

WRJ CENTENNIAL



Devar Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Sarah: Names and Responsibilities
Parashat Lech L'cha (Genesis 12:1 – 17:27)

During 2013, we celebrate the legacy of the first one hundred years of WRJ, and we arrive at another *Lech L'cha* moment... preparing to go forth into our next one hundred years! We have lived to fulfill five score years of NFTS and now WRJ. And we are filled with excitement and hope for our next hundred years.

Let us look at the life of Sarah, previously known as Sarai. As a child, she was so beautiful that “everyone wanted to look at her.” Sarai also bears the name Yiscah which means “to look” (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Commentary of Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein, citing BT *M'gillah* 14a, p 54). Upon her marriage to her uncle/husband Abram, she became known as Sarai, the princess. Upon fulfilling the divine covenant by giving birth to Isaac, she became known as Sarah. She is known over time by three names, and, we know her as a matriarch, mother of the Jewish people.

Yiscah the beautiful child, to Sarai the beautiful princess bride, to Sarah the beautiful mother: mother of a son; mother of the Jewish people.

Name changes may signify a change in our responsibilities, but not who we are.

Before we established the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS), individual women were filled with potential to do more than their traditional role as daughter or wife allowed. Enterprising women gathered together to serve their congregations. Some formed burial societies. Others helped the poor and disadvantaged. Many organized to educate the children. Some were already advocating for women's right to vote. Unfortunately, everyone was ‘making Shabbos for herself’. Finally, those independent groups joined together to form the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, becoming a stronger, more vibrant voice for women's rights and so much more. Soon after forming NFTS, the women created the white Uniongram note with the blue NFTS logo. Selling Uniongrams helped NFTS establish scholarships for Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College students. NFTS affiliates continued working as the backbones of their congregations but, by joining together, our matriarchs were empowered to accomplish so much more!

Highlights from our earliest years make interesting reading.

In 1914, NFTS established the National War Emergency Committee, subsidized free tuition for religious school children from low-income families, raised funds for Jewish war veterans, and protested literacy tests for immigrants directly to President Woodrow Wilson,

In the 1920's, NFTS passed major resolutions endorsing international efforts toward peace and disarmament and established a National Committee on Peace. NFTS established Sisterhood Sabbath, children's services on Jewish holidays, and encouraged the revival of religious ceremonies at home. We built and dedicated a dormitory at Hebrew Union College (HUC), continued rabbinical scholarships and set up fellowships for graduate students. We expanded our network of state and district federations. We participated in the first conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and we established a Special Committee on Literature for the Jewish sightless.

In the 1930's, NFTS offered fellowships at Hebrew Union College (HUC) to rabbinical students and scholars from European academies closed by Hitler. We founded the National Organization of Young Folks Temple Leagues (today named NFTY). We intensified our efforts for world peace. We passed resolutions advocating humanitarian efforts related to health, child labor and work with refugees. Under the guidance of first Executive Director Jane Evans, NFTS established the Jewish Braille Institute of America, Inc.

So much of what was started within the first thirty years of NFTS remains important today! Every decade that followed has built upon the dedication of women, called by different names, who all worked together in the name of NFTS.

Let us fast forward to 1993 when NFTS renamed itself, while still remaining true to its core. By our 80th year, we were ready to be named by what we were: Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

At the 1993 joint closing session of the UAHC-WRJ biennial conventions in San Francisco, which were themed around *Lech L'cha*, the first of many name changes occurred within the Reform Movement. WRJ President Judith O. Rosenkranz (1993-1997) announced, "Over this Shabbat, Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, and The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods became the Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods."

That was a *Lech L'cha* moment for the women of our movement!

Judy recalls, "The moment the words 'Women of Reform Judaism' were said, screaming and yelling began and drowned out anything that followed. This was much more than a change in name; this was a change in attitude; an opportunity to show a new look and a new direction, incorporating all that made us so proud of our past! This was saying we are taking the best of our past and making the changes to adapt it to the next generations. We have something to say and we are here to say it! We are the 'Women of Reform Judaism!' Abraham and Sarah were different people after their name change... and so were we!"

We embraced in our name what we had been doing for all those years as NFTS: preserving Reform Judaism. That name change took place only twenty years ago. WRJ's 80th year was filled with the promise of what it would look like when it reached its 90th and then its 100th year.

And now as Women of Reform Judaism turns one hundred, our thoughts move to where we will take WRJ, where WRJ will take us, and what WRJ will continue to accomplish as we strengthen the North American Reform Movement as well as worldwide progressive Judaism. Like Sarah, WRJ was born with the potential. Our matriarch founders had vision, diligence and determination. It is now our turn to initiate our second hundred years built on the history and accomplishments of thousands of women.

Let us deliberate today with the understanding that we, as affiliates of Women of Reform Judaism, are linked in very special ways to the beautiful matriarch Sarah in our words and actions, not merely by physical beauty. The beauty of WRJ comes first from its members in local sisterhoods and second, from the actions we take together to make this world better than when we entered it... for us, for our children, for our grandchildren, for our great-grandchildren and all those who come after.

Women, like Sarah, with a beautiful vision...

who gave birth to National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1913...

which became Women of Reform Judaism in 1993...

mothers and grandmothers, sisters and daughters, all impacting Reform Judaism across North America and across the world

Stronger Together!

May we go from strength to strength... *Stronger Together!* Amen!

This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.