

Leisure and Culture

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All cultures have rhythms and all of us live our lives according to those rhythms. Not all days are the same and neither is time experienced the same within each day. Leisure is time outside of work. In some cultures the only leisure time was tied to a sacred calendar. In the modern world, leisure has been and remains a setting in which to experiment with new ideas and experiences.

Jews both pioneered the creation of leisure activities and were avid participants in them. For immigrants at the turn of the century, leisure served as an important vehicle for Americanizing, as well as for solidifying relations between Jews. But leisure, like work and family, was experienced differently by Jewish men and women.

Leisure time is usually shared with others. In contrast to Italians and Irish, for example, Jewish immigrants were more likely to spend leisure time with family members of both sexes, whether they went to the new silent movies in the neighborhood or gathered with their extended kin to pass the time. Immigrant Jewish families vacationed together, seeking relief from cities in the Catskill Mountains and later at the seashore.

In the same period, nevertheless, new leisure activities created a sphere available exclusively to young people, native-born and immigrants. Young Jews went to new amusement parks, dances, dancing schools, and soda shops with one another but never with their parents. Leisure taught them how to become Americans. Young Jewish women began dating in their leisure time, and ideas about “treating” and sexual favors structured relationships between men and women during this period. Americanized and native-born Jewish women, when they had free time, also spent it in the company of other women. They played mah jong and card games, which often were condemned by rabbis and moralists. Women joined study circles and read about Zionism and Bible and Jewish history, often raising funds for philanthropy as part of these activities. In the early decades of the twentieth century, affluent Jews pursued other leisure activities. Jewish women organized charity balls and events. Early patrons of the fine arts, they also supported the creation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as venues for modern dance.

Following World War II, the majority of Jews moved from the working class into the middle class. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish women with children tended to leave the paid workforce and became increasingly associated with leisure. In contrast to Jewish men, they devoted the majority of their leisure time to philanthropy, education, and volunteerism in synagogue and schools. Women also pursued activities associated with the suburbs, where many Jews had moved, but continued to go to the city in great numbers to participate as patrons of and participants in the arts.

Some of these patterns changed after the 1970s when Jewish women entered the paid workforce in unprecedented numbers. Increased work time took them out of the volunteer sphere and reduced their available leisure time. Increasing integration in the larger society has led Jewish women to move outside of exclusively Jewish venues for philanthropy. They also have increased their participation in sports and fitness, which was far less common during the first half of the century.

Leisure remains an important index of how Jewish women see themselves in relationship to work, the family, culture, and the larger society.