“KEEPING THE FAMILY TOGETHER”: FAMILY CIRCLES AND CHANGING AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A THESIS

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Amanda B. Cohen
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Approved by:______________________________
Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Ph.D.
Director and Distinguished Service Professor
Cooperstown Graduate Program
State University of New York College at Oneonta

______________________________
Jenna Weissman Joselit, Ph.D.
Charles E. Smith Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of History
The George Washington University
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A decade ago, my maternal grandparents, Earl and Ina Gross, moved to a new home. As they sifted through years of old documents, they came upon the minutes of the Gross Family Circle. My grandfather was the last recording secretary, and when the family circle fell apart in 1966, he was left with two record books and a smattering of correspondence. My grandparents gave the minutes and correspondence to my parents, and these documents languished in a closet until very recently. These minute books provided the inspiration for my thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

“We should form a circle of happiness and goodwill, letting no troubles or evils enter or break our circle.”¹

During the first half of the twentieth century, many American Jewish families of Eastern European descent banded together to create formal organizations. These organizations took a variety of names—family circles, family groups, family clubs, family societies, etc.—but their *raisons d’être* were largely the same: they brought the family together, rendering mutual aid, both financial and emotional, to help members survive and thrive in American society. As American Jews became more affluent and moved out of the neighborhoods they shared with other family members, relationships with relatives began to fall by the wayside. The family circle, however, countered this trend by offering social opportunities, helping to cultivate kinship bonds that might not have existed otherwise. Family circles reached their peak of popularity after World War II, as many American Jews of Eastern European descent achieved social and geographic mobility. By the 1950s and 1960s, after the older generations had passed away, younger generations lost interest and turned to other activities that met their social needs. Eventually, nearly all family circles ceased operation.

Though each family circle was unique in structure and function, most operated as formal organizations. Family circles often met monthly or bimonthly in members’ homes

¹ Minutes of the first meeting of the Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle, October 5, 1947. Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore.
or, for larger circles, in synagogues or community venues. A rotating schedule determined who hosted meetings and when. Family circles elected officers, took meeting minutes, collected dues, and conducted meetings according to Robert’s Rules of Order. Some family circles created constitutions and bylaws. Some put out newsletters. Earlier family circles conducted their business in Yiddish, while English dominated family circles by the late 1930s. Though the activities of family circles changed over time, these formal practices guided the family circle’s primary activities: rendering mutual aid, arranging philanthropy, planning special events, celebrating Jewish holidays, recognizing lifecycle events, and socializing. We are fortunate that family circles operated so formally, because they left documents that give us insight into this brief but significant chapter of American Jewish history.

In this paper, I examine how American Jews structured their family circles to better respond to their changing circumstances throughout the twentieth century. Then, I ask what role the family circle played in helping members define themselves as American Jews. I argue that American Jews founded and, later, restructured family circles to meet their shifting economic and social needs and desires. As family circles fulfilled these needs, they helped their members thrive in American society while maintaining a connection to Judaism. Family circles enriched members’ sense of Jewishness by creating a space in which to participate in and perpetuate Jewish traditions in the midst of a Christian society. By participating in Jewish activities, members could define themselves

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3 For a more detailed study of the structure of family circles, see Mitchell, *Mishpokhe*. 
as Jewish in a way that met their needs. At the same time, members did not need to think deeply about reconciling the American and Jewish pieces of their identity.

Only two books have been published about family circles. The first was a 1930s survey of nearly 2,500 hometown associations, called landsmanschaften, and family circles by the Works Progress Administration’s Yiddish Writers’ Group. The Yiddish Writers’ Group collected data on the activities and composition of landsmanschaften and family circles in New York City, offering limited interpretation. The study was published in two volumes in 1938 and 1939, both in Yiddish. Communications scholar Hannah Kliger edited the unpublished, abridged, English version of the study in 1992, adding notes about contemporary groups in New York City. The other book on family circles is Mishpokhe: A Study of New York City Jewish Family Clubs (1979), by anthropologist William Mitchell. Through oral histories, club documents, and questionnaires, Mitchell examined the history, structure, and function of Jewish family circles and cousins’ clubs, offering an anthropological explanation for why family clubs existed. Cousins’ clubs were founded by the younger, more Americanized generations for social purposes, and they often excluded the older immigrant generations from membership. I do not study cousins’ clubs here. As cousins’ clubs were founded later than family circles, they do not offer a rich narrative of change over time as family circles do. Aside from the exclusion of older generations, cousins’ clubs function almost identically as later, social family circles, so an in-depth examination of such clubs is superfluous.

Both the WPA and Mitchell studies provide excellent jumping off points for my research. The WPA study contains no records of family circles after 1939; delving into

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5 Mitchell, Mishpokhe.
the records of family circles founded and active after this date and comparing my conclusions with those of the Yiddish Writers’ Group provides a fascinating look into how and why the family circle changed. Mitchell originally suggested that family circles changed over time from a mutual aid to a social function, and I am indebted to his formulation. Using family circle documents and recent scholarly literature, I expand, update, and nuance Mitchell’s economic-to-social narrative. I also add the dimension of examining American Jewish identity.

The information contained in the minutes, photographs, documents, and ephemera of four diverse family circles has driven my analysis. I studied the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society (Baltimore, active c. 1901 to present), the Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle (Baltimore, active 1947 to 1954), the Gross Family Circle (Philadelphia, active 1946 to 1966), and the Samuel Rudin Family Plan (Philadelphia, active c. 1940 to c. 1958) in depth; the limited documents, objects, photographs, and ephemera of a few other Baltimore-based family circles also proved useful. I chose these four groups as they broadly represented the different types of family circles and how family circles changed over time. Furthermore, with the exception of the Gross Family Circle papers, the documents of these family circles were accessible in public archives: the BAYL Society and Portney Family Circle papers at the Jewish Museum of Maryland and the Samuel Rudin Family Plan at the National Museum of American Jewish History. Additionally, I had the great fortune to interview members of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society and the Gross Family Circle. I added depth and subtlety to the experiences of these family circles by drawing on

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6 The Gross Family Circle is the exception because my maternal grandparents belonged to the circle and passed down the papers through the generations.
scholarly literature on such wide-ranging topics as the history of Eastern European Jews in America, Jewish families, communal organizations, *tzedakah* (the commandment to help the needy), and American Jewish culture. The paucity of scholarly sources on family circles was a disguised blessing, as it provided corroborating evidence from interesting and unexpected angles.

Before I outline the direction of this paper, I must briefly discuss the role of identity in my study. During my research, I came across innumerable interpretations of identity-building in ethnic Americans, particularly among American Jews. However, in my conversations with family circle members, I found that American Jewish identity was not something they thought very deeply about, even in the context of the family circle. The members I interviewed, who were third-generation American Jews, expressed their view that they were both Jewish and American; they did not feel that these two aspects of their identity were in conflict.\(^7\) Ironically, the same identity scholars who offer complex interpretations of identity formation still echo my informants’ perspectives. For instance, Jack Citrin and David O. Sears describe immigrants and their descendents as blending their two identities, viewing their identities as not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing. Charles Liebman also argues that American Jews do not see acceptance into American society and the survival of Judaism as mutually exclusive. Finally, in what Jeffrey Mirel calls “patriotic pluralism,” groups like American Jews simultaneously demonstrated their integration into American society and their religious and cultural

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\(^7\) Earl and Ina Gross (members of the Gross Family Circle), oral history interview with the author, November 21, 2011, Wynnewood, PA; Rebecca Flaxman Tucker (president of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society), oral history interview with the author, January 19, 2012, Pikesville, MD.
distinctiveness. Additionally, my informants also revealed that the family circle did not make them feel any more Jewish than they already felt. My interviewees already had strong connections to Judaism prior to their involvement in the family circle, although the activities of the family circle enhanced their repertoires of Jewish experiences, thereby enriching their sense of Jewishness. For the purposes of this paper, Jewishness connotes the cultural behaviors that Jews invoke to identify themselves as Jewish. This is not the same as Judaism, the religion. Because Jewishness often involves defining one’s connections to Judaism, I use “Jewishness” and “connections to Judaism” synonymously in this paper. For instance, a less-observant Jew who feels connected to food and family traditions may be just as connected to Judaism as someone who keeps strictly kosher; it is only the character of these connections that differs. Members of family circles varied in the character of their individual connections to Judaism. It is sufficient to say that in participating in Jewish experiences through the family circle, members bolstered the connections to their Jewish heritage that they already forged, whatever the character of the connections might have been.

The making of American Jewish identities permeates my analysis of family circles. As family circles transitioned from fulfilling economic to social needs, activities continued to provide opportunities to make stronger connections to Jewish culture. The first section addresses the ways family circles responded to the changing needs of American Jews through economic activities. This section explains how the mutual aid

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9 Interview with Earl and Ina Gross.
function of family circles grew out of the *landsmanschaften*, as well as the variety of forms of mutual aid that family circles tendered. It discusses how geographic and social mobility among American Jews stimulated the transition from aid oriented circles to socially oriented circles, as well as the ways family circles brought the family together, even when members came from a variety of neighborhoods and socioeconomic statuses. A fascinating topic broached in this section is class differences within the family circle and how they affected family dynamics and organizational involvement. The section then discusses how taking part in mutual aid activities and giving to Jewish organizations and causes further enhanced members’ connections to Judaism.

The next section focuses on the social activities of family circles. By the mid-to-late 1950s and the early 1960s, continued involvement in the family circle was becoming a burden, and members were beginning to lose interest. Family circles attempted to remove as many barriers to accessibility as possible, often forsaking business for pleasure. Family circles also responded to changes in American society by doing such things as electing women to positions of leadership. No matter how much the family circle attempted to cater to the needs and wants of its members, most of these groups eventually fell apart. One of the primary reasons for the family circle’s demise was the inability to keep the younger generation interested. A highlight of this section is the examination of family circles’ favorite Jewish holidays, and how this choice of favorites reflected members’ desires to express American values and strengthen a connection to Judaism without the demands of strict observance. Family circles also offered a connection to Jewish history as they facilitated interactions with older generations.
This study offers a renewed perspective on a largely ignored yet significant piece of American Jewish history. The time is right for a new study on the subject, particularly one that updates and expands past research and offers a postmodern historical analysis. This examination also addresses an important and transitional period in American Jewish history through a micro lens, using everyday people to help tell the story of Jews in America. A witness to changing American Jewish life throughout its 110-year history, the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society is a fitting place to begin this investigation.
MUTUAL AID AND PHILANTHROPY: SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

The B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib (BAYL) Family Society is one of the oldest known family circles in the United States. The BAYL Society was founded between 1901 and 1905 in Baltimore after a number of relatives emigrated from Lithuania. Noted family member Myer Smith began the group to facilitate the immigration of relatives to the United States. Every Sunday evening, relatives gathered together at his apartment, and he collected five cents from whomever could contribute to help pay for relatives’ passages. Once immigrants reached the United States and achieved a measure of economic stability, it was expected that they would reimburse the society.¹

Members still required aid once they arrived and settled in America; in 1932, the BAYL Society appointed someone “to render any immediate help needed by a member.”² This “help” often took the form of loans. As members reached financial stability, the emphasis shifted away from rendering mutual aid. In its place, the BAYL Society emphasized philanthropy and social activities to cultivate family relationships. Still,

¹ “Deeply concerned in the welfare of all his kin, he [noted family member Myer Smith] arranged passage and visas for those who had no means of their own, and met the costs with Bank Loans underwritten by himself and a few other interested persons. He was married to Anna Rubin and their flat at 117 Front Street, became the Sunday evening rendezvous of the FAMILY while he collected five cents a week from as many relatives as could contribute and, in that way, paid off the loans…. [The group] declared that its purpose was to continue the policy of making loans for any relative who, as a would-be-immigrant, needed that loan, and with the understanding that when he took his place within the FAMILY he would then repay the loan.” “This Is Our History.” The Bulletin of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society, 50th Anniversary Edition 4, no. 18 (November-December 1950): 408-409. Original emphasis.
² Ibid., 412.
relatives socialized in the early years of the society, and the society continues to give mutual aid to the present day.³

Family circles like the BAYL Society did not turn to social activities exclusively for want of purpose after most members became financially solvent. Rather, increasing affluence brought about two side effects that family circles stepped in to address. First, social mobility often went hand-in-hand with geographic mobility; nuclear families moved out of cities, where the family was often concentrated, and into more spacious homes, generally in the suburbs. Along with the dispersal of families, the move to the suburbs also broke up the communities of Eastern European American Jews. Second, member families within family circles achieved affluence at different rates, creating class differences among family members. Geographic location and class differences strained the bonds of kinship. As family circle members achieved social mobility, the purpose of family circles shifted from furnishing aid to members to providing social outlets for “keeping the family together” and building up the sense of community that American Jews of Eastern European descent had lost.⁴ Some but not all family circles—particularly affluent ones—also engaged in philanthropy.

During the earlier years of family circles, financial aid and other benefits helped needy members survive and even thrive in American society. This section will explain how family circles met the changing economic needs of Eastern European American Jews, and how meeting these needs helped contribute to members’ senses of Jewishness.

³ Philip Shapiro (historian of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society), personal communication with the author, October 6, 2011.
In giving to both needy members and charitable organizations, family circles helped members feel Jewish while expressing American values.

To contextualize the mutual aid activities of family circles and their role in strengthening connections to Judaism, let us look briefly at the economic and social situations of Eastern European Jews in early twentieth-century America. Most recent immigrants were very poor. Many poor immigrants, however, were very sensitive to their positions and did not want to be seen as dependent on charity and as a drain on society’s resources; they believed that such perceptions would further lower American society’s opinion of Eastern European Jews and “undesirable” immigrants in general. Furthermore, in the first several decades of twentieth century, antisemitism excluded Jews from or limited their access to many sectors of American life. For instance, American Jews were barred from living in certain neighborhoods and receiving mortgages, were socially excluded by their non-Jewish colleagues, and faced quotas in university admissions. American Jews realized that they had to take care of themselves, because almost no one else would. Thus, they created their own spheres, such as Jewish universities, clubs, and neighborhoods. In a similar manner, immigrants turned to one another for aid. They founded landsmanschaften and other mutual aid groups like family circles to help one another survive in their new country.

Landsmanschaften were societies founded largely in the late nineteenth century that brought together former residents of the same villages in Eastern Europe’s Pale of

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5 Kliger, Jewish Hometown Associations, 84.
Jewish Settlement. Members banded together for financial and emotional support in their new country, creating a network that helped members navigate unfamiliar and, often, lonely conditions in the New World.⁸ Landsmanschaften provided a safety net as members established themselves in America, furnishing different types of mutual aid like income support, medical services, and burial.⁹ To provide mutual aid, landsmanschaften members paid dues, and this money was used to pay benefits to those in need. Such a mutual aid structure appealed to recent immigrants because it meant they did not have to depend on outside charity. Landsmanschaften members saw charity as marking them at the bottom of America’s social hierarchy. Mutual aid, on the other hand, allowed members to engage in what historian Daniel Soyer calls “reciprocity and democratic control,” which provided a sense of equality among members.¹⁰ Says Soyer, mutual aid “transformed a necessity into an opportunity to embrace the American promise of self-reliance and independence.”¹¹

This simultaneous promotion of American values and re-creation of Jewish communities was sustained in the next iteration of the landsmanschaften—the family circle.¹² Unlike landsmanschaften, however, family circles were founded later, beginning with the turn of the twentieth century, and membership was limited to relatives of the group’s founders or an apical ancestor, either by blood or marriage.¹³ In its study of family circles, the Works Progress Administration’s Yiddish Writers’ Group identified two categories of family circles: those that rendered mutual aid (such as sick benefits, ⁸ Kliger, Jewish Hometown Associations, 11, 25. ⁹ Soyer, Jewish Immigrant Associations, 6. ¹⁰ Ibid., 81, 112. ¹¹ Ibid., 83. ¹² Hannah Kliger identifies the family circle as the “favored outgrowth” of the landsmanschaften. Kliger, Jewish Hometown Associations, 120. ¹³ Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 40.
loans, and burial services), and those that were purely social in nature. In 1939, 46% of family circles owned cemetery plots, 38% furnished benefits but did not own plots, and 16% existed for “having a wonderful time.” As in landsmanschaften, family circle members turned to one another for mutual aid, knowing that even if they received outside assistance, it might further lower public opinion of Jews. American Jews were not the only ones to turn inward for aid: other marginalized ethnic groups joined together for assistance in organizations like Chinese family associations and Italian benevolent societies.

Through the Depression, World War II, and afterwards, American Jews as a group achieved affluence and integrated themselves into American society at different rates. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, both the size of the Jewish middle class and overall class diversity among Jews increased. For instance, in 1938, most family circle members were middle class, with one third of the members as wage earners. Though it is tempting to equate affluence with integration into American society, some Jews never reached middle class status, and some never wholly adapted American values and lifestyles.

After World War II, American Jews reached a collective level of affluence such that almost no family circles founded after the war furnished mutual aid as their primary

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14 Kliger, *Jewish Hometown Associations*, 79.
16 Kliger, *Jewish Hometown Associations*, 78.
17 Calvin Goldscheider does note a data correlation between higher social class and decreased Jewish self-identification, but this correlation comes with the caveat that Jews came to view their identity as separate from their social position: “Money, education, and occupational opportunities over time resulted in the formation of new types of Judaic expressions and Jewish cultural options. These new forms of Jewishness, and of Jewish identity, increasingly have been disentangled from social class and from the indicators of social class. Identifying Jewishly in diverse ways has become the norm…. In short, there are many factors that sustain or diminish Jewish identity and the boundaries of Jewish community, but social class is no longer the culprit.” Goldscheider, “Boundary Maintenance,”112.
purpose.\textsuperscript{18} Not only was there a significantly decreased need for mutual aid; less affluent members might have felt pressured to present an affluent façade to better-off family circle members, and they might have sought aid elsewhere.\textsuperscript{19} Mitchell goes as far as saying that requesting aid was a \textit{faux pas}: “A family circle is a primary group to which a member can now demonstrate his financial success in an affluent society; it is not a group to which one goes for money and certainly not for the sum of $25. One’s prestige within the club is more valuable than that.”\textsuperscript{20} Mitchell later invokes a study that says that needy family members would rather seek aid in the community than from their family.\textsuperscript{21}

For those that required mutual aid—particularly members of the earlier family circles—such assistance helped members survive and thrive in American society. Mutual aid took many forms: bringing relatives over from Europe, giving financial loans and gifts to relatives here and abroad, furnishing medical and sick benefits, providing death benefits such as cemetery plots and burial services, connecting relatives to personal services, helping relatives find jobs and start businesses, and facilitating opportunities for social mobility. The mechanics of mutual aid in \textit{landsmanschaften} functioned similarly in family circles. Family circles dedicated money in the treasury collected from dues and other sources to the “sole benefit of the members,” meaning they distributed money to members in accordance with the family circle’s guidelines.\textsuperscript{22} In earlier family circles, this money was primarily directed toward furnishing aid; however, it also helped to subsidize social events, such as the BAYL Society’s 1912 banquet.\textsuperscript{23} Later family circles generally

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Mitchell, \textit{Mishpokhe}, 47.
\item Ibid., 47, 48, 106, 114, 168, 183.
\item Ibid., 106.
\item Ibid., 168.
\item Ibid., 100; Kliger, \textit{Jewish Hometown Associations}, 78.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
spent this money on social events, outings, gifts for lifecycle events, and Jewish holiday celebrations.24

Family circles offered many different types of mutual aid. Assistance in bringing relatives to America was one method of aid. As one BAYL Society member recalled, “The major activity of the Society in those days was to help members bring over relatives from the old country and then help them to establish themselves in this country. The new arrivals from Europe would then join the Society and in a convenient manner pay back whatever expenses had been incurred.”25 The family’s attitude toward furnishing this type of aid seems to be less one of charity and more one of investing in their relatives; it appears as if the society expected a return on their investment as established immigrants joined the circle and helped bring over more relatives. The BAYL Society also helped relatives immigrate to South Africa and Palestine.26 Like real-life family circles, in the film *Avalon* (1990), the Krichinsky’s family circle was originally founded to bring relatives over from Europe.27 Though a fictional work, *Avalon* is worthy of citation as it addresses the realistic, contemporary concerns of an American Jewish family of Eastern European descent.28 With the immigration restriction laws of the 1920s, the BAYL Society could no longer facilitate relatives’ emigration; instead, the society raised dues and sent financial gifts to needy relatives in Europe with no expectation of repayment.29

After World War II, family circles reactivated their mutual aid function, helping to bring

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24 Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 110.
26 Personal communication with Philip Shapiro, October 6, 2011.
over and care for Holocaust survivors.\textsuperscript{30} The Gross Family Circle and the fictional family circle in \textit{Avalon} made possible the immigration of survivors and helped these refugees establish themselves in the United States.\textsuperscript{31} The Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle, founded in 1947 for purposes “social, charitable, or whatever the chosen subject may be,” sent care packages with food, clothing, and linens to refugee relatives in Europe and, later, Israel. The Portney Family Circle sent packages with such frequency that the group created a separate fund for packages as to not deplete the organization’s treasury. The Portney Family Circle also tried working with the Associated Jewish Charities of Baltimore to facilitate the immigration of relatives after World War II. However, the minutes do not record whether the group succeeded in this endeavor.\textsuperscript{32}

Family circles also provided relief to relatives here and abroad through no-interest and low-interest loans and outright gifts. Recalled one member of the BAYL Society:

…I began to realize that the purpose for which these meetings were held was not so much for the social pleasures of the various members, but that their real object was in using their combined financial strength to help out any member of the Family who may have been in need of such help…. [I]f they knew of anyone who was having some serious difficulty…or any situation of special need, help was furnished in a most unobtrusive manner so that the recipient was unaware of how that help came through.\textsuperscript{33}

Protecting the dignity of a recipient so the recipient did not feel like a “charity case” appears to be a priority of family circles. The Portney Family Circle tried to keep the names of loan recipients confidential.\textsuperscript{34} Even as the BAYL Society turned more to social

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30} Mitchell, \textit{Mishpokhe}, 106.  
\textsuperscript{31} Earl and Ina Gross (members of the Gross Family Circle), oral history interview with the author, November 21, 2011, Wynnewood, PA; \textit{Avalon}, directed Levinson.  
\textsuperscript{32} Constitution of the Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle. Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore; Meeting Minutes of the Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle, October 5, 1947; January 4, 1948; February 1, 1948; April 4, 1948; September 3, 1950; February 10, 1952; February 7, 1954. Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore.  
\textsuperscript{34} Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, October 10, 1948; February 12, 1950; October 1, 1950.}
pursuits, the society continued to give mutual aid. In their 60th Anniversary *Bulletin*, the BAYL Society noted, “In recent years, there has been little need for direct financial help for any member, nevertheless, the proportionate number of interest-free loans of $100 per dues paying member remains about the same as always.”35 A suggestion was made in 1960 to increase individual loans to $200. Financial records reveal that this measure passed and that members paid back their loans.36 In this climate of overall affluence, the family expressed concern that it might miss an opportunity to recognize and assist need. The minutes of the November 11, 1962 meeting read, “[Name withheld] suggested that we have a committee to investigate and consider needy cases in our family. In the past, there were some who perhaps needed financial aid but the Family Society was not aware of it.”37 A few years later, this same member defined the difference between loans and gifts in the BAYL Society, saying that it was often up to the individual who received the aid to decide whether it would be a loan or a gift.38 In addition, while individuals might have asked for financial assistance, gifts by family circles were sometimes unsolicited. The minutes of both the BAYL Society and the Gross Family Circle tell of the decision to give financial gifts to sick relatives and those relatives’ immediate family members.39

Family circles also furnished medical and sick benefits. The family circle might provide benefits to cover necessities if members missed work due to illness. Family

36 For instance, a treasurer’s report from a 1976 meeting says that $200 had been received in loan repayments and there were currently $200 out in loans. Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, May 9, 1976 in *The Bulletin, 75th Anniversary Edition* 33, no. 3 (April-September 1976): 43.
37 Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, November 11, 1962.
38 Ibid., June 29, 1965.
circles also helped to subsidize the hospital bills of needy members. One family even formed a health insurance plan, and members paid dues that would cover the hospitalization expenses of ill members. The members of the Samuel Rudin Family Plan were the American-born children of immigrant Samuel Rudin, and at least a few members were probably working class. It is easy to see the appeal of a family health plan to the Rudin family: it allowed a less affluent family to support one another, instead of relying on outside organizations like Blue Cross. Interestingly, the Rudin Family Plan also held social activities, both by themselves and with the family’s cousins’ club.

In furnishing death benefits, family circles purchased cemetery plots and subsidized some funeral expenses. Family circles often owned cemetery gates to mark their burial plots. One of Mitchell’s informants described how members had different opinions on owning family plots:

And someone brought up a burial plot…but the overall majority…[felt] that this was strictly a social club, a club of friendship and fellowship and keeping the family together, and each one should worry about his own burial rights…for his family rather than as a club…. I mean, you see, it’s more or less a get-together rather than worrying about a burial-together.

42 The minutes of the Samuel Rudin Family Plan reveal an ongoing existential crisis about the organization’s purpose, particularly with the availability of other health insurance plans through companies; the family frequently compared its dues and benefits to those of Blue Cross. On several occasions throughout the 1950s, the Rudin Family Plan voted as to whether it should disband and pursue “some other more secure means of hospitalization.” It is possible that the Rudin relatives did not trust an outside health insurance company. Meeting Minutes of the Rudin Family Plan, December 21, 1951; March 1954; January 1955; April 8, 1956; June 1956; February 3, 1957.
These differences of opinion were likely generational, with older members interested in burial plots. Similarly, a proposal for cemetery plots in the socially oriented, multigenerational Gross Family Circle never came to be, despite several attempts. Mitchell notes that younger family members perceived circles’ interest in burial plots as being for the elderly, which often discouraged the young from joining.

Family circles offered mutual benefits beyond financial assistance, providing important connections for relatives and a ready-made customer base for members who owned businesses. Often, family circle members invested in fellow members’ businesses. Wealthier members also facilitated opportunities for their less-affluent brethren to achieve social mobility through assistance in finding jobs, supporting relatives’ businesses, and modeling a middle-class lifestyle. The BAYL Society gave members the opportunity to buy ownership in the family’s summer retreat, Greenhaven. For poorer BAYL members, vacationing like wealthier members and owning a vacation home, if only in part, were hallmarks of a middle-class lifestyle to which they could aspire. Less affluent members could also provide income and business for their wealthier relatives, whom they might have been more likely to patronize as fellow family circle members. Mitchell relays the story of a family circle member whose child became very sick one evening. She called a doctor relative that she knew through the family circle, and the doctor made an emergency house call.

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48 Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 104.
49 Ibid., 85.
50 Ibid., 106.
51 Ibid., 86; Kliger, 78.
52 Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, 1931-1950.
53 Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 85.
Providing opportunities for members to interact with those normally outside of their social circles went beyond facilitating social mobility. Family circles also helped to bring diverse members together to strengthen kinship bonds taxed by differential education levels, occupations, and places of residence.\textsuperscript{54} The WPA painted a rosy picture of class differentiation within family circles, saying that both rich and poor members enjoyed equal rights in a family circle.\textsuperscript{55} While this might have been true at times, the dynamics of class difference in family circles were more complicated. Often, social differences among members affected participation in the family circle. First, ability to pay dues and other fees often precluded members from becoming involved to some degree. The BAYL Society took steps to remedy this, making exceptions so financial situations wouldn’t bar those who wanted to be involved. For instance, one member of the BAYL Society wanted to continue buying into Greenhaven, but was unable to do so with the current rates. The board then recommended that the managers of Greenhaven let her pay lower dues.\textsuperscript{56} Almost a half-century later, the society expressed concern that cost might be an issue for some who wanted to attend the upcoming banquet: “The question of subsidizing members who cannot afford but wish to attend the banquet was discussed. It was made clear that this matter will be handled when it comes to light.”\textsuperscript{57} The BAYL Society’s financial records also show that loans were made to active members of the group.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 71, 86, 121, 180.
\textsuperscript{55} Kliger, Jewish Hometown Associations, 81.
\textsuperscript{56} “[Name withheld] requested to allow her to pay 75 cents per month dues, due to her financial conditions, the board of governors recommends to our Society to let her pay 75 cents per month dues.” Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, December 7, 1939.
Mitchell cites class as one of the most important causes of inactivity and ceasing involvement in family circles. First of all, class differences might have brought about strained relations with fellow group members, particularly over differing social values. Members on both ends of the social spectrum might have felt alienated if they did not fit in with the prevailing socioeconomic status of the family circle. Whereas a poorer relative in an affluent family circle might have found “his lifestyle is negatively sanctioned,” a wealthier, suburbanite relative might have found it both uncomfortable and inconvenient to travel back into the city to keep up with relatives with whom he had little in common.\textsuperscript{59} Hosting meetings was also a financial burden on members, especially as hosting was a way to express affluence. The Gross Family Circle, like many family circles of the time, had to set limits on the food served at meetings because members often tried to outdo one another in the refreshments they offered. A smaller home or apartment might have also precluded certain members from hosting meetings, due to space limitations or embarrassment.\textsuperscript{60} Finally, class differences among members might have caused tacit ill will to fester, alienating some members.\textsuperscript{61} Inactivity, however, was not always based upon financial reasons: conflicts had innumerable causes, and some

\textsuperscript{59}Mitchell, \textit{Mishpokhe}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 76, 88, 129, 139; Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, April 12, 1959; Interview with Earl and Ina Gross.
\textsuperscript{61}There is a curious entry in the BAYL Society’s meeting minutes: “Jack Smith spoke for himself and about thirty-five other persons, who claim to be interested in improving our place in Green Haven and are willing to help as with money to do so. We decided that we do not need any outside financial aid.” Could this refusal of financial assistance have had something to do with class differences? It is unclear whether “outside” refers to people outside the family circle or people outside the Greenhaven Society—a subgroup of the BAYL Society—who were BAYL members. Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, October 31, 1948.
members, for whatever reasons, simply were not interested in attending meetings and social events.  

For the most part, however, relatives were often happy to help one another, and it was often expected that assistance would be unreciprocated. Wealthier members could be quite sensitive to the plight of their needy relatives. For example, the BAYL Society’s board decided to help some members in need, but their meeting minutes explicitly stated that this decision should not be read with the rest of the minutes at the general body meeting.

In addition, family circles sometimes engaged in philanthropic work directed outside of the group. After World War II, the BAYL Society founded the Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund to assist the needy. According to a 1950 history of the BAYL Society:

The international problem of rehabilitating the war-torn refugees of Europe found deserving consideration among our members. However, since all the dues are used for the mutual aid of our members, the Board recommended the raising of funds independent of the treasury so that the society would be in a position, financially, to meet the requests for contributions by either national or international charities.

Though the society solicited only members, outsiders would often contribute to the fund. This fund is still active today, and it generally gives to Jewish institutions. As of 1951, the society had given to the United Jewish Appeal, Hadassah, Histradrut (General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel), and the Society of Lithuanian Jews. The BAYL Society also earmarked money for charities that fulfilled Mo'os Chitem, the

\[\text{\footnotesize 62 For a description of different types of conflicts within family circles, please see Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 155-168.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 63 Personal communication with Philip Shapiro, October 6, 2011; Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 236 n.3.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 64 Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, December 17, 1963.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 66 Ibid., 416; Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, June 29, 1965.}\]
commandment to donate food to the needy, traditionally around Passover. In 1962, the Fund gave gifts to the Associated Charities (also known as the Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore), the Jewish Welfare Fund, the Society of Lithuanian Jews, Histadrut, and Mo’os Chitem. In 2009, the society earmarked half of the Fund’s contributions for Jewish organizations in Baltimore, giving to groups like the Associated Charities and Ahavas Yisrael Charity Fund, the latter of which helps needy Baltimore families, particularly through Mo’os Chitem. The other half went toward Israel, through charities like American Friends of Magen David Adom, Israel’s Red Cross. Family circles that engaged in philanthropy used funds from different sources. The BAYL Society took careful steps to keep dues, which went toward mutual aid and social activities, separate from contributions to the Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund. The Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle also had a designated charity fund. Members made small donations at every meeting in honor of simchot—joyous occasions—or in memory of a deceased family member. A small amount from each member’s monthly dues went toward the group’s charity fund that supported organizations like Hadassah, Histadrut, Associated Charities, the Jewish Welfare Fund, the American Red Cross, and

70 In 1965, the BAYL Society had a lengthy discussion on the respective jurisdictions of the Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund, the society’s general fund, and a proposed mutual aid fund. Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, June 29, 1965.
a local convalescent home. The Gross Family Circle often used money from dues to give contributions to Jewish hospitals in honor or in memory of members.

Such philanthropic giving was not pervasive among family circles. According to Mitchell, the majority of family circles did not give to outside charities; they preferred to focus on the needs of their families rather than the needs of their larger communities. Giving was likely more common among affluent family circles, where there was more disposable income and the needs of a larger community were more urgent than the needs of the family. For instance, the BAYL Society founded the Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund after World War II, a time when many Jews were achieving social mobility. Nevertheless, more affluent family circles might have chosen not to give for fear that one solicitation from one organization would turn into many solicitations from several organizations. For instance, the Gross Family Circle discussed giving money to Israel through the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Someone brought up the concern that “the name of the Gross Family Circle would then be given to other organizations seeking funds,” so the discussion was tabled.

Giving and receiving mutual aid, as well as engaging in philanthropy, enabled family circle members to enhance their sense of Jewish identity by participating in Jewish activities and helping Jewish organizations. Most significantly, family circles relied on one another—kin and fellow Jews—for assistance. Antisemitism forced Jews to depend upon one another. In the process, they demonstrated that as poor Jews living in America,

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71 Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, November 2, 1947; October 10, 1948; February 20, 1949; January 15, 1950; March 5, 1950; October 29, 1950; January 7, 1951; May 6, 1951; June 3, 1951; April 6, 1952; May 17, 1953.
74 Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, March 27, 1949.
they were self-reliant and were not dependent on outside charity. For instance, in order for the Portney Family Circle to bring over relatives from Europe, “One member of the circle would have to submit a financial statement, and assure the authorities that said refugees would be taken care of for the first six months after their entry into the U.S.”

By proving that they were not a burden on American society, family circle members tried to ameliorate the status of Jews in the eyes of Americans and demonstrate that they were capable of living in American society. In addition, Jews might have also avoided assistance from amenable non-Jewish organizations for fear that these organizations would push a Christian agenda. By turning inward for help, American Jews erected a boundary that marked them as separate from American society in giving and receiving aid.

One of the largest concerns of the earliest family circles was offering a Jewish burial to members. In 1939, 46% of family circles existed to provide cemetery plots. Cemeteries have always played an important role in Jewish communities, particularly because they help fulfill the commandment to honor one’s father and mother. Cemeteries were typically segregated by race and religion, so one should not read too much into a member’s choice to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. However, the decision to spend eternity with one’s family, a group that provided a rich repertoire of Jewish experiences, might have bolstered members’ connections with Judaism. Strengthening one’s connection to Judaism through the purchase of a burial plot and a secular identification as an American were not mutually exclusive. The WPA Yiddish Writers’ Group describes a discussion over whether the text on a family circle cemetery gate should be in English or

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75 Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, March 7, 1948.
76 Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations*, 84, 112.
77 Kliger, *Jewish Hometown Associations*, 79.
in Yiddish. Ultimately, it was decided that the group inscription should be in English, but individual members could choose whether their names were listed in English or Yiddish.\textsuperscript{78} In this case, members expressed both their American identity in using English letters and their Jewish identity in their choice to be buried among family and, for some, their use of Yiddish.

Philanthropy in family circles was also rooted in Jewish practice, specifically in the Code of Maimonides, which created a hierarchy of charitable giving. According to Maimonides, the highest form of *tzedakah*—the Jewish obligation to help the needy—is a gift that enables one to become self-supporting. Many earlier family circles were founded precisely for this purpose. Whether the founders of family circles consciously invoked Maimonides as they declared their purpose is unknown. However, those with knowledge of Maimonides’s eight degrees of *tzedakah* would have recognized how family circles carried out Maimonides’s highest level and perhaps they would have shared this Jewish knowledge with fellow members. In addition to providing a forum for the sharing of Jewish ideas, family circles helped members add to their body of Jewish experiences by participating in *tzedakah*, a cornerstone of Judaism.

In families that engaged in outside giving, philanthropy enabled members to identify as Jewish through consciously taking part in *tzedakah* while still embracing an American lifestyle. Several recent surveys reveal that secular American Jews best connect with Judaism through the commandment of *tikkun olam*—repairing the world—to bring about social justice. Though these surveys come several decades after the family circles studied here, the prevalence of *tikkun olam* and *tzedakah* in less-observant Jewish organizations throughout the twentieth century confirms that American Jews have

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 79-80.
continued to view social action as a more accessible way to express their Jewishness than religious observance. In 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* conducted a survey of American Jews, asking for the most important factor in the respondents’ religious identities. An overwhelming 50% answered that “commitment to social equality” was the most significant personal determinant of Jewish identity. In contrast, 17% indicated that religious observance was the most critical aspect of their Jewish identity and 17% replied that Israel was most important. In 2000, sociologist Steven M. Cohen and writer Leonard Fein asked the same question, and 47% of respondents answered “commitment to social equality.” Again, the majority did not cite religious observance (24%) or support for Israel (13%) as most important. In 2003, the American Jewish Committee administered a similar survey. 41% indicated that “being part of the Jewish people” was most significant in their Jewish identity. In second place, 21% answered “commitment to social justice.” Only 13% said “religious observance.”

Notes Conservative Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, even non-observant Jews “feel in their bones that they have a duty as Jews to make this a better world, that this is the essence of what it means to be a Jew.”

Surely, *tikkun olam* was, and continues to be, an accessible entry point into Judaism for secular American Jews.

One of the ways in which family circle members underscored their connection to Jewish identity was by giving almost exclusively to Jewish organizations. The Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund gave to Jewish organizations in the United States, Lithuania, and Israel. The BAYL Society confirmed this notion with an amendment passed in 1964 regarding the Anna and Myer Smith Memorial Fund: “The only charities to be considered

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80 Ibid., x.
are those that directly help toward the welfare and benefit of the Jewish people…"\(^{81}\)

Mid-century American Jews championed two causes in particular, both of which helped emphasize their connections to Judaism: the rehabilitation of Holocaust survivors and support for the State of Israel. For the former cause, family circles gave to groups like the Society of Lithuanian Jews. They also facilitated the immigration of refugee relatives to the United States, helped the refugees establish themselves, and sent care packages to refugees abroad.\(^{82}\) Supporting Israel also helped American Jews connect with their roots.

In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe writes, “But if one could establish oneself as a Jew by ‘working for Israel,’ then one might put aside those irksome spiritual and metaphysical problems life was now imposing on all nonreligious Jews.”\(^{83}\) In ‘working for Israel,’ American Jews identified themselves as Jewish despite their integration into American society. By planting trees in Israel’s John F. Kennedy Memorial Forest (as the BAYL Society did beginning in 1964), providing scholarships for young relatives to go to Israel (as the BAYL Society continues to do to this day), buying Israel Bonds, donating to Israeli charities, and encouraging congressmen to support Israel, family circles could support the Jewish homeland in a variety of ways.\(^{84}\) Taking part in these activities helped American Jews create, maintain, and strengthen personal connections to Judaism.

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\(^{81}\) Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, January 12, 1964.

\(^{82}\) Interview with Earl and Ina Gross; Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, October 5, 1947; January 4, 1948; February 1, 1948; April 4, 1948; September 3, 1950; February 10, 1952; February 7, 1954.


Milton Goldin argues that Jews at all levels of observance give to Jewish organizations to ensure the survival of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion: “In times of crisis, Jews respond not only by seeking to preserve each other but by seeking to preserve Judaism, however vaguely practiced or understood.”85 By assisting needy American Jews, Holocaust refugees, and Israel, family circle members were not merely ensuring their individual connections to Judaism; they were ensuring that there would be a rich body of tradition and culture with which future generations could make similar connections.

Engaging in *tzedakah* also offered American Jews the chance to express their Jewishness without compromising their position in American society. Argues Goldin, “Searching for common bonds with coreligionists, they [American Jews] found the quasi-American conviction that money can solve any problem could be tastefully joined to the ancient concept of *tzedakah*.”86 Sometimes, this *tzedakah* was less altruistic and more self-serving. Wealthy German Jews of the nineteenth century looked down upon the poor Eastern European Jews they assisted, and encouraged assimilation so recent arrivals would not reflect poorly upon all American Jews.87 For family circles, helping out their less fortunate brethren was perhaps a way for family circles to distinguish themselves from needy American Jews by demonstrating their affluence and integration in American society.

Finally, family circles often gave contributions to charities in memory of someone or in honor of some important lifecycle event, which might have emphasized their

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86 Ibid., 172.
connections to the past and to Jewish traditions (Figure 2:1). For instance, the Gross Family Circle often made contributions to Jewish hospitals in memory of members who had passed away or in honor of members’ accomplishments. 88 Members donated to the Portney Family Circle’s charity fund in honor of special occasions and in memory of deceased relatives. 89 The BAYL Society “taxed” its members, asking that they give a contribution of one dollar to the society’s general fund in honor of simchot like births, b’rit milot (baby boys’ circumcisions), b’nai mitzvot (bar and bat mitzvahs), weddings, and anniversaries. 90 Although Jews are not the only group to dedicate their contributions, such tzedakah encouraged donors to recognize and participate in specifically Jewish rituals, perhaps by attending a bar mitzvah service or remembering the anniversary of death—the yahrzeit—of a family member.

89 Meeting Minutes of the Nathan and Mary Portney Family Circle, February 20, 1949; January 7, 1951; May 6, 1951; May 17, 1953.
Figure 2:1 Donation card of the Etelson & Posner Family Circle, n.d., Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore (1995.174.006). Photograph by author. In the blank space, donors could dedicate their gift in honor of a lifecycle event or in memory of a beloved family member. Dedicated giving, especially in honor of a b’rit milah or a bar or bat mitzvah was another way for members to acknowledge their connections to Judaism.
Today, the BAYL Society still makes philanthropic contributions, and even gives mutual aid when necessary.\(^{91}\) In 1998, however, the organization began to seriously question whether it should continue. The group voted unanimously that it should. The minutes from this meeting gave many reasons the group should continue to exist, including “linkages to the past/sense of history and connection felt in belonging,” “the ability/need to reach out and help family members in times of distress,” and “the charitable contributions.”\(^{92}\) These justifications for the society’s continued existence echo the ways in which family circles were able to address the changing financial needs of American Jews, and how in meeting these needs, family circles enriched members’ connections to Judaism. The BAYL Society, like other family circles of the twentieth-century, rendered assistance to needy members and other persons and organizations outside of the family circle while bringing together relatives from diverse backgrounds in a spirit of brotherly affection. By engaging in *tzedakah*—directed either internally or externally—family circle members could personally connect to Judaism in a variety of ways, from supporting Jewish organizations and causes to providing Jewish burials for relatives. However, family circles did not only help members meet their needs and bolster their Jewish identities through mutual aid and philanthropy; family circles also filled a need for social connections among kin that might have been strained by geographic and social mobility.

\(^{91}\) Personal communication with Philip Shapiro, October 6, 2011.

“HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME”: REMAINING RELEVANT AND CREATING ACCESSIBLE JEWISH EXPERIENCES

The world is always changing, and in the middle of the twentieth century, American Jewish families faced broad changes to American society, as well as changes unique to American Jewish life. For many Americans—including American Jews of Eastern European descent—social and geographic mobility placed increasing emphasis on the nuclear family unit, often at the expense of relationships with extended family. Women began to take on leadership roles beyond those of private motherhood, while youth generally became less interested in participating in community life.\(^1\) American Jews also dealt with unique circumstances, contending with the Holocaust’s destruction and the creation of the State of Israel.

Family circles responded to all of these changing circumstances, but their primary focus was keeping the extended family together. In helping to “keep the family together,” family circles provided social opportunities that helped members strengthen kinship bonds tested by economic, geographic, and generational differences.\(^2\) In family circles founded earlier, generally established for the dual purposes of “keeping the family

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together” and rendering aid to one another, the latter purpose faded as the former grew stronger, usually around mid-century. The B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib (BAYL) Family Society began to take on a more social function beginning in late 1962 and early 1963. By the early 1960s, members had achieved affluence to the extent that mutual aid was no longer needed as the chief purpose of the organization. The BAYL Society’s adaptation to a more social organization is typical of contemporary family circles. Family circles founded after World War II, like the Gross Family Circle and the Portney Family Circle, were primarily social organizations; they participated in social outings, holiday celebrations, and special events. Aid oriented family circles that generally shied away from social activities, like the Rudin Family Plan, became obsolete and disbanded.

Family circles also addressed contemporary changes by encouraging indifferent youth to be active members and restructuring gender roles within the group. Through socializing with one another and engaging in contemporary Jewish concerns, members shared American and Jewish experiences, nurturing members’ connections to Judaism.

The social importance of family circles finds its root in landsmanschaften and earlier family circles. Despite both groups’ emphasis on mutual aid, providing social outlets for members was always important: the Yiddish Writers’ Group concluded in 1939 that in addition to mutual aid, most family circles “strengthen[ed] their family ties and provide[d] outlets for common social interests and cultural needs.” When the mutual

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3 Ibid., 43. Sometimes, cousins’ clubs would take the place of the aid oriented family circle. Like later family circles, cousins’ clubs were primarily social. However, they often would not permit the older generations to join.
aid function of family circles became obsolete, “keeping the family together” was a logical choice for an organization’s renewed purpose.

For family circles founded after World War II, “keeping the family together” was best achieved through socializing. The term “socializing” is broad here, and it includes any kind of interaction among family members, such as formal group meetings, banquets, holiday celebrations, outings, picnics, card games, and other get-togethers. The highlights of the BAYL Society’s social activities included summer weekends at Greenhaven (Figure 3:1), anniversary banquets every five years (Figures 3:2 and 3:3), short meetings to allow for more socializing over food and games, and Jewish holiday celebrations like a “Purim hootenanny.” The Gross Family Circle put on annual events like picnics in June and Chanukah parties. They also planned special events, like trips to the Latin Casino and Atlantic City, but such outings often fell through. The Portney Family Circle did “straw rides,” bus trips to nearby destinations, and baseball and basketball games with another local family circle, along with bingo games and rummage sales to raise money for the organization.

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7 Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, May 16, 1948; March 12, 1950; April 8, 1951; December 14, 1952; May 10, 1953; December 15, 1953; November 5, 1957; April 23, 1961. Private collection.

8 Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, March 6, 1949; October 1, 1950; June 11, 1950; October 19, 1950; February 4, 1951; May 6, 1951; January 6, 1952. Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore.
Figure 3:1 Family gathering at Greenhaven, c. 1930s. Courtesy of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society. At Greenhaven, multiple generations gathered together, forging relationships and sharing meals, stories, and traditions. Furthermore, members enjoyed leisure time and home ownership—luxuries to which many Americans aspired during the Depression.
Figure 3:2 50th Anniversary banquet of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society, 1951, Community Hall, Baltimore. Part 1 of 2. Courtesy of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society. The number of relatives in the photograph conveys the large size of the society and that it had sufficient resources and a formal organizational structure to plan large special events.
Figure 3:3 50th Anniversary banquet of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society, 1951, Community Hall, Baltimore. Part 2 of 2. Courtesy of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society.
The need for “keeping the family together” had never been greater as socioeconomic and geographic distances grew between relatives. Anthropologist William Mitchell eloquently explains the need for an organization that brought different family members together: “Membership in a family club…gives a person an opportunity to interact regularly with those relatives he would like to see or feels he should see, but with whom an intimate relationship is precluded because of social differences, geographic distances, and/or temperament differences.”

Words that express creating and maintaining relationships permeate documentation on family circles. According to members of one family circle, “It’s our only means of contact and the family tie that binds…” As of 1998, the purpose of the Smelkinson Family Circle of Baltimore was “to cement family relationships.” Furthermore, “keeping the family together” might have been a way for American Jews to cling to an important Jewish institution—and perhaps Jewishness itself—in the tumult of integrating into American society.

In order to strengthen and sustain relationships, family circles often took steps to take down barriers to participation, encouraging involvement and promising an enjoyable time. While earlier family circles often required long-winded meetings to carry out mutual aid and other social business, socially oriented family circles tended to perceive such meetings as impediments to members’ participation. Family circles therefore made structural changes to encourage less business and more pleasure. The BAYL Society restructured in the early 1960s, noting, “There is a general feeling that our meetings have become boring, and that we have strayed away from one of the main purposes of the

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9 Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 121.
10 Ibid., 119.
organization—that of socializing with the family.” Members suggested meeting in their homes for a more informal and friendly setting, limiting business to board meetings, reserving lengthy discussions for *The Bulletin*, and shortening meetings.\(^\text{12}\) Around this same time, the Gross Family Circle was also attempting to reorganize to renew members’ interests. Though already a socially oriented family circle, it sought to limit business in order to appeal to more members by cutting down on the number of meetings. Members also suggested accommodating children with earlier meetings and fun activities and adults with special events like film nights, discussions on current events, talent shows, and bingo games.\(^\text{13}\)

It is hardly coincidental that these two family circles reorganized around the same time, in the early 1960s. Becoming a social organization was not enough; family circles tried to make it as easy as possible for members to stay involved because post-war geographic and social mobility threatened networks of extended kin. The following excerpt describes the BAYL Society’s difficulty in maintaining family interest just before it sought to restructure:

> Perhaps this is the natural consequence of an improved economic and social status with the spreading of interests and the irresistible pull of outside forces…. Caught up in the maelstrom that is America, we have learned to live independently of each other, so much so, that a simcha [a happy occasion] within the mishpocho [family] is no longer a simcha for the mishpocho.\(^\text{14}\)

This quote foreshadows the fate of the family circle institution, and describes the constant tension between “the maelstrom that is America” and “keeping the family together” present in all family circles. Family circles battled to reconcile this tension by not only


changing their purpose as the needs of their members shifted but also reorganizing to more effectively meet those needs. This included creating and sustaining extended family bonds as members no longer lived together in the same neighborhoods.

Family circles also made participation accessible to members who lived farther away. One of the ways in which family circles stayed in contact with those who could not or did not attend meetings was through newsletters. The BAYL Society’s *Bulletin* was and still is a “means of keeping informed, those who cannot attend regularly to the meeting, of all the activities that are taking place.” This sentiment is reflected throughout the organization’s history, in a 1962 president’s message: “The Bulletin has undoubtedly been a concrete force in keeping our members in far-flung places….”

Unlike most family circles, however, the BAYL Society has had a large enough membership to cater to faraway members. Around the 1960s, the society decided to hold a meeting or two per year in Washington, DC to better involve more distant members. Today, regional contingents of the family get together on occasion. In 2000, the first BAYL Society meeting was held in Israel (“What would our parents and grandparents have thought of that!” mused *The Bulletin*). A Southern contingent of the family, called the “United Nachamsons,” meets once a year, and members in California have gotten together. The society also accommodates faraway members by allowing members in

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Israel to pay their dues in shekels.\textsuperscript{21} Hundreds of members from across the country and the world gather every five years for anniversary banquets (Figures 3:2 and 3:3). Furthermore, members need not gauge their involvement in the circle based upon attendance at meetings and events. According to current president Rebecca Flaxman Tucker, the society no longer plans social activities because members have other priorities and do not want formal obligations. Members prefer to keep their involvement at an informal level by keeping in touch through emails, \textit{The Bulletin}, and anniversary celebrations every five years. Says Tucker, “It doesn’t make sense to knock yourself out to do those kind of things [social activities] when that’s not what they want from this group. They can have that with other organizations.”\textsuperscript{22} The BAYL Society’s uniquely large size and its ability to respond to the changing needs of members allow it to “keep the family together,” despite geographic mobility.

Keeping the interest of young members was also vital to “keeping the family together,” and it was a ubiquitous concern of family circles. As the WPA study notes, children often preferred to take part in activities away from the eyes of parents.\textsuperscript{23} Family circles addressed this by cultivating young members, in the hopes that they would one day be leaders. From 1936 until 1940, the BAYL Society had a younger contingent called the B’nai Juniors. They planned their own activities, and as of 1950, 95% of former B’nai Juniors were active members of the BAYL Society.\textsuperscript{24} A history of the organization, updated in 1971, discusses the society’s interest in attracting younger members: “The minutes describe our constant efforts to make the meetings interesting, especially for our

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Rebecca Flaxman Tucker. 
\textsuperscript{23} Kliger, \textit{Jewish Hometown Associations}, 83. 
\textsuperscript{24} It is unknown how large the original B’nai Junior group was. “B’nai Juniors.” \textit{The Bulletin, 50th Anniversary Edition} 4, no. 18 (November-December 1950): 429.
young members; they are the future of this Society. When we were youngsters, and our parents vitally involved, every meeting was interesting—an occasion to remember, even though geared for the adults.”25 In 1991, the society voted to give members’ children a gift of a free, one-year membership when they married, hoping that they would become full-fledged members. The board of the society also invited younger members to board meetings in the hope of cultivating more officers.26 The Rudin Family Plan employed similar strategies, suggesting that younger members pay lower rates and appointing a young member as acting secretary.27 The Gross Family Circle held “children’s meetings,” in which they conducted no business and had activities and refreshments geared toward younger members.28 Keeping the interest of youth was also a challenge because the further removed members were from the founding generations of the circle, the less likely younger cousins were to be close with one another. As Rebecca Flaxman Tucker describes, in the early generations of the family circles, siblings and first cousins were often each other’s closest friends. Their children and grandchildren, generationally removed from their second and third cousins, instead built relationships outside of the family.29 Earl Gross echoes this sentiment, explaining that the founders of the Gross Family Circle—all siblings—were the glue that kept the family circle together. After the founding siblings died, there was less of a reason for cousins, who were not very close with one another, to meet regularly in a formal environment.30

29 Interview with Rebecca Flaxman Tucker.
30 Earl and Ina Gross (members of the Gross Family Circle), oral history interview with the author, November 21, 2011, Wynnewood, PA.
The need for lowered barriers to accessibility and the difficulty of cultivating the interest of children might have been part of a nationally declining interest in community life. In Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001), he argues that American participation in community organizations cycles through periods of involvement and disconnect. Beginning in the middle to late 1960s and continuing to the present, overall community engagement has been on the downswing. He identifies a number of causes for this decline, such as the movement away from “mom and pop” stores in favor of nationalized and global industries, electronic entertainment, pressures of time and money, suburban sprawl, and the tendency for younger generations to be less involved than older generations.31 Perhaps restructuring to remove obstacles to participation and efforts to cultivate younger members were in part a response this waning civic engagement.

Family circles also might have suggested to both fellow Jews and outside observers that the Jewish family—nuclear and extended—was a strong and healthy institution. A number of studies from the middle of the twentieth century demonstrate a preoccupation among Jewish scholars with proving the closeness of Jewish families. These statistical studies, evaluating both extended and nuclear families, concluded that overall, American Jewish families tended to be more closely knit than non-Jewish families.32 One study found that attachment to extended family was stronger among Jews,

but that Jews generally felt more attached to their nuclear families. Other contemporary documents were intent on painting a positive picture of Jewish families. A 1954 pamphlet produced by the National Council of Jewish Women, called *The American Jewish Family: A Study* described the nuclear American Jewish family as tight-knit and strong and lauded the Jewish family for providing a foundation of values that allowed American Jews to contribute to the progress of American civilization. Like the scholarly studies, family circles were intent on espousing a positive picture of the family. Note the editor’s reaction to this blurb in the BAYL Society’s *Bulletin* on “What the Family means to me:"

You picked the wrong person to write any reminiscences… As you know, I haven’t lived in Baltimore since I was a very young boy, and have attended the Family meetings very infrequently. (Editor’s note: Not so. Statistically, he has quite a high attendance compared with many local members). So to be perfectly candid, the Family Society hasn’t meant anything special to me personally (Editor’s note: Is that why he rushes from pillar to post during his “travels” to deliver regards between relatives and publicizes pending banquets, etc.?).

The editor is quick to defend the member’s connection to the society, despite the member’s claims to the contrary. I believe that the editor hoped to demonstrate that the members of the BAYL Society—even those that lived far away and did not feel strongly connected—still valued the family. Having healthy family relationships is both a Jewish and an American value. Embracing this value helped American Jews express their Jewish identity and demonstrate to American society that they too were American and valued positive relationships. Though outsiders were likely unaware of family circles, non-Jews might have witnessed family circle outings, or a member might have mentioned the family circle in conversation with a non-Jewish friend.

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33 Brav, *Jewish Family Solidarity*, 47.
Family circles also adapted to and reflected the changing roles of women in American society. As women began to enter the public sphere and continued to seek equal rights, they played more active roles in the family circle, often becoming leaders. In the early years of family circles, women were relegated to minimal roles, particularly where the Orthodox tradition of separating the sexes ruled. Upon electing its first female president in 1950, the BAYL Society Bulletin noted that it was “[a] far cry from those early days when the men sat around the council table while the women sat some distance away and the children…stood about and listened to the proceedings.” When women began taking leadership roles, they did so less frequently than men and were generally in very specific positions. On the subject of the correlation between gender and officer position, one informant told William Mitchell, “We don’t have any discrimination against women [both laugh]. It is just that women are more capable as far as the Good and Welfare Fund is concerned and so on than men so we choose them for the jobs.” In addition to heading the “Good and Welfare” or “Sunshine” committees, women were often secretaries, and sometimes treasurers. Throughout its twenty-year history, the recording secretary of the Gross Family Circle was almost always a woman. A few women in the Gross Family Circle and the Portney Family Circle rose to be vice president, but never president. However, as former member Ina Gross notes, the women let their husbands think that the men were in control, but the women had quite a bit of

38 “Good and Welfare” or “Sunshine” committees took care of sending cards and gifts for simchot and illnesses, along with keeping up on family news. Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 94-95.
sway, particularly in how they planned and hosted meetings and events.\textsuperscript{40} Though the Gross and Portney family circles never had a female president, the BAYL Society has had nine female presidents out of twenty two.\textsuperscript{41} 

The contemporary concerns of international Jewry also influenced the activities of family circles. At mid-century, these issues were primarily the aftermath of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.\textsuperscript{42} This paper has already discussed how family circles supported Holocaust survivors in various ways. In 1949, the Gross Family Circle signed a petition encouraging their U.S. senators to support continued eradication of Nazism in Europe. At the same meeting, the member who introduced the petition also exhorted those present to write postcards to President Truman and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Warren Austin, opposing the internationalization of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{43}

Getting involved in these causes was a way for family circles to connect with relatives over shared concerns, following Regina Morantz-Sanchez’s argument that Jews turn to “connection and community” after upheavals such as war and tragedy.\textsuperscript{44} The Holocaust had destroyed so many families, and it seems hardly coincidental that groups like the Gross Family Circle and the Portney Family Circle were founded in 1946 and 1947 respectively, almost immediately following the Holocaust. Responding to the aftermath of the Holocaust also reinforced members’ connection to Judaism. As Irving Howe explained in his seminal \textit{World of Our Fathers}, “Memories of the Holocaust pressed deep

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Earl and Ina Gross.


\textsuperscript{42} Kliger, \textit{Jewish Hometown Associations}, 77.

\textsuperscript{43} Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, October 9, 1949.

into the consciousness of Jews, all, or almost all, making them feel that whatever being a Jew meant, it required of them that they try to remain Jews. This was in part a matter of fear; somewhat more, a matter of need; but most of all, a matter of honor.”

Nazi Germany had obliterated an enormous percentage of world Jewry, and American Jews recognized the importance of and dignity in keeping their family intact and their faith and traditions alive.

Family circle members locked on to key Jewish issues, maintaining and perhaps strengthening their connections to Judaism, but often not wrestling too consciously with their American and Jewish identities. Writing in 1973, Charles Liebman explained that American Jews generally do not believe that acceptance as Americans and the survival of Judaism are mutually exclusive: “The behavior of the American Jew is best understood as his unconscious effort to restructure his environment and reorient his own self-definition and perception of reality so as to reduce the tension between these values.”

The ways in which family circles participated in Jewish activities, celebrated Jewish holidays, and championed Jewish causes allowed members to identify as Jewish in a comfortable environment while expressing their acceptance of American culture and values. When members of the Gross Family Circle signed the petition urging their senators to eliminate Nazism in Central Europe, they supported an emotional Jewish cause while they appealed to their senators’ desire for democracy in Germany.

47 Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, October 9, 1949.
Sociologist Herbert Gans notes, American Jews “salvage from tradition only those themes, objects, and experiences which bring pleasure and at the same time never conflict with or disrupt the basically American way of life.”

American Jews did this particularly in their celebrations of Jewish holidays, favoring holidays that espoused American values and, often, ignoring those that made Judaism visible in the public sphere. Their favorite holidays were Chanukah and Passover; the former was essentially a Jewish response to American Christmas and the latter drew upon American narratives of freedom, often comparing Moses to Abraham Lincoln. Holidays like Chanukah and Passover were made even more American by their emphasis on domesticity and consumerism, two key mid-century trends. Jenna Weissman Joselit notes that the most frequently forgotten holidays were Purim, Sukkot and Shavuot; not only did they render Jewishness publicly visible, but they also revealed how different Judaism was from American society. Passover, Chanukah, and, surprisingly, Purim were the most popular holidays among family circles. For example, in its seven-year existence, the Portney Family Circle only celebrated these three holidays as a group; they held Passover Seders

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50 Weissman Joselit, Wonders of America, 220, 227, 230; Mitchell, Mishpokhe, 152. For more detailed information on the appeal of Chanukah and Passover, see Weissman Joselit, Wonders of America, 219-243.

51 Weissman Joselit, Wonders of America, 262.

52 Ibid., 243.

almost annually, and a Chanukah party and a Purim party were held at least once. Purim seems like the most likely of the less-popular holidays to be observed, because it is a festive, costumed celebration. A family Purim celebration would likely be more informal and enjoyable than a long Megillah reading at synagogue. For children in family circles, Chanukah was the most popular holiday. With its promise of presents, it prevented children from being seduced by Christmas and provided an accessible entry point into Jewish tradition. Chanukah, for young and old, strengthened connections to Judaism by providing a set of traditions that members could identify with during the holiday season. The Gross Family Circle conducted a “Rachael Leah” (a more Jewishly-named “Pollyanna”) among members, and children received gifts from “Chanukah Claus.” Younger members also witnessed the lighting of the menorah, learned the accompanying, simple prayers, and heard the story of Chanukah.

Despite its emphasis on American-compatible holidays, family circles could also be considerate of the more observant members who celebrated the religious holidays with less popular appeal. For example, the BAYL Society postponed a meeting because it fell on Lag BaOmer, a comparatively obscure Jewish holiday. Members might have also found it easier to celebrate these Jewish holidays because these celebrations took place in the relative privacy of the family circle. Gary Gerstle argues that American Jews either left behind their more outmoded traditions, or relegated them to privacy in order to be accepted into American society. The semi-private, semi-public environment of the

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54 Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle. Seder: March 7, 1948; February 20, 1949; March 5, 1950; April 8, 1951; March 9, 1952; March 1, 1953; May 9, 1954. Purim: February 1, 1953. Chanukah: January 3, 1954.
56 Meeting Minutes of the BAYL Society, April 23, 1963.
57 Gerstle, American Crucible, 330.
family circle was a safe place in which members could express the aspects of their Jewishness less palatable to Americans.

American Jews could also comfortably explore their heritage within the multigenerational environment of the family circle. Through regular meetings and special activities and events, older members could share their experiences with younger members and form stronger relationships. As a former president of the BAYL Society described, “From our elders, we gather fascinating information that is really history now, and unavailable in books and most literary sources…. Through working side by side we truly get to know one another.”  

Elders and youngsters often held different worldviews, but in the family circle, young members could learn about their grandparents’ traditions and cultural values. In the film *Avalon*, elder Sam Krichinsky tells the youngsters of the family circle the story of his immigration and life in the United States. As the adults complain that he retells the same stories, Sam responds, “If we don’t tell them, they don’t know.”

Today, the BAYL Society involves members in learning about the family’s past. The society studies genealogy and a handful of members have visited the family’s village of origin in Lithuania.

The very act of being with fellow Jews could also help American Jews feel more Jewish, and family circles offered ample opportunities to be together. Several scholars, from Irving Howe (“He is a Jew in that his experience contains the possibility of linking himself with the collective and individual experience of earlier Jews”) to Deborah Dash

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Moore (“The essence of Jewish identity, the core meaning for many American Jews, may very well be their social ties to one another”), have described how American Jews—both individually and collectively—identify as Jewish through communal experiences. Because American Jews lived in a predominantly Christian society, the family circle allowed American Jews to come together and create temporary Jewish worlds.

Family circles offered geographically mobile, suburban Jews access to Jewish experiences that they had once had in their urban, Jewish neighborhoods. Unlike the highly religious culture of the Jewish neighborhood, however, family circles offered a more accessible entry point, stressing “good works, liberal ethics, Jewish responsibility,” and comfortable Jewish traditions, instead of the demanding religiosity pervasive in the old neighborhoods. In other words, family circles offered what Herbert Gans calls “symbolic Judaism”: “Instead of living Judaism as a part of daily life, American Jews were choosing the few activities, objects, and places that enabled them to ‘feel and express their Jewishness’ without being bound by it.” For example, the Portney Family Circle had an English family prayer, which they presumably read at meetings:

Heavenly Father, we beseech thee to bless our noble and charitable organization, the Nathan & Mary Portney Family circle. Grant us many years of continued success in the fulfillment [sic] of our worthwhile endeavors. Keep us united in good health and protect and shield us from all sickness, trouble, and loss. Provide us with the power to overcome all our obstacles, and may we succeed in all our

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63 Ibid., 615. Howe describes how Jews sought out this low-pressured form of Judaism; it is my formulation that family circles were one way in which Jews met this need.
undertakings. May the Supreme King of Kings in His mercy watch over our elected officers, give them wisdom, courage, and understanding to continue their good work, and may they lead us to even greater achievements in the years ahead. Amen.65

This prayer expressed members’ Jewishness without demanding knowledge of Hebrew or strict observance of the Torah’s commandments. Instead of being tethered to their ancestors’ way of life, American Jews could define their connections to Judaism, which also freed them to express theirAmericanness. At the same time, family circles were respectful of those members who sought a demanding, highly religious Judaism. In planning their 100th anniversary banquet, the BAYL Society voted unanimously to keep the banquet kosher, “…in keeping with the history of our family, out of respect to our ancestors and our observant members…”66

Family circles created accessible Jewish experiences by recognizing Jewish lifecycle events. During a certain period in its history, the BAYL Society annually held a brief memorial service at the beginning of meetings, saying the prayer “El Mordechai Rachamim” and remembering family members who had passed away during the year.67 The Gross Family Circle also kept a running list of family yahrzeits, as well as members’ birthdays and wedding anniversaries.68 For a few years, the Portney Family Circle held an annual yahrzeit service for departed family members outside of their regular meeting schedule.69 Family circles also bought gifts to recognize members’ birthdays, b’nai

65 Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, 1947-1954.
68 Meeting Minutes and Ephemera of the Gross Family Circle.
69 Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, April 6, 1952; April 19, 1953.
mitzvot, engagements, weddings, and milestone anniversaries. Members often kept abreast of family lifecycle events through the “Good and Welfare” portion of meetings. These occasions were also shared with the BAYL membership in *The Bulletin*. For instance, in the 60th Anniversary issue of *The Bulletin*, a member who was a Conservative Jew wrote of the *auf Ruf*—when a soon-to-be-groom is called to recite a blessing over the Torah—of an Orthodox cousin, describing how he participated in and learned about the traditions of another denomination. This sharing of lifecycle events continues today with a section of *The Bulletin* called “Family Chatter,” devoted to brief notices about family b’nai mitzvot, trips to Israel, and other simchot.

In addition, family circles participated in Yiddish and Israeli cultural activities, allowing members to take part in enjoyable Jewish experiences. In 1963, the BAYL Society encouraged members to see noted Yiddish actor Theodore Bikel, and at a meeting in 1986, the society showed a film about Yiddish theater. The society discussed planning a family trip to Israel in 2006, but it has yet to happen. Taking part in Jewish experiences and recognizing Jewish lifecycle events was an appealing way for members to maintain their Jewishness without grappling too deeply with their American and Jewish identities.

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72 The BAYL Society has had a “Family Chatter” section in their *Bulletin* for several years. For one example, see “Family Chatter.” *The Bulletin* 68 (January 2010): 2-21.


75 This follows from Irving Howe’s statement, quoted earlier, that “[I]f one could establish oneself as a Jew by ‘working for Israel’ [along with taking part in Israeli cultural activities and having Jewish experiences], then one might put aside those irksome spiritual and metaphysical problems life was imposing on all nonreligious Jews.” Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 630.
Despite the efforts of the family circles to keep their activities pleasurable, the barriers to involvement low, and the Judaism they espoused undemanding, most eventually disappeared. It is interesting to track the declining interest in family circles in the years before they gradually fell apart. Throughout the mid-1960s, the Gross Family Circle often had poor attendance at meetings, and many meetings were canceled.\(^{76}\) Activities were frequently canceled due to lack of interest, and a president of the Gross Family Circle acknowledged this when planning one outing, asking “if everyone would abide by arrangements made by the committee for the trip.”\(^{77}\) In late 1952 and through 1953, the Portney Family Circle began to acknowledge that its membership was dwindling and active members were losing interest.\(^{78}\) The minutes of the circle cease in 1954.

Throughout the history of family circles, it had always been easier to recruit members than to encourage their involvement.\(^{79}\) However, the same forces that encouraged an accessible, social family circle—affluence, geographic mobility, the demise of community life, and the desire for a Judaism that did not conflict with the American lifestyle—also contributed to family circles’ disappearance. The minutes of a 1998 meeting of the BAYL Society echo these reasons for the disappearances of family circles, as members expressed the “difficult/inability to get members to actively participate; the feeling that the BAYL had outlived its usefulness; [and] the inability to draw into the group the younger family members.”\(^{80}\) American Jews found other ways to

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\(^{77}\) Meeting Minutes of the Gross Family Circle, April 23, 1961; Meeting Minutes of the Rudin Family Plan, December 2, 1951.
\(^{78}\) Meeting Minutes of the Portney Family Circle, November 9, 1952; June 7, 1953; September 6, 1953.
meet their social needs, support Israel, and be Jewish that were even more convenient, closer to their homes, and less demanding than a frequent meeting schedule. “Keeping the family together” now meant interacting with immediate family and sporadically seeing extended family. Ina and Earl Gross recall that after the family circle ceased to exist, they kept up informally with family members on occasion.81

The B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society is an exceptional case in that it is still active today. Its large size and geographically dispersed membership allow members to be as involved as they wish. Through most of its history, the BAYL Society has had the resources to meet members’ needs as the circumstances of American Jews changed. Says current president Rebecca Flaxman Tucker, “The world changes, and we change with it.”82

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81 Interview with Earl and Ina Gross.
82 Interview with Rebecca Flaxman Tucker.
Indeed, life was changing for American Jews of Eastern European descent in the twentieth century. Eastern European American Jews were moving away from the urban Jewish neighborhoods in which they lived with their extended kin, dispersing to the suburbs and attenuating relationships with now-geographically distant relatives. This geographic mobility was typically accompanied by social mobility, as many American Jews achieved affluence, though sometimes at a different rate than other relatives. Younger generations sought acceptance into American society, and relationships between generations could be strained as family members held different cultural worldviews. The neighborhood was no longer the locus of American Jewish life, and family members no longer shared similar economic situations and cultural values across generations. The focal point of Eastern European Jewish identity also blurred as American Jews reconciled American and Jewish cultural values.

The family circle is a micro lens through which one can study how twentieth-century Eastern European American Jews responded to their changing environments. This study builds upon the existing literature on family circles, namely Hannah Kliger’s edited WPA study and William Mitchell’s *Mishpokhe.*¹ The minutes and other records of four different family circles add to the Yiddish Writers’ Group’s survey and Mitchell’s

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analysis to create a deeper and more nuanced interpretation. This study also looks at broad secondary source material, on topics ranging from Jewish philanthropy to the decline of community life, to introduce new ways in which the family circle evolved to meet the needs of its members. Finally, this paper adds an additional dimension of identity as it tackles how in meeting these needs, family circles forged and strengthened members’ connections to Judaism without compromising their integration into American society.

As American Jews increasingly became integrated into American society, their lives transformed, particularly in the economic and social dimensions. And as their lives transformed, so too did their needs. Family circles adapted to these needs in many ways. Early family circles provided economic support to help members—often immigrants and second-generation Americans—achieve stability and even social mobility in their new country. As members achieved social mobility, they traveled less and less in the same social circles as other relatives and sprawled to more suburban neighborhoods. Here, the family circle helped “keep the family together,” providing opportunities for interaction that most likely would not have happened otherwise. As family circles on the whole became more affluent and mutual aid was largely unnecessary, they became primarily social organizations. Maintaining interest and involvement was at times difficult, so many family circles removed barriers to involvement and attempted to make participation in the circle as enjoyable and effortless as possible. Family circles attempted to cultivate the interest of younger members, who were generally expressing more apathy toward communal organizations than their parents. Through encouraging multigenerational connections, family circles also sought to strengthen family relationships, for their own
internal benefit, and perhaps also to convince American society that Jews also cherished
the American value of healthy family relationships. Finally, the structure and activities of
family circles responded to other contemporary concerns at both the national and Jewish
community levels: women took on more leadership roles, and family circles assisted
Holocaust survivors and supported the new State of Israel.

The activities of the family circle, which met the needs of its members, also
helped members identify themselves as Jewish, strengthening individuals’ existing
connections to Judaism. Typically, this involved taking part in accessible Jewish
traditions that didn’t conflict with members’ American lifestyle. Family circles offered
activities and a structure that required neither a demanding religiosity nor a profound
wrestling match with their American and Jewish identities. For instance, family circles
celebrated Jewish lifecycle events together and took part in Yiddish and Israeli cultural
activities. Members could feel both American and Jewish in activities like celebrating
Jewish holidays that corresponded harmoniously with American values. Family circles
also catered to members who were more religious, providing a safe, semi-private
environment to express their Judaism, where they would not be subject to antisemitism or
compromise their acceptance into American society. The mere act of being with other
Jews was also sufficient to sustain members’ connections to Judaism, and members could
learn more about Jewish heritage and traditions by interacting with older members.
Giving to Jewish charitable organizations was another way in which family circles made
connections to Judaism. Through philanthropy, members could demonstrate that they
were socially conscious, productive members of American society. Antisemitism drove
Jews to band together for mutual aid. In the process, American Jews showed that they were not a burden on American social service resources.

Ultimately, however, the family circle was not only about “keeping the family together” through financial and social means; it was a way to preserve and express Judaism in a predominantly Christian society through one of the most highly valued institutions in Jewish life—the family. The family circle celebrated and passed down Jewish traditions, preventing Judaism from dying out in America. It demonstrated how Jewish institutions could adapt to changing circumstances in the present while maintaining a connection to the past. And finally, it allowed its members to integrate themselves into American society while nurturing their distinctiveness as American Jews. Though the family circle itself might have failed—with few exceptions, like the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society—it did not fail to preserve Jewish culture in America.
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