Multiple Loyalties

A Great-Granddaughter's Reflection on the Life of Ida Lewis Siegel

by Rabbi Gail Labovitz

Pendant ses 97 années d'existence, Ida Lewis Siegel a joué un rôle important au sein de nombreuses organisations religieuses, sionistes, charitables et éducatives. La petite fille de Ida Lewis

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Siegel trace le portrait de sa grand-mère en mettant en relief le travail de cette femme exceptionnelle et son engagement pour l'éducation, le pacifisme et les droits des femmes.

It is a somewhat common occurrence. I meet a Jewish person, or group of Jews, active in the Toronto Jewish community; two of my father's aunts and uncles live there, as do their children and grandchildren, so we play a little "Jewish geography." Sometimes my new acquaintances know my living relatives, sometimes not. But when I mention my grandmother's mother, my great-grandmother Ida Lewis Siegel, then faces always seem to light up in recognition. Some actually knew my great-grandmother, some have only heard of her and her works, but few fail to recognize her name.

I have always known that my great-grandmother was a special person, someone of extraordinary achievement. Growing up, I knew that she had been a key force in the development of the Toronto Jewish community, that she had been a member of the Toronto school board, and that she had lived, and lived actively, well into her 90s. But growing up far from Toronto, I had very little personal contact with my great-grandmother, and knew only the broadest outlines of her life and achievements. As I began to write this article, I did not expect to be quite so overwhelmed by her and her activities.

To simply list the organizations—religious, Zionist, charitable, educational—that Ida Lewis Siegel founded, led and/or participated in, starting when she was as young as 14, might take up more space than I've allotted. Rather than supply some sort of catalogue of organizations and honors, I have attempted to understand something of how my great-grandmother lived her life and what inspired her work. To this end, I interviewed each of Ida's five surviving children (she had six; my great aunt Sarah died in 1943 at the age of 30), and am grateful to them as well for all the additional materials they provided me, such as newspaper articles, copies of "Ida's Corner," which she wrote in her later life for the bulletin of Beth Tzedek synagogue, eulogies, and more. I also drew on information in Steven Speisman's book *The Jews of Toronto*, reference works on Canadian Jewry available in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and an obituary from the *Canadian Jewish News*.

Perhaps the most prominent feature I found in my great-grandmother's life was her multiple loyalties of place and culture. She was born in Pittsburgh, in 1885, after her parents and two older brothers had emigrated from Lithuania, and all who knew her agree that she very much considered herself an American, rather than European, woman. However, being herself an immigrant to Canada (she arrived in 1893), at a time when a large segment of the community consisted of poor European immigrants, she dedicated much of her earliest charitable and social work to immigrant families. She formed sewing circles and other classes, Saturday afternoon story hours and other youth activities, as well as charitable organizations such as the Hebrew Ladies Maternity Aid and Child Welfare Society. The very goals of these organizations indicate the multiple loyalties of Ida's life, encompassing both preservation of Jewish culture and the integration of the families into Canadian life.

Acculturation was indeed an important part of Ida Siegel's work with immigrants. For example, one of her activities during the early part of the century was the establishment of a mothers' club at Hester How school on Elizabeth Street in the neighbourhood then known as "the Ward." This group provided a place for immigrant parents to meet with their children's teachers in such a way that the parents would be less intimidated by the language and cultural differences between them. Talks by such local authorities as medical workers or a judge of the juvenile court helped ease immigrants' fears of the state, increase familiarity with English, and teach modern ideas about hygiene and child care.

Yet, Ida's groups worked to provide acculturation without sacrificing Jewish (or other ethnic) identity. One of her key goals was to combat the activities of Christian missionaries who targeted Jewish immigrants. Such missionaries often spoke Yiddish, and attracted community members by offering various forms of material aid and a sense of integration into Canadian society. Thus, Ida's sewing circles quickly expanded into a sewing school, formalized in 1912 as the Jewish Endeavor Sewing School for girls, "with a library to keep young people who wished

to read in English out of the missions" (Speisman 152). The school also offered a variety of Jewish subjects, taught by "young women of East European background who had been born or who had grown up in North America" (Speisman 152) who thereby served as models of integration into Canadian life for their students. Ida also worked with immigrant women, Italian as well as Yiddish speaking, to establish Saturday afternoon children's groups whose focus was to "help children keep the language and culture of their parents." ("We Are All Immigrants..." 8).

In her later life, Ida came full circle, returning to her work with immigrants, particularly children. For ten years at the Dewson Street Public School, and then into her 90s, at the Church Street School, she volunteered her time to teach civics classes, particularly for immigrant children. Ida talked to children about her own experiences as an immigrant to Canada and a worker with the immigrant community in the early part of the century. She prompted children to teach her words in their native languages. Using the many contacts she had developed in her years of community service, she arranged field trips for her students to see the symphony rehearsing or a local court in session.

Perhaps one of her most controversial involvements was with the Daughters of Canada, a group dedicated to the development of a distinct identity for Canada separate from British influence. Their effort included an attempt to create a Canadian flag.

Ida herself spoke Yiddish and used the language to speak to the women served by her various projects (as well as to make speeches during her run for the Toronto school board and an unsuccessful bid for an aldermanic position). Yet she clearly felt the Jewish community should be North American and English speaking in its outlook.[1] When Goel Tzedek Synagogue (later merged into Beth Tzedek) decided in 1914 to bring an English speaking rabbi to Toronto from the young Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), she was instrumental in establishing the beginnings of a congregational school, an effort intended, in no small measure, to impress the new religious leader with the forward-looking nature of the congregation. She had other contacts with the newly developing, distinctly American, movement of conservative Judaism as well. She corresponded with JTS head Solomon Schechter, and established a coalition of women's synagogue auxiliaries in Toronto that became affiliated with the National Women's League, founded by Schechter's wife Mathilda. Ida and other women from the community began travelling to New York and other places to attend League conventions and activities.

She also had a deep commitment to Canada. Her political activism, serving on the Toronto school board for several years in the early 1930s and running for an aldermanic position, is evidence of this, as were many of her other activities. Out of her work at the Hester How school grew the non-sectarian Home and School Association, which eventually became a national parents' advocacy group in the area of public education. A suffragette, she was also active in the Women Electors of Toronto, encouraging women to take part in the electoral process. Perhaps one of her most controversial involvements was with the Daughters of Canada, a group dedicated to the development of a distinct identity for Canada separate from British influence. Their effort included an attempt to create a unique Canadian flag. My great-grandmother was among the members arrested for sedition during a demonstration in a local park.[2]

There was yet another level as well to her multiple loyalties of place—Ida was a committed Zionist long before this was a near universally accepted idea in the Jewish community.[3] It is worth remembering, as Rabbi Benjamin Friedberg noted at her funeral, that she was a "younger contemporary of [founder of modern Zionism, Theodore] Herzl." As early as 1899 (only two years after Herzl organized the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland), while still in her teens, Ida formed a group of young women into the Toronto Daughters of Zion, and set them to Zionist activities such as collecting donations for the Jewish National Fund, thus creating the first women's Zionist organization in Canada. Another of her groups would rename itself the Herzl Girls in 1906, in honor of the Zionist leader who had recently died. She was active in the early Youth Aliyah[4] movement, helped bring Hadassah[5] to Canada, and served as National Vice President for the Zionist Organization of Canada (the first woman to do so).

Another prominent theme in my great-grandmother's life was education. She herself never finished school—family members agree that her formal education ended no later than tenth grade—but never stopped learning her entire life. Her children and others who knew her observed the tremendous amount and diversity of the reading she did. Rabbi Friedberg recalled that at 94 years old "she had no time for newspapers ... she was reading Erich Fromm." Her son Avrom Siegel recalls that she attended some university lectures with her eldest child, Rohama Lee. Late in her life, she was known for spending her time in synagogue reading and studying the weekly Torah portion. She was also determined to see her children achieve academic success. My grandmother, Gittel Labovitz, remembers that despite Ida's many contacts in the schools due to her work on the Board of Education, she never used her influence to get any special favors for her own children. In her child-raising, she stressed the authority of the teacher, which was to be respected, but was also deeply aware of the need to teach children according to their special circumstances. "We should offer the children the

kind of education that is best for them. If ... you think only of what the child needs there would be no problem" ("We Are All Immigrants..." 15).

Her commitment to education encompassed both Jewish and secular education. As already mentioned, she served for several years on the Board of Education in Toronto in the 1930s[6] and was one of the founding members of the Home and School Association. She was instrumental in founding several Jewish schools, including the previously cited Jewish Endeavor Sewing School and the synagogue school at Goel Tzedek, as well as the Zionist Sunday School, which would become known as the Zionist Jewish Free School. She served on a number of Jewish councils dedicated to education: the Associated Hebrew Schools Executive Committee, the Board of Governors of Associated Hebrew Schools, and the Toronto Bureau of Jewish Education, for which she was the honorary secretary. One particularly interesting episode in her life was the battle she led, with the other women of Goel Tzedek, to convert the *mikvah*[7] in the synagogue basement into classroom space. Eventually the women succeeded despite much resistance from some of the traditionalist men in the congregation, who claimed that the necessary funds were unavailable; much of the money was raised by the women themselves.

She fought the marginalization of women in the Jewish community as it began to come together with the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. Only after protest did they consent to admit one woman, though they chose someone other than her.

Among her other commitments, she was also a dedicated pacifist. In 1915, she became an early member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, advocating against Canadian involvement in World War I. Her commitment to peace was such that at one point she was elected to represent Canada at a peace conference in Paris, though she chose to turn this honour over to the president of the United Nations Society. The League remained active well after the first World War, its projects including reducing the budget to cadet programs in the schools. Canadian involvement in World War II presented Ida with a terrible moral dilemma, in no way eased by the enlistment of her two sons, Avrom and David Siegel. As Avrom recalls, "It was a great shock to [my mother] when I told her I enlisted." In an interview, she recalled a nasty anti-Semitic incident during the war years, and revealed something of her own ambivalent feelings about the war:

> One afternoon I was riding in the middle of a crowded street car and a man at the front of the car noticed a bearded man at the back. And he called out so all could hear him: 'If there's anybody here with a gun, I'd like to shoot that dirty Jew' and I called back to him, 'I'm a Jew too. And I'm sorry I haven't got that gun, but my sons have it, fighting for Canada....' Oh, I was so upset, I was sick.... I was a pacifist, and my two boys were in the army, and that dirty skunk to get up and say a thing like that. ("We Are All Immigrants..." 10)

I feel that specific reference must be made to what would today be called Ida's feminism, which seems to peek out of every corner of her activities. Nearly all of her charitable work focused on women and their children. One of her earliest accomplishments was the founding of the Hebrew Ladies Maternity Aid and Child Welfare Society, which dedicated its efforts to providing new mothers with medical care, milk and food, linens, and baby clothing (often sewn by the Society members themselves, and by students in Ida's various sewing circles and classes). In another early project, a house about half an hour out of town was acquired to serve as the Mothers and Babes Rest Home, a "camp" providing women a week's stay, with child care, in the country. Ida's youngest daughter, Rivka Gurau, noted that her focus on women's concerns meant that "many times she almost got thrown down the stairs by the husbands." She fought the marginalization of women in the Jewish community as it began to come together in a more cohesive and communal structure with the creation of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in Toronto in 1916. Although Ida was the among the first to call a community meeting to discuss developing such a federation, the fledgling board initially approved a constitution which excluded women. Only after protest led by Ida did they consent to admit one woman, though they chose someone other than her (Speisman). In secular society she was committed to women's suffrage and participation in the political process. My grandmother, Gittel Labovitz, recalled that one of the issues her mother concerned herself with while on the Board of Education was unequal demands placed on women teachers at the time; she persisted despite the opposition she met.

There are two important caveats in assessing my great-grandmother's life, however. Despite Ida's numerous achievements, several of the family members I spoke with suggested that she (and to some extent, they as well) felt that she might have gone even further than she did, under other circumstances. She was, said her eldest daughter Rohama Lee, the kind of woman who "could have been the President of the United States' wife."[8] Despite the many organizations she founded, and her role in establishing the more over-arching communal structure of Jewish philanthropy in Toronto, she never had the high ranking positions in these larger organizations that she was likely capable of. Family members offered several different reasons for this. One obvious explanation is discrimina-

tion against women. Thus, despite her role in bringing the Jewish community together, and although many of the organizations that became part of the Toronto Federation were women's charitable societies, as noted above, she was not given a leadership role in the new organization. Gender discrimination may have also been part of her unsuccessful run for an aldermanic position. Speisman suggests that she was opposed by Jewish political party bosses, who felt "that since she was not a lawyer, and a woman at that, she could not be an effective spokesman for Jewish interests." (253) Anti-Semitism was also an occasional barrier. One of her sons noted that while she served as chair of the management committee of the Toronto school board, Ida never became the chair of the board as a whole, and felt this was due to a religious barrier (my grandmother, on the other hand, thought gender discrimination was also a factor here). She herself blamed a lack of financial resources as a chief cause preventing her from rising quite as high as she thought she could have in the Jewish community. She could not make the large donations, or afford the travel necessary to many of these positions.

Finally, a discussion of my great-grandmother's life would not be complete without some discussion of the sacrifices she made and external supports she received in order to achieve what she did. The reader should not forget that Ida was mother to six children at a time when many suffragettes and leaders of feminist activism in America were unmarried or childless. Family members recall my great-grandfather, Isidore Siegel, as being very emotionally supportive, even encouraging, of his wife's work, but he was a travelling salesman and later a store owner in Cochrane, Ontario, who was not home during the week to provide active support in the household. Ida's parents, Hannah and Samuel Lewis, lived with the family, and it was largely Hannah who raised Ida's children and oversaw the household on a daily basis. Ida's elder daughters, Rohama and Gittel also had a significant role in raising their younger sisters, Sarah and Rivka. To this day, family members speak of her with a certain awe that is not quite the same thing as pride. Her children admire her work greatly but clearly express the ways in which they felt the lack of her presence in their lives. In our age, when much is made of the pulls women feel between the demands of family and life outside the home, it is worth remembering that there was a time when women may not have felt the possibility of any balance, that choosing one meant foregoing the other.

And so, in reviewing my great-grandmother's life, I find myself in a similar position to other family members. I cannot help but be impressed by all she achieved. Whatever her doubts about her accomplishments, few have the impact on their community that she did. I find it hard to have such high expectations for myself. But having discovered her life through writing this article, it will stand for me as a reminder, at the times when everything seems to be overwhelming, that I have an opportunity for balance that she may never have had, as well as a supreme model for achievement.

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[1]I do not know to what degree the debate between French and English speaking Canadians over the national language was a critical issue at the time, nor Ida's feelings on the matter.

[2]One of the women involved had connections with a senator, and the group was released.

[3]Indeed, as Speisman writes of the years before World War I, "among those who considered themselves the elite of Jewish society in Toronto, to be a Zionist was to be considered slightly disloyal to Canada ..." (204).

[4]An organization which endeavored to remove children from Nazi-occupied Europe to Palestine.

[5]A Zionist women's organization founded by Henrietta Szold in 1912 (and still in existance today).

[6]According to family members, she was the second woman to do so. I was not able to confirm that she was the first Jewish member, though several family members, and her obituary in the *Canadian Jewish News*, claim that this was so. Speisman, however, suggests that Samuel Factor became a board member as early as 1923 (252). Certainly, she was the first Jewish woman.

[7]Pool in which ritual purification baths are performed.

[8]Perhaps someday we will all be able to think of her as the kind of woman who could have herself been President.

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