

Women's League Publications: A Vision One Hundred Years Strong

by Lisa Kogen (2023)

Historical Introduction

In January 1918, Mathilde Schechter, delivered a historic address to an assembly of more than a hundred Jewish women, including not only women associated with the recently established Conservative movement, but also women from other Jewish women's organizations already in existence. In it she articulated a vision for the establishment of a Women's League of the United Synagogues of America, describing it as one that will *"serve the cause of Judaism by strengthening the bond of unity among Jewish women and by learning to appreciate everything fine in Jewish life and literature."* The means by which to achieve this lofty vision, she concluded ... *"..for our own and for our children's sake... [is that] we must educate ourselves with single-hearted devotion... to the self education of the conservative (sic) Jewish women..."*

"The self education of the conservative Jewish women" This mission, mandated over a hundred years ago, remains, unabated, the principle focus of Women's League for Conservative Judaism into the third decade of the twenty first century.

Until the twentieth century, the religious education of most Jewish women was at best negligible at worst, non-existent. By the second decade of the twentieth century the number of Jews living in America had swelled from a half million in 1880, to over two and a half million by the early 1920s. The most recent arrivals, largely from Eastern Europe were impoverished, [formally] uneducated, and the women wholly lacking in Jewish knowledge beyond the most rudimentary and pragmatic. They understood the basic fundamentals of kashrut and holiday observance, but knowledge of Hebrew or sacred writings -- beyond those in Yiddish for women -- had been deemed unnecessary and even prohibited for women. It was these East European immigrants and their children who were drawn to this new branch of Conservative Judaism that sought to integrate its members into American culture, while at the same time conserving traditional religious observances and beliefs.

The League as Publisher: The Early Years

In the earliest days of Women's League, its leadership, comprised of a cadre of uncommonly well-educated Jewish women, became an army of peripatetic teachers fanning out into far-flung communities across the United States and Canada to teach members of newly established women's groups, auxiliaries and sisterhoods about Jewish ritual, prayer and practice. But the needs of a vastly growing complex of

women's organizations far exceeded the episodic appearance of this rarified but dedicated corps of teachers. And thus began the commitment of the League to the production and dissemination of written resources that could be made readily available and to its members.

The first publications focused on the crucial need for instructional aides for celebrating Shabbat and the holidays in the form of ***Kiddush Cards, Daily Prayer Cards, Sukkot and Hanukkah Cards***. Equally essential was the need for the creation of engaging, age appropriate resources in English for children, generally a largely neglected demographic. ***Friday Night Stories*** (1919, 1928, 1946) were a adaptations with illustrations of midrashic stories from Louis Ginsberg's *Legends of the Jews* (translated by Henrietta Szold) and ***Prayers for Young Children*** (1923). One of The League's most significant and enduring contribution to publishing will come several decades later in 1947 ('64 and '80) with Sadie Rose Weilerstein's groundbreaking ***Adventures of K'ton Ton***, a Jewish Tom Thumb whose mischievous antics keep him in and out of trouble. K'ton Ton emerged in the world of children's literature as the *first uniquely Jewish character*, whose stories reflect Jewish characters and culture.

The most foundational and iconic publication of the early years was ***The Three Pillars: Thought, Worship and Practice*** (1927) by Deborah Melamed, a professional educator and long-time leader in Women's League. The critical need for an instructional guide for women about the fundamental precepts of Judaism was first articulated by Mathilde Schechter and was completed three years after Schechter's death. Melamed's fulfillment of this most audacious of tasks, to write a book designed for women —the first in the English language – was despite the pessimism of publishers and booksellers that there was no market for such a work. ***The Three Pillars***, nevertheless, endured through nine editions and became a pioneering work in women's publications and served as the cornerstone of the educational philosophy of the National Women's League.

Finally, The League looked to monthly publications for disseminating all manner of information and resources for women in Conservative synagogues. Initially this was done through "***The Women's Section***" of ***The United Synagogue Recorder*** in which WL contributors provided articles about Jewish living and women's issues. The success of this instructional column for the rapidly growing readership (of Conservative Jewish women) soon evolved into The League's starting its own publication, ***Women's League Outlook***, first printed in 1930 and continuing on through its present iteration, ***WL New Outlook***. The Women's League *Outlook* became an indispensable tool for first and second generation Jewish women who were grappling with the seemingly conflicting goals of Americanization and the reinforcement of Jewish identity and culture. The new

League monthly publication offered an extensive array of articles on contemporary living – from holiday and Sabbath observance and preparation to cooking and handcrafts, child rearing, book reviews, world events, including and especially in Palestine, and the very popular original stories and poetry.

Publications: Post-War Through Today

By mid-century, with the rapidly accelerating growth of Conservative synagogues and their sisterhoods that exceeded 200,000 members, and with the process of Americanization and vastly improving Jewish literacy among women well underway -- so grew the demand for new kinds of publications for League members – not only in quantity, but content as well.

From the early 1950s through the end of the century, Women’s League embarked upon an ambitious publishing agenda, in no small part the result of post-war improved social and financial status for Jews. The League’s publishing output would reflect, through its readership, both its influence and reach into the Jewish community, and would also reflect the more aspirational individual goals of its membership for self-education. During this half century, publications focused on an extensive array of subjects: Women’s League history, Jewish ritual and religious practice, Jewish homemaking, theology and ethics, books for and about children, and a sizable collection of divray Torah and scripts, the latter numbering well into the hundreds.

One of the most enduring WL publications that came out soon after the war, ***The Jewish Home Beautiful*** (Greenberg and Silverman, 1945) became the iconic and aspirational template for Jewish homemakers. Based on a pageant of holiday table preparations presented at the 1941 Convention, ***The Jewish Home Beautiful*** was a detailed guidebook for how any modern Jewish woman could create a genteel, artistic and religiously inspired holiday in her home. Despite its wholly impossible and impractical recommendations for most women – even the most willing and/or accomplished – ***The Jewish Home Beautiful*** went through numerous printings until the 1970s. It was a standard addition to home libraries and became a commonplace gift for new brides.

The mid-century shift to, and emphasis on, refined Jewish homemaking tells the story of Jewish attainment of middle-class status and its trappings. Jews were no longer living from hand to mouth, as did many/most of their parents and grandparents, with sparse incomes that were dedicated to the most basic needs of rent, food and clothing. But with the post-war financial success enjoyed by Americans, including Jews, came the ability and desirability to spend on enhancement goods. While the term “domestic goddess” has taken on a negative connotation in today’s world, for Jewish women

emerging from a not-too-distant past of young girls and women toiling in brutal sweatshops for pittance wages, living in crowded tenements and with little left over in family budgets for niceties, their post-war suburban homes – filled with matching furniture and overflowing refrigerators became reflections of their greatly coveted and improved social and economic condition..

It was this new post-war social and cultural reality that drove Women's League's publishing agenda. During this time, while most Jewish women did not work outside the house, their home was their work. In support of creating beautiful, enriched Jewish households, WL offered books and a large variety of published materials to enhance, guide and support this goal. The explosive success of ***The Jewish Home Beautiful*** led to the publication of many more works on Jewish homemaking, most containing more realistic goals and strategies. They included:

What Every Jewish Mother Should Know About Her Home and Synagogue;
Across the Threshold, Guide for the Jewish Homemaker (Levy and Kaplan, 1959);
Kosher Cookery Unlimited (Perry, 1960); **Kosher Parties Unlimited** (Perry, 1968);
Quantity Kosher Cooking (1984); **Have Pots Will Travel** (Rosenberg, 1988, 1994, 2000).

The support of kosher cooking continued well into the end of the twentieth century which included **Quantity Kosher Cooking II** (1992) and even a cookbook compiled by members of the WLCJNet, an online group: **Women's League Cyber Kitchen** (2001). Other published works supported the handcraft creations: **Aleph Bet Variations for Needlecraft** (Chase, 1978, 1982) and **Head Coverings**. A further resource was **Basic Booklist for the Home Library** (1974) that provided book suggestions for rapidly expanding Jewish home libraries, yet another reflection of social and cultural progress.

In order to create a Jewish household – and more importantly, nurture and educate Jewish children – knowledge of ritual, practice and belief was an ongoing obligation. Whereas ***The Three Pillars*** had been a foundation for basic learning, women removed from the immigrant generation who were more knowledgeable were looking for additional instruction on religious observance. Over the next decades WL provided extensive resources, materials and guides to further this goal. In the area of prayer and ritual practice it offered: **An Introduction to Daily Worship** (Goldstein, 1966); **A Time to Pray: A Personal Approach to the Jewish Prayer Book** (Goldstein, 1972); **Time to Pray + Instruction Guide** (Goldstein, 1972); **Birkat Hamazon** (Joint Conservative Movement, 1977, 2004), a folio of the abridged version; and **Kiddush for Sabbath Evening**. Guides for increased knowledge and observance of mitzvot included: **Count Your Blessings** (1972, 1978, 1992, 2007) **Mitzvot B'maalot** (Rosenberg, 1980 -); **Mitzvah of Bikkur Holim** (1998); and **Mitzvot Yomit – A Mitzvah A Day (2013)** -- cards, study and activity guide to increase mitzvah observance.

Also developed were **Capsule Descriptions of Judaica**, informational handouts (history, symbolism and use) with ritual objects sold in sisterhood Judaica shops.

Holiday observance has, to this day, been one of the most requested resources from Women's League. An early series in the 1970s included a holiday **Manual** series detailing the specifics of holiday celebration: **Hannukah, Pesach, Purim, Shabbat, Shavu'ot and Sukkot Manuals. The Celebration Series** of the 1990s, offered updated publications containing greater detail and historical information about the holidays: **Hanukkah, Pesach, Purim, Rosh HaShanah/Yom Kippur.** The most comprehensive holiday guide, reflecting a very Judaically knowledgeable membership, **The Hiddur Mitzvah Project (2010)** offers a multi-tiered approach that includes Biblical and rabbinic text study, holiday and shabbat observances and rituals, food preparation and crafts.

Ethical concerns within family life was another focus of WL publications. Several focus on children, starting already in the 1930s with **Modern Problems of Jewish Parents** (Kohn, 1932) that dealt with parenting. Additional works provide advice on love and sexuality: **Sex and the Family in the Jewish Tradition** (Gordis, 1967) **Love and Sex: A Modern Jewish Perspective** (Gordis, 1978); and **Let's Talk About Loving** (Kripke, Robinson, 1980) By the late twentieth century, with the unprecedented rise in intermarriage, WL commissioned Rabbi Alan Silverstein to write **Interdating : a Jewish Parents Guide** (1994).

For children, in addition to the highly acclaimed **K'ton Ton** Series (1935, '64, '80), other books were published throughout the mid-century, including several that highlight the role that Jews played in American history – a reflection on the importance of teaching children that patriotism is an important aspect of being a good American: **What the Liberty Bell Proclaimed** (Spitz, 1951, 1975) and **Ghosts of Camp J**, (Garvey, 1955) Jewish patriots in American history. **Debbie in Dreamland**, (Kripke and Giacalone, 1960) provides a fictional account of a little girl's adventure. **Join Us for the Holidays** (Abramson and Robinson, 1958) is a holiday activity book for children and the very popular **Bas Mitzvah Treasury** (Eisenberg, 1965) offers a collection of folk tales and poetry. Finally, but not least, WL published its very successful **Welcome to the World: A Jewish Baby's Record Book**, (Wolff and Isaak, 1982) that provides record charts, personal reflection space and naming certificates for both boy and girl babies.

A discussion of publications must include the many *divray Torah* and scripts that were written over the years by its members. A number of *divray Torah* were printed in several collections: **Leket Divray Torah** (1992, 2002) and **Leket Divray Torah Bet** (2003). One of the most enduring and influential components of WL publications were the scripts, dramatic presentations on every possible subject imaginable in Jewish women's lives.

Scripts ran the spectrum from the most religious to the most mundane; from Biblical heroes to literary villains; from mitzvah to mendacity. They covered the entire realm of human experience, not always Jewish but from a Jewish perspective. While seen as instruments of entertainment, their unspoken intention was to educate, inspire, elevate, and convince. Some required a dialogue between only two, others an ambitious cast of a dozen. But the script was a treasured fixture of sisterhood programming and education throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. (For a more comprehensive analysis of their importance in WL history, see article: "Oh My Mama: The Script as a Teaching Tool", *WL New Outlook*, May 2017, <https://www.wlcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Oh-My-Mama-The-Script-as-Teaching-Tool-by-Lisa-Kogen-May-2017.pdf>)

A Time to Celebrate

By the 1960s, Women's League had grown from its original founding membership of a few hundred women in 26 sisterhoods to 800+ sisterhoods with several hundred thousand members. It was time to move out of their original home at The Jewish Theological Seminary and set up their own office. Moreover, WL had endured through years of great social, political and economic turbulence. It had withstood the challenges of corrosive American institutional and social anti-Semitism, the Depression, the War and the trauma of loss of two thirds of European Jewry, many of whom were relatives of League members. Despite these devastating historical conditions, and a never abating concern about limited financial resources, Women's League continued to grow in size and influence, establishing a significant presence in Jewish organizational life. By mid-century the leadership felt it was time to publish a history of their organization's success. Over the next decades WL would produce four accounts: **Builders of the Conservative Movement** (Goldstein, 1964); **They Dared to Dream 1918-1968** (1968); **The Sixth Decade** (1978); and **75 Years of Vision & Voluntarism** (1992).

Modernity: Kolot Nashim

With the rise of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s, and Jewish feminism shortly thereafter in the early 1970s, the Women's League members were rapidly becoming so well educated, both in the secular and Jewish learning – that many would have seemed unrecognizable as Jews to women of the early twentieth century. This was partially the result of women's greater access to higher education, but as important, parity for girls in Jewish education. By the 1980s the bat mitzvah ceremony was more the norm than the exception. These new religious realities were reflected in full equality for women in synagogue, with more and more women becoming synagogue presidents – and especially an expanding number of female Jewish scholars, in both the rabbinate

and the academy. This extraordinary transformation in Jewish women's lives in just a quarter century mandated WL to provide publications that addressed these new social and religious conditions.

New realities required new rituals. They included contemporary approaches to observance, some for women and a number for synagogue life in general. In the area of the environment, an early salvo was issued with **Services for the Tu B'Shvat Seder: The Fruits of Our World** (1978). The many to follow reflected heightened ecological concerns among the membership: **Tree of Life: An Ecological Cantata** (Osborne and Blocker, 1993); **Environmental Sabbath**; and **Yom Yarok-Green Day for Tu B'Shevat** (2010). A Jewish healing service, reflecting new-waves aesthetics, was published in 1997 **Under the Wings of the Sh'khinah: A Jewish Healing Service**.

In the area of new rituals for women, the most ambitious were: **Simhat Bat Kit** in 1992 by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin and **Etz Ha'yim He** (2000) by Dr. Lisa Grant. The **Simhat Bat** publication provided an extensive collection of resources for an equalizing rite of passage for baby girls. The baby naming ceremony was created to provide families with a positive and meaningful ritual that celebrated the birth of a baby girl, an expression that heretofore had been afforded only male infants. **Etz Hayim He**, created as a two year study course for adult education was marketed by WL as an adult bat mitzvah curriculum. Most noteworthy about both these works is the scholarly quality of both, engaging their readerships in serious classical text study. Additionally, these publications allowed WL to highlight the extraordinary strides of Jewish women through the works of two authors who were both recipients of advanced degrees at JTS, where, only a short time prior, had been the exclusive domain of men.

The early twenty first century also ushered in for Women's League yet another possibility for transformative study. In marked contrast to the sermonic quality of scripts and divray Torah of earlier decades, members engaged in interactive, collaborative study in which all members were participants rather than recipients or spectators. This kind of study, exemplified in **Days of Study (Kits + Leader's Guides)** and **Divrei Hokhmah**, are modeled on the chavruta study of an earlier era, that allow for women, not necessarily expert in a particular text, to lead a serious study session. **The Days of Study Kits**, which included both a participant and leader's guide, were prepared by female scholars. These kits offer in depth study of biblical and rabbinic texts on the **Hamesh Megillot: Ruth, Esther (Adult and Family Guides), Eikhah, Kohelet, and Shir haShirim**. An additional **Day of Study** was devoted to **The Book of Tehillim**. The second vehicle for the interactive study, **Divrei Hokhmah**, were short, 5 minute interactive sessions designed to supplant the more passive devar Torah. They include: **Kol Ishah, Proverbs, The Ten Commandments, Heart and Soul and Pirkei Imahot-Wisdom of Our Mothers**.

In 2008, following its **Beauty, Brains and Brawn: The New World Balabuste** exhibit (2004) commemorating the 350th anniversary of Jewish arrival in America, WL offered an expansion of the 26 highlighted women to 50 in the book **With Strength and Splendor: Jewish Women as Agents of Change** (Kogen). Written almost a century after the founding of Women's League, **With Strength and Splendor** -- featuring a collection of extraordinary Jewish women who were pioneers in so many areas of life that had been previously prohibited to them -- reflected the WL century long commitment to educational pursuit and fulfillment.

In this comprehensive introduction to Women's League publications and printed resources, it is important to include the many guides and tutorials in administrative practices for sisterhoods, starting with Deborah Melamad's **Handbook for Jewish Women's Organizations** (1924, 1938) and Sara Kussy (1947). The varied and numerous offerings reflect organizational issues and changing strategies for leadership. These works include: **Blueprint for Membership** (*a comprehensive guide for building your sisterhood membership*); **Directions and Directives for Sisterhood Presidents** (2001-2015); **Directory of Judaica Shop Providers** (1990); **Elections Activity Guide for Sisterhoods** (2008); **Image Plus Public Relations Handbook**, *publicity, brochures, social networking, the media*; **Membership Magnets 1, 2 & 3**, (1999 – 2003) featuring *membership programs*; **Parliamentary Guide; Parliamentary Q & O; President to President** (1975 – 2010); **Sisterhood Planner** (2006, updated periodically); **Ways to the Means** (2003, updated periodically); and the **Z'havah Planner** (1998-2016).

An impressive and ambitious century of publications. To provide a memorable context: think of two bookends to the century, **The Three Pillars** on one end, and **Etz Hayim He** at the other. Appreciate the remarkable educational trajectory of Conservative Jewish women in the twentieth century. It begins with **The Three Pillars** – that instructed women with little to no knowledge of the most basic, fundamentals of Judaism to its conclusion with the **Etz Hayim He** participants -- Hebraically and Judaically literate women; women who know the difference between the TANAKH, the Talmud and Shulchan Arukh; women who can explain the text included in tefillin. While these twin towers of Women's League history were separated by a scant hundred years of extraordinary advancement, when women finally arrogated to themselves the obligation of self-education, it was embraced as a task which, according to Pirkei Avot “*we are not mandated to complete, but from which we may not desist.*”