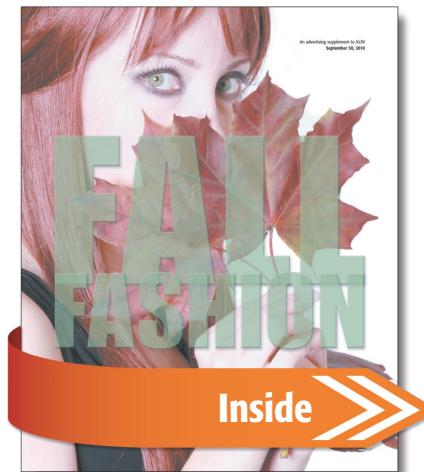




Dancing with the Torah

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Inside

A Newark legend celebrates her centennial

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Celia Arons has never been one of those people who dread public speaking. In all her many decades working for the Jewish community, for education, and for numerous other causes, she has always been ready to stand up and speak off the cuff.

At her 100th birthday party, celebrated one day early on Sunday, Sept. 26, at her temple, Ahavas Sholom in Newark, she had a yellow page of notes, but didn't need it. The words came as easily as ever, even faced with a VIP guest,



Celia Arons, front, is joined at her 100th birthday party by, from left, Ahavas Sholom president Eric Freedman, Mayor Cory Booker, and her daughters, Harriet Baker and Susan Sullivan.

Photo by Ellen Goldner

Newark Mayor Cory Booker, who came by to deliver an official letter of congratulations.

"Whenever we got together, I made sure he had some kugel because that's what he loves best," she declared. Booker, holding her hand, nodded with a big grin of affirmation.

As upbeat and caring as ever, and elegant in her satin suit and wrist corsage, Arons thanked the crowd of friends and family, encouraged them to enjoy the bountiful food, and urged anyone who doesn't belong already to join Ahavas Sholom. "This is a wonderful congregation," she said. "Look

how it makes people welcome for a celebration like this."

Arons and her husband, Ben, who died 10 years ago, helped save the Conservative shul, located on Broadway. They also pledged to stay in Newark when everyone else was leaving, in their apartment a short walk away on Mount Pleasant Avenue.

Arons still lives there, getting by with the help of a companion and the support of her two daughters, Susan Sullivan and Harriet Baker; her five granddaughters; one great-grandson; and one great-granddaughter. Until just a few years ago, she was still catering the Saturday morning kiddush at Ahavas Sholom, experimenting with new recipes — and she continues to help out.

Arons was born in Brooklyn, but moved to Newark as a baby. A press release put together by her granddaughter, Jessica Baker, describes the arc of her career. In addition to her devotion to the shul and her work with United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ, its predecessors, and the United Jewish Appeal and with Hadassah, whose local branch she led for more than half a century, Arons taught for many years, played piano briefly for a radio station in New York, served on the Newark Board of Education, and volunteered for the United Nations Association and the March of Dimes. She has also helped numerous new immigrants find their feet in the city.

Among the friends who rose to pay tribute to her at the party was



Centenarian Celia Arons talks with her longtime friend Mayor Cory Booker, who came to her birthday party at Ahavas Sholom in Newark. Inset, photos of her over the past century were on display at the party.

Photos by Elaine Durbach



Ellen Goldner, immediate past president of UJC MetroWest NJ. She is the founding president of The Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life, and serves as director of admissions for the Alexander Muss High School in Israel. Goldner said, "With Ceil, it has never mattered where someone came from or what color they are; if they needed help, she was there for them."

Booker stressed that same quality. In his brief speech, and in the letter he presented to her, the mayor spoke about the shining example she has set. In a life that has gone

from horse-drawn travel to supersonic jets and the Internet, he said, she has been "defining the term 'mitzvot.'" He wished her health and happiness "as you enter your second century" and told her, "You are one of our shining stars." ■

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