Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 18)

Jacob Mordecai (1762 – 1838), Pioneer in Women’s Education

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There was time when it was thought that it was unnecessary to give women an academic education equal to the one given to men. Indeed, until the twentieth century, more often than not women were schooled primarily at home where they were taught the skills needed to properly run a home. They were given little academic education beyond some basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Some even 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, during the years of 1809 to 1818, he established and ran the Warrenton, NC Female Seminary, also known as Mordechai’s Female Academy.

Jacob Mordecai was “the son of Moses and Esther Mordecai, observant Jews who in 1760 emigrated from Germany to Philadelphia. Jacob was born in 1762. He attended private schools and received 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, a small town well situated on the roads linking Richmond, Charleston and Savannah.”¹ 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, during the years that they lived there.

“Judith Mordecai, always delicate and with a fast increasing family, died on the birth of the seventh child, and it was perhaps natural that Rebecca Myers, the younger half-sister of his first wife, should be his choice in giving a mother to his children.”

Jacob first made his mark as a tobacco merchant in Warrenton. However, “commercial life did not greatly interest him. It is not mentioned where he obtained his excellent knowledge of the Hebrew language and literature, but he was always studious and devoted to literary and especially to Biblical research, of which he left great masses of manuscript. He must have felt that in spite of his early imperfect education the work in life for him must be intellectual, and the most available field that of imparting his hard-earned knowledge.”²
Reverses in fortune made it necessary for him to give up his business. “In the summer of 1808 several local citizens met with Jacob and offered to help support the establishment of another school for girls if he would become its headmaster. Jacob was highly regarded for his learning and wisdom by the influential town leaders who recognized that he had the skills and temperament to be an effective teacher. He was extremely well-read and was compared by one scholar of the era to the model of the Jewish sages of the Middle Ages, who acquired great secular erudition, respect and ‘knowledge equal to that of a rabbi (professional clergyman).’ Their views of Mordecai’s abilities as a teacher may have been further reinforced by the education he provided for his children, several of whom were already gaining excellent reputations in their chosen professions.”

“The school was truly a family project. Initially, Jacob and Rebecca taught all the classes, but were soon 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. Only the music teacher was not a member of the family.

“The school’s curriculum focused on academics but also stressed proper manners and demeanor. Jacob insisted on personal discipline and a highly structured day in which the students were kept constantly busy. Students were required to wash their own utensils, scrub their hands and faces and brush their hair and teeth daily, even on the coldest mornings. The school’s reputation blossomed so quickly that Mordecai, who initially had 30 students in 1809, concluded by 1814 that he would have to cap enrollment at no more than 110 students.”

“Jacob was careful to maintain high standards of behavior and performance in his students and assistants. He was concerned with molding the character and intellect of his students and he carefully checked on their character development as well as that of the people he employed. He arranged for students to attend the church of their choice and upon occasion went with them to the preaching, as he called it. While he was careful to avoid doctrinal and sectarian discussion in school activities, he was scrupulous in providing an opportunity for all of his students to discuss philosophical and ethical issues, using classical texts, as a way to sharpen their critical faculties and make them aware of important moral and ethical considerations. This was another unique aspect of the school as these were subjects which were usually provided only in schools for men.”

“Jacob Mordecai stressed that piety in any religious tradition was an important part of character development. The Mordecais included observance of Jewish holidays in the school’s educational program. All of the Mordecai children – male and female – attended and worked in the school, as did several cousins, so there was always a critical mass of Jewish students to observe holidays. Jacob equally encouraged the Christian students at the Academy to observe their own religious holidays and attend church services. It mattered little what religious practices his
students observed so long as they were respectful of the religious preferences of others. The Academy’s curriculum included philosophical texts that raised moral and ethical issues his students could discuss together regardless of their religious differences.

“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 Shalome. Jacob died in 1838.”

One of his grandsons provides us with an insight into the enduring impact which the education given at the Academy had on its students. When he visited Jacob's 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.”

“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.”

1 http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=228

2 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, page 41. This article is available at http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm.

3 Mordecai’s Female Academy, by Sheldon Hanft, American Jewish History, 1989, 79 page 79.

4 http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=228
5 Hanft, pages 87 - 88.

6 http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=228

7 Mordecai, page 45.

8 Hanft, page 93.