

SISTERHOOD AND THE MODERN WOMAN

Transforming Women's Programming In the Reform Temple

Case Study: Temple Emanuel of Tempe

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Nanci B. Wilharber
Temple Emanuel of Tempe
Tempe Arizona
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Then drew near the daughters of Zelophehad: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. And they stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes and all the congregation, at the door of the tent of meeting, saying: "Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not among the company of them that gathered themselves together against Adonai in the company of Korah, but he died in his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he had no son? Give unto us a possession among the brethren of our father."

And Adonai spoke unto Moses saying, "The daughter of Zelophehad 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."¹

Sisterhood: the thought conjures up images of bespectacled, gray-haired bubbies in the Temple kitchen baking rugelach & brewing coffee for an Oneg Shabbat; stocking the shelves of the Gift Shop for the annual Chanukah sale; preparing charoset for the congregational Passover Seder; advocating for the rights of women and children, just like the daughters of Zelophehad in the Torah. Are these the images of the women in the synagogue of 2006 and beyond?

For Temple Executive Directors, Temple staff, and leaders to create a vision for the future of Sisterhood and women's programming in the Temple, it is crucial that one first understand the history of Jewish women's roles in the community and in the synagogue, as well as the changing dynamics of women's roles at home and in the Temple. One must also note that Sisterhood's metamorphosis may be reflective of the transformation of the entire Reform Jewish community- its nature is evolutionary, changing and advancing with the face of Reform Judaism. Its nature must also be welcoming to all, regardless of one's background and the degree to which one practices Judaism.

As time advances, so must Sisterhood and the other Temple subcultures. Yet, as swiftly as time moves, so do the trends. The nuances of these dynamics are so new to Reform Judaism that the trends have not been fully defined. Some women's organizations appear to not want to face the fact that they are losing ground and do not publish the statistics that reflect the decline; yet the waning exists and cannot be denied. It is an issue that must be addressed in order that Executive Directors and Temple leaders may create new strategies for designing and executing programs which enhance Jewish life.

¹ Torah. Numbers, Chapter 27: 1-4; 6-7.

The experience of Jewish women in North America began in 1654. Initially, twenty-three Jewish men and women arrived in New Amsterdam (now New York.) Subsequently, the first Jew to arrive in Canada (then known as New France) in 1738 was Esther Brandeau. She was disguised as a man in order to be accepted into the country, but once her secret was known, she was deported back to France.² This occurred because it was widely recognized, as early as the 18th century, that Jewish men had many liberties including the freedom to study, pray, and work outside the home, while Jewish women had few of those freedoms. Women were expected to stay at home, raise children, and manage the household and the finances. Because of the responsibilities of caring for the home and children, women were excused from time-related mitzvot, such as praying at certain times of the day. Instead, women passed on the traditions of Judaism to the children by physically demonstrating the practices of Shabbat and the holidays, while men were motivated to become intellectuals of the Torah and its teachings. "The ideal woman, commanding as little of the traditional learning as is compatible with reading of her prayers, still contributes to fulfilling the mitzvah of learning"³ by creating an atmosphere in which men may study with complete concentration. This was the widely held notion of the role of Jewish women in the Eastern European shtetl of the 1800s and was carried forth as this population later migrated to America.

For American Jewish women, inspired to offer hospitality to these new immigrants and develop Jewish society through their charitable missions, the decade of 1809-1819 was groundbreaking in its intensity. Three Jewish institutions were amongst those established with the mitzvah of tzedakah as their foundations. In 1809, the Mordecai Female Academy was opened in Warrenton, North Carolina as the first nonsectarian school created and led by American Jews. Ten years later, Rebecca Gratz founded the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in Philadelphia. The Society provided food, fuel, and clothing to needy Jewish people. This was the first American Jewish charity that was not synagogue-based. In 1838 Rebecca Gratz took yet another major step and founded the Hebrew Sunday School Society for the training of Jewish female educators.

Taking a different turn, in 1887, Gustav Gottheil, the rabbi of Temple Emau-El in New York City, founded the first Sisterhood of Personal Service in his synagogue to serve in a societal capacity, helping the poor and disenfranchised.⁴ The significance of these Sisterhood of Personal Service groups was that they were composed of all women leaders, whereby the aforementioned benevolent societies had been led by men. Additionally, the former simply asked for financial aid to execute the strategy of the group; the latter asked for active participation by members.

Although the growth of Sisterhoods of Personal Service was strong, in the 1920s, women's organizations continued to spin off, and different auxiliaries, what are known as simply "Sisterhoods" today, were established to support Temples and clergy. Felicia Herman, in her article "From Priestess to Hostess" explains that initially the Sisterhoods of Personal Service focused on the "home," meaning society at large; conversely, the newly-created synagogue auxiliaries focused on the Temple as the "home." She penned, "In this

² www.jwa.org. "Jewish Women's Archive: Timeline 1654 to Present."

³ Priesand, Sally, *Judaism and the New Woman* (New York: Behrman House Publisher, 1975) p. 70.

⁴ Herman, Felicia. "From Priestess to Hostess," *Women and American Judaism*. (London: Brandeis University Press, 2001) p. 152.

familial relationship, the Sisterhood assumed responsibility for many of the duties considered incumbent upon homemakers...fostering a warm, familial Jewish environment in the synagogue that would encourage religious affiliation."⁵

In parallel to the development of Sisterhoods within Temples, other Jewish women's organizations continued to flourish outside of Temple structure. In 1893, Hannah Solomon established another one of the forerunners of national women's groups: the National Council of Jewish Women.⁶ Initially, this organization coordinated settlement efforts on behalf of the mass of new immigrants to the United States, and later branched out into the areas of social legislation and anti-Semitism. NCJW also created a forum for women to learn both Jewish text and general studies outside of the home, thus allowing women to apply their newly gained knowledge to advocating and strengthening the influence of Jewish women in society. What makes National Council of Jewish Women so significant is that the organization went beyond the walls of the synagogue, and even crossed the lines of sects of Judaism. All Jewish women were invited to participate, and the organization was a vehicle by which women could "acculturate without losing ethnic identity or challenging the limited definitions of gender roles dominant in the United States."⁷

Nineteen years later, in 1912, another powerful women's organization was founded. Hadassah was organized by Henrietta Szold as a Zionist organization in the United States. Today, Hadassah continues to grow and is very instrumental in impacting Jewish life in America and Israel. Hadassah is "committed to the centrality of Israel based on the renaissance of the Jewish people in its historic homeland. Hadassah promotes the unity of the Jewish people. In Israel, Hadassah initiates and supports pace-setting health care, education and youth institutions, and land development to meet the country's changing needs. In the United States, Hadassah enhances the quality of American and Jewish life through its education and Zionist youth programs, promotes health awareness, and provides personal enrichment and growth for its members." Presently, there are more than 300,000 Hadassah members in 1200 chapters.⁸ Similar to the National Council for Jewish Women, belonging to a certain sect of Judaism is not a factor; all Jewish women are invited to become Hadassah members.

Although women practicing Reform Judaism were welcomed to become members of NCJW or Hadassah, some still chose to associate within their own Temples. The most prevalent women's group affecting Reform Jews was formed in 1913: the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the predecessor of Women of Reform Judaism (the name was changed in 1993.) WRJ, which falls under the auspices of the Union for Reform Judaism, was established during an era known for the struggle for women's rights. It has grown and evolved exponentially in less than 100 years. To date, Women of Reform Judaism has an enrollment of greater than 75,000 women in over 500 Temple Sisterhoods throughout the US, Canada, and 12 other countries across the globe.⁹

WRJ, when it was born as NFTS in the early 1900s, supported the war efforts of both World Wars I and II, advocated for the rights of those resettling in Palestine after the war,

⁵ *ibid*, p. 165.

⁶ www.jwa.org. "Jewish Women's Archive: Timeline 1654 to Present."

⁷ Rogow, Faith, *Gone to Another Meeting: National Council of Jewish Women 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993) pgs. 2-3.

⁸ www.hadassah.org.

⁹ www.wrj.org. "WRJ Story,"

and worked for the formation of the United Nations.¹⁰ As decades passed, marking drastic and profound changes in society, a most important time for WRJ, and women in the Reform movement as a whole, was the decade of the 1970s with its struggle for societal and religious parity between the sexes. Especially influential to Women of Reform Judaism was the ordination of the first woman rabbi in any sect, a Reform Jewish rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972.

At the present time, however, WRJ is recognized for its Outreach efforts, for its support of Israel's social and educational issues, and for the push for more Reform vision in Israel.¹¹ Most importantly, regarding Temple sisterhoods, WRJ has developed resources and tools for Temples to utilize to better train female leaders as well as to enhance Sisterhood programming. Women's programming in synagogues is constantly evolving and changing with the time, and WRJ monitors those changes and communicates the trends to the Sisterhoods of its membership.

WRJ members were, and remain, very much influenced by societal, political, and sociological trends. WRJ experienced a boom through the 1970s and 1980s based on the excitement of Reform Jewish women being installed as rabbis. Women were enthusiastic about being included in both religious life and the synagogue at degrees never before recognized. At the same time, however, it was reported that National Council of Jewish Women was losing members due to the fact that women were now active in the workforce and had less time and inclination for participation in a non-synagogal social group. WRJ was not immune to the same political climate that clearly affected NCJW's membership; it simply occurred at a time later than NCJW. Shelley Lindauer, Executive Director of the Women of Reform Judaism, noted that for about 10 years from 1992-2002, women drifted away from Temple Sisterhoods for reasons that were personal, familial, and professional. The membership in WRJ declined during those years, as had NCJW in the 1980s, but Ms. Lindauer stated that she has noticed resurgence in interest over the past couple of years. Ms. Lindauer claimed, "There is something unique, warm, and special about a women's group"¹² and therefore, there seems to always be a need for a female bonding mechanism in a Reform Temple.

Ms. Lindauer stated that Reform Jewish women are interested in coming together for one or more purposes: spirituality, social justice, socializing, or advocacy. Unlike the women of past generations, the women of today are more focused on the spiritual aspects of being together and seek a deeper connection to G-d through Sisterhood.¹³ Rabbi Richard F. Address, Director of the URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns, echoed a similar sentiment about people of both genders in his article, "Evolution and Transformation in Temple Membership." He wrote about Temple membership in general, "The need for a spiritual community that values, enhances, and affirms these relationships- regardless of the level of Jewish knowledge of the member- is never more necessary than in today's person-centered society...we need connections, we seek community, we crave relationships, and we will seek them out."¹⁴

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Lindauer, Shelley, Women of Reform Judaism Executive Director. Telephone interview. April 4, 2005, 12:10PM.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Address, Richard F. "Evolution and Transformation in Temple Membership," *NATA Journal*, Winter 2005, p. 6.

Sisterhood may well be considered a microcosm of the Temple in its communal, yet ever-changing nature. Regarding Sisterhood's transitory character in specific, Ms. Lindauer explained that to create programming that is appealing to members and will raise them to that higher plane, one cannot make assumptions about what women want from Sisterhood;¹⁵ one must seek answers from those involved, or equally not involved, to steer the direction of Sisterhood. It is obvious that no two Sisterhoods have the same characteristics or identical goals and missions that define the group. But, overall, most Sisterhoods share some of the same responsibilities: creating a caring community, advising the youth, fundraising, and supervising the kitchen, to name a few. Yet, even those seemingly constant responsibilities are evolving as women and their desires change with the times.

Because of present-day egalitarianism, the freedom of women to participate in all aspects of Temple life and governance, and the increasing number of Jews-by-Choice in the Reform movement, there are those women who do not want to spend their time in the kitchen at Temple, for example, as a Sisterhood-sanctioned program. Modern women are shying away from these traditional activities; they are not making the same choices that their mothers made; in reality, some do not even have Jewish mothers. Gone are the days when women wanted to be Board members of Sisterhood because it provided them with a title; today's women have jobs and titles in their daily lives. Many have already assumed leadership roles within the Temple governance. Women do not want to attend more meetings or have more obligations, adding to an already jam-packed schedule. Instead, women want to bring value to themselves and their congregations in other significant ways. They seek avenues for personal learning, growth, fulfillment, and a deeper connection to G-d. The modern women want to participate in "tikkun olam;" they want something else; something more. As stated by Blu Greenberg in her article, "Judaism and Feminism" in the book The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives, "As Jews, we affirm that there is value and validity in serving and giving to others- in volunteer action and professional work, in being good family members and friends, in doing good works."¹⁶ Sisterhood has always prided itself on being a conduit for women to perform mitzvot for their community and the larger population. But, in today's modern society, performing mitzvot may be more individualized according to the woman's lifestyle, and this is one example of how changing times can affect Sisterhood's ability to coordinate and achieve its goals.

The transition of Sisterhood is undeniable. In the July 16, 2004 issue of The Forward newspaper, an insightful article explaining the decline of Sisterhoods in these modern times was published. It was titled, "Doing it for Themselves: Synagogue Sisterhoods Come Into the Future."¹⁷ Written by Rukhl Schaechter, this article speaks of the demise of Sisterhoods, placing the blame on the fact that young women do not feel the obligation to continue the tradition of serving the synagogue under the auspices of Sisterhood. In this article, Roslyn Citronowicz, a former Sisterhood president in Florida, laments the fact that today's young mothers are too busy to participate in Sisterhood activities. Many are

¹⁵ Lindauer, Shelley, Women of Reform Judaism Executive Director. Telephone interview. April 4, 2005, 12:10PM.

¹⁶ Greenberg, Blu. "Judaism and Feminism," *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p.189.

¹⁷ Schaechter, Rukhl. "Doing it for Themselves: Synagogue Sisterhoods Come Into the Future," *The Forward*, July 16, 2004.

employed, and others devote time to their children in their classrooms. A growing number of these children attend Jewish schools,¹⁸ which are becoming more and more commonplace. These families are becoming acquainted with other Jewish families at school, and making connections via the classroom participation enables these young women to accomplish the goal of creating a Jewish community on their own terms.

As observed in the aforementioned article, young women of today, with their many familial and professional obligations, are not attracted to the subculture of Sisterhood. The article states that in the first half of the 20th century, most women were homemakers, and Sisterhood offered a way out of the daily monotony of cooking, cleaning, and child-care chores. Additionally, it was stated in this article, "Women relished the chance to work together for a common goal, and not incidentally, to cultivate lasting friendships." Repeating what has been stated previously, being a part of Sisterhood during these decades, "provided talented women an opportunity to be elected to president, treasurer, and other esteemed positions, in a time when society as a whole (including the synagogue itself) only considered men for those positions."¹⁹ The article continues to cite the statistics that by 1990, more than 50% of Jewish women have a college degree, compared with only 17% of other Caucasian women in America. Also, 73% of married women and 83% of divorced women have full- or part-time jobs. Consequently, the statistics dictate that women have less time to devote to leisure activities than in the past and are therefore being more selective in how they spend this precious time. Also factored into this equation is the inescapable fact that women are having children later in their lives. Thirty years ago, women in their 30s and 40s were the prime audience for Sisterhood activities, since usually their children were already independent: in their teens and young 20s.²⁰ That is not the situation in modern times- often today women in their 30s and 40s are raising infants and toddlers. The modern evolution of women's lifestyles clearly impact the Temple and its demographics.

Rabbi Richard Address' comments regarding Temple membership support this observation, stating that generally people spend less time as synagogue members. "Our people join our congregation at a later age and leave at an earlier age... We are marrying later and delaying having children."²¹ Whereas it was traditional for women to want to follow in the footsteps of their matriarchs and climb the ladder of Sisterhood, modern women are not necessarily involved in Temple life during their 20s and 30s, so if they eventually join Sisterhood, they often become active after the chain of succession has been established. On the other end of the spectrum, it is common for "Empty Nesters" or parents whose children are post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah to feel disengaged from Temple and to terminate membership at an earlier age, feeling no obligation to continue Temple membership. It appears as though fewer active female congregants actually remain Temple members long enough to experience the Sisterhood progression.

In a conversation with Susu Bolton, an active member of Beth Sholom Sisterhood in Santa Ana, California, this trend and lack of progression became very clear. Susu has been a member of many Temples, and has served in a number of capacities in various

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Address, Richard F. "Evolution and Transformation in Temple Membership," *NATA Journal*, Winter 2005, p. 7.

Sisterhoods. She has even served on the regional board for the WRJ. Susu spoke very enthusiastically about her Temple's sisterhood; narrating the plethora of activities that they offer: a fashion show, a Mah Jongg tournament, luncheons, and book reviews and discussions. When asked the ages of the members, Susu mentioned that the age at which most women join Sisterhood at her Temple is 45, but most of the Sisterhood participants are in their 60s and 70s. Susu explained that when her daughter, presently a member of Temple Emanuel of Tempe, lived in California, she had become active in planning programs with Susu in Santa Ana. This coordinated effort of creating activities for a wide range of ages appealed to many women and generated a lot of excitement with younger women, but when her daughter transferred to the Phoenix area, the majority of the younger women no longer attended Sisterhood events.²² Susu did not mention specific means used to attract or retain these younger women after her daughter's departure; she simply noted that at the recent Mah Jongg tournament, there were a number of younger ladies in attendance, and that had surprised her. Susu's reaction is one that requires analysis: if these young women are the future of women's programming in the Temple, without their engagement, Sisterhood may cease to exist once the core group is older, fragile, and simply unable to attend any longer.

In an attempt to lure and keep young women as members, the newest trend in synagogue participation is independent women's programming, meaning, not always developed and executed under the auspices of Sisterhood. These programs create new and exciting outlets for those who at one time might have been Sisterhood members. Women's Book Club, Rosh Chodesh Group, and Women's Seder are activities that may have once fallen under the umbrella of Sisterhood. Now these same activities might be committee- or independently-driven and developed with a minimum number of meetings and duties. Usually there are not titles for committee members; and other than those who choose to, women are not obligated to participate in planning or implementing; they can simply show up and be a part of the event without any previous commitment. The freedom to pick and choose one's level of participation is very attractive to the women of today.

Some Temples find success by having both a Sisterhood and independent programming, each serving a different need for the women of the Temple. Congregation Emanuel in Denver (2000 member units) is one such Temple that has a strong Sisterhood and a separate Rosh Chodesh group. Yet, Janet Bronitsky, Executive Administrator of Congregation Emanuel observed that, "Synagogue 2000 felt affinity groups were the way to go...individuals are drawn to individuals and make groupings that way," and removing the "...traditional kitchen roles of women" has resulted in "...the loss of many Sisterhoods."²³ Similarly, Administrator Karen Grimm of Temple Har Zion in Toronto, Canada (600 members units) wrote that although her Temple's sisterhood is strong, it is not attracting young members. She questions what will happen in 5 or 10 years.²⁴ Elaine Tenenbaum, Executive Director of Temple Israel in Columbus, Ohio (775 member units) voices other thoughts. "The challenge to Sisterhood," she writes, "is to adapt to the changing needs of women." Making adjustments and exchanging ideas, she feels, is why

²² Bolton, Sue. Telephone Interview. June 22, 2005, 3PM.

²³ Bronitsky, Janet. *National Association of Temple Administrator NATA Schmooze discussion site*. Feb 17, 2005.

²⁴ Grimm, Karen. *National Association of Temple Administrator NATA Schmooze discussion site*. Feb 18, 2005.

Temple Israel's Sisterhood remains a strong and vital component of Temple community.²⁵ Yet many Sisterhoods do not follow this philosophy and are unable to sustain themselves.

At Temple Emanuel of Tempe, Arizona (550 member units), Sisterhood had been inactive; attendance at meetings and programs declined steadily over about ten years, and finally in April 2004, the group disbanded. There were mixed emotions from a number of charter members who felt that they had worked very hard for almost 30 years to create the group and then see it fail. One of the co-presidents stated her opinion in an article for the Temple Emanuel of Tempe monthly newsletter, "Times have changed...our Temple is doing an excellent job of attempting to meet the needs of all from toddlers to seniors...we are grateful for those women who have supported us over the years, but would urge taking advantage of the many opportunities to participate in Temple life."²⁶

Yet another charter member of Temple Emanuel's Sisterhood wrote her own Letter to the Editor and bemoaned the fact that, "It is very discouraging when we let traditions die in these modern times." Yet, she concedes, "Yes, I agree that times change and we must change with the times."²⁷ The irony of this letter is that the composer thereof had not attended a Sisterhood meeting at Temple Emanuel of Tempe in over a year. It is unfortunate that the writer of the letter, also a past president, was so pained by Sisterhood's demise: she had made no effort to engage herself in recent years. However, she did acknowledge that times do change, and Sisterhood must be flexible to be able to maintain its usefulness or it will, in fact, die.

Meryl Briscoe, another charter member of Temple Emanuel of Tempe and a past president of Sisterhood, constructively presented her thoughts regarding the breakdown of Temple Emanuel's Sisterhood. Meryl explained that there used to be a Sisterhood "rule" that each woman in Sisterhood helped with three Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations, and then when it was time for one's own personal simcha, other women would step in and do the work so that the hosting family could enjoy the day. In 1993, however, a trio of Sisterhood members banded together and formed a business that could be hired for set-up and clean-up for simcha celebrations. Meryl surmised that this was a pivotal time for Sisterhood because the business "took away the reason for Sisterhood women to work together, chit-chat, and get acquainted."²⁸ Making another fascinating observation, Meryl also pondered whether or not the success of Temple Emanuel's Chavurah program impacted Sisterhood since the Chavurot provided yet another avenue for people to meet and socialize. Chavurah groupings tend to include the entire family unit, so it allows men and women to enjoy social activities together, not sidelining one partner or the other, or even their children. Evidently, some women favor the Chavurah-style of social intervention instead of the typical "hen parties" of Sisterhood.

Meryl actively participates in all of the independent women's programming presently offered at Temple Emanuel. Additionally, Meryl is presently the Chairperson of Outreach on the Board of Trustees, and therefore is clearly aware of the impact that the Jews-by-Choice (over 50 per year) are having at the Temple, and how this increasing population affects programming as well.

²⁵ Tenenbaum, Elaine. *National Association of Temple Administrator NATA Schmooze discussion site*. Feb 17, 2005.

²⁶ Allen, Billie Sue. "Letter to the Editor," *Temple Emanuel Newsletter*, March 10, 2004.

²⁷ Ginsburg, Laurel. "Letter to Editor," *Temple Emanuel Newsletter* (letter not printed), July 7, 2004.

²⁸ Briscoe, Meryl. Personal Interview. June 21, 2005, 2PM.

In an interview Susan Schanerman, Director of Education and Cantorial Soloist at Temple Emanuel of Tempe, a positive and future-focused perspective about the evolution of women's programming at Temple Emanuel came to light. Susan has been instrumental in changing the face of women's programming after experiencing her own frustration, and that of other women, in the congregation. Susan was a member of Sisterhood for at least five years; on the Board as Treasurer for two of those years, and acted as the liaison to the Religious School Board for another two years. When asked what prompted her to create new avenues of programming for women, Susan responded, "I felt that the women who were running the Sisterhood had lost sight of a vision for all women. Their programs weren't appealing to many women in the congregation. They were cliquish and close-minded to new program ideas." When asked if she had consulted the Sisterhood members when inventing new programming opportunities, Susan noted, "When we first started the original Rosh Chodesh program, I approached the (Sisterhood) President to ask Sisterhood. She was not interested in being involved. I didn't ask them again."²⁹ That lack of support from the Sisterhood leadership, however, did not deter women from attending the newly introduced programs. Susan mentioned that some inactive Sisterhood members, as well as former members, attended and enjoyed the new programs that she had designed.

Susan has made substantial strides in her efforts and her committees' efforts to develop programs that are keeping Temple Emanuel's women engaged and united. The annual Women's Seder that began as a new program in 2002 has grown from 26 women in attendance to 70 in only four years. The Jewish Women's Book Club that began in 2003 has met every month since (except during the summer), and attendance ranges from 5-20 women each month. The Rosh Chodesh group that began in June 2004, itself revived from an earlier form, attracts 15-30 women for the activities that are held every other month.³⁰ The activities range from a discussion of "Inspirational Women in Our Lives" to a mock-mikvah experience in a member's swimming pool.

Another successful independent program has recently been added to the Temple Emanuel list: "Yarn Yentas." This affinity group began in early 2005. Women from their 20s to 90s give knitting instructions to teens known as the "Yarn Yenteles," and together they knit assorted items including tallitot. The group meets on Sunday, an hour before Religious School is dismissed, when many mothers are already at Temple to pick up their children. A perfect, non-committal way to participate in programming without being inconvenienced! The camaraderie is very strong, and the devotion to mitzvot is just as unwavering. The group members knitted and donated almost 50 items that were sold at a recent fundraiser which raised close to \$10,000 for a Temple family whose finances have been devastated by the father's terminal illness.

So it has been proven that for Temple Emanuel, the demise of Sisterhood in 2004 was not necessarily negative, for other programming replaced it. The new programs are more stimulating and more appealing to the women who were not interested in meetings, titles, and cliquish attitudes that had dominated Sisterhood of the past. The fundraising aspect of Sisterhood, which was so heavily relied upon, has become more focused. A group of

²⁹ Schanerman, Susan. Personal Interview. May 15, 2005, 1PM.

³⁰ *ibid.*

volunteers, both men and women, manage the Judaica Shop, and raise almost \$15,000 per year. This group now reports to the Board of Trustees.

Does Temple Emanuel miss Sisterhood on other levels? Although many women find great satisfaction in alternative women's programming, new members are often puzzled by the lack of a true Sisterhood. Some women still yearn for the organization of their mothers and bubbes. There have been undercurrents of discussion that Sisterhood will be revived in the future, probably in 2006. It will be quite interesting to see if the new Sisterhood will be successful, or if Temple Emanuel should live by the adage, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it."

Similar to Temple Emanuel of Tempe, other synagogues have also experienced the disbandment of Sisterhood. Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco (1850 member units) no longer has a Sisterhood but does have a Rosh Chodesh group that meets monthly. Because attendance is not consistent, they are considering having programs quarterly, according to Terry Kraus, Director of Membership Services.³¹

Sheila Feldman, Executive Director of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland, echoes similar sentiments. This temple does not have a Brotherhood or Sisterhood, but has an active Rosh Chodesh group. The monthly programs are volunteer-driven and are done without clergy intervention, even though the program often includes text study. For the past two years, Adat Shalom has also sponsored a women's Seder that is "extremely successful." Ms. Feldman reports that approximately 120 members attend with daughters, mothers, and friends.³² She also noted that the Temple's young female cantor initiated this popular program.

A young female cantor likewise took the lead at Temple Chai in Phoenix, Arizona (850 families.) Ilene Singer, Executive Director, explained that Cantor Sharona Feller created Bat Chai, a women's group. Bat Chai is the successor of Temple Chai's Sisterhood that disbanded due to lack of interest. Ilene explained that one of the most innovative and successful events sponsored by Bat Chai is the annual weekend-long Women's Retreat. The cost is significant: \$200 per person, but there is always a waiting list to be a part of the exciting program. Ilene explained that it is this spiritual-based, not kitchen-based, women's programming that is leading the women of the congregation into the future. Not surprisingly, Ilene experienced a similar trend when she was Executive Director of Temple Emanuel (632 member units) in Pittsburgh. Sisterhood had lost favor with young females, and instead, independent programming was developed.³³ After experiencing the demise of Sisterhood once, Ilene understood how important it was for the congregation to be supportive of Cantor Feller and her creation of Bat Chai.

As has been intimated, it appears that young women, like Susu Bolton's daughter Julie, Susan Schanerman, and Sharona Feller, are at the forefront of this transition from Sisterhood to independent women's programming. It must be recognized that the women of 2006 face different challenges than the older generations have, and to be inclusive of these younger women, Sisterhoods need to have insight as well as foresight. Modern young women in their 20s to 40s, even if they would like to participate in Sisterhood, have many needs which must first be addressed, but are often ignored by the traditional Sisterhood organization.

³¹ Kraus, Terry. *National Association of Temple Administrators Schmooze line*. February 16, 2005.

³² Feldman, Sheila. *National Association of Temple Administrators Schmooze line*. February 16, 2005.

³³ Singer, Ilene. Personal Interview. June 28, 2005, 11:45AM.

Non-synagogal Jewish women's groups, such as NCJW and Hadassah, are stepping up to the plate and addressing the issues and needs of modern women. Many of these needs are affected by both children's and parents' overwhelming schedules and also by childcare. Non-synagogal groups appear more amenable to accommodating women and their children's needs. Often times a Hadassah chapter will offer events for mothers and their children, but it is very uncommon for Sisterhood to do likewise. Therefore, it can be surmised that this could potentially be another reason why the non-synagogal groups and independent programming continue to grow while Sisterhoods seemingly lose ground.

Yet another reason why non-synagogal Jewish women's groups or independent programming is booming in comparison to Sisterhood is due to the increase in unaffiliated Jewish people, both single and families. The former do not always feel welcomed in a Temple, especially because singles programming is very limited, if it exists at all. For the latter, with synagogue dues climbing each year, it might be restrictive for a family to join a Temple even with generous dues relief. Therefore, with no Temple affiliation seeming feasible to them, women especially yearn for alternative means for acquiring female, Jewish friends. Non-synagogal groups have outstanding marketing tools to advertise to these women and to draw them in with the idea of "connection." It is rare for a Temple Sisterhood to advertise in publications other than their own newsletter; thus, outsiders are often times not even aware of what programs the Sisterhood offers.

Marketing to the unaffiliated and drawing them in with devotion to a cause (domestic violence, health care, advocacy for children, for example) creates following and thereby growth for non-synagogal groups. It is a fact that these associations' membership costs, and unfortunately the benefits, are significantly less than Temple affiliation. But, it is still something Jewish. The trend used to be that the majority of women who affiliated with a Temple also joined Jewish women's organizations outside of the Temple. Now it may be that the opposite is significant; women's organizations have become, for some women, the only Jewish connection, but fill a tremendous void for a Jewish woman. This is especially true for those who have a non-Jewish spouse: the woman has the opportunity to socialize with Jewish friends without the spouse having to be involved, obviously, since these are single-sex organizations. Due to the fact that the groups are not synagogue-based, these associations appear less intimidating to the non-Jewish husbands. The activities involve other Jews, but are typically not religious in nature, and the non-Jewish spouses may be relieved by that revelation. As Tobin Belzer wrote in the introduction to Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives, "Young Jewish women are joining and creating "sisterhoods" in every corner of their lives. We are using our strength of spirit to transform our environments, our intimate relationships, and ourselves."³⁴

When asked for qualification and quantification of this theory that unaffiliated are seeking connections through non-synagogal groups instead of Temples, the WRJ, since it is a resource for Reform Temple Sisterhoods, claimed that its office did not have any data regarding unaffiliated Jewish women. This lack of data is of interest to this author because it sends up a red flag: is WRJ not tracking the information or have they chosen not to divulge it because it would make them sit up and take notice of the fact that Jewish people

³⁴ Belzer, Tobin and Pelc, Julie ed. *Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.) p. 9.

are not affiliating because Temples are not meeting their needs? Rabbi Eric Yoffie has made pleas to all of the Union for Reform Judaism congregations to investigate the phenomenon of unaffiliation and to work to bring these people into the communities; acknowledging these realities could be the first step to bringing Rabbi Yoffie's work to fruition.

As demonstrated in this thesis, it is concluded that Sisterhood remains an important subculture of most Temples. It has also been demonstrated, however, that young women are not attracted to the concept of Sisterhood as it has existed for over 100 years. Many Sisterhoods, like that of Beth Sholom in Santa Ana, are happy with the status quo which includes a group that is active, but programming that is not always original, with little outreach to young women. Their future is questionable, however. On the other hand, Temple Emanuel of Tempe and Temple Chai in Phoenix have chosen to proactively address the changing roles of women in the Temple and society, and thereby offer innovative, non-committal, independent programming that is appealing to women of all ages. Temple Emanuel even offers admission to non-members with the hope that unaffiliated women will attend and become enthusiastic about the other wonderful programs that Temple Emanuel has to offer its community. These programs continue to flourish and gain strength and support from the women of these Temples.

A simple analysis proves that Sisterhood clearly mirrors what Temple membership wants and needs as a whole: inviting, pleasant, exciting programming that attracts unaffiliated and both new and long-standing members. Each group within a Temple, Sisterhood notwithstanding, must act as a "membership committee" when it comes to retention of present members as well as outreach to the unaffiliated in the community. When Sisterhood is viewed as cliquish, outdated, and not open to new ideas, the group, and perhaps the Temple, will neither gain nor keep members.

Sisterhoods must be cognizant of the fact that with the progression of Reform Judaism in society, it is imperative that all Jews, especially those who do not have a high level of Jewish education and/or background, be included and made to feel as though they are contributing to the group, as well as the Jewish people as a whole. Stuart Eizenstat, representative of a Jewish think-tank group was recently quoted on Haaretz.com, "We need to lower the entry level of participation in Jewish organizational and religious life. We need to work with those who are less connected to the community, those who traditionally were not part of the community."³⁵ Independent women's programming is seemingly more apt to welcome less-connected Jews than a Sisterhood group that often does not permit non-Temple members to join and participate.

In the Torah, Zelophehad's daughters fought for what was their deserved birthright. Likewise, Reform Jewish women of today have the right to be provided with programming that promotes their growth and development as Jewish individuals, mothers, sisters, daughters, and members of their respective congregations. "Jewish women have taken one more turn in the process of their development," writes Blu Greenberg in [The Forward](#). "Jewish women in America have come full circle, from the Americanization of immigrants to a deepening of Jewish religious expression as native American Jews. While much remains

³⁵ www.haaretz.com, June 23, 2005.

to be done, women have taken up ritual and prayer, religious leadership and Torah study- to the extent that this is the most Jewishly well-educated generation of women in all of Jewish history. In the process, Jewish women have increased the ethical and spiritual quotient of Judaism itself."³⁶

It is a reality of today's culture that not every Jewish person has a grandmother who spoke Yiddish or baked hamantashen for the Sisterhood-sponsored Purim Carnival. That culture has changed, evolved, and actually no longer exists; to assume that is very close-minded, and one must be aware of this when creating women's, or any Temple, programming. Unless Sisterhood embraces this reality, it will continue to diminish its value for the future. Clearly it is up to each Sisterhood, or women's group, to define what works best for its group and its Temple and how its mission will be accomplished via programming that unites all women for the benefit of the synagogue, the community at large, and most significantly, themselves.

It is imperative that Temple Executive Directors, Temple staff, and leaders understand this trend and watch for indicators that mark this movement in his or her own congregation. The future of Reform Judaism is optimistic, and strong leadership for this new generation is crucial. Sisterhood, independent women's planning committees, and all subgroups of any Temple organization must be willing to face the challenges of the future with flexibility and enthusiasm about the opportunities for growth that abound. Judaism continues to evolve and flourish after 5766 years, so must its people and its programming. When comparing the similarities between the transition of Temple Chai's and Temple Emanuel's Sisterhoods to independent programming, Ilene Singer of Temple Chai of Phoenix observed that it is not an easy journey. She so wisely stated, "There is sometimes pain with change."³⁷ But more often than not, from the pain arises a phoenix that blesses the Temple community with an amazing and life-changing metamorphosis for those who choose to embrace it and grow with it.

Finally, Lisa Aiken wrote in her book, To Be a Jewish Woman, "No matter what form our activities take, we can create a true sisterhood by giving of ourselves to others, and thereby serving G-d in yet one more way."³⁸ Thus, be women young or old; Jewish by birth or Jewish by Choice; serving coffee or fighting for free trade coffee growers; creating community and performing mitzvot are the utmost goals that today's women strive to achieve. Sisterhood and independent women's programming have the ability to empower women to accomplish those objectives with success while affecting positive change for the entire Jewish community.

³⁶ Greenberg, Blu. "Women of Valor," *The Forward*, March 12, 2004.

³⁷ Singer, Ilene. Personal Interview, June 28, 2005, 11:45AM.

³⁸ Aiken, Lisa. *To Be a Jewish Woman*. (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Publishers, 1992.) p. 255.

THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WITH REGARD TO SISTERHOOD AND INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S PROGRAMMING

Ultimately, it is vital that the Executive Director have his/her thumb on the pulse of the congregation to determine if Sisterhood is an asset or liability to the Temple. The Executive Director must be able to answer the following, among other, questions:

- Is the number of members of Sisterhood dwindling?
- Is Sisterhood seen as cliquish, geriatric, and given to stale programming?
- Is Sisterhood serving the community or only its Board and/or members?
- Is there an increase in the number of Jews-by-Choice in the congregation?
- Is there an increase in the number of young families in the congregation, especially those with working mothers?
- Is there a need for alternative programming for women which is innovative and enriching and not kitchen-related?

An Executive Director acts in the best interest of the Temple. If one allows a group to continue because "that's the way it's always been done," then one is not doing a very good job as an Executive Director. One must sometimes make decisions which are not favorable at the onset, but with vision towards the future, a good Executive Director will facilitate changes that need to be made. To allow a group to decline and humiliate itself and the Temple does not do anyone any good. On NATA Schmooze, December 19, 2005, Mark Rubenstein emailed regarding Tuoro Synagogue (New Orleans) Brotherhood and Sisterhood, saying, "They are not smart enough to realize that they are dead yet."³⁹ It seems that the Executive Director may need to be the one to "pull the plug" when one knows that this is the case. Unfavorable as this may be, the Executive Director must have the strength and integrity to know that it is the right move to make.

Prior to disbanding Sisterhood, however, the Executive Director should work with the Sisterhood Board, members and Temple Program Director (if there is one) to create a strategy, including the creation of exciting new programs which can replace what Sisterhood offers. By implementing and executing innovative programs, one may find that the transition to independent women's programming is much smoother. One may even notice relief on the part of some of the Sisterhood members who are glad to be liberated from the Board position and the responsibilities which may not have even given much personal reward, but that they felt obligated to continue.

On the other hand, if Sisterhood is still "holding its own" or going strong while being a vital part of the community, then it is imperative that the Executive Director take an active role in helping the Sisterhood to flourish and grow while instilling pride in the organization. It may be that there needs to only be some "fresh" programming to reinvigorate the women of the Temple to become active. Some women may become resentful of the interference by a professional staff member, but hopefully will realize that the Executive Director is working for the benefit of the Temple as a whole and by having a feel for the direction of the congregation, will guide Sisterhood into a bright and optimistic future.

³⁹ Rubenstein, Mark. *National Association of Temple Administrator NATA Schmooze discussion site*. Dec 19, 2005.

Sisterhood's existence or demise is truly a matter of each Temple's culture. Some Temples get stuck in a time warp and do not understand a need to change. Others know that the congregation's demographics are always in flux, and that women's programming must be reflective of this new and evolving culture. Sisterhoods have performed wonderful mitzvot for their communities and congregations. For that, Temples must always be grateful and respectful; and also for that, Executive Directors must strive to do what is right and just on behalf of the entire congregation that they represent.

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