



Rabbi Silvers'

Shabbat Message



Good Shabbes...

On January 21, 1913, 156 women from 52 congregations around the country met in Cincinnati, Ohio, under the leadership of Carrie Obendorfer Simon, to create the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS).

While local women's groups had been formed in many individual synagogues in the 1890s, NFTS was the first national body to bring these groups together. Although convened within the framework of the national meeting of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, NFTS was initially envisioned as a federation of all synagogue sisterhoods. Within a decade, however, sisterhoods from Conservative and Orthodox synagogues formed their own national organizations, thus leaving NFTS as an arm of Reform Judaism.

Differentiating itself from the National Council of Jewish Women and other social service groups, NFTS focused from the beginning on women's contributions to their own synagogues. Early projects included sponsoring Chanukah and Purim parties for religious school children, beautifying synagogues for holidays, and supporting religious schools. NFTS also raised money for rabbinical school scholarships and played a leading role in creating the National Federation of Temple Youth.

From an early impressive membership of 9,000 in 49 local chapters, the organization today claims 75,000 members in 500 different affiliated groups around the world. In 1993, NFTS was renamed Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ), reflecting a desire to be seen not only as an auxiliary group, but as an organization that puts its members and their interests at the center of Reform Judaism.

Sisterhood members were concerned from the beginning with the changing role of women in Reform Judaism. Leaders pushed for women to be able to sit on synagogue boards and, in the 1920s, instituted Sisterhood Sabbaths, during which, in many congregations, women both led services and delivered sermons. In 1963, NFTS called upon Reform Judaism to take up the question of women's ordination as rabbis (the first Reform woman rabbi was ordained in 1972). In recent decades, NFTS/WRJ has been active in addressing such issues as civil rights, child labor legislation, capital punishment, and abortion rights. In December 2007, WRJ published *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss. This project, in process for many years, reflects an effort by WRJ to connect its members to the work that Jewish women have been doing to redefine the tradition and texts of Jewish life.

Join us on this Shabbat Shirah (Sabbath of the Song) as we celebrate another pioneering woman of Judaism – Miriam, who helped lead our ancestors out from slavery to freedom in song and in rejoicing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bob Silvers