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JACOB MORDECAI: PIONEER IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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There was a time when it was thought unnecessary to give women an academic education equal to the one given to men. Until the middle of the nineteenth century they received little education beyond some basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Some people felt that women were not capable of learning much more than this.

Jacob Mordecai, a pioneer in education, showed that this was not true when he established the Warrenton, NC, Female Seminary, also known as Mordecai's Female Academy.

Mordecai was "the son of Moses and Esther Mordecai, observant Jews who in 1760 emigrated from Germany to Philadelphia. Born in 1762, he attended private schools receiving a classical education. At age 13, Jacob served as a rifleman when the Continental Congress was resident in Philadelphia and later helped supply the Continental Army as a clerk to David Franks, the Jewish quartermaster to General George Washington.

"After the war, Jacob Mordecai moved to New York and married Judith Myers. In 1792, Judith and Jacob moved to Warrenton, [North Carolina] a small town well situated on the roads linking Richmond, Charleston and Savannah."^[1]

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It is worth noting that despite the fact that the Mordecais were the only Jewish family in and around this small town, they remained observant Jews, keeping a strictly kosher home where *Shabbos* was observed.

Judith Mordecai was a woman of delicate constitution who died at the time of the birth of her seventh child. Subsequently Jacob married Rebecca Myers, the younger half-sister of his first wife.

Jacob first made his mark as a tobacco merchant in Warrenton. He was not, however, particularly interested in his

business pursuits. He managed to obtain an excellent knowledge of Hebrew language and literature and studiously devoted himself to literary pursuits, especially biblical research, and wrote many scholarly articles.

Reversal of fortune made it necessary for him to give up his business, leaving him with the dilemma of how to support his large family. In the summer of 1808, some of the locals met with Jacob and offered to help support the establishment of an "academy" for girls, on the condition that he would become its headmaster. The influential town leaders regarded him highly for his learning and wisdom and were sure that he had the skills and temperament to be an effective teacher.

In 1809 the school opened with 30 students and quickly became a family project. In the beginning, Jacob and Rebecca taught all the classes. Soon they were joined in the classroom by their daughter Rachael and in later years by two of their sons. The younger Mordecai children helped with the cooking and care of the dormitories. The only instructor in the academy who was not a member of the family was the music teacher.

The school's curriculum was not limited to academics; it also stressed proper manners and demeanor. Students were subject to considerable personal discipline and a highly structured day. High standards of behavior and performance were the norm for both students and faculty. The goal was to properly mold both the character and intellectual development of the students.

The girls were required to wash their own utensils and maintain a high level of personal hygiene. Since the overwhelming majority of girls who attended the academy came from well-to-do homes in which they were pampered, some of them must have had trouble adjusting to the school's regimen.

Jacob made sure that students attended the church of their choice. He was careful to avoid all doctrinal and sectarian discussions in school activities. At the same time he provided

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opportunities for all of his students to discuss philosophical and ethical issues.

Jacob stressed that piety in any religious tradition was an important part of character development. Interestingly enough, the Mordecais also included the observance of Jewish holidays in the academy's educational program. Since all of the Mordecai children, male and female, attended and/or worked in the school, as well as several cousins, there was a critical mass of Jewish students to observe holidays.

Jacob encouraged the Christian students at the academy to observe their own religious holidays. To him it mattered little what religious practices his students observed, just so long as they were respectful of the religious preferences of others. There were discussions of philosophical texts that raised moral and ethical issues that all students could deal with regardless of their religious differences.

Given the above it is no wonder that within a few years the academy's excellent reputation had spread so quickly that by 1814 Mordecai was forced to cap enrollment at 110 students.

"In 1819, at age 56, ten years after opening his Female Academy, Jacob Mordecai chose to sell the highly successful enterprise and move his family to Richmond, Virginia. He purchased a farm and lived as an active member of Richmond's Jewish community, serving as president of its Congregation K. K. Beth Shalom."^[i]

Jacob died in 1838. One of his grandsons provides us with an insight into the enduring impact the academy had on its students. When he visited Jacob's elderly widow, Rebecca Myers Mordecai, he was impressed by the respect shown her by a former student.

"One scene is vividly recalled, when Mrs. John Y. Mason, formerly Miss Fort, who was shortly to sail for France with her husband, then minister to that country, called to say farewell to my grandmother. Mrs. Mason was moved to tears, and kneeling down, begged for a blessing. Mrs. Mordecai was then a silvery-haired widow, worn and aged, and in a solemn and touching way she laid her trembling hands upon the lady's head and pronounced the priestly benediction of our race."^[ii]

"Jacob Mordecai was influential, like most major role models, because of his strong personality and his determined activities at a critical point in history. He inspired women to attain a level of education which had been denied them and motivated some of them, like his children, to become teachers, writers and advocates for his cause. He succeeded, in part, because he located his school strategically to attract many of the daughters of the leading families in the South, and he used his extended family and social contacts as well as his curriculum to attract them to his school.

"He used his knowledge, administrative abilities and his children to encourage his female students to attain a level of intellectual proficiency and professional achievement which had previously been reserved only for men. His Female Academy provided his students with skills, confidence and aspirations which allowed some of them to join the teachers, reformers and leaders of their generation who altered American social, educational and political history."^[iv]

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^[i] <http://www.aihs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=228>

^[ii] *ibid.*

^[iii] **Notice of Jacob Mordecai, Founder, and Proprietor, from 1809 to 1818, of the Warrenton (N.C.) Female Seminary**, by Gratz Mordecai, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 1898, 6.

^[iv] **Mordecai's Female Academy**, by Sheldon Hanft, *American Jewish History*, 1989, 79 page 93.

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As the displaced and fairly unknowing descendant of Eastern North Carolinians, many in Halifax and Warren Counties, this comes as a very "unexpected" glimpse into the past.

For whatever reasons, perhaps economic collapses following economic collapses, the situations that took Jacob Mordecai to Warrenton seem, nowadays, hard to imagine.

I hope there is more information to come on his family's infusion of education into Warrenton... is there any list of his students?

Thanks,

Mel Jenkins
Columbia, SC

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