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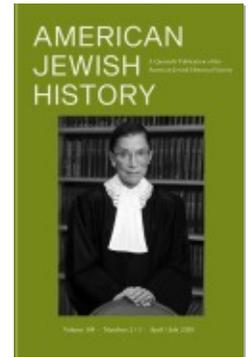
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## “No Better Education”: Helen Solomon at Wellesley College, 1901–1902

Cynthia Francis Gensheimer and Kathryn Hellerstein

In 1901, Hannah Greenebaum Solomon and her husband sent Helen Solomon—their only daughter—from their home in Chicago, Illinois to spend her junior year at Wellesley College near Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> The voluminous correspondence between this Midwestern Jewish daughter and her mother during the 1901–1902 academic year sheds a great deal of light on the ambivalent experiences of the Jewish students—fewer than one hundred every year—who attended the Seven Sisters, a predominantly Protestant group of women’s colleges on the East Coast, at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Although Wellesley’s Protestant foundations made it difficult for Helen to practice at college the form of Judaism she learned from her mother—a syncretic belief system drawn from radical Reform Judaism, universalism, and Progressivism—she overcame the limitations of this environment with diplomacy and humor to experience what she called “a perfectly beautiful year.”<sup>3</sup>

Helen was the daughter of an extraordinary woman. A master coalition builder and agent for dramatic social change, Hannah Solomon was a

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1. The authors thank Samantha Pious, John Dromey, Laura Reimer, Rebecca Goldman, Ali Ruxin, Dan Sharon, and Marianne Hansen for their assistance. The authors began collaborating on the research for this article at the American Jewish Archives (AJA) and thank the funders of their fellowships, Bernard and Audre Rapoport and Joseph and Eva R. Dave, and the entire AJA staff, especially Elisa Ho and Dana Herman.

2. Unless otherwise specified, all letters cited in this article are to be found in MC 749, the Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, AJA. Hannah Solomon to “My dearest girlie,” March 9, 1902, folder 5, box 17. The term “Seven Sisters” originated in 1926 after Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley formed the Seven College Conference. It is impossible to calculate precise Jewish enrollments. Some schools did not ask students their religions and some Jews chose not to identify when asked. In 1898, Wellesley reported seven Jews among 478 reporting students; in 1900, Smith reported eleven Jews among its 1,118 students; in 1899, Bryn Mawr reported eight Jews among its 287 undergraduates. Mount Holyoke likely had no Jewish students. Wellesley College, *Annual Reports of the President and Treasurer of Wellesley College, 1898* (Boston: C.H. Heintzemann, 1899), 9; Smith College, *Smith College President’s Report, 1899–1900*, 14; Bryn Mawr College, *Annual Report of the President of Bryn Mawr College, 1898–1899* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co.), 28, <https://archive.org/details/annualreportsofp02bryn/page/n383/mode/2up>.

3. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Daddy,” folder 7, box 17.

celebrated figure even in her own lifetime. She led Jewish women in their transition from the *noblesse oblige* of the Gilded Age to the preventive philanthropy of the Progressive Era: from ladies' societies to women's clubs. She famously organized the Jewish Women's Congress of 1893 after standing up to the men who refused to put women on the Jewish program of the World Parliament of Religions.<sup>4</sup> She and her sister were the first Jews to be admitted to the Chicago Woman's Club. As founder and president of the National Congress of Jewish Women (NCJW), she went on to represent Jewish women nationally and internationally, in Jewish and non-Jewish contexts.<sup>5</sup> A congregant of perhaps the country's most radical Reform rabbi, Emil G. Hirsch, Hannah observed almost no Jewish ritual and saw Judaism not as a race or ethnicity but as a religion. Yet, in many other respects, she was a traditionalist. Adele Hast writes, "She [Hannah G. Solomon] called herself a 'confirmed woman's rights-er'... but her perceptions of such rights were a mix of traditional and progressive approaches. For Solomon, the most desired role for a woman was as wife and mother."<sup>6</sup> This duality was likely essential to Hannah's success.<sup>7</sup> It was only as a traditional Jewish wife and mother that Hannah was able to garner political support for the radical advancement of Jewish women's rights for which she advocated. And indeed, it was probably Hannah's embrace of radical Reform Judaism that helped her daughter to succeed as a Jew in an elite Protestant institution.

As the daughter of a radical Reform Jewish celebrity, Helen was not exactly a typical Reform Jewish woman collegian. Yet in her letters home, she articulated many of the typical dilemmas faced by upper-class young Jewish women at elite private colleges at the turn of the twentieth century. How much should a Jewish student participate during Christian worship? How could she attend Jewish services? How openly could she

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4. Adele Hast, "Solomon, Hannah Greenebaum," in *Women Building Chicago, 1790-1990*, eds. Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 819-25; Pamela S. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019), 82-4; Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 9-25; Hannah Mary Farmer, "Eve in the Renegade City: Elite Jewish Women's Philanthropy in Chicago, 1890-1900" (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2012); Beth Wenger, "Hannah Greenebaum Solomon," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/solomon-hannah-greenebaum>.

5. Tobias Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 200-4.

6. Hast, "Solomon, Hannah Greenebaum," 822.

7. Rabbi Iah Pillsbury, "How to Become a Hero: An Analysis of Self Disclosure," unpublished student paper, Hebrew Union College.

respond in encounters with antisemitism? What was the proper role for women in society, and what was the purpose of a girl's education? A closer examination of Helen and Hannah Solomon's correspondence during this "perfectly beautiful year" offers us insight into the complicated position of upper-class Jewish women at the turn of the twentieth century, and into the conflicted demands of higher education during this era. Jewish parents encouraged their daughters to become a part of a Protestant elite world of culture and education, while at the same time urging them to preserve elements of Jewish identity in a Christian world that was indifferent or openly hostile to them. Upper-class Jewish women were encouraged to develop the skills that would make them effective organizers and even public figures, while still assuming that they would pursue a domestic future of marriage and motherhood. While scholars have written about the conflicts of Jewish girls and women during these Progressive years, and they have charted the ambivalent demands of higher education for women during the same era, there is much more to explore about the experiences of female Jewish students on elite Protestant college campuses.<sup>8</sup> Helen Solomon's correspondence from Wellesley demonstrates one way that young Jewish women balanced these conflicts—by championing ecumenism and philanthropy with a religious fervor and by embracing female public activism as well as traditional women's roles.

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8. For texts that explore middle- and upper-class Jewish girls' and women's complicated position during this era, see, for example, Nadell, *America's Jewish Women, 55–108*; Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*; Melissa R. Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Leonard Rogoff, *Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); and Shira Kohn, "A Gentlewoman's Agreement: Jewish Sororities in Postwar America," (PhD diss., New York University, 2013), chapter 1. For texts that explore the ambivalent messages received by women in higher education during this era, see, for example, Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); and Diana Turk, *Bound by a Mighty Vow: Sisterhood and Women's Fraternities, 1870–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). For more on the experiences of Jewish men in higher education during this era, see, for example, Marianne R. Sanua, *Going Greek: Jewish College Fraternities in the United States, 1895–1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Harold S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 2014); Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

## THE SOLOMON FAMILY: CLASS, RELIGION AND GENDER

The Solomons lived an affluent lifestyle in Chicago. Helen's maternal grandparents, Michael and Sarah (Spiegel) Greenebaum, had arrived in Chicago well before the Civil War, and their large family had prospered. Helen was born in 1882 in Chicago, where her father, Henry, was a successful manufacturer of boys' and men's clothing. The family employed two live-in servants who cooked and did housework, and Helen's daughter remembered her grandparents as part of the upper echelons of Jewish leadership in the city.<sup>9</sup>

Although many scholars have contended that turn-of-the-century affluent Reform Jewish philanthropists were nearly indifferent to religious doctrine, the Solomon family correspondence reveals that their philanthropy itself was in fact a religious practice stemming from their deeply held beliefs about the nature of God and the created universe.<sup>10</sup> Hannah Solomon and other Reform Jewish women philanthropists found inspiration in Reform rabbis such as Emil G. Hirsch, who guided the Chicago section of the NCJW during its first quarter century. Rabbi Hirsch championed his congregants' regular attendance at services, in Solomon's words, for "the uplift of group assembly to stimulate the spirit and to listen to the words that help moral growth." According to Solomon, "The religion he [Rabbi Hirsch] taught was the religion of the prophets—righteousness, honesty, freedom were its watchwords... He...carried the positive conviction of the Supreme Power who demands worship through righteousness practiced by men in their daily lives."<sup>11</sup> Though perhaps not quite as "radical" as Rabbi Hirsch, mainstream Reform rabbis, too, promoted cross-religious understanding and cooperation and considered charitable work to be a religious obligation.

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9. Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai*, 12, 16, 25–6, 56; Gerald Kane Typescript of interview that Gerald Kane conducted with Mrs. Philip Angel of Charleston, W. Virginia, April 20, 1970, SC-11722, (hereinafter called Frances Levy Angel interview), AJA; US Census, 1900; 1910.

10. "Beginning in the era of mass immigration, many American Jews practiced a civil religion, achieving unity, purpose, and identity as a moral community through secular organizations devoted to philanthropy and social work and to the welfare of Jewish people abroad." Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 234. See also Derek J. Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 192–3, 230; Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 22–6.

11. Hannah G. Solomon, "Dr. Hirsch and Religion," The Chicago Section Council of Jewish Women, *In Memoriam Dr. Emil G. Hirsch* 4, no. 4 (February 1923): 6, folder 1, box 50.

The Solomons' religious traditions were a syncretic mix of Reform Jewish and secularized Christian practices. In 1861, Helen's maternal grandfather and great-uncle had seceded from a more conservative Jewish congregation, K. A. M., to help found the Sinai Congregation. Fifty years later, her great-uncle would recall fighting "stubborn opposition" in order to rid Judaism of the "mist and rubbish of superstition and ossified ceremonies" and redirect the religion toward "deeds not creeds."<sup>12</sup> Her aunt Henriette Frank articulated her family's religious perspective—and their desire not to offend—when she spoke to the Chicago Woman's Club in 1896: "For the *radical* Jews, to whom I belong, the rites and ceremonies no longer have their power; they are symbols connected with the life of the past, but we respect the rights of those to whom they are essential."<sup>13</sup>

This radical Reform philosophy created a home life for Helen that blended Jewish custom with Protestant culture. Reform Jews like the Solomons tended toward secularism even in their celebrations of Jewish holidays, and in some respects their worship resembled that of some Protestant churches; Hannah, for example, described the Handel oratorio played in synagogue as a traditional Hanukkah celebration.<sup>14</sup> Helen, like many Reform Jews, grew up celebrating Purim, Passover, and Hanukkah, while also exchanging gifts and hanging stockings on Christmas.<sup>15</sup> Helen grew up listening to guest ministers speak at Sinai and visiting liberal Protestant churches.<sup>16</sup>

The Solomon family's practice of Shabbat may have been the most controversial element of their practice. Continuing the Jewish custom of welcoming the Sabbath, Hannah Solomon—who loved cooking and being hostess—held large Friday-night dinners for her extended family and inner circle.<sup>17</sup> With her relatives gathering round, she lit candles—but

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12. Henry Greenebaum, speech delivered at Sinai Temple reflecting back on its first fifty years, n/d, folder 3, box 49, AJA.

13. Henriette G. Frank, "Why Am I a Jew," January 20, 1896, folder 2, box 8. Emphasis ours. For texts on Reform Judaism, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 116–23; 129–33; Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai*, 100–5.

14. Hannah G. Solomon to "My dearie ittie girlie," December [8 or 9], 1901, file 2, box 17.

15. Hannah G. Solomon, draft of *Fabric of My Life*, 23, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, MS 749, Sub Series 2. Writing and Speeches, folder 6, box 3, AJA, as cited by Iah Pillsbury, "How to Become a Hero."

16. Helen Solomon to "My own dear People," n.d., folder 4, box 18.

17. Hannah G. Solomon, *Fabric of My Life*, 68.

if she recited the blessing, she did so with decorous restraint.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps most notably, rather than preserving Saturday as the Sabbath, the Solomons regularly attended Sinai's Sunday morning Jewish services and gave up the idea of Saturday as a day of rest. Hannah Solomon's attending Sabbath services on Sunday rather than Saturday was so radical that it nearly cost her the presidency of the NCJW in 1896.<sup>19</sup>

Hannah Solomon was an ardent devotee of Rabbi Hirsch, who, in turn, participated closely in both the religious and philanthropic work of the Chicago section of the NCJW.<sup>20</sup> Every week, the Solomon family—including the children—heard Hirsch preach “the great gospel of service,” exhorting his congregants to work to effect social change through the organized charity and Progressivism that he endorsed so fervently.<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Hirsch taught Bible classes for the Chicago Section of the NCJW as well as interfaith Bible study sessions, which Hannah attended.<sup>22</sup> With their shared interest in Progressive social reform, Solomon and Hirsch aligned closely with Unitarians and liberal Protestants such as Jane Addams.<sup>23</sup> According to her granddaughter, Solomon and Addams worked “‘hand in hand’ through the [Chicago] Woman's Club and the Women's City Club” and other organizations too numerous to list.<sup>24</sup> Rima Lunin Schultz writes of Hirsch and Addams: “[I]n striving

18. Oral History Interview with Rose Haas Alschuler recorded with Mary Lynn McCree, edited by Richard H. Alschuler, recorded in 1973, folder 4, box 46.

19. Farmer, “Eve in the Renegade City,” 150–2.

20. Hannah G. Solomon, “Dr. Hirsch and Religion,” Chicago Section Council of Jewish Women, *In Memoriam Dr. Emil G. Hirsch* (February 1923), 6–7, folder 1, box 50; Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai*, 152–7, 200–2; Hasia R. Diner, *Julius Rosenwald: Repairing the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 72–6, 104.

21. For Hirsch's devotion to social responsibility, see Leonard J. Mervis, “The Social Justice Movement and the American Reform Rabbi,” *American Jewish Archives* 2 (1955): 172; Hannah G. Solomon, “Woman in the Synagogue,” *The Reform Advocate*, February 20, 1897, 8; Hattie Greenebaum, “Dr. Hirsch and Philanthropy,” Chicago Section Council of Jewish Women, *In Memoriam Dr. Emil G. Hirsch* (February 1923), 10–1.

22. Hannah G. Solomon, “Dr. Hirsch and Religion,” 6–7.

23. Brinkman, *Sundays at Sinai*, 217–8; “Humanity Its Creed,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1894, 7; “Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon,” *The American Jewess*, April 1895, 27.

24. Having been a member of the Chicago Woman's Club from the time she was a teenager, Hannah was molded by its serious discussions of philosophy and literature. Helen jokingly wrote when asking her mother for advice, “Ha! Ha! Please do not answer that if the Women's [Woman's] Club stands for any one thing it is for the truth etc!” Helen to “Dearest Mother,” January 13, 1902, folder 3, box 17. Typescript of interview conducted by Gerald Kane with Frances Solomon (Mrs. Philip) Angel of Charleston, West Virginia, April 20, 1970, 7–8, SC-11722, AJA; Helen Solomon Levy to Miss Patch, Wellesley College, [1941], Helen Solomon Levy Biography File, Wellesley College Archives.

to bring about social justice for their age, they put creedal differences in the background and universal humanistic values they believed consistent with the practice of democracy in the foreground.”<sup>25</sup>

Through direct association with Rabbi Hirsch—and indirectly, through her mother’s interactions with the liberal Protestant intellectual elite—Helen’s young life was imbued with universalist values.<sup>26</sup> Despite the family’s ecumenism, however, her mother had faith in “a Higher Power” and believed her children’s “richest inheritance” was “the religious faith that has come to us through our ancestors.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to instilling strong beliefs about social responsibility and ecumenism in Helen, Hannah Solomon also encouraged her daughter to understand the possibilities and limitations of her future as an educated woman. On the one hand, Solomon wanted to equip her daughter Helen for community leadership as part of a full life. Hannah had a network of friends and NCJW leaders around the country who were very much like her: intelligent married women who embraced culture, philanthropy, Reform Judaism, and higher education for their daughters.<sup>28</sup> These women, like Hannah, expected their daughters to follow in their footsteps. In advising them about traveling, money, personal appearance, and acquaintances, they were also grooming them to be effective organizers and respected public figures.

At the same time, Hannah did not want her only daughter to pursue paid employment, even as she understood that this pursuit was essential for some women. Although Hannah led efforts to educate Jewish women about preventive charity, this work was still done primarily by volunteers and a few paid professionals without formal training. Professional social work was still nascent, and social norms prevented women professionals from marrying.<sup>29</sup> Five years before Helen began her stud-

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25. Rima Lunin Schultz, “Striving for Fellowship: Sinai’s Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch and Hull House’s Jane Addams, A Not-So-Odd Couple,” February 2015, unpublished manuscript.

26. Helen to “Dearest Mother,” January 13, 1902, folder 3, box 17. Farmer, “Eve in the Renegade City,” 209–13.

27. Hannah G. Solomon, “Dedication,” *A Sheaf of Leaves*; Hannah G. Solomon, *Fabric of My Life*, 41.

28. Some NCJW leaders whose daughters or sisters attended Seven Sisters colleges include Pauline Witkowsky of Chicago, whose daughter Esther graduated from Vassar in 1885; Miriam Landsberg of Rochester, New York, whose daughter Clara graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1897; Sarah Ezekiel Van Noorden of Boston, whose daughter Deborah graduated from Smith in 1902; Carrie Shevelson Benjamin of Denver, whose sister Rachel graduated from Smith in 1888; and Henrietta Szold of Baltimore, whose sister Bertha graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1895.

29. Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 124–5.

ies at Wellesley, Hannah had publicly declared, “There is no higher or holier duty...than guardian of home, mother and protector of children, the companion and friend of husband.”<sup>30</sup> Hannah probably hoped that after college graduation Helen would find a Jewish husband not unlike her own “dearest, best man”: a good provider who gave his wife the autonomy to pursue unpaid work as a professional club woman with the mutual understanding that her first allegiance was to her family.<sup>31</sup>

Helen had grown up with a variety of female role models: Jane Addams and other single women social workers; her own mother, a loving family member as well as a revolutionary club woman; and upper-class married women she saw as “ladies” of leisure. In 1893, when Hannah was presiding over the Jewish Women’s Congress as part of Chicago’s Columbian Exhibition, twelve-year-old Helen and her older brother Herbert had helped by sealing and mailing letters, but besides admiring her evening gown, “they seemed remarkably unimpressed by the Congress, itself,” as Hannah later recalled:

How Jane Addams chortled as she told us, later, of a conversation she and Mary Rozet Smith had with Herbert and Helen after the one session they were permitted to attend. “Aren’t you proud of your mother?” Miss Smith asked the children. “Oh, yes,” replied Herbert. “Helen, wouldn’t you like to do what your mother has done?” queried Miss Addams. “Oh, no,” Helen immediately responded, “when I grow up I’m going to be a lady, like my Aunt Rose!” And here, philosophied Miss Addams, was mirrored the distinction of the day: on the one hand, a “lady,” and on the other, a woman interested in “causes”!<sup>32</sup>

Although at twelve Helen dreamed of high society, with time she would understand that her Aunt Rose was, as Hannah explained, “also a servant in the cause of humanity, brightening in her charming and unobtrusive way the lot of many who were in need.”<sup>33</sup> Helen’s life as the daughter of a famous club woman might have prepared her to be either a fulltime social worker or a lady of leisure, but as she entered Wellesley College, she almost certainly planned for a combination of the two.

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30. Hannah G. Solomon, “Women as Breadwinners,” *A Sheaf of Leaves* (Chicago: privately printed, 1911), 65, as quoted in Adele Fast, “Solomon, Hannah Greenebaum,” 822.

31. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Daddy,” May 24, 1902, folder 7, box 17.

32. Hannah G. Solomon, *Fabric of My Life* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1946), 85–6.

33. Solomon, *Fabric of My Life*, 86.

## WELLESLEY COLLEGE AND JEWISH STUDENTS

Although Wellesley's first Jewish student had likely graduated in 1896, Jewish (and Catholic) collegians were still a rarity when Helen Solomon arrived on campus, joining two Jews in the junior class of 138 young women.<sup>34</sup> The Jews who preceded Helen were predominantly Midwestern; some, like Helen, attended only a year or two. Few Jewish parents would have allowed their daughters to attend Protestant institutions, and no comparable Jewish institution then existed.<sup>35</sup> Other obstacles kept out all but a rather homogenous group of Jewish students—students, for the most part, from affluent families committed to Reform Judaism and to philanthropy, much like Helen Solomon.

Very few families could afford to send a daughter to a private college: working-class families could not forego their daughters' potential earnings, and even for middle class families, tuition was high and scholarships were limited.<sup>36</sup> Besides tuition and board—\$400 at Wellesley that year—music students like Helen paid extra fees for piano lessons and practice rooms.<sup>37</sup> Parents worried about sending their daughters on long train journeys, especially those with overnight stays. Traveling from Chicago to Boston required Helen to spend two nights in a sleeping berth,

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34. Official college denominational breakdowns included in presidents' reports indicate that in most years between 1888 and 1895, only one or two Jews and one or two Catholics attended Wellesley, making 0.2% of enrollment. In 1898, seven Jews comprised 1.5% of students. Early Jewish Wellesley alumnae include Irene Kahn of St. Joseph, Missouri (Class of 1896), Florence Brentano of Evansville, Indiana (Class of 1898), Anna Wolfson of Kansas City, Missouri (Class of 1899), Edith Lehman of Cleveland, Ohio (Class of 1900), and Sybil Cohen of Sioux City, Iowa (Class of 1901). Graduates in Helen's Class of 1903 included one black student, Charlotte Atwood, as well as two other Jews: Chicagoan Belle Schlesinger and Leah B. Friend, who later converted to Episcopalian. Wellesley College, *Wellesley College Calendar 1901-1902* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1901), 102, <https://repository.wellesley.edu/catalogs/139>; Wellesley College, *Annual Reports of the President and Treasurer of Wellesley College, 1902* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1903), [https://books.google.com/books?id=TJ\\_OAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA15-PP1&lpg](https://books.google.com/books?id=TJ_OAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA15-PP1&lpg); Leah B. Friend, Biography File, Wellesley College Archives.

35. In the nineteenth century, the UAHC had considered creating a college for Jewish women but decided to concentrate its efforts on maintaining the solvency of Hebrew Union College, which few women attended. "The Fourth Council of the United Hebrew Congregations," *American Israelite*, July 20, 1877, 5. Cited in Cynthia Francis Gensheimer and David Frolick, "Late Nineteenth-Century Experiments in Expanding Jewish Women's Roles in Small Midwestern Towns," forthcoming in *American Jewish Archives* 72, no. 1 (2020); Synnott, *The Half Opened Door*, 15.

36. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 64-75.

37. Wellesley College, *Wellesley College Calendar 1901-1902*, 23-5, <https://repository.wellesley.edu/catalogs/139>.

and family finances did not allow her to return home during the school year at all. And Jewish parents were loath to forego a year or more of their daughters' companionship and help at home.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the biggest obstacle to Jewish women's college careers was the perception that college precluded marriage by attracting women to careers and/or rendering them unattractive to men.<sup>39</sup> Many of the Jewish students who had attended Protestant women's colleges during the 1870s and 1880s did indeed remain single or marry outside the faith.<sup>40</sup> Through her NCJW friends, Hannah Solomon knew early Jewish graduates of Vassar and Smith who fit this description, although Hannah herself—highly self-educated—had not graduated from high school. These alumnae, who belonged to the first generation of women collegians in the United States, were serious students at colleges that were still cloistered, regimented, and pervasively Protestant.

Helen Solomon belonged to the second generation of women collegians, who attended after colleges began offering more elective courses and a broad range of extracurricular activities; many more of these students married after college.<sup>41</sup> Even though the women's colleges had begun to relax entrance requirements, these were still stringent and excluded all but a small minority.<sup>42</sup> Students entering Wellesley in 1901 were expected to have taken English, History, Algebra, Plane Geometry, Latin, a second language (either Greek, French, or German), and a sci-

38. Sadie American, "The National Council of Jewish Women," *American Jewess*, October 1895, 49.

39. This was a widespread perception among the general population as well, confirmed by statistics of the earliest women alumnae. Some of those early statistics were exaggerated, because some of the single alumnae did eventually marry at a more advanced age. See, for example, Ellen Fitzsimmons Steinberg, *Irma: A Chicago Woman's Story 1871-1966* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 40-1, as quoted in Farmer, "Eve in the Renegade City," 230-1; Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 31-2, 119-21; Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 30-3; Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 279-80.

40. Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America*, 100-4; "San Francisco," *American Israelite*, March 30, 1883, 322; *American Jewess*, October 1895, 61 and November 1895, 76-7; "Does College Life Tend to Make Women Irreligious," *Jewish Exponent*, August 4, 1899, 5.

41. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 147-69; Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education*, 33-40, 44-51; *Wellesley College Nineteen Three Annual* 3 (April 1935): 55; Box 24, MS-749, Helen G. Solomon Family Collection, AJA.

42. High school graduation was still unusual for girls in 1900. Barbara Miller Solomon reports that in 1900 only 2.8 percent of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one attended college. As late as 1916, Melissa R. Klapper reports, only 3.6 Jewish boys and 0.4 Jewish girls out of a thousand attended college. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 62, 109; Klapper, *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America*, 98.

ence (Chemistry, Physics, or Zoology).<sup>43</sup> Few met these criteria. Because most Jewish women high school graduates planned to marry, perhaps after working for a few years, they generally sought short courses in stenography or bookkeeping. Some with means attended finishing school or studied elocution or voice. Some top students chose normal school or state or local universities, which did not entail such rigorous entrance requirements, lengthy separations, or expenses—or such a Protestant atmosphere.

Unlike most of her Jewish peers, Helen Solomon had completed a college preparatory program, including courses in Vergil, Cicero, Greek, Latin, and physics, at Hyde Park High School.<sup>44</sup> She had, moreover, attended the nearby University of Chicago as a day student for two years before going to Wellesley. Her older brother Herbert (who was sent home with a serious illness and died during Helen's first year at the University of Chicago) had attended St. John's Military Academy, an Episcopal boarding school in Wisconsin, where church attendance was mandatory.<sup>45</sup> When Helen was still in high school, *The American Jewess* had sounded a dire alarm: "[T]here is nothing more disastrous to Judaism than to send Jewish children to sectarian schools. They become dissatisfied with their religion, forgetful of home training, they long for the pleasures and delights which are denied them in the social circle on account of their creed."<sup>46</sup> Evidently, neither the Jewish press nor her brother's experience at St. John's deterred Helen from choosing a Protestant college for her junior year.

Helen's parents certainly had reservations about sending her nearly one thousand miles away to attend a Christian women's college. Yet faced with obstacles other Jewish families would have found insurmountable, the Solomons were able and willing to give their daughter a year of enjoyment and self-improvement at Wellesley, confident she would return

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43. Wellesley College, *Wellesley College Calendar 1901-1902*, 29-32; See also Harold S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student*, 3-38; Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 21-3.

44. Helen Solomon Report Cards, folder 6, box 25, MC 749, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, AJA.

45. "Famed for Its Work, St. John's Wisconsin's Noted Episcopalian School," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago), May 21, 1899, 30.

46. A Jewish Student, "Does a Christian College Influence a Jewish Student?" *American Jewess*, March 1897, 266-267. Other articles in the Jewish press, including a sensational account of the intermarriage of an early Jewish graduate of Vassar College, warned against sending Jewish women to college for fear they would assimilate or remain single. "San Francisco," *American Israelite*, March 30, 1883, 322. See also *American Jewess*, October 1895, 61.

home better able to enjoy a full life as a Reform Jewish wife, mother, and community member.

The Solomons may have been reassured by reports from NCJW acquaintances and Chicago friends whose daughters had recently attended sectarian women's colleges.<sup>47</sup> These second-generation women collegians often intended to experience "college life" and to marry soon afterward. Some spent a year or two at college to hone their language skills, study a particular subject, or simply partake in athletics, drama, music, and other extracurricular activities. Some, like Helen, returned home to graduate from a local university.

Wellesley was still a profoundly white, Protestant institution during Helen's time there. Inspired by the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Wellesley's founder, evangelist Henry Fowle Durant, established the school in 1875 to educate middle-class women for lives of Christian service as wives, mothers, teachers, and missionaries.<sup>48</sup> According to Wellesley's statutes, "The College was founded for the glory of God and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ." Women's historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz terms another clause in the statutes a "necessary corollary": "It is required that every Trustee, Teacher, and Officer, shall be a member of an Evangelical Church, and that the study of the Holy Scriptures shall be pursued by every student throughout the entire college course under the direction of the Faculty."<sup>49</sup>

After Durant's death in 1881, Wellesley slowly began to modernize, attracting a more urbane and affluent student body.<sup>50</sup> Student activities began to blossom, including student government. The college began to offer many new courses and to advertise its extensive science laboratories and library facilities. By the time Helen arrived on campus, the regimen of silent devotion and twice-daily chapel services had been relaxed, but strong vestiges of the college's evangelical origins still remained. Wellesley was still "undenominational, but distinctively and positively Christian in its influence, discipline, and instruction."<sup>51</sup> Sunday was dedicated to rest and worship, courses in biblical history and literature were mandatory, and administrators and faculty assumed a Protestant worldview. Wellesley's 1902 annual report stated that the college's philosophy students had achieved "a deeper insight into the rationality of religion and

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47. See footnote 28 above.

48. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 42–55; Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 47–8.

49. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 54.

50. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 203–5.

51. Wellesley College, *Wellesley College Calendar 1903–1904*, 19.

especially of Christianity.” It listed the lectures hosted by the Christian Association, which included those on temperance and missionary work in China, India, and Africa, and the Protestant ministers who spoke at each Sunday service.<sup>52</sup> Residential cottages like Freeman Cottage, where Helen was housed, were supervised by house matrons in order to replicate, as closely as possible, respectable Protestant home life. In her 1902 report, President Caroline Hazard, noting the speed at which the college was expanding, argued for construction of new dormitories in order to “get hold of this easily swayed body” of “impressionable young girls.”<sup>53</sup> These efforts to maintain the Protestant character of the college were supported by Durant’s widow, Pauline Durant, who disapproved of Wellesley’s attempts to secularize and urged the college to hew to her husband’s evangelist vision long after his death.<sup>54</sup>

## HELEN SOLOMON’S ENCOUNTERS WITH PROTESTANTISM AT WELLESLEY

When “the gong rang” in Freeman Cottage at 8:45 a.m. on her first Sunday at Wellesley, Helen began to comprehend how alien Wellesley’s religious life would be. Thinking at first that “it was the house on fire,” Helen soon grasped the Protestant Sunday regimen: “At nine we girls all gathered together in the parlors downstairs, sang a few hymns, said a few prayers and Miss Dennison read some scripture.”<sup>55</sup> Even for Helen, accustomed to her home congregation’s unusual Jewish practice of Sunday morning services, this Christian Sunday was a drastic departure.

Yet Helen was not only undaunted by Wellesley’s Protestant practices, she was even drawn to some of them. A casual mention of chapel in her first letter home suggests that she found nothing remarkable about the experience, as does her matter-of-fact description of a meal in which both meat and milk were served, violating Jewish dietary restrictions.<sup>56</sup>

Although she could not accept basic tenets of Christianity, Helen enjoyed the music, ambiance, and fellowship of Wellesley’s chapel services.<sup>57</sup> Her first Sunday on campus was Flower Sunday, the school’s

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52. *Annual Reports [of] President and Treasurer, Wellesley College 1902* (Boston: Frank Wood, Printer, 1903), 9.

53. *Annual Reports [of] President and Treasurer, Wellesley College 1902*, 15.

54. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 204.

55. Helen Solomon to “My own dear Frankie boy,” September 22, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

56. Helen to “Mother dearest,” September 20, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

57. Helen wrote, “I like the church quiet, even if I can’t sympathize with all the words.” Helen Solomon to “Mother dearest,” September [22], 1901, folder 11, box 16.

oldest tradition, which had been established by its founder in reaction against a visiting minister's "hellfire and damnation sermon."<sup>58</sup> Describing this "pretty custom," Helen recounted her early-morning discovery of a little card "decorated with a sprig of 'Golden Rod'" on the sill outside her room. The card's inscription, "God is Love," was the topic of the minister's sermon that morning. The day ended in "an open place in the woods" with a late afternoon service led by the president of the Christian Association. Helen concluded, "I like the spirit of it all here... Of course these services don't mean the same to me that they do to the other girls, but yet I like them."<sup>59</sup>

Helen's correspondence with her mother reflected both women's identification with Judaism—and their insistence upon finding spiritual connections among all religions. Helen wrote that she didn't "usually care for the services + sermon, except as it gives me an insight into the Christian religion." She explained that with "a religion in which every step, every relation is so clearly defined as the Christian religion, there grows such a familiarity in a man with his beliefs that he can go to church and say the Lord's prayer while he is wondering what time it is and say his 'Amen's' by machinery." She continued, "Strange,—but the more I go to other people's services, the more firm I am in my own beliefs, vague and indifferent as they are...the more definite and concrete a doctrine of religion is, the harder it is to be sincere in it and to believe in it religiously."<sup>60</sup>

Hannah replied that rote prayer was uninspiring but added, "There is much charm in the traditional even though it is perfunctory." Of Trinitarianism (a core tenet of most Christian denominations), she said, "The Trinity as taught in the church is something absolutely incomprehensible to me. The Father is clear, but the son & Holy Ghost are so at variance to all Human experiences that it takes more faith than I possess to accept." But she also urged Helen to attend "some Boston churches," including that of a minister whom she knew through her work with the Council of American Liberal Religious Societies. She explained, "The churches are getting away from Orthodoxy more & more and a 'brotherhood of man' is meaning more & more—In that sense Judaism & Christianity—approach each other." She herself was "busy reading 'Talmud'" and "enjoying it very much."<sup>61</sup>

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58. Jana Riess, *The Spiritual Traveler: Boston and New England: a Guide to Sacred Sites and Peaceful Places* (Mahwah: HiddenSpring, 2002), 157–158.

59. Helen Solomon to "My own dear Frankie boy," September 22, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

60. Helen Solomon to "My dearest family," October 5/6, 1901, folder 12, box 16.

61. Hannah G. Solomon to "My dearie," n/d, folder 12, box 16.

As much as Hannah wanted Helen to expand her religious horizons at Wellesley, she also wanted her to adhere to the family tradition of attending temple on Yom Kippur. Hannah had reminded Helen to attend services on Yom Kippur and had given her heartfelt advice: “I need not tell you that in all things I wish you to remain true to your family traditions and in none more than in following those Jewish customs to which you are no stranger.”<sup>62</sup> But, because of scheduling conflicts and the campus’s remote location, it would have been nearly impossible for turn-of-the-century Jewish collegians at Wellesley to attend Jewish services regularly or even observe the autumnal Jewish high holidays.<sup>63</sup> There was no synagogue in the village of Wellesley. The alternative was a trip to Boston, but Helen decided to forgo it. Instead, she would mark the day by “doing all my thinking at home.”<sup>64</sup> As we shall see, this improvisation portended her future approach to religion as an individual connection to a higher being.

Helen grew accustomed to the rhythm of the Protestant calendar and to setting Sunday aside as a day of rest. In one letter, she exclaimed, “Blessed be Sundays! I never appreciated them before I came here,—but now I make it a principle to keep them as a day of real rest and they are such a comfort.”<sup>65</sup>

Helen made her own compromises. She participated during Christian services, but refused to violate her conscience: “I repeated the psalms with the rest and sang the hymns that didn’t refer to things I didn’t believe in, because I didn’t want to be a mere looker on, you know.” She also sought her mother’s approval: “Don’t you think that is the right way?”<sup>66</sup> Though the theology did not resonate with her, Helen felt the spiritual allure of Christian holidays. Describing Christmas Vespers as “so peaceful and restful,” she confided to her mother her appreciation of “its fundamental message of ‘peace + good-will to men’” and her feeling, leaving the service with her friend Louise, of being “perfectly in accord with one another and this world.”<sup>67</sup>

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62. Hannah G. Solomon to “My dearest daughter,” September 16, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

63. From Helen’s correspondence, it appears that during her year at Wellesley, she attended synagogue only once—when her mother spoke from the pulpit.

64. Helen Solomon to “My own dear Frankie boy,” September 22, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

65. Helen Solomon to “My dearest Ones,” February 2, 1902, folder 4, box 17.

66. Helen Solomon to “My own dear Frankie boy,” September 22, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

67. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mother,” December 1901, folder 2, box 17.

Helen found a similar fellowship in Boston's Old South Church with its "air of sisterly + brotherly sympathy."<sup>68</sup> She even discovered her own spirituality there. Almost apologetically, she asked whether her mother could "understand" that "I did feel more religious and more free to think my own thoughts" at a Protestant church than at home at Sinai Congregation, "where the atmosphere simply of brilliancy and intellect predominates." The spirituality that Helen found at Old South Church did not make her a "sister in Christ," but rather a "sister in humanity."<sup>69</sup>

Without exception, Helen's letters are filled with happy activities with the Protestants who were her closest friends at Wellesley. Even so, she may have encountered some social slights.<sup>70</sup> Only five years after Helen's junior year, another Jewish student at Wellesley would report that some of her classmates had never before met a Jew "outside the Bible," exclaiming, "It's as though they expect me to have a water jug to my shoulders, and stride barefoot down the road, singing something out of the Psalms."<sup>71</sup> When a senior moved out of Freeman Cottage, Wellesley Registrar Helen Marian Kelsey moved Helen to a single.<sup>72</sup> Whether this was because Helen was Jewish is not known, but there is evidence that Christians often objected to Jewish roommates.<sup>73</sup> At Thanksgiving, neither Helen nor Stella Kohn—the only other Jew living in Freeman Cottage—received any invitations for home visits, a common plight for Jewish students. Helen wrote sadly, "Carrie is going to Hartford and Louise to Providence and here am I all alone."<sup>74</sup> As charming and accul-

68. Helen Solomon to "My own dear People," n/d, folder 4, box 18.

69. Helen Solomon to "My own dear People," n/d, folder 4, box 18.

70. Much of the social exclusion that Jews experienced on other campuses stemmed from rejection from Protestant sororities. Marianne R. Sanua, *Going Greek: Jewish College Fraternities in the United States, 1895-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), esp. 35-68; 80-85; Turk, *Bound by a Mighty Vow*, 100-110. In her correspondence, Helen mentions only one of Wellesley's invitation-only societies. A friend who was a member of Alpha Kappa Chi (first established as a classics society in 1892) invited Helen to a Friday-night dance at which Helen had a good time. Social exclusion against Jews worsened on college campuses in the decades following Helen's year at Wellesley.

71. Ruth Sapinsky Hurwitz, "Coming of Age at Wellesley," *The Menorah Journal* 38, no. 2 (Autumn 1950): 231.

72. Helen Solomon to "Mother darling," 27 September 1901, folder 11, box 16; *Wellesley College Calendar, 1901-1902*, 11.

73. National Education Association, Department of School Patrons. *Report for Year 1919-1920; Council of Jewish Women Ninth Triennial Convention, Denver Colo., November the Seventh to the Twelfth 1920*, 139-45; M. Carey Thomas to Mrs. Seth, October 11, 1898, M. Carey Thomas Official Papers Letterbook 15, reel 91; President M. Carey Thomas to Mary Garrett, October 10, 1898, M. Carey Thomas Reel 21 Personal Papers 0638-40, Bryn Mawr College Special Collections.

74. Helen Solomon to "Dear People," November 24, 1901, folder 1, box 17.

turated as Helen was, she would not have been admitted to her friends' family circles. Speaking of nominally Protestant fraternities, Marianne Sanua writes, "The traditional rushing question, 'Would you want your sister to marry him?' was not an idle inquiry." The prospect of Jews and Christians "dating one another, or being accepted at each other's parental homes as 'brothers' or 'sisters'" would have been "remote indeed."<sup>75</sup>

It was with humor that Helen chose to deflect the overt antisemitism she experienced in her encounters with Ruby Warfield, a fellow student who also lived in Freeman Cottage. Explaining that Ruby "believes I'm condemned to eternal damnation," Helen wrote to her mother that Ruby had made Helen "howl" by accusing her of "leading her [friend Louise] astray." Helen made light of the accusation, asking rhetorically, "Isn't that a joke?"<sup>76</sup>

Jewish students like Helen may have been relatively unaware of the extent to which the Protestant outlook of President Caroline Hazard and other administrators, faculty, and trustees informed their decision-making and leadership. President Hazard had made chapel attendance optional, but retained chapel itself as a short daily Protestant service rather than a schoolwide informational assembly. During Helen's year at Wellesley, the president expressed her pleasure that chapel was the "centre of the thronging life at Wellesley."<sup>77</sup> Hazard's personal feeling about regular church worship took Helen aback in a chance encounter on a street car. After Helen "plunked [herself]...down next to a lady," she "nearly fell through" when she discovered it to be Miss Hazard: "She had no idea who I was...[T]he first thing she asked, was how was the minister Sunday morning." Helen, who "hadn't been near the chapel," wrote, "I got out of it best as I could by saying we'd gone down to read by the lake + stammered out something about thinking it a nice way to spend Sunday + she answered 'yes but she thought we enjoyed it better sometimes though for having first been to church.' I felt duly squelched."<sup>78</sup>

Wellesley was still a religious institution, and, by and large, its faculty hewed to a Protestant worldview. This would have been apparent in their approach to teaching history, philosophy, and religion. But if Helen was disturbed by the way Judaism was portrayed in her required courses in Bible, she never mentioned it. Instead, she "feasted on Bible."<sup>79</sup> Writing to her father, perhaps to justify the financial sacrifice of her college

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75. Sanua, *Going Greek*, 39.

76. Helen Solomon to "Dearest Mother," January 13, 1902, folder 3, box 17.

77. *Annual Reports [of] President and Treasurer, Wellesley College 1902* (Boston: Frank Wood, Printer, 1903), 3.

78. Helen Solomon to "Dearest People All," April 20, 1902, folder 6, box 17.

79. Helen Solomon to "Dearest Mother," Thanksgiving 1901, folder 1, box 17.

tuition, she declared herself “especially glad for ... the study of the Old and New Testament” and asserted that her study of the Bible as literature and history had “no bearing to religion.”<sup>80</sup> Unsurprisingly—given that her mother studied the Bible in depth—Helen wrote: “I’ve always felt so the necessity of knowing something about it,—a thing which I think is neglected more than any other book in the world, yet it is the most important.”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Helen was surprised to find that in some respects she knew as much or more about Christianity than her classmates. She was startled that two friends were unfamiliar with a quotation that she recited from the Sermon on the Mount. Relaxing in the parlor with Ruby and three others, Helen was shocked when “they all looked blank” when Helen asked them to explain the Christian iconography on the cover of “‘The Life of Our Lord in Art’ or something of the kind.” After she and Ruby eventually remembered the meaning, Helen concluded that the experience had been “strange” and said, “I wonder how many staunch believers there would be if people studied their bible as closely as they read the current newspapers.”<sup>82</sup>

Helen’s studies at Wellesley not only increased her appreciation of Christian religious traditions, they also deepened her understanding of Jewish history, especially of Purim.<sup>83</sup> Purim was the only Jewish holiday other than Yom Kippur that Helen mentioned in her correspondence home that year: “I can see you all going off to temple,—and if you don’t say something about ‘missing your daughter today’, I shall feel oh so bad!” With her usual good humor, Helen wrote, “[I]t’s a particularly blessed Sunday, isn’t it—Purim!...I did want you to know that even in this camp of those of little (or other) faith I’m observing the day.” Previously she had imagined the Purim story “in the light of a novel like Daniel Deronda.” Now, with her deeper knowledge of Biblical, Greek, and Jewish history, she could set Purim “like a diamond in a ring...into its historical background” and would “love it better for that.”<sup>84</sup>

Hannah had made clear to Helen that she wanted her to preserve Jewish traditions, not only to preserve the religion itself, but also to

80. Helen Solomon to “Mother dearest,” [October 2/3, 1901], folder 12, box 16; Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mother,” Thanksgiving 1901, folder 1, box 17; Helen Solomon to “Dearest Daddy,” [December 3, 1901], folder 2, box 17.

81. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Daddy,” December 3, 1901, folder 2, box 17; Hannah G. Solomon to “Dearie ittie daughtie,” [October 1902], folder 12, box 16.

82. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mother,” January 13, 1902, folder 3, box 17.

83. On another occasion, Helen told her mother that she was going to “the library to read about the Maccabees,—168 BC–30 AD of the History of the Jews. I’m learning so much.” Helen Solomon to “Dearest mother,” n/d, folder 3, box 18.

84. Helen Solomon to “My own dear People,” n/d, folder 4, box 18.

learn how to earn respect in a mixed religious environment. Hannah believed that by remaining true to these Jewish religious traditions while at Wellesley, Helen would earn social regard, but only by being tactful as well. She warned, “[We] Jews cannot be too careful in our ways when we are thrown into contact with the world.” She suggested her daughter should attend church services “occasionally for the experience” but be circumspect in sharing her true thoughts: “Never scoff at any religious thought or form even if it seems ridiculous—That does not mean that you should not speak your mind but be respectful toward others—and mindful of their feelings.”<sup>85</sup>

Interacting with her Protestant classmates, including Ruby Warfield, who had accused Helen of leading a mutual friend astray, Helen learned an essential leadership skill: to be assertive without being offensive. At first, when Ruby—“one of these goody-goody people”—stopped by her room after Helen and her best friends Louise and Carrie had been “telling about our respective peoples and friends at home,” Helen tolerated Ruby’s effusions about “this bishop and that sermon and the other ‘sweet’ pastor.” But after Ruby announced that she wanted to “devote herself entirely to bringing religion to the poor,” Helen retorted that “one’s first duty was at home” rather than “trotting around the world just trying to bring comfort promiscuously [sic, promiscuously].” Helen wrote, “I spoke up,—mother,—and I did want to say lots of things,—but of course I wouldn’t,—and then besides I wasn’t sure to what extent Louise & Carrie sympathized with her.” Wanting to remain on good terms with Ruby, Helen—though “wrathy on the inside”—proudly reported that the conversation had been “perfectly cool & quiet” and that afterward Helen had “asked her [Ruby] up with the girls to eat the rest of the fudge.” Another time, Helen wrote home that she’d “dined...[on] mutton flavored with a hot discussion of Jew versus Christian in which Miss Solomon for a change, held forth on ‘Why should the Jew not be saved as much as the Christian’ while Miss Eaton confessed that...she’d never thought about it in that light.”<sup>86</sup> Helen’s letters reflect a young woman encountering religious difference while embracing her mother’s goals of tolerance, liberal religiosity, and quiet assertion of Jewish identity.

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85. Hannah Solomon to “My dearest daughter,” September 16, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

86. Helen Solomon to “Dear People,” November 24, 1901, folder , box 17. Helen to “My own dear People,” n/d, folder 4, box 18.

## HELEN SOLOMON'S EDUCATION AS A WOMAN AT WELLESLEY

Like her mother, Helen believed that one's "first duty...[is] at home."<sup>87</sup> Viewed in this light, her studies of art, music, and languages were preparation for domesticity. She was also, however, working toward a broader life goal: "to leave some impression for good upon the world, to be a helpful and valuable influence in the lives of others."<sup>88</sup> At Wellesley, she learned independence, as well as leadership. Most importantly, she learned to be discreet yet also speak her mind. She declared at the end of her junior year, "I think there is no better education than the coming in contact with so many people of different opinions from different places."<sup>89</sup>

Initially derisive of the all-women faculty, she wrote, "All of the teachers here are 'Miss,' I think. It just seems as if the whole of the United States had dumped its 'Old Maids' at Wellesley."<sup>90</sup> However, despite her doubts about "lady teachers in the place of professors" and "the lack of men [...] to supply the backbone," she found Wellesley more challenging than the University of Chicago.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, the Wellesley experience encouraged the kind of education for leadership that Hannah sought for her daughter: with Hannah's guidance, Helen was learning to choose her words carefully, so as to avoid offending Christians or Orthodox Jews, arousing feelings of jealousy, or appearing immodest, as her interactions with Ruby and Miss Eaton suggested.<sup>92</sup> After having nearly been ousted as NCJW president over the Sunday Sabbath controversy five years earlier, Hannah cautioned Helen to be discreet when meeting observant NCJW members: "Don't tell the things you do on Sabbath...one doesn't need to talk too much until you get the lay of the land."<sup>93</sup>

Hannah made some overt efforts to train her daughter for leadership while Helen was at Wellesley. Indeed, Helen once lightheartedly referred to herself as "the future president of the C.J.W.," probably reflecting her

87. Helen Solomon to "Dear People," November 24, 1901, folder 1, box 17.

88. Helen Solomon to "Dearest mamma and papa," October 17, 1901, folder 12, box 16.

89. Helen Solomon to "Dearest Daddy," May 24, 1901, folder 7, box 17.

90. Durant intended that Wellesley's faculty and administration be composed of women. Helen Solomon to Hannah G. Solomon, September 20, 1901, as quoted in Farmer, "Eve in the Renegade City," 234; Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 53-4.

91. Helen Solomon to "Mother darling," [September 27, 1901], folder 11, box 16.

92. Hannah G. Solomon to "My dear little girlie," April 21, 1902, folder 6, box 17.

93. Hannah G. Solomon to "My dear Helen," February 3, 1902, folder 4, box 17.

mother's efforts to groom her for the role.<sup>94</sup> Hannah introduced Helen to NCJW leaders in Boston and elsewhere on the Eastern seaboard. When calling on Boston's "leading Jewish women," Helen tried to comport herself as befit her mother's position. After one such visit, Helen wrote, "I guess I looked all right,—at least I hoped so to do justice to my title as usual of 'Daughter of the President of the C—etc'."<sup>95</sup> Helen skipped class for several days to accompany her mother on NCJW business on an eastern seaboard trip ending in Hannah's historic speech from the pulpit of Boston's Congregation Ohabei Shalom.<sup>96</sup> Helen's description of the event reveals the awe she felt toward her mother's accomplishments and the value she placed on "womanly virtues": "To think of our little mother so honored and loved as the 'woman who had done the most for Judaism in the country.'" She gloried in Rabbi Samuel Hirshberg's praise of Hannah's "beauty of mind and character" and told her father that the congregants "were impressed with mama's sweetness and womanliness."<sup>97</sup>

At the same time, however, Hannah seems to have expected the year at Wellesley would give Helen "more time and freedom"—including freedom from being her mother's daughter.<sup>98</sup> That spring, Hannah was presiding over the NCJW's eight thousand members among sixty-eight American cities.<sup>99</sup> Her speech on delinquents at a national Jewish charity conference was widely acclaimed.<sup>100</sup> Despite her mother's fame, however, Helen went unrecognized in a chance encounter with President Caroline Hazard. When Hannah Solomon visited Boston and spoke at several venues, Wellesley was not among them.<sup>101</sup> On campus, Helen was given the opportunity to be an ordinary college girl.

And, although she strongly supported her mother's work, Helen did not seem particularly interested in philanthropic theory or practice during her year at Wellesley. For example, she did not study economics or evince any interest in the College Settlement Association, apart from making a doll and "the cunningest sailor-suit you ever saw" to donate

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94. Helen to "Dearest Folks at Home," April 10, 1902, folder 6, box 17.

95. "Reception and Lunch," *The Boston Globe*, March 3, 1902, 4; Hannah Solomon to "My dearest daughter," September 16, 1901, folder 11, box 16.

96. "Jewish Woman in Religion," newspaper clipping, n/d, Helen Solomon Wellesley Scrapbook, box 24.

97. Helen Solomon to "Daddy dearest," [March 3, 1902], folder 5, box 17.

98. Hannah Solomon to "my dearest daughter," September 16 [1901], folder 11, box 16.

99. "Mrs. Solomon Spoke," *The Boston Globe*, March 1, 1902, 7.

100. "National Conference of Jewish Charities," *The Jewish Voice*, June 6, 1902, 6.

101. "Guest of Boston Section," *The Boston Globe*, February 25, 1902, 2.

to the Boston College Settlement house at Christmas.<sup>102</sup> She did occasionally attend talks by visiting missionaries and ministers, but, given the opportunity to hear the famous Yiddish Labor Poet “Mr. [Morris] Rosenfeld...read ‘In the Sweatshop,’” she wrote: “I want to go ever so much + shall if I can—but pleasure, of the gay kind first calls me.”<sup>103</sup> Ultimately she chose to skip the reading and take part in a mock wedding in Freeman Cottage instead.<sup>104</sup>

Helen’s education at Wellesley was not simply grooming for club leadership; her descriptions of friendships, social outings, extracurricular activities, and trips to museums and concerts in Boston suggest that she was also engaged in the traditional education of an upper-class woman who would return to a conventional life of marriage and motherhood once college was over.<sup>105</sup> In addition to embracing residential life, Helen participated in campus athletics, took nature walks with her friends, and shared in their “usual Friday night fudge.”<sup>106</sup> She visited Boston’s Museum of Art and wrote home in detail about Boston concerts.<sup>107</sup> And she and Hannah exchanged correspondence about hairdos, clothes, and potential suitors.<sup>108</sup> Helen’s activities at Wellesley suggest that she embraced the College’s grooming of young women for conventional marriage, cultural connoisseurship, and female sociability.

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102. The College Settlement Association was a Progressive collaboration among several women’s colleges, including Wellesley. Other Jewish contemporaries of Helen studied social science and took an interest in settlements. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mother,” Thanksgiving 1901, folder 1, box 17; Helen Solomon to “Mommy darling,” [December 2, 1901], folder 2, box 17; Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education*, 47–8, 148–9; Robert Archey Woods and Albert Joseph Kennedy, eds., *Handbook of Settlements* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), 109–10; Leonard Rogoff, *Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 47, 50–3.

103. Helen Solomon to “My dearest People,” January 19, 1901, folder 3, box 17.

104. *Ibid.*

105. By this time, Wellesley boasted a yearbook, student newspaper, student government, field day, and had begun many school traditions, including a May Day celebration that ended with college songs on the chapel steps. For the vibrant life on women’s campuses during this era, see Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 147–69.

106. Helen to “Dearest People,” March 15, 1902, folder 5, box 17.

107. Helen Solomon to “Dearest Daddy,” December 3, 1901, folder 2, box 17;

Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mother,” January 13, 1902, folder 3, box 17.

108. Hannah G. Solomon to “My dear Helen,” March 15, 1902, folder 5, box 17; Hannah G. Solomon to “My dear Helen,” March 15, 1902, folder 5, box 17; Helen Solomon to “Dearest Mommy,” May 1902, folder 7, box 17.

## AFTERWARD: HELEN SOLOMON LEVY'S CAREER AND LEGACY

Helen graduated *cum laude* from the University of Chicago in 1903. A woman of “rare culture” who made study a lifelong habit, she continued to put family life first.<sup>109</sup> She stayed in Chicago until her marriage to Emile Levy in 1911 and, after a short stint in Mississippi, returned to spend the rest of her life in her home city, where her only child, Frances Hannah, was born in 1912. Frances, who could not remember a time when her widowed grandmother Hannah did not live with the family, recalled that her parents hosted many recurring study and musical groups.<sup>110</sup> Helen fostered a love of literature and culture in her grandchildren, reading to them in Latin and English.<sup>111</sup> Frances was raised as a Jew and went on to found the West Virginia section of the NCJW.

Helen remained an active Jewish member of the NCJW throughout her life, but she was also a leader of the Chicago Woman's Club, and her religious outlook became increasingly ecumenical. In 1904, after attending an international women's conference in Berlin, she and her mother joined the rest of the family for a European vacation. In Rome, they were thrilled to be greeted by the Pope, but back in Germany, Helen seems to have found Orthodox Judaism utterly alien. In her travel diary, she wrote that whereas the men entered the synagogue “in the front way like ‘lords of creation,’” the women had to sit in “a place partitioned off at the side from the main room, with tiny curtained windows through which we might see.” Moreover, using a Protestant framework, she compared the Torah procession with the kind of pageantry she associated with Catholicism. She wrote, “When it came to the putting back of the ‘Thorah,’ one could not help thinking of Rome and ‘St. Peter,’ and the word ‘idolatry’ with which we branded much that we saw.”<sup>112</sup>

Helen spoke before the Chicago Woman's Club in 1927, at age forty-six, on “The Search for Truth,” encouraging her audience to form their own religious beliefs:

The great tragedy is that men wish to have their ideas turned over to them upon a silver salver...Consequently beliefs have been handed down from father to son...in unopened caskets. Often, we realize, these coffers remain

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109. Dr. Louis L. Mann, “Words Spoken by Dr. Louis L. Mann at the Funeral of Helen Solomon Levy, January 30, 1955, at Sinai Temple,” 2–3, folder 3, box 26, MC 749, Series B, Helen S. Levy, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, AJA.

110. Frances Levy Angel interview, 12.

111. Mann, “Words Spoken by Dr. Louis L. Mann,” 5–6.

112. Helen Solomon, “Our Trip to Europe 1904,” 117, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, folder 5, box 13.

sealed, because individuals fear that they might not approve their contents: And how unpleasant it is to be dislodged from one's comfortable mooring!<sup>113</sup>

For Helen, God was a universal being, necessarily incomprehensible. Religion was to be understood through science as well as the teachings of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius. When Helen died at age seventy-four, Rabbi Mann said, "She was an ardent Jewess—in the prophetic sense. Her religion included all and excluded none...Jew or Christian, white or black, rich or poor."<sup>114</sup>

Because of Helen's ecumenism, much of her work for social change was interfaith or secular. She is best remembered for founding the first day nursery in Chicago, leading citywide efforts to provide quality daycare for working mothers, and advocating for mothers' pensions, aspiring toward "that Utopian day when no mother need work, when every mother...will be able to make a happy, safe home for her children."<sup>115</sup> At age sixty, replying to a Wellesley questionnaire, she compiled "a haphazard list that looks terribly imposing but really isn't" of her community activities. She was then a leader in several Chicago groups on race relations, employment for the disabled, and daycare for African American children, while also supporting nonsectarian private and public efforts to improve daycare and public education, advance interfaith relations, and advocate for peace.

Helen planned to send her daughter to Wellesley, and Helen's attachment to the college remained strong even as it instituted antisemitic quotas later in the century.<sup>116</sup> We do not know whether Helen ever knew of Wellesley's unofficial ten-percent quota on Jewish admissions, but in 1936—while that quota was still in place—Helen served on Wellesley's "Advisory Committee on Alumnae Participation in the Selection of a President," which she described as "the biggest fun she has had lately."<sup>117</sup> Wellesley's new president, Mildred McAfee, privately continued to defend the quota and, in 1947, asserted that the College's bylaws still bound it to "consider religious affiliations" in order to hire faculty members "in sympathy with the design of the College which was founded 'for the glory of God and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ by the educa-

113. Helen Solomon Levy, "The Search for Truth," 1927, folder 10, box 15.

114. Mann, "Words Spoken by Dr. Louis L. Mann," 3.

115. Helen established the day nursery at the prompting of Jane Addams. "New Building for Helen Day Nursery," *The Reform Advocate*, July 9, 1910, 1070; Helen Solomon, "A Mothers' and Children's Building," *American Israelite*, January 19, 1911, 1; "Jottings," *American Israelite*, August 18, 1910, 7.

116. Helen Solomon Levy Biography File, Wellesley College Archives.

117. Class of 1903, 1936 Wellesley Annual, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, folder 1, box 24.

tion and culture of women.”<sup>118</sup> In 1948, Helen wrote to her classmates that her Wellesley reunion had been “the most delightful experience” of the year.<sup>119</sup> Helen’s commitment to Wellesley transcended (and perhaps ignored) some of its uglier realities.

Yet Helen embraced nonsectarian, coeducational education, too. She supported Chicago’s Roosevelt College, because, as she informed her Wellesley classmates, “[i]t is completely non-sectarian and non-quota.”<sup>120</sup> In her last decade, Helen became a trustee of the newly established Brandeis University, founded by Jews as a nonsectarian university. She was also recognized as one of the University of Chicago’s most outstanding alumni.<sup>121</sup>

Despite Helen’s unusual background, her Wellesley correspondence reveals much about the challenges to their religious identity that Jewish students faced when confronted by the profound Protestant religiosity of sectarian women’s colleges at the turn of the twentieth century. As acculturated, worldly, and ecumenical as Helen was, she encountered Protestant hegemony in and out of the classroom. None of this should have come as any surprise to the Solomons or to similar families who sent their Jewish daughters to sectarian colleges like Wellesley, established with explicit mandates to educate Protestant women. Indeed, as our in-depth study of Jewish students who attended the Seven Sisters colleges during the 1870s through 1920s will show, others encountered exactly the same obstacles and few managed to practice any form of Judaism during their college years. Like Helen, the bulk of these alumnae remained Jewish but were religiously tolerant. They retained strong allegiances to their alma maters and devoted their lives, at least in part, to social betterment.<sup>122</sup>

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118. See President Mildred McAfee Horton’s statement on the proposed Massachusetts Fair Educational Practices Act, June 1947, Jewish Problems 1938–1954, Records of the President’s Office, Wellesley College Archives. Jerold Auerbach argues that “Wellesley’s policy of discrimination was couched in President McAfee’s rhetoric of respect and tolerance.” Jerold S. Auerbach, “Wellesley College: Anti-Semitism with White Gloves,” in *Antisemitism on the Campus: Past & Present*, ed. Eunice G. Pollack (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 25, 26.

119. Class of 1903, 1948 Wellesley Annual, Hannah G. Solomon Family Collection, folder 1, box 24, MS-749, AJA; Auerbach, “Wellesley College: Anti-Semitism with White Gloves,” 26.

120. Class of 1903, 1950 Wellesley Annual, 30, folder 2, box 24.

121. “U. of C. Awards Merit Citations to Nine Alumni,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 1947, 214; “Mrs. Emile Levy,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1955, 23.

122. Cynthia Francis Gensheimer and Kathryn Hellerstein, “*The Experience of a Lifetime*”: *Jewish Students at the Seven Sisters, 1870–1930*, manuscript in progress.

Helen Solomon's experience at Wellesley offers us insight into the ambivalence of these women's experiences—the ways that they needed to navigate between a public Protestantism and their private Jewish lives, and the ways that they were encouraged to become civic leaders as well as gracious wives and mothers. Helen may have been exceptional in her effective leadership in championing women's causes through nonsectarian organizations, but her correspondence from her year at Wellesley demonstrates the ways that values like ecumenism and tolerance enabled Jewish women to tactfully dissent and seek respect from—and even to find avenues for leadership within—an elite, antisemitic, Protestant world.