

The Evolution of American Jewish Philanthropy

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Jewish philanthropy in the United States defies neat categorization and reflects the diversity of religious, cultural, and ideological concerns that have motivated American Jews over the centuries. Best understood as a broad umbrella of distinct efforts rather than a singular phenomenon, Jewish philanthropy has touched virtually every aspect of American Jewish life. Secular and religiously based organizations have raised money, offered assistance, and engaged in advocacy to further their missions. In addition to funding particular causes, Jewish philanthropic activities have included support for **immigrants** arriving in the United States and aid supplied to Jews abroad. Jewish philanthropy has never been monolithic or free from the internal differences that have divided American Jews. Yet, it has remained a constant part of community life, even as its goals and approaches have changed over time.

Jewish philanthropy in the United States started with local efforts to support **synagogues** and religious needs in early communities. By the early twentieth century, these efforts grew into city-wide and national initiatives. As immigration swelled and Jewish communities abroad faced devastating crises, new organizations emerged with far-reaching philanthropic portfolios. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, changes in tax policies and growing pockets of wealth influenced philanthropy across the United States. The American Jewish community followed this trend, focusing on organizational endowments and foundations that shaped communal priorities.¹

Some scholars have argued that Jewish philanthropy can be traced directly back to the biblical era. They claim that **tsedakah** (the **Hebrew** term for charity or righteousness) has been a continuous thread throughout Jewish history, and that ancient precepts connected seamlessly to modern Jewish philanthropy. But such assessments often ignore the particular historical circumstances that led Jews to create philanthropic institutions over time. For example, in the medieval and early modern periods, rulers generally required Jews to assume responsibility for their own poor as a condition of their residency in a given place. As a result, Jewish communities developed structured systems of charity to meet these obligations, balancing religious duty with practical necessity. Jewish philanthropy evolved in response to specific historical conditions, creating a rich network of societies, organizations, and institutions long before Jews arrived in the United States.²

¹ Lila Corwin Berman, *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex: The History of a Multibillion-Dollar Institution* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

² Derek J. Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (University of California Press, 2001), 90–107.

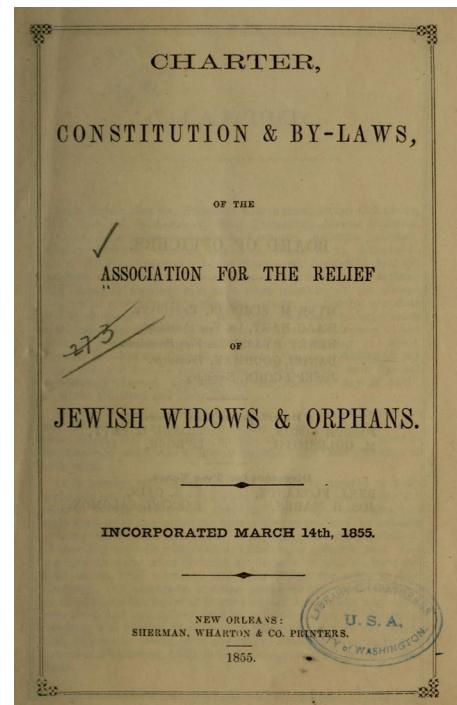
THE BEGINNINGS OF JEWISH PHILANTHROPY IN THE UNITED STATES

The first recorded instance of Jewish charitable activity in the North American colonies came, ironically, after New Amsterdam Governor Peter Stuyvesant failed in his effort to prohibit Jews (whom he called “the deceitful race”) from settling in the colony. His Dutch superiors permitted Jews to remain in New Amsterdam on the condition that “the poor among them, shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”³ In all likelihood, Jews would have undertaken this task without the imposed stipulation. However, the notion that “Jews take care of their own” referred to by later generations of Jewish social workers as the **“Stuyvesant Promise,”** endured as a guiding principle of communal life in the United States.⁴

GENDER AND JEWISH PHILANTHROPY

The Jewish population in the United States began to increase in the mid-nineteenth century, reaching about 50,000 by 1850. Jewish charitable associations, often associated with synagogues, sprang up to meet the charitable needs of the Jewish community. In this respect, Jews followed the patterns described by French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the United States and authored his famous *Democracy in America* in the 1830s. His observation about the proliferation of voluntary societies in the United States aptly characterized Jewish communal behavior in early America. Jews joined non-Jewish Americans in constructing what historians call the Benevolent Empire.⁵

In the nineteenth century, in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles, charity increasingly became identified as the province of women, because women were considered to possess an innate nurturing character.⁶ Often associated with synagogues, Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Societies, sewing circles, and scores of other Jewish women’s organizations emerged across the United States to help the needy. Jewish women often personally delivered assistance, goods, and funds to families in distress.⁷ This was so common that it is virtually impossible to find a synagogue report or communal address that fails to thank “the ladies” for their good works.



Printed cover page for the Association For The Relief Of Jewish Widows & Orphans, *Charter, Constitution & By-laws, of the Association for the Relief of Jewish Widows & Orphans, 1855*, Library of Congress (ca10001843).

³ Reply of the Amsterdam Chamber of the West Indian Company to Peter Stuyvesant, in Samuel Oppenheim, “The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654-1664,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909), 8.

⁴ Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (Yale University Press, 1996), 139-42.

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville and Henry Reeve, *Democracy in America*, 128-133. Library of Congress (09021576). <https://www.loc.gov/item/09021576/>.

⁶ To learn more about “The Cult of True Womanhood” or the “Cult of True Domesticity” see the following video resource from PBS Learning Media: wisconsin.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ush22-soc-domesticitycult/the-cult-of-domesticity/.

⁷ Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 140-41; Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920* (New York University Press, 2012), 45-46.

A few of these efforts expanded into more far-reaching endeavors that extended beyond the boundaries of the synagogue community. Philadelphia's Rebecca Gratz founded the city's Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and the nation's first Jewish foster home and Hebrew Sunday School. For Gratz, these institutions served the needs of the growing Jewish community but equally important, they comprised part of a far-reaching effort to preserve and promote Judaism in Christian society.⁸

In nineteenth-century America, Jews combined both philanthropic and religious concerns. The first Jewish fraternal lodge, B'nai B'rith, was founded by Jewish men in 1843. It was created to offer a space for male sociability outside the synagogue. In addition, the lodge included a mission to provide aid to members facing illness or other “untoward events,” and to support widows and orphans.⁹ As the Jewish American population grew, individual synagogues and societies could not shoulder charitable burdens alone and began reaching across congregational and associational lines. By the late 1800s, this resulted in the creation of everything from Jewish hospitals to orphan asylums to organizations that gave **matzah** to the poor on **Passover**. A few Jewish charitable efforts were grand affairs, such as the lavish balls held during the Jewish holiday of **Purim**. These events served not only as elegant social gatherings but also as opportunities to raise funds for communal needs.¹⁰



The Hebrew Purim Ball at the Academy of Music, March 14, 1865. Library of Congress (96505276).

⁸ Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Wayne State University Press, 2015).

⁹ Deborah Dash Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership* (SUNY Press, 1981), 11.

¹⁰ Polland and Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis*, 45-57.

CONSOLIDATING JEWISH PHILANTHROPY

Even as the number of Jewish charitable associations grew, a growing chorus of Jewish communal leaders began to decry the duplication of efforts and to advocate for more systematic approaches to Jewish philanthropy. In 1860, Chicago's Jews created a United Hebrew Relief Association, bringing together several charitable associations. Philadelphia did the same with a United Hebrew Charities in 1869, and New York followed suit in 1874. For a time, these joint ventures succeeded, but even they could not keep up with the constant creation of new charitable organizations within the Jewish community. As the Jewish population grew, so did the demand for support and the number of organizations working to meet those needs.

Between 1880 and 1924, approximately three million Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, immigrated to the United States. This surge in immigration led to the rapid growth of aid societies. Addressing the needs of these new arrivals became a key communal priority, prompting efforts to merge various charitable organizations into more efficient, unified institutions. The notion of Federated Jewish Charities was conceived to coordinate a wide range of Jewish associations. Jewish Federations (as they are now known) were based on the principle of creating an umbrella structure "to bring together the various agencies engaged in separate fund-raising and to concentrate on a single, annual, combined subscription appeal on their behalf."¹¹ This approach sought to centralize an annual campaign and distribute the funds to constituent groups. The first Jewish Federation was established in Boston in 1895, followed by Cincinnati a year later. By the early twentieth century, Federations had been founded in Baltimore, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, and many other cities across the country. New York, due to its large Jewish community and numerous organizations, took longer to organize, finally creating a Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies in 1917. Despite this delay, the trend was clear: by the time World War I began, 23 cities had established Jewish Federations.¹²

The coordination of fundraising and disbursement proved advantageous in avoiding duplication of efforts, but had ripple effects, impacting the professional development and gendered practices of Jewish philanthropy. Faced with the challenge of serving millions of East European Jewish immigrants, American Jews searched for more productive ways of caring for the poor, meeting their employment needs, and searching for the root causes of poverty, delinquency, and other social problems. As efficiency and scientific methods became the watchwords of the day, men began to take center stage in American Jewish philanthropy.¹³

Women remained active in charitable activities, but their efforts were increasingly deemed quaint and unscientific by men who assumed professional leadership positions. Some independent Jewish women's associations remained, and a few became large-scale organizations. The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), for example, was founded in 1893 by middle-class women who arrived in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹¹ Harry L. Lurie, *A Heritage Affirmed: The Jewish Federation Movement in America* (Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 38.

¹² Boris D. Bogen, *Jewish Philanthropy: An Exposition of Principles and Methods of Jewish Social Service in the United States* (Patterson Smith, 1969), 43-58.

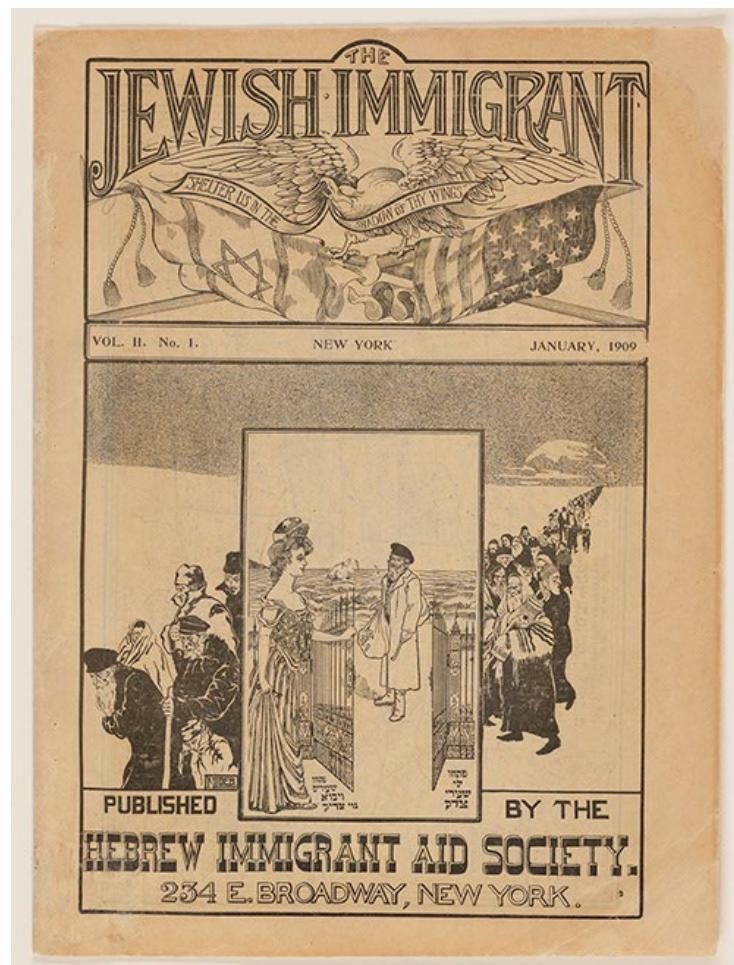
¹³ Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 32.

The organization's original goal was to promote Judaism and advocate for social justice, but it soon focused on immigrant aid, specifically assisting women and children. During the peak years of immigration to the United States, the NCJW regularly dispatched delegates to the docks to assist young Jewish women, preventing them from falling into the hands of men who preyed on immigrant women traveling alone.¹⁴ While the NCJW and other women's organizations remained prominent players, community-wide Federations generally excluded women from leadership positions as a professional class of men increasingly adopted corporate models of philanthropy.¹⁵

ASSISTING MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Jewish immigrants mobilized to help one another. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), founded by East European Jews who had recently arrived in the U.S., sent representatives to Ellis Island and other major ports to negotiate with authorities who might attempt to detain or deport Jewish immigrants. *The Jewish Immigrant*, a bilingual HIAS publication, circulated widely in Eastern Europe to prepare immigrants for what to expect when they arrived.¹⁶ HIAS workers also advised newcomers how to navigate the maze of American bureaucracies.

At the same time, immigrants initiated their own grassroots and mutual aid organizations, most notably **landsmanshaftn** (Jewish hometown societies). More than 3,000 of these societies were created in New York alone. Groups of Jews from the same European hometown pooled their resources to provide unemployment insurance, sick and death benefits, low-interest loans, and other services. Later, these organizations sent funds back to Europe during times of crisis.¹⁷



The Jewish Immigrant, January 1909. New York: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 1909. Library of Congress (045.00.00).

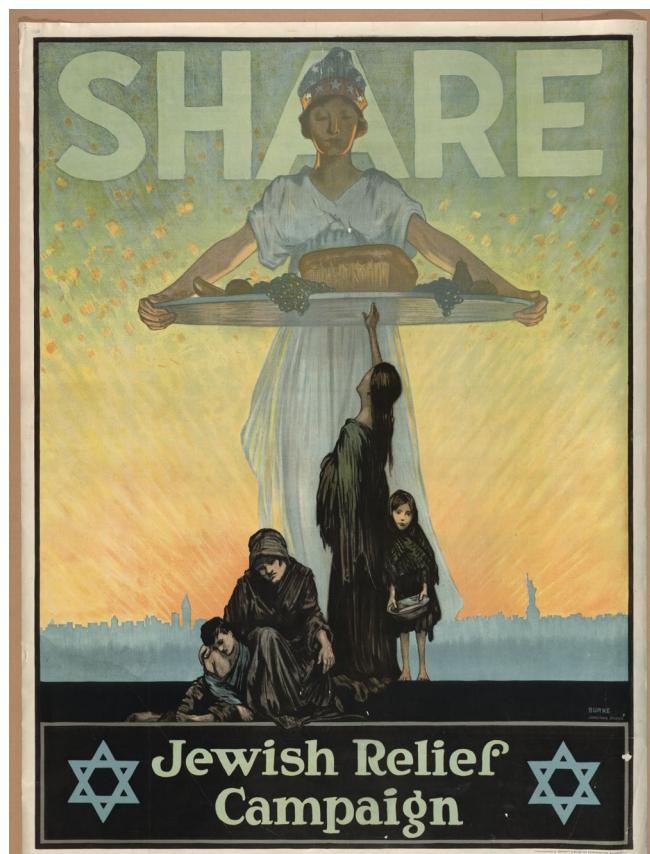
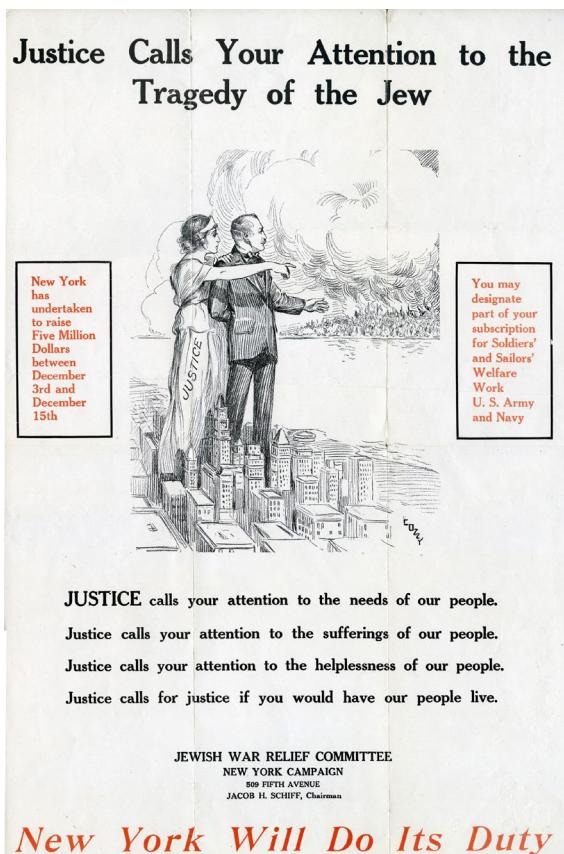
¹⁴ Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (University of Alabama Press, 1993), 136-66.

¹⁵ Beth S. Wenger, "Federation Men: The Masculine World of New York Jewish Philanthropy, 1880-1945," *American Jewish History* 101:3 (July 2017), 377-99.

¹⁶ Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 49-50.

¹⁷ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 1, 81-112.

During the First World War, American Jews from a variety of backgrounds rallied to help their coreligionists abroad, as war ravaged Russia's Pale of Settlement, where millions of Jews lived. Several different Jewish war relief organizations sprang up, each representing a different constituency.¹⁸ The most enduring organization, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), was initially founded to assist Jews in Palestine. However, it quickly became the leading organization providing aid to European Jews after World War I. Later, the JDC also supported Jews threatened by the Nazis and provided care for survivors of the **Holocaust**. The JDC emerged as a leading American non-governmental organization.¹⁹



Left: This poster was produced by the American Jewish War Relief Committee, one of the JDC's constituent organizations, and was directed at residents of New York City, 1917. Library of Congress (2021670901).

Right: This poster depicts America/Justice as a female figure who offers her abundant bounty to widows, orphans, and refugees, 1917. Library of Congress (2002708880).

American Jewish philanthropic organizations, like their religious and nonsectarian counterparts, could not sustain communal self-sufficiency in the wake of the Great Depression. Jewish communal leaders and social workers supported the New Deal and embraced the idea that the government should care for those in need. They distributed state funds while also focusing on Jewish religious, cultural, and educational projects.²⁰

¹⁸ Polland and Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis*, 166-67.

¹⁹ Oscar Handlin, *A Continuing Task: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1914–1964* (Random House, 1964); Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939–1945* (Wayne State University Press, 1981).

²⁰ Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 139-65.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Jewish philanthropy expanded significantly. Organizations grew larger and reflected the community's changing concerns. Jewish groups mobilized to support Jews during and after the Holocaust and provided assistance to survivors. **Zionism**, once a relatively small movement in the United States, steadily gained followers during the 1920s and 1930s, bolstered by an array of organizations like the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and Hadassah, which became one of America's largest women's organizations. A merger of existing organizations, the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) disbursed funds to Jews in Palestine and around the globe. American Jews contributed a staggering \$150 million dollars to Israel in its first year of existence, and those figures increased in later years, spiking during Israel's wars in 1967 and 1973.²¹ Even as Jews have become more divided in their opinions toward Israel, support for the state remains a key aspect of American Jewish philanthropy.

CONCLUSION

The landscape of Jewish philanthropy has followed broader American patterns. In the late twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, Jewish organizations have continued to respond to moments of crisis. However, with a more secure and affluent community, their focus shifted from addressing immediate material needs to promoting Jewish identity and supporting educational and cultural projects. The financial structures that characterize Jewish philanthropy have also changed substantially. Jewish Federations have built large endowments, taking advantage of changing tax policies to accumulate capital in their organizations. Jewish philanthropy also increasingly relies on private foundations. These developments are hardly unique to American Jews; they reflect overall trends in American philanthropy and evolving government policies and regulations.²² The meanings and methods of Jewish philanthropy have changed significantly over the years, but contributing to Jewish causes and concerns remains a vital part of American Jewish identity.

²¹ Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad* (Rutgers University Press, 1963), 524; Melvin I. Urofsky, *We Are One! American Jewry and Israel* (Anchor, 1978), 225-27.

²² Berman, *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex*.