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**MONTREAL SYNAGOGUE SISTERHOODS (1900-1949): A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION**

Jewish women and their volunteer associations have played an important role in Jewish life. They have made significant contributions to Jewish community life. Their involvement in abundant aspects of social work, welfare programs, and fundraising projects has been a vital asset in the effectiveness of community organizations. Energetic and committed, they brought their skills and roles as homemakers into the public arena. Women's volunteer services in the community have not been appropriately recorded or noted. Communal histories usually include only cursory references to women's volunteer services commending these women for their dedication to the community. Historians of Jewish communal life are also guilty of only brief mentions and descriptions of women's roles in the synagogue and philanthropic organizations. Basically, their labours and contributions have more or less been taken for granted. The inner dynamics of their organizational life has not been described in the past as a force that helped shape women's development and affected their status and roles.<sup>1</sup> Women experience the community and define it differently from men. They bring their own gender-linked concerns and experiences to communal activities. Traditionally the primary concern of women was the administration of the "private domain" – the household. They were considered to have natural mother instinct. Nurturing and caring for their husbands and children were of the essence. A component of their domestic duty was the informal

transmission of social, moral and religious values. Stemming from the notion that women were inherently charitable, a part of women's traditional work was to care for the poor or underprivileged. Their talents and experiences as social housekeepers could easily be applied to the needs of the larger community.<sup>2</sup>

While the voices and experiences of American Jewish women have begun to be recorded, examined and analyzed, the same has not been performed for Canadian Jewish women. In the past two decades, the significance of Jewish women's volunteerism and their organizational activity has prompted research in the United States. The examination of the historical role and ways in which women are involved in religious affairs and organizations has led to the exploration of synagogue sisterhoods.<sup>3</sup> But again, minimal research in this area has been done in Canada.

The nature of each form of volunteerism is different. All types of volunteer activity have frequently been grouped together indiscriminately. However, each category of activity and each organization serves different purposes and responds to different needs of the Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly each women's organization serves a distinct purpose not only to the community but to the individual women themselves. Synagogue sisterhoods were formed and evolved in the twentieth century alongside other women's organizations. They had their own characteristic organizational structure and purpose which continue today, notwithstanding some changes. They seemed to have filled a particular niche in Jewish institutional and religious life. They played a role in the creation of a female culture, community, and religious world. Thus, it is important that the history of the synagogue sisterhood in Canada be recorded as a noteworthy organization in itself, and as part of the overall movement of Canadian Jewish women's organizations, thus contributing to the much needed historiography of Canadian Jewish women.

The purpose of my larger study<sup>5</sup> was to begin the documentation of the sisterhood organizations tracing the origins, formation, and evolution of the sisterhoods in Canada up to

1949, focusing on the three oldest synagogues in Montreal; Spanish and Portuguese, Shaar Hashomayim and Temple Emanu-El. Synagogues and sisterhoods are often poor record-keepers and, therefore, the archival information was sparse. Consequently, the synagogue and sisterhood histories had to be accumulated through bulletins, newspapers announcements, annual reports, anniversary and commemoration booklets, minutes, and references in synagogue histories. Material from American sources helped provide a contextual backdrop for the sisterhood histories. An additional and vital component was that of the voice and perspective of sisterhood women themselves. Seven women were interviewed from the three above mentioned synagogues.

This essay will present some of my findings and conclusions; however, first some background of the history and development of sisterhoods in general needs to be addressed. Many of the secular ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resonated with the traditional values and roles of Jewish women. The “Cult of True Womanhood of Domesticity” was a powerful concept which envisioned women as pious pure, submissive, domestic and naturally religious.<sup>6</sup> The doctrine of “separate spheres” and the bourgeois ideal of family life in western Europe and America also merged with Jewish teachings about women.<sup>7</sup> Women were deemed to be the guardians of morality and religiosity. Their place was at home, making it a “retreat” in which they guided and nurtured their husbands and children.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, Jewish women were most commonly idealized and esteemed as mothers and homemakers, “queens of the home.” Their work was metaphorically described using religious language associated with the sanctuary as “service at the altar” and a “home as a miniature Temple.”<sup>9</sup>

But as women acquired middle-class incomes and a heightened sensitivity to their secular surroundings they began to require a ‘broader sphere’ than that of the home. Novel interpretations began to allow them to bring their special sensitivities and their proclivity toward charity into the public arena.

Women's auxiliaries and societies formed in the early nineteenth century, performing various charitable and social functions such as sewing and fundraising. During the immigration periods of 1880s-1890s, and 1900 to after the First World War, women's organizations flourished and were more proactive in the community, providing women the opportunity to organize 'hands-on' work with the recipients of their charity.<sup>10</sup> However, as immigration slowed and the needs of the community changed the majority of these organizations ceased to exist or evolved. In Montreal, the Jewish community which constituted the third largest ethnic community was becoming a "Third Solitude" between the Francophone and Anglophone communities due to the bi-national, bi-linguistic quandary and was turning inward.<sup>11</sup> The women's organizations were incorporated into larger philanthropic or community organizations or their activities became included under federated systems in each major Canadian city starting in 1915. These federations were male dominated and enforced "scientific philanthropy," a strict system of economy and efficiency. The women's methods were often devalued as not being "scientific" enough. They were criticized for their old-fashioned methods of open-handedness and lack of written reports. Disillusioned, they began to withdraw and due to lack of funds dissolved or operated on a much reduced scale.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the drive for trained professionals in the social work sector eliminated many volunteer women from much social work activity as well as dislodging them from many responsible positions. The concept of "professional" and "volunteer" distinguished the spheres of male and female.

As the areas of social welfare involvement diminished, at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Jewish women's volunteer efforts narrowed to activities such as self-education, fundraising and programming. There was no reason that their organizational abilities and religious inclinations could not *now* be used for religious institutional purposes. At this time the new concept of the synagogue-centre, an institution which was a "family enterprise" where "all members would feel

at home” was being introduced in concurrence with an emerging new allegiance to the synagogue.<sup>13</sup> In the United States, there was concern for religious observance. This was not necessarily a problem in Montreal which was a more traditional Jewish community. Youth activities and afternoon Hebrew schools were the first concerns of the modernized synagogues. Sisterhoods as successors to the various Ladies Auxiliaries were initiated by rabbis or sometimes their wives. Rabbis of the Montreal congregations who were trained in the United States and maintained close ties there were most likely influenced by their American counterparts.

Historian Jenna Weissman Joselit wrote that sisterhoods were the most popular manifestations of the newly Americanized synagogues and that no modern synagogue – Reform, Conservative or Orthodox – wanted to be without one. Rabbi Lookstein of the Orthodox Kehilath Jeshurun congregation in New York succinctly explained that “A congregation without a sisterhood is like a home without a mother.”<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Abramowitz of Montreal’s Shaar Hashomayim agreed and posited “what the soul is to the body, that our women are to the life of our Congregation.”<sup>15</sup> The synagogue sisterhood was a religious organization unlike the charitable or social service institutions in which many Jewish women had previously voluntarily worked. Their primary purpose was service to the synagogues. They were to press for religious observance and help render the synagogue a warm, friendly, and accessible institution fostering sociability and religious engagement with their congregation. The appeal was to the dormant energies of the women to work on matters both practical and spiritual. The sisterhood women took the newly-acquired tasks upon themselves with fervour and diligence applying their domestic sensibilities and skills with the belief that “no task was too great, too menial or demanding” for the development of their “spiritual home.”<sup>16</sup> Their duties were wide ranging, from financially supporting and working on educational activities, particularly the religious schools, to equipping the kitchen.

They decorated the sukkahs and altar with flowers, designed Torah covers and cared for the Ark, provided furnishings for the buildings and pioneered gift shops selling ritual articles. To foster hospitality and “instill warm good feelings” they organized entertainments for the children, held teas, luncheons, bazaars, dances, fashion shows, regular meetings, supplied congregational food, and sent birthday, anniversary and condolence cards.<sup>17</sup> They arranged classes for themselves on Jewish subjects and attempted to educate members on how to be good Jewish wives and women. Manuals and guidebooks were published, resources provided and programs initiated to instruct how to conduct rituals and maintain traditional Jewish homes. An example is the pageant, “The Jewish Home Beautiful,” an annual presentation by the Shaar Hashomayim sisterhood which was extremely well attended and considered very successful. Current events and book reviews were the subject of lectures and meetings. New and innovative projects were continuously being developed. At the suggestion of the Shaar Hashomayim Women’s Auxiliary,<sup>18</sup> the boardroom was to be used as a library and reading room for young children so that they could “spend time delving into Jewish Literature.”<sup>19</sup> To further this concept, they initiated a Bar Mitzvah Book program in which Bar Mitzvah boys donated a book for a Bar Mitzvah shelf and girls, upon their graduation of the Religious School, donated a book of Jewish interest. Through the round of activities and programs the sisterhoods came to be regarded as the “cultural and social arm of the congregation.”<sup>20</sup>

Besides being considered the backbone of the social spirit they developed a fiduciary relationship. Although fundraising was not the primary focus of the sisterhoods, the congregations came to rely on them as a source of revenue for their institution, supplementing their incomes and absorbing the costs of many extras, such as relocation, upkeep of the edifice, and the schools. Jenna Joselit has suggested that the concern for the fiscal well-being of the congregation may have endowed the social orientation of the sisterhood with a “higher purpose” vali-

dating the social activities as “dignified charity” or pursuit of “sacred hobbies.”<sup>21</sup> Outreach to the community was mainly through donations to selected organizations and immediate community needs. For example, during the Second World War each sisterhood took the time to be involved in the war effort by knitting and sewing bandages, sending parcels overseas, filling “V bundles” and “ditty bags” and raising funds. Two exceptions that are noteworthy were the Temple Emanuel-El’s sisterhood’s annual interfaith teas and book review forum to encourage inter-faith dialogue.

Each sisterhood belonged to the national organization of its denomination which was an essential resource for information and guidelines. They kept close ties following many of their suggestions and programs. Delegates from each sisterhood were sent regularly to national conventions so that “new and advanced work could be discussed with other women prominent in synagogue activities.”<sup>22</sup> The relationship with the national organizations gave the Montreal sisterhoods a feeling of unity, significance and a collective voice.

During the course of my research it became clear that a significant difference of opinion existed between contemporary historians Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon, and Jenna Joselit. They held opposing views as to the influence of sisterhoods on American women’s roles and power. The question in dispute is to what extent, if any were these views reflected in the activities and roles of the Montreal sisterhoods.

Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon in their study of the Reform sisterhoods in the United States commented that the actions of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods were influenced by their intersections with American life and culture. They pointed to the debates about female suffrage, the meaning of women’s votes and the emergence of new opportunities for middle- and upper-class women in the spheres of education, the professions and the labour force. The rabbis and their wives even took part debating with one another about women’s roles and women’s ordination. They further claimed that the Reform

sisterhoods through the influence of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods extended the sphere of women's roles in the synagogue. This was done through their ideological concerns and pioneering activities, such as women conducting and leading summer services and occasionally giving sermons. Not only did these help change the expectations of women's roles, they also helped their leaders to envision new ones for future generation of women. A vision that they believe was inspired in this period of activism was the call for the ordination of female rabbis in 1961.<sup>23</sup>

Jenna Joselit expressed an opposing view based mostly on the study of orthodox and conservative movements: "As forces for change within the American Jewish community, the sisterhoods were negligible factors."<sup>24</sup> She disagreed with the assertions of some sisterhood women who claim women gained power "via the sisterhood, of being propelled into the synagogue boardroom through the synagogue kitchen."<sup>25</sup> Her standpoint was founded on the unchanged social structure of the synagogue and the larger Jewish community and the fact that the sisterhood as an institution did not lobby for increased opportunities for Jewish women in either arena. Her evaluation of the sisterhood programs was, in terms of power and decision making, that they had no real say, and that their influence was rather one of outreach. Still, she does believe that they were a worthwhile organization, serving certain needs of women at that particular time in acceptable forms and boundaries to both men and women, but that they were not organs of change of power. Each argument has developed from a different perspective and has valid points in application to the Montreal sisterhoods.

The allegorical image of the "woman of valor" as a symbol of proper Jewish womanhood was used interchangeably by both males and females in Montreal. Synagogue bulletins and dedication booklets frequently employed the metaphor in reference to the sisterhood. In the 1946 Sisterhood of the Spanish and Portuguese Commemoration Booklet, the Men's Club president wrote:



As King Solomon's "Aischess Chay-yil" is the good and dutiful Jewess that is eternal, so in our own day and hour, it is right and becoming to compliment the work and efforts of the Officers and Members of the Spanish and Portuguese "Shearith Israel" Sisterhood of Montreal. Their history and co-operation stem back to the year 1768 for without them there could not have been founded the holy and sacred synagogue we all so much adore.... They have been valorous and helpful and resourceful and successful. By their noble and dignified example they have instilled, and opportunely so, both courage and loyalty and faith and hope. By their works and achievements the Cause of Israel is forever enriched and glorified.<sup>26</sup>

Another anniversary booklet refers to the sisterhood as "mothers" and refers to (Esheth Chayil) "a woman of spiritual strength."<sup>27</sup> The powerful symbol of "woman of valor" was not only preserved at the same time that women's sphere was renegotiated and reinvented, but was reinforced and glorified. As the men supported the women's entrance into new arenas, such as the synagogue, they claimed that the women were being true to the ideals of the women in their past. As the women's sphere of boundaries extended from the home into the synagogue the rhetoric of continuity enabled, and at the same time obscured, the changes in the gender norms. The women themselves accepted the image and the accompanying definitional meaning, posited by historian Beth Wenger, of "enabler, behind the scenes agents" as part of the new functions of the sisterhood.<sup>28</sup> Service to the synagogue and motivating their husbands and children in the religious aspect of their lives were primary goals of their agenda. As one Montreal sisterhood member stated about the work of the sisterhood, "Behind every good man is a woman".<sup>29</sup> In general, the Montreal sisterhoods functioned within acceptable bounds. They incorporated both Jewish and Canadian views of proper behaviour, behaviour which did not endanger prevailing gender roles. The Temple Emanu-El sisterhood's

initiation of a Women's Shabbat and Luncheon involving a sermon was a small step toward egalitarianism but was essentially performed within non-threatening boundaries. There were no overt ritual transgressions or appeals for women's equal opportunities. Theoretically the Reform movement called for women's equality in the synagogue, but in reality this did not actually occur in the individual synagogues.<sup>30</sup> The basic structure of the synagogue was not altered by the sisterhoods. They did not change women's roles within the synagogue or within the larger community in Montreal during this time. Their community work was minimal, and largely in the form of donations or intermittent cooperative work with other organizations. Even the occasional dynamic community interfaith discussions of women's roles of the Temple Emmanuel sisterhood affected no notable visible changes. Yet, undercurrents of change *were* having effect.

Although the Montreal sisterhoods may not have lobbied for change or increased opportunities within the synagogue or the greater community, they were an influential and positive factor in individual women's lives and in synagogue institutional life. The sisterhood organization brought women into the synagogue making them a visible entity. It offered them the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and dedication (which was equal to the men's). Their involvement in various facets of the institution helped prepare the way for future opportunities and advancements.

Historian Karen Blair has argued domestic feminism's moderate approach to effecting change in women's roles was more successful than more militant ones (such as that of the suffragists) because changes were brought about while appearing non-threatening.<sup>31</sup> The sisterhoods in Montreal used such a moderate approach using "proper" channels. While this approach did not bring about radical changes to which Blair was referring, it affected some transformation and imparted vision. Their programs became an integral part of annual synagogue activity and were critical to the flourishing of synagogue orga-

nizational life. They sustained the community in the congregations and helped create novel frameworks as the congregations moved westward to new areas and the suburbs. The Reform mother-daughter Shabbat programs where women led their own services and sermons gave scope to women's leadership ability from the pulpit. Fundraising and allocation of funds changed both women's and men's perception of women's competence to handle money. Sisterhood members sitting on Boards of Trustees certainly gave women an image of respectability and served as a precedent to their future decision making power in the synagogue institution. The sisterhood representatives on the Temple Board of Trustees as advisors in this era were appointed not elected. Although the vote of two women could not yield power to make changes, their participation gave them a presence and voice. At the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Irene Wolff's seat on the Board of Trustees in 1928 may have afforded similar possibilities.<sup>32</sup>

Jenna Joselit has disputed claims that in the first half of the century women were propelled into the boardroom via the sisterhood and that "the development of the power of the American Jewess in the life of the congregation has been experienced through Sisterhood experience," suggesting instead that these changes were in fact minimal.<sup>33</sup> Her argument is legitimate for two reasons. First, Joselit has taken issue with those statements that were sweeping generalizations and used vigorous language. Second, women did not attain significant measures of leadership or governing power within that time period, either in the United States or Montreal. In fact, the sisterhoods did not really have an actual focused sense of themselves as an organization in this era. They did not preserve their records nor did they document their history. Such an attempt was made by the Shaar Hashomayim Auxiliary in 1953, but there is no evidence that it was ever completed.<sup>34</sup> It was not until 1996 that the sisterhood once again took the initiative to write its story. Similarly, the history of the Spanish and Portuguese Sisterhood was not noted until one women chose to do so to in 1993 to

commemorate its 75th Anniversary. Recording of their own achievements by sisterhoods was done for the most part in occasional dedication booklets with sparse detail. However, their persistent involvement, visibility, and presence did lead to gradual acceptance and changes and initiated aspirations for the future. Hence, Pamela Nadell and Rita Simon's position, that sisterhoods did influence change and movement toward equality for women in the synagogue and religious life, does have validity in a broad, more far-reaching sense for the Montreal sisterhoods.

Furthermore, the sisterhood can be seen in a certain way as an organization along feminist lines. First, it recognized and responded to the needs of its middle-class members. Women were seeking an outlet outside of the home which would bridge the conflicting demands of home and society. The sisterhood provided a fulfilling and viable outlet in multiple ways for women in Montreal.<sup>35</sup> An opportunity for meaningful and responsible work was offered. It enhanced members' personal sense of involvement and self-worth. Their status was raised as they took pride in their leadership and accomplishments in the synagogue and community work and *were* awarded recognition.<sup>36</sup> It was also an agent for education at a time when women's education was just being accepted. Through the sisterhoods, the women became more knowledgeable and articulate in various areas. By means of classes, speeches, the national organizations' written material, synagogue preparations and events for the annual holidays and festivals, they became more Judaically-educated. In order to function efficiently as an organization, the sisterhood required skills in management and financial matters. Meetings had to be planned and led, events organized, sisterhood administrative and monetary decisions made, and financial records kept. Not only were the women able to improve the skills they already possessed they were also able to learn new ones. The programmes consisting of book reviews, current events, and public speaking also expanded their knowledge about issues related to the public sphere.

Feelings of female unity, camaraderie, bonding, and belonging emanated within the sisterhoods. This was a significant factor in the building of their new self-image and self-confidence. It was a place where they could socialize with other women comfortably. The women enjoyed working together as a women's organized group with a set agenda and towards common goals. In the sisterhood, mutual help was customary and they could develop a sense of effectiveness. However, the Montreal sisterhoods had limited interaction and regular sharing of ideas between their local synagogue institutions. Each seemed to operate independently for the most part. They had a stronger vertical connection with the national organizations rather than a local horizontal one with each other. Perhaps, one explanation for this occurrence could be that they were of three different denominations. This conundrum should be explored in further research. Although their interaction was minimal it is interesting to note that very little difference existed between the different denominations. They were all structured along similar lines. Their objectives, ideology and rhetoric closely resembled each other and they engaged in the same activities. Where they diverged was to how best promote ritual observance. This would be an interesting area for further research as well.

Second, they brought a distinctive voice into the realm of the synagogue. Working from a specific female perspective the sisterhoods implemented programs geared for women and different from those of males. This was apparent in their work, educational and social agendas. As advisors on the board they offered suggestions and opinions which presented alternate perceptions and helped balance points of view in the governing realm. They also added a feminine touch throughout the synagogue in the course of their ideas, work and programs. Although their role may have been limited and contained, it allowed a presence of female energy and contribution. Most of their programs and implementations were successful and added something substantial to the synagogue in terms of its embellishments, growth and general flourishing. Women's serious

dedication to the establishment was demonstrated as well. Hence, they became a vital part of the institution.

Third, the sisterhoods carved a “niche” for themselves within the Montreal Jewish women’s organizations and in the religious life of the community. Although the other women’s organizations were based on the Jewish religious tenet of charity, they were secular in nature. The particular unique characteristic with which the sisterhood was endowed was a religious one. The sisterhoods granted a form of religious participation and expression for women. Its attachment to a religious institution assured this feature. Whether it was in the form of doing good works, creating and participating in annual holiday celebrations, becoming educated in Jewish studies, being involved in the synagogue religious school, or prompting family or community religious participation it contained religious sentiments and significance. Their flurry of activity and dedication demonstrates that they had been waiting to find a way to contribute to the synagogue and express their personal commitment in the religious public arena. Now they were able to transfer women’s sacred responsibilities of charity and maintaining and transmitting Judaism, which were traditionally carried out in the private sphere of the family and home, to a public religious venue and new institutional concept of “family” and “home.” To be sure, a sense of belonging can be elicited in associating within any organization and women’s organizations offer a sisterhood bond as well. However, the feeling of belonging through membership in the sisterhood extended into its affiliated synagogue institution. Thus, the sisterhood provided a “female family” in and of itself and through the synagogue a more rounded fuller family with the inclusion of men and children. In addition, through the sisterhood the women found an additional religious or ‘spiritual’ home. The religious nature of the sisterhood is captured in a 1938 anniversary booklet:

The accomplishments of the Sisterhood are a tribute to all officers both past and present as well as to all members who by their zeal for *holy work*,

enabled the Sisterhood to progress and flourish.  
May the almighty crown their work for religion  
and Judaism with success everywhere....<sup>37</sup>

Seeming to work within appropriate boundaries, the sisterhoods were accepted and even welcomed by the more conservative/traditional Montreal Jewish community. A change in ideology was imminent. A woman's home was now to include her actual domicile *and* the synagogue. The sisterhood served the needs of both the women and the synagogues in this period. At this time the Montreal congregations were encouraging religious observance and increased participation. The rabbis endorsed women's participation in the form of sisterhoods for several reasons. First, it was their hope that women would enhance observance both at home and in the community; and second, that women's involvement and allegiance to the synagogue would further men's and children's participation in the institution and synagogue growth. Historian Felicia Herman described the congregation as a home with "mothers" (sisterhood members), "fathers" (synagogue or brotherhood members) and "children" (religious school students and youth groups).<sup>38</sup> The concept of the sisterhood members as "mother" reinforced the belief of the "synagogue family" and the synagogue as the second home, legitimizing the broadening of the women's home sphere into the synagogue venue. In the essentially religious organization, the sisterhood women were able to practice Judaism through their good works and answer the call to Jewish women to help preserve and encourage Judaism. It also afforded the women an opportunity to utilize their domestic and organizational skills, to access both Jewish and secular education, and gain self-worth and esteem through their activities, participation and contributions in the public venue of the synagogue. Hence, the sisterhood organization was a suitable vehicle for both entities.

Changes in Jewish women's status and roles within the synagogue were transpiring which, in all probability, were not fully realized during this time period. The synagogue was no longer solely a "boys' club." An authentic and permanent place

for women was being forged in the synagogue institution through the sisterhood association. As the sisterhoods undertook more responsibilities the congregations began to depend more on them, developing confidence and trust in their capabilities. Women's voices were being heard. Not only was their advice being sought, but they were making decisions in a myriad of synagogue affairs; from decorating, fundraising, and entertainments to enhancing ritual observance, and educational and financial matters. The decision making emanated from within the sisterhood organization itself and from sisterhood women on synagogue boards. Women's presence was becoming pervasive and a force throughout the institution. Gradually the gender lines were blurring and the boundaries of women's sphere within the synagogue setting were expanding. The absence of confrontation and what is more, favourable reception may be explained by the inconspicuous manner in which the transformations were taking place.

This leads to a consideration of the story of the congregational sisterhoods in the next decades and the necessity of a fuller portrait of sisterhoods in Canada. There are several areas for potential investigation that would be ideal as a starting point for this study. The changes that occurred in the sisterhood organizations should be chronicled. Through this scholarly debate concerning their impact on women's roles in the synagogue and community can be more clearly examined. A significant factor to monitor is whether the sisterhoods changed according to the needs of women. It would be interesting to explore the effect feminism had on the sisterhoods. Did the fact that there are women in the pulpit and on the synagogue boards in decision-making capacities affect sisterhoods' position? With the movement towards women's equality in the religious institutions, another question to investigate is the possible obscurity or loss of the female niche and feminine distinctive voice that the sisterhood afforded within the synagogues. The issue of whether these organizations are still needed or important requires addressing. Overall, the challenge for further research is how



and why did sisterhoods continue, what purpose are they serving in contemporary times, and how do they continue to affect women's lives and the Jewish community in Canada?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Some treatment of the adaptability of women's roles can be found in Hasia R. Diner and Beryl Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); William Toll, "A Quiet Revolution: Jewish Women's Clubs and the Widening Female Sphere, 1870-1920," *American Jewish Archives* 41 (Spring/Summer 1989): 7-26; Beth S. Wenger, "Jewish Women and Volunteerism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers," *American Jewish History* LXXIX, no.1 (Autumn 1989): 311-333.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholarly literature focuses on Jewish women's organizations in which a degree of sisterhood information is recorded. Examples of research focused specifically on the synagogue sisterhood phenomenon are: Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936," in *Women and American Judaism*, edited by Pamela Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna, 148-181 (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press 2001); Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Women: The Synagogue Sisterhood 1890-1940," in *The American Synagogue, A Sanctuary Transformed*, edited by Jack Wertherimer, 206-230 (Cambridge University Press); Pamela S. Nadell and Rita Simon, "Ladies of the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930," in *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*, edited by Maurice Sacks, 63-75 (Urbano & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> "Montreal Synagogue Sisterhoods (1900-1949): A Female Community, Culture and Religious World," (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966), p. 151-173; and Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Beth Wenger discusses the term "separate spheres" in her article "Jewish Women and Volunteerism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers," *American Jewish History* LXXIX, no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 311-333 claiming that its framework is an almost standard interpretive tool in American women's history. It is open to a variety of interpretations by those who use the term with the understanding that is always an artificial construction.

<sup>8</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, "Priestess and Hausfrau: Women and Tradition in the German-Jewish Family," in *The Jewish Family, Myths and Reality*, edited by Steven M. Cohen and Paula E. Hyman, 62-81 (New York: Holes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Woman," 207.

<sup>10</sup> Immigration to the United States and Canada differed somewhat. The emigration of German Jews in the 1840s to the United States had no comparable migration in Canada. As well, the immigration period in Canada began a good decade later than in the United States. See, Gerald Tulchinsky, "The Contours of Canadian Jewish History," in *The Jews in Canada*, ed. Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, Morton Weinfeld, 5-21 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> The face of the communities in Quebec to which Jewish immigrants came was a Christian one with strong Catholic foundations. Most Jews who came to Canada were prepared to make concessions in order to integrate but were unwilling to give up their religion altogether and sought to seek vestiges of their ethnicity. Due to the insufficient provision of social funds by the Canadian government the responsibility fell upon the shoulders of the ethnic communities in Montreal. For these reasons, the Montreal Jewish community established an extensive network of organizations operating with a certain degree of cultural and religious independence. However, occupational patterns, political affiliations and the importance of language linked the Jewish community more with the anglophone rather than francophone community. The little part Jews played in the intellectual, cultural and social affairs was also within the world of Anglo-Canada. French

Canadians considered the Jews unwelcome outsiders viewing them as a threat to the Catholic faith, an affront to the purity of the French Canadian ideal. Although there was, to a degree, more acceptance on the part of the anglophone community than the francophone one, the anglophones also felt threatened by non-Christians who posed a peril to their stability in the midst of the majority Catholic/French culture. For further discussion, see Michael Brown, *Jew or Juif* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), p. 164-77, 246-47; and Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Lester Publishing Limited, 1992), p. xvi-xix.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen A. Speisman, *The Jews of Toronto* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1979), p. 264- 65.

<sup>13</sup> The synagogue-centre is basically understood as a multipurpose synagogue encompassing the functions of religious worship, social activity and education. It has no European precedent. It is entirely an American movement in its origin beginning in the late nineteenth century. For a fuller history see, David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (American University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Rosetta Elkin, interviewed by author, tape recording, 6 January 2003; Janice Steinberg and Alice Lehrer, "History-Shaar Hashomayim Sisterhood," June 1996, Montreal, personal files of authors.

<sup>16</sup> Jewish Public Library [JPL], Temple Emanu-El, Minutes of Temple Emanu-El, 1908.

<sup>17</sup> Joselit, "The Special Shpere of the Middle-Class Ammerican Women," 10.

<sup>18</sup> The title Women's Auxiliary was used until the 1950s when it was changed to Sisterhood under the presidency of Rosetta Elkin who explained in an interview that the term "'sisterhood' gives a feminine description" whereas auxiliary "can mean anything."

<sup>19</sup> Shaar Hashomayim Congregation Archives, Minutes of Women's Auxiliary, 1935.

<sup>20</sup> Joselit, *New York Jewish Jews*, p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives [CJCCCNA], Temple Emanu-El, Temple Emanu-El Pre-Dedication volume 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Nadell and Simon, "Ladies of the Sisterhood," p. 69-71. Sally Priesand became the first women in America to be ordained a rabbi in 1972.

<sup>24</sup> Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Woman," p. 223.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> CJCCCNA, The Sisterhood of the Spanish and Portuguese Commemoration Book, 1890-1946.

<sup>27</sup> JPL, "The Beth David Sisterhood Story," 50th Anniversary Booklet, 1888-1938, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Wenger, "Jewish Women and Voluntarism," p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Mrs. Robins (pseudonym), interview by author, tape recording, Montreal, Quebec, 17 April 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Karla Goldman documents the ambivalence of women's equality in Reform Judaism in America and what would happen to gender roles in its full implementation in Karla Goldman, *Beyond The Synagogue Gallery* (Cambridge Massachusetts & London, England, 2000) and "The Ambivalence of Reform Judaism: Kaufmann Kohler and the Ideal Jewish Woman," *American Jewish History* 79 (Summer 1990), p. 492.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Blair, "The Club Women as Feminists" in Faith Rogow, "Gone to Another Meeting," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader* ed. Pamela S. Nadell (New York & London: New York University Press, 2003), p. 71. Karen Blair was writing in reference to the General Federation of Women's Clubs which, she asserts, did effect significant change for women's autonomy by rendering the notion that women's place is in the home obsolete.

<sup>32</sup> CJCCCNA, Minutes of the Spanish and Portuguese. The minutes stated that board members remained the same for the next year. I was not able to find documentation at this time whether she served for more years or whether any other woman did during this period.

<sup>33</sup> Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman," p. 223.

<sup>34</sup> Shaar Hashomayim Archives. It was to record its history since its inception and into the future, to be used as a guide for reference and as a guide to the workers, and to have it as a memento for interest and inspiration.

Loose pages from an auxiliary report reveal that a bound leather book with engraved title was presented to the current president, Sadie Brown at an annual meeting in 1954 but that material and data was still being collected before starting on the book itself. The sisterhood does have a memento book of the years 1951-54 with clippings, photographs and data that was possibly compiled from the material which was supposed to be used for the larger project. Two books of the Auxiliary's minutes from the years in the 1930s and 1940s were also just recently discovered.

<sup>35</sup>Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class the American Jewish Woman," p. 223.

<sup>36</sup> Paula Hyman, "The Volunteer Organizations: Vanguard or Rear Guard" *Lilith* 5 (1978), p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> JPL, Beth David, "The Sisterhood Story," 50th Anniversary Booklet, 1888-1938, p. 23. The italics are my emphasis on the sacred/religious aspects embedded in the sisterhood.

<sup>38</sup> Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936," in *Women and American Judaism*, edited by Pamela Nadell and Jonathan Sarna, 148-181 (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001), p. 166.

