

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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The Women's League for Conservative Judaism—a group founded in 1918 by visionary Mathilde Roth Schechter with the purpose of improving the Jewish education of Jewish women and strengthening traditional Judaism both in the home and in the greater community—has left a quiet but ubiquitous mark on the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Every day, JTS students and faculty gather to *daven* in the Women's League Seminary Sanctuary (WLSS). Every year, JTS erects its famous giant *sukkah* originally decorated by Women's League members. Names of Women's League leaders adorn many a plaque throughout the halls of the Seminary. The entire JTS community benefits from the Women's League Torah Fund Campaign (also known as the "Torah Scholarship Fund"), which, *inter alia*, has improved the JTS courtyard and the Seminary's library.¹ For decades, many Seminary students resided in the Mathilde Schechter Dormitory, the student housing established by the Women's League in 1976.² For the past century, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism has not only contributed generously to the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, but also, through its individual

¹ 75 Years of Visions and Volunteerism, pp. 70-71. The Torah Fund continues to be Women's League's major fundraising project, having contributed \$99 million. Phone interview with Judi Kenter, July 28, 2017.

² Women's League also completely refurbished the Seminary's Goldsmith Hall dormitory.

regional groups, has quietly served as the backbone of local Jewish communities across North America and beyond.³

In light of Women's League's significant support of and impact upon American Conservative Jewish life, it is most perplexing why there does not yet exist a comprehensive institutional history of this organization.⁴ Even in many mainstream historical and sociological overviews of Conservative Judaism, Women's League is largely ignored.⁵ This paper will provide an overview of the organization's history, mission, accomplishments, challenges, and shifting identity, while considering how and why such a central group could be so generally neglected.

The genesis of Women's League is best understood within the context of other emerging Jewish women's groups during the early chapters of Jewish settlement in the United States. Before Women's League was founded, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, and Hadassah were already establishing the groundwork for Jewish American women's involvement in their local congregations and national community.⁶ Because Jewish

³ Women's League has also supported Jewish life and learning abroad, especially in Israel.

⁴ For the purpose of this paper, I consulted a number of Women's League papers and pamphlets, which are not publicly accessible but offer brief sketches and surveys of Women's League history. Most of these pamphlets read more like institutional hagiographies than critical and/or complete histories. Such pamphlets include *75 Years of Vision and Volunteerism* (1992), *The Sixth Decade: 1968-78* (1978), and *They Dared to Dream: A History of National Women's League, 1918-68* (1967).

⁵ For example, while Marshall Sklare's sociological study *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1983) offers passing mention of women's involvement in the movement, Women's League is never formally mentioned. Michael R. Cohen mentions Women's League in passing in *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 91-93, 95, and 125-126.

⁶ In the early years, there was a great deal of overlap between the active leadership of Women's League and Hadassah, including such

women were excluded from their synagogues' boards of trustees until well into the 1950s, they found the need to seek other avenues that would enable them to establish a power base from which they could address their specific needs, and pursue their collective dreams of strengthened Jewish identity and empowerment.⁷ Indeed, leadership cultivation and organizational training represent the cornerstone of Women's League's monumental contributions to North American synagogue life. One of the great continuing successes of Women's League is its comprehensive leadership and public-speaking trainings throughout the organization.

The original goals of the Women's League responded to the exigencies of their day. At a time when the bulk of Jewish American women were either children of immigrants or themselves immigrants, and suffered from a profound lack of Jewish and/or Hebrew literacy, the Women's League, made up largely of an elite group of educated Jewish women—many of them the wives of the leaders of the United Synagogue, or of some of its most outstanding scholars—saw as their mission the education of these women so that they could protect, preserve, and defend Jewish values and lifestyle at home.⁸ Spearheaded by the likes of

figures as Carrie Davidson, Mathilde Schechter, and Henrietta Szold.

⁷ Beginning in the mid-1950s, certain sisterhood women were allowed to join their congregations' boards. Today, some sisterhood women sit only *ex officio* on their synagogue boards. But as Jack Wertheimer notes, while women had made great strides in occupying Conservative synagogues' administrative roles, even by the 1970s, few women won their synagogues elections for highest board positions. See Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, (Cambridgeshire, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 137.

⁸ Interview with Women's League Education Director Lisa Kogen, Monday, March 17, 2014. Examples of such erudite leadership included Matilde Schechter's successor, fellow Rebbetzin Fanny Hoffman, who hosted a weekly radio Jewish educational program on New York's WEAJ-WIN radio station (*75 Years of Vision and Volunteerism*, p. 18). Racie Adler, spouse of JTS president Cyrus Adler, was the original chair of the radio program. See Lisa Kogen's article in *CJ Magazine*, "Hand in Glove," accessed at <http://www.cjvoices.org/article/hand-in-glove/> on October 19, 2017.

Mathilde Schechter, the original organizer of Women's League and spouse of Solomon Schechter, the top tier of Women's League leadership were the primary educators. Indeed, in its early years, Women's League worked closely with United Synagogue to spread and strengthen Jewish education across the United States and represented a vital arsenal of the United Synagogue.

The creation of a Jewishly-aware woman was no small task. The early leaders of Women's League traveled far and wide to coach Jewish American women throughout the country in a myriad of practical matters, including how to maintain kosher kitchens, create Jewish educational opportunities for children, and properly celebrate the various Jewish holidays. One of the Women's League's best-known printed contributions to the education of mainstream Conservative Jewry was its publication of Deborah Melamed's *The Three Pillars: Thought, Worship and Practice for the Jewish Woman* (New York: Women's League and United Synagogue of America, 1927) which enumerated basic principles of Jewish observance and belief for the Jewish American woman of that day.

Indeed, a major part of the Women's League's work was the publication of such educational material for its membership. For nearly 80 years, the organization independently maintained a quarterly magazine, *Outlook*; and, at its peak, Women's League sent out mailings to its entire membership multiple times each month.⁹ Women's League was also responsible for the publication of the first-ever English language educational Jewish children's series, *K'tonton* (introduced in 1935).¹⁰

⁹ According to Lisa Kogen, Women's League consisted of nearly 200,000 members at its zenith. Women's League began publishing *Outlook* in September 1930 (*75 Years of Vision and Volunteerism*, p. 61).

¹⁰ Other earlier landmark Women's League publications include an eponymously authored review of the holidays, *The Jewish Home Beautiful*, Written by Betty D. Greenberg and Althea O. Silverman (New York: Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, 1941); Rabbi Jacob Kohn, *Modern Problems of Jewish Parents; a Study in Parental Attitudes* (New York City: Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, 1932), dealing with childrearing in light of both contemporaneous psychology and traditional values; and, another children's book, Sadie Rose Weilerstein, *The Singing Way: Poems for Jewish Children* (New York: Women's League, 1946). Such expanded publication, combined with national programming, such as Women's League Shabbat, helped create a sense of national unity

The Women's League (along with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods) also advocated for the establishment of synagogue libraries and synagogue gift shops. Both of these additions to congregational life would serve educational purposes each in its own way. Achieving and spreading Jewish literacy through modern Jewish America was a prime goal and value of the Women's League, and congregational libraries represented one essential step in realizing that vision.¹¹ In addition to their extensive publishing of Jewish educational materials for a broad audience, the Women's League compiled a "canon" of essential Jewish texts that would color the character and values of the Movement. Indeed, the very process of determining what selections should be including in a sample congregational library helped solidify Conservative Jewish identity in America.

While the impact of the establishment of synagogue gift shops (now often called "Judaica shops") on Jewish education and identity may not, at first glance, be apparent, the effect of these shops was quite significant, in that the gifts that they featured included some of the earliest products from the Jewish *yishuv* in pre-State Palestine, and functioned as symbols of both social mobility and Jewish identity and pride. Ritual items, including educational printed material, became standard gifts for milestone lifecycle events and were both aspirational and inspirational in their cultivation of a new, modern, informed Jewish American identity and lifestyle.¹²

throughout Conservative synagogue life in America and establish a certain degree of "conformity." See Wertheimer, p. 127.

¹¹ See discussion of the importance of a synagogue library and gift shop in Sarah Kussy, *Handbook and Guide for Jewish Women's Organizations* (New York, NY: The National Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, 1947), pp. 22-24. The appendix of the handbook includes a complete list of bibliographic recommendations for the creation of a Jewish library, prominently featuring the works of the early greats of the Conservative movement, such as the landmark writings of Louis Ginzberg, Mordecai Kaplan, Alexander Marx, Morris Adler and Louis Finkelstein. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-105.

¹² The dream of expressing Jewish identity through visible affluence and upward mobility was strongly echoed in a variety of WWII-era Women's League publications. Consider, for example, the following fantasy of affluence prescribed in *The Jewish Home Beautiful*:

The very definition of Jewish-American identity has transformed quite dramatically over the course of Women's League's century of existence. Whereas Women League enjoyed a vigorous and influential beginning in the post-WWI era, and continued to flourish as American Jewry spread out to the suburbs, changes in society that have expanded the horizons of women beyond the home and the classroom have negatively impacted the group's overall activity and membership. While in its earlier days, the Women's League provided a vital social apparatus that allowed stay-at-home mothers to come together at meetings to work on meaningful community projects, both the social needs and the schedules of contemporary Jewish American women have changed dramatically.¹³ Today's Jewish American women have more complicated schedules and less time, and rarely can attend daytime meetings. Even evening meetings pose certain challenges: the majority of young

The Table should be very gay and colorful; set for a Purim Seudah, a dinner for eight people, service plates, silver, glassware, etc. The color scheme might be gold and red or blue—a gold cloth, red roses for the centerpiece, red or blue candles and red or blue glassware, goblets and wine cups. A small doll richly dressed as Queen Esther may be perched on a tiny throne in the center of the flowers. If a glass horse is available, a figure dressed in purple as Mordecai should be sitting on the horse which is led by another figure dressed as the villainous Haman. The group is place to one side of the centerpiece. On the other side is propped an illustrated Megillah partly unrolled. If desired a huge platter containing a goose or other fowl of papier mache or clay may be placed on the table with a carving set nearby At each setting is a gragor or noisemaker, a paper cap and mask, and a small dish of nuts... (P. 71).

¹³ In its first decades of existence, the Women's League's publications very much reflected the identities, mentalities, and roles of Jewish American women of that era. Accordingly, their pamphlets and books placed special emphasis on domestic concerns within a traditional Jewish framework.

contemporary American Jewish women are working; those with children return home from work drained and often must tend to their children and families. Women's League for Conservative Judaism's Director of Education Lisa Kogen explains that even the best programming still will often fail to attract these younger working women.¹⁴ In addition, overall Jewish literacy has markedly improved throughout the last several decades, thus eliminating one of the major purposes of the Women's League programming. Hence, due to the changes in the lifestyles, social needs, and schedules of this new generation of Jewish American women, the bulk of Women's League's current active membership consists of women in their 50s and 60s.¹⁵

The expanding rights and rapidly improving lot of women in Conservative Judaism also, paradoxically, created certain tensions for the Women's League internationally. While the investiture of female cantors and ordination of female rabbis in the Conservative Movement opened new vistas for many Jewish women, these developments created a certain degree of friction between Women's League leadership and the emerging younger, increasingly-educated, trained female clergy. Older members of the Women's League report that female rabbis in particular tend to distance themselves from Women's League for fear of being associated with so-called Kiddush ladies (a pejorative stereotype of Women's League leadership that has developed over the years.). More generally, certain younger leaders and congregations have come to question the need for gender-segregated groups in their communities, and are thus less supportive of Women's League's activities. It should be noted, however, that the Women's League has always supported the advancement of women in Conservative Judaism, and already in 1972 provided the first forum for Ezrat Nashim (a highly learned, group of Jewish feminists from the New York Havurah) to advocate on behalf of Conservative Jewish women's rights when the Rabbinical Assembly did not permit them to speak at its convention.

An additional challenge that the Women's League faces is a longer-running logistical complication concerning fundraising within synagogues. Earlier in its institutional history, Women's League

¹⁴ Interview with Lisa Kogen, March 17, 2014.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that longtime Women's League leader Judi Kenter reported attendance by women in their 30s and 40s as well, at the 2017 Women's League national convention. Phone interview with Judi Kenter, July 28, 2017.

sisterhoods were the major fundraising arms of synagogues and would raise money for a variety of congregational needs, such as Hebrew schools, scholarships, and building renovations. Today, Women's League continues to fundraise, but mostly for internal purposes.¹⁶ The Women's League international office reports nearly daily phone calls concerning the contested ownership of funds. Certain synagogues even prohibit their sisterhoods from fundraising at all, and if they do, all of their money must go directly to the synagogue's finances, even if the sisterhoods maintain separate bank accounts.¹⁷

Within the last decade, Women's League has experienced several structural changes and introduced new programming to respond to the shifting needs and identities of American Conservative Jewry. In order to streamline their operations, Women's League has consolidated their many international branches into 13 regions. Beginning in July 2014, Women's League's theretofore biannual convention shifted to a triennial model. Likewise, as of July 2014, the presidential tenure for Women's League presidents changed from two consecutive terms to one three-year term. Also, just a few years ago, in an effort to alleviate the work load of the international office in New York City and in response to a flagging budget and membership, Women's League's magazine *Outlook* merged with the journals of United Synagogue and the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs to create *CJ Voices* magazine. Notably, under the "About Us" section of the print edition of the *CJ* magazine (phased out in late 2015 before migrating to an online magazine), there was no mention of the publication's origins in Women's League.¹⁸

In the recent years, Women's League has developed an increasingly global vision, expanding its focus and reach as an international organization. Whereas the earlier Women's League leadership was heavily concentrated in the metropolitan New York area, the last 15 years have seen more geographic diversity among its leadership. This increasing geographic diversity in Women's League

¹⁶ However, Women's League continues to contribute generously to the Seminary.

¹⁷ Interview with Lisa Kogen, March 17, 2014.

¹⁸ Women's League has also demonstrated a continued commitment to collaborating with such allied groups as the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and, some 18 years ago, sold its building at 48 East 74th St. and move to an office space in the same building as the FJMC office, close to the Seminary.

leadership is due, in part, to Women's League's decision nearly two decades ago to host its annual international convention in a different city each year instead of continuing to host the annual convention each year at the Concord in New York.¹⁹ In addition to sisterhoods in Canada and Mexico, Women's League leadership has acknowledged the importance of looking broadly at global trends and issues as they pertain the Jewish woman. Part of this shift to a more global model and outlook has included a more expansive emphasis on issues-based education, as evidenced from such programs as, at the 2017 international convention in Detroit, the "Taking Action on Women's Health" panel, which featured representatives from JWI (Jewish Women International) and Planned Parenthood and presented *halakhic* perspectives on the subject matter.

Women's League programming and recently emerging initiatives also reflect the changing landscape of American Jewish life. Women's League current president Margie Miller explains, "We are here to meet people where they are. We want to help people live Jewishly, even if they don't walk into our building. Our goal is inclusion. Inclusion not just in words, but in action."²⁰ Women's League fully endorses the acceptance of and respect for same-sex marriage in the Jewish community, and their *Mishpacha* initiative provides materials to bolster awareness and to help strengthen this sense of inclusion within the Conservative Jewish community. The Women's League New Jewish Family initiative acknowledges the rapidly changing face of the Jewish family, which includes LGBTQ Jews, as well as a steady increase in singles, and the steep decrease in formal synagogue affiliation. As longtime Women's League leader Judi Kenter notes, "even if people won't join a synagogue, they want community, some kind of family."²¹ Additionally, the Women's League has expanded their "Orpah's List," an annual book club recommendation program started in 2005, which provides a study guide for a selected book by a Jewish female author, to include a list specially for children. 2014's selection was Elisabeth Kushner's *The Purim Superhero* (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben, 2013), which prominently features a protagonist with two fathers.

Another salient organizational shift has been in the nature of Women's League's adult education and community activism. Earlier

¹⁹ The move to shift around annual conventions in different cities resembles Hadassah's convention model.

²⁰ Phone interview with Margie Miller, August 10, 2017.

²¹ Phone interview with Judi Kenter, July 28, 2017.

decades of Women's League programming relied heavily upon fairly formulaic and declamatory Women's League written-out scripts (not only for international Women's League Shabbatot, but for educational programming generally and, especially, for the highly performative "holiday pageants" featured at each biennial convention). With the change from the 20th to the 21st century, Women's League has revamped its adult education curricula to be more issues-based and to accommodate a diversity of modes of learning.²² Providing meaningful, rigorous educational opportunities for Jewish women remains part of the core mission of Women's League, who continue to partner regularly with the Jewish Theological Seminary to offer special Women's League Seminary classes, with their renowned faculty, for Sisterhood women.²³ Additionally, under the direction of Lisa Kogen, Women's League has expanded its *chesed* outreach focus to the greater community, with every cycle helping the broader community, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, in the city where it hosts its international convention.²⁴ In reaching out to the

²² The Women's League's Day of Study is an example of the new model, in which different kinds of texts are presented for study and discussion. Originally, upon instituting the international Day of Study, the Women's League introduced a five-year cycle to explore one of the five *megillot* each year; in following years such topics as *Psalms*, environmentalism, and the observance of *mitzvot* have been topics of focus.

²³ The impact of the educational programming indeed propels Women's League's leadership. Longtime Women's League leader Elaine Schanzer reflects:

I never stop learning. There is so much to learn about Judaism. The more I learn, the more I love it. I love how stimulating and intellectually engaging it [Womean's League educational programming] is. Women's League has given me a love of learning and made me seek out new ideas constantly. (Phone interview with Elaine Schanzer, August 21, 2017.)

²⁴ The past four conventions have included such community *chesed* projects including gathering supplies and fundraising for a center for female domestic abuse victims in Philadelphia, knitting hats, gloves and scarves for homeless people in Detroit, the very

larger community, Women's League is demonstrating its understanding of adapting to meet the needs of contemporary times and expanding Jewish identities.

Technology is also playing a major role in the development and future of the Women's League. In order to expand its reach, both nationally and globally, and to accommodate constituents' demanding schedules, the Women's League has experimented with more online learning opportunities. While Women's League has disproportionate representation in certain regions, such as in the Northeast corridor of the United States, online learning opportunities enable more remote regions to access Women's League content and appreciate their mission. The 2017 national convention marked the first time Women's League live-streamed programming from a convention.²⁵

Looking ahead, Women's League anticipates major changes in both its communication and programming with the incoming president. The two most recent presidents, Carol Simon of Tampa, FL, and the newly-installed Women's League president, Margie Miller of Long Island, represent a younger generation and are more media savvy than their predecessors.²⁶ Among the priorities of Women's League, as it plans ahead, are to provide opportunities for professional networking with a Jewish emphasis and to create a welcoming space for the steadily increasing singles demographic within North American Jewry.²⁷ Although Women's League has outlived its original goals of providing a social space for Jewish women, encouraging Jewish literacy, and

successful "book for Baltimore" program, in which Women's League raised over \$40,000 and partnered with the Baltimore public school system to give every Baltimore public school student in pre-K and 3rd grade a book, and a project to support families of hospitalized veterans in West Los Angeles.

²⁵ Phone interview with Judi Kenter, July 28, 2017.

²⁶ Margie Miller took office as Women's League International President in the summer of 2017.

²⁷ Lisa Kogen elaborates upon this sociological trend, encouraging the Jewish community to respond accordingly in her piece, "Two-by-Two?" – which appeared in *CJ Magazine* (Winter 2013-2014, p. 45), accessed at <http://www.cjvoices.org/article/two-by-two/> on October 19, 2017.

enhancing domestic observance, it hopes to continue, albeit in an attenuated form, by adjusting its goals and expanding its vision.²⁸

Ironically, at a time when Women's League members unquestioningly accepted the roles externally imposed on them as homemakers diligently working "behind the scenes" to create a positive Jewish home-life, their institutional presence as a "quiet but ubiquitous" force in Conservative Jewish life was strongest. Perhaps it is due to the Women's League's quiet acceptance of its role as unheralded "assistant" in the various efforts of Conservative Judaism that the men writing the earlier histories of the movement felt justified in glossing over their significant contributions while emphasizing the work and accomplishments of their male counterparts instead. Today Women's League understands and embraces the evolving role and identity of the Jewish woman, but, in so doing, its relevance as an institution becomes increasingly ambiguous and ill-defined. Nevertheless, however one evaluates the different contributions and perceptions of Women's League, it is clear that the organization's historical development has paralleled the sociological shifts in the ever-changing identity of Jewish women, and, as such, Women's League has been and continues to be reflective of its times.²⁹

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²⁸ With increased gender equality and socialization in both the workplace and in American's leisure life, the demand for gender-exclusive spaces appears to have lessened significantly. Moreover, with expanding understanding of gender and sex, some congregants do not identify with the gender binaries upheld by Women's League and the Federation of Jewish Men's Club.

²⁹ The author would like to gratefully acknowledge Judi Kenter, Lisa Kogen, Margie Miller, and Elaine Schanzer for their generous time and help sharing their experiences and insights from their extensive Women's League involvement and leadership. In particular, I would like to thank Lisa Kogen for allowing me access to a treasure of historic Women's League archives in researching this history.

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