

Historian's talk highlights role of Jewish women



Dr. Yael Zerubavel, director of Rutgers University's Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, speaks during a program on American Jewish women's activism. The program's speaker, Dr. Melissa Klapper of Rowan University stands in the background. Photo by Debra Rubin

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American Jewish women, despite being overlooked by many historians, took activist roles in social causes leading up to World War II, particularly in the suffrage, birth control, and peace movements.

"Why do we not know that much about Jewish women in American history?" asked Dr. Melissa Klapper, professor of history at Rowan University in Glassboro.

Klapper spoke on Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace, Feb. 25 at the Toby and Herbert Stolzer Endowed Program sponsored by Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

"It is impossible to understand American Jewish history or the history of America without understanding the impact of Jewish women," said Klapper during her talk at Traves Hall on the Douglass campus in New Brunswick.

Indeed, seeing these women as "stereotypical" sweatshop workers downplays the role of women such as Maud Nathan, who despite wealth and privilege, fought for the rights of shop girls and factory workers. Nathan became "indispensable" to the suffrage movement.

Meanwhile, Jewish women doctors like Hannah Meyer Stone staffed illegal birth control clinics during the early part of the last century.

Poor Jewish women living in the Lower East Side, whose health was being ruined by multiple pregnancies, embraced the cause of safe, affordable contraception.

Klapper said immigrant Jewish women flocked to Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger's clinic when it opened in 1916 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, and Sanger "found many allies in the Jewish community."

"Birth control clinics offered opportunities to Jewish patients, but even more opportunities for Jewish women doctors," said Klapper. "At a time when anti-Semitism restricted American Jewish doctors' abilities to secure medical residencies and positions and the Jewish hospitals reserved the bulk of their staff jobs for men, Jewish women doctors turned to birth control clinics as places where they could practice medicine, conduct research, and contribute to a cause they virtually all believed in."

Klapper also called for the recognition of activists prior to the rise of Nazism who believed it was part of their heritage as Jews and women to bring an end to war — and faced anti-Semitic critics who labeled them as Communists.

"Despite these challenges and the issues they faced as Jews, Jewish women rarely allowed themselves to be chased away from causes they believed in and worked hard for," she said.

However, the 1930s and the rise of the Nazi threat produced "a crisis of faith" among Jewish women pacifists.

"Activist movements enriched their lives and increased their sense of autonomy," said Klapper of these early female leaders. "Though in retrospect the gendered and sometimes separatist nature of activism during this period may seem limiting, most women developed strong commitments to the idea that their power to effect change in the world stemmed from gender difference, not in spite of it."

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