

Women's Benevolent Societies
Lesson plan for adults

This lesson may be particularly fitting for a group of women volunteers/professionals.

1. **Read (or describe highlights) from the background essay** on Jewish women's charitable institutions.
2. **Look at and discuss together the 1921 "New Year's Wish" cover** of *The Jewish Woman*, the journal of the National Council of Jewish Women.
 - What do we learn from the images and text on this journal cover?
 - If your organization had a journal, what would be written on your four banners?
3. **Read the excerpt** from "An Interview With Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon" (*The American Hebrew*, April 23, 1920)

The women of the council had vision and they had a definite plan of work, which looked far ahead of the generation in which they themselves were working. At our first triennial we had two aims: religious work and philanthropy. We hoped to establish Sabbath schools and to extend the study of Jewish literature and history. In philanthropy we wanted to introduce preventive work, making the family rather than the individual the object of our care. By these plans, you can readily understand how limited was our field of endeavor in 1896. Charity and religion – these two were the province of womankind. Women's sphere is in the home, they told us. The last thirty years have been devoted to proof of our boast that women's sphere is the whole wide world, without limit.

4. **Discuss the excerpt** from the Solomon interview:
 - Why did women create all-female organizations based primarily on charity and religion?
 - What were the advantages and disadvantages of the organization being for women only?
5. **Consider Jewish women's organizations today.**
 - Which Jewish organizations are all-women? What are their missions?
 - Are there still similar advantages and disadvantages to these organizations being exclusively for women?
 - Do you think the work of these organizations is more or less meaningful because they are run by and for women?
6. **Read and discuss the excerpt from Ann G. Wolfe's 1975 speech "No Room at the Top"** (on next page). Wolfe was the head of the American Jewish Committee's programs on the status of women in the Jewish community.
 - Do you believe there is still an important place for all-female organizations, or do you believe that women's organizations are, or should be, primarily a historical phenomenon?

Ann G. Wolfe, "No Room at the Top."

Excerpted from NCJW's journal, *Council Woman* 38 (January 1976). Reprinted with permission of the National Council of Jewish Women.

...I could give you statistics on how many women go into the fields of Jewish education, social work, community relations, or fund raising. Where do they end up?

How many ever get to be the executive of an agency, or the principal of the school, or the head of the department? The role models we use encourage our women to be teachers, not supervisors or principals; case workers, but rarely the executive of the child care or family agency; program specialists, but almost never the executive of the Jewish community center; the organizer of the women's luncheon to raise money, but not the chief fund raiser. We remain the helpers, the do-ers, the devoted and loyal assistants, but for us, there seems to be no room at the top. We see this in our national organizations as well as in our local community agencies.

The greater part of what I've had to say so far comes out of my assessment that the male domination in Jewish communal structure has deprived women of the opportunity to share leadership at the top – leadership in the mainstream of Jewish life. Which leads me to the touchy subject of women's organizations, sisterhoods, and other all-women activities...

My own observation through visits to communities across the country is that younger women and men, those who are looking for some affiliation with Jewish communal life, seek a more integrated setting. What these younger people argue is that they do not see the issues that need to be addressed as dividing into female and male areas. Certainly, the issues on your own agenda – juvenile crime and the criminal justice system, gun control, health insurance, income maintenance, Soviet Jewry – are not specially feminine. Is a concern with Arab propaganda more male? Why should that be? And is Jewish family life only for the mother? What is the father's role?

On the other hand, I have noted the views of middle-aged and older women who have found great satisfaction through their work as members of women's organizations. This is particularly true for women who have achieved leadership positions in women's organizations and who treasure the autonomy of an all-women's group. They maintain that women's groups actually serve to multiply opportunities for leadership and mobilize a source of energy and power that move the over-all aims of the larger Jewish community. There may well be some truth to this argument.

I think that the future will see less separation between male and female participation in Jewish life but the time for abandoning women's groups, if that is to be, is not now. The larger women's movement is one of the most significant social forces of the century, and whether one regrets this force or not, one should see it, I think, as the reality we will live with...