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**"Women's Equality in the Synagogue: The National Federation of Temple
Sisterhood's Search for Autonomy 1913-1930"**

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“בשכר נשים צדקניות נגאלו ישראל ממצרים סוטה יא”
“By the merit of its righteous women Israel was redeemed from Egypt”

Chapter One: Introduction

Reform Jewish Women Define Their Existence

Much of the contribution of Reform Jewish women to transforming women's roles in Judaism grew out of the foundation of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS). The creation of this national body of sisterhoods in 1913 offered large numbers of women in American synagogues a unified forum for their voices. Through local and national sisterhood organizations, women directed their energy to benefit Jewish life. The opening meeting in Cincinnati served as the pivotal moment in which a pioneering group of women devoted to the synagogue forwarded their efforts to revitalize Jewish rituals for the family both inside and outside the synagogue. Building on the groundwork of existing local groups and past accomplishments, NFTS founders identified their goals, created a system of governance, and selected its leadership.

Assessing the question of NFTS's influence requires an understanding of the environment and historical moment in which this organization arose. Women have been fundamental to the domestic side of Jewish life throughout Jewish history. However, women took on new roles as they began to emerge as public figures. After hundreds of years of being the silent sex within the Jewish tradition, American Jewish women starting in the mid-nineteenth century began to find their voices in synagogues which had been male-dominated for centuries. Scholars suggest that the American phenomenon of

considering women as the "religious sex"¹ contributed to Jewish women's growing participation in synagogue life. Jewish women, like their Christian counterparts, were regarded as having an inherently religious nature. As Karla Goldman argues "In the American context, a powerful middle-class gender ideology held that female religiosity was to be expressed in the church."²

Similarly, Joyce Antler in her book, The Journey Home, describes how upper and middle-class Jews in the 1890s viewed their role in light of such expectations. Antler cites Rebekah Kohut, founder of the Ahavath Chesed Sisterhood in New York, and her address to the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress. Antler's book reflects upon Kohut's description of what the prevailing societal expectations were for the National Council of Jewish Women:

Kohut felt it was important that Council members follow the standards set by Christian Americans; religion meant not only 'the chanting of prayers' but 'the living of our faith in our contact with our neighbor.' She insisted that 'we must not be clannish and narrow-minded'.... Kohut warned Jews to be 'refined, chaste, quiet in our manners and dress' and also adopt the American vernacular: 'No foreign tongue, no jargon! We are Israelites, but we are also Americans as well.'³

Jewish women responded to prevailing American stereotypes by emphasizing their role as the religious sex. By volunteering with their local chapters of the NCJW and with other

¹Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: The Sisterhoods of Personal Service, 1887-1936," Paper discussed at the Feinstein Center Conference at Temple University, Philadelphia, March, 1998, p. 1.

²Karla Goldman, "When the Women Came to the Shul," in Judaism Since Gender, eds., Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), p. 59.

³Joyce Antler, The Journey Home, How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America, (New York: Schocken Books, 1997), p. 49.

women's charitable organizations, Jewish women found their place in American society alongside their Christian neighbors.

Prevailing American nineteenth-century middle-class expectations and assumptions identified women as the spiritually-motivated sex. In this view, it was natural for women to find their place in attendance at worship services, in charitable work, and in pushing others to participate in religious observance and activities.⁴ Scholars believe that one of the primary tasks of the Reform movement was to adapt "Judaism's ancient traditions to America's gender norms."⁵ Felicia Herman asserts that American Jews molded their religion "to fit" into the belief system of nineteenth-century American religious and cultural ideals.⁶ Karla Goldman explains that Jews in the United States desired to transform traditional Judaism of Europe to a new American Judaism, and they did so through emphasizing the importance of the synagogue. Goldman insists that this shift meant that women needed to find a new way to be religious. She writes, "American Jewish women had begun to define a major component of their religious identity in relation to the synagogue and the public sphere of worship."⁷

With women's growing attendance at services, sisterhoods formed out of a

⁴Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: The Sisterhoods of Personal Service, 1887-1936," p. 1.

⁵Ibid, p. 2. (Herman bases her footnote on Karla Goldman's 1993 dissertation, "Beyond the Gallery: The Place of Women in the Development of American Judaism")

⁶Ibid, p. 3.

⁷Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, Finding A Place For Women in American Judaism, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 77.

communal desire to help rabbis manage the communal, social, and structural needs of synagogue buildings and communities. Goldman points to the growing female presence in the nineteenth-century Reform synagogue and the waning male presence as signals of a transformation in public worship and religiosity in the United States.⁸ She writes, "American Jews could not aspire to the social and religious status they imagined for themselves until they altered the gender order of their public worship so that Jewish women could become the 'guardian angel[s]' of the family pew, rather than the beautiful temptresses of the gallery."⁹ Prior to this time, women lacked opportunities to be able to express their religiosity and desire to do charitable work within the synagogue. Even with these changes, women were not given equal status to men in terms of liturgy, ritual, and general acceptance as equal community members.

During the mid-nineteenth century when women were being welcomed into the synagogue, traditional roles for women proved difficult to change. Goldman describes the change as "more subtle than momentous." She suggests that changes in women's synagogue roles were reflected in the removal of "physical barriers" separating women from men and the eventual innovation of mixed seating rather than in a conscious redefining of women's religious roles. Goldman captures the change by insisting, "But synagogues filled with women were profoundly different spaces than synagogues filled with men." Goldman recognizes that the controversy over the place for women in the

⁸Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 2.

⁹Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, p. 99.

Reform synagogue eventually began to fade. Women were needed to fill the pews and eventually female roles were redefined.¹⁰ Goldman emphasizes that,

The redefinition of women's religious place accompanied or led to other adjustments involving synagogal sacred space, educations, membership, music and liturgy as well as congregational participation, attendance, and leadership. As female religiosity was reconstituted in the American setting, so too were the American synagogue and American Judaism.¹¹

Ultimately, these innovations which legitimated woman's presence in the synagogue opened doors for women to organize their work within the sisterhood groups. In doing so, women were able to change expectations of women's role within the synagogue and create a place for Jewish women in the public sphere.¹² As scholars have noted, this created a female culture in the synagogue – a radical departure from the traditional synagogue defined exclusively by its male worshipers.¹³

The transition from the ladies' benevolent organizations of the 1850's primarily organized to help settle new immigrants to American life to synagogue-based sisterhoods was based on the changing needs of Jewish communities. Sisterhood groups integral to the American synagogue emerged in the 1890s. Real contributions began to be made by the women of sisterhoods at the end of the nineteenth-century. These organizations eventually shifted their priorities to activities and projects that focused almost exclusively

¹⁰Karla Goldman, "When the Women Came to the Shul," p. 59.

¹¹Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, p. 4.

¹²Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon, "Ladies and the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930," in Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture, eds., Maurie Sachs, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 63.

¹³Ibid.

on service to the synagogue. Another difference between the charitable societies of the mid-nineteenth century and the sisterhoods of the twentieth-century was that some of the earlier ladies benevolent societies were guided by a male leadership while the later sisterhood groups were led by the women themselves.¹⁴ Goldman asserts, "The organized participation of women's groups often became a marker of modernity for Jewish communities and congregations, and women's synagogue work came to touch every expression of American Judaism."¹⁵

Local sisterhoods redefined themselves in accord with the shifting needs of the early twentieth-century synagogue. This change often found expression when auxiliaries voted to rename their organizations with the title "Sisterhood" instead of "Auxiliary," and wrote new constitutions. Rabbis looked to women's participation in many areas of synagogue life as male presence began to wane. While men often absented themselves from Sabbath services due to work obligations, women were expected to attend services and to encourage others to participate. Male Jewish leaders relied on women to perpetuate Jewish traditions within the family unit and for volunteer work – or "personal service."¹⁶ According to Linda Gordon Kuzmack, men were eager to abandon their obligation to the worship service, bored by long services in Hebrew and outside pressures to work on the Sabbath. Women were more acculturated and socially aware in the United States: Middle-class Jewish women had the leisure time and prosperity which enabled

¹⁴Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess," p. 12.

¹⁵Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, p. 206.

¹⁶Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess," p. 18.

them to introduce new structures to channel their energies. These new channels afforded women the confidence to organize as well as to make changes in ways that affected women's participation in the synagogue.¹⁷ Jewish women showed that they welcomed the idea of more synagogue participation through their attendance, modeling their participation on Christian women who paved the way in the United States.¹⁸

As the twentieth-century approached, they began to expand their roles by taking on new responsibilities. In many synagogues, women's first organized efforts were directed at decoration with attention to things like carpeting, wall hangings, and general maintenance. Synagogue social events, fund-raisers, and children's education became increasingly the responsibility of women who chose to participate. Because of the need for leadership and volunteers, sisterhoods formed and grew rapidly. Once women proved their abilities and value to the synagogue, synagogue leaders began to depend on them to fulfill an unwritten obligation to maintain the synagogue in most areas beyond the rabbi's domain. Through the work of established sisterhoods, women's position shifted into roles of influence over synagogue life. As Faith Rogow notes, once women began to organize they quickly recognized their power to influence the communities they were working to improve.¹⁹

¹⁷Linda Gordon Kuzmack, Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and in the United States, 1881-1933, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), p. 48.

¹⁸Felicia Herman, p. 8.

¹⁹Faith Rogow, Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993, (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 1993), p. 1.

Women involved in local groups enjoyed their new status as participants in the synagogue. It gave them a sense of purpose in a world that had not often valued or recognized women's initiatives. Sisterhood work provided a sense of purpose. Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon also recognize the similarity between Jewish women and other women in American society at the time,

Thus like American women in their churches, they too began to exercise influence in their communities by extending accepted middle-class roles – sustaining their families, nurturing their children, and beautifying their homes – to their community in the public spaces of their synagogues.²⁰

The creation of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods grew out of a desire to establish a collective voice and a need for solidarity. However, even before the founding of the NFTS, public identities for women began to emerge on a national level. Nadell and Simon relate that by the end of the twentieth-century, “Jewish women’s associational life had blossomed into an array of national organizations.”

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) was formed in 1893 in order to create an organization that could promote “self-education” and “social welfare.” Women from the nation’s German-Jewish community, having established themselves socially and financially, felt empowered to organize a forum of women to pursue their growing interest in religion and reform.²¹ A component of their mission was to advocate for equal rights for women. Similar to the rhetoric that would be used by the founders of NFTS, the leaders of NCJW used familiar terms in defining women’s roles through the domestic sphere to

²⁰Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon, “Ladies and the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930,” p. 64.

²¹Faith Rogow, Gone to Another Meeting, p. 1.

legitimize the organization's foundation. For instance, their goal of social welfare was to be achieved through accepted roles for women as "proper" wives and mothers.²² One year before the founding of NFTS, in 1912, Hadassah was established to promote the awareness of Zionism for American Jewish woman; and in 1918, in similar spirit to NFTS, the Conservative movement founded the National Women's League of the United Synagogue of America.²³

Differentiating itself from the NCJW founded twenty years earlier, the NFTS, the pioneering federation for local women's synagogue groups, based its creation on strictly religious aims. Joyce Antler explains, "The establishment of national organizations of temple sisterhoods meant that Jewish women could find alternative gender-specific arenas in which to express common religious bonds."²⁴ Its main purpose was to support the sisterhoods and women joined the NFTS as a way to help their communities. Because women left the NCJW to join the NFTS, Faith Rogow points to the NFTS as being in part responsible for the weakening of the NCJW.²⁵

From its founding in 1913, the organizers of the NFTS met their goals. The NFTS grew every year adding more and more sisterhoods to its roster. At the opening meeting, the NFTS recorded 52 Sisterhoods with 156 delegates, while two years later there were

²²Ibid, p. 4.

²³Pam Nadell and Rita Simon, "Ladies and the Sisterhood," p. 64.

²⁴Joyce Antler, The Journey Home, p. 52.

²⁵Faith Rogow, Gone to Another Meeting, p. 113.

105 Sisterhoods with a membership exceeding 15,000.²⁶ From the start, the organization initiated a widespread marketing campaign sending letters to every synagogue associated with the UAHC requesting synagogue women's groups join the NFTS. If the synagogue did not already have an established sisterhood, the NFTS encouraged synagogue leaders to start such a group.

Not only were many local sisterhoods enthusiastic about joining, they were willing to send delegates to conventions, pay dues to the NFTS, and participate early on in campaigns to raise money for various national causes such as the Hebrew Union College Scholarship Fund, the HUC Dormitory Building Fund, and a number of charities that the NFTS staunchly supported. NFTS biennial conventions served as forums in which NFTS women voiced their concerns and committees planned new initiatives. The conventions also brought sisterhood women together from all over the country creating intense bonds of fellowship. When a sisterhood had an unusually successful fund-raiser, the convention offered a forum for recognition as well as a place to share such creative ideas. Smaller sisterhoods had the opportunity to seek assistance from the leadership and from larger sisterhoods for support and legitimacy.

The group's leadership, the Executive Board of the NFTS, was a strong voice for its delegates. Nadell and Simon suggest that the NFTS, "gave the women of Reform Judaism a sense of sororality that allowed them to extend their public participation in Reform Judaism beyond their established roles as nurturers and philanthropists."²⁷ Strong

²⁶*The American Hebrew*, January 22, 1915, p. 320.

²⁷Pam Nadell and Rita Simon, "Ladies and the Sisterhood," p. 67.

female voices articulated the goals of the NFTS, and its leaders became respected public figures. Beginning with Carrie Simon, the first President (1913-1919) of the NFTS, Mrs. Joseph Wiesenfeld of Baltimore, the second President (1919-1923), and Mrs. Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, first Vice-President and third President (1923-1929) NFTS leaders became national spokeswomen for Jewish women. In particular, Carrie Simon was an advocate for the religious education of children, and her views were often published by Jewish publications. Simon's vision of women's equality in the synagogue was clear and ambitious, as this 1916 quote from *The American Hebrew* indicates:

The Sisterhood has no higher aim than to bring forward every measure of service which will bring the American Jewess forward in her most helpful relationship to the Synagogue. To accomplish this it proposes an equality of status. The Jewish woman should become a member of the congregation as an individual or as the head of the family in the absence of her husband.²⁸

In turn, women of local sisterhoods looked to the Executive Board for direction, support, and connection. The NFTS constantly reinforced its presence through different modes of communication and participation. Many times, if a telegram was sent to a local sisterhood by an Executive Board member or the leader of a committee, the letter would be read aloud and considered with respect and careful attention. If the leadership called for financial support, implementation of national programs, or letters of petition to the government of the U.S. – whatever the call, sisterhoods again and again answered with support. Also, if a local sisterhood could not send the annual request of \$350.00 for the HUC Scholarship Fund, they would send whatever they could. If they could not afford to send two delegates to the convention, they would send one with a letter of apology

²⁸*The American Hebrew*, April 14, 1916, p. 658.

explaining their current situation.

The national organization and local sisterhoods were bonded by their commitment to the Reform synagogue. The NFTS functioned as the leading body while the local sisterhoods had distinct functions. Rabbi Louis Grossman, of Cincinnati's Congregation Bene Yeshurun, in a 1916 article in the *American Hebrew* attempted to explain the specific function of each,

The Federation means to comprehend those women's societies which are auxiliary to the congregations and wants to limit itself to them. There are many Jewish Woman's Societies doing good work and engaging the interest of Jewish Womanhood in various directions. These have distinct functions in the Jewish community and perform them with evident seriousness. But the Federation of Sisterhoods will neither duplicate nor disturb these."²⁹

Early on, it was evident that the NFTS would have to emphasize the distinct function of a woman's organization within Reform Judaism. The NFTS proved its purpose through focused and strong leadership. The organization established an Executive Board with key leading figures from some of the largest synagogues in the nation. Carrie Simon was the wife of Rabbi Abram Simon of the Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington, D.C. Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg, the national organization's first Vice-President, was married to a man who was the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the president of a prominent Cincinnati congregation. The founding leaders were prominent Reform Jews connected, usually by marriage, to the leadership of the movement.

In addition, Rabbi George Zepin, as director of the UAHC's Synagogue and Extension School, was the central figure guiding the organization in its early years. He was

²⁹Ibid.

elected secretary of the NFTS during the first days of the opening meeting. Because of Zepin's important position in the Reform movement and his commitment to the NFTS, his support and inspiration further legitimized the organization. The NFTS was quick to select a name, a constitution, committees, and initial goals. The Biennial conferences, Executive meetings, and committee work brought delegates from every corner of the country to coordinate local sisterhood activities. Members of the national leadership often spoke at local sisterhood meetings and major events, complimenting local efforts and recognizing lofty accomplishments. Jewish publications such as the *American Israelite* and the *American Hebrew* also added to the legitimacy of sisterhood work by reporting on the activities and significant accomplishments of both local organizations and the NFTS.

Influencing synagogue trends, the NFTS, began traditions that many synagogues continue today. From its very origins, the NFTS created and distributed a Jewish Art Calender for sale which is still distributed. Also, sisterhood women became responsible in many communities for running Sabbath School education for the children. Women were active in every aspect of the Sunday School from teaching to funding budgets. The NFTS supported such roles for women and education and established committees to help facilitate support. Other major roles for sisterhoods included overseeing cemeteries, providing flower arrangements on the Sabbath and holidays, and sending letters of condolence to families who lost loved ones. Local sisterhoods initiated ideas of how to stimulate membership at their synagogues. They did so through social events as well as by creating greeting committees that welcomed members and strangers to the synagogue. Local sisterhoods were also responsible for creating lucrative ways of raising money from

donation boxes next to the entrance ways to bazaars that raised thousands of dollars.

Most significantly, the NFTS "reclaimed traditions" that Reform Judaism had not made a priority. The women sought to bring renewed vitality to holiday observance and ritual into the home and synagogue. By emphasizing traditional Jewish holiday and home observance, Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon assert that the "sisterhood women broadened their participation in Jewish religious life."³⁰ By the 1920's, the NFTS was successful in introducing the Sisterhood Sabbath, one of their most influential initiatives. Local synagogues were encouraged to support their sisterhoods in a yearly commitment to celebrate the Sisterhood Sabbath. On this Sabbath, women led or participated in the service as much as possible. The Sisterhood Sabbath was one of the ways in which the NFTS could "demand public recognition" for their work within the movement.³¹ Though keeping religion its focus, the NFTS concurrently took on initiatives that reflected current events in the United States. For instance, in 1915, NFTS protested in the name of common humanity against the Immigration Restriction Bill and urged the President to veto any such bill. U.S. involvement in World War One inspired the NFTS to encourage sisterhoods to support their local Red Cross branches. Through the records of sisterhood meetings, we can nearly count the number of sweaters knitted, funds collected, and soldiers visited. During the height of the struggle for suffrage in the nineteen teens, the NFTS encouraged sisterhoods to advocate for women's right to vote by encouraging speakers on the issue. In addition, the suffrage debate furthered the NFTS aim of

³⁰Pam Nadell and Rita Simon, "Ladies and the Sisterhood," p. 67.

³¹Ibid, p. 68.

recognizing women as members of synagogues, independent of their husbands. These discussions also initiated debates about women having a vote on synagogue boards and changing attitudes about women in the synagogue. Thus, the NFTS leadership influenced individual sisterhoods in creating a steady and positive focus on Reform women's presence.

As evidenced by growing numbers of sisterhoods, large conventions, active synagogues, and frequent articles in the Jewish news, the successes of the NFTS were widespread. Newspaper invitations to Jewish women to comment on their roles in the synagogue focused on sisterhood leaders and members as early as 1916.³² Women were often interviewed about their opinions on how sisterhoods affected their synagogues. Local sisterhoods gave women a way to devote themselves to the synagogue, and to redefine American Jewish ritual and observance at home and in the synagogue. At the same time, the women viewed their work within the context of helping to build Reform Judaism. Women of the sisterhoods believed it was their obligation to create a strong movement.

As Carrie Simon asserted in 1919, "The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods has come to stay and to serve the cause of Judaism in America."³³ Throughout this historical examination of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, it will be evident how the local and national organizations co-existed and created a voice for Jewish women in the United States. The goals, work, and vision of the leaders of the NFTS will be explored in the context of their influence on the American Reform synagogue. A careful examination

³²*The American Hebrew*, April 14, 1916, p. 655.

³³*Ibid*, May 16, 1919, p. 716.

of how it was that sisterhood women perpetuated Judaism at home and in the synagogue should help to transform our historical understandings of American Judaism. By creating a strong governing body, by making resolutions, and by supporting individual sisterhoods, the NFTS established a safe forum of leadership and solidarity for women who otherwise would not have found in their congregations and the UAHC an atmosphere that was always welcoming to women. Ultimately, the vision of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods became a reality as the American synagogue began to open its doors to women as distinct individuals in membership, board votes, and eventually leadership roles. The impact of the NFTS is profound, for its work affected the way women's roles are understood in Judaism today.

Chapter Two: Part I

Establishment of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods

The establishment of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods on January 20, 1913 in Cincinnati, Ohio, marked a revolutionary moment in the history of American Jewish women's organizations and in the history of American Judaism. With the call for the establishment of this organization, the women of Reform Judaism collectively affirmed their identity as Jewish women. Not only did the women demonstrate their eagerness for a national organization, they also quickly illustrated their determination to transform Reform Judaism.

A national organization of sisterhoods was shaped at the first national meeting of sisterhood delegates during a convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in January, 1913. The session became a reality when sisterhoods across the nation responded to a national call. Leaders of the Reform movement's congregational federation, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), sent an official invitation to the sisterhoods affiliated with congregations belonging to the UAHC. The letter, dated December 13, 1912, from Cincinnati, Ohio, reads as follows:

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

The President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations issues this call to all ladies' organizations connected with congregations belonging to the Union, to appoint or elect delegates for a meeting to be held in Cincinnati during January 20-21-22-23, 1913. This meeting is called for the purpose of organizing a Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.¹

¹Transcript of Proceedings of the NFTS, First General Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 21-23, 1913, Women of Reform Judaism Records, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

The letter, signed by Lippman Levy (Secretary) was issued by order of J. Walter Freiberg, President of the UAHC. The letter served as an official announcement of the beginning of the organization. Before J. Walter Freiberg even sent the invitation, it was already known that the 1913 UAHC convention would provide the historic moment when the new and permanent campus of Hebrew Union College would be dedicated. A number of local sisterhoods appreciated the serious nature of the invitation, and in 1913, fifty-two sisterhoods sent 156 delegates to Cincinnati. It is no coincidence that the wife of the Union's president -- Mrs. Stella Heinsheimer Freiberg became the first Vice-President of the NFTS and the federation's third President. She was also instrumental in helping to found the organization.² Many of the first NFTS delegates were wives of delegates to the UAHC.

The exact details of the birth of the NFTS are not decisively clear, but Carrie Obendorfer Simon and Rabbi George Zepin have been recognized as the most visible figures in the founding of the organization. By 1913 it is possible that the accomplishments of the local sisterhoods had proved so overwhelming that the leaders of the Reform movement felt it advisable to harness some of the energy for their own purpose. By initiating the call, the leaders of the Union provided the plan with legitimacy. The location of Cincinnati also contributed to the historic sense of this occasion since Cincinnati was the birthplace of American Reform Jewry. Under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and the Cincinnati Jewish community, Cincinnati had been the birthplace of the

²Laura Lieber, "Freiberg, Stella Heinsheimer (1862-1962)," in Jewish Women in America, An Historical Encyclopedia, eds., Paula E. Hyman, Deborah Dash Moore, Vol. 2. (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 478.

UAHC in 1873 and became the home of Hebrew Union College (HUC), the nation's first long-lasting school for rabbinical training founded in 1875.

Carrie O. Simon, wife of Rabbi Abram Simon of Washington Hebrew Congregation in Washington, D.C., dedicated her life to Jewish causes. Before her marriage, Simon volunteered her efforts with a local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) in Cincinnati where she lived with her family. Her mother had begun the Cincinnati chapter in 1895. Simon married her husband a year later while he was a student at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. The couple moved to a few different cities, following Rabbi Simon's rabbinical career, before settling in Washington, D.C. in 1904.³

As a volunteer with the NCJW, Carrie Simon came to feel that the organization no longer met her goal of improving the religious life of American Jews.⁴ The NCJW commitment to religious issues had always been ambivalent and near the time that the NFTS organized, religion seemed to be becoming a more divisive issue within the organization. The focus of the organization was placed on social welfare. Some women, who volunteered with the NCJW, found that the best way to identify religiously was through sisterhood organizations and not with the Council.⁵ Simon thought that the synagogue

³Mark I. Greenberg, "Simon, Carrie Obendorfer (1862-1962)," in Jewish Women in America, An Historical Encyclopedia, eds., Paula E. Hyman, Deborah Dash Moore, Vol. 2, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1261.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Faith Rogow, Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993, (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, Alabama, 1993), p. 112.

served as the best venue to pursue her goal of enriching the religious lives of American Jews. Simon regarded her husband's congregation as the most obvious place to devote her energies. Hence, Carrie O. Simon, founder of the Ladies Auxiliary Society of Washington Hebrew Congregation, directed her time and energy to this auxiliary and to the support of other local sisterhoods.⁶

Less than ten years later, Simon was instrumental in founding a national organization for the sisterhood groups. Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon believe that Carrie Simon "had higher hopes for this organization, for she envisioned a national union of women organized specifically for religious work."⁷ Other commentators suggest that Rabbi George Zepin was the man "who conceived the idea of organizing the women in congregations into the first major agency of the Union."⁸ Zepin, born in Kiev, Russia, was ordained by Hebrew Union College in 1900 and was appointed the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's first full-time executive in 1903.⁹ In 1905, Rabbi Zepin was

⁶Mark I. Greenberg, "Simon, Carrie Obendorfer (1862-1962)," *Jewish Women in America*, p. 1261.

⁷Pamela S. Nadell and Rita S. Simon, "Ladies of the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930," in *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*, eds., Maurie Sachs, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 19995), p. 65.

⁸Jane Evans, "Intertwining Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow The Union of American Hebrew Congregations," in *The Jewish Condition: Essays on Contemporary Judaism Honoring Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler*, ed. Aron Hirt-Manheimer, (New York: UAHC Press, 1995), p. 291.

⁹Ibid, p. 292.

appointed as the director of the Union's Synagogue and Extension School.¹⁰ Zepin was known for his long and prominent career with the UAHC. Under his guidance, the UAHC was divided into three main departments. The first department was designated to support Hebrew Union College, the second to oversee the "defense" initiatives of the Board of Delegates, and the third was known as the Board of Synagogue Extension.¹¹ Zepin's goal was to create congregations in the isolated areas of America. While in charge of the Board of Synagogue Extension, he made it a priority to work closely with the UAHC Committee on Religious Education in order to create a Sabbath School curriculum that could be used by congregations across the country.¹² This curriculum was eventually utilized by the NFTS in their Sabbath Schools.

Jane Evans, in her article "Intertwining Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow The Union of American Hebrew Congregations," explains that it was Zepin who asked Carrie Simon to "organize" the NFTS.¹³ In addition to his responsibilities at the UAHC, Zepin maintained an active role in the early years of the NFTS. He was the only man on the Executive Committee of the woman's organization, which he served as Executive Secretary.

With the collaboration of Simon, Zepin and others, the NFTS developed

¹⁰ M. Carolyn Dellenbach, "An inventory to the George Zepin Papers: 1914-61," American Jewish Archives at the Jacob Rader Marcus Center, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹¹ Alan Silverstein, Alternatives to Assimilation: The Response of Reform Judaism to American Culture, 1840-1930, (Brandise University Press, Hanover, 1992), p. 185.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jane Evans, "Intertwining Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow The Union of American Hebrew Congregations," p. 291.

successfully under the auspices of the UAHC. The NFTS very quickly became a force in the Reform movement and helped to create a voice for Reform Jews in the United States. The leadership of the UAHC convened the opening meeting. They made the arrangements for the first day's proceedings including when it was to be held, where it should take place, how such a gathering should be organized, and which ladies' auxiliaries and clubs could participate.

All those invited to speak at the inception of a woman's organization were men. Local rabbis and men of honorable standing who were linked to the leadership of Reform Jewry gave the opening addresses. It may seem odd that male voices were called upon to celebrate the commencement of the national meeting of women who were already successfully established in their local sisterhoods. The male voices and their messages can be understood in a number of ways. To begin with, the UAHC's leadership was entirely male and since the NFTS was to be under the auspices of the Union, male dominance of the founding convention may have seemed natural. The meeting was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the Reform movement's leadership had been positioned since 1873. The authority of the UAHC and the distinguished rabbis who were invited to speak provided legitimacy to the women's efforts. The male speakers also emphasized the connection between the sisterhoods and the UAHC. Perhaps at that time, it would have been deemed inappropriate to have female voices announce such an important new UAHC endeavor.

Although the speeches acknowledged the hard work of sisterhood women, a close examination reveals that the speakers' voices relegated the women's efforts to the

domestic sphere — a sphere belonging to women only. When the male speakers talked about the women of the sisterhood, they spoke about them as wives and mothers and not as the future leaders of the Reform movement with the same status as the male leadership. The male speakers differentiated female and male roles in relationship to synagogue life. Women's work had more to do with charitable, social, and family-related issues than the male-identified spheres within the synagogue. Simon Wolf suggested that the NFTS would be "specifically religious, a handmaiden, and what its name purports, an auxiliary to the Synagogue and Temple."¹⁴

The views on women's roles expressed by the male speakers did not, however, undermine the women's efforts. The women themselves accepted the centrality of male religious leadership. They would not have questioned the right of their male rabbis to serve as Judaism's preeminent leaders. The early records of the NFTS show that its leaders and members believed that women did have a special contribution to make based on their distinctive experience and talents as women. The speakers thus may not have recognized that their celebrating of women's efforts as wives and mothers, could be understood as subordinating women's work in the synagogue.

The speeches were delivered to the assembled women delegates by Rabbi David Philipson of Congregation Bene Israel, Rabbi Louis Grossman of Congregation Bene Yeshurun, and Rabbi Jacob Mielziner, a prominent national Jewish leader. There were also remarks by an Simon Wolf of Washington a distinguished leader of American Jewry.

¹⁴Proceedings of the NFTS, from the First General Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 21-23, 1913, p. 21.

The men all appeared to recognize the significance of the creation of the national organization of sisterhoods and spoke of the honor of being a part of such a historic event. Looking to the creation of the NFTS as beneficial to local congregations, the male speakers praised the efforts of sisterhood women.

Rabbi David Philipson of Congregation Bene Israel, chosen to speak at the opening meeting, was a prominent rabbi in Cincinnati and a member of the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College in 1883. He taught at HUC and held the position of president of the CCAR from 1907-1909. Philipson set the tone for the meeting by framing the Reform movement's role in transforming Jewish women's religious roles. By illustrating how great reformers such as Abraham Geiger, David Einhorn, and Isaac M. Wise "placed the Jewish woman on a plane of religious equality to man,"¹⁵ Philipson emphasized what Reform Judaism had done for women but fell short of acknowledging the potential of the women to greatly influence the direction of Reform Judaism.

He explained the positive improvements that Reform synagogues made to creatively include women in the spiritual life of the congregation. For instance, he spoke about changes in life-cycles, "The religious majority of the boy was expressed by the Bar Mizwah ceremony. For the girl there was no institution of this kind. The Reform movement changed all this when the confirmation ceremony for boys and girls became one of the most prominent features of congregational life."¹⁶ Philipson described the expansion of

¹⁵Proceedings of the NFTS, from the First General Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 21-23, 1913, p. 16.

¹⁶Proceedings of the NFTS, from the First General Convention Cincinnati, January 21-23, 1913, p. 17.

the minyan as the most influential reform introduced by the Reform movement. Dr. Samuel Adler, in 1845, issued a change to include women among those counted a part of the ten people necessary for public worship. Adler, at the Frankfort rabbinical conference, explained that not obligating women for prayer was merely custom, and women should have the same commitments as men to prayer and Jewish education. Philipson further suggested that women should become members of the synagogue in their own right.¹⁷ He declared, "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."¹⁸

Philipson held the view that women should be included in the synagogue as equal members, yet he appealed to women through their positions as wives and mothers. He encouraged the women by stating, "It is for our mothers to reach mothers, and possibly a woman's organization with a committee of mothers to persuade mothers to interest themselves along these lines is the best way of reaching such a consummation so devoutly to be wished." Philipson's address meant to honor women's strengths and the sisterhood's ability to support Jewish life. Because he did not equate the efforts of the sisterhood women with those of the UAHC's male leadership, he set the women apart. He saw women's roles in the synagogue as different from male roles. Philipson and the other speakers viewed women as the preservers of Judaism for children and the family in the home and synagogue, not as those who would be innovators of contemporary Judaism.

The speakers understood the national federation to be a counterpart of the UAHC.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

The women's organization would serve the needs of the wives and mothers in Reform congregations. At the opening proceeding, the different roles of men and women were made explicit by Rabbi Grossman. He suggested that while women might support organizations, men change them. As Grossman addressed the women he said, "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 be sure some large social issue is at stake."¹⁹ He marked the distinction between men and women in synagogue life by perceiving that the sexes enter society from their own realms. He asserted that while men were busy building schools, that "mothers fill the school-houses with their souls." He assumed that the role of women was to be the moral protector of Jewish children, the teachers of family loyalty, and the rejuvenator of synagogue life instead the builder of the institutions themselves.

Grossman's concluding words provide a composite of how the speakers viewed the future organization of the NFTS: "The Jewish woman is becoming again what through the history of the Jewish people she has been, the Mother of Israel. She will foster the sacred things of life, the sanctities of home and the sacred ideals of the people."²⁰ Perhaps it was not their aim, but when identifying the presence of women in more visible roles in the synagogue, the male speakers applauded the efforts of the women as wives and mothers, as adjuncts of an essentially male institution. The male leaders did not realize that the women were embarking on a journey that would distinguish women's participation within

¹⁹Proceedings of the First General Convention, January 21-23, p. 22.

²⁰Ibid, p. 24.

the synagogue. The work of the NFTS would forever change female roles in Reform Jewry.

The first meeting of the NFTS was held at the Sinton Hotel, in Cincinnati, Ohio on January 23, 1913. The President, Mrs. Carrie Simon, of Washington and Recording Secretary Mrs. S. Lazaron of Cincinnati, were elected by "acclamation" as the first gathering got underway. The board then elected the other officers; the Vice-President was to be Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg of Cincinnati, the Treasurer, Mrs. Israel Cowan of Chicago, and the Executive Secretary was Rabbi George Zepin of Cincinnati. In order to inform the congregations of the UAHC of the NFTS's creation and the goals it represented, and to invite additional participation, the board decided that the constitution should be sent to each affiliated congregation the UAHC.²¹

The Constitution of the NFTS was adopted by the 156 delegates at the Proceedings of the First General Assembly. The Committee on Constitution wrote a preamble that articulated the purpose of the NFTS. The Preamble stated that "the congregation forms the unit in Israel," that "the increased power which has come to the modern American Jewess ought to be exercised in congregational life," and it was concluded that "the religious and moral development of Israel will be furthered by this co-operation." The Committee on Constitution then officially initiated the NFTS by resolving that we "Do hereby agree to form a National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods for the effective carrying out of the above very laudable aims."²² The women agreed that the

²¹Proceedings of the First General Convention, Jan. 21-23 1913, p. 31.

²²ibid, p. 24.

name of the organization should be the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. They identified four primary goals which included: the bringing together in "closer co-operation" the local sisterhoods across the United States, strengthening the "religious consciousness of Israel" through spiritual and educational activities, and spreading the word for "the cause of Israel, and collaborating with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations."²³ Any sisterhood of a Jewish congregation could apply for membership to the Executive Board of the Federation. The Committee on Constitution allowed for exceptions to this rule. For instance, if a Jewish women's group was doing religious work in a place where there was no synagogue, they were eligible to apply for admission. At the inception of the NFTS, membership was open to Reform, Conservative and Orthodox sisterhoods. However, women from the Conservative and Orthodox movements soon formed their own organizations, federating separately from the NFTS.²⁴

Each local sisterhood was to appoint one member to the biennial meeting of the NFTS and one extra person for every additional twenty-five members above twenty-five.²⁵ The establishment of six Standing Committees, consisting of five members each, indicated the initial objectives of the NFTS. Committees were established to focus on Co-operation, Religion, Sabbath School, Propaganda, Scholarships, and the Union Museum for Jewish

²³Ibid, p. 25.

²⁴Pamela S. Nadell, "The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods," in Jewish Women in America, p. 979.

²⁵Ibid.

Ceremonial Objects.²⁶

The first Committee, on Co-operation, was intended to foster a sense of fellowship between the local sisterhoods. The women were to learn what projects and ideas worked best in the individual sisterhoods and share their findings with the NFTS at large. The NFTS recommended that if there were several sisterhoods in one city, they should have a joint meeting at the beginning or close of each year. The Committee on Religion, a multi-faceted committee, was intended to foster an improved Reform Jewish life. Its aims were to encourage religiosity, synagogue attendance, and to initiate classes for the study of Jewish history, Hebrew, and prayer. The third Committee, on Sabbath Schools, was to "Furnish sisterhoods with the best results in Sabbath-school education," to teach Jewish holidays, and to encourage Jewish young adults to commit to teaching. They were also responsible for supplying Sabbath School equipment. The fourth Committee, on Propaganda, was to initiate the formation of new sisterhoods in synagogues where there were none. In addition, this committee was to collaborate and co-operate with the UAHC, "especially with the Board of Managers of Synagog and School Extension."²⁷ The Fifth Committee, on Scholarships, was to create ways to raise funds for scholarships as well as to oversee the scholarships given to rabbinical students. This committee was also intended to encourage new candidates to apply for admission to the Hebrew Union College. Lastly, the Committee on the National Museum was to collect art for the museum at Hebrew Union College.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid, p. 26.

The NFTS set out to coordinate the active work of the local sisterhoods and hoped to establish collective standards for activities in the individual sisterhoods. For instance, during the First Day's Proceedings, the Executive Committee set terms for the "General Task of Assisting Local Congregations." The NFTS clearly spelled out the foremost obligation of each sisterhood:

The first duty of each sisterhood where such need exists, is to render personal and financial assistance to its own congregation. The sisterhood that applies itself to a need of this description will find its efforts so well welcome, that no question of 'representation' or 'cause for existence' will ever arise.²⁸

The wording of this section must be considered carefully. The NFTS instructed local sisterhoods to make themselves indispensable to their congregations so that no one would question whether they should exist. These instructions suggested that local congregations were not always comfortable with the presence of the women's groups within the synagogue. Some may have questioned the efforts of the women; especially if the sisterhood had not yet proven its strengths within the synagogue at large. The NFTS expected that the local sisterhoods would continue to aid synagogue religious and communal life in as many ways as possible. In turn, the local sisterhoods proved loyal to the NFTS and were eager to implement the national agenda. The success of the national organization and the local sisterhoods was made manifest in steady growth in membership, fund-raisers, and conferences. Projects immediately set into action included the NFTS Art Calendar, to be put into the home of each sisterhood member, the Uniongram, serving as "the substitute telegram" between sisterhood members, as a fund-

²⁸Ibid, p. 36.

raiser, and in addition, the establishment of a NFTS seal to be used on all NFTS stationary and documents.²⁹ The partnership between local sisterhoods and the national organization was a match that strengthened Jewish life.

²⁹Ibid, p. 39.

Chapter Two: Part II

Local Sisterhoods Redefine and Recreate Themselves

Local sisterhoods and ladies auxiliaries established themselves at different times from the mid 1890s through the early 1900s. The NFTS set out to oversee sisterhood efforts to make Jewish life religiously meaningful for families and communities in the United States. With the backing of the UAHC, the NFTS provided sisterhood women with the impetus and support to create a national organizational structure. They established an Executive Committee and Standing Committees, sent communications to the local synagogues, and most importantly, held biennial meetings to share ideas and directives for the organization.³⁰

Specific roles were immediately anticipated for the national organization and the local sisterhoods. As described by Pamela Nadell, "NFTS expected that local sisterhoods would encompass the tradition of their foremothers, the women of the nineteenth-century Hebrew ladies' benevolent society, and buy ritual objects and flowers to beautify their synagogues."³¹ The local sisterhoods concentrated on a hands-on approach which had already proven successful. The sisterhoods sought to turn synagogues into warm places of worship. They set out to decorate the function rooms, organize social functions and fund-raisers, keep up the kitchen and encourage participation in worship services. They were also largely responsible for Sabbath School education, holiday observance, and the

³⁰Pamela S. Nadell, "National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods," in Jewish Women in America, p. 980.

³¹Ibid.

overall preservation of the Jewish family. Meanwhile, the NFTS assumed responsibility for maintaining the religious affiliation of America's Jews.³² The committees of the NFTS coordinated their efforts to oversee the activities of sisterhoods across the country. With the guidance of national leadership, sisterhoods collaborated to strengthen the synagogue. The women of the NFTS set high goals for themselves and were determined to prove that they would be a force in the Reform movement. The NFTS wanted to advance one step beyond local sisterhood efforts to make the synagogue central to religious life; they also hoped to reintroduce religiosity and fervor for ritual Judaism into their homes and their communities.³³

With the inception of the NFTS, many local rabbis and congregational boards were called upon to introduce and support sisterhoods at their congregations. Most strikingly, in the city of Cincinnati, the birthplace of Reform Judaism, the two major Reform congregations, Bene Yeshurun and Bene Israel did not have established sisterhoods prior to 1913. Women's societies associated with the congregations, that had been active in the mid-nineteenth century, had already become inactive by the 1860s. Both synagogues lacked any women's organizations until sisterhoods were created in 1913 just in time to become founding members of the NFTS.³⁴

Though these Cincinnati sisterhoods were established late in comparison to many

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Karla Goldman, "The Public Religious Lives of Cincinnati's Jewish Women," p. 7, unpublished paper, 1998.

other communities, they grew quickly. By 1915, the president of the sisterhood of Bene Yeshurun reported that their sisterhood had 425 members.³⁵ Sisterhood women would meet once a month to plan programs for the Jewish holidays. Within just a few years, the women of the sisterhood established children's services, an Entertainment Committee, a Committee on Sociability, a Mother's Club, a Committee on Student's Welfare, a Memorial Fund, a Scholarship Fund, and a National Museum Committee.³⁶ In addition, sisterhood announcements indicate the growing inclusion of women in congregational governance. In 1915-1916, only two years after the sisterhood formed, two of its members were invited to attend synagogue board meetings. As sisterhood's President Belle A. Lowenstein reported, "We have been asked to serve on the Temple Board, as two of our members have been appointed auxiliary members of that Board an honor which we much appreciate."³⁷ The invitation to participate in board meetings indicates how quickly the sisterhood became a force with the congregation.

Cincinnati's Congregation Bene Israel, served by Rabbi David Philipson since 1888, did not have an established sisterhood before the inception of the NFTS. However like Bene Yeshurun, Bene Israel decided to create such a women's group at the very same time that preparations were underway for the creation of a national sisterhood organization in their city. In fact, J. Walter Freiberg, who was President of the UAHC and issued the

³⁵Year Book 1915-16, K. K. Bene Yeshurun (Plum Street Temple) Cincinnati, Ohio, p. 27.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid, p. 28.

call for the organization of NFTS, was also president of Congregation Bene Israel. In the congregation's 1913 Yearbook, Freiberg explained that there had not been a specific women's group prior to that time because individual women had been doing volunteer work on their own. The time had come, he observed, to introduce a sisterhood. Freiberg's message notified the congregation that the congregation's women were now organized "under the guidance" of Dr. Philipson. The president said that though the congregation "recognized "the value of women's volunteer work on different committees such as the "Ladies' Auxiliary House Committee" and the "Ladies' Auxiliary to the Religious Schools Committee" the women did not previously have an autonomous group of their own.³⁸

Just one year later, sisterhood women were said to be "quite active in many directions." The president of the congregation noted that the sisterhood gave four organ recitals and volunteered their time to the synagogue in many ways. The president concluded his report, "As time passes, the value of the Sisterhood as an adjunct will become more and more apparent."³⁹ With the success of the NFTS, the national body provided a legitimacy which reinforced and supported local sisterhoods whose existence became a vital part to congregations.

An Outline History of Congregation Beth El of Detroit Michigan includes a history of their congregation's sisterhood as well. The historical outline indicates that the Woman's Auxiliary Association was formed in 1902 in order to raise money for equipment needed by the temple and was meant to "foster the spirit of mutual co-operation among

³⁸Data of K.K. Bene Israel, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1913), p.12.

³⁹Data of K.K. Bene Israel, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1915,) p. 12.

members of the congregation."⁴⁰ Even though the Auxiliary sent representatives to the first gathering of the NFTS,⁴¹ the outline of the sisterhood's history did not include that information. Temple Beth El's women's group was already a success when the NFTS was established, but it was not until 1917 that one of their members was mentioned as a delegate elected to the advisory board of the NFTS. The Auxiliary did send financial support to the Hebrew Union Scholarship fund as early as 1914. It is also significant that the Auxiliary was slow to change its name, for the women did not transition to the new name — the Sisterhood of Temple Beth El — until 1922.⁴²

The Tree of Life Synagogue in Columbia, South Carolina included the sisterhood's history in their congregational history. The Ladies' Aid Society of the Tree of Life Synagogue was organized by one of its members, Mrs. August Kohn, in 1905. Mrs. Kohn came from the Charleston synagogue, K.K. Beth Elohim, where women's volunteer work was already a success story. Kohn believed that the Ladies' Aid Society should focus on the Sunday school as well as on general assistance of the synagogue wherever necessary.⁴³ Already in existence for eight years, the Ladies' Aid Society celebrated their anniversary with a surprise birthday cake and by adopting a new constitution in 1913.

However, the history of the Tree of Life Congregational sisterhood did not mention

⁴⁰An Outline History of Congregation Beth El, (Detroit, Michigan, 1850-1940), p. 50.

⁴¹Proceedings of the First General Convention, p. 20.

⁴²Ibid, p. 51.

⁴³Helen Kohn Henning, The Tree of Life, 1896-1946, (Columbia, South Carolina, Press of The R. L. Bryan Company, 1945), p. 69.

the inception of the national organization or any desire to join the NFTS. Internal problems may have distracted the group from national developments. The group claimed 29 members in 1912, but in 1913, the group lost members due to death and because of families relocating away from their city. This sisterhood also mourned the death of its founder, Mrs. Kohn at this time. It was in 1914, when the women were busy working to provide a new cover for the Torah, that they mention having received a letter from the NFTS inviting them to join the federation. Because the women felt that they did not know enough about the NFTS, they turned the matter over to their rabbi, Rabbi Merfeld. With his approval, their group joined the NFTS on April 6, 1915. Immediately upon joining the NFTS, the Ladies' Aid Society changed its name to the Sisterhood of the Tree of Life Synagogue.⁴⁴

For another perspective, the Euclid Avenue Temple Sisterhood of Cleveland, Ohio provides a picture of one of the earliest successful sisterhoods. The synagogue organized its sisterhood in 1909 just as they were building a new building. Immediately, the sisterhood of Euclid Avenue presented an organ to the temple, furnished the temple's parlor, and began its efforts to raise funds. In 1919, the sisterhood reported a rapidly growing membership with more than one thousand members. Mrs. Sol Moses, the honorary president was excited about the group's size, observing that the women could continue to "fulfill the mission outlined by the NFTS."⁴⁵

⁴⁴Ibid, p. 80.

⁴⁵The Euclid Avenue Temple, A History, (Cleveland, Ohio, October 20, 1919), p. 3.

With the formation of the national organization, preexisting local sisterhoods continued their work with renewed enthusiasm. The mission of NFTS to support the synagogue further legitimized sisterhood women's work. Providing financial, educational, and religious support to their communities became a national initiative and fostered sisterhood pride. In cities where sisterhood groups did not exist before 1913, the NFTS inspired groups to organize in places like Cincinnati, for instance. Often with the assistance of their rabbis, women's auxiliaries changed their names and constitutions to affiliate with the NFTS. Sisterhood officers also reorganized their committees based upon the new model provided by the NFTS constitution. NFTS members initiated a wave of ideas that helped to strengthen sisterhood relationships with congregations. Through their participation on national projects such as the Uniongram, HUC Dormitory Campaign, HUC Scholarships, the Art Calendar, and the Sisterhood Sabbath, local groups contributed to the NFTS strengthening of Reform Judaism. At the same time, sisterhood groups redefined their roles within the synagogue. Sisterhood officers communicated with temple Boards in ground breaking ways. By learning to coexist in partnership with other synagogue organizations, sisterhood groups helped to define distinct roles for each organization. Sisterhoods took responsibility for running Sabbath Schools, donating funds for buildings and religious objects, organizing celebrations, and creating a Sisterhood prayer. The mission of the sisterhood continued to be about improving the congregational life of individual synagogues. The women responded to the charge by strongly affiliating with the NFTS, by raising large amounts of money for NFTS projects, and by participating in conventions.

Chapter Three:

A Change in Governance as Sisterhood Women Assume their Place in the Synagogue

Women's efforts to find a worthy place in the synagogue were supported and inspired by the formation of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. Early Reform philosophy stressed equality for women in Judaism. At the first General NFTS Convention in Cincinnati in 1913, Rabbi David Philipson reminded those gathered of the early Reformers thoughts on women's equality. As Philipson recalled one of the most respected Reform rabbis and thinkers, Abraham Geiger, in 1837, had encouraged equal treatment of women in Reform Judaism:

Let there be from now on no distinction between duties for men and women unless flowing from the natural laws governing the sexes; no assumption of the spiritual minority of woman as though she were incapable of grasping the deep things in religion; no institution of the public service, either in form or in content, which shuts the doors of the temple in the face of woman..¹

Geiger and others offered an innovative vision. Never before in the history of Judaism did its leaders proclaim equality between the sexes in every aspect of Jewish life. The reality, however, was that America's Reform synagogues and leaders were slow in matching reality to their rhetoric. Congregational leaders welcomed early sisterhood efforts in areas like planning dinners and selecting decorations for the synagogue, they were slower to integrate women as fully enfranchised members of their communities.

With the formation of sisterhoods, women's benevolent work was welcomed by

¹Transcript of Proceedings, the First General Convention, January 21-23, 1913, p. 16, Cincinnati, Ohio, Women of Reform Judaism Records, Jacob Rader Marcus Center, of the American Jewish Archives.

most rabbis and synagogue boards, and sisterhood women quickly realized the impact they could have on the life of the synagogue. Not only did the women volunteer their time and creative energy, but their financial contributions were significant to synagogues, the Reform movement, and to other charitable organizations. The ability of sisterhoods to raise large amounts of money did not go without notice, and congregations and the UAHC began to rely upon them for large donations. The extent of women's contributions to their synagogue communities and the changing political context helped shape new roles for women in the American Jewish synagogue. The suffrage amendment contributed to redefining women's status within congregations at a time when sisterhood groups had proved their worthiness. With the support of the NFTS, sisterhood women changed expectations of women's roles in the synagogue throughout the twentieth century.

The History of Inclusion of Women in America's Synagogues

The process by which women became equal members in synagogues occurred for varying reasons and at different times in America's Reform synagogues. Governance issues arose as sisterhoods took on more responsibility within their synagogues. As congregations began to rely on contributions made by sisterhoods, temple boards requested a sisterhood presence at their meetings. Sisterhood officers worked with temple leaders to allocate responsibilities to best serve the congregation. Karla Goldman explains that although leaders of Reform congregations thought they had addressed women's needs by introducing pews and mixed choirs, a question of women's roles surfaced again as women volunteered their efforts and became instrumental in synagogue

life.² As the twentieth century progressed, cultural expectations shifted with the adoption of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, granting women the right to vote in 1920. With this historic decision, synagogues came under increased pressure to recognize women's right to political equality in the congregation. As a result, sisterhood women, active in almost every aspect of synagogue life, came to expect congregational membership and the right to serve on congregational boards.

The women of NFTS knew that a change in synagogue climate was required before their names could be added to congregational rosters. A limited number of congregations included women in membership and governance before the NFTS push for such opportunities. Linda Kuzmack describes how Reform rabbis usually supported women's equality, for "the woman's movement's values were compatible with Reform's stress on prophetic ethics and reflected the future trend of woman's role in the majority culture..."³ Goldman asserts that the earliest congregation to include women as members was an Orthodox synagogue, Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel, in 1882.⁴ Certain reformers challenged existing models of synagogue governance and membership which were exclusively male. Goldman notes that Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati called for women to become voting members of synagogues as early as 1876. He suggested, "We must have women among

²Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 193.

³Linda Gordon Kuzmack, Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and in the United States, 1881-1933, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), p. 26.

⁴Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, p. 194.

the Board for the sake of the principle, and to rouse in them an interest for congregational affairs.”⁵ Bene Yeshurun did not fulfill Wise’s vision immediately, but in 1915 they granted women the right to representation at congregational board meetings.⁶ Rabbi David Einhorn also supported the idea of woman’s equality. Kuzmack explains that at the 1869 Rabbinical Conference, Einhorn convinced others to support significant changes in religious laws affecting women. Kuzmack points out that Wise and Einhorn stressed their support for women’s emancipation in Reform temples in their newspapers— Wise’s *Deborah* and Einhorn’s *Sinai*.⁷ Kuzmack also points out that Rosa Sonneschein’s newspaper *The American Jewess* founded in 1895, voiced her commitment to suffrage by insisting that congregations “must change with the times.”⁸ Sonneschein demanded that congregations accord membership to their female adherents and celebrated those congregations which acted to grant women suffrage. She suggested that membership and representation on congregational boards was not just about equality, it was a “spiritual quest.”⁹ Sonneschein wrote an appeal for equality because very few congregations had advanced on this front.

The leaders of the Reform movement as well as prominent sisterhood women

⁵Ibid.

⁶K. K. Bene Yeshurun’s Yearbook, 1923-24, p. 22.

⁷Linda Gordon Kuzmack, Woman’s Cause: The Jewish Woman’s Movement in England and in the United States, p. 25.

⁸Ibid, p. 43.

⁹Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery, p. 195.

realized the importance of women becoming equal partners in American Reform synagogues. Nonetheless, the male-dominated culture of the synagogue slowed the process of according women an equal place in synagogue life. In 1916, the *American Hebrew* published the article, "Women and the Synagogue: A Symposium," which assembled the views of leading sisterhood women of the day. In reply to the question, "What can women do for the synagogue," Mrs. Alexander [Rebecca] Kohut asked instead, "What is there that women cannot do for the Synagogue?"¹⁰ She continued her response by suggesting, that if a person were to enter any Reform synagogue in the United States, he would be certain of the important role women played in American Reform Judaism. Concerning women's role in the synagogue, Kohut suggested:

If the synagogue is to be more than a commercial enterprise who would dare to say that a woman, as the President of the congregation, or women on the Board of Trustees, could not guide the destinies of the synagogue as successfully as men! To deny the Mother in Israel these opportunities for service or to withdraw from her such responsibility, is to deny her part in our common religious life. It is fundamentally irreligious and unJewish because Judaism, as we have said, led the way in all things that made for the dignity and recognition of women.¹¹

Kohut eloquently emphasized her point by illustrating how Judaism as a religion had always revered women. Kohut believed that if synagogues denied women leadership, Reform Judaism could not be true to its very core.

In the same symposium, Carrie Simon, NFTS president, articulated the consistent message that had informed NFTS from its organization's beginning. Her vision of the

¹⁰*The American Hebrew*, April 14, 1916, p. 655.

¹¹*Ibid*, p. 656.

NFTS was that it would help American Jewish women strengthen the synagogue through service and at the same time, elevate women's status within the American synagogue. Simon expected that Jewish women would become members of congregations in their own right or as heads of families, and that women would serve on congregational boards. She noted that Rabbi Gries in Cleveland, and Rabbi Wolf in Rochester, had women serving on their synagogue boards.¹²

NFTS records make clear that NFTS leaders expected that women should actively participate in the governance of the American Reform synagogue. Beginning in the early 1920's, the NFTS placed more and more emphasis on issues of equality for women in the synagogue. A June 2, 1921 article in the *American Israelite* reported on the twenty-seventh Biennial Council of the UAHC and the Fourth Assembly of the NFTS in Buffalo which focused in part on the question of "Religious Equality of Women." At the meeting, Mrs. Weisenfeld, the NFTS president, appealed for the religious equality of women. She declared, "that if there was ever a time when women's influence in religion was needed it was now."¹³ Success at the local level pushed NFTS leaders to emphasize the logic of inclusion at the national level. The implications were great, for sisterhood women took the charge seriously and worked for equality in their own communities.

NFTS proceedings from 1924 illustrate the women's awareness of their growing success in the continued pursuit of equality. The Minutes of the Executive Board from 1924 proclaim that "this is acclaimed to be the age of women. All barriers are down and

¹²Ibid, p. 658.

¹³*The American Israelite*, June 2, 1921, Vol. 47, No. 49, p. 1.

her ambition is limitless."¹⁴ In 1925, the leaders of the NFTS continued to use language indicative of their successes as they addressed their delegates with pride. Mrs. Freiberg stated, "I don't know how the rabbis will feel about it, but we have not called on them to invoke us with their blessing. Our own women are doing it."¹⁵ Sisterhood women felt empowered by their accomplishments, for they knew they were capable contributing to congregational decisions by raising their own voices casting their own votes.

President Freiberg's Message at the Sixth Assembly of NFTS in 1925 celebrated the organization's insistence on equality. Freiberg reflected on the progress of women in Judaism since the days when Jewish women were expected to live up to unrealistic domestic expectations of womanhood expressed in the Proverbs poem, *Woman of Valor*. Though most of the poem did not represent a realistic view of women, the last verse struck Freiberg. She believed that its words were relevant to the women of Israel in her own generation. "Comeliness passes away, beauty is in vain; the woman that feareth God, her honor endureth forever." Freiberg insisted that opportunities were open for sisterhood women who served God by working for the Jewish people with honor. She eloquently addressed the women at the convention:

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-

¹⁴Proceedings of the NFTS, Volume VI., January 19-22, 1925, Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports and Sixth Biennial Assembly, St. Louis, Box. 1; Minutes of the Executive Board, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 7-8, 1924, p. 12.

¹⁵Women of Reform Judaism Records, Series A Proceedings, Box 2, Sixth Assembly of the NFTS, St. Louis, Mo., January 18-22, 1925, p. 2.

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 judgement are unquestioned. The day of woman's inferiority is a memory of the Dark Ages.¹⁶

Freiberg's inspiring words must have engaged the women at the convention. Sisterhood women were already demanding membership rights, voting power on temple boards, and requesting that sisterhoods be included in temple budgets. Freiberg and her colleagues felt empowered to assert the strength of their organization and its 50,000 members.¹⁷ Freiberg's message to the national federation voiced women's strength, progress, and expectations of equality in America's synagogues.

The Quest for Legitimacy

The quest for equal status within the synagogue came at different times for different sisterhood groups, reflecting changing congregational and social conditions. As Carrie Simon noted, in 1913, Cleveland's The Temple, was among the leading synagogues to recognize the value of involving women in temple governance. The congregation's yearbooks illustrate the respect that male leaders proclaimed for female participants. The women of the congregation realized that the decision to include women in every aspect of congregational life was ahead of its times. As Edna Goldsmith explained,

Organized in 1896, The Temple Women's Association was one of the first organizations of Jewish women to be actively connected with and to be officially recognized by any congregation in this country. For fifteen years the Association, known later as The Women's Auxiliary, has been identified

¹⁶Ibid, p. 115.

¹⁷Ibid.

with every important Temple Occasion.¹⁸

Women were invited to attend annual meetings, to participate in the temple club dinners, and to actively participate on temple committees. The membership of the sisterhood in 1913 was 760 women.¹⁹ By 1915, the sisterhood counted more than eleven hundred members. The president of the sisterhood, in her yearly report, acknowledged the hard work of active sisterhood members. Her message communicated the high level of appreciation that the congregation felt towards the sisterhood. By 1915, women had been invited to serve on the Board of Trustees.

The Temple has promptly recognized our earnest efforts and labors and has granted us unusual distinction and official recognition; six of our women have been elected Trustees of the Congregation, of whom three have been appointed chairmen of the important Sabbath School, Library and Commemoration Fund Committees.²⁰

As in Cleveland, Cincinnati's Bene Yeshurun, as early as 1915, proved its commitment to supporting women's efforts by including women in synagogue governance. Considering women capable of assisting in board decisions, the Board of Trustees asked the auxiliary to choose two members to serve as board representatives. The women were thus given a voice in the affairs of the temple.²¹ Membership, however, was still a different issue and the president of the sisterhood, Mrs. S. Geismar, seemed to accept the difference between male and female congregants in her call to encourage membership,

¹⁸The Temple's Yearbook, The Twentieth Anniversary Number, 1913, p. 46.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰The Temple's Yearbook, 1915, p. 52.

²¹*The American Israelite*, June 17, 1915, Vol. 61, No. 51, p. 5.

In the matter of Temple membership as well as our sisterhood membership much remains to be done. We conceive it to be our sphere, to urge all parents of this congregation to prompt the enrollment of their sons as members of the congregation and their daughters as members of the Sisterhood.²²

Though Mrs. Geismar understood women's usefulness in certain areas of leadership, she seemed to accept that men and women would serve in different places. Parents did not seem to have the same expectations for their daughters as their sons. Young women would be encouraged to participate through sisterhood membership while young men would be urged to join the synagogue.

The sisterhood president in 1923-24 aware of the strength of their organization, acknowledged the influence sisterhood women had in Reform Judaism:

In the short ten years of the existence of the Sisterhood, women have accomplished great things (say we modestly), and added strength to the Union in their appeals for Service and more Service for the cause of Judaism. Never, in the history of the Congregation have they realized their possibilities, nor felt the needs of co-operation, as they do at this time, when they feel and know, that they have become living, breathing factors in the House of Prayers. Not alone in local organizations has the strength of women been manifested, but in the State and National affairs, has her influence been an important one.²³

Realizing the advances that Bene Yeshurun's sisterhood had made in a remarkably short period of time, the sisterhood president's report cited the importance of women's work in the congregation and beyond. Her statement indicates an awareness of changing expectations for women's participation within their synagogue, Reform Judaism and American life. She noted especially the incredible progress of women in governance of

²²K. K. Bene Yeshurun's Yearbook, 1917-1918, p. 25.

²³K. K. Bene Yeshurun's Yearbook, 1923-24, p. 22.

the synagogue,

What might be termed the evolution of woman in the Synagogue, is very evident at this time, for she has made the strides of a life time and now sits with her elders. Unlike her sisters of old, tucked away in obscurity, out of sight and almost out of mind, apart from her lord of creations, she now sits with him, on an equal plane, confers with him, and determines grave matters in Congregational and Religious interests. The Plum Street Temple was one of the first in the Union to recognize woman's worth in this particular instance and placed two on the Board of Directors.²⁴

The report also emphasized the fact that a wife of a member could now be considered an independent voting congregational member with the payment of nominal dues.²⁵

The American Israelite, in 1917, reported that in Youngstown, Ohio a woman was to represent the sisterhood on the Board of Trustees of the local temple. Miriam S. Moyer, former president of the Youngstown sisterhood described how this came about,

Filled with enthusiasm at what I heard at the Biennial Convention, I returned to our Sisterhood and urged them to make a decided effort to obtain this important change in the Constitution. After a campaign of publicity and enthusiasm with the co-operation of some of the members of the congregation, an amendment was submitted at the Annual meeting in May and voted upon at the special meeting held in September. As a result we have one woman representing us, on the Board of Trustees, and best of all that woman will be elected by the Sisterhood.²⁶

Moyer's enthusiasm captured the impact of the NFTS. With the national organization pushing for equality in governance throughout the country's Reform synagogues, she represents the NFTS's successful efforts. Biennial Conventions served as a forum to learn about national initiatives encouraging representatives to return to their sisterhoods to seek

²⁴Ibid, p. 24.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶*The American Israelite*, September 27, 1917, Vol. 64, No. 13, p. 5.

representation on their temple boards.

In 1919, *The American Hebrew* captured the voices of men and women who recognized the need for women's leadership in the synagogue. Daniel P. Hays, a New York lawyer extremely active in communal affairs, spoke for the inclusion of women in synagogue governance. Because of his position as a member of the executive committee of the UAHC, he was asked to express his position. He declared that women were equal to men in the synagogue. In the article, it was clear that sisterhood women viewed Hays as one who was "both practical and spiritual," and they appreciated his strong statement at a Reciprocity Meeting of Temple Sisterhoods when he asked:

Why should man relegate to himself the administration of the Temple? There should be women upon every Board of the Trustees upon every Temple in New York. And if the men don't want them, the women should demand the right to be represented, because the future of Judaism is in the hands of the women.²⁷

By 1924, this message had gained credibility, as sisterhood women were asking for the right to full representation on Executive Boards. Later that year, the sisterhood women of the New York State Federation of Temple Sisterhoods paid tribute to the recently deceased Daniel P. Hays by honoring his name with an amendment stating: "Whereby full equality will be conferred upon the women of the Synagogue. Let it be known as the Daniel P. Hays Amendment."²⁸

²⁷ *The American Hebrew*, December 12, 1919, p. 152.

²⁸ *The American Hebrew*, January 4, 1924, p. 235.

A Search for Equality in Synagogue Governance

The collection of sisterhood records at the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives provides insight into the climate within sisterhoods regarding the desire for equal standing within congregational hierarchies. Minutes from different sisterhoods afford a rare opportunity to see first hand how women perceived their struggle for equal representation. Research suggests that sisterhood leaders recognized that the issue of women's inclusion was a sensitive one. Sisterhood minutes record often contested debates over suffrage, membership, and the right to vote on congregational boards.

The sisterhood in Charleston, West Virginia offers a good example of a sisterhood's efforts to deal with these concerns. In 1919, the sisterhood discussed the question of whether or not women should become members of the congregation. Meeting organizers appear to have understood the controversial nature of their topic, for Mrs. Joseph Schwab emphasized that the gathering was to be a "social" meeting for the purpose of discussion only and that no business would be transacted.

Current events affected the sisterhood's agenda, for the same meeting also included a debate on women's suffrage in American society. The speaker presented some background on the subject, and then the women discussed different views on the issue. The records indicate that Dr. Bettan (an active member of the board) was invited to speak on the "negative" side of the question. The women noted, however, that because he was in favor of suffrage, he "was not a good exponent of the anti-side of suffrage." There was no further discussion on the topic, until about five months later when the records include

a discussion of a more serious nature.

As the debate progressed over many months, the president of the sisterhood announced that a special meeting was to be held on Monday, May 6, 1920, and that the agenda concerned, "important matters concerning the Temple Membership."²⁹ On May 6, 1920, the sisterhood did address the question of the membership of women. Mr. Joe Loewenstine, president of the Temple, was invited to speak about the Model Constitution adopted by the temple. He noted that changes were made in the constitution and stressed that these changes pertained to "Unity of Membership." Next, a suggestion was made by Dr. Bettan, that "every woman of the Sisterhood become a member of the congregation." At that time, a motion was made that the resolution be tabled for discussion until the next scheduled meeting.

On May 20, 1920, at the annual temple meeting, members of the congregation adopted a new constitution. Sisterhood members were included in a vote concerning dues. The voting members discussed a possible minimum charge for women to become members of the temple. They decided on four dollars per annum.³⁰ However, on May 1, 1922, the discussion of membership continued, when a joint meeting was held between a Special Committee appointed by the sisterhood and a Special Committee appointed by the Board of Trustees. At this gathering, various opinions were expressed by individual members of both committees upon the question of the "desirability" of women becoming

²⁹Congregational Sisterhood Records of Temple Sisterhood of Charleston, West Virginia, 1917-1920 and 1921-1922, p. 114.

³⁰Ibid, p. 114.

members. As to the matter of dues, many suggestions were also made. The secretary described the lengthy debate and consideration of various issues and explained that the two committees decided that the minimum dues to be paid by a woman where the head of the family was already a member of the congregation, might properly be six dollars a year. In cases where the payment of additional minimum dues would be a hardship on the family, the dues of the male head of the family would be readjusted accordingly. At the meeting, those present also decided that for each member of the congregation, a dollar a year was required to be paid to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Lastly, a final note from the meeting was included dealing again with the payment of dues by women becoming members when a male head of the family was already a member, and it was noted that this issue was not of "any material importance."³¹ The records also indicate that for the year 1921-1922, the sisterhood was considered as an item in the temple's budget.³²

Temple Israel's sisterhood in Gary, Indiana, had a lengthy history of requesting representation at congregational board meetings. As early as March of 1915, when still called the Woman's Auxiliary, the group adopted the following resolutions:

That if it be the will and pleasure of the officers and members of Temple Israel, that the women be represented at their monthly meetings. The auxiliary will appoint a board of five members, whose duty it shall be to attend the temple meetings. And said board's privileges at said meetings, be decided as the majority of members of the Temple shall deem right and

³¹Ibid, 1922, p. 54.

³²Ibid, 1921-1922, p. 60.

proper.³³

On June 28, 1915, a "representative board" was appointed to represent the auxiliary at all temple meetings. The auxiliary women strove to be recognized as active members of the congregation in areas beyond "sisterhood" concerns. By being included at board meetings, the women could be better educated about the infra-structure of the temple. At this point, however, women were not granted the right to vote.

The emphasis on "representation" as opposed to voting privileges was further stressed three years later at an auxiliary meeting. On Oct. 4, 1917, the temple board informed the Auxiliary that:

The Ladies Auxiliary of Temple Israel is permitted to be represented by a committee appointed by its president in the capacity of entering into discussion on matters of interest to them; however, it is understood that such representation shall not have the privilege of voting.³⁴

The records do not include discussion of the communication. It does appear, however, that auxiliary members must have requested the right to vote on board decisions or such a communication would not have been sent to be officially read at a sisterhood meeting.

For many months following receipt of this letter, auxiliary minutes reflect discussions specifically pertaining to sisterhood activities and not about requesting a vote. Debate appeared at various times in the minutes as to whether or not the group was responsible for a particular job within congregational life. For instance, on January 6, 1921, a question arose as to whether the temple or the auxiliary should send flowers in the case of a death

³³Gary Indiana, Ladies Auxiliary Minutes, Box. No. X-133, p. 5.

³⁴Ibid, p. 78.

of a member. The temple board voted upon the issue and communicated their decision to the women that the auxiliary should be responsible for sending the flowers.³⁵ The decision is indicative of how the temple understood the auxiliary's role within the temple. The auxiliary, viewed as an appendage to the synagogue, is understood as helpful in certain functions that the board found to be appropriate "female" responsibilities.

In 1928, fifteen years after joining the NFTS, Temple Israel's Sisterhood changed its constitution. Though it considered itself an affiliate of the national organization, the sisterhood did not officially change its name or create a new constitution until that time. In the section describing the duties of the officers, the sisterhood president and vice-president were said to serve on the temple board in an "ex-officio" capacity.³⁶

The sisterhood of Ohev Sholom Congregation in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a member of the NFTS since 1913, responded to the initiatives of the national organization, and its work reflected awareness of NFTS goals and philosophy. First, the women of the sisterhood expressed the desire to maintain control over allocating funds to the congregation. On March 7, 1916, the minutes record a refusal to act on a motion brought to the sisterhood by the board of the congregation. The board asked them to fund a gift to the president of the congregation. The sisterhood refused, for they stated that "such things should be acted upon by the board."³⁷ Beginning in 1922, the sisterhood made

³⁵Ibid, p. 170.

³⁶Ibid, p. 158.

³⁷Harrisburg, Pa., Ladies Hebrew Social Circle, Manuscript Collection No. 392, p. 82.

explicit their intention of being represented in all areas of congregational life. The minutes of April 4, 1922, indicate that a motion was made by Mrs. M. Uman for two women members of the congregation to represent the sisterhood on the board of the temple.³⁸

The final ratification of the nineteenth Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote in the United States, only positively affected the work of sisterhood women across the nation. Passage of the national suffrage amendment empowered women in congregational settings to request votes from their synagogue boards. The sisterhood of Ohev Sholom in Harrisburg sought out the support of women's organizations in order to educate its members on how to seek equality in their house of worship. At a meeting on November 7, 1922, for instance, the sisterhood secretary read a plea from the League of Women Voters for the sisterhood to become members of that organization. Communication with the League of Women Voters remained a theme in the minutes from 1922 through 1924. At this same meeting of November 7, 1922, the sisterhood women voiced their requests for representation on the various standing committees at the temple. This time it appeared that they were successful in their efforts to elevate women's role in their temple, for on February 5, 1924, the records indicate that a plea was made for more women to join the temple membership and pay dues.³⁹

As evidenced from sisterhood minutes, newspaper articles, and yearbook records, governance of synagogues opened to sisterhood women at different times. During the late nineteenth century, it was rare that women were granted membership in their own right.

³⁸Ibid, p. 82.

³⁹Ibid, p. 135.

As the twentieth century progressed, congregations slowly incorporated women into membership and board representation. The year 1915 stands out from the congregational records analyzed as the time when certain sisterhoods obtained representation at temple board meetings. The suffrage debate advanced sisterhood group's quest for equality. Many times, as sisterhoods struggled to define their own identities within congregations, the request for further acceptance within congregations seemed to be too much to request.

Women embraced membership and voting rights as synagogues admitted women privileges that had been restricted to men. As women began to be included in the governing bodies of synagogues, they contributed to the changing shape and direction of the American synagogue. As Rebecca Kohut stressed in 1916, the acceptance of women as members of synagogues with equal voting rights would be true to Judaism's very core. With the NFTS encouragement and support of such efforts, Reform Judaism grew as it grasped American as well as Jewish ideals.

Chapter Four:

Religious Contributions of the NFTS: Sisterhood Participation in the Religious Life of the American Reform Synagogue

The core mission of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, as defined at the first convention in 1913, was to support the synagogues of American Reform Judaism in any way possible and to uphold "the religious and moral development of Israel."¹ The NFTS declared that the main task of every individual sisterhood associated with the UAHC was to "render personal and financial assistance to its own congregation."² In keeping with both goals, the women felt that it was their responsibility to encourage attendance at services, to educate their children, to ensure a functioning synagogue, and to educate themselves.

The NFTS encouraged sisterhood members to enhance the ritual lives of Jewish Americans. The range of religious activities sponsored by congregational sisterhoods grew to affect every aspect of Jewish life. The National Committee on Religion, created in 1913, oversaw many of these activities with a special emphasis on education and holiday observance. Many of these projects continue to influence the way congregants interact with their synagogues to this day. The committee's impact on Reform Jewish institutions is evident in many current approaches to education and certain liturgical practices. From home observance of holidays to the creation of an Art Calendar to the running of Sabbath

¹Transcript of Proceedings, First General Convention, January 21, 1913, p. 24, Volume 1, Women of Reform Judaism Records, Jacob Rader Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

²Ibid, p. 36.

schools, sisterhood women affected the way Judaism was to be taught and practiced. As Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon note, it was these activities that enabled sisterhood women “to change the expectations of their proper behavior within its portals and expand Jewish women’s public religious roles.”³ The NFTS directed and supported local sisterhood efforts to help those within their community live as educated Jews. Because NFTS projects such as the Study Circles, the Art Calendar, and Special Sisterhood Days illuminate the core mission of the organization, they will be the focus of this chapter.

The Pursuit of Jewish Knowledge

The NFTS encouraged women’s involvement in religious life in various ways that over time redefined women’s participation in congregations. During the NFTS’s opening meeting, the Committee on Religion was developed for the purpose of devising “ways of stimulating the acquisition of knowledge of things Jewish.”⁴ In order to persuade sisterhoods to carry out this goal, the Committee on Religion proposed that each sisterhood devote a dozen or so evenings per season to Jewish topics; thus organizing sisterhood “Study Circles.” Because of the lack of curricular materials to help them with this task, the NFTS Committee on Religion recommended that the committee “acquire and publish such literature as it finds helpful for this purpose.”⁵ One method the NFTS pursued

³Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon, “Ladies and the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue 1900-1933,” in Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture, eds., Maurie Sachs, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 64.

⁴Proceedings of the NFTS from the First General Convention, Volume 1, 1913-1923, p. 36.

⁵Ibid, p. 37.

was to support the creation of "Jewish Educational Tracts" that were being developed by the CCAR and the UAHC.⁶

As the idea blossomed throughout 1913, many congregations organized successful Study Circles across the nation. The NFTS identified the Circles as a priority, arguing that adult education was essential to women's ability to teach their children. Study Circle topics ranged from Biblical studies to politics. They were often led by congregational rabbis, or many times sisterhoods invited scholars from Hebrew Union College and other major academic institutions as guest lecturers. In 1920, the Committee on Religion reiterated their plan to make education a part of every sisterhood's goals. First, the NFTS urgently appealed to the sisterhoods to form small study groups to discuss "questions of religion which are of the vital importance in creating a better Jewish womanhood." Second, the national organization prompted sisterhoods to do all in their power to "increase the efficiency of the Religious Schools."⁷

In a report of the National Committee on Religion in 1921, the Committee reported that Bible and other study groups continued to be established in almost every community throughout the country. The attendance level at the Study Circles and classes were reported to be high especially when held during evening hours so male members of the congregation could attend. The Committee also reported that, "in most cases" the rabbi of the congregation conducted the classes, yet "occasionally" a member of the sisterhood

⁶Proceedings of the NFTS, Biennial Meeting Baltimore, Report of the National Committee on Cooperation, January 1917, p. 27.

⁷Ibid, National Committee Report on Sabbath Schools, p. 33.

served as the leader.⁸

Local sisterhoods across the country developed adult classes with the support of the National Committee on Religion. For instance in 1914, the Rodef Shalom Sisterhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania planned a lecture course on the Philosophy of Jewish History delivered by Professor J. Morgenstern of Cincinnati. In addition, a Bible class was to be conducted every Friday evening for both men and women and a psychology class would be led every Thursday morning by Rabbi, Dr. J. Levy. The sisterhood also organized a successful Choral Club. Women from other congregations were encouraged to join; soon sixty women calling themselves the "Lyric Club of Pittsburgh" were performing public concerts.⁹

In 1913, the president of Cleveland's The Temple sisterhood enumerated the organization's main goals in her yearly report to the congregation. The president explained that they planned to improve the religious life of the temple and to pursue the study of Bible. Mrs. Siegmund Joseph, president of the sisterhood, proposed, "Let us prove ourselves worthy of the privileges granted and the confidence expressed. By our own interest in the religious life of The Temple, and in the study of the Bible, we, the mothers in Israel, will demonstrate to Rabbi Gries that his Congregation at least may earn the right to be called "The People of the Book."¹⁰ Edna Goldsmith presented the annual

⁸Proceedings of the NFTS, Report of the National Committee on Religion, 1921, Louisville, Kentucky, pp. 22-23.

⁹*The American Israelite*, November, 12, 1914, Vol. 61, No. 20, p. 8.

¹⁰The Temple, Twentieth Anniversary Number, 1913, p.42.

report the following year in Mrs. Siegmund Joseph's absence. She emphasized the educational contributions made by the sisterhood. She reported, "Religion, Literature, Art and Music have been interpreted to us during the year in a manner which can not be adequately reviewed in this brief moment..."¹¹ The sisterhoods demonstrated their agreement with the NFTS's Committee on Religion's guidance through their widespread demonstration that education was a priority. As a result, a community of women became better educated in fields of study that were once forbidden to women. Sisterhood members empowered themselves to go beyond the role of caretaker in their communities as they took on more responsibilities. Women proved confident in planning and participating in educational seminars, teaching holiday observance, and running Sunday Schools. Sisterhood women were helping to create active Reform synagogues with a focus on educating Jews. Women gained skills necessary to educate Jewish children and shape Jewish lives. Sisterhood women's participation in and organization of Sunday School work including financing, teaching, furnishing, and running the schools, should be recognized as one of their most outstanding accomplishments (although this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis).

The Committee on Religion's initiative for study groups was first directed toward adults and later to children. In Parkersburg, West Virginia, for instance, the sisterhood minutes from October 9, 1923 recorded that the NFTS made many requests for the sisterhood to organize a Child's Study Circle. The minutes indicate that Sisterhood

¹¹Ibid, p. 46.

President, Mrs. Nathan, was asked to "take charge of the wonderful work."¹² One year later, in 1924, the NFTS Committee on Religion launched its national plan to organize Child Study Circles in its congregations.¹³ Though the initiative was not immediately embraced by every sisterhood, the committee expressed their commitment to the idea in the 1926 Report of the National Committee on Religion. The women on the Committee reported their feelings, "that our efforts were justified in the formation of seventy-five Child Study Circles and in the reports of the progress of these reports. It is hoped that this year will see an increased number of Child Study Circles formed."¹⁴ The report indicated that the NFTS distributed a uniform curriculum to each sisterhood for the Study Circle, and individual sisterhoods "conducted according to the needs of the Circle members."¹⁵

The initiative to educate Jewish adults and their children persisted as one of NFTS main goals throughout its existence. As important as the study of Jewish knowledge and rituals was the need to educate children about the spiritual and moral aspects of the Jewish tradition. In 1921, at the Biennial Meeting, Mrs. Misch reported on the need to educate children. Stressing the importance of religious education, she queried her audience,

What are we doing for his spiritual health? If we fail to strengthen his character, we fail all along the line. No matter how many bathtubs or

¹²Hebrew Ladies Auxiliary Minutes, Parkersburg, West Virginia, October 9, 1923.

¹³Proceedings of the NFTS, Reports of National Standing Committees, Baltimore, Md., October 21, 1926, p. 91.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

playgrounds or medical inspections we give the child, we have failed unless we have also made him high-minded, loving truth, hating a lie, loving religion, trained to live in harmony with his fellows, and with high ideals.¹⁶

Mrs. Misch continued to emphasize the need to educate children about faith and morality. By stressing moral integrity and spiritual growth, the women hoped to teach their children how to live full and meaningful lives as Jews. Mrs. Misch explained that religious awareness grows out of "daily prayers, informal allusions in conversation and direct instruction."¹⁷

Mrs. Misch spoke further about her hope that knowledge of Bible stories would be a key part of a child's education. She urged sisterhood women to encourage mothers to read to their children before bedtime in order to teach a love of Bible. Mrs. Misch reminded delegates that they should stress synagogue attendance, personal prayer, and study to families. She pleaded, "Please, please mothers, whether it is through your own private study, or whether it is through betterment by means of study circle which has been urged upon you, and above all through the instructions of your Rabbis, make yourselves fit teachers for your Children!"¹⁸ The Biennial meetings proved fruitful, for sisterhood members who participated brought home concrete ideas about the education of children. The Committee's educational programs were developed by individual sisterhood women who brought their programs to NFTS conventions. Sisterhood women created and maintained schools, and at the same time, influenced the educational goals of the Reform

¹⁶Proceeding of the NFTS, Forth Biennial in Buffalo, New York, May 1921, p. 60-63.

¹⁷Ibid, p.61.

¹⁸Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Meeting of the NFTS, May 23-26 1921, p. 77.

movement.

The mission of the NFTS to improve religious education for the younger Jewish generation manifested itself in various projects. One area in which the NFTS saw need for immediate improvement was the Confirmation ceremony. As early as 1915, the National Committee on Religion began their campaign to improve the Confirmation ceremony which was often organized by sisterhoods. The NFTS recommended to mothers of students to forgo certain "undignified customs" that did not enhance the meaning of the day.¹⁹ Adjustments were made in the service as well as the rituals surrounding the religious ceremony. NFTS leaders challenged unwanted customs surrounding confirmation such as "the acceptance of Confirmation gifts, home receptions and showy gifts on the pulpit."²⁰ By 1922, the Confirmation Ceremony, according to the National Committee on Religion, had been improved. Their report stated, "Each year finds more religious schools adopting greater simplicity for the confirmation service. Temple receptions are held for the confirmants, and the promiscuous giving of presents is being frowned down upon everywhere."²¹ The NFTS, concerned with the religious content of the service, emphasized the spiritual meaning of confirmation. Thus, the idea of presenting the confirmants with a copy of the prayer book or "Blessings and Praise," or another gift given to boys was a

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Proceeding of the Fifth Biennial Assembly of the NFTS, New York, January 1923, p. 132.

²¹Proceedings of the NFTS, Reports of the National Standing Committees, Louisville, Ky, October 31, 1922, p. 64.

miniature mezuzah enriched the religious meaning of the occasion.²²

Projects to reach children also included the 1917 NFTS plan to ask that all synagogues associated with the UAHC to offer Junior Membership to boys and girls who, after confirmation, would be encouraged to join their synagogues.²³ During the 1927 meeting, the NFTS Committee on Religion informed delegates that many congregations were successfully sponsoring Junior organizations. The Junior membership, viewed as a way to provide “spiritual” and “social activities” to young people, helped to maintain the affiliation of post-confirmation students.

Another area in which NFTS shaped the religious education of Reform Jewry was in its mission to open Free Religious Schools. The Committee on Religion directed sisterhoods to promote free religious schools and tuition-free education for families that could not afford to educate their children otherwise. In this regard, the NFTS maintained that in 1917, four free schools had already been founded but they stated for the record that, “...we trust that the Sisterhood will come to realize the obligation that is attached to Jewish womanhood in this respect. The motto of Israel has always been ‘Talmud Torah Keneged Kullom,’ – ‘The study of the Torah is the greatest of all virtues.’”²⁴ Sisterhood women felt obligated by this motto and much of the NFTS philosophy was based on its meaning. The NFTS committed to pay for all educational literature at such schools, thus

²²Proceedings of the NFTS, Reports of the National Standing Committees, Fourteenth Annual Report, October 1926, p. 86.

²³Proceedings of the Second Biennial Meeting of the NFTS, Baltimore, 1917, p. 46.

²⁴Proceedings of the NFTS, Biennial Meeting Baltimore, 1917, p. 47.

they did not see any reason for the sisterhoods not to form the schools wherever needed.²⁵

With their goal clearly stated, the NFTS officially set their plan into action with their 1917

Resolution:

Believing it to be the duty of every Jewish organization to increase the facilities of religious education, be it therefore Resolved, That the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods endorse this principle and that the Sisterhoods use their good offices in securing admission to the religious schools of their synagogues for such children as can not pay for the tuition.²⁶

The Report of the National Committee on Religion reported in 1921 that numerous sisterhoods had provided the financial backing, supplies, and teachers to create Free Religious Schools. In Denver, for instance, at Temple Emanuel, the sisterhood offered a Bible to children who had perfect attendance.²⁷ In Cincinnati, the Rockdale Temple sisterhood worked with the Reading Road Temple sisterhood to support a school for needy Jewish children.²⁸ By 1923, the NFTS reported the existence of forty-two free religious schools created under the auspices of local sisterhoods.²⁹ In 1926, the Committee on Religion reported that the Mt. Neboh Sisterhood of New York maintained the largest Free School with an enrollment of eight hundred children and a staff of twenty teachers and two

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid, p. 56.

²⁷Proceedings of the NFTS, Report of the National Committee on Religious Schools, Wikes-Barre, Pa, Oct. 31, 1921, p. 41.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Series A Proceedings, Box 1, Volume 1, 1913-1923, Report of the Special Committee on Progress of Sisterhoods, Chicago, January 23, 1923, p. 145.

substitutes.³⁰

In accordance with the NFTS mission to support Jewish education for its youth, the National Committee on Religion committed to forming Religious School libraries wherever possible. In 1919, the NFTS passed a Resolution to create and support libraries at religious schools. The Resolution read:

Whereas the education of the child in the religious schools is one of the main interests of the Temple Sisterhood, and Whereas, the library of the school can be made an important factor in religious school education, Therefore, be it Resolved that the Sisterhood, through its Committee on Religious Schools, send out propaganda from time to time with suggestions stimulating the local Sisterhoods actively to cooperate with the rabbis in the effort of establishing religious school libraries.³¹

The establishment of libraries could only enhance Sabbath School education. The initiative to create and maintain libraries for Sunday Schools exemplifies the NFTS commitment to literacy. In 1926, in the Fourteenth Annual Report, the Committee on Religion continued to encourage sisterhoods in the formation of libraries as the report stated, "that wherever possible, a library be instituted which will have on its shelves the numerous interesting and worth-while books on Jewish subjects, and encourage a popular demand for such literature."³² With their plan underway, NFTS women began the transformation of Sabbath School education within Reform synagogues. At the same time,

³⁰Proceedings of the NFTS, Fourteenth Annual Report of the National Standing Committees, Louisville, Ky, October 31, 1926, p. 91.

³¹Resolutions of NFTS 1913-1939, Box Number 12, Manuscript Collection Number 73, Adopted by the Third Biennial Assembly, Volume III., 1919, p. 63.

³²Proceedings of the NFTS, Fourteenth Annual Report of the National Standing Committees, Louisville, Ky, October 31, 1926, p. 90.

women in congregations grew intellectually and further developed their individual sense of purpose. As President Simon concluded "our emphasis upon these lines of work through our organization has led to the emergence of a new type of Jewish and womanly leadership."³³

The national organization encouraged education from childhood through adulthood for the Jewish people. One area which the NFTS knew should not be neglected was college-age Jews. The leaders of the national organization made this demographic group a priority. In their efforts to spread the idea of Study Circles, the leadership believed it was essential to include the nation's young Jewish adults. Mrs. Harry Sternberger, vice-chairman of the Committee on Religion, in an article she wrote for the *American Hebrew*, expressed her frustration with the lack of attention towards this age group by the Jewish community:

It is a very lamentable fact that American Jewry has practically neglected the Jewish young men and women at the universities. During the very years when these young men and women are actively engaged in formulating and deciding their life-interests and life-ambitions, we stand aside and make no attempt to urge upon their thoughtful attention Judaism's cause and Judaism's need for their loyal service.³⁴

The NFTS's Committee on Religion wasted little time in determining a practical way of solving this problem. In 1919, Mrs. Harry Sternberger proposed that the national organization create and support "Miriam Circles," or women's study circles at universities

³³*The American Hebrew*, "The Federation and the Religious Problem of the American Jewess, May 16, 1919, p. 716.

³⁴Mrs. Harry Sternberger, "Jewish Womanhood: Its Power and Opportunity," *The American Hebrew*, August 29, 1919, p. 348.

and colleges across the country. The plan included a group of speakers, rabbis, and communal workers to lecture before the "Miriam Circles" on different campuses on a wide range of topics.³⁵

The NFTS, looking for creative ways to reach young adults, launched a plan to seek out college students. The NFTS created a list of Jewish College students in order to invite students to sisterhood women's homes for the holidays. By 1927, a list was established with 1,330 student names.³⁶ One Texas delegate, concerned about college-age Jews leaving their Jewish religion behind, remarked that she had come to the convention in 1925 hoping to find solutions to the question of "what to do with our college at Austin."³⁷ The NFTS encouraged local sisterhoods to include college students in congregational and home observance of holidays. Mrs. Blatner of Albany, New York, commented at the 1925 Biennial Convention on "rebellious" college Jewish students found all over the world hoping that young Jews maintain their Judaism. She expressed at the convention,

Women, I make a plea here, today, as an earnest teacher of Judaism, don't let your children believe that they can be born with a philosophy of thought. Judaism, as any religion, is a philosophy of thought and they must work for it, and when you tell them that they must work for it they will not find the rebellious and indifferent students in our Universities. They can not be born

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Pamela S. Nadell, "The National Federal of Temple Sisterhoods," in Jewish Women in America, eds., Paula E. Hyman, Deborah Dash Moore, Vol. 2, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 980.

³⁷Proceeding of the NFTS Sixth Assembly St. Louis, Mo. January 18-22, 1925, p. 123-4.

with the philosophy of Judaism.³⁸

Struggling to solve the problem of maintaining the ties of college age-students to Judaism, Mrs. Blatner joined the chorus of voices trying to figure out how to prevent the loss of more Jews to a primarily non-Jewish American society. Mrs. Feder of Cleveland, Ohio, suggested that sisterhood women should invite both Jewish and non-Jewish students to their homes as a way of making Jewish students feel more accepted. At the end of the discussion, Mrs. Steinfeld, the National Chairman of the Student Welfare Committee, shared her assessment of the situation, "The ultimate solution to these problems lies, however in the hands of the individual mother." She further explained, "You can assist most materially by interesting your sons and daughters before they leave their homes by telling them it is your desire, your profound hope, that they will respond to the overtures made to them by the women of this department."³⁹ Visionary in their outreach to college students, NFTS realized the vital importance of reaching young adults. NFTS members took on the responsibility of outreach because they felt it was a part of the philosophy of "Talmud Torah Keneged Kullom," – "The study of the Torah is the greatest of all virtues" as well as the NFTS mission of protecting American Judaism.

The NFTS Makes A Lasting Impression

The NFTS's Committee on Religion was serious about educating and supporting the religious lives of American Jews. Beginning with the Study Circles in 1913, the

³⁸Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the NFTS, St. Louis, Mo. January 18-22, 1925, p. 125-6.

³⁹Ibid, p. 133.

committee pursued its educational goals through lecture series, courses, bible studies, Sabbath Schools, libraries, and outreach in synagogues across the United States. They also sought to publish certain materials that would support their efforts. One long-term goal was to publish a sisterhood magazine. Even though this goal was not fulfilled quickly, NFTS President Jane Evans did eventually initiate a newsletter, *Topics and Trends*, which was officially established in 1936.⁴⁰ Sisterhood minutes as well as newspaper articles capture discussions of the possibility of publishing a magazine. In Parkersburg, West Virginia, for example on December 6, 1923, the secretary was asked to write Mrs. Boche Leimer regarding the sisterhood magazine.⁴¹ The sisterhood magazine was also an idea proposed by Mrs. Harry Sternberger. She suggested, "I shall also welcome the day when we can have a magazine devoted solely to the interests of Jewish womanhood, which might be called "The Jewish Woman."⁴²

Second, the NFTS launched a plan in 1919 to help guide the religious lives of Jewish families with the creation of a prayerbook that the committee hoped would be available to every Jewish home. Mrs. Bauer, a representative at the Buffalo Biennial Meeting in 1921, suggested to the delegates that a book of prayers be created and sent to the Sisterhoods for sale. She described her plan to the delegation:

Now it seems to me, along this line, that if we want to encourage religion in our homes – as we do – that perhaps under the head of this Committee on

⁴⁰Pamela S. Nadell, "National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods," p. 981.

⁴¹Minutes of the Hebrew Ladies Auxiliary Association, Parkersburg, West Virginia, December 6, 1923, Ms. Collection, No. 427.

⁴²*The American Hebrew*, August 29, 1919, p. 348.

Religion we might have some sort of competitive compositions, or something of that kind, in the nature of religious work, by means of which the Sisterhood might foster and bring about some good results among the junior members of our body.⁴³

The Committee decided to engage Professor Freehof of Hebrew Union College to prepare a book of prayers for the fall.⁴⁴ Discussion of the prayer book was mentioned in Richmond, Virginia's Yearbook of 1923-1924 in the sisterhood report, where it was mentioned that the prayer book was ready for distribution. Sisterhood president, Mrs. Meyer Kirsh described the news, "At the Boston Assembly, the Sisterhoods asked for a book of prayer and meditation, and this book is now ready for distribution. It is compiled by Dr. Freehof, of Cincinnati, contains fifty themes of Blessing and Praise. I commend it to every one and trust it will find a place in every home."⁴⁵ The Chairman of Publications for the CCAR, Mr. Isaac Marcuson, wrote a letter to Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg in May of 1923 indicating, that the book of Meditations and Prayers "prepared" by the CCAR and "requested" by the NFTS was being printed and would soon be ready for distribution. The book in cloth-bound form would be sold for fifty cents per copy while a leather-bound edition would be one dollar per copy. He hoped that the book was what the NFTS anticipated and that it would "satisfy the yearnings of the heart for closer communion to God."⁴⁶

⁴³Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Meeting of the NFTS, May 23-26 1921, p. 24.

⁴⁴Ibid, p. 29.

⁴⁵Beth Ahabah Yearbook, Congregation Beth Ahabah, (Richmond, Virginia, 1923-1924), p. 31.

⁴⁶Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, May 13, 1923.

As early as 1913, the NFTS planned for the creation of an Art Calendar which became the NFTS's most successful and long-term publication. The National Committee on Religion articulated their vision of an Art Calendar in connection with the goal of "stimulating the acquisition of knowledge of things Jewish."⁴⁷ They suggested that the Executive Board should extend into the home of each sisterhood member a "beautiful reminder" of the Jewish year in the form of a calendar.⁴⁸ Thus, it was moved and carried that a sum of two hundred and fifty dollars be designated to produce one thousand calendars. It was also duly carried that the Executive Secretary of the NFTS request that rabbis affiliated with the UAHC promote the calendars from their pulpits.⁴⁹

The calendar was to consist of six leaves, each set in an artistic design made up of the holidays during those months.⁵⁰ The purpose of the calendar was to raise money, to educate people on the upcoming holidays, and to cultivate "a wider appreciation among Jewish people of notable works of art on Jewish subjects."⁵¹ In 1917, the popularity of the Art Calendar was noted by the *American Israelite*. That year's calendar depicting the life of Moses had been completely sold out. The article further stated that the demand for the

⁴⁷Proceeding of the Executive Board, National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, January 1913, p. 36.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰*The American Israelite*, September 11, 1913, Vol. 60, No. 11, p. 1.

⁵¹Ibid, September 18, 1913, Vol. 60, No. 12, p. 1.

calendar continued, and it was necessary to print a second edition.⁵² The President's message in 1917 also captured the efforts of the Committee on Religion to ensure the success of the Art Calendar. President Simon explained,

The Committee on Religion has thus far published four Art Calendars, and while the first three have in themselves won slow approval, the last, known as the Joseph calendar, won instant appreciation on the part of the Jewish community. This proved to me not merely that the aesthetic is desired by our people, but rather that it is possible to educate our people as to an insistence upon art's ability to satisfy modern Jewish needs.⁵³

President Simon expressed her congratulations to the Committee on their success with the Joseph Calendar.

In a 1925 letter to local Chairwomen of the Committee on Religion, National Chairwoman Mrs. Leon Goodman, wrote, "I hardly need mention the Art Calendar to our Jewish women. We now sell enough Calendars to distribute to one-fourth of our membership and I shall never feel that my ambition is realized until every woman in the Federation possesses an Art Calendar."⁵⁴ The goal of distributing and creating the Art Calendar remained constant throughout the years, and the purpose is still to educate, to "acquaint our people with Judaism in Art," and to understand the Jewish cycle of the seasons. The following year Mrs. Goodman's report to the local Committee on Religion maintained an optimistic tone and described the distribution of the Art Calendar with pride.

⁵²Ibid, July 26, 1917, Vol. 64, No. 4, p. 5.

⁵³Proceeding of the NFTS, President Annual Message, 1917 Biennial Meeting in Baltimore, p. 25.

⁵⁴Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, September 2, 1925.

She described the activity of planning the Art Calendar as an “outstanding” achievement. Goodman reflected too, that it was hard to believe that a few sisterhoods still did not participate in the Art Calendar project.⁵⁵

The 1926 Report of the National Committee reiterated the “outstanding” reception that the Art Calendar continued to receive and detailed the Art Calendar’s three main purposes. Because so few calendars in English detailed the Jewish holidays, the Art Calendar proved to be a useful tool for Jewish families. The second objective was to support and educate the Jewish people about art, “a subject about which we know so little.” Third, by producing for sale a beautiful and educational calendar, the women of the NFTS hoped to “augment the local treasury.”⁵⁶ The longevity and popularity of the Art Calendar demonstrates the quality of vision and strategic planning of the National Committee on Religion. Because of its threefold purpose, the calendar epitomized the mission of the NFTS. The Art Calendar provided financial support to sisterhoods, offered education about art and Jewish topics, and linked Jewish life in the United States to Jewish time. The Women of Reform Judaism today continue to produce and sell the calendar for the purpose of educating, raising money, and supporting art as a way to reach the Jewish community.

⁵⁵Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, September 10, 1926.

⁵⁶Proceedings of the NFTS, Fourteenth Annual Report of the National Standing Committees, Louisville, Ky, October 31, 1926, p. 87.

Participation in Ritual and Worship

The NFTS supported women's efforts to participate in worship services taking place within the American Reform synagogue. The request for a role in public worship may have grown out of the dominant presence of women congregants at Sabbath services. Sisterhood members were encouraged by rabbis to attend worship, especially in the absence of male congregants. Second, sitting in congregations during worship services, women, over time, became comfortable in the setting and with the liturgy. In 1915, for instance, the NFTS passed a resolution that required sisterhood members to participate in the burial service of members of the sisterhood by reading a special prayer.⁵⁷ Without realizing the full impact for the future, sisterhood women created opportunities within synagogue life that had never before been available to Jewish women, opening up spaces for women's public participation in congregational religious life. In doing so, they literally changed the face of American Reform Judaism.

The NFTS also adopted a special sisterhood prayer to be recited at the beginning of all sisterhood meetings. The prayer created by the NFTS for the purpose read:

Our Heavenly Father, we unite today in purpose and prayer to ask Thine assistance to aid us in promoting the spirit of religion. Help us, O Lord, not only to realize the importance of bringing religion into our homes, so that it will be a religion of every day, but inspire us, mothers and daughters in Israel, with a sense of our responsibility in these homes. May we all work in harmony in this great cause, drawing our inspiration from Thee, All-Kind Father, whence all good comes. Amen.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Resolutions of NFTS 1913-1939, Box Number 12, Manuscript Collection Number 73, Adopted by First Biennial Assembly, Volume I, p. 73.

⁵⁸Ibid, Resolution Adopted by Second Biennial Assembly, Volume II, 1917, p. 55-56.

The prayer echoed NFTS mission of strengthening religion in the home. Sisterhood women understood their purpose to be to assist congregations in making Judaism accessible to their community. While the Committee on Religion proposed this resolution and it was adopted, the NFTS suggested, "that wherever possible the meetings of the Sisterhoods be opened with prayer by a rabbi, or be opened by a selection of Scripture to be read by a member of the Sisterhood."⁵⁹ This amendment to the resolution indicates the importance placed on prayers offered by official rabbinic leadership as well as on the Tanakh. In 1917, the Committee on Religion resolved to adopt a motto for NFTS. The Committee suggested that the motto: "Come to Temple," should be placed on official notices and meetings of the individual sisterhoods. The Executive Board, recommended a different phrasing for the motto. They suggested using the formal words of the Psalmist: "Let us go to the House of the Lord;"⁶⁰ it is unclear if the revised motto was ever actually used. In 1916, the minutes from the Executive Board meeting indicate that Mrs. Ida Goldsmith Morris wrote a sisterhood song with music composed by Mrs. Sidney J. Meyers that was to be distributed to the sisterhoods.⁶¹ Again, the song was to help encourage participation during Sabbath services.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid, p. 56.

⁶¹Proceedings of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, Volume II, Proceedings of the Executive Board, Louisville Kentucky, February 24, 1916, p. 16.

"Special Days"

The NFTS made a lasting impact on the life of Reform synagogues by infiltrating the calendar with key sisterhood days. With the creation of "Religion Day," the "Sisterhood Sabbath" and the "Sisterhood Vacation Day," the NFTS and local sisterhoods throughout the country made a statement about what was important to the women of Judaism. These special days served as an organizing focus for sharing ideas, further educating their communities, and acknowledging the accomplishments of women of the synagogue.

As early as 1916, the NFTS planned a national initiative to encourage sisterhoods to participate in a Religion Day, a day to educate their congregations about Jewish religion, culture and history. Mrs. Leon Goodman, Chairwoman of the Committee on Religion for NFTS, suggested in a letter on February 4, 1916 that Religion Day "is to be the rallying-cry of more than 16,000 mothers in Israel at the February Meeting." One of the goals of Religion Day was to educate women in their observance of the Friday evening service at home with the lighting of the candles, the Kiddush service, and the recitation of the blessing for children. Mrs. Goodman proposed, "Let us become real priestesses, hallowing the altar of our homes every Sabbath Eve and rededicating ourselves to the preservation of our inspiring Jewish family life...."⁶²

In 1922, Mrs. Goodman reiterated the NFTS commitment to continued observance of a Religion Day. On February 6, 1922, she sent a letter to the sisterhoods associated with the NFTS requesting that they focus on "Religion" during their February meetings.

⁶²Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, February 4, 1916.

She recommended that the sisterhood make the day Religion Day. The goal of Religion Day was for sisterhoods to have a program geared to studying religious subjects of "Jewish character," to have music of "traditional old melodies," and to discuss the aims and objects of the National Committee on Religion.⁶³ In 1931, Chairwoman of the National Committee on Religion, Mabel Cohn Hartman, reflected on the successes of the Committee on Religion. She recalled that Religion Day was created to "emphasize the fact that the Sisterhood is a religious organization and its program should be of a religious nature. Accordingly, it was urged that at least one Sisterhood meeting during the year be devoted exclusively to religious subjects."⁶⁴ In 1927, Hartman explained that the Committee on Religion designated March instead of February for sisterhoods to observe Religion Day in order for the day to be linked to the anniversary of Isaac Mayer Wise's birth and death.⁶⁵

The NFTS also created a way to recognize women's hard work within the synagogue by creating a special service once a year to honor sisterhood women called the "Sisterhood Sabbath Service." In doing so, the NFTS further shaped the future of women's participation in congregational life. Throughout the history of Judaism, women had never been accepted participants in worship services. The Sisterhood Sabbath involved sisterhood women in the Sabbath service and in some congregations afforded

⁶³Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, February 6, 1922.

⁶⁴Women of Reform Judaism, Records of the Committee on Religion, 73, Box 26, File 1, October 5, 1931.

⁶⁵Ibid.

them the rare opportunity of possibly leading public worship. The "Sisterhood Sabbath" created a way for sisterhood women to express themselves religiously in front of their congregations. This was not the purpose at first. An annual Sisterhood Sabbath was initially intended as a time for women to be publically honored by their congregations. Rabbis would present a sermon on a woman's topic and sisterhood work would be honored. Through years of participation in the Sisterhood Sabbath, sisterhood women's opportunity for participation in the service grew. Women, depending on the community, took the initiative to read prayers, lead services, and to present sermons; eventually leading the entire service. With the popularity of the Sisterhood Sabbath, women's opportunities for participation in synagogue life expanded beyond anyone's expectations.

The Sisterhood Sabbath developed into an organized initiative in which the NFTS called for sisterhoods to conduct a Sisterhood Sabbath service one day each year. In 1921, the NFTS's Executive Board discussed their intent of spreading the idea of a Sisterhood Service. Their records state that "several" sisterhoods had accepted the idea of participating in a Sisterhood Sabbath that would include a Sisterhood message.⁶⁶ The Committee on Religion's Chairperson, Mrs. Barbara L. Goodman, sent an official letter on October 27, 1922, to the local sisterhoods conveying the resolution of the Executive Board to "recommend to all congregations the advisability of establishing a national Sisterhood Sabbath in November." The letter indicated the impact that the sisterhood hoped to make with the creation of the Sisterhood Sabbath:

⁶⁶Proceedings of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, Minutes of the Executive Board, Report of the National Committee on Religion, 1921, Louisville, Kentucky, p. 23.

It has always seemed to me that every Sabbath should be a Sisterhood Sabbath and that each Sisterhood member should feel it incumbent upon herself to attend services regularly. Temple going is an excellent habit to acquire, and like all good habits it grows upon one. It was thought however, that a special Sisterhood Sabbath should be established, and that on that day the members of the Sisterhoods should ask for the cooperation of the Rabbi in bringing before the congregation some knowledge of the work and activities of the organization....⁶⁷

Mrs. Goodman stated in the letter that she knew of several sisterhoods that were already planning similar Sabbath services. Mrs. Goodman's communication represented the culmination of the Committee on Religion's work earlier that year. In January of 1922, President Simon had acknowledged the projects of the Committee on Religion. In her President's message, Simon, too upheld the idea that a definite Sabbath should be set aside during which a woman would deliver the sermon to the congregation. Simon mentioned that the Sisterhood Sabbath had already been successful in several of the large cities. She reported, that in one large city, three sisterhoods joined together to hold a service and a member of the executive board presented the sermon.⁶⁸

In 1923, the NFTS Report of the Ways and Means Committee recognized the advances made by sisterhoods as a result of their participation in the Sisterhood Sabbath. The committee noted that the Sabbath services, "sermon and all" were conducted by the members of the sisterhood and reported widespread participation in the program. With

⁶⁷Women of Reform Judaism, Committee on Religion Records 73, Box 26, File 1, October 17, 1922.

⁶⁸Proceedings of the NFTS, Report of the President, Baltimore, January 7, 1922, p. 16-18.

evidence of successful Sisterhood Sabbath programs in a number of congregations, the NFTS continued to support the Committee on Religion's efforts to expand the Sisterhood Sabbath in synagogues throughout the country. Sisterhood groups wrote, organized, and planned special events around the Sisterhood Sabbath Services. By celebrating women's efforts with the Sisterhood Service, congregations provided support and confidence for the sisterhood. As a result, women's roles expanded in new ways that had lasting effects for American's Reform synagogues. Women of the sisterhood created a culture in synagogues which familiarized congregations with women leading services, presenting sermons, and reading liturgy.

The popularity of the Sisterhood Sabbath was one of the proud achievements of the NFTS's Committee on Religion. In 1931, the Chairwoman of the committee, Mrs. Mabel Cohn Hartman, noted that she had numerous requests from sisterhoods to learn about the history of the Sisterhood Sabbath. She reminded local groups that the Sisterhood Service was observed any Friday evening or Saturday morning during the month of November "(the month was arbitrarily chosen)" at which time sisterhood members were to participate in the regular Temple Services. Participation during the service depended on the particular congregation. Mrs. Hartman indicated that she looked to see who first recommended the service idea and noted that it was in 1923 by Mrs. Goodman. Though in 1923, the term for the service was the "Sisterhood Service," a more popular name for the service became the "Sisterhood Sabbath." However, in 1925, it was "recommended" that the name

"Sisterhood Service" be the proper name for this service.⁶⁹

Different congregations celebrated the Sisterhood Sabbath in their own fashion during different months of the year. Congregation Rodeph Shalom of Philadelphia recorded their plan to initiate a Sisterhood Sabbath in 1922. President Bertha R. Rosenstein reflected on their intention to participate in the NFTS national initiative to create such a service. She also noted that their sisterhood had held Sabbath services "many years ago," and had always looked to stimulate increased attendance at all services.⁷⁰ In Richmond Virginia, at Congregation Beth Ahabah, the Sisterhood Sabbath was not instituted until 1924. President Sadie M. Kirsh reported in her address for their yearbook that "a Sisterhood Sabbath is nationally observed in November and Dr. Calisch held an appropriate Service."⁷¹ Beth Ahabah's sisterhood participated in their first Sisterhood Sabbath with the help of their rabbi, yet the women did not appear to participate themselves.

In Cincinnati, three sisterhoods united in their commemoration of important days to women of Judaism. As Plum Street Temple's sisterhood president Mrs. Jonas B. Frankel, wrote in 1926, "We record with unusual satisfaction the splendid relationship between the

⁶⁹Women of Reform Judaism, Committee on Religion Records 73, Box 26, File 1, October 5, 1931.

⁷⁰Yearbook of Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia, Pa., 1922-1923, Annual Number 30, p. 26.

⁷¹Yearbook, Congregation Beth Ahabah, No. XIX, Richmond, Virginia, 1924-1925, p. 29.

sisterhoods of sister Congregations and the concerted work and interest manifested at these District meetings, comprising the three in Cincinnati, one in Hamilton and one in Norwood."⁷² An other example of joint participation took place during the Golden Jubilee celebration for the Hebrew Union College when the three sisterhoods served as hostesses for the wives of visiting rabbis and members of the Executive Board of the UAHC. In addition to their usual hostess duties, the sisterhood, "did daily services."⁷³ It was not surprising that when called to participate in the Sisterhood Sabbath that the sisterhood of Plum Street Temple did so jointly with other women's organizations. Mrs. Frenkel reported that a Sisterhood and Council of Jewish Women's Sabbath was observed in 1924. During this service, the Council of Jewish Women's president delivered the sermon while sisterhood members read parts of the service. In addition to the Sisterhood Sabbath, the sisterhood also participated in Sisterhood Day in February at which time the annual meeting of the Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs took place in the auditorium of Rockdale Temple.⁷⁴ The joint participation in the Sisterhood Sabbath and Sisterhood Day was recorded in the Plum Street Temple Yearbooks in the years following. Sisterhood President Frenkel continued to speak with pride about their joint participation. The shared leadership of the service continued between sisterhood officers and members of the

⁷²Yearbook 1926-1927 of K. K. Bene Yeshurun, The Plum Street Temple, Cincinnati, Ohio, p. 33.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

National Council of Jewish Women. President Frankel recorded in 1925, the "Women's Sabbath was held in the Temple, when a National Sisterhood Officer delivered the sermon and the President of the Council of Jewish Women and the President of the Plum Street Temple Sisterhood shared the honors and assisted in the reading of the Services."⁷⁵

The American Israelite reported in 1922, "From various reports it appears that wherever a 'Sisterhood Sabbath' service was held in the temple it was an unvarying success."⁷⁶ For instance, Temple Emanu-El, in Dallas, Texas, held a Sisterhood Sabbath Service on Saturday, November 25, 1922. The service was read by Mrs. Joseph Utay and Mrs. Max Casper and Mrs. Aline Rosenberg presented the sermon. The Sisterhood Choral participated in the music. The article also mentioned that on the Friday evening before the service, the sisterhood held an informal reception for the new members of the congregation and in honor of Sisterhood Day.⁷⁷ The different events planned around the Sisterhood Sabbath and Sisterhood Day indicate the import placed on continuing this tradition. The Sisterhood of Dallas, Texas was just one of many sisterhoods that took the initiative from the national organization seriously. The involvement of the women in the planning, participation, and leadership of the different Sabbath events illustrate that the women were willing and capable of taking on a role in service leadership.

⁷⁵Ibid, 1925-1926, p. 24.

⁷⁶*The American Israelite*, July 27, 1922, Volume 68, No. 4, p. 1.

⁷⁷Ibid.

Participation in the Sisterhood Sabbath spread quickly in Reform synagogues across the country making the Sisterhood Sabbath a steadfast tradition of the sisterhoods of the NFTS. In Seattle, Washington, at Temple De Hirsch, a Sisterhood Sabbath was held on November 18, 1923. The members of the congregation were notified of the special service and attendance was reported to be large. In this case, the rabbi, on Friday evening, gave an address on the "most inspiring" work of the Sisterhoods.⁷⁸ Also in 1922, the Sisterhood of Temple Israel in Boston, honored Mrs. Galveston, Sr., "one of the oldest members of the Sisterhood," by having her read a prayer. At the same service, Dr. Levy presented the sermon on the topic of "Women in Religion," and the choir played selections "appropriate" for the special service.⁷⁹

On July 26, 1923 *The American Israelite* reported that the National Committee on Religion encouraged the sisterhood of Galveston, Texas to participate in the Sisterhood Sabbath. Without hesitation, the sisterhood organized a service in which an "inspiring" sermon was given by Mrs. Max Levy from the pulpit.⁸⁰ In Toledo, Ohio, the sisterhood reported a great deal of enthusiasm about their work. They established a Sisterhood Sabbath, and one sisterhood meeting a month was designated as "Sisterhood Reciprocity Day," which seemed to be their own creation. During this designated time, the Jewish

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹*The American Israelite*, July 27, 1922, Vol. 68, No. 4, p. 1.

⁸⁰Ibid, July 26, 1923, Vol. 70, No. 4, p. 5.

women's organizations in the city met in order to ensure friendly relations between the women's groups.⁸¹ Also, in that same month, the sisterhood of Ft. Worth Texas reported participating in a Sisterhood Sabbath among all their other activities.⁸²

The NFTS initiated the Sisterhood Sabbath in order to honor sisterhood women's efforts for their work in improving the educational and spiritual commitment of their congregations. With the widespread success of the service, the Sisterhood Sabbath served to open doors for women to lead services for the first time before their congregations. Nadell and Simon assert, "By increasing Reform Jewish women's avenues for participation and even religious leadership within their synagogues, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, helped change the expectation of the proper female roles within Reform Judaism."⁸³ The impact of the Sisterhood Sabbath and its continued celebration went beyond anyone's expectations. Congregations became accustomed to seeing women on the pulpit. Thus, the Sisterhood Sabbath proved to be one avenue which helped advance women's equality in the synagogue. With continued observance of the Sisterhood Sabbath, opportunities for women's participation in synagogue life continued to slowly expand.

In addition to the Sisterhood Sabbath as a way to recognize the accomplishments

⁸¹Ibid, August 9, 1923, Vol. 70, No. 6, p. 6.

⁸²Ibid, August 23, 1923, Vol. 70, No. 8, p. 3.

⁸³Ibid.

of sisterhood women, Simon explained that the NFTS also established a "National Sisterhood Day" during the summer.⁸⁴ The NFTS adopted a Resolution in 1921: "that a day be appointed in August to be known as 'Vacation Sisterhood Day.' Members to meet for interchange of thought and ideas."⁸⁵ In September of 1926, the *American Israelite* reported that the Sisterhood Vacation Day on August 12th was "widely" and "successfully" observed.⁸⁶ Vacation Day represented an opportunity for a social gathering during summer months as well as a way of maintaining communication with the national organization.⁸⁷ Chairman Goodman, in 1928, sent a letter to the sisterhoods urging continued participation in the "Sisterhood Vacation Day." She wrote that, "The Summer Resort is an excellent place to celebrate Vacation Day. Here women gather from many cities and towns and this is an opportunity for valuable and helpful interchange of ideas."⁸⁸ The establishment of the Religion Day, the Sisterhood Sabbath, and Sisterhood Vacation Day was instrumental in creating fixed traditions for the NFTS. The Sisterhood Vacation day was a success. *The American Israelite* reported in 1922 that the "first Sisterhood Day" was highly attended by

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Resolutions of NFTS 1913-1939, Box Number 12, Manuscript Collection Number 73, Adopted by the 4th Biennial, Volume IV, p. 109.

⁸⁶*The American Israelite*, September 16, 1926, Vol. 73, No. 12, p. 3.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Women of Reform Judaism, Committee on Religion Records 73, Box 26, File 1, May 18, 1928.

members of the Connecticut State Federation. The sisterhood women met at Fort Trumbull Beach, where Mrs. Seymour Kashman of Hartford and her mother, "kindly threw open their house and lawn." The women enjoyed a social day as well as an array of shared ideas.⁸⁹

The *American Israelite* reported on the "widely observed" Sisterhood Vacation Day which took place on August 12, 1926. Mrs. J. Walter Freiberg, President of the NFTS, expressed her pride at the number of sisterhood gatherings at country homes of members or at temple picnics throughout the country. She explained,

The Sisterhoods of Appleton, Wisconsin and Greenville, S.C., and Temple Anshe Emeth, New Brunswick, were among those which held picnics. The Reading Road Temple Sisterhood of Cincinnati held its get together party on the Temple grounds, as did the Women's Auxiliary of Temple Israel, Far Rockaway, which invited its orthodox neighbors to share the enjoyment of a musical program and social hour....⁹⁰

Details of the different congregations' choices to celebrate Vacation Day continued throughout the article. The Rockdale Avenue Temple event stood out, for their sisterhood entertained more than two hundred people on this day with a cafeteria dinner and a minstrel show.⁹¹ The article continued by listing many more sisterhoods from all over the United States and the different ways to participate in Vacation Day ranging from breakfasts, to garden parties, to luncheons. The special days served to create an

⁸⁹*The American Israelite*, July 27, 1922, Vol. 68, No. 4, p. 1.

⁹⁰*Ibid*, September 16, 1926, Vol. 73, No.12, p. 3.

⁹¹*Ibid*.

appropriate forum for women to further integrate their talents and voices into synagogue life. Unlike the Sisterhood Sabbath, the Religion Day and the Sisterhood Vacation Day do not appear to have lasted.

A View from Within: The Sisterhood Minutes of Ohev Sholem,

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The Sisterhood of Ohev Sholem in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, offers an example of how a sisterhood organization participated in and supported the goals of the NFTS. From its origins, the sisterhood of Harrisburg maintained communication with the national organization while pursuing its own goals. The sisterhood joined the NFTS in 1913 and committed to paying the required dues of ten cents per annum.⁹²

The link between the NTFS and Ohev Shalom's sisterhood is evidenced by frequent conversations about how to honor the national organization's requests. For instance, the national organization frequently asked that the sisterhood select delegates for future conventions. The minutes include discussions during various years of whether or not to send delegates to the national gatherings. Another example of local commitment to the national organization is evident in the serious attention the sisterhood gave to initiatives from the national group. In conjunction with the Committee on Religion's goal of increasing attendance at services, the sisterhood joined the conversation of how to increase its own

⁹²Harrisburg, Pa., Ladies Hebrew Social Circle, Manuscript Collection No. 392, October 7, 1913.

numbers at Sabbath services. Sisterhood member, Mrs. Freund, advocated "more religious and better observance in the Jewish house."⁹³

As Congregation Ohev Shalom grew to depend on work of its sisterhood, questions of responsibility arose. The sisterhood's minutes include several conversations about the religious and financial responsibilities of the sisterhood. For example, on March 7, 1916, the sisterhood refused their temple board's request to contribute a gift to the temple's president, agreeing that "such things should be acted upon by the Board."⁹⁴ At the sisterhood meeting on April 30, 1916, the minutes include a request by the board of the temple for the sisterhood to raise the necessary funds during the summer for a piano for the Sunday school. The conversation in 1917 included a decision to create a religious committee within the sisterhood to visit soldiers during their time of need.⁹⁵

In 1919, a December 20 resolution of the synagogue's Board of Trustees expressed appreciation for the sisterhood's efforts in raising money for the new building. The board of the temple also requested that in the future, all such funds should be raised within the Jewish community. The resolution read in part:

Be it further Resolved, that we, The Trustees, deem it advisable, for the best interests of the Congregation and Sisterhood, to confine, in the future, the sale of tickets, or other solicitations, excluding rummage sales, to members

⁹³Harrisburg, Pa., Ladies Hebrew Social Circle, Manuscript Collection No. 392, April 4, 1916, p. 83.

⁹⁴Ibid, p. 82.

⁹⁵Ibid, April 4, 1917.

of our Congregation, their families and relatives and no one outside of these except members of the Jewish faith.⁹⁶

The board expressed appreciation to the sisterhood for their hard work and they thanked the women for the money raised; yet the temple's Board sought to determine how fund-raising was to be handled in the future.

On a national level, the sisterhood of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, made contributions supporting the religious and educational life of the Reform movement by sending donations to the Hebrew Union College Scholarship and Dormitory funds, and by supporting the Art Calendar, education tracts and the Uniongram programs. On April 5, 1921, sisterhood minutes include a description of a welcome card that the sisterhood's Committee on Religion developed to maintain more decorum during services. The message read: "Welcome! Whosoever thou Art, that enter this house, be thoughtful, be silent, be reverent, for this is the house of God, leave it not without prayer for thyself for those who minister, for all who worship here."⁹⁷ The sisterhood was pleased to hear that the NFTS reported about their sisterhood activities in fifty-two different publications.⁹⁸ In 1922, when the NFTS Committee on Religion made an official request to hold a special Sisterhood Sabbath once a year, the sisterhood also supported the initiative.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁶Ibid, New book, Ledger 1919 -1925, p. 29.

⁹⁷Ibid, p. 56.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid, p. 96.

minutes record that a successful Sisterhood Sabbath took place on December 1, 1922 at which time Mrs. Samuel Freidman and Mrs. David Kaufman spoke from the pulpit.¹⁰⁰

The NFTS remained committed to its goals throughout its founding years. With a sisterhood focus on volunteering, education, and fund-raising, the NFTS helped to build Reform Judaism. The national organization oversaw sisterhood groups as they anticipated the needs of the Jewish community with projects such as the sisterhood prayer book, the Sisterhood Sabbath, and outreach to college age students. The Committee on Religion of the NFTS carefully chose projects that had lasting influence. Study Circles, the Art Calendar, and Sabbath Schools helped to establish long-term traditions that set the tone for sisterhood influence. The national organization's vision of equality for women in the synagogue encouraged sisterhood women to find their voices. The collective efforts of sisterhood groups brought women and children into synagogues at a time when congregations had fewer and fewer male congregants. Sisterhood members devoted tremendous time, money, and creativity to their temples. With the NFTS's wide range of accomplishments, the organization helped to expand women's roles in the synagogue. Joint collaboration between the NFTS and local groups started a successful partnership that continues today.

¹⁰⁰Ibid, December 5, 1922, p. 130.

Conclusion: A Retrospective

Carrie Simon's vision of strengthening the synagogue through service shines brightly over the women of the NFTS. With the creation of the NFTS, sisterhood women, driven to meet their goals, worked to build houses of worship that educated and supported the American Jewish people. At the same time, women clearly outlined a space for themselves as respected members of the American Reform Jewish community.

The projects created, funds raised, and functions planned by sisterhood members are innumerable. The outstanding work of sisterhoods is evidenced through advancements made in women's equality in the synagogue, in the growth of Reform Jewish synagogue membership, and in the betterment of Jewish life. Sisterhood women concentrated on educating children through the creation of Sunday Schools, libraries, children's services, Bible studies, and youth activities. The women raised large sums of money in support of charitable organizations, for the purchase of ritual objects, and the maintenance of synagogues. Funds were also allocated for many national projects including the building of the dormitory at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, participating in the founding of the House of Living Judaism in New York City, and giving scholarships to rabbinical students. Women's roles were greatly expanded in synagogues, from participating in worship services to voting on congregational boards. Women became integral to the life of the synagogue and without their input and energy, the American Reform synagogue would be a different place of worship today.

In this thesis, I considered the time period of 1913 to 1929. To see the impact of these sisterhood women, it is important to discuss the period past 1929 up until today.

Congregational sisterhoods realized the goals set by the founders of the NFTS and as a result, congregations were strengthened. One illustration of this is found in Helen Kohn Henning's history of the Tree of Life Synagogue, published in 1945. Henning demonstrated how her sisterhood continued to thrive in Columbia, South Carolina, as members proved their devotion to the congregation year after year. Henning's history detailed how the sisterhood followed the NFTS main objectives – educating the Jewish family and supporting the synagogue:

On January 5, 1932, the literary pulse of the Sisterhood beat a little faster, for at that time they received the compliments of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods on their program for the year, "The Jew in Literature"; and an especial commendation for their splendid Religious School. They also heard, with pride, the report of Mrs. Monroe Mayer, librarian, that the books in the Religious School library had now passed the thousand mark....Columbia is proud of three members of the Tree of Life Sisterhood who have graced the presidency of the South Carolina Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.¹

Henning also acknowledged the sisterhood's financial contributions and social presence over forty years of devoted service to the temple. The sisterhood raised money during the depression for chairs for the Religious School, a new Religious School building, and for the overall maintenance of the building. One of their proudest accomplishments was the binding of over 200,000 books for different charitable organizations. The following words reflected the respect that the sisterhood earned over time, "The Tree of Life Sisterhood now measures its history, not in years, but in decades." Henning continued, "Forty years of such devotions might ordinarily entitle the Sisterhood to rest upon its

¹Helen Kohn Henning, The Tree of Life, "Fifty Years of Congregational Life at the Tree of Life Synagogue," Columbia, S.C., Published by the Tree of Life Congregation, 1945, p. 83.

laurels, but the present membership has accepted the work of those forty years as a challenge to a continued performance of loyal, devoted service, made more pressing by the demands of this One World."²

Similarly, at Temple Beth El in Detroit, Michigan, in the Congregation's history, Mrs. John C. Hopp, Sisterhood President, proudly wrote of the sisterhood's activities from 1940 to 1945. Celebrating their successes, she reported that the sisterhood has over one thousand members and that they were one of the "largest" and "most active" groups in the country. She explained that the sisterhood, "presents during the course of the year a diversified program of religious, cultural, social, philanthropic, social service and communal projects." The sisterhood also was devoted to the war effort doing everything possible to help their country.³ Temple Beth El's sisterhood noted that they were affiliated with the NFTS and their devotion to the goals of the NFTS was in part responsible for their strength, size, and success.

In 1963, at the twenty-fourth NFTS Biennial Assembly, a gathering organized to celebrate fifty years of service by the NFTS, Dr. Maurice N. Eisendrath, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, paid tribute to the organization in a booklet called "The Days of Our Years," compiled in celebration of the NFTS accomplishments. The collection illustrated how NFTS goals were fulfilled beyond expectations. In a letter to Mrs. Irving E. Hollowbow, NFTS President in 1963, Eisendrath congratulated sisterhood

²Ibid, p. 97.

³A History, Temple Beth El, of Detroit, Michigan, 1940-1945, Compiled by Irving I. Katz, Executive Secretary, p.12.

women's efforts on their fifty years of service. He recognized their unique commitment to Reform Judaism: "To the many outstanding and distinguished lay women of the past and present who have labored selflessly to bring to fruition the rich seeds of their fertile minds and outreaching hearts, countless of thousands of our young people and adults are eternally grateful."⁴ Dr. Eisendrath acknowledged sisterhood accomplishments and looked to future support from the NFTS. The organization reached many with its efforts to continually improve Jewish life. Notably, the NFTS began in 1913 with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations initiating the call for its first meeting and in 1963, the President of the UAHC continued to encourage future success.

In the same booklet, "The Days of Our Years," Mrs. Irving E. Hollowbow's Anniversary Message was a retrospective titled, "If 1963 met 1913." Her words are an appropriate part of the conclusion to this thesis, which explored the NFTS formation, early goals and accomplishments:

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. The woman of 1963 live in a world of mechanical servants rather than with the domestic help that made life easier for her forbears. If she lives in the suburbs, she may be caught in the trap of a multitude of duties concerned not only with her own family but with many other community efforts and drives.

Her schedule is long. She has less freedom, less leisure, but if she were to come face to face with the Sisterhood member of 1913, she would surely share with her an awareness of the centrality of the synagogue in Reform Jewish life. Perhaps she would amaze her 1913 friend by her added knowledge of Judaism brought about through the many Jewish educational

⁴National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, "The Days of Our Years," Chicago, Illinois, November 1963.

programs in synagogue and Sisterhood and their informative publications.

They would recognize each other in terms of devotion to service – service to their families, to the synagogue, service to the Jewish community, service to humanity everywhere....⁵

Echoing Mrs. Hollowbow's words, if a sisterhood member of 2001 met a sisterhood member of 1913, they would share a common purpose. From a devotion to Jewish life to a commitment to a strong Reform movement, we owe much to the women of the NFTS past, present and future.

In the 1990's, the NFTS changed its name to the Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ), and now represents 100,000 women in hundreds of local sisterhoods across the United States, Canada, and in thirteen other countries.⁶ The organization's growth and success was a direct result of women working towards a collective goal. True to its original mission, the WRJ continue to uphold religious values as the core of their work. WRJ activities expanded over time to include representation on the Board of Trustees of the UAHC, improving relations between Jews and Christians, and writing a woman's Torah Commentary, while continuing successful programs such as the Art Calendar, Lecture Series, and Sisterhood Sabbath. One of the most striking changes, that a sisterhood woman of 1913 or 1963 did not see, was the ordination of female rabbis, beginning in 1972, which met the goal of equal status for women in the American Reform synagogue.

⁵National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, "The Days of Our Years," Chicago, Illinois, November 1963.

⁶Transcript of Proceedings, Institutional Sketch of the WRJ, 1913-1999, p. 1, Cincinnati, Ohio, Women of Reform Judaism Records, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

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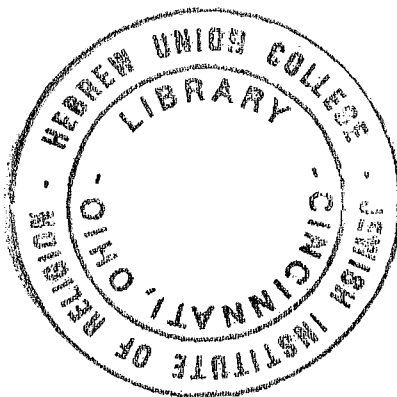
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