Emma Lazarus, Maud Nathan, and Alice Menken: Notable American Jewish Women

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The 1880s ushered in a period of mass immigration, with many hundreds of thousands of Jews among those seeking a new life in America. Some immigrants were fleeing oppression, and some were simply seeking a better life for themselves and their families. The image of America as a promised land with streets paved of gold attracted the poor and downtrodden of Europe. Between 1880 and 1900, the United States population surged 50 percent, from 50 million to 75 million.

Among the throngs of Jewish immigrants were many who were fleeing the pogroms and persecutions in Tsarist Russia. Most entered the country though the port of New York, and a large majority remained in New York City and environs. To Americanized Jews, their incoming coreligionists posed new challenges. The newcomers, for the most part, were poor, unfamiliar with English, and unskilled by American standards. They were very much "old country" in their garb, language, religious outlook, and manners. They needed places to live, jobs, schools for their children, and medical care. In short, they needed help in adapting to American life.

The Jewish immigrants crowded into tenements on the Lower East Side of New York, eventually also spreading out to other neighborhoods in uptown Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The native American Jewish community established agencies to help the immigrants, and expended considerable energy and resources to assist them. Certainly, there were sometimes tensions between them culturally, economically, and socially. Yet, to the credit of the New York Jewish community in particular—and American Jewry in general—much good work was done to assist in the absorption of the immigrants into American life.

Emma Lazarus

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), a descendant of old and distinguished Shearith Israel families, became an ardent spokesperson on behalf of these immigrants. She spent time with Russian-Jewish families in their tenement homes and sought ways to alleviate their misery. A noted poet in her day, she expressed her empathy with the plight of immigrants and gave voice to American idealism at its finest. Her poem, “The New Colossus” was inscribed on a plaque and affixed to the Statue of Liberty in 1903. In it, she wrote her now famous words:

Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Among the millions of Jews who arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1924 were 30,000 to 40,000 Sephardim who were mostly from Turkey, the Balkan countries, Greece, and Syria. The existing Jewish agencies that helped immigrants were geared for Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic Jews like themselves. They did not easily recognize the Sephardim as Jews because the Sephardim did not have what they thought of as typical “Jewish” names and because they did not speak Yiddish….

The Sisterhood [of Shearith Israel] established an “Oriental Committee,” whose sole task was to work with newly arrived Sephardim. The Sisterhood operated settlement houses on the Lower East Side specifically for the Sephardim. The one at 86 Orchard Street opened in 1913, and a larger one at 133 Eldridge Street opened in 1918. These settlement houses provide social services, advice, meeting places, youth programs, a Hebrew School, and even a synagogue.

Shearith Israel's spiritual leader, Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, was very interested in the welfare of the immigrant Sephardim. His assistant, Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool, worked most actively with the Sisterhood's "Oriental Committee" and with the Sephardic immigrants themselves. He represented Sephardic interests at meetings of Jewish social workers and charity agencies, and wrote articles explaining their background and needs to the Jewish community at large.…

Shearith Israel's commitment to the Sephardic immigrants entailed a remarkable expenditure of time, effort, and money. Had Shearith Israel performed no other public service at the time, the congregation would still have reason for pride in its social action work.

However, the social conscience of the congregation found expression in other causes as well. Several members of Shearith Israel made particularly notable contributions to the improvement of life in New York City—and well beyond.

Maud Nathan

Maud Nathan (1862–1946) was a social activist and a strong advocate of women's rights. She was a leader in the women's suffrage movement and was appointed by Theodore Roosevelt as the head of the women's suffrage committee in his National Progressive Party. She became an international figure in the women's rights movement, addressing conferences on the topic in such places as London, Lucerne, Stockholm, Budapest, the Hague, Canton, and Peking.

Maud Nathan was once confronted by an opponent of women's rights. The critic asked her derisively: "Would you want your cook to vote?" She answered calmly: "He does!"
A member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Maud Nathan had deep roots in American life. A member of Shearith Israel, she was imbued with a commitment to public service. She was a founder, and the first President, of Shearith Israel's Sisterhood, established in 1896.

Throughout the nineteenth century, almost all charity and social action work in New York was conducted on a denominational basis. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews each had their own separate institutions and agencies to meet the needs of their communities.

By the end of the nineteenth century, individuals from the different religious groups began working together. Maud Nathan was one of the first Jewish women in American to be involved on the highest levels in a social action cause that crossed denominational lines.

Josephine Shaw Lowell, a prominent personality in the New York social service world, invited Maud Nathan to become involved in the work of the Consumers' League of New York, which was founded in 1891. Maud Nathan not only joined this group, but went on to serve as its President from 1897 to 1917. She also served as Vice-President of the National Consumers' League that developed on the model of the New York Consumers' League.

In her work for the Consumers' League, she and her colleagues addressed the terrible working conditions of young women clerks in New York's department stores and shops. The basic insight of the Consumers' League was that the problem was caused not just by the callousness of employers but by the thoughtlessness of consumers. If shoppers would demand proper conditions for store workers, the employers would be forced to comply. The Consumers' League printed a "white list" naming the stores that met at least the minimum standards required by the League. At first, only a few stores earned the right to be included on the list. It soon became clear, though, that consumers were becoming sympathetic to the cause. More and more shoppers were patronizing "white list" stores and many were refusing to shop in stores that exploited their workers.

Through persistent hard work and ongoing negotiations with employers, the Consumers' League brought about a revolution in working conditions for the store clerks. The success was so monumental that other cities and states copied the New York model, which won adherents internationally as well. Maud Nathan described the history of the Consumers' League in a book she wrote called The Story of an Epoch-Making Movement.

Through her work for the women's suffrage movement and in the Consumers' League, Maud Nathan left an imprint on American history. In eulogizing her at her funeral on December 15, 1946, Rabbi David de Sola Pool referred to "her strong spiritual insight." She is noteworthy for having been able to translate her spiritual insight and idealism into practical action that helped her fellow human beings.

Maud Nathan was outspoken in her criticism of anti-Semitism and racial prejudice. She felt that group hatred and bigotry were increasing in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her autobiography, Once Upon a Time and Today, she reminded her readers:

Prejudice produces humiliation which is not easy to bear. And the sad part is that the nature becomes warped and the spirit of kindliness and friendliness is changed into bitterness and resentment. To live in peace, there must be mutual confidence, trust, cooperation, no antagonism. How often, instead of mutual

respect for differing spiritual values, there is suspicion, intolerance. Does not this intolerance find its final expression in the un-American principles of the Ku Klux Klan?

She saw herself as a victim of discrimination, both as a woman and as a Jew. Still, she took pride in the fact that he had “been able to make her protest count, because she persisted.” She devoted her life to advocating the American—and Jewish—ideals of freedom, mutual respect, and social justice.

Alice Davis Menken

A remarkable contemporary of Maud Nathan, also an active leader within the Shearith Israel community, was Alice Davis Menken (1870–1936). She, too, descended from early Shearith Israel families who had served in the American Revolution. Her husband, Mortimer Menken, was a successful New York attorney, and served as Parnas of Shearith Israel from 1922 to 1926. Alice Menken was President of Shearith Israel’s Sisterhood from 1900 to 1929….

Alice Menken’s interest in helping shape a better society went further [than the Sisterhood’s operation of settlement houses on the Lower East Side]. She was troubled by evidence of delinquency and vice among poor young Jewish immigrants. These young people often grew up in horrendous conditions and it is no wonder that some of them fell into anti-social behavior. Alice Menken believed that the way to deal with such individuals was through genuine, kind assistance and not through punishment. The goal was to rehabilitate them, not to harden them. In 1907, she was a prime mover in founding the Jewish Board of Guardians, which created a system of volunteers to look after wayward young people. Volunteers were given responsibility for supervising Jewish youth who had been placed on court-ordered probation.

In 1908, she organized a group of women from the Shearith Israel Sisterhood to work with the probation department of the Women’s Night Court of New York City. The Sisterhood group took responsibility for delinquent women so that they would not have to be incarcerated. In 1911, she helped found the Jewish Big Sister Association, through which women would “adopt” young women who were at risk of leading anti-social lives. Through one-to-one relationships, the “big sisters” could help guide the “little sisters” to constructive and fulfilling lives.

Alice Menken set a personal example for service. In the period from 1919 to 1922, in cooperation with the probation department, 346 probationers were under her own supervision—for as long a period as required by each of them. The average

age of these women was 20, and 197 of them were foreign-born. Alice Menken spent time getting to know the young women, and assessing their needs and wants. She sought to find ways of helping them to help themselves. Almost all of the women for who she took responsibility went on to live better lives—returning home, finding jobs, establishing families of their own. In at least one case, Alice Menken took a probationer home to live in her own house, making her part of her own family for several years! The young woman went on to live a good life, and was ever appreciative of this incredible generosity of spirit.

In 1920, Governor Alfred E. Smith appointed Alice Menken to serve as a member of the Board of Managers of the Reformatory. In this capacity, she strove to improve prison conditions and to eliminate solitary confinement. She believed that prisoners needed an environment that offered them the possibility of rehabilitation.

In 1933, she published a book entitled On the Side of Mercy, in which she discussed her philosophy (and her actions) relating to problems in social readjustment. She wrote

We must seek a balanced philosophy of life. We must live to make the world worth living in, with new ideals, less suffering, and more joy….And when the cry of distress is heard from those overtaken by moral disability, organizations and individuals whose creeds are different, but whose ideals are one, respond in full measure. In this way the new generation, maturing during these years of depression, will be cheered to action and taught something of human and spiritual values.