Grace Aguilar and Modernity

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This article is drawn from two sources, one by Rabbi Marc Angel, and one by Ronda Angel Arking.

(The first part of this article is drawn from Marc D. Angel, Voices in Exile, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, 1991, pp.152-155.)

Grace Aguilar (1816–1847) belonged to the Sephardic community of London. Although her life was cut short by an untimely death, she left a remarkable literary legacy. Aside from a number of novels, she also wrote works relating to Jewish religious teachings.

She was concerned that the wave of modernism was undermining the foundations of traditional religious life. Jews were seeking success in the secular world; the bond of religion was weakening. She was particularly aware of the spiritual turmoil among Jewish youth, and she sought to address their religious questions and to thereby strengthen their faith.

Aguilar corresponded with Isaac Leeser, spiritual leader of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, and he was of much help to her. Indeed, he edited several of her works for publication, including Shema Yisrael: The Spirit of Judaism. This work reflected Aguilar's deep concern that Jewish youth were not receiving a proper spiritual education in Judaism. She feared that they would be attracted to Christianity, which was popularly portrayed as a religion of the spirit. In contrast, Judaism was described as a religion of numerous detailed observances. Presented as an elaborate commentary on the first paragraph of the Shema (which she transliterated in the Spanish and Portuguese style as Shemang), the book dealt with a wide range of religious topics, emphasizing the profound spirituality inherent in Judaism.

Grace Aguilar argued that if Jews understood the true power and beauty of their religion, they would proudly assert their Jewishness instead of trying to conceal it. The repetition of the Shema itself is a source of holy comfort. If recited regularly “we shall go forth, no longer striving to conceal our religion through shame (for it can only be such a base emotion prompting us to conceal it in free and happy England); but strengthened, sanctified by its blessed spirit, we shall feel the soul elevated within us” (Shema Yisrael: The Spirit of Judaism, p. 9).

She stressed the need for Jews to devote themselves to the study of the Bible, the foundation of Judaism. In so doing, she made some pejorative remarks about “tradition,” apparently referring to the traditional stress on fulfilling the details of the law. (Isaac Leeser, in his notes to the book, took her to task on several occasions for her detraction of “tradition.”) (Ibid., pp. 21, 100, 104) However, Aguilar can hardly be accused of being unorthodox and opposed to the observance of mitzvoth.

She consistently called for the faithful observance of the commandments in their details: “Instead then of seeking to find excuses for their non-performance, should we not rather glory in the minutest observance which would stamp us as so peculiarly the Lord’s own, and deem it a glorious privilege to be thus marked out not only in feature and in faith, but in our civil and religious code, as the chosen of God?” (Ibid., pp. 225-226).

It may be argued that her stress on the Bible and seeming deprecation of “tradition” was her way of trying to appeal to the religious needs of her audience. She perceived her readers as being under the influence of Christian notions of what a religion should be. By asking Jews to read the Bible, she was asking them to do something that was desirable even for Christians, who also venerated the Bible. By emphasizing the spirit of Judaism, she wished to convey to Jews that they had no spiritual need whatsoever to turn to Christianity. But in the process of stressing the Jewish spirit, she found it necessary at times to downplay the details of the laws of Judaism as transmitted by tradition. These details themselves had to be framed within a context of spirituality and not be seen as ends in themselves.

In The Jewish Faith: Its Spiritual Consolation, Moral Guidance, and Immortal Hope, completed shortly before her death, Aguilar presented her arguments in the form of a series of letters from a knowledgeable Jewish woman to her beloved young friend, an orphan with little Jewish education. She felt that this style of presentation would be more interesting for her readers, especially younger readers whom she hoped to influence.

In the introduction to the book, she emphasized the need to present sophisticated religious educational materials to young people. Youth were easily influenced by outside sources; unless they had a proper understanding of Judaism, they would be tempted to abandon it. Indeed, the orphan to whom the letters in the book were addressed had been considering the possibility of converting to Christianity, believing that Christianity offered more spirituality than Judaism. The author, of course, forcefully refuted this claim; in the end, the orphan did not convert, but rather became a more devoted Jew.

Grace Aguilar expressed the conviction that it was necessary to provide Jewish education for girls as well as boys. She lamented the fact that the education of Jewish girls had not been given adequate attention. She described her book as “an humble help in supplying the painful want of Anglo-Jewish literature, to elucidate for our female youth the tenets of their own, and so remove all danger from the perusal of abler and better works by spiritual Christians” (The Jewish Faith, p. 10).

Arguing that the new knowledge and ideas brought about by the advances in science did not contradict the truth of the divinely revealed Torah, Aguilar wrote: “So simple, so easy appears to me the union of Revelation and all science, that how any mind can reject the one as contradicting the other is as utterly incomprehensible as it is fearful” (Ibid., p. 124). Scoffers who scorned the truth of religion were guilty of arrogance; they did not have a proper understanding of religion. Aguilar was obviously troubled by the increase in skepticism among Jews and by their intellectual surrender to the antireligious proponents of modern science and philosophy.

Moreover, Jews were not learning the spiritual aspects of Judaism. They were taught laws and customs, but often had no insight into the deeper meanings and ideas of Jewish tradition. She noted that the Spanish and Portuguese Jews tended to stress the external forms of religious ceremony, giving the impression that these forms were the essence of Judaism. While she recognized the reasons for the emphasis on form, she argued for the necessity of emphasizing the spiritual aspects of Jewish teachings. She warned, however, that people should not abandon religious observance, thinking that spirituality was of higher value. On the contrary, the observances gave expression to the spiritual feelings of love of God. She wrote that “every spiritual Hebrew, instead of disregarding the outward ceremonies, will delight in obeying them for the love he bears his God, welcoming them as immediate instructions from Him, even as a child obeys with joy and gladness the slightest bidding of those he loves” (Ibid. p. 221).

Aguilar was troubled by the phenomenon of Jews who achieved success in general society but in the process moved away from Jewish commitment. “Many, indeed, have lately distinguished themselves in the law, and in the fine arts of the English world; but why will not these gifted spirits do something for Judaism as well as England? There is no need to neglect the interests of the latter, in attending to the need of the former. We want Jewish writers, Jewish books” (Ibid., p. 264). She was convinced that if the most enlightened Jewish minds devoted themselves to presenting Judaism at its best, the non-Jewish world would be duly impressed. Hatred of Jews would diminish as non-Jews came to learn about and respect Judaism and Jews.

Grace Aguilar’s writings reflected major issues of modernism: the education of women, the need for spirituality, the renewed interest in the Bible, the critique of blind obedience to details of the laws without understanding their deeper meanings. They also shed light on the religiosity of her reading audience: relatively unversed in Jewish learning, skeptical about the mitzvoth, susceptible to the spiritual charm of Christianity. (Leeser challenged the latter point, believing that it was very rare for a Jew to convert to Christianity. As he saw the problem, Jews were simply becoming apathetic to their own spiritual heritage.) (Shema Yisrael, pp. viii, 165)

Grace Aguilar’s essential goal was to demonstrate that loyalty to traditional Judaism was not antipathetic to success in the modern world. By studying the classic sources of their religion and maintaining observance of the commandments, Jews would be secure in their own faith and could function more confidently in the general non-Jewish society.

(The following pages are drawn from Ronda Angel Arking, “’A Spirit of Inquiry:’ Grace Aguilar’s Private Spirituality and Progressive Orthodoxy,” Conversations, Issue 3, Winter 2009, pp. 31-41.)

While not a “feminist” in the modern sense of the word, she was a strong advocate of women’s rights and responsibilities within Jewish life. Indeed, women played a central role in the maintenance and transmission of our traditions. “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” (The Women of Israel, pp. 12–13).

Jewish mothers had an amazing role of instilling Judaism in the hearts of their children. “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” (Shema Yisrael, p. 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 Christian missionaries who sought to convert Jews, and saw Jewish girls and women as prime candidates for conversion. Aguilar wrote, therefore, to help women stand strong against conversionary pressures. For example, in her novel The Vale of Cedars, she 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.

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 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. When examining the lives of biblical women, she 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, p. 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 she 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.

In her 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" (Ibid., p. 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" (Ibid., p. 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, she believes that public societal positions should be left in the male domain; women should remain in that spiritual, private sphere.

While Aguilar's thinking was rooted in traditionalism, she recognized the need for a more progressive and inclusive approach. "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 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" (Ibid., pp. 11–12).

Aguilar continually placed the Bible on a pedestal of unquestioned authority. 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, p. 228).

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" (Ibid., p. 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. 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 every Jew to go back to the original source—the Bible—to try to understand the essential spirit of the halakha. As a traditional Jew, she encourages a more rational, Bible and reason-based, evolving Orthodoxy that will be rich in tradition and spirituality for men and women alike.