

## Special Feature / By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

# Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, z"l

*Correction: In last week's article, "An Early Askan: Mr. Jonas Friedenwald, z"l, of Baltimore," I wrote that Mr. Jonas Friedenwald was born on November 9, 1802. This information came from his grandson's book, Life, Letters, and Addresses of Aaron Friedenwald, M.D. Prominently displayed in my article was the invitation to a gathering celebrating the 90th birthday of Mr. Friedenwald, which took place on November 29, 1891. Additionally, the invitation gives the dates 1801-1891.*

*Some "observant" Hamodia readers emailed, asking about the contradiction in dates given by these two sources. In researching the matter further, it is clear that Mr. Friedenwald was born in 1801, not in 1802.*

Last week, *Hamodia* published an article about the life of Jonas Friedenwald, who came to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1832. This article sketches the life of Jonas's youngest son, Aaron, who became a well-known physician. While many Jews born in America during the nineteenth century abandoned the Orthodox practices of their parents, Aaron 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 Rav of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation in 1840. Realizing that educating 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 ... 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 if 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."



Dr. Aaron Friedenwald (1902)

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

### Return to Baltimore

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. He became the first professor of diseases of the eye and ear in the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Baltimore.

### Commitment to Yiddishkeit

"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 spe-

cial interest in any Jewish topic that was medically related. He wrote a strong defense of *shechitah* 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 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."

### Eretz Yisrael

In 1898, Dr. and Mrs. Friedenwald visited Eretz Yisrael. Dr. Friedenwald wrote a number of letters to his children describing this trip. 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 cir-

cumstances 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..."

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."

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 [which was Orthodox at this time], 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 nineteenth century Orthodox Jewish physician.

*Note: 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.*

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 Yisrael in 1898.

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