

Public Abstract

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Title:One Heart, Many Souls: The National Council of Jewish Women and Identity Formation in St. Louis, 1919-1950

This study examines the ways middle-class Jewish American women expressed their Jewish identities through particular volunteer activities from 1919 to 1950. Focusing on the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, this work examines options for adaptation of identity formation and expression in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which ethnic and religious group identification is established and altered.

This issue of assimilation and Jewish survival has given rise to much debate within the Jewish community over Jewish identity and how to best maintain it. I maintain that Jewish identity is strong and adaptable. I argue that concepts of Jewishness are, like race and gender, socially-constructed and therefore not fixed. Individuals form an identity, but others around them may perceive that identity differently. Communities also form identities and interact with one another. Interactions between the individual and her community and between different communities can shed light on the ways in which identity is formed on both an individual and a collective level.

The St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women engaged in activities that appealed to various identities of class, race, and religion, emphasizing different faces at different times. They never completely cast off any of their different selves, but they did favor one identity over the others when they deemed it necessary or desirable. These women Americanized themselves (and others), but they eventually returned to their Jewish heritage in a much stronger and more public way.