What happened to Box 14? A 1978 inventory of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library’s archival holdings listed the thirteen-box collection of Herman H. Rubenovitz. But Rubenovitz, rabbi of Temple Mishkan Tefila in Boston, Massachusetts, from 1910 to 1947, served jointly with his wife, Mignon, in a two-person rabbinate. Their memoirs appeared in one volume as *The Waking Heart*, yet Mignon’s papers did not appear in the archives. Twenty years later, cleaning out the JTS tower in preparation for its renovation, archivist Julie Miller discovered Box 14: “Mrs. Rubenovitz Mignon L. Letters, article, memoirs, notes, reviews on her publications etc.” This box had been separated from the collection, abandoned in an unused storage area.

Box 14 symbolizes the unique position of the rabbi’s wife in American Jewish life. Just as the box went unnoticed for decades, so too have the contributions of rabbis’ wives to the American rabbinate largely been ignored. Successful in her own right, Mignon had papers that she thought worthy of preservation. Yet Mignon lacked an official title and position. If they had not been appended to her husband’s collection, Mignon’s papers would probably never have survived at all. However, without her efforts, his papers would probably not have been preserved either, since Herman predeceased Mignon. She collected and annotated their papers and then, presumably, donated all fourteen boxes to JTS.

This fourteen-box collection, now renamed the “Herman H. and Mignon L. Rubenovitz papers,” stands as a poignant reminder of the extent to which the American rabbinate was—for most of the twentieth century—a two-person career. The feminist gains of the last forty years have opened up most careers, including the clergy, to women. But until recently, by both policy and social convention, most careers remained closed to women. As they struggled to find socially acceptable ways to create and sustain meaningful lives, many women discovered that they could expand their opportunities through marriage. Supporting their
husbands’ careers gave women a consequential focus for their lives. Their “wife of” status opened doors to the public domain, affording them otherwise unattainable access and power.¹

Scholars have only recently begun to examine these “backstage contributions to public life,” which, until the last few decades, were rarely understood or recognized. Generally dismissing this work as “natural” for women, scholars did not view it as deserving of special comment or study. Even when recognized for its supportive function, women’s work was not acknowledged for its unique contribution to the building of community. This is understandable, since women often used informal, hard-to-measure techniques. They “helped out” in the absence of other qualified individuals, “pitched in” when more hands were needed, and provided a “shoulder to lean on” for individuals needing private counsel. The success of this status-maintenance or supportive work depended on obfuscation, for societal norms did not easily accommodate women who openly flaunted gender expectations. Also, since these volunteer activities did not fall into the category of formal “work,” the critical role women played in the creation and maintenance of community life went unacknowledged and undocumented.²

Hanna Papanek, a sociologist, first conceptualized the relationship of a wife to her husband’s work as a “two-person single career” in which wives gain vicarious achievement through their husbands’ jobs. Identifying this two-person career as a peculiarly middle-class American phenomenon, Papanek demonstrated its power to shift the occupational aspirations of educated women onto a noncompetitive track without overturning the concept of equal educational opportunity. Women gained approval for indirect behavior, while men garnered rewards for individual mastery. Because of this, women often sought to marry men who could provide not only security but also position and status. They then channeled their energies into augmenting their husbands’ careers. Such women, including the wives of corporate executives, army officers, physicians, politicians, and academics, have historically enhanced their husbands’ work through intellectual contributions, status maintenance, and public performance.³

Some two-person careers required spouses to utilize specialized skills or knowledge or to perform functions unique to their husband’s profession. Ambassadors’ wives, for example, conducted political and social messaging through the symbolic aspects of diplomatic life or through nonofficial channels. This work—though unpaid and without formal
title—enabled women to achieve levels of status, authority, and legitimacy they would have been unable to attain on their own, no matter how talented or ambitious they might be.  

The frau professor provides a nineteenth-century European paradigm for the pluses and minuses of this two-person career. Shielding him from financial worries, the frau professor enhanced her husband’s reputation among colleagues through her social skills. She managed the entertaining deemed essential to her husband’s job, smoothing the way for new colleagues through dinner invitations, parties, and discreet inquiries. She also served as her husband’s unseen colleague, critic, and editor. She benefited from this aspect of the relationship as well, for she was in an intellectual milieu where she could further her own academic interests. Some academic wives openly collaborated with their husbands on books. Despite the fact that they lacked institutional affiliation in their own right, the wives sometimes received credit as coauthors.

Not all wives were interested in or capable of fulfilling the expectations placed on them by their husbands’ careers, and their lack of conformity engendered pain, frustration, and anger. For example, the public expected politicians’ wives not only to accompany their husbands on the campaign trail but also to advocate for them publicly. Because of this, the public assumed that politicians’ wives possessed the communications and public-speaking skills necessary to do so. But some wives dreaded the limelight and proved to be ineffective campaigners.

The “wife of” role caused difficulties even for those who enjoyed it because it left women in an untenable position. Encouraged to seek out the “wife of” role, women suffered criticism if they succeeded too well. Those thought to have violated gender boundaries were disparaged for speaking their minds or overshadowing their husbands.

Ambivalence about the power women derive through marriage is deeply ingrained in western civilizational attitudes. Aspasia, wife of the fifth-century BCE Athenian statesman Pericles, was said to have taught rhetoric and participated in discussions with Socrates, but she also found herself the target of attacks and jokes for her supposed influence over her husband. Her position brought her fame, but it also provoked controversy. Aspasia was charged with impiety, and some historians blamed her for the Peloponnesian War.

These mixed emotions ingrained themselves into the fabric of the United States through the role of First Lady. The term first came into use in the 1870s among journalists writing about both the first First
Lady, Martha Washington, and the current one, Lucy Hayes. Appearing in dictionaries beginning in 1934, the honorific title described the “wife of the President of the United States, [or] . . . the woman he chooses to act as his official hostess.” Gradually, the First Lady role expanded into a more public position that included policy and personnel decisions. This evolution paralleled both the executive branch’s ascendancy over the legislative and the growing importance of the United States in the world. Americans were proud of their First Ladies and admired their accomplishments. At the same time, First Ladies never lacked detractors. Over the years, the women suffered criticism for traits that spanned the spectrum of behavior: extravagance, casual entertaining, prudishness, gaiety, excessive grief, advanced age, youthful inexperience, or excessive influence on their husbands or on government.\(^8\)

The unique potential and pitfalls of the role emerge in sharpest relief in the career of Hillary Rodham Clinton. A Yale-educated attorney, Hillary merited praise for her intelligence and abilities. Thus, when Bill Clinton campaigned for the presidential nomination, Hillary promised Democrats that in nominating her husband, they stood to gain a team, not only an individual. Yet as First Lady, Clinton was severely criticized for trying to make good on that pledge. When she led the effort for health care reform, the public brutally attacked her for overstepping her bounds. Several years later, Hillary succeeded in her own run for United States Senate. Yet, she ironically achieved this goal in large measure because, as the *New York Times* columnist Margaret Talbot argued, Hillary derived much, if not all, of her star power not from her own accomplishments but from her First Lady status. After winning, however, Senator Clinton began to solidify her own reputation as a public official.\(^9\)

This study explores the ways in which women succeeded in forging consequential lives through the “wife of” role when direct avenues of power remained largely closed to them. Adopting the life’s mission of their husbands, these women worked alongside them to further it. While this phenomenon existed in many careers, it especially characterized the ministry, for this profession most openly embodied a sense of “calling.” Moreover, societal expectations of the ministry most explicitly articulated the desire for a spouse who shared the values and activities of her husband. For these reasons, women who heard the call to religious service found that marriage to a minister provided an especially advantageous route to a life of influence.\(^10\)
Some Jewish women—particularly Jewishly educated, motivated, and ambitious women—also felt this calling. Since being a rabbi’s wife was the highest status a Jewish woman could attain, it is not surprising that some women coveted the position for its own sake. Priva Konowitz Kohn expressed it best when she explained, “I was a rebbetzin before I married a rabbi.” Propelled to a life of service, Priva faced the question only of which rabbi to wed.

For other women, marriage to a rabbi imposed a new set of expectations that willy-nilly became their own. These rabbis’ wives gave no prior thought to such a “career.” By marrying a man who either functioned as or would become a rabbi, these women grew into the “wife of” role. Some eventually embraced it as their own, gaining the requisite knowledge and skills and growing to love the lifestyle and the work.

Turning a spotlight on the evolving role of the American rabbi’s wife will allow her many accomplishments to come to the fore. It will also demonstrate the nuances of marriage as a route to power for women, by revealing the opportunities and limitations marriage placed upon women’s own desires for power, status, and meaningful work. Because these women worked both as behind-the-scenes helpmates and as partners with their husbands, this study will deepen our understanding of the fluid boundaries between women’s public and private lives. This focus on rabbis’ wives will also reinforce the growing recognition of the centrality of women to American religious history, by shedding light on the complexity and significance of the religious leadership role of clergy wives.

Noting the terms used to describe rebbetzins will also help illuminate the significance of the rhetoric used to praise women. Observers initially used imprecise language to describe the accomplishments of female leaders. Using adjectives that stressed feminine virtues of modesty, charm, graciousness, and generosity of spirit, writers often neglected to specify the behaviors and achievements that merited such approbation. Similarly, laudatory compliments based on traditional Jewish texts, such as “fitting helpmate,” “mother in Israel,” and “woman of valor,” abound in descriptions of rabbis’ wives. Sorting out what such terms signified will deepen our understanding of the kinds of behavior that merited praise in different eras.

Moreover, highlighting the careers of rabbis’ wives will enrich our understanding of American Jewish religious life. Early studies, such as Nathan Glazer’s *American Judaism* and Marshall Sklare’s *Conservative Judaism*, focused more on the ideologies, institutions, and socioeconomic
characteristics of the major religious denominations than on the contributions of individual rabbis or communities. Even the more recent five-volume series, *The Jewish People in America*, edited by Henry L. Feingold, noted the pivotal role that certain rabbis played in the growth of American Jewish religious life in the twentieth century. But these volumes barely mentioned rabbis’ wives. Murray Polner, in *Rabbi: The American Experience*, noted how little attention had been paid to rabbis’ wives, and devoted eight pages of his 1977 study to enumerating tensions in the role that he attributed to feminism. But Polner, too, neglected to recount the accomplishments of rabbis’ wives. Similarly, contributors to the 1985 edited volume *The American Rabbinate* note briefly the potential hardships the rabbinate inflicted on the Conservative rabbi’s family, but otherwise, the volume made no mention of rabbis’ wives.14

Recent works, such as Jenna Weissman Joselit’s *The Wonders of America*, Deborah Dash Moore’s *To the Golden Cities*, and Karla Goldman’s *Beyond the Gallery*, have introduced a gendered perspective to the study of American Judaism. These historians bring to light the critical role women have assumed both as regular worshippers and as pivotal volunteers, particularly through congregational Sisterhoods. Pamela S. Nadell’s study *Women Who Would Be Rabbis* reveals the extent to which rabbis’ wives played a vital role in the quest for women’s ordination. Through these works, the leadership role played by specific rabbis’ wives has begun to emerge.

Until now, however, no one has focused primary attention on rebbeztins themselves. This study traces the careers of rabbis’ wives from the emerging awareness of a special “wife of” role at the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. It tracks the evolving consciousness of rabbis’ wives—as individuals who recognized their potential to be leaders, then as cohorts of leaders who worked together on behalf of American Judaism, and finally, as both individuals and groups who redefined their roles yet again in light of changing gender expectations. In doing so, this study brings to light many achievements never before recognized while also forcing us to think more broadly about what Jewish leadership is and how it has been exercised by American Jewish women.

Finding appropriate sources for this study proved challenging at first. Many rabbis did not preserve their papers; their wives were even less
likely to do so. This is not surprising, since as Carla Freedman specu-
lates in her rabbinic thesis, “The Rebbetzin in America in the Nine-
teenth and Twentieth Centuries,” most rabbis’ wives would not have
considered what they did important enough to document. Even when
rebbetzins left a written record, scholars often overlooked such mater-
ial, as happened with Rubenovitz’s Box 14. Moreover, like early femi-
nist historians who ignored the work of clergy wives when seeking
evidence of female leadership in the past, most scholars found this “wife
of” role too inconsequential to be studied.

This volume brings to light material hidden in rabbis’ papers or reb-
betzins’ closets. Rebbetzins rarely left diaries or memoirs, but some
saved speeches, outlines of invocations or lessons, invitations, program
announcements, and local newspaper clippings about their career mile-
stones. Condolence notes and obituaries also proved valuable as records
of how others viewed rebbezins. Yet these sources are fragmentary and
incomplete, and virtually no national statistical data concerning rabbis’
wives exists to help the scholar evaluate how pervasive certain anec-
dotes or experiences were for rebbezins as a whole.

Oral interviews with rebbezins supplemented information gleaned
from written sources. As the historian Marc Raphael has argued, oral
history is especially useful as a way of learning more about people,
trends, or events that “have not received the benefit of conventional
documentation.” But accuracy in interviewing can be elusive, given the
limitations of human memory. Even when conducted with thorough and
deliberate technique, oral documentation must be approached warily.
To guard against such concerns, I have attempted to verify oral evidence
by asking the same questions of many interviewees. I have also at-
ttempted to elicit recollections with a minimum of prodding or direction
that might influence the outcome, and to guard against conflating con-
temporary testimony either with what actually happened or with how
interviewees felt in the past. Thus the story that follows is based on
both extant records and oral interviews and is in no way statistically
representative of rebbezins as a whole. Ultimately, it is the preponder-
ance of data that elucidates the rabbi’s wife role. It also suggests individ-
ual variations and the way they developed. Taken together, such evi-
dence illuminates the breadth of the role, the ways in which it evolved
over time, and the ramifications of those shifts on the wives themselves,
on their communities, and on American Jewry.

Introduction
**The “Rebbetzin”**

In choosing to marry rabbis, American Jewish women assumed a unique position, for they alone among clergy wives stepped into a role with an established title. The Yiddish title “rebbetzin” was the most prestigious one available to a woman in the Jewish community in the era before women could become rabbis. While some Yiddish lexicons define the term simply as the wife of a rabbi or teacher, others note that the term “rebbetzin” also connotes a pious woman, a woman with good lineage, or a woman learned in religious matters. Spivak and Bloomgarten’s 1911 Yiddish dictionary includes two sayings that capture essential aspects of the role. The first, “when the man is a rabbi, the wife is a rebbetzin,” points to the inevitability and derivative nature of the rebbetzin role—attainable automatically and only through marriage. The second ominously suggests its negative connotations: “Better a son a bath attendant than a daughter a rebbetzin.”

Thus, American rabbis’ wives assumed a role with longstanding rich, historical associations—both positive and negative. Rabbis’ wives, especially in eastern Europe, developed reputations for piety, scrupulous observance, leadership, and concern for the poor. Laudatory stories—though surely exaggerated and embellished—abound in both memoirs and fiction. Together, they constitute a vital part of the collective imagination of eastern European Ashkenazic Jews. A few examples will suffice. Perele, the daughter of Rebbe Israel of Kozienice and wife of Ezra Zelig Shapira of Magnuszew (d. 1849), was remembered for wearing ritual fringes, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, receiving petitions from her followers, living a life of poverty, and distributing funds to the needy. Lubavitcher rebbetzins became known for their tradition of holding gatherings before the holidays to dispense blessings to Hasidim. Among the most notable Hasidic rebbetzins, Sarah Horowitz-Sternfeld (d. 1939), the “Chentshiner Rebbetzin,” daughter of Rabbi Joshua Heschel Frankel-Teonim and wife of Chaim Shemuel Horowitz-Sternfeld, developed a far-reaching reputation for her asceticism, exemplary character, meticulous observance of Jewish law, charismatic leadership, devotion to the poor, and miraculous powers. The Yiddish essayist Moshe Feinkind described her as “the last rebbetsin of the old generation that conducts herself in the manner of a Rebbe in Poland.” Contemporary accounts reported that about 10,000 attended her funeral.
Tales of frugality and business savvy also proliferated, since rebbeztins were expected to earn sufficient income to free their husbands for full-time study. Rabbis’ contracts often stipulated that the rabbi’s wife be given a store with exclusive rights to sell indispensable household items such as candles, yeast, wine for ritual use, salt, sugar, and kerosene. In Czarist Russia, the rebbeztin’s burden was even greater, for tax levied on these items was used to support the community, and the rebbeztin was responsible for collecting it. Some rebbeztins also served as executive directors of their husbands’ schools. For example, Rayna Batya—granddaughter of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner and the first wife of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (1817–1893), who headed the Volozhin yeshiva for approximately forty years—took responsibility for bookkeeping, loan guarantees, and stipend distribution to local landlords who took in yeshiva students.21

The term “rebbetzin” also encompassed women known for their learning and wisdom. This was particularly true of rebbeztins who were rabbis’ daughters. By living in a home where rabbinic affairs were conducted, these women absorbed a tremendous amount of traditional Jewish learning and occupied what Wendy Zierler describes as the borderline between traditional Jewish gender divisions. In rabbinic families with no sons, daughters often gained additional opportunities to study with their fathers. This phenomenon was common in general society as well. For centuries, a woman’s chances for acquiring education improved greatly if she were a daughter in a family without sons. Serving as surrogate sons for intellectually driven fathers, these women gained their education through informal apprenticeship to their fathers.22

Such rebbeztins possessed a breadth of knowledge that included rabbinic texts and fine points of Jewish law, especially concerning dietary laws, family purity, and Sabbath and holiday observances. Among these learned women was Krendel Steinhardt, wife of Joseph ben Menahem Steinhardt (1720–1776), a German rabbi and decisor of Jewish law. In his Zikhron Josef, Joseph quoted his wife’s comments and novellae. Similarly, Eidele, wife of Isaac Rubin of Sokolow (d. 1876), developed a reputation for delivering discourses. Lubavitcher rebbeztins also gained reputations for their comprehensive Torah knowledge, and stories recount erudition that, in some cases, supposedly manifested itself in childhood. Similarly, the Zionist advocate Sarah Bayla Hirschensohn (1816–1905), wife of Yaakov Hirschensohn, who moved to Palestine from Pinsk
in 1848, “was considered a scholar in her own right and was responsible for the administration of yeshivot in both Safed and Jerusalem.”

Yaffa Eliach, in her chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok, recalls Rebbetzin Hendl Krechmer Hutner (wife of Zundl Hutner, rabbi of Eishyshok from 1896 to 1919) as an outstanding exemplar of these characteristics. She supported her family as an agent for a Russian dye company and saw to it that her husband pursued his studies with a minimum of distraction. Knowledgeable in rabbinic texts and principles, Hutner merited having students and scholars alike stand up out of reverence when she entered a room—a customary gesture of respect usually reserved for rabbis and teachers. Hutner rendered routine Jewish legal decisions, especially in the area of dietary laws. She comforted the dying and worked with her husband to minister to the sick, old, and poor during World War I. In Eliach’s view, Hendl Hutner represents “a group—at least two centuries’ worth of Lithuanian rebbeitzins—who used their husband’s status to gain entrée to the intellectual elite, but [then] secured their place there on their own merits.”

These paradigms appear in legends and fiction as well: the poor rebbeitzin who struggled to make ends meet, or the rebbeitzin whom all the townspeople sought out for counsel and who dispensed profound wisdom. For example, in a popular parable that recounts one woman’s desperate efforts to lighten her heavy burdens, one version puts the sage advice in the mouth of a rebbeitzin. She encouraged the troubled woman to substitute any other bundle of troubles for her own and helped the woman realize that her own burdens were actually the lightest.

The term “rebbetzin” conjured up a host of negative images as well. Chaim Grade, especially in his novella “The Rebbetzin,” introduced his readers to the full range of eastern European rebbeitzins, including those who typified the darker side of the role. He depicted envious, nasty, meddling, haughty, and embittered rebbeitzins, enabling the reader to appreciate the extent to which individual personality traits shaped a rebbeitzin’s experience.

“The Rebbetzin” features Perele, a rabbi’s daughter who had heard in her father’s house and then in her own “many snatches of Talmudic lore, which she could recite with fluency and ease.” Emissaries from distant yeshivas and itinerant preachers who spent the Sabbath with Perele and her husband, Uri-Zvi HaCohen Koenigsberg, rabbi of Graipewo, praised her learning. But Perele was a moody, nervous woman who suffered from headaches and indigestion and resented her rebbeitzin role.
She nagged her husband for years to retire from the rabbinate until he finally relented.  

Grade peppered this story with other community rebbetzins. Bashka, whom Grade referred to as the “Schloss Street Rebbetzin,” manifested a happy disposition. Not fanatically religious, she got along very well with all kinds of people and brooked no qualms about wearing the latest styles. But the wife of the Wolkowysk Street Rabbi complained about her lot because of the poor treatment her husband received. She lamented that it was “‘better to be a woodchopper than [a rabbi,] like a public rag everyone uses to dry their hands when they leave the baths.’” She was explicit about the way this treatment affected the rabbi’s wife: “They all watch him to see if he’s wearing a new hat, and they watch his wife to make sure she isn’t buying too good a piece of meat for Sabbath.”

Often, individuals employed the term “rebbetzin” with a touch of ridicule or humor. For example, the Zionist activist Shmarya Levin recalled that in eastern Europe “some of the animals have special names. One of them, a large, quiet cow, slow and stately of motion, is called the Rebbitzin, the rabbi’s wife.” This mocking tone was particularly evident when used to refer to American rabbis’ wives who fell short of the eastern European saintly models. As the cookbook author Elizabeth Ehrlich noted, “when applied to a woman of obviously lesser virtue, or newfound virtue, such as my mother’s daughter, this term rebetsin had the humorous force of a gentle put-down.” As Lillian Feinsilver, a rabbi’s wife and author of The Taste of Yiddish, noted, the term is an “affectionate and slightly disrespectful title” that “combines the loving feeling for the old-time REBBE with a certain touch of light humor.” Her husband described a rebbetzin as “‘a girl who’s foolish enough to marry a rabbi, but smart enough to know what to do about it.’”

Occasionally, rebbetzin stereotypes bordered on the insidious, as the following joke indicates:

A traveler arrives in town and asks the rabbi if he can assemble a minyan (prayer quorum of ten men) so he can say the Kaddish for his dead father. With effort, the rabbi assembles nine, then tells his wife to go out and ask the first man she meets to come and be the tenth man. It is pouring outside and the rabbi’s wife is a mess. She sees a man and asks him: “Du vilst zein dem tzenta? [Do you want to be the tenth man?]” The man takes one look at her and replies: “Nit dem ershter afileh [I wouldn’t even want to be the first].”
The rebbetzin title, then, brought dubious prestige to its bearer, bequeathing an ambivalent legacy to twentieth-century rabbis’ wives.

In actuality, the rebbetzin role, in both its favorable and pejorative aspects, predates the Yiddish term. The most famous rabbi’s wife in rabbinic literature is Beruriah, wife of the second-century Rabbi Meir. Though elsewhere in the Talmud the rabbis cautioned against teaching women Torah, they described Beruriah as so learned that she “studied three hundred laws from three hundred teachers in a day.” About her, rabbis reported, “Rightly did Beruriah say.” They also highlighted her high moral character and deep faith, as evidenced by the story in which Beruriah withheld news of her sons’ sudden death on the Sabbath from her husband, and then relayed the horrible information to him with a parable about the need to return precious jewels to their rightful owner. Beruriah was also known for teasing rabbis about their negative views of women. Yet these stories of Beruriah’s erudition, faith, and boldness are counterbalanced by an anecdote that illustrates how men ultimately outsmarted her. The noted eleventh-century Bible and Talmud commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac [Rashi] quoted a legend that describes Meir’s decision to send one of his students to seduce Beruriah. According to this source, she succumbed to temptation and subsequently committed suicide. As a whole, then, the Beruriah stories illustrate both women’s ability and potential for religious leadership and the heartbreak that might befall them should they cross the line of gender propriety.  

In the medieval period, evidence also exists in Ashkenazic circles of rabbis’ wives who developed a reputation for erudition. For example, Miriam, the wife of Jacob Tam, the twelfth-century Tosaphist and grandson of Rashi, possessed the necessary expertise to decide Jewish legal questions in her community. In fifteenth-century Germany, another rabbi’s wife and descendent of Rashi, Miriam Spira Luria, was said to have given public lectures and expounded the Talmud and Jewish legal codes. In addition, she was noted for supporting a yeshiva.

In Renaissance Italy, rabbis’ wives also merited respect for their knowledge and position. They came to be known by the Hebrew title “rabanit,” rabbi’s wife, the Hebrew equivalent of the Yiddish “rebbetzin,” which referred to both rabbis’ wives and widows. These women enjoyed special status. Like their husbands, they merited a seat of honor in the synagogue. Moreover, though the testimony of women was not considered binding in a rabbinic court, some rabbis accepted the testi-
mony of rabbis’ wives based on the rabbinic principle that “the wife of a colleague is considered like a colleague.”

In the Sephardic world as well, evidence exists of a tradition of learned and respected rabbis’ daughters and wives. For example, Asenath (1590–1670), daughter of Rabbi Samuel Barazani of Kurdistan and wife of Jacob ben Abraham, her father’s successor, was a learned woman who succeeded her husband as the chief teacher of Torah in Kurdistan and head of the Mosul yeshiva. Asenath was also known for her letters of exhortation and instruction to various communities and for soliciting aid for the yeshiva.

American Ministers’ Wives

American rabbis’ wives, then, inherited centuries-old Jewish associations with their position. At the same time, these women also shouldered growing American expectations for clergy wives. In seventeenth-century America, ministers’ wives enjoyed an honorific position, similar to their European Jewish counterparts. For instance, the minister’s wife and the widow of his predecessor merited special seats in the New England meetinghouse. But the position did not presume a special sense of calling or encompass discrete behaviors until the mid-1800s. As Methodism emerged as the leading Protestant sect, the role of the minister’s wife took on definite shape.

The developing role of the clergy wife in nineteenth-century America grew concurrently with the increasingly accepted notion of “domestic feminism,” according to which women possessed an innately religious nature that predisposed them to serve as society’s moral guardians. This belief justified women’s involvement in all kinds of altruistic work in the public sphere. It also gave them more personal authority while reinforcing their social subordination to men. Such a mandate uniquely suited wives to assist their clergy husbands in their work.

This concept made it easier for Methodist itinerant ministers—most of whom had remained single in the previous century—to marry. Marriage enabled them to gain a valued partner in what could be a lonely, challenging career. For women, marriage to a frontier itinerant minister promised broad avenues of religious usefulness either as an assistant or through the possibility of a genuinely shared ministry. Leonard I. Sweet, in his pioneering study of the minister’s wife, found that the
“most common vocational fantasies of Evangelical women in America involved becoming a minister’s or a missionary’s wife. . . . Both permitted women a public, assertive form of usefulness. . . . and the wives of ministers functioned as ministers.” He further noted that the best way to ensure the realization of those dreams involved being either a minister’s daughter, the daughter of parents who ran a “Methodist Tavern,” or a student at a female seminary or academy.  

Catherine Livingston Garrettson exemplified this type of clergy wife. In 1793, she married Freeborn Garrettson, an experienced Methodist evangelist minister, in order to fulfill her desire to serve God. Six years later, the Garretts purchased a home in Rhinebeck, New York, which became known as “Traveler’s Rest.” While Freeborn continued his itinerancy, Catherine transformed their home into the center of her ministry. She presided over religious services, taught Bible and theology, conducted prayer groups, solicited testimonies of salvation, and served as pastoral counselor and spiritual director.

Catherine Brekus, in her study of female preaching in America, discovered that such marriages became more common after 1830. Clergy wives opened their homes for services, provided hospitality to circuit riders, presented testimony at love feasts, and led prayer meetings. When wives joined their husbands on the circuit, they cared for the sick and dying, prepared bodies for burial, and facilitated conversions. Wives remaining home while their husbands traveled established schools, conducted pastoral visits, provided counseling, and raised funds for church maintenance.

Because they saw themselves assuming an activist role in improving society, many of these clergy wives also came to play an instrumental part in founding women’s societies that dispensed charity and served as auxiliaries for Bible and prayer book groups. Such organizations gave ministers’ wives a venue for leadership somewhat removed from, yet complementary to, their husbands’ congregations. It enabled them to cultivate organizational, executive, political, public relations, financial, and leadership skills and to develop reputations as backbones of religious philanthropy.

Of course, even in the nineteenth century, society was of two minds about this emerging role. In 1877, for example, Hannah Reeves was memorialized with great ambivalence. She was praised for being a “helpmeet” to her husband even though she was “superior to him in gifts” and could have demanded her own circuit. Yet Reeves was also
described pejoratively as a “‘masculine,’ ‘indomitable’ woman” who
sacrificed her children’s welfare for her own career.41

Ministers’ wives suffered from the confining gender expectations of
the role. Those who gave up preaching in public after marriage often
experienced regret. Others who wanted to continue preaching found
themselves unable to do so because domestic chores and childrearing
overwhelmed them. They were vulnerable to depression, loneliness, and
discouragement, and many ministers’ wives felt responsible for allevi-
ating not only their own feelings of despair but also their husbands’.42

The restrictions of the role surfaced in clergy advice books of the
period. An 1832 manual expected the minister’s wife to view herself
as “‘wedded to her husband’s parish, and to the best interests of his
flock.’” In his 1851 The Itinerant Wife: Her Qualifications, Duties and
Rewards, Herrick Eaton emphasized the wife’s need to tend to her hus-
band and children first and then to the church. He acknowledged the
unreasonable expectations placed on her by congregants, for “more is
expected of her by the public than of other persons, and generally her
words and actions are considered with less charity than are those of
others.” Eaton also admitted that she deserved sympathy for being “the
servant of the Church in an eminent, and frequently humiliating sense.”
Enumerating the rewards for such a life, Eaton suggested that they lay
in the knowledge that she served her husband and her children well and
that she would experience the glory of her Savior in the future world.43

Other frustrations of the clergy wife role can be attributed in part to
Methodist ideals concerning poverty and frugality. Methodist ministers
received meager compensation for their work, with western itinerants
especially living at or close to the poverty line. Not only did they func-
tion as unpaid servants of the church, they also struggled to manage
household finances on small salaries that were sometimes difficult to
collect. Many ministers’ wives operated inns where they fed and lodged
itinerant evangelists and freeloaders; they also entertained parishioners
on the same budget. They endured an especially demeaning form of pay-
ment known as the “donation party” or “surprise visit” and, later in the
century, as a “pound social.” The minister’s wife sponsored this party in
her home for parishioners who would bring a gift as well as money for
an offering. The value of these donations would usually be deducted
from what the congregation owed the minister in salary. This deepened
the bitterness of ministers’ wives, because they were put into the awk-
ward position of accepting as charity what was in fact their husbands’
rightful due. Moreover, guests often brought items that the minister’s family did not need, which did nothing to alleviate the family’s financial worries. If anything, they exacerbated them by absolving the congregation of further responsibility for the minister’s salary that year. Moreover, the party gave congregants license to snoop around the parish house, further eroding whatever dignity the family still maintained.44

According to Sweet, the ideal of minister’s wife as vocational partner or institutional asset declined in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The minister’s wife withdrew to a more behind-the-scenes role that he called the “Companion model,” in which the wife primarily served as a psychological support system for her husband. This retreat exemplified a larger trend. By the end of the century, men and women had become deeply concerned about the feminization of American culture, and they mounted concerted efforts to reverse it. This led both to a general decline in the ministry and to changes in the status of women that reinforced patriarchal structures and woman’s traditional roles.45

American Rabbis and Wives

Though influenced by precedents in the Christian world, the rabbi’s wife role in America developed later, emerging at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, as the American rabbinate itself came into its own. It was not until 1840 that the first ordained rabbi, Abraham Rice, settled in the United States to serve as spiritual leader of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. After 1850, larger congregations began to hire European-trained rabbis, but many fledgling congregations struggled to secure stable rabbinic leadership. Disputes between rabbis—many of whom lacked formal ordination—and laity were common, and religious leaders often moved from congregation to congregation. One congregant, Samuel, son of Israel (born in Albany in 1862), recalled that “the rabbis of our congregation played no important role in the community, and I think I can say in all truth that the Jews paid little attention to them. They were ‘offish.’ We really hardly knew them.”46 Understandably, then, rabbis’ wives from the mid-nineteenth century rarely appear in records except to note a congregation’s beneficence in granting them some sort of compensation—their husband’s salary, a stipend, free housing, or a pension—after their husband’s death.47
The wives of eminent Reform rabbis Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler, both daughters of the Reform rabbi and ideologue David Einhorn, played supportive spouse roles typical of middle-class women of their time. A clubwoman involved in organizational work, Mathilde Hirsch volunteered with the National Council of Jewish Women from its founding and served several terms as a director on the local Executive Board. She was remembered as a “real and noble person in her own right. . . . Though she avoided the limelight, her influence ‘behind the scenes’ was never absent. Emil G. Hirsch himself often paid tribute to her wise counsel, her sound advice and her intuitive admonitions.”48

Johanna Kohler also exemplified the ideals of true womanhood embraced by late-nineteenth-century middle-class women, extending her sphere of influence into the community to promote a variety of religious and benevolent causes. After her marriage to Kaufmann in 1870 and during their years in Chicago, Kohler joined other German-Jewish women in founding the Johanna Lodge in Chicago in 1874, the first midwestern chapter of the Unahngiger Orden Treue Schwestern (United Order of True Sisters). When the Kohlers moved to New York, Johanna became one of the first board members of the New York section of the National Council of Jewish Women. She also joined the boards of the Kindergarten Association of the Hebrew Free Schools of New York and Temple Beth El’s Sisterhood.49

When her husband became president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1903, Kohler turned her attention to that community, serving in roles that enhanced her husband’s position. In her capacity as first Chairman of Religion for the Council of Jewish Women, Kohler invited Henry Englander, professor of medieval exegetical literature at Hebrew Union College, to teach a Bible class. This group, which flourished for more than twenty years, appreciatively remembered through letters Kohler’s role as its founder. Years later, Kohler served as chairman of the National Committee on Union Museum for the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the Reform organization founded in 1913.50 She tried to increase awareness among Sisterhood women of the significance of ceremonial objects and to solicit new objects and funds for the museum, first housed at Hebrew Union College.51

Upon her death, the Hebrew Union College faculty remembered Kohler for her “cordial interest in all that pertained to the welfare of the College and its students, her warm personality, her spiritual and cultural interests . . . hospitality . . . devotion to Jewish ideals . . . and
the home which she and her distinguished husband established and so richly blessed by their presence and influence. Her life was a symbol of Jewish womanhood at its best.” Condolence letters and resolutions issued upon her death call attention to her modesty, refinement, and good works, and praise her for embodying “all the noblest traits of ideal womanhood.”

Like the wives of other prominent Reform rabbis, Kohler exemplified nineteenth-century, middle-class ideals for American Jewish women without articulating the contours of a specialized role for rabbis’ wives. But Ray Frank, a charismatic preacher and lecturer who studied at Hebrew Union College during its early years, did highlight the potential significance of the rebbetzin role in response to a query posed in 1880 by the Jewish Times and Observer: “what would you do if you were a rebitzen?” In her view, the role should be a public one, for even in its present state, the rebbetzin role afforded a woman the opportunity to function as moral exemplar, help establish Jewish women’s organizations, and work on behalf of needy congregants.

With the graduation of the first four rabbis from the Cincinnati-based Hebrew Union College in 1883 and the creation of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889 with thirty rabbis, a small cadre of American-trained, English-speaking activist rabbis began to serve congregations around the country. The early graduates of Hebrew Union College, including Henry Berkowitz and his brother-in-law, Joseph Krauskopf, actively labored to initiate a more open Temple, or what historian David Kaufman calls the “classical Reform synagogue-center.” They hoped such a synagogue would both model American openness and freedom and incorporate new social and secular functions. These classical Reform rabbis were first and foremost preachers, and the most prominent among them combined oratorical skills with the intellectual capacity to shed light on current issues. But just as they literally opened up their synagogues several days a week—not only on the Sabbath—so, too, did their roles expand to include educator, executive, counselor, and pastor. They exercised a dominant influence in their congregations as they came to exemplify the ideal American Jew.

This broader view of the rabbinate also expanded the horizons of rabbis’ wives. For one thing, it created more public venues in which they might serve, both within the synagogue and nationally. For example, rabbis’ wives served as delegates to the biennial councils of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the lay arm of the Reform
Movement, as early as 1896 because they attended with their husbands. Second, a more expansive rabbinic role opened up opportunities for women to partner with dedicated spouses who both shared their vision and would work with them to implement it.55

Soon after, the Conservative Movement set out on a similar path. After its reorganization in 1902 under the presidency of Solomon Schechter, the Jewish Theological Seminary also began to ordain English-speaking rabbis for the American Jewish community. Like their Reform counterparts, early JTS graduates played a crucial role in fashioning a comprehensive view of the synagogue and promoting the American rabbinate. Many came to see their wives as essential to realizing their goals.

American Jewish Women

The beginnings of the American rabbi’s wife role coincided with an expansion of opportunities for American women in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, a development one might expect to deter women from seeking the “wife of” role. The same period that saw a hardening of attitudes about feminization also witnessed an explosion of both careers and volunteer options for women. By 1880, 40,000 women, 34 percent of all students, were enrolled in higher education. Nearly half never married; those who did married later and bore fewer children. This fostered a new class of independent career women who moved into the fields of teaching, nursing, and social reform, with a few rare women breaking the barriers in traditionally male careers such as law, medicine, and the ministry. Middle-class women’s groups also flourished, as clubwomen used their leisure time for self-improvement and the betterment of their communities. Women became increasingly aware of their potential to contribute to society, a consciousness that found expression in the World’s Congress of Representative Women meeting in conjunction with the 1893 Chicago World Columbian Exposition.56

Jewish women grew increasingly aware of the special role they could play not only in American life but also in shaping American Judaism. Reform Judaism had already taken steps in mid-nineteenth-century Germany to ensure the increased involvement of women through the introduction of religious instruction and Confirmation. This trend continued in the United States with Isaac Mayer Wise’s establishment of mixed pews and their rapid proliferation in Temples across the country. As
Goldman has demonstrated, Jewish women filled a majority of those pews, and their presence influenced the evolution of liturgy, music, congregational participation, and sacred space. Goldman has demonstrated, Jewish women filled a majority of those pews, and their presence influenced the evolution of liturgy, music, congregational participation, and sacred space.57

Jewish women had also come to play an important role as Jewish educators and benevolent workers. Rebecca Gratz was an early example of this impulse, for she effectively channeled her religious devotion and commitment to Jewish life in America into the launching of innovative Jewish institutions for charity and religious education. Through her own example, the Sunday school she founded, and the other schools she subsequently inspired, Gratz also created career opportunities for a whole cohort of Jewish women.58

The symbolic coming-of-age of American Jewish women also dates to 1893, when the Congress of Jewish Women convened to represent Jewish women at the World’s Parliament of Religions, which met in conjunction with the Chicago World Exposition. As Rosa Sonneschein, editor of the American Jewess, the first English-language magazine for Jewish women in the United States, noted, “this is a matter for congratulation, considering that, as a rule, Jewish women have had but little experience in parliamentary rules and public speech.” This Congress led to the formation of the National Council of Jewish Women, the first national Jewish women’s organization to promote Judaism. Through the Council, Jewish clubwomen channeled their commitments to domestic feminism, civic responsibility, social justice, and the preservation of American Judaism. Rabbis’ wives played a role in the founding of the Council, but they did so as middle-class clubwomen, not as rebbetzins.59

Glimpses of a discrete rabbi’s wife role surfaced more frequently during this decade. A fictional depiction of the rabbi’s wife functioning in a distinctive role appeared in an 1892 story about Chanukah. In it, Mrs. Halvick, described as “so grand a person as Rabbi Halvick’s wife,” reached out to invite a young girl from a poor family to a Chanukah Ball. She recounted the details of the Chanukah story, promising to teach the girl about other Jewish holidays in the future. Enthralled with the holiday and the ball, the girl inspired her father to revive Chanukah observance in their home. The story concluded with his admission that Mrs. Halvick had helped them enrich their lives.60

A real-life example of the emerging role can be found in Rosa Sonneschein, one of the most public rabbis’ wives of the period. Daughter of the Hungarian rabbi Hirsch Bär Fassel, she was well educated both at home and at a local high school. In 1864, Rosa married Solomon,
and four years later they moved to the United States. They settled in St. Louis, where her husband served as rabbi of Congregation Shaare Emeth. Theirs was a discordant marriage, and there is evidence of Solomon's abuse, infidelity, and alcoholism. Despite this, the Sonnescheins were leading figures in the community. Rosa organized two congregational choral societies and “Ladies’ Meetings” and founded a Jewish women’s literary society, The Pioneers, in 1879. Yet congregants criticized Sonneschein for behavior inappropriate to her position as rabbi’s wife, including powdering her face, attending the theater on Friday night in the company of an unmarried man, and playing tenpins.61

While she surely launched the American Jewess in part to support herself after her 1893 divorce, Sonneschein also hoped it would become a forum to promote her ideas of Judaism, Zionism, and women’s rights among middle-class Jewish women. The magazine struggled financially and lasted only through 1899, but during its run Sonneschein used editorials and feature articles to champion her causes to a readership that grew to 29,000. Sonneschein lobbied for the rights of women to participate actively in religious ceremonies, to hold independent congregational membership, and to vote and run for office in Temple school board elections. She highlighted the work of the Council, publicized Ray Frank—the “girl rabbi”—and introduced her readers to the female minister Ella Bartlett. Sonneschein stopped short of advocating women’s ordination, but she called for women to become well-educated and well-prepared “preachers.”62

Sonneschein expressed ambivalence about women’s roles, a stance no doubt due in part to her own struggles as a divorcée. On the one hand, she endorsed the female breadwinner who “demonstrated to men her intellectual capacity to a degree which must assure for her perfect equality in the family and in the state.” Yet she clung to traditional attitudes, believing that, on the whole, women workers represented a sorry lot and that “to be childless is a misfortune.” The goal for her was that the “home woman, at the head of a large family doing her full duty in the narrower sphere of domestic life,” be recognized as a true breadwinner.63

The same ambivalence characterized her position as rabbi’s wife. Sonneschein struggled for decades to extricate herself from her unhappy marriage. She also suffered criticism as a rabbi’s wife for insisting on autonomy. Ultimately, Sonneschein established her reputation in an independent arena through her magazine, yet she undoubtedly built on
skills and contacts cultivated during her years as the wife of a rabbi. These experiences presage some of the opportunities and struggles rabbis’ wives would confront in the twentieth century.

At the 1893 Congress of Jewish Women, similar ambivalence concerning appropriate Jewish women’s roles also found expression. Ray Frank brought these issues to the fore by serving as the Congress’s “rabbi.” Frank expressed compelling ideas both at the Congress and in lectures throughout the country over the next several years that offered new possibilities for female independent religious leadership to a generation of women eager to expand their own roles.64

Frank’s paper on “Women in the Synagogue” raised the question of women’s ordination. Recalling several illustrious women who had played pivotal roles in Jewish life in the past, including Krendel Steinhardt (mentioned above), Frank sought to demonstrate that these women had already earned the right to the pulpit. “Intellectually they were the compers of their husbands; practically, they excelled them. They built synagogues, controlled colleges, and stipended students.” However, she remarked that “with one or two exceptions, they were all wives and mothers, most of them wives of rabbis, and in the discharge of their duties no one thing was done at the expense of another.” Despite her conviction that women possessed the ability to serve as rabbis and that someday they “may be ordained rabbi or be president of a congregation,” she stopped short of advocating women’s ordination. Instead she concluded that “every woman should aspire to make of her home a temple, of herself a high priestess, of her children disciples, then will she best occupy the pulpit, and her work run parallel with man’s. . . . her noblest work will be at home, her highest ideal, a home.” After raising expectations that women might serve as rabbis, Frank articulated an ideal that echoed her 1880 praise of rebbetzins.65

Emil G. Hirsch also raised the question of women’s ordination in an 1897 symposium on “Woman in the Synagogue” in his Reform Advocate. Two-thirds of the twenty-six respondents were open to the possibility. They also argued for equal representation in all aspects of Jewish life. But here too, mixed feelings surfaced. Henrietta Szold, who would come to epitomize the American Jewish female leader, endorsed the concept of women rabbis. However, like Frank and Sonneschein, she repeated the traditional belief that a “woman can best serve the interests of the synagogue by devoting herself to her home.”66

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For Jewish women, then, the 1890s ushered in a decade bursting with possibility for women’s independent leadership roles yet filled with traditional rhetoric about the primacy of Jewish women’s roles as wife and mother. Certain women tested the limits of their autonomy, but the question of how far women should go as religious leaders remained unresolved. As Nadell has shown, such debate disappeared during the first decades of the twentieth century as Jewish women found other vehicles for their talents. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and as the needs of American Jewry escalated dramatically, one of those outlets—particularly for women who wanted to marry—became the role of rabbi’s wife. Jewish women married to rabbis both exemplified the traditional emphasis on Jewish homemaking and contributed to the growth of American Judaism through their own accomplishments. Marriage to a rabbi gave these women the opportunity to satisfy their religious calling; to experience a life of service through teaching, public speaking, and good works; and to gain recognition and status. And they could do so without raising eyebrows about neglecting traditional feminine duties or exceeding limits of appropriate female behavior, for their role built upon solid precedent both in the traditional Jewish world and in American Protestantism. At the same time, marrying a rabbi exposed women to certain risks, for it opened them to public scrutiny, special expectations, gossip, and criticism. For most of the twentieth century, many American Jewish women decided that the benefits outweighed the negatives, and it is these women to whom we now turn to better understand the contours of the rebbetzin role in American Jewish life.

The story of rebbetzins in the United States unfolds gradually over time. Certain discernable patterns emerge in specific eras, and each chapter of this book focuses on how the role developed as well as on specific rebbetzins who epitomize it. At the same time, the role progressed in a fluid manner. New characteristics emerged while older ones persisted; individual rebbetzins emphasized different aspects of the role based on their distinctive personalities, predilections, opportunities, and goals. Thus the chapters represent eras that are fluid and filled with variety even as they illustrate phases in the evolution of the role. Rebbetzins left their mark through each of their myriad activities as well as through the cumulative impact of their evolving role over the decades.

Chapter 1 chronicles the careers of Carrie Simon, Mathilde Schechter, and Rebecca Goldstein, rabbis’ wives who founded the national
women's organizations of their respective denominations—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism—and modeled the role of rabbi's wife for American Jews. Chapter 2 describes the emergence of a discrete rebbetzin role in the 1920s and the way in which rebbetzins, conscious of their position, exercised leadership. Chapter 3 recounts the distinctive achievements of several larger-than-life rebbetzins who illustrated the heights of power and influence attainable during the interwar and postwar period. Chapter 4 traces the growing sense of consciousness among rebbetzins as a group in the postwar period. Even as they became more openly reflective about both the joys and the limitations of their role, they continued to expand the arenas in which they served. Chapter 5 reviews the changing role of the rebbetzin in the wake of dramatic transformations in American life in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 6 considers the contemporary rebbetzin in light of both the ordination of women as rabbis and the emergence of rabbinic couples as well as male rabbinic spouses. Looking toward the future, this chapter also reflects on the broader implications of this study for women, for leadership, and for American Jewish life.