

Our History: An Interview with Bernice Balter
May 19, 2021

(YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzY_KwMV0rw)

Cory Schneider:

This is an oral history interview. I am Cory Schneider, Archives Chair for Women's League for Conservative Judaism. I will be interviewing Bernice Balter, former Executive Director and long-term employee of Women's League. Bernice will share her perspectives from her long association with Women's League.

Also present is Debbi Kaner Goldich, International President of Women's League. The interview is taking place over Zoom. Cory is in her home in Somerset, New Jersey, Bernice in Riverdale, New York, and Debbie in Scottsdale, Arizona. The day is May 19, 2021.

Okay, Bernice.

Bernice Balter:

Yes.

Cory Schneider:

Where and when were you born?

Bernice Balter:

Oh, God. I was born in Philadelphia on February 21, 1933.

Cory Schneider:

Great. Where did you grow up?

Bernice Balter:

I grew up in Philadelphia. I married there and had children there before I moved to New York.

Cory Schneider:

What kind of education did you have?

Bernice Balter:

I went to public schools, and then after I got married... I worked for lawyers, and then after I got married we moved to New York and I went to Queens College and got my BA in political science there.

Cory Schneider:

When did you first start working for Women's League?

Bernice Balter:

I guess it was September 1978. Actually, the book that was written about Women's League has the wrong date for me. It has me starting in 1980, but it was 1978.

Cory Schneider:

Okay, and from that book you're referring to They Dare to Dream?

Bernice Balter:

I'm not sure what it was called. Shelly Buxbaum did it. The date is wrong. It was published and I never was able to... I didn't proofread it. I wasn't asked to proofread it, but it was wrong.

Cory Schneider:

Okay. What were your responsibilities when you came to work at Women's League?

Bernice Balter:

First, I came in as Executive Assistant, it was called. It was the end of Ruth Perry's administration and Goldie Kweiler was starting. They were kind of afraid they were going to upset some of the other staff, so they kind of fussed around with it for a while. It was Executive Assistant. I was actually there to promote and work on public policy, which was really being done by the education director, who at that time was Edya Arzt. It was an extra thing they gave to her, but it didn't really have any real focus. That was my job. That was why I came in.

Cory Schneider:

What was Women's League's focus at the time?

Bernice Balter:

It was a women's organization. I think, and this is again subjective, I think it was a place for women to express themselves. That's what women's organizations were at the time. They've since evolved as feminism has evolved, and women's roles have evolved. At that time, it was a place where women could make decisions, have meetings. People were much more available then. There were fewer women working. It was a very different kind of organization from what it is now, or even in the years when I was there.

Cory Schneider:

So, you came on really to focus on world affairs, social action-

Bernice Balter:

Right. That was my portfolio, no question.

Cory Schneider:

What do you think were the things that you accomplished that you were focused on in that area for the first few years, or for the first bit of time?

Bernice Balter:

I organized the department. We had a separate department. I had chairmen. I organized the World Affairs Resolution Session at Convention, and created a system. We also kept records, and I suggested that we start publishing the resolutions so that all the sisterhoods would be aware. We have little copies of that, that were done at least in the years that I was there, we published and sent to every sisterhood the resolutions that were adopted at Convention. We also kept a comprehensive file in the office of what we had resolved, and developed a system in which we made it clear to sisterhoods that we now had the authority to act on those resolutions publicly. We could take positions because that was the position that the organization had adopted. You can't just say you're for or against something in a corporate setting, as we are, without the permission which came through the resolutions to do that, to take that kind of position. That's really what gave us the authority. What it really was, was organizing the whole world affairs program and codifying it in some way.

Cory Schneider:

How did the social action resolutions impact Women's League and change over the years? What happened with that?

Bernice Balter:

It's like teaching. You can have all the courses in the world, but the bottom line is what does the teacher do in the classroom. That was the same thing here. Some sisterhoods were much more involved and took it more seriously, and some didn't. They just didn't have the people to do it, or they have the interest. Nationally, it made a difference because I think what was happening, and probably why I was brought in to expand the department, really enlarge it and grow it, was the notion, which was correct, that to be an entity on the international stage, public policy was the key. So, we became players in that role nationally, and we were part of national organizations that focused on that. That's really what it did. It put us into the national scene with all the other Jewish agencies.

Cory Schneider:

When you read Women's League's history, was Women's League involved in social action and the Women's Movement for suffrage and stuff like that over the years. We were founded in 1918. How, in your recollection or knowledge of speaking to people who were there before you, how did that impact the organization?

Bernice Balter:

I never really saw us as being prominent in the Feminist Movement. That's not who our women were. They are today, but they were not when I came in in '78. As I said, this was a women's organization that gave them a voice in decision making and budget, public policy, et cetera. I did not see them in the forefront of the Feminist Movement, and that will show up later in our discussion I think.

Cory Schneider:

Would you talk a little bit about the relationship of Women's League with the other arms of the Conservative Movement?

Bernice Balter:

One of the things I was able to do with our president at the time was to develop a council of the Conservative Movement, which we did not have. You have to realize that the birth of the Conservative Movement came from the Seminary, whereas the Reform Movement came from the people, not the educational institution. There were arms of the movement that really didn't connect at all, and we brought them together in a council. I think it was called the Leadership Council of the Conservative Movement. We rotated the officers, the president, the chair rather, among the organizations. We wound up with, I think, with 10 or 12 organizations. Obviously, we had the seminary there, Women's League, the Men's Club, United Synagogue. Then we brought in USY, Ramah Camps, Schechter Schools.

These were groups that were part of the movement and developed by the movement, and supported by the movement, but never saw themselves as part of the movement. We did, the four hosts actually, the builders of the movement, United Synagogue, Women's League, Men's Club, but the others were totally disconnected. That was a way we met, I think once or twice a year. We had minutes. We sent out minutes to the members. We had an agenda where we'd discuss different issues and try to take a position on issues that we could agree on. That was a big movement. I don't think it exists anymore today, which is a shame, but I have to say it was a struggle.

Bernice Balter:

It was a struggle because some of these other arms really never quite understood the vastness of the movement and what kind of influence we had. It was good to get together.

Cory Schneider:

What were some of the results of the Council?

Bernice Balter:

We took positions on certain world affairs issues. We talked to each other. We talked about how we could build the movement. It was mostly a way of connecting more than anything else. It wasn't that we were trying to make so much of a public statement. The Reform Movement always did that better. For instance, the women's arm was never as independent as Women's League was. They could kind of tell them what to do. Really, I think what we accomplished was getting ourselves to see who we were. We did develop certain standards and a basic understanding of what we stood for.

Cory Schneider:

It brings to mind all this talk, and I didn't have it in the formal questions, but it brings to mind the World Affairs Conferences. Would you talk about that a little bit?

Bernice Balter:

The ones in Washington?

Cory Schneider:

Yes, please.

Bernice Balter:

Yeah, they were very successful.

Cory Schneider:

What were they?

Bernice Balter:

We did that... I'm sorry, what?

Cory Schneider:

What were they? How did they start and what did they include?

Bernice Balter:

It was an idea I guess I had with my chairs. It had some wonderful people that chaired with me. We decided it would be a good thing to go to Washington every two years and interact with the different arms of the government. Originally, I started with the help from David Saperstein of the Reform Movement, who was really wonderful. Reform Movement had an office in Washington. I think he's since retired, but he helped me set it up. There were a lot of little things that you needed to know in order to be successful. For instance, he said "Don't stay in a motel out of the Washington area because when you want speakers to come, they don't want to travel a whole distance to get to you. If something is canceled or changed, it's very important that you be easily accessible."

I learned a lot from him. After once or twice, I could do it on my own. We would spend two and a half days in Washington. Obviously, we'd try to keep the cost down and Kosher catering was required. We would have breakfast in the hotel. We would try to have our dinners, which could be Kosher catered either at some embassy or some local synagogue that would house us. It was wonderful. We had wonderful programs. We had sessions at the Pentagon, state department, the health facility in Bethesda, Maryland, the National Health Service. In fact, we were part of the original group that was lobbying to get women's health issues on the agenda separate from what was being studied.

Always, we had a session with congress. We would have a time where you could visit your own senator or a representative. It was wonderful, and I have to say, the success of any of these sessions is how quickly the reservations come in. Once we sent out a notice, we were filled. It never took us more than one notice to get people to come, and they came from all over the country. And, we had many husbands that came as well. Our number, after my trip to Germany

with Evelyn Seelig, who was president then, we had a session at the German Embassy that was very successful. In fact, I think Cory, you were there with your husband.

Cory Schneider:

I was. Talk a little bit about how you prepared the women for lobbying, and what the lobbying consisted of.

Bernice Balter:

We would pick certain issues and we would have a session first upon arriving. We would have some kind of orientation, and we'd prepare the women and tell them what issues we thought were important to talk about, and how you go about doing that, et cetera. It was very successful. I think we did it about six times. What happened was the cost of hotels and food just got prohibitive. We just couldn't afford to do it anymore. Of course, a few \$1,000.00 for two days in Washington. That was the end of that. For the time that it lasted, it was very successful.

Cory Schneider:

Super. Talk a little bit about your feelings about what you know about the relationship with JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Bernice Balter:

Mostly, it had to do with Torah Fund, which I was not involved in. It had a separate director, and Women's League had chairs that worked there and went there for meetings and things. I was really not involved in that. That was mostly our connection with the Seminary. I think that's changed somewhat over the years, but basically, it had to do with raising money. From what I'm told, it all started when Louie Finkelstein was the chancellor of the seminary. In the 40s, he came to Women's League and said, "Maybe, *efsher*, you can raise \$10,000.00 for the poor rabbinical students." Of course, the \$10,000.00 that year became \$2 million over the years. We did have meetings when we moved to our offices in the Interchurch Center. We were closer to the Seminary, and we had a lot of board meetings at the Seminary. That was our connection, basically.

Bernice Balter:

I believe our president was on boards, and we had Torah Fund representation.

Cory Schneider:

Thank you. Over the decades, what is your perspective of how feminism impacted Women's League and it's members?

Bernice Balter:

There was a big difference. Over the years, I would say about halfway through the years I was there, is when you were getting women presidents who were better educated Jewishly, and had

worked. Many had careers. They were different people. Women were different people. That affected how they perceived themselves in their roles at Women's League and their relationship with the professional staff. That changed tremendously.

Cory Schneider:

Talk a little bit about, and we've talked about this before and I think our audience would really like to hear it, is how about the husbands' names being listed and what happened with that, as well as increased equality for women and increasing role of women as spiritual leaders. That, I believe, all happened during your tenure at Women's League.

Bernice Balter:

Absolutely. In fact, it happened early on. I remember sitting at my desk, it was in the first year I was there, and I had letters to sign. My name was listed as Mrs. Shlomo Balter. I wasn't sure how to sign the letter. I thought to myself, what is Shlomo's name doing on here? He had nothing to do with what I did or what I'm doing now. Early on, I think it was in my first or second year at Women's League, I spoke with the president and we brought to the executive committee how we listed women's names, and also there was an anonymity to what work was being done. The only people that seemed to be visible were the presidents. Other women that were doing good work in the Jewish family living and adult education, all kinds of areas, were not permitted to have their names on what they produced.

I didn't like that at all. There was a big change. It took us a few sessions of the executive committee. Sociologically, I would say the change came about with a lot of anti-feeling by the women whose identity was basically their husband's. The change came with the younger women coming in who didn't see themselves at all that way. Finally, the compromise was that they would be listed by their own name, but their husband's name would be in parentheses. I don't know if that's still happening, or if they finally got rid of it. The other point is that some people weren't married. If you didn't have a husband, did that mean you didn't exist? It was all of that stuff that went on that women had been carrying for centuries. That was a big shift, getting that done.

Also, I remember the resolutions sessions at Convention. Two particular things stand out in my mind. One was, when we voted for women's rights over RITES in the synagogue, it won by about two to one. A lot of women were nervous that they would be called upon to do something ritually in the shul that they weren't quite comfortable with. When it came a couple of years later to supporting women in the rabbinate being accepted at the seminary, it was overwhelmingly four to one. It won. I always thought that reflected the fact they were thinking of their daughters and granddaughters, not themselves.

These were big, big shifts in how women saw themselves, and all part of the Feminist Movement.

Cory Schneider:

During that time, Torah Fund was one of the major donors to JTS. How did JTS react to our push to have women as spiritual leaders, as rabbis and canters?

Bernice Balter:

Before my time, the chancellor who was Gerson Cohen at the time, he had really went through a metamorphosis on the issue as well. I remember he made a public statement saying that he had done a total U-turn on the issue. It was emotional. He was raised differently, and I understood that. He pressured Women's League not to take a position on women in the rabbinate until after the Rabbinical Assembly and the Seminary did. We exceeded to that. I don't think we would have exceeded today. We did then, but today I think we would have said what we wanted to say, and he had the right not to listen. Ultimately, they did adopt and then we came in with our resolution. Quite frankly, if we were asked today, I don't think we would have exceeded to that. I think we would have said what we wanted to say when we wanted to say it.

Cory Schneider:

Thank you. You were the first Executive Director of Women's League.

Bernice Balter:

I'm not sure I was.

Cory Schneider:

Okay.

Bernice Balter:

Cory, I'm not sure I was. I think early, early on, and I never really knew them, was Phyllis Scieta and [Shoshanna Ebstein. I think I met Shoshanna once. Phyllis, I never met. It goes way back. Then there was a hiatus where there was nobody. They just filled in somehow. I'm not sure that I was the first one. Even when I came in, I was called Executive Assistant. I used to say I was assistant to someone named "Something", looking for a cause or something. Ultimately, they had confirmed it.

Cory Schneider:

Thank you. How do you think you and role of someone long-term as executing director advanced Women's League?

Bernice Balter:

My goal was to make it more professional, which I think we accomplished. Also, I was dealing I would say halfway through with younger women who were not afraid of the professional. We each had a role to play. As I used to say to the president, "The professional are the staff are the ones you can trust because they're not after your job. We're here to make you do the best job you can do. That's our function," and loyalty is part of that. And we were. We had a wonderful staff. I always loved coming in in the morning because I really liked my colleagues. We were there to really make the organization look as good as it could do as it could.

Cory Schneider:

I remember, just as an aside, I remember when I became International President, and we had one of our first meetings. You said that the role of the executive director was to make the president look good. Comment on that a little bit.

Bernice Balter:

First of all, we were there every single day. Also, I knew my colleagues. I knew the national scene. I worked with them. I knew what was important and what was not important for the president. I knew how she needed to be perceived. Also, I knew the turf and I could introduce her to the players in the national organization, such as the Conference of Presidents of [MACRAC 00:26:10] at the time, and World Jewish Congress, all the agencies that I had been to with other presidents. I knew them. I knew the people. That was a role that I could play to enhance the role of our president. I remember we had one president who wondered why I was going to a certain meeting she wanted to go. I said, "It isn't for you. It's for the staff. You have to go places that presidents go to."

I could clear the way. I could run interference for the presidents in that way, and I think I tried to do that.

Cory Schneider:

You were Executive Director for many, many years. What was the change that you saw in the organization over those years, and how did it, if it did, how did it change the mission and focus of Women's League? How did that change?

Bernice Balter:

There were two things, I think. One was education. What we saw was, and made it clear to the Rabbinical Assembly because rabbis are out there not really knowing what they're accomplishing sometimes. Sometimes, you're too close to the issue. Through adult education, and local synagogues doing their job, our women were much more knowledgeable Jewishly. The change came at Convention, for instance. When I first came, we used to hire canters or rabbis to run services for us. It didn't take too long when we started doing our own services. Even then, they were kind of cute. There was a guitar. We played around with it. But ultimately, our member Edya Arzt was teaching delegates how to put on tefillin and we were doing our own services, full shacharit services and mincha, and we had competition from all across the country.

There were only so many days in the Convention. It wasn't just California or New York. It was coming from all over the country. That was a big change, that women were much more educated and knowledgeable Jewishly. Then in terms of public policy, they were much more involved locally, they were in different boards of CRCs and things like that. There was a vast change, and as we said, these were different women. They saw themselves differently and presented themselves differently, and really wanted to take part in as much as they could. Did I answer that question fully? Or is there more to it?

Cory Schneider:

You did. Let's go back to your every day. Who'd you work most closely with?

Bernice Balter:

Always with the president, but I also felt that the executive director needed to know what each department was doing. I also wanted the support staff to be involved, and I was close to them. I knew them all. I knew their families. It was important that Women's League be an organization which cared about each other. I know that because of computers, we went from 23 in staff to 11. That's what computers could do. When I first came, we were busy with carbon paper and stencils. I remember talking to one of the secretaries years later and had mentioned carbon paper. She had no idea what I was talking about. It was like I came up from the Neanderthal period. We were able through computers to really reduce the staff, and the cost that went with it.

Cory Schneider:

Who were your mentors within the organization?

Bernice Balter:

Within the organization.

Cory Schneider:

And outside the organization as well.

Bernice Balter:

Really outside the organization, I used to talk to Wolfe Kelman sometimes. He was the exec of the Rabbinical Assembly. Then Joel Myers.

Cory Schneider:

Who is Joel? What was his job?

Bernice Balter:

Joel Meyers replaced DeWolf Cowman at the Rabbinical Assembly. They were both rabbis. I can't say I had any real mentors. Only my background and my training in political science I would say helped me probably more than anything else.

Cory Schneider:

You worked pretty closely with the Conference of Presidents too, didn't you?

Bernice Balter:

Yes. Yeah, we were members. That was another thing, originally we were members of the old national organization through United Synagogue. Even though we were a separate affiliate of the movement, for some reason we did things through United Synagogue. I think a lot of that had to do with who the women were. They were very dependent. As the younger women came in, I remember saying to Goldie Kwellner, "Why are we paying dues?" Oh, then we found out that the

full dues weren't being paid all the time. We were paying United Synagogue our half of the dues, but they were forwarding the dues to the agencies. So I said, "Why don't we just pay the dues ourselves?" Goldie Kweller said, "Absolutely," and we did.

So, we became members in our own right. There was no reason why we shouldn't be. It was the whole age of being much more assertive.

Cory Schneider:

Women's League had it's greatest growth during your tenure. What were the things that were most responsible for this growth, do you think?

Bernice Balter:

First of all, I don't know that we had our greatest growth during... I came in in '78. That was not our greatest period. The greatest growth in numbers was in the 50s and 60s. That was post-WWII and everyone was joining everything. I remember you could have a Torah Fund luncheon and have 600 people come. That didn't happen anymore in the 70s and 80s. Nor today. Everyone's working. Nobody's going to luncheons. You could even get little cigarette packs if you called the tobacco companies. They were more than happy to supply you. It was a different time. No, the greatest growth was the 50s and 60s. When I came in, I would say we had about 150,000 members.

Cory Schneider:

Would you talk about the two locations of the Women's League office? You were in both. How was it to work in each both 74th Street and Riverside Drive?

Bernice Balter:

74th Street was a brownstone we bought in, I think, 1969. From what I'm told, we paid \$220,000.00 for it. That made sense at the time because we were housed in some room at the seminary originally, and we had outgrown it. Of course, it was tax-free because we're not-for-profit, so that was a good move. Then we sold it I think in 2005, or a little earlier, for I think \$3.5 million. It was nice. It was cozy, but it really was very inefficient. First of all, you had to go up and down steps. We had one cranky elevator that held two or three people. Usually, if we had a meeting there, it wound up breaking down because everybody would jam in and whatever. When we sold it and we moved... Then we had to bring in food for lunch. They would have to get someone to prepare it.

When we moved to a building where they had a cafeteria, we could send people to get their own lunch. It just became much more efficient, plus we had space on a floor where you could interact with each other much more easily. We had meeting space, we had a big board room, and we had the use of a big meeting room there if we chose to use it, which we did. We were close to the seminary. I thought it was a big improvement. Plus, we didn't have the burden... We had to do roofing. We had to plumbing, things that we weren't really trained to do. We were painting. I was contracting with all kinds of people to do jobs that really wasn't what I was hired to do. We were all involved in that we needed to have someone clean. We had to hire people to do maintenance for us.

I remember putting up new drain pipes. They were copper. I said to everybody, "Tomorrow, they won't be there," because the winos were sitting around the corner at a church that was giving out free food or something. Sure enough, the next day the drain pipes were gone. So, we replaced it with bronze or something cheaper I remember. No, having a floor... And we were at the church center, which was not-for-profit, so we were paying rent well below what New York renters were. That was a good move. That was really a good move.

Cory Schneider:

When you think back on your career, what makes you most proud?

Bernice Balter:

I did things I liked. I think I worked well with the volunteers. I wanted them to be important. I saw to it that their names were on what they produced. I think I had good relationships with my staff and the presidents. I admired the hard work that they did as volunteers. I think I helped professionalize the agency. As one of my colleagues said, it was Jerry Chanis actually, who was at... He was at NACRAC, now he's at the graduate center of university of the CCNY. He said he would attribute to me that I brought them to the national four. I think that was our activity and our participation in the Conference of Presidents, and in NACRAC, which became JACPA, they changed their name. Because what was clear was, you had to be part of the organization Jewish community in public policy. That's how you became nationally known, no question about it.

Cory Schneider:

What were your greatest challenges?

Bernice Balter:

What were my greatest challenges. I guess getting people to come along with what I saw were important things to do. I wasn't always successful, but sometimes I was. Also, what you learn as a professional is when people adopt your ideas let them run with it. You don't need to take credit. That's not what's important. What's important is accomplishing what you think is important to do. It doesn't matter who takes credit for it.

Cory Schneider:

Were there any things you had hoped to accomplish but weren't able to?

Balter:

I can't think of any. I'm sure there were plenty of things. One that stands out in my mind is getting the president to go to the Soviet Union when that was a big movement to get Jews out of there. I thought our president would want to go. That was a disappointment for me. I think we accomplished a lot. As I said, the education of women Jewishly was a very big thing, and that I can attribute not only to what we produce, but what local rabbis were doing in their congregations. I've often said that I think one of the overlooked accomplishments of the

Conservative Movement is the great impact we had on adult education. It's not talked about enough, but I really think that was the thing that we did better than anybody else.

Cory Schneider:

When you think back and think forward, when you came into the organization, the focus of Women's League was mainly what? And when you left, how did that focus change?

Bernice Balter:

You now have a rabbi who's the executive director, and I think her focus is on education, which is as it should be. She's highly qualified to do that. We always had a focus on education, but it was never as effective as it was later on when women saw themselves differently. I think synagogue life has changed, and I think as that has changed, so has the life of synagogue women. Our focus was on getting people together and comparing notes, and they were talking about gift shops, things like that. All of that expanded as women's interests expanded. That's what I think has really been the growth of Women's League.

Cory Schneider:

Nicely put. Thank you. Is there anything I have not asked you that you feel it is important to add at this time? Any anecdotes, thoughts, feelings?

Bernice Balter:

I can't think of too much. All I can say I've spent 29 years there. I loved it. I couldn't wait to get in every day. I liked my colleagues. I liked the staff. I liked what we were doing, and I was happy to be doing something I cared deeply about. That was great. I can't think of anything else that I would want to say about that. I think they were years well spent. I felt like I was doing something that I liked doing and I cared about, and that was important. Not everybody can say that.

Cory Schneider:

Thank you. Bernice, I really appreciate your time and your knowledge. Unfortunately, you are probably the only person left with such history on Women's League that can share it with us. We're very grateful to you for doing that, and grateful to you for all the time and effort, and love and talent, and everything that you have given to Women's League. You've made us a much richer organization over the decades.

Bernice Balter:

Thank you. Thank you.

Cory Schneider:

Thank you.

Bernice Balter:

That's very kind. That's very kind.