Mathilde Schechter Address on the occasion of the founding of National Women's League Given on January 21, 1918 and reprinted in Outlook Magazine, April 1932

A National Organization for the Perpetuation of Traditional Judaism

Women's League

CONVENTION May 15, 16, 17

OUTLOOK

A TASK FOR JEWISH WOMEN

Address delivered by Mrs. Solomon Schechter at the United Synagogue on January 21, 1918

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The founder and first president of the United Synagogue, for the sake of whose memory I have been asked to address you here today, prized three achievements above all others of his career: the discovery of the Cairo Genizah treasures, the finding and restoration of the original Jesus Ben Sira—part of the Apocrypha of the Bible—and the creation of the United Synagogue of America. Although his work, until he came to this country, had always been in Christian institutions, it was his heart's desire to serve Judaism, to found a School for Rabbis and Jewish scholars, and through his followers to awaken once more the matchless beauty of Traditional Judaism, that had lain dormant for so long.

To help in this task we Jewish women of conservative tendencies have gathered today, in order to organize an auxiliary branch to the United Synagogue, a women's organization for Jewish work of a unique character—not for altruistic spirituality and uplift, but before all for the saving of our own souls and of those who come after.

We shall not interfere with the activities, nor encroach upon the territory of existing national organizations of women, such as: The Council of Jewish Women—Federation of Sisterhoods—Young Women's Hebrew Association—Zionist Hadassah. We have invited representatives of everyone of these, to honor us with their presence here today, as we desire their kind cooperation wherever possible, and the benefit of their large practical experience.

Whilst we women of conservative homes have done our full share in helping them whole-heartedly, we have neglected our own work that is calling to us, we have been magnificently disorganized. We wish to 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.

You will probably ask: "Is this the time for more work?" And I say there never was a time, when the religious and moral influence of women was more sorely needed than at the present day of war and misery and social upheaval. "I lift up my voice unto God, and I cry; I lift up my voice unto God." (Ps. 77). How could the mothers of the world bear the heart-breaking trials without faith? People will turn to religion for comfort in their grief, and for inspiration in seeking a path amidst the hopeless turmoil of things.

The mothers of Israel, having suffered in the fiery furnace throughout the centuries, have evolved beautiful women's prayers for all of a woman's woes. The *Techinnah* of our grandmothers in its genuine tenderness and delicate intimacy, is a great comfort. We possess a wealth of women's literature, awaiting to be re-discovered and to be made accessible to us. Dr. Schechter held very high its literary and religious value and collected it lovingly for years, from every Jewish bookseller of note, all over Europe. He hoped that the one womanly woman of sufficient scholarly and literary attainments, to unearth these treasures and make them accessible to the women of today, might spare some time from her work in other fields to acomplish this splendid task. Would that we could persuade Henrietta Szold to do this important work for Jewish womanhood! There is still, as Dr. Schechter used to say, "encyclopaedic ignorance" among us, the noxious mist of half culture. For our own and for our children's sake, we must educate ourselves with single-hearted devotion, in study-circles and in our homes, and we must cooperate in every way that lies in our power with the Education Committee of the United Synagogue. We ought to study our own history, our ancient literature, and the present day works of Jewish interest, such as those issued by the Jewish Publication Society. Above all, we must familiarize ourselves again with our own Bible. Some twenty years ago the head of a well known English women's college asked Dr. Schechter: "Can you explain why, when I was a child, we were taught the Old Testament in all our Welsh schools, and when I visited Wales recently there was a complete change? The Old Testament was replaced entirely by the New Testament." Dr. Schechter answered: "Never mind, in times of stress and when the world will be in need of great moral strength, your schools will turn again to the Old Testament."

But the self-education of the conservative Jewish women is only the first step towards the better education of our children. There is so much beauty in our ancient observances, and children always come to cherish the various ceremonies of the Sabbath and the Holy Days, when taught their significance intelligently and lovingly. Even the observance of the dietary laws, the much abused Kashrut, can be made a vehicle for education in self-control.

One of the tasks which the United Synagogue hopes to accomplish is to see that the Jewish students and the Jew traveling on business may be enabled to observe the dietary laws when away from home. This work lies peculiarly within the province of the women's auxiliary of the organization. Abroad, the kosher restaurant does double service. It is not only a place where kosher food can be obtained, but also where the resident Jew can find his friends. and where the stranger is sure of a welcome, and can form Jewish connections. I remember in Florence in the one modest room at Pergola's we met French, Italian, Roumanian Jews, a Falasha student, a charming Washington lady, and a very interesting young philosopher from Kieff, Russia.

In an organization such as ours—founded on the essential principles of Judaism, "Zadakah" (charity) must necessarily play an important part. Our present-day problems of charity are tremendous, and America's Jewry has risen to meet it in an admirable way. The magnificent work done by all sections of the community in the present Federation drive, in faithful loyal co-operation, is an inspiration!

But aside from this organized philanthropy, there must always be a large field left untouched, that can only be dealt with by private charity. We hope in the future to affiliate with ourselves all the various existing conservative sisterhoods and other organizations, in the endeavor to reach the shame-faced poor, the "bekoved" people. The Sisterhoods are peculiarly fitted to carry on the work of private charity. In modern form it can do what in former days was done by the "Gabbetes" of the communities. The so-called "Gabbetes" were ladies from good families, without home-ties, widows and women whose children had built their own nests, and who could devote their whole time to good deeds. The "Gabbetes" social standing was very high and she became the confidante of even the most reserved woman. She was full of discretion and wise counsel and where money could not be offered, she would find out something the gentle woman could do, and pay very high prices for her work, to make her feel independent. To the poor of all degrees she brought help and comfort and that fine personal note of understanding sympathy which needs must be lost in the huge mechanism of organized philanthropy. In a very quiet and tender way we must endeavor to evolve some plan to make private charity as wonderful and perfect as our public charity has grown to be.

Outside in the war-zone our beloved are in danger, and we try to be helpful in all ways, though a great many of us can only give money and our hands' works, in knitting and sewing, and for the rest wait patiently with prayers and unshed tears. After the war there will be need for all of a woman's strength and love, and patience and self-sacrifice and religious work in the upbuilding of a new world. Our Jewish women are willing and able and will be a great force among the healing Womanhood of the World.

ED. NOTE.—The above address which was resuscitated from our old files might have been written yesterday rather than fourteen years ago. It might be well if all of us would check up and ascertain how far we have progressed towards fulfilling the ideals laid down by our far-seeing founder.