

The Story of our Sisterhoods

By PHINA HOBERMAN

Although the Reform movement had its beginnings in Germany in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it was in the United States of America that it found more fertile soil for its growth and development.

Freed from the interference of the state, Orthodox restrictions and the suspicions they encountered in Europe, Reform leaders who had crossed the seas to the United States were at last able to present Judaism in a more modern and meaningful way in the 'land of freedom'.

From the outset, Jewish women became actively involved in the fields of education and good deeds. The first Jewish American Sunday School was founded by Rebecca Gratz, daughter of a distinguished Philadelphia family.

The second Jewish Sunday School in America became a reality in 1838 when Sally Lopez, a worshipper of the Reform Congregation Kahel Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, successfully petitioned her synagogue to set up a school to teach the children of congregants all about Judaism and their Jewish heritage. The Beth Elohim School was staffed by Lopez and other women volunteers, under the supervision of Penina Moise, an educator of that period and noted writer of poems and hymns.

The seeds which gave birth to the Sisterhood movement can be traced to 1844, when worshippers at the other Reform congregation in Charleston, Shearith Israel, met to form a 'Society for the instruction of Jewish Doctrine'.

Several of these women had previously been involved in the religious school at Beth Elohim, and they decided to go one better by creating a formal women's group that would not only provide a Jewish education for their children, but would also participate more directly in congregational

activities, promote Reform Judaism and do other useful communal work.

Not in their wildest dreams could these early pioneers have foreseen the historic impact that the creation of their society would have on the future of American Jewish life.

Although these and other early groups of Reform Jewish women are the first Sisterhoods on record, by the early 1900's the idea of an affiliated women's group had caught on and spread beyond the Reform movement. Many Conservative and some Orthodox congregations began to follow the Reform initiative and organised their own Sisterhoods.

The development of Sisterhoods paralleled the growing political voice of other women's movements as they sought to win the vote and obtain political, social and economic rights that were then denied them. Many Reform Jewish women were among the leading exponents of the general emancipation of women.

By the end of the 19th century there were 74 Reform Sisterhoods in existence. Their early efforts were concerned with religious education, fundraising for Sisterhood-sponsored scholarships and programmes for rabbinic students, establishing Temple libraries, holding cultural events, and seeking greater leadership roles for women in congregational life.

In 1913 the impact of the women's group was enhanced virtually overnight with the organisation and establishment of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS), as the central body of Reform Sisterhoods.



Phina Hoberman

The local women's society now had a national and international voice with burgeoning power and influence, enabling them to project a Reform viewpoint in the larger world.

In November 1993, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was renamed *Women of Reform Judaism* (WRJ).

Today the movement has grown into a federation representing some 100 000 Reform Jewish women in more than 600 local Sisterhoods throughout the United States, Canada and thirteen other countries, including South Africa.

WRJ is an accredited non-governmental organisation (NGO) of the United Nations and continues its involvement in programmes and projects working for world peace and stability. Delegates of the organisation attended preparatory conferences and meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the Fourth World Conference on Women. Very recently, Women of Reform Judaism connected with the world's women by having representatives at the UN Women's Conference in Beijing. Over the years the movement has continued to play an activist role in a variety of causes, embracing social justice, humanitarian concerns and working to achieve equity and opportunity for women.

At national and international conferences and through the mail WRJ continues to keep local and international Sisterhoods informed about what is happening in the Sisterhood world. I am indebted to them for much of the information contained in this article.