

President's Column:
Academic Excellence
By Nancy Falchuk

For 96 years, Hadassah has empowered Jewish women, always spurring us to new heights. Our thirst for knowledge and our need to connect inevitably lead us beyond our traditional work.



In the 21st century there are so many intellectual challenges, so many avenues for broadening our minds, strengthening our community. Where, for example, can we find scholarship—or just open discussion—on the meeting of feminism and traditional Judaism, the role of women in Israel, the impact of the Internet on relationships? Where can we find Jewish women writers and artists discussing their work, or meet women of other faiths to compare notes on gender equality?

In fact, all of these activities and more are under one umbrella—and it's an umbrella emblazoned with our name. We recently marked the 10th anniversary of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

Established at Brandeis University with major funding from Hadassah and now from others, HBI was set up to develop fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide by promoting research and artistic projects. The only academic center of its kind, it provides resources for scholars, students and the public. It hosts international conferences, lectures and forums, provides scholarships and research grants and publishes articles and papers.

HBI addresses the most entrenched cultural challenges and the newest phenomena. In April, HBI brought Shirin Ebadi and Jody Williams, both Nobel Peace Prize winners, to the Brandeis campus to participate in the institute's Project on Gender, Culture, Religion and the Law. Their appearance was followed by a dialogue among lawyers, activists and academics on the conflict between gender equality and cultural and religious norms in Christian, Muslim and Jewish societies.

Earlier this year, HBI sponsored a forum on how JDate, the online

dating service, has altered the way its participants think about their romantic lives and their Jewish selves.

HBI grew out of a Hadassah-sponsored study on the status of American Jewish women. That project demonstrated that Jewish women were living on a broad cultural landscape that encompassed much more than our medical, educational and advocacy projects. We thought it was important to be not only part of the key conversations of Jewish life but to help define the agenda.

In many ways the launching of HBI brought Hadassah full circle. The 20th century utterly transformed Jewish life. Zionism and advanced communication allowed world Jewry to come together under a single banner with the goal of reestablishing national sovereignty.

Along with Zionism—part result and part catalyst—came the liberation of Jewish women. Hadassah played a pivotal role in both phases of this revolution. Left out of the early Zionist leadership, women flocked to Hadassah, which developed its trademark ethic of building. Soon the entire Zionist movement was looking up to us.

Henrietta Szold was a pioneer in Jewish scholarship at a time when she was typically the only woman in an academic discussion. Hadassah itself grew out of her Daughters of Zion study circle. In retrospect, what could have been more natural than for such an accomplished organization to decide, in 1997, that it was time to go to college?

HBI has linked Hadassah to new worlds and generations. We now have a permanent academic presence in the Boston area—the cradle of American higher education. Under the dynamic direction of Brandeis Professor Shula Reinharz, the institute gives us a central role in studying the Jewish past, present and future. Even if you're far from Boston, you can get an appreciation for HBI's work by looking at its Web site, www.brandeis.edu/hbi.

Hadassah has been pushing the frontiers of Jewish knowledge and experience for nearly a century. Each discovery brings new questions, leaving us with an open-ended goal: never to quench our thirst for learning.

To view Nancy Falchuk's monthly podcast, go to