

A Garland of Grace
A Tribute to the Presidents of Women's League for Conservative Judaism
Transcript of Video

Prepared for the 100th Year Celebration

Premiered at the 2017 Women's League Convention, Crystal City, Virginia

Presidents:

Ruth Perry (1974-1978)
Selma Weintraub (1982-1986)
Evelyn Auerbach (1986-1990)
Audrey Citak (1990-1994)
Evelyn Seelig (1994-1998)
Janet Tobin (1998-2002)
Gloria Cohen (2002-2006)
Cory Schneider (2006-2010)
Rita Wertlieb (2010-2014)
Carol Simon (2014-2017)

Selma Weintraub:

Well, I always felt it was important to do things that were done in the past. And because of that, it helped me to do the archives. Well, I felt that is very, very important, and I wanted to make sure that we had this for the future.

Audrey Citak:

Women's League, 48 East 74th Street. It was a brownstone. We owned a brownstone. We had a full building. It was between Park and Madison. I mean, at that time I lived in Whitestone. We're coming into the city all the time. Well, the Women's League supplied me with a parking place. I had a beautiful office. The Women's League president's office was gorgeous. It was an absolutely beautiful space. I had the services of a secretary and I had all kinds of people to help me do whatever I wanted to do. I mean, I didn't have a computer. I didn't have a cell phone. There was a lot of the technology that was not available, which is just as good because I'm still not good at the technology.

Gloria Cohen:

I think that when I was offered the associate patron's job for Women's League, for Torah Fund. That was the days when Evelyn Henkind was very involved, and Sid Goldstein was very involved and it was Elaine Ravich and Evelyn Seelig and Phyllis Haas. So to be in that group with these elements of women, I was the new kid on the block. I never thought of myself as aspiring to become the president. And the reason I never thought of myself that way is because the more I met women of Women's League, the more they inspired me. These women were so fabulous. They were so exciting. They were creative. They were visionary. And you always think of yourself, "My gosh, I'm not like

that person. How can I be as good as she is?" And I've admired the past presidents that came prior to my position, the 17 that came before me. And you say to yourself, "I don't know if I could do what they did. I mean, these women were so brilliant."

Then the second thing that happened to me at that convention, in those days, all the incoming vice presidents and executive committee would stroll across the stage, this magnificent stage at the Concord Hotel, in these elegant gowns. So I said to myself, "I want to be up there. And I want the other people in the audience to say, 'One day, I want to look like Gloria Cohen standing up there.'" And you know something? That to me was a big achievement. So when I walked across the stage the first time, when it was Audrey's administration, as recording secretary, I was blown away. I was absolutely blown away. So that's how we came about.

And I will tell you that I was nervous. I was concerned. I was hoping that I could do what my predecessors had done. I was hoping that I could inspire the women to want to do what I have done. I wanted them to feel that there's an opportunity for them. And many a times when I go out to speak and I'd see these large groups, I'd say to them, "There's someone that's sitting in the audience now that's going to absolutely be standing where I am today, because I was that person sitting in the audience, just where you are."

Janet Tobin:

New leaders, they come up in the long run. They really do. I think that having personal relationships and meeting often... And they love being involved in Women's League activities.

Evelyn Auerbach:

It was a day out for me. I loved the time speaking with other women. And I could go to a meeting and speak with women who lived in Connecticut, in upstate New York, in Washington, in Pennsylvania, who always came to meetings. And it was a pleasure. And I think that what I did was get a new family, and the new family were all Women's League women, Sisterhood women, and I loved that. And then one day they offered us the opportunity to learn how to go out and be speakers for Women's League and teach women to speak publicly. And I joined that group, took the course, and then went out for many, many long years, training other women.

Carol Simon:

Well, I started as a Sisterhood president in Miami. It had been a difficult time in the congregation, and I looked around the room and the only people that were in the room were my mother-in-law's friends and other women their age, which is what I am now. But I thought if I don't do something, it will always be a club for older women. So that's when I started. And I needed to educate myself, so I went to my first branch conference, and I met people there and it felt very much like USY. I loved it. It was just connecting with other women all over. And I kept going back because I wanted to see my new friends. And I became branch president twice. Twice. And once I met the people that I trained with from the 25 other branches, it was the same kind of thing. We kind of meshed and melded and connected and just wanted to keep working with everybody.

Cory Schneider:

And I believe deeply that Jewish women need Jewish women. There's nothing more exciting to that young 35 year old, who's got a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah or a naming or a wedding for the older ones coming up, than to be able to share that with other Jewish women who've experienced it or are going through some of the same frustrations that they've gone through. And I'm talking about something as mundane as where do I buy the kippot, and something as spiritual is to how do I contribute to my child's simcha myself. One of the things, we belonged to a non-egalitarian synagogue, so I couldn't have an aliyah at my son's bar mitzvah. So what I did was I ended up finding a loom at a synagogue in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and I wove my son a tallit, each of them. And that was my spiritual, my Judaic, contribution to their lives. And I think that those tallitot, when they wrap themselves in them, they've got to think of their mom.

Janet Tobin:

The Mitzvah Torah Project, which was something that my husband sort of stuck in my head and said, "If Women's League needs some extra money, why not write a Torah?" And I said, "Well, that's a possibility." But then there was an incident that occurred at one of our branch conferences, at one of the large synagogues in our area. And when we came on Thursday to practice our Shacharit service, the shamas wouldn't let us in. "You can't go into our synagogue. You can't touch our Torahs." We had to change our conference that day. At the last minute, we had a call up over 500 women that were coming to conference. Fortunately, we got a synagogue not too far from where we were supposed to be. But I was totally horrified to think that anybody would not allow me to read from my Torah, to touch my Torah, that I'm not pure.

And we had a wonderful conference, but it really made me feel very strong about egalitarianism. And I came back to Women's League and I said to them, "I never ever want any woman to feel that they couldn't read from the Torah, to hold the Torah, and to be part of the ritual of our Conservative movement." And Women's League was very, very pleased to take on this project. Edya Arzt and Bernice Balter, our directors, were unbelievable. Rhonda Kahn was terrific. They all gathered round me and we went for it. It was a very exciting, challenging, enthusiastic, and inspirational crowning glory.

Evelyn Seelig:

I was involved with the creation of the of the seminary synagogue, the Women's League Seminary Synagogue, which is called "WLSS". And I was involved with that. Now, we took this room that was the original reading room of the Jewish Theological Seminary library, and we created that thing. We worked with the architects, we worked with everything. The original fixtures, we took down and they found out that they were gold-plated fixtures. We took down some of the beautiful other items and had them recreated and kept them up. It was one of the joys of my life to see that come to fruition. And the main reason was that there was not an egalitarian synagogue at the Seminary. They had the original synagogue, and that was women sat separately. And we really felt, and the Chancellor felt the time had come for us to have an egalitarian synagogue. And that's what we created.

Rita Wertlieb:

Women studying with women, to me, is very different than women and men studying together. And I've experienced both. And I think that women come together, number one, give a job to a woman and it will get done and it will get done efficiently and it will get done cost-effectively, if there's such a word. But also the comradery that comes from being with your sisters, the friendships that are forged, they're lifetime friendships. The friendships I have both in my Sisterhood and in Women's League are friendships that I will always treasure and always have. So I think there's no comparison. I think there's a time and a place for men and women to do things together, and they should, but I think that women need to make their own space and their own time for what they want, what's important for them and to express themselves the way they feel they can.

Sometimes when men are in the room, it becomes a little intimidating. And I've been there and I've seen it. So I feel that it's time for men to have their own group and women to have their own group, and then when it's time they come together. It doesn't always have to be separate. Well, in my last, probably year of being president, I had in my mind that I wanted to leave something tangible for Women's League to be able to use as a teaching tool, and to be able to travel around the country and be used. So ultimately we decided on a Megillah, and we did the Women's League Megillah. We had the Simchat Megillat Esther Project. We raised almost \$35,000, which was a tremendous feat and showed a great deal of support from our Women's League community.

The symbolism of doing a Megillat Esther for Women's League is another way of showing the power of women and how women can accomplish great goals in life, because we all know Queen Esther certainly saved the Jewish people, and is given credit for that. So she is one of our heroines, I guess you would call her. And I think that's a great significance for Women's League to have had the opportunity to do our own Megillat Esther, and to have it available for everybody.

Evelyn Seelig:

One of the things that was really great about the period of time that I was president is there was the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism, which included all of the major organizations within the movement. We had the Seminary which housed it. We had the United Synagogue, we had the Men's Club. We had the Women's League. We had Mercaz. I think that was about it. But all of them sat at the same table, had the same rights to speak, had the same rights to put forward ideas. And I thought it was a marvelous experience because everyone at Women's League was equal to everybody there. It was known that Women's League could get things done.

Ruth Perry:

Then of course, the president of Women's League is privileged to represent the organization in various parts of the country and the world. And I went to Israel several times. Ultimately, I was on the Conference of Presidents and then I was an officer of the World Council of Synagogues. So they had a broader, what shall I say, exposure than

Women's League did because Women's League was primarily for Conservative Jewish women in America. And it was a mind-boggling, incredible experience, and the highlight of my life. It was very interesting. As a matter of fact, I think at one point I was the only woman early on because you weren't automatically on the Conference of Presidents because you were the president of Women's League, not at all. But I knew I had had experience meeting some of these people and I knew them and they asked me if I would consider being on the conference.

And of course I was delighted and honored. And the one thing I will say about them is they treated me very carefully and very respectfully. And remember, those were the days when feminism was far away, and I think they were tickled to have a woman among them. And they were always very courteous and very careful and very polite. And they treated me... The best part about it is they didn't treat me as an inferior. They made me feel as if I was a compatriot. And that was very pleasing to me. They were very warm. They were very friendly. They recognized that I did have something to say. They didn't put me down or treat me, oh, she's a woman, let her go. Don't ask her when she waves her hand or whatever. And they involved me in a good deal of their meetings, and our trips were marvelous. And I got to know most of them and they were very respectful.

You may have to take this out of it, but one of them was Golda Meir. Golda was a smoker. I don't know if you'll keep this in, but Golda was a smoker. And at that time I smoked and none of us knew that she was being treated at Hadassah Hospital for lung cancer. None of us knew it. But she, because she wasn't supposed to be smoking, she would find the people who smoked and asked them for cigarettes. And I smoked with her behind the Knesset more than once. I remember her coming over to me and say, "Ruthie, "Have you a cigarette for me?" I would say, "Of course," and I would give her one, and the two of us would stand there and smoke together, discuss whatever the meeting was. When I heard that she had cancer, I stopped smoking.

Selma Weintraub:

I had dinner with Menachem Begin and we talked about children, grandchildren, and then somebody introduced me and he said, "Oh, I know Selma Weintraub. We talked about our grandchildren together."

Cory Schneider:

When we look at the women who have become region presidents over the years, almost a hundred percent have attended a Leadership Institute. And that's very cool. The Leadership Institute was a novel idea. We had done leadership training. We had done multi-day leadership trainings for Sisterhoods, for regions, but we had not done the... We focused on Sisterhood, how to lead a Sisterhood, how to organize a Sisterhood. And so the Leadership Institute was developed to grow the individual woman. Yes, we used examples from Sisterhood, but it was not focused on Sisterhood. We offered to women an opportunity to grow, an opportunity to look inside themselves as to who they are, what qualities they have, and to give them some tools for them to be

a leader. We publicized it. And in fact, it truly was valuable, not only as an individual in Women's League and Sisterhood, but in their work.

Evelyn Auerbach:

So I did Torah Fund for eight years, and we went from collecting \$100,000 to \$200,000. That was at the time that we had about 200,000 women as members. Membership of Sisterhoods has gone down. Some Sisterhoods have closed because synagogues have closed their doors. We then realized that there were some women that were part of synagogues that had closed that really were interested in Women's League and in doing the work of Women's League.

And then we started accepting members from outside of Sisterhoods because their synagogues had closed. When I stopped being president at the end of four years, Women's League was still dear to me and still something that I've loved. But the one thing that I learned that I promised myself when I was president, was that I was not going to become a past president. I was not going to tell the new regime what they should do or what they shouldn't do. If somebody comes to me and asks me a question. I will answer you honestly, but I certainly will never tell you, "This is what you're supposed to do, because I think so. Do it."

Carol Simon:

I think one of the things that is the most outstanding is that I broke the ceiling a little bit by being the first international president outside of the Northeast. I live in Florida. You go down to Florida region now and you sit in a room with everybody and ask, "How did you get started?" A lot of them will say, because I asked them to do something, face to face, one-on-one, just asked them to do one little task and to get them involved. And during this past three years, well, two and a half years, I reached out to a lot of different people. And I believe in working together. It's always a we.

Rita Wertlieb:

Bringing somebody new into the fold, so to say, is probably one of the greatest things that you can accomplish, trying to bring women in who have potential, who you see some sort of spark, you see something in them, and giving them the opportunity to grow and to become experienced and to take on responsibilities that they would have never taken on. It's one of the greatest gifts you can give to someone.

Ruth Perry:

And that's what I feel. And I feel that Women's League is wonderful because through these Sisterhoods, we have brought in women who are peripheral. And when they got involved, they got more interested and they learned more and they cared more and they did more. And that's what we need more than ever today.

Audrey Citak:

I mean, I have so many friendships from coast to coast because of training services, because of the traveling that I did, because of the gatherings that we had.

Gloria Cohen:

Today, the working woman is not the same woman when I started the presidency. When I started in 2002, women were getting back into the workforce. But today, so many of our young women are working. So I think that when they join their Sisterhood, they don't want to be a chair or a vice president, but they like to be part of a group, and they like to be part of a team. What do you like to do? You like to bake? You like to read? What is of interest to you? Just to work with other women can be very exciting. Pick something that's of interest to you. You don't have to do responsibility all yourself. We have team efforts here. So I would say we don't need any titles. We don't need the name of a vice-president or a chair. Step aboard. Let's be happy together. Let's make happy memories together.

Cory Schneider:

She's got power within her, and that she's got opportunities abounding around her, and that she can either stay on the path she's on and grow in whatever ways that path will take her, or if she's ready to break out of who she is a little bit, she can become someone that is more enriched, more fulfilled, and will be able to have the opportunity to change other people's lives.

Janet Tobin:

I personally think that Women's League is the Conservative Movement. I think that they have played a tremendous role and they can do more than others. And I think when they work alongside of, not together, but alongside of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, that's the Conservative Movement.