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**Small Synagogue: Great Strides**

**History 489: Research Seminar**

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Figure 1: Temple Sholom. Reproduced with permission of Temple Sholom.

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## **Abstract:**

In 1972, the Chippewa Valley Lodge of B'nai B'rith sparked national attention when members voted to remove the "male only" clause in B'nai B'rith membership. Breaking a long tradition of male fraternity, the lodge added two females to their roster, angering other B'nai B'rith Lodges and the B'nai B'rith national headquarters. Despite heated exchange from the district Grand Lodges and national B'nai B'rith leaders, the Chippewa Valley Lodge continued to allow women to serve as full members within their Lodge.

Refusing to stop there, the Lodge fought back vehemently against what they considered to be a discriminatory policy and petitioned the leadership to have gender removed from membership requirements. Ultimately their efforts led to a national vote that decentralized the establishment of membership requirements, enabling individual branches to decide on the issue of gender and membership. This victory, while a product of the Chippewa Valley Lodge's leadership, fits within the context of the events that occurred within the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and Conservative Judaism.

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## **Introduction**

“In some senses it wasn’t earth shaking, but in the context of what life in America was like and life in Judaism was like at that time, it was more earth shaking then from how we would view it today. We were in essence pioneers in the effort we made.”

-Mort Sipress

Perhaps by current American standards, the notion that a woman is equal to her male counterpart is nothing extraordinary. Since twenty first century women now make up nearly fifty percent of the American labor force and more women are attending college than men, it is no wonder that an age when women could not join certain organizations based on their gender is a long ago nightmare.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the great strides visible in American society today, thirty years ago the American climate towards women in fraternal organizations was very different. B’nai B’rith, an American Jewish fraternal organization that relentlessly fought against religious and ethnic discrimination, was no exception.

Although currently women can join B’nai B’rith without being forced into a segregated auxiliary, in the year 1972, B’nai B’rith had a one hundred and thirty-one year tradition of male only membership within the organization.<sup>2</sup> That tradition would become bravely contested by a seemingly obscure group of Jews in the Eau Claire, Wisconsin community. Deeming male only membership policies as sexist and unjust discrimination, in 1972 the Chippewa Valley Lodge of B’nai B’rith made a controversial decision to allow women to serve as full members in their

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<sup>1</sup> “WB- Statistics & Data” <http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/main.htm> (accessed 20 December, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “B’nai B’rith International” [http://www.bnaibrith.org/about\\_us/bbi\\_roots.cfm](http://www.bnaibrith.org/about_us/bbi_roots.cfm) (accessed 15 November, 2009)

Lodge. Adding two females from the Temple Sholom congregation to their roster and disbanding the female auxiliary, the seemingly insignificant Chippewa Valley Lodge sparked national attention for their decision to disregard male only membership policies.<sup>3</sup> Since this violated both the B'nai B'rith constitution and traditional Jewish patriarchy, the decision outraged both male and female leadership from other Lodges and the Grand Lodge of B'nai B'rith. Despite being ordered to disband their policy of co-ed membership, the Chippewa Valley Lodge refused to back down from their egalitarian decision. Instead, the Lodge pushed for an amendment to the B'nai B'rith constitution to legally allow women to participate as members in the male Lodges.

Occurring in the midst of the second wave feminist movement and merely years after the civil rights movement of the 1960's, the Chippewa Valley Lodge's move towards egalitarianism did not occur in a historical vacuum. Mort Sipress, the president of the Eau Claire chapter and leading advocate for including women as full members was deeply affected by the political ferment occurring during the 1960's and 1970's. This is apparent through his long affiliation with the Democratic Party, ties with Civil Rights activists, and self proclaimed support of feminism. As a strong supporter of liberal ideology, particularly in regards to civil rights issues, Sipress embraced egalitarian values that clearly influenced his policies as president of both the Temple Sholom congregation and the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith Lodge.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Yet Sipress' influences were not solely secular in nature. Temple Sholom decided in 1969 to affiliate with the United Synagogue of America of Conservative Judaism<sup>4</sup>, a more liberal and egalitarian form of Judaism in comparison to Orthodoxy. For decades, many Conservative synagogues were seeking to achieve greater gender equality within their congregations well before the feminist movement of the 1960's and 1970's. Using Jewish theology to justify breaking from traditional Jewish patriarchy, Sipress too believed that Judaism was intrinsically egalitarian despite the centuries of Jewish patriarchy.<sup>5</sup>

While Conservative Judaism and liberal ideology were certainly strong influences on Mort Sipress, his decision to include women as full members of Temple Sholom and the Chippewa Valley Lodge was also a practical move. With declining membership in both the Temple Sholom congregation and the Chippewa Valley Lodge, keeping men and women in separate Lodges and excluding women from leadership positions within the congregation was becoming a hindrance. Realizing the impracticality of these policies, Sipress knew he had to act in favor of the survival of the congregation and the Chippewa Valley Lodge. Presenting a proposal to simultaneously include women as full members in both the B'nai B'rith Lodge and the Temple Sholom community, Sipress proposed a bill of gender equality to the congregation in terms of practicality. Although he faced opposition from older members of Temple Sholom,

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<sup>4</sup> United Synagogue of America of Conservative Judaism was founded in 1913 in the United States. It's the main collection of synagogues that affiliate with the Conservative Movement.

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

the majority of the congregation voted in favor of this decision, and in spring of 1972, Temple Sholom and the Chippewa Valley Lodge allowed women to become members for the first time.<sup>6</sup>

Fitting within the context of the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and Conservative Judaism, the decision to include women as full members was motivated in terms of both liberal ideology and practicality. Affecting more than just the small Jewish community in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, this decision made important strides towards gender equality in both Judaism and the B'nai B'rith fraternal organization. Temple Sholom was one of the first Conservative synagogues to extend membership to both men and women.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism did not pass a measure to give female membership an option in synagogues until 1973.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps more significantly, the decision forced B'nai B'rith leadership to reexamine their policy of forced gender segregation and the tradition of fraternal organization. Claiming in the 1971 B'nai B'rith constitution to have "the mission of uniting persons of the Jewish faith in the work of promoting their highest interests and those of humanity [...] [and] coming to the rescue of victims of persecution," allowing sexist policies within their own organization was obvious hypocrisy.<sup>9</sup> The issue of female membership was brought to a vote within the organization at large in 1973, and despite the initial resistance by B'nai B'rith leadership; a proposal was passed that allowed the issue of female membership to be decided by individual

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>8</sup> "RA History" [http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/learning/ra\\_history.html](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/learning/ra_history.html) (accessed 5 December, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

Lodges. Evidently a clear victory for the Chippewa Valley Lodge, its fight to expand membership to women ultimately extended beyond its own Lodge.

## **Chapter One: Temple Sholom- A Brief History**

In the 1970's, all the members of the Chippewa Valley Lodge were also members of Jewish synagogue Temple Sholom. This symbiotic relationship resulted in both organizations sharing the same president, holding fundraisers that supported both groups' activities, and events that were cosponsored by both the temple and B'nai B'rith. In 1972, when the Chippewa Valley Lodge extended membership to women, this occurred simultaneously within Temple Sholom's membership policies as well.<sup>10</sup> Since there is such a strong connection between the Eau Claire synagogue and the Chippewa Valley Lodge, understanding the roots of Temple Sholom and the Eau Claire Jewish community is vital to understanding the events that transpired in 1972.

Although little is known about the Eau Claire Jewish community's early years, a few documents and a historical memory within the Temple Sholom congregation survive. In the mid-nineteenth, a small community of Jews was forming in the Chippewa Valley that later created the Cemetery Association established in 1885. Two years later, Jewish women in the Eau Claire community created a philanthropic organization called the Chippewa Valley Ladies' Aid Society.<sup>11</sup>

During the early twentieth century, a little more is known about the Eau Claire Jews; however, the information is not well documented. What is certain is that a permanent place of

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<sup>10</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>11</sup> "History of Temple Sholom." <http://www.uscj.org/mid-continent/eauclaire/history.htm> (accessed 20 September, 2009).

worship was not established during this period. Eau Claire Jewish residents conducted services for the High Holy Days in rented spaces in locations such as the Knights of Pythias and the Eau Claire Hotel while lesser events were carried out in the homes of community members.<sup>12</sup> In 1960 this changed when the Jewish community purchased what was formally named the Wesleyan Church, providing for the first time a permanent Jewish religious sanctuary. The synagogue was open to all Jewish movements, whether Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform.<sup>13</sup> While maintaining a policy of open membership to all Jewish religious affiliations, the congregation decided in 1969 to align with the United Synagogue of America of Conservative Judaism.<sup>14</sup>

In 1972 under the leadership of Mort Sipress, the Temple Sholom congregation voted to count women towards the *minyan*<sup>15</sup> (the minimum number of Jewish people required for certain religious practices) and gave women equal membership rights. Traditionally, men held an elevated status within the congregation, but this change gave women the same political and religious opportunities as their male counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Eventually this led to a series of female temple presidents such as Dana Giffen, Helaine Minkus, and Linda Clark, and innumerable

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<sup>12</sup> "History of Temple Sholom." <http://www.uscj.org/mid-continent/eauc Claire/history.htm> (accessed 20 September, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>14</sup> "History of Temple Sholom." <http://www.uscj.org/mid-continent/eauc Claire/history.htm> (accessed 20 September, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> In order to have a minyan, there is a requirement of 12 adult Jews. Traditionally, only men aged 13 and over could be counted towards the minyan. This is still true in the Orthodox movement and some Conservative synagogues.

<sup>16</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

women in various other leadership positions.<sup>17</sup> Temple Sholom currently serves approximately thirty five families in the Chippewa Valley, and remains a gender equal religious institution.<sup>18</sup> While the careers, religious backgrounds, and political views of the congregation are greatly varied, Temple Sholom continues to strive for the equality of all people.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Interview of Helaine Minkus by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>18</sup> "History of Temple Sholom." <http://www.uscj.org/mid-continent/eaucclair/history.htm> (accessed 20 September, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Although Temple Sholom is a Conservative synagogue, the members of the congregation come from variety of Jewish religious backgrounds such as Reformed, Reconstruction, Orthodox, and Conservative. The careers of members of Temple Sholom are varied. Many work as academics at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire and some individuals work for a local Jewish run company called Presto.

## Chapter Two: Second Wave Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement



Figure 2: Temple Sholom basement where B'nai B'rith Women met by: Maureen Tomal. Figure 3: Temple Sholom sanctuary where the Chippewa Valley Lodge met by: Maureen Tomal.

Before the decision to allow women to hold an equal status in Temple Sholom and the Chippewa Valley Lodge, meetings for the temple and organization were segregated by gender. Women held their B'nai B'rith Women meetings in the synagogue's basement, and men conducted Temple and Lodge meetings upstairs.<sup>20</sup> John Lavine, the former public relations representative, recalled that during one particular meeting the men engaged in a lively discussion of the Vietnam War. It occurred to him that the men were losing important assets to the conversation since his former wife, Dana Giffen, and Sylvia Sipress were both knowledgeable on the war.<sup>21</sup> A point that was not lost on Mort Sipress, he and other men in the congregation agreed they were missing an important demographic in Temple affairs and understanding alternative viewpoints.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>21</sup> Interview of John Lavine by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Although it is possible this realization could have occurred at a different point in history, it is more likely the Temple Sholom congregation was influenced by the social activism fermenting in the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism. After all, four of the most important individuals in changing the male only clause in membership, Dana Giffen, Sylvia Sipress, John Lavine, and Mort Sipress, were involved in social activism during the 1960's and 1970's. Lavine owned a local newspaper where he often showcased articles that addressed equality for all people in American society, and worked with other Eau Claire community members to remove a male and white only membership policy in the Elks fraternal organization.<sup>22</sup> Sylvia and Mort Sipress brought Civil Rights activists to Temple Sholom to speak to the congregation about social issues, and encouraged women to take on traditional male roles during religious services such as taking an *aliyot*<sup>23</sup>.<sup>24</sup> Since it is clear the equality ideology emanating from the social activism during the 1960's and 1970's had an impact on the Chippewa Valley Lodge's own platform of gender equality, it is important to explore the pinnacle events of the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism.

Fighting for political and social equality, African Americans and women shared similar goals during the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism. Despite the victory of the fourteenth amendment for African Americans in 1868 that extended citizenship and voting rights to all races, and the nineteenth amendment ratified in 1920 that granted

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<sup>22</sup> Interview of John Lavine by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>23</sup> The honor of reciting blessing before the Torah.

<sup>24</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

women's suffrage, both blacks and women still held an unequal status in America politically, socially, and economically.

For African Americans, many of the major goals in their fight for equality were to elevate the status of blacks in American society, end racial discrimination, and tackle societal racism.<sup>25</sup> To achieve these objectives, participants in the Civil Rights Movement conducted mass protests, used lawsuits to overturn discriminatory policies, and participated in politics on both a local and national level. These efforts led to the triumphant passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 that eliminated various forms of private segregation (such as employment policies) and outlawed "racial discrimination in voter registration".<sup>26</sup>

Largely credited to the feminist arguments put forth by Betty Friedan's illustrious book the *Feminine Mystique*, women began to reexamine the status of their gender in American society during the 1960's and 1970's. Although women had held the right to vote for four decades, by the 1960's women began to view equality as something that went beyond the ability to vote. As stated by Friedan in her book published in 1963, women needed "to stop giving lip service to the idea that there are no battles left to be fought for women in America."<sup>27</sup> Women organized in a similar fashion as participants in the Civil Rights Movement, demanding equal pay and opportunities in employment, safe abortions, child care etc.

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<sup>25</sup> John Dittmer, George C. Wright, and W. Marvin Dulaney. *Essays on the American Civil Rights Movement*. (Arlington: University of Texas at Arlington, 1993) xi.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Detlefsen. *Civil Rights under Reagan*. (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1991) 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Hymowitz, and Michaele Weissman. *A History of Women and America*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1978) 341.

Second wave feminists not only wanted tangible rights, but fought to change the perception in American society that men and women were intrinsically different and unequal. Feminists battled against stereotypes that defined women as docile housewife and sex objects, and argued that women were just as capable as men in any field.<sup>28</sup> Despite incredible opposition, feminists won great strides with legal victories such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974.

Significantly, Jews were major participants in both the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism. Jewish men and women participated in Civil Rights organizations such as SNCC, NAACP, and CORE. In fact, a substantial amount of money and support came from Jews to help make events such as the Mississippi Summer Project possible.<sup>29</sup> Many Jewish women were involved in the feminist movement of the 1970's and carried their feminist views into their synagogues. They began to demand the same equality within their religious institutions that they already gained in the political arena. Since this clearly had an effect on Judaism, whether Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, it is important to explore the literature written on Jewish Feminism.

Similar to other topics encompassed in the larger category of social history, the study of women and feminism in relation to Judaism are fairly new focuses in the field of history. Yet even though social history as a whole is relatively young, a wealth of literature regarding both women and feminism emerged since the 1970s. In the following sources, almost all the authors

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 341.

<sup>29</sup> Claybourne Carson Jr. "Blacks and Jews in the Civil Rights Movement." *In Jews in Black Perspectives a Dialogue*, Edited by Joseph R. (Washington, 113-131. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984) 114-117.

seek to celebrate women, highlighting achievements and contributions women made in regards to both Judaism and history itself. Although the overwhelming majority of the authors agree that women are both important and significant contributors in shaping both Judaism and American society, the authors' arguments on defining the "legal" role of women within the religious Jewish tradition are not always in accordance.

For many of the secondary sources written about women in the Jewish faith, the main focus is exploring the lives and experiences of Jewish women in America, and showing their significance in both American society and their faith. Authors tend to avoid arguing a specific stance, rather, they present their research to show how American Jewish women lived during certain points in history. A good example of this approach is *Women in American Judaism*. Editors Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna tracked the lives of ordinary Jewish American women through a series of essays from Jewish immigrants' first arrival in America up to the present day.

Yet even though the authors are largely answering mundane questions such as who these women were and where they lived and worked, Nadell and Sarna also attempt to connect the experiences of Jewish American women with greater historical events. In the introduction of the book, the editors confirmed their belief in the importance of Jewish women in impacting both the Jewish religion and American history. Beyond serving as mothers and bastions of the home, the editors note American Jewish women served their communities in powerful ways through community service and philanthropic societies.<sup>30</sup> In more recent decades, Sarna and

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<sup>30</sup> Pamela S. Nadell, and Jonathan D. Sarna. *Women and American Judaism : historical perspectives*. London : University Press of New England, 2001, 1-5.

Nadell point to major achievements in promoting egalitarianism in both American society and their synagogues such as fighting for women's suffrage and the equal opportunity to serve as rabbis in certain Jewish movements.

Studying feminism and gender issues within the realm of Judaism is also addressed heavily in scholarly works. Sally Priesand explores these topics extensively in her book *Judaism and the New Woman*. As the first ordained female rabbi in America, Priesand works through difficult sexist *halakhah*<sup>31</sup> to find new interpretations and meanings in the modern era. As stated in her preface, "That is the purpose of this work, to examine Jewish tradition in terms of its view towards woman, to struggle with our own identity as Jews in the modern world, and to suggest ways in which we can adapt Judaism to allow women full and complete participation in the life of our people."<sup>32</sup> An example of this is in chapter five where she discusses rituals within Judaism and the traditional lack of participation and even in some cases outright exclusion of women in activities such as reading the Torah. Priesand proves that both the Torah and the *Talmud*, both important Jewish texts, do not prohibit women from participating in this activity, and therefore argues for reinterpretations to be made.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Priesand's argument makes it possible for a Jewish woman to be both a religious Jew in a traditionally patriarchal religion, and also be a feminist without compromising her faith.

Susannah Heschel in her article "Gender and Agency in the Feminist Historiography of Jewish Identity" attempts to answer whether women can be truly considered Jews and completely equal to their male counterparts. Essentially Heschel concludes that in order for a

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<sup>31</sup> Halakhah is commonly referred to as Jewish Religious Law. Much of these laws are defined in the Jewish Talmud.

<sup>32</sup> Priesand, Sally. *Judaism and the New Woman*. Behrman House, Inc.: New York, 1975, xvi.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* 56-57

woman to be fully Jewish, she needs to “become a man” by performing rituals traditionally only prescribed to males. Yet men do not have to execute any “female tasks” in order to achieve a true Jewish identity, placing traditionally female rituals below men’s. As Heschel writes, “Why does becoming a rabbi require both women and men to follow the role of Jewish religious men, even when it forces women to violate the laws regulating women's piety? For a woman to be a Jew, the rabbinical ruling insinuates, means becoming a male Jew, and the question of ordaining women rabbis is really a question of whether Jewish women can become Jewish men.”<sup>34</sup> This is a very different perspective than the previously addressed authors who felt readapting halakah to allow women to partake in male only rituals led to the empowerment of Jewish women. Heschel clearly disagrees.

Steven Cohen, author of “American Jewish Feminism: A Study in Conflicts and Compromises”, asks whether Judaism and feminism are compatible. Initially his conclusions appear to be similar to Heschel’s, showing how their philosophies are in direct opposition. He then argues that through the efforts of Jewish feminists in the second half of the twentieth century, feminism and Judaism evolved from being diametrically opposed frameworks to becoming more complementary. According to Cohen, this was largely done within Jewish feminist organizations that worked “to bridge the gap between feminist principles and the

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34 Susannah Heschel . “Gender and Agency in the Feminist Historiography of Jewish Identity.” *Journal of Religion* 84 (2004): 580.

conventional Jewish community.”<sup>35</sup> These efforts resulted in a new interpretation of the proper role of women in Judaism, and ultimately made certain forms of Judaism more egalitarian.

Feminism and its role within Judaism is a complex topic where scholars approach difficult questions in different ways. Although most of the discussed authors are in agreement about the importance of women in impacting both their religion and history as a whole, not all of their conclusions on the status of women in Judaism are the same. Yet despite the lack of consensus on many Jewish feminist issues, there exists a wealth of literature on this topic. The amount devoted to women in the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith, however, is surely lacking. This is a void future historians should aspire to fill, and hopefully this paper will make the first step towards that direction.

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35 Steven Martin Cohen. “American Jewish Feminism: A Study in Conflicts and Compromises.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 23 (1980): 519-588.

### **Chapter Three: Conservative Judaism- Reviewing its roots**

In 1969, the Temple Sholom congregation decided to align with the United Synagogue of America of Conservative Judaism.<sup>36</sup> This particular form of Judaism is distinguished for its greater inclusion of women, something that transpired within Temple Sholom three years after becoming a Conservative synagogue. Disregarding the connection between Conservative Judaism and its influence of egalitarianism on Temple Sholom and the Chippewa Valley Lodge would be a mistake. Exploring the history of this form of Judaism is critical to understanding the religious influences on the Chippewa Valley Lodge's decision to give women an equal status in their organization.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, America witnessed waves of immigrants flowing through its ports. Among the sea of newcomers were European Jews, seeking opportunities in a new promised land. For many Jews it was the first time they were presented with religious freedom and an equal status in the nation they inhabited. Although some Jews experienced more inclusion in certain European countries due to the liberal attitudes inspired by the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>37</sup> the United States was unique in that the American constitution protects an individual's religious rights.<sup>38</sup>

This new religious freedom and tolerance gave the Jewish community many opportunities, but it also came at a cost. As America became the proverbial "melting-pot" in the

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<sup>36</sup> "History of Temple Sholom." <http://www.uscj.org/mid-continent/EAUCLAIRE/history.htm> (accessed 20 September, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> The European Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that focused on secular thought and reason. One of the beliefs that resulted from the Enlightenment was the idea that all humans were born equal.

<sup>38</sup> Moshe Davis. *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism- The Historical School in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 4

19<sup>th</sup> century, all ethnic groups were encouraged to assimilate to the American culture and disregard previously held traditions.<sup>39</sup> Like other recent immigrants, Jewish immigrants bought into the American dream and wanted to become an American both in terms of citizenship and culture. Yet, they did not wish to completely forego important customs, which for Jews were both religious and cultural.

Using the Reform German Jewry as their model who also experienced a similar need to assimilate in 19<sup>th</sup> Germany, Conservative Judaism was established to conform to American society while striving “vigorously to maintain the religious, ethnic and cultural unity of American Jewry”<sup>40</sup> It aimed to serve as the middle ground between the Orthodox and Reform movements, since the first was too restricting and the latter too liberal. Four areas outlined as needed renovation and change included:

1. Upgrading the synagogue decorum.
2. Introducing new rituals.
3. Using English as well as Hebrew in services, and including supplementary readings for services.
4. Allowing women to assume new and greater roles in the synagogue.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most significant of these reforms was the greater inclusion of women in synagogue life. Influenced by both Reform Judaism and American society, the Conservative movement noticed the more prominent role women had in public life and embraced the growing gender inclusiveness. As argued by Isaac Leeser, a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century American Rabbi who strongly influenced Conservative Judaism:

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<sup>39</sup> Moshe Davis. *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism- The Historical School in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963),, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 119.

The females too belong to Israel, and they also must be taught, that they may understand and observe the law... there are a thousand opportunities when man's voice is not heard, when the admonition of the highly endowed and eloquent will remain without effect... There is so much given to women, especially the women of Israel, that we may freely say with a great writer of modern days, whose name we do not now remember, "that we are always what women make us." When the child first begins to think, it is his mother who infuses into this mind the first ideas. Does he show symptoms of a development of the power of his speech? It is the mother who teaches him to lisp the first words. Is he able to learn something of God? It is the mother again who instructs him concerning the great Being who is the Creator of all... She ought to be deeply and early impressed, nay penetrated with a profound respect for the Divine ordinances, and be carefully instructed in the duties which are demanded of us as Israelites, and be thoroughly initiated in the books of revelation which contain the basis of our holy faith...<sup>42</sup>

Yet despite the more egalitarian principles taken up by the Conservative movement, including women in synagogue life was also a practical maneuver. Male attendance in religious services in both Christianity and Judaism was on a decline. By and large, women were the predominant attendees to religious services, and Conservative Jewish leaders realized religious adaptations needed to be made to appease their female constituents.<sup>43</sup> One way Conservative synagogues sought to make their temples more "woman friendly" was by removing the segregated female seating, and establishing family pews that allowed males and females to sit together during worship services.<sup>44</sup> These adaptations, however, were merely suggestions put forth by the Conservative movement, making the extent to which Conservative Judaism was egalitarian dependent on individual synagogues.

Temple Sholom and members of the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith belonged to the Conservative movement. The egalitarian principles upheld by the movement had a significant

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<sup>42</sup> Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism- The Historical School in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. 123-124.

<sup>43</sup> Sklare, Marshall. *Conservative Judaism- An American Religious Movement*. 86-87.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism- The Historical School in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. 211.

impact on Temple Shalom, allowing women to assume leadership positions in the temple, read from the Torah, and be counted as part of the *minyan*. This tradition of gender equality did not stop in the religious realm, but transferred into the temple's various Jewish organizations such as B'nai B'rith.

### **Chapter Three: B'nai B'rith International- A Historical Perspective**

Understanding the history of B'nai B'rith International is critical to understanding why the Chippewa Valley Branch's decision to include women as full members was so controversial. Both a uniquely Jewish and an undeniably American organization, B'nai B'rith was established by German Jews who emigrated to the United States in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> Seeking something more than the camaraderie found in a synagogue, the recent immigrants began a secular brotherhood to help one another cope with the burden of establishing a life in a new nation. In English meaning "sons of the covenant," B'nai B'rith was formally established in 1843 with the aim to create solidarity and friendship among Jewish men in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

As stated in the preamble of the organization's constitution, the visionary mission was to unite Israelites, and therefore B'nai B'rith accepted members from all Jewish movements, focusing on the importance of Jewish cultural identity rather than one's religious affiliation.<sup>47</sup> Since in the United States remaining a Jew was largely a personal choice, B'nai B'rith sought to offer a moral framework for Jewish secularist without an obligation to a synagogue. It served as a beacon for terrified newcomers, establishing some of the first connections and friendships for Jewish immigrants. Providing more than a sense of belonging in a time where one's self respect was repeatedly in jeopardy by ruthless working conditions, B'nai B'rith supplied aid for the

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<sup>45</sup> Deborah D. Moore. *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 4-6.

<sup>46</sup> Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership* 4-6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 10.

Jewish community in the form of sick benefits for members and monetary funds for orphans and widows.<sup>48</sup>

In 1851 the leadership democratized the organization, giving members both a vote and voice within B'nai B'rith by introducing Constitution Grand Lodges. This major shift enabled various Lodges to participate in the political and patriotic ferment during the Civil War without the overall organization taking a stance on the war one way or another.<sup>49</sup> While becoming democratic was a major shift in the organization, B'nai B'rith also transformed into a strong and visible philanthropic organization during this period. Moving beyond providing aid and social services for only fellow Jews, B'nai B'rith built retirement facilities, hospitals, and orphanages that served the wider communities they inhabited.

In 1868 questions over who was entitled to membership arose within the organization. A debate was held over the issue, and an article for the new constitution was proposed that stated "any male Israelite of good moral character is eligible for membership in the I.O.B.B., if found worthy by the Lodge to which the petition is presented."<sup>50</sup> Ultimately this was not included within the constitution and the decision of membership was left to the various Lodges' judgment. Despite the decentralization of membership during this period, the District Grand Lodge's perception of membership began to evolve from a solely secular outlook where religious beliefs were irrelevant, to one that demanded a Jewish religious affiliation.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership*, 28.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, B'nai B'rith suffered from waning membership due to numerous problems that are beyond the scope of this paper. Becoming increasingly desperate, some members proposed including women as members within the organization. As a supporter who cited the Torah stated: "Man and wife are but *one* flesh [...] the name, i.e., B'nai B'rith, can be no serious objection especially as there are almost as many men who are little better than women, and an equally great number of women who are far more manly, with more heroism in their nature and in their deeds, than men."<sup>51</sup> Despite the troubling declining membership, the proposal to include women was defeated in the 1890 convention.

With similar aims as B'nai B'rith, Jewish women established the National Council of Jewish Women in 1883.<sup>52</sup> Its self proclaimed purpose was to provide, philanthropic, religious, and educational activities for Jews and their communities at large, as well as "unite Jewish women of varying religious and social background." Like the founding fathers of B'nai B'rith, members of NCJW provided relief and aid to recent Jewish immigrants, particularly fellow women. By 1895, B'nai B'rith allowed women to organize as an auxiliary to the organization. The women's division was named B'nai B'rith Women, which translates to the odd statement "Sons of the Covenant Women."<sup>53</sup> Although it was a step towards gender inclusion in B'nai B'rith, the women's division was largely insignificant to the overall organization as it held no voting power within the overall organization.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 61-62.

<sup>53</sup> Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership*, 78.

Under the new leadership of Henry Monsky who became president of B'nai B'rith in 1938, membership was drastically revised to allow entrance to nearly any Jew who wished to join the organization. Within his first year of presidency, his policies allowed 20,000 individuals to be added to the organization's membership rolls. Along with opening membership to more males, Monsky worked hard to advocate for equality for women within the organization as well. In the late 1930's, B'nai B'rith Women had 17,000 female members and 178 Lodges compared to 80,000 in the men's division.<sup>54</sup>

While Monsky was a great supporter of gender inclusion, women advocated for their cause as well. Recognizing that they lacked representation at the triennial conventions and were placed in an inferior status within the organization, women lobbied for a true voice and vote. Despite their efforts in 1938, women did not achieve any true gains in equality until nine years later.<sup>55</sup> Instead, B'nai B'rith gave the women's auxiliaries a token representative per women's district but this did not amount to real representation.<sup>56</sup> B'nai B'rith also invited presidents of six women's district to come to Washington to create a powerless B'nai B'rith Women's Supreme council. Despite this let down, the first president of the toothless assembly, Leone D. Underwood, continued to fight hard for the cause of full representation within B'nai B'rith.<sup>57</sup>

Inspired by images of "Rosie the Riveter" and constant public encouragement for women to assume a more public role during World War II, women's membership in B'nai B'rith

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 182-183.

<sup>55</sup> Sally Priesand. *Judaism and the New Woman*. (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1975) 79.

<sup>56</sup> Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership*, 183.

<sup>57</sup> Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman*, 79.

Women soared higher up and beyond the men's figures. With a larger female base and new American perspectives towards women, B'nai B'rith granted the women's auxiliary equal power over their separate branch in 1947.<sup>58</sup> Despite decades of being kept in a subordinate position, one female member from each district was "given full delegate status at Supreme Lodge conventions."<sup>59</sup>

As an organization with an independent voice and finally political clout, B'nai B'rith Women took an active role in supporting various projects and other organizations such as the Hillel foundations for college youth, Operation Stork, the Anti-Defamation League, the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization etc. The auxiliary also worked hard to advance the position of women in the modern world. As stated in the platform for the 1974 International Convention:

"B'nai B'rith Women, as a supporter of the rights of women as equal participants in our society, is dedicated to the prompt ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and we urge such ratification by all the states. [...] Ratification, enforcement and enactment of U.N. Conventions will eliminate political discrimination as well as discrimination on the basis of sex. Therefore, B'nai B'rith Women advocates continued support of the Commission on the Status of Women and the various national Commissions. [...] How women exercise their prerogatives, carry out their responsibilities and work together to attain their full rights and recognition will be the determining factor in attaining their birthright- true and equal status in the world society."<sup>60</sup>

Yet despite the fervor to empower women around the world, members of B'nai B'rith Women were still in a "separate but equal" organization. They may have gained a higher position within B'nai B'rith, but they remained a segregated auxiliary within the organization.

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<sup>58</sup> Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership*, 183-184.

<sup>59</sup> Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman*, 80.

<sup>60</sup> Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman*, 80-81.

Why refuse women to be members in B'nai B'rith but allow them to be a separate entity in B'nai B'rith? According to members of the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith branch, this separate but equal, male only inclusionary clause was pure and clear discrimination.

## **Chapter Four: Mort Sipress and his campaign of equality**

Temple Sholom's controversial decision to include women as full members within the Chippewa Valley Lodge was neither random nor a continuation of previous egalitarian moves by the Temple Sholom congregation. Rather, this step towards equality was largely the brainchild of Mort Sipress who labored relentlessly to have this important legislation passed. As stated by the former Chippewa Valley Lodge president thirty-seven years later, "This congregation has done a lot for itself and one thing I take credit for is this movement to include women, and I was the initiator of that. It was during my presidency that we developed that more and more strongly."<sup>61</sup> The efforts of Sipress and key individuals in the congregation strongly influenced the current level of egalitarianism within the Temple Sholom congregation and the B'nai B'rith organization.

Born and raised in a New York City borough, Mort Sipress was brought up in a traditional Orthodox environment. Although his parents did not attend synagogue services often, they kept a kosher home and ensured that Sipress received a Hebrew education. Politically, his mother and father affiliated with the Democratic Party, something Sipress believed had a strong impact in forming his egalitarian values that remained an important influence in both his career and spirituality throughout his life.<sup>62</sup>

After high school, Mort Sipress attended a university in New York City, and upon completion of his Bachelor of Arts he furthered his education at the University of Minnesota.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

While in a graduate program, Sipress served as residence assistant in the dormitories where he encountered students who were curious about Judaism. It was these candid talks with fellow students that inspired Sipress to learn more about his own faith. Although he did not have time to become heavily involved with the Jewish community in the Twin Cities, Sipress attended a Conservative synagogue for the High Holidays and occasional services.<sup>63</sup>

Following his graduation at the University of Minnesota, Sipress began a search for a teaching position. Among the several promising job offers Sipress received, in the spring of 1966 Mort Sipress took a position at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire where he began a successful teaching career in the political science department. Although he never intended to remain in Eau Claire indefinitely, Sipress began to sow roots in the Eau Claire Jewish community quite nearly upon stepping on the Chippewa Valley soil.

He sought out the company of fellow Jews and Jewish spirituality at the only local synagogue Temple Sholom. According to Sipress, “The [Jewish] community here was very friendly very welcoming and I was invited into the community very quickly.” Sipress instantly became a member of the Eau Claire Jewish community; something he always felt was true from that point onward.

Becoming involved in a way he could not previously in the Conservative synagogues in Minneapolis, Sipress took on leadership roles at Temple Sholom right from the start. His first position was heading an education committee at the synagogue where he invited speakers to

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<sup>63</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

educate the congregation on a variety of topics such as Civil Rights. This progressed to Sipress being elected to vice president of the congregation in either 1970 or 1971. Sipress was assured by the members who elected him into this role that the position did not entail a great deal of time or responsibility. Despite this promise, within six months of serving as vice president, Sipress and the congregation unexpectedly learned that the president was relocating to Florida. Since Sipress was the vice president, he assumed the presidency, a position he would hold for seventeen out of the next nineteen years.<sup>64</sup>

Despite being somewhat pushed into the role of president, Sipress did not back down from the challenge of running a congregation. In fact, within his first term of presidency (two years), Sipress put forth a multitude of reforms that sought to restructure the role of women in the Temple Shalom congregation and B'nai B'rith. Facing a declining membership in the congregation, Sipress knew significant changes were required.

In the early 1970's Temple Shalom served approximately 30 families, and the membership of both the synagogue and B'nai B'rith was on the decline. All members who belonged to the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith Lodge and the B'nai B'rith women were also members of Temple Shalom. Although not all members of the congregation were likewise members of B'nai B'rith, a significant majority participated in the organization which amounted to thirty individuals. Because of the connection between membership of Temple Shalom and B'nai B'rith, meetings regarding the congregation also served as meetings for B'nai B'rith. This

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<sup>64</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

caused limited distinction between B'nai B'rith and Temple membership, making activities and fundraisers a dual contribution of the synagogue and B'nai B'rith.<sup>65</sup>

Seizing an opportunity to promote egalitarianism at Temple Sholom, Sipress capitalized on the declining membership by putting forth a proposal to simultaneously grant women full membership in the congregation and in the B'nai B'rith Lodge. Although for Sipress this resolution was guided by both principle and practicality, he sold the proposal to the congregation in terms of necessity. For example, by allowing women to serve as full members of the congregation, there would be more individuals who could serve in leadership positions. By counting women towards the *minyan*, Temple Sholom could more easily conduct a Torah service with a small congregation. Through disbanding the B'nai B'rith Women's chapter and allowing men and women to participate in the same B'nai B'rith Lodge, the membership of the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith would more than double in size. As said by Sipress, "our numbers were such that it was nonsensical to maintain two separate organizations. So while we were moving to integrate the congregation itself, we did the same with the B'nai B'rith membership." Sipress used these practical reasons and more to stimulate the congregation into moving into a new era of egalitarianism.<sup>66</sup>

Although Sipress did have some supporters such as the public relations chair John Lavine, Dana Giffen, and his wife Sylvia Sipress, he was also met with opposition and negative feedback from fellow members of the congregation. Mostly older individuals "complained that if they went along with this, the next thing we know a woman would be asked to be president.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Obviously that would happen eventually.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the criticism and objections made by some of Temple Sholom’s members, the resolution passed and Sipress won a huge victory for gender inclusiveness in Conservative Judaism.

Although Temple Sholom was not the first Conservative synagogue to allow women to serve as full members of a congregation, it was among the earliest. Temple Sholom granted women the same status as men in their synagogue in the spring of 1972, while most Conservative synagogues did not follow suit until a decade later.<sup>68</sup> For the first time for many of the female members of Temple Sholom, women participated in formerly male only activities such as donning a tallit and reciting the blessing before the Torah scroll. Despite the previous objections made by some members of the congregation, women enjoyed their newly earned rights and the men of the congregation did not protest the new female activities.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, although Temple Sholom was one of the first Conservative synagogues to give women the same rights as men within the congregation, the reaction of this decision outside of the Eau Claire community was minimal. Unlike many other religions such as Roman Catholicism, Conservative Judaism lacks a central authority to regulate customs and procedures. Due to this lack of centralized control, individual synagogues have relative autonomy in decisions such as the role of women in a synagogue and religious service.<sup>70</sup> This in

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<sup>67</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Interview of Helaine Minkus by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

effect allowed Temple Sholom to become egalitarian without answering to a centralized leadership.

The situation with B'nai B'rith, however, was very different. Purposely spreading the word that the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith had dropped the "male-only" clause in membership and added two women to their ranks, John Lavine, a longtime journalist, got the news on the wire. "He [...] made sure that this was noticed and taken seriously, he made sure it got into the press. With articles circulating in places such as Flint, Michigan and Los Angeles, California, numerous newspapers broadcasted the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith's decision to include women."<sup>71</sup> For example on March 18, 1972, the local Chippewa Falls newspaper, Chippewa Herald Telegram, contained the following article:

#### **B'nai B'rith here junks male only member clause**

No.1474 of the B'nai B'rith has unanimously passed a resolution calling on the national B'nai B'rith to drop its male only membership clause.

The resolution was believed to be the first against the male only clause passed by any B'nai B'rith in the country. B'nai B'rith is the largest organization of Jewish men in the United States.

The resolution was backed by putting the Wisconsin Lodge on record as admitting women immediately. Following passage of the motion, the wives of the president and public relations director of the Lodge became members.

The resolution said discrimination on the grounds of sex is "unfair and socially regressive and destructive of the opportunity of women to participate more fully in our society."

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<sup>71</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

It also said “the order of B’nai B’rith has taken leadership in the past in the struggle against discrimination in all its forms.”

John Lavine, public relations director of the Chippewa Valley Lodge, said he did not know how the national B’nai B’rith organization would react to his Lodge’s action.

“But we hope the reaction is positive and rapid,” he said. “Certainly the change is long overdue.”

In a letter distributed to various newspapers, Lavine went on to say, “B’nai B’rith is one of the finest lay religious organizations in the nation. It is greatly respected both inside and outside the Jewish community. And just as it has led the way in so many areas of injustice and discrimination in the past, we are sure that it will positively respond to correcting this obvious wrong.”<sup>72</sup> Despite Lavine’s optimistic statement, the response from the District Grand Lodge was anything but positive.

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<sup>72</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

## **Chapter Five: A clash between ideologies**

On March 20, 1972, the Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith Lodge received a letter addressed to John Lavine from Hyman Crystal, the district executive director of the B'nai B'rith District Grand Lodge no. 6 of Chicago, Illinois. In a curt tone, Crystal acknowledged the Grand Lodge had received the note that contained the resolution the Chippewa Valley Lodge passed; however, he stated that he had no comment on the action and would forward the resolution to the Supreme Lodge for their input. Despite his self proclaimed "no comment," Crystal deemed the motion as unconstitutional and stated "I cannot accept the Membership of the wives of yourself and the Lodge president, since I am bound by the Constitutional provision of both the Supreme Lodge and the District that Membership is for men." He then advised the Chippewa Valley Lodge to encourage their female members to join B'nai B'rith Women and also informed Lavine that B'nai B'rith was experimenting with co-ed units.<sup>73</sup>

In a brochure sent to the Chippewa Valley Lodge by the chairman of a B'nai B'rith Co-ed Unit in Encino, California, the following reasons for establishing a co-ed unit was thus:

In 1954 the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation.

In 1969 the first co-ed dorm opened its doors at UCLA.

And in 1971, B'nai B'rith and B'nai B'rith Women have broken a century old tradition.

In a pilot program, members of both B'nai B'rith and B'nai B'rith Women can now meet as one: a trend that is clearly the Way of the Future.

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<sup>73</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

Co-ed units: a program for young adults who will take a modern stand while indentifying with an ancient heritage.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly consistent with the Chippewa Valley Lodge in terms of male and female membership, the co-ed unit movement was an attractive alternative to the traditional gender segregation. Unfortunately, The Chippewa Valley B'nai B'rith Lodge could not become a co-ed unit, for this provision only applied to newly established chapters.<sup>75</sup> In a letter in response to Hyman Crystal's initial correspondence, Lavine reacted to this rule. "This policy is one of great concern to us because, if I read your letter correctly, it says that those Lodges like ours who have supported B'nai B'rith for many years are penalized for that support or are discriminated against in that we do not have, in the Grand Lodge's eyes, the right to not discriminate against women, but the new Lodges have that right."<sup>76</sup> Despite being told they could not have female members or become a co-ed unit, according to Mort Sipress, "we stuck to our guns and there was quite an exchange."<sup>77</sup>

An exchange there certainly was. After reading about the Chippewa Valley Lodge's decision to drop the "male only" clause in the March 20, 1972 edition of the Flint Journal of Flint Michigan, the program chairman of the local B'nai B'rith Lodge, Frank Friedman, wrote to John Lavine. Clearly unhappy with what he read in the local newspaper, Friedman wondered if

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<sup>74</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 19620 1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>75</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>76</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 19620 1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>77</sup> Interview of Mort Sipress by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

the Chippewa Valley Branch had a woman's chapter, something his own community had in Flint, Michigan. Because his community had both a men's and a women's division, he stated, "I do not see why there is any discrimination. If there is such practices, (which obviously we must be guilty [of], then why are there so many men's organizations throughout the U.S. strictly forbidding women. The Elks, Kiwanis, Rotary etc. It is my opinion there is no discrimination. [...] Women prefer to have their chapters." <sup>78</sup>

Upon receiving the letter from Friedman, Lavine responded promptly. Finding the note sent by Friedman "interesting," Lavine wrote that since men and women were equals there was no reason to keep the sexes in two separate organizations. Although Lavine felt it was acceptable to have separate organizations of B'nai B'rith if that was the preference of the community, he argued against a constitutional clause that prevents branches from allowing men and women to work together if they so chose.<sup>79</sup> In essence, the Chippewa Valley Lodge felt that since one of the core aims of B'nai B'rith was to fight discrimination, harboring sexist practices made the organization hypocritical.<sup>80</sup>

In the months of March and April of 1972, the Lodge heard from B'nai B'rith Women. Having read an article in the "Charlotte Review" regarding the Chippewa Valley Lodge's decision, the president of the Charlotte B'nai B'rith Women wrote to Sipress with mixed feelings about the Lodge's choice to admit women as members. "I congratulate you on your

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<sup>78</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>79</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>80</sup> Interview of John Lavine by Maureen Tomal. The Chippewa Valley Lodge Historical Capstone project. 2009. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

blow for Women's liberation, however, there is still and always will be B'nai B'rith Women, who are doing a fantastic job, both here in the United States and in Israel." She then urged the Lodge to have the women from the Temple Sholom congregation join B'nai B'rith Women, despite her claim that allowing women into the men's chapter was a victory for women's rights.<sup>81</sup>

In a similar but slightly harsher fashion, Mrs. Bruce H. Millen from the B'nai B'rith Women's headquarters wrote to Mr. Lavine regarding the same issue.

Dear Mr. Lavine:

Several copies of the recent action of the B'nai B'rith Chippewa Valley Lodge wanting to drop its "male only" membership clause have come to my attention through publication throughout the country. We have received copies of this AP release from Districts Five, Six, Seven and Four. You certainly are to be congratulated on the kind of coverage the Lodge resolution received through your expertise in getting it on the AP wire service.

As you undoubtedly know, it is not possible for B'nai B'rith Lodges to accept female members any more than it is possible for B'nai B'rith Women chapter to accept male members.

Since your Lodge's resolution has been forwarded by your District Director to the Supreme Lodge, you will, no doubt, receive an answer from them. The purpose of this letter is to advise you that B'nai B'rith Women would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Jewish women of your community for the purposes of forming a B'nai B'rith Women chapter. [...] I can assure you that B'nai B'rith Women District Six will be most appreciative of your assistance in the formation of such a chapter.

Sincerely,

Joan Millen  
Mrs. Bruce H. Millen  
Director of Membership<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

These examples of women's resistance against the Chippewa Valley Lodge's policy of admitting women probably stem from the fear that the policy threatened the survival of B'nai B'rith Women. If segregating men and women into two separate organizations was no longer the policy, it would be possible that B'nai B'rith Women would no longer be a necessary organization, and would be disbanded. In the Eau Claire community, female members revoked their affiliation with B'nai B'rith Women after allowing women to join the men's organization. Since this occurred on a local level, it is not so unlikely that this could have happened on a national level.

In his response to Mrs. Millen, John Lavine continued to argue for a co-ed B'nai B'rith on feminist principles. "The fact of the matter is that the B'nai B'rith organization still has a clause which excludes females from membership. Whether or not there is another organization for Jewish women in this area, in no way answers the blatant discrimination founded in the present B'nai B'rith policy."<sup>83</sup> This statement clearly echoes the anti-segregation rhetoric during the Civil Rights Movement, something that evidently impacted John Lavine and his views while serving as public relations director of the Chippewa Valley Lodge.

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<sup>83</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

## **Chapter Seven- Amendment and Success**

With each successive letter, it became apparent that Sipress and Lavine were no longer pushing for equality in just their own Lodge, but within B'nai B'rith at large. By May 1972, the correspondence changed from defending the Chippewa Valley Lodge's membership policies, to lobbying the B'nai B'rith headquarters for an amendment to the constitution. In a reply to Albert Z. Elkes, the National Director of B'nai B'rith, Lavine states "[...] we took action primarily because we believe that Article 3, Section 131 of the B'nai B'rith Constitution is, as a matter of fair play and moral judgment, wrong. I might parenthetically add that I wonder when the 27 Amendment to the Constitution passes if we might not find the male only clause to be illegal as well. [...] Finally, I know that our Lodge that we can only ask B'nai B'rith on a national and international level to change the Constitution."<sup>84</sup>

Sympathetic to the moral dilemma put forth by Lavine, Elkes urged the Chippewa Valley Lodge to defend their policy by bring a resolution to the district Grand Lodge. Yet unless a change could be made to the constitution, Elkes ordered the Chippewa Valley Lodge to cease from their current practice of allowing women into their Lodge. While the Lodge did send a resolution to the District Grand Lodge for a vote, the Lodge refused to desist from allowing women to participate in their Lodge.<sup>85</sup>

On June 27, 1972, John Lavine received the following letter:

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<sup>84</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Dear John,

The Convention is over, and I feel that you will be interested specifically in the resolution stated below-

“Upon motion seconded, to memorialize the Supreme Lodge to consider the advisability of changing the Supreme Lodge Constitution to provide for the admittance of Women as members into existing B’nai B’rith Lodges. Carried.”

This office will memorialize the Supreme Lodge immediately, as directed by the above resolution.

Cordially and fraternally,  
Hy Crystal  
District Executive Director<sup>86</sup>

Despite the initial resistance from the B’nai B’rith leadership, the Chippewa Valley Lodge’s proposal to constitutionally allow women to serve as members in B’nai B’rith Lodges passed. This was probably not due to a reversal of the leaderships’ opinion, rather, an attempt to appease the growing number of individuals who had heard of the Chippewa Valley Lodge’s initial decision to drop the male only clause in membership. John Lavine had successfully gained national press on the Chippewa Valley Lodge’s decision, and as stated by the District Executive Director of B’nai B’rith, “we are now catching hell for failure to act on this issue.”<sup>87</sup>

In the end the Chippewa Valley Lodge successfully changed the B’nai B’rith constitution and by 1973 the resolution took effect throughout the nation. No longer was co-ed membership offered exclusively to newly created units, but also to already established Lodges

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<sup>86</sup> Temple Sholom. *Temple Sholom (Eau Claire, Wis.) records, 1943, 1962-1976*. McIntyre Library, Eau Claire; 1943, 1962-1976. Text- fiche.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

such as in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. More importantly, the amendment no longer forced discriminatory policies on Lodges that believed it was morally incorrect to legislate that men and women must be kept in separate Lodges. Despite the tirade of heated correspondence from other Lodges and B'nai B'rith leadership, Mort Sipress, John Lavine, and their supporters did not back down in the face of intense opposition. Because of their valiant efforts, the Chippewa Valley Lodge made an important victory for the role of women in both Judaism and fraternal organizations.

“Our effort helped to push them in the direction of ending the fiction that there is something dramatically different about men and women in an organization.”

- Mort Sipress

## **Appreciation**

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