

---

# A Quiet Revolution: Jewish Women's Clubs and the Widening Female Sphere, 1870–1920

*William Toll*

In the late nineteenth century middle-class American women emerged from the confinement of their homes and the private friendships which had sustained them to develop new public voices.<sup>1</sup> The agricultural and industrial revolutions, which drove millions of poor people to America's cities, depended on a technology that by the 1880's turned to the production of durables to be used in the home. As electricity and indoor plumbing allowed servants to be replaced by refrigerators and washing machines, middle-class women were freed from the drudgery of housework.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a new sense of choice led middle-class women to postpone marriage, to have far fewer children than had their mothers, and in many cases not to marry at all. With larger segments of their lives free to devote to themselves, women could join together to cultivate their own interests. Initially they combined a faith in woman's distinct nature with a tradition of cliques and networks to form clubs, that pursued literary studies, or encouraged professional ambitions. But by the mid-1880's the consequences of industrialization began to impinge on their leisure. Problems arising from immigration, inadequate public services, and incompetent political leadership led women to seek a more public expression of their nurturing interests.

Though women created new organizations, they often rested on traditional religious loyalties.<sup>3</sup> In a nation whose middle class was overwhelmingly Protestant, most early clubs like Sorosis and the New England Woman's Club were composed of Protestant women, many with experience in the abolitionist or suffrage movements. But in cities across America, Jewish women were beginning to organize institutions of their own. Initially these societies rested on the traditional division between male and female spheres which had characterized

societies in Europe.<sup>4</sup> The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Societies, from Portland and Seattle to Vicksburg and Charleston, defined their realm as the nurture of women and children. Their natural ally, they believed, was the men's Hebrew Benevolent Society, which looked after the business as well as the health and burial needs of Jewish men. But by the mid-1890's, American-born Jewish women created a new organization, the Council of Jewish Women, in large measure to redefine their social relationships. In addition to cooperation with other Jewish organizations, the Council saw Protestant women's clubs as its new ally. Across ethnic lines, both groups spoke the language of public action. The transition from the benevolent societies to the era of the Council represents a major shift in the self-image and sense of purpose of Jewish women. It was marked by inner conflict and self-doubt. While it followed the shift to feminist public action that had begun among middle-class Protestant women approximately ten years previously,<sup>5</sup> it suggests also that ethnic loyalties lent a traditional dimension to women's lives that modulated their self-assertion. This paper will describe the quiet revolution in the lives of Jewish women and suggest how it compared with the perception of women's roles held by their Protestant contemporaries.

### *The Ideology of True Womanhood*

For the years from the 1870's through the 1950's, Sheila Rothman has identified three successive ideologies that characterized public expectations about the "virtuous woman." From the mid-nineteenth century through the 1890's, women were supposed to display an "instinctive motherhood." Their unique biological features were assumed directly to regulate their psychology, which was of necessity different from that of men. Nature and society could reach harmony only if women perfected their sphere—in the home, nurturing children. The 1890's through the 1910's were defined by an ideology of "educated motherhood." Women were now to coordinate their instincts with their intellectual powers in order to apply new scientific findings to the efficient and healthful ordering not only of the home, but of society. Women were expected to study the advice of experts and to campaign for higher public standards of health, education, morality, and even their own emancipation. From the 1920's through the 1950s, the

“educated mother” was replaced—in the popular literature of the day—by the ideal of the “wife companion.” Because child-rearing had become professionalized, women were to turn nurture over to experts and become primarily the intellectual and sexual companions of their husbands.<sup>6</sup>

Did Jewish women follow this model? Does their experience suggest that the model itself might require modification? For the late nineteenth century perhaps a few representative opinions will suggest how Jews approached the concept of “instinctive motherhood.” Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, in his prescient speech to the rabbis assembled in Pittsburgh in 1885 to draft a statement of principles for Reform Judaism, called on religious leaders to grant women an equal voice in the worship service, religious instruction, and in developing contacts with immigrants. This new freedom for women, he felt, was necessary to combat the intellectual indifference and moral drift of the newly affluent Jewish merchant families. But what appeared to be support for a new role for women rested on very conservative premises. Kohler called for the religious integration of women not because they were fundamentally the same as men, but because they had a different nature, based on an instinctive sense of nurturing. Women, he said, “do the work of charity everywhere and their sympathies are broader and more tender than those of the stern strugglers for existence in the business mart.”<sup>7</sup> Women were self-denying by nature and uniquely able to bring to children the moral education which the public schools neglected.

Members of the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Societies echoed Rabbi Kohler’s image of “instinctive motherhood.” In their memorial tributes to departed members—admittedly stylized but for that reason the quintessence of their sense of achievement—they agreed that women by nature sacrificed themselves to the home and to the community’s institutions of nurture. At Galveston, Texas, in 1891, Mrs. Isabelle Haas was memorialized as “admirable in all things that become true womanhood, but in her philanthropy she was conspicuous. Hers was a merit founded as deeply in good intuition as in useful works.” At Trinidad, Colorado, in 1898, Mrs. Helena Goldsmith was commended for her “words of comfort . . . to all, regardless of creed, color or race. . . . In her unselfish and noble life, she has taught us all that the highest aim in life should and must be to live for others.” At Galveston

in 1902, the late president of the Society, Mrs. Jacob Block, was commended for “her self-sacrifice and charity displayed in public and private life . . . [which] were based on the loftiest benevolent instincts.” As a variation, the memorial to Mrs. Julia Dreyfus based “true womanhood” on simple piety and self-sacrificing charity.<sup>8</sup>

But in new settlements where extended family-support networks had been broken, and where men themselves were creating new institutions to ease their own resettlement, the female “instinct” had to be substantially extended. Women had not only to reknit the female sphere, but to extend themselves by coordinating actions with men to create the new quasi-public realm of the ethnic community. Especially in smaller towns where self-conscious minorities were carefully observed, the public realm rested on the club life of women and men. The ideology of “instinctive motherhood” was not confined to the home, but had a communal and public dimension. The women of Trinidad, Colorado, or Galveston, Texas, annually held fund-raising fairs and festivals open to the public, where the gentile world could observe Americanized Jews, an exposure about which Jewish women were most self-conscious. Scholars of mid-nineteenth-century Victorian families in Britain and America have characterized the middle-class household as a “haven” where women provided a safe refuge for their children and husbands, who retreated homeward from the struggles of the capitalist market economy.<sup>9</sup> But the women of the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Societies had a more cooperative sense of their proper sphere. They may have resided in households, but as Jewish women they had to assist each other in reconstructing families and in helping Jewish men in organizing and providing a public face for the new ethnic community. Their haven was as much the community as the family.<sup>10</sup> The responsibilities undertaken by the benevolent societies were partly ritual—preparing a woman’s body for burial, partly nurture—sitting up with sick women and caring for their children, and partly economic—providing funds in emergencies.<sup>11</sup> The Seattle, Washington, society noted as late as 1896, “The great work of sisterly love and benevolence is constantly carried on in a systematic and discriminating but quiet manner known to the needy recipient. . . . The field of benevolence and charity is properly and virtually a woman’s.”<sup>12</sup> The sense of society as sisterhood is reflected in the Fargo, North Dakota, society in the 1920’s. This group of women of Eastern

European descent continued to refer to one another as "Sister," and cared for the broken families of members in poor physical or mental health for years.<sup>13</sup>

A sense of religious obligation pervaded yet set limits to the undertaking. Each Jewish family was supposed to be self-supporting, and the Societies desired to assist each family so that it might be. But the ladies felt obligated to assist any Jew passing by who seemed in need. When at the turn of the century some younger and better-educated members suggested affiliation with or donations to non-Jewish organizations, the members were very reluctant to move beyond the original conception of responsibility.<sup>14</sup> The isolation of towns like Portland, Seattle, Galveston, and Fargo allowed women to have an amorphous sense of responsibility and usually required them to cooperate with men. Perhaps the most unusual case of cooperation occurred in Portland when the ladies organized in 1874. Because so many women were young, immigrant, and inexperienced in formal meeting procedures, the constitution allowed the president and the secretary of the society to be nonmembers. Since all Jewish women could join, this meant that the officers could be men. For ten years wealthy merchants held the presidency, and for five another was secretary. By 1884, however, the new president was the wife of a former mayor of Portland, and herself well-known for her strong personality. The transition from male to female headship was made with no fanfare, and periodically the women called on men for financial advice. Across the continent in Albany, Georgia, the benevolent society was launched in 1878, with more male honorary members than female charter members. The men apparently provided a stable financial base. But all along, women tended to their own needs within the society, and might occasionally assist transient men. In Fargo they even paid a man's bail and found him a job, while sending his wife and daughters on to Chicago.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to charity, the women also saw their mission as including support of local synagogues. In Trinidad, Colorado, the ladies' annual Strawberry Festival and Halloween Fair virtually supported the synagogue. In larger cities like Portland or Galveston they supplemented the funds raised by men. When an elaborate temple was built in Portland in 1888, the women paid for the vestry room. When Galveston had to rebuild after the hurricane and flood of 1900, the women, as they had done before, contributed funds amounting to

about one-quarter of what was given by the men.<sup>16</sup>

As Jewish communities matured and as their members aged, the extent and tone of their charitable work changed. At first the membership consisted of young, married women, caring for one another and their families. But as their own daughters matured, they decided to admit unmarried ladies.<sup>17</sup> By the late 1870's in Portland, some women of Polish descent appeared and were recruited into the society.<sup>18</sup> But as the East Europeans increased and appealed for help, they were treated not as friends facing misfortune, but as "cases." Unwilling to take their pleas at face value, the society appointed a committee to assess their needs. Occasionally, an individual woman was appointed permanent investigator in the immigrant district. In Galveston after 1903, as the clients of the Immigrant Aid Society arrived, the local Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society established an employment committee to assist them. Failing to find jobs, however, the committee blamed the immigrants for lacking skills. As the cases accumulated, general questions about responsibility arose. Should women with husbands present be given aid? Should deserted wives be sent back to Russia? In any case, these working-class arrivals had to learn to be "self-sufficient," beyond the sisterhood of the established families. Individual cases were treated differently, as some women received sporadic financial aid, others were told to find work, and still others given funds to leave town.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1900's, the benevolent societies were undergoing an eclipse, as the concept of sisterly charity and informal cooperation with men's benevolent societies was becoming obsolete. The men's societies were being replaced by national insurance companies, which had begun to hire Jewish men as local agents, by the founding of city clubs like Concordia to provide social outlets, and by the new national agenda provided by the B'nai B'rith.<sup>20</sup> For women too the concept of general, nurturant benevolence was being replaced by more specialized institutions. The dispensing of charity to regional institutions like the orphanages in Atlanta, New Orleans, or Cleveland, or to the National Jewish Hospital in Denver, became a matter of routine.<sup>21</sup> In Portland, the society, which had seen its membership swell to over 150 in the early 1890's, had difficulty attracting more. By 1900, attendance at meetings rarely exceeded a dozen, and business had been reduced to approving annual donations. In addition, as synagogues proliferated,

the societies could not affiliate with all of them. To meet the needs of the temples, new rabbis began to organize sisterhoods. Though the women understood that their work now expressed limited aspirations, the societies were reluctant to disband. In Toledo in 1911, for example, the society agreed to become a benevolence committee of the local Council of Jewish Women, though many older members could not bear to see their fellowship subordinated to a new organization. Appreciating this feeling, the Council's president resolved that "these ladies, who from a feeling of sentiment could not sever their connection from the [society], be permitted to pay \$1.00 toward the sick delicacy fund and be permitted to work on the benevolent committee. This condition to be given a year's trial, trusting in the meantime that a practical sentiment will induce these few ladies to become Council members." In Seattle, in 1917, the society merged with the men's benevolent society with the same recognition that they must modernize their work. By pooling their funds they could hire a professional social worker and open a children's sheltering home.<sup>22</sup> In Vicksburg, the society tottered on into the 1930's, with its annual donations and membership dwindling. In Galveston the focus by 1905 had shifted almost entirely to charity cases, and donations to a local kindergarten for East European immigrants opened by the Council of Jewish Women. But despite the urgings of Rabbi Henry Cohen as late as 1918, the ladies refused to consolidate with the Council. For them there was still a special sphere.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Educated Motherhood and the Council of Jewish Women*

By the 1890's, American women, including Jewish women, had created a new stage of life—young womanhood, and were searching for useful functions on which to focus.<sup>24</sup> In Charleston, South Carolina, at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, the rabbi and the older women must have recognized this social development, because in February 1889, they encouraged the formation of a club called the Happy Workers. Creating a unique niche for themselves, this group of forty-five sisters and cousins limited their membership to single women.<sup>25</sup> Although some of the members retained affiliation when they married, motions in the 1890's to admit young married women or to open membership to girls under age sixteen were defeated.<sup>26</sup> Once having defined themselves by age, marital status, and friendships, what were

these young women to do? While their sense of status may have been original, their sense of purpose and mode of operations drew on the traditions of the benevolent societies. "The present desire of the Happy Workers," their minutes explained, "is to care for as many poor children as the funds will allow." They acquired wards by sending members into the poor districts to locate Jewish children to whom they hoped to dispense charity.<sup>27</sup> They combined a sense of personal responsibility with sociability by sewing up, rather than purchasing ready-made goods, for the children who came to their attention. Meetings consisted not only of business, but of sewing, which often was continued in one another's homes. By the mid-1890's, the Happy Workers had assumed responsibility for three to five sets of children and their mothers, and provided clothes and medicine to many others. As with the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Societies, the Workers gave several poor women traveling expenses to join husbands in New York. But the workers also assumed a wardship approach to several young women, whom they apprenticed to dressmakers. They were even willing to shift with the changing aspirations of working-class girls. When one young girl preferred to learn stenography for an office job instead of sewing, a member volunteered to teach her.<sup>28</sup>

The Happy Workers also reflected the turn from selfless charity to moralistic supervision which crept into benevolent work as transient denizens of the poor districts became the recipients. In many cases the Happy Workers insisted that their charges show a desire to become self-sufficient. When Laura Crystal seemed unwilling to continue with an apprenticeship to a local dressmaker, "it was determined not to worry with her any longer." As late as 1910, when a job was found for a Mrs. Lambert at a cigar factory on the condition that she leave her child at a day nursery for which the Workers would pay, the woman refused. Instead, she agreed to leave town at the Workers' expense.<sup>29</sup> Over the years the women accumulated a small endowment and a large sense of tradition. They contributed funds to projects pertaining to children, like a kindergarten and a night school, both of which were taken over by the Council of Jewish Women. In the 1920's they provided eyeglasses and hearing aids for a project initiated by the Council in the public schools. But sticking to their original charge, they would not extend their benevolence beyond the Jewish community.<sup>30</sup> Although not initiating new projects, the ladies insisted on their autono-

my. Not until 1949 did they finally consent to become a Happy Workers Committee of the local section of the Council of Jewish Women.<sup>31</sup>

The Happy Workers symbolized a transition on several levels for Jewish women. The members represented a new social group, well-to-do, educated young women, many unmarried, with an intimate sense of comradeship yet a religiously based sense of obligation beyond their social class. Their stage of life had readied them for new activities, but they were not prepared to see beyond the models of action provided by their mothers. They lacked a sense that women could shape their nurturant interests in novel ways. In the 1890's, however, a group of young Jewish women, at first in Chicago and very rapidly all over the country, made the transition from instinctive to educated nurturing. Now, however, they felt obligated to extend professionalized nurture not only beyond their social class, but beyond the ethnic community. The vehicle they developed for their new autonomy was the Council of Jewish Women. From its inception at the national and local levels, members of the Council saw themselves as participating in the women's club movement. The original women's clubs hardly saw themselves as revolutionary, and they usually avoided the one issue which symbolized the public divide between the sexes—woman's suffrage.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the club movement promised a more persistent redefinition of woman's proper place by making domestic issues a part of the public agenda. To go public respectably meant that women assessed domestic issues by the same professional standards that men allegedly gave to business. This required that women master the formalities for conducting public meetings and study the scientific literature on issues like public health, education, factory conditions, and legal proceedings which they took as their purview. Women may never have said that the basis on which they were organizing rested on a new understanding of their nature. But they became so absorbed in intellectual pursuits and in the social settlement literature that they came to justify their new public role not as an extension of a special instinct, but on their ability to bring new ideas and organizational skills to the nurture function.<sup>33</sup> And within this context of a universal social science Jewish women felt welcome within a predominantly non-Jewish, but secular, domain.

In 1914, a Chicago clubwoman, Jennie Franklin Purvin, traced this change in club work among Jewish women. In the nineteenth century,

she said, women were confined “to those acts of tenderness and mercy for the unfortunate which the feminine sympathy well understood.” But by the 1890s younger Jewish women, freed by technology from household drudgery, sought more systematic, scientific ways of eliminating rather than just relieving poverty. To some degree they wished to become educated mothers, but many had wider ambitions. They desired to do “intensive work,” partially by redefining the relationship of the community to the widening secular world. The organization with which Mrs. Purvin was initially associated, the Chicago Women’s Aid, “has given us an opportunity to serve a Jewish community, and yet it has identified us with a broad civic movement in which the entire body politic has [an] interest.”<sup>34</sup>

For the younger Jewish women of the 1890’s, the tension between following the “instincts” of their mothers and pursuing the secular analysis of the new social sciences marked their first efforts at club work. The Council of Jewish Women grew out of the Jewish Women’s Religious Congress, which was part of the World Congress of Religions called by the Federation of Women’s Clubs for Chicago in 1893. Participating Jewish women spoke on traditional themes like “Women in the Bible,” “Women in the Synagogue,” and “Religion in the Home,” but also on “Women as Wage Workers” and “Women Protesting Persecution.” Importantly, single women like Julia Richman, Sadie American, Henrietta Szold, and Julia Felsenthal were as prominent in the proceedings as married women, and worked with them on most panels.<sup>35</sup> Experience with nurture did set married women apart from their younger sisters, but a common desire to educate women drew them together. When local Council sections were organized as the result of a call for a national Jewish women’s club movement after the Religious Congress, single women were, as a matter of course, recruited with married women. Characteristically, single women were most sensitive to the need for new directions in women’s lives. The Terre Haute section in 1901, for example, listened to a paper by a very active member, Miss Helen Arnold, on “The Continued Misconception of a Woman’s True Sphere.” It was followed by a discussion in which each member was required to express her views.<sup>36</sup> Regrettably, we have no transcript, but references in the minutes to alternative projects for the organization suggest that the members were searching for new goals.

As women redefined their life-cycle, leading Reform rabbis expressed apprehension at the consequences. In Boston in 1891, Rabbi Solomon Schindler decried the new independence of women, especially their desire to seek an independent income rather than marry, to have fewer children in marriage, and to resort to divorce in record numbers. Invoking the Victorian ideal, he asserted that harmony would reign in the Jewish family when men provided the income and "the wife would endeavor to make herself indispensable to her husband by surrounding him with the charm and comfort of a pleasant home." By 1906, in Philadelphia, Joseph Krauskopf traced among the wealthy of both sexes a malaise toward conventional marriage patterns. While young men might initiate the discontent with libertine behavior prior to marriage, women, he argued, sought compensation by refusing to bear children and by absorbing themselves in their own clubs. Both parties deserted the home: the women, absorbed in their meetings, "neglected the family circle and . . . such other work with which God and nature have especially honored womanhood."<sup>37</sup>

Women were aware of these criticisms, and local Councils initially focused on self-instruction under rabbinic direction to bring decorum and modern Jewish knowledge to their work. The president of the Savannah section in 1897 looked back on its founding two years before. The women began, she said, "with the fear and trembling peculiar to their sex," but now, men attending their open meetings often commented on the professional decorum with which they were conducted.<sup>38</sup> This was hardly surprising, since members often enrolled in parliamentary classes so they could present a dignified public image. The local sections usually were nominally attached to and met in Reform temples, and with rabbinic supervision they formed study circles to discuss biblical themes. The agenda of the meetings in the early years were dominated by discussions on such themes as women of the Bible, Jewish authors like Emma Lazarus and Israel Zangwill, and literary works like *Ivanhoe* and *The Merchant of Venice* that contained Jewish characters.<sup>39</sup>

Sections differed in focus depending on the size and location of the Jewish community. They also took some color from regional differences. The small section in Terre Haute saw itself primarily as a literary club, like those springing up among Protestant women throughout the state. It eagerly sought affiliation with the Indiana Federation of

Women's Clubs, while leaving Jewish philanthropy to the Ladies Aid Society.<sup>40</sup> Informing the National Council that it was interested only in literary pursuits and would not follow a suggested national agenda, it laid out a very elaborate monthly program to discuss novels, plays, and Jewish history. Before they began their readings the members heard a lecture from a university professor on how to study history, and talks from Protestant clergymen on the role of Jews in history. Assuming responsibility for their own cultivation, they voted not to allow the rabbi to lecture, so that they might develop their own speaking skills. In Charleston, South Carolina, the section was not organized until 1906, and immersed itself in biblical and literary studies. The chairman of its philanthropic committee placed greater priority on other "club work" which occupied her time, while charity cases were left to the benevolent society. In Toledo under the energetic leadership of Rabbi Alexander, the Bible study circles were consolidated and flourished as late as 1912.<sup>41</sup>

But in Terre Haute, as in southern and western cities, the literary focus failed to sustain interest or to attract new members.<sup>42</sup> The development of social settlements and of expertise in political lobbying drew and held the unmarried women and the college graduates. The effort to "uplift" the immigrants was shot through with condescension, but it rapidly captured the enthusiasm of most members. The vitality of the Savannah section grew from the work of Miss Julia Simon, who inaugurated a "Mission school" for the children of poor Jewish families of the West End. Each month a different committee of three women was required to aid Miss Simon at the mission, where children were taught habits of cleanliness, self-discipline, and English so that they might enter the public schools. Though Council volunteers might complain about the rude behavior of the older boys and even of an "incendiary incident," they continued to support the mission.<sup>43</sup> Even more ambivalence accompanied the move to philanthropy by the section in Toledo, Ohio. In mid-1906, it finally rented a small building for night classes, sewing classes for girls, and a clubhouse for a new boys club organized by Miss Sarah Kaufman. The section's members wanted their venture not to be known as a settlement, but as a "mutual improvement society." Within a month, however, trouble erupted, when unruly boys at a picnic "insulted" Miss Kaufman and another member. After being denied access to the Coun-

cil House, the boys sent a delegate to the next Council meeting, where he contritely apologized. The boys club was again allowed access to the building, "at such times as would not interfere with the work of the Council."<sup>44</sup> By 1901, Mrs. Englander, an energetic member, had become a regular attendant at the juvenile court, where she referred cases to the Federation of Jewish Charities. Rabbi Alexander had cases "probated" to him, and Mrs. Frank visited the children's homes to induce the parents to monitor their children's errant behavior.

In Terre Haute the move to settlement work was even more gradual, for by 1906 Miss Arnold had merely read a paper on the subject. But when the records allow us to return there in 1912, the study circles had disappeared, while attendance at meetings had tripled and the focus was on settlement work and public health. Of the sixteen new committees, eight dealt with some form of social welfare. Occasionally, concern for the poor reflected greater regard for the status of section members than for the poor themselves. Members of the Charleston section in 1914 were alarmed when the Salvation Army informed them of the presence of five Jewish prostitutes. After an investigation which revealed that the "ladies of the evening" actually numbered eight, the Council members hoped to reform them. Soon learning that they were not permanent residents of the city, but "followed the races," the Council decided to drop the matter.<sup>45</sup>

In Portland and Denver, regional centers to which a steady stream of poor Jewish families migrated, the Councils by 1905 had built their own settlement houses. Starting with cooking and sewing classes in rented or donated rooms, kitchen gardens in vacant lots, and sponsorship of free public baths, the women eventually raised enough money to construct modern buildings in the immigrant district.<sup>46</sup> Such intense contact with immigrant families led Mrs. Seraphine Pisco of the Denver section to identify a reciprocal relationship that seemed to fill the spiritual vacuum in her young colleagues. "While we bring to them Americanism," she wrote in 1906, "we may at the same time be inspired with some of the spiritual passion which glows in the breasts of these ardent Jews, who are, after all, the rock which is the foundation of the house of Israel."<sup>47</sup> As the settlement programs expanded, female doctors were asked to speak on sex hygiene, and the Councils cooperated with the Federation of Women's Clubs to agitate for public health nurses. With the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act in 1921, the

women saw federal matching funds flow to the states to open well-baby clinics. In addition, the settlement houses also supported Americanization classes for immigrants, athletics for young men and women, and even Hebrew schools.<sup>48</sup>

Settlement house work also created a demand for a whole new class of social work professionals, and Councils soon began to employ their own. Often local women would take a few classes in conjunction with volunteer work at the settlement house or in the juvenile court, and they might become part-time employees at the Neighborhood House. Other women would undertake more intensive training in Chicago or New York, and would then be hired as full-time social workers. The employment of such professionals did not necessarily mean that the ordinary members would not be needed as volunteers, because attendance at night schools, sewing classes, or children's clubs fluctuated. But the Councils did add to the stock of professional employment for Jewish women, and the social workers soon became leaders in the Jewish community. Indeed, by the 1920's, most sections had initiated scholarship funds to subsidize the higher education of Jewish women.<sup>49</sup>

Local sections took their direction in part from programs suggested by the national headquarters, as memos from the national secretary, Sadie American, punctuated their provincial round with new suggestions for study circles or social activism. The smaller sections felt overwhelmed yet exhilarated by this periodic glimpse of what they might be doing. The sections further expanded their sense of what women could do by their close attachment to local and state Federations of Women's Clubs.<sup>50</sup> Beth Wenger has recently argued that in the South, as compared with the North, local sections sought affiliation with these federations earlier in their history, and that southern Jewish women were quickly accepted and elevated as officers in these religiously integrated organizations. "The Council," she writes, "concentrated on creating an image of the Jewish woman as a concerned and involved citizen in the Atlanta community."<sup>51</sup> But in western commercial hubs of similar size, like Portland and Denver, the same relationship with gentile women's organizations developed at the same moment in their respective histories. In Denver particularly the presence of the National Jewish Hospital led the local section of the Council to

intensive fund-raising and the development of contacts with gentile clubwomen. Indeed, fund-raising for a national institution gave Jewish women extensive local prominence. In 1899, Seraphine Pisco, who later became a major administrator at the hospital, represented the Denver Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society, the local section of Council, and the Woman's Club of Denver at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in Cincinnati. More practically, the Denver section cooperated with the Associated Charities to open a day nursery in the Jewish immigrant district.<sup>52</sup>

In Portland in its early years the section invited speakers from the Portland Women's Club, the public schools, and the YMCA to speak on social services. As early as 1899, the Portland Women's Club saw the Council as the major voice for social and civic matters in the Jewish community. With prodding from the Portland Women's Club, the local Council was enlisted in a crusade to expand the public schools, to hire women as school district administrators, to create a public employment bureau for women, and to battle against prostitution and venereal disease.<sup>53</sup> In these cities, as well as in smaller towns like Toledo and Terre Haute, gentile women continued to address the Councils, while talks by rabbis and other male experts virtually ceased by 1910.<sup>54</sup> Instead, female professionals, especially public health nurses and doctors, gained the support of the Councils to discuss birth control and to support the Crittenden Homes for former prostitutes and battered women. The Councils also endorsed female candidates for school boards, and in Portland they campaigned for one of their own.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, what emerges from the evolution of the Councils through the early 1920's is far more than the creation of an educated motherhood or a feminism that thrust domestic issues into politics. It is instead a sense that Jewish women as a self-conscious entity were carving out a distinctive role within the club world, as the club world itself created a niche in state and local politics. A few women like Seraphine Pisco, Julia Swett, Pauline Steinem, Jennie Purvin, and even a Rebekah Torner in Terre Haute devoted far more time than the average married, middle-class woman to social and political work. But they received wide support from their colleagues for a new female role. Entering the vacuum that men had left in the delivery of social services

through the public sector, they mounted a religiously pluralist attack on male prerogatives to place nurture functions on the political agenda and to politicize the religious community.

### *Epilogue*

With the return of prosperity to America after World War I, rabbis again worried about the moral decay of Jewish families and the nurturant role of women. Rabbi David Philipson of Cincinnati criticized women particularly for deserting the household through employment, entertainment, and ultimately through divorce. Speaking at his Rockdale Avenue Temple in the early 1920's, he claimed to welcome the emancipation of women, particularly as they were absorbed in the governance of the synagogue. "But," he continued, "all rights of whatever character . . . cannot wipe out the fundamental differences between the sexes. Nature has set certain bounds which cannot be overcome or evaded. There remains the irreducible minimum . . . [which is] the function of wife and mother."<sup>56</sup> In New York Rabbi Stephen Wise took a more even-handed approach. Focusing on the relationship between parents and children, he did not blame women for attempting to violate "nature." He even condoned divorce where the husband and wife had antagonistic personalities. Nor was he concerned about the small size of families. Instead, Wise saw the crux of conflict in the Jewish family to be the transmission of Jewish values to the adolescent in a society where free choice, skepticism, and a plethora of secular attractions were honored. For him parents had a subtler task, which required their own Jewish education and the cultivation of trust with their children.<sup>57</sup>

Most Council members would not have dissented even from Philipson's desire that women devote more time to their families. They would certainly have accepted Rabbi Wise's assessment of their difficulties with their children. In Portland and Denver in the 1920's, relatively few Council members worked, apart from aiding their husbands in the family business. But the tone of Philipson's remark, the reference to woman's "nature," had become dated and offensive. Certainly Rabbi Wise's criticism of parents never suggested that women had a greater responsibility than men for the moral and intellectual tone of the household. The Council's sponsorship of new legislation on peace and arbitration, support of birth control, scholarships, and Junior

Councils suggests how the local sections tried to expand their political knowledge while also educating their daughters. If women now devoted themselves to their families, that was their choice. If they wished to agitate so that women could limit family size and pursue careers, that too was now their choice. More than simply educated mothers, or even wife companions, they had created new, formal female-support networks to draw themselves together in their new middle-class neighborhoods.<sup>58</sup>

---

William Toll received his doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley. His latest article is "Ethnicity and Freedom in the Thought of Horace M. Kallen," in Moses Rischin, ed., *The North American Jewish Experience* (1987).

### Notes

1. The implications of intense friendship networks for understanding women's separate world are explained in Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York, 1979), p. 312. The emergence of middle-class women from the home is ably described in Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York, 1980), pp. 3-5 and passim.

2. This change is ably summarized in Sheila Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York, 1978), pp. 21-22. See also the recognition of the implications of this revolution in housework for the mobilization of women in Jennie Franklin Purvin, "The Chicago Woman's Aid" (undated manuscript ca. 1914), 1, in Jennie Franklin Purvin Papers, American Jewish Archives (hereafter referred to as AJA).

3. Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, p. 69. On demographic changes see Daniel Scott Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," in Cott and Pleck, *Heritage of Her Own*, pp. 222-245; William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations* (Albany, 1982), pp. 45-55.

4. Judith Smith, "Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks in Providence," in Cott and Pleck, *Heritage of Her Own*, pp. 395, 399, 403.

5. My dating is taken from Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, p. 90, who analyzes the political agitation of the Women's Educational and Industrial Unions of Boston and Buffalo, beginning in 1887. It is not indicated whether any Jewish women belonged to these clubs. Jennie F. Purvin, "Chicago's Woman's Aid," p. 3, describes the evolution of this organization from charity for hospitalized children in the mid-1880's, just as the Council of Jewish Women was being organized. "Club life" among Jewish women, then, seems to follow by about a decade its inception among Protestant women.

6. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Sphere*, pp. 14, 97, 178, 210.

7. "Conference Paper of Dr. Kohler," in *Proceedings of the Pittsburgh Rabbinical Conference* (1885), published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Richmond, 1923), pp.

10-11; "On the Divorce Problem, The Topic Considered by Reverend Solomon Schindler," in *Boston Herald*, March 9, 1891, Rabbi Solomon Schindler Papers, AJA. My thanks to Bill Braverman for calling my attention to this clipping. My views here are supported by Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980* (New York, 1981), pp. 59-60.

8. Galveston, Texas, Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society (LHBS), minute books, February 26, 1891, July 20, 1902; Trinidad, Colorado, Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, minute books, November 2, 1898, AJA.

9. The point is summarized in Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington, 1982), p. 4. "By locating Christian values in the home and capitalist values in the public world of commerce, the Victorians were able to achieve an efficient moral balance." The public sphere belonged to men and the private to women.

10. Stephen Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture* (New York, 1983), p. 5, argues that the family absorbed external tensions and prepared its members, with much distress, to emerge from a hierarchical, deferential society to a contractual and individualistic one. Jewish families in American hinterland towns used interfamilial networks within the religious community to perform the same functions. Minute books, of course, rarely record the intimate lives of individual members, though by the 1880's they do so for "cases" of transients.

11. Typical are the by-laws of the Portland, Oregon, LHBS, noted in the minutes, May 24, 1874, Oregon Jewish Historical Society, Portland; Trinidad HLAS, August 21, 1889.

12. Seattle, Washington, LHBS, March, 1896, summary, AJA.

13. Fargo North Dakota, HLAS, June 9, 1920, January 19, 1921, February 23, 1921, December 29, 1926.

14. Portland, Oregon, LHBS, November 27, 1904, May 3, 1905, November 30, 1901, May 31, 1910; Trinidad HLAS, November 10, 1897, January 6, 1909; Vicksburg, Mississippi, LHBS, May 6, 1908, AJA.

15. Toll, *Making of Ethnic Middle Class*, pp. 48-49; Albany, Georgia, LHBS, The Golden Jubilee and Memorial Fund, "Mrs. S. K. Simon's Report on the History of the LHBS" (1928), AJA; Fargo HLAS, February 22, March 17, 1925.

16. Trinidad HLAS, July 3, 1889, and passim; Portland LHBS, November 28, 1888; Galveston LHBS, November 4, 1900, June 6, 1901.

17. Trinidad HLAS, April 2, 1890.

18. Portland LHBS, May 29, 1888, December 26, 1889; Galveston LHBS, December 21, 1898.

19. Portland LHBS, August 27, 1883, February 23, 1897; Galveston LHBS, September 23, 1902, February, 1903, November 27, 1903, November 7, 1905. The ideological gulf between elite American women of mercantile family backgrounds and working-class women has been carefully examined in Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1869* (New York, 1986). In that earlier era, elite women saw benevolence as their personal link with the poor, but as working women proliferated and as their cultural milieu expanded, they became estranged from the elite. A similar pattern developed among Jewish women fifty years later.

20. Toll, *Making of Ethnic Middle Class*, pp. 18-19, pp. 31-38.

21. Vicksburg LHBS, April 4, 1905, May 3, 1906, June 6, 1914; Galveston LHBS, December 23, 1895, February 7, 1900.

22. Seattle LHBS, May 2, 1917, February 12, 1919, January 2, 1922; Toledo, Ohio, Council of Jewish Women, minutes, February 3, 1911, AJA.

23. Vicksburg LHBS, February 4, 1923; Galveston LHBS, December, 1918.

24. The importance of young womanhood, its nurturance in colleges and public universities, and the philosophical battles that had to be fought to establish the intellectual equality of women are traced in Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Femi-*

nism (New Haven, 1982), pp. 5–7, 14, 51, 78. Note that 43 percent of female college graduates in the last two decades of the nineteenth century never married (p. 23).

25. The Happy Workers, Charleston, South Carolina, minutes, February 25, 1889, and list of members, including the Misses Belitzer, DeLeon, Elias, Fabian, Goldsmith, Hart, Levy, Moise, Ottolengui, Pinkussohn, Solomons, AJA.

26. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1892, December 18, 1894, February 25, 1896.

27. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1889.

28. *Ibid.*, January 19, 1900.

29. *Ibid.*, November 8, 1892, April 5, 1910, May 3, 1910, June 7, 1910.

30. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1928, February 19, 1929.

31. Mrs. H. P. Givner to Members, Happy Workers, January 18, 1949, Happy Workers Minute Book.

32. Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, p. 4, 66, 69. The argument that women first asserted autonomy through sexual practices within the family is argued by Smith, "Family Limitation," pp. 233–239.

33. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, p. 51, 78. Jane Addams still believed that the temperament of women differed from that of men for biologically determined reasons. See Jill Conway, "Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution," in Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington and London, 1972), pp. 151–152.

34. Purvin, "Chicago Woman's Aid," p. 2, 10.

35. Jewish Women's Religious Congress, "Convention Program," pamphlet, AJA.

36. Terre Haute, Indiana, CJW, Minute Book, December 17, 1901, AJA.

37. "On the Divorce Problem"; Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf, "The Club Versus the Home," a discourse at Temple Knesseth Israel, January 21, 1906, manuscript in Joseph Krauskopf Papers, AJA; my thanks to Carla Goldman of Harvard University for the reference.

38. Savannah, Georgia, CJW, Minute Book, March 2, 1897, AJA; Denver CJW, Minute Book, June 8, 1898, Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

39. Terre Haute CJW, October 19, 1899, October 16, 1900.

40. *Ibid.*, January 8, 1903.

41. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1899, December 7, 1899, February 1, 1900, December 27, 1900; Charleston CJW, April 19, 1909, February 7, 1910; Toledo CJW, February 3, 1911.

42. Denver CJW, January 8, 1902, February 13, 1901; Charleston CJW, May 11, 1909, December 20, 1909.

43. Savannah CJW, April 15, 1896, December 7, 1896, March 7, 1898, May 2, 1898, January 12, 1899; Terre Haute CJW, October 7, 1902, March 23, 1906.

44. Toledo CJW, March 17, 1906, July 11, 1906, November 3, 1906, November 19, 1906, November 5, 1909, May 9, 1910, January 6, 1911.

45. Terre Haute CJW, November 1, 1906, November 4, 1912, December 2, 1912, September 23, 1913; Charleston CJW, February 9, 1914, March 9, 1914.

46. Toll, *Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, pp. 58–61; Denver CJW, June 8, 1898; Seraphine Pisco, "Denver's Jewish Settlement Work," *Jewish Outlook* (Denver), 3, no. 10 (January 5, 1906): 1.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

48. The Sheppard-Towner Act is discussed in Rothman, *Women's Proper Place*, pp. 136–141. Columbia, S.C., CJW, Minute Book, December ?, 1920, AJA; Terre Haute CJW, March 7, 1921; Denver CJW, January 8, 1919; Toll, *Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, pp. 60, 102–103.

49. Toledo CJW, March 25, 1905, April 11, 1905; Denver Council of Jewish Women Bulletin,

June 1930, p. 3, March 1931, pp. 2–3; Purvin, “Chicago Woman’s Aid,” p. 3; Toll, *Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, pp. 102–103, 123, 139–140.

50. Terre Haute CJW, November 9, 1905, December 28, 1905; Savannah CJW, February 25, 1896.

51. Beth Wenger, “Jewish Women of the Club: The Changing Public Role of Atlanta’s Jewish Women (1870–1930),” *American Jewish History* 76, no. 3 (March 1987): 312, 317, 321 (quotation).

52. Denver CJW, May 10, 1899, September 22, 1899, January 8, 1902.

53. Portland, Oregon, CJW, December 6, 1899, February 5, 1902, May 7, 1902, May 14, 1902; January 6, 1904.

54. Terre Haute CJW, March 11, 1902, November 5, 1903, October 7, 1912, January 6, 1904.

55. Columbia, S.C., CJW, February 24, 1920, October 12, 1920, February 8, 1921; Terre Haute CJW, March 7, 1921, October 7, 1921, December 5, 1921; Toll, *Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, p. 62.

56. David Philipson, “Women’s Sphere” (n.d., internal evidence indicates early 1920’s), David Philipson Papers, AJA.

57. Stephen S. Wise, *Child Versus Parents: Some Chapters on the Irrepressible Conflict in the Home* (New York, 1922), pp. 4, 48, 82, 125, 131.

58. In Denver and Portland between 1920 and 1940, Council members moved steadily into more affluent neighborhoods, while their husbands’ business flourished. Of the 636 women belonging to the Denver section in 1921, 30 percent remained members through 1931, despite a substantial decline in membership associated with the Depression, and a steady and normal migration of families from the city. Twenty-one percent still belonged in 1941. During this period, the occupational profile of the husbands shifted from retail proprietorship, sales, and clerical work to wholesale proprietorship, professional, and semiprofessional (insurance, real estate) employment. The largest occupational category in 1941, however, was still retail proprietorship. The data have been gathered from the Council membership lists and Denver city directories.

When I think of great, inspirational Jewish women, my list is varied. A quick straw poll of my female editorial colleagues resulted in this list, including a prime minister, an author, a singer and cook. Who would you add to our list of the top ten Jewish women in history?

Golda Meir : Israel's fourth prime minister, she was the first woman to be elected leader of Israel.