

Chapter Title: CONCLUSION

Book Title: Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace

Book Subtitle: American Jewish Womens Activism, 1890-1940

Book Author(s): Melissa R. Klapper

Published by: NYU Press. (2013)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfptx.11>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

NYU Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace*

CONCLUSION

To think of others is as natural to the Jewish woman as to breathe.

—Belle Lindner Israels Moskowitz, 1917¹

I stood for Jewish interests, Jewish thought, Jewish feeling quite as much as I stood for the broader and more universal outlook on life.

—Maud Nathan, 1933²

When Fanny Brin rose from her seat of honor at the Speakers' Table and stepped up to the podium at the closing session of the Woman's Centennial Congress in November 1940, she stood there as a representative of American women. Her longtime colleague and friend Carrie Chapman Catt had convened the Woman's Centennial Congress to assess "how far women have progressed in the past century and how today they may best continue this forward movement." Hundreds of women, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, Pearl Buck, and foreign dignitaries, convened at the Hotel Commodore in New York to hear reports on women's achievements in economic and social welfare, government and politics, ethical and religious values, and world peace and international relations. They celebrated one hundred American women in careers that had not been open to them a century earlier, when women could not even be seated as delegates to the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. With war already raging in Europe, the participants in the Woman's Centennial Congress resolved "to work for the progressive securing of freedom, social justice and peace for all people."³

Brin, identified in the press coverage as the former president of the National Council of Jewish Women, embodied the activists attending the Woman's Centennial Congress, women who called attention to what was wrong in the world and worked to make it right. American Jewish women could take pride in the prominent role played by one of their own, someone who had spent decades explaining how her Jewishness shaped and motivated her activism. Brin was not alone: suffrage and peace activists Maud Nathan, Constance Sporborg, and Gertrude Weil; labor leaders Pauline Newman, Rose Schneiderman, and Fannia Cohen; birth control advocate Nadine Kavinoky; political radical Rosika Schwimmer; and Zionists Tamar de Sola Pool,

Julia Dushkin, and Emily Solis-Cohen all attended the Woman's Centennial Congress as well, many at the special invitation of Catt and the organizing committee. They represented thousands upon thousands of American Jewish women who, like them, had spent the past fifty years engaged in activism that had resulted in significant social, legal, educational, and civic change.⁴

Over a period of several decades and several generations, American Jewish women of diverse class, national, and religious backgrounds embraced the exuberance of large-scale social movements that promised to grant them political authority and citizenship, enhance their power over their own bodies and families, and expand their roles in international relations through the promotion of peace. Though Jewish identity constantly fluctuated, many women held fast to their own ideas of what it meant to be Jewish. Jewishness often shaped their political commitments to secular causes. Each individual crafted her own identity as an American, Jew, and woman, and American Jewish women's experiences fused these divergent dimensions of identity. That fusion helps explain Jewish women's prominence not only in Jewish movements like Zionism and Jewish-inflected movements like labor activism but also in American women's social movements.

As the preceding chapters illustrate, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace* seeks to contribute to the ever-broadening story of American feminism as a diverse movement. Any analysis that attempts to explain the complexity of movements oriented to women must acknowledge the great differences among them. This history of American Jewish women's participation in the suffrage, birth control, and peace movements aligns with earlier critiques of women's history as too focused on middle-class, white, Protestant women and also explores the important differences among Jewish women, whose ideas about gender, Jewish identity, and activism were shaped by their varied class, ethnic, religious, national, and ideological backgrounds.⁵ At the same time, Jewish women also shared interests among themselves and with other women that led to remarkable activist success.

The suffrage movement has been criticized as a relatively conservative, homogenous movement. Although there is some truth to that characterization, the engaged presence of Jewish women as well as other marginalized groups such as African American and working-class women challenged early feminism to expand ideas about what equal citizenship would mean for women. Similarly, opponents and some historians of the birth control movement have seen it as a form of social control. However, the eagerness with which both working-class and middle-class Jewish women availed themselves of contraception and participated in the movement to make birth control legal and accessible requires an acknowledgment of the agency all these women demonstrated in making

the best decisions possible for themselves and their families. In the wake of the bloody twentieth century, the peace movement is sometimes seen as hopelessly quixotic, a dismissal due in part to the dominance of presumably powerless women in peace work. But early twentieth-century women were savvy and practical activists, and Jewish women in the movement demonstrated that they were fully capable of acting on their own interests.

American Jewish women's participation in nonsectarian women's social movements raises intriguing possibilities for understanding the processes of acculturation and the shift of ethnic and immigrant groups from the margins toward the center during the early twentieth century. While both Jewish women and men generally sought some integration into mainstream American society, their paths to acculturation often diverged, due in part to gender differences. The similarity of women's gender roles across all kinds of boundaries of ethnicity, religion, class, and even race—particularly the common valorization of motherhood—offered Jewish women opportunities for social integration less available to Jewish men, who first had to overcome stereotypes of effeminacy that may have dogged their efforts to take on attributes of American manhood. Native-born white men who still commanded the power structure of early twentieth-century America saw little need to accommodate immigrant men, let alone Jewish men of suspect masculinity, by expanding access into their bastions of male privilege.

This is not to say that differences of class and national origins played no role. Native-born American Jews or Jewish immigrants who came from central and western European countries where Victorian values held sway had fewer changes in gender roles to negotiate. The continuity of such roles probably eased the transition to American middle-class family and economic structures. By contrast, the public economic roles that many eastern European Jewish women played prior to immigration required adjustment in an American society only gradually coming to grips with an expansion of women's activities at the turn of the century. Similarly, the ideal of men devoted to intellectual pursuits and the study of Torah rather than economic responsibility, while never describing more than a minority of eastern European Jews, nonetheless affected traditional understandings of men's roles that seemed unacceptable in a New World that assumed men would—and should—be the breadwinners. As a result, gender formed an important element of the culture clashes that faced all immigrant Jews in America and sometimes served to differentiate new Jewish arrivals from their more established, American-born, second-, third- or fourth-generation Jewish counterparts.⁶

The realignment of gender roles, which moved toward a middle-class set of norms while still allowing for a somewhat unconventional public space for

Jewish women's political expression, thus helped form the American Jewish community throughout the period of mass migration and then consolidation following restrictive immigration legislation. Feminist activism, far from endangering acculturation, in fact facilitated it for Jewish women through participation in American women's associational life. Despite persistent anti-Semitism, only rarely did Jewish women feel it necessary to abjure Jewish identity as participants in American social movements. Jewish women instead deployed a strategic range of engagements with both women's movements and Jewish identity that offered a level of complementarity. Their notable participation in the great women's movements of suffrage, birth control, and peace not only helped shape early twentieth-century feminism but also laid the groundwork for the further development of feminism in later decades.

Whether native-born or immigrant, working or middle class, urban or rural, Jewish or Catholic or Protestant, American women who embraced feminist causes shared values and goals related to improving women's status. Social movements enriched their lives and increased their sense of autonomy. Though in retrospect the gendered nature of activism during the early twentieth century may seem limiting, most women developed strong commitments to the idea that their power to effect change in the world stemmed from gender difference, not in spite of it.

The suffrage and birth control and especially the peace movements proved expansive enough to admit specifically Jewish arguments and political identities as well. American Jewish women saw no reason to disregard their Jewishness when they entered these movements. On the contrary, their Jewishness enhanced both their own activism and the contributions they could make to the larger movements. Ultimately they also brought their feminist interests to bear on their Jewish communal life, as Jewish suffragists did when they demanded greater representation in the synagogue, or as Jewish birth control activists did when they examined the relationship of Jewish law to contraception, or as Jewish peace activists did when they called on biblical texts about peace and pointed out the special interest of a diasporic group in ending war. These activist Jewish women set the stage for the expansion of women's roles in the Jewish community as well as in American society more generally. Even though these goals were not fully realized in the prewar era, an important process of education, reevaluation of women's status in the Jewish community, and politicization was launched by Jewish women activists.

Americans have always claimed that they are free to reinvent their identities and to fashion themselves as they wish. Jewish women did not necessarily have to present themselves as Jewish or even give much thought to what

Jewish identity might mean to them. But it is telling that very few denied being Jewish. They became activists in such numbers because Jewishness shaped their understanding of politics and gender and impelled them to activism regardless of possible constraints of class position or prejudice. And when Jewishness writ large increasingly came under attack during the 1930s, Jewish identity became more rather than less important to them just at the moment when it might have made more practical sense to deny it altogether. For women who had always viewed even nonsectarian causes like birth control and peace as implicitly reflective of Jewish concerns, the transition was comparatively smooth. But for those who had not seen much of a connection between the Jewish dimensions of their identity and their political work in the past, the new importance Jewish identity acquired during the years leading up to World War II required a rethinking of the relationship between their political activism and Jewishness. Jewishness moved to the forefront of their consciousness, where it would remain for the rest of the crucial decade of war and peace.

Although relatively few women activists observed the letter of Jewish law, the diaries, memoirs, speeches, and correspondence of suffragists, pacifists, and birth control activists, as well as the organizational records produced by groups such as NCJW and NFTS, bear significant witness to the central importance of Jewish identity. Again and again American Jewish women cited their upbringing in a culture of concern for other Jews and the wider world as primary factors in their political activism. Jewish values of community and *tzedakah*, usually translated as “charity” but more accurately understood as “righteous justice,” provided ample Jewish justification for women’s activism.⁷

American Jewish women of the early twentieth century bequeathed this legacy of activism to their daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters. As political activism and then feminism flourished anew in the postwar era, a striking number of American Jewish women continued to operate on the cutting edge of social movements. The struggle of Jewish women to balance their feminist and Jewish commitments remained complex and continuously complicated the changes they made to both Jewish life and broader social institutions. Yet they all could draw on a Jewish heritage of concern for community, commitment to social justice, willingness to confront powerful institutions, and empathy for the oppressed. Like their predecessors, the Jewish women activists of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond brought Jewish insights to the women’s movement and feminist insights to Jewish life, enriching both and transforming a world they believed they could make a better place.

This page intentionally left blank