

Mrs. Oliver H. P. Belmont, "Jewish Women in Public Affairs," *The American Citizen* (May 1913): 181-82, 232. Maud Nathan Papers, reel 1, vol. 5, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Introduction

Alva Belmont, wife of Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont, a Democratic Congressman from New York from 1901 to 1903 and son of financier August Belmont, offered a view of biblical Jewish women's activism from a non-Jewish perspective. Using the three Biblical examples of Deborah, Achsah, and the daughters of Zelophead, Belmont argued that Jewish women were the original agitators for woman's rights. She offered Ernestine Rose, an early lecturer on abolition, woman's rights, and other reform issues, as an example of the way that their heritage shaped modern Jewish women's activism. Belmont argued that although anti-Jewish prejudice remained prevalent in much of the world, Jewish women's activism aided in developing "a closer friendship and better mutual understanding" with Christian women that would eradicate prejudice and "leave the impress of its work on all coming generations."

JEWISH WOMEN IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

In Every Campaign Waged in the Interest of Public Welfare the Jewish Woman May

be Found Doing her Part and Doing it Well

By MRS. OLIVER H. P. BELMONT

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THE spirit of unrest pervading the whole world, the apparent discontent with established order, the breaking away with traditions, the disregard of custom, which marks the beginning of the 20th century, have a tendency to place us in an interrogative attitude toward both the old and the new regime. We have acquired the habit of demanding reasons for all things and to decline to accept those formerly regarded as representing the fullest measure of wisdom and discernment. We are all called upon, sooner or later, to give a direct answer to a definite question, and in this article I am asked to answer two, the first being as follows: "Is there a widespread prejudice existing in society against the Jew? If so, what is the reason for such prejudice and how can it be best overcome?"

Speaking generally and impartially, it must be admitted that there is a noticeable prejudice against the Jew in many parts of the world, but I believe it is gradually diminishing. In certain quarters of the globe a pronounced prejudice still exists, which is kept alive and periodically brought into prominence with direful results by a few fanatics and intolerants who use it to inflame the minds of emotional people through personal motives. There is no doubt that religion plays a conspicuous part in strengthening and accentuating the difference between Jew and Gentile, and it is only just to say that the prejudice is as deeply rooted in the one as the other.

Therefore in any attempt to overcome it the remedy must necessarily be applied to both alike. The average Jew is sensitive and jealous of his prerogatives and shrinks from association with the class of society which is slow to understand and appreciate him. It is my experience that the Jew of education and culture is welcomed into the most exclusive social circles, provided their members can boast the same quality of attainments. In Science, in Literature, in Art, in Statecraft, in Commerce, in Finance, in the whole domain of higher development where the Jew is so often conspicuous, he is confronted with no barriers; and if in the social world he meets with slight recognition it may be for the reason that the scholarly and cultured Jew has not sought admittance to a society with which he finds little in common.

The faculty for accumulation attributed to the successful business man has a peculiarly irritating effect on some minds, whether the fortunate person be Jew or Gentile; and while the rapid rise of the Jew from penury to great wealth is sometimes deemed a matter of ridicule, the Gentile under similar circumstances proudly proclaims himself a "self-made man."

The second question is: "In great public movements in which women are interested, such as political equality, is the Jewish woman as energetic and as influential as the Christian woman?"

In my opinion, there can be but one answer to this question, and that is emphatically in the affirmative. From time immemorial the Jewish woman has exerted a most decided influence in the interest of home and State. In every known branch of philanthropy and civic reform she is found playing an active part and exercising a tremendous power. The desire to prove helpful is inherited and instinctive with her. It is her nature. It is in conformity with the traditions of her race. She regards it her duty, and from the exercise of duty the Jewish woman is seldom known to shrink. The discipline of ages has trained her mind to wisely meet conditions and to effectively adjust problems which often appear insurmountable. Her well-known veneration for the aged, deep devotion to the young, faithfulness to home and family, unselfish service to the helpless and dependent, gentle nursing of the sick, and, above all, her marked sense of justice, have contributed toward making her a public or general benefactor.

After reading the delightful sketches of Jewish women of the olden time by Mrs. Annie Levy, of London, it is not difficult to trace the secret of the spirit of progression so dominant in their descendants. One of the most notable incidents related in the Old Testament is the life of Deborah, who filled the proud, honorable, and responsible position of a "judge in Israel." It is recorded that she judged for forty years and under her rule the land had peace; that the people hearkened unto her voice and were guided by her judgments. We are further reminded that in every phase of public life which concerned the welfare of her people she was fully competent to take part and guide them aright. This remarkable woman was not only a statesman, a poetess, a prophetess, a sacred singer in Israel, a military instructor, but she was also recognized as "a mother in Israel," who devoted her life to her people and freely gave her wonderful talents to their service.

The claim is put forward that the Jewish woman has the distinction of being the original advocate of woman's rights inasmuch as the earliest record is found in the Book of Numbers. While the Israelites were traveling in the wilderness, Zelophehad died and left no male descendant. His five daughters finding themselves deprived of their inheritance came before

Moses, the priests and the whole congregation, to plead for justice. They asked that the same right to inherit be given to daughters as to sons and that sex should not be considered a disqualification. The story reads that Moses brought their grievance before the Lord, and the Lord spake unto Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophead speak right, thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them. If the power of heredity counts for anything, the initiative displayed by those young women and transmitted to their descendents through all the intervening centuries, accounts in a measure for the fearlessness and clearness of vision with which the Jewish woman of today attacks and adjusts the problems with which she is confronted.

For a further evidence of the Jewish women's effective methods in paving the way for reform measures, it is recalled that the first "Married Woman's Property Act" was introduced into the world when Achsah, wife of Othniel, pleaded with her father, Caleb, for lands and springs of water; which he gave her. And, at the risk of being accused of irrelevance, it must also be admitted that even our modern "hikers" find a precedent in the Jewish woman's participation in the historic "journey through the wilderness," which sustains us in the hope that we, too, will find and enter the "Promised Land."

Among the pioneer advocates of woman's rights in the United States was Mrs. Ernestine Rose, daughter of a Polish rabbi and wife of William E. Rose, whose earnest sympathy with her efforts was only equalled by his generous contributions to the cause which she espoused. Mrs. Rose, whose maiden name was Potoski, was born in Poland, and came to America in 1836. She immediately began a series of public lectures on the evils of the existing social system, the formation of human character, slavery, the rights of women and other reform questions. Mrs. Rose, in that early day when opposition to women in public life was intense, lectured in twenty-three States of the Union and addressed legislative bodies with marked effect, pleading the necessity of legal redress for the wrongs and disabilities to which women were subjected. As an advocate of woman's rights, anti-slavery and religious liberty, she earned a world-wide celebrity. It was said of her that "she took an active part in the great progressive movements which mark the present as the most glorious of historical epochs and accomplished for the elevation of her sex and the amelioration of social conditions a work which can be ascribed to but few women of her time."

In the winter of 1855 Mrs. Rose spoke in thirteen of the fifty-four county conventions for woman suffrage held in the State of New York and each winter took part in the Albany conventions and hearings before the Legislature, which in 1860 resulted in the passage of the bill securing to women the right to their own earnings and the equal guardianship of their children. An article which appeared in the Boston Investigator in 1881 referred to her as follows: "As an anti-slavery lecturer, a pioneer in the cause of women's rights and an advocate of Liberalism, Mrs. Rose did good service and is worthy to be placed with such devoted friends of humanity as Frances Wright, Harriet Martineau, Lucretia Mott and Lydia Maria Child, who will long be remembered for their work's sake." In a letter to Susan B. Anthony, written in 1877 in answer to a request for certain information regarding her activities, Mrs. Rose said: "I had no other ambition except to work for the cause of humanity, irrespective of sex, sect, country or color.*** I have used my humble rights in general and the elevation and rights of woman in particular nearly all my life. * ** I sent the first petition to the New York Legislature to give a married

woman the right to hold real estate in her own name in the winter of '36 and '37, to which, after a good deal of trouble I obtained five signatures. Some of the ladies said the gentlemen would laugh at them; others that they had rights enough; and the men said the women had too many rights already. Woman at the time had not learned to know that she had any rights except those that man in his generosity allowed her; both have learned something since that time which they will never forget. I continued sending petitions with increased numbers of signatures until '48 and '49, when the Legislature enacted the law which granted to woman the right to keep what was her own. No sooner did it become legal than all the women said, "Oh! that is right! we ought always to have had that."

Writing of her work for women, Miss Anthony said of her: "All through those eventful years Mrs. Rose had fought a double battle not only for the political rights of her sex as women, but for their religious rights as individual souls, to do their own thinking and believing. How much of the freedom they now enjoy the women of America owe to this noble Jewish woman cannot be estimated, for moral influences are too subtle for measurement."

In seeking a woman member for its National House of Representatives, the Australian people have chosen one of the Jewish race, the versatile Miss Vida Goldstein, who is now a candidate for that office with strong prospects of being nominated and elected, in which event she will be the first woman thus honored in that country, and her record of many years as civic reformer in her home city of Melbourne fully justifies the confidence placed in her by her fellow citizens. Another brilliant young Jewish woman, Miss Isaacs, a girl under twenty-five, was last year appointed an associate judge of the Supreme Bench of Australian, and is noted for her activities in behalf of women and children.

A celebrated Jewish physician of Holland, Dr. Alletta Jacobs, an officer of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, a few months ago completed a two years' tour of the world, which was taken for the purpose of thoroughly investigating the extent of white slavery and of devoting her time, wealth and ability to the campaign for the suppression of this ever-increasing evil.

The great National Consumers' League, with branches throughout the American Union, accomplishing a humane work whose beneficial effects are far-reaching and almost beyond computation, has, in its president, Mrs. Frederick Nathan, of New York, one of the most public spirited and philanthropic women of our time.

To adequately describe the results of the various phases of work for the benefit of humanity to which Miss Lillian Wald of the Nurses' Settlement of New York is devoting her life is a task far beyond my ability to achieve. The fact that she initiated the idea which resulted in the establishment of the Federal Children's Bureau at Washington, D.C., gives her a leading place among the world's benefactors of this generation and adds a bright star of glory to her race.

The list of Jewish women active in great public movements is too long to be included in the short space allotted to me, but in every campaign waged in the interest of public welfare the Jewish woman may be found doing her part and doing it well. The National Council of Jewish Women furnishes a noble record of helpfulness extended whenever an emergency has presented itself. In every effort made toward securing remedial legislation for women and children the

Jewish woman assumes her full share of the burden. The peace movement, the Child Labor League, the White Slave agitation, the Women's Trades Union, hospitals, old people's homes, orphan asylums, educational institutions, charity associations, all have the active support of the Jewish woman whose efficiency is everywhere demonstrated and universally recognized.

The noble work of those women who are seeking political equality for their sex has done much to unite the women of all creeds, classes, and conditions of life into a sisterhood of closer friendship and better mutual understanding, a sisterhood that has swept aside prejudice and that will leave the impress of its work on all coming generations.

Maud Nathan to Rabbis, 23 April 1917, Maud Nathan Papers, reel 2, vol. 7, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Introduction

Maud Nathan, a suffragist leader and Jewish society matron, sent this letter to New York rabbis in an effort to win their support for women's suffrage. She argued that women's enfranchisement would reduce organized vice because of women's inherent righteous morality. In her argument, Nathan also utilized Jewish traditions of working for social justice and the tradition's emphasis on home and family.

Letter sent to Rabbis.

April 23, 1917.

My dear Sir:-

As one who is striving to better the community in every way, we ask you to consider the enclosed evidence from ministers in the West, who, like yourself, are working to make this a world where boys and girls can have a chance to grow up into worthy men and women.

In fighting evil conditions about them, from obscene posters and picture shows to vice of every kind (all of which are decided to-day by the officials chosen at the ballot-box) ministers have invariably found that the forces working for decency have been tremendously strengthened by giving the woman of the community the vote - that power to work directly in the greatest of all world struggles, righteousness against evil.

The enemy to the Home and to the Synagogue to-day is organized vice -- a colossal octopus with tentacles in every hamlet and town. It does not want to enable the women of New York to back up the men in their fight for righteousness - they know the result too well - the West has taught them.

In view of this testimony from those who know, we ask you to stand by our State and work to give to the men who are struggling for more moral conditions, the direct aid of their women. It does not mean that all evil will at once vanish - simply that an added force will be freed to combat it.

We, of the House of Israel, have ever believed in the sacredness of the home, and in centering all the influence of life upon it. Womanhood has occupied an unique place in Jewish life and we should be among the first to welcome the assumption of those responsibilities of citizenship by womankind which are an inevitable part of the new order of democratic life that lies before us. No one ought to be more sympathetic to the ideal of enfranchisement than Jews, who as a people have long known the hardship and the bitterness of unjust and proscriptive political discrimination.

Knowing that as a clergyman you ardently wish to strengthen the powers of righteousness whenever and wherever you can, we feel sure of your active co-operation.

Faithfully,

(Signed) Maud Nathan.

(Mrs. Frederick)

"American Jewish Women in 1890 and 1920: An Interview with Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon," *The American Hebrew*, 106, no. 23 (23 April 1920): 748-49.

Introduction

In an interview with *The American Hebrew* in 1920, Hannah Greenbaum Solomon gave an overview of the contributions of the National Council of Jewish Women to Progressive causes over several decades. From an original--albeit visionary-- concern with charity and religion, the Council broadened its goals and outreach to include legislative work, immigrant aid, and community planning, among other activities, and created alliances with secular women's groups. She also noted that membership in NCJW provided means of enrichment and development for countless Jewish women.

American Jewish Women in 1890 and 1920: An Interview With Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon

Nearly thirty years ago, a group of pioneer club women laid the foundation for the Council of Jewish Women. The following interview with Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon, founder, is full of interesting reminiscences and contrasts between 1890's women and 1920's.

"They used to think that the woman who belonged to a club was entirely too radical for polite society, and so most of us contented ourselves with sewing circles and coffee-klatches. We learned to play cards and then we were the equals of men," Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon, of Chicago, the founder of the Council of Jewish Women and pioneer of women's club work in America, laughingly said. Mrs. Solomon has been in women's club work since 1876. When as a school girl, barely out of her teens, she joined one of the first women's clubs in America. Those were the days when women met to worshipfully discuss the mysteries of Browning's poetry, the far-off rumblings of woman suffrage, and to mention with trepidation the subjects of higher education for women.

"I was considered quite radical," Mrs. Solomon said, "and the good ladies of Chicago were skeptical indeed about whether I was a fit person for their company." At the New York headquarters of the national campaign of the Council of Jewish Women, this "mother" of an organization that now numbers thirty thousand, was telling the story of the early days to a group of younger workers -- telling it with the enthusiasm and affection of a mother who praises her favorite child.

Mrs. Solomon is an active and ardent campaigner. Speaking tours, making long trips from city to city have no fears for her, and even the prospect of asking for funds from a public that has been called "drive weary" has no terrors. Indeed, why should it have? Didn't Mrs. Solomon thirty years ago -- alone and unafraid -- set out on a huge task of bringing into one co-ordinate body the Jewish women of America, and thereby defy convention and all its dame Grundy's?

"There are thirty thousand of us now," Mrs. Solomon said. "All working together for the welfare of the nation and of our people. Thirty years ago -- we had the time of our lives getting a scant dozen together. The Council of Jewish Women had its inception at the Congress of

Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. if ever there was a lovely place to be born in -- it was Chicago at the time of the World's Fair and there the infant council first reared her head. To Susan B. Anthony, the great pioneer of women, belongs to the idea of calling together the women of America to participate in the World's Fair and the Parliament of Religions, and to bring forward women's work in every field. To me was assigned the task of organizing the Jewish women. There was never a more difficult job. First of all, we had no way of knowing who the leading Jewish women of the country were. Emma Lazarus, Julia Richman and Henrietta Szold were perhaps the only nationally known Jewesses in the country at that time. Some of us had become acquainted at summer resorts or occasional out-of-town visits.

"Jewish women's organizations were practically unknown. There were, I think, two Temple Sisterhoods then in existence -- one in New York and one in Chicago -- and the women of the Sisterhoods confined their activities to a small measure of philanthropic work for the poor of the congregation and to securing funds for the interior decoration of the synagogue. Imagine today a women's drive for funds for a new carpet for the Temple Emanu-El of New York or the Sinai Congregation of Chicago!

OBJECTIONS FROM THE MEN

"First of all when we tried to organize, we met with objections from the men. Rabbis and laymen did not want to help us in the beginning, because they were skeptical about separating Jewish women from women of other faiths, and were doubtful of the feasibility of bringing together any large number of Jewish women. It took a year of work to create a committee to assist me in carrying out my plans.

"We organized mass meetings throughout the country where women delegates were elected. We corresponded with every prominent rabbi in every city, asking for suggestions, and when the Congress met in 1893, we had a representative gathering of Jewish women. On the last day of the Congress, the late Julia Richman, of New York, presented a resolution calling for the formation of a national Jewish women's organization, and every woman present at the Congress pledged herself to support any organization that might be formed. Officers were elected and I was chosen president. We set about to formulate a constitution and a tentative plan for organization, and in 1896 our first Triennial Convention was held.

"The women of the council had vision and they had a definite plan of work, which looked far ahead of the generation in which they themselves were working. At our first triennial we had two aims: religious work and philanthropy. We hoped to establish Sabbath schools and to extend the study of Jewish literature and history. In philanthropy we wanted to introduce preventive work, making the family rather than the individual the object of our care. By these plans, you can readily understand how limited was our field of endeavor in 1896. Charity and religion--these two were the province of womankind. Woman's sphere is in the home, they told us. The last thirty years have been devoted to proof of our boast that women's sphere is the whole wide world, without limit.

"So well were these original purposes carried out, that today there are thousands of Jewish children in the Sabbath schools of the council all over the country. There have been many

successful study circles, and in many cities where the council now exists, they are the only Jewish activity in the community.

"But as we grew our work naturally expanded. We began Americanization work long before others thought of the existence of such a need. We had settlement houses, clubs and classes, English classes for foreign mothers and working girls--things which still seem novelties today.

"In looking back from 1920, wherein our first national drive for funds for Americanization and women's welfare work is launched, we find that the council was the first organized body to claim a place for Jewish womanhood in the affairs of the country. It has furnished opportunities for women's development and has aided them in developing their talents. It has aided many other national organizations; it has furnished plans of study for small communities and assisted in the formation of Jewish Sabbath schools for girls, in many instances paying for instructors. It has carried on preventive and corrective work for the blind and deaf. Often these activities are carried on by the cost of thousands of dollars...National Council carries on important aid work with workers at Ellis Island, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Seattle and San Francisco. Recently work was undertaken for Jewish women on farms.

"In addition, the council takes an active interest in legislation that is of the community and women's welfare. It maintains committees on Purity and the Press, Peace and Arbitration, Social Hygiene, Civic and Communal activities, and during the war it assisted in every national activity -- Liberty Loans, Thrift Stamps, Red Cross, National Council of Defense and others.

"Even the ambitious pioneers of 1893 did not dream of such a scope of work. They could hardly foresee that during the war, the National Council of Jewish Women would be the only organization permitted to carry on welfare work at Ellis Island. They could scarcely foresee the honored place the council holds in the National Council of Women of the United States, the National Federation of Women's Clubs and International Council of Women.

"But our pioneers builded [*sic*] well, and so carefully that they may yet recognize in the Council of Jewish Women of today, the foundations which they themselves laid -- for the spirit of the work has remained unchanged -- even though the work has changed with changing times. The ranks of the workers still include many of our "old timers."