

The Women of Temple B'rith Kodesh

by Marjorie B. Searl



TBK members, founders of Baden St. Settlement House, Rochester NY

Like most religious congregations founded in America's first century, Temple B'rith Kodesh was organized by a group of men. And, like most religious congregations, TBK has slowly evolved in its acceptance of women into its leadership ranks. However, women have been the heart of the community from its earliest years through the present day. Both inside the synagogue and out, TBK women have fulfilled the mission of Reform Judaism, "*tikkun olam*, the repair of our world, to bring about a world of justice, wholeness, and compassion."^[1] While the congregation has only "lived" in Brighton since 1962, its women's history, rooted in the Gibbs Street years, was firmly transplanted.^[2]

In the years leading up to the establishment of a women's group at TBK, women participated in synagogue activities and Jewish life outside the home by teaching in the day school, singing in the choir, and some were members of the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society and the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, assisting poor women and orphans at Rochester City Hospital [AtC, pp. 26, 47, 81, 217]. However, women were not deemed eligible for positions of leadership in the synagogue. Things began to change, albeit slowly, with the 1871 arrival of liberal Reform Rabbi Max Landsberg [1845-1927] and his wife, Miriam [1847-1912] [AtC p. 42ff]. Both Landsbergs were supporters of civil rights for women and other progressive causes. Mrs. Landsberg encouraged the more formal participation of women in the synagogue and the community by founding the Sisterhood in 1892, two years after she was a founding (and for many years the only Jewish) member of The Wednesday Morning Club, a high-brow

^[1] For more on Reform Judaism, see <https://reformjudaism.org/what-reform-judaism> (retrieved April 7, 2020).

^[2] Thanks to Peter Eisenstadt, PhD, for permission to draw heavily from his 1999 sesquicentennial history of Temple B'rith Kodesh, *Affirming the Covenant*, referred to as AtC.

literary club that counted among its members some of Rochester's most powerful women^[3]. Both husband and wife joined in speaking and writing about the role of women in Judaism [AtC p. 83-89]. Miriam Landsberg was an active supporter of the work of Susan B. Anthony; her husband shared a podium with the controversial leader on several occasions.^[4] In the 1891 Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, which Rabbi Landsberg had established with Anthony's church, First Unitarian, and which has been an annual Rochester tradition since 1871, Anthony opined "a 'wholesome' discontent had provided the impetus for the progress of women."^[5] In 1901, the local Council of Women met at Temple B'rith Kodesh, where Landsberg and Anthony again spoke from the same platform to the assembled group. This meeting, billed as the largest peace gathering ever held in the City of Rochester, coincided with the opening of the Court of International Arbitration at The Hague.^[6]

While the Landsbergs took very public positions on behalf of women's equality, members of the Sisterhood typically acted very concretely within the social sphere. Its founding mission of "charity, philanthropy, and education...and to lend a helping hand" was fulfilled many times over during the hundred and thirty years since Mrs. Landsberg called it into existence.^[7]

In Sisterhood's first year, school books were distributed to those in need. Milk was provided to students, as well as the help of a visiting nurse who gave lessons in hygiene. In 1901, two members of Sisterhood, Therese Katz and Fannie Gerson, created the beginnings of a settlement house, originally called "Social Settlement of Rochester," and then in the 1920s, called Baden Street Settlement, which still exists today to serve the needs of the community. Many kinds of classes were offered in the early years to help newly arrived immigrant children and young women learn vocational and intellectual skills — sewing, crocheting, basket weaving, Shakespeare, Hebrew, current events, and also, kindergarten classes and a day nursery for the children of working mothers were established. In 1908, Baden Street's newsletter expanded into the journal "The Common Good," showcasing the many community-wide efforts to create healthy initiatives for residents of Rochester [AfC p. 102].

The Sisterhood's many fund-raising projects have supported needs of the synagogue as well as to lend a helping hand anywhere it was required. The 1911 Flour City Cookbook continued earlier efforts to promote wellness with its hygienic cooking tips. Art shows, antique shows, and rummage sales have helped to fill the coffers in order to sustain important programs, many of which have been aimed at young people. From chaperoned community socials in its early years, to hospitality to international students, to present day scholarships for girls wanting to study science, Sisterhood initiatives have benefited many people in the Rochester community. Current projects further some

^[3] AfT, p. 80; for more information about The Wednesday Morning Club, see <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/3579> accessed April 7, 2020.

^[4] "An Eventful Reception," *Democrat & Chronicle*, February 11, 1897, p. 11,

^[5] "The Benefits of Unrest," *Democrat & Chronicle*, November 27, 1891, p. 6,

^[6] "Meeting for Peace and Arbitration," *Democrat & Chronicle*, May 18, 1901, p. 13,

^[7] Many thanks to Ellen Solomon, longtime Sisterhood member and leader, for providing information from the Sisterhood Centennial publication and for her careful reading and suggestions.

of its earliest ambitions: education — ongoing education of themselves and others, creation of a small museum of Jewish art and artifacts, and support of the Pencils and Paper program for teachers in Rochester City School District; hygiene — support of the P. A. D. S. personal hygiene supplies for homeless women, spearheaded by National Council of Jewish Women; enhancement of interfaith activity in the community — the annual interfaith event with women from other faith congregations; and social justice concerns — support of reproductive rights and civil rights for the LGBTQ community. TBK Sisterhood is affiliated with Women of Reform Judaism, a global organizational umbrella that shares the Sisterhood's priorities for community and social action. In its support of religious practice, the Sisterhood has assumed responsibility for leading one service every year, Sisterhood Shabbat, in which Sisterhood members lead the congregation in Sabbath prayers and Torah readings.

Meanwhile, by the 1940s, women began to assume leadership positions within the congregation. Elizabeth Schwartz was the first woman principal of the Sunday School in 1944, Nettie (Annette) Sheiman became the first woman board president in 1989, and the first woman rabbi, Rosalind Gold, was called in 1978 as assistant rabbi. Since then, women have continued as cantors (leaders of music liturgy), board presidents, school administrators, and rabbis.^[8] Women share equally in ritual practices, including the most sacred reading from the Torah.

The move to Elmwood Avenue from Gibbs Street firmly cemented the identity of Temple B'rith Kodesh as a local Brighton institution. Through TBK, its female members have found, for over 150 years, a spiritual home and an institutional base from which to care for community concerns and to serve the greater good. In the 21st century, Sisterhood continues its historic role of looking inward to the needs of the synagogue and looking outward to the needs of world.

^[8] A complete list of rabbis, board presidents, and educators can be found in *Affirming the Covenant*, pp. 251-156.