

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 18)

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

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

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 Mordecai’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, [North Carolina] 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 was a woman of delicate constitution, and she died at the time of the birth of the 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. However, he was not particularly interested in his business pursuits. In some way or other he obtained an excellent knowledge of the Hebrew language and literature. He studiously devoted himself to literary pursuits, especially Biblical research, and wrote many articles based on these intellectual pursuits. He may have felt that he had to in some way make up for his early imperfect education, and therefore the main focus of his life should be intellectual endeavors.

Reverses in fortune made it necessary for him to give up his business. This left him with the dilemma of how to support his large family. A solution to his financial concerns came along in the summer of 1808. Several local citizens met with Jacob and offered to help support the establishment of an “academy” for girls, on condition 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. Indeed, he was so well-read that one scholar of the era compared him to the great Jewish sages of the Middle Ages, and said he had knowledge equal to that of a rabbi.

The town leaders’ positive views of Mordecai's abilities as a teacher may have been further reinforced by the education he provided for his children, several of whom had gained excellent professional reputations.

In 1809 the school opened with 30 students and ended up being a family project. In the beginning, Jacob and Rebecca taught all the classes. However, 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 subjected to considerable personal discipline and a highly structured day during which they were kept constantly busy. 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. To foster this, the headmaster and his staff carefully and regularly checked on the girls’ character development. The school staff was also held to a high standard.

In addition, 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 school’s regimen.

Jacob made sure that students attended the church of their choice. There were times when he even went with them to the “preaching,” as he called it. He was careful to avoid all doctrinal and sectarian discussions in school activities. Nonetheless, at the same time he provided opportunities for all of his students to discuss philosophical and ethical issues. This was done using classical texts, with the goal of sharpening the girls’ critical faculties so that they would become aware of important moral and ethical considerations. Such an approach was unique for a girls’ school, since these subjects were usually studied only in schools for men.

Jacob Mordecai 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.

At the same time 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 Shalome. Jacob died in 1838."²

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 then 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."³

"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.”⁴

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

² *ibid.*

³ **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.

⁴ **Mordecai’s Female Academy**, by Sheldon Hanft, *American Jewish History*, 1989, 79 page 93.