

Jewish Women in Social and Religious Movements

Joyce Antler, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of American Jewish History and Culture and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University

Jewish women have been instrumental in the women's rights movements in the United States, advocating for greater opportunities and more equitable gender roles in society. From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, they have helped bring changes that give women (and other people) more opportunities and fairer treatment in society. Many of their most significant contributions were deeply influenced by Jewish traditions, values, and cultural heritage.

PIONEERING VOICES

Ernestine Rose, a **rabbi's** daughter born in Poland in 1810, became one of the most prominent figures in the early women's movement. Rose's father taught her to read the **Torah**, which was unusual for girls at the time. However, he rejected the criticisms that she made of religion, arguing that young women should not question such matters. Rose recalled this as the moment she became a feminist, advocating for equality between men and women.

In London, Rose was influenced by the British radical socialist Robert Owen. With his support, she began speaking at public meetings (an unusual practice for women at the time). She immigrated to the United States in 1836, settling in New York, where she became widely known for her speeches on free thought, abolition, and women's equality. Dubbed the "Queen of the Platform," she delivered a groundbreaking speech at the 1851 National Women's Rights Convention, advocating for "political, legal, and social equality with man," a key moment in the early women's movement.¹ Rose was a pacifist who argued that women had a special stake in crusades for peace. As both an immigrant and a Jew, she also faced **antisemitism**, even among her circle of freethinkers.

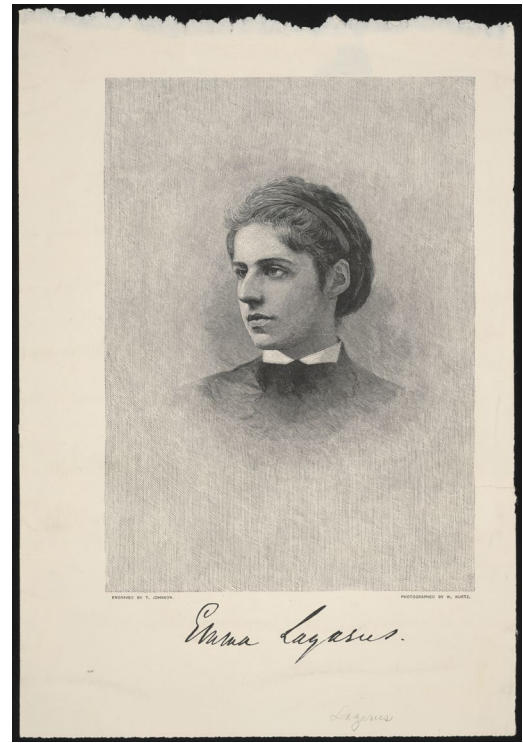
WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Readers may wonder why this particular American minority group played such a role in the women and feminist movements of the last two centuries. Among the Jews of Europe (who comprised the bulk of Jewish **immigrants** in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), religious teachings linked men to scholarly pursuit. Women often worked in breadwinning roles, running family stores or business, while men were responsible for their studies and for religious education in the family. After arriving as new **migrants** to America, Jewish women continued to work and in many cases to branch out even further in pursuit of independence and self-sufficiency.

¹ "Speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention - Oct. 15, 1851," Iowa State University Archives of Women's Political Communication, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/speech-at-the-national-womans-rights-convention-oct-15-1851/>.



Left: Portrait of Ernestine Rose, c.1870–1890. Library of Congress (006681152).



Right: Engraved portrait of Emma Lazarus, c.1888. Library of Congress (99402695).

Emma Lazarus, best known for her poem “The New Colossus,” engraved on the Statue of Liberty, was a prominent Jewish literary figure of the nineteenth century. Born in 1849 into a leading **Sephardic** Jewish family, she was raised in an upper-class New York City household and received private tutoring in European languages and literature. At 17, she published her first volume of poetry, which earned praise from prominent literary figures. Her identity as a Jewish writer became more pronounced when she translated the works of medieval Jewish poets, and later, in her publications responding to the **pogroms** that targeted Eastern European Jews in the 1880s. Deeply moved by the struggles of Jewish refugees arriving in New York, Lazarus wrote essays and poems advocating for immigrant rights and took a strong stance against antisemitism. She also encouraged Jews to establish a homeland in Palestine.²

THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The first U.S. Jewish women’s movement began in the early 1880s with the formation of **synagogue** sisterhoods and the establishment of the Jewish Women’s Congress at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Jewish women worked to improve the lives of Eastern European immigrants, especially women and children. Beginning in the 1880s, they established sisterhoods devoted to social welfare activities. Sisterhood reform activities opened the public space of the synagogue to female benevolence, demonstrating that despite continuing **assimilation** to American life, Jewish women valued their connections to Judaism and to the Jewish people.

Jewish women established schools, clubs, camps, clinics, and settlement houses. Lillian Wald, a former nurse, created the influential Henry Street Settlement in New York City, and played a leading role in developing the federal Children’s Bureau.

² See the term “Zionism” in the glossary.

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and other Jewish women's groups also campaigned against child labor, prostitution, and the harms caused by poverty. The establishment of Hadassah (The Women's Zionist Organization of America) in 1912, led by Henrietta Szold, became another milestone for Jewish women.³ Providing health, education, and welfare services to women and children in Palestine, Hadassah helped foster the nascent Jewish women's movement.

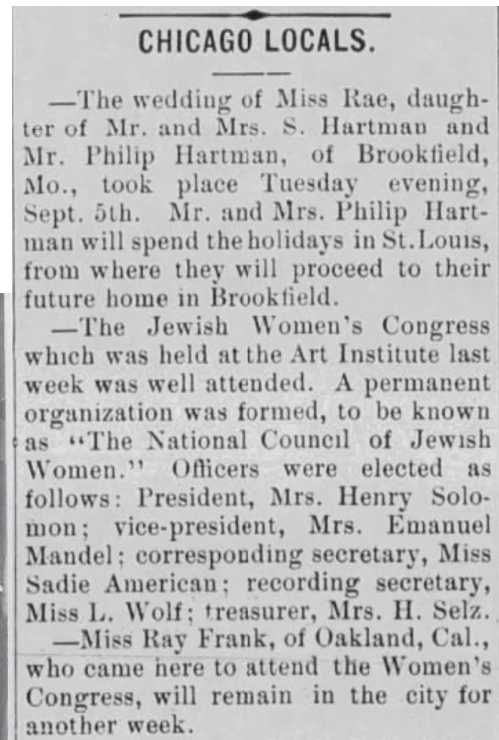
In the early twentieth century, Jewish women in the garment trades, including Rose Schneiderman, Clara Lemlich, and Pauline Newman, sparked protests that led to the founding of the American labor movement. Schneiderman, the Vice President of the New York Women's Trade Union League, helped build momentum for the garment workers' strike of 1909-1910, the "Uprising of the 20,000," inspired by the passionate speech of 17-year-old Clara Lemlich.⁴

JEWISH RADICALISM AND JEWISH WOMEN

Jewish women flocked to myriad radical movements, including socialism, anarchism, and communism. Emma Goldman, a Russian immigrant who had been a midwife, nurse, then radical agitator, became a strong voice protesting the injustices of industrial capitalism and the subordination of women. Jewish women were at the forefront of the birth control movement.



Left: Group of striking shirtwaist workers in New York City, c.1909, Jewish Women's Archive.



Right: From a section titled "Chicago Locals" in a Jewish newspaper from St. Louis, Missouri. *The Jewish Voice*, September 15, 1893.

³ Mira Katzburg-Yungman, "Hadassah in the United States," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hadassah-in-united-states>.

⁴ Tony Michels, "Uprising of 20,000 (1909)," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/uprising-of-20000-1909>.

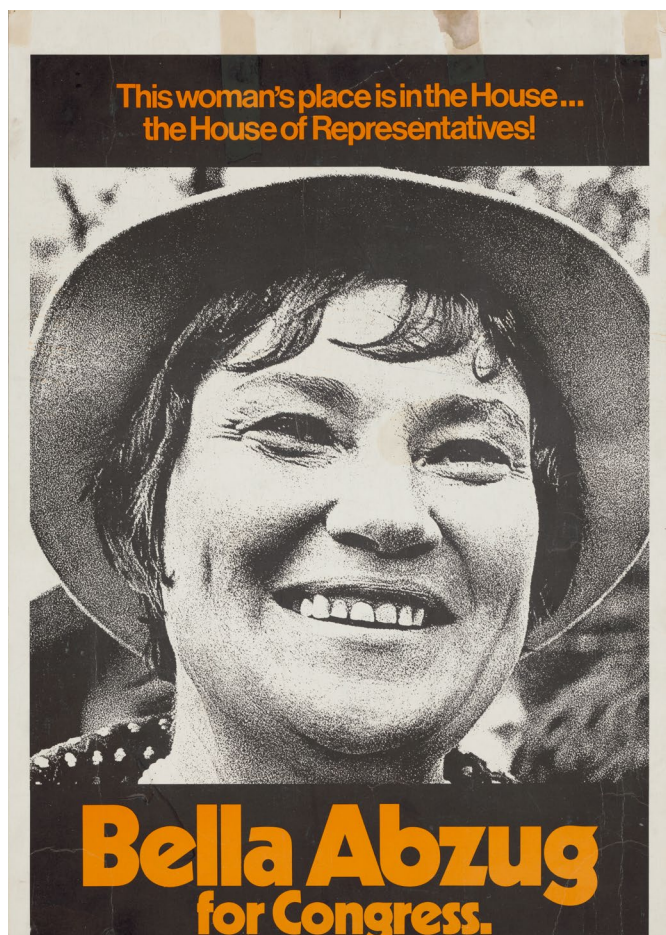
Additionally, Jewish women played a major role in the movement for women's suffrage. Maud Nathan, a wealthy **Orthodox** Jewish woman from a prominent New York family, became one of the suffrage movement's most significant advocates. After passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, Susan Brandeis, the daughter of Supreme Court Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis, became the first woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court (*Johnson v. New York and New Jersey*, 1925).

During the 1930s and 1940s, Jewish women joined women's groups in record numbers. Involved in campaigns against immigration restriction, rescuing refugees from Nazism, and the creation of a Jewish homeland, they strengthened Jewish communities throughout the world. In 1945, Bess Myerson became the first Jewish woman to be crowned Miss America. She served as a spokesperson for and director of the Anti-Defamation League. Later, she helped found the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York.

Jewish women continued their activism in the 1950s and beyond. They were deeply involved in campaigns for civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and peace, providing them with organizational skills that were useful in developing the feminist movement. In 1961, Bella Abzug of New York co-founded Women Strike for Peace, which campaigned for a ban on nuclear testing and an end to the Vietnam War. Abzug was elected to Congress in 1971, where she had a distinguished career as a lawmaker. She went on to serve as Chairwoman of President Jimmy Carter's National Women's Advisory Council, chaired the first National Conference on Women in Houston in 1977, and co-founded the Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO).



Badge (paper, plastic, metal, round, paper) produced by the Jewish League for Woman Suffrage (JLWS), c.1912–1918. Jewish Women's Archive (TWL.2004.613).



Campaign poster for Bella Abzug. c.1971–1976. Library of Congress (2016648584).

The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s was strongly shaped by Jewish leaders. Betty Friedan, a Jewish journalist and author from Peoria, Illinois, helped launch the movement with her bestselling book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which challenged the myth of women's domestic fulfillment. She also organized the Women's Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970—the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment—where over 50,000 women marched for equal rights. In 1971, Friedan co-founded the Women's Political Caucus with Congresswoman Bella Abzug and journalist Gloria Steinem, also Jewish.

Jewish activists played key roles in pioneering feminist organizations of this same time period. The Chicago Women's Liberation Group, recognized as the first women's liberation group in the U.S., was founded by four Jewish women: Heather Booth, Amy Kesselman, Vivian Rothstein, and Naomi Weisstein.⁵ Other Jewish leaders, including Shulamith Firestone, Alix Kates Shulman, Susan Brownmiller, Ellen Willis, and Robin Morgan, were instrumental in collectives like Redstockings and New York Radical Feminists. Morgan later became a contributing editor of *Ms.* magazine alongside Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Gloria Steinem when it was founded in 1972.

FEMINISM AND THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF JEWISH WOMEN

Inspired by secular feminism's attacks against male superiority, other Jewish women recognized themselves explicitly as Jews and carried on the fight against sexism within Jewish religion and community life. In 1971, a dozen women in New York City, including Martha Acklesberg, Arlene Agus, and Paula Hyman, founded Ezrat Nashim to fight patriarchy within Jewish religion. In March 1972, the group invaded the **Conservative** movement's Rabbinical Assembly in Kiamasha, New York, demanding more equitable treatment of women within synagogues.⁶

Women's liberation also influenced figures in Jewish religious leadership, such as feminist theologian Judith Plaskow, rabbis Laura Geller and Rebecca Alpert, and Orthodox feminist leader, Blu Greenberg. Greenberg organized the First and Second International Conferences on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1997 and 1998 and founded the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997.⁷

The Jewish feminist magazine, *Lilith*, launched in 1976 to explore the changing roles and opportunities of Jewish women. *B'not Esh* ("daughters of fire" in **Hebrew**), a Jewish feminist spirituality collective, was founded in 1981. In 1990, feminist theologian Judith Plaskow published her influential book, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*.

Leaders in these efforts developed new rituals, liturgy, and midrash (a Hebrew term that refers to the textual interpretation of religious texts) focused on women's experiences. In 1976, several prominent New York Jewish feminists, including Esther Broner, Phyllis Chesler, Gloria Steinem, and Letty Cottin Pogrebin, organized a Jewish women's **seder** that became a model for women's seders throughout the country.

⁵ To learn more about the Chicago Women's Liberation Union and its ongoing curriculum and archive initiatives, visit cwlherstory.org/.

⁶ For more information about this historical event, access "Episode 72: Ezrat Nashim Confronts the Rabbis" from the podcast *Can We Talk? The JWA Podcast*, available at: jwa.org/podcasts/canwetalk/episode-72-ezrat-nashim-confronts-rabbis.

⁷ Moira Ran Ben Hai, "Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jewish-orthodox-feminist-alliance.

Women constitute a major component of the modern Jewish clergy and have innovated Jewish prayers and programs based on women's experiences and perspectives. On March 18, 1922, 12-year-old Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, the daughter of the founder of **Reconstructionist Judaism**, became the first American girl to celebrate her **bat mitzvah**. In 1972, the **Reform** movement ordained Sally Priesand as its first woman rabbi. Two years later, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso became the Reconstructionist movement's first woman rabbi. The Conservative movement ordained Amy Eilberg as its first female rabbi in 1985. Sara Hurwitz became the first Orthodox woman rabbi in 2009 with the titles *maharat* or *rabba*.

MODERN JEWISH FEMINISM

Entirely new organizations have focused on gathering stories of Jewish women, including more diverse representation, and created new sources of information and connection, which are rich sources for historical research and analysis in the present day. The Jewish Women's Archive (JWA), founded in 1995, pioneered the use of digital archives in collecting material about Jewish women and developed innovative oral history projects and public programs. The creation of this archive is, in itself, an example of activism in action.⁸

Jewish women's activism in and around the new millennium took multiple forms. Jewish feminists served as leaders in the anti-violence movement, immigration reform, the promotion of human rights, environmental justice, and labor activism, and in campaigns against poverty and racial injustice. Coalitions of Jewish women of color emerged as prominent voices of Jewish feminism.

Issues of racism, sexism, antisemitism, and anti-**Zionism** continue to be the topics of important conversations being held across diverse communities, both within the Jewish world and working in cooperation with those outside of it. These conversations have enabled Jewish women to increasingly bring their voices to bear within larger feminist movements.

⁸ Access the Jewish Women's Archive at jwa.org/.