

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Dr. Aaron Friedenwald Part I (1836 - 1902)

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

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Life, Letters, and Addresses of Aaron Friedenwald, M.D.** by his son Harry Friedenwald, M. D. This book was printed for private circulation by The Lord Baltimore Press in 1906. The book may be downloaded at no charge from <http://books.google.com/>*

Introduction

Last month's **Glimpses Into American Jewish History** column dealt with the life of Jonas Friedenwald, who came to Baltimore, MD in 1832. Jonas' youngest son, Aaron, was born on December 20, 1836, and eventually became a well-known physician. Many Jews born in America during the 19th century abandoned the Orthodox practices of their parents. Aaron, however, lived his entire life as an observant Jew. This was no small accomplishment in light of the fact that the reform movement was very much on the ascent during this period.

Early Life and Medical Studies

The first ordained rabbi to settle in America, Rav Avraham Rice, became the Rov of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation in 1840. Realizing that education of the youth was the key to the preservation of traditional Judaism in America, Rabbi Rice started a day school shortly after arriving in Baltimore. Aaron attended this school, where he received both a secular and religious education.

His early religious training was received at the congregational school. His [religious] instructors were Mr. Weil, Mr. Dannenberg, Mr. Sachs, and, later on, Reverend Dr. Henry Hochheimer, who, soon after his arrival in this country, prepared my father for the *Bar-Mitzvah (Mitzvah)* ceremony, and introduced him to the study of Rashi's Biblical commentary. He early acquired for the study of Hebrew a love which he retained throughout his life. He was an apt scholar, and in later years looked back to his school days as pleasant memories.

An important influence upon the formation of his character was that exerted by the late Reverend Abraham Rice, the first Rabbi of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation and an intimate friend of the family. [Rabbi] Rice was a very pious man, whose congenial nature and religious fervor attracted the thoughtful boy, and it is to his influence rather than to any other that I should ascribe the

consistent [Orthodox] religious views which marked the whole course of my father's life. His loving veneration for [Rabbi] Rice appeared in his frequent references to him and in his unvarying custom of having the prayer for the dead recited in his memory on the Day of Atonement. He mentioned on several occasions his intention of publishing a biography of the rabbi, together with a selection from his sermons, some of which my father transcribed; this intention, however, was never carried out.

Aaron's formal schooling was over by the time he reached age 15, and he went to work as a bookkeeper in his brothers' clothing business. He found the work drudgery and soon realized that he wanted to do other things with his life. He therefore began preparing for a career change.

His evenings were devoted in great part to study and general reading. He took lessons from Mr. Jonas Goldsmith in French, making considerable progress in that language; and he learned to know English literature well, being particularly interested in fiction and in history. The sciences, especially physics, chemistry, and mathematics, were also diligently studied, and he gained so thorough a knowledge of them that in later years his children never brought him a question in science or a problem in algebra or geometry which he could not help them to unravel.

When Aaron reached the age of twenty-one, he informed his parents that he had decided to leave his job and study medicine. Thus, in the spring of 1858 Aaron Friedenwald enrolled as a student at the University of Maryland which had been founded in 1856.

This step marked the turning point of his life. He had long looked forward to intellectual work, and was obliged to overcome great difficulties in the shape of prejudices and other obstacles which blocked his path. His studies meant a new life to him, a life which released him from an occupation thoroughly distasteful, and opened the way to activities which he had long looked forward to and never ceased to love.

One of the difficulties that Aaron had to deal with was anti-Semitism.

One day, soon after he entered Professor Smith's office as a pupil, he walked into the university infirmary and found a note, unsigned, making an insulting reference to his religion. He immediately wrote underneath the scrawl "The man who wrote the above lines is as great a coward as he is a scoundrel, or he would have signed his name"; and then added his own, "A. Friedenwald." In a short time he was confronted by a number of students, one of whom demanded menacingly to know it he had written those words. He emphatically affirmed that he had, and stood so plainly ready to answer for what he had done that his opponents left the room one by one not daring to molest him.

Upon completion of his studies at the University of Maryland, Aaron decided to continue his medical education in Europe before returning to Baltimore where he intended to practice medicine. This was a most unusual step to take in those days, given the difficulties of travel to Europe. Nonetheless, on May 1, 1860 he sailed from New York on the steamship *Hammonia*.

Shortly before leaving for Europe, Aaron became engaged to Bertha Bamberger. The engagement was kept secret with the understanding that they would marry upon his return.

Bertha was born in Germany into a poor family and was the youngest of her father's five children from his second marriage. Three of her stepbrothers immigrated to Baltimore and became fairly successful in the clothing business. Based on this, they convinced their father and the rest of the family to start a new life by joining them in Baltimore.

After her thirteenth birthday, Bertha had to leave school for employment in the family store where she worked until a few weeks before her marriage. She apparently never ceased to regret leaving her studies and made a habit of supplementing her learning with reading throughout her life.

Bertha and Aaron were married in Baltimore on June 14, 1863.

While in Europe Dr. Friedenwald studied at the Universities of Berlin, Prague and Paris.

He especially devoted himself to the diseases of the eye under Von Graefe, and made this branch of medical science his specialty in after (sic) life. He was a member of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland for twenty-five years, and was elected its President in 1890. He was the first President of the Maryland Ophthalmological Society. At his suggestion, a convention was called to consider the improvement of medical schools, resulting in the formation of the American Association of Medical Colleges. Doctor Friedenwald was its first Vice-President. From 1873, he was Professor of Diseases of the Eye and Ear in the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

He was well-known as a lecturer, and frequent contributor to the medical journals and proceedings of medical societies. In fact, it is not too much to say that every useful cause in medical education and science, everything that advanced the Jewish religion, which Doctor Friedenwald practiced as well as advocated, and everything tending to the amelioration of the condition of his people, found in him a tireless and efficient champion.¹

Aaron Friedenwald passed away on August 26, 1902. At a meeting held in his memory he was described as "a Jew to whom the yoke of the law was a joyous privilege and not a grievous burden."

In our next article we shall discuss Dr. Friedenwald's many activities on behalf of Orthodox Judaism.



Aaron(1860)and Bertha (1862)Friedenwald

1 **Aaron Friedenwald**, by Cyrus Adler, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961); 1903; 11, AJHS Journal, pages 206 – 207. This article is may be downloaded at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>