

Jewish Journal

Nobel gesture

Israeli winner thanks South Florida for support

By JAY SCHLEIFER
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

It was a scientific idea few understood and in which even fewer believed. It ran against the grain of research. In the opinion of many, it was a waste of time.

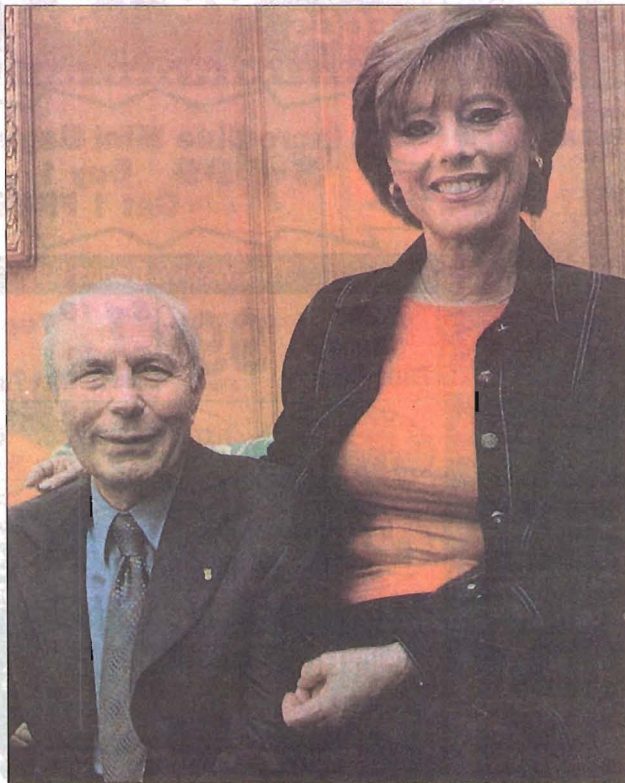
Professor Avram Hershko of the Technion, Israel's institute of technology, pursued it anyway. Last fall, he got his reward: The Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

In coming years, others may get rewards from Hershko's work, including new drugs and treatments for certain cancers, Parkinson's disease, cystic fibrosis and other inflammatory ailments, along with a better understanding of the mechanisms of life.

Hershko, age 67, and Judith, his wife of 41 years, were in South Florida last week to personally thank the supporters of the American Technion Society, the institute's U.S. fund-raising arm, for years of donations that enabled his work. ATS maintains a regional office in Hollywood and chapters in Miami, Boca Raton and Palm Beach.

Betty Lustig, ATS southern region director, knows Hershko well.

"He's very modest, a



Professor Avram Hershko, left, who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry and Judith, his wife of 41 years, were in South Florida last week to personally thank the supporters of the American Technion Society. STAFF PHOTO BY MARTA MIKULAN MARTIN

true academic," she says. "Many universities gain recognition. But this means the competition is over, guys. This is the real stuff. We're honored to have them."

Jack Bullock, of Aventura, who sits on the ATS national board, reflects on Hershko's struggles.

"He's a self-made individual," Bullock said. "Whatever he's achieved, he's achieved the hard way. This is the first time Israel has received a Nobel Prize in science. It's recognition by the world of the achievements of a little country."

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The idea Hershko pioneered, for which he shares the prize with another Technion professor, Aaron Ciechanover, and with Irwin Rose, a Jewish-American scientist from California, has to do with proteins, which carry out the functions of life at a cellular level. These functions include cell division and defense against disease.

In the 1960s and '70s, there was much research on how proteins were made, but virtually none on how they were disassembled when no longer needed, a process called degradation. Hershko was among the first to conclude that the unmaking is as important as the making.

"Many knew how the

king and queen.

Avram especially recalls his moment on stage.

"It was very solemn," he says. "You think about how you got there and what it means to your family and your country."

Judith echoes her husband's sentiments.

"The outpouring in Israel was unbelievable," she says. "The news in the evening started, 'At last, we have something good to tell.' Two days later there was this terror attack, which took away from the awards for a time. But wherever we went, everybody was happy, smiling, and it's like that until today."

She says her husband, who still goes to the lab at seven several mornings a week and is working on another major project, is unchanged from before

body produces proteins, but not how they were destroyed," Hershko wrote in a Technion publication. "Without an engine, a car cannot run, but without brakes, it is out of control."

Degradation, Hershko explains, is the cell's braking system, preventing such maladies as cancerous growth or extreme inflammatory reactions.

Hershko, whose family were "Holocaust escapees" from Hungary before they settled in Israel, and who became a doctor before he became a biochemist, got into degradation research for two reasons, he says.

"I realized it was important because proteins are important," Hershko says. "And I also thought what a small country Israel is, and if you do what the

the prize.

"He still takes out the garbage," she says with a laugh.

Avram Hershko agrees.

"I am the same person," he says. "And my life is slowly going back to normal. It had two main things: my family and my work. I was happy with it. Why should I change it - just because I got the Nobel Prize?"

For more information about Technion, call the American Technion Society at 954-981-4334 or visit www.ats.org.

great laboratories are doing, you have no chance. They have bigger groups and more money so we should find some special angle that is important.

Everybody told him not to waste his time on this, says Judith Hershko, who has collaborated in her husband's work the last 17 years.

"But he just had a vision," she says. "He saw that as very important and you can only crack it with biochemistry."

Although Hershko received strong support from Technion, he says there was no progress for the first 10 years. Then, in 1979, came the breakthrough. It had to do with getting a special protein called ubiquitin, which, he thought managed the degradation process to attach itself to a protein destined for destruction.

"The experiment was done at night by Chiechanover, but I wasn't there," Hershko recalls. "I promised my wife I would be home every night for dinner. Next morning, someone asked Aaron, 'Nu? Did it bind?' And he said 'It bound,' and there was the breakthrough."

International recognition, however, did not come for another decade. Then Hershko began to accumulate a string of prestigious awards, some of which were regarded as pointing toward an eventual Nobel selection.

"People started to tell me, 'Your husband will get the Nobel Prize,'" Judith Hershko recalls, "and I started to believe it. But Avram said 'It may be next year or it may be 10 years, so don't get the October syndrome, where people won't leave the room and they just wait.'"

▼ HERSHKO

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She took her husband's advice. On the eve of Sukkot, 2004, with prize announcements scheduled, they took their grandchildren swimming. It was then that Avram's cousin called with a huge *mazel tov*, followed by the news.

"When we got home, the press was there and we looked like *shleppers* straight from the beach," she says with a laugh. "With four kids on an overnight, the house was full of chocolate and cookies. We had to clean up fast."

Nobel ceremony week in December was no less hectic. Judith Hershko says they got no more than three to four hours of sleep a night. They also had to learn to properly bow and speak to Sweden's