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WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League for Conservative Judaism is the national organization of Conservative sisterhoods established by MATHILDE SCHECHTER in 1918 as the National Women's League of the United Synagogue. Schechter continued the work begun by her husband, Solomon Schechter, who had called for women to assume a role in the newly established United Synagogue of America. As founding president (1918–1919), she envisioned an organization that would be the coordinating body of Conservative synagogue sisterhoods and inspired Women's League to promote an agenda whose mission was the perpetuation of traditional Judaism in America through the home, synagogue, and community. The early leaders disseminated their message through the publication of educational materials in English, which helped young women through the process of acculturation and Americanization. One of Schechter's first projects adopted by Women's League was the opening of a students' house offering a homelike atmosphere with room and kosher board to Jewish students in New York. After succeeding in New York, the project was expanded to other cities, including Philadelphia, Boston, Denver, and Detroit.

By 1925, Women's League had grown from the founding hundred women in twenty-six sisterhoods to a membership of 230 sisterhoods in six branches in the United States and Canada with twenty thousand members. In 1939, six additional branches were added, contributing to a total of over 100,000 members. By 1968, the Women's League reached a peak of 200,000 members affiliated with eight hundred sisterhoods represented in twenty-eight branches. After a consolidation resulting from changing demographics, Women's League in 1997 has 150,000 members affiliated with seven hundred sisterhoods in twenty-five branches.

EDUCATION

The Education Department of Women's League has operated on the premise that "Education is the lifeline of sisterhood" and includes people who work in the areas of adult education, books, libraries, creative handicrafts, Jewish family living, Judaica shops, music, and programming. The goal of all these efforts is to make members more knowledgeable and better equipped to educate others. Early publications provided guidance and instruction for Sabbath and holidays, with *The Three Pillars: Thought, Worship and Practice* (1927) by DEBORAH MELAMED serving as the cornerstone of educational programs. Women's League also published the popular *Jewish Home Beautiful* (1941) by Betty D. Greenberg and Althea O. Silverman. This book, based on a popular pageant of the same name, included descriptions, traditional recipes,

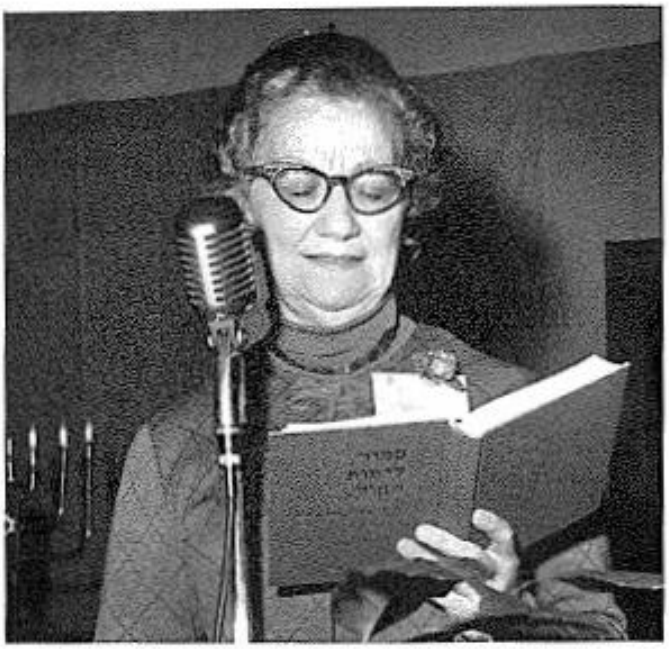
MATHILDE SCHECHTER *saw the need for an organization that would coordinate all the sisterhoods of the Conservative synagogues. The agenda of the national organization would be the perpetuation of traditional Judaism in America through the home, synagogue, and community. True to the activist tradition begun by Schechter, the league has been involved in all the critical issues of twentieth-century American Jewish life. Particularly, it has played a leadership role in promoting and protecting the rights of women, from aliyah to abortion. [Women's League for Conservative Judaism]*

illustrations of table settings, and music, all of which illustrated the potential for creating a Jewish home filled with beauty and spirituality.

The league's continuing concern with enhancement of Jewish ritual and observances is perhaps best symbolized by the magnificent sukkah at the Jewish Theological Seminary. After Schechter's death, ADELE GINZBERG, founder and active member, took charge of this project for decades, decorating the sukkah with fresh fruits, vegetables, and greenery. In the 1970s, the National Women's League dedicated a Sukkah Endowment Fund in the name of "Mama G" to underwrite the increasing costs associated with it. Women's League together with the seminary continues to be responsible for the decoration of the sukkah, which is named in Ginzberg's memory.

After World War II, Women's League's educational activities expanded tremendously in response to the increased pace of growth of the Conservative Movement. Adele Ginzberg initiated a Girl Scout project in 1946 that led to the establishment of the Menorah Award for Jewish Girl Scouts in order to stress the importance of Jewish education and encourage Jewish scouts to participate in synagogue activities (and to parallel the Ner Tamid Award for Jewish Boy Scouts). The Judaism-in-the-Home project introduced in the 1950s, and chaired by ROSE GOLDSTEIN and Anna Bear Brevis, produced instructional materials to teach sisterhood women the meaning of Jewish holidays and rituals in order to promote family observance. A series of Oneg Sabbath programs based on the weekly Torah portions were published under the leadership of Education Department chairs EVELYN GARFIEL, Rose Goldstein, and Adina Katzoff. In 1952, the newly created Ceremonial Objects and Gift Shop Department made Jewish ritual objects and other ceremonial items, including New Years cards, accessible to all members. In 1959, Hadassah Nadich initiated the first calendar diary. Issued annually until 1986, these calendar guides promoted Jewish activities in the home, synagogue, and community. They were distributed to all sisterhoods so that local leaders could incorporate educational elements into their projects.

Intensive Jewish study for its own sake has also long been a priority. In 1931, the Women's Institute of Jewish Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America was initiated through the league's Metropolitan Branch in cooperation with other leading Jewish women's organizations, including HADASSAH, the NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN, Ivriah, the Federation of Jewish Women's Organizations, and Women's League for Palestine. The purpose of the institute was "to offer women attending its classes an opportunity to equip themselves for making a constructive approach to the problems of contemporary Jewish life, and a broad perspective of modern Jewish problems." Since 1977, Women's League has organized its own annual institute consisting of two semesters of classes taught by seminary faculty members. In recent years, similar programs have been developed in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and east and west coast Florida. In 1993, Women's League, under the chair of Lynne Heller, sponsored its first Elderhostel program at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and this has since become a regular part of its educational offerings.



In the 1950s, the league introduced the Judaism-in-the-Home Project, which produced instructional materials to teach sisterhood women the meaning of Jewish holidays and rituals in order to promote family observance. The program was chaired by ROSE GOLDSTEIN *and Anna Bear Brevis. Goldstein is shown here at the 1966 Jubilee Convention, leading morning services. [Women's League for Conservative Judaism]*

Women's League members have long sought out additional opportunities to advance their knowledge and observance of Jewish ritual. Inspired by the burgeoning Jewish feminist movement, many women chose to undertake the necessary studies to become bat mitzvah as adults. *Kolot Bik'dushah* was formed in 1993 and consists of over 250 women nationwide who have the ability to lead a religious service and/or read from the Torah.

Women's League's magazine *Outlook* has been published since 1930. Its initial mission was to keep sisterhood members in touch with each other and with the other organizations with which the league was affiliated. It was also meant to be a means for members to voice their opinions. CARRIE DAVIDSON served as editor from 1930 to 1942 and then again from 1945 to 1953 and, together with Hanna Marx, SARAH KUSSY, and Fanny Minkin, she shaped its initial tone. Davidson was especially interested in helping women learn how to influence the preservation of traditional Judaism. Articles focused on Jewish cultural subjects and contemporary issues as well as on the achievements of the seminary and United Synagogue. Each issue carried a president's message and messages from National Activity chairpeople and branch presidents. One of the most popular features was the Children's Corner, which introduced thousands of readers to Sadie Rose Weilerstein's fictional character K'tonton beginning in 1935. Leading spokespersons for the Conservative Movement are frequent contributors to the magazine, which has a current readership of 150,000.

FUND-RAISING

Women's League has been closely linked not only to the Conservative Movement but especially to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. It has always been particularly concerned with the welfare of its students. Beginning in 1934, this interest was formalized through the establishment of an educational fund to which members would contribute an annual amount to assist the seminary in its work; it was renamed Torah Fund after 1942. Initially it was suggested that each member contribute a minimum of $6.11 (the Hebrew numerical equivalent of the word "Torah"). Building on the success of this campaign, in 1945, the Chai Club was formed to encourage women to increase their annual contributions to eighteen dollars. Since 1957, thousands of contributors in a special gifts category have proudly worn Torah Fund pins, which are designed annually to enable Women's League members to symbolize their dedication to the seminary. Monies were raised to support the seminary with scholarships and, after 1958, for a dormitory for women students through the Mathilde Schechter Residence Hall campaign. The annual goal was raised to $100,000, and different giving categories were established both to encourage grass-roots giving and to recognize large donors. In 1963, the Torah Fund campaign was expanded to support all of the seminary's schools and well as other seminary facilities and programs.

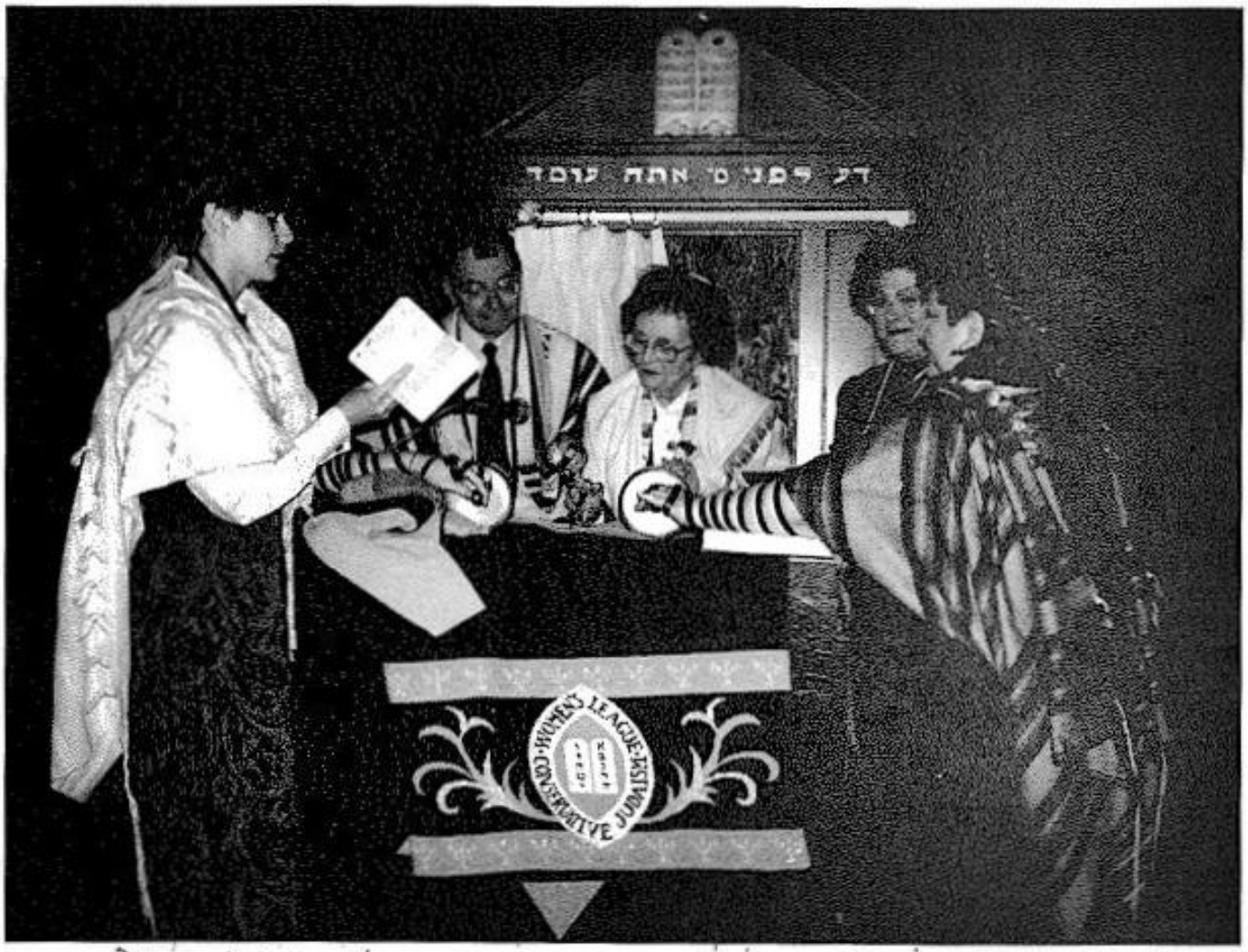
The Mathilde Schechter Residence Hall opened as a dormitory for seminary undergraduates in 1976. In response to changing needs, it has always been a coeducational residence hall. After this goal was reached, the fund was used to provide support for all seminary residence halls (including those at the University of Judaism), bookshelves and study carrels in the new seminary library, the beautification of the quadrangle of the seminary building, and increased financial aid for promising students. The most recent fund-raising project was the refurbishing of the seminary synagogue, which was named the Women's League Seminary Synagogue at its dedication in October 1995. The league is currently raising funds to refurbish the Residence Hall. As of 1997, the annual fund-raising goal was $2.6 million; it is noteworthy that league campaigns have always reached or surpassed their goals.

SOCIAL ACTION

As part of its commitment to further traditional Judaism, Women's League has long been involved with social action on issues of social justice, human rights, and care for the poor, hungry, and homeless. The league has also been especially active in helping the Jewish blind through the Jewish Braille Institute. League women served as transcribers of Braille for the Jewish blind, and the first Hebrew-English prayer book in Braille was underwritten by the league in 1954.

During World War II, the league was active in the Supplies for Overseas Survivors Drive and in collecting food and clothing for the Joint Distribution Committee. Members were also trained to assume needed tasks in many different areas, including serving as Red Cross instructors and air raid wardens. Sisterhoods in areas of war industry turned their social rooms into emergency hospitals, and some organized kosher kitchen units for civilian populations in the event of a catastrophe. Concerned about the deteriorating condition for Jews in Nazi Germany and its occupied territories, beginning in 1933, Women's League called for personal sacrifice on the part of its members to aid the war efforts.

After the war, Women's League continued its involvement with issues of public concern. The first resolution adopted in 1950 advocated the elimination of discrimination in public places. Over the decades, Women's League has supported a liberal political and social agenda, zealously guarding civil liberties in the McCarthy era, advocating the separation of church and state, and calling for government funding to



This photograph from the 1992 Biennial Convention of the league includes, from left to right: Debra Togut, cantorial student; Dr. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, receiving an aliyah; Hadassah Blocker, reading the Torah; Lynne Heller; and, Paula Victor, cantorial student. [Women's League for Conservative Judaism]

ameliorate deteriorating social conditions of the poor and the aged. Especially concerned with women's issues, the league passed resolutions urging the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment as well as laws to protect battered women and abortion rights. This commitment also affected Women's League's policies toward Jewish religious life. Women's League was an early and vocal advocate for egalitarianism in Conservative Jewish religious life. At its national convention in 1972, women were called to the Torah for an aliyah; they also voted to remove their husbands' names from the official roster. An opinion poll taken at that time revealed that an overwhelming majority of members believed that women should be elected to congregational boards, be permitted to read from the Torah, and be able to initiate divorce proceedings. Over 60 percent also called for women to be counted in the minyan [quorum of ten] and called to the Torah for an aliyah. In subsequent years, delegates voted three-to-one for the ordination of women by the Jewish Theological Seminary (1980) and the acceptance of women as cantors (1990). Resolutions throughout the period forcefully called for equality in Jewish life.

Israel has always been a high priority for the organization. In 1923, National Convention delegates voted unanimously "for unqualified support of all agencies engaged in the upbuilding of Palestine." By 1926, the league had embarked on a project to raise funds for the

construction of the Yeshurun Synagogue in Jerusalem. Since the creation of the State of Israel, Women's League has continued its unwavering support, passing resolutions supporting the need for foreign aid and security and criticizing the Arab boycott and propaganda and United Nations discriminatory policies.

In recent years, attention has shifted to religious issues with Women's League asserting the need for religious pluralism and for the recognition of the Masorti (Israeli Conservative) movement. It has fought vigorously against calls to amend the Law of Return and has supported Masorti congregations as well as the Conservative Kibbutz Hanaton and Conservative Moshav Shorashim. Overseas groups of women in Masorti congregations were formed in 1972, and since 1979, individual sisterhoods in each of the league's branches have offered financial support to these groups. This project serves to link Women's League members with Israel in a more direct manner. Concern for world Jewry resulted in resolutions of advocacy on behalf of the Jews of Ethiopia, the Soviet Union, and Syria. On the broader international scene, Women's League has opposed apartheid, the communist takeover in Hungary in 1956, and international terrorism. It has called for nuclear arms control and support for emerging democracies in Eastern Europe.

Beginning with an invitation to the White House Mid-Century Conference on Youth in 1950, Women's League has been included in all such major assemblies of the nation's leading organizations. Its presidents have been invited to conferences on civil rights, children and youth education, and racial equality. Since 1952, Women's League has also been an accredited nongovernmental observer at the United Nations. Within the Jewish world, Women's League has been a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations since the 1960s, and its president and executive director serve as representatives to the group. The 1965 Women's League Convention was the first international conclave of synagogue women to be held in the State of Israel. During the 1970s, the presence of Women's League expanded to the international scene as it became an active member in its own right of the World Council of Synagogues. In 1980, it gained autonomous affiliation with the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. Women's League has also had an increasingly independent voice as one of the constituent arms of the Conservative Movement. Convening a joint leadership conference for Women's League, the United Synagogue, and the Federation of Men's Clubs in 1986, the league paved the way for the establishment of the Leadership Council of the Conservative Movement.

By the mid-1970s, Women's League had come of age, an attitude symbolized by two important events. First, in 1969, it moved out of the seminary, where it had been housed since its inception, to new offices on Seventy-fourth Street in New York City. Three years later, the organization changed its name to Women's League for Conservative Judaism, signifying what had been increasingly the case, that it was not a subsidiary of United Synagogue but rather an independent arm of the Conservative Movement.

Women's League in the 1990s continues to be involved in all of the critical issues of twentieth-century American Jewish life, both Jewish and secular. It remains firmly committed to the enhancement of Jewish educational programs on all levels while also continuing to promote a broad spectrum of interests. For the past ten years, Women's League has sponsored a biennial Capital Conference in Washington, D.C., that promotes public policy debates with the nation's leaders on issues such as women's health, foreign policy, and immigration. Its most recent project is its involvement in President Clinton's "Read*Write*Now," a national literacy program, with league volunteers across the country tutoring children individually. Women' League remains a vital force in accenting the pivotal role played by women in the preservation and promotion of Judaism and broader Jewish interests in America, and it has been a critical factor in contributing to that goal.

PRESIDENTS OF WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Mathilde Schechter 1918–1919; Fanny Hoffman 1919–1928; Dora Spiegel 1928–1946; Sarah Kopelman 1946–1950; Marion Siner 1950–1954; Helen Sussman 1954–1958; Syd Rossman 1958–1962; Helen Fried 1962–1966; Evelyn Henkind 1966–1970; Selma Rapoport 1970–1974; Ruth Perry 1974–1978; Goldie Kweller 1978–1982; Selma Weintraub 1982–1986; Evelyn Auerbach 1986–1990; Audrey Citak 1990–1994; Evelyn Seelig 1994–.

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