

Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 23

Article 9

2019

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Recommended Citation

Porter, Katherine (2019) ““What Does our Council of Jewish Women Stand For?”: Secular Versus Religious Goals Within the Progressive Era’s Council of Jewish Women,” *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 23 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol23/iss1/9>

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**“What Does our Council of Jewish Women Stand For?”:
Secular Versus Religious Goals Within the Progressive Era’s
Council of Jewish Women
Katherine Porter**

Contemporary debates over immigration in the United States often elicit concerns over assimilation into American society. Muslim immigrants are frequently discriminated against and viewed as the ‘other,’ often vilified as holding radical views based on their religion. Intensifying islamophobia has made assimilation much more difficult for Muslims in America, who are confronted with a variety of ways to meld their own religion, culture, and political views with those of a society much different from theirs. Yet this is not a dilemma unique to modern-day immigrants. Different groups have arrived in the United States facing the very same problem—how much should they adapt to American culture? Is it worth the potential loss, or watering-down, of a native culture or religion? And how does a group or individual reckon with different understandings and expectations of assimilation? Jewish immigrants dealt with these same difficulties during the Progressive Era, in which a vast wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe entered the country, resulting in profound xenophobia. The Jewish immigrants in this wave followed in the footsteps of Western European Jews who had immigrated in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.¹ These antecedents, many from Germany, had already begun the process of assimilation despite intense anti-Semitism. Many, especially Reform Jews, were also receptive to popular progressive ideas and embraced the reform spirit, allowing a Jewish-American identity to develop. This set the stage for a national organization for Jewish women.

¹ Eli Lederhendler, *American Jewry: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 62-63.

Jewish women gathered at the Congress of Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. This meeting offered a unique opportunity to discuss the long-awaited creation of a national organization.² By the end of the Congress, the women had established the National Council of Jewish Women (later the Council of Jewish Women), the foundation for a large, ultimately international organization.³ Although the Council initially maintained a fairly narrow religious emphasis, it was also distinctly progressive from its inception. It provided a space for Jewish women to have a political voice, echoing the sentiments of the era's first wave feminists. Their more secular social reforms were part of a wider array of reforms espoused by progressive activists. The philanthropic work these Jewish women championed eventually expanded into the secular arena of immigration, as they tackled white slave traffic and promoted Americanization.

Significant literature has analyzed the influence of the Council of Jewish Women. Faith Rogow's *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* chronicles the development of the Council and the ways in which it created a Jewish-American womanhood. Linda Kuzmack outlines the roles of Jewish women in England and the United States, noting similarities and differences between the two, in *Woman's Cause: the Jewish Woman's Movement in England and the United States, 1881-1933*. This paper reveals the internal struggle the Council faced in selecting comprehensive goals for the organization. The progressive spirit is a very American notion, and one that these Jewish women embraced—but what did that mean for their Jewish identity? In the Council's early years, these women struggled to define the objectives of female Jewish-American reformers, resulting in a tug-of-war between religious

² Hannah G. Solomon, "Beginnings of the Council of Jewish Women: Success Due to Readiness of Jewish Women of the Land to Organize," *American Israelite*, 2 May 1912.

³ "National Council of Jewish Women: First General Convention in New York," *American Israelite*, 26 Nov. 1896.

and philanthropic reforms. The results would play an important role in how Jews were characterized in the mainstream press.

Within two years of the Council's founding, the leaders established four resolutions to guide their efforts and shape their constitution.⁴ The first, "Seek to unite in closer relations women interested in the work of religion, philanthropy and education and shall consider practical means of solving problems in these fields," revealed the desire to provide a space for women to make a difference. These fields fit within women's sphere of influence as Progressives expanded domesticity to surpass the home and include greater society and city life. Second, they declared the Council "Shall encourage the study of the underlying principles of Judaism, the history, literature and customs of the Jews and their bearing upon their own and the world's history." Their Jewish faith and culture is clearly a vital component that the Council considered worthy of preservation, especially in the face of modernity. The third tenet, "Shall apply knowledge gained in this study to the improvement of Sabbath-schools and in the work of social reform," promoted the application of Judaism to social reform. Lastly, they stated the Council "Shall secure the interest and aid of all influential persons in arousing the general sentiment against religious persecutions wherever, whenever and against whomever shown, and in finding means to prevent such persecutions." With anti-Semitism plaguing countries around the world, the Council asserted its intent to combat religious persecution, thereby supporting its own religious values. These ideals and goals were the basis for the official constitution, adopted at the Council's first convention in 1896.⁵

A very basic purpose of the Council of Jewish Women was to provide Jewish women an opportunity to become active members

⁴ Hannah G. Solomon, "Report of the National Council of Jewish Women," *American Jewess*, April 1895.

⁵ National Council of Jewish Women, "Constitution of the Council of Jewish Women," *Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1897), 407.

within their community. This expansion of women's arena within American society is fundamentally progressive. The Council was the first of its kind to provide Jewish women with this degree of power. It was geared towards helping and benefiting Jewish women, providing advancement within both within Jewish culture and American society.

There are mixed reports over the level of support the Council received. Council founder, Hannah G. Solomon, claimed, "We are receiving every possible encouragement from our Rabbis and should women desire to enter the ministry there will be no obstacle thrown in their way."⁶ Yet, fifteen years later, Solomon recalled the reception of the Council much differently: "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."⁷ A lack of faith in Jewish women's ability to take charge and be successful was echoed by others. At Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, Rabbi Dr. Voorsanger articulated a stance against the Council. He believed that a women's organization increased the chasm between the sexes, and that men and women should be learning from each other and working together. Furthermore, the Council's work was redundant. According to Voorsanger: "They are establishing themselves as watchtowers in the community, reaching out in all directions to ingather the people and qualify the latter for the great task of perpetuating Judaism, its religion, its history and its culture. That is, strictly speaking, the task of the Synagog [sic], not of a council of women."⁸ Another religious leader, Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf, held similar doubts about the Council's ability to succeed, especially with duplicate institutions in place. After

⁶ Solomon, "Report of the National Council of Jewish Women."

⁷ "American Jewish Women in 1890 and 1920: An Interview with Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon," *American Hebrew*, 23 Apr. 1920.

⁸ "Opposed to Women's Organizations," *American Israelite*, 27 Feb. 1896.

observing its growth and success, however, he eventually saw the value in such an organization, and strongly expressed his support, saying: "The work of the National Council of Jewish Women will grow in breadth, and ripen in fullness... The woman keeping aloof from it will be regarded false to her sex; the man opposing it will be branded hostile to his species; the community without a Section of it will be considered an object of commiseration."⁹

While there was not universal support for the Council, the women within the organization clearly saw the benefit in providing Jewish women this space. The Council gave Jewish women greater opportunities to work within their gender and religious spheres, and eventually push the limits of those spheres.

Initially, the Council focused on religious work and philanthropy, areas of engagement considered acceptable for women. As part of Rabbi Karuskopf's proclamation in support of the Council, he encouraged this role: "The woman of Israel has at last found her way into the sphere where she is needed, for which her nature has constituted her, for which God has destined her, into the sphere of Religion and Philanthropy."¹⁰ Some of the Councilwomen endorsed such ideals of womanhood, exemplified by Rebeka Kohut: "The women of America! The religiously enlightened matrons of our country, delivered from the oppressor's yoke, must dive into the depths of vice to spread culture and enlightenment among our semi-barbaric Russian immigrants."¹¹ Besides reflecting the blatant prejudice against new Jewish immigrants, Kohut's remarks cater to traditional women's roles. However, their philanthropic efforts quickly expanded into more secular and political arenas. As Solomon reflected in 1920, "Woman's sphere is in the home, they told us. The last thirty years

⁹ Joseph Krauskopf, "The National Council of Jewish Women," *Jewish Exponent*, 17 Apr. 1896.

¹⁰ Krauskopf, "The National Council of Jewish Women."

¹¹ Rebeka Kohut, "Discussion of 'Mission-Work Among the Unenlightened Jews,'" *Jewish Women's Congress: Papers of the Jewish Women's Congress* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894), 190.

have been devoted to proof of our boast that women's sphere is the whole wide world, without limit."¹² Despite some level of doubt expressed by others in their community, these women banded together to influence American society in a growing number of ways. They might have been in agreement over allowing Jewish women this new space, but they did not necessarily agree on which issues should be their focus. Differing views on Judaism influenced the attention and effort given to religious goals, resulting in a divided front.

Although there was a push for religion, not everyone was in agreement about what this meant. Reform Judaism became a notably popular branch of Judaism in the United States by the middle of the nineteenth century.¹³ This branch of Judaism was open to Christian influence, adaptive to modern life, and receptive to progressive ideals. A statement by a prominent Reform Jew in New York conveys the appeal and intent of Reform Judaism: "As Jews we must revere and respect the ancient history of our race, but feel that Judaism, our religion, must be progressive, a religion that assists us in our daily life, not merely a religion of the synagogue, but of the home."¹⁴ This modern and fluid branch of Judaism stood at odds with Orthodox Judaism. Within Orthodox Judaism, religious practices and traditions are much more rigid. The Torah is considered to be directly divine, without any human interpretation.¹⁵ For some, Orthodox was the ultimate and only form of Judaism. "Orthodoxy and Judaism cannot be dissociated, as they are one, and the disintegration of Orthodoxy would be naught but the downfall of the Judaism that the countless centuries of attack in the past have found miraculously enduring."¹⁶ Whether

¹² "American Jewish Women in 1890 and 1920," *American Hebrew*.

¹³ Eds. Susannah A. Link and William J. Link, *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era: A Documentary Reader* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 169.

¹⁴ "What America Means to Jews," *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1911.

¹⁵ "Orthodox Judaism: Background and Overview," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed 26 May 2018, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/background-and-overview-of-orthodox-judaism>.

¹⁶ "Reform Versus Orthodoxy," *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1908.

an American Jew practiced Reform, Orthodox, or something in between, the different views on tradition and Jewish law impacted Council dynamics.

The Council claimed to be unaffiliated with a specific branch of Judaism, thus keeping it open to all Jewish women.¹⁷ Yet, reflective of broader tensions within Judaism, the Council was not immune to disagreements over religion. Discussions over changing from Saturday to Sunday-Sabbath raised particular controversy. American society largely centered around a Christian lifestyle, meaning Sunday was regarded as the major day of rest and worship. This disadvantaged those with different schedules of worship, especially Jews, who celebrated the Sabbath from sundown on Friday until after nightfall on Saturday. Having different days of worship negatively impacted Jewish business owners. By closing their stores on Saturday, they missed out on earning a profit from Christian shoppers. Some Jews could not even afford to observe the Saturday Sabbath, working instead on Saturday rather than more strictly observing the Sabbath. Jews in support of the Sunday-Sabbath believed this change would economically benefit Jewish business owners and allow for more faithful Sabbath observation.¹⁸

This debate within Reform Judaism infiltrated the dynamics of the Council. At an 1896 convention, "It was resolved unanimously that the Council should use its influence in favor of the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and to reinstate its observance in the homes of our people in its pristine purity."¹⁹ Yet, concerns over Sabbath tradition continued, particularly since Council President Solomon and Executive Secretary Sadie

¹⁷ Hannah G. Solomon and Sadie American, "A Brilliant Record: The Rapid Work of the National Council of Jewish Women," *Jewish Exponent*, 17 Jan. 1896.

¹⁸ "Radical Hebrew Reform: Services in the Synagogue on Sunday," *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1890.

¹⁹ "National Council of Jewish Women: This Week's Convention," *Jewish Messenger*, 20 Nov. 1896.

American were known to be supporters of Reform Judaism and the Sunday-Sabbath, leaving many members upset.²⁰

Those against the Sunday-Sabbath were vocal. The Cincinnati Council called on Jewish women to more carefully observe the Sabbath day and “[keep] alive in the heart and home the spirit of our faith.”²¹ Several articles in the Jewish press urged the Council to preserve the Jewish, or Saturday, Sabbath.²² They also advocated for leaders who would uphold this tradition.²³ Tensions over Sabbath observation mounted, indicative of a larger concern for religious practice overall.

Within the first decade of the Council’s founding, many women voiced their desires to strengthen women’s Jewish faith and increase religious practices. By 1896, Kohut proudly announced: “There are now more than thirty cities working in the same sphere and with the same object in view—the Judaizing of the Jews...It is safe to say that in the near future we shall have an intelligent body of Jewish women, proud of their race, their history and themselves, and with this knowledge shall come a greater and stronger love for their faith.”²⁴ Yet, by the end of the year, some Councilwomen were airing their doubts over Jews’ faith. One meeting in New York sparked a debate over the religiosity of Jewish women compared to Christian women. Nellie L. Miller claimed that Jewish people were losing their sense of religion and could learn something from Christian women’s organizations. She questioned the religious authenticity of a national Jewish women’s organization and contended, “This eagerness to open heart, mind, and home to all things non-Jewish, our impetuous zeal in

²⁰ Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, 103.

²¹ “Appeal of Jewish Women: The Cincinnati Council Deplores the Desecration of the Sabbath,” *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1898.

²² “The Council and the Saccah,” *Jewish Exponent*, 26 Jan. 1900.

²³ “Jewesses in Council,” *Jewish Messenger*, 2 Mar. 1900; “The Sabbath and the Jewess,” *American Hebrew*, 19 Jan. 1900.

²⁴ Rebekah Kohut, “The National Council of Jewish Women,” *The Independent... Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*. 23 Jan. 1896.

affiliating with non-Israelitish [sic] movements, demonstrates how slightly and disparagingly we estimate the worth of any project distinctly Jewish in character." While several women challenged this assertion, some agreed with it, with one matter-of-factly insisting, "The Christian woman goes to her church. The Jewish woman stays at home."²⁵

These early statements and debates suggest the Councilwomen's strong interest in preserving Jewish religion, culture, and history, as reflected in the Council's constitution. They even established a Committee on Religion and a Committee on Religious School Work to help identify and achieve these religious goals.²⁶ However, the broadness of these goals allowed for different interpretations based on the various denominations within Judaism. A discussion at the first convention in New York revealed the disagreement over the religious intent of the organization, "Several of the delegates were of the opinion that the fact that the Council was an organization intended to promote Judaism was not sufficiently brought out in the constitution. One delegate said that the constitution 'sat upon' Judaism."²⁷ This foretold the problem that would plague the Council for several years. No specific plan on how to preserve Judaism could be created without agreeing on one religious foundation. Variation in specific Jewish beliefs allowed cracks to form within the organization, creating a shaky foundation upon which the Council grew and its work expanded, particularly as it increasingly encompassed secular, philanthropic works.

The Council initially established a Committee on Philanthropy "to study the work of existing philanthropic associations with a view to making practical application of the

²⁵ "Jewish Faith Neglected: Mrs. Miller Says the Women are Indifferent," *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1896.

²⁶ National Council of Jewish Women, "Constitution of the Council of Jewish Women," 409.

²⁷ "National Council of Jewish Women: First General Convention in New York," *American Israelite*, 26 Nov. 1896.

results of this study.”²⁸ However, they did not foresee the expansion of this field until they began working with immigrants. The Council created the Committee on Immigrant Aid in 1904 to better focus on this issue and work together with the Committee on Philanthropy.²⁹ The Committee on Immigrant Aid “concerns itself primarily with the protection of young girls, giving them friendly aid and advice — not money... It is a safeguard to the girls from port to destination, and guides them to the best Americanizing influences.”³⁰ This goal required Councilwomen to work extensively with new immigrants, necessitating nearly continuous contact. Committee members stationed themselves at Ellis Island to gain immediate access to immigrants. Armed with brochures in different languages, multilingual agents met new arrivals and offered aid and advice. To help keep track of young immigrants, the name of any girl aged 12 to 25 years old was recorded, and she was visited to ensure she had found a safe home and received any further aid she might need.³¹

These “friendly visitors,” as they are often called, also urged immigrants to take classes related to Americanization. The Americanization movement was popular particularly during World War I, pushed forward by ideas of 100% Americanism strongly supported by Theodore Roosevelt.³² However the work of the Council did not completely align with this. Its tactics were more reflective of assimilation efforts that preserved a Jewish identity.³³ According to Rebekah Kohut in the *American Hebrew & Jewish*

²⁸ National Council of Jewish Women, “Constitution of the Council of Jewish Women,” 409.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Immigration, *Statements and Recommendations Submitted by Societies and Organizations Interested in the Subject of Immigration*, 61st Congress, 3d Session, 1910, S. Doc. 764 (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1911), 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Immigration, 38.

³² “Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated,” *New York Times*, 13 Oct. 1915.

³³ Seth Korelitz, “‘A Magnificent Piece of Work’: The Americanization Work of the National Council of Jewish Women,” *American Jewish History* no. 2 (1995): 177, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost, accessed 5 May 2018.

Messenger, "We have taught them the American language, history and customs and have endeavored to instill into them the true American Spirit. We have tried to teach them that the Ten Commandments and the constitution of the United States must be the Decalogue of the American Jew."³⁴ As a Jewish organization, the Council could not endorse complete Americanization at the price of its faith. Rather than directly addressing the role of religion in Americanized Judaism, the central means by which the Council approached Americanization was secular, promoting literacy in English, as "the fundamental, unifying force in Americanization."³⁵ Helping immigrants, many of them Jewish, to assimilate into American society also allowed the Council to conduct preventative philanthropy, particularly in relation to prostitution, or white slave traffic.

Prostitution was certainly not an exclusive concern of Jewish women. Many Progressives expressed fear over the growth of vice and declining morality. Both men and women worked for reform, citing different reasons, but the most prevalent was to protect the family and home life.³⁶ Worries over prostitution culminated with the passing of the White Slave Traffic Act, otherwise known as the Mann Act, in 1910.³⁷ It "was aimed at the complete suppression of the 'white slave traffic' and imposing imprisonment and heavy fines for any person importing women into this country for immoral purposes or harboring them after their arrival."³⁸ This landmark piece of legislation reveals the pervasiveness of the concerns over prostitution, especially when it pertained to white women.

³⁴ "Americanize the Immigrant Before He Comes to America," *American Hebrew & Jewish Messenger*, 12 Mar. 1920.

³⁵ "Americanization Program: A Laudable Activity of the Council of Jewish Women," *American Israelite*, 31 Oct. 1918.

³⁶ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 44-45.

³⁷ "First Arrest Under White Slave Act," *New York Times*, 10 Jul. 1910.

³⁸ "Report 'White Slave' Bill: Immigration Committee Presents New Measure to Suppress Traffic," *New York Times*, 18 Dec. 1909.

The Council of Jewish Women took up the cause along with other progressive reformers. Sadie American, the president of the Council's New York section from 1902 to 1908, was the most prominent crusader against white slave traffic among women in the Council. She learned about it through Jewish women in Britain with whom she had been in correspondence. In 1899, she represented the Council at an international conference in London that addressed the evils of white slave traffic.³⁹ The New York Section was particularly influential in leading this cause. Working for the prevention of white slave traffic was a secular political reform area, drawing attention and resources away from religious goals. However, after reports in the early twentieth century were published confirming a problem with Jewish vice and prostitution, the Council, along with the greater Jewish community, grew concerned over female Jewish immigrants being tricked or persuaded into prostitution.⁴⁰ They took on the responsibility of protecting young women from this troubling phenomenon.

As reported to the United States Senate in 1910, "The immigrant is given much misinformation [and]...is apt to get false notions of American ideals and standards and ways. We must correct this misinformation and help her by putting her in touch with the best of American life immediately upon her arrival... They must learn to recognize pitfalls in their path and dangers in the gulse [sic] of what seem legitimate amusements or legitimate means of procuring employment."⁴¹ Even after helping girls settle into a new home and life, Councilwomen were still concerned that they could end up associating with the wrong people. They needed to be warned against and protected from the dangers of modern, urban life. As further stated in the report to the U.S. Senate, "The crowded quarters in which the girls live afford them no opportunity

³⁹ Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: the Jewish Woman's Movement in England and The United States, 1881-1933* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1990), 69.

⁴⁰ Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, 66.

⁴¹ U.S. Senate, Committee on Immigration, 38.

for home amusement; the wonderfully electric lighted streets of our day lure them, and all along these streets are dangers and pitfalls, dance halls which are bad, shows whose influence is bad, men and even women and other girls who in the guise of friends lead to the downward path."⁴²

Work with immigrants to encourage Americanization and combat white slave traffic was clearly reflective of mainstream progressive reforms. However, it lacked the explicitly religious objectives of the Council. This kind of more secular philanthropic work only grew in the early twentieth century, garnering a lot of attention and support outside the Jewish community, especially for the New York Section.

The New York Times, America's newspaper of record, published several articles that hailed the Council's success in its philanthropic efforts. An article from 1895 describes the formation and development of the Council, organized only two years prior. Significantly, it glosses over the religious foundation of the organization, stressing instead the women's involvement in philanthropy and education.⁴³ With a well-established interest in white slave traffic by 1910, an article describes Sadie American's involvement at the Jewish International Conference in London and her explanation of the Council's flourishing efforts to combat prostitution.⁴⁴ Prominent publications demonstrate great support for the Council's involvement in secular philanthropy fields. Without much mention of the Council's religious foundation, the press promoted the idea that the Council's main goal was secular. News of the philanthropic achievements of the Council even reached those in the higher political echelons of American society.

The New York Times published several articles in which significant Progressive Era figures supported the Council of Jewish Women. It reported on a section meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria in

⁴²U.S. Senate, Committee on Immigration, 43.

⁴³ "Jewish Women's Council: An Outgrowth of the Congress at the World's Fair," *New York Times*, 4 Aug. 1895.

⁴⁴ "Jews to Fight White Slave Traffic," *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1910.

which members proudly described the successes of their immigration work, while also calling attention to Colonel Roosevelt's interest in immigrants and his desire to have attended the meeting.⁴⁵ President Elect William H. Taft spoke out in support of the Council's work with the Red Cross and expressed regret for not attending the triennial convention. His wife, Helen Taft, provided best wishes for the Council's further success.⁴⁶ In 1920, Woodrow Wilson's wife spoke out in support of the Council's Americanization efforts.⁴⁷ As Americanization and prostitution were political, rather than religious fields it is no surprise that the Council gained the attention and support of a broader audience. While people outside of the Jewish community might have high praise for the Council's accomplishments, some Jews expressed more dissatisfaction over the direction the Council had been heading.

Articles from the Jewish press reveal popular discontent over the failings of the Council in fostering Judaism and religious practices. In 1899, an editorial in a weekly Jewish newspaper, *The American Hebrew*, praised the efforts of the Committee on Religion and strongly suggested it continue working towards its goals: "The Council of Jewish Women must stand or fall by its loyalty to Jewish Law and its success will be determined by what it stands for. If it shows only efforts for humanitarian or philanthropic work or only a feeble attempt at study of Jewish history, it must ultimately fall. If it means a revival of Jewish sentiment, then it will live."⁴⁸ A prominent religious leader from Philadelphia, Rev. Henry Iliowizi, also articulated support for the Council as long as it ultimately benefited Judaism and not just Jews: "If thy gatherings mean to restore Jewish womanhood to

⁴⁵ "Tributes to Work of Jewish Council," *New York Times*, 9 Dec. 1912.

⁴⁶ "Taft to Jewish Women: Sends Letter to National Council in Cincinnati—Miss Helen Taft Also," *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1908.

⁴⁷ "Mrs. Wilson Aids Jews: Commends \$150,000 Americanization Drive of Women's Council," *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 1920.

⁴⁸ "The Council of Jewish Women," *American Hebrew*, 23 Jun. 1899.

faith and reverence, the Jewish home to its beauty of holiness, and Jewish life to its consecrating influences... then will God and man bless thy doings, American Jewess... [If] it means vanity and notoriety, articulate wind and vain boasting, then the sooner thy Council dies, the better for Israel and the Jewish family."⁴⁹ After a convention in Cleveland, an article in *The Jewish Exponent* criticized the Council's inability to fulfill its religious aims and the spirited passion it had ignited. "Religiously... the convention did not realize the expectations that the Council had awakened. The tone of the dominant spirits was one that was far removed from religious enthusiasm."⁵⁰ These shared sentiments demonstrate a disappointment with the Council's weak efforts to increase religiosity and observance of Jewish practices.

Within the Council, women were also in disagreement over the roles of religion and philanthropy. At a Triennial Convention in Chicago, Evelyn Aronson from San Francisco cautioned,

The Council is unconsciously swerving from its original impulse. Practical philanthropy is always intensely interesting... but primarily we are banded together 'to further united efforts on behalf of Judaism'... Unless we constantly cultivate a Jewish spirit through an intelligent understanding of our religion, of our history and of our philosophy we will cease to be Jewesses through inclination and belief and remain Jewesses through habit and external pressure.⁵¹

Even some women providing assistance to immigrants were hesitant about Americanization efforts and the potential loss of a Jewish identity. As reported in *The American Hebrew & Jewish Messenger*, Mary Antin, one of the directors of the National Americanization Committee, shocked members of the Council with her "thoroughly Jewish sentiments," when she asserted,

⁴⁹ "The Hallowing of the Home," *American Israelite*, 13 Jan. 1898.

⁵⁰ "The Jewish Women's Council's Status," *The Jewish Exponent*, 16 Mar. 1900.

⁵¹ "Report of Committee on Religion," *American Israelite*, 18 Jan. 1906.

“Don’t try to Americanize us so much. Let us be good Jews first, and we will be good Americans too!”⁵² Other women attempted to promote religion at the Boston Section’s annual meeting by reminding the Council of the personal benefits of maintaining and practicing Judaism: “Our very vital efforts with the immigrant and delinquent classes should not blind us to the fact that we ourselves may need and require intellectual and spiritual stimulus. Study classes...should be arranged on such topics as the Bible, Jewish history and literature, child-life, mothercraft [sic], current events, —the field is limitless.”⁵³ These women clearly recognized the success of the Council’s philanthropic work, yet that was not all that the organization had sought to do. However, the study and preservation of Jewish culture, history, and religion that were initially meant to play a significant role within the Council of Jewish Women never successfully took hold, especially in comparison to philanthropic works, creating a divergence over the two. The question posed to a Chicago Section meeting in 1898 encapsulated the ongoing disharmony over the Council’s main goals: “And now, sisters of the Council, again I ask that oft repeated question: What does our Council of Jewish Women stand for?”⁵⁴

The formative years of the Council of Jewish Women were rife with disagreements and doubt as its members attempted to tackle differing areas of reform in an effort to establish a role for Jewish-American reformers during the Progressive Era. While they set out with the intention of explicitly promoting Judaism by creating study circles and Sabbath-schools, this work eventually took backstage to growing philanthropic work related to immigration that garnered Jews praise in the mainstream press and fostered assimilation. The variation within Judaism impeded the

⁵² “What Americanization Means,” *American Hebrew & Jewish Messenger*, 10 Mar. 1916.

⁵³ “Annual Meeting of Boston Section Council of Jewish Women: President’s Report in Full,” *Jewish Advocate*, 4 May 1916.

⁵⁴ “The Hallowing of the Home,” *American Israelite*.

establishment of a unified religious goal. Hindered by differences in belief, aiding immigrants became an initially unifying concern, even for those outside of Jewish society. Yet, Jews within and outside of the Council also spoke up about the need to preserve Judaism and practice religious customs. Despite this, the Council's more secular, philanthropic efforts persisted and dominated. The Council of Jewish Women continued to provide a place for women to take part in social and political reforms, allowing them to broaden women's sphere.

The fact that women within the Council faced such difficulties in establishing their main objective was reflective of broader Progressive Era reforms, not just differences within Judaism. Debates raged over the goals of secular social and political reforms of the Progressive Era, spanning a variety of topics, including child labor, big business, and women's rights. The dialogue and debate within the Council was both uniquely Jewish and fundamentally American, and speaks to the pervasiveness of progressive values, tactics, and divisions.

Today, the National Council of Jewish Women exists as "a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children and families by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms."⁵⁵ The contemporary Council continues to engage with prevailing issues from a Jewish point of view, yet their interests are much more pointedly and unapologetically political than those of the Progressive Era Council, with their main priorities encompassing issues like reproductive rights and civic engagement.⁵⁶ While the NCJW has come a long way from its initial iteration, it remains a space for women to get involved in

⁵⁵ "Mission," *National Council of Jewish Women*, accessed 28 Mar. 2018, <https://www.ncjw.org/about/mission/>.

⁵⁶ "Our Work," *National Council of Jewish Women*, accessed 2 Jun. 2018, <https://www.ncjw.org/work/>.

issues reflective of Jewish-American values and ideals and is just one of many multicultural organizations in the United States today.

For present-day immigrants, much can be learned from the evolution of the Council of Jewish Women and its reception by Jews and greater society. Secular, philanthropic successes of the Council received much attention and acceptance from a broad audience, but this left out the explicitly religious intentions of the Council. Modern Muslim immigrants face similar difficulties in assimilating into a predominantly white, Christian society and are often divided over their understandings of American society, with some embracing American culture and others fearful of assimilation.⁵⁷ While some organizations focus on geopolitics and a Muslim identity, newer organizations, like the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, embrace American society and politics by getting involved in both foreign and domestic issues.⁵⁸ This new approach will likely garner greater societal approval, just as it did for the Council of Jewish Women. However, it offers the same risk of losing sight of strictly religious goals and traditions. Muslim immigrants, along with others, must weigh the potential cost of assimilating into American society. The tradeoff between a seamless integration and a loss of culture and religion merits debate and continues to be a facet of the American immigrant experience.

⁵⁷ M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Political Muslims in America: From Islamism to Exceptionalism," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 32, accessed 3 Jun. 2018.

⁵⁸ Khan, "Political Muslims in America," 34-35.