

## **Review Essay: An Alternate Path to Modernity: Grace Aguilar and Victorian Jewish Humanism**

*Grace Aguilar, Selected Writings, Edited by Michael Galchinsky, Broadview Books, 2003*

The currents of history often serve to hide and sometimes suppress alternative visions in our march towards enlightenment and progress. Our normative version of Modernity can be traced from Galileo and Descartes to Hegel and Darwin. Such a trajectory preserves for us a foundational split between science and religious belief. In these Modern thinkers there is no common language to allow us to speak of religion and belief in the same context as science and truth. The rupture of this Enlightenment has been seen as sacrosanct in our experience of modern realities and systems of pedagogy.

Stephen Toulmin, in his prescient masterpiece *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, traces a variant history of Modernity for us, replacing Descartes with the late Renaissance Humanist Michel de Montaigne, by articulating a more inclusionary model of Western civilization than that preserved by Enlightenment scholars like Descartes:

*The contrast, between the practical modesty and the intellectual freedom of Renaissance humanism, and the theoretical ambitions and intellectual constraints of 17<sup>th</sup>-century rationalism, plays a central part in our revised narrative of the origins of Modernity. By taking the origin of Modernity back to the 1500s, we are freed from the emphasis on Galileo's and Descartes' unique rationality, which was a feature of the standard account in the 1920s and 30s. The opening gambit of modern philosophy becomes, not the decontextualized rationalism of Descartes' Discourse and Meditations, but Montaigne's restatement of classical skepticism in the Apology [for Raymond Sebond], with all its anticipations of Wittgenstein... Montaigne claimed that in the Apology that "unless some one thing is found of which we are completely certain, we can be certain about nothing": he believed that there is no general truth about which certainty is possible, and concluded that we can claim certainty about nothing.*

As is not so well known, Montaigne was born to a Converso family exiled from Spain and Portugal that had resettled in France. His skepticism is firmly rooted in a Converso culture that placed a high premium on religious pluralism and cultural tolerance in the face of a Catholic certitude that was deeply intolerant and exclusionary.

Montaigne's lineage of cultural skepticism, religious pluralism and philosophic historical relativism was restored by the little-known Napolitano scholar Giambattista Vico in his *New Science*. Vico produced a model in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that cut against the grain of philosophical rationalism. He looked back to ancient poetry and history emphasizing the way that they served to reflect one another while positing a new historically-centered anthropology that left space for the multiplicity of the human experience in its secular variant. Vico's analysis was predicated on an interpretive method grounded in philology; a discipline that had hitherto been used only by literary specialists and disdained by philosophers in the Platonic spirit.

Contemporary with Vico's researches, the central and defining moment in Anglo-Jewish history was taking place. The invitation of the Spanish and Portuguese community in London to the scholar and physician David Nieto to take the pulpit at the newly constructed Bevis Marks Synagogue was a transforming moment in the history of Western Jewry. That this moment has been forgotten and marked with a blank in the annals of modern Jewish culture speaks to the way in which roads not taken in our historical memory can posit a very different reality and self-perception which has led us to think that things must exist in very circumscribed ways; meaning that Modernity and Judaism should be seen contrapuntally. Hakham Nieto was a product of the University of Padua, an important nexus for a new generation of Jews who had been challenged by the ideas of Descartes.

This is the way in which David Ruderman presents Nieto in his book *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*:

*As Nieto's writings testify, he considered the profound impact of the sciences on European culture and society a supreme intellectual challenge to the viability of Judaism at the turn of the century. In England, especially, Nieto encountered a highly sophisticated society of scientists and churchmen who had creatively wedded the new advances in science with their own political and religious aspirations. These "virtuosi," first prominently Puritan and later Anglican, had found in the new scientific discoveries a potent vehicle by which to enhance their understanding of the Christian faith. In early modern Europe, and particularly in England, as Margaret Jacob has argued, ideas about the natural world often bore a direct relation to the way people understood the social and moral order.*

In summing up Nieto's impact, Ruderman states:

*Seen as a whole, Nieto's major writings suggest a consistent and well-conceived educational strategy for presenting the Jewish faith in a social environment that was isolated from the mainstream of Jewish culture, highly secularized, and only tenuously attached to traditional Jewish norms. By choosing to construct his own public image of Judaism along lines similar to the Anglican social and intellectual elite, he hoped to make the most effective case for Jewish faith and to insure the civic welfare of the Jewish community. An examination of Nieto's theology thus offers a remarkable test case of adaptation and reformulation of Judaism in light of the formidable challenge scientific advances had posed to traditional faith.*

Inexplicably, Ruderman in his analysis of Nieto does not point to the rich and variegated traditions of the Spanish Jews, especially in the Converso culture we have mentioned, as a key factor in his thinking. Such a culture is perhaps best seen in the Jewish apologetics of Isaac Cardoso who grew up in Catholic Spain only to return to his Jewish roots in the Venice ghetto. In fact, Ruderman explicitly rejects any links between Converso culture and the emergence of a new Religious Humanism among rabbis like Nieto in London.

But the lines that link Cardoso to Nieto via Montaigne and Vico allow us to explain the ways in which an alternative form of Jewish theology and civilization was allowed to develop in Western Europe. Mainstream Jewish scholars like Ruderman who have followed the lead of Heinrich Graetz and Cecil Roth in occluding the Sephardic component of Modern Jewish civilization have served to reify an Ashkenazi-centric version of Jewish history that not only minimizes the massive achievement of figures like Nieto and his heirs, but has ill-served Jews by maintaining, as we have seen in Toulmin's critique of Modernity, the harsh separation of categories such as the secular and the religious.

The standard reading of Jewish culture is refracted through the German-Ashkenazi Haskalah which produced the schismatic relationships that have anchored modern Jewish life and belief. The separation of religion from science, in the Cartesian modality, marks the ways in which 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish culture is read. Eschewing the Religious Humanism and cultural pluralism of Nieto, emerging from the Sephardic traditions of Cardoso which lead us back to Maimonides, post-Graetz Jewish historiography has drawn a portrait of Judaism that is marked by conflict and polemics.

Having filtered Jewish Modernity through the mechanisms of these polemics, contemporary Jewish scholars have painted a picture of a culture that is Byzantine in its complexity and impenetrable in the static nature of its various individual and conflicting components.

As contemporary Jews look for wholesome models of their culture which would allow for the possibility of preserving a Jewish parochialism within a larger universal humanism, Jewish scholarship has failed to articulate the ways in which Sephardic Humanism created a living and breathing model of just such a phenomenon – a Judaism that was at home in its own tradition and in the world at large.

Our ignorance of Anglo-Jewish history is due to this denigration of the Sephardic component.

The first scholar to restore the lines of this tradition has been Arthur Kiron in his brilliant dissertation on Sabato Morais, *Golden Ages, Promised Lands*. It is in Kiron's trenchant and brilliant formulations that we see for the first time the interlinked cultural constructs that brought together Italy, England and America. It is through the agency of a figure like Morais that we can trace the lines of influence that bring Maimonidean Humanism into the Modern Age.

As we have seen in Yosef Yerushalmi's classic biography of Cardoso *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, Cardoso's Converso culture was transplanted to Venice which then led to the emergence, recounted in Ruderman's book, of the University at Padua as the central place for enlightened Jewish education in Europe. Padua served to produce the most innovative and brilliant thinkers of European Jewish culture in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is little wonder that Jose Faur in his various works has been able to reconstruct a neo-Maimonidean renaissance among Sephardic thinkers by tracing the line from Maimonides to the Conversos and on to Vico, Nieto and eventually to Elijah Benamozegh, that final flowering of Jewish Humanism prior to the occlusion of Sephardim from Jewish discourse.

Kiron follows Faur in establishing that a neo-Maimonidean tradition had been established in a nexus which linked Livorno, London and Philadelphia.

*Morais devoted a good portion of his life in the United States, as we will see, through his innumerable public lectures and addresses, trying to communicate (and often, literally, translate), his formative experiences and Livornese Jewish perspective to his American audience. From childhood, Morais was imbued with profound political and religious convictions. From his later writings, which he produced in the United States we know that he was a sensitive student inter alia of medieval Spanish traditions of philosophy and ethics (particularly of Maimonides, and Bahya Joseph ibn Pakuda) and of "secular" Hebrew poetry, the theology and poetry of Judah ha-Levi, another outstanding figure of the Spanish Jewish golden Age; the fourteenth century "Jewish Dante," Immanuel of Rome, the early sixteenth-century Biblical exegesis and theological writings of the Iberian Jewish refugee Isaac Abravanel, the sixteenth century Italian Jewish humanist Azariah dei Rossi, the seventeenth-eighteenth century Haham [David] Nieto, his predecessor in Livorno and London... Beyond his literary interests, Morais also nurtured a deep love for music, including Italian opera, composed occasional Hebrew poetry, and later was reputed to be one of the most outstanding Hebraists in America in the nineteenth century, though he characteristically rejected such honorifics.*

The period in which Morais traveled from Livorno to London and on to Philadelphia saw a flowering of Nieto's Religious Humanism in the writings of two prominent members of the London Sephardic community.

In the classic work of Moses Angel published in the generation following Nieto's ministry in London's Sephardic community, *The Law of Sinai and Its Appointed Times*, published in London in 1858, the outpouring of Religious Humanism and its rich and brilliant values comes to the fore:

*[B]lind obedience is generally the result of early teaching or of ignorant imitateness; it may arise from faith, but it is faith of so undignified a character that it scarcely rises above superstition. On the other hand, the faith which is based on reason, acquires all the majesty of self-sacrifice and all the beauty of devotion; it is unshakable because it is not capricious, it is unerring because it is founded on principle. True, faith, as our ancestors taught us, must precede reason, but also true that reason must follow faith. Faith without reason is like those golden fruits which are tempting to the eye but rotten at the core. Reason without faith would resemble that motion into eternal space which depended on projection without attraction; it would be aimless and endless. Reason and*

*faith conjoined form that lovely combination which resembles the pure mind in the pure body; the inner life is as unsullied as the outward frame is consistent with harmony.*

It is here that we finally arrive at the historical person of Grace Aguilar, one of the most arresting Jewish writers of the modern period, whose work springs from this grand albeit forgotten tradition and represents the most accessible library of Sephardic Humanism in Anglo-Jewish letters.

Thus we can see that Sabato Morais (1823-1897), Moses Angel (1819-1898) and Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) are all seminal figures that reflect the tradition of Jewish Humanism transmitted through the agency of the Sephardic traditions of Maimonides and Bahya ibn Paquda and which had been channeled by illustrious figures such as Isaac Abrabanel, Solomon ibn Verga, Isaac Aboab, Isaac Cardoso, Menasseh ben Israel and David Nieto.

Of all these legendary figures, it is only Grace Aguilar that is of the female persuasion.

Following the current work being done in the reconstruction by feminist scholars of Jewish women's writings, the ideas found in the works of Grace Aguilar are quite unique among the books and writings that have been unearthed from Jewish women. Aguilar's writings encompass the entire gamut of Jewish creativity; not strictly limited to a concern for the living intimacy of the diary or memoir, Aguilar wrote novels and stories about Jewish life with an especial emphasis on the historical mode as perfected by Sir Walter Scott in his *Ivanhoe*; analyses of Jewish legends and history in studious works of Biblical exegesis and Midrashic reconstructions; and works on Jewish history and theology. There was no genre of writing that Aguilar would not take on.

In Michael Galchinsky's admirable anthology of Aguilar's writings, he presents many selections from the entire spectrum of her work.

There is a lengthy selection of Aguilar's fiction in the book that includes the complete version of her novella *The Perez Family* and the indelibly memorable story "The Escape." In these fictional works Aguilar examines both the history and contemporary reality of Spanish Jews who were exiles from the Spanish Inquisition.

"The Escape" is an intimate and compassionate study of a Converso family in Portugal who are forced to flee when one of their houseguests rats them out to the Inquisition. Note well how Aguilar boldly marks the positive relationship between the Conversos and their Muslim servant who ultimately saves them:

*It was as Ben Ahmed had feared. The known popularity and rumored riches of Alvar Rodriguez had excited the jealousy of that secret and awful tribunal, the Inquisition, one of whose innumerable spies, under the feigned name of Leyva, had obtained entrance within Alvar's hospitable wall. One unguarded word or movement, the faintest semblance of secrecy or caution, were all sufficient; nay, without these, more than a*

*common share of wealth or felicity was enough for the unconscious victims to be marked, tracked and seized, without preparation or suspicion of their fate.*

In “The Escape” Aguilar humanizes and makes real the domestic tragedies of the Conversos and their generations. The tale is set in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century just a few decades prior to Aguilar’s own birth into a family whose roots go back to the same Converso history. Alvar Rodriguez finds his sanctuary in England, as did the Aguilars. This sense of historical transition in Aguilar’s fictional writings marks the ways in which she sought to create a counterpoint to the legendary historical fictions of Scott and his ilk. Rather than romanticize the Sephardic past, Aguilar sets the stage for a more realistic and balanced portrayal of her community by articulating the pain and tragedy of their experiences in a way that would resonate within the culture of Victorian England.

As Galchinsky states in his wonderful introduction:

*Aguilar’s writings contribute to a more complete understanding of Victorian literature, Jewish cultural history, women’s cultural history, and English national identity. From a literary perspective, Aguilar was pre-eminent among those attempting to produce a new Anglo-Jewish literary subculture that could engage in complex and constructive encounters with broader Victorian genres and traditions. Her novels and poetry both assimilated the forms she drew from her surroundings, and altered those forms to express her particular sensibility as an Anglo-Jewish woman...*

*Aguilar’s works offer modern readers a view from the margins of the struggle that took place during the early and mid-Victorian periods over what it meant to be English. By contributing texts that were different from those written by majority writers, Aguilar posed two questions to her readers: What is Englishness? And what are its borders? And while seeming to acquiesce to the borders set for her by others, she often transgressed them. Her double vision, simultaneously assimilationist and resistant, gives her work the double consciousness that makes it worthy of comparison with the work of other marginalized writers, and lends it its Arnoldian quality of high seriousness.*

Galchinsky’s analysis brings to mind the hermeneutical modalities that frame Paul Gilroy’s classic work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*:

*Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to me mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.*

It is this sense of “double consciousness” that Aguilar herself sees as a part of her own project. This “double consciousness” is remarked on in a review of her historical work in the literary journal *Athenaeum* in August 1845:

*To criticize a work like this is a task of some delicacy, if not difficulty. The author being a Jewess, enthusiastically attached to her ancient faith, and entertaining no great respect for the Nazarenes [i.e. Christians], the critic's first duty is to suppress feelings which, however natural, must not bias him in the exercise of his judgement. His next, is to make all reasonable allowances for the influences of education on her mind – the authoress would say on his own – and, consequently, for the power of prejudices which, though often unperceived by herself, creep forth in several passages of her book. He must, indeed, do more than this: he must elevate himself to such a position that he can look down with calmness on the growth of such prejudices, on their ever active energy, and on the circumstances which rendered them an inevitable result. There are prejudices, which all may lament, but which, at the same time, every honest mind must respect – not in, or for, themselves, but purely in the circumstances to which we allude.*

The Christian writer of this review is drawn in by Aguilar's writing but wary of her anti-Christian sentiment. On the one hand, the writer is aware of the stain of Anti-Semitism in British history that Aguilar references. On the other, he has to maintain his Christian elitism that finds in Judaism a lesser example of religious truth.

Such a dialogue is a fascinating example of the ways in which Sephardic Humanism posed a stark and intimidating challenge to Western Christianity in its hegemonic forms.

Wondrously, Aguilar herself works through this problematic in one of the central plot lines in her *The Perez Family*. Retelling the story of a Victorian Jewish family struggling to survive after the death of its patriarch Simeon, *The Perez Family* examines the issue of assimilation by having the eldest son of the family Reuben marry the Christian daughter of his banker boss, while his mother Rachel and brother Simeon struggle over whether or not to accept him:

*“Peace, I command you!” exclaimed the widow, with a tone and gesture of authority which awed Simeon into silence, and checked the wrathful reply on Reuben's lips. “My sons, profane not the Sabbath of your God with this wild and wicked contention. Simeon, however you may lament what Reuben has disclosed, it is not your part to forget he is your brother – yes, and an elder brother – still.”*

*“I will own no apostate for my brother!” muttered the still irritated young man. “Others may regard him as they list; if he had given up his faith, I will not call him brother.”*

*“I have neither the will nor the occasion to forswear my faith,” replied Reuben, calmly. “Mr. Wilson has made no condition in giving me his daughter, except that she may follow her own faith, which I were indeed prejudiced and foolish to deny. He believes as I do; to believe in God is enough – all religions are the same before Him.”*

*“That is to say, he is, like yourself, of no religion at all,” rejoined Simeon, bitterly. “Better he had been prejudiced, rigid, even despising us as others do; then this misfortune would not have befallen us.”*

Aguilar enters into the highly charged battleground of religious exclusivism and universalism in these complex passages. Reuben articulates the assimilationist position with gusto: There is only one God and we can all worship Him through a non-exclusivist faith. Reuben is losing his Judaism to the promises of the ecumenical nature of Christianity as practiced by the British Middle Classes. Christianity is seen as the great unifier and Judaism merely a minor player in this game of religion. As in the film “Chariots of Fire,” the Jewish faith is seen as marginal or expendable.

But Simeon’s position is equally inflexible in its own view of religion and ethnicity.

Simeon is well aware of the great struggles of Jewish history, especially in what has been bequeathed to him from the Converso heritage, of having to fight and battle just to be Jewish. But beyond this noble struggle for Judaism, Simeon establishes a principle that is familiar to us today: For Jews to be strong and united, as Sartre said, there must be a firm resistance to them through the agency of the Anti-Semite. Both Simeon and Reuben represent the false vanity of the modern Jew. Each is convinced of the truth of their convictions and will not seek to compromise.

In the course of the story, we are drawn to the position of Rachel – the mother who has kept the family together from tragedy to heartbreaking tragedy with a fierce faith and determination – who seeks to tolerate Reuben’s marriage and watch on stoically from the side as Reuben’s life is changed for the worse as his illusions eventually crumble.

This sense of steadfastness in the face of adversity is Aguilar’s idealization of the Sephardic woman in England and the way in which she chooses to conduct her own mature and insightful dialogue with the forces of zealotry and assimilation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe and the Jewish Question.

Reuben’s wife eventually gets sick and dies – leaving Reuben bereft of any sense of who he is and what he represents as a human being. While Simeon has rejected Reuben for his wandering outside the faith, Rachel Perez holds on to Reuben and provides him with a way back once his dreams are shattered. Rachel’s adoptive daughter Sarah, a niece of her husband whose mother dies leaving her with a father who cannot properly take care of her, is the true heroine of *The Perez Family*. Sarah is charged with preserving the altruistic value system of her “mother” and setting an ideal example of the ethic of what Sabato Morais called *abnegazione*, self-abnegation, when she remains with the Perezes after her father gets rich – allowing him to then disown her – only to return to him when he is debilitated and loses everything.



Reuben and Sarah thus bring the story of the Perez family full circle: Like Simeon and Rachel Perez, Sarah and Reuben build a new Jewish family on the rubble of catastrophe and defeat. Aguilar fights the assimilationist tendency by showing a poignant restraint and expressing a fierce and absolute faith in God that is stronger than many of us could realistically bear in dealing with the pain and tragedy of our life:

*“And your blessing, mother, dearest mother; oh, say as you have so often told me, you could wish and ask for no dearer, better wife for your Reuben; and such blessing may give my Sarah voice!” He threw his arm around her when he spoke, and both bent reverently before the widow, whose voice trembled audibly as she gave the desired blessing, and told how she prayed and yearned that this might be, and Sarah’s voice returned, with a tone so glad, so bird-like in its joy, it needed but few words.*

The brilliance and the sophistication of Aguilar’s rhetoric reflects her determination to raise Judaism to a rarefied height; to restore Judaism to the grace and wisdom of its most sacred ethical values. Rather than affirm her son Simeon’s fatalistic view of Judaism, Rachel Perez holds back her deepest and most intimate feelings and altruistically shows her own self-discipline to wait out the inevitable storm of Reuben’s intermarriage until God restores her family to its Jewish honor.

It is in this manner that Aguilar composes her three most important Jewish books, *The Women of Israel*, *A History of the Jews in England* and *The Spirit of Judaism*. In each of these lengthy studies, excerpted by Galchinsky in the anthology, Aguilar stands firmly in the spiritual shadow of her ancestors and shows them the utmost fealty and respect. Her vision of Judaism, in the wake of the Sephardic Haskalah of Ibn Verga, Cardoso and Nieto, is one that is inclusive of history and culture as well as of religion. Aguilar is consistently critical of the Christian history of anti-Jewish persecution as well as the rabbinical heritage and its inherent misogyny:

*That in former times the Christian should have been regarded with loathing, and hate, and terror, can astonish none acquainted with the history of persecution; but now that in all civilized lands we are protected, cherished, nay, often honored and beloved, why should this feeling continue to rankle in the Israelitish bosom? Treated with charity and kindness, why should we not encourage the same soothing emotions? It is alleged that it is dangerous to associate intimately with those of other creeds, that it is as dangerous to our faith as the open warfare of old. They are mistaken who thus think; were the Jewish religion studied as it ought to be by its professors of every age and sex; were the Bible, **not tradition**, its foundation and defense, were its spirit felt, pervading the inmost heart, giving strength and hope, and faith and comfort: we should stand forth firm as the ocean rock, which neither tempest nor the slow, still, constant dripping of the water could bend or shake. We should do more; thus prepared, thus convinced of truth, we should find that every argument they might employ, every book we might be persuaded to peruse, would but strengthen conviction in the faith of Israel...*

In this extraordinary – and markedly representative – passage Aguilar transforms Nieto's apologetic from a very different vantage point: Having assimilated the values of Victorian England in its liberal variant, Aguilar has also brought to bear a renewed understanding of Hebrew Humanism that is more comfortable with itself and with its Other, more deeply tolerant and forgiving of those who have done it wrong, and more self-confident in its own self-perception.

Thus, Grace Aguilar returns to the Bible as her fount of ultimate meaning and examines the stories of the women of ancient Israel in ways that turn Victorian England into a new Biblical age. Her feminism will seem strange and somewhat muted and toothless to modern feminists; her love of woman is presented as it had been idealized in the Victorian mind: Altruistic, stoic, reserved, composed, modest and intellectually circumspect, Aguilar's ideal woman takes charge in a way that is unassuming and unassertive. She does not seek to make men out of women – she remains resolutely politically incorrect by accepting the separation of the sexes and defining the role of the woman from within the accepted cultural conventions of both her time as well as from the Biblical modality. Aguilar seeks parity and equality for women rather than seeking to collapse the differences that separate the cultural roles of gender.

Her portrait of the Biblical Sarah, for instance, shows Sarah as a perfect model of the Victorian ideal:

*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. Some, however, would have found it difficult to preserve their humility and meekness, situated as was Sarai. A coarser or narrower mind would have prided herself on the promises made her husband, imagining there must be some superlative merit, either in herself or in Abram, to be singled out by the eternal.*

Standing in contrast to those modern feminists like Virginia Woolf who would come half a century later, Aguilar remained the perfect model of a Religious Humanist; disdaining the false luster of the purely secular as much as she did the zealous ignorance of the fundamentalist, Aguilar was a restless and searching wanderer for truth and a firm partisan of character and morality. She would have found our current penchant for extremes – religious and secular – to be distasteful and foolish. While fighting for the elevation of the status of Woman she would never degrade the character and beauty of the female person, as she would never minimize the significance of Judaism and its wondrous spiritual values.

Thus was Grace Aguilar a shining example of the varied and multiple polarities of a deeply religious person who was pointedly concerned with the proper dignity of women who could at the same time harbor a commitment to the intellectual values and priorities that we would claim as the inheritance of Modernity.

For some today that might mean that Aguilar was a bundle of contradictions. And yet our means of comparative understanding, the analytical tools that we have at our disposal, might not be rich enough to penetrate the world of one as brilliantly complex and polymorphous as Aguilar.

While Hannah Arendt preserved a version of an Ashkenazi woman, Rahel Varnhagen, who she showed as reflecting a prototypical variant of the modern Enlightened Jewish woman, Grace Aguilar did not see herself as any kind of revolutionary. She blazed her own path in a life cut tragically short by a debilitating physical illness which silenced her voice in its very prime. Her writings – and for such a short life there are indeed a lot of them, so much so that Galchinsky's anthology at a little over 400 pages cannot even begin to mine the great depth of her work – were not composed with any sense of cultural limitation or indulgent self-absorption. In essence, her writings were the product of a deeply confident Jewish consciousness that was fully aware of the world in which it was a part and the needs that it had to address to fulfill what Aguilar saw as what was lacking in the Jewish community of her time.

Indeed, the very internal Jewish mechanisms that have blocked her writing and the writings of other Anglo-Sephardim like Moses Angel from finding their way into our contemporary Jewish culture are anticipated in her own books when she discusses the differences between Sephardim and Ashkenazim:

*The Spanish Hebrews had occupied so high a position in Spain and Portugal, that even in their compulsory exile their particularly high and honorable principles, their hatred of all meanness, either in thought or act, their wealth, their exclusives, and strong attachment to each other, caused their community to resemble a little knot of Spanish princes, rather than the cowed and bending bargain-seeking individuals known as Jews.*

*The constant and enslaving persecution of the German Hebrews had naturally enough produced on their characters a very different effect. Nothing degrades the moral character more effectually than debasing treatment. To regard an individual as incapable of honor, charity and truth, as always seeking to gratify personal interest, is more than likely to make him such. Confined to degrading employment, with minds narrowed, as the natural consequence – allowed no other pursuit than that usury, with its minor branches, pawn-broking and old clothes selling – it was not very strange, that when the German Hebrews did make their way into England, and were compelled, by actual subsistence, still to follow these occupations, that their brethren from Spain should keep aloof, and shrink from all connection with them.*

The march of history saw the German Hebrews, as Aguilar calls the Ashkenazim, make the demographic strides that led to their hegemony in the Jewish community. But the internal dissension that continued to mark the Ashkenazi experience and solidify its remove from the grandeur of Sephardic civilization would become the line that would separate these two varying Jewish cultures and deprive modern Judaism of its most

brilliant and cultured expression. Aguilar belonged to a Sephardic Jewish tradition that did not see her modern views as being anathema or deeply conflicted with the Jewish culture that they were comfortable with. Like David Nieto before her, Grace Aguilar sought to find ways to connect Jewish tradition with the best of what Western civilization had to offer. Not for her the cognitive dissonance and endless polemic and anathema that characterizes so many of the internecine wars of Ashkenazi Orthodox and non-Orthodox, believers like Samson Raphael Hirsch and his neo-Orthodox peers on the one hand, and Jewish modernists like Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka and Karl Marx on the other.

The Sephardic culture of Anglo-Judaism as exemplified by individuals like Sabato Morais, Moses Angel and Grace Aguilar was one that embraced the world as it was and boldly envisioned what it could be. It was deeply enmeshed in the articulation of a Judaism that would engage those people who were literate in the culture of Modernity and who wanted to maintain a sense of Jewish continuity. These Anglo-Sephardic figures spoke in a Victorian-Jewish language that would be compromised by the great secular and religious struggles of the following century.

But reading the eloquent texts of Grace Aguilar in the beautifully prepared and annotated edition by Professor Galchinsky, we hear a voice from our Sephardic past that stands in contrast to the mixed-up and strident voices that currently permeate our discourse and have made incoherent the values of a Hebrew Humanism.

Grace Aguilar's *Selected Writings* is a book that is an all-too-brief introduction to an author who is lamentably unknown to contemporary readers. It redresses this serious imbalance by framing Aguilar's voice in all its multiple richness within a Humanistic context that does not fail to highlight the deep and abiding love and concern Aguilar had for her faith and her traditions.

At the very end of the book, Galchinsky includes some portions of Aguilar's own diary, written at the very end of her short life. The diary is filled with the moral insights and aesthetic values that permeated the life and letters of this extraordinary Jewish woman. She was both a deeply worldly as well as profoundly spiritual person whose rich life encompassed so much more than what passes for culture today. Her youthful energy and enthusiasm was brutally curtailed by her most untimely death. At the very moment that she was reaching her mature potential, she was unmercifully struck down and silenced.

Grace Aguilar's is a voice that will startle and amaze those who are unfamiliar with the Sephardi milieu in which she was raised and of which she was such a brilliant representative. Hers is a vision of humanity that harmonizes our past with the needs of the present while still keeping a sharp eye on the future.

Aguilar's *Selected Writings* is a book that stands as a blueprint for what the Jewish future might look like as refracted through the prism of the noble Sephardic tradition.

David Shasha

### **Select Bibliography**

Grace Aguilar: Selected Writings

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The Spirit of Judaism

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