Part VI

Judaism
Leaders of Reform Judaism in the United States have often celebrated their movement’s role in emancipating Jewish women from the many restrictions that Judaism has traditionally imposed upon women’s ability to participate in and lead public worship. Historians generally see the American Reform movement as growing out of the German Reform Judaism that emerged in the early nineteenth century as an attempt to adapt traditional Jewish worship to the perceived demands for rational religious practice brought by the Enlightenment. Although it is true that the direction of the American movement was largely shaped by mid-nineteenth-century immigrant rabbis from German-speaking lands, American Reform Judaism found a distinct expression that was both more radical and broader than German Reform in terms of actual practice.

This distinctiveness emerges most clearly in the way that women’s changing roles have continually and centrally shaped the emergence and evolution of Reform Judaism in the United States. Although mid-nineteenth-century German Reform leaders made the case for women’s equality in Judaism and the abolition of anachronistic laws and customs that stifled the public expression of women’s religiosity, it was only in the United States that practical innovations adopted by the Reform movement actively redefined the nature of women’s participation in public worship. Chief among Reform Judaism’s liberating innovations were the abolition of separate women’s gallery within the synagogue in the 1850s and the ordination of the first American woman rabbi in 1872. In addition to these important institutional changes, Reform congregations have also provided important sites for Jewish women to work out the tensions between evolving societal expectations for women and the roles identified with traditional Jewish practice.

Efforts to adjust the American synagogue to reflect American understandings of female religious identity long predated the emergence of an American Reform movement in the mid-nineteenth century. American synagogue builders in the eighteenth century had already begun to do away with the partition barriers that kept women out of sight in traditional women’s galleries. American Jewish women quickly seemed to realize that American culture demanded women’s presence at public worship. Moreover, American Jewish leaders came to understand that the segregation and seeming subjugation of women behind opaque barriers was hardly the way to achieve respectability as an American religion. By the 1850s, open American synagogue galleries offered tiered rows of seats, carefully affording a clear view to the many women who took their place at regular worship services.

A number of other innovations that helped to redefine women’s place in Jewish worship, and that would become characteristic of American Reform practice, found a place in synagogues that congregants still expect to be sites for traditional worship. A desire for a more formal worship service led many congregations to introduce mixed male and female choirs, challenging the usual orthodox proscriptions against hearing women’s voices during worship. In addition, the introduction by the 1850s of confirmation services in many American Jewish congregations signified, in part, an effort to celebrate the Jewish education and identity of girls together with those of boys.

The departure that most clearly heralded the arrival of a Reform style of worship and definitively separated that style from traditional Jewish practice was the introduction of the family pew. The earliest instance of the mixed seating of men and women in the synagogue may have arisen as a matter of convenience. In 1851, a breakaway Albany congregation, Anshe Emeth, led by reformer Isaac Mayer Wise, adopted the mixed-gender use of family pews when the group moved into a former church building and adopted the existing design rather than build additional balconies to create a customary women’s gallery. Similarly, three years later, Temple Emanu-El in New York City utilized the existing family pews of the church building that they had bought to serve as their new synagogue. Within the new Emanu-El building, family pews were one component of a wide range of revisions of traditional synagogue practice that included an abridged liturgy, elaborately orchestrated organ and choir music, emphasis on a service leader who intoned the worship service in distinguished and modulated tones, and a regular vernacular sermon. With the exception of mixed seating, all these reforms found parallels in German Reform efforts. Family pews, however, remained an exclusively American innovation until well into the twentieth century.

Women never could have been integrated into the main sanctuary at Emanu-El if the congregation itself had not been transformed. In traditional Jewish worship settings the male congregants played a vital part in the proceedings, participating in the Torah-reading service and other aspects of the ritual. Although a traditional service would have a leader, it was understood that he mainly marked time for the congregation as each individual chanted (quietly or with more volume) his own way through the liturgy. By contrast, services at Temple Emanu-El were guided and orchestrated by a leader—who having moved from the reader’s traditional position in the midst of the congregation to an elevated position at the front of the sanctuary became the center of at-
tention and of the service. One observer of the congrega-
tion in its 1854 building described a service in which
"[T]he minister and reader do all the praying, the organ
and choir perform the music." The congregants them-
selves had been transformed into spectators: "The visi-
tors appear as mere dummyes . . . the visitor acts no part,
but that of auditor . . . [E]xcept for an occasional rising
from the seat, the congregation does not participate in
the worship" (Goldman, 134). Women became eman-
cipated just in time to become part of an assembly that
was rapidly losing its identity as a traditional kahal
(community); the congregation was now often referred
to as an “audience” (134). Women did gain a kind of
equality with men as worshippers in the sanctuary, but
it was a role that had already been greatly devalued.
Women had gained the right to join men in the shrink-
ing role of congregant.

Introduced at a period when many American syna-
gogues were just beginning to explore the implications
of departing from strict adherence to traditional syna-
gogue practice, it took some time for family pews to be
widely adopted. Still, despite the limited spread of family
pews in the 1850s and early 1860s, Temple Emmanu-El's
grand new sanctuary was occupied by some of the na-
tion's most prominent and accomplished Jewish citizens
and offered an influential model for an Americanized
version of Jewish public worship.

An emerging Reform Judaism found expression in
the many opulent synagogues that arose in urban cen-
ters from New York to San Francisco in the years after
the Civil War, all proclaiming the prosperity, achieve-
ment, and refinement of the nation's Jews. These tem-
ples were home to a self-conscious and focused effort,
driven by German-trained rabbis, to create a public Ju-
daism that would satisfy the needs of an Americanized
Jewish population. Acculturated rabbis and lay leaders
hoped to thus associate themselves with the decorum
and respectability of religious sanctuaries occupied by
established members of America's social and religious
elites.

Apart from a few determinedly orthodox settings, all
the synagogues built to house this Americanized Juda-
ism emphasized the repositioning and integration of
women within Jewish religious space. Male Jewish lead-
ers saw the introduction of this innovation as completely
consistent with their drive for respectability. The 1863
annual address of the president of the Indianapolis He-
brew Congregation proudly reported that in the con-
gregation's new building, "Ladies & Gentlemen are
seated together which," as he pointed out, "is nothing
more than civilization demands" (Goldman, 130).

Offered a place in the sanctuary, Jewish women oc-
cupied the family pews of these magnificent temples in
force, continuing a trend that had marked early-
nineteenth-century American synagogues. In a depar-
ture from the traditional pattern of synagogue worship,
but in keeping with the attendance patterns of most
American Christian denominations, women quickly
came to dominate attendance at weekly Sabbath services
as men increasingly attended to business concerns on
the Jewish day of rest. The extent to which these syna-
gogues were shaped by women's presence was again a
distinctively American phenomenon. Neither family
pews nor synagogues filled with women found any par-
allel in European Jewish experience. The success of the
mid-nineteenth-century reformers in shaping a deco-
rous and refined synagogue ceremonial that became the
dominant expression of American Judaism had perhaps
unforeseen consequences when it came to devising new
public identities for women beyond that of synagogue-
ger. The reorientation of worship space and gender
roles within the synagogue, which Reformers would later
describe as acts of emancipation for women, had decid-
edly mixed effects. Although Jewish women's attendance
patterns may have emulated the pew dominance of
American Christian women, mid-nineteenth-century
Jewish women did not participate in the explosion of
voluntary and organizational activity identified with
women in Protestant churches of the same era. In Chris-
tian churches, women's numerical dominance of the
pews was reinforced by their central role in general
church-related activity. Historians have described the
years after the Civil War as an era when the expansion
of Christian women's work for benevolence and social
reform was incorporated locally and nationally into or-
ganizations that gave life and vitality to churches and to
church work.

This, however, was a time when the Reform syna-
gogue's intense emphasis on refining synagogue ritual
rendered many other communal activities suddenly ir-
relevant. The narrowing of the congregation to the lim-
ited sphere of public worship undermined the existence
of the many groups, like female benevolent societies,
which had earlier been active players within broadly de-
fined synagogue communities. Although women's view
of the proceedings within emerging Reform sanctuaries
changed, they moved no closer to active participation
or leadership in the religious life of their synagogues.
Those active synagogue affiliations that remained, spir-
itual leadership and lay governance, remained exclu-
sively in male hands. Even the question of who could
be a "member" of a synagogue continued to be limited
to those (men) who enjoyed the full rights and respon-
sibilities associated with traditional synagogue worship.
These limitations generally stretched only far enough to
encompass widows of deceased members and, in some
cases, unmarried women, so that they could be included
among the dues-payers of the congregation.

Thus, although Reform leaders would often celebrate
their introduction of the family pew in bringing gender
equality to Jewish religious life, the second half of the
nineteenth century brought mixed results in forwarding
the public position of women in America’s Reform con-
gregations. Male synagogue leaders did often request aid
from women within their communities to raise funds
with which to build synagogues or to pay off debts. In
many Southern and other small communities, in fact,
women often took primary responsibility for raising
funds and pushing for the building of synagogues. In
most cases, however, these organized efforts were short-
lived and did not translate into permanent organizations
or sustained collective influence within their congrega-
tions and communities.

Formal organization of the Reform movement grew
from the founding of the Union of American Hebrew
Congregations (UAHC) in 1872 and Hebrew Union
College (HUC) in 1875. Although women from seventy-
nine (mainly southern and midwestern) communities
responded to President Isaac M. Wise’s call to commit
one dollar a year to aid HUC’s indigent students, women
generally played little role in these institutional devel-
opments. Although Wise had often advocated the crea-
tion of a female theological seminary, nothing along
these lines ever emerged. A few female students did en-
roll at the early Hebrew Union College, but none ad-
vanced very far in their studies.

Congregational religious schools constituted one im-
portant area where women associated with Reform con-
gregations did expand their involvement in synagogue,
servering as both teachers and supporters. Even in these
settings, however, women were often explicitly excluded
from leadership roles and could not serve on the con-
gregational boards that governed the schools. Still, con-
gregational religious schools offered girls a supplemen-
tary religious education that was equivalent to that of
boys. Many nineteenth-century Reform congregations
rejected the exclusively male bar mitzvah, adopting the
confirmation ritual observed on the festival of Shavuot
(in May or June) as the primary adolescent rite of pas-
sage, a practice that incorporated equality for girls in
religious education. During confirmation services, girls,
together with boys, offered prayers and speeches, dem-
onstrating their learning and commitment.

Not until the late 1880s did new structures emerge
to absorb the latent energies of the women within Re-
form congregations. The first Jewish Sisterhood of Per-
sonal Service organized by Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of
New York’s Reform Temple Emanu-El in 1888 provided
a prototype that was quickly emulated in Jewish con-
gregations throughout the country. These groups of
Americanized Jewish women, especially in New York, at
first focused their energies on the impoverished eastern
European Jewish multitudes lately arrived in the United
States. Women from many of New York’s uptown syn-
agogues, ranging from Reform to Orthodox, formed si-
therhoods of personal service that cooperated in dividing
responsibility for care of the city’s immigrant districts.
Sisterhood members engaged in a broad range of social
welfare work directed toward aiding newly arrived im-
migrants. The most common activity was that of
“friendly visiting,” wherein sisterhood workers would
visit the homes of immigrant families to assess their
needs and, if necessary, dispense material aid. Interested
in training immigrants to become both self-sufficient
and sufficiently American, the sisterhoods of personal
service in New York and San Francisco, and similar
groups in other cities, also offered vocational schools,
classes and clubs for working girls, child day care and
kindergartens, and employment bureaus. Acculturated
Jewish women throughout the country created religious
schools that attempted to expose immigrant children to
an Americanized form of Judaism. Many sisterhoods
dispensized these services from settlement house-like
buildings of their own. Although the work of these or-
ganizations was outwardly directed, it brought a mea-
sure of shared purpose and community to the women
of these congregations.

Between 1880 and 1920, over 2 million immigrant
Jews flowed into the United States, deterred only by
World War I and then finally by the Immigration Re-
striction Acts of 1921 and 1924. In many locales, accul-
turated women remained a vital part of congregational
and communal efforts to welcome and support the new
arrivals throughout this period. Despite the dedicated
work of these women, the numerous “professionalized”
Jewish social service organizations that emerged around
the turn of the century to address the needs of new
immigrants ultimately marginalized the benevolent ac-
tivities of the female “friendly visitors” who were often
associated with congregations.

This did not, however, bring an end to the era of
growing Jewish women’s activism. Building on the
model that their own organizations had helped to spark,
sisterhood workers refused to simply retreat to their
homes. The activation of women’s energies that had
arisen to meet the needs of new immigrants had inspired
a general awakening of organized activism among more
acculturated Jewish women at both the local and na-
tional level that began to match the intensity of Chris-
tian women’s commitments to causes like temperance
and missionary work. Much of this energy found its
expression within synagogues.

Instead of gathering as ad hoc groups of women to
advance particular and limited congregational projects,
women in many Reform synagogues around the country
during the 1890s started to approach their responsibil-
ities on a permanent organized basis. Congregations, in
turn, began to depend on synagoge women’s groups to
take responsibility for the physical, charitable, and social
needs of the community. This activation of female en-
REFORM JUDAISM ~ 535
ergy for the benefit of the congregation intersected with efforts by graduates of Hebrew Union College to expand the institutional work of Reform congregations beyond the narrow scope of worship. Women’s groups offered services in whatever ways congregations would allow them to participate. In some communities this meant that they became more involved in addressing the needs of religious schoolchildren or in furnishing and decorating their temple buildings. In other congregations, women’s participation became the key to sparking a general expansion of congregational cultural and charitable activities. The emergence of synagogue auxiliary associations offered women, for the first time, positions on various committees devoted to congregational work and opportunities to be officially recognized for their communal contributions. A wave of temple building in the 1890s and early twentieth century became necessary to encompass the expanding and variegated institutional life made possible by women’s emerging activism.

The first national organization to emerge from the rising tide of Jewish women’s activism was the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW). This movement was spearheaded by women associated with Chicago’s Reform Sinai Congregation. They took the lead in creating a Jewish Women’s Congress that took place at the Columbian Exposition and World’s Fair held in Chicago in 1893. Participants from around the country who came to the Congress embodied and articulated the ways in which Jewish women were finding their way into a public world of Jewish activism. The subsequent creation of the National Council of Jewish Women offered acculturated Jewish women in communities across the country a structure that could facilitate and validate their activism as Jewish women.

Adopting a range of issues and concerns that ranged from immigrant welfare, religious education for children, and the creation of study groups among NCJW members and classes with rabbis to the effort to ask synagogues to afford women membership, NCJW provided thousands of women with a channel through which they could invest their energies as Jewish women. NCJW’s ability to offer itself as an organization that represented the religious interests of Jewish women was, however, undermined by conflicts between members of the leadership who were associated with a desire for radical Reform measures within Judaism and more traditionally inclined leaders and members. Conflict over issues like whether the Sabbath should be observed on the traditional Saturday or on Sunday, as was advocated by some radical Reformers in the United States, drew the Congress into fruitless debate. The resulting inability to address women’s issues that arose within Jewish religious settings helped give rise to a new generation of national Jewish women’s groups.

Carrie Obendorfer Simon (1872–1961) was one of the leading figures in the creation of the Reform movement’s National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. She drew upon her experience of the expansion of Jewish women’s public identities that had redefined American synagogues and Jewish communities in the 1890s and translated this into a form of women’s organization that would do much to define twentieth-century American synagogues, whatever their denomination. Simon’s mother had been a founder of the Cincinnati chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women. Thus, as a young woman, Carrie Obendorfer would have been intimately familiar with the new possibilities being opened to women within Jewish communities. After her marriage at age twenty-four to Hebrew Union College graduate Abram Simon, Carrie Simon found herself in many settings where she had the opportunity to push these possibilities in new directions.

As the National Council of Jewish Women stumbled over the differing religious approaches of its diverse membership, Simon, as a rabbi’s wife first in Sacramento, then in Omaha, and finally in Washington, D.C., became engaged with the work of congregations at a local level. A sisterhood was founded at Temple Israel of Omaha in 1903, and Carrie Simon herself founded the Ladies Auxiliary Society of Washington Hebrew Congregation in 1905, for the purpose of “congregational work, pure and simple, and to endeavor to establish a more congenial and social congregational spirit” (Nadell and Simon, 65). Simon focused her efforts on synagogue women’s groups that, although they had been established in some congregations as organizations intended to assist needy immigrants, had turned increasingly to attending to the needs of the synagogue community.

In 1913 the male leadership of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations issued a call “to all ladies’ organizations connected with congregations belonging to the Union” to send delegates to a meeting to be convened in Cincinnati “for the purpose of organizing a Federation of Temple Sisterhoods” (Lefton, 17). The meeting, held in conjunction with the national UAHC convention, was attended by 156 delegates (mainly the wives of UAHC delegates) from fifty-two congregations. Carrie Simon was elected as the organization’s founding president, and Rabbi George Zepin became its executive secretary.

The preamble adopted by the delegates, with its declaration that “the increased power which has come to the modern American Jewess ought to be exercised in congregational life” (Lefton, 27), reflected its framers’ recognition that the new organization was built upon recent transformations in Jewish women’s public lives. And just as the emergence of women’s activism within acculturated Jewish communities helped bring about the formation of the National Federation of Temple Sister-
Carrie Obendorfer Simon was one of the leading figures in the creation of the Reform movement’s National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. She drew upon her experience of the expansion of Jewish women’s public identities that had redefined American synagogues and Jewish communities in the 1890s and translated this into a form of women’s organization that would do much to define twentieth-century American synagogues, whatever their denomination. Used by permission of the Jewish American Archives.

hoods (NFTS), the creation of a framework for the work of women in Reform congregations at the national level helped to transform the identity and work of Reform Jewish women at a local level. With the founding of NFTS, many local congregations that had not previously had women’s membership organizations created sisterhoods, and the work of many existing women’s organizations was transformed by the advent of a national organization. The energy engendered by the creation of NFTS encouraged tens of thousands of women to focus their energies on congregational life and on the broader efforts of American Reform Judaism.

The contributions of both new and reconfigured sisterhoods to the educational, material, and social life of American Reform congregations were transformative. Sisterhood groups moved boldly to take on a vast range of responsibilities within their communities. Within a year of the return of their delegates from the Cincinnati founding convention, Cleveland’s Tifereth Israel’s Temple Women’s Association reported on the work of twenty-six different working committees. The renamed sisterhood of Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia described a similar advance as it reported on the formation of fifteen new working groups. Often responding to suggestions from the national leadership, sisterhoods across the country took on concerns that ranged from the sponsoring of religious schools for immigrant children to the selection of decor for the ladies’ lounge.

Congregational religious schools reflected the sudden infusion of new energy that accompanied the founding of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. From the provision of “paper roller towels and waste baskets” in Cincinnati (Goldman, 207) to the expansion of holiday celebrations to provision of appropriate gifts for male and female confirmands to the creation and oversight of temple libraries, religious schoolchildren benefited from the careful attention that sisterhoods directed toward their religious education. Sisterhood efforts to create social spaces for students within their synagogues led to the expansion of leisure activities provided by synagogues for young people. Individual women and women’s groups had often taken responsibility for providing the synagogue sanctuary with appropriate religious objects, but sisterhoods radically expanded this traditional practice. Women’s groups around the country provided their congregations with organs, carpeting, furniture, and wings of buildings. With the mandate of expanding synagogue attendance, many sisterhoods re-