

# Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to recover the life and contributions of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg (1862-1962, Cincinnati, Ohio), a founder and early leader in the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS). Freiberg exemplifies a generation of women who created coalitions and organizations that allowed women to take on active leadership roles in public, but who also remained tied to their homes and families. Illustrating this tension between public and private were two statements made by Freiberg--one in 1925 and one in 1926--that urged women to embrace the former and then the latter roles. These statements, made to the membership of the NFTS, are discussed in depth.

Relying heavily on primary, archival sources from various American repositories (programs, speeches, newspaper articles, etc.) , this thesis presents Freiberg's biographical data, the historical and organizational contexts that shaped her, and a discussion of possible reasons for her to have first supported public leadership roles for women and later advocated domestic duties. Secondary sources including the interpretations of contemporary historians help contextualize Freiberg's life and two statements. In addition to reviving the memory of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg and paying tribute to her many contributions, this thesis contributes to the understanding of women's experience during an era of transition into a new status as enfranchised citizens of the United States (1890s-1920s).

The thesis is organized into three chapters: The life of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg; the times of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg; and 1925-26--What happened?, an exploration of the possible motivations or influences on her two diverging statements, and the challenges of advocating for women's public leadership roles in the mid-1920s.. Each chapter is further subdivided both chronologically and thematically.

# **She is, in fact, a force**

**The life and times of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg**

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# Acknowledgements

The process of researching and writing this thesis has felt like a sacred task. It has been a privilege to spend time with Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, an inspiring, visionary, and complicated human being. She deserves to be remembered and celebrated for her many accomplishments. It has been an honor to revive her memory.

Without the support, guidance, and keen mind of Rabbi Joseph A. Skloot, PhD, this thesis would have been a different--and less focused--project. His insights and comments were invaluable, but even more significant was his belief in me and in Stella. I am indebted to him.

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Finally, I want to express my gratitude for my family. Aunts, uncles, cousins, brother, and parents--all are present on the pages of this thesis. Being able to tell a Cincinnati story felt,

in many ways, like coming home. Speaking of home, my deepest appreciation is due to my parents, who are my first, last, and best readers and champions. Thank you. For everything.

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## Chapter 1 - The life of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg



*Woman has at last found her niche in religious life as well as in civic and political work. We do not find her today relegated to the gallery of the synagog [sic] docilely watching the men of the congregation. Her voice is heard on Temple Boards, her advice is asked in the direction of the affairs of the Sabbath School, she is, in fact, a force in the religious community. And just as woman has taken her place in the affairs of the Temple, so the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods has taken its place in the religious life of America.*

-Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, 1924<sup>1</sup>

*Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg enriched two important worlds in her long and useful life--the world of religion and the world of music.*

-The American Israelite, 1962<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Largely forgotten today, Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg had already been relegated to a mere footnote by the time of her death at age 99 in 1962. More than a participant in the worlds of religion and music, she was a force in the first generations of women who created pathways to leadership for other women in American Jewish communities. She was an early leader of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) in her hometown of Cincinnati; a co-founder of

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<sup>1</sup> Quote: "Report of the President," *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 7 January 1924, p. 12; AJA-MS 73, Volume 1, Box 2; photo: Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, undated; AJA PC-1319.

<sup>2</sup> "Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg," in *The American Israelite*, Cincinnati, 25 January 1962, p. 4.

the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS); one of the first women to serve on the (formerly all-male) Board of her synagogue K.K. Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple); the founder, chairwoman, spearhead, and engine behind some of the NFTS's greatest and most impactful achievements; one of the founders of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ); a supporter, donor, and fundraiser for the students of the Hebrew Union College (HUC); a lover of the arts who championed visual culture in the home, the synagogue, and the city through the nascent Union Museum of HUC and the Cincinnati Art Museum; and a trained musician who was also co-founder of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. And yet, when quoting her 1924 statement on women and the NFTS in Reform Jewish life, historian Paula Hyman did not attribute the words to Stella, but instead chose to leave the president of the NFTS unnamed.<sup>3</sup>

Stella Freiberg's contributions to women's leadership, Reform Judaism, and the philanthropic and cultural landscape of Cincinnati were extraordinary. From its inception in 1913, Stella was passionately involved in her local sisterhood, the NFTS, its committees and its national leadership. From her positions of influence and leadership, she sought to foster the personal religious growth of all Reform Jews, especially women and young people. However, over the course of just one year, her attention seems to shift from advocating for women's public religious leadership to women as keepers of religious tradition in the private or domestic realm. Whatever caused this shift, in 1925-26, eventually led Stella so far as to withdraw the NFTS from the National Council of Women in the United States, as she found that body too political.

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<sup>3</sup> Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, pp. 42-43. Hyman took this quote not from a primary source, but from Jenna Weissman Joselit's *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years*, 1990. In the body of her text, Joselit herself did not cite Stella by name but instead called her a "new type of American Jewess" (p. 98). It is only in Joselit's own footnote (no. 14, p. 172) that Stella's name first appears.



Following this moment, and for the rest of her life, Stella spoke of women not as leaders but as religious beings whose greatest power and influence lay within their homes and families.

Stella Freiberg's life exemplifies the successes as well as challenging realities of her generation of women--the first to create pathways to public leadership for other women. Caught in the tension of women's changing roles in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, Stella represents a generation of women who were no longer satisfied to stay home and let men run their world. The NCJW (1893), Hadassah (1912), and NFTS (1913) were the first national institutions organized and run by women in the Jewish world, and quickly became central to communal life, as well as to women's emerging identities as leaders in the public sphere. These groups and their participants did not just work for their own betterment--they were driven by missions of communal support and betterment (what, today, we might call equity and social justice). Her life, including her retreat from feminist advocacy, illustrates the challenges faced by women change-makers of her generation. Whether or not her public shift can be tied to a cause, it demonstrates the difficulty these women had in instigating lasting progress.

This thesis attempts to recover Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, as a representative of her generation, primarily through a reading of the public statements she left behind, and applying the insights of Jewish women's history and scholarship to her story. The guiding questions of this thesis include:

**Who was Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg? How did she lead, in response to her times and community? What shaped her public persona and values? And what happened in 1925-26 to change her public stance on women's roles in the Jewish community?**

This chapter will present a biography of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, with a focus on her primary voice, using her words to understand how she led in her various roles within and beyond the NFTS. Chapter two will look at her context, and what historical circumstances and organizations shaped her as a leader. The final chapter will turn to the dramatic shift in her public statements about women's leadership, and attempt to make sense of that change.

## Biography of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg

### Childhood

Stella Heinsheimer was born in Cincinnati, in November 1862, to Emma (Goodhart) and Louis (or Lewis) Heinsheimer.<sup>4</sup> Stella was the second-eldest of six children: Edward, Stella, Charles, Norbert, Walter, and Daisy<sup>5</sup>; a seventh child (an unnamed younger sister) died when Stella was in her late teens.<sup>6</sup> At age 13, Stella and one of her sisters were in attendance when a false fire alarm resulted in a stampede at a benefit for the Cincinnati Relief Union. Nine died and many more were injured--including young Stella.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg," *American Israelite*, 25 January 1962, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Heinsheimer and Westheimer family genealogy, AJA GF-396.

<sup>6</sup> "Local and Domestic: Cincinnati," *American Israelite*, 21 Oct 1881, p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> "A Sad Catastrophe," *American Israelite*, 11 February 1876, p. 6.

Louis Heinsheimer was active in the Reform Jewish community of Cincinnati. An annual donor to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC),<sup>8</sup> he was even more involved in his local synagogue than in national Reform activities. Louis was an active member of congregation Bene Yeshurun (the Plum Street Temple) at the time that Isaac Mayer Wise was its rabbi (so the congregation was not yet eponymously named), and frequently represented the congregation in Reform gatherings.<sup>9</sup> Louis was not the only leader in the family: Emma was one of the women who issued a call to the Jewish women of Cincinnati to organize in support of a widows and orphans asylum as early as 1863.<sup>10</sup> This early example of women's collective philanthropy and social justice activism set the stage for the later collectives of Jewish women in which Stella would take part.

A singer, piano-player, and lifelong devotee of music, by age twenty Stella was appearing in front of audiences in the Cincinnati Jewish community. In 1883, she performed as part of the musical and literary entertainment of the second meeting of Cincinnati's International Order of B'nai B'rith.<sup>11</sup> She would be one of nine women to establish the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in

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<sup>8</sup> "Annual roll," *American Israelite*, multiple issues 1870s-90s, usually p. 4. Envisioned as a confederation of all American Jewish congregations, in which they could "join hands and hearts," the UAHC was founded in order to "promote education, and to keep alive the eternal principles of their religion... to preserve the Jewish identity, and to employ the proper agencies by which the future advocates of our religion shall be educated...." On the founding of the UAHC, see "It Is Coming," *American Israelite*, 4 April 1873, p. 4; "A New Chapter in the History of the American Israel," *American Israelite*, 18 July 1873, p. 4; "First Congregational Conference, Official Report," *American Israelite*, 18 July 1873, p. 5 (source of quotes above).

<sup>9</sup> For example: "U.A.H.C. Preparing for the Delegates of the Tenth Council, to be Held in Cincinnati in July," *American Israelite*, 4 May 1883, p. 367.

<sup>10</sup> "A Call to the Hebrew Ladies of Cincinnati," *American Israelite*, 3 April 1863, p. 308; the asylum was eventually established for Jewish orphans in Cleveland; for more on asylums in Cincinnati, see article and bibliography in "The Cincinnati House of Refuge and Asylums for Children in 19th century Cincinnati," University of Cincinnati LiBlog, May 2018, [https://libapps.libraries.uc.edu/liblog/2018/05/the-cincinnati-house-of-refuge-and-asylums-for-children-in-19th-century-cincinnati/#\\_edn1](https://libapps.libraries.uc.edu/liblog/2018/05/the-cincinnati-house-of-refuge-and-asylums-for-children-in-19th-century-cincinnati/#_edn1)

<sup>11</sup> "Local and Domestic," *American Israelite*, 12 January 1883, p. 239.

1895, where she remained an active and involved leader for half a century.<sup>12</sup> Later, Stella participated in the music-lovers' "symphony circle" of the Cincinnati Woman's Club,<sup>13</sup> and even continued to play four-hand (i.e., duet) piano with friends.<sup>14</sup>

Within the Reform Jewish community, Stella followed in her parents' footsteps, actively engaging with the movement's institutions from a young age. In July 1883, she attended the 8th Council of the UAHC, where newspaper accounts recognized her as one of 16 women in attendance. Also among the 16 were her mother, her future mother-in-law, future sister-in-law, and Miss Henrietta Szold of Baltimore.<sup>15</sup> During this Council, the first HUC rabbinical commencement was celebrated--and Stella (alongside her mother, future-mother-in-law, and Henrietta Szold) was in attendance at the infamous Trefa Banquet, which at the time was simply considered the most important social event of the season.<sup>16</sup> Emceed by Stella's future father-in-law, Julius Freiberg, the banquet led attendees to declare, "'Cincinnati is not a backward city, so say all of us,' was the expression... made by a visiting Delegate, with reference to the banquet which had just ended, and which was given in honor of the visiting Delegates to the Convention. Following immediately after the College Commencement Exercises, the time was most appropriate. The attendance was favorably commented upon, and... was up to

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<sup>12</sup> "Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg," *American Israelite*, 25 January 1962, p. 4; "Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg To Deliver Sermon," *American Israelite*, 20 February 1941, p. 5; email correspondence with Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra librarian Christina Eaton, 16 March 2019.

<sup>13</sup> "Local," *American Israelite*, 18 February 1926, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation with Peter Bloch, regarding his grandmother Jean Kaufman Bloch's friendship with Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> "The Council," *American Israelite*, 13 July 1883, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Untitled article, *American Israelite*, 20 July 1883, p. 6; see also Sussman, Lance, "The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism," *American Jewish Archives Journal*, Volume 57, Issue 1-2, pp. 29-52.

standard.”<sup>17</sup> While the food was not commented upon, the toasts at the event included one offered by Simon Wolf, future president of B’nai B’rith, to ““Our Ladies’--Without women, no joy, no blessing, no kingdom, no religion, no home, no happiness.” Even at this early moment in her life, Stella was taking part in national Reform Jewish life, and being presented with messages about women’s involvement therein.

By age 22, Stella had married J. (Julius) Walter Freiberg (1858-1921).<sup>18</sup> The two came from the same social and religious circles in Cincinnati’s Reform Jewish community; their families were bastions of the two bedrock Reform congregations: Bene Yeshurun (Plum Street Temple, later Isaac Mayer Wise Temple) and Bene Israel (later Rockdale Temple). While Louis Heinsheimer represented Bene Yeshurun at Reform events, J. Walter’s father Julius W. Freiberg represented Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) at the same events.<sup>19</sup> Both fathers were also involved in the early years of HUC, both seated on the dignitaries’ platform at the 1881 formal dedication of HUC’s first stand-alone building.<sup>20</sup> That same year, they also served together on the UAHC Board subcommittee on “agricultural pursuits,”<sup>21</sup> the term used to describe the attempt to turn tenement-dwelling immigrant Jews into farmers. This committee sought to aid and speed the

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<sup>17</sup> “Celebrating with a Banquet,” *American Israelite*, 20 July 1883, p. 5. Stella is mistakenly listed in the article as “Mrs. Stella Heinsheimer.”

<sup>18</sup> While their engagement and marriage seem not to have made the local Jewish press, they must have married by late 1884 as their son Julius W Freiberg was born 9 August 1885: “Julius W. Freiberg,” *American Israelite*, 17 August 1892, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> “U.A.H.C. Preparing for the Delegates of the Tenth Council, to be Held in Cincinnati in July,” *American Israelite*, 4 May 1883, p. 367.

<sup>20</sup> “Dedication of the Hebrew Union College,” *American Israelite*, 29 April 1881, p. 337.

<sup>21</sup> “The Union of American Hebrew Congregations semi-annual meeting of the Executive Board,” *American Israelite*, 4 February 1881, p. 254.

resettlement of the teeming masses onto “government lands” (i.e., Native American lands) in the south, plains, and west.<sup>22</sup>

The couple’s mothers were also active in their synagogues, and in ladies’ philanthropic work in the community. Together with her mother and mother-in-law, Stella was a member of the Hebrew Ladies’ Sewing Society. Her mother-in-law, Mrs. Freiberg, was president of the chapter, and Stella and Mrs. Heinsheimer were assigned to the cutting committee.<sup>23</sup> This was no mere social gathering--the sewing circles of this era were fundraising (and work-providing) organizations for the poor.<sup>24</sup>

Further cementing the ties between the Heinsheimer and Freiberg families, in 1886, Stella’s elder brother Edward and J. Walter’s sister Sallie also married.<sup>25</sup>

Following in the footsteps of his father, the UAHC’s second president, J. Walter Freiberg served as President of the UAHC from 1911 until his death in 1921.<sup>26</sup> Lamenting his passing after a

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<sup>22</sup> “An Earnest Appeal” advertisement, *American Israelite*, 8 September 1882, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> “Hebrew Ladies’ Sewing Society, Secretary’s Report,” *American Israelite*, 30 October 1890, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> “Louisville, Ky,” *American Israelite*, 5 April 1878, p. 6; also Rogow, Faith, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> “Heinsheimer--Freiberg,” *American Israelite*, 19 November 1886, p. 9. In later decades, consanguinity and affinity laws (Black, Henry Campbell, M.A. Black’s Law Dictionary, Revised Fourth Edition, West Publishing Co., 1968, p. 81.) would prevent marriage between spouses’ siblings, but it is unclear what the law in Ohio was in 1886.

<sup>26</sup> “Union of American Hebrew Congregations,” *American Israelite*, 4 January 1912, p. 4; “J. Walter Freiberg Passes,” *American Israelite*, 16 June 1921, p. 1. During this time the couple resided at 3583 Alaska Avenue (“Officers and Standing Committees,” *Proceedings of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods: First General Convention and First Biennial Meeting*, AJA MS-73, Box A-1, volume 1, p. 6) in Cincinnati, just blocks from Rockdale Temple in the then-largely Jewish Avondale neighborhood. Stella continued to live there through the 1940s (“National and Special Committees, 1946-1948,” *Proceedings of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods: Thirty-second, Thirty-third, and Thirty-fourth Annual Reports*, AJA MS-73, Box A-1, folder 4, pp. 7 and 10).

year of illness, the *American Israelite* called J. Walter Freiberg “...probably the most prominent and best known Jewish citizen of Cincinnati.” Following his death, Stella even received a condolence message from President Warren G Harding.<sup>27</sup> The couple had one son, Julius W. Freiberg (1885-1972).<sup>28</sup>

### Bene Israel

Though she was born into the Bene Yeshurun congregation, Stella Heinsheimer became an active and involved member of Congregation Bene Israel after her marriage to J. Walter Freiberg. She was present in the congregation’s Sabbath school when Julius was a small child, and the congregation still occupied its Mound Street location.<sup>29</sup> When Bene Israel formed a Sisterhood in 1912, Stella was elected its first president.<sup>30</sup> Her leadership among the women of the congregation was recognized when she was selected to sit on the first women’s auxiliary committee to the Board of Trustees five years later.<sup>31</sup> Upon the congregation’s centenary in 1924, two women were asked to join the Board of Trustees; one of them was Stella.<sup>32</sup> These women were able to join the Board because,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Julius W. Freiberg,” *American Israelite*, 17 August 1972, p. 22. Like his father, he served as a UAHC Board member, and like his mother he served as president of one of the UAHC’s National Federations (he of the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods. Julius’ less-than-perfect obituary describes his father’s role as co-founder and second President of UAHC and a Vice President of HUC, although those describe his grandfather, and not his father. The obituary says nothing at all about his mother’s roles in the Reform movement—she is simply acknowledged as his progenitrix.

<sup>29</sup> “Mound Street Temple Sabbath-school,” *American Israelite*, 31 December 1891, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> “Bene Israel Sisterhood,” *American Israelite*, 26 December 1912, p. 6. Bene Israel was not the first, or even among the earliest, synagogue sisterhoods. For more on early sisterhoods, see below, chapter two.

<sup>31</sup> “Committees,” *Data of K.K Bene Israel*, 1917, p. 5; AJA MS-24, Box 24.

<sup>32</sup> “Officers & Trustees” listings, *Year Book of Congregation Bene Israel*, 1924, p. 4; AJA MS-24, Box 24.

*At the last general meeting our By-Laws were amended, to provide for an associate membership so that the women of our Congregation could become members in their own names at a nominal cost and with all the rights and privileges of other members. ...This would make them eligible to membership on Committees and on the Board of Trustees, which obviously is not the case today.*

*It is gratifying to report that the President of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods [Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg] and the President of our Center have been nominated for Trustees. **This marks a distinct departure from tradition and from former practice, and is a step forward, which will surely rebound to the benefit of the Congregation and to the furtherance of its work.***<sup>33</sup>

In honor of the anniversary, Stella--President of a major Reform organization--was invited to speak to the congregation at its Centennial Celebration in January of 1924, held at the Gibson Hotel in downtown Cincinnati. After paying tribute to her late (and still beloved) husband, Stella turned to describing her Sisterhoods work. She said,

*In this day the Sisterhood or Women's Auxiliary means much to the synagogue. In fact, in many instances it has been the inspiration for rekindling the Jewish religious fervor in the community in which it functions. Meeting together and considering seriously all the problems which confront them, the women of Israel through their synagogue activities, have succeeded in awakening the Jew and Jewess to the responsibility of their splendid heritage.*<sup>34</sup>

Nine months later, the Nominating Committee proposed her name as a new Board member; the full Board approved her election a week later.<sup>35</sup> Stella served for one term, until early 1927.<sup>36</sup> No reason was given, or even hinted at, for Stella's rotation off the Board in the official records

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<sup>33</sup> "Annual Report of the President, Ralph W. Mack, written Cincinnati, Ohio, October 25, 1924; *ibid.*, p. 46. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> *Year Book of Congregation Bene Israel*, 1924, p. 22 AJA MS-24, series F, Box 24.

<sup>35</sup> Nominating committee report, 25 September 1924, and Board meeting minutes, 2 October 1924, *K.K. Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, 5 Dec 1918 - 4 Dec 1924*, p. 638; AJA MS-24, Series C, Subseries 18, Folder 2.

<sup>36</sup> Nominating committee report, 27 December 1926, and Board meeting minutes, 6 January 1927, p. 762; *K.K. Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, 8 Jan 1925 - 12 Jan 1931*; AJA MS-24, Series C, Subseries 18, Folder 3.



of Rockdale Temple. But the timing coincides with her withdrawal from an assertively feminist stance in her public statements (to be discussed further, below).

#### National Council of Jewish Women

Before rising to the leadership of a national Jewish women's organization, Stella participated in the local leadership of the first such group: The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW). Organized as a national body in Chicago during the World's Fair of 1893 (a result of the World's Congress of Religions and its Jewish Women's Religious Congress sub-convening), one of the first local sections was founded in Cincinnati on 21 January 1895. Stella was elected to the Board of Directors at that first meeting.<sup>37</sup> The group committed to women's collectivization in service of the greater good, the local section's constitution declaring,

*We, Jewish women, sincerely believe that a closer fellowship, a greater unity of thought and purpose, and a nobler accomplishment will result from a widespread organization, and do therefore band ourselves together in a union of workers to further the best and highest interests of humanity in fields religious, philanthropic and educational.*

*The purposes of this organization are to bring about closer relations among Jewish women, to furnish by an organic union a medium of communication and a means of prosecuting work of common interest, to further unite efforts in behalf of Judaism by supplying means of study, and in behalf of the work of social reform by application of the best philanthropic thought.*<sup>38</sup>

Study of Jewish texts--particularly of Torah--was central in the activities of the NCJW branch in Cincinnati. A contemporary account relates that, "The ladies of the circle studied the Book of Books, meeting every two weeks. One hour was devoted to Bible study. ...Each member chosen to read one or more chapters, also prepared a synopsis of the same for the succeeding meeting."

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<sup>37</sup> "A Local Organization Effected," *American Israelite*, Thursday 24 January 1895, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> The seriousness of purpose illustrated by this regular Bible study suggests the intellectual aspirations of the participants. Jewish women understood themselves as having religious purpose, whose attainment meant studying and understanding religious texts. In writing of this generation of women in Germany, Nahida Ruth Remy (see below, chapter two) suggested that women's study was "fully appreciated," for it built "The depth of feeling, the gentleness of mind, the richness of intellect, the never-failing motherly faithfulness of the Jewess...."<sup>40</sup> Using her learning, a woman could model knowledge and piety to both her family and her religious community, stepping "forth as a prophetess and 'openeth her mouth with wisdom.....' (Prov. 31: 26.)"<sup>41</sup>

Stella remained a leader in the NCJW over the course of the Cincinnati section's first 20 years of existence (until 1913, the year of the NFTS's founding).<sup>42</sup> She continued her activity with the NCJW at a time when the NFTS would have demanded the largest share of her time and attention: she was even serving as a local Board member during her NFTS Presidency.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Cincinnati Branch," *The American Jewess*, Volume 2, issue 3, December 1895, p. 184

<sup>40</sup> Remy, Nahida Ruth, *Nahida Remy's The Jewish Woman*, Mannheimer, Louise transl., 1897, p. 120.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Stella was not the only woman to shift her primary involvement from the NCJW to the NFTS after the inception of the latter. At least seven women in regional leadership of the NCJW 1893-1913 became national leaders in the NFTS 1913-1923: Stella Heinsheimer (Mrs. J. Walter) Freiberg; Alma D. (Mrs. Israel) Cowen; Ida Weiss (Mrs. Joseph) Friend; Alice (Mrs. Samuel) Lazon; Belle (Mrs. Ben.) Loewenstein; Carrie (Mrs. H.) Oppenheimer; and Bella Ney (Mrs. B.H.) Printz. Another five (5) possible women to include in this list: Mrs. AJ Johnson (Belle Levy?); Mrs. Otto Kempner (Fanny?); Mrs. Nathan J. Miller (Fannie S.?); Mrs. Adolph Rosenberg (Pauline?); Mrs. Eugene Schwab (Flora?). Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, Appendix A, Chart 1, p. 211; and 1913-1923 NFTS Executive Board member listings, AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Who's Who in American Judaism*, 1926, p. 176

### National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods

Most accounts of the founding of the NFTS focus on Carrie Simon, Rabbi George Zepin, or even Rabbi David Philipson.<sup>44</sup> However, the official call for the organization of a nationally federated group of Reform women came from the Freiberg household: J. Walter Freiberg, President of the UAHC, issued the message, a “Call to all the ladies’ organizations belonging to the Union to appoint or elect delegates for a meeting to be held in Cincinnati, during January 20-23, 1913. This meeting is for the purpose of organizing a Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.”

<sup>45</sup> The ladies answered, flocking to Cincinnati’s Sinton Hotel in January 1913.

On 21 January 1913, what became the first and primary day of the gathering proposed by J. Walter, the NFTS was officially founded. Called to order by J. Walter,<sup>46</sup> the meeting placed the all-male leadership of Reform Judaism firmly in the spotlight. The male rabbis and lay leaders who spoke that day envisioned this as a religious (and religiously conservative, at that) body. They understood the women’s role as supporting the decisions of Reform men, participating in but not amending the liturgies and ritual observances of Reform Jews, ultimately not making changes to Reform Judaism or blazing any new paths. These expectations are exemplified by the

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<sup>44</sup> Nadell, Pamela. “‘The Synagog shall hear the Call of the Sister’: Carrie Simon and the Founding of NFTS,” in Balin, Carole D. et al, eds. *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of the Women of Reform Judaism*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2013, pp. 18-48; Nadell, Pamela and Simon, Rita J., “Ladies of the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930,” in Sacks, Maurie, ed. *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, pp. 63-75; “National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods Gets a Voice,” *Women of Reform Judaism: A Centennial Celebration*, unnumbered p. 15; “Carrie Obendorfer Simon,” *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women’s Archive, [www.jwa.org/encyclopedia](http://www.jwa.org/encyclopedia).

<sup>45</sup> Mailing to all Union congregations; AJA MS-73, Section A, Box 1, Volume 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Proceedings of the First General Convention of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 21 January 1913, p. 15; AJA MS-73, Section A, Box 1, Volume 1.

words of Cincinnati rabbi and HUC professor Louis Grossmann, the second speaker (and second male speaker) at the founding convention:

*Women organize not to change institutions, but to maintain them. It is the function of women to uphold what is necessary and valuable, and, when women come together with a common aim and for concerted action, you may believe some large social interest is at stake. Woman is conservative, and saves for us the goods of culture and religion men so often jeopardize. There is good reason, even though it be unconscious, for every large movement on the part of women, and this effort of the Jewish women of this country to organize for the specific purpose of doing what they can for American Judaism is demanded by the times and the conditions. The Jewish men of this country built up the congregation, the lodge, the temples, the asylums, the colleges and seminaries and the schools. And they have made them efficient. Now the opportunity and the need of the Jewish woman has arrived. These institutions must have her pervasive influence, her moralizing presence, her motherly thoughtfulness and her piety.*<sup>47</sup>

What the women themselves envisioned may have been somewhat different from moralizing, mothering, and piety--but it was only men who delivered addresses over the three days of the First General Convention.<sup>48</sup> While these women did understand the NFTS as primarily a “religious and moral” body,<sup>49</sup> Stella in particular saw this religious work with wider scope and potential for women’s involvement in religious leadership. Elected at this founding meeting to the position of Vice President, it was Stella who gave the national leadership’s response to the local welcome that opened the First Biennial of the NFTS, held in Chicago in 1915. In her speech, she spoke of women with roles not limited to home and hearth: “We are all here working for a common cause,” she said, “and that is the preservation of our religion and the cultivation of a true Jewish spirit in all our endeavors.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Grossmann, Rabbi Louis, DD. “The American Jewess,” *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> The female delegates discussed, debated, and conducted the business of forming a national federation of sisterhoods, but the only addresses were delivered by Rabbi David Philipson, Simon Wolf, Rabbi Louis Grossman, and Rabbi Jacob Mielziner: *Ibid.*, pp. 15-28.

<sup>49</sup> “Constitution,” *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> *Proceedings of the First Biennial Meeting of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 19 January 1915, p. 46; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 1.

The “common cause” was not embraced immediately by all local sisterhoods. As late as 1922, almost a decade after the NFTS was founded, the sisterhood at Temple Emanu-El (New York), the first sisterhood in the country, had declined to join the national federation. Then, in late fall 1922, Mrs. Sallie Kubie Glauber (who served on the NFTS national leadership as chair of the National Committee for Union Museum) presented a passionate plea, “explaining the necessity of joining the said organization in order to set the Women of Temple Emanu-El right in the eyes of the National Federation. She took the liberty of having us officially represented at the coming Convention, January 23-25, just as all other Temple groups are.”<sup>51</sup> The subsequent vote of the sisterhood’s Board of Directors “was taken and it was unanimously carried to join at once. Mrs. Glauber immediately telegraphed the news to Cincinnati.”<sup>52</sup>

For the first ten years of the NFTS (as it slowly gained local support nationwide), and under its first two Presidents, Stella served as Vice President. During these years, she effectively and successfully fundraised both for the women of Reform Judaism, and for the movement’s rabbinical students. The Sisterhood Uniongram, the ubiquitous conveyer of good wishes, was ushered into existence by NFTS subcommittee chair Stella Freiberg (though the idea had come from Mrs. Joseph [Blanche] Stolz).<sup>53</sup> A “blank page that was described as a ‘telegram substitute,’” the Uniongram “evolved into a catchall notecard for expressing any number of sentiments, including condolences, get-well thoughts, wishes for the Jewish and secular new years,

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<sup>51</sup> Temple Emanu-El Archives, Minutes of the Board and Chairmen of Committees Meeting, Friday, November 24, 1922.

<sup>52</sup> Temple Emanu-El Archives, Minutes of the General Meeting, December 7th, 1922.

<sup>53</sup> “The Birth of the Uniongram,” *Women of Reform Judaism: A Centennial Celebration*, unnumbered pp. 18-19.

congratulations on graduations and retirements, and greetings on birthdays, anniversaries and other occasions.”<sup>54</sup> Over the two years of Stella’s chairmanship, Uniongram sales raised \$500 (as the NFTS “[overcame] the first great obstacle of unfamiliarity”<sup>55</sup>). By the time she completed her terms as Vice President of NFTS, in 1923, NFTS Uniongram sales brought in ten times that amount.<sup>56</sup> Initially, intended as a revenue stream for the NFTS itself, by 1923 the proceeds were largely dedicated to underwriting HUC scholarships.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to helping pay for their tuition via Uniongram sales, the women of the NFTS cared deeply about the young men attending HUC. As the NFTS itself came into being, so did a dedicated scholarship subcommittee<sup>58</sup>, and the construction of an HUC student dormitory in Cincinnati came about solely through funds raised by an NFTS committee.<sup>59</sup> Stella had been a member of the dormitory committee, and was the NFTS President who oversaw the dormitory’s



completion and dedication.<sup>60</sup> On her own, she also fully funded the construction of an HUC gymnasium, given in

<sup>54</sup> Balin, Carole B., “‘Get the Uniongram Habit’: NFTS’s Imaginative Fundraising Campaign, 1913-1953,” in Balin, Carole B. et al editors, *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of Women of Reform Judaism*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>55</sup> “The National Committee on Uniongram,” *Proceedings of the Second Biennial Meeting of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 16 January 1917, p. 30; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 1.

<sup>56</sup> “Report of the Executive Secretary,” *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 4 January 1924, p. 16; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Duties of Standing Committees,” *Proceedings of the First General Convention of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 21 January 1913, p. 26; AJA MS-73, Section A, Box 1, Volume 1.

<sup>59</sup> “Resolution for the Erection of a Dormitory at the Hebrew Union College,” *Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1920, p. 60; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Report of the President - Completion of the Dormitory,” *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 4 January 1924, p. 12; AJA MS-73, Section A, Box 1, Volume 2.

memory of her late husband J. Walter Freiberg, upon her assumption of the NFTS Presidency in 1923.<sup>61</sup>

In 1923, after the terms of Carrie Obendorfer (Mrs. Abram) Simon and Hattie (Mrs. Joseph) Wiesenfeld expired, Stella succeeded to the Presidency of the NFTS. Like Mrs. Simon, she served an extended, six-year term (1923-1929; as opposed to Mrs. Wiesenfeld's four years as President). Unlike either of her predecessors, Stella used her President's Report as an opportunity to teach Jewish texts and connect them to the lives of the women in her organization. In one address, Stella casually introduced her benediction by linking the Sisterhoods assembly to the matriarch Leah, who was, she taught, the first woman in the Torah to pray.<sup>62</sup> In another, she quoted both Mishnah and Micah in celebrating the work of the Sisterhoods:

*We read in the "Ethics of the Fathers" that: "The world is based upon three things- the Torah, Temple Service and the practice of Charity." Where could we seek for a firmer foundation on which to build the activities of the Sisterhoods?*

*...Let us put every effort into these enterprises and succeed in enriching our own lives in service for others. May we find satisfaction in our Sisterhood work and continue "To seek Justice, to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with our God."<sup>63</sup>*

She also engaged more deeply and radically with the Bible in her addresses. In 1925, Stella framed her most revolutionary statement on woman's potential as leaders in relation to the text

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<sup>61</sup> "Gymnasium for Rabbis Has Swimming Pool" (photograph with caption), *American Israelite*, 17 April 1924, p. 1; "Twenty-ninth Biennial Convention U.A.H.C. at St. Louis," *American Israelite*, 22 January 1925, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> "President's Message," *Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 11 February 1929, p. 96; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Report of the President," *Minutes of the Executive Board*, 31 Oct 1927, pp. 15 & 18; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

known as *Eshet Chayil*. Using a text that focuses on woman's role in home and family, Stella used it to argue for women's ascension "even into the pulpit":

*In that portion of the Bible which is known as 'Proverbs', there is a beautiful tribute to Jewish womanhood. It is both a tribute and a standard, and happy is the woman who can measure up to it. Judaism has ever glorified the home and woman as the home-maker and most of this scriptural reacting is devoted to woman's duties in the home. But the last phrase digresses, from this theme and it especially catches the eye for it reads, "Comeliness passes away, beauty is vain; the woman that feareth God, her honor endureth forever.*

*Many, many years have elapsed since some sage in Israel uttered that prophetic word. Many changes have occurred in religious, home and civic life. This twentieth century finds many doors of opportunity opened to woman, many new fields are hers to explore. Woman is not only the home-maker, today she is a captain of industry--a head of professions--a governor of states. Alluring new activities beckon her at every turn, her ability and judgment are unquestioned. The day of woman's inferiority is a memory of the Dark Ages.*

***Could that sage in Israel have foreseen the future? Could he have realized that at some far distant time woman would rise to such great heights? Could he have seen her rise in the realm of her religion, watch her descend from the gallery unto the lower floor and then ascend even into the pulpit? Could he have seen her, loving her faith, pledge herself to become one of a group of 50,000 women to serve her religion?***<sup>64</sup>

For Stella--who spoke these words in the context of a conference since she could not have spoken them from a pulpit at the time--women's deep engagement in religion could not be limited to the home or the synagogue women's gallery; it extended to the *bimah* itself. She could not have meant women to be mere decorative presences on Shabbat or holidays, either, as she made this bold statement in the context of a *drash* on Proverbs. The intellectualism and vision she displays in this address flies in the face of the men, like Louis Grossmann, who feared that

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<sup>64</sup> "Report of the President," *Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 18 Jan 1925, p. 115; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2. Emphasis added.



women would romanticize and frivolize the Jewish community if allowed to publicly engage in Jewish communal leadership.<sup>65</sup>

Such restrictive attitudes had begun to shift before the mid-1920s (see chapter 2). For Stella and the women of the NFTS, their Reform communities were making decisions about education and music, and even budgets and leadership, guided by women's perspectives.<sup>66</sup> By raising their voices together, women's insights were being heard. Stella acknowledged the importance of collectivization, saying of the federated sisterhoods that, "only when a group of women are federated in every sense of the word can they work together for a common good."<sup>67</sup>

Stella declared this era, "to be the age of woman. All barriers are down and her ambition is limitless."<sup>68</sup> Speaking specifically of the Reform communities these Sisterhood women served, she continued, "Woman has at last found her niche in religious life as well as in civic and political work. We do not find her today relegated to the gallery of the synagogue [sic] docilely watching the men of the congregation. Her voice is heard on Temple Boards, her advice is asked in the direction of the affairs of the Sabbath School, she is in fact, a force in the religious community."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For the variety of ways in which men objected to women's public leadership roles within the Jewish community, see: Rogow, Faith. *Gone to Another Meeting*, pp. 87-91.

<sup>66</sup> Temple Emanu-El Archives, Board of Trustees Minutes, 18 December 1916, bound volume 05/03/1909-01/11/1926; Rockdale Temple board minutes, 1918-1925, AJA MS-24, Series C, Subseries 18, no. 2; "Report of the President," *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 7 January 1924, p. 12; AJA-MS 73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>67</sup> "Report of the President," *Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 18 Jan 1925, p. 118; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>68</sup> "Report of the President," *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 7 January 1924, p. 12; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. It bears mentioning that historian Paula Hyman published this quote, attributing it to the unnamed president of the NFTS, in her 1995 book *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish*

Within the world of Reform Judaism, woman's niche was, in fact, beginning to include an institutionally-sanctioned presence on the *bimah*.<sup>70</sup> The NFTS Executive Board passed a resolution in 1921 to encourage local chapters to participate in a Sisterhood Sabbath annually in November.<sup>71</sup> Without initial guidance on the nature of a Sisterhood Sabbath, by November of 1924 women across the country took to the pulpit. In fifty congregations, "women jointly conducted the entire service, reading the prayers and preaching the sermon."<sup>72</sup> This era of the Sisterhood Shabbat had begun.

But women were to be found on the *bimah* in UAHC-affiliated congregations even beyond those special services set aside to honor women and the Sisterhoods. According to the NFTS committee on religion, "So familiar are the Sisterhood members with the work of the Synagog [sic], that several women are able to conduct services during the summer in the absence of Rabbis."<sup>73</sup> While it may seem that acting as *shlichat tzibur* would be the greatest achievement of a woman in a synagogue, the religion committee thought otherwise. With mounting enthusiasm,

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*History*. She names Carrie Simon in the book's next paragraph (pp. 42-43), but does not identify Stella Freiberg, who is both gone and forgotten 33 years after her death.

<sup>70</sup> "Institutionally sanctioned" meaning approved of by the Reform movement and the CCAR, as opposed to the extraordinary appearances of Julie Rosewald or Ray Frank on pulpits in the wilder and institutionally liminal western United States in the 1880s-90s. See Nadell, Pamela S., "The Women Who Would Be Rabbis," in Nadell, Pamela S. ed., *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, pp. 175-184; and Pinnolis, Judith S., "Julie Rosewald: America's First Woman Cantor," in *Jewish Women's Archive - Jewish Women, Amplified*, <https://jwa.org/blog/julie-rosewald>.

<sup>71</sup> Sarna, Jonathan D., "The NFTS National Committee on Religion, 1913-1933," Balin, Carole B. et al eds., *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of Women of Reform Judaism*, p. 59.

<sup>72</sup> "Twenty-ninth Biennial Convention U.A.H.C. at St. Louis," *American Israelite*, 22 January 1925, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> "Report of the National Committee on Religion," *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1925, p. 21; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

they told of a woman present on the *bimah* during a regular congregational Shabbat service.

Their report continued:

*In a large middle Western city it is the custom to have two trustees of the Temple seated on the pulpit, during the reading of the Torah. On one occasion [sic] during the past winter, on an unusually bad day, only one trustee was present. A woman member of the Board, who was in the congregation, was asked to take his place. She assumed this position with the dignity of a practical official and those who did not know the circumstances, took the incident as a matter of course. The case will not be surprising when you know that the woman Board member was our own President, Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg.<sup>74</sup>*

Stella's presence on the *bimah* as representative of the Rockdale Temple Board of Trustees--what apparently was an event of huge importance to the NFTS--goes without mention in Rockdale Temple's notes, bulletin and annual report; nor does it appear in the usually exhaustive social and religious coverage of the *American Israelite*. But to extend this honor to a woman of the congregation--for her to sit before the community as the visual representation of the synagogue's power structure--would have been a powerful symbol to all who saw her.

The final innovation reported by the NFTS religion committee was another equilibrium-upsetting event:

*One of the most radical reports of the participation of women in congregational life, was an account of Yom Kippur Day Services at the Rockdale Avenue Temple, Cincinnati. During the portion of the Services which deals with the reading of the Scriptures, which is usually taken care of by the trustees of the Temple, four women were also included; a most inspiring innovation on this most holy of days.<sup>75</sup>*

Unlike Stella's presence on the *bimah* the previous winter, this innovation did draw the attention of the local press:

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

*The services on the Day of Atonement were extremely impressive. There was standing room only on Sunday night and the Temple was crowded throughout the day on Monday. An innovation this year was that women were among the readers of the scriptural and other selections found in the Prayer book. These ladies were Mrs. Harry A. Bohm, Mrs. David Philipson, Mrs. Carl J. Kiefer, and Mrs. Mae Herz. This innovation met with a great deal of favor.*<sup>76</sup>

1925 also saw the formation of the first political subcommittee of the NFTS: The National Committee for Peace. With the memory of the Great War's atrocities still hauntingly fresh, this subcommittee was meant to advocate for peace among the nations, starting at home and in the synagogue.<sup>77</sup> Like the National Committee on Cooperation (whose domestic welfare work included fundraising, visiting the sick, and sponsoring a new synagogue on Welfare Island to meet the needs of Jews quarantined there<sup>78</sup>), the work of the National Committee for Peace was understood as religious activism, more than political activism. These were women using their collective voices to demand a more peaceful and just world, and taking collective action to create that world for themselves and the needy who surrounded them.

1925 was clearly a year of crucial firsts for Sisterhood women. Despite the growing acceptance of women's voices and work in the religio-political realm, and the accepting--even warm--coverage of those Yom Kippur services in the *American Israelite*, might all of these changes have proven too much for NFTS President Stella Freiberg? No young radical, but a woman in her 60s, by late fall 1925, she was already distancing herself from her earlier radical statements about women's potential for public leadership. Already starting to move toward the

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<sup>76</sup> "Rockdale Avenue Temple," *American Israelite*, 1 October 1925, p. 6. Emphasis added.

<sup>77</sup> "President's Report," *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1925, p. 11; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

more conservative language that would define her later years, Stella described the NFTS in a newspaper interview as a group that, “devotes itself exclusively to religious work and does not duplicate or conflict with the efforts of other Jewish women’s organizations which are interested in such additional movements as Americanization, Immigration Aid, Education Work, etc.”<sup>79</sup> By defining the NFTS in purely religious terms, Stella distanced the Federation from the social justice and political agitations of other groups. This interview did not, however, go so far as to reject the gains Sisterhood women had made in the religious life of their congregations.

She was still fiercely defending the religious zeal of her peers two months later, according to a report in the *American Israelite*. “Jewish women throughout America resent the oft-repeated accusation that this is an irreligious age, declared Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg, president of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, in her annual message before the Executive Board of that organization.”<sup>80</sup> This statement came during the time of transition from Stella’s full-throated support of women taking on public leadership roles within their Jewish communities, to the conservatism that takes hold of her by fall 1926.

Rather than exhorting the rise of women in public religious life, Stella wrote in her October 1926 President’s Report: “That the leadership of man in commerce and politics is paralled [sic] by **the reigning position of woman in the home, where she is the Priestess, is an accepted fact.**”

<sup>81</sup> This is no feminist optimism, no idealistic vision of a woman taking full part in public ritual.

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<sup>79</sup> Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), “Temple Sisterhoods is an American Idea,” syndicated interview as published in *American Israelite*, 19 November 1925, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> “National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods,” *American Israelite*, 28 January 1926, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> “President’s Report,” Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 31 October 1926, p. 136; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2. Emphasis added.

Over the course of not-quite two years--between January 1925 and October 1926--Stella made an unaccountably dramatic shift. Never again would she repeat the “even into the pulpit” language of her 1925 President’s Report; instead, she would write that, “Our homes must be altars where the fires of religion are kept burning and where the hearts of our children glow with Jewish inspiration.”<sup>82</sup> When she talked about the widening activities of the NFTS, she framed them not in terms of political or social impact, but in the inherent religiosity of women and the NFTS: “The hope of our work has broadened and we have assumed many new activities in the course of our progress, but each new task undertaken was motivated by a religious consciousness.”<sup>83</sup>

Although inconsistent with her earlier idealism, this glorification of home and motherhood is in line with the early years (1893-1913) of the NCJW--Stella’s primary years of involvement with the organization. That was a time when women were not expected to lead within the Jewish community, but rather to perform piety in the synagogue and at home. According to Faith Rogow, historian of the NCJW, “Many Jewish men concluded that because much of traditional Jewish religious observance was based in the home, the home was the key to Jewish survival in America. The next logical conclusion was that because both the home and the religion were women’s domain, it would be up to women to save the religion.”<sup>84</sup> Calling upon the foundational texts of Jewish religion, Stella continued in this period to cite Jewish texts (e.g., *Pirkei Avot* and Micah,<sup>85</sup> as well as Genesis<sup>86</sup>) when talking about the activities of the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>84</sup> Rogow. *Gone to Another Meeting*, p. 50 & footnote 43, p. 254.

<sup>85</sup> “Report of the President,” Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 31 October 1927, pp. 15 and 18; AJA-MS 73, Box 1, Folder 2.

Sisterhoods. Her addresses--arguably *drashot*--would have both educated and inspired her fellow women in their mission, stoking the love of Judaism in their hearts as well.

Keeping the fires of religion burning within the Sisterhood women and their families was neither a political nor a civic task, in Stella's estimation. Therefore, as one of the last important acts of her NFTS presidency, she decided to withdraw the Federation from the National Council of Women (NCW-US) in 1928. A Council that had "no department of religious work" made no sense to belong to--especially because, "As far as we were able to judge, this organization is interested chiefly in political and civic measures, and we as a National Federation, are not." Straight to the point, she related that, "In view of the fact that we were unable to contribute or receive much benefit, due to the nature of the National Council of Women work, we thought it best to resign."<sup>87</sup>

While not supporting the future participation of the NFTS in the NCW-US, Stella did work for the integration of the Federation with other Reform Jewish institutions. In addition to her financial support of HUC, she also sought greater involvement for the NFTS with the UAHC. During her term, it was proposed to the UAHC that a representative of the NFTS be invited to serve on the UAHC Executive Board, at least as an *ex officio* member. The argument in favor was that the women of the NFTS had already served the Union honorably and faithfully for many years in many local and national capacities. The women of the NFTS believed that the UAHC

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<sup>86</sup> "President's Message," Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 31 October 1928, p. 96

<sup>87</sup> "President's Message," *Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 Oct 1928, p. 99; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

bylaws already allowed for women to serve on the Board, and a report by the UAHC Executive Committee confirmed and emphasized this conclusion.<sup>88</sup> However, it is unclear whether it was Stella or her successor Martha Steinfeld who first successfully took her place on the UAHC Executive Board as NFTS representative.

A less ambitious project of Stella's final year as NFTS President was her support of a proposal to place a bust of Isaac Mayer Wise in every Reform synagogue in the United States. According to the records of the Women's Auxiliary of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York, Stella reached out to this local Sisterhood with greetings, and to urge them to participate in this national venture:

*Chairman presented Uniongrams from Mrs. Freiberg, President of National and Mrs. Goldfarb, President of State Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, in which they extend New Year greetings.*

*...A letter from Mr. David Brown of Detroit, a member of the Board of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, in which he favors the placing of a bronze plaque (sic) of Isaac M. Wise in every affiliated Congregation in the U.S.*

*Mrs. Freiberg in a letter to Mrs. Wertheim, recommended that the Auxiliary be the donor.*<sup>89</sup>

While not every congregation Stella urged to participate did so, Temple Emanu-El's Women's Auxiliary did choose to dedicate the bust of Isaac Mayer Wise that still stands in the congregation's Wise Hall.

Having completed six years as President (years that saw her perspective virtually reverse on women and their roles in Judaism), Stella retired in 1929. In honor of her service, she was

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<sup>88</sup> Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The American Jewish Woman, A Documentary History*, pp. 296-298.

<sup>89</sup> "Women's Auxiliary Minutes of the Executive Board," 09/28/1928 minutes; Temple Emanu-El Archives, Volume 1922-1941, Box 1, Sept. 1928-April 1929 folder.



presented with a suede-covered Bible with a gold inscription plate<sup>90</sup>--an appropriate gift for a woman who kept her focus on the religious work of the NFTS, and who invoked Biblical inspiration and quotes in a way no other leader of her era did. Recognized as a leader, “whose unique native abilities of mind and heart added to the charm of personality have been devoted to her people and her faith,” the Federation passed a resolution in her honor, that “this poor expression of our lasting gratitude and loyal devotion be herewith recorded while we pray that our Heavenly Father may bless and guide her, granting us a continuation of her interest and her help as we go on, re-inspired through her, to serve the Cause to which she has been so true.”<sup>91</sup>

A final honor granted Stella upon her retirement from the NFTS Presidency was closely aligned with her pre-Presidency activity: A scholarship fund in her name, benefitting the students of HUC.

*For the first time all the Sisterhoods of the National organization united in giving a National Scholarship. It is named in honor of Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg and was presented at the Biennial in San Francisco last February. Surely, no more fitting tribute of the esteem and affection of our women could have been paid her upon her retirement from the Presidency than this gift to a cause with which she has been identified for so many years and to which she has so generously given of herself and her means.*<sup>92</sup>

Despite no longer serving as President, Stella remained deeply involved in the Federation and the Reform movement until the 1940s. Her most significant impact beyond the NFTS was made in her work with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ or World Union). Founded

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<sup>90</sup> “Report of the Committee on Thanks,” *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>91</sup> “Resolution X,” *ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>92</sup> “Report of the National Committee on Hebrew Union College Scholarships and Dormitory Maintenance,” *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 Oct 1929, pp. 53-54; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

in 1926, the original Board of the organization included three London-based leaders: Claude G. Montefiore, President; Lily Montagu, Vice President; and Dr. Israel Mattuck, Vice President. In addition to its three British members, the founding Board also included three American Vice Presidents: Rabbi Louis Wolsey, Ludwig Vogelstein, and Stella Freiberg.<sup>93</sup> It was Stella who urged the UAHC and its sub-organizations--the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods--to lend official, institutional support to the nascent World Union, and to ally with it as an international sibling.<sup>94</sup> In her post-Presidential life, she regularly traveled to London for WUPJ meetings, and spoke about the organization's aspirations and growth to American audiences.<sup>95</sup>

Fifteen years after her Presidency ended, Stella again took to the lectern at the 1943 NFTS Biennial. In the shadow of yet another international conflict, the Committee on Peace (the same national committee that had been founded during her Presidency) had necessarily morphed into the Committee on War Services. Delivering a benediction for the Forum on Sisterhood War Services, Stella turned the participants' attentions back to the Jewish value of peace, saying,

*Lord of the Universe, we Thy children cannot close this session dedicated to war services without thinking also of Thy eternal message of peace. We know full well that we must dedicate our hearts, minds and souls to the creation of a just world order in which all men and women shall live in dignity and in brotherhood. We ask now Thy help and Thy compassion for mankind in this gigantic struggle from which a new world shall be born. In the words of our Union Prayerbook we forget the clamor of the moment to ask as we do on each Sabbath morning, "Grant us peace, Thy most precious gift, O Thou*

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<sup>93</sup> "Claude Montefiore Chosen President of World Union of Progressive Judaism," *JTA Daily Bulletin*, 30 July 1926. Other notable leaders who participated in the founding of the World Union as members-at-large of its governing body were Rebekah Kohut, Leo Baeck, Jacob Elbogen, Rudolf Geiger, Julian Morgenstern, and Carrie Simon's husband Abram.

<sup>94</sup> "President's Report," *Proceedings of Seventh Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1926, p. 137; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>95</sup> These speeches are mentioned in Stella's President's Messages and later the NFTS WUPJ committee reports, but none of them is preserved in the NFTS, Freiberg or Heinsheimer family, or WUPJ records, all of which are held by the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.

*Eternal Source of Peace, and enable Israel to be a messenger of peace unto the peoples of the earth.”  
Amen.*<sup>96</sup>

Despite her turn from activism in the late 1920s, Stella seems to have still (or, once again) been advocating the equal dignity of men and women, in a time when both men and women had valuable roles to play in the war, and eventual peace, efforts. Looking beyond the chaos of the moment to a time when peace might once again reign, this elder stateswoman of the Sisterhoods delivered a prayer in keeping with anything a rabbi of her time might have composed: It was based in traditional liturgy, used vernacular Reform language, and spoke to universal human concerns.

After the end of World War II, and as Israel’s independence was looming, Stella was still speaking in a similar voice to her NFTS sisters, blessing the opening of the following Biennial (postponed from 1945 to 1946 due to the War) with the words,

*With want and suffering still rampant on much of the earth, with bitter antagonisms both within and without the Household of Israel, let us be chastened but not defeated. In the shadow of Thy Spirit may mankind and Israel yet move forward to a new day of peace in which a shattered world shall be reborn and then upheld by the self imposed disciplines commanded by Thee, the disciplines by which men achieve for themselves and others justice, righteousness and mercy. Amen.*<sup>97</sup>

A product of her time and context, Stella had lived her entire life in the passionately anti-Zionist Reform circles of Cincinnati--but through her NFTS, UAHC, and World Union roles, she had been exposed to Zionism and its ardent supporters. In this invocation she acknowledged the

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<sup>96</sup> “Forum on Sisterhood War Services,” *Minutes of the Fifteenth Biennial Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 2 April 1943, p. 122; Box 1, Volume 4.

<sup>97</sup> “Invocation,” *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Biennial Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 3 March 1946, p. 181; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 4.

peaking tensions between Zionist and anti-Zionist circles, while not taking sides. Her language entwined idealistic theology and pragmatic experience to present a prayer of “justice, righteousness and mercy.”<sup>98</sup> She may not have been a rabbi, but she certainly spoke like one.

#### Passion for the arts

Stella’s formal training was not in rabbinics, but in music. Throughout her life, musical and visual arts maintained a place of significance in her life and work, both within and beyond the Jewish community. Recognizing the significance of the material and visual cultures of the Jewish people, Stella fought, cajoled, organized, and planned for decades to establish an important collection and museum of Jewish art at HUC in Cincinnati. Intended to benefit all Jews of the United States, it was envisioned as an attraction that would edify their minds and their hearts. Stella and the ladies of the Sisterhoods hoped to build a collection and exhibition program that would draw visitors from around the country. Consistent with her later view of the Sisterhoods’ work as essentially religious, Stella approached the proposed Union Museum as a way for the NFTS to meet their goal, “to understand Judaism and to further it.”<sup>99</sup> The Museum, as part of the overall educational program of the NFTS, would help Reform Jewish women connect with rites and rituals, so that,

*our religious consciousness will be stimulated and enable us to include as an integral part of our daily lives, the finest qualities of our Jewish womanhood. Our interest in the Judaism of tomorrow is centered in the religious education of our children and in the education of the Jewish youth at college. These young people represent future Jewry. Can we expect them to be religious leaders unless we give them a religious training?*<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “President’s Report,” Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 31 October 1926, p. 136; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

The Museum, like the NFTS itself, was to be one shield protecting Jewish families from the threats of secularism and anti-religious sentiment in this country.

From the very beginning, sponsoring a museum was central to the NFTS's purpose: the NFTS Committee on Union Museum for Jewish Ceremonial Objects was one of the six original Standing Committees of the Federation.<sup>101</sup> By 1917, during her Vice Presidency of the NFTS, Stella was also the Vice-Chair of the National Committee.<sup>102</sup> Stella and her fellow committee members saw their role, and the role of women nationwide, as "endeavoring to stimulate local gathering of collections and also to collect funds for purchases of ceremonial objects for the National Museum at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati."<sup>103</sup> This group of women sent out lists of desired items to local Sisterhood chapters, and spent subsequent years following up on these requests,<sup>104</sup> attempting to collect family and community heirlooms in order to display the greatest examples of Jewish life and ritual, and thereby inspire greater religious devotion in their envisioned audience.

Even without a museum building, the visual arts played a role in NFTS programming during Stella's Presidency. Despite her reluctance to engage in the politics of Zionism, Stella did

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<sup>101</sup> "Constitution," *Proceedings of the First General Convention*, 21 January 1913, p. 25; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 1.

<sup>102</sup> Letterhead of National Committee to Establish a Union Museum, letter dated 24 May 1917; AJA MS-73, E-3/2.

<sup>103</sup> "Report of the President," *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 7 January 1924, p. 13; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>104</sup> Letters from National Committee on Union Museum, including those dated 24 May 1917 and 21 September 1923; AJA MS-73, E-3/2. Further underlining their message, the Committee had its own stationery made, featuring a small gilded spice box in the left-hand margin.

support the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts. Sculptor and Bezalel founder Boris Schatz was even a guest of honor at the NFTS Biennial Assembly in 1927. Fearing the school might close due to a lack of financial support, Stella wrote to the national membership to strongly encourage Sisterhood support by purchasing art for their synagogues and homes, and by making donations directly to the school in Jerusalem.<sup>105</sup> Local programs educating either Sisterhood members or their religious school-age children were encouraged--programs that could be led by the rabbi or by an informed and engaged Sisterhood woman. These included tours of synagogue buildings and their symbols and ritual objects, religious school lessons on ritual, educational programs on specific rites and symbolic traditions (e.g., Chanukah observance and *menorot*), time set aside during each Sisterhood meeting for a lesson on ceremonies and holidays, and even Sisterhood-organized exhibitions of Judaica and Jewish art in the public spaces of their synagogues.<sup>106</sup> However successful they were in inspiring local arts programming, the focus of the arts-dedicated committee truly was the opening of a museum.

Stella was just one woman of her time interested in collecting and displaying art to the public. Before, during, and after her NFTS Presidency, Stella was strongly committed to the opening of a world-class Judaica museum on the HUC campus in Cincinnati.<sup>107</sup> Following the success of the Committee on Union Museum's donations drive in the 1910s and early 1920s, a collection

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<sup>105</sup> Letters to local Sisterhoods from Stella Freiberg, 14 February 1927 and early 1928; AJA MS-73, E-3/2.

<sup>106</sup> "Report of the National Committee on the Union Museum," *Seventeenth Annual Report of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1929, pp. 72-73; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>107</sup> The active role of Jewish women in art collecting, patronage, and display is a huge and fertile area for scholarship to explore. While that is not within the scope of this thesis, research on European and American salons and salonnières, Jewish women art dealers, and museum founders and patrons have begun to appear as publications and exhibitions. Examples include the recent Jewish Museum (New York) exhibitions and catalogues on Florine Stettheimer (2017) and Edith Halpert (2019-20).

worthy of display had been assembled in Cincinnati. Speaking to the assembled national membership, she attempted to rally them to her vision:

*The new library buildings [on the HUC campus in Cincinnati] will soon be constructed. This will leave the present library bereft of its books and purpose. The building itself could easily be converted into a museum, and it is my sincere hope that the Sisterhood will seriously consider this as a new project for its efforts. As you know, the present library has in its cellar, packed in unopened boxes, one of the rarest collections of Jewish art objects, Judaica coins, manuscripts, embroideries, etc., in the world. Would it not be a splendid undertaking for the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods to bring to light this marvelous collection so that these interesting, unique and valuable articles could be properly exhibited and housed. Doubtless this museum would attract people from every section of the country and would prove a rare treat to all visitors. I believe that at a very small cost we could convert the building and undertake to maintain it.*<sup>108</sup>

When her Presidency concluded, in 1929, Stella transitioned back into leadership of the Committee on Union Museum. In her first report as Chairman of that Committee, she spoke of her vision, that the collection and its one-day home in a museum would be a source of edification and inspiration to its visitors:

*may we anticipate the future for a moment, and repeat our hope that at some not too distant day the Union Museum will be so housed as to attract visitors from all parts of the country--many of whom will undoubtedly be Sisterhood members. There they will be able to see, and carry back to their organizations the inspiring message of these beautiful and unique objects.*<sup>109</sup>

Referring to those local Sisterhood programs that introduced art and objects to women and children, she further emphasized her case for a museum, in that, “children as well as adults are always interested in the concrete examples offered through these objects, in learning of the

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<sup>108</sup> “President’s Message,” *Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1928, p. 100; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 1.

<sup>109</sup> “Report of the National Committee on the Union Museum,” *Seventeenth Annual Report of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1929, p. 71; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

symbols and ceremonies of Jewish life.”<sup>110</sup> In fact, the final entry in the list of suggested arts activities was, “That all Sisterhoods hold themselves in readiness for the conversion of the Library into a Museum and arrange for wholehearted cooperation in that project.”<sup>111</sup>

However, two years later the museum remained a dream rather than an imminent reality. Stella and the Committee on Union Museum were still making appeals for financial donations toward the renovation and conversion of the library into an exhibition space.<sup>112</sup> A decade after that, plans for a museum had largely been abandoned: the Committee on Union Museum had been renamed the National Committee on Jewish Ceremonials and Art; the stellar collection that had been assembled was displayed piecemeal in the HUC library in Cincinnati, but individual items were most widely seen when reproduced in an annual Sisterhood Art Calendar.<sup>113</sup> Not simply catalogues of attractive objects, the art calendars responded to national events, such as when it took the aspirational theme of “peace” in 1944-45.<sup>114</sup>

Sisterhoods had found other new ways to display and share art and ritual objects as well—including the art calendars, and the ubiquitous Sisterhood gift shop.<sup>115</sup> Even in the face of this change of focus, Stella had not given up all hope for a museum, writing that, “nothing has been done for a permanent Museum Building on the campus of Hebrew Union College. Let us not abandon all hope for such a building. Possibly when the world is again at peace, when

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>112</sup> Prospect booklet, September 1931; AJA MS-73, E-3/2.

<sup>113</sup> “Speaking of the Art Calendar,” *Topics & Trends* Sisterhood newsletter, September-October 1941, p. 2; AJA MS-73, Box K-3, Folder 2; and art calendars, AJA MS-73, K1.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., art calendar 1944-45.

<sup>115</sup> Joselit, Jenna Weissman. *Wonders of America*, p. 166.



individuals once more will be able to have visions, then possibly our Utopian idea will take root and a beautiful building will rise on the campus to house all the College's superb ceremonial objects and works of art.”<sup>116</sup> Despite her stubbornness, the Union Museum would never open. The Union Museum collection would one day be displayed in the Skirball Museum, which opened on the Cincinnati campus of HUC in 1990.<sup>117</sup>

In her final major contribution to Reform Judaism, Stella was Honorary Chairman for the committee on the House of Living Judaism, envisioned as a new home for the UAHC and its affiliated institutions.<sup>118</sup> Born into one of Cincinnati's cornerstone German Reform families, and married into another, Stella understandably championed a Cincinnati location for this capital project.<sup>119</sup> However, after World War II ended, Reform Jewish life was increasingly gravitating to New York. Despite the opposition of the committee's Honorary Chair, the UAHC decided to move its headquarters east, where it built a home on the southeastern corner of East 65th Street and Fifth Avenue.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> “National Committee for Jewish Ceremonials and Art,” *Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1939, p. 66; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Volume 4.

<sup>117</sup> Conversation with Skirball Museum Director, Abby S. Stein, 23 April 2019.

<sup>118</sup> House of Living Judaism steering committee minutes, *The Days of Our Years*, 1963, n.p.; AJA MS-73, C2-1/5.

<sup>119</sup> “House of Living Judaism Honorary Chair Urges UAHC Stay in Cincinnati,” *American Israelite*, 11 November 1948, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, the House of Living Judaism's closest neighbor, Temple Emanu-El, took a decidedly lukewarm or even negative stance toward the move. The Board of Trustees acknowledged, “It was the sense of the Board that the Congregation take an absolutely neutral position in this controversy. ...The consensus of opinion on the Board was in favor of retaining Union headquarters at Cincinnati. However, it was decided that the Congregation as a body would take no action, but that the individual members of the Congregation who will attend the Convention [NB: UAHC Biennial in Boston, 14-17 November 1948] will vote as seems best to them.” Board President Nathan Strauss considered the move particularly imprudent: “it occurred to me it made our situation very much more vulnerable, our complete collections of books of ceremonial objects, everything is here, in the event of catastrophe of the sort with which I concern myself every day. I hate to think of it (sic) being wiped out. I hate to think of American Jewry making a Vatican of New York City. And as a further thought, I think of the additional strain on this congregation from the point of acting as we would have to act in an hospitable

### Commitment to social services

This failure to keep the UAHC headquartered in her hometown notwithstanding, Cincinnati benefitted enormously from Stella's lifelong community involvement. Despite her youthful misadventure at the fundraiser for the Cincinnati Relief Union, she was active in supporting social services for children, the aged, and the needy throughout her life. She hosted benefits and lent her name and support to several social service agencies.<sup>121</sup> According to a laudatory 1928 article distributed internationally by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency,

*Cincinnati's Jewry has also blazed a trail of progress in social service. It established precedents through its organized charity enterprises, its diagnostic clinics, its homes for convalescents, for the aged and for temporary care of children, its method of combating tuberculosis and its system of dealing with transients. Notable among the pioneers in this public welfare endeavor [is]... Mrs. Stella H. Freiberg, who has been an influential force in almost every important public undertaking in the Jewish community of Cincinnati.*

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She was influential, indeed. Into her 90s, she was still active in the leadership of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (which she had co-founded in 1895), serving as a "trustee emeritus" as late as 1955.<sup>123</sup> She was also "a director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. She is active in the League of Women Voters, Foreign Policy Association, English Speaking Union, Ohio State Federation of Music Clubs and the Consumptive Relief Association."<sup>124</sup> And, somehow, she still found the

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manner, when that occurs." (Board of Trustees annotated minutes, 10 November 1948, Temple Emanu-El archives, Box 9/21/1947-12/13/1948.)

<sup>121</sup> "Settlement Concert," *American Israelite*, 7 March 1907, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> "Cincinnati, Cradle and Capital of Reform Judaism, Hums with Religious and Civic Activity," *JTA Daily Bulletin*, 21 February 1928.

<sup>123</sup> "Personals," *American Israelite*, 20 October 1955, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> "Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg To Deliver Sermon," *American Israelite*, 20 February 1941, p. 5. All of these associations can be confirmed independently, save one: Despite this mention of her involvement in the Cincinnati Art Museum, no records exist in the museum's archives that show Stella serving on its board. (Email exchange with librarian and archivist Jennifer Hardin, 13 March 2019.)

time to participate in the local Garden Lovers' Club.<sup>125</sup> Having come of age in a time when women of means did not work--especially after they became wives and mothers--Stella focused her wealth and energies on philanthropy. She would have found both personal fulfilment and social connections with her peers in these wide-ranging groups--all of which improved the social or aesthetic conditions of her community.

Her involvements and achievements did not go entirely without mention. HUC honored Stella with a Doctor of Hebrew Letters *honoris causa* on 8 December 1945, an event the Sisterhoods acknowledged at their annual Board meeting the following day:

*...the year 1945-46 marks the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the College. ...At the special convocation of the College on December eighth in the Plum Street Temple we saw bestowed upon a beloved Past President of the Federation, Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, the honorary degree Doctor of Hebrew Letters. We shared in the honor that came to her, one of the outstanding women of American Israel. We feel blessed that Dr. Freiberg is among our active leaders and serves the Federation not only as a life member of its Board but also as Chairman of its Committee on Jewish Ceremonials and Art.*<sup>126</sup>

#### Death and legacy

At the age of 99, having lived for only a short time in a retirement community, Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg died on 20 January 1962.<sup>127</sup> To put the span of her life in context, Stella had been born during the Civil War, and over a decade before HUC would be founded. By the

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<sup>125</sup> "Local," *American Israelite*, 27 May 1926, p. 6.

<sup>126</sup> "President's Message," Annual Meeting of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 9 December 1945, p. 112; AJA MS-73, Box A, Volume 4.

<sup>127</sup> "Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg Summoned Here at 99, Philanthropy Recalled," *American Israelite*, 25 January 1962, p. 1.

end of the decade in which she died, men would land on the moon and the first woman to be ordained by American Reform movement would be in rabbinical school.

1962 was not an NFTS Biennial year, so it was not until November 1963 that the Sisterhoods would gather and have an opportunity to mark Stella's passing. This meeting was the Golden Jubilee of the NFTS, and could have presented the perfect moment to pay tribute to such an influential late member. However, while President Mrs. Irving E. Hollobow did name Stella among the deceased founders of the NFTS at that Golden Anniversary meeting in Chicago, she made no mention of Stella's recent passing. Mrs. Hollobow took particular pride in conveying to the NFTS the thriving success of their Uniongram committee, Committee on World Union for Progressive Judaism,<sup>128</sup> Committee on Peace and World Relations, and Committee on Jewish Ceremonials and Art.<sup>129</sup> All had been committees led by Stella or reliant on her achievements, though her many personal contributions went unacknowledged.

Stella had been largely forgotten by the time she died. She seems to have outlived those who knew her real impact and vision. The *American Israelite* did publish two short obituaries: One, on the front page, ran nine sentences--but only five of those sentences described her life<sup>130</sup>; the second was a bit more expansive,<sup>131</sup> listing her local, regional, and national Sisterhood positions, and called her a "woman of valor," likely unintentionally echoing Stella's own fiery use of this

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<sup>128</sup> Committee report, 18 November 1963; AJA MS-73, E24/2, p. 1-09. This report did not list Stella Freiberg's death, but did note the death of Lily Montagu, Stella's British colleague in the founding of the World Union.

<sup>129</sup> President's Report speech, 17 November 1963; AJA, MS-73, E24/2.

<sup>130</sup> "Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg Summoned Here at 99, Philanthropy Recalled," *American Israelite*, 25 January 1962, p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> "Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg," *American Israelite*, 25 January 1962, p. 4.

archetype in her 1925 statement on women's leadership potential. Both articles focused nearly as closely on her late husband's achievements as her own.

The most extensive and thoughtful tribute to Stella after her passing came from the Board of Governors of HUC. Perhaps this was one place where her peers (or, the peers of her only son, Julius W. Freiberg) still remembered the old woman's impact. The Board's resolution *in memoriam* did pay tribute to her late husband, his father, her son, and her brother. It then went on to honor Stella herself, saying,

*She herself was a great benefactor of the College. She was one of the founders of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and was twice its president. She was instrumental in having the Sisterhoods raise the money for the first dormitory on the Cincinnati campus. She gave the College its gymnasium in 1923 in memory of her husband. She maintained a keen interest in the Union, the College and the Sisterhoods till her last illness.*

*Mrs. Freiberg was a woman of culture, a witty conversationalist and a charming hostess. She was one of the founders of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and interested in every worthy public cause. For many years she was a frequent visitor to the College and took a keen interest in the students.*

*Mrs. Freiberg lived a full and good life. She is survived by her only son, Julius W. Freiberg, three grandsons, whom she reared after the untimely death of their mother, several grandchildren and great grandchildren and two great great grandchildren.*<sup>132</sup>



A leader, philanthropist, musician, mother, wife, sister, daughter, visionary, Jew--Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg's life was worthy of note, and her accomplishments deserve to be resurrected and acknowledged again today. "She was an

<sup>132</sup> Resolution *In Memoriam*, February 1962; AJA SC-3722.

exemplar of the finest characteristics of a true mother in Israel. We do ourselves honor in memorializing her.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2 - The times of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg

From the 1890s through the 1920s, the tension between public communal work and duties of the home kept women trapped in a certain stasis. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, for example, the World's Fair Jewish Women's Religious Congress presented deliberations on "Charity as Taught by Mosaic Law" and "Woman's Place in Charitable Work; What it is and What it should be," as well as "Women in the Synagogue"; and also a session on "Influence of Jewish Religion on the Home."<sup>1</sup> Those present heard Ray Frank deliver "the first female-uttered benediction that all but a handful of... listeners had ever heard."<sup>2</sup> The program balanced on the point between public works and private service--the same balance women of Stella's generation were seeking to strike.

Stella lived during a period of great change for women--changes that played out in her public roles and statements. Stella left behind no diary, journal, or personal correspondence. Because the only trace she left is what she said and did publicly, in order to understand her formation and her motivations, one must look at other evidence and the experience of other women of her generation, and extrapolate. She was part of the generation of women who first created pathways to communal and public leadership for women, both within and beyond the Jewish community, but it was largely in future generations that the seeds planted by these women would bear fruit. Stella herself advocated two mutually contradictory positions: By her 60s, Stella wholeheartedly

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Women's Religious Congress convention program; AJA SC-5798.

<sup>2</sup> Diner, Hasia R. and Benderly, Beryl Lieff, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, p. 251.

believed in women's leadership potential, even into the pulpit; but she also seems to have embraced the increasingly old-fashioned notion that woman's most important role was supporting her husband and raising their children, and her place was not on the *bimah* but in the home. Her biography and relationships may reveal a specific explanation; but both of these publicly-held positions were shaped more generally by her times.

What shaped her public persona and values? What historical currents, movements, organizations, and people formed Stella Freiberg into the woman, leader, and complicated visionary that she became? While the details of her life help form a portrait of her, the picture can only be completed by a sketch of her historical context. This chapter will explore the people and institutions which shaped the Cincinnati Jewish community that, in turn, shaped Stella; the rise of women's activism both within and beyond the Jewish community; the organizations that women formed out of this activism; society's understanding of women's relationship to religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; and the ways religion and politics played out in society during this era. Because Stella's life was so deeply enmeshed in women's organizations, this chapter will place particular focus on these groups, all of which were dedicated to the communal support of women, and the betterment of community and society by these federated women. These groups include the National Council of Women of the United States, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods--three organizations in which Stella directly participated.



## Cincinnati and its Reform institutions

By the time Stella Heinsheimer was born in 1862, her Cincinnati community was already primed to listen to the voice of its women. Nearly a decade before her birth, the female congregants of Kahal Kodesh Bene Israel (not yet having the standing of members) collectivized in 1853 to protest their *mechitzah* being disregarded by male members. The women felt they, like the *mechitzah* itself, were being disrespected, and as a group wrote a letter to the rabbi and president to demand that their dignity be protected.<sup>3</sup> While Bene Israel (called “Rockdale Temple” after its move to Rockdale Avenue in 1906) would one day become a bastion of Reform Judaism, in the 1850s it was still traditional in its rite and culture. The *mechitzah* was replaced, and no further protest is extant. The women seem to have won this battle. By the end of that decade, women had secured the right to “enjoy the same privileges as a member’s wife” at KKBI, so long as they were widows of members who remained un-remarried.<sup>4</sup> It would take nearly another 50 years, however, for unmarried women over the age of 21 to be allowed to become full members in the Rockdale congregation.<sup>5</sup>

The 1850s also saw the arrival of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati. Wise’s reforms of Judaism included radical new ideas about the roles of women and girls in religious life. Writing in the newspaper he founded, the *American Israelite*, Wise proudly reported the accomplishment of

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<sup>3</sup> Goldman, Karla. “The Public Religious Lives of Cincinnati’s Jewish Women,” in Nadell, Pamela S. and Sarna, Jonathan D., eds. *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> “Charter, By-Laws & Regulations of Kahal Kodesh Beneh Israel, Holy Congregation of the Children of Israel of Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.,” 1859, Article II, Section 6, p. 6; AJA MS-24, Series D, subseries 20, no. 6.

<sup>5</sup> “By-Laws, Congregation K.K. Bene Israel, Cincinnati, Ohio, as revised October 1906,” Article XIII, Section 1, p. 12; AJA MS-24, Series D, subseries 20, no. 6.

girls reading publicly from Torah at Shavuot Confirmation services, and then went on to insist, “You must enfranchise woman in your congregations, she must be a member, must have a voice, and a vote in your assemblies.”<sup>6</sup> He called for women to be included in synagogue Boards, religious school leadership, and choir oversight. He went on, “The principle, the advancement of the cause, justice to woman, and the law of God inherent in every human being, require that woman be made a member of the congregation, of equal rights with any man; that her religious feelings be given full scope to develop, and she be fully attached to the sacred cause of Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite his standing, the Reform community of Cincinnati and the United States did not fully heed Wise’s clear call for equality through religious enfranchisement. The national Reform community’s ambivalence toward this radical notion is evident in the decades-long discussions within the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) over the place of women in congregations and society. In 1892, the rabbis of the Reform movement passed a resolution proposed by Rabbi Clifton Levy to study the advisability of allowing women the right to individual congregational memberships, a pursuit that led to no clear recommendation, either for or against.<sup>8</sup> As seen above, Stella’s congregation Rockdale Temple did not extend this right to women until 1906.

The same year the NFTS was founded (1913), the rabbis of the CCAR were asked to consider a resolution proposed by Rabbi Moses P. Jacobson, to “advocate and advance the cause of

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<sup>6</sup> Article by Wise in 1876, as quoted by Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The American Jewish Woman, A Documentary History*, pp. 293-294.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, A Documentary History*, pp. 389-390.

women's equal political suffrage with man's," what could have been a profound step toward gender equality. However, the committee that put forth the resolution did so with the recommendation that the decision to support or oppose women's suffrage be left up to individual members. The binding version of the resolution did not come to a vote; the non-binding version passed.<sup>9</sup> Not content to allow the CCAR organizational neutrality in the struggle for women's rights, in 1915 Rabbi Horace J. Wolf submitted another resolution supporting women's suffrage. After debating the proposal, which was a clear and binding stand in support of suffrage, the CCAR chose not to approve the new resolution, and instead to reaffirm the 1913 non-binding version.<sup>10</sup> It was not until 1917 that a binding resolution in favor of women's suffrage would pass in the CCAR--and even then, there was a large minority opposed to the Conference's statement of support, instead preferring the non-binding status quo.<sup>11</sup>

## Women's activism

Not finding unqualified support among their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, or religious leaders, women in the 1890s-1920s began to federate among themselves in order to rally support to the causes they believed in. Jewish women followed the approaches of the suffrage movement, in which women "deployed a range of approaches to exert political power despite their formal voicelessness."<sup>12</sup> The suffrage movement relied on the mutual empowerment of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 391-392.

<sup>12</sup> Klapper, Melissa R., *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism, 1890-1940*, p. 23.

women, who demanded greater acceptance in American public life.<sup>13</sup> Starting from the home and working toward the public square, suffragists “expanded women’s domestic responsibilities in ways that increasingly legitimized their presence in the public arena.”<sup>14</sup>

The strategies and goals of suffragism infused Jewish communities, as “Jewish women began to see direct connections between civic and religious enfranchisement, drawing on all elements of the suffrage movement to reinforce their claims to wider, more meaningful participation in Jewish communal and religious life.”<sup>15</sup> The vote, secured in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, would transform the self-perception of all American women, empowered in their new “solemnized public roles as voting citizens....”<sup>16</sup>

Among the socially and economically disadvantaged Jewish community of New York’s Lower East Side--many of them not yet citizens and therefore not directly impacted by enfranchisement--Jewish women took political action in order to protect their families, through protests (such as the 1902 Kosher Meat Boycott) and rent strikes.<sup>17</sup> These wives and mothers of immigrant families, in addition to social justice action, worked grueling hours from their homes. These were not white-collar professional women or socialite wives, they were the poor huddled masses who were taking collective action in order to protect their families and their neighbors’

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<sup>13</sup> Lepore, Jill, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, pp. 385-387, 393-394, 402-403; von Drehle, David, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>14</sup> Klapper, Melissa R., *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women’s Activism, 1890-1940*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Rosenbaum, Judith, “‘The Call to Action’: Margaret Sanger, the Brownsville Jewish Women, and Political Activism,” in Kaplan, Marion A. and Dash Moore, Deborah, eds., *Gender and Jewish History*, p. 261.

families against unfair treatment by merchants and landlords. “Yet in fulfilling their gendered responsibility to protect and preserve life, such women organize[d] collectively, with potentially revolutionary consequences.”<sup>18</sup> These women collectivized as individuals, creating networks of women empowered to make widespread change in the realm of social justice. Most significantly, this included the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), organized in the 1900s, whose voices were heard most clearly in the aftermath of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory tragedy. Jewish immigrant Rose Schneiderman and her fellow Union members had already brought attention to the unsafe conditions garment workers were subjected to in their Uprising of the 20,000 in 1909-1910,<sup>19</sup> but after the Triangle fire these women projected their message to the entire country. Eventually, their demands led to worker protections, work-week regulations, and fire codes that would protect countless lives. The networks built around reforming labor also, eventually, led to the enfranchisement of women.<sup>20</sup>

When the advantages of money and social class were added to confederations and networks, women like Stella Freiberg and her peers were able to amplify their voices and values. Speaking in unison, these women amplified their message in the ears of decision-making men in their circles; and pooling their resources, these women were able to make an impact on the issues facing their communities. From the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth, volunteerism and philanthropy largely defined the groups the Jewish women of Stella Freiberg’s

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Rose Schneiderman, selection regarding labor relations in the early twentieth century and the Triangle fire, *All for One*, 1967,” Zola, Gary Philip and Dollinger, Marc, eds., *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*, pp. 150-152.

<sup>20</sup> Von Drehle, David, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, p. 267.

class created and participated in. In fact, “It is likely that in the area of philanthropy, the women were as important as the men--maybe even more important. Despite the fact that men were at the top of the philanthropic heap, much of the actual work load in almost every community was still borne by women.”<sup>21</sup>

Philanthropy was understood by the women of this generation as,

*...inherently Jewish: “In no other religion is charity linked up with the idea of social justice as in ours. The Jewish philosophy which is expressed in the adage, ‘The whole world rests upon the Torah, the practice of religion, and the practice of social justice,’ is so inextricably interwoven with the idea that it is our religious duty to give to the poor with a view of helping them to rehabilitate themselves, that it completely dominates our conception of philanthropy. The abandonment of this controlling idea might indeed be tantamount to weakening our Jewish social structure.”*<sup>22</sup>

What began as case-by-case fundraising (as in the United Hebrew Charities in New York, founded 1874; or the Cincinnati Relief Union, at whose benefit young Stella Heinsheimer was injured in 1876) soon coalesced into more organized approaches to systemic problems (such as settlement houses).<sup>23</sup> But each of these ventures was spearheaded by Jewish women, largely to serve other women and their families. As Jacob Rader Marcus observed,

*Why a Jewish women’s organization? Was there an unconscious desire on their part to document themselves, to do something for women as women? Was this innovation of theirs an avowal of feminine consciousness, of collective “sisterhood”? Probably. This much at least is clear: they wanted to function on their own in a man’s world; they wanted to be by and for themselves. Without fanfare, these women now staked out an area for themselves voluntarily. ...By the 1890’s, there was no Jewish community of size without a woman’s organization. All were committed to good works, but no two were exactly alike. Some were intent on mutual-aid; others offered relief to the distressed. Some were affiliated with congregations, others were autonomous. Some limited their benefactions to local petitioners, others were*

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*, p. 129.

<sup>22</sup> Rouh, Bertha, *Jewish Woman*, April 1922, p. 7; as cited in Rogow, Faith, *Gone to Another Meeting*, p. 132, footnote 6, p. 267.

<sup>23</sup> Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, p. 131.

*willing to aid suffering Jews, and Gentiles as well, in distant communities. Local societies frequently came to the assistance of regional orphan asylums; only the larger metropolises could support such institutions without the help of outside communities.*<sup>24</sup>

The nineteenth-century benevolent societies certainly did arise to allow wealthier women to help the less fortunate; but as Marcus insightfully identified, they also came into being as mutual-aid. Women were not just doing good for others, but they were doing good for themselves--creating pathways to leadership roles for themselves, and their peers in wealth and class who would follow them.

As women struggled to prove their potential for public leadership roles, they were also dealing with the tension of expectations of their private and domestic roles. This tension is what we see play out in Stella Freiberg's 1925-26 reversal in her statements about the proper place of women. Stella was not the only woman struggling with this tension in the post-suffrage era:

*...the image of the "New Woman" expanded the legitimate field of female activity. The writers and the editor of the American Jewess, for example, often referred to women as "queens of the home," who were meant to bring about the "reign of religion" and "reinstat[e] the Sabbath to its old glory" [footnote: American Jewess, 7 no. 2 (May 1898), p. 97]. At the same time, Rosa Sonneschein, the editor of the magazine, called for women to serve as synagogue trustees and members of Sabbath School boards.*<sup>25</sup>

Queen of the home and trustee of the synagogue--a woman attempting to occupy both roles initially caused confusion if not outright resistance; rather than seeing an immediate change in the perception (and self-perception) of women in Jewish communities, what plays out is a process of shifting boundaries between public and private--and between home and synagogue,

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<sup>24</sup> Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, p. 37.

and even between a man's role and a woman's role. Writing about the women of the National Council of Jewish Women in the US (established 1893), the Jüdischer Frauenbund in Germany (established 1904), and the Union of Jewish Women in Great Britain (established 1902), historian Paula Hyman suggested that,

*Without challenging the primacy of home and domestic responsibilities as the proper focus of women's lives, they reconfigured the boundaries between the domestic and public spheres.... In teaching administrative skills and conferring public positions of authority and responsibility upon their members, they also expanded the range of appropriate female behavior.*<sup>26</sup>

Volunteering was largely accepted as appropriate female behavior, even before these boundaries between public and private began to shift. Women organized sisterhoods of personal service through their synagogues, which “served expressly as a vehicle for women's religious expression through charitable endeavor,”<sup>27</sup> namely to attend to the less fortunate Jews in their cities. The earliest such group was Temple Emanu-El's Sisterhood of Personal Service, founded in 1888<sup>28</sup>; two years later, Rebekah Kohut would organize a parallel group at her husband Alexander's congregation Ahawath Chesed (later Central Synagogue).<sup>29</sup> By the time the NFTS federated, these two sisterhoods were already well into their third decades of activity.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Herman, “From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936,” p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Temple Emanu-El Archives, Board of Trustees Minutes, 1913, bound volume 05/03/1909-01/11/1926.

<sup>29</sup> Kohut, Rebekah, *My Portion*, p. 173.



## Women's and Jewish women's organizations

At Emanu-El and Ahawath Chesed, sisterhoods existed only tangentially to provide social opportunities to their members; their primary missions were to uplift the downtrodden and to Americanize the hordes of Jews newly arrived from Eastern Europe, following the barrage of pogroms that erupted across the Pale of Settlement starting in 1881. "To be sure, Sisterhood work was never entirely... free of the condescending attitudes that plagued other charitable activities of the time--wealthier, established Jews certainly had much to gain by bettering conditions for their embarrassingly poor and foreign-seeming coreligionists."<sup>30</sup> Put a different way, "A large, needy population of unassimilated Yiddish speakers reflected badly on those in a position to help."<sup>31</sup> So, they helped. Through sisterhoods and through settlement houses, established Jewish women used their wealth to try to make middle-class Americans out of their sisters from the Pale.

Help from these "uptown" women came not only in the form of money, but of time and effort. Reflecting a generational shift, "daughters of privilege wanted to be known as workers rather than as ladies expressed something powerful about a new generation and its approach to *tzedakah* and social action. Young women wanted to give not only money but personal labor, not only of their wealth but of themselves."<sup>32</sup> However, the opportunities for women to give of themselves outside of the home were limited, especially as the Jewish community "adopted the

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<sup>30</sup> Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City 1887-1936," p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Diner and Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

rhetoric of gender norms”<sup>33</sup> in America, and “the conventions of the time required them to be wives first... and not to exercise authority over men. Thus they were nurses but rarely doctors, teachers but rarely superintendents, religious teachers but not rabbis, sisterhood presidents but not synagogue presidents,”<sup>34</sup> and above all they were volunteers more than they were paid workers.

Women of wealth and status not only volunteered for the less fortunate; they also came together to create social and communal organizations serving their own needs. By creating their own organizations, rather than fighting for inclusion in men’s groups, women could not only participate in public social and social justice activities, but could both hold and shape positions of leadership in their own images. There was a “separate but equal” mentality in the early women’s federations and clubs; these were spaces in which women needed not prove to men the validity of their opinions and values, or their fitness for leadership roles.<sup>35</sup>

Leadership roles aside, the mere presence of a woman in what was considered a man’s space was cause for concern and for exclusion. Perhaps the first women’s club in the United States was founded in 1868, when “Jane Cunningham Croly, a professional journalist, attempted to attend a dinner at an all-male press club honoring British novelist Charles Dickens. Croly was denied admittance based upon her gender, and in response, formed a woman’s club—Soros. In celebration of Soros’ 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary in 1889, Jane Croly invited women’s clubs throughout the

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<sup>33</sup> Herman, “From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City 1887-1936,” p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> Diner and Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, p. 305.

<sup>35</sup> This is my argument, worth exploring in greater depth in a future article.

United States to pursue the cause of federation by attending a convention in New York City. On April 24, 1890, 63 clubs officially formed the General Federation of Women's Clubs by ratifying the GFWC constitution."<sup>36</sup> The GFWC still exists today, with constituent clubs dedicated to encouraging local volunteerism and forging social connections (i.e., creating community) among its individual members. However, as in 1889, even today the GFWC does not include Jewish women's groups among its members.

The National Council of Women tells a different story, of greater inclusion and federation across religious, cultural, and even racial lines. Jane Croly's Sorosis was a member of the NCW,<sup>37</sup> but so was the National Council of Jewish Women and the National League of Colored Women.<sup>38</sup>

Founded in 1888 in recognition of the fortieth anniversary of the 1848 establishment of the National Woman Suffrage Association<sup>39</sup> at Seneca Falls, New York, the NCW existed not only to advance the cause of votes for women. This new group, part of an international coalition of National Councils of Women,

*...neither intended nor desired that discussions in the International Council shall be limited to questions touching the political rights of women. ...Literary Clubs, Art and Temperance Unions, Labor Leagues,*

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<sup>36</sup> General Federation of Women's Clubs, *History and Mission*, <https://www.gfwc.org/about/history-and-mission/>

<sup>37</sup> "Members of the Council," *First Triennial Session*, 22-25 February 1891, p. 25; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1.

<sup>38</sup> "Members of the Council," *Second Triennial Session* 17 February - 2 March 1895, pp. 165-168; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1.

<sup>39</sup> The National-American Woman Suffrage Association, as it was known in 1891, would join the National Council of Women, and remain a part of the group even after its name changed to the National League of Women Voters. "Members of the Council," *First Triennial Session*, 22-25 February 1891, p. 25; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1; and "National Council of Women Membership," *Program, Biennial Meeting and Fourteenth Convention of the National Council of Women of the United States*, November 1925, p. 15; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.2, box 3, folder 15.

*Missionary, Peace and Moral Purity Societies, Charitable, Professional, Educational and Industrial Associations will thus be offered equal opportunity with Suffrage Societies to be represented in what should be the ablest and most imposing body of women ever assembled.*<sup>40</sup>

Successful in attracting member groups from all of the listed areas, the National Council opened its constitution with a mission statement speaking to its lofty vision of a world transformed by the power of women cooperating with other women:

*We, women of all nations, sincerely believing that the best good of humanity will be advanced by greater unity of thought, sympathy and purpose, and that an organized movement of women will best conserve the highest good of the family and the State, do hereby band ourselves together in a confederation of workers committed to the overthrow of all forms of ignorance and injustice, and to the application of the Golden Rule to society, custom and law.*<sup>41</sup>

This mission statement is consistent with the first half of Stella's NFTS presidency, more than thirty years later. Therefore unsurprisingly, early in her presidency Stella brought the NFTS into the NCW as a member organization.<sup>42</sup> However, her 1925-26 reversal of position meant that while she would still have supported women's mission to "conserve the highest good of the family and the State," she could not stand behind the political "overthrow of all forms of ignorance and injustice."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, in the fall of 1928, Stella submitted a resignation on behalf

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<sup>40</sup> "History of the Origin of the National Council of Women of the United States," *Report of the International Council of Women*, 25 March 1888, pp. 3-4; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1.

<sup>41</sup> "Constitution of the International Council of Women, Organized at Washington, D.C., United States of America, March 31, 1888," *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> "National Council of Women Membership," *Program, Biennial Meeting and Fourteenth Convention of the National Council of Women of the United States*, November 1925, p. 15; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.2, box 3, folder 15.

<sup>43</sup> "Constitution of the International Council of Women, Organized at Washington, D.C., United States of America, March 31, 1888," *Report of the International Council of Women*, 25 March 1888, p. 12; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1.

of the NFTS from the NCW.<sup>44</sup> The NFTS was only one of ten organizations that “seceded” from the NCW in the period covered by their 4 November 1929 Executive Committee meeting’s new business. But the NFTS was the only one of those ten that the NCW wanted to keep in its fold: “it was voted that [NCW Board member] Mrs. Sternberger convey to the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods the regrets of the National Council of Women on its withdrawal from membership and appeal to it to reconsider its decision.”<sup>45</sup>

While her reason for withdrawal was not articulated in the NCW’s Executive Committee minutes, Stella did explain her decision to the NFTS. As she informed the members of the NFTS,

*I beg to advise that with the approval of our Executive Committee, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods resigned from the National Council of Women... because the program of the National Council of Women holds no department of religious work.... As far as we were able. to judge, **this organization is interested chiefly in political and civic measures, and we as a National Federation, are not.***<sup>46</sup>

No record exists of the plea Mrs. Sternberger made to Stella; all that is certain is that the NFTS did not again join the NCW.

The National Council of Jewish Women, though, had joined the National Council of Women of the United States by 1895 and remained a member after Stella withdrew the NFTS in 1929.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “Minutes of Executive Committee,” *Biennial Meeting and 14th Convention of the National Council of Women*, 4 November 1929, handtyped notes, NP; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.2, box 3, folder 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “President’s Message,” *Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1928, p. 99; AJA MS-73, box 1, volume 2. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> “Members of the Council,” *Second Triennial Session* 17 February - 2 March 1895, p. 165; National Council of Women of the United States records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, NYPL MssCol 2103, Subseries 2.1, box 2, volume 1.

Founded during the 1893 convening of Jewish women at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the NCJW from its very inception existed in the balance between a woman's public communal work and her presence in the home.<sup>48</sup> Before the session officially organizing the NCJW the week of 3 September 1893,<sup>49</sup> the World's Fair Jewish Women's Religious Congress included the presentations "Charity as Taught by Mosaic Law," "Woman's Place in Charitable Work; What it is and What it should be," and "Women in the Synagogue"; plus "Influence of Jewish Religion on the Home."<sup>50</sup> The program embodied the tension--or balance--between public works and private service that enmeshed Stella and her career in the NFTS.

## Women and religion

The organization that emerged from the World's Fair was the first to attempt to create a national identity for Jewish women in the United States. Women found support together in educating their children, volunteering in the community, and carving out a place in their synagogues, all tasks which the World's Fair program and the NCJW founding resolution<sup>51</sup> touched upon. Already in the late nineteenth century, women were the greater presence within synagogues, as men were busy with the work of assimilating into American society.<sup>52</sup> Following German Reform Jewish precedents,

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<sup>48</sup> Diner, Hasia R. and Benderly, Beryl Lieff, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, p. 251.

<sup>49</sup> Invitation to Jewish Women's Religious Congress; AJA SC-5798.

<sup>50</sup> Jewish Women's Religious Congress convention program; AJA SC-5798.

<sup>51</sup> The resolution, passed during the Jewish Women's Congress opened, "the National Council of Jewish Women shall... seek to unite in closer relation women interested in the work of Religion, Philanthropy, and Education and shall consider practical means for solving problems in these fields": Solomon, Hannah G., "The Report of the National Council of Jewish Women," *The American Jewess*, Volume 1, Issue 1, April 1895, p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, pp. 46-51.

*Men continued to control American synagogues, serving on congregational boards and reserving for themselves the right to vote on all important congregational policies, but they rarely attended as worshipers or students.*

*Women, on the other hand, attended worship services in relatively great numbers. ...numerically American synagogues had been "feminized."<sup>53</sup>*

In 1921, Martha Neumark--the daughter of HUC professor Rabbi David Neumark--had successfully pursued studies alongside male rabbinical students, and was seeking ordination in her own right. Unlike many women of her generation, Neumark was not content within the flourishing Jewish women's organizations, and hoped to take her place in what was still (and would remain) a man's world. Rogow suggests that the fear of synagogal and communal "feminization" is what led to Neumark's rejection as an ordination candidate,<sup>54</sup> despite the support she received from many of the school's rabbinic authorities and leaders.<sup>55</sup> The bimah, in 1921, was too far for a woman to ascend.

Women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were believed to have inherent religiosity not accessible to men. "American Jews had fully absorbed" this assumption that "religious sentiment inhered in a woman's nature."<sup>56</sup> The NCJW, a product of its time, sought to organize women toward their "natural" inclination of religion and religiosity.<sup>57</sup> The same attitude was shared by Stella in her 1926 statement, when she embraced the assumption that the task of the woman was to nurture Jewish practice within her family. That woman had a natural religious

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., citing Meyer, Michael, *Response to Modernity*, p. 379.

<sup>55</sup> "Ordination of Women, ARR 24-43-2," *American Reform Responsa*, Vol. XXXII, 1922, pp. 156-177.

<sup>56</sup> Herman, Felicia, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936," in Nadell, Pamela and Sarna, Jonathan, eds., *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, p. 148.

<sup>57</sup> Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, pp. 87-91.

inclination was a widespread belief, not limited to North America. In Germany, Nahida Ruth Remy (later Lazarus) wrote *The Jewish Woman* to encourage women to embrace their spiritual strength, and to counter the

Modern views [that] have undermined the religiousness of many a Jewish heart to such a degree that the children frequently receive no religious foundation. *With the abandonment of the religious forms, the religious sentiment likewise is vanishing. They have relinquished the old, but have gained nothing new in exchange.*<sup>58</sup>

Despite having written in German, Remy's words were not unknown in the United States. An 1897 translation of her 1895 book was published in Cincinnati, perhaps the result of a visit her husband Dr. Moritz Lazarus made to HUC in order to receive an honorary Doctorate in Theology in 1895.<sup>59</sup> The American readers of Remy's book would have received her message that women's ultimate calling was in the home and in furthering religion, even though Remy decried that she rarely could find a woman who,

*...fully appreciates the poetry of home life; who strives only for the admiration and ever-renewed love of her own husband, and whose deepest sympathies are stirred by the interesting and touching dramas in the nursery; dramas in which destiny has decreed her to take the most prominent and loftiest part, and has given this part to her as her highest calling; as her supremest joy.*

*Jewish woman appeared to the observer, in former times, as the most faithful wife, the most devoted mother, and the chastest woman. Is that still so?*<sup>60</sup>

Remy found that all was not lost, however. After deploring the social pretensions and dress of modern women, she continued,

*But all this is only the shell, not the kernel of life, which is found only in RELIGION. Of course, one for whom this word is meaningless will throw this kernel away like an empty nutshell. However, there is reason to believe that in the heart of the Jewess is still glowing a spark of that lofty integrity and devotion to her faith by which her ancestors were inspired. She will shake off the fetters of indifference and rise*

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<sup>58</sup> Remy, Nahida Ruth, *Nahida Remy's The Jewish Woman*, Mannheimer, Louise transl., 1897, p. 249; all emphases original.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Moritz Lazarus to "the gentlemen of Cincinnati," 7 June 1895; AJA SC-6705.

<sup>60</sup> Remy, *Nahida Remy's The Jewish Woman*, p. 250.



*above the prevailing shallowness to higher levels. She will resist the restless rush and turmoil of modern life ; she will not go astray....*<sup>61</sup>

As was common in her generation, Remy identified home observance of Judaism as the way to avert a moral crisis within the Jewish community, the likes of which was facing other religious communities--and the Jewish mother as the person to lead the charge.

*The complaint is frequently heard that the child evinces little interest for religious teachings. How should it become imbued with them? ...The Sabbath celebration is such an influence! It is of even greater significance for the child than for the parents. If the child learns to look forward with anticipating joy to the coming Sabbath; if it observes how the festively-dressed mother makes the preparations for the feast; sees her lighting the candles; hears her pronounce the benediction... then the child's heart feels the influence of religion, and becomes prepared for its teachings. Without this feeling, religious observances will remain but empty formalities, performed with indifference, even reluctance, and thus, perhaps, soon will be entirely discarded. **The mother herself must be imbued with the feeling of consecration, and she will be imbued with it if she only will learn again to know, and thus learn to love, her Judaism.***<sup>62</sup>

Learning to love her Judaism was one of the goals the NCJW had for its individual members. In fact, the organization's constitution placed studying and teaching Judaism second in its mission, only behind--or expanding upon--the goal of uniting women in their work of "religion, philanthropy and education."<sup>63</sup> It is possible that the early members of the NCJW,

*may have been totally comfortable when called upon to simply represent Jewish women in a social setting, but when asked to address or respond to various issues as Jews, to explain Jewish customs or practices, or to justify particular Jewish beliefs, they were faced with their ignorance of the rudiments of Jewish ritual, Jewish history, and Jewish philosophy. They sought to correct this imbalance through a program of organized study.*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 250-251.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-253. Emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup> Solomon, Hannah, "National Council of Jewish Women," *American Jewess*, Volume 1, issue 1, April 1895, pp. 27-31.

<sup>64</sup> Elwell, Ellen Sue Levi, *The Founding and Early Programs of the National Council of Jewish Women: Study and Practice as Jewish Women's Religious Expression*, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1982, p. 105.

It seems that “the impetus to become better educated as Jews may have come from an involvement in the secular world....”<sup>65</sup> As a result, women of the NCJW began to organize study groups, separate from their regular section meetings. They were “a revolutionary educational innovation, both because they involved women in Jewish study and because they used skilled women as group leaders.”<sup>66</sup>

The Cincinnati section of the NCJW was “just coming into being” in the spring of 1895, with Miss Clara Block as president and Stella Freiberg as a member of the local Board of Directors.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps unclear as to its mission initially, by 1898 the Cincinnati section had “decided to pay more attention to the primary object of the Council, viz., the promotion of religious sentiment, and especially the furtherance of a greater reverence for and the better observation of the Jewish Sabbath. With this end in view, an appeal by the Committee on Religion will be made to our Jewish women to attend divine services.”<sup>68</sup> Self-education for these women happened in section meetings, in study circles, and in the experience of religious life in the synagogue.

By 1923, the year Stella assumed the presidency of the NFTS, the NCJW published a report on Jewish women’s achievements in this extraordinary modern age, with the goal of “inspiring appreciation of women’s abilities” as politicians business owners and managers, writers, philanthropists, directors on boards, lawyers, doctors. Within the NCJW, women had been

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>67</sup> Solomon, Hannah, “National Council of Jewish Women,” *American Jewess*, Volume 1, issue 1, April 1895, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> “Council of Jewish Women,” *American Jewess*, Volume 7, issue 1, April 1898, p. 39.

promoted as leaders and teachers of their peers for three decades, and a new horizon seemed in sight. The 1923 report went on, suggesting that “In view of the favorable action of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, on the question of admitting women into the Jewish ministry,<sup>69</sup> it may be anticipated that the liberal and progressive Jewish seminaries of the United States will, before long, remove the obstacles that now stand in the way of women’s ordination.”<sup>70</sup>

Rebekah Kohut, another widow who carved out her own place in Jewish communal leadership, was one of the important early leaders of the NCJW and also communicated a similarly optimistic message. In 1925, Kohut was interviewed about the role of Jewish women, saying,

*“The place of the Jewish woman of today,” continued the author of My Portion, “is not only established in the field of arts and letters and communal work, but also in the field of religion and religious cultural movements. It will be the rule, in the next decade, and not the exception that among the greatest American women we shall find American Jewesses in large numbers. I believe, too, that even as woman has made her way to the head of almost all the other professions she will make her way to the front rank of the synagogue and Jewish center, and become the spiritual leader.”<sup>71</sup>*

What Kohut was saying was uncannily similar to Stella’s own 1925 statement,

*Could that sage in Israel have foreseen the future? Could he have realized that at some far distant time woman would rise to such great heights? Could he have seen her rise in the realm of her religion, watch her descend from the gallery unto the lower floor and then ascend even into the pulpit?<sup>72</sup>*

These words, spoken within months of each other, demonstrate that both Rebekah Kohut and Stella Freiberg could see an opportunity opening up before Jewish women. It is impossible to

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<sup>69</sup> NB: Despite Martha Neumark not being approved for ordination, the body of rabbis who argued her case voted to approve, in theory, the ordination of women at some future date.

<sup>70</sup> Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, A Documentary History*, pp. 745-748.

<sup>71</sup> Derby, Rosalind. “Rebekah Kohut Talks on Jewish Culture,” *The Jewish Tribune*, 3 April 1925, p. 74; AJA, Kohut, Rebekah, Nearprint File.

<sup>72</sup> “Report of the President,” *Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 18 Jan 1925, p. 115; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

know if they discussed this vision with one another, though each certainly knew of the other.<sup>73</sup>

However, after 1926 their paths markedly diverged. When Stella disavowed political statements and activism, Rebekah Kohut embraced a public political role, going so far as to issue an endorsement of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's reelection in 1940 (despite her being a Republican).<sup>74</sup> No longer in step with more modern women like Rebekah Kohut, Stella's 1926 position that "the reigning position of woman in the home, where she is the Priestess, is an accepted fact,"<sup>75</sup> more closely parallels a B'nai B'rith statement from thirty years previous: "The modern Jew is so completely taken up by the struggle for existence that it absorbs all his energies, and if the wife and mother does not resume her ancient function as priestess of the household, our prospects for the future are really discouraging."<sup>76</sup> In her statement, Stella seems to have been returning to the maternal, internal ideals of her past and abandoning the heady, external optimism of her present.

Unlike the NCJW, Hadassah (founded in 1912) focused its activities on the improvement of Jewish life and health in the *yishuv*. Henrietta Szold, its founder, shared a similar background with Stella, and in fact they were two of the only young women to attend the dinner honoring the

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<sup>73</sup> In addition to their concurrent involvement in the NCJW between 1893-1913, Rebekah Kohut named Stella in a brief history of the NFTS that she included in her article, "Jewish Women's Organizations in the United States: (p. 191) in Rebekah's article on "Jewish Women's Organization in the United States": *American Jewish Year Book*, 1931-32, pp. 165-201; AJA, Kohut, Rebekah, Nearprint File.

<sup>74</sup> According to a Democratic National Committee press release, "Mrs. Rebekah Kohut, Jewish leader, author, and President of Columbia Grammar School, New York City, today announced that although she is an enrolled Republican, she will vote for President Roosevelt." Press Department - Women's Division, Democratic National Committee, press release 26 September 1940; AJA, Kohut, Rebekah, Nearprint File.

<sup>75</sup> "President's Report," Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 31 October 1926, p. 136; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Menorah*, November 1896, p. 318, as cited by Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, p. 50 and footnote 43, p. 254.

first HUC ordination class, the “Trefa Banquet.”<sup>77</sup> While Szold’s organization relied on the financial support of American Jews, its work took place abroad, and therefore connects only tangentially to the story of Stella and the NFTS.

## Rabbi David Philipson

In the United States, Jewish life mostly revolved around opportunities to pray and to learn together, as well as opportunities to improve one’s Jewish and civic communities—for both men and women. Jacob Rader Marcus, in reflecting upon the period of the 1880s-1920s, asked,

*What part was this woman now playing in the tripartite structure of Judaism--worship, study, and good deeds? Administratively, she now had a foot in the door of the synagogue... general culture and education were probably as important as Jewish indoctrination. It is likely that in the area of philanthropy, the women were as important as the men--maybe even more important. Despite the fact that men were at the top of the philanthropic heap, much of the actual work load in almost every community was still borne by women.*<sup>78</sup>

The expanding role and responsibilities of women met both encouragement and unease from the men in these communities--and occasionally these polar reactions came in the form of a single person. Perhaps the most influential man in Stella’s life after the passing of her husband was her rabbi, Dr. David Philipson. A member of that first HUC ordination class, having entered HUC at age 13 and receiving ordination at age 21, Philipson served as Senior Rabbi of KKBI/Rockdale Temple from 1888 until 1938 (and as Rabbi Emeritus until his death in 1949).<sup>79</sup> During his 50 years leading Rockdale (including moving the congregation from downtown to

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<sup>77</sup> Untitled article, *American Israelite*, 20 July 1883, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*, p. 129.

<sup>79</sup> “Dr. Philipson Dies; Leader in Judaism,” *The New York Times*, 30 June 1949, p. 23.

“suburban” Rockdale Avenue), Philipson shaped the congregation and his congregants—including the Freiberg family--through his own strong views on Judaism, American politics, and the changing role of women in Jewish and American life. A co-founder and president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Philipson’s influence extended far beyond his own congregation, and he remained a respected voice in Reform circles until the end of his life.<sup>80</sup>

Philipson attended the women’s religious congress at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, and found himself inspired by the women’s words and drive to organize across denomination and geography. He knew the monumentality of the moment even before it happened, as he had corresponded with Hannah Solomon in the months leading up to the April 1893 meeting.<sup>81</sup> Consistent with his support of women’s federating to serve Judaism and Jewish community, he was at the inception of the NCJW’s Cincinnati section in 1894--and was, in fact, the only man in the room.

When his congregant J. Walter Freiberg called for the founding of a national federation of sisterhoods in 1913, Philipson not only supported the idea, but delivered the very first address at the group’s opening plenary. Entitled “Woman and the Congregation,” he acknowledged the “momentous significance” of the founding of a Reform women’s federation, and his role as

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<sup>80</sup> For a more complete biography of Dr. Philipson, see the “Biographical Sketch” in the finding aid to his papers; AJA MS-35.

<sup>81</sup> File copy of letter from David Philipson to unknown recipient, probably 1939; AJA MS-35, Box 4, folder 6.

speaker an “honor I am deeply sensible” to.<sup>82</sup> He envisioned that the nascent NFTS “will be the counterpart of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The two organizations will be the obverse and the reverse of the same shield, the congregation as the basis of Jewish representation.”<sup>83</sup> With genuine pride, he announced that such a pairing “is possible because the reform [sic] movement placed the Jewish woman on a plane of religious equality with men,”<sup>84</sup> and he pointed to the inclusion of women in Reform *minyanim* as early as 1845, and the replacement of Bar Mitzvah with confirmation (thereby offering the same coming-of-age ritual for boys and girls).<sup>85</sup> He even took a jab at his own lay leaders, who would not explicitly extend the right of membership to women until 1924, when he said, “The last word in woman’s relation to the congregation will not be spoken until she be received into full membership, if she so desires, on the same footing as man.”<sup>86</sup> Philipson understood himself to be a full-throated, forward-thinking supporter of women.

And yet, his understanding of women’s inherent abilities and potential was limited by his generational context. Accepting the gospel of women’s inborn religiosity, he told those gathered that

*Your work is primarily for the congregation and for the religious interests of our communities. In union there is strength. By federating all these women’s organizations you will forge a mighty weapon in the service of Judaism. We have organizations galore for philanthropic, charitable and humane purposes. We have not organizations enough for specifically religious work and for the strengthening of our congregational life. Here lies your great opportunity. May you rise to it. As our religion is the basis of all*

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<sup>82</sup> “Woman and the Congregation: Address Delivered by Rabbi David Philipson, D.D., 1913,” p. 1; AJA MS-35, Series D, Box 5, folder 9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

*that is best in our life, so will your work as a religious and congregational organization be basic to that of all other organizations.*<sup>87</sup>

Because of woman's religious propensity, he even acknowledged that "her position in the home and in private life has always been on the highest plane among Jews.... **Woman's position among the Jews as wife and mother has always been a distinguished one.**"<sup>88</sup>

For all of his support of women and their religiously-oriented organizations in theory, Philipson limited their actual participation in religious services and activities. For the Woman's Sabbath of 1926 ("Sisterhood Shabbat"), Stella was one of three women who participated in the Shabbat service at Rockdale, but unlike at Reading Road Temple and Plum Street Temple, no woman delivered the sermon. While Etta Lauterbach preached on "Women's Participation in the Ceremonies and Customs of Jewish Life" at the Reading Road Temple, and Mrs. Siegfried Geismar (president of the Cincinnati section of the NCJW) preached on "Woman's Contribution To The Religion Of Our Day," Rabbi Philipson delivered a sermon at Rockdale entitled "The American Jew."<sup>89</sup> Despite the presence of the national President of the NITS in the congregation, the rabbi exercised his prerogative to be that evening's preacher.

When even a great supporter of women and their religious rights limited women's access to religious roles, women had no choice but to create their own organizations and structures of leadership, separate from the men who might limit their full participation.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 1; emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> "Woman's Sabbath," *American Israelite*, 25 February 1926, p. 6.



## Women, religion, and politics

Organizations like the NCW, NCJW, and NFTS sought to elevate all women, not just the elite or extraordinary few--like Ray Frank (the Jewish preacher of the west), Martha Neumark (HUC student and aspiring rabbi), and even Jeannette Rankin (suffragist and first woman in the House of Representatives)--who could rise as women in a man's world. These new organizations provided wide platforms to develop the leadership potential of a broad range of women. All three organizations, however, perpetuated the nineteenth-century legacy of innate religiosity that had attached to women, and raised up religious and communal work on par with or beyond political and civic work. In the NFTS, religious and political commingled in the desire to elevate women onto the *bimah*--and the former negated the latter when Stella celebrated women as Jewish mothers instead of religious leaders. While her statement in 1926 was inconsistent with her statement in 1925 (see above), the later declaration was in keeping with the push-pull of the religious and political that had been present in the NFTS since David Philipson's opening address at the federation's first plenary. Even in the call for women to collect and donate objects to the future Union Museum, through the list of suggested donations included Torah mantles and binders it was dominated by Shabbat candlesticks, kiddush cups, *chanukiyot*, jewelry, and family documents--the tools of domestic Jewish observance.<sup>90</sup>

Stella shaped the NFTS during her years in leadership, particularly while she served as President. The resolutions brought forward at the 1929 Biennial reflect both the vision she brought in and

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<sup>90</sup> "List of Articles Desired for the Museum," letter dated 24 May 1917; AJA MS-73, E-3/2.

the one she left behind when she stepped down. While a statement in support of world peace is included among the resolutions, so is a resolution “that the prayer for peace in our Union prayerbook... be learned by women and children and used as a daily prayer.”<sup>91</sup>

The NFTS’s political and liturgical focus on peace is one example of the complications facing women as they sought ways to enter and engage with the world. By the time Stella passed away, the women of the NFTS were much more comfortable taking explicitly political stands through both statements and action--and no longer needed to mitigate a political stance with a home-based religious practice. In contrast with the 1929 statements in favor of world peace and learning prayers for peace, the resolutions passed at the 1963 Golden Jubilee meeting supported urging: the Senate to ratify the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; the US Department of State to protest on behalf of Jews in the Soviet Union; the President and Congress to legally outlaw discrimination against women in pay; and the UAHC and HUC to admit and ordain women as rabbis.<sup>92</sup> The women of the NFTS when Stella died knew they were different from the generations that came before them:

*In this, the Golden Jubilee Year of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, we think of how our role as women in Jewish life has changed.*

*Fifty years ago, in the early dawn of women’s political equality, our Reform Jewish women... were strong in their faith and strong in their devotion to their congregations. They sought ways to work in their world. In their world of 1913, men and women stood secure in the knowledge that good efforts and high ideals could surely bring a better life.*

*Now, in 1963, our world is threatened with an awesome new technology; ours is a different world, a different task. We know many ways to serve our children and our communities, but we search for the meaning of life, for the strength of congregation and of faith.*<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> “Resolutions,” *Proceedings of the Eighth Biennial Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 11-15 February 1929, p. 122; AJA MS-73, Box 1, Folder 2; draft version of Resolution V: Peace Prayer; AJA MS-73, Box B-11, Volume 1.

<sup>92</sup> Biennial Assembly Resolutions, 1963; AJA MS-73, Box B-11, Folder 3.

<sup>93</sup> Golden Jubilee statement of purpose, 1963, p. 26; AJA MS-73, Box K-3, Folder 1.

Facing a nuclear world, and a country torn by racial tensions, the women Stella left behind in 1962-63 were as dedicated to creating a safe and just world as their predecessors. These women, however, were most proud of having “joined more than 210,000 fellow Americans, Negro and white, to participate in the Freedom March in our nation’s Capitol on August 28th” of 1963,<sup>94</sup> a fact celebrated in no fewer than three committee reports.

The NFTS of 1962-63 recognized itself as both the heir of the NFTS of Stella’s time, and an entirely different organization. Writing of her organization’s trajectory over fifty years, President Mrs. Irving E. Hollobow mused,

*If a Sisterhood member of 1963 were to meet her counterpart of 1913, she might be given pause at first by the difference in their clothes and modes of speech but these differences would soon be transcended by the many interests they share in common....*

*...Perhaps she would amaze her 1913 friend by her added knowledge of Judaism brought about through the many Jewish educational programs in synagogue and Sisterhood and their informative publications.*

*They would recognize each other in terms of devotion to service -- service to their families, service to the synagogue, service to the Jewish community, service to humanity everywhere.<sup>95</sup>*

A significant difference between 1913 and 1963 that Mrs. Hollobow neglected was the political context of the times, in particular the values and methods of first wave and second wave feminism. “Any twentieth-century political movement was liable to amnesia--modernity by definition instructs its protagonists that the past has little to offer--but feminists have been

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<sup>94</sup> “President’s Message,” *Proceedings of the 24th Biennial Assembly*, 17 November 1963, p. 10; AJA MS-73, Box K-3, Folder 1.

<sup>95</sup> “Sisterhood Topics,” *American Judaism*, Winter 1962-63, p. 46; AJA MS-73, Box B-6, Folder 3.

peculiarly liable to seeing their own generation's ventures as unique."<sup>96</sup> Unlike the second-wave feminists to come, Hollobow collapsed rather than inflated the differences between the two feminist waves. Writing of her own generation's imagined encounter with Stella's, Hollobow did acknowledge the debt a woman of her generation owed to a Sisterhood woman of the past, in that "she would amaze her 1913 friend by her added knowledge of Judaism brought about through the many Jewish educational programs in synagogue and Sisterhood...."<sup>97</sup>

American and global politics, while only occasionally referenced by the NFTS in its meeting minutes, certainly shaped the views and activities of its members and leaders. The very organization of the NFTS in 1913 reflects its times, having come about during the heights of the "first wave" of American feminism. The late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a shift in attitudes toward women's capabilities, but the 1910s and 1920s were watershed decades when promise finally led to action. The movement for women's rights saw its greatest political victory in the national ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the vote in 1920.<sup>98</sup> This was the moment that the movement for women's rights morphed from "suffragism" into "feminism," a French term indicating more radical and political activism than simply agitating for the vote.<sup>99</sup> The shift in terminology is evidence that "the suffrage movement changed. A younger generation churned the political waters, turning a polite, ladylike movement into a confrontational, contentious one."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Stansell, Christine, *The Feminist Promise, 1792 to the Present*, p. 155.

<sup>97</sup> "Sisterhood Topics," *American Judaism*, Winter 1962-63, p. 46; AJA MS-73, Box B-6, Folder 3.

<sup>98</sup> Lerner, Gerda, *The Woman in American History*, 1971, pp. 169-171; Lepore, Jill, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, p. 402.

<sup>99</sup> Stansell, *The Feminist Promise, 1792 to the Present*, p. 153.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

In fact, the new feminism better reflected the causes and concerns of Jewish women, not just younger American women, than did suffragism.

*The newcomers to the suffrage fight were as likely to be gripped by issues of labor, poverty, and class as they were to be engrossed by the woman question. ...As the pace of urban reform quickened in the first decades of the century, left-leaning progressives searched for ways outside moral reform and charity to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots.*<sup>101</sup>

In a time when the Johnson acts of 1921 and 1924 had stemmed Jewish immigration from flood to trickle,<sup>102</sup> the Jewish women coming to feminist activism were increasingly American-born, and shared the broad social concerns of other American women. New concerns for American women, these issues had already guided the work of Jewish women in their sisterhoods of personal service, the NCJW, and NFTS for several generations.

By 1925-26, the years of Stella's most ambitious and most limited (and disappointing) feminist stances respectively, Jewish women halfway around the world had also begun collectivizing to empower themselves and their sisters. During a visit to Mandatory Palestine over New Year's 1925-26, NCJW leader Hannah G. Solomon observed women's collectivization and move toward emancipatory rights. During her time in Jerusalem, Solomon wrote, "I also was told that a Jewish Woman's Club had been organized and had a committee on 'Equal Rights for Women.' However, the clericals had given some trouble since they objected to women's emancipation and

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>102</sup> A direct result of Congressional limits on immigration, 1925 was the first year in which more Jews immigrated to Palestine than to America. Sarna, Jonathan, class lecture 28 October 2019.

insisted on abiding by the laws of the Talmud.”<sup>103</sup> Apparently, based on Solomon’s report, these Palestinian clerics found women’s enfranchisement at odds with rabbinic law.

Unrestrained by Talmud, by 1925-26, America had enfranchised women, and had already witnessed its first woman in Congress (Jeannette Rankin of Montana, where she had worked to pass statewide women’s suffrage in 1914, after winning the same victory as an organizer in Washington state in 1910<sup>104</sup>); and more recently the inauguration of the first women governors (Nellie Tayloe Ross in Wyoming and Ma Ferguson in Texas<sup>105</sup>) in 1925. Suffragism and feminism had begun to reshape American public life.

The feminist movement had also begun to impact women’s private lives. Having opened a women’s clinic in Brooklyn in 1916,<sup>106</sup> Margaret Sanger believed that “No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.”<sup>107</sup> This pioneer of birth control took her values and vision to the streets of Brownsville, a Brooklyn neighborhood of Jewish immigrant families. Access to birth control was a radical shift--for the first time, a woman could choose the size and timing of her family expansion. Family planning allowed women to improve the health and financial security of their households. Far from banning the practice, the

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<sup>103</sup> Solomon, Hannah G, *Fabric of My Life*, complete draft with hand-written edits, ca. 1940; AJA MS-749 (“The Four Ladies Papers (1867-2001)”), Series A, Subseries 2, Box 5.

<sup>104</sup> “Jeannette Rankin,” History, Art and Archives of the United States House of Representatives, [https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-\(R000055\)/](https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-(R000055)/)

<sup>105</sup> Lerner, *The Woman in American History*, p. 173.

<sup>106</sup> Rosenbaum, “‘The Call to Action’: Margaret Sanger, the Brownsville Jewish Women, and Political Activism,” p. 251-252

<sup>107</sup> Sanger, Margaret, *Woman and the New Race*, p. 29.

CCAR supported birth control in a 1927 statement, with the caveat that family planning decisions be undertaken jointly by a woman and her husband,<sup>108</sup> a position also encouraged by Sanger.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the CCAR's liberalism, conservative religious values were more broadly significant in shaping American culture. Illustrating the country's rising religious conservatism, the news cycles of spring and summer 1925 were dominated by the "Monkey Trial," the week-long proceedings trying Tennessee schoolteacher John Scopes for the crime of teaching his students about Darwinian evolution.<sup>110</sup> America was torn in a battle between religion and science, a confrontation that at its most basic level pitted tradition against modernity.<sup>111</sup> Caught in a similar squall, Jewish women were also attempting to honor religious tradition, but at the same time embrace modernity; tradition vs. modernity defines the struggle Hannah Solomon observed being undertaken by Jerusalem's Jewish women, as well as the tension inherent in Stella's 1925-26 shift.

In the mid-1920s, earnestly held religious values did not automatically lead to conservative political stances, especially when relating to armed conflict and its commemoration. In May 1925, the CCAR sent a telegram to President Coolidge, opposing

*the attempt to make of Armistice Day an occasion for the American people to review and to display its military preparedness and force. We believe that infinitely greater service can be rendered to America and*

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<sup>108</sup> Lauterbach, Jacob Z, "Talmudic-Rabbinic View on Birth Control," in *CCAR Yearbook*, 1927, pp. 369-384.

<sup>109</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, p. 29.

<sup>110</sup> Lepore, Jill, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, pp. 414-420.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 414-415.

*to the world at large by continuing to observe Armistice Day as a time for turning the thought of the nation to world justice and world peace.*<sup>112</sup>

Less than a decade after the end of the Great War, European statesmen pursued the creation of a lasting peace. Hoping to avoid any future world war, Germany, England, France, and Italy ratified the Locarno Security Pacts on 10 September 1926. This signal of “sunrise in Europe” also recognized the anti-Semitism alive and well on that continent, prompting mixed reaction from American Jewish observers.<sup>113</sup> The CCAR took an optimistic view of the Pacts, quoting Dr. Gustav Stresemann, Foreign Minister of Weimar Germany, who believed peace to be God’s will for humanity:

*The Divine Architect of the World has not created mankind as a homogeneous whole. He has made the nations of different races; He has given them their mother tongue as an expression of their spirit; He has given them countries with different characteristics as their homes. But it cannot be the purpose of the Divine world-order that men should direct their supreme national energies against one another, thus ever thrusting back the general progress of civilization.*<sup>114</sup>

The complicated political and historical landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shaped Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg. Attitudes, movements, and organizations unthinkable to her mother’s generation sprang into being and changed the shape of the world in which she lived. The Jewish woman’s transition from domestic to public life was not complete, but was certainly well underway by the mid-1920s.

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<sup>112</sup> Telegram to the President from S.H. Holdenson, chair of the CCAR committee on peace; AJA MS-34, Box 13, Folder 26.

<sup>113</sup> “The Dawn of a Better Day,” *American Israelite*, 10 December 1925, p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> “Report of the Committee on International Peace,” *CCAR Yearbook*, 1927, p. 117.



## Chapter 3 - 1925-26: What happened?

Illustrating the incomplete transition of women from domestic to public lives in 1925-26 are

Stella Freiberg's two opposing statements:

*Could that sage in Israel have foreseen the future? Could he have realized that at some far distant time woman would rise to such great heights? Could he have seen her rise in the realm of her religion, watch her descend from the gallery unto the lower floor and then ascend even into the pulpit?*<sup>1</sup>

*...the reigning position of woman in the home, where she is the Priestess, is an accepted fact.*<sup>2</sup>

The tension of the time is perfectly captured in these words. Was Stella simply an archetype (or, alternatively, victim) of her generation, caught in the tension between ambition and expectations? Or was there a precipitating event, a reason that she turned away from the pulpit in favor of the home? Or, is it possible that she considered her changed stance not as a turning away, but as a turning toward a more natural or even noble purpose for the NFTS and for women?

If there was a reason, a catalyst for this change, it could fall into any of four broad categories.

First, her life circumstances. Did Stella go through some ordeal that made her shift her own focus (and therefore her vision for a woman's role) from public life to domestic obligations?

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<sup>1</sup> "Report of the President," *Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 18 Jan 1925, p. 115; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

<sup>2</sup> "President's Report," *Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 31 October 1926, p. 136; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

Was there a loss or other trauma that can be identified in her family, whose ramifications led to her public shift in attitude?

Second, the influence of members of her close circle. Did someone important to Stella pressure her to dial back her feminist rhetoric? Could her son or rabbi or fellow congregants have had reasons to try to rein her in?

Third, the existence of generational conflict within Jewish women's organizations. Rather than thinking she was going too far, could there have been younger, more radical feminists in the Jewish community trying to speed change, and might Stella have reacted against this pressure?

Finally, international politics. Could there have been global events that caused Stella to turn away from religious leadership and instead embrace the power of women's domestic religious roles?

## Stella's life

A significant trauma that affected the Freibergs during this period may well have caused Stella to refocus her energies from her public role to her domestic one: Stella's beloved son, her only child, was the victim of a violent personal attack. According to a newspaper report,

*Julius W. Freiberg, President and Treasurer of the Ideal Concrete Machinery Co., was halted on Spring Grove avenue [sic] Tuesday afternoon by two robbers who kidnaped [sic] him and took him to Mt. Airy forest, where they robbed him of the \$1,000 payroll of the Machinery Company. Mr. Freiberg had just drawn the money from the First National Bank and was on his way to the plant to pay the employees. The robbers have not been captured.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Local," *American Israelite*, 30 September 1926, p. 6.

Stella was extraordinarily close with her son and his family: After Julius's wife died at a young age, it was Stella who raised her three grandsons.<sup>4</sup> Could this traumatic incident in her son's life have prompted Stella to shift her own energies from her growing public role to her home and family? She had spent many years nurturing the organization and members of the NFTS, but in this moment her family's needs may have felt more pressing to her, and she may have chosen to turn her attention to them. By logical extension, recognizing this choice as important for her own family, might it have led to her exhorting other women to make the same choice, and abandon their ambitions to the pulpit in favor of re-embracing their roles as Priestesses (and guardians) of the home?

### Stella's circle

The closeness of Stella and her son may also provide an argument in favor of the second possibility, that someone she valued persuaded her to change her position. Following in his parents' footsteps, in October 1925 Julius stepped into a leadership role within the Reform movement. As President of the Board of Managers of the Department of the Synagog [sic] and School Extension,<sup>5</sup> Julius was in charge of the most powerful subcommittee of the UAHC Board,<sup>6</sup> the one tasked with supporting and maintaining the standards of both synagogues and

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<sup>4</sup> Board of Governors of HUC-JIR, "Resolution in Memory of Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg," 1 February 1962. AJA SC-3722.

<sup>5</sup> "Local," *American Israelite*, 29 October 1925, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> "Report, Board of Managers Meeting U.A.H.C.," *American Israelite*, 3 December 1925, p. 8.

religious schools. Less than a year later he was also added to the UAHC Committee on Budget,<sup>7</sup> controlling the movement's finances. In light of these two significant roles, did he (or his peers) have expectations for how his family could act and speak publicly? Did Julius or his peers exert pressure on Stella to be less forceful in her public opinions? Was there a sense that her feminist leadership would somehow reflect poorly on her son in his institutional roles? Or, might she have chosen to tone down her public image in order to support his rise in Reform circles? As a mother, did she choose to step back in order to let him step forward?

Whether Julius's leadership role was the cause or simply co-incidental, Stella not only reversed her public position on women's roles in 1925-26, she also reduced her own public leadership involvement in her community.<sup>8</sup> After serving as one of the first two women on the Rockdale Temple Board 1924-26, she was not renominated for the term beginning in 1927.<sup>9</sup> This decision was made sometime after the High Holy Days of 1925, when women were included on the *bimah* during Yom Kippur services. Did Stella choose not to rejoin the Board for the same reason that she changed her position? Or is this evidence that the pressure to reverse her position came from within her synagogue community, and perhaps as a result of women's expanding presence there?

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<sup>7</sup> "Executive Board of Union of American Hebrew Congregations Deliberates on Measures for Advancement," JTA Daily Bulletin, 4 June 1926.

<sup>8</sup> She did not decrease her involvement internationally, however; at this time she co-founded and joined the Board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism ("Claude Montefiore Chosen President of World Union of Progressive Judaism," JTA Daily Bulletin, 30 July 1926). Perhaps it was not her son's but her own changing leadership role that came with different expectations?

<sup>9</sup> Nominating committee report, 27 December 1926, and Board meeting minutes, 6 January 1927, p. 762, K.K. Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, 8 Jan 1925 - 12 Jan 1931; AJA MS-24, Series C, Subseries 18, Folder 3.

Pressure certainly may have come from Rabbi David Philipson. From his attendance at the Jewish Women's Religious Congress in 1893 to his address at the foundational plenary of the NFTS in 1913, Philipson had long supported women's expanded roles--so long as they supported the Jewish family and Jewish community. In that NFTS plenary address, he spoke to the assembled women, saying,

*I should like to see in every congregation women enlisted in the high service of bringing the homes and the congregations into close relation. I should like to see every mother in our congregation a committee of one to work for our schools by sending her children, for our confirmation classes by having her children confirmed, for our post confirmation and other young people's classes by inducing her sons and daughters to attend. ...**Your work is primarily for the congregation and for the religious interests of our communities.** In union there is strength. By federating all these women's organizations you will forge a mighty weapon in the charitable and humane purposes. We have not organizations enough for specifically religious work and for the strengthening of our congregational life. Here lies your great opportunity. May you rise to it. As our religion is the basis of all that is best in our life, so will your work as a religious and congregational organization be basic to that of all other organizations.<sup>10</sup>*

Rockdale Temple under Philipson's leadership did allow women to be members: By the end of 1926, Rockdale had 571 male members and 242 female members.<sup>11</sup> The congregation--and its rabbi--gained a national reputation for its inclusion of women during this time.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, whether he was speaking before his congregation or the NFTS, Philipson was honing his view of women's proper roles in front of largely female audiences. In one Shabbat morning sermon,

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<sup>10</sup> Philipson, "Woman and the Congregation" sermon, 1913, p. 4; AJA MS-35, Box 5, folder 9. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> "United States Census of Religious Bodies, Department of Commerce: 1926"; AJA MS-24, Series C, subseries 18, folder 3.

<sup>12</sup> Sol Fligelman, a lay leader of Mount Zion Temple (St. Paul, MN), wrote to Julius W. Freiberg about women's membership: "I have been advised to communicate with you on these questions as one who has had experience in [such] congregational matters." After asking about revenue if pews are unassigned, Fligelman asked, "Are women eligible to membership and representation on the Board of Directors. What is your experience in this regard." Letter from Sol Fligelman to Julius W. Freiberg, 6 November 1925; AJA MS-24, Series A, subseries 4, folder 2.

entitled “Woman’s Sphere,”<sup>13</sup> Philipson lamented the “sensationalists in dress and behavior” of that “short skirted, bobbed hair sisterhood” of women. The sermon extolled the expanded rights of women in the modern world, but only when they embraced the “fundamental differences between the sexes” and accepted their “natural” functions as wives and mothers. His argument was that when “women, taking advantage of their new found opportunities may compete with men in the marketplace, in the counting room and at the bar, they are not serving the highest interest of society as women.” According to Philipson, it was only “the wife and mother” who served those highest interests of society. How would the women of his congregation have reacted to this message?

Stella had been present at the 1913 NFTS founding plenary; and as his congregant, she had heard Philipson’s sermons regularly over the years. His voice must have been influential, or at least ever-present, in her head. His actions, too, must have shaped her; this is the rabbi who did not allow women to preach, even during the Sisterhood Sabbath.<sup>14</sup> He did allow women to participate in Jewish life—including participating in the liturgy of Sisterhood Sabbath and the High Holy Days—but what he actively encouraged was women embracing their roles as priestesses of the home, the locus of true Judaism. Relating the business of a conference in Cleveland, on “the preservation of Judaism in modern American life,” Philipson (in his role as Chairman of the UAHC Commission on Jewish Education) celebrated the

*most striking feature of this three day symposium was the constant stressing of the home life and religion on the home. This harping on this note made one feel that the leaders there gathered were on the right*

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<sup>13</sup> Philipson, “Woman’s Sphere” sermon, n.d.; AJA MS-35, Box 5, folder 9.

<sup>14</sup> “Woman’s Sabbath,” *American Israelite*, 25 February 1926, p. 6.

*track. To restore the traditional Jewish home spirit into the modern Jewish home is the consummation now devoutly wished.*<sup>15</sup>

Did Philipson so devoutly wish that women would turn their attention to kindling the fires of Judaism in the home that he recruited Stella to his cause? Would she have been a willing partner in this task? Did she also come to believe, through Philipson's influence or another cause, that women best served their communities and the world by dedicating themselves to their families?

That women were innately religious seems to have been one of Stella's generational assumptions, so perhaps she welcomed Philipson's message. She also fought for the NFTS to be understood as a religious organization, rather than one dedicated to social or political concerns. At one of the final Board meetings of Rockdale Temple during Stella's tenure as a Board member, that body decided "that the Temple be used only for religious purposes."<sup>16</sup> What prompted this declaration? By 1926, Rockdale Temple was using two facilities: The Temple with its sanctuary and offices, and the Annex with classrooms. When they met at Rockdale, the NFTS and Rockdale Sisterhood had been allowed to use space in the Temple building. However, the local NCJW section had also requested the use the Temple for a program, and their request was denied; instead, they were offered space in the Annex to meet. The NCJW section appealed the decision, but the request was denied.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent Board discussion of whether it was appropriate to allow the NCJW or the NFTS to use the Temple or the Annex was really a

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<sup>15</sup> Philipson, "Some Religious Training in Judaism" lecture presented by Dr. David Philipson,, probably to the National Parent Teacher Association, January 1927; AJA MS35, Series D, Box 5, folder 6.

<sup>16</sup> Board meeting minutes, 1 December 1926, in compiled K.K. Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, 8 Jan 1925 - 12 Jan 1931, p. 754; AJA MS-24, Series C, subseries 18, folder 3.

<sup>17</sup> Letters between Rockdale Temple and Dorothy Cohn, Executive Secretary of Cincinnati section of NCJW, 20 and 23 December 1926; AJA MS-24, Series A, subseries 4, folder 3.

conversation about the identities of the two organizations--they were weighing whether the work of either group (or both) was religious in nature.<sup>18</sup> At her final meeting as a Rockdale Temple Board member, Stella participated in this discussion. Deciding that the NCJW was not a religious group, it was offered the Annex for its meeting. In Stella's presence, and perhaps based on her persuasion, the NFTS's mission was deemed religious, and they were allowed to continue meeting in the Temple.

### Generational conflict

This distinction between the missions and activities of the NCJW and the NFTS leads to possibility number three, that younger and more radical women were pushing too hard and too fast for change, and caused Stella to reassess her own position out of discomfort. Stella's NFTS--especially of 1926 and later--celebrated the religious work at its core. Conversely, the NCJW at this time was beginning to embrace its work in social justice and even explicitly in politics. An illustrated front-page article in the *American Israelite* covered the upcoming NCJW triennial meeting to be held the week of 14 November 1926, just two weeks after the NFTS biennial at which Stella made her statement. In stark contrast to the NFTS priestess of the home, the woman of the NCJW was providing immigrant aid, supporting farm and rural work, assisting Jewish refugees, advocating for peace, and lobbying for new (since 1923) legislative priorities.<sup>19</sup> While the NFTS also aided immigrants, supported those living in rural areas, assisted

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<sup>18</sup> Board meeting minutes, 6 January 1927, in compiled K.K. Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, 8 Jan 1925 - 12 Jan 1931; AJA MS-24, Series C, subseries 18, folder 3.

<sup>19</sup> "Modern Jewish Woman Gets Results," *American Israelite*, 4 November 1926, p. 1.



refugees, and advocated for peace, that organization did so under the guise of religious mandate--a mandate that certainly did not extend so far as legislative priorities.

While women of Stella's generation and circle were involved in the Cincinnati NCJW section (including her sister-in-law Sallie Freiberg [Mrs. Edward] Heinsheimer<sup>20</sup>), the leaders of the group by this time were a half- or full generation younger than Stella. In fact, one of the most active members of the Cincinnati section of the NCJW was another of Stella's in-laws, Ruth H. (Mrs. Sidney J.) Freiberg, who was about ten years younger than Stella.<sup>21</sup> Like her in-law, Ruth Freiberg ascended to national leadership of her organization in the 1920s, being named chair of the NCJW's national Committee on Extension just months before the 1926 triennial meeting.<sup>22</sup> One of her highest priorities was establishing new NCJW sections around the country, bringing their programs and partnerships (as with the National Council of Women and the League of Women Voters) to Jewish women who had yet to be able to access them.<sup>23</sup> The NCJW's comfort with partnering with political organizations reveals its values, and the values of its members. That it was pursuing new legislative priorities suggests that the NCJW, in fact, was seeking to increase its political activism. Younger members, such as Ruth Freiberg and those younger than her, may have been inspired by the organization's growing politicization.

While the same might be said of Ruth Freiberg, it is important to acknowledge that Stella was a Victorian in the Roaring Twenties.

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<sup>20</sup> "Council of Jewish Women," *American Israelite*, various issues 1920-1936, usually p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> "Sidney J. Freiberg," *New York Times*, Friday 29 December 1933, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> "National Council of Jewish Women," *American Israelite*, 22 April 1926, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

*American culture in this decade was staging a revolt against the 'Victorian mother' figure of the nineteenth century. ...For the Sisterhoods of Personal Service, this reaction to Victorianism meant a challenge to the notion of woman's 'natural' proclivities for and access to religious and charitable activities that had served as their ideological underpinning. ...American society rebelled against [their] piety, moralism, and sentimentality....*<sup>24</sup>

Were younger Jewish women rebelling, pushing for greater political involvement in a way that felt uncomfortable to Stella? Was she forced to confront the clash between the Victorian expectation of religiosity and modern feminism? Did she begin to regret her earlier statement, and deem it “unnatural” for a woman to ascend even into the pulpit, in light of even greater liberalism around her? While a possibility, this seems less likely.

## International politics

The fourth possibility is that global events caused Stella to embrace the domestic role of women. Dominating the news in both Jewish and secular media from the winter of 1925 through the fall of 1926, the Locarno Security Pacts (see above, chapter 2) sought to avert any future possibility of war on the European continent. There was rising interest internationally in embracing one's ancestral faith as a way of elevating mankind from a warring race to a peaceful one. In addition to speaking of peace as God's will for humanity, Dr. Gustav Stresemann, the Foreign Minister of Weimar Germany and co-laureate of the 1926 Nobel Peace Prize, placed the onus for lasting peace on individuals. Stresemann believed that it was religion that would rightly guide people:

*He will serve humanity best who, firmly rooted in the faith of his own people, develops his moral and intellectual gifts to their highest significance, thus overstepping his own national boundaries and serving*

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<sup>24</sup> Herman, “From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936,” pp. 162-163

*the whole of mankind, as has been done by those great men of all nations, whose names are written in the history of mankind.*<sup>25</sup>

The early history of the NFTS coincided with the Great War, so it is no surprise that the sisterhoods took peace and its advocacy so seriously in their committees and prayers. Inspired by Stresemann-- who was often quoted by the CCAR, its members, and the *American Israelite*--was Stella moved to do her part for peace by urging American Jewish women to develop the religio-moral “gifts” of America starting in each of their homes? Did she anticipate that the greatest impact women could have would be on kindling the fires of peace in the hearts of her family, and not in praying or preaching from the pulpit?

Assessing this evidence, family trauma or rabbinic pressure or inspiration from international events all seem reasonable possibilities when searching for a cause (or causes) of Stella’s reversal. With the documentation available, however, it is impossible to know for certain what truly inspired the shift. What is certain is that she was a woman of her times. Precipitating event or not, Stella was a product of her generation. She was caught inextricably in the push-pull tensions of tradition and modernity, of home and public square, and of family or communal engagement and individual identity. Though she had declared her era, “to be the age of woman,” it turned out that not all barriers were down. What was true was that woman’s “ambition is limitless.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Report of the Committee on International Peace,” *CCAR Yearbook*, 1927, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> “Report of the President,” *Minutes of the Executive Board of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods*, 7 January 1924, p. 12; AJA MS-73, Volume 1, Box 2.

Despite the complicated reality of the 1890s-1920s, Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg was, in fact, a force for women's empowerment and leadership. She was able to envision a time when women would ascend into the pulpit, and lived to see them do so--not as rabbis, but as sisterhood leaders. She was among the shapers of the modern age, ensuring that women could both lead and create pathways to leadership for other women. Not content to live a life of quiet domesticity or even of individual achievement, Stella shaped organizations and individuals that continue to have impact on the Reform and wider Jewish worlds of today. Her story was lost, but now it is found.

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