Dear Friends,

One of the everlasting messages of Pesach is that the survival of the Jewish people is in the hands of women. The description of how the midwives, Miriam, Yocheved, and Pharoah's daughter banded together in a colossal show of feminine solidarity shows how, when women unite, the most diabolical plan can be thwarted.

In the 100 years since the International Council of Jewish Women was created, the Jewish people has also been subject to the most horrible assaults on its very existence. Nevertheless, we have somehow survived and, in some respects, have blossomed; for example, in the fact that there is now a Jewish state. I have no doubt that women, as the transmitters of Jewish values and those ultimately responsible for Jewish continuity, have been a major factor in the endurance of our people—in the past century, as in Biblical times. And I truly believe that ICJW has played a great role in this endeavor by sustaining the crucial element of solidarity among Jewish women around the world.

Much has changed over the last 100 years, yet some of the same issues still trouble us. The one we can most easily point to is human trafficking, which is discussed in the following pages. This was the issue around which our ICJW matriarchs originally bonded, and remains a worldwide scourge. Therefore, while we celebrate the achievements, we must keep in mind the work that still lies before us. I believe that the deliberations at the ICJW Convention, entitled "Beyachad, Ubuntu. Together. Jewish Women United in ICJW. A Century of Achievement-The Future Beckons," will address exactly that. The program will deal with what ICJW has accomplished throughout its long history, against the background of how we go forward with confidence, maintaining our relevance in a changing world.

I would like to take the opportunity of this last Newsletter in this administration to thank Judy Telman and Aviva Kohlmann, the co-editors, and Sarah Manning, who consistently added her professional talents, for together having produced these publications. I would also like to thank the contributors to this and all previous issues, and Sara Winkowski for translating them into Spanish. I believe that our decision to have each Newsletter address a single theme has made it a valuable tool for more in-depth treatments. I hope that the discussions of these topics will also be of value in the future development of ICJW.

With best wishes for a happy and meaningful Pesach,

Leah Aharonov
President, ICJW
Jewish women first organized themselves on a national scale at the end of the nineteenth century. The pioneer organization was the National Council of Jewish Women in America (NCJW), which was followed by many others around the world. Some of these, such as Hadassah and WIZO, defined themselves as Zionist, with the primary purpose of assisting the Zionist enterprise. Others concentrated on providing humanitarian and philanthropic assistance at the local level, while also relating in various ways to Zionism.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, some of these local Jewish women’s organizations tried to establish activities on an international level, following the initiative of NCJW. They modeled themselves on the International Council of Women (ICW), which was established in America in 1888. Whenever ICW held a meeting, the leaders of the Jewish women’s organizations were invited to attend. These conventions gave Jewish women an opportunity to meet, strengthen bonds, discuss problems common to Jews in various countries, study organizational methods, and try to devise solutions for issues of local and global concerns.

After the meeting of the International Council of Women held in London in 1899, NCJW President Hannah G. Solomon encouraged the creation of the Union of Jewish Women of England. At the next meeting, in Berlin, in 1904, she helped create the German Jewish women’s organization, Jüdischer Frauenbund. Speaking that year in St. Louis, Solomon expressed the importance of an international bond among Jewish women: “And so we need internationalism for Jewish women, that shall bring them together to utilize their strength in perpetuating the great moral truths we hold for the world....”

The official founding of ICJW is dated to 1912, and, at a meeting held in Rome, the leaders of Jewish women’s organizations from the United States, Britain, and Germany, voted to establish a worldwide organization of Jewish women, with Bertha Pappenheim from Germany as its first president.

A great deal of courage and daring was needed to establish an international women’s organization in those times. For one thing, travel from one country to another was neither easy nor safe. Furthermore, the magnitude of the task was overwhelming. Many Jews the world over, in dire straits caused by poverty, persecution, and pogroms, were seeking refuge in friendlier countries. Among the waves of Jewish immigrants, women were the most vulnerable, especially single women—whether young girls travelling alone, abandoned wives, or destitute women. By this time Jewish women’s organizations were providing extensive social services and humanitarian assistance in their own countries, helping immigrants, the sick, and the elderly. Under the auspices of an international organization, these humanitarian services could be offered to tens of thousands of Jews in distress throughout the world, particularly in Eastern Europe.

At first the international organization of Jewish women remained theoretical. The opportunity to become a truly international Jewish sisterhood occurred only in 1920, when NCJW sent delegates to Europe to study the problems of European Jewry in the aftermath of World War I, and to explore ways of assisting them. Massacres in the Ukraine and persecution in Poland had left thousands of refugees wandering from town to town throughout Europe. In Germany, Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, they crowded into city hostels run by the local Jewish communities, and NCJW sent teams of professional social workers to help those seeking to emigrate.
Two World Congresses of Jewish Women were held in Vienna in 1923, and in Hamburg in 1929, in order to renew international ties with European Jewish women after they had been suspended during the war. These meetings were initiated and financed largely by NCJW of America, which sent large delegations, and were chaired by Rebekah Kohut.

The first Congress in Vienna, in May 1923, brought together delegates from Jewish women's organizations from over twenty countries, as well as leaders of the local Jewish community and many Viennese literary figures and politicians. The five main topics discussed over six days were: the duties of the Jewish woman within the community; the problem of refugees and orphans; the situation of homeless girls; aid for emigration; and support for Palestine. Relocation to Palestine was recognized as a humanitarian solution and a way of providing sanctuary for European refugees.

The second World Congress of Jewish Women, in 1929, in Hamburg, Germany, demonstrated Jewish women's solidarity on an international scale. Two hundred representatives from fourteen countries came together to discuss subjects of common interest and to form a world organization of Jewish women, as agreed upon at the previous congress. The various sessions dealt with general concerns of their communities and with problems faced by Jewish women in particular: Jewish education; the struggle against anti-Semitism; and the tragedy of abandoned wives. This time the question of Palestine was more accentuated than at the previous conference, and one of the resolutions passed was "to cooperate in the work of building Palestine."

These inspiring meetings enabled Jewish women to meet and exchange views on important issues and to participate in determining the destiny of the Jewish people. They were recognized by Jewish communal leaders and by leading Jewish institutions. However, World War II prevented this success from being converted into practical implementation, and the activities of Jewish women's organizations were not renewed until after World War II.

Immediately after World War II, the National Council of Jewish Women decided to revive its overseas program and to participate in the rescue actions of the Joint Distribution Committee. At their 1946 Convention, they agreed to re-establish the international Jewish women's organization, which had been effectively dormant for nearly twenty years. Some of the European activists had disappeared, and others had resigned from public life, but the International Council's last president, Rebekah Kohut, was still alive. For the sake of continuity, she was asked to head the organization.

The International Council's Reconstitution Committee sent letters to Jewish women's organizations in France, England, Mexico, Switzerland, Belgium, Australia, South Africa, and Brazil. Enthusiastic replies were received from organizations in Australia, England, South Africa, and Switzerland, indicating that they were hungry for any assistance, stimulation, and inspiration that the Americans could give them through meeting together. After two years of preparation, an international meeting was held in May 1949, in Paris, at which ICJW was endowed with some of its basic structures and its principles were defined. Many of those apply to this day.

The International Council of Jewish Women was defined as a federation of national women's organizations, independent of each other, and apolitical in nature. Its objects were essentially: "To promote friendly relations and understanding among Jewish women of all countries; to further the best and highest interests of humanity; to uphold and strengthen the bonds between Jewish communities throughout the world; to support the principles of the United Nations Bill of Human Rights; and to improve the status of women."

Bertha Pappenheim

Courtesy: Leo Baeck Institute, New York
Bertha Pappenheim was born in Vienna in 1859, and died in Frankfurt in 1936. In addition to her pioneering social work to help young women, the first president of ICJW may also have been instrumental in developing the “talking cure” of modern psychoanalysis. In his biography of Freud, Ernest Jones revealed, in 1953, that Bertha was the patient described in Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud’s ground-breaking book Studies on Hysteria as “Anna O.”

Jones writes that, at the age of 23, Bertha was taken to see Dr. Breuer, a well-known specialist in Vienna, because she was suffering from facial neuralgia, coughing, hallucinations, and symptoms of hysteria. While in a state of self-hypnosis, Bertha began recounting stories that she referred to as the “talking cure.” Breuer noticed that her “obstinate whims” disappeared when the fantastic thoughts that originated them could be evoked by this verbal “chimney sweeping,” as she herself called it.

In an incident of considerable importance for the future of psychoanalysis, Bertha was cured of her refusal to drink water by revealing under hypnosis a memory that had caused her aversion. From this incident Breuer developed the “cathartic” method of treatment.

Historians disagree over how “Anna O”’s treatment ended, but it seems that her health gradually improved, and she began to use her prodigious intelligence in other ways. Just as her pseudonym (A.O.) was formed from the letters preceding her real initials (B.P.), Bertha reversed her initials in order to create a new name—Paul Berthold—under which she wrote children’s short stories and plays. She also translated The Memoirs of Gluckel von Hameln, a seventeenth-century maternal ancestor who recorded the life of Jewish women of her day.

Bertha worked as headmistress of an orphanage for many years. She became a prominent activist and social worker, founding the “Care for Women Society” to help young women who left orphanages, and establishing the Juedischer Frauenbund in 1904, as its first president. With close ties to the German feminist movement, Bertha fought for decades against the “white slave trade,” and established a shelter near Frankfurt for runaway girls and illegitimate babies. She also wrote articles concerning Jewish women and criminality.

Bertha traveled to America and London, and spent 1911-1912 in Turkey, Jerusalem, Egypt, and Eastern Europe. At the age of 55, she accepted the role of first president of ICJW, and continued her social work during World War I and its aftermath. When Hitler came to power, she opposed those Zionist organizations that advocated relocation of Jewish children to Palestine without their parents.

Intestinal cancer forced her to cut down on her social and humanitarian activities, and she died, aged 77, in May 1936. That November, following Kristallnacht, Nazis looted her home in Frankfurt and destroyed her furniture and belongings. Most of her social-work colleagues were killed in concentration camps.

The recent revelations about Bertha Pappenheim’s early psychiatric problems should only increase our admiration for what she went on to achieve. All in ICJW should take great pride in the fact that her legacy as a social reformer lives on through the organization she helped build.

Based on an article by Alain De Mijolla in the “International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis”
The League of Jewish Women in the UK has commissioned Dr. Gerry Black, a historian of Jewish life in Britain, to write the story of the organisation, which hopefully will be published during 2010. Based on Dr. Black’s research, Ella Marks and Judy Lever explain the history of LJW and its connections with ICJW.

The LJW was formed in 1943, in the middle of World War II, as a way for Jewish women to aid the war effort by providing hands-on help to all those in need among the UK’s civilian population. There was a growing need for volunteers to help with the many new social problems that were arising at that time. It was created after discussions between three organisations: B’nai Brith, the Federation of Women Zionists (now WIZO) and the Union of Jewish Women.

The Union of Jewish Women had, before World War II, played a prominent part in ICJW from its conception, but had become less active during the late 1930s and during the War. It had been an early pioneering organisation but, by the mid-1960s, with decreasing membership and financial problems, decisions were taken to combine the Union of Jewish Women with the Anglo-Jewish Association. Its contact with ICJW dwindled, and eventually it ceased to report as a separate organisation.

Meanwhile, by 1949, when ICJW was being rejuvenated, LJW played an increasingly prominent part in the discussions. It is unclear from the archives the exact relationship between the Union of Jewish Women and LJW at this time, although by the mid-1950s the League’s membership made it one of the largest organisations within ICJW, with nearly 3,000 members. It subsequently became the sole UK affiliate of the International Council of Jewish Women.

LJW has always played a significant part in ICJW, with two leading members becoming presidents of ICJW: Frances Rubens in the 1960s, and June Jacobs in the 1990s. Several other League members have played prominent roles on ICJW standing committees, and LJW has always sent large delegations to international conferences and conventions.

Each year, the ICJW committee of the League arranges three meetings for the membership, selecting speakers and topics with an international flavour, or with particular human rights focus. The annual Human Rights Day meeting is a highlight of the League calendar, marking the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and attracting an audience of around 100 members. In recent years, LJW has also celebrated International Women’s Day with a special event.

On some occasions and issues, such as in 1961, when ICJW asked its affiliates to urge their Governments to control nuclear armaments, the League has felt unable to take as strong a political stance as it would have wished, or to stand alongside the other ICJW affiliates, because the terms of its charitable status restrict its participation in political activity. However, ICJW remains a vital part of LJW’s remit, with some members regarding their contact with Jewish women from around the world as one of the main reasons for their continuing membership.
In the late 19th century, the White Slave Trade was one of the first issues to galvanize Jewish women's organizations around the world, leading to the founding of ICJW. Groups of women in America, Germany, Great Britain and France devoted their volunteering efforts to protecting Jewish refugee women and children, who were at risk of exploitation and forced prostitution. Today, the same issue—known as Human Trafficking—is still a major concern throughout the world, and remains one of ICJW’s key international campaign issues. Judy Telman describes some of the efforts being made today to solve this centuries-old problem.

The subject of human trafficking does not generally make headlines, unless there is a major exposé that awakens the interest of the media. However, this subject is and has been a matter of concern throughout the world for many years. It was recently highlighted by the tragic earthquake in Haiti, which has created thousands of widows and orphans, who may become victims of those who exploit human tragedy and desperation.

Human trafficking is the acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them. Human trafficking is a crime that strips people of their rights, ruins their dreams, and robs them of their dignity. It is a crime that shames us all. It is a global problem, and no country is immune. Millions of victims are entrapped every year in this modern form of slavery. It epitomizes man’s inhumanity to men, women and children, since this ugly practice especially attacks the weakest segments of our societies.

Human trafficking is the third largest criminal industry after drugs and arms, and it happens both trans-nationally and within a country’s borders. Traffickers often work as part of a larger criminal organization, but some traffickers are individuals or families.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, impoverished former Eastern-bloc countries such as Albania, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine have been identified as major trafficking source countries of women and children. As part of this multi-million dollar criminal industry, thousands of women are also trafficked from West African countries, such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Cameroon, and Guinea. Low-skilled workers from China, Turkey, Thailand, the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India also fall into the trap, lured by the promise of paid, legitimate employment.

In August 2009, at the United Nations Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, the Anti-Human Trafficking Manual for Criminal Justice Practitioners was launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). This manual aims to address the seeming inability of the international criminal justice system to prevent and combat trafficking, and to protect and assist the victims. It sets out...
protocols for international cooperation between the many groups and agencies involved in tackling this complex issue, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental, judicial, and law-enforcement bodies.

In February 2010, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for unconditional aid to victims of trafficking and a reassessment of the penalties for traffickers. They stressed that the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation has not decreased and trafficking for forced labour is increasing.

NGOs such as ICJW are essential to the fight against human trafficking, providing a vast array of support services to the anti-trafficking struggle. Working locally and internationally, they help to increase public awareness of the evils of human trafficking; they work to rescue, shelter and support the victims; and they are influential in advocating and lobbying for governmental action and legislation to eliminate this trading in human beings.

Since 1912, ICJW has prioritized the issue of trafficking of women and girls as an urgent problem requiring action. Through our affiliates, we urge women around the world to join forces with the key organizations in their country or region which provide services and support to trafficked women and girls, and to campaign for more effective laws to stop trafficking and to improve conditions for trafficked persons. We encourage our members worldwide to educate themselves and their communities about these issues, by attending seminars, inviting activists to speak at group meetings, and joining forces with members of the Jewish community and other women's organizations.

The National Council of Jewish Women in Australia recently took up the challenge, gathering together their members from Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. As well as informing them and raising awareness of the issue, they decided to seek ways to encourage relevant local organizations to take stronger action against traffickers, and to create support groups for the victims.

There is no question that efforts are being made on a global scale to eliminate the unfortunately lucrative practice of human trafficking. The United States, France, Sweden, Great Britain, Israel, Australia, and United Nations agencies are trying to initiate and pass adequate legislation to put a stop to this human tragedy. However, members of the public must also be made aware of the dangers, and the individuals and groups that reap huge financial benefits from this trade must be found, prosecuted, and sentenced.

We urge all our members to investigate what is happening in your country and get involved in trying to stop human trafficking. There is a wealth of information on the internet – you may find out more than you want to know – but we cannot turn our backs or close our minds to this horrific contemporary slave trade. We cannot allow this problem to continue for another 100 years.
Many of the wonderful women whom I have met in recent years do not consider themselves leaders in the Jewish world, simply because they are working within the framework of a women’s organization. Even though we live at a time in which women have gained greater access than ever before, few of the people running our communities are female. Moreover, despite decades of efforts by women’s organizations to empower women, through courses, seminars and other frameworks, when we look around we wonder why so few of us are found in top leadership positions. Often we feel that our leadership is not accepted within a mixed male and female setting.

Feminine leadership is one of the issues that I have tried to place high on the ICJW agenda during this administration. The fact that men have gripped the leadership reins for so long causes people to think about leadership in masculine terms. Male stereotypes have influenced organizational norms and practices, and organizational leadership tends to embody their preferences and lifestyles.

I believe that many women, who have much to contribute as leaders in a variety of frameworks, are reluctant to seek advancement in organizations that are based on a male model of leadership—task-oriented, hierarchical, and autocratic. Many women feel out of place and inauthentic in traditionally masculine settings. Male-style leadership tends to be aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident and forceful, self-reliant and individualistic, with the ability to exert influence over others. Women tend to look for rewarding interpersonal connections and for democratic and inclusive leadership opportunities, based on the characteristics with which we feel comfortable. Women tend to work collectively, setting goals in a cooperative spirit, and striving together as equals without battling egos.

Women are often willing to take on responsibility without the corresponding authority, which, according to the accepted definitions, makes us “powerless.” Dee Dee Myers, in her book, Why Women Should Rule the World, found that many powerful women are uncomfortable with power as it is traditionally defined. Most of the powerful women she interviewed actually shrank from the concept of power, claiming that they were influential, but not powerful.

Bella Abzug, who founded the National Women’s Political Caucus in the United States, once said: “In my heart I believe women will change the nature of power, rather than power changing the nature of women.”

Throughout history women have succeeded as leaders by adopting male rituals, particularly in politics. Golda Meir was referred to as the “only man” in Israel’s Cabinet, and some contemporary female politicians try to project a masculine or androgynous identity. Female leaders are expected to fulfill the “female” gender role by being warm, selfless, nice and friendly; but they are also expected to fulfill the “male” leadership role by displaying assertiveness and competence. By combining these seemingly contradictory roles, they may face hostility to their attempts to exercise authority over other people, which can raise doubts as to their competence as leaders and undermine their authority.

Much of the prejudice against female leadership flows from this dissonance between people’s mental images of women and of leaders. Even when people believe that women are nicer, kinder and more effective than men, they usually choose male leaders. The traits that society encourages in women—self-sacrifice, helpfulness and supportiveness—do not engender respect for women as authorities and leaders.

However, by accepting the idea that they should behave like men, some women have reinforced the prejudice that women cannot become leaders without surrendering their feminine values. This not only undermines people’s belief in female leadership, but also causes other women who could step forward to doubt their own abilities, perpetuating the cycle of reluctance.

If we strive to retain our “feminine” values, we risk resistance and rejection, but if we emulate the behaviors and values of our male colleagues, we feel unnatural and dishonest. It is often difficult for us to find just the right balance, to be true to our own natures without undermining our effectiveness.

So what can we do to change the status quo? By talking about the problem, we can raise people’s consciousness. As individuals we can help by legitimizing the contributions of female leaders and by conveying our respect and confidence in their “feminine” qualities. In order to encourage women to step forward, and others to accept them, we need to embrace the differences in our leadership styles and show how gender diversity can enhance an organization’s effectiveness. Once members of an organization can accept the idea that diversity fosters success, they become more likely to accept women as decision-makers.
I believe we must discourage tokenism. Token women are often subjected to intense performance pressures, but when women are present in greater numbers, they have more confidence in their abilities. They can speak in their authentic voices and actually help to change the organizational culture. Only when there are enough women in the room that everyone stops counting will women become free to act as women. This is critical in Jewish communities and in Jewish community leadership, where we need to work hard to bring a critical mass of women into positions of influence.

We must also face the fact that men are reluctant to relinquish their power. The advancement of women creates more competition for elite positions, power and reward, so men are bound to resist female leadership in those positions where they have the most to lose. Even in this age of political correctness, silent resistance is a strong barrier to women's leadership.

Finding mentors is critical. Before most people can imagine themselves in a particular role, they need to see other people who look like them doing something similar. This is what Barack Obama signifies for African-Americans, and what Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign meant for many women—you can be anything you want to be.

Sadly, not all women are interested in helping other women. They may be so afraid of being replaced or displaced that they will even work to undermine their potential competitors. As women rise up the ladder, they attract respect and admiration but also jealousy and envy—which we must all do our best to minimize.

As we see more women in leadership roles, gender stereotypes will be gradually updated and prejudice reduced. Within families, for example, there is actually more social acceptance of equal task-sharing, and changing attitudes in our homes may help to change young men’s attitudes to women as competitors.

I believe that it falls to each of us, and to those who will follow us, to redefine the parameters of leadership and power, so that women can claim our rightful place at the table, in our own style and according to our own “feminine” values.

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Dance for Peace! by Marine Solomonishvili, President of International Foundation LEA & ICJW in Georgia

“Jewish communities throughout the world, as well as in Georgia, every Jewish woman is a decisive person in the process of the Jewish revival within the family and the community, and for the development of civic society, regardless of the place she lives.”
French Judaism has been rapidly changing in the past decades. Recently, several voices have been heard arguing for a better inclusion of women within traditional Judaism. But there are very few precise studies of what happens within synagogues, and especially within Reform and Conservative synagogues.

Beatrice’s research focused on one Reform and one Masorti (Conservative) synagogue located in France. Through ethnographic research, she studied the practice of gender equality in the synagogues and evaluated where women fit into their leadership structures and within rituals. Her results show how equal rights do not automatically translate into an equal representation of men and women in synagogue life.

Religious Services

In both the Reform and Masorti synagogues, members express pride at women’s participation in the services, although involvement in public prayer and ritual leadership is strongly gendered. With the exception of the female rabbi, very few women have the Hebrew and liturgical skills to lead all or part of the service or read the Torah portion, and these roles are taken by a small group of men, generally with an Orthodox background. Sections of the service that are most likely to be performed by women are the small parts recited in French, which have less liturgical importance.

The distribution of ritual honors is also gendered. The formal call to the Torah in Hebrew is made by a male gabbai (sexton), and women are generally given aliyot (called up) as part of a couple, with women representing slightly less than half in the Reform synagogue, and approximately 30 percent in the Masorti synagogue. Men are given the honor of opening the Ark, carrying the Torah scrolls in procession, or lifting them up for all to see, whereas the ritual task of dressing the Torah scrolls after the reading of the Torah is mostly done by women.

Public prayer is also gendered. As in traditional synagogues, all men wear a head-covering (kippa), and nearly all wear the prayer shawl when required. In the Reform synagogue, the rabbi also wears them, and she recommends that women do, too, especially the prayer shawl, which she makes mandatory for people who are called to the Torah. In the Masorti synagogue, the rabbi is more ambivalent toward what he sees as a threat to gender boundaries, preferring a “feminine” prayer shawl. As a result, only a very few women feel authorized to wear either the prayer shawl or the kippa, and the practice is controversial.

Educational Activities

Teaching positions within the synagogue are also gendered. In both synagogues lay women are more likely to teach children than adults, but adult courses are attended by a majority of women. In the Masorti synagogue, some religious courses are taught by women with academic backgrounds, who also often deliver drashot (homilies) during the service. In the Reform synagogue, the rabbi is the only woman to teach religious courses to adults, and almost the only woman to deliver drashot.

Voluntary Work and Administrative Responsibilities

Both synagogues rely on their members to volunteer, and in this area sexual division of labor in synagogues does not differ from most voluntary organizations. Tasks that may be defined as “domestic” are nearly exclusively done by women, especially those that relate to food offering after services (kiddush) and the ensuing clean-up work. Women are represented on both synagogue boards, though female and male administrators do not fill the same roles. Women taking on administrative responsibilities generally have a longer history within the synagogue than men and function
on the basis of their familiarity with religious activities. Men in these positions attend services less regularly, but seek to utilize their professional abilities and familiarity with other Jewish organizations.

**Ritual Honors**

Interviewees revealed that ritual honors have different meanings depending on the individual’s Jewish background and gender, which strongly affects their readiness to accept them and the likelihood that they may be offered.

Men with a traditional background see ritual honors as a normal part of synagogue life and may be offended if they are not offered at regular intervals or in circumstances such as lifecycle anniversaries. They take ritual honors as a matter of fact, whatever their liturgical skills may be. Men with a secular background and women of all backgrounds are more likely to be reluctant to receive honors, claiming either that they do not need them socially or spiritually, or that they are not worthy of them because of their lack of Hebrew skills. Women especially frame this in terms of shyness. They say it is difficult to stand in front of the whole congregation. In most cases the rabbis who are responsible for distributing these honors are aware of their congregants’ attitudes and may tend to propose them less often to people who express reluctance.

**Ritual Clothing**

Wearing the kippa and the prayer shawl is even more clearly gendered. Men almost never question the personal meaning of these ritual ornaments; men with secular backgrounds have no difficulty wearing them. Women, on the other hand, feel the need to account for their choice to wear them or not. It seems they only feel authorized to wear them if they both “feel” something spiritual when doing so, and if they master the legal (halachic) justification for doing so, making their choice more difficult.

**Understanding Gender Divisions**

The gendered division of labor is not necessarily perceived as such in both synagogues. At the Reform synagogue, gender equality in ritual is not considered an issue, since the female rabbi plays a prominent role in the service. The rabbi refuses to pressure the other women, expecting them to take personal responsibility for themselves. However, at the Masorti synagogue, congregants take pride in equal rights and insist that women participate. Several women interviewed made it clear that, in their eyes, being called to the Torah was only tokenism if they were not actually able to read the Torah portion. A small group tried to organize so that at least one woman reads from the Torah or delivers a drasha each week, thus exerting a form of collective pressure on women to train themselves in liturgical skills.

At the Masorti synagogue the expectation of liturgical performance is higher, and pronunciation errors do not go unnoticed. More lay women participate in leading the prayer service or reading the Torah, even if only occasionally, due to informal peer pressure. The regular liturgy classes are oriented toward actual practice rather than an abstract understanding of the meaning of rituals. By contrast, religious classes in the Reform synagogue are more oriented toward individual empowerment and spirituality, which helps many women feel at home at the synagogue on a personal level.

French women are less likely to view the synagogue as a public space, and they, more often than men, view prayer even in the synagogue as something essentially private. However, gender is not the only variable to take into account. As suggested above, such factors as one’s Jewish background and education, for instance, intersect with gender when it comes to accounting for individuals’ attitudes toward communal prayer.
ICJW’s European Meeting in November 2009, took place in Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, prior to the ICJW Executive Meeting. There were representatives from Russia, the Balkans, Central Europe, Western Europe, Canada, Latin America, and Israel.

ICJW European Regional Chairperson Gillian Gold welcomed the opportunity for women from former Communist countries to meet with their counterparts, twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Czech Republic’s “Velvet Revolution.”

Participants explained that many of the Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe share a common history, having been damaged not only by the Shoah but also by Communism. Families of Holocaust survivors still show evidence of unhealed scars and emotional fragility, because the totalitarian regimes that followed the war damaged souls and communities still further and inhibited their recovery.

The discussions at the meeting were very emotional, exposing the deep and enduring pain of many of the speakers. It was felt that ICJW’s engagement with these issues can help European Jewish communities by encouraging them to discuss and compare their experiences with Jews from other parts of the world.

Helena Klímová, joint president of the Czech CJW, summed up the meeting as follows: “By facilitating the dialogue which can enrich our mutual understanding and improve our lives, ICJW can help the reality to become enlightened by spirituality. In our contemporary world, where we are facing rapid changes in values and lifestyle – which are often driven by economic or ideological reasons – the basic ethical, existential, and spiritual questions that we face are forgotten. ICJW can help us to formulate these questions anew, in contemporary terms which are relevant to the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, where our main pain stems from the existential and spiritual vacuum in which we have been living.”

Delegates from Moscow, Prague, Kosice, and Germany spoke about Jewish renewal in their communities, and thanked the women of ICJW for their support during unsettled times. Among the issues raised were the difficulties faced by Jewish women’s organizations in Hungary in establishing communication with other women’s organizations because of their anti-Semitism, and the physical and psychological health problems of second-generation Holocaust survivors.
In November 2009, I enjoyed attending the ICJW meetings in Prague, in an atmosphere of sisterhood and togetherness, enhanced by the experiences we shared.

We visited the exhibition held at the Prague Castle in honor of the 400th anniversary of the death of the renowned Rabbi Yehudah Loew, known as the Maharal of Prague. The religious, pedagogical, and philosophical legacy of this scholar lives on, but there is also the myth of the Maharal as the miracle worker, mathematician, and creator of the Golem monster, which has provided immense inspiration for literature, art, and drama.

As legend tells it, the AltNeu (Old-New) Synagogue in Prague was built by angels, and became home to the Golem, who remains locked away in the building to this day. We went there for the Friday night service and prayed sitting in the women’s section, which is behind (not above) the main hall, separated by a wall. Through three holes we were able to peep into the beautiful main hall, where the men were praying. Slowly it was not important anymore to look in there, as a feeling of belonging overcame us.

As I watched Clarita from Colombia leaning her head on the ancient wall with her eyes closed, singing quietly the traditional prayer tunes, I felt united, not only with my colleagues but also with all the Jewish women who for almost 800 years have leaned their heads on the same wall, soaking it with their tears, and whispering their prayers.

Two days later the Prague Jewish community held a memorial ceremony in the same synagogue on the anniversary of Kristallnacht. This time women were allowed to sit in the main hall. Arriving early, wandering alone, admiring and almost bewitched by Europe’s oldest active synagogue, I suddenly heard an angelic voice, as if from Heaven: "Eli, Eli, She Lo Yigamer Le’Olam..." (Oh Lord, O Lord, let it never end...). This song of hope, composed by Hannah Szenesh, echoed from the ancient walls, as if coming from Heaven—until I saw Helena from Prague sitting and singing so movingly, capturing the spirit of the moment.

The synagogue filled up, and the Holocaust memorial ceremony began. It did not matter that the rabbi spoke in Czech and that we did not understand; each of us was inspired to meditate and reflect on our own thoughts. Throughout the years this sacred place of prayer and celebration had endured plagues, wars, and the Nazi regime. For centuries there were attempts to exterminate the magnificent Jewish community of Czechia; even after World War II the Communist regime tried to destroy the remaining survivors of the Holocaust.

Yet here we were, sitting in the AltNeu Schul in Prague, witnessing the survival of the Jewish spirit again, like plants that survived the winter and whose buds now appear like miracles from beneath the earth.

As we read in the Pesach Haggadah: "This promise made to our forefathers holds true also for us, in every generation. Not one alone has risen against us, but in every generation there are those who rise against us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.”

That is what I saw in the eyes, sparkling with enthusiasm, of Verona, Alice, and Helena. And I, Aviva, from Israel, second generation to Holocaust survivors, was standing here proudly in this sacred place together with Jewish women from all over the world, part of an ongoing, never-ending, indestructible chain of my people! Am Yisrael Chai! I was overwhelmed by a feeling of victory.

The quadrennial convention will open with a Gala Dinner hosted by the Mayor of Cape Town, Alderman Dan Plato, in the presence of the Ambassador of Israel and many local dignitaries.

The three program days follow the theme of togetherness as expressed in Hebrew, Xhosa, and English. On day one, centered around “Together,” participants will discuss the role of women as leaders of social change; the need to speak out on such issues as human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, and the effects of the media on young women; as well as hearing about the views and involvement of young women in the Jewish community.

On the second day, under the heading of the Hebrew word “Beyachad,” the Convention will discuss Israel-Diaspora relations in a changing international reality, examine contemporary anti-Semitism, take a virtual tour of Jewish communities throughout the African continent, and hear about the work of ICJW in international forums.

“Ubuntu” in Xhosa carries with it deep connotations of promoting cooperation between individuals, cultures, and nations. On day three, this theme will inspire delegates to learn lessons from the strength of the women of Africa, with a visit to the Rainbow community center. Following tours of the Cape Town Jewish Museum and Holocaust Museum, they will discuss human rights issues, and how people can learn to live together while disagreeing with one another.

The Gala Closing Dinner will be capped with the installation of ICJW’s new president Sharon Gustafson, the vice-presidents of the organization, and the new Executive.

In September 2009, in honor of the Union of Jewish Women of South Africa hosting the ICJW Convention, a new breed of rose—the Fiesta Flamenca Floribunda Rose—was introduced at a gala launch. This has become the signature blossom of the international gathering.
The South African Union of Jewish Women was established in 1932, and prides itself on the fact that, even during wars and the dark days of apartheid, it never forgot its motto: “Service to those in need – regardless of race, colour or creed.” Their social-welfare projects today include counselling services for abused and traumatized women in the Jewish community, friendship clubs for the elderly, kosher meals on wheels, centers for underprivileged children, and counselling groups for female prisoners. Among other things, they provide scholarships and bursaries for Jewish and non-Jewish students, and raise funds for local projects such as HIV/AIDS clinics, children’s homes and hospitals, and comfort rooms for crime victims in police stations.

The Convention Organizing Committee is committed, wherever possible, to using local products that will benefit and empower women from the previously disadvantaged communities in South Africa.

Another highlight of the Convention will be an appeal for the resources to build an ICJW Habitat for Humanity. This replicates a highly successful project pioneered by the UJW in Cape Town, in August 2008, at which time volunteer members worked with the Department of Housing and commercial sponsors to build two new houses for first-time owners in just seven days. This will demonstrate in deed what ICJW women can achieve collectively through the power of “Beyachad. Ubuntu. Together,” and hopefully will inspire the Convention delegates and other ICJW members to continue to work together to build a better world.
March 2010 will mark the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing (Beijing +15). The UN General Assembly will review the progress made by Member States in implementing the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), particularly in the twelve critical issues outlined in the document, at regional and national levels.

In 1995, the United Nations convened the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, which sought to advance the position of women all over the world. The Conference, one of the largest ever organized by the UN, brought together more than 17,000 participants, including 6,000 government delegates, more than 4,000 NGO representatives, 4,000 journalists, and representatives of all UN entities. The Conference achieved the unanimous adoption by all 189 UN Member States of the landmark Beijing Platform for Action, which identifies a range of actions for governments, the United Nations, and civil society groups to undertake regarding the advancement of women.

The twelve critical concerns identified in the BPFA include: poverty of women; unequal access to education; lack and unequal access to health care systems; violence against women; vulnerabilities of women in armed conflict; inequality in economic structures; inequalities in power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms to improve the advancement of women; lack of respects and inadequate protection in human rights; under-representation of women in the media; inequalities in natural resource management and in the safeguarding of the environment; and the discrimination and violation of the girl child.

Beijing+15 will take place in the framework of the 54th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women and will also be an opportunity for women working at the grassroots and through NGOs to discuss and debate the progress made thus far. Emphasis will be placed on the sharing of experiences and good practices, with a view to overcoming the remaining obstacles and meeting new challenges, including those related to the Millennium Development Goals.

In the lead up to Beijing +15, various governments, UN entities, regional commissions, and civil society organizations have held preliminary discussions in order to analyze the progress made in the implementation of the BPFA and, where possible, to develop joint statements and positions.

ICJW was present with a delegation at the Beijing Conference and will be in attendance at the Beijing +15 Conference and at the Commission on the Status of Women in New York.