

Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 21

Rebecca Gratz (1781 – 1869), Champion of the Unfortunate

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Editor's Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from The **Jewish Women's Archive**, <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/gratz/>.

During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries the lives of most women were centered on their family matters. In contrast, the life of Rebecca Gratz took a very different course. She never married, but instead “devoted her adult life to providing relief for Philadelphia's underprivileged women and children and securing religious, moral and material sustenance for all of Philadelphia's Jews. An observant Jew living in a predominantly Christian nineteenth century culture, Gratz integrated her American experience and Jewish identity to establish the first American Jewish institutions run by women, including the first Hebrew Sunday School and Jewish Orphanage. She believed that women were uniquely responsible for ensuring the preservation of Jewish life in America and worked to create an environment in which women could be fully Jewish and fully American.”

Rebecca Gratz, the seventh of twelve children born to Miriam Simon and Michael Gratz, was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania on March 4, 1781. Her mother was the daughter of Joseph Simon, a preeminent Jewish merchant of Lancaster. Her father was descended from a long line of respected rabbis. Miriam and Michael were observant Jews who were active members of Philadelphia's first synagogue, Mikveh Israel.

“Well educated for her day, Gratz attended women's academies and read in her father's extensive library stocked with works of literature, history, and popular science. As an adult she added Judaica, seeking original new works in English and works recently translated into English, as well as requesting new books and early readings of works-in-progress from knowledgeable American Jews such as hazan Isaac Leeser and educator Jacob Mordechai.”¹

In her late teens, the lively, beautiful, and articulate Rebecca took her place among the social and literary elite of Philadelphia. She came to know many of the important thinkers of her era and corresponded regularly with British educator and novelist Maria Edgeworth, American author Catherine Sedgwick, British actress Fanny Kemble, and Jewish-British theologian Grace Aguilar. She was also familiar with many of the nation's leading artists including.

Over the years Rebecca focused her efforts on a variety of *Chesed* and educational activities. “Like other women of her era, Gratz believed that benevolent work was an appropriate extension of women's roles so long as it was done quietly. She devoted her adult life to providing relief for Philadelphia's underprivileged women and children and securing religious, moral and material sustenance for all of Philadelphia's Jews.”

“With her mother, Miriam, and older sister Richea, Gratz at twenty helped to found a charitable society for women, the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. Early on Gratz became the organization's executive secretary, an office she grew to love and sought in most of the organizations she established. Fourteen years later in 1815 she worked with other Philadelphia women in establishing the city's first orphan asylum (The Philadelphia Orphan Asylum), remaining its executive secretary for forty years.”²

“A religious woman, Gratz grew more devout as the years went by. After her sister Sarah's death in 1817, Gratz went into a period of mourning. During that time she intensified her study of Judaism and sought the company of her sister congregants at Mikveh Israel.”³

“In response to the burgeoning Christian Sunday School movement and increased religious fervor, Gratz began to perceive a need for Jewish education among women and children. In 1818, she began a small religious school for her siblings and their children. Although this early experiment did not expand beyond her family members, it convinced Gratz that this kind of training was essential for Jews living as minorities in a Christian world. Bar Mitzvah preparation and private tutorials were the only avenues of formal Jewish education available for boys, and there were none at all for girls. The family school became the prototype for the Hebrew Sunday School that Gratz would establish twenty years later.”

“Gratz's experience with the Female Association and the Philadelphia Orphan Asylum had led her to believe that women, because of their aptitude for domestic duties, were particularly equipped to take care of the greater ‘house of Israel.’ Because her work with nonsectarian charitable organizations had convinced Gratz that even the most well meaning Christians were often eager to convert others, she became concerned about the growing number of needy Philadelphian Jews. In 1819, she helped establish the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society to create a Jewish presence in the benevolent community. Gratz believed *‘it is not too much to hope - too much to expect from the daughters of a noble race that they will be foremost in the work of Charity - provided their young hearts are impressed with its sacred duties.’* The society provided Philadelphia's impoverished Jews with food, clothing, fuel, and other necessities. The Society was the first non-synagogue Jewish women's organization in North America and did not require its clients to attend religious services or belong to a congregation. Gratz hoped to build women's stature in the Jewish community and show that Jews could take care of themselves.”

“Gratz adored her nieces and nephews and thought, *‘children are very good society.’* She was particularly close to her sister Rachel's six children and considered them her, *‘favorite toys.’* In 1823, when Rachel died in childbirth, Gratz resigned from the Female Association's board and brought the children home to live with her.”

“By the 1830s Gratz had become increasingly concerned about the future of Philadelphia's 750 Jews. In 1835, she urged the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society to address, *‘that most pressing need - the mental impoverishment of those who are rising to take their places among the thousands of Israel scattered throughout the families of the earth.’* Her solution was a Jewish educational program modeled on the Christian Sunday Schools which had successfully taught thousands of children all over the United States the fundamentals of reading and Christianity. In 1838, the Society resolved that *‘a Sunday school be established under the direction of the board, and teachers appointed among young ladies of the congregation.’* The school opened three weeks later, on Gratz' fifty-seventh birthday, with sixty students enrolled. Gratz became the school's superintendent and served for more than twenty-five years. The model spread quickly and Gratz advised women in Charleston, Savannah, and Baltimore on establishing similar schools in their own communities.”

“In her personal life, Rebecca was a consistently devout and observant Jewess. Each day began and ended with prayer. She was very self-critical, and consistently examined herself searchingly.”⁴ “During that icy March (of 1840) in Philadelphia, Gratz learned that the old Sephardic Jewish congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, had embraced Reform, brought an organ into their new synagogue, and renounced claims to Zion.

“An implacable foe of Reform, Gratz was distressed by the news. She told her niece Miriam that Charleston's Jews were *‘selling their birth-right for a mess of pottage. Even the greatest enemies of the Jews never denied their claims on the country inherited from their fathers or doubted they would be restored to it.’* From Gratz's perspective, Charleston's Jews rejected the meaning of Scripture and the special relationship between God and Israel that it described. She was flabbergasted that Jews would take such a position and could only express her thoughts by a series of rhetorical questions. *‘Where is the [truth] of prophecy? Whence the fulfillment of promises? What is the hope of Israel? Of what does the scattered people bear witness? Alas, we may ... weep for the spiritual destruction of Jerusalem when her own children are content to sing the songs of Zion in a strange land and deny the words of God so often repeated by the prophets.’*”⁵

“Rebecca Gratz died on August 27, 1869. She remained actively involved on the boards of the Philadelphia Orphan Society, Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, Hebrew Sunday School and Jewish Foster Home well into her eighties. Gratz's enduring legacy can be measured by the success and longevity of the many

institutions she founded. The Philadelphia Orphan Society and Female Association provided material sustenance to thousands of women and children. The Jewish Foster Home thrived until it eventually merged with other institutions to create the Philadelphia Association for Jewish Children. The Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and Hebrew Sunday School continued their work for almost 150 years. As historian Dianne Ashton writes, *'By training younger Jewish women in administering the agencies she founded, Gratz ensured that the FHBS, HSS and JFH would continue to flourish long after her death. In their work, these organizations continued to provide Jewish women and children a way to be both fully Jewish and fully American.'*

¹ **Rebecca Gratz, Women and Judaism in Antebellum America**, Dianne Ashton, Wayne University Press, 1997, page 13.

² **Rebecca Gratz, Women and Judaism in Antebellum America**, page 16.

³ *Ibid.*, page 19.

⁴ **Jewish Pioneers in America**, Anita Libman Lebeson, Brentano's Inc., New York, 1931, page 301.

⁵ **Rebecca Gratz, Women and Judaism in Antebellum America**, pages 178 – 179.