

How Jewish Socialism in America Led to the Significant Involvement of Jewish Women in the
Suffrage Movement

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The Jewish immigrants who came to New York City starting in the mid to late 1800s were unique compared to the large influx of immigrants coming to America at the time. Unlike other immigrant groups, Jews from the Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe had a different understanding of gender roles. This group was accustomed to women making money for the family and commonly working as breadwinners. The Jews that settled in New York City were faced with new challenges surrounding both the living conditions of the growing city, as well as being faced with the budding American culture, which conflicted with the traditions of the Old World. While changes affected all Jewish immigrants who came to America, Jewish women became the backbone of the balance between tradition and new American ideals, especially movements focused on their working and public lives. In this paper, I will show how the movements of socialism and women's suffrage in America were expressed by Jewish women, especially in New York City. I will put emphasis on how the culture of these women both at home and as workers impacted how they would perceive the two movements happening in the United States.

Transition from the Old World to the New World

The Pale of Settlement was a part of Russia that had previously been under Polish control. This area had a higher percentage of Jews compared to most other parts of Europe. In the Pale of Settlement, the lives of Jewish Women were often defined by their marital status and the social standing of the man they married. When a woman married a well respected man, who studied the Torah, they would have a better position in society; however, this often led to poor financial standing. In order to feed their families, many Jewish women in these situations took on the role of the breadwinner. This would be represented in running family shops or doing garment work through the home to support their families. When Jews first immigrated to America, the

dynamics set in place from Orthodox Jewish tradition often remained with families. In Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, the fictional father character is a man who studies the Torah while his daughters work to support the family. When he chastises the mother character for her worrying about late rent for their apartment, she states, "You're so busy working for Heaven that I have to suffer here such bitter hell."¹ While a work of fiction, this quote emphasizes the role that women had to play in supporting their families economically under Jewish traditions. This contrasts with the American viewpoint that the opposite should happen, that men should be the ones working while the women stay home to care for the children. In the lives of many Jewish women, they had to take on both the roles of childcare and being the family breadwinner.

Coming to New York City, the dynamics around women's work began to shift. Since work offered in America was primarily in the form of factory labor, there was shame for married Jewish women to leave the home to earn money in this way. In the Pale, the work of a married woman was usually attached to the home in some way, allowing her to tend to her children while earning money for the family. Due to factory work being the most prominent opportunity for females at the time, immigrant Jewish families shifted the financial responsibility to their children, notably their daughters.² The high income needed to support the family led to the children of the family working, while the mother cared for the younger children. Fathers began working in greater numbers, compared to the Pale, but it was seen as necessary for many of the children to work to support their families' needs. For a large number of Jewish families in America, there was no gender discrimination about which of the children would work to support the family. After receiving an education to a certain point, both boys and girls would begin working where they could. In the cases of young women working in the factories, their work also

¹ Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York, NY: Persea Books, 1925), 10

² Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 66-67

exposed them to ideas outside of their cultural framework. Being surrounded by fellow young women with differing viewpoints created challenges to social and political norms held by their more traditional families. Specifically for young Jewish women, some ideas that became popular included socialism and the suffrage movement.³ The feminist movement that was seen in the lives of young Jewish women led to radicalization of these women, in comparison to the cultural roots of immigrant Jews.

Growing of Socialist Ideas

Outside of the growing political movements that came out of factory work for Jewish Women, American customs encouraged women to make life decisions based on factors outside of their religious practice and cultural customs. Young immigrants began to embrace new ideas surrounding things like American fashion, economic systems, and notably, marriage conventions.⁴ Unlike traditional Jewish customs, many young women strived to marry for love instead of social standing or financial stability. Young men and women in America were also encouraged to find each other outside of their parents' or community's control. With the significant Jewish population in New York City, young people were able to meet through social gatherings or community events for people their own age. The expansive city differed from life in the Pale where everyone knew each other. Having a large Jewish population allowed independent opportunities for people to meet potential spouses. The mingling of men and women together was an idea that stemmed from American culture. In Eastern Europe, young people would have only been introduced through their parents or a marriage broker.⁵ While marriage was still seen as important to fulfill Jewish tradition, the influence of American culture shifted

³ Glenn 173-177

⁴ Beryl Lieff Benderly and Hasia R. Diner, *Her Works Praise Her* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002), 194-195

⁵ Benderly and Diner 195

how this would be structured in modern life. The independence gained through young women being able to choose who they wanted to marry contributed to how they saw themselves as more in control of their lives compared to women in Europe. Even though young women would not have complete romantic freedom, as purity was still seen as an important virtue, growing self-determination through aspects, such as choosing their spouse, would allow women to start to desire social and political freedom.

Even with the progressive adoptions that Jewish women were making in America, the question remained of how should Jewish women balance their traditional Jewish values with their new found American ideals? During the period of mass Jewish migration to America, the conflict between Orthodox and Reform Judaism started to become a noteworthy aspect of Jewish life. This was prevalent overall, but notably for Jewish women. In this time period, some women became disconcerted with the treatment of women in traditional Judaism. This was due to factors such as less independence or the less importance women were given in cultural customs, such as the Bar Mitzvah. For many who left the religious observance of Judaism, they still involved themselves in Jewish community as a way to stay connected to their culture.⁶ Sochen argues that a large portion of Jews who no longer observed their religious faith, instead turned to socialism as a new “religion.” She explains that the spreading of socialist ideas gave a different outlet to those who no longer connected with Judaism as a religion.⁷ For many Jewish women, the transfer to socialist ideas came from the spread of political viewpoints heavily through factory work. While not all women who were socialists rejected their religious beliefs, a significant portion of Jewish women used socialism as a new belief system. Since socialism was an idea that grew

⁶ June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 27-28

⁷ Sochen 30-31

popular in Jewish circles through the discussions in New York City's Jewish communities, it shows that American culture impacted Jewish Women.

Connected to socialist ideals observed by Jewish women, came the role of these women in the suffrage movement. The idea of "New Womanhood" was broadly understood to be the ways that women could escape the existing traditional expectations of gender roles that they had been taught both by prior generations as well as Eastern Europe.⁸ Beyond just looking for the right to vote, women who subscribed to this idea believed that new socialist ideas, which influenced labor strikes of the time, should allow women the right to have a say in the greater social and political conditions of America. The relation to socialism is notable in the discussion of Jewish feminism because it expands on the right to fair labor beyond the changing desire of women to be included in broader political discussions. Especially in the case of Jewish women, their fighting on the picket lines and understanding of socialist desires allowed them to become a part of the growing conversation around the changing landscape of the rights of American laborers. These women were also becoming a part of the proletarian class, as understood by Marx, which made them stronger advocates for workers rights compared to their time in the Pale and Eastern Europe. Growing importance of fighting for worker's rights also allowed Jewish women to expand their influence outside of the realms of households and community spaces.⁹ The acknowledgement of Jewish women in important labor struggles allowed their ideas to spread much farther and affect the lives of many more people, especially when it came to unions. These women recognized their expanding impact and many wanted to expand this further, by gaining the right to vote.

⁸ Glenn 208-209

⁹ Glenn 211

A criticism presented towards Jewish Women during social and political movements of the early 20th century is the common practice that many women would participate in these movements until they got married. This implies that these women no longer cared about these issues once they no longer impacted them directly, and instead fell into the role of the subservient housewife. It is understood that this was not always the choice of the woman, but sometimes came from the pressure of the husband or other family members.¹⁰ While marriage was often not the end of work for these women, instead of working in factories, they would transition to working in small shops, often with their husbands. Part of the reason for Jewish wives not being able to continue their factory work after marriage was because of the expectation of birthing and raising children. For many of these women, support they may have received in the Pale from relatives was not possible in America. Many grandmothers and other older women in the community would have stayed in Europe due to the difficult journey to the United States.¹¹ Even young women who may have assisted new mothers to care for their young children would have been working or in school during the day. This left married women to take on the entirety of child rearing and housework, not allowing them to work in factories. However, even though this was more similar to life in the Pale for these women, mothers staying home with their children was an idea that was very American. Married Jewish couples started following the American framework of the husband working as the breadwinner while the wife stayed home. Even if this was due to necessity, the American system made it so this would be common for Jewish families.

The idea of the husband as the sole breadwinner was not always achievable for Jews in New York City. According to figures from 1907, the cost of a household was about \$800 per

¹⁰ Glenn 239

¹¹ Benderly and Diner 211

year; however, male New Yorkers were making, on average, \$520.¹² Due to the insufficient funds that came from a man's paycheck, the family would need both the older children and the wife to bring in money as well. For the children, they would often work in factories, but mothers had many different avenues for making extra money. Since this extra income had to be earned concurrently with raising young children, women had to get creative with how they could help support their families. On the Lower East Side, one option women would take was to peddle from a pushcart. They would be able to sell a variety of goods for passersby to purchase, without having to own a storefront. Another method that was utilized was work done from home. Since many of these women had previously worked in the garment industry, they would elect to sew finishers for clothing, being paid per item.¹³ The extra income that came in from these ventures allowed for money to come in for the family, while also giving Jewish Women the pride in helping to support their families. While the lives of married Jewish Women were not fully aligned with that of American customs, the shift towards women staying at home with the children, while their husbands made the majority of the income, shows that Jews were starting to assimilate into American culture.

Jewish Suffragists

Jewish women represented large numbers in unions of this period. While many unions were founded by men, Jewish women were able to climb the ranks to make an impact on the union's organizations. Beyond the organizational work in unions, many Jewish women were also notable figures in the suffrage movement. The combination in the values of both the socialist movement and the suffrage movement are seen in many of these Jewish suffragists. Notably, many of these women were active in both suffrage movements and movements advocating for

¹² Benderly and Diner 172

¹³ Benderly and Diner 213-214

the rights of workers, specifically working women. Four notable Jewish suffragists in this period include Rose Schneiderman, Maud Nathan, and Pauline Newman.

Rose Schneiderman was born in 1882 in Poland. When she was eight years old, her family and she immigrated to New York City. Joining the workforce at the age of thirteen, in the highly Jewish garment industry, exposed her to ideas about socialism and workers' rights.¹⁴ The start of Schneiderman working prevented her from continuing her education. According to Endelman, she utilized the factory she worked at to continue her education, by learning about the intricacies of unions and fair working conditions for women.¹⁵ This relates to Glenn's idea that women in the factories were able to absorb information on socialist ideals, a sentiment that was growing throughout Jewish circles on the Lower East Side.¹⁶ These ideas about workers' rights interested Schneiderman, causing her to join multiple unions, notably, the Women's Trade Union League. As a member of this organization, she advocated for the need for workers' rights to be extended to women. A famous example of this was her speech following the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster. In this speech, she claimed that women should be able to have both "Bread and Roses," referencing the need for women to be able to financially support themselves, but also the idea that these same women should still be able to enjoy luxuries, instead of just survival.¹⁷ Schneiderman expanded this idea to include how better working rights for women and better wages were necessary to achieve the "Bread and Roses" principle. In order to gain these things, Schneiderman thought that women needed the right to vote. While she did not believe women's suffrage would lead to revolutionary change for workers' rights, she argued that women needed

¹⁴ Endelman, Gary Edward, "Solidarity Forever: Rose Schneiderman and The Women's Trade Union League," PhD diss., (University of Delaware, 1977), 1

¹⁵ Endelman 27

¹⁶ Glenn 173-177

¹⁷ Annelise Orleck. "Rose Schneiderman," Jewish Women's Archive, 2009.
<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/schneiderman-rose#pid-17035>

the vote so that they could receive protection through laws. Otherwise, she believed the lawmakers could ignore their requests.¹⁸

Maud Nathan was another Jewish woman who participated in both the fights for workers' rights and women's right to vote. Born in New York, Nathan was born to a wealthier family compared to the immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement. In her autobiography, she explains that her family was very religious, setting her apart from her Christian neighbors and friends.¹⁹ When she was twelve, her family moved away from the city to Green Bay, Wisconsin, then to Chicago, and back to New York as an adult. Even though Nathan was not exposed to socialist ideas in the same way as women working in the New York factories, she began to understand these ideas while serving on the Board of the Exchange for Women's Work, where she would fight for higher standards for women's working conditions.²⁰ This time in her career also influenced how she would fight for women's suffrage, recognizing that women in this period had no political power, notably over their working conditions. She would go on to work for the New York City Consumers' League, which would advocate for workers' rights for both men and women. Her transition from a wealthy upbringing to her work fighting for workers' safety and fair wages allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of the socialist ideas that were being spread throughout the city. Nathan would take her work concerning unions and labor rights and apply these ideas to women's suffrage. In a quote from her autobiography, Nathan stated:

My experiences in endeavoring to get legislation enacted for the better protection of working girls had strengthened my convictions that until women obtained the franchise, their influence with members of the legislature would continue to be a negligible quantity. So more and more of my time was given to the work which I felt would hasten

¹⁸ Rose Schneiderman with Lucy Goldthwaite. *All for One* (New York, NY: P.S. Eriksson, 1967) 122

¹⁹ Maud Nathan. *Once Upon a Time and Today* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1933) 24-35

²⁰ Nathan 105-107

the day when women would have, on equal terms with men, the privileges, the rights, and the burdens and responsibilities, too, of the franchise.²¹

Nathan understood the movements of socialism and feminism to be intertwined. She thought that rights for women workers would not be able to be achieved if these women did not have a say in legislation surrounding their labor. Her work in both movements reflect this, showing that she was deeply committed to their combined success. Nathan would continue fighting for both of these movements until she died in 1946.

Similarly to Schneiderman, Pauline Newman was a Jewish immigrant who joined the labor industry at a young age. Her work at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory introduced her to the word of socialism through the New York's Socialist Literary Society, where she was given an education in both English and socialism.²² More than some of the other suffragists of her time, Newman would hold onto the socialist ideas she learned working in the factory, and used these ideas to contextualize her desires for both workers' rights and women's suffrage. Her connection of these two movements exemplifies how the movements were connected for many Jewish women of the time. Newman believed that women had to achieve the vote and other rights for the purpose of joining with men to fight for socialist ideals. She also used the combination of class and gender to argue that women's suffrage would give women an equal playing field to advocate for justice at the same level as their male counterparts. Newman notably defined the vote as a "means to an end," the end being the abolition of the suffering of the working class.²³ The interconnection she utilized to fight for both of these movements exemplifies the idea of how socialism in New York led to an increase of Jewish women in the suffrage movement. The ideas found in both of these movements led to the understanding by these women that one could

²¹ Nathan 175-176

²² Ann Schofield. *Portraits of Four Women Activists 1893-1986* (Dexter, MI: Thomson-Shore Inc, 1997), 86-87

²³ Schofield 87-93

not exist without the other. The fights for both labor and gender equality were essential to achieve freedom for working women.

Connecting Socialism and Feminism

During this time period, there were connections seen between the ideological ideas surrounding both socialism and feminism, specifically when it came to unions and suffrage. According to socialist movements in New York, there was stress upon the equalization of people. In the movement, this referred to the uniting of the proletariat to demolish class divisions. Similarly, the suffrage movement wanted to break away barriers that divided men and women. However, since this was the early 20th century, it is important to acknowledge that most women were not looking for equality as much as they were looking for less of a divide between the genders. Most women were not looking for the abolition of gender roles, but wanted their ideas to be listened to in the lawmaking process. Even with this, the ideas of equality that were present in both socialist and feminist movements help to show why these movements would end up being connected. The tie that both of these had with Judaism is notable when discussing the role of Jewish women. Unlike other immigrant or ethnic groups, Jews had high concentrations in both of these movements, especially socialism. This significant outlier suggests that there is a link between Jewish cultural and religious values, and the desire for equality in different sectors of society.

Along with the suffrage movement, Jewish women during this period pushed for feminism in other ways. One way that these women aligned with feminism was through the early acceptance of birth control. In 1916, Margaret Sanger, one of the major advocates for birth control, opened a clinic in Brooklyn, where she distributed cervical pessaries to largely Jewish

and Italian immigrant communities.²⁴ The acceptance of birth control in the Jewish community was heavily influenced by Jewish law not requiring women to have children. Sanger herself claimed that the Jewish community was willing to listen to her and accept new ideas when it came to their health. She went on to claim that the early success she received in the Jewish community was unexpected.²⁵ In the cases of Jews who immigrated and settled on the Lower East Side, the success of these measures also hinged on the status of this group socioeconomically. For the immigrant communities in New York at the time, many women believed that birth control would help them to have more control over their financial situations. This point was specifically argued by Jonah J. Goldstein, Sanger's Jewish lawyer, when he asked the court whether the "prevention of disease and suffering by poverty and too frequent childbirth were legitimate reasons to prescribe birth control under the medical exemption."²⁶ While their financial status played a role in their acceptance of birth control, the role of Jewish women in the working class also contributed to how they reacted. While it was mainly unmarried women who worked in Jewish-American culture, the revolutionary roots of the married Jewish woman from past participation in radical politics or the involvement of their husbands led to this group being a strong force in the fight for women's rights to their bodies. Unlike the union strikes seen in younger unmarried women, married Jewish women were often seen participating in uprisings that concerned the family, such as rising prices for kosher meat.²⁷ This translated to how these same women reacted when birth control was criminalized by the government, resulting in Sanger being arrested. These women fought for the freedom to only have an amount of children that they could properly care for. These women did not oppose having children, but wanted to control

²⁴ Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, *Gender and Jewish History* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011) 253-255:

²⁵ Kaplan and Moore 255

²⁶ Kaplan and Moore 257

²⁷ Kaplan and Moore 261

how they made these decisions. The acceptance of birth control by immigrant Jewish women relates to how this community was largely represented in feminist movements. While they most likely would not have used this term to describe their activism, their concern with the right to birth control could be seen as the beginnings of the push towards equal rights, specifically when it comes to women having rights over their own bodies.

The connection between Jewish culture and the suffrage movement goes beyond the activism that its women took part in. Beyond these women, Jews in New York City largely supported suffrage as a whole, being much more united for the vote compared to other immigrant communities. In both the 1915 and 1917 New York Suffrage amendment votes, Jewish men in Manhattan were the largest group in support of women's suffrage.²⁸ This was in comparison to other immigrant groups, like the Irish who overwhelmingly opposed the vote and the Italians who were split. In the statistics that came out of these two elections, the Jewish support for suffrage increased between the two elections. This was heavily due to socialist efforts to expand voter registration in the community. Socialist principles also assisted women in joining the suffrage movement. The Women's Trade Union league helped to unite the missions of both socialist and suffrage movements. The purpose of the WTUL was to organize women into trade unions. This group consisted of both middle and working class unions, and heavily worked with young Jewish women on the Lower East Side.²⁹ Due to the union culture of the city at this time, different leagues were able to grow due to mutual support from other groups. An example of this is when the WTUL joined with the Woman Suffrage Party in order to create the Wage Earners' League in 1911. The purpose of combining the two organizations was to increase the effectiveness of the two movements by working together. The combination also demonstrated the

²⁸ Elinor Lerner, "Jewish Involvement in the New York City Woman Suffrage Movement (*American Jewish History*, 1981). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23881911>.

²⁹ Lerner 445

mutual goals of the movements. The Wage Earners' League supported both movements by campaigning for the rights of the working woman. Mutual goals included increased wages for women, and the right for women to have a say in laws that impacted them.³⁰ Jewish neighborhoods as a whole strongly supported suffrage, notably being the most active in Manhattan in terms of holding suffrage events. The Socialist Party would even create a small suffrage headquarters in Jewish Harlem.³¹ By 1915, all Yiddish newspapers were in support of the vote and would allow suffrage news in their papers. Despite the important suffrage work of Jewish neighborhoods, publicity would often focus on the work of upper-class demonstrations of the movement. Even with their lack of publicity, the Jewish community played an important role in gaining the vote in New York City.

The inclusion of Jewish women in the suffrage movement also led to them participating in similar feminist movements during this time and immediately after. Compared to other immigrant groups in America during this time, Jews had a greater respect for women and allowed them more independence. This relates back to how in Jewish American households, boys and girls had equal access to education and the right to work. While there was not full equality between the sexes by any means, there was greater respect for women in the Jewish culture. One example of how women immediately after the vote was won is seen in an issue of the *Forverts*, an American Yiddish newspaper that centered around Jewish life, and held socialist viewpoints. In an article from December 6, 1925, the author discusses that women are continuing to change even after the suffrage movement.³² Zuckoff explains that even though some women thought of the suffrage movement as only a means to an end, many more in the community were

³⁰ Lerner 446-448

³¹ Lerner 450

³² Ruth Zuckoff, "Woman's First Duty is to be True to Herself, She Says," *Forverts*, December 6, 1925. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/frw/1925/12/06/01/article/30/?srpos=5&e=-----en-20-frw-1--img-tx|N%7ctxTI-suffrage-----1>

interested in continuing to extend the rights of women. She goes on to discuss how changes in clothing trends show that women have gained more freedoms in the past 10 years than they had the decade before. This article is interesting because it shows the continuation of the feminist movement after the vote had been won. While there were definitely women who were satisfied with the rights gained from suffrage, the trend was that more and more Jewish women were interested in taking the movement to new heights. The significance of Jewish values to this movement are reflected in the newspaper itself. Being a Jewish Socialist newspaper, *Forverts* reflected the ideas common in Jewish American circles of the time, especially in New York City. The inclusion of articles about suffrage and feminism, while the term was not used at the time, supports the idea of a connection between the movements. It shows that the community was interested in, if not at least conscious about, the growing push for women's rights in America. Since Jewish women were more independent compared to other ethnic groups in New York, it makes sense that they would be the ones who were the most aware and interested in this movement.

Conclusion

The work that Jewish women did in both socialist and feminist movements during the early 20th century made them stand out from other New York demographics of the time. Their commitment to equality based on the changes their lives faced after immigration to America shows the group's overall perseverance in this new country. This willingness to stand up for the rights of themselves and others, even in the face of antisemitism, makes the female Jewish activist something notable in this period. After suffrage was achieved, Jewish women would continue their impact on feminism in the 1960s, being even larger participants in the second

wave of feminism.³³ The importance of education for these women and their interest in breaking free from gender roles led to this demographic spearheading the second wave for the movement. The attractiveness of feminism to Jewish women can be seen from the 1900s, with the suffrage movement, all the way until today. While there are a variety of factors that lead to this, Jewish women in America have always been interested in fighting for what they believe will be a better tomorrow.

³³ Joyce Antler, "Feminism in the United States," Jewish Women's Archive, 2021, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/feminism-in-united-states#pid-16675>.

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