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Roses and Votes: Immigrant Jewish Women and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894-1917

by Katelyn Johnson

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to explore the role that Jewish immigrant women had in the Women's Suffrage Movement. It is focused in New York due to the unique concurrency of a large, concentrated Jewish immigrant community and a heavily active location for the Women's Suffrage Movement. The project draws a strong link to Jewish workingwomen's influence and participation in the Labor Rights Movement, also during the early nineteenth century. The research draws upon several primary sources from the Lower East Side Jewish community, as well as the research of historians Susan A. Glenn and Melissa R. Klapper. The Jewish immigrants coming from Eastern Europe had distinctive cultural worldviews that allotted the women of the families a stronger economic presence. This cultural mindset led to a strong support of the Labor Rights and Women's Suffrage Movements. Not only were they involved with the suffrage movement, but also without the large support of working class Jewish women, the New York Women Suffrage Movement may have not experienced the ultimate success that it did.

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that modern woman suffrage might not exist if it had not been for the efforts of Jewish women in the early twentieth century New York. The Jewish community has often had an interesting place in social history, not simply as a religious group, race, or nation, but a mixture of that, which is represented in a community spread across the world. There are many examples throughout history where they have faced anti-Semitism, rejection, and unfounded blame. In America, they entered into a society that very much saw everything and everyone as “black” or “white,” and they, along with many other immigrants, were “neither” in the eyes of the white American public. In the early twentieth century, thousands of Jews immigrated to America, primarily from Eastern Europe. With the immigration station Ellis Island right off the coast of New York, immigration caused the city’s population to expand rapidly. Simultaneously, women in America were in their final push for political suffrage, and New York City became the hub of the suffrage movement. Both the Jewish immigrants and woman suffragists converged in the State of New York. Jewish immigrant women, who brought with them their cultural roots as well as a thirst for new opportunities, were key players in the fight for women’s suffrage for several reasons. The political and economic ideas that they brought with them, heightened by the struggles of immigrant life, caused Jewish immigrant women to become activists to make a better life for their families. From 1894, when New York turned down the suffragists’ appeals and continued to deny women the right to vote during a state constitutional congress, to 1917, when New York finally granted women the vote, woman suffrage entered discussions at every social level. As with many social circles of this period, Jewish-American women had many different opinions about the quest for women’s suffrage. Though the majority joined in and supported the cause, others stood back or openly opposed it. The presence of immigrant Jewish women from Manhattan’s Lower East Side contributed greatly to the ultimate success of the woman suffrage

movement in New York, and their significance to the cause was particularly due to their unique social and cultural worldview. They saw themselves as economic providers for their families, which led to some of their great work for the labor movement. Without the work of many Jewish immigrant women in New York, the labor movement would have suffered, and without their connection to the labor movement, the woman suffrage movement would have lost a valuable asset.

Jewish immigrants were not unfamiliar to American society of the early twentieth century. Jewish immigrants sought a home in America since the early colonial era, and arrived in three distinct waves of immigration. The first wave came primarily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These immigrants were collectively known as the Iberian, or Sephardi, Jews who made their journey from homelands in Spain and Portugal. The second wave was composed of the Central European Jews during the nineteenth century. They traced their roots primarily to Germany, thus they were also known as the German Jews. The third and largest wave came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were the Eastern European Jews.¹ This third wave is the group that populated the Lower East Side in New York and made a considerable contribution to the growth of the woman suffrage movement.

The main entry point of Eastern European Jews was Ellis Island, located off the coast of New York. Although Jewish immigrants made their way across the continental United States, most remained close to the port of entry and took up residence in New York.² The Jewish population in America grew from 300,000 (0.6 percent of total US population) in 1880, to 1.058 million (1.39 percent of total US population) in 1900, to 3.6 million (3.41

¹ Henry Feingold, "Introduction" in *The American Jewish Album: 1654 to Present*, Allan Schoener, ed. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983), 9.

² Allan Schoener, *The American Jewish Album: 1654 to Present* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983), 109.

percent of total US population) in 1920.³ Most settled in New York's Lower East Side in Manhattan, a tenement district that quickly grew to have the single largest population of Jews in the world at that time.⁴ Historians also note that New York's tenement district had the highest population density of any city in the world in 1895.⁵

Although the Lower East Side was home to immigrants from all over the world, it became a cultural hotspot for the Jewish immigrants making their way from Ellis Island, and the Jewish population soon made up the majority of the area's population. Photographs of the Lower East Side⁶ show streets filled with vendors, billboards advertising Jewish businesses, and signs peppering the way in both Yiddish (the popular language of the Jewish immigrants which was essentially a mixture of German and Hebrew) and English.

Living conditions in the Lower East side were far from what most immigrants expected. The high population created a low living standard. Many immigrants settled into tenement housing, apartment-style living arrangements that were typically dark, overcrowded, and unsanitary.⁷ Immigrants had to find housing, jobs, and navigate the new dynamic of the new world. Most Jewish women immigrated along with their husbands or fathers. Even with the support system of family with them, they struggled with the new challenges of how to most efficiently help their family survive.⁸ There was also a significant population of young, unmarried Jewish women who were sent on alone to America. Thousands of these girls were now faced with the bleak living

³ "From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America," Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-haven.html>

⁴ *The Jewish Americans, Part 1*, "They Came to Stay," directed by David Grubin, PBS, 2008.

⁵ Schoener, 114.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷ Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (New York: Cornell University, 1990), 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

conditions, usually forced to find room with a resistant next-of-kin.⁹

One view that was prevalent in the Jewish community was socialism. In Eastern Europe, the heavily oppressed Jewish communities found the idea of an equally shared society very appealing. In many places in Europe they were restricted in where they could live and work.¹⁰ Socialist ideology traveled across the ocean from Eastern Europe along with the immigrants and the socialist movement grew in the Lower East Side, particularly among the garment workers, known for their labor and woman suffrage activism. By 1917, about fifty percent of Jewish men from the Lower East Side voted for socialist city and state candidates.¹¹ Women of the tenement districts formed similar political goals and opinions, accustomed to their welcomed presence in Europe, where socialist political groups allowed women to become members. The distinctly Jewish, radical socialist group in Eastern Europe, The Bund, was especially open to the participation of young women. In fact, young, Jewish woman made up about one-third of their membership, and many Jewish immigrant women emigrated to the United States with the mindset that the political sphere was open to them.¹²

Even though the Jewish community in the Lower East Side was a mix of people from different European countries, and many spoke different Yiddish dialects, similar religious cultural ties provided a sense of comfort and identity in the face of new cultural challenges.¹³ Thus, Jewish culture grew in the Lower East Side. *The Jewish Daily Forward*, often just referred to as *The Forward*, was a Yiddish newspaper that helped the Jewish immigrants cope with both American and Jewish identities. An Eastern-European Jew, specifically a Lithuanian Jew or *Litvak*,¹⁴ named Abraham

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹¹ Ibid., 182.

¹² Ibid., 38.

¹³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴ Ronald Sanders, *The Down-Town Jews: Portraits of An Immigrant*

Cahan was one of the founders of the paper. His newspaper reached Jewish immigrants across the United States, but it was especially significant in its home state of New York, where Cahan's articles worked to bring the Jewish community together and spread socialist ideas. Cahan, and consequently his articles, was both pro-worker and pro-women's liberation.¹⁵

In 1906, Cahan created a daily feature in the paper called "A Bintel Brief," which literally translates to "a bundle of letters."¹⁶ The feature was the predecessor to what we know as "Dear Abby" columns today. Jewish immigrants from the Lower East Side could write in to the paper and Cahan could publish it anonymously along with a reply. Even those who could not write well found ways to get their letters to Cahan.¹⁷ Many of the Jewish community had difficulties in writing their letters, so certain businesses advertised dictating services, in which an employee would write letters for the illiterate.

For the Jewish immigrants who found themselves alone or struggling with the cultural differences between the tenement districts and the Eastern European *shtetls*, Cahan became a listening ear and a trustworthy advisor.¹⁸ Part of what made "A Bintel Brief" so popular was Cahan's appeal to families. Many letters came in from women and even children, and Cahan welcomed them, realizing the importance of the strong family unit to the Jewish immigrants.¹⁹ Jewish immigrants wrote about marriage, social issues, political questions, and even unruly children. Letters ranged from a young man asking if he should dye his hair due to teasing because of its red color, to a woman

Generation (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 28.

¹⁵ *The Jewish Americans, Part 2*, "A World of Their Own," directed by David Grubin, PBS, 2008.

¹⁶ Sanders, 361.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁸ Isaac Metzker, introduction to *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward*, ed. Isaac Metzker (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 10.

¹⁹ Ronald Sanders, *The Down-Town Jews: Portraits of An Immigrant Generation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 366.

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searching for her long-missing children, to a man sending in his suicide note because he had no one else to turn to. Cahan's answers were fair and compassionate. Cahan's socialist leanings deeply informed his responses, as they were consistently pro-workers and unions and pro-women's liberation. In 1909, a contributor whose letter was published simply from "With Socialistic regards, L.V." wrote in asking about the issue of woman suffrage. The writer says that they are on the side of woman suffrage, but that they have been part of a group of people who have been debating the issue for several weeks. The opponents of woman suffrage in the group claim that if women were to get the vote, "the women would then no longer be the housewife, the mother to her children, the wife to her husband – in a word, everything would be destroyed."²⁰ In Cahan's response, he praises the writer for their defense of women and their case for the support of woman suffrage. Cahan then stated that justice can only exist once all people have equal rights, and that men cannot rule over women in the tyrannical fashion that they have been.²¹ *The Forward* was also very popular and widely read by the Jewish community in the Lower East Side, and "A Bintel Brief" was easily one of the favorite features.²² This made it an important tool in the spreading of the connected ideas of socialism, labor, and woman suffrage.

In contrast to the emotional and physical turmoil faced by Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side, there were also elite Jewish families in the city. On the other side of town, the Upper East Side of New York, many of the German Jews of the second immigration wave had taken up residence. Having had more time to establish themselves, many of these immigrants were now successful business owners. They often referred to themselves as "Our Crowd," an elitist group of well-to-do New York Jewish

²⁰ L.V., "A Bintel Brief," in *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward*, 94.

²¹ Cahan, "A Bintel Brief," 95.

²² Isaac Metzker, introduction to *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward*, 12.

families.²³ For instance, Irma Levy Lindheim was born to German Jewish parents and lived in the Upper East Side, growing up around the turn of the century. She wrote about her family's success and the stark contrast it held to the lives of Eastern European Jews in the Lower East Side in an article titled "My German-Jewish Family Life."²⁴ She describes that the tenement housing was crowded, there was little help for medical needs, and it was impossible to avoid filth, while the homes of the Upper East Side were well taken care of and comfortable.²⁵

Although life in the tenement housing was harsh, the Jewish immigrants grew into a tight-knit community. With the help of Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward*, common ideologies could spread and gain wider appeal. Many Jews readily embraced both their Jewishness and newfound Americanism. Immigrant women found the opportunity to make differences in their lives; in particular, many became involved in the labor and women's suffrage movements. Jewish workingwomen were at the forefront of the labor movement, which had strong connections with the woman suffrage movement.

In Eastern Europe, Jewish women were heavily involved in the garment industry, a cultural role that they brought with them to America. Many of these Jews came from the Russian 'Pale' (the area of Eastern Europe where the government allowed the Jewish people to take up permanent residence) and *shtetls*. *Shtetls* were small Jewish towns in Eastern Europe socially organized through Jewish religious standards, although they remained under the control of the country's reigning government.²⁶ In addition, the Jewish family structure had several differences from the traditional American family structure. Though not always the case, the usual ambition of a Jewish man was to become an intellectual, a

²³ *The Jewish Americans, Part 2*.

²⁴ Irma Levy Lindheim, "My German-Jewish Family Life", in *The American Jewish Album: 1654 to Present*, ed. Allan Schoener (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983), 130.

²⁵ *The Jewish Americans, Part 2*.

²⁶ Glenn, 9.

religious scholar of the Torah, while in the United States the popular ambition was to be a successful workingman, the economic provider of the family. In order to allow their husbands to study, Jewish women often had to be the breadwinner in the family. Their economic efforts were widely accepted by the Jewish community. On the contrary, American society expected women to be only domestic and live up to their Victorian ideals of a virtuous woman.²⁷ Understanding this different culture provides a clearer picture of why Jewish women working in American factories would have a different perspective on labor than other workers, male or female.

The garment industry was a prominent part of Jewish society in Eastern Europe. Jewish daughters would aspire to become seamstresses. They took pride in the industry and it was an area where women dominated. The Jewish community looked down upon men in the industry for participating in “women’s work.”²⁸ However, work in the American garment factories was anything but comfortable. Clara Lemlich, a Jewish immigrant, leader in the shirtwaist strikes, and an advocate for women’s suffrage, wrote on what it was like working in the garment sweatshops. In 1909, she wrote that the terrible working conditions involved working over twelve hours a day with only a half hour break. The young women would be paid six dollars a week, but in the slow season their pay would be reduced by two dollars with no explanation from their superiors.²⁹ Surprisingly, many of the owners of these factories were Jewish as well, members of the successful “German-Jews.”³⁰

Such was the case in the disastrous Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, which served as one of the great sparks for the labor movement. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was located in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, not too far from the Lower East

²⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁸ Ibid., 21

²⁹ Clara Lemlich, “Working in a Sweatshop”, in *The American Jewish Album: 1654 to Present*, 118.

³⁰ *The Jewish Americans, Part 2.*

Side. The company was owned by German Jewish business partners, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, and staffed by mainly young Eastern European Jewish women. On March 25, right before quitting time, a fire started on the 8th floor of the building. The fire spread extremely quickly through the work areas located on the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors, which were filled with loose fabric and string. With the exit doors locked by the owners as they usually were, and the fire escape collapsed from the rampaging escapees, 146 workers were killed either by the flames and smoke or by falling from the upper stories. The community was horrified by the tragic event. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck were tried for manslaughter; the argument against them was based on the unnecessarily locked doors without too much mention of the other unsafe working conditions. The partners were ultimately acquitted.³¹

On April 2, 1911, Jewish immigrant Rose Schneiderman gave an impassioned speech in response to the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster. She noted that this was not a singular tragedy, for, “every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers.” Schneiderman’s speech was a call to arms for the labor movement. She declared that the only people capable of making changes in the labor system were the workers themselves.³² Here she also spoke the famous phrase, “The woman worker needs bread, but she needs roses too.” Bread was meant to represent the very basic needs of survival, while roses were the rights and privileges that made life worth living. From this, the labor movement adopted the mantra “Bread and Roses.”³³

³¹ “Complete Transcript of *Triangle Fire* (New York, 1911),” Cornell University, <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=triangletrans>

³² Rose Schneiderman, “Protest of The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire” Jewish Women’s Archive, <http://jwa.org/media/excerpt-from-rose-schneidermans-april-2-1911-speech>

³³ Annelise Orleck, “Rose Scheiderman Biography,” Jewish Women’s Archive, 20 March, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/schneiderman-rose>

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One of the ways that women workers could take hold of their own destinies in the workplace was by gaining suffrage. Suffrage was key in having a voice in politics and society. These Jewish women whose lives depended on their work, served in the front lines of the labor movement and needed the vote as much as anyone else. However, suffrage was still withheld from the women of America. New Yorker Leonora O'Reilly understood clearly the significant connection between the workingwoman's labor movement and suffrage. Born to Irish immigrant parents in the Lower East Side, O'Reilly knew exactly what the young working Jewish women were facing because she was also experiencing it herself. In 1912, she gave a zealous testimony before a Joint Senate Committee.³⁴ After explaining her experience working in shirtwaist factories, starting when she was a girl, O'Reilly merged into firmly arguing for woman suffrage. She emphasized that in the current social system many women from poor families had to work in order to survive, and with that being the case, they needed the vote for self-protection. Suffrage would give these women more control over their work environment, which, as she claimed, should not be a privilege, but a right. O'Reilly knew that suffrage was very important for the workingwomen to support because it was necessary for their survival and that of their families: "All other woman ought to have it, but we working women must have it."³⁵

In 1894, a state constitutional convention was held in New York, the "great battleground for the rights of women."³⁶ Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper worked tirelessly during the lead up to the convention in Albany, New York. Supporters of women's suffrage sent out thousands of petitions and obtained 332,148 signatures, of which about half were women. Prominent signers of their petitions included New York tycoon John D. Rockefeller and

³⁴ Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 105.

³⁵ Leonora O'Reilly, "A Labor Organizer Speaks Out For Suffrage," in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, 106.

³⁶ Ida Husted Harper and Susan B. Anthony, *The History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 4*, (Indianapolis: The Hollenbeck Press, 1902), 842.

progressive Jewish activist, Rabbi Gustav Gottheil.³⁷ They battled valiantly, however the suffrage amendment was turned down, with ninety-eight votes opposed and fifty-eight votes in favor.³⁸

This failure of the petitions was not a deterrent for the women who were determined to claim their right to the vote; it was time for the movement to become louder and stronger. On May 21, 1910, the first substantial suffrage parade was organized in New York City. Several thousand women marched down the streets of New York City in the largest public spectacle so far organized by the suffrage movement. This parade was only the first of many to come. Although there was much fear within the movement about whether such a demonstration would appear ridiculous, parades quickly became a significant way the suffragettes could make their intentions known.³⁹ Such a public display was contrary to the typical social customs women were meant to adhere to, particularly those of the upper and middle classes.⁴⁰ Therefore, all classes of women parading together became a symbol of courage, integration, and independence.

Organizers were vital in putting together such large demonstrations. However, Jewish women faced some particular obstacles in participation. Harriet Stanton Blatch, a prominent New York suffrage activist, organized the May 21 march along with her Equality League of Self-Supporting Women. She organized parades to take place on Saturday morning. This schedule interfered with the Jewish observation of Sabbath. This meant that the marches were missing a substantial number of participating activist women. More than 320,000 Jewish immigrants lived in the Lower East Side in 1915, making up about sixty percent of the demographic.⁴¹ Of those 320,000, seventy-five percent of the

³⁷ Ibid., 850.

³⁸ Ibid., 852.

³⁹ Linda J. Lumsden, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹ "Jews – Lower East Side," Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 2005, <http://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/Jews.htm#les>.

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women supported women's suffrage. In 1915 and 1917 New York State suffrage referenda, Jewish immigrant districts showed stronger support than the rest of Manhattan, even the upper-classes.⁴² Inquiries were raised about moving the parades to evening in order to include the Jewish population. However, Blatch held strictly to her carefully detailed plans and argued that the majority of the marchers were young women who might not be allowed out so late by their parents and that the light of day made their demonstration more impressive. After some time, a compromise was made and the parade times were shifted to the afternoon when the Jewish women could join in at the end.⁴³ This was not the only obstacle that Jewish women faced in their activism. Anti-Semitism was just a present within the movement as it was in the society around them. Jews involved with movements such as woman suffrage were accused of trying to destroy white Christian life.⁴⁴ Though Jewish neighborhoods had the highest percentage of women's suffrage voters in New York City, they were blamed by the Woman Suffrage Party when it was turned down in a 1915 vote. Many suffrage leaders not only tried to gloss over the amount of support that came from the Jewish population, but they openly tried to stop it. Leading suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the mother of Harriet Stanton Blatch, attempted to pass an 1885 resolution in the National Woman Suffrage Association that stated, "dogmas incorporated in the religious creeds derived from Judaism" were "contrary to the law of God as revealed in nature and the precepts of Christ."⁴⁵ More of this negativity towards Judaism was written into her 1895 publication, *The Woman's Bible*, in which she even claims that the Jews maliciously

⁴² Glenn, 215.

⁴³ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriet Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1997), 141.

⁴⁴ Abraham D. Lavender, *Ethnic Women and Feminist Values: Toward a "New" Value System* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 153.

⁴⁵ Joyce Antler, "Feminism in the United States," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, March 1, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/feminism-in-united-states>.

“manipulated” the words of the Old Testament to subjugate women to men.⁴⁶

However, discrimination within the movement was not too large a deterrent for Jewish activist women. One Jewish woman who was very involved in leading the woman suffrage movement was Maud Nathan. Nathan was born to a prominent New York Jewish family in 1862 and could trace her ancestry to the early immigration wave of Sephardic Jews. Nathan was technically a part of “high society,” but she developed an ardent interest in the living and working conditions of the poor of New York. She helped found, and was president from 1897 to 1927 of the New York Consumers League, where she focused on exposing and improving working conditions in the city. She pushed consumers within the elite classes to look into the working conditions in the factories that produced the products they were buying. Nathan also saw her Judaism as all the more reason to be involved in social work, because a true person of faith should support the equality all of peoples and fight social injustice. Nathan’s husband, Frederick Nathan (sometimes referred to in the 20th century media as “Mrs. Maud Nathan”), was also very involved in activism, and he led the Men’s League for Equal Suffrage in New York.⁴⁷ Together, they were a suffrage power couple and Maud Nathan herself was a member of the Equal Suffrage League of New York. She recognized that the fight for better working conditions was a hopeless cause without the ability to vote. She also knew that the Labor Movement would struggle without the success of the woman suffrage movement.⁴⁸

In the “Old Country,” the importance of extended families and the community of the *shtetls* was a central part of their life.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Michigan: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 18.

⁴⁷ Anne Kaufman, “Maud Nathan Biography,” Jewish Women’s Archive, March 20, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/nathan-maud>.

⁴⁸ Seymour Brody, “Maud Nathan: Social Worker and Suffragist,” in *Jewish Heroes and Heroines of America*, Seymour Brody (Hollywood: Frederick Fell Publishers, 2004), 57.

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However, the journey across the ocean to the “New World” disturbed the traditional family unit. Families were split up out of financial necessity; fathers traveled ahead of their wives and children, or children would leave parents behind to make a life in America. Some family members would be turned back after not passing the stringent tests at the Ellis Island immigration center. This loss of both the nucleic and extended family and the established Jewish community, caused many to struggle with their new environment. As seen in several of the letters sent to “A Bintel Brief,” immigrants dealt with loneliness, a sense of a loss of culture, and struggle with adhering to orthodox Jewish beliefs. Too often parents could be overrun by the trials of poor immigrant life. Cahan received letters from mothers struggling with having to give up their children and wives searching for their runaway husbands. In 1908, one deserted wife, or *agunah*,⁴⁹ wrote to *The Forward* calling out to her missing husband to let him know that of their four children, now only two were still alive, and that he had “made them living orphans.”⁵⁰ However, with this disturbance also came a revival in the protection of the Jewish nucleic family. The establishment of the father, mother, and children, wherever it could be found, became a sacred institution in many instances.⁵¹ Traditionally, the family is placed in the women’s sphere, which left Jewish women with the burden of protecting this family security in the harsh immigrant living environment. Out of this sprung a new form of woman, a distinctly Eastern European Jewish immigrant version of “New Womanhood.” This version of the Jewish woman did not strive to leave the prescribed gender role entirely, yet she was a freer being. These women were workers and laborers, as well as mother and wives. A new relationship with the opposite sex developed as they began to work together toward common goals in unions and strikes. This “New Womanhood” was

⁴⁹ Isaac Metzker, “Introduction” in *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward*, 84.

⁵⁰ Deserted Wife, “A Bintel Brief,” in *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward*, 83.

⁵¹ Sanders, 351-352.

consistent of young Jewish women, who could labor all day in a factory, work in a union beside a man, and then go home and take care of domestic chores.⁵² According to historian Susan A. Glenn in her book *Daughters of the Shtetl*, “immigrant women’s consciousness of their new role and responsibility in public life was an essential element in their activism.” Their role as women now branched into the public “men’s” sphere, however, the issues they publically addressed still only pertained to the domestic “women’s” sphere. Their activism remained under the goal of improving domestic life through labor and suffrage.⁵³

This domestic women’s sphere was not unique to Jewish culture. The idea that women were the “softer” sex was prevalent in American culture as well. According to the “Cult of True Womanhood,” the Victorian ideal that women were supposed to adhere to, the four fundamental virtues of womanhood are “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” This belief gained particular strength in the mid nineteenth century and carried on into the twentieth century.⁵⁴ This Cult of True Womanhood elevated women to a special place in society; however, it also made them inferior to men. This was a struggle for women from all sorts of backgrounds. Due to familial upheaval caused by the immigration process, Jewish immigrant woman had a particular connection to the protection of their place in society. This is one of the main reasons that the fight for suffrage and labor rights was such an important goal.

Many women saw suffrage as the key to being able to protect this family structure. As with the labor movement, a number of Jewish women supported women’s suffrage because they saw it as necessary in order to fulfill their duty in the “women’s sphere.” Culturally, it makes sense that Jewish women would be involved in movements like woman suffrage. Suffrage, labor, peace, and birth control all had to do with women protecting

⁵² Glenn, 210.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁴ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, 18 (1966): 152.

their “women’s sphere.” Traditional culture places women in the role of protectors of the home and family. Particularly for Jewish women, as Glenn points out, this means working to support them.⁵⁵ Suffrage would give them a voice in the government and allow them more opportunity to influence things like labor, which affected their family roles.⁵⁶ Many suffragists openly recognized women’s traditional place in the domestic and private sphere and were not demanding a reorganization of the established cultural gender roles.

A suffragist leader and parade organizer in New York, Alice Paul, said in an interview many years after her involvement in the suffrage movement: “Women are certainly made as the peace-loving half of the world and the homemaking half of the world, the temperate half of the world. The more power they have, the better world we are going to have.”⁵⁷ Paul was a well-educated Quaker and founder of the National Women’s Party. Interestingly, she had attended for a while the New York School of Philanthropy and lived in Manhattan’s Lower East Side for a year, until she graduated in 1906. She did social work with the residents of tenement housing while living right next to a Jewish synagogue in the Lower East Side.⁵⁸ Paul believed in the equality of women with men, but also in the stereotype of women being the “softer” sex. However, Paul had witnessed for herself the struggles of working women in the Lower East Side and her activist plans to gain suffrage were, more often than not, anything but meek and lady-like. Paul spent time in jail after a protest, where she and her suffragist jail-mates participated in a hunger strike as a final form of protest.⁵⁹ They were calling for an entrance into the public

⁵⁵ Glenn, 21.

⁵⁶ Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women’s Activism, 1890-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 22.

⁵⁷ Interview of Alice Paul by Amelia R. Fry, “Conversations with Alice Paul: Woman suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment,” 401.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁹ Alice Paul, “Suffrage Militant Alice Paul Goes to Jail,” in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Susan Ware (New York: McGraw-Hill,

sphere, customarily under the domain of men.⁶⁰ Suffrage would grant them a certain amount of equality with men, yet the focus remained within their own socially constructed gender roles.

Opponents to the women's suffrage movement saw the consequences of granting women suffrage very differently. There were a large and growing number of woman suffrage supporters in New York, but there were still many who were opposed, even many women, both Jewish and Gentile. This group called themselves anti-suffragists or "anti's." There were a variety of different reasons why some Jewish women would not support woman suffrage. Some did not feel that it was their place, or that there were more important issues to deal with first. Many anti-suffragists saw the division of gender roles as the laws laid out by nature, and the fight for woman suffrage as trying to destroy those laws. An article published in the anti-suffrage *The Woman's Protest* titled "The Elimination of Sex" emphasized the absurdity of the woman suffrage movement, claiming the suffragists' goal was to eliminate sex, or even to create some sort of gender "hybrid."⁶¹ The author stressed the natural division of men and women as a vital cog in the instrumentation of society. In the author's opinion, "women can do without the ballot." In other words, this softer and gentler sex has their own inherent strengths and purposes, without needing to take on the characteristics of men. The final claim of the author is that, "this proposition to eliminate sex, under any circumstances, or for any purpose—is such an insult to womanhood that if one could stop laughing at the absurdity one must weep at the tragedy of misapprehension and misunderstanding." The fear is that the gendered structure of society will be completely broken down with the "elimination of sex" if the radical suffragists got their way.⁶²

2002), 112.

⁶⁰ Abraham D. Lavender, *Ethnic Women and Feminist Values: Toward a "New" Value System* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 5.

⁶¹ "The Elimination of Sex" *The Woman's Protest*, June, 1912, 4.

⁶² Ibid.

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Melissa R. Klapper points out in her book, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace* that although “there was no Jewish suffrage organization per se, there was also no anti-suffrage Jewish group,”⁶³ but there were instances when the roles of Jews in the movement were particularly noticed. One such Jewish-American anti-suffragist was Emma Goldman. Goldman was born in Russia in 1869, and though she was not an ardent supporter of religion, the culture of her family and her experiences in Russia under the controlling Czarist government, and the threat of the secret police, along with racial discrimination for her Jewish heritage laid the foundation for her activism in the United States. Rumblings of the Bolshevik revolution and their ideas for a free and equal population caught the ear of young Emma⁶⁴ and at the age of seventeen, she emigrated to America in search of independence. She experienced the harsh conditions of the factory system, and influenced by different factions of the labor movement, Goldman developed an anarchist view, and in 1889 she moved to New York to be in the center of the movement. From then on, Goldman adopted a completely activist lifestyle. In 1910, she published a collection of her works titled *Anarchism and Other Essays*, included in which is her essay on woman suffrage, where she argued that the fight for universal suffrage was not a worthy cause.⁶⁵ Political participation in an already corrupt government system was not what would set women free. Her anti-suffrage argument is that women will not be able to improve the country’s condition through voting and the equal suffrage movement itself is an unequal class entity, claiming that the movement was being carried only by the elite women of the city. Goldman argues that the woman suffrage movement grew up as a “parlor affair,” a plaything of the elite class of women and excluded the working class women. Rather than making themselves equal through hard

⁶³ Klapper, 101.

⁶⁴ “Emma Goldman (1869-1940)”, PBS American Experience, March 11, 2004, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goldman/peopleevents/p_goldman.html.

⁶⁵ Hippolyte Havel, “Biographical Sketch” in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, by Emma Goldman (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910).

work, like Russian women, American women were spending too much of their energy trying to outdo men.⁶⁶ Goldman suggests that the solution to the problems woman face in society must be solved through their own means, not through politics. They must free themselves from the roles American society has boxed them into.

Goldman criticizes suffragettes for seeking freedom from church, war, and home, but then arguing that voting will make them better Christians, citizens, and home keepers. She wants women to be able to break free of the stereotype of being pure, pious, and domestic, yet the suffrage movement, which claims to pursue freedom, is only perpetuating the idea. Goldman strongly believes that women are equal to men and are in all ways capable of the vote, but because they are completely equal there is no reason why they should be able to do a better job. If men have already ruined the political system, why would women, who are the same as men, make it any better? Goldman argues, “Woman’s greatest misfortune has been that she was looked upon as either angel or devil, her true salvation lies in being placed on earth; namely, in being considered human, and therefore subject to all human follies and mistakes.”⁶⁷

What is unique about Goldman’s anti-suffrage rhetoric comes from her anarchist standpoint. Most protests against woman suffrage fell along patriarchal and traditionalist lines: women belonged at home, politics would corrupt them, and they were not smart enough to handle the importance of the vote. The anti-suffrage newspaper *The Woman’s Protest* printed an article in 1912 on a New York woman suffrage parade. The author of this article accused the activists of having a socialist agenda, asking, “Where were the suffragists?”⁶⁸ However, even though the opposition, the suffrage movement in New York won its battle. In 1917, New York legislature declared that women in the state of

⁶⁶ Emma Goldman, *Woman Suffrage* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “Where Were The Suffragists?” *The Woman’s Protest*, June 1, 1912, 7.

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New York could vote. Woman suffrage won by an immense majority that was a stark contrast to the denial of 1894⁶⁹.

Often the woman suffrage movement is seen as an elite women's movement, pulled along by figureheads such as Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Stanton Blatch. However, there was so much more to it and so many others who had significant roles to play in its success. The figureheads of the movement were important, but they also needed the support at the grassroots level. Jewish immigrant women from Manhattan's Lower East Side were key members of the movement. Due to their culture and immigrant experience, they had special interest in defining their social roles. Their cultural background gave them a comfort in being economically involved in providing for their family. Protecting their families and livelihood was very important to them, which led to both their activism in the Labor and Woman suffrage movements. They recognized the need for both movements. Gaining suffrage was pivotal to the pursuit of political help for labor rights, and without the support from the working-class; the woman suffrage movement probably would not have had the influence and ultimate success that it did. Their socialist leanings, labor rights activism, and fight for suffrage all revolved around their inherent right to help their family to survive. Jewish immigrant women were driven by the need to protect their families during the upheaval of the immigration process, and they had a firm understanding that voting was basic "bread" needed in order to accomplish this.

⁶⁹ Ida Husted Harper and Susan B. Anthony, *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 5 (New York: J.J. Little and Ives, 1922.), 400.

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Katelyn Johnson graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in the spring of 2014 with her Bachelor of Arts in History, with an emphasis in United States History. She enjoys furthering her interest in history through study and travel. Since her senior year at CSUSB, Katelyn has had the opportunity to visit America's colonial roots on the East Coast several times and even take an international tour through China. Her hope for the next adventure is to explore New York City and its immigrant history. Katelyn also actively participates in the Lake Arrowhead Mountain Fife and Drum Alumni Corps, playing the traditional fife for different historical reenactments and events throughout the year. As well as working at a local Christian camp, and pursuing her love of history, Katelyn is loving married life with her wonderful high school sweetheart. She would like to thank her husband, Ben, for all his unwavering support and countless cups of coffee during her academic career. She would also like to express her appreciation for Dr. Joyce Hanson, who encouraged, challenged, and inspired her throughout this project.

