In Hindsight, History Always Looks Inevitable. When we look at Hadassah’s 100-year saga, we see the linear version, showing the founding meeting at Temple Emanu-El in New York, the first two nurses dispatched to Palestine and Hadassah’s emergence as the architect of much of Israel’s social welfare foundation. Written history does not dwell much on the roads not taken. Though Hadassah’s founders had specific goals and boundless energy, they could not predict the obstacles the organization would encounter or the catalytic moments when it would leap forward. And if we can’t be sure of the weather next week, they certainly couldn’t have painted a clear picture of how Hadassah, Israel or the global Jewish family would look in 2012. Still, history is a more exact discipline than prophecy, and the details behind the timeline reveal not only how Hadassah emerged from the mist of a bygone era but also thrust itself—with help from close friends and distant forces—to the forefront of the Zionist enterprise. Broadly speaking, Hadassah’s success resulted from three forces: an intellectual climate that promoted the idea of self-determination, the work of individuals and the unpredictable march of events.
At the outset, the pioneers of Hadassah lived in a world in which women had few options for productive activity outside of family. Hadassah helped change all that with their independent, pro-Zionist stance.

A TALE OF TWO STORIES

THE HADASSAH CENTURY

By Pamela S. Nadell

If the Hadassah century had a scrapbook, its first page would show women gathered on February 24, 1912, shortly before Purim, to found an organization of women Zionists. The headline of the closing page of Hadassah’s Centennial scrapbook would read: “Thousands of Hadassah women, representing over 300,000 members, celebrate their Centennial Convention in Jerusalem, October 15-18, 2012.” The pages in between would tell two stories: the first, a century of Hadassah’s milestones. They start with two American women opening a nurses’ station in Jerusalem in 1913 and continue, in 1918, with the creation of the American Zionist Medical Unit, a group of doctors, nurses, dentists and sanitary engineers who traveled to Israel to establish permanent health and welfare programs. The next pages would show children drinking pasteurized milk distributed by Palestine’s first...
In Connecticut, where I grew up, my mother and my Aunt Lucile were forever “going to Hadassah.” I was not sure what they did in that mysterious place. The greatest puzzle was the annual linen shower. Today, my knowledge of Hadassah history far expanded, I know that, from the 1920s onward, hundreds of Hadassah sewing circles nationwide produced linens, blankets and clothing for orphans and the Hadassah Medical Organization. Still, what did my mother do there? She didn’t know how to sew.

Throughout our extended family, Hadassah was a sacred word, and out-of-town cousins compared notes at family gatherings. When I became active in Young Judaea, the Zionist youth movement, I shared a panel with National President Rose Matzkin (1972-1976), who was from Connecticut, too. Connecticut eventually had a woman governor, but I had never met an orator and leader like Rose Matzkin. I was awestruck by Hadassah. When I moved to Israel at the end of the 1960s, I quickly learned that Hadassah had a different meaning. On the
When I was little, my mother told me that she would always remember where she was when she heard that President Franklin Roosevelt had died. That fascinated me—the idea that one moment in history could be so indelible seemed strange, mysterious, majestic. Little could I have imagined that one day, the same would happen to me, and that Hadassah Hospital would play a pivotal role in that memory. * In September 2000, I didn’t feel great the night before Rosh Hashana, but did not think much of it. I took some Advil for a stomachache and slept fine through the night. The next morning, though, I woke up early to review my Torah reading for *shul*, and noticed that the pain had moved to the lower right side of my abdomen. I looked up appendicitis in a book we had at home; it said that often the pain begins in the upper abdomen and then several hours later moves to the lower right quadrant.

I WAS STARTING TO GET worried, but still went to *shul*. It was Shabbat and Rosh Hashana, after all. But as I read the Torah, it actually seemed like the scroll was moving, levitating on the table. That certainly didn’t seem right. So I did what all Jews in *shul* do—I asked one of the doctors sitting near me what he thought. He said that if the pain did not go away in a few hours, I should go to the emergency room. I lasted another half hour. Feeling awful, I went home to rest, but ultimately I just knew something was up and decided to go to the hospital.