

This is a truly historic document: the address given by Mrs. Solomon Schechter shortly after the organization of the Women's League. It was written of our people and our problems half a century ago, yet it speaks eloquently to our present condition. It is as beautiful and timely a talk today as when it was first delivered.

#### AIMS AND IDEALS OF THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE

by Mrs. Solomon Schechter  
(Delivered in May, 1918)

The Jewish Women's League\* of the United Synagogue was organized on January 21, 1918, barely four months ago, and it has already grown to over three thousand members, consisting of individual members and members of organizations in New York, Brooklyn, Far Rockaway, White Plains, Mount Vernon, Chicago, Boston, St. Paul, Denver, Newark, Philadelphia and Washington. What are the aims and ideals of this national movement among Jewish women? All the Jewish national women's organizations are doing noble work, and all are doing some religious work. But their efforts have turned mainly into altruistic channels, into philanthropic and uplift work for others.

Of late years, from the religious point of view, conditions among Jewish women of culture have grown to be alarming. Open conversions to Christianity are no longer rare, and a large number of women, too timid to go all the length, are filling the Christian Science churches. With some it is mere snobbishness, a hope to climb into social circles where they are not wanted, either before or after conversion. There are others, however, with sincere spiritual longings. You recall Emerson's saying that every ship looks romantic except the one we are on. So they are turning away from us, from fashion or fad or ignorance. I have heard people say: let them drift away - they are only dead leaves falling off, improving the health of the tree. It is not so! We cannot spare a single leaf.

To save the remnant among us, to stop that disintegration, to dispel the encyclopedic ignorance, to save our own souls and those that come after, to impress the women of Israel with the beauty and wondrous depth of our religious and literary treasures, to attract the women and through them the Jewish children - these are the aims of the Women's League. Earnest rabbis and teachers are doing their best from pulpit and platform to turn the tide,

\*(Later named National Women's League)

but they and the Synagogues are helpless, unless the women of Israel create Jewish homes again. It is too great a problem to be solved quickly and noisily.

"Mighty are you; 'tis due to the quiet charm of your presence,

What is not done by the calm, never the fussy perform."

So we are getting out quietly and earnestly to religionize ourselves, to educate ourselves and to rebuild our Jewish homes.

The Women's League is receiving the most generous assistance from the faculty and the graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Their Education Committee is carefully planning the work with us women to give us scholarly results in such a way that the average woman can follow. You may have seen the first pamphlet issued by the Women's League, on Shavouth - artistic in form. Scholarly in matter, yet simple in style. There are in preparation now a pamphlet on the Ninth of Ab, and another on the Sayings of the Fathers, both by scholars of the United Synagogue; an address on the Place of the Women's League in the National Jewish Women's Organizations of America, by Miss Henrietta Szold; and a paper on how to celebrate Hanukkah instead of Christmas by Miss Jessie Sampter. These essays will be published in book form and will be worthy of a place in the library of every Jewish home. These pamphlets will be sent to each individual member and to our organizations all over the country, to be read by the presidents of Sisterhoods at their cultural meetings. No doubt many women will want to hear about the Kashrut and other practical questions; most women will be interested in our educational plans. Bible study will have our great attention. Some women will want to read the Bible from cover to cover; others will desire to read those parts famous for their literary beauty. Our Bible, the product of devout poetic souls, will again become to us an ever fresh source of divine emotion. As one great Jewish writer of the Nineteenth Century puts it: "Who has lost his God can find Him again in this Book and



he who has never known Him, feels here the breath of the Divine Word."  
And as with our Bible, we shall familiarize ourselves with our Liturgy.

There will be those who will want to study their prayers in Hebrew, and there will be those who will learn to love them in the beautiful English translation, for the classic Hebrew has become, alas, a strange tongue to many. Bible and Liturgy lead our interest toward the great drama of our History where "Religion and race, the two incendiary forces of history, shot jets of flame from their undying embers." We women desire to study and to know which means to love, our great Family History and Literature and Liturgy.

We are proud of our general literary culture, and know little of the Psalms and the Prophets. Have you ever thought of the beauty of the Jewish wedding-prayers, of the dignity of our Kaddish, of the stirring quality of that oldest and grandest symphony: our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Liturgy! All human passions and follies, remorse and sin and the great reconciliation pass in review before us, but the leading motif is not the wrath of an angry God, but merciful, sorrowing love, as expressed in Jeremiah's words. "I remember thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown."

The Women's League will try to revive religious home-observance. Women of culture and feeling cannot live without traditions, without memories, without sentiment. And we cannot have spirit without forms, forms tenderly kissed into life and warmth by the spirit. By a natural law forms will spring up genetically. Then why not keep to the old beautiful forms, hallowed by the use of centuries? The Jewess of this twentieth Century ought to be the finest type of American womanhood: bred in the best American traditions, she should also know and lovingly gather all the sweet blossoms of our poetical Jewish customs and traditions and with these beautiful

old-time garlands, beautify the Jewish home and the Synagogue. The House of Israel is on fire, the House of Israel is falling to pieces! Shall we let destruction take its course? Or shall we try to build up and save our home, our beautiful Jewish home, for our children and grandchildren? They are the heart of the home, their voices the music of the home; they are our Sabbath lights, dedicated to the Lord!

Let us learn to gain time from them, rest amid the feverish unrest of war-time and philanthropic activities. You must give to your little children the daily sacred twilight-hour of song and story and Jewish thought and poetry, and to your big children your loving comradeship and a religious atmosphere that will sow the seeds of a love for things Jewish. And the Friday night and the Yomtov might belong to our children, not to the opera, the movies, the theatre and society! With great and greater economic pressure the Sabbath-day and the Festivals are little observed, and the Synagogues are full of emptiness. But the evenings ought to see the Jewish father and mother and child draw together in close and tender companionship. The best dress, the best dinner, the table decked with flowers, a short family prayer, singing the dear old melodies in unison, reading part of the Bible portion for the next day's service, playing their games, listening to their fancies - your child's happy evenings, your grown-up children's dearest memories, they are Friday Night and Yomtov Night!

The Women's League will try to help us find our way back home. We have lost our way. The world's darkest hours close in around us, and we need the divine light as never before to guide us aright! Selma Lagerlof ends one of her stories about a deeply religious couple with words: "It is you who are wise; we are the fools! Who among us does not know that God is all-powerful? And yet not one of us dares rely wholly on His support. Thank God for the gift of Faith! It is the greatest of all His blessings."

To recover some of the precious ground, to restore some of the beautiful ideals in which our women were once supreme, these are the aims of the Jewish Women's League.