In May, 1990, the front page of “Nursing: the Jewish Connection,” the first Hadassah National Center for Nurses Council Newsletter, featured the historic 1913 Jerusalem photo of American nurses Rose Kaplan and Rachel Landy, (with Eva Leon, a member of the New York Chapter of Hadassah) in front of the The American Daughters of Zion Nurses Settlement, Hadassah’s original welfare station.

A photograph above the 1990 newsletter read “We’ve come a long way Baby”!

It was hard to believe that just a year before, at the Hadassah National Convention Gala, where National leaders, wearing the latest in formal fashion, introduced the Hadassah Director of Nursing, who appeared in her white uniform and nursing cap. The cap needed to be made from cardboard because they were not worn in Israel.

As an organization, our first act of practical Zionism was to raise the funds to send nurses Rose Landy and Rachel Kaplan to Palestine to assess the public healthcare needs. Hadassah pioneered public health and nursing in the Middle East and later established the very first academic School of Nursing in the country.

With historic respect and appreciation for the profession, generations of HWZOA leaders fulfilled its organizational mission to address the healthcare needs of the people, all the people, of what would one day become the State of Israel.

In 1989, after speaking with those nurses at convention, hearing their need for basic educational tools, for nursing journals, for carts to deliver medications safely, for graduate programs for clinical specialties to care for complex patients, it was obvious to me and others that nursing at Hadassah once again needed the advocacy of HWZOA, the owners of the Hadassah Henrietta Szold Hebrew University School of Nursing and the Hadassah Medical Centers.

So, what to do?

Rachel Albert, President of the Boston Chapter, challenged me: “Find some other Jewish nurses and do something!” I replied with these famous last words: “I believe I am the ONLY Jewish nurse!”

Spurred on by the challenge, Rachel and I reached out to Jewish nurses in Boston and held a small meeting. Not one of the Jewish nurses had ever
been approached to join Hadassah, and, if they had been gifted life membership, never became involved because Hadassah was, their “mother and grandmother’s organization.”

At our first Boston meeting, Dr. Rachel Spector, a professor of nursing at Boston College came with a list of more than 500 Jewish nurses! She had been trying for 2 years, with the Jewish federations, to find a “Jewish” home for these nurses.

No one wanted them! The common thinking about nurses was, “Assume no money, assume no brains. Who needs them?”

We began to organize. Each Boston meeting brought more and more Jewish nurses, who, when meeting for the first time, said, “I didn’t know that you were a nurse!” or “I didn’t know that you were Jewish!” We raised money, brought in members and developed programs.

Many of us recalled the tears that flowed when we were asked to remember what it was like when we told our parents we wanted to become a nurse. Those were painful memories for almost all of us, which we could finally share with others who felt the same way. “Why do you want to empty bedpans?” families asked. “That’s not a job for a nice Jewish girl.”

Suddenly, we had found a “home” with Hadassah and, in 1990, chartered ourselves as the “Landy-Kaplan Hadassah Nurses Council” We became a pioneer advocacy group within HWZOA and, in Israel for our sister nurses at Hadassah, and it became clear that we were becoming a support system for each other.

As our meetings grew, so did our membership. Almost every nurse who had not been a Hadassah member, became one. We knew that if there were that many Jewish nurses in Boston, there must be thousands in the United States. We needed a national outreach!

We successfully approached National HWZOA for $3,000 to host a Hadassah booth at an upcoming American Nurses Association Convention which brought more than 7,000 nurses to Boston. Our booth was directly across from the Saudi and other Arab nurse recruiters. We proudly displayed our Jewish nurses seal and the Hadassah Zionist banner.

We were listed in the program book, and the Jewish nurses attending came out of the woodwork to find us! Our booth was surrounded by some of the top leaders in nursing—hospital nursing directors, deans of schools of nursing, Jewish nursing administrators—all of whom had never had the opportunity to connect their profession with being a Jewish woman. We received hundreds of names for our mailing lists and dozens of memberships. Many enthusiastically committed to help find Jewish nurses in their respective communities.

With so many names from across the U.S, in 1990, we once again successfully approached National HWZOA, and lobbied to establish a new department, the Hadassah National Center for Nurses Councils, for the specific purpose of reaching out to American Jewish nurses. This would be the first, and remains the only, professional organization for Jewish nurses in the United States. Its main office was set up in Boston, outside of the NY headquarters—also a first.

That first year, 1990, we:
• Established “nursing councils” throughout the United States
• Created a Hadassah nursing leadership institute in NY, bringing in 20 American nurses as well as nurses from HMO in Israel
• Established a Mission Statement
• Established a National Center for Nurses Councils “Advisory/Resource Board,” members included nursing leaders in Administration, Nursing Education, Clinical Care, and Nursing Research
• Created an educational mission to Israel, “Israel through the Eyes of a Nurse”
• Created a Newsletter: “Nursing: the Jewish Connection”

Our membership grew to the thousands; despite many Hadassah organizational obstacles, we were beginning to fulfill our mission as advocates for and partners with our Israeli colleagues. Nurses speak one language and understand nursing needs. The funding came quickly in that first year to support the most basic needs for nursing journals, medication carts, etc.
When the War in Bosnia created a desperate lack of medications for the people of the region, the Hadassah Nurses Council took the lead and became the force behind the National Hadassah Bosnian relief effort. We collected and delivered more than a ton of medications to bring to war torn Bosnia. This was the largest volunteer relief shipment to ever reach the hospitals and medical professionals in Bosnia, and personally delivered under gunfire by four very courageous Hadassah nurse's council volunteers. In recognition of these humanitarian efforts, HWZOA received a formal Congressional citation.

Our nursing members activism brought visibility, membership, and money to Hadassah to support the needs of nursing at HMO.

Since we were together for the first time as women, as nurses and as Jews, we found we shared and needed to address the painful reality of anti-Semitism within the profession. We established a national partnership and program with the Anti-Defamation League, “Anti-Semitism within the Nursing Profession.”

With the leadership of Barbara Sabin, we created international nursing seminars on “Infection Control” for literally thousands of nurses in the countries of Venezuela, Brazil, and Mexico.

Dr Barbara Heller, Dean of the School of Nursing at the University of Maryland, with the members of the Advisory/Resource Board, fought the Israeli Ministries of Health, Nursing, and Education and even the management of Hadassah Medical Organization to establish and fund the very first Clinical Masters Program in Nursing in Israel!

Our first nurses’ mission “See Israel through the Eyes of a Nurse” coincided with the beginning of the Gulf war. The Nurses Council is an excellent example of a Hadassah Outreach that worked successfully. It produced professional and passionate leaders thereby fulfilling the needs of this member population.

Today, 30 years later, we’ve run more than 15 nursing educational missions to Israel, helped establish a new nursing PHD/nurse practitioner program, witnessed the establishment of the first Department of Nursing at the Hebrew University, supported essential ICU/OR educational programs and created and funded international nursing educational opportunities to name just a few.

It is with tremendous respect for the wisdom of Henrietta Szold and our National leaders back in 1913 that today, 30 years later, nurses in America and in Israel are valued as an indispensable and admired professional part of the healthcare team.

The leaders of HWZOA in 1913 had the vision that educated nurses would be vital to the health of a nation. Today, 107 years later, 2020, the International Year of the Nurse, that vision is as vital today, as it was then.

“We’ve Come a Long Way, Baby”