

THE STORY OF THE SISTERHOODS OF TEMPLE ISRAEL CAPE TOWN

BY PHINA HOBERMAN - 6th July, 2007

For more than 60 years the Sisterhoods of Temple Israel in Cape Town have banded together in friendship, voluntarily giving of their free time to organize various programs and events to benefit our Temples, the congregation, the community at large and for social activities. Life-long friendships have grown and developed and all committees, past and present, can look back at their work with great pride and satisfaction. Over the years they have continued to assist with planning and catering for chagim, brochat, and the many Temple and Congregational events and functions that take place throughout the year.

By the nature of their work, some get noticed by the public and others – who work just as hard in the background – receive very little if any recognition. As it is not possible to list everything that the Sisterhoods have achieved in the constraints of a short article like this, I shall only touch on a few of the many projects, contributions and achievements of the Cape Town Sisterhood Committees. Apart from our founding Reform rabbis, I have also avoided using names.

The very first Sisterhood established in South Africa was launched on the 30th August 1933, shortly after the arrival of Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler, the founding Rabbi of the South African Jewish Reform Movement. This fledgling Sisterhood became known as the “Sisterhood of Johannesburg Jewish Reform”. With the passing of time the name was eventually changed to “The United Sisterhood” and today it is the largest and oldest Sisterhood in South Africa and the umbrella organization of the Sisterhoods of the four Temples in Gauteng.

The motto adopted by that first South African Sisterhood was "Sisterhood Means Service", and this motto is today still used by all South African Sisterhoods.

The successful growth of the Reform movement in Johannesburg attracted a lot of interest elsewhere and soon new Congregations and Sisterhoods were established in other areas of Southern Africa, including what was then known as Southern Rhodesia.

Encouraged by Rabbi Weiler when on a visit from Johannesburg, a Sisterhood was launched for the then fledgling Cape Town Jewish Reform Congregation at a meeting held in the Delmonico Restaurant in April 1944. According to Rabbi Sherman's book “Pioneering for Reform Judaism in South Africa” published in 1983, *‘this was an important move, because, except for High Holy Day services, Sisterhood was for the next two years the only really functioning part of the congregation’*.

In April 1945, a year after the establishment of its Sisterhood, the Cape Town Jewish Reform Congregation began regular Shabbat services in the small ballroom that came with a large old house with large grounds that had been purchased on the corner of Main and Upper Portswood Roads in Green Point.

The first rabbi of the newly formed Cape Town Jewish Reform Congregation, Rabbi David Sherman, arrived in South Africa in July 1945 and on November 2, 1946 a Hebrew School with two classes was started in the by then newly refurbished Portswood Road house.

One of the teachers at the Hebrew school was a Miss Bertha Cohen and on January 7, 1947, shortly after the establishment of the school, Rabbi Sherman and Miss Cohen were married by Rabbi Weiler. The warmth, enthusiasm, energy and dedication of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Sherman over the next almost 60 years, had a significant effect on the growth in membership and stature of the Congregation and its Sisterhood.

In those early years the Sisterhood worked very hard at numerous fundraising projects. Most of the proceeds from their endeavors went towards the needs of the Congregation and towards an ongoing building fund. With the help and support of the Sisterhood and congregants the building fund grew steadily

so that a sanctuary and two communal halls could eventually be built in the garden of the old Portswood Road house.

For many years the Sisterhood also undertook to fully support the Hebrew School, thus enabling the Congregation to provide free tuition for the children of its members. The fact that free tuition was being offered also helped to swell the rapidly growing membership of the Congregation.

With the continued growth of the Congregation it became necessary for additional services and Hebrew school classes to be established for members living in the southern suburbs and elsewhere in the peninsula. From about 1956, services were started in the suburbs in a succession of different hired halls and in January 1959 a property known as "Many Stairs" was purchased in Salisbury Road, Wynberg. It consisted of an old house with a large garden. The old house was used as classrooms until 1961 when a hall was added for shul services.

There was always the need for a building fund as much building work was necessary. Thus at the same time that the hall was added in Wynberg, the old house in Green Point was demolished and a Community Centre with offices, schoolrooms and a library was erected in its place.

By 1966 the house in Wynberg gave way to a new modern complex. Thus the Suburban Sisterhood Committee (*also known as Wynberg Sisterhood*) was officially born. Previous to this, many of their members had already been actively involved in a Southern Suburbs "Work Party" and several were also members of the Green Point Sisterhood Committee. Membership of the Sisterhood had also expanded to other areas, and I am told that between 1950 -1970 a vibrant and active Sisterhood group existed in Pinelands,

Other past Sisterhood groups that existed in the early years come to mind. These were the "Junior Sisterhood" and the "Pace Makers", both of which had mainly younger women as its members. Keen and busy Sisterhood "Work Party" groups also met regularly in Green Point as well as in the Southern Suburbs and in Milnerton. Over a cup of tea and a chat, these senior members of Sisterhood produced beautiful handmade knitwear and other items which they sold throughout the year and at the annual Sisterhood fetes.

The Hadassah Sisterhood committee was started in the late 1980s. It was originally formed because of the need to accommodate younger working women whose days were taken up by their work or occupation and who were therefore unable to join Sisterhood activities during working hours. Hadassah draws its membership from both Green Point and Wynberg and it has monthly meetings that alternate between the two centres.

Hadassah introduced the popular "Pot Luck Suppers" which take place several times during the year at both Green Point and Wynberg. Over the years they have held many interesting and innovative functions which have contributed to both the Temple coffers as well as supporting other worthwhile causes while also encouraging friendship and fellowship amongst those participating.

The West Coast Congregation was started in 1999 for members living in the Milnerton and Table View areas. Services were held in a succession of hired premises until 2006 when a "home" was at last purchased at 25 Glanville Rd, Tygerhof, Milnerton. Hopefully this fledgling new Progressive Congregation will continue to grow and flourish and perhaps a Sisterhood Committee will eventually be established there.

The Sisterhoods of Temple Israel have always tried their best to rectify injustice and oppression and tried to give refuge and new opportunities to those less fortunate than themselves. During the bitterly cold and wet winter of 1977 the authorities started to bulldoze the flimsy shacks of squatters in Crossroads so as to try to force them to return to their "home lands". Moved by the plight of the squatters, the Sisterhoods embarked on a drive to provide blankets and sleeping bags for these unfortunate citizens. On several other occasions lorry loads of squatters were brought to the Temples where they were given temporary refuge, fed and allowed to sleep overnight. At one time the Sisterhoods also sponsored Literacy Schools where Black adults were taught how to read and write.

The Wynberg Sisterhood continues to organize annually a large musical Soirée in aid of various charities including Oranje Children's Home and the African Children's Choir.

For more than 40 years the Sisterhoods of Cape Town joined together to organize an annual Simchat Torah Party for up to 1000 Senior and Handicapped Citizens in the large Major Hall adjoining the old Temple in Green Point. Funds were raised for transport, an excellent tea was served and entertainment was provided by the "Tivoli Girls". With the sale of a major part of the property, the restructuring of the premises and a much smaller new hall, this annual event that was the highlight of the year for so many, has regretfully been discontinued.

Over the past two years, the Green Point Sisterhood has raised funds towards providing items and equipment needed for the new sanctuary and administration facilities in Green Point. They continue to support Ikamva La Bantu feeding schemes which care for underprivileged children who attend the day care centre of the Siyazama Educare Centre for disabled children in Guguletu and at the Mvula Siphika School in Miller's Camp.

All the Sisterhoods in Southern Africa are members of the South African Union of Temple Sisterhoods. SAUTS was founded in April 1952 and the Sisterhoods are all nationally and internationally represented by this organization.

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was founded in 1913. The name was changed in 1993 and it then became known as Women of Reform Judaism. WRJ is based in the United States. It represents over 100 000 Reform Jewish Women in more than 600 Sisterhoods throughout the USA, Canada and 14 other countries including South Africa. It has a seat on the governing body of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and it also has "Non-governmental Organization" status at the United Nations. All South African Sisterhoods are affiliated to WRJ and the South African Union of Temple Sisterhoods, our National body, is represented on the WRJ Board of Directors.

Besides trying their best to care for those who need help locally, all the South African Sisterhoods continue to make substantial donations to our National body SAUTS, so as to also help those beyond our borders who have fallen on hard times.

Thus SAUTS has in recent years been able to provide more than 5 000 Shabbat dinners for the Jews in Argentina; helped two school girls with transport and food for a year (also in Argentina); assisted women in the Ukraine establish Jewish homes with the provision of Judaica; and provided new clothing for children in Israel who have been affected by the ongoing terror.

Over the years the Sisterhoods have tried their best to continue to play a significant role, presenting an image of the Congregation to the wider community of which all congregants can be justly proud. We appeal to all members of our Congregation to become more actively involved by joining your nearest Sisterhood Committee. Even if unable to attend committee meetings voluntary helpers are often needed for special events and to assist on special occasions. We need a new look, fresh ideas and the enthusiasm of younger members in order to grow and to continue with the sterling work that Sisterhood has undertaken in the Interest of Temple Israel and the community at large for so many years.