

Ahavat Yisrael

Making Our Wilderness Bloom

350 YEARS OF EXTRAORDINARY JEWISH WOMEN IN AMERICA

Jewish Values

TZEDAKAH AND GEMILUT CHESED

The word “tzedakah” comes from the root “tzedek,” meaning justice. Tzedakah is giving money to those in need. The Jewish idea of justice, therefore, includes every person’s sense of obligation to give a portion of his/her income to people poorer than him/herself. In the Jewish tzedakah system,

- Everyone must give a percentage of what he/she makes, even poor people themselves. Why do you think even poor people are obligated to give?
- Even though there will always be poor people, we should be practical about alleviating suffering. Do you know the song, “*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, lo alecha ligmor...v’lo atah ben chorin l’hibatel mimenah, v’lo atah ben chorin...*”? The words mean, “*It is not up to you to finish the work, but you are not free to avoid doing it either.*” How does this teaching apply to tzedakah?
- Any kind of giving is good. Every dollar that every person gives can help someone obtain food, shelter, clothing, or other needs. But Jewish tradition also teaches us that there are better and worse ways of giving tzedakah. Rabbi Eleazar said, “*The reward that is paid for giving charity is directly related to the kindness with which it is given*” (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkot 49b). What do you think this means?
- Maimonides, also called Rambam, came up with a “tzedakah ladder” that ranked eight different ways of giving tzedakah, each better than the previous one. The best way to give, he taught, is to support someone by “*giving him a gift, or a loan, or entering into partnership with him, or creat[ing] a job for him...until he no longer needs to depend on others*” (Mishneh Torah Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7-14). In other words, the best kind of tzedakah is that which helps someone become independent, and free from reliance on tzedakah. If one can’t do that, then the next best way is to give so that both the giver and the recipient are anonymous. Why do you think the anonymity of both the giver and the recipient is so valued? The other levels that Rambam discusses include giving before being asked, and giving with pleasure rather than grudgingly. Think of relevant examples of each of these different ways of giving tzedakah.

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- The Christian concept of tzedakah is called charity. The word charity comes from the word caritas, which means love. But tzedakah means justice. The two most important things to know about tzedakah are 1) that we are all obligated to give tzedakah and 2) that we are supposed to give in a way that preserves the dignity of the people who are in need of it. Why is giving tzedakah in Judaism considered an act of justice, as opposed to an act of love?
- Although each person is obligated to give individually, organizations to help collect and distribute tzedakah are always important. The Talmud states, “*The verse, ‘They who provide tzedakah for the many are like the stars forever and ever’ (Daniel 12:3) refers to collectors for tzedakah*” (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 8b). How are tzedakah collectors like “the stars forever and ever”?

Related to tzedakah is the value of gemilut chesed or gemilut chasadim, act(s) of loving kindness. These are any good deeds that help individuals or the community, such as visiting the sick, comforting a friend, bringing food to someone hungry, or preparing the dead for burial.

- *Our masters taught: Gemilut chesed is greater than tzedakah in three ways. Tzedakah is done with one’s money, while gemilut chesed may be done with one’s money or with one’s person. Tzedakah is given only to the poor, while gemilut chesed may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Tzedakah is given only to the living, while gemilut chesed may be shown to both the living and the dead (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkot 49b).*

If tzedakah is commanded, why do you think the rabbis said that gemilut chesed is “greater”?

You will see that the women involved in organizations such as the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society actively engaged in tzedakah, tzedakah collection, and gemilut chasadim.

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Topic One

Women's Organizations

BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES AND LADIES AID

Today, people in need — for example, the poor, recent immigrants, or the disabled — often turn to the government for assistance.

Before the twentieth century, however, much of the responsibility for caring for those who could not fully care for themselves fell to private groups or charitable individuals. Even today, private organizations continue to play crucial roles in providing essential social and educational services.

Religious groups were often the main resource for those in need. Given the small Jewish population in North America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, poor Jews were often forced to apply to Christian organizations for assistance. Many of these organizations attempted to convert recipients of their aid to Christianity. In response to this danger and in accordance with Jewish values and traditions, as soon as they could Jewish communities organized their own mutual aid societies, burial associations, and other groups to assist the sick or poverty-stricken.

In the nineteenth century, women began to play increasingly important roles in providing social welfare services. Few middle-class women of the era held paying jobs, for most Americans believed that women should focus on the private world of the home and family and leave public activities to men. Unpaid philanthropic work, particularly when associated with a church or religious denomination, however, was considered acceptable — indeed highly desirable — for women, for it was viewed as an extension of their roles as mothers and caregivers beyond the household to the wider community, and a reflection of their inherently religious nature. In addition to dispensing charity individually, many women created benevolent societies, often devoted to assisting needy women and children.

In the early nineteenth century, Rebecca Gratz, a member of a well-known Jewish family in Philadelphia, became aware of how Christian missionaries targeted the Jewish poor. In 1819, she was one of several

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prominent Jewish women who created the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (FHBS), the nation's first non-synagogue-based Jewish charity and the earliest Jewish women's organization. Dedicated to assisting the city's Jewish women and children, the FHBS provided food, fuel, shelter, and later an employment bureau and traveler's aid service.

Over the next decades, similar organizations were created around the country. In small Jewish communities, the ladies' charitable society and the synagogue were often the only Jewish communal institutions. Other groups, such as sewing societies, allowed women to apply their domestic skills to philanthropic work. In the late nineteenth century, as the Jewish immigrant population swelled, women's philanthropic and social service work became especially important, often shaping the community's response to pressing problems. Women founded "sisterhoods of personal service" to perform relief work among poor immigrant Jews. They also pioneered the settlement house movement, in which middle-class volunteers lived and worked in centers in poor urban areas, providing services ranging from vocational training, to classes in English and other subjects, to cultural programs, to medical treatment. As professional social workers took over many of the tasks formerly performed by female volunteers, synagogue sisterhoods often began to focus more on service to their congregations than on the broader community.

In addition to providing much-needed assistance to those in need, Jewish women's philanthropic organizations also played important roles in the lives of their members. Unable to vote, hold office, or work in most professions, women found in these organizations valuable opportunities to exercise leadership and authority. For Jewish women, whose religious obligations were more limited than those of men, philanthropic work was also an important spiritual outlet, one that fit well with general societal expectations of American women.

In addition to working in all-female associations, women have also participated in general Jewish communal institutions. Historically, women found their ability to play key roles and exercise authority in these organizations severely limited, but in recent decades, this situation has begun to improve. For example, in 1975, only 17% of the board members of Jewish Federations were women, but that number had risen to 32% by 1993. Even as women's opportunities in general Jewish organizations have widened, however, national and local women's organizations have continued to play important roles in the Jewish community.

Links

- > *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Religious Education (Documents include Topic Introduction, Biography, Photos, and Primary Documents): 110*
- > *Other female pioneers in Jewish Leadership: Women on the Pulpit: 89*
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As Secretary of Philadelphia's Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (FHBS), Rebecca Gratz was responsible for writing the Society's annual reports. In these reports, Gratz not only reviewed the FHBS's activities, but also shaped the future direction of the Society by highlighting certain needs and encouraging members and potential members and donors to focus their attention on certain areas. In these excerpts from reports from 1835 and 1837, Gratz urged her readers to further action and fostered their sympathy for the needs of the city's poor Jews.

Female Hebrew Benevolent Society Reports of Philadelphia, 1835 and 1837

- Gratz uses some difficult language in this report, but in essence she focuses on the Society's need to educate young Jews and to attract new leadership. Why does she think attracting new leadership is of such concern?
- Gratz calls Jewish women the "daughters of a noble race" and implies that they have a special responsibility to take part in benevolent work. Why might she believe this? Do you agree?
- In the second paragraph, Gratz writes about the "changed heart" that will "make our wilderness bloom." What will cause this changed heart? Whose hearts will be changed? What is the wilderness and in what way will it bloom?

Ladies,

In a little while the remnant of those who first plead [sic] for the female poor of this congregation will have passed away and perhaps the sweetest memorial raised to their names will be the record that they laid the corner stone to this institution. It is not too much to hope — too much to expect from the daughters of a noble race that they will be foremost in the work of charity — provided their young hearts are impressed with its sacred duties...

[W]e need look for no greater miracle than the changed heart that an enlightened faith, piety, self-respect and charity will generate to make our wilderness bloom...but this is far in advance of our present purpose. The grain must be sown before the harvest can be reaped and if we are only employed in the humblest occupation of preparing the soil for future seasons of prosperity — our labor will not be lost to that all seeing eye that searcheth out the smallest germ of good and quickeneth it to an allotted end. Let us then still strive to aspire and reform — give freely of our own means and ask a blessing on the mite bestowed.

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November 1, 1837

...To the Jews, who have no country, and whose brethren come from every clime, it is incumbent [obligatory or urgent] wherever a few are collected together in a community, to form societies for the relief of the wayfarer, the poor, and the stranger; for in all their borders God has blessed them

During the summer and autumn several poor Jewish families arrived in this city from Europe, who required aid, and will be still more destitute in the severity of winter, if your charity is not extended to them. Let them not plead in vain. At your comfortable firesides think of the habitations of the poor; for them no glowing anthracite or blazing wood [coal] sends out a genial heat; their hearths are mocked by smoking shavings, and even these but scantily supplied; nor is the winter storm excluded from their dwellings.

- *What reasons does this report provide for establishing and maintaining societies like the FHBS?*
- *In what ways does Gratz attempt to convince others to join the society or give aid?*

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—> *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Religious Education (Documents include Topic Introduction, Biography, Photos, and Primary Documents): 110*

- What were the goals of these societies?
- How did these societies provide for the poor? Why do you think they chose these methods?
- What had the societies already accomplished?
- Why do you think the author of the second account says that “one afternoon a week spent in sewing” is “far more charitable than the giving of dollars and cents”?
- What do you think the members of the Philadelphia Sewing Association meant by “avoiding deception on the part of applicants”? Why do you think they highlighted this concern in their report?
- Do any of the organizations you belong to hold clothing drives? What organizations initiate these drives?

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—> *Ladies' Sewing Societies: Hannah Greenebaum Solomon biography: 164*

By the second half of the nineteenth century, most American Jewish communities had some form of women's philanthropic society. In many cities, this took the form of a Sewing Society. In most of these groups, middle-class members contributed their time, money, and labor to produce clothing and other goods for distribution to the poor. Another approach, used by Chicago's South Side Ladies' Sewing Society, was to employ needy women to sew the clothing, which had the advantage of assisting both the producer and the recipient of the goods. This approach fit well with both the Jewish value of helping someone in need become more self-sufficient, and nineteenth-century philanthropic workers' desire to foster self-sufficiency rather than encouraging “pauperism,” or dependence on charity. These excerpts from the reports of Sewing Societies in Philadelphia and Chicago give a sense of the organizations' activities and aims.

Ladies' Sewing Societies, 1861 and 1895

The Association, under the supervision of your Board of Directors, have distributed the following to the deserving poor of the city:—856 finished Garments, 150 pairs of Shoes, 75 pairs of Hose, 20 heavy Blankets, 2,283 yards of Calico, Flannel &c., and 12 entire suits of Boys' Clothes.

This will be found a very flattering result for a Society having but just reached the end of the first year. It is also proper to state that the greatest care has been taken, in order to avoid any deception on the part of applicants while at the same time all who were actually in need, received plentifully.

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North Side Ladies' Sewing Society, Chicago, 1895

Every mother here among us knows how her heart beats with gratitude when at night she tucks her little ones up snug, and remembers that they have been warm, well-fed, and consequently happy during the day. I think of those other mothers who also love their children tenderly, who would willingly sacrifice their lives to keep them from want, and who can only say at night, 'I thank God that my little ones sleep, that they may forget that they are hungry and cold.' One afternoon a week spent in sewing will not put any one out much, and may be the means of making many comfortable, and is far more charitable than the giving of dollars and cents.

South Side Ladies' Sewing Society, Chicago, 1895

We had in our midst such ardent and indefatigable workers that the success of the society was assured, philanthropically, financially and socially. The plan of making many of our poor Jewish women self-supporting is steadily increasing. Our disbursements [distributed gifts] have amounted to \$5,187.49, out of which we have supplied 400 families, numbering more than 1,850 persons, with bedding and clothing as well as boy's underwear and complete children's outfits.

Unlike the Philadelphia Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, which devoted itself solely to philanthropic work and was not attached to any particular congregation, some Ladies' Benevolent Societies — often those in smaller Jewish communities — combined charitable work with efforts on behalf of the synagogue. In this paper, presented at 1917 meeting, one of the original members of the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society of Anniston, Alabama, shared the story of the establishment of the Society in 1890 and told of the organization's early work.

Alabama Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society, 1890

- *What were the original aims of the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society in Anniston? How were these aims shaped by the small size and lack of formal organization of the city's Jewish community?*
- *What do you think the connection was between building a synagogue and aiding Jews in distress?*
- *Does it surprise you that none of the original members of the Society had ever belonged to an organization before? Why do you think this was so?*
- *How did this society accomplish its aim of building a synagogue? Does it surprise you that the ladies were able to accomplish their goals through these methods?*

About 27 years ago there were a number of Jewish families in our city. The spirit of Judaism prevailed among them as now. During the great fall holidays of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, services were held usually in a hall, occasionally in a home.

Usually a layman officiated at these services. From the coming of our revered Mr. Sterne — he was our leader — his impulses were consistent with the welfare of our Jewish community. One day almost all of our ladies received a message from our friends, Mr. and Mrs. Sterne, stating that if we felt interested in organizing a Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society we were invited to their home to discuss the matter with them. All responded to the call. There were about twelve ladies present. I believe not one had ever been members of an organization before. After a cordial welcome from our hosts, we were seated. Standing before us were that imposing couple. They made the most inspiring addresses, letting us know of the beauties and duties of a Jewish benevolent society. We became enthused to the highest pitch, and all expressed a willingness to give their time and effort to the work that had been outlined to them. That was the beginning of our Society, later to be known as the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society. Our object: to promote Judaism in our midst and aid our co-religionists in distress. Our aim: to build a temple, a Beth El [a House of God].

Now, in order to achieve our aim, to build a temple, we had to have funds, and to procure these funds it was decided a bazaar should be held. As you can imagine and as some present know, for I see some charter members here, we worked faithfully. We gave our time and of our substance. We met at the homes of the members weekly at half past two in the afternoon. Light refreshments were served for which a small sum, ten cents, was

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required. That money, together with an extra dollar given by each member, was used as a needle work fund. Our initiation fees and dues, the same as now, were kept separate. I believe our [synagogue] windows were bought with that money. We bought our material for [the sewing] work out of this fund, besides giving material very often ourselves.

Suffice it to say, our little band accomplished much. Some really beautiful pieces of embroidery and fancy articles were made. We were enthused and wanted to accomplish our exalted purpose. After a winter of work and really pleasant meetings, we decided the time had come to hold our bazaar. Our vice-president thought it would be a good move to enlist the outside support of our husbands and other members of the congregation in our work. So we asked them to write to the firms they had "biz" dealings with for aid in our cause. Nearly all responded generously. We actually received merchandise and money amounting to over a thousand dollars. That was a busy time for a small number of willing workers, for not alone did we rely on the fancy articles we had to sell, but we served dinner and supper for three days to the public, besides replacing articles we saw there was a demand for. Of course there was raffling, and other means of chance were resorted to. After three days of arduous labor our bazaar was closed. We had the means on hand wherewith to build a sanctuary.

- *What were the goals of each of the Sisterhood committees listed in this document?*
- *How was this Sisterhood different from Philadelphia's Female Hebrew Benevolent Society? What areas of Jewish life did it focus on that the FHBS did not? Why do you think women were now focusing on these areas?*
- *How were the activities of this Sisterhood similar to or different from the roles of women in traditional Jewish life?*
- *Does your synagogue have a Sisterhood? What are its goals? Does your synagogue have a Brotherhood? What are the differences between the two organizations?*

By the early twentieth century, professional social workers had taken over many of the activities performed by women's philanthropic societies in the nineteenth century. Synagogue sisterhoods, which continued some charitable work but focused more on their community's religious needs, then became one of the dominant forms of Jewish women's organization. The following excerpts from the 1912 Constitution of the Sisterhood of Philadelphia's Keneseth Israel congregation give a sense of the breadth of activities undertaken by many sisterhoods. The Sisterhood also had committees on Music, Alumni, Membership, Sociability, Hospitality, Program, Property, and Floral Decorations.

Sisterhood of Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia, 1912

Constitution — Duties of Committees

1. *Committee on Religion.* It shall be the duty of this committee to further attendance upon divine worship and participation in worship; to foster religious services in the home; to invite and welcome strangers to the Temple; to assist in spreading knowledge concerning the Jew and Judaism, by dissemination of printed discourses of the pulpit of Keneseth Israel among Jews and non-Jews. It shall devise ways and means looking toward an eventual establishment of Reform services and Reform religious schools in the congested centers of the city and in its outlying districts. It shall encourage, through the medium of classes, lectures and readings, the study of the Jewish religion, history, literature and kindred subjects.
2. *Committee on Religious School.* It shall be the duty of this committee to bring about close co-operation between the religious school and the home; to get in touch with parents whose children are of age to be enrolled as pupils of the school; to encourage the organization of post-confirmation classes; to provide, with the aid of teachers, suitable celebrations for the children on festal [festive] occasions....
6. *Committee on Visiting.* The duties of this committee shall be to visit the sick, the mourning, new members of the Sisterhood and the Congregation, and to inform the Rabbis of sickness and trouble in the families of members of the Sisterhood and Congregation....

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12. *Committee on Sewing*. It shall be the duty of this committee to continue and enhance the work of the present Temple Sewing Circle — i.e., to collect material, sew and distribute garments for the poor, and to raise the means therefor [sic].

13. *Committee on Ways and Means*. It shall be the duty of this committee to provide ways and means for raising funds for the furtherance of the work of the Sisterhood, of the Congregation, of the religious school and the Alumni, excepting in such cases where committees will undertake to raise their own funds.

- Review the questions following the introduction to the “Women’s Work” section.
- Why does Wolfe say “there seems to be no room at the top” of Jewish organizations for women?
- In your local Jewish institutions (schools, synagogue, youth group, JCC, etc.), do you see women at the highest levels of leadership? If not, why do you think this is so?
- What do you think are the benefits of an all-women’s organization? What are the drawbacks?
- Why does Wolfe call the subject of women’s organizations a “touchy” one?
- According to Wolfe, why does the younger generation think women’s groups are unnecessary today? What arguments does she note in favor of all-women’s organizations, by those women who have been involved with them? Do you think there are still reasons to have all-women’s organizations?

In addition to forming their own organizations, Jewish women — especially in the twentieth century — also participated in general Jewish communal institutions that included men as well as women. Until recently, however, women in these organizations worked mainly in lower-level jobs and had a hard time breaking into positions of power and authority. In 1975, Ann Wolfe, head of the American Jewish Committee’s programs on the status of women in the Jewish community, gave a talk in which she analyzed the difficulties women faced in Jewish communal organizations and discussed the place of specifically women’s organizations in today’s society.

No Room at the Top, Ann G. Wolfe, 1975

....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

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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...

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