

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Dr. Aaron Friedenwald Part II (1836 - 1902)

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*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/>*

In last month's Glimpses Into American Jewish History column we traced the early life of Dr. Aaron Friedenwald. Dr. Friedenwald was born in Baltimore in 1836, educated in the Jewish Day School founded by Rabbi Abraham Rice, and worked for six years as a bookkeeper before entering the University of Maryland to study medicine at age 21. Upon graduation he spent two and half years in Europe studying ophthalmology.

Dr. Friedenwald returned to Baltimore in July of 1862. He hoped to open a practice that specialized in ophthalmology, but this was not financially viable at the time. The best he could do was open an office in his parents' home and become a general practitioner. However, he maintained his interest in ophthalmology and over the years his practice focused more and more on treating patients with eye problems.

Dr. Friedenwald became an active member of a number of medical societies, taking a prominent role in their proceedings and presenting scholarly papers at their meetings.

In the fall of 1873, on the occasion of reorganization, he became the first professor of diseases of the eye and ear in the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Baltimore, which had been established in 1872. He held the professorship for twenty-nine sessions. Besides filling the chair of ophthalmology, he took a leading part in administering the affairs of the college, being for more than ten years treasurer of the Maryland Maternite, which the faculty had established, and for eighteen years, from 1884 until his death, treasurer of the college itself.

In connection with the professorship he was ophthalmic and aural surgeon at the Baltimore City Hospital and the other hospitals connected with the college. He held a similar position at the Nursery and Child's Hospital and at the Hebrew Hospital.

Commitment to Yiddishkeit

Dr. Friedenwald grew up at a time when far too many Jews were abandoning Orthodoxy. Reform was on the ascent, and many Orthodox shuls throughout became reform temples. Reform leaders mislead people into believing that the only way to save Judaism in America was to liberalize it, often to the point where adherence to *Mitzvos*, such as kashrus and Shabbos, was abandoned. Therefore, it is interesting and important to note that throughout his life Dr. Friedenwald remained true to his Orthodox upbringing.

As we have seen, my father was brought up in accordance with the traditions of Orthodox Judaism, and he remained a consistent observer of the ceremonial as well as of the spiritual side of his religion. He was a regular attendant at the services of the synagogue, and took a deep interest in the welfare of the congregations with which he was connected. He was one of the founders and an officer of the Shearith Israel congregation, and later joined the Chizuk Emoonah congregation, which his father had been chiefly instrumental in organizing, and in 1892, at the earnest desire of his father, succeeded him as president. He filled this position until his death, and it was during his incumbency that the congregation removed from the synagogue on Lloyd Street to its present edifice at the corner of McCulloh and Mosher Streets.

Dr. Friedenwald had an extensive library consisting of books dealing with a variety of Jewish subjects. He had a special interest in any Jewish topic that was medically related. He wrote a strong defense of *shechita* in which he maintained that the Jewish method of slaughter had a humanitarian influence on the Jewish people.

He was requested to write for the "Jewish Encyclopedia" the article upon the medical aspect of circumcision, and delivered at Gratz College, in Philadelphia, on January 20, 1896, a lecture entitled "Jewish Physicians and the Contributions of the Jews to the Science of Medicine, which was printed in the first number of the Publications of the College.

He was interested from his earliest years in the study of Hebrew, and attained sufficient command of the "Holy Tongue" to read a Hebrew paper or a chapter in the Bible with ease. A Hebrew book, usually a copy of the Psalms, always lay upon his desk, to be taken up whenever occasion offered. He could compose and occasionally wrote a letter in Hebrew.

He frequently attended banquets at which he ate nothing, because of his rigid adherence to the Jewish dietary law. This circumstance did not lessen his enjoyment, however, for he was always in the best of humor on these occasions.

However, he was most distressed when a Jewish organization held an affair at which kashrus was not properly observed. The letter below shows this.

Baltimore, November 21, 1899.

To The President and Board of Directors of the Hebrew Benevolent Society,

Gentlemen,

A short time before the annual banquet of the Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1898 I called the attention of a prominent member of your board to the fact that due regard was not [paid] to the Jewish dietary law in getting up the supper. It was claimed that all arrangements had already been made. To my great mortification I found that the same disregard characterized the banquet of the present year, and I therefore present the matter before your honorable body for your serious consideration. I have been an attendant at these festivals for over forty years, almost uninterruptedly, and I hope I am not presuming too much in requesting you to see to it that the Jewish law and those who observe it will on these occasions in the future receive due respect.

In 1898 Dr. and Mrs. Friedenwald visited Eretz Yisroel. Dr. Friedenwald wrote a number of letters to his children describing this trip.¹ On May 29, 1898 after his visit to Jerusalem he wrote

Dear Children,

. . . I was pleased with our visit to Jerusalem, notwithstanding the predictions that we should be dreadfully disappointed. It is a city of the most varied interest. The past is presented to one at every turn, and the present is not less interesting. There are as fine Jews here as can be met with anywhere. There is as much disinterested effort to benefit the lowly as at any other place. Those that have been painted in the blackest colors are better than the circumstances surrounding them would warrant [one in expecting].

And such a medley as is met with here! Sephardic Jews are not all of one class; there are the Spanish - Portuguese, the Turkish, the Italian, the Moroccan, the Yemenite, the Kurdish, and the Bokhariot Jews. The German Jewish community is composed of real Germans, of Russians from all the Russias, Polish, Roumanian, American, and other unclassified Jews. There are those who live in comparative luxury; many starve quite a little; and not a few live pretty well on nothing, their needs being so primitive and so few. ... I have not seen anything in all my travels to interest me as much as my trip to Jerusalem. ...

Dr. Friedenwald died on August 26, 1902. His obituary appearing the next day in the New York Times said in part

Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, an eminent physician and noted philanthropist, died today, aged sixty-five years. Last Wednesday he underwent a surgical operation for cancer.

Dr. Friedenwald took an active interest in Jewish affairs, and held many offices in (the) various organizations. At the time of his demise he was President of the McCulloh Street Temple, a Director of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York, Vice President at the Jewish Publication Society, a Director of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, and the President of the local branch of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.

As a lecturer he was extensively known and contributed frequently to the medical journals and proceedings of medical societies.

Such were the many accomplishments of this renowned 19th century Orthodox Jewish physician.



Dr. Aaron Friedenwald (1902)

¹ Chapter IX of **Life, Letters, and Addresses of Aaron Friedenwald, M.D.** contains many interesting letters in which Dr. Friedenwald describes the situation in Eretz Yisroel in 1898. This book may be downloaded at no charge from <http://books.google.com/>