

# VOLUNTEERISM



1918- J. M. H. A. San Francisco



Temple Emanuel Sisters of S. F.



1921- Henriette Bold



# The Volunteer Organizations: Vanguard or Rear Guard?

by Paula Hyman

Jewish women's organizations were not always out of touch with the needs of their members. When they were founded, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, they offered middle-class women an important opportunity to leave the confines of the home and engage in socially useful activity which was also of great value to the entire Jewish community. Paid employment was out of the question for middle-class married women, and serious volunteer work constituted an assault on the concept of the refined and helpless Victorian lady.

Like general women's organizations of the time, the National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah, and the networks of synagogue Sisterhoods relied on the concept of social housekeeping to legitimize—and mask—what was in fact a radical redefinition of appropriate behavior for women. (If women belonged in the home and had developed a special and inborn talent for housekeeping, what was the larger society except the home writ large?) Women could thus bring their skills and moral sensibilities to the pressing social problems of their time. As Sadie American, the most outspoken (and only paid) officer of the National Council of Jewish Women declared in 1896:

*We do claim that for a woman to give in words and publicly of ... the wisdom of her experience to make life fuller and better for others, is quite as womanly as to sing operatic arias ... to execute sonatas ... or to imitate poor actresses—all of which meet with general approval.*

These attitudes did not make the Jewish women's organizations into hotbeds of



1910, Sadie American

feminism. The major organizations, for example, regularly refused to pledge their support in the fight for female suffrage. But they were feminist in a larger sense, in that they enhanced the self-worth of women and worked on their behalf.

First and foremost, Jewish women's organizations staked a claim to articulating and meeting the special needs of women clients. It was the National Council of Jewish

Women which first established an extensive immigrant aid network tailored to the conditions of immigrant women traveling alone or with children, largely because it felt that male-dominated Jewish institutions ignored that group. The Council arranged for the first Yiddish-speaking female worker to meet incoming women at Ellis Island and find lodgings for girls with no relatives to receive them. In pre-state Israel, it was Hadassah which addressed itself to the health problems of women and children.

While the organized Jewish community as a whole would have been happy to bury the issue of white slavery simply by denying Jewish involvement, Jewish women's organizations—Council in the U.S. and the Jüdischer Frauenbund in Germany—treated it as a major social problem. Moreover, they proffered sympathetic aid to the victims—both actual and potential—of the traffic in women.

The Jewish women's organizations not only served an otherwise ignored constituency, they also raised the status of their own members. In a period when male leaders in the Jewish community routinely denigrated the capacity of women for leadership, these organizations asserted their right to communal recognition and to pride in their own accomplishments in the field of social welfare and philanthropy. Women leaders continually battled the prejudices of male Jewish leaders in the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the Jewish Welfare Board and the Joint Distribution Committee who were reluctant to share power with women and who expressed doubts as to the ability of women to manage funds.

Gradually the women achieved grudging  
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recognition. For its immigrant aid work, the National Council received accolades from both the American and Italian governments. Zionist leaders learned that the women of Hadassah could not be ignored on political issues when Hadassah broke with the Zionist Organization of America in 1923, was expelled from its ranks, and proceeded to seek and gain status as an independent affiliate of the World Zionist Organization.

Their very success in the first two decades of the twentieth century taught organized Jewish women lessons that are still timely. Particularly during World War I, when women were encouraged to apply themselves wherever their talents were needed, they learned to think highly of themselves and of their work. Council president Janet Simons Harris exulted in 1917 that

*through the war, men have learned... to respect women... and that is great and glorious; but there is something infinitely greater than this which has happened: women have learned to respect women.*

And, as Rebekah Kohut, a prominent Council leader, demanded

*[to refuse] as women to be used merely to raise money and to act as figure-heads in the management... of ladies' auxiliaries. We have earned the title to larger responsibilities than this.*

That statement from 1920 could, unfortunately, still stand as a manifesto today. In fact, it is particularly poignant at present because women have come so far in the society at large and have made so few gains in the Jewish community.

Jewish women's organizations still do valuable work. But power and prestige in the Jewish community, for the most part, lie elsewhere. The priorities of American Jewry are determined still by local Federations and national organizations which give women little say in the decision-making process. Yet the early feistiness of the women's organizations has given way to a comfortable acceptance of the status quo. And so the "Hadassah lady," whatever the value of her philanthropic activity, is a stock comic figure, not a respected communal leader.

Why were our women's organizations more responsive to Jewish women's needs then than now? Why did they lose the struggle for real power within the community? The answers to these questions are bound up with the phenomenon of volunteerism among women in a society that devalues both unpaid work and female labor, and with the change in options available to women both as volunteers and as workers.

Since the pioneering days of the Jewish women's organizations, the options available to the woman volunteer—as well as her status in American society—have declined

considerably. The options available to middle-class women who seek to pursue careers, on the other hand, have increased dramatically, especially in the past ten years. The major Jewish women's organizations have been unable and/or unwilling to deal with these changes.

**“But whether they confront feminist issues or not, the women's movement and all it has accomplished will not disappear. Ignoring the women's movement and its impact on their own members encourages defections.”**

The Jewish women's organizations, which worked primarily in the area of social welfare, were hard hit by the professionalization of social work between the two world wars. The trained men who spearheaded the drive for professionalization measured the success of their campaign at least in part by the elimination of volunteer women from much social work activity, using the argument that they were unprofessional. The men saw their own leadership as necessary to win popular respect for the new profession. Women were thus dislodged from many responsible positions in the sector of social welfare, and focused their energies on less direct and personalized work, such as fundraising.

The trend to professionalization also affected the structures of these organizations themselves. In their early days, the Jewish women's organizations were actually staffed mainly by volunteers. Paid workers were few and were clearly subordinate to the volunteers (as Sadie American learned to her dismay, a situation which led to her abrupt departure from the National Council). Today, the professionalization, expansion, and centralization of the organizations themselves have placed power in the hands of the paid administrative staff and a thin stratum of upper-echelon volunteer leaders on the national level.

In 1910, or even 1950, the constituency of the Jewish women's organizations had few alternatives to volunteer work. In that direction lay their only opportunity for meaningful and responsible work outside the home.

Today, paid career opportunities for women abound, despite the persistence of sex discrimination. Middle-class women are increasingly likely to direct their energies into careers which provide both social recognition and challenging work (not to mention that more and more middle-class families require two salaries to maintain their accustomed or desired standard of living). Women with paying jobs are obviously less likely to assume heavy voluntary responsibilities unless these are made very attractive. Yet in many cases, not only are working women not enticed into volunteer work, but they are actively discouraged from entering it because so many meetings

are scheduled during working hours.

The transformation of both the work and the structure of Jewish women's organizations as well as the expansion of job opportunities available to middle-class women has resulted in a decline in the centrality of these organizations in the lives of many of their members.

The records of the first generations of the women's groups reveal widespread and intense personal commitment—in social work, fundraising and Jewish education. Some women still derive great satisfaction from the philanthropic activity and social events sponsored by their organizations. But for many, membership today means little more than paying dues. The organizations seem to be satisfied with nominal membership and do not actively recruit working women.

Nor have the Jewish women's organizations addressed themselves seriously to the changing needs of contemporary Jewish women. While this is a time of great transition for women, a time of stress as well as opportunity, Jewish women's organizations do not seem to have recognized this. They have not found the issues that today's women's movement is addressing itself to as compelling as they did the problems of white slavery and aid to immigrant women and children some two generations ago. They have little to say to us about our quest for meaningful roles for ourselves as Jewish women and for expanded options within the Jewish community.

Nor do they deal with the family and career problems of their own constituencies. They do not provide counseling or scholarships for displaced Jewish homemakers, or day care for the growing number of two-career or single-parent Jewish families. While women in Jewish communal organizations have been meeting as individuals to press for equality of job opportunities, the women's organizations themselves have scarcely engaged in lobbying for greater power within the Jewish community. They appear content to continue in their admittedly good work, with perhaps an occasional meeting devoted to a discussion on the new roles of Jewish women. In short, they have not grappled in any serious way with the growing assertiveness of Jewish women or with our rightful struggle for positions of communal responsibility.

Perhaps they are afraid to question a structure based on volunteer labor: if feminism succeeds, might not their dedicated workers choose to work elsewhere for pay? Perhaps. But whether they confront feminist issues or not, the women's movement and all it has accomplished will not disappear. Ignoring the women's movement and its impact on their own members (and potential recruits) simply encourages defections.

Jewish women's organizations once took the lead in fighting discrimination against women within the Jewish community. Wouldn't it be wonderful if they championed the cause of Jewish women today? ■