

[“A Spirit of Inquiry:” Grace Aguilar’s Private Spirituality and Progressive Orthodoxy](#)

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One of the most influential writers of Jewish philosophy, theology, and fiction during the early Victorian period was Grace Aguilar. A traditional Spanish and Portuguese Jew, Aguilar spent most of her short life living outside of a structured Jewish community. Yet her vast knowledge of biblical, and even some rabbinical, texts—as well as her highly Romantic prose—brought her works to a wide audience of both Jews and Christians. Her popular novels were read all over England and the United States, as were her works of history, theology, and biblical criticism. In *The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer*, Michael Galchinsky asserts that Aguilar “was recognized by Christians and Jews alike as the writer who best defined the Anglo-Jewish response to the challenge to enter the modern world” (135). Aguilar’s works reflect a philosophy that merges traditional Orthodoxy with progressive thinking, elevates the role of women while stressing their domestic roles, and focuses on the individual nature of spirituality while at once identifying with a larger peoplehood. Aguilar’s traditional upbringing and theology resonate throughout her works—as do her Romanticism and passion. It is her way of framing social and theological issues that defines her as a progressive traditionalist; a woman who, within the framework of traditional Judaism and gender roles, sees opportunities for spiritual development of men and women alike. She promotes questioning and personal biblical interpretation, as well as the evolution of the halakhic process to address contemporary realities. In this article, I will provide a brief history of the Jews in England, laying the foundation for Aguilar’s cultural environment. Focusing mainly on her work, *The Women of Israel*, I will then discuss Aguilar’s views on Jewish women and their role in religion and society. Finally, I will address Aguilar’s progressive Orthodoxy, her views of tradition, which are colored by an open eye to the outside world and a personal intellectualism. Jews in England from 1270 until the Victorian Era England was devoid of Jews from the time of their expulsion in 1270 by Edward I until 1656, when Oliver Cromwell readmitted a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in an effort to increase commerce. At that time, 35 Sephardic families came with one and a half million pounds in cash; the businesses of these 35 families constituted one-twelfth of the total trade in England (see Zatlin, 17). The Spanish and Portuguese community was very strong in England; this community brought with it a solid sense of tradition. Although some crypto-Jews who came to England converted to Christianity—mostly for practical reasons—the ones who didn’t convert maintained an enlightened yet traditional identity. They looked to their cultural ancestor, Moses Maimonides, as an example of rational traditionalism (see Galchinsky, 26). This model of Judaism was prevalent in the Spanish and Portuguese community in England for several centuries. Unlike their German coreligionists, who felt the need to reform their religion in order to “fit in,” the more tolerant atmosphere in England did not push the Jewish community to make changes to their religion to become accepted socially. Regarding the Spanish and Portuguese community in England, Galchinsky notes that Sephardim in England were likely to adopt from their new host

country a liberal ideology that emphasized tolerance of minority groups—indeed, some historians argue that crypto-Jews invented the ideology of liberalism. At the very least, crypto-Jews had brought with them from Amsterdam a philosophy emphasizing skepticism, tolerance, and individual choice over communal authority. (26) It was in this tradition of liberalism, skepticism, and tolerance that Grace Aguilar was raised. The Women of Israel (and England) Free to assert their right as immortal children of the living God, let not the women of Israel be backward in proving that they, too, have a station to uphold, and a “mission” to perform, not alone as daughters, wives, and mothers, but as witnesses of that faith which first raised, cherished, and defended them.... Let us then endeavor to convince the nations of the high privileges we enjoy, in common with our fathers, brothers, and husbands, as the first-born of the Lord, by the peculiar sanctity, spirituality, and inexpressible consolation of our belief. (The Women of Israel, 12-13) During the English Haskalah, or Enlightenment period, much of the literature written by Jews in England was authored by women. Jewish women in England became popular novelists, poets, journalists, and writers of theology. Included in this group are the Moss sisters, Amy Levy, and Grace Aguilar. Aguilar had a short—but prolific—life. Many of her novels were published after her death at age 31. She was born in 1816 in London and died in 1847 in Germany, having gone to spas there on the advice of her doctors. Her parents were of Spanish and Portuguese descent, and practiced traditional Judaism. Emmanuel Aguilar, Grace’s father, was the Parnas, or president, of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London until the family moved to Devonshire in 1828, due to Emmanuel’s poor health. Aguilar’s Spanish and Portuguese heritage instilled in her a deep appreciation for female storytelling as a way to preserve identity. For Jews living in Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition, religion could only be practiced in the home, in secret. Galchinsky notes that “Families like Aguilar’s who had fled the Inquisition often had a matriarchal structure: the oral traditions of the crypto-Jews were passed down from mother to daughter in the domestic space because the traditionally male Judaic public spaces...had been closed down” (136-137). In this tradition, Aguilar instructs mothers to pray with and tell Bible stories to their sons and daughters: A mother, whose heart is in her work will find many opportunities, which properly improved, will lead her little charge to God. ... A mother’s lips should teach [prayers and Bible] to her child, and not leave the first impressions of religion to be received from a Christian nurse. Were the associations of a mother connected with the act of praying, associations of such long continuance that the child knew not when they were implanted: the piety of maturer years would not be so likely to waver. (The Spirit of Judaism, 225) Aguilar faced several issues as a traditional Jewish woman. First, she was denied access to rabbinical texts. Although Jews were relatively emancipated in English society, Jewish women were not fully emancipated in traditional Jewish circles. Second, she felt the pressures of conversionists. According to Milton Kerker, missionaries often targeted Jewish women, “under the perception that these were more spiritual and chafed under the shackles of a rigid, male-dominated creed” (36). Aguilar wrote, therefore, to help women stand strong against conversionist pressures. For example, in her novel *The Vale of Cedars*, Aguilar presents a heroic main character who chooses to give up the (Christian) love of her life—and ultimately suffers at the hands of Inquisitors—in order to remain true to her Jewish faith. In addition to showing resistance to conversionists, Aguilar also tells of the history of the Jews of Spain, creating sympathy and understanding of her culture and history in her readers. What Jewish women needed, according to Aguilar, was to be strengthened in their Judaism, and to feel fulfilled intellectually and spiritually. She wrote *The Women of Israel* as an apologetic text; in it, she “proves” women’s equality in Judaism—stressing that even the idea of ideal Victorian womanhood can be found in Jewish texts. Jewish women, she argues, should not be seduced by missionaries’ arguments that Judaism relegates them to second-class citizens. *The Women of Israel* became a very popular book among Jewish and Christian readers. It highlights some of Aguilar’s theological ideas, her social values, and some of the tensions inherent in her enlightened traditionalism. In *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, Paula Hyman notes that Aguilar’s *The Women of Israel* suggests the double-edged implications of the bourgeois gender division that placed religion and the inculcation

of religious sensibilities within the female domain. On the one hand, Aguilar manifested a strong loyalty to Jewish faith and to Jewish distinctiveness; she expressed a firm belief in woman's inherent religiosity as well as in her physical and mental inferiority to men...on the other hand... she championed women's religious education and the ceremony of confirmation for both sexes—innovations we would rightly see as progressive. (36) As we will see in the following section, Aguilar's focus on gender in her biblical commentary is fraught with tension between women's absolute equality and their "natural" place in the domestic sphere. Public Religion vs. Private Spirituality Aguilar exalts the feminine, private aspects of Judaism in her work, *The Women of Israel*. When examining the lives of biblical women, Aguilar glorifies the domestic sphere as the arena of true spirituality and communion with God. For example, in retelling the story of the matriarch Sarah, Aguilar envisions a Victorian model of domesticity—who is at the same time equal in God's eyes to her husband, Abraham: The beautiful confidence and true affection subsisting between Abram and Sarai, marks unanswerably their equality; that his wife was to Abram friend as well as partner; and yet, that Sarai knew perfectly her own station, and never attempted to push herself forward in unseemly counsel, or use the influence which she so largely possessed for any weak or sinful purpose....There is no pride so dangerous and subtle as spiritual pride....But in Sarai there was none of this... it is not always the most blessed and distinguished woman who attends the most faithfully to her domestic duties, and preserves unharmed and untainted that meekness and integrity which is her greatest charm. (*The Women of Israel*, 49) To a modern reader, the idea that a meek, domestic wife has attained equality with her husband seems odd. Aguilar is here promoting Victorian ideals of womanhood alongside a Jewish philosophy that holds women equal in status and responsibility to men. Although Aguilar believes that women and men necessarily have different "stations," or prescribed social roles, she emphasizes women's spiritual equality, or her equality in worth as a human being in the eyes of God. Cynthia Scheinberg, in *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England*, makes the argument that "Aguilar's own distrust of the public realm of Jewish practice...made it impossible for her to solve the problem of Jewish women's religious agency by making claims for women's public rights in Judaism. Instead, she claims the private sphere was the essential realm of true Jewish practice" (157). Here, Scheinberg implies that Aguilar believes that all Jewish spirituality takes place in the private realm—not just for women, but for men as well. I would argue that Aguilar actually elevates the "female" sphere above the public, "male" sphere as the site of one's relationship with God. We see again and again in *The Women of Israel* the value of one's private connection with God. In Aguilar's description of Hannah for example, she lauds Hannah's ability to privately utter her own prayers: her poetry shows her intellect, as her poem is "a forcible illustration of the intellectual as well as the spiritual piety which characterized the women of Israel, and which in its very existence denies the possibility of degradation applying to women, either individually, socially, or domestically" (*The Women of Israel*, 260). Additionally, Hannah is able to enter the Temple, showing that she has equal access to holy places. Hannah's private, quiet prayer—the first of its type—is used by rabbis as the model of prayer in general. Aguilar praises Hannah's prayer for its quiet modesty and its feeling and intellectual composition, thus elevating a woman's role to the paradigm of all prayers said by Jewish men and women. Aguilar's concern is for the private, spiritual nature of Judaism and the individual's ability to read Jewish texts and draw use these texts to preserve and strengthen one's identity. For example, in discussing Yokheved, the mother of Moses, Aguilar follows the rabbinic interpretation that Moses was sent to live with his birth mother until he was weaned. In these few years, Yokheved was able to educate her son and create in him an identity that would enable him to become a great leader of the Jewish people. Home, the site of maternal love and education, is glorified as the only place a Jewish woman should desire to reside and lead: [Mothers of Israel should] follow the example of the mother of Moses, and make their sons the receivers, and in their turn the promulgators, of that holy law which is their glorious inheritance. (*The Women of Israel*, 144) In the nineteenth century, Jewish women were not taught Talmud; they were exempt from public prayer; and they could not hold positions of authority in the Jewish community. But rather than chase after a "male" type of

emancipation, Aguilar raises the “female” spaces of the Jewish woman to a higher plane than that of Jewish men. Private, personal relationships with God are seen throughout the Bible; thus spirituality should be an individual, private affair. But while spirituality is elevated as a private value for women and men, Aguilar believes that public societal positions should be left in the male domain; women should always remain in that spiritual, private sphere. The idea of gendered public and private life can be seen dramatically in Aguilar’s portrayal of Miriam, sister of Moses. Miriam is one of the few biblical women who is referred to as a *neviah*, a prophet. She is a public figure among the Israelites; when she dies, the whole camp ceases its travels and mourns for seven days. Miriam leads the women in song after the miraculous splitting of the sea. Aguilar points to this incident and notes that *neviah* here means poet, not prophet, thus diminishing her public role in the community. Then, Aguilar focuses on Miriam’s sin: speaking gossip about Moses’ wife. She points to Miriam as what happens when women presume to live in the same sphere as the men in their lives, namely, they get punished for the sin of haughtiness: “Miriam sought to raise herself not only above her brother’s wife, but to an equality with that brother himself; and, by the infliction of a loathsome disease, she sank at once below the lowest of her people” (*The Women of Israel*, 208). At the same time, Aguilar argues that Miriam’s punishment shows women’s equality to men: Were women in a degraded position, Miriam, in the first place, would not have had sufficient power for her seditious words to be of any consequence; and, in the next, it would have been incumbent on man to chastise—there needed no interference of the Lord. We see, therefore, the very sinfulness of Jewish women, as recorded in the Bible, is undeniable evidence of their equality, alike in their power to subdue sin, and in its responsibility before God. (*The Women of Israel*, 210) The idea of women’s equality versus women’s sinful “nature” and private sphere, as illustrated in Aguilar’s interpretation of Miriam, is one of the tensions in Aguilar’s works. Galchinsky sums up this feminist/anti-feminist tension: In the 1860s, when women’s rights debates grew strong, Aguilar’s work could appeal both to feminists and to anti-feminists. Feminists could support her work as a Jewish woman’s groundbreaking act of self-representation and advocacy, a stage on the way to liberation, while anti-feminists could support it as a model of modesty and domesticity. (187) An additional tension comes from Aguilar’s promotion of women’s private roles as mothers and domestic teachers, while she herself tells of these ideas through the publication of books for a wide public. But this tension is an integral part of Aguilar’s upbringing and philosophy. Tradition and progress must go hand in hand—in perpetual tension; consistency is of secondary importance. In her poem, “Sabbath Thoughts VI,” Aguilar expresses her private connection with God in lines 61–64: Oh, ‘tis to hold commune with Thee To feel I am Thine own, Thy “still small voice” would silent be In festal halls alone. (“Sabbath Thoughts VI”) The “still small voice” Aguilar refers to is the presence of God, as told by Elijah the prophet in Kings I 19:12. Elijah seeks God. A wind splits mountains and shatters rocks, followed by an earthquake and fire—but Elijah does not see God in any of these mighty events. Then he hears “a still small voice”—and realizes that in that voice is God’s presence. In this reference, Aguilar focuses on the private, quiet spirituality that individuals experience. Through personal Bible study, prayer, and intellectual development, Aguilar hopes that Jewish women can accept their defined private role and appreciate the spiritual opportunities afforded to them in that sphere. The “still small voice” of God’s presence is accessible by anyone who seeks it. Toward a Progressive Orthodoxy A new era is dawning for us. Persecution and intolerance have in so many lands ceased to predominate, that Israel may once more breathe in freedom...the voice of man need no longer be the vehicle of instruction from father to son, mingling with it unconsciously human opinions, till those opinions could scarcely be severed from the word of God... This need no longer be. The Bible may be perused in freedom... A spirit of inquiry, of patriotism, or earnestness in seeking to know the Lord and obey Him...is springing up. (*The Women of Israel*, 11–12) Some criticize Aguilar’s theology in *The Spirit of Judaism* as “Jewish Protestantism” and note that Aguilar’s work shows a lack of deep knowledge of rabbinic texts. However, as a woman in a traditional Jewish community—where would she have found access to rabbinical texts? Scheinberg responds to the label “Jewish Protestant”: Aguilar fervently believed

that only through active “defensive” engagement with Christian culture could Jews and Judaism advance in Diaspora life; she took on this project of advancing Jewish learning despite the fact that she was excluded from traditional Jewish theology. If she sought strategies that could speak conclusively and inclusively to Christian readers, it was always part of a project of advancing Judaism and the Jewish people, a rhetorical strategy... rather than ideological commitment to Christian/Protestant doctrine.” (154) I agree with this argument; Aguilar has a broad view of Judaism and its role in the world. In order to succeed in the world, to be a “light unto the nations,” Jews need to interact with their non-Jewish neighbors every day, in ways that promote the beauty of Judaism. Jewish texts, according to Aguilar—whose own writings reached many different audiences—should be read by everyone, not just to an insular Jewish group. In his article “Jewish Religious Thought in Early Victorian London,” Steven Singer points out a new philosophy among Jewish intellectuals during the Victorian period, namely neo-Karaism. He cites Grace Aguilar as an example of this progressive wave of Jewish thought: In her writings Aguilar continually placed the Bible on a pedestal of unquestioned authority and simultaneously downgraded the Oral Law as having little importance. For example, she declared that “the Bible and reason are the only guides to which the child of Israel can look in security....those observances...for which no reason can be assigned save the ideas of our ancient fathers, cannot be compared in weight and consequence to the piety of the heart.” [The Spirit of Judaism, 228] Again she criticized Jews who, “earnest in the cause, yet mistaken in the means, search and believe the writings of the Rabbis, take as divine truths all they have suggested, and neglect the Bible as not to be compared with such learned dissertations” [The Spirit of Judaism, 51]. (190) Aguilar’s emphasis on shifting academic study of Judaism to the Bible and reason, and away from rabbinic texts, is not necessarily a move toward Karaism. First, Aguilar emphasizes the resources to which she herself has access; it is only natural to value one’s own path of access above learning that one does not have the opportunity to delve into. Her belief in the Bible as a source of “unquestioned authority” stems from her traditional philosophy that the words of the Bible are divine. Second, Aguilar makes some very valid points in looking at Orthodox tradition—from a traditional perspective. Just because Aguilar criticizes the status quo in the Orthodox world does not, as some critics argue, make her a reformer. In fact, in progressive Orthodox circles today, these same claims are being made: There is too great a focus in the yeshiva world on the Oral Law; many yeshiva students do not have a basic knowledge of Tanakh, biblical writings. Aguilar argues that “Circumstances demand the modification...of some of these Rabbinical statutes; and could the wise and pious originators have been consulted on the subject, they would have unhesitatingly adopted those measures” (The Spirit of Judaism, 31). Rather than reject rabbinic law, Aguilar promotes modification—based on contemporary realities. The process of halakhic decision-making is a fluid, changing structure. By viewing the Oral Law as “divine,” one discredits the whole nature of the halakhic process, which necessarily evolves as new realities crop up. Additionally, Aguilar notes, it is important to understand the backgrounds and biases of those rabbis who wrote the halakha: “There may be some observances which superstition and bigotry have introduced” (The Spirit of Judaism, 241). Looking at halakha as an evolving process, Aguilar demands an honest assessment of the origins and intellectual validity of each law as it is practiced. She thus encourages each Jew to go back to the original source—the Bible—to try to understand the essential spirit of the halakha. As a traditional Jew, Aguilar encourages a more rational, Bible and reason-based, evolving Orthodoxy that will be rich in tradition and spirituality for men and women alike. Scheinberg sums up Aguilar’s philosophy: “Aguilar maintains an unwavering commitment to Judaism; she constructs a theology that makes a commitment to ‘God, Torah, and Israel’ while never fully deferring to the ‘normative’ scholarly traditions of Jewish commentary” (155). Aguilar doesn’t elevate the “normative” scholarly traditions—partly because she does not have access to these traditions, and partly because she sees these traditions as evolving. Today, traditional Judaism has much to learn from Aguilar’s still, small voice—her voice of inquiry, her voice that combines Jewish theology with a respect and understanding of her surrounding culture. Works Cited Aguilar, Grace. *The Women of Israel*. New York: D. Appleton and

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