

## 75th Anniversary of Women's Right to Vote in the United States - 1995

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What was Deborah's character that she should have judged Israel, and prophesied to them...? ...whether it be... man or woman,... according to the deeds which he does, so will the Holy Spirit rest on him. (Tanna debé Eliyahu, p.48)

### Issue

Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States involves recognition of Sisterhood participation in the struggle to gain the right to vote. The lack of full participation in the electoral process today is of great concern.

### Background

The effort to establish women's suffrage began with Abigail Adams, who wrote on the eve of the founding of the new nation, "We will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation." In 1848, a women's rights convention made the first formal demand in the United States for women's right to vote. Nonetheless, it was 72 years before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, stating: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" (August 26, 1920). In Canada, all female citizens aged 21 and over had become eligible to vote in federal elections on May 24, 1918.

From its beginning, the religious equality of women and men has been an integral part of Reform Judaism. In 1837, Rabbi Abraham Geiger stated in an essay on "The Position of Women in the Judaism of Our Time," "Let there be from now on no distinction between duty for men and women... no institution of the public service, either in form or in content, which shuts the doors of the Temple in the face of women." Rabbi David Einhorn, reporting for the Committee on the Position of Women, stated in 1846: "It is our sacred duty to declare with all emphasis the complete religious equality of women with men."

Since the founding of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (now Women of Reform Judaism) in 1913, support of women's rights has been an important part of its program. Sisterhood members played a significant role in the suffragist movement, following Reform Judaism's precedent of religious equality for women in the congregation. In 1971, the NFTS resolution Women in Decision Making noted the paucity of women in elective offices "despite comprising 53% of the voting population" and political apathy on the part of many women and men. WRJ resolutions and policy statements addressing the Equal Rights Amendment (1973, 1975, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1983) and women's rights (1993) discuss effective use of the franchise and participation in political life by women.

In addition, voting rights and the imperative for voter participation were addressed in the 1981 We the People and Extremist Movements resolutions, followed by a Board of Directors Statement on Electoral Politics (1986) and the resolution The Bicentennial of the United States Constitution (1987). In its concern with the activities of the Religious Right, Citizenship and Civic Responsibility (1993) called on Sisterhood women to "engage in voter registration drives, facilitate candidate forums, hold forums on ballot referenda,... exercise their privilege to vote in all elections and special referenda."

### Resolution

*For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit [www.wrj.org/social-justice-home](http://www.wrj.org/social-justice-home)*

We celebrate the 75th Anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States and urge all eligible women and men to use their franchise. Reaffirming prior resolutions and commitments to accept our full responsibility to be an informed electorate, Women of Reform Judaism calls upon its U.S. affiliates to recognize and celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment as follows:

- 1) Inform sisterhood and congregational members about the history of women's right to vote, making sure to include the Reform Jewish history of women's rights and the role of early NFTS women in the struggle for women's suffrage.
- 2) Educate its constituencies on civil liberties.
- 3) Sponsor non-partisan programs on the issues in each election to help members become more informed voters and be alert to extremist groups and their agendas.
- 4) Work with local coalitions and groups to encourage everyone in the congregation and community to register and vote in every election.
- 5) Urge non-United States members of Women of Reform Judaism to examine women's suffrage in their countries and to study and undertake appropriate action to advance women's position and participation in the electoral process.