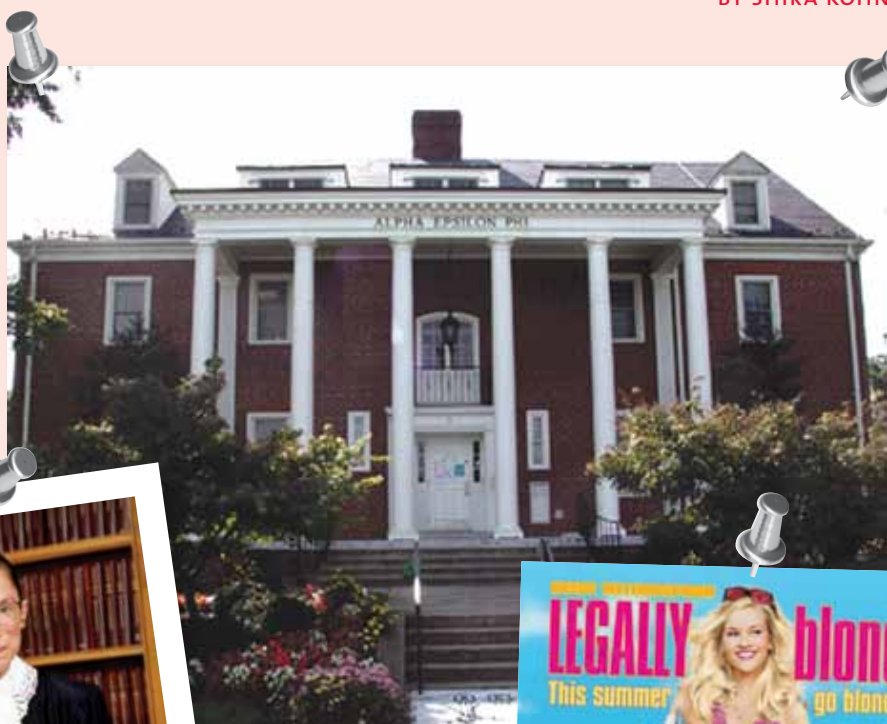


A (Re)Consideration of

JEWISH SORORITIES

BY SHIRA KOHN





Remember the opening scene of *Legally Blonde*? Or the Saturday Night Live salutation “Delta, Delta, Delta, can I help ya, help ya, help ya?” To many observers, sororities look like the embodiment of values you’d love to hate—elitism, conformity, traditionalism, and perhaps even “inauthentic” or “superficial” expressions of Jewish identity. Cinematic representations aside, there’s an alternative narrative. Here’s a tip: watch for a hidden proto-feminist agenda in Jewish sorority life.

As someone who has invested a lot of time (10 years!) and intellectual energy (a doctoral dissertation!) examining the history of these Greek organizations, I’ve come to recognize Jewish sororities as an underrated, unsung resource for developing Jewish women’s leadership. Through the many decades of their existence, they’ve offered their 100,000-plus current members and alumnae a chance to hone communication skills, troubleshoot obstacles (have you ever tried to balance a household budget for 40 people at the age of 20?), and as undergraduates, develop career strategies using an established network of women already primed to be mentors. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (opposite), Senator Barbara Boxer, astronaut Judith Resnick, Rockefeller Foundation president Judith Rodin and novelist Lauren Weisberger are some of the Jewish sorority alumnae who have made their mark as activists, rabbis, leaders and educators.

So entertain for a moment the hypothesis that sororities are in fact useful institutions for promoting Jewish feminist identity and that they provide a unique alternative to established religious and cultural Jewish groups on today’s campuses. Sororities appealed to a wide swath of Jewish women from the decades of their founding in the 1900s and 1910s until the end of the 1960s, when the rise of second wave feminism and the crescendo of the civil rights movement led many college students to embrace differences and individuality while rejecting any institution that appeared to endorse conformity or sectarianism. The next 20 years saw stagnation or decline for the Greek system in general. And since Jewish students, for a number of reasons, were overrepresented in social-change movements, many of them turned their backs on sorority recruiters. “This was an period of anti-establishment sentiment on campuses across the country, for both general Greek and Jewish Greek organizations,” said Bonnie Rubenstein Wunsch, Executive Director of the Jewish sorority Alpha Epsilon Phi.

Simultaneously, in the 1960s and 70s, the diminishing interest in Greek life led non-Jewish fraternities and sororities to scout out new members from ethnic and religious minorities they’d previously excluded or even shunned. Some Jewish students took advantage of the opportunity to join organizations previously barred to them, thus contributing to a dramatic membership decline in the Jewish houses. To appeal to a wider variety of students in hopes of boosting their numbers, two Jewish sororities, Delta Phi Epsilon and Phi Sigma Sigma, decided to rebrand themselves by moving away from any acknowledgement or celebration of their Jewish roots and identity. Slowly, they opened up several new chapters on campuses with few Jewish

Is there a hidden, proto-feminist agenda in Jewish sorority life?

students, and today both have a majority of non-Jewish women as members. The other two sororities, Alpha Epsilon Phi and Sigma Delta Tau, continued to market themselves mostly to Jews, but were able to open up only two or three new chapters during the 1970s, a significant decrease considering that these national sororities had previously expanded, on average, by more than 10 chapters per decade. “It was a time of more loss than gain,” Wunsch reported.

Then Jewish sororities also began to accept non-Jewish women in slightly larger numbers. And, while these four sororities were able to stay afloat during the 1970s and early 1980s, Jewish sororities had every reason to believe that their golden age was over.

But not so fast. Interestingly, in the past decade Jewish sororities have experienced a renaissance, increasing their membership and raising their profile both on campus and in the larger community. Sigma Delta Tau, according to Executive Director Ann Braly, has seen a 17% increase in membership over the last two years, and now boasts a membership of over 5,300 women on more than a hundred campuses across the country.

A widespread embrace of multiculturalism in the 1990s meant greater appreciation for pride within many minority populations, especially on campus. The decade witnessed the founding of several Latino and Asian and Pacific Islander fraternities and sororities, particularly in the western and southern states. African-American sororities, many of which also started early in the 20th century, when the Jewish groups were founded,

also witnessed a rise in membership and proliferation of new chapters. Society's new level of acceptance of ethnic differences allowed for the creation of niche groups catering to these students, and Jews were part of this trend. The way the Black Pride movement of the 1960s spurred a greater outspokenness for Jews around the time of the 1967 Six-Days' War, Jewish fraternities and sororities in the 1990s became places where Jewish students could comfortably self-identify while strengthening explicitly Jewish experiences.

Missy Present, an alumna of Alpha Epsilon Phi at George Washington University, explained her own decision to join a Jewish sorority as "finding a community similar to what I had at home [growing up]...a connection with a group of women [with] whom I shared a set of ideals, including educational goals and leadership aspirations on campus." For Present and many other college students, the sorority offered both familiarity and a launching pad for involvement in activities beyond the group itself. She said she employed the recruitment skills learned in her sorority in her work at Hillel on campus while she was an undergraduate and later in her professional life, working in Hillel's national office; she is now the Undergraduate Director of Admissions at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

It's fascinating that the reasons for renewed interest in Jewish sororities today are the same ones articulated by the founders of these organizations a century ago. Jewish sororities emerged on college campuses during the first two decades of the 20th century. They formed only when a critical mass of Jews began to attend secular institutions. Iota Alpha Pi, the first Jewish sorority, was founded in 1903 at Hunter College in New York. (These women called themselves the "JAPS" when translating the "I" in "Iota" to a "J" in English—no connection to the later opprobrium of "Jewish American Princess.") Alpha Epsilon Phi, founded at Barnard College in 1909, is the oldest Jewish sorority still in existence. Women who founded this sorority, and later, those who started Phi Sigma Sigma, Delta Phi Epsilon and Sigma Delta Tau, came together to counter the social anti-Semitism of the time—non-Jewish Greek organizations unabashedly barred their doors to Jewish students—and to build community with other Jewish women. They "wanted to join a group that was not biased by prejudices of religion or any racial discrimination," in the words of one Alpha Epsilon Phi founder, and vowed to create "a place void of pettiness where our ideals as young women could be fostered and nourished." Even in those days, Jewish sororities provided their members with a "safe space" on campus to pursue their intellectual and social goals.

Their members were women not unlike their Jewish peers who didn't join Greek life. They all likely had slightly more disposable income than the average college student of that era, a function of the growing middle-class status of American Jews. While most were first-generation Americans, their families had already become less traditional in religious observance; for example, parents didn't mind their daughters spending Friday nights at mixers with single men (so long as chaperones were present). In fact, many parents embraced a daughter's decision

to join a Jewish sorority in the hope that she would mingle with eligible Jewish men whom she could and would marry.

Marriage to an educated Jewish man was one way a Jewish woman in the early 20th century could create a life for herself, but moving beyond this, there's evidence that Jewish sororities encouraged their members to invest in themselves. All of them did, after all, join sororities while in pursuit of a degree. The founders of the Jewish sorority Delta Phi Epsilon met as students at New York University Law School, and all of them went on to careers at a time when only a minority of women worked after marriage. Minna Goldsmith Mahler, for example, served as a United Nations observer, and Ida Bienstock Landau used her law degree to sue for the right to retain her American citizenship after marrying her Austrian husband in 1921. At that time, women who married foreigners lost their citizenship, and for Landau, that also meant her right to practice law. She succeeded in her suit, which led to the creation of the Cable Act of 1922, protecting the citizenship of all American women married to foreigners.

Even during the age of the so-called feminine mystique in the 1950s and early 1960s, Jewish sorority women promoted their commitment to strong and unconventional female role models who often defied the stay-at-home stereotype. In 1953, Delta Phi Epsilon instituted a "Person of the Year Award" and celebrated as its first recipient Anna Rosenberg, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense who had recently defeated Senator Joseph McCarthy's attempts to smear her. By highlighting Rosenberg, the sorority showcased a liberal-leaning working woman as a

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role model. During the Cold War, when Jews were often under suspicion for their political affiliations, this public proclamation made a courageous statement. The Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority had previously instituted its own recognition program by offering honorary membership to women it considered inspirational; recipients included Hannah Solomon and Rebecca Kohut, founders of National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), and Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah. Like Rosenberg, these honorees had not been sorority members, but they all valued education and activism as essential attributes of a Jewish woman.

While the Jewish sororities regularly highlighted their alumnae's involvement with Hadassah and NCJW in their magazines and drew connections between the Jewish sorority experience and post-collegiate participation in these women's organizations, the same connections were not reciprocated by the established women's groups. Even though both NCJW and Hadassah leadership and membership ranks were populated with alumnae of Jewish sororities, neither organization explicitly recognized the thread that initially bound these women together. By overlooking the Jewish sororities and their training of young Jewish women to assume active roles in their communities, it seems, looking back, that a membership-development opportunity was missed.



Senator Barbara Boxer and Lauren Weisberger, the author of *Devil Wears Prada*.

Given the numbers of women involved over the decades, why have historians and others who have studied community leadership dismissed or ignored the value of the Jewish sorority experience? In an era that saw the birth of both Jewish studies and women's studies (the 1960s and 1970s), it's understandable that emerging academics might have been reluctant to examine organizations viewed as snobby or antiquated. Joyce Antler, Professor of American Jewish History and Culture at Brandeis University, who has written extensively on Jewish women and feminism, suggests an alternative explanation for why scholars have bypassed Jewish sororities. Focusing on labor history, political history or religion, they have generally neglected youth culture and girls' culture.

And what about now? Why are Jewish sororities reasserting themselves as significant Jewish institutions on the college campus? Jill Finkelstein, active in Greek life at the University of Delaware from 2005–2009, suggests this is because a sorority provides a route to “sisterhood, social and service events... it makes [college] less overwhelming and easier to find your niche and a sense of community.” Responding to the demand of Jewish women for a Jewish sorority at the University of California-Davis in 1998, Sigma Alpha Epsilon Pi was founded, and actively promotes itself as a “Jewish-interest” sorority on the 13 campuses where it now has chapters. Another local Jewish sorority at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill named itself Sigma Rho Lambda after the Jewish matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. According to a past advisor, Sheila Katz, the group is successful because “they explore many ways to be Jewish. Some students are connected through social justice, some through religion, some through a sense of peoplehood... being Jewish doesn't mean one thing.”

Older and more established groups are now highlighting their “Jewishness” in ways previously unexplored. Alpha Epsilon Phi has partnered nationally with Hillel to create orientation activities for new students and jointly sponsored Shabbat services. Shoshanna

Schechter Shaffin, Director of Hillel at Virginia Commonwealth University, a campus which has recently experienced a boost in Jewish campus involvement, sees a “clear correlation between a strong Jewish Greek life on campus and the overall ‘rebirth’ of Jewish life at VCU. Our Hillel numbers are literally doubling every year...The Hillel president is the president of Alpha Epsilon Phi.”

In addition to renewed Jewish social activities, the Jewish sororities are engaging energetically in philanthropic and social action projects. “In addition to Jewish Women International,” Sigma Delta Tau's Braly said, “our undergraduates also support ‘Prevent Child Abuse America’ and ‘Women for Women International’.” After working four years planning fundraising events and educating fellow students, she reported, “the missions of these [other] organizations—the empowerment of women and children—become part of their being.” Alpha Epsilon Phi adopted as one of their philanthropic recipients Sharsheret, dedicated to increasing breast cancer awareness among young Jewish women and the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, inspired by its founder, who had been a member of the sorority's University of Wisconsin chapter. Individual members of all of the Jewish sororities are also out-front and active in campus organizations as diverse as J-Street, AIPAC, independent campus minyanim, and Chabad, in addition to student government, environmental organizations and, importantly, feminist groups including *Vox* (Planned Parenthood) and Take Back the Night.

Similarly to those who sought membership in the past, many are from relatively affluent families—sorority dues for chapters with houses cost anywhere from \$1,000–\$2,500 a semester and cover both national and local dues, housing costs and for new members, initiation fees—but over 9,000 current students deem the Jewish sorority experience worth the investment. And the national sororities have scholarship funds available for members demonstrating academic achievement. Members say they feel their money isn't going to social attire for dances or buying friends, but to help women gain a foothold into the world of networking and leadership with tools that will help them succeed. Present's sorority experience taught her “how to be an effective communicator, how to work with people who hold diverse opinions and visions, and [gave her] on a national level, exposure to women doing great things in their fields.”

Jewish sororities are trying hard to counter the negative portrayals in popular culture, like the self-obsessed taskmasters in the film “Sydney White” and the sorority archetypes (bulimic, bully, slut, etc.) described in Alexandra Robbins's 2004 bestselling expose *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*. And while Jewish sorority women are easy targets for the derisive “JAP” stereotype, their commitment to social activism and female empowerment have helped to defuse such accusations. “Today Jewish sorority women are combatting the JAP stereotype just as non-Jewish sorority women are combatting that of the WASP.” declared Wunsch of Alpha Epsilon Phi. As Ann Braly contends “The old sorority stereotypes are ancient history.” ■

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