



Nettie Younker (in black) with her sisters and Younker cousins.
(Courtesy Tedi Macias)

Inching Toward Women's Equality: Tentative Steps in Three Small Jewish Communities

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During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of the American suffrage movement, women seemed poised to take on leadership roles across many facets of society, including within the Jewish community.¹ At the Jewish Women's Congress in 1893, Ray [Rachel] Frank gave the opening and closing prayers and delivered a speech on "Woman and the Synagogue," making national headlines—and catching the attention of Isaac S. Moses, Isaac Mayer Wise, and other Reform rabbis, who urged Frank to become the first Reform woman rabbi in America. Frank demurred, and it would take another eighty years for America to ordain its first female rabbi.²

That story of the advancement of Jewish women, which played out primarily in American cities with significant Jewish populations, was entrenched in politics, tradition, halakhah, and progressive ideology. But in other, smaller Jewish communities dotted across the American

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2 Sally Priesand, the first Reform woman rabbi in the United States, was not ordained until 1972. The first Reconstructionist woman was ordained in 1974, and the first Conservative woman in 1985. Orthodox women are now acting in some capacities as teachers and spiritual leaders but in a gender-segregated setting. See Pamela S. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 247, and Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination 1889–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

landscape, the story of Reform women acceding to leadership roles in their synagogues was a story of survival. Although this change was motivated mostly by logistical necessity, a growing shift in permissible practices aligned with the Reform movement in America supported its legitimacy. By the late 1870s, there were 136 cities that were home to between one hundred and one thousand Jews, plus many more with even smaller populations.³ By the turn of the twentieth century, many of those Jewish communities no longer existed; those that remained struggled with diminished populations and either less-than-qualified spiritual leaders or no rabbis at all. The need for lay leadership was clear—but in these small towns, where most men tended to focus on business as they let religion take a back seat, the responsibility vacuum created by declining membership and vacating rabbis was sometimes filled by women, who had the time, the education, and the interest to take on those roles.

Most scholars who have studied the history of Jewish women in America have focused on women living in cities with large concentrations of Jews, while scholars of small-town Jewish life and commerce have not paid much attention to women.⁴ Shari Rabin's *Jews on the Frontier* delineates the problems faced by nineteenth-century Jewish men—and women—living in remote pioneer outposts. She uses the term “pragmatic adaptation” to describe the various accommodations they made, bending rules to try to live as Jews individually and communally.⁵ This work takes

3 Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 338–349; 1895 Iowa State Census, www.iowadatacenter.org/Publications/iowa1895.pdf (accessed 18 October 2020). Of the ten small Iowa cities that Weissbach identified, only five still had more than one hundred Jews in 1895.

4 Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Nadell, *America's Jewish Women*; Weissbach, *Jewish Life*; Michael Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstructionist Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Anton Hieke, *Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South: Ambivalence and Adaptation* (Boston: De Gruyter Press, 2013).

5 In *Jewish Women Pioneering the Frontier Trail*, Jeanne Abrams cites many examples of trailblazing Western women, arguing that since Jewish women were among the first white settlers in the West, they faced fewer limits than elsewhere. Jeanne E. Abrams, *Jewish Women Pioneering the Frontier Trail: A History in the American West* (New York: New York University

Rabin's approach to study the niche role of women who crossed gender boundaries to preserve small-town Jewish life.

Pamela Nadell's *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, an in-depth history of the long path to women's ordination in America, provides much relevant background material, especially in detailing the story of Ray Frank, who got her start as a Sabbath school teacher, and several other women, decades later, whose path to serving as proto-rabbis began the same way.⁶ Some of them were wives of rabbis, who partnered with their husbands in significant ways, as described by Shuly Rubin Schwartz.⁷ Melissa Klapper's work is important in helping us understand the role that education played for the women poised to fill leadership roles within the Reform movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Klapper explains that, although fewer than a third of Jewish children received any formal religious education in 1880, "supplementary religious education marched in tandem with public education. Since girls ... often stayed in high school for longer periods, they were also more likely to stay in religious school."⁸ She describes the concurrent expansion of opportunities for Jewish women in secular and religious education and how the teaching profession—one of the few professions open to women at the turn of the century—attracted many Jewish women. At the same time, Klapper, Julia Richman, and other scholars acknowledge the uneven and haphazard quality of supplemental Jewish education, which they attribute to underfunding, parental apathy, poor curricular materials, but perhaps most importantly to the "ignorance and lack of preparation" of female Sabbath school teachers.⁹ Yet, as this article demonstrates,

Press, 2006); Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

6 The *San Francisco Chronicle* outlined Frank's qualifications for the role and said that Rabbi Isaac S. Moses urged her to accept an offer to be rabbi of a Chicago congregation. "First Woman Rabbi," *San Francisco Chronicle* (19 October 1893): 12.

7 Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

8 Melissa R. Klapper, "The History of Jewish Education in America, 1700–2000," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 196, 206.

9 In fact, when Samson Benderly set out to reform Jewish education, he recognized the

scattered throughout the United States, even in the smallest of towns, were exceptional women—highly intelligent, well informed, qualified, and motivated to teach in congregational schools and thereby become community leaders.

The phenomenon of women's expanded responsibilities in very small Reform congregations has, for the most part, been overlooked and is the emphasis of this article. By focusing on three small communities over the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, we will show that existential necessity forced the bending of old norms so that Jewish communities could survive. Success, it would seem, would be measured by survival. Two of these communities did not last long, while the third managed to maintain a temple until 2019. Nevertheless, their short-lived actions provided creative building blocks that are now an accepted part of the Reform Jewish landscape. These three small cities—Louisiana, Missouri; Keokuk, Iowa; and Quincy, Illinois—were chosen to illustrate how expanding women's responsibilities, in fits and starts, was an attempt to address problems faced in congregational governance, worship, education, and leadership. Located along a ninety-mile stretch of the upper Mississippi River, these communities were connected to one another and to the outside world through numerous familial and business relations, as well as through the Jewish press.¹⁰ Each town's circumstances and shortcomings were so unique that different formulas needed to be applied, but they are probably representative of many other small towns of the era.

The shift that gave women enhanced power within their communities grew from their roles as devoted congregational workers, teachers, and Sabbath school directors. It was made possible when intelligent

importance of educating Jewish girls and relied heavily on female teachers. Julia Richman spelled out in great detail the many problems with Jewish education at the turn of the century and proposed thoughtful remedies. Julia Richman, "The Jewish Sunday School Movement in the United States," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 12, no. 4 (July, 1900): 563–601; Melissa R. Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 59–143; Klapper, "History of Jewish Education," 198; Jonathan B. Krasner, *The Bendersly Boys & American Jewish Education* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

10 Cynthia Francis Gensheimer and Anton Hieke, "Heimat and Home: Mobility Among Jews in Quincy, Illinois," *American Jewish History* 102, no. 2 (2018): 255–282.

girls who had been confirmed in Reform congregations went on to become Sabbath school teachers in numbers far greater than their brothers. Although this was true in larger cities as well, it was in small-town congregations without rabbis that women assumed added responsibility out of a fervent desire to keep their congregations viable. Such are the stories of Sadie Wald in Louisiana and Rebekah Lesem in Quincy.

The smallest congregations had always struggled to attract qualified spiritual leaders, but, paradoxically, they became increasingly marginalized once Hebrew Union College (HUC), founded in 1875, began ordaining rabbis with credentials adapted to the American way of life.¹¹ American Reform leaders had hoped that such a seminary would produce enough qualified rabbis, including some circuit preachers, to serve even congregations in

11 Isaac Spiesberger of Keokuk described how some “country” congregations had disbanded for lack of qualified rabbis: Of the half dozen applicants from all over Europe, one is chosen who “has a good voice as canter [*sic*], delivers a tolerable sermon, appears to know how to instruct children in the Hebrew and German branches....” The congregation finds, however, that “one is addicted to strong drink, another keeps bad company, a third is not fit to teach our children, a fourth is so bigoted and headstrong, that he is bound to carry out his own peculiar ideas.” Cassi [Isaac] Sembach, “Keokuk, Iowa,” *The Israelite* (4 August 1871): 6. Cassi Sembach was a pen name of Isaac Spiesberger, an immigrant from Sembach Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. Many correspondents to nineteenth-century newspapers used initials or pseudonyms, some of which were playful. Cassi, for instance, is Isaac spelled backwards. The correspondents’ names will be stated when the authors of this article can make positive identifications. Prior to being hired in Keokuk in 1887, Rabbi Samuel M. Laski had served at least twelve other congregations. In 1899, a rabbinical group voted to send him \$50 because he was starving, “having been deserted by successive congregations.” “One Sabbath Enough,” *Pittsburgh Dispatch* (22 May 1889): 6. Hired in 1889, Rabbi Jacob Korn remained in Keokuk only fifteen months. Over a span of about three years surrounding this time, he worked also in Woodville, Mississippi, and Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. Congregation B’nai Israel Minute Book, 1 September 1889, 2 February 1890, and 31 August 1890, The Arnold and Deanne Kaplan Collection of Early American Judaica, MS 56, Codex 026.1, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter Katz Center). A digital scan of the minute book can be found at <https://colenda.library.upenn.edu/catalog/81431-p3df6k85h> (accessed 28 October 2020). Letter to the editor from Bruder Lustig, Woodville, MS., dated 5 December 1890, *The American Israelite* (18 December 1890): 5; “Personal and Pertinent,” *Pensacola News* (14 April 1894); hankstories.com/anna-bernstein-korn-a-tragic-story-chapter-5 (accessed 18 October 2020).

far-flung places, but HUC graduates gravitated to prestigious pulpits in large cities, and circuit preaching never succeeded for want of viable funding. Accreditation called into further question the employment of some whose credentials and abilities were suspect. Calling positions in small southern towns “rabbinical graveyard[s],” historian Adam Mendelsohn described them as “often poorly paid, isolated backwater postings that lacked prestige and opportunities for advancement, but that came with a taxing job description.”¹² Louisiana was never able to afford a full-time rabbi, and by 1900, both Quincy, with twenty members, and Keokuk, with twenty-one, had also become “rabbinical graveyards.”¹³

During the mid-1870s, however, rather than being graveyards, places like Quincy and Keokuk nurtured ambitious young immigrant rabbis.¹⁴ The experiences of Rabbis Isaac S. Moses in Quincy and Ferdinand Becker in Keokuk prove another of Mendelsohn’s points: that frontier congregations offered “latitude for innovation and independence.”¹⁵ Moses and Becker, while fulfilling the demand for capable rabbis who could preach in both German and English, presided over their congregations during periods of rapid depopulation and, as seen below, tackled the associated threats in creative ways that empowered women.

Early Reform and Traditional Gender Roles

Early reformers in Germany advocated egalitarianism in matters of prayer and worship. In 1837, Rabbi Abraham Geiger declared, “The social position of women in Judaism remains unnatural.”¹⁶ Historian Michael A. Meyer describes Geiger’s position as “proposing that women and men should be entirely equal in religion except where differentiation flowed

12 Adam Mendelsohn, “Two Far South: Rabbinical Responses to Apartheid and Segregation in South Africa and the American South,” *Southern Jewish History* 6 (2003): 63.

13 *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. II, 1900–1901 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1900), 245, 254.

14 Isaac Mayer Wise through his travels and networking knew many such congregations very well and orchestrated assignments for young rabbis he thought could benefit from serving for a few years in such places.

15 Mendelsohn, “Two Far South,” 66.

16 Goldman cites this quotation among others as being from Geiger, “Stellung des weiblichen Geschlechtes,” 1–14. Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, 25, 223.

from natural distinctions between the sexes.”¹⁷ Geiger in Germany and, subsequently, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in the United States took the lead in pushing for many changes, but early reformers quickly discovered that their ideas clashed with the traditions of their congregants.

Beginning in the 1840s, when he occupied his first American pulpit, Wise attempted to forge “a pathway to reform.”¹⁸ He introduced mixed choirs and mixed congregational seating, but he never achieved perfect equality for the women of his congregations, even when he moved to Cincinnati. In his 1857 Reform prayer book, *Minhag America*, Wise declared, “Ten Adults, Male Or Female, Make a Minyan.”¹⁹ A *minyan*, or the required minimum who must be present when the Torah is read or the mourner’s *kaddish* is recited, had traditionally been ten adult Jewish men. In this very sharp break from tradition, Wise promulgated a controversial stance that dated back to the inception of Reform Judaism in Germany, but which had not been universally adopted there or in America.²⁰ Even among the American congregations

17 Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 140.

18 American rabbis Isaac Leeses, Max Landsberg, Kaufmann Kohler, Emil Hirsch, Isaac S. Moses, Joseph Stolz, and Leopold Wintner, among others, also advocated for expanded female participation.

19 This directive can be found on page twelve of the 1872 edition, wherein it states: “Ten adults, males or females, to be a *minyan*.” Wise prepared a draft of *Minhag America* in 1847. At the time there were numerous *minhagim* in use around the United States. Some were brought over from Europe; others were written in the United States. Each reflected a particular style of religious practice. Wise wanted his *minhag* to reflect the American environment and have broad appeal. It shortened and/or eliminated some of the traditional services and prayers, and it was written in both Hebrew and English. Although first published in 1857, the 1872 edition is the one that was most widely disseminated, especially in the southern and western United States. The first edition of the prayer book was titled *Minhag Amerika*, but we use the later spelling. Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 253–254.

20 At the Frankfort Conference in 1845, Samuel Adler said, “The custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service is only a custom and has no religious basis.” David Philipson, *The Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 260–261; Wise’s inclusion of women in the count for a *minyan* was extremely controversial at the time. “Rabbi Wise and the Jewish Woman,” *The American Israelite* (8 November 1923): 4.

that adopted the new prayer book, it is likely that few immediately made the change to count women toward a *minyan*.²¹ However, the importance of this change in wording cannot be overvalued, because a respected authority figure realized that, for the Reform movement to progress toward modernity, it had to make women full and equal partners in religious practices. This would turn out to be a slow process since it would require the acquiescence of male lay leaders and a generational shift in thinking. Wise's remarks in 1876 show that he was still striving to make that happen in both congregational governance and religious practices:

The principle, the advancement of the cause, justice to woman, and the law of God inherent in every human being, require that *woman be made a member of the congregation, of equal rights with any man; that her religious feelings be given full scope to develop and she be fully attached to the sacred cause of Israel*. All laws contrary to this principle, on any statute book of a congregation, should be wiped out as reminiscences of barbarism and degrading to the cause of religion.²² (Emphasis added.)

David Philipson, in his respected history of the Reform movement, is even more emphatic: "Nowhere was the orientalism of the synagogue more pronounced than in the inferior position assigned to woman in the public religious life."²³

21 In 1867, for instance, counting women was still enough of a novelty that *The Occident*, a leading national Jewish newspaper with a traditionalist bent, published the following searing statement: "One of our doctors [rabbis] permitted women to be taken as a *Minyan* in a place where there are men enough, if only they would attend worship." "Education," *The Occident* (December 1867): 423.

22 Isaac Mayer Wise, "Women in the Synagogue," *The American Israelite* (8 September 1876): 4. Isaac Mayer Wise, "*Das Recht des Weibe in der Gemeinde* [The Rights of Women in the Congregation]," *Die Deborah* (22 March 1867): 146. Wise criticized Orthodox rabbis for relying on the Talmudic opinion of one rabbi to prohibit singing by women. "Does the Canon Law permit Ladies to sing in the Synagogue," *The Israelite* (10 August 1855): 1. For good general discussions of Wise's positions, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1981), 292–295, and Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 20–21.

23 Philipson, *The Reform Movement*, 509.

Within a generation, the Jews in our three communities would adopt or identify with Reform Judaism. The challenges of reaching consensus on what traditions should be retained or discarded required some adroit persuasion and varied with each localized environment and its individual personalities. An across-the-board challenge was the declining participation of men in congregational life caused by demographic changes, indifference, and economic competition.

The changes in Reform practice in America must be considered against the backdrop of the American frontier environment. Initially, few women aspired to break from the traditional role of presiding over the home and rearing children, and the opportunities to do so were few and far between. As Jews immigrated in the mid-nineteenth century and fanned out to small towns across the American landscape, male and female benevolent and burial societies sprang up as the seeds for building community.²⁴ Gender specific in almost every case, these societies filled the pressing requirements of buying land for a cemetery and preparing corpses for burial, and also seeing more generally to the needs of fellow Jews. Although many small communities lacked the numbers to hold regular weekly worship services, each year at the High Holidays peddlers came in from the countryside, and local men led services in makeshift quarters. Hundreds of communities began this way, because they could rely on the many men who had the necessary religious training. As their numbers grew, Jews, even in the smallest of places, envisioned a future with regular services in a synagogue under the direction of a *hazzan* [cantor], who could serve also as teacher, *shohet* [slaughterer], and/or *mohel* [circumciser].

During this time, nearly all the Jewish women who settled along the upper Mississippi River were German-speaking immigrants who aspired

24 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Moral Sublime: Jewish Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Writing a Modern Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Salo W. Baron*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (New York and New Haven: The Jewish Museum and Yale University Press, 2006), 36–54; William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

to enter the middle class. As Marion Kaplan says of Jewish women in Germany:

For women, in fact, *religion and family were one totality*. Whereas Judaism relegated women to a peripheral role in the synagogue, it placed them on a pedestal in the home.... Family life and the observance of the Sabbath, holidays, and dietary laws were clearly women's domain.²⁵

Imbued with strong Jewish identities and religiosity, Jewish women had carried these ideals with them from Europe. After prospering during or immediately after the Civil War, many Jewish immigrants in small communities along the Mississippi River did become solidly middle class. Nearly all the women married young. Idealized as spiritual and pious, they were charged with maintaining bourgeois households and rearing well-behaved, educated Jewish children.

Ascertaining the degree of Jewish literacy among the women in these communities is difficult. Most came from small central European towns, where they might have received a few hours a week of Jewish education at home from a tutor, as part of their regular schooling, or in a supplemental school.²⁶ According to Kaplan, "boys received far more intense religious and Hebrew instruction to prepare them for the Bar Mitzvah. It was not uncommon, therefore, while services went on below them, for women to read the *tkhines* or German prayers and translations of the Hebrew services and to chat with other women."²⁷ Revered for their special place within the home, women prayed "in their own way in their own space."²⁸

25 Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70.

26 In Hechingen, Germany, as early as 1838, the rabbi taught a weekly coed class before one of the Sabbath services. Boys attended up to age eighteen and girls until age sixteen. Manuel Werner, "Die Juden in Hechingen als religiöse Gemeinde," *Zeitschrift für Hohenzollerische Geschichte* 21, no. 108 (1985): 102.

27 The immigrant women who settled along the Mississippi River would have likely prayed in German and did not recite the *tkhines*, which were Yiddish private prayers and devotions for women. Kaplan, *Jewish Middle Class*, 66.

28 *Ibid.*, 65.

These women's American-born daughters would break the constraints of their mothers' upbringing. At the end of the nineteenth century, as explained below, these young women constituted the backbones of their small-town congregations. Although this sort of shift was occurring in large cities, too, it was in small cities that reservations about breaking gender rules were overcome out of necessity, in an effort to preserve Judaism.

Early Jewish Settlement on the “Upper Mississippi River”

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Mississippi River's 2,300 meandering miles constituted the heartland's major commercial highway. Because it was also a jumping-off point for Western exploration, the river invited the creation of many settlements for trade, ideal for the typical immigrant Jewish peddler and small merchant.²⁹ The three communities that are the focus of this article are merely dots on a very large canvas; they represent hundreds of places where Jews set up shop, married, started families, and hoped to live out their dreams.

Phineas and Delia Block settled in Louisiana, Missouri, in 1825. While Phineas operated a mill and a commission and grocery business, he also acted as “Spiritual Adviser to all the Hebrews for many miles around.”³⁰ Phineas and Delia's close relative, Louisa Block, and her husband, Abraham Jonas, settled further up the Mississippi River in Quincy in 1838.³¹ The first permanent Jewish residents of Keokuk

29 At this time the key commercial internal river ports were Cincinnati on the Ohio River; St. Louis at the confluence of the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi Rivers; Memphis; and New Orleans. See Timothy R. Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820–1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), for a detailed account of the impact of these rivers on the communities mentioned in this article.

30 Block served also as a *shohet* and probably a *mohel*. The closest community of Jews to Louisiana was ninety miles away in St. Louis. “The Hebrews for many miles around” consisted of peddlers and traders who roamed the area. Charles Edward Pancoast, *A Quaker Forty-Niner: The Adventures of Charles Edward Pancoast on the American Frontier*, ed. Anna Paschall Hannum (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930), 43–44. Pancoast was quoted in Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis*, vol. 1 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 37.

31 Jonas had previously been active in politics and in the Masons in Kentucky, and he

arrived in the mid-1850s from western Poland and southwestern Germany. In fact, most Jews in the three towns were from southern Germany or western Poland.³²

As these communities attempted to establish congregations, they sought to reach agreement on a range of issues, including the form of *minhag* (ritual). Lee Shai Weissbach writes of the struggles in these places to resolve conflicts amicably: “There is reason to believe that battles over the adoption of Reform were especially intense in small communities . . . because the limited size of smaller settlements inhibited the establishment of dissident congregations when conflicts arose.”³³ In Quincy and Keokuk, these compromises eventually resulted in single Reform congregations, which would have a profound effect on the status of women.

The region’s Jewish population peaked around 1870, when Quincy had both a traditional and Reform congregation, Keokuk had one congregation beginning to shift from traditional to Reform, and Louisiana had none.³⁴ By this time, however, the frontier had moved beyond the Mississippi River, railroads were displacing river traffic, and big-city industrialization and immigration concentrated capital in growing urban areas such as Chicago and St. Louis.³⁵

followed this path in Illinois. Eventually he and Lincoln became very close friends. See Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).

32 See Gensheimer and Hieke, “Heimat and Home.”

33 Weissbach, *Jewish Life*, 159.

34 Gensheimer estimates that just under five hundred Jews lived in Quincy in 1870, fewer than one hundred in Keokuk, and around forty in Louisiana. Precise numbers are impossible due to the transience of the population, especially among young single male peddlers. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Jews in other nearby small places, such as Hannibal, Missouri, and Pittsfield, Illinois, organized “associations” to conduct worship and education. Hannibal eventually erected a synagogue. Unfortunately, all records of these groups have been lost. Farther up the Mississippi beyond Keokuk, Jews could be found in Iowa in Ft. Madison, Burlington, Davenport, Clinton, and Dubuque, and in Rock Island, Illinois. See Oscar Fleishaker, *The Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community on the Banks of the Mississippi River*, doctoral dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1957.

35 Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines: Koch Brothers Printing Co, 1904), 305–306.

Counting the Women

By the mid-1870s, declining Jewish populations in small towns, widespread indifference among Reform Jews, and general business slowdowns had unforeseen and deleterious effects on Jewish life along this stretch of the Mississippi. The decline in synagogue membership and its corresponding effect on congregational operations was so precipitous as to threaten the survival of some of these young congregations. Quincy provides one example of how this created a new reality.

Initially, Quincy's congregational leaders thought these changes were temporary and underestimated the degree to which they threatened their community. After all, these Jewish pioneers believed that Quincy would be a magnet for other Jews. Individually, most of them had found a satisfactory financial footing, while collectively they had established two congregations whose impressive structures represented lasting permanence. In 1876, however, Lewin H. Cohen, secretary of B'nai Sholom, reported to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC):

I am sorry to report a decrease in our membership on this occasion, but hope next year to do the opposite. Death, insanity and removal from the city on account of business misfortunes here injured us by [depriving] us of members good & true but trust for better in the future.³⁶

Not only did this exodus imperil the financial solvency of Quincy's congregation, but it drained the workforce as well. There were still important tasks to tend to, such as looking out for the sick and poor, educating children, celebrating holidays, maintaining and heating the temple, and paying the rabbi's salary. Quincy's Jewish women, through their various benevolent associations and volunteerism, had shouldered a portion of the burden for all of those activities, demonstrating both their capacity and capability to

36 Lewin H. Cohen to Lipman Levy, secretary of the UAHC, 10 March 1876, box A1-3, folder 11, MS-72, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter AJA). Reflecting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Temple B'nai Sholom in 1895, Rabbi Elias Eppstein recalled: "The old members went home [died] and the younger generation moved to larger cities. The decrease really commenced immediately after the Chicago fire, in 1872, when many went out in search of big fortunes." Shirachirim [Elias Eppstein], "Quincy, Ill.," *The American Israelite* (15 August 1895): 8.

manage communal tasks. In many respects, they provided the social fabric that kept the community together. From a modern perspective, by this time, it would seem logical to assume that leaders in small-town Jewish communities would have considered whether it was appropriate to elevate the status of women in both religious and congregational life. However, even though a few rabbis had begun to advocate for enlarged responsibilities for women, this did not garner broad appeal. In fact, the nation's leading Reform rabbis made clear that they did not entertain the thought of women as the community's future teachers and leaders.

Shortly after HUC was founded to train future rabbis, an 1877 rabbinical conference considered a proposal to establish a "Hebrew young ladies' seminary" for instruction in "Hebrew, English, German and French, including music and the arts, also a practical knowledge of domestic duties."³⁷ The conference participants rejected the proposal, however, feeling that it should first put HUC on a firm financial footing. A leading proponent voiced his disappointment by saying that he was "of the opinion that a Hebrew Young Ladies' Seminary is as essential to the prosperity of Judaism as the College [HUC] is for the education of teachers and rabbis in Israel."³⁸ Implicit in this discussion were two parallel goals: to prepare women to be good Jewish wives and mothers, and to prepare men to be rabbis who would serve as teachers. Nevertheless, women in these small towns had as much interest in the affairs and survival of their communities as men, and survival was the paramount concern.

In our three communities, the survival challenge manifested itself in different ways. For Keokuk, the initial challenge was to maintain a *minyan* to ensure regular worship services, the most important reason for the congregation's existence. For Quincy, there was first the need to persuade unaffiliated Jews to join the synagogue and become active participants by incorporating them into synagogue governance, and subsequently the need to maintain the religious school. Louisiana's Jews were so few that they were never able to sustain a permanent rabbi; they needed to find someone within their ranks to assume the responsibility for their children's education.

37 "The Fourth Council of the United Hebrew Congregations," *The American Israelite* (20 July 1877): 5.

38 "Rejected," *The American Israelite* (27 July 1877): 4.

Making a *Minyan*

Once a community organized a public worship pattern, ensuring a *minyan* emerged as a new challenge. Liberated from the strictures that applied in Europe, many men began moving away from traditional Saturday synagogue attendance, thus imperiling regular worship in many localities.

According to the long-standing tradition mentioned above, women had not historically counted toward the *minyan*. Rachel Biale explains that both men and women have traditionally been required to pray, but that “women’s prayers remained essentially private, personal, and spontaneous supplication... Prayer in public requires the presence of a quorum, a *minyan*, and usually takes place in a synagogue.... The definition of a quorum does not only exempt women, it totally excludes them.”³⁹

As already mentioned, even among the American congregations that adopted the *Minhag America* prayer book, few were likely to have made an immediate change to count women toward a *minyan*. Indeed, there is no consensus as to exactly when American Reform congregations as a group began to move away from the *minyan* requirement altogether. On the one hand, Jacob Rader Marcus speculates that by 1869, “it was probable that ... the most liberal congregations disregarded the need for an all-male quorum when they conducted services.”⁴⁰ Yet Jews in Quincy and Keokuk, adopters of the *Minhag America*, still heeded the concept of *minyan* well into the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴¹

39 For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Rachel Biale, *Women & Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women’s Issues in Halakic Sources* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 20–24.

40 Marcus, *American Jewish Woman*, 56–57. Among the positions taken by the rabbis that affected women were equalizing the status of the woman at a marriage service and declaring divorce and the determination of the death of a missing spouse to be civil matters. The rabbis present were Kaufmann Kohler, L. Mayer, S.H. Sonenschein, M. Schlesinger, Isaac Mayer Wise, David Einhorn, and Bernhard Felsenthal. David Polish, “The Changing and the Constant in the Reform Rabbinate,” *American Jewish Archives* 35, no. 2 (1983): 270. Unfortunately, Marcus does not elaborate on whether “disregarding the need for an all male quorum,” meant dispensing with the quorum all together or permitting a mixed or all-female quorum.

41 Reform Rabbi Eppstein, who served congregations in Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Quincy during the nineteenth century, wrote in his diary that because he lacked a “quorum,” he was at times unable to hold services and at other times held only “informal” services or did not read from the Torah. When the *Union Prayer Book* replaced the *Minhag America* in

In 1860, while visiting the small town of Lafayette, Indiana, Wise encountered the *minyan* problem firsthand. He observed a young congregation of about thirty men committed to their businesses, but not, in his opinion, commensurately committed to their synagogue. Wise advised:

I am sorry to say, that the *Hazan* frequently finds no *minyan* (ten male adults) in that the men of Lafayette, like the men of so many other towns, were not committed to their Synagogue on Sabbath. I, therefore, instructed him to count the ladies to a *minyan*, not to suspend the divine service, *as the act of confirming girls puts an end to the idea, that females are not members of the Synagogue as well as males.*⁴² (Emphasis added.)

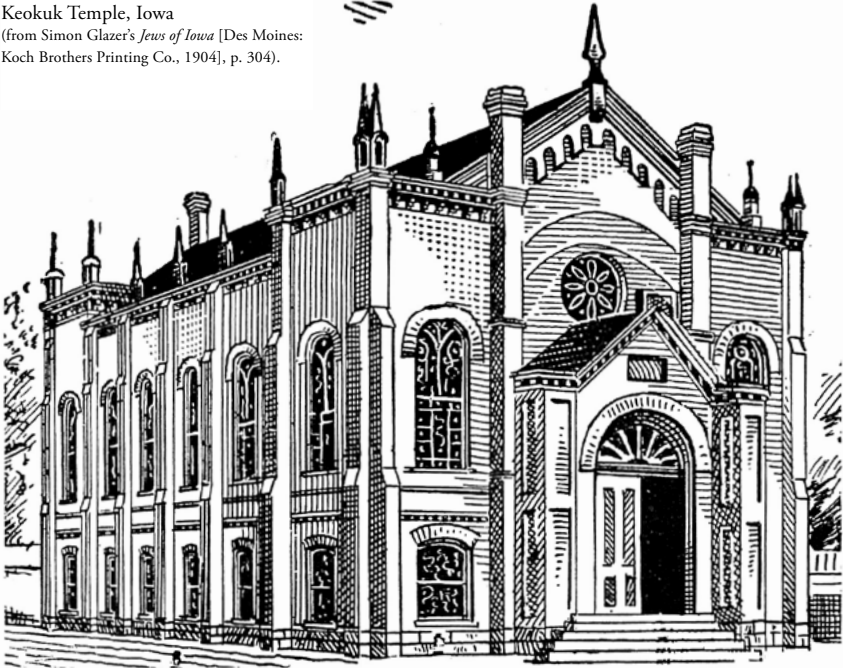
In Wise's mind, the confirmation of girls qualified women to be full participants in congregational life.⁴³ This shift in thinking would prove to be prescient and an important key to placing women on an equal footing with men.

1892, all mention of *minyan* requirements was gone. Isaac S. Moses wrote the first edition of the *Union Prayer Book*, which was then published with some modifications by The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). Wise himself gave up the *Minhag America* and yielded to the *Union Prayer Book*. *Diary of Rabbi Elias Eppstein*, 3 January 1873, Milwaukee; 18 September 1880, 16 April 1881, 20 April 1881, 17 June 1882, and 19 May 1883, Kansas City; 7 January 1898, 9 November 1901, 5 April 1902, Quincy; *Elias Eppstein Diaries*, MS-220, AJA; "Isaac S. Moses," *The American Israelite* (13 December 1917): 3.

42 The authors thank Shari Rabin for bringing this example to their attention. "Lafayette, Ind.," *The Israelite* (6 January 1860): 214. Sandford C. Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (Lafayette, IN: Courier Steam Book and Printing Co., 1860). Unfortunately, the authors were not able to establish whether the congregation in Lafayette heeded Wise's advice to count women toward a *minyan* in 1860. No further discussion of the matter appeared in *The American Israelite*, and the congregation continued to use traditional ritual until it revised its constitution in 1876. Irit Erez-Boukai, "On the Banks of the Wabash: Jewish Life in Greater Lafayette, Indiana 1840–1960," *Indiana Jewish History* 31 (August 1996): 16, <http://images.indianahistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16797coll18/id/1057/rec/1> (accessed 19 October 2020).

43 Wise's thinking suggests that confirmation qualified women to participate in prayer, yet traditionally there was no litmus test for counting men toward a *minyan*; any male over the age of thirteen counted, regardless of his level of education or literacy. Moreover, neither bar mitzvah nor confirmation was ever made a condition for communal prayer or congregational membership. See, for instance, David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *Central Conference of American Rabbis* (1890–1891): 47.

Keokuk Temple, Iowa
 (from Simon Glazer's *Jews of Iowa* [Des Moines:
 Koch Brothers Printing Co., 1904], p. 304).



KEOKUK TEMPLE

Keokuk, Iowa: “Opening Divine Service If Ten Ladies Are Present”

In 1863, after a period of intense factionalism, Keokuk’s congregation of sixty-two men was able to incorporate as Congregation B’nai Israel. They adopted the *Minhag Ashkenaz*, which the city’s German element favored.⁴⁴ By 1869 and still without a permanent home, the congregation adopted the *Minhag America* prayer book, thus joining the ranks of the American Reform movement.⁴⁵ During the Panic of 1873, after a mass exodus of Jews from the city, the congregation had dwindled to around fifteen men, not enough to ensure a *minyan* for regular religious services.⁴⁶

44 Jews had been worshipping communally in Keokuk since the mid-1850s, but Congregation B’nai Israel’s charter was granted in September, 1863. Dr. [Max] Lilienthal, “Keokuk, Iowa,” *The American Israelite* (3 August 1877): 4–5.

45 Fleishaker, *Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community*, 195. The congregation joined the UAHC in 1874.

46 “Keokuk, Iowa,” *The Israelite* (17 January 1873): 7.

Like rabbis in many small communities, Keokuk's young Rabbi Ferdinand Becker found the worshippers at services, particularly on Sabbath morning, to be increasingly populated by women.⁴⁷ His reflective letter to *The American Israelite*, dated 8 November 1875, spells out how the congregation resolved the dilemma of ensuring a full *minyan*:

I can not help giving credit to the ladies, both old and young, who attend the divine service very regularly on Friday evening, as well as on Sabbath morning, on holidays and on all other special occasions. They feel well pleased because *we adopted the rule to open divine service if ten ladies are present, as well as if ten men are present*. Many a time we could not open at all if we had to wait for our men, who always make the well-known excuse: "We like to come, but we can not lose the best business day of the week, so we can not leave the store."⁴⁸ (Emphasis added.)

Becker provides no clues as to how long the congregation—or Becker individually—had considered liberalizing its *minyan* requirement. Nor do we know whether it was a contentious decision or whether Wise's edict about equality in the *minyan* was even considered. No rabbi could unilaterally make this change, because it required approval of the congregation's male members. The women presumably would not have pressed publicly for this change, as it would have seemed inappropriate. However, the men could not deny the obvious religious devotion of their wives and daughters, nor could they deny that the women's participation was necessary to sustain the congregation into the future.⁴⁹

47 In 1872, at the age of twenty, Ferdinand Becker arrived in New York and within two years had been hired to be Keokuk's rabbi. In a letter to the editor of *The American Israelite*, a correspondent from Keokuk wrote: "We have been fortunate in securing the services of a good minister, Rev. Ferdinand Becker, who, though a very young man, is working well.... The manner in which he conducted the Confirmation ceremonies on Shabuoth evening, gave great satisfaction." Becker was born in Gaugrehweiler, a hamlet southwest of Frankfurt. Sembach, letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (10 July 1874): 5.

48 F.B. [Ferdinand Becker], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (19 November 1875): 5.

49 For a more detailed explanation of the divisions among Keokuk's Jews, see Michael J. Bell, "'True Israelites of America': The Story of the Jews of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994): 94.

49 Throughout Rabin's *Jews on the Frontier*, she mentions many places—with and without rabbis—where Jews struggled to make a *minyan*, including Keokuk. She and the authors of

Comprising a *minyan* was not the only way these women sustained the congregation. These immigrant women also felt that they fulfilled a religious obligation through charitable deeds and financial support of their congregation. A few years before they began to be counted for a *minyan*, Keokuk's Jewish women purchased the land for a synagogue and donated it to the congregation with the proviso that it be used for that purpose. Completed in 1877, the resulting building was one of Keokuk's finest buildings: Iowa's first synagogue.⁵⁰ Rabbi Max Lilienthal singled out this group for emulation by saying, "The Jewish ladies stand unrivaled as to this point; they have set a noble example to all the sisters throughout the land. Three cheers for the Jewish ladies of Keokuk!"⁵¹

The Keokuk *minyan* decision may have stimulated similar debates in other small towns dealing with worship attendance problems.⁵² In 1888, another small congregation, this one in Topeka, Kansas, informed the readership of *The American Israelite* that "the ladies make up the full quorum" on Friday evenings. The explanation was clear: "The religious ardor of our masculine members would hardly stand the test of a high degree Fahrenheit."⁵³

Counting women toward a *minyan* did not lead to the penetration of other boundaries in Keokuk. Women did not gain further religious

this article discovered the Keokuk example independently. Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier*, 49.

50 Simon Glazer explains that the women's benevolent society spearheaded efforts by buying the land in 1872. He says, "The soul of the Keokuk Jewry were the godly ladies." Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 303. Through a series of annual masquerade balls attended by Jews and Christians, the Keokuk women had raised the funds to purchase the lot and then quickly raised \$750 toward the synagogue's construction. This encouraged the men, who raised an additional \$2,250 in 1874. By the time Rabbi Lilienthal visited Keokuk to dedicate the temple in 1877, the congregation had paid off all but \$1,000 of the building's \$12,000 cost. Dr. [Max] Lilienthal, "Keokuk, Iowa," *The American Israelite* (3 August 1877): 4-5. "Keokuk, Iowa," *The Israelite* (17 January 1873): 7; Sembach, letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (10 July 1874): 5. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 191.

51 Dr. [Max] Lilienthal, "Keokuk, Iowa," *The American Israelite* (3 August 1877): 4.

52 Even though the congregation in Davenport, Iowa, had adopted Reform as their worship mode in 1879, it took ten more years before women were counted as part of the *minyan*. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 280-281.

53 Hecla, "Topeka, Kan.," *The American Israelite* (20 April 1888): 2.

privileges, such as reading from the Torah or leading the prayer service. Their advancement toward that end was gradual; it grew as girls attended Sabbath school and were confirmed. Even though Keokuk's women achieved *minyán* status in 1875, no woman led any part of worship until five years later. Even then it was a "novel occurrence," during the confirmation service at Shavuot in 1880, as "two girls, namely Misses Bertha Spiesberger and Nettie Younker, assistants in the Sabbath-school, opened and closed the services with prayer."⁵⁴ The two girls were from Keokuk's leading Jewish families. Unlike their immigrant mothers, these American-born girls attended public school and studied Jewish history, holidays, ritual, theology, and some German and Hebrew alongside the boys.

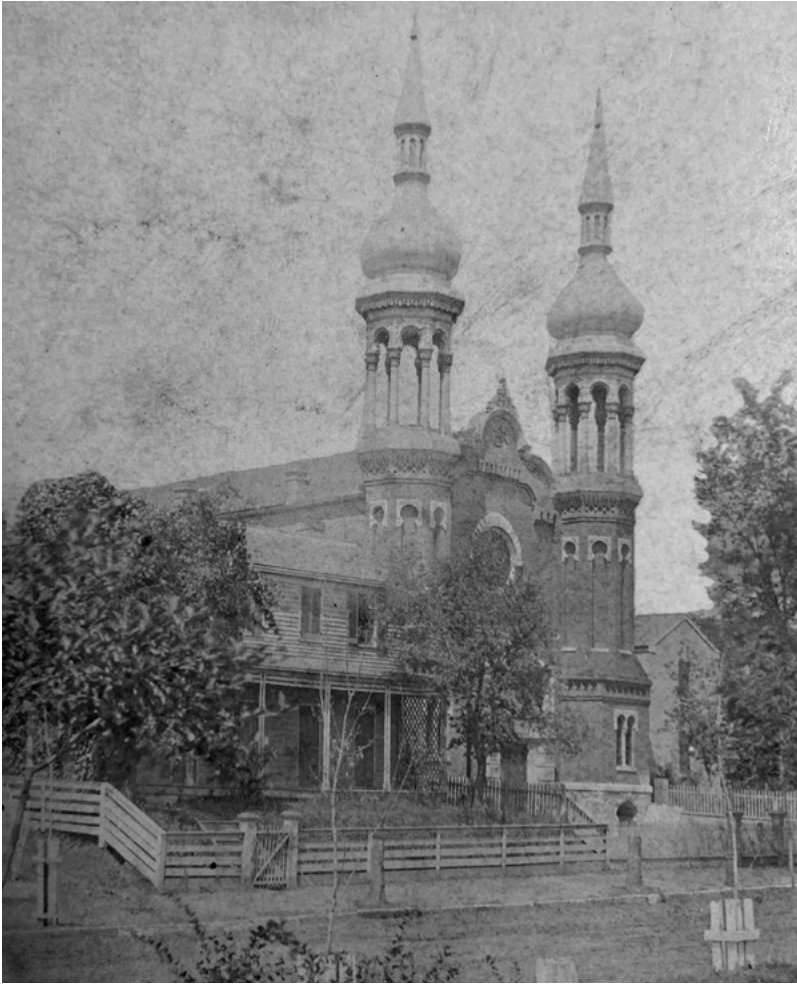
Quincy, Illinois: Attracting New Members

The story of the formation of Quincy's congregation follows a pattern of many other small to medium communities. In 1849, about a decade after the Jonas family arrived in Quincy, the city's small number of Jews began holding regular High Holiday services in "a room ... containing a Scroll of the Law, fitted up for the purpose of divine service," and by 1851 they had raised enough money to purchase a burial ground. When Wise visited Quincy in 1856, he suggested that the "40 souls of the Jewish persuasion, hailing from Germany, Poland and England" would make a nice congregation. In December of that year, Quincy's first Jewish congregation, the traditional Congregation B'nai Abraham, came into existence.⁵⁵

By the start of the Civil War, Quincy had become one of most politically and economically influential cities in Illinois. Seeking to attract more co-religionists, Edward Jonas described Quincy in 1863 as a "peaceful and prosperous" city of 20,000, with a Jewish congregation

54 Whether these prayers were recited in English or Hebrew is unknown. Sembach, letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (4 June 1880): 2.

55 For a history of Jewish life in Quincy from 1838 to 1872, see David A. Frolick, "From Strangers to Neighbors: The Children of Abraham in Quincy, Illinois," *Journal of Illinois History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 2–36.



B'nai Shalom, Quincy, IL.
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

of 45 paying members comprising 200 persons of all ages.⁵⁶ A year later, however, B'nai Abraham began to fracture when a small group of reformers seceded to found Reform Congregation B'nai Shalom. Over the next eight years, the two congregations warily co-existed as they

56 E.J. [Edward Jonas], "Quincy, ILL.," *The Occident & American Jewish Advocate* (July 1863): 190.

sought to attract and retain members. After B'nai Abraham's membership further declined and a fire seriously damaged its wooden structure, the two groups finally merged in 1872. Quincy's Jewish population, which included many young families, had peaked around this time at about 500 people, but many, particularly single men, had not affiliated with either congregation.⁵⁷ Little did the members of the recently consolidated B'nai Sholom realize that their newfound confidence would be undermined by an approaching population drain that would affect their financial well-being. This trend would continue until the end of the century, when there would be only about 170 Jews in the city.⁵⁸

When defining the meaning of "member," congregations historically treated married couples as single units, with the men considered to be the members. This entitled them to vote on congregational matters, sit on committees, and hold office. As Daniel Judson's recent work on American synagogue finance explains, only those who owned pews and paid annual assessments were entitled to membership and voting rights.⁵⁹ Widows who inherited their husbands' pews were considered members, but they were generally not granted voting rights.⁶⁰ The price of membership and its associated privileges was the willingness and ability to pay.

57 As was typical elsewhere, many men who lived in the area did not join the congregation. For some the barrier was cost, and for others it was indifference or transience. In 1879, for instance, when the Keokuk congregation numbered twenty-two, there were "forty-five members, residents and non-residents" of the local B'nai B'rith Keokuk Lodge No. 179. *The History of Lee County, Iowa: Containing a History of the County, Its Cities, Towns, &c* (Chicago: Western History Co., 1879), 648.

58 Calculations of Cynthia Francis Gensheimer. Simon Glazer counted fewer than eighty Jews in Keokuk in 1905. In 1906, in response to an Industrial Removal Office survey, Moses Kingsbaker estimated Quincy's Jewish population at one hundred. Industrial Removal Office Records, reel #65, box 123, American Jewish Historical Society, New York (hereafter AJHS). Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 306.

59 Dan Judson, *Pennies From Heaven: The History of American Synagogues and Money*, doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University, 2016, 55–57.

60 Dues-paying widows were granted the privilege of voting at New York's traditional Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in the 1880s, and Philadelphia's Orthodox Mikveh Israel enfranchised women in 1882. No Reform congregation is known to have granted women full membership privileges earlier than 1895. Marcus, *American Jewish Woman*, 292, 295; Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, 194.

Karla Goldman explains that congregations were very slow to extend full membership to women. As Goldman points out, “For the most part, nineteenth-century American Jewish congregations, like traditional synagogues, continued to deprive women of any official status within the community. Women were consistently excluded from lay and religious leadership, and even from membership.”⁶¹

Women’s fundraising became essential to the smooth operation of congregations, and their voluntary associations, such as benevolent societies, formalized the manner in which they shared the burden of pastoral care with their rabbis. The women’s associations had their own governance structures, with formal constitutions, bylaws, and elected officials. The congregation and women’s groups interacted formally and informally, since in small towns the women’s groups functioned as congregational auxiliaries and the officers of the women’s benevolent societies were, in most cases, married to the officers of the congregation and men’s benevolent societies. Hence, women became an informal part of the governance of the congregation.

An 1874 census compiled for the UAHC reported that B’nai Sholom, at fifty-eight members, was close to the average congregational size among the reporting communities.⁶² In the four subsequent years—during the tenure of Rabbi Isaac S. Moses—the congregation lost nearly one-third of its members, though through no fault of the rabbi.⁶³ Congregational leaders could not reverse the losses due to death and relocation. They had to confront what had become the national problem of growing indifference

61 *Ibid.*, 2.

62 Keokuk’s B’nai Israel reported only eighteen members. “Proceedings of the Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations: In Cleveland, Ohio, July 14, 15, and 16,” *The American Israelite* (24 July 1874): 5. The census responders were congregations east of the Mississippi River, save for Des Moines and Keokuk.

63 Although a local newspaper had reported that B’nai Sholom counted sixty members at the end of 1877, that figure appears to have been inflated. According to reports that B’nai Sholom filed with the UAHC, the congregation had fifty-nine members in 1874 but only forty-two in 1878. Lewin Cohen to UAHC, 16 December 1874; Jos. Kaufman to Lipman Levy, 18 March 1878, Union for Reform Judaism A1-3, MS-72, AJA. “Hebrew,” *The Quincy Whig* (13 December 1877): 2. Poor business prospects in Quincy, not the arrival of Rabbi Moses, caused the membership drain.

by recruiting the unaffiliated, especially the young.⁶⁴ By this time, Quincy included a sizable number of educated, American-born young women who could be a potential source of new members.

Rabbis nationwide attempted various solutions to hold onto their flocks.⁶⁵ Moses, with enthusiasm and urgency, announced a novel solution from the *bimah* during a Sabbath service the weekend of 19 January 1877. Using biblical language to rouse his congregation to recruit new members, he “invited the congregation to return to God their father.” Three officers of the congregation immediately took up the challenge.⁶⁶

A process was quickly initiated that resulted in the following blanket offer: “*Each Israelite, including women, over the age of eighteen can become an honorary member of the congregation including the full privilege of a seat and a vote free of charge.*”⁶⁷ Twenty people immediately

64 In 1878 only about half of the eighty-eight members of Quincy’s two B’nai B’rith lodges belonged to B’nai Sholom, which was reported to have forty-two members. Quincy was not at all unusual in this respect. It should also be noted that some men who moved away from Quincy retained their membership in a Quincy B’nai B’rith lodge rather than transferring elsewhere. Annual reports to the UAHC of Congregation K.K. Bnai Sholom, Quincy, Illinois, for the year ending 1 March 1878; *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Convention of [B’nai B’rith] District Grand Lodge No. 6, Held at Chicago, Ill., January 1878* (E. Rubovits, Chicago, 1878); Deborah Dash Moore, *B’nai B’rith and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 1–11.

65 Rabbi Isaac M. Wise remarked during a western tour that he found men in California preoccupied with business, reluctant to support congregations, and attending synagogue only on the High Holidays. In a letter from Quincy, published in *Die Deborah* (17 April 1876): 2, “Daisy Plummer” observed that despite their rabbi’s continued urging, Jews in Quincy paid “homage to indifference” and “in that we are the same as all other congregations.” Almost a year later, Lewin Cohen, secretary of the congregation, also realized the severity of the problem. Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier*, 142; Isaac M. Wise, “Editorial Correspondence Number XI,” *The American Israelite* (14 September 1877): 5; Lewin Cohen, “Letter From Quincy,” *Die Deborah* (2 March 1877): 1.

66 “Quincy, ILL,” *Die Deborah* (2 March 1877): 1. One of those officers was the energetic and forceful president, Isaac M. Lesem.

67 Moses likely perceived that the cost of membership created a barrier for many. Later in life he became a proponent of the free-church movement and founded a Chicago congregation on the principle of voluntary dues. Kerry M. Olitzky and Marc Lee Raphael, *The American Synagogue: A Historical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, 125; Judson, *Pennies*, 105–108; “Jews Form New Church,” *Chicago Tribune* (5 September 1896); “A New Thing in Congregations,” *The American Hebrew* (28 August 1896): 414.

signed up. Lewin Cohen, B'nai Sholom's secretary, described the next meeting in a letter to *The American Israelite*: "[It] turned out about all the Jewish young men and ladies in the city; the honorary membership was greatly increased, the young ladies also signing."⁶⁸ Moses immediately formed a Sunday evening Bible study class open to all, and the class's executive committee included both men and women.⁶⁹ Cohen ended a subsequent letter on an optimistic note: "Perhaps this report may also contribute to achieving similar results in other congregations; thus our straightforward endeavor for the well-being of our religion could find a doubled and quite worthy reward."⁷⁰

Unfortunately, there is no record of the total number of individuals, men or women, who took advantage of the honorary membership offer. Even Cohen sent conflicting messages.⁷¹ The Bible class functioned like a club, so it is no surprise that women were allowed to vote for its officers; however, it is unlikely that women were extended the same privilege when the congregation met to elect its officers. One conclusion is clear: Honorary membership, despite the welcoming invitation, did not convey much of lasting consequence to the women.

The entire experiment in honorary membership was short-lived. By December 1877, an observer noted that the Sunday evening Bible class was suffering a "slow drag."⁷² In fact, B'nai Sholom seemingly neither allowed full membership for women nor gained many, if any, permanent

68 "Letter From Quincy," *Die Deborah* (2 March 1877): 1; and Si. Onilli [Lewin Cohen], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (16 March 1877): 6.

69 Dr. [Max] Lilienthal, "Keokuk and Quincy," *The American Israelite* (10 August 1877): 5.

70 Cohen, "Letter from Quincy," 1.

71 In one version of events, honorary membership, including voting privileges, was offered to both young men and women without charge. The other version said the honorary members did not have to pay dues but were not allowed to vote or hold office. Anonymous, "Letter from Quincy," 1; and Si Onilli, "Letter to the Editor," 6.

72 When discussing how to cover the cost of the weekly meetings, someone suggested the pattern used by Christians be followed, namely to ask females as well as males to contribute weekly. A correspondent from Quincy explained that "Some of our fine young men say we don't want to see the ladies pay." He went on to opine, "I hope the Bible Class will continue and not allow the few pennies to interfere with the good cause." Tojey, letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (4 January 1878): 5.

male members as a result of the offer. Nevertheless, the idea represented a small step toward an egalitarian Reform Judaism.

Religious Education

In 1860 Wise predicted the future when he envisioned that coed schooling and confirmation would effectively open the door to gender equality in Reform congregations.⁷³ This gradually empowered women, first as advanced Sabbath school students and then as teachers, preparing them to be their rabbis' closest educational assistants. Eventually, this put them in a position to serve as proto-rabbis in communities such as Louisiana, Missouri, which was never able to secure a permanent rabbi, and Quincy, Illinois, where a woman became something akin to a rabbinical assistant.

In small communities, reinforcing a child's Jewish identity through education was extremely important. Education, however, was another area in which small-town Jews had to make practical adaptations. Most historians cite Rebecca Gratz's Hebrew Sunday School (HSS), founded in Philadelphia in 1838, as the prototype for American Jewish supplemental education, but the majority of schools established in small Midwestern and western cities were first led by men.⁷⁴ Gratz was able to draw from a large pool of educated women able to volunteer their time. The HSS was a community-wide school whose curriculum focused on Bible study and basic religious values and precepts, and instruction was entirely in English.⁷⁵ While other established and robust commu-

73 "Lafayette, Ind.," *The Israelite* (6 January 1860): 214.

74 Goldman states correctly that in general Philadelphia's Jewish women's benevolent work, though "creative, vigorous and persistent," was not typical. She says also that they "established an American pattern in which Sunday schools with female teachers became a familiar and accepted model of Jewish supplementary education." The authors of this article have not found that "pattern" to have been followed when Sabbath schools were established in the Midwest. Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, 61–62.

75 At the time of the founding of the HSS, Rabbi Isaac Leeser, who urged and encouraged Gratz's efforts, had been at the helm of Gratz's Orthodox congregation, Mickveh Israel, for nine years. Leeser was a strong proponent of egalitarian education—for girls as well as boys, poor as well as rich. When Philadelphia's Hebrew Female Benevolent Society created the HSS, the group mandated that teachers were "to be appointed among the young

nities along the Eastern Seaboard—Richmond, Savannah, Charleston, Baltimore, New York, and Augusta, Georgia—did adopt the Gratz model, German-speaking immigrants in small towns had to rely on the resources at their disposal to teach whatever they felt most important, usually in congregational schools.

All along the frontier, Jewishly literate men, some with extensive training, volunteered or were hired to tutor children. Advertisements for rabbis or *hazans* during this period specified that the job would include teaching. Nothing captures the haphazard state of Jewish education in America better than the discussion among twenty-seven attendees at an 1871 rabbinical conference convened to create a union of American congregations. The problems of the prevailing free-ranging approach to education were summed up as follows:

Every teacher, capable or incapable, conducts the religious school in his place, as he pleases, and uses such textbooks as suit him best. One thinks the Hebrew is necessary, and another thinks it is not. One teaches Bible stories as mystical as possible and the other does not want to know anything about it. One teaches a catechism entirely contrary to the doctrines preached from the pulpit, and another thinks everybody can make his own catechism... [T]he congregations suppose the young are taught religion, while in numerous instances they are taught the peculiar notions of some superficial thinker.⁷⁶

The conferees—all male—realized the existential importance of

ladies of the congregation [Mickveh Israel].” Over time, the board members continued to be drawn exclusively from Mickveh Israel. Eventually, Leaser withdrew his support for the HSS because he felt that a school that met only one morning a week was inadequate. He helped found the Hebrew Educational Society, another community-wide, coeducational school. Most Philadelphia congregations continued to operate their own congregational schools, which prepared boys to become bar mitzvah. David Uriah Todes, “The History of Jewish Education in Philadelphia 1782–1873 From the Erection of the First Synagogue to the Closing of the Maimonides College,” doctoral dissertation, Dropsie College, 1952, Katz Center; Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 149–169.

⁷⁶ “The Importance of the Conference,” *The Israelite* (23 June 1871): 8; “The Conference,” *The Israelite* (9 June 1871): 8.

producing quality curricular materials that would standardize religious education. However, the proposed instructional resources never materialized, and the execution of the plan depended on individuals and congregations.⁷⁷ In the cities along the upper Mississippi, men initially assumed responsibility for religious instruction, but by the end of the century educated women took their place.

Like their sisters in Keokuk and Quincy, the Jewish women of Louisiana, Missouri, lent their financial support to a host of causes, including Jewish education, when they organized a Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society in 1874.⁷⁸ This was seen as a logical extension of the maternal nurturing role women occupied within their homes, so that, for instance, when two women passed the hat in Louisiana for contributions to re-establish a Hebrew Sunday school, the Jewish press called them "two true mothers in Israel."⁷⁹

At this time, nearly half of the Jews living in these three communities were under age fourteen, creating a strong imperative for Jewish education.⁸⁰ Almost without exception, the adult women were immigrants who married young and immediately began large families; thus, unlike in Philadelphia, there was no pool of educated, single women available to teach.⁸¹ Men on the frontier, on the other hand, married later, and

77 "Importance of the Conference," 8. "The conference must furnish the congregations with complete plans and specifications, how to organize and to conduct Hebrew schools, which text books must be used, how much of each is to be imparted in a given time ... by uniformity, to make the text books cheap and above all things correct in doctrine and diction; that the great object of religious education be attained in the best and most systematical manner possible. The conference has declared its willingness to take care of the theoretical part and has given it into the hands of committees. The practical part thereof must be left to the congregations." Also see Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier*, 70–71.

78 Women in Louisiana, Missouri, also supported Jewish orphans and indigent rabbinical students. F.F. [Ferdinand Fishel], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (20 March 1874): 6; I.M. [Isidor Michael], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (24 August 1877): 2.

79 I.M. [Isidor Michael], letter to the editor, 2.

80 Calculations of Cynthia Francis Gensheimer.

81 Only two Jewish women in Quincy—Kate Cohen and Annie Jonas—fit the profile of those who taught at Philadelphia's HSS. Cohen was one of the first Sabbath school teachers in Quincy, but during the Civil War Jonas worked closely with educated Christian women in a soldiers' aid society and later converted to Christianity. See Cynthia Francis Gensheimer, "Annie Jonas: Jewish Daughter, Episcopal Wife, Independent Intellectual," *American Jewish*

some of those found the time to be volunteer teachers.

Louisiana provides a useful example of how a small town without a spiritual leader educated its children in fits and starts, first relying on male teachers but eventually on a woman. “Verily the light of our divine religion penetrates every nook and corner of our broad land, no matter, however secluded the place may be.” Simon Lesem, a young Louisiana merchant who had immigrated with his brother from the German Palatinate in 1867, penned those words as part of a glowing report about Louisiana to *The Israelite*.⁸² When a Sunday school was initiated in 1870, Lesem reported, “some of our young men had undertaken the task of teaching the same, and go to work with much zeal.”⁸³ Like Quincy and Keokuk, Louisiana had a core group of men with sufficient Jewish literacy to serve as teachers.⁸⁴ Its twenty-four students most certainly included girls as well as boys—those whose “young minds” were being taught “the truth of our glorious religion and its lasting principles.”⁸⁵

When Lesem departed, Louisiana’s Sabbath school closed, but soon a grocer with “considerable Jewish learning” stepped into the breach.⁸⁶ Two young women joined him on the faculty and the school’s governing board, but the lead teachers were men.⁸⁷ After the school lapsed yet

History 98, no. 3 (July 2014): 83–125.

82 Simon Lesem, letter to the editor, *The Israelite* (20 May 1870): 7.

83 *Ibid.*

84 At least a quarter of the members of Louisiana’s Hebrew Cemetery Association, which organized services for the High Holidays, were able to lead services, and some of them, including Benjamin Younker and Solomon J. Bloch, were highly skilled. When the association’s charter members met to plan High Holiday services in 1871, seven of the twenty-six men were considered to lead prayers. Hebrew Cemetery Association Ledger, 11 June 1871; 13 August 1871. Collection of Betty Allen, Louisiana, Missouri; “Death of B. Younker,” *Louisiana Press Journal* (7 September 1897). Simon Lesem, letter to the editor, *The Israelite* (13 October 1871): 6.

85 Lesem, letter to the editor, *The Israelite* (20 May 1870): 7.

86 Philip Zuzak was the president of the Sabbath school board, but young women served as secretary and treasurer. I.M. [Isidor Michael], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (24 August 1877): 2.

87 L.J. Reinheimer was considered “the foremost teacher of the Sunday school” when he left Louisiana for Chicago in 1880. When Philip Zuzak’s family left Louisiana in the mid-1880s, Louisiana was again without a Sabbath school. I.M., letter to the editor; “Obituary,” *The*

again in the mid-1880s, families had to educate their own children. Several subscribed to *The Sabbath Visitor*, a national publication targeted to Jewish children unable to attend Sabbath school.⁸⁸ Scattered in small enclaves throughout the country, many subscribers reported reading the publication with their mothers, and this essentially substituted for their religious school education.⁸⁹

When no man in Louisiana stepped forward to lead or teach after this relapse, the responsibility fell to a woman, Sadie Liebenstein Wald. In 1888, the eighteen-year-old high-school graduate left her Chicago home after marrying Adam Wald, a prominent Louisiana merchant. In her memoir, Wald explained how she came to establish a Sabbath school in Louisiana. An Orthodox rabbi from St. Louis visited and “seized upon me as a likely teacher and urged that I undertake a Sabbath school.”⁹⁰ Soon after, she was teaching the city’s Jewish children in her home.⁹¹ She explained, “These classes filled a need, for while few were pious, many yearned for spiritual sustenance.”⁹² Whereas Louisiana’s first Sabbath

American Israelite (6 March 1924); “Louisiana, Mo.,” *The American Israelite* (24 December 1880): 206. From their new home in western Kansas, the Zuzak children sent in frequent correspondence to *The Sabbath Visitor*. Herman Zuzak to “Cousin Sadie,” McPherson, Kansas, *The Sabbath Visitor* (January 1887): 576, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3101954;view=1up;seq=242> (accessed 19 October 2020).

88 Klapper, *Jewish Girls*, 112–113; Naomi W. Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of Nineteenth-Century American Rabbis* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008); I.M. [Isidor Michael], letter to the editor.

89 See, for example, Jennie Zuzak to “Cousin Sadie” (McPherson, Kansas), *The Sabbath Visitor* (September 1886): 313, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3101954;view=1up;seq=242> (accessed 19 October 2020).

90 Sara L. Hart, *The Pleasure Is Mine: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Newman-Valentine, 1947), 56–57. The Walds lived in Louisiana as a young married couple and had one child. After Adam Wald died on 1 January 1901, Sadie returned to Chicago, eventually marrying Phillip Hart, becoming Sara Hart. Her memoir was written after that marriage.

91 Wald established the school in 1896. Hart, *Pleasure Is Mine*, 56, 57. By this time, her only daughter, Hilde, was seven years old, thereby contributing to Hart’s desire for a Jewish school. In similar manner, Alice Lyons Allmayer founded and ran a Sunday school in Ottumwa, Iowa, when her children were school-age. Jolly, letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (10 July 1890): 3.

92 Hart, *Pleasure Is Mine*, 57.



Sadie Liebenstein Wald (1869–1949).
(Courtesy Carol Bouville)

school—whose faculty consisted of young working men—was held on Sundays, Wald convened her school on Saturday mornings. Her weekly program included a religious service for the town's children—complete with “unusually good” music, and recitation of the “Hear, O, Israel” and biblical passages.⁹³ This filled a religious void in Louisiana, because for twenty-five years men there had conducted services every Friday night, but they kept their stores open on Saturday and held no services on that day.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Wald had become a community leader, presiding over services held for children on Saturday mornings. She achieved this stature because she was devoted enough to launch a Sabbath school. Little is known about Wald's qualifications other than that her Chicago rabbi, Emil G. Hirsch, thought highly of her, and another rabbi considered her “a likely teacher.” In her own words, she “was raised, as thousands of girls were, someday to marry and to have a family, and that was about all.”⁹⁴

A few years later Wald's cousin, Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, visited Louisiana. In 1893 Solomon had organized the Jewish Women's Congress and founded the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW),⁹⁵ and in 1895 she made her way to Louisiana to open a section of the organization there. As section president, Wald led a weekly Saturday morning Bible study session for Louisiana's adult Jewish women.⁹⁶ At these Saturday morning sessions the group also read “a published

93 Sadie Wald, “Plain Tales from a Small Town,” *Proceedings of the Council of Jewish Women Second Triennial Convention Cleveland, March 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1900* (Chicago: Toby Rubovitz, 1900), 116.

94 Rabbi Hirsch of Chicago's Reform Sinai Congregation officiated at the Walds' marriage. Shortly beforehand, Hirsch congratulated Wald “on the extremely happy choice and good taste displayed.” Hart, *Pleasure Is Mine*, 48.

95 Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893–1993* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993); “Hannah Greenebaum Solomon,” Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/solomon> (accessed 19 October 2020).

96 In 1895 fourteen women in Louisiana joined together to form a local section of the recently founded NCJW. “Report of the Louisiana, MO Section,” *Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women Held at New York, Nov. 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, 1896* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1897), 90–91.

sermon by one of our Rabbis ... [lending] an air of devotion ... to the Sabbath day.”⁹⁷ Wald spoke in New York at an NCJW convention and offered this Sabbath plan as a model for women in other small cities. She suggested, “The morning’s program might be augmented by the singing of appropriate melodies, and in the course of time, a nucleus would be formed for a Sabbath service, decorous and devout, *even without the Rabbinical leader*” [Emphasis added.]⁹⁸ There is no record of Wald’s reading from the Torah or officiating at significant events, such as High Holiday services, weddings, or funerals. In fact, like the men who preceded her, Wald left Louisiana five years after having established the Sabbath school, and the school likely closed at that point. Nevertheless, by acting as an ad hoc leader, Wald took on some of the functions of a rabbi, which was very progressive for a woman of her day.

The Louisiana story shows how one community accepted the leadership of a woman to provide its children with some kind of Jewish engagement intended to insure their Jewish identity. Sadie Wald creatively filled that void—and more—through a thoughtful consideration of what her community needed.

The development of Jewish education in Quincy took a much different trajectory because of its strong rabbinic leadership and its larger size. In time, however, a woman, Rebekah Lesem, assumed a role very much like that of Sadie Wald in Louisiana and Ray Frank, who had received acclaim based on her teaching in Oakland, California, her Yom Kippur sermon in Spokane, and her speech at the Jewish Women’s Congress.

Immediately after the Jews of Quincy organized Congregation B’nai Abraham in 1856, they advertised for a *hazan* whose responsibilities would include educating the children.⁹⁹ Even though religious leaders

97 “Report of the Committee on Religion,” *Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women*, 191.

98 Ibid.

99 In 1856 “the assembled residents ... had already supported a Schochet among them.” M. Jacobs, “Quincy, Ills,” *The Israelite* (28 January 1859): 238; “Es wird ein Chazzan und Lehrer dort gesucht” (We seek a *hazan* and teacher), “Quincy, Ill.,” *Die Deborah* (14 November 1856): 99; “Rev. Israel Worenski is Hazan and Shochet,” “Quincy, Illinois,” *The Occident and Jewish Advocate* (October 1857): 360.

came and went, and the competing B'nai Sholom was founded in 1864, each rabbi supervised religious education as an important component of his job.¹⁰⁰ Regular public exams were conducted to demonstrate the accomplishments of the children.

Dr. Lewin Cohen was important to the organization of educational opportunities in Quincy. In 1869, when B'nai Sholom was temporarily without a rabbi, Cohen, a very learned and committed Jew, organized a congregational school to teach "principles of religion and morality" using passages from the Hebrew Bible in catechism. The school served fifty children, with Cohen and another man teaching the two upper classes and Cohen's erudite sister, Kate, and another woman, Fanny Bernheimer, teaching the younger students.¹⁰¹ These four volunteer teachers were all young, single, affluent, well-educated native English speakers.¹⁰²

In 1873, the first full year following the merger of the two congregations,

100 In 1878, in a letter of recommendation for Rabbi Ferdinand Becker, the officers of Keokuk's B'nai Israel described him as "Minister and Teacher" and gave him a glowing recommendation, including that he was "very proficient in Teaching the Children." Correspondence, Ferdinand Becker, SC-789, AJA.

101 Born in Scotland, Lewin Cohen and his sister Kate were highly distinguished. Their mother, Harriet, was a sister of Abraham Jonas. Lewin Cohen's publications and his eloquent correspondence to the UAHC as secretary of B'nai Sholom made him known to the wider Jewish world. Kate was an accomplished teacher of piano and voice. "Lewin H. Cohen, M.D.," *The Medical and Surgical Reporter*, ed. Charles W. Dulles (July–Dec 1888), 574; Lewin H. Cohen, "Two Prize Essays on the Post-Biblical History of the Jews," *The Israelite* (9 July 1869): 10. "Last Rites for Kate Cohen to be Held Today," *Chicago Tribune* (5 December 1933): 24; "Miss Bertelle is Appreciated," *Quincy Daily Whig* (2 September 1903): 8; "In Floods of Rich Harmony," *Quincy Daily Herald* (18 July 1906): 8.

102 B'nai Sholom's financial and congregational records from this period have been lost, but the manner in which the secretary thanked Cohen and the other teachers, wishing them success also in their "every-day affairs," suggests that they were all volunteers. Foreshadowing the future, at a public examination marking the end of the school's first term, prizes in the two lower classes were evenly divided between boys and girls, but girls captured five of the six prizes awarded in the two upper classes as well as that for best essay. Most notably, girls were chosen to deliver the opening and closing prayers. "The Examination of the Hebrew Bible School," *Quincy Daily Herald* (18 May 1869): 4.

ninety students attended the newly combined school.¹⁰³ One man was paid to help the rabbi teach Hebrew, and all but one of the seven volunteer teachers was a man.¹⁰⁴ As was standard around the country, Quincy's rabbis retained a great deal of discretion over the religious school curriculum. For example, Rabbi Moses taught students about prayer, holiday celebrations, and how to live a righteous life. In the notes that he used to guide his teaching, he eschewed "ceremonial symbols" and declared that "a life devoted to righteousness is the only truly human one."¹⁰⁵ At confirmations, which were festive celebrations full of pageantry, children recited prayers in English and Hebrew, gave speeches, and sang hymns. At an 1868 confirmation service, one girl "became moved to tears and the contagion spread to her fellow confirmees and to the audience until nearly all were weeping with her as she sobbed forth in broken utterances her prayer."¹⁰⁶

As men grew disinterested and did not prioritize the school, women filled the void, in short time comprising the majority of Quincy's Sabbath school faculty. In 1886, the teaching staff consisted of four young women and one middle-aged male Hebrew teacher.¹⁰⁷ That year at Shavuot, nine girls and three boys were confirmed.¹⁰⁸

103 "Annual Report to The Union of American Hebrew Congregations of Congregation K.K. Bnai Sholom, Quincy, Ill for the Year Ending March 1, 1874," Union for Reform Judaism Records 1873–1991, MS-72, box C-5, AJA.

104 "Hebrew School under charge of Minister and one paid assistant. Sabbath School taught by seven volunteer teachers under direction of the Minister as Superintendent; School controlled by a Board of Directors; two school rooms in basement of Temple. Rev. Mr. Moses, assisted by the following: Mr. F. Hoffman, Mr. B. Vasen, Mr. G.M. Jackson, Mr. David Nelke, Mr. Alex [Alexander] Levi and Miss Hattie Levy." Mr. F. Hoffman was the paid assistant, leaving only five of the seven volunteer teachers named. "Annual Report to The Union of American Hebrew Congregations of Congregation K.K. Bnai Sholom, Quincy, Ill for the Year Ending March 1, 1876," Union for Reform Judaism Records 1873–1991, MS-72, box C-5, AJA.

105 Isaac and his brother Adolph also published several books for confirmation students. Isaac S. Moses Papers (1873–1926) Confirmation materials 1880, 1892, n.d., MS-122, box 1, folder 3, AJA.

106 "The Feast of Pentecost," *Quincy Daily Whig* (28 May 1868): 4.

107 Scribner, "Quincy, Ill.," *The American Israelite* (12 February 1886): 5. "Shebuouth," *Quincy Daily Whig* (10 June 1886): 3.

108 "Quincy, Ill.," *The American Israelite* (25 June 1886): 1.

It should be noted that in Sabbath school, girls learned Hebrew alongside boys, capturing the top prizes in the language and occasionally reading from the Torah.¹⁰⁹ Even though the congregation was firmly Reform and followed the Reform movement's emphasis on confirmation in lieu of bar mitzvah, exceptions were made for individual boys to become a bar mitzvah throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰

In Quincy in the quarter century between 1873 and 1900, roughly equal numbers of boys and girls stayed in religious school through age thirteen.¹¹¹ However, as Melissa Klapper observes, girls far outnumbered boys in postconfirmation classes, as well as in secular public high

109 Girls won eleven of twelve prizes awarded to Hebrew students at the public examination in 1886. One girl and one boy read from the Torah on that occasion. Over the years, several boys read from the Torah at their confirmations, and in 1891 a girl—Jessie Lesem—did so, too. “The Examination of the Hebrew Bible School,” *Quincy Daily Herald* (18 May 1869): 4; “The Feast of Weeks,” *Quincy Daily Herald* (28 May 1871): 4; “Shebuouth,” *Quincy Daily Whig* (10 June 1886): 3; “Hebrew Sunday School,” *Quincy Daily Herald* (8 July 1886): 4; “Confirmation,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (11 October 1886): 3; “Confirmation,” *Quincy Daily Herald* (13 June 1891): 3.

110 “Next Saturday will occur the Bar Mitzvah of Herbert, son of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Nelke, in honor of which his parents will give a seven o'clock dinner at Hotel Newcomb,” *Jewish Voice* (St. Louis) (16 November 1894): 5; “This Saturday morning, at 10 o'clock, a very impressive ceremony will take place, being the occasion of the ‘Bar Mitzvah,’ or confirmation of Master Eli Jackson,” “Ninth Street Temple,” *Quincy Daily Herald* (18 October 1884): 4. Pauline Levy to Lena Levy Younker, 18 December 1889; Anna Berkson to Sam Younker, 24 January 1894. Younker Family Correspondence, collection of Cynthia Francis Gensheimer. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women*, 182–183. There was still no female counterpart to the bar mitzvah; the first bat mitzvah in the United States occurred in 1922, and in Quincy on 11 November 1955, when Barbara Teper, under the tutelage of Reform Rabbi Joseph Lieberles, read from the Torah. Conservative Rabbi Sidney Rothstein, who arrived a year later, continued the practice. Email from Barbara Teper Pearson to David Frolick, 26 October 2020.

111 Between 1873 and 1900, sixty-eight children were reportedly confirmed in Quincy. Girls made up 55 percent of all of those confirmed. However, adding in the boys known to have become bar mitzvah brings to seventy-four the total number of children educated through age thirteen, and exactly half of those were boys. Gensheimer's estimates of confirmands, as well as those of bar mitzvahs, are based on accounts in the press, and therefore are underestimates.

school.¹¹² Jewish girls—mostly from affluent families—were among the first high school graduates in Quincy, Keokuk, and Louisiana, but few of their brothers completed high school. The demands put on teenage boys to “learn the trade” included being sent to other cities to work for relatives, becoming traveling salesmen, and, for those who stayed in town, working full time, including Saturdays.¹¹³ Their sisters generally did not travel when school was in session, so they were available to be Sabbath school teachers and trained for that role in postconfirmation classes.¹¹⁴

Starting in 1890, all of the Sabbath school teachers in Quincy were young, American-born women who worked under the supervision of Rabbi Eppstein.¹¹⁵ Women in Quincy were marrying later—or not at

112 Klapper, “History of Jewish Education,” 206.

113 For instance, a biographer of Keokuk’s Nate A. Spiesberger explained, “During vacations, holidays, and after school hours, he busied himself about his father’s establishment [a wholesale millinery concern in Keokuk]. When he was thirteen years of age he regularly entered the employ of the house.” *The Illustrated Milliner*, May 1915, 61. Similarly, Nate’s sole brother completed eighth grade, whereas both sisters graduated from high school. Keokuk, Quincy, and Louisiana, Missouri, had multiple examples of this phenomenon. For instance, at age sixteen, Ike Stern left the Keokuk public schools to work in his father’s wholesale millinery business, but his sister Lenora graduated from Keokuk High School in 1887. Annette Mann, “Mr. Ike Stern” in “A History of the Jews of Des Moines,” *Reform Advocate* (9 May 1908): 40; *The Comment* [Keokuk High School yearbook], 1921. At age fifteen, Aaron Younker left Keokuk’s public high school to work at Younker Brothers, a dry-goods store. Johnson Brigham, *Des Moines: The Pioneer of Municipal Progress and Reform of the Middle West Together with the History of Polk County, Iowa*, vol. 2 (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1911): 1370. Similarly, Samuel Michael remained in public school in Quincy until age sixteen, when he began as a clerk in his uncle’s store. *The History of Pike County, Missouri* (Des Moines: Mills & Company, 1883): 708. Samuel Michael’s sister Sadie graduated from Louisiana High School in the Class of “Sweet Sixteen,” so named because it consisted of thirteen girls and three boys. *Louisiana Press Journal* (9 December 1924). Published lists of the earliest high school graduates in Louisiana and Keokuk enable some quick comparisons of brothers and sisters within the same families. Five daughters of Benjamin Younker and his wife Annie Wilchinski Younker, for instance, graduated from Louisiana High School, but none of their three sons did. Four of the five daughters of Manassas Younker and Lena Levy Younker graduated from high school, and the fifth daughter completed eleventh grade, but neither of their sons graduated.

114 Girls did most of their traveling during the summer or at winter break.

115 For instance, in 1891 Rabbi Eppstein supervised a faculty of five single, American-born

all—and during their single years some had the time, training, and inclination to teach. Half a century after Rebecca Gratz established her Sunday school, Quincy had a small pool of young, single women like those who constituted Gratz's faculty. This shift to an all-female faculty mirrored what was happening throughout the country in Reform congregations large and small.

Despite the fact that most of the country's Reform religious school teachers had been confirmed, many nationwide were not well equipped for the job, either by temperament or training, and some of them taught for only a short time before they married.¹¹⁶ Some had scant knowledge, due to their own weak religious education. Others were unreliable, had insufficient pedagogical skills, or were unable to control unruly behavior.¹¹⁷ While the qualifications of young female teachers varied consid-

young women (Rebekah Lesem, Nellie Berger, Lillie Bachrach, Sophie Kingsbaker, and Tenie Goodman), each a representative of a family that had been a pillar of Quincy's Jewish community for several decades. The next year, Jennie Eppstein, a daughter of the rabbi, joined the faculty, and later in the decade four others of similar backgrounds joined: Alice Meyer, Rosa Morris, Naomie Levy, and Clara Wile. Although none of the mothers of these women had taught in the school, they belonged to the Ladies' Temple Aid Society, which purchased books and supplies for the school as well as provided prizes, treats, and entertainments. By 1895, all available evidence suggests that both the Sabbath school and other advanced Jewish study in Quincy had become an all-female pursuit led by Rabbi Eppstein. The rabbi taught weekly classes on the Hebrew Bible and probably taught the high school girls who met every week in the temple to study Hebrew. "Confirmation," *Quincy Daily Journal* (12 June 1891): 6; *The American Israelite* (10 November 1892): 2; (11 February 1897): 7; (9 December 1897): 3.

116 The chronicler of Kansas City's Reform congregation, Frank J. Adler, gives a sense of how quickly the faculty turned over: "Most of those [young women teachers] who resigned did so on account of getting married. Nine vacancies on the teaching staff thus developed in one year, and the openings were vied for by young would-be brides. Applications to fill one of the vacancies were so numerous that the school board placed a sign on the temple door, reading: 'Over fifty applicants ahead of you. If the wedding cyclone continues, call again in about a month.'" Frank J. Adler, *Roots in a Moving Stream: The Centennial History of Congregation B'nai Jehudah of Kansas City 1870–1970* (Kansas City, MO, 1972), 83. See also Richman, "Jewish Sunday School Movement."

117 Keokuk, with its small pool of qualified teachers, reflects the acute problems of recruiting faculty for small-town religious schools. A Keokuk Sabbath school teacher asked her friend to substitute one Saturday when she had an appointment at the dressmaker, and another

erably, the few who staffed Quincy's religious school at the turn of the century had the benefit of good training.¹¹⁸ By 1900, even though the school met twice a week, Quincy's reduced Jewish population required only two teachers for its twenty-five pupils.¹¹⁹ Those teachers—almost certainly Rebekah Lesem and Jennie Eppstein—were both knowledgeable about Judaism, and Lesem was a trained teacher.

Throughout his career, Rabbi Eppstein championed education for girls, and during his time in Quincy, he continued to make female education a top priority. Although he found that women made up the majority of worshippers at many services, he lamented that some did their marketing on Saturday and made “the Friday eve the only evening for theaters, balls, dances, and other places of amusement.”¹²⁰ Beginning in 1894, the Quincy section of the NCJW—the first section established outside of Chicago—conducted weekly discussions of Jewish literature and Sabbath school work. Rebekah Lesem and Rabbi Eppstein's daughter

seemingly quit in the middle of the school year. The disorderly conduct of some students had been a long-standing problem, going back at least to 1888. The school disbanded some months after Sam Younker wrote the following in January 1893: “Our Sabbath School is getting along very well now and all the teachers are satisfied and the general behavior is very good except your loving Brother Sam.” When the school resumed in December 1893, Amanda Younker wrote, “They think of organizing a Sabbath School to be held after Schul every Saturday morning. Every one is very intusiastic [*sic*] about it, but no doubt it will have the fate of all the other[s].” Congregation B'nai Israel Minute Book, 4 November 1888, Katz Center; Pauline Younker to Nettie Younker, 16 December 1893; Kate Younker to Nettie Younker, 23 December 1893; Dorothy Younker to Nettie Younker, 26 December 1893; Sam Younker to Nettie Younker, 6 January 1893; Amanda Younker to Nettie Younker, 7 December 1893; Younker Family Correspondence, collection of Cynthia Francis Gensheimer. 118 Unlike Keokuk, which had struggled for years to attract qualified rabbis, Quincy retained a series of capable rabbis who ran good educational programs throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. See n. 115 for the names of the young women who staffed Quincy's religious school in the 1890s.

119 Keokuk's religious school, which met three times a week, had one teacher for its thirteen pupils. *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. II, 1900–1901 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1900), 245, 254.

120 Diary of Rabbi Elias Eppstein, January 29, 1898; October 1, 1898. Elias Eppstein, “Our Sabbath Schools,” *The American Israelite* (20 December 1894): 4.

Jennie led the sessions.¹²¹ Rabbi Eppstein, who attended these discussions, had high hopes that they would inspire women to revive Jewish life in Quincy and transmit their love of Judaism to their children.¹²²

Rabbi Eppstein followed in the footsteps of Rabbi Moses by similarly focusing his confirmation classes on topics that would have resonated with acculturated Jewish girls from prominent families—girls wanting perhaps to emulate their mothers' religiosity and yet adapt it to the mores of their day, including Progressive Era ideals such as personal social service.¹²³ Eppstein's diary indicates that he enjoyed leading Quincy's postconfirmation class. He referred to the class as the "normal class," thus reflecting the prevailing view that it was the training ground for teachers.¹²⁴ By working so closely with the rabbi as students and then teachers, some young women proved that they were more than capable of assuming greater congregational responsibility. One such woman, Rebekah Lesem, exemplified the intelligent woman whose education ultimately empowered her to achieve a position of authority within the congregation.¹²⁵

Rebekah Lesem: The Model "Modern" Jewish Teacher

The eldest of a family of seven girls, Rebekah Lesem was born in Quincy

121 "Quincy, Ill.," *The Jewish Voice* (16 November 1894): 5; Diary of Rabbi Elias Eppstein, 17 December 1896; 26 December 1896.

122 After a year of NCJW study, the rabbi enthusiastically reported that in Quincy he had seen "our mothers and daughters searching and taking up the discarded volumes containing the history of our people." Eppstein, "Our Sabbath Schools," *The American Israelite* (4 April 1895): 5.

123 Eppstein's *Confirmant's Guide to the Mosaic Religion* (n.p.: F.A. Schober, 1868) shows his strong belief in God and the afterlife of the soul and spells out his thoughts about Shabbat, the major holidays, and the Ten Commandments. In the back of the book, he lists prayers in English and a few prayers in German. His thoughts about what constituted the proper curriculum for a confirmation class may have evolved in the twenty-two years between publication of *Confirmant's Guide* and his arrival in Quincy. Precise numbers of students who continued in postconfirmation class are difficult to determine.

124 S. [Elias Eppstein], letter to the editor, *The American Israelite* (10 November 1892): 2.

125 Speaking of Rebekah Lesem's work leading the Quincy NCJW study sessions, one observer noted that her "enthusiasm and love for study cannot but awaken a renewed thirst for knowledge." CHIC, letter to the editor, *The Jewish Voice* (St. Louis) (16 November 1894): 5. "Quincy, Ill.," *The American Israelite* (4 April 1895): 5.

in 1863 and at thirteen was confirmed by Rabbi Isaac S. Moses.¹²⁶ In many respects, Lesem represented young Jewish women living in acculturated Midwest households. Her parents, Henry Lesem and Mary Kern, immigrants from the Palatinate, were part of the large Lesem clan that founded and sustained both Quincy's Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society and Congregation B'nai Sholom.¹²⁷ An accomplished pianist who graduated from Quincy High School, Lesem subsequently earned money by teaching piano and volunteered to choreograph children's musical and dramatic performances staged by the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society. In some respects, however, Lesem's life was unusual. Her family was more transient than most, and her childhood was spent moving from one small Midwest town to another.¹²⁸ Her father died when she was twenty-one, and, unlike her female Lesem cousins, whose fathers and husbands were extremely successful businessmen, she remained single and supported herself. Not only was Lesem thoughtful and highly intelligent, but, much like Ray Frank, she was also well versed in Reform Jewish theology and practice, Torah, Talmud, and Jewish history. Under Eppstein's tutelage, she became one of the young women who comprised the Sabbath school faculty.

At the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress in Chicago, the thirty-year-old Lesem drew on her experiences teaching in Quincy's congregational school to deliver the address, "Advanced Sabbath-School Work." By the time she gave her speech, Eppstein had made her responsible for the postconfirmation class, an endorsement of both her substantive and pedagogical expertise. In addition to being well qualified to speak on the subject, Lesem may have come to the organizers' attention from having

126 That would have made Rebekah Lesem a teenage eyewitness to the honorary membership experiment.

127 Not only were there a large number of Lesems in Quincy, but Lesems could be found in Louisiana and Hannibal, Missouri, and Gillespie, Illinois, among other places.

128 Rebekah Lesem lived in St. Joseph, Missouri; Leavenworth, Kansas; Quincy, Illinois; and Clay Center, Kansas. Only one of Lesem's sisters married. Her mother, Mary Kern Lesem, was a charter member of Quincy's Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society and was "long ... prominent in the affairs of that congregation [B'nai Sholom]." "78th Birthday of Mrs. Mary Lesem," *Quincy Daily Journal* (8 January 1914): 3. For Henry Lesem's obituary, see "Died," *The Times* (Clay Center, Kansas) (24 January 1884): 1.



Rebekah Lesem (1863–1951).
(Courtesy Phyllis Fist)

been personally acquainted with another participant, Rabbi Moses, as well as knowing Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, the chair of the gathering and the person who invited the speakers.¹²⁹

In her talk, Lesem proclaimed that “the future of our cause” lies in the hands of Jewish teachers. She argued that Sabbath schools should inculcate in Jewish children the kind of ethical precepts that would lead them to work toward social progress. This reflected the tutelage of Moses and Eppstein, as well as the general prophetic focus of many other Reform leaders. Lesem further decried that religious school teachers, particularly those in small cities, still lacked good textbooks and proper training.

By zeroing in on the dull way that the subject matter was presented in most Sabbath schools, Lesem declared that no one should be surprised that Jewish children opt out as soon as they can. She wrote:

It is then no wonder that our children cease to attend Sabbath school after their thirteenth year with such a sigh of relief. They leave with such a slight acquaintanceship with their religion as may be derived from a study of their confirmation speeches or from their [*sic*] teachings of a poorly taught volunteer teacher.¹³⁰

She then offered suggestions on how to engage and motivate students by selecting appropriate curriculum, actively engaging children in class discussions, and ensuring that teachers themselves are adequately trained.¹³¹ Perhaps as a result of her exposure at the Jewish Women’s Congress, she was appointed, alongside Julia Richman and Sadie American, to the NCJW’s prestigious national standing committee on Sabbath schools.¹³²

129 Hannah Greenebaum Solomon knew Lesem because Lesem’s aunt, Theresa Greenebaum Lesem, was Solomon’s sister. When Theresa Greenebaum Lesem lived in Quincy in the 1870s, she was secretary of the Hebrew Ladies’ Benevolent Society. Unfortunately, there appears to be no record of what Moses said about Lesem or her presentation when they shared the podium at the Jewish Women’s Congress.

130 Rebekah Lesem, “Advanced Sabbath-School Work,” *Jewish Messenger* (20 October 1893): 5.

131 Ibid.

132 “Miss Lesem of Quincy is Honored by the National Council of Jewish Women Now in Session in New York City,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (17 November 1896): 4. Rebekah Lesem,

In 1895, Lesem became the first person from Quincy to attend normal school.¹³³ Upon her return, she became a public school teacher and helped train other teachers while taking post-graduate courses in education during summers at the University of Chicago.¹³⁴ Not only did she develop pedagogical expertise, but she had in-depth knowledge of Jewish history and could analyze the Bible as literature and demonstrate its contemporary relevance.¹³⁵ After Eppstein suddenly retired and left Quincy in 1906, the congregation, its membership greatly diminished, had difficulty attracting and retaining rabbis. During a hiatus in rabbinic leadership, Lesem, head of the Sabbath school, may have been one of the congregants who helped conduct services. This can be inferred from the following report: “The Sabbath-school under the supervision of Miss Rebecca Lesem, is doing fine work.... Not having a rabbi, the various members have been reading the services Friday evening. The children of the Sabbath-school sing the chants and responses.”¹³⁶

Though it may have been only an occasional occurrence, conducting a part of religious services allowed Lesem to venture beyond the boundaries of the customary gender norms of the day, much as Sadie

“Advanced Sabbath-School Work,” *The Jewish Messenger* (20 October 1893): 5; “National Council of Jewish Women,” *The American Jewess* 2, no. 2 (November 1895): 115.

133 “Boys and Girls of Yesterday,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (5 December 1914): 2.

134 Rebekah Lesem made a career of teaching, which, in her day, required that she remain single. After graduating from Illinois State Normal School, a college that trained teachers, she lectured and published in the general field of pedagogy. When she left her job teaching eighth grade in Quincy to begin teaching at the Illinois State Normal School, Quincy’s superintendent of schools declared her “one of the most competent teachers in the public schools.” She returned to Quincy to train teachers locally and later taught at the Milwaukee State Normal School and at a residential school for disabled children outside Chicago. Rebekah Lesem’s transcript from the University of Chicago states that she graduated from Illinois State Normal University in 1896 and earned a degree in education at the University of Chicago in 1912, mostly through summer coursework beginning in 1901. “Child Study,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (5 December 1896): 4; Rebecca Lesem, “Ethics of the Teaching Profession,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (6 April 1909): 6; *Diary of Rabbi Elias Eppstein*, 26 September 1895, MS-220, AJA; “Miss Lesem Resigns,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (6 June 1904): 8; “Class of 1879,” *Quincy Daily Journal* (5 December 1914): 2.

135 Rebekah Lesem, “Hebrew Literature,” *The Jewish Messenger* (19 April 1895): 1.

136 “Quincy, Ill.,” *The American Israelite* (12 December 1907): 2.

Wald had in Louisiana.¹³⁷ In fact, Lesem's relatively unrecognized actions mimicked those of Ray Frank, whose teaching and oratory skills had gained national acclaim even before she spoke at the Jewish Women's Congress. Frank honed her skills as lecturer by teaching children and adults in Oakland, California. In 1890, she agreed to speak following Yom Kippur services while visiting Spokane, Washington, because the then-small community would otherwise have had no service to mark the solemn day.¹³⁸ Decades later, several American women acted briefly as proto-rabbis, and their stories, like those of Wald, Lesem, and Frank, reflect how Sabbath school teaching prepared them for leadership roles.¹³⁹

Entrees for Women into General Congregational Affairs

Although Reform congregations increasingly entrusted women with greater responsibilities, especially as teachers, they were still not considered equal partners in the governance process. As a general rule around the country, Sabbath school committees were the first congregational committees to include women, and that opened the door to full participation in synagogue affairs later.

Even though Jewish women in Louisiana, Missouri, became officers

137 Rebekah Lesem's married sister, Carrie Lesem Fist (1864–1939), provided the impetus and leadership for twelve families to establish the first congregation in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1905. After her husband died, she became a beloved matron of the dormitory of the Hebrew Union College. Randall M. Falk, *A History of the Jews of Oklahoma with special emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community*, doctoral dissertation, Hebrew Union College, 1946, 10, 124; "Rabbis—And a Mother," *The American Israelite* (12 March 1931): 1; "Obituaries," *The American Israelite* (2 February 1939): 9.

138 "Ray Frank," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/frank> (accessed 27 October 2020). "First Woman Rabbi," *San Francisco Chronicle* (19 October 1893): 12.

139 In the 1920s and 1930s, a few women attended rabbinical school but none were ordained. Over the years, many rabbis were assisted by their wives and daughters, who were then in a position to step in when a congregation was without its rabbi. Shuly Rubin Schwartz describes several examples of this phenomenon, including that of longtime Sabbath school teacher Paula Herskovitz Ackerman, wife of Rabbi William Ackerman of Temple Beth Israel in Meridian, Mississippi, who served as her congregation's spiritual leader after her husband's death in 1950. Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 90–101, 120–125; Ellen Umansky, "Paula Ackerman: Pioneer in the Pulpit," *Southern Jewish History*, 14 (2011): 77–117; Schwartz, *Rabbi's Wife*, 84–85, 160–164.

of its short-lived Sabbath school board in 1877, there is no evidence that they were recruited to join whatever governance structure existed there. In Keokuk, women continued their traditional roles through their work with the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society, yet there is no evidence that any woman ever held a congregational office.¹⁴⁰ The all-male board of directors of Congregation B'nai Israel did, however, appoint two women to the congregation's school board in 1886.¹⁴¹ These two—Lena Levy Younker and Caroline Blum Spiesberger—were key members of the cadre of devout women who had worked hard to raise funds for their synagogue.¹⁴² In 1906, after the deaths of Younker and her husband, Manassas, and at a time when B'nai Israel was desperate for funds, the couple's four single adult daughters, "the Misses Younker," were listed as dues-paying members.¹⁴³

140 Extant congregational records cease in 1906, which was probably when the congregation had dwindled in membership to the point that formal meetings ended.

141 Congregation B'nai Israel Minute Book, 3 January 1886, Katz Center.

142 At one time Lena Levy Younker served as president of the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society, and when she died in 1891 she was eulogized as a "true mother in Israel." The temple's *ner tamid* (eternal light) burned for a full year in Younker's memory. "A Good Woman's Death," *The American Israelite* (8 October 1891): 7 (reprinted from the *Daily Gate City* of Keokuk, Iowa); Congregation B'nai Israel Minute Book, 5 October 1891, Katz Center.

143 The eldest daughter, Nettie Younker, was one of the two girls who first prayed publicly in Keokuk. She later belonged to the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society but also assumed nontraditional and unofficial responsibilities within Keokuk's tiny Jewish community. Nettie's brother Samuel was nominally secretary of Keokuk's congregation, but the last set of congregational minutes in 1906 state that Nettie, without holding any official title, did the bookkeeping for him. Furthermore, even though only men were appointed to the volunteer committee set up to help Jewish immigrants arriving in Keokuk through the Industrial Removal Office (IRO) in the early 1900s, Nettie's correspondence to the IRO indicates that she was actively involved in finding jobs for the newcomers. In nearly all larger cities, the IRO correspondence was conducted by men. In the nearby small town of Hannibal, Missouri, home to only ten Jewish families at the time, Rebecca Levy Tobias was secretary and treasurer of the IRO committee. For the report of IRO field representative Stanley Bero, naming the four men who comprised Keokuk's volunteer committee, see Stanley Bero report dated Jan. 23, 1907 in Industrial Removal Office Records, I-91, Box 18, AJHS. For a report filed by Nettie Younker with the IRO, see report of Miss N. Younker, Keokuk, Iowa, undated, Placement Records from Cities Which Persons Removed To, 1904–1906; Industrial Removal Office Records, box 15, AJHS. For a report filed by Rebecca Tobias, see report of Mrs. R. Tobias,



Lena Levy Younker (1845–1891).
(Courtesy Tedi Macias)

Although Quincy had experimented with honorary female membership, no woman held congregational office during the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ Instead, women retained traditional congregational roles in their voluntary associations.¹⁴⁵ Through the local section of the NCJW, however, Quincy's women made inroads into congregational governance. In 1896, the Quincy NCJW president reported: "Our entire Sunday School Board is composed of women, six of the members of the Jewish Council."¹⁴⁶ That same year, Lesem's national Sabbath School Committee of the NCJW was able to claim credit for having placed women on the boards of Sabbath schools in eighteen cities. Like Quincy, most of these cities were in the West and Midwest.¹⁴⁷ B'nai Sholom's financial ledger that begins in 1902 lists only two women—the divorcee Betty Milroy and widow Mary Lesem—who paid dues during the first decade of the twentieth century. Whether these two women were considered full members with voting rights is unknown.

Even as the NCJW promoted the appointment of women to school

Hannibal, Missouri, received 24 Jan. 1905, Industrial Removal Office Records, box 15, AJHS.; Congregation B'nai Israel Minute Book, 11 June 1906 and 26 Oct. 1906, Katz Center; "Keokuk, Iowa," *Jewish Voice* (20 October 1905): 7.

144 Eventually Jewish women in Quincy became officers and board members of the congregation, but no woman ever achieved the presidency.

145 For the most part, the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society concentrated on helping needy and sick Jews and providing proper burials for its members. The Temple Aid Society (also called Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society) focused on supporting B'nai Sholom, its rabbi, and its Sabbath school. For example, the Ladies' Aid Society raised the funds to install new windows in the synagogue. "Quincy, ILL.," *The American Israelite* (4 April 1895): 5. The Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society eventually morphed into the Temple Sisterhood, and responsibility for the needy shifted to the B'nai B'rith.

146 The president of Quincy's branch of the NCJW at this time was Rebekah Lesem's cousin, Jennie Lesem Nelke. "Report of the Quincy, Ill., Section," *Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women*, 74.

147 Admitting women to serve on Sabbath school boards was still rare on the East Coast, as Rosa Sonneschein explained: "In New York Dr. Kohler's congregation has elected women on the Sabbath School Board, a measure which has for many years been successfully employed in the West." Rosa Sonneschein, "Editorial," *The American Jewess* (December 1897): 142; "Report of the Corresponding Secretary, Sadie American, dated November 17, 1896," *Proceedings of the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women*, 149.

boards, and though Philadelphia's Orthodox congregation Mickveh Israel had already counted women as members since 1884, only a few Reform congregations admitted women as full members before 1900.¹⁴⁸ Despite having been a long-standing subject of debate, supported by rabbis such as Isaac Mayer Wise, individual congregations were slow to approve the change. For example, at a meeting of the Jewish Ministers' Association (JMA) in 1885, Reform Rabbi Leopold Wintner presented a paper, "The Admission of Women to Active Congregational Membership."¹⁴⁹ A year later, because of dissension among those present, the JMA tabled Wintner's motion to allow women to serve as congregational trustees. The milder version that was passed granted "that women can become active members of congregations by having a voice in the meetings and serving as members of committees on Sunday-schools."¹⁵⁰ Women could exercise their influence only indirectly through specific assignments, or, as some claimed, by influencing their husbands.

In June 1895 Rosa Sonneschein, founder and publisher of *The American Jewess*, decried the fact that married women were denied membership status in congregations and issued a call for change.¹⁵¹ In July,

148 By the time they were granted membership privileges, the women of Mickveh Israel had proven their mettle in numerous ways, including operating the HSS for nearly a half century, and establishing a Jewish orphanage. For a full discussion, see Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, 192–196. Goldman credits Ruth Alpers for having found the documentation supporting Mickveh Israel's vote: "Seat Holders (both male and female) are eligible to membership after holding seats in the Synagogue for one year." "Congregation Mickveh Israel," 1 September 1884, Philadelphia, papers of K.K. Mickveh Israel, Resolutions, Appeals, and Decisions of the Board of Managers, 1848–1885, SC- 9631, AJA. See also "The Foster Home's Jubilee," *The Jewish Exponent* (21 April 1905): 4; "Women as Members of Mickveh Israel," Charles J. Cohen, "Letter to the Editor," *The Jewish Exponent* (28 April 1905): 2.

149 The JMA was an East Coast association of rabbis that existed prior to the formation of the CCAR in 1890. "Hebrew Convention," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (15 April 1885): 2; *Jewish Conference Papers (1886) of the Jewish Ministers' Association of America* (New York: Philip Cowen, 1887), 41, 42, 47, 48.

150 *Jewish Conference Papers (1886) of the Jewish Ministers' Association of America* (New York: Philip Cowen, 1887), 48.

151 Sonneschein had examined names of over 20,000 members listed in the records of 102 congregations "coming from every section of this country and representing every shade of

following Sonneschein's dare, Hirsch's Sinai Congregation in Chicago and Max Landsberg's B'rith Kodesh Congregation in Rochester granted membership privileges to women.¹⁵² At a rabbinical conference that month, Rabbi Moses commended the two Reform congregations for this and said: "I plead for a larger share of woman's work in our congregational life. Why should woman not have the right to membership, to vote and to hold office, especially if she contributes the same amount of money and often the tenfold amount of earnest and loving work?"¹⁵³

An editorial in the *American Hebrew* indicated how the momentum favoring women was shifting. Noting the growth in giving women greater opportunities to participate, it said: "Among other denominations, as with us, and in secular institutions as well, woman has been looked upon as good enough to contribute money for support, but has not been asked to take an active part in managing affairs, or even by vote to have a voice in the selection of officers."¹⁵⁴

In 1897, when Hirsch surveyed prominent Jewish women about women's proper role in the synagogue, the published responses remind the modern reader of the divide among women as to full gender equality,

our ancestry belief." By 1896, she stated that a few congregations extended membership privileges to single and widowed women, and that one congregation, "the blessed Temple Isaiah, in Chicago," granted women "the unconditional right of membership and representation." *The American Jewess* (June 1895): 153; "Editor's Desk," "Editorial," *The American Jewess* (December 1896): 137.

152 The record is somewhat ambiguous, but Cleveland's Tifereth Israel may have allowed women to become members in October 1895. Even though Chicago's Sinai Congregation counted women as members at this time, it is not clear whether they were permitted to serve on the board of directors. Mrs. Emanuel Mandel, an NCJW officer and member of Rabbi Hirsch's congregation, wrote: "I believe that women are well fitted to take an active part in the affairs of the synagogue. They are represented on almost every board of directors, be it educational, charitable, or philanthropic. Why not on that of the synagogue or congregation?" E.G.H., "Editorial Note," *The Reform Advocate* (4 July 1895): 1; Tobias Brinkman, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 223. Annual meeting of the congregation, 19 October 1896, The Temple (Cleveland, OH) records, 1850–1942, MS-504, AJA. Quotation of Mrs. Emanuel Mandel, Chicago, "Woman in the Synagogue," *The Reform Advocate* (20 February 1897): 4.

153 "Nearing the End," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY) (13 July 1895): 12.

154 Editorial, "Woman in the Synagogue," *The American Hebrew* (16 August 1895): 354.

even in the Reform movement.¹⁵⁵ Most, including Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, continued to maintain that women's most important roles were as wives and mothers creating proper Jewish homes, and rearing children in the faith. Typical respondents echoed the traditional belief that women were best suited to handle the educational and charitable work of the congregation, as well as other tasks relying on domestic skills. About half of respondents, including Solomon, did maintain, however, that qualified women should be able to assume any role in the synagogue, including that of rabbi.¹⁵⁶

In the 1890s the growing pressure to welcome women's full participation in the synagogue was taking place in the shadow of the growing national women's suffrage movement. Some Jewish women supported the movement, while others did not.¹⁵⁷ In Quincy, where only two Jews—both men—signed a suffrage petition in 1870 and where local newspapers mocked women's suffrage in the 1890s, it is likely that most Jews still opposed suffrage.¹⁵⁸ Yet Lena Salomon Swimmer, who served two lengthy stints as president of Quincy's Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society, publicly argued in favor of suffrage and led the drive that earned women the right to serve on the city's school board.¹⁵⁹ Although Jewish women took on some expanded congregational responsibilities, most Jews still advocated traditional roles for women within the synagogue. Even Ray Frank opposed women's suffrage and felt it inappropriate for

155 "Woman in the Synagogue," *The Reform Advocate* (20 February 1897): 7–10 and (27 February 1897): 24–27.

156 Based on the responses, it seems that few congregations of the time allowed women to hold office.

157 "Many Jews viewed the suffrage movement with suspicion. They considered many suffrage leaders xenophobic at best and anti-Semitic at worst." In fact, "no major American Jewish women's organization endorsed suffrage until 1917." Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism, 1890–1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 31–51.

158 Ferdinand Nelke and J.S. Rosenthal signed the 1870 petition. Petition for Suffrage, Denman File, Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County.

159 Cynthia Francis Gensheimer, "Lena Swimmer Was Tireless Mover and Shaker," *Quincy Herald-Whig* (11 October 2015): 7A; "Meeting of the Parliamentary Club," *Quincy Daily Journal* (20 October 1894): 7; "Suffrage," *Quincy Daily Journal* (11 May 1895): 7.

married women to have careers.¹⁶⁰ Leaders of the NCJW considered women's work with Sabbath schools to be an extension of their natural maternal talents.¹⁶¹ In 1902, when Solomon was the first woman to speak from the *bimah* during Friday evening services at Boston's Temple Israel, her daughter Helen recognized the historic importance of the occasion. Helen was elated to witness how intently the congregation listened to her mother but noted also that they were impressed with her "sweetness and womanliness."¹⁶²

At this point, traditional gender norms still restricted the space that women could occupy within the governance structure of the synagogue. However, in short order, prevailing attitudes tilted toward a growing acceptance that elevated the position of women in synagogue life.

In 1916 Jennie Franklin Purvin, an acculturated Chicago communal volunteer, credited confirmation with making young women qualified for parity within synagogue governance. Purvin boldly claimed that "with very, very few exceptions," the men in control of congregations simply paid their dues and attended High Holiday services, leaving "all synagogal activities to their wives and mothers and daughters."

160 Ray Frank declined Rabbi Isaac S. Moses's offer to be a rabbi. She was not in principle opposed to single women having careers, even being rabbis if they were so qualified. However, speaking of herself, she told a newspaper reporter, "I do not even aspire to the office of rabbi, because being a woman I could never be one; that is thoroughly masculine." "Ray Frank, Paradoxical Positions," <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/frank> (accessed 20 October 2020). At the same time, she offered another explanation as to why she didn't want to be a rabbi: As a rabbi she would have to answer to a congregation and would lose the ability to speak her mind freely. "A Latter Day Deborah," *San Francisco Examiner* (12 November 1893): 14; "Some Common Sense from a New Woman," *Arizona Weekly Citizen* (Tucson) (23 November 1895): 2; Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 59.

161 See also Cornelia Ney, "Women on Congregational and Sabbath School Boards," 1899 *Council of Jewish Women*, 189, National Council of Jewish Women Collection, MS-NAT. N2, box 1, Western Historic Manuscript Collection, Kansas City. "Religious Schools," *The Council of Jewish Women*, May 1903, n.p., Hannah G. Solomon Collection, box 8, folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

162 Helen Solomon to Henry Solomon, 3 March 1902, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, box 17, MS-749, AJA. See also Cynthia Francis Gensheimer and Kathryn Hellerstein, "'No Better Education': Helen Solomon at Wellesley College, 1901–1902," *American Jewish History*, 104, nos. 2/3 (2020).

At the same time, she maintained, men refused to break with tradition and allow women “a vote on the important matters which come before every synagogal board.”¹⁶³ Purvin made a direct connection between confirmation and empowerment:

Was not tradition broken when the Americanized Jew took his boys from the Cheder and placed his children, both boys and girls, in the religious school of the congregation? Was not a tradition broken when the Reform Jew gave up the Bar Mitzvah ceremony and substituted therefore the rite of confirmation, not only for boys but also for girls? Have not these girls, long since grown into womanhood and motherhood, earned the honor thus paid them and brought renewed vitality and vigor and inspiration into the life of the religious community? Then why not crown their painstaking and worthy efforts with official recognition?¹⁶⁴

Despite prior attempts, it was not until 1917, three years before the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, that the CCAR supported political suffrage for women.¹⁶⁵ Once the federal amendment was ratified and American women gained universal suffrage, American Reform congregations made it common practice for women to be granted full membership.¹⁶⁶ Subsequently, however, the movement to appoint women to important congregational committees or to hold elective office remained slow. The school committee remained the first step to women’s acceptance, and in many cities the president of the temple Sisterhood became the sole female on the congregation’s board of trustees.

Conclusion

The concept of pragmatic adaptation goes a long way in explaining the decisions that granted women new authority in small Jewish communities struggling to survive. This article looks at the adjustments made

163 Jennie Franklin Purvin, “The Woman on the Board,” *The Reform Advocate* (15 January 1916): 713–714.

164 Ibid.

165 Marcus, *American Jewish Woman*, 389.

166 Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*.

by three small Jewish communities when women stepped in to fill the vacuum created by voids in male leadership. Looking back, women did not seem to seek radical changes in their congregational roles, but rather took on new responsibilities as a matter of personal religious responsibility and practical necessity. A consequence of this was fuller participation in congregational affairs.

When Rabbi Isaac S. Moses spoke immediately after Ray Frank at the Jewish Women's Congress in 1893, he was alarmed that thousands of Jews living in small towns still lacked qualified teachers and rabbis. He had known Rebekah Lesem from her time as a student in his confirmation class in Quincy, and he had certainly followed Frank in the national press before hearing her speak at the Congress. Putting two and two together, perhaps, he conceived of a creative, pragmatic way to meet a pressing need. Citing "dire necessity," Moses proposed "placing women preachers in the pulpits in the smaller communities, and advocated the establishment of a ladies' seminary for the education of women preachers and teachers."¹⁶⁷ Moses's suggestions were not adopted, and we don't know whether he urged Lesem to become a rabbi or work at the proposed seminary. Moses, who had offered honorary membership to women in Quincy in 1877, continued to be ahead of his time. His proposing, in the mid-1890s, a seminary to prepare women for the rabbinate shows how far American Jewish opinion had shifted since 1877, when rabbis proposed a Hebrew young ladies' seminary to prepare girls to be better mothers and wives. In fewer than twenty years, the women of Keokuk, Quincy, and Louisiana, along with nationally known figures like Frank and Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, had demonstrated the potential for women to be equal partners with men in Reform Judaism.

167 In 1895, Moses spoke at the annual convention of the CCAR, where he voiced his support for full membership of women in congregations as well as his concerns about the future of Jewish life in small communities. He advocated establishing colleges for Jewish women and offered suggestions to bolster Jewish life in small communities. "Jewish Women's Congress," *The Reform Advocate* (September 1893): 60; "Nearing the End," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY) (13 July 1895): 12; "Ray Frank—The First Woman Rabbi?—Debates about the Ordination of Women," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/womenofvalot/frank/first-woman-rabbi/debates-about-ordination-of-women> (accessed 20 October 2020).

In summary, several conclusions are noteworthy. First, the women in these three towns seemingly did not demand a change in their status, for they would have considered such a thing to be unseemly. In addition, while prominent rabbis urged a greater role for women, especially through the Jewish press and national conferences, it took rabbis at the local level to help shepherd the way. In some cases, local men had to vote to authorize women's expanded roles, whereas in others female educators simply stepped in to fill voids at critical junctures. Factors beyond local control, such as economic and demographic reversals, created existential crises, and the creative experiments that preserved Jewish life in these small towns were made possible within the Reform movement, which was at the same time adapting many religious practices to contemporary American life. Thus, early inclusionary steps for women in Reform Judaism, though in some ways almost accidental, fit within the framework of the country's religious and political changes.

Unfortunately, in these three towns, as well as in many others, the pragmatic changes only temporarily staved off the decline and demise of small-town Jewish life. Even though gender accommodation ultimately did not save the day, opening the doors for female participation helped these Jewish communities survive a bit longer and maintain Jewish engagement. While they were isolated, daring, and novel experiments, these precedent-setting acts were harbingers of a future that ensured full female equality in Reform Judaism.

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