“A Spirit of Inquiry:” Grace Aguilar’s Private Spirituality and Progressive Orthodoxy

View PDF



Ronda Angel Arking is the Language Arts Program Manager for an international education company and is the Managing Editor of Conversations. She is an active member of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Baltimore, where she teaches several courses in biblical literature. This article appears in issue 3, 13 and 29 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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.

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)

.

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.

"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.

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.

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.

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)

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.

Works Cited

Aguilar, Grace. The Women of Israel. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1872.
Galchinsky, Michael. The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer: Romance and Reform in Victorian England. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1996.
———, ed. Grace Aguilar: Selected Writings. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2003.
Hyman, Paula E. Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.
Kerker, Milton. "Grace Aguilar, A Woman of Israel." Midstream 47:2 (2001): 35–37.
Scheinberg, Cynthia. Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Singer, Steven. "Jewish Religious Though in Early Victorian London." AJS Review 10:2 (Autumn 1985): 181–210.
Zatlin, Linda Gertner. The Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Jewish Novel. Boston: Twayne Publisher