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“the *invisible* Spirit alone”: the Romance of Reform in Grace Aguilar’s Theological
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The Anglo-Jewish author Grace Aguilar lived in the early nineteenth century when England was experiencing revolutions and reforms in philosophy, politics, and religion. The daughter of Sephardic immigrants, Aguilar authored novels, poetry, essays, theology, and midrash. She is perhaps the most well-known and the most prolific nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish woman writer. Aguilar’s works, especially her theology, channel various ideological streams that were running through English thought in the early nineteenth century. Aguilar, who is usually considered a “traditionally observant” Jew, presents herself as a Victorian woman who values the very “Victorian” concepts of domesticity and womanhood present in much nineteenth-century literature for women. The ideal Victorian woman is pure and good, tends to the needs of her children, husband, and home, and is the religious center of the home; Aguilar preached the importance of these domestic values in her theological work. Though ostensibly traditional in these respects, her theological works argue for the political emancipation of the Jews, for radical reforms in Jewish belief and practice, and for the value and dignity of Jewish women, all while she defends Judaism against disparagement from Christians and provides a model of conduct for Jewish women. This work seeks to present the “spirit” of Grace Aguilar’s theological works *The Women of Israel* (1845) and *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842) through three different historical lenses. By “spirit” I mean the driving force behind her theology, that which moves her arguments: her own unique concept of the “Jewish spirit.”

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Introduction

“Judaism is a doing which can be grasped only by the heart.”¹
—Julius Lester

At the beginning of the daily morning prayers, traditionally observant Jewish men recite a brief passage that has provoked much debate over the status of women in Judaism: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who did not make me a woman.” At the same time, women thank God for making them “according to God’s will.” Many have interpreted the men’s blessing as incredibly disparaging to women and cite this blessing as evidence of rabbinic misogyny. Others attempt to explain and justify this passage in order to refute claims that Judaism disparages women.

Judith Hauptman explains that the context of this passage in the Tosefta is a discussion of the blessings a Jew recites before performing a mitzvah, such as putting on tzitzit or tefillin.² R. Judah, who argues for daily recitation of this and two other “who has not made me” blessings, explains why each is recited.³ The blessing is not intended to imply that women are defective by nature. Hauptman points out that, according to R. Judah, men recite this statement in order to express their gratitude for their higher level of ritual obligation (235, 222). But R. Judah’s explanation does mark women as inferior because they have fewer religious demands made upon them. Hauptman believes that the blessing intends to point out that women occupy a lower social status than men (236).

In nineteenth-century England, Christian women used this blessing to validate their claims that Christianity, above all other religions, best appeals to woman’s nature. In 1839 Sarah Lewis released *Woman’s Mission*, a book based on Louis Aimé Martin’s *Sur l’éducation des meres* (1834). *Woman’s Mission* reflects quintessential Victorian ideals about women and motherhood, and celebrates what Lewis regards as woman’s newly

exalted position in nineteenth-century Christian England (Helsing 3, 5). Women owe this exaltation to Christianity: “For woman never would, and never could, have risen to her present station in the social system, had it not been for the dignity with which Christianity invested those qualities, peculiarly her own” (Lewis 140-41). For Lewis, Christianity accords women freedom that other religions do not, and she questions how women can “be anything but Christians, when they hear the scornful thanksgiving of the Jew, that he was not born a woman” (142).

Six years after the publication of *Woman’s Mission*, Grace Aguilar released *The Women of Israel*, in which she addresses both of Lewis’ claims: that Christianity exalts women and that Judaism degrades women. According to Aguilar, Christian writers of moral and didactic works are compelled by “education and nationality” to “believe that ‘Christianity is the sole source of female excellence’”:

[. . .] that to Christianity alone they owe their present station in the world, their influence, their equality with man, their spiritual provision in this life, and hopes of immortality in the next;—nay more, that the value and dignity of woman’s character would never have been recognised, but for the religion of Jesus; that pure, loving, self-denying doctrines were unknown to woman: she knew not even her relation to the Eternal; dared not look upon him as her Father, Consoler, and Saviour, till the advent of Christianity. (1: 2)

Aguilar empathizes with Lewis’ love for Christianity and shares her scorn for “the Heathen and Mahomedan.” But Aguilar implores Lewis not to “be so unjust as to count the Jewish religion amongst those in which woman, in her clinging and truly feminine character, is uncared for and unvalued” (2: 422). Grace Aguilar’s *The Women of Israel* demonstrates how Judaism similarly exalts its women.

Regarding the “scornful thanksgiving of the Jew,” Aguilar falls into the apologist category since she seeks to vindicate the Jewish religion. Invoking “[t]he thanksgiving in

the Israelitish morning prayer, on which so much stress is laid as a proof how little woman is regarded” is a “false and foolish reasoning on the subject; almost, in truth, too trivial for regard” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 3). Some Christians intentionally construe the blessing to mean whatever will suit their aims, but Aguilar insists that the blessing betrays “neither scorn towards [women], nor too much haughtiness for [men].” It is “but one of those blessings in which the pious Israelite thanks God for all things, demanding neither notice nor reproof” (1: 3). Gentiles argue that the Talmud originated the blessing in order to inculcate the “moral and mental degradation” of Jewish women, a supposition which Aguilar rejects. She claims that Jewish women are so exalted by the word of God that the blessing need not even be abolished from the morning service (1: 3-4). This is one among many examples of how Aguilar answers charges against Judaism brought by Christians.

Aguilar lived in the early nineteenth century when England was experiencing revolutions and reforms in philosophy, politics, and religion. The daughter of Sephardic immigrants, Aguilar authored novels, poetry, essays, theology, and midrash.⁴ She is perhaps the most well-known and the most prolific nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish woman writer. Aguilar’s works, especially her theology, channel various ideological streams that were running through English thought in the early nineteenth century. Aguilar, who is usually considered a “traditionally observant” Jew, presents herself as a Victorian woman who values the very “Victorian” concepts of domesticity and womanhood present in much nineteenth-century literature for women. The ideal Victorian woman is pure and good, tends to the needs of her children, husband, and home, and is the religious center of the home; Aguilar preached the importance of these

domestic values in her theological work. Though ostensibly traditional in these respects, her theological works argue for the political emancipation of the Jews, for radical reforms in Jewish belief and practice, and for the value and dignity of Jewish women, all while she defends Judaism against disparagement from Christians and provides a model of conduct for Jewish women.

The writings and experiences of Georgian era Jews in England are marked with unique tensions and contradictions. The tension exists between desires to remain Jewish while confronting modernity and contributes to the contradictions and ambiguities present in the work of Aguilar and other Anglo-Jewish writers. Moses Mendelssohn, often called the father of the Jewish Enlightenment, wanted to help Jews live in both the world of the modern state and the world of the Jewish community.⁵ He advised Jews to “[a]dapt yourself to the morals and the constitution of the land to which you have been removed; but hold fast to the religion of your fathers, too. Bear both burdens as well as you can” (qtd. in Taitz 201). Aguilar, an admirer of Mendelssohn, similarly deals with issues of assimilation: to what extent are Jews loyal to Judaism? To what extent are Jews loyal to the state? How can these dual loyalties cohere?

Mendelssohn grappled with Jews’ encounters with the modern state, which consequently contributed to the collision of ideas within Jewish communities all over Europe during this period. Jews in England could not escape the predominance of the Christian culture that influenced the thought of the early English Jewish Reform movement. The theology of David Woolf Marks, the first rabbi of the first Reform synagogue in England, reveals certain inconsistencies and ambiguities. Marks and the early Reformers valued Mosaic Law over rabbinic law, but his theology reflects hints of

an allegiance to traditional practice (Kershen 17). Aguilar's theology virtually mirrors Marks', and she similarly presents an inconsistent definition of "traditional" Judaism. But these seeming contradictions, as we shall see, will be worked out. For the early English Reformers, an allegiance to traditional practices does not contradict the new Reformist spirit, which elevated the spiritual desires of the individual.

Both *The Spirit of Judaism* and *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar's two major theological works, address the place of Jews in England and the modern world. These works also address the Jewish community's internal issues. But her work necessarily takes into account women's experiences, which complicate the first two issues. Women's writing does not occur in a vacuum. Some feminist critics have decided that, since Jewish women have struggled for equality in the Jewish world, they do not or can not take part in historical discourse, which has been traditionally male dominated. Aguilar's theological tracts evince that she was privy to and participated in reforms and intellectual movements in England and in Judaism. But Aguilar's work demonstrates that Jewish women dealt with the additional burden of Victorian domestic idealism. She deals with all of these issues in her theology, and at first glance, her responses appear inconsistent, even contradictory.

It is clear that Jewish critics who write about women and Judaism hold various commitments and multiple desires. Chava Weissler proposes a series of important questions that often have no clear answers and end in ambivalence: "What does loyalty to Judaism demand? What does loyalty to women demand? What does loyalty to scholarship demand? I too may reach a point at which the conflicting loyalties block any response but silence" (qtd. in Peskowitz 2). I think that much of Aguilar's contemporary

relevance lies in that she is unafraid to contradict herself or appear inconsistent in her public and vocal exploration of her categorical sense of self. She simply *is*, and she presents her singular categorical identity as the most natural existence in the world. And what's more, she encourages women to understand ourselves similarly. Those of us for whom merging categorical identities is not so simple can learn much from Grace Aguilar.

This work seeks to present the "spirit" of Grace Aguilar's theological works *The Women of Israel* (1845) and *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842) through three different historical lenses. By "spirit" I mean the driving force behind her theology, that which moves her arguments: her own unique concept of the "Jewish spirit." Weissler's reaction to the conflicting loyalties experienced by Jewish women scholars and writers inspired my historical approach to Aguilar's theology. I took this idea of multiple loyalties and contexts and applied it to my exploration of *The Spirit of Judaism* and *The Women of Israel* in an attempt to extrapolate Aguilar's answer to the question of dual loyalties and to clarify her vision of the "Jewish spirit."

I examine her theological prose through three different contexts: 1) as a woman writing within the Victorian domestic tradition, 2) as a Jew writing the relationship between Jews and Christians, and 3) as a woman writing reform in the Jewish world. But like Aguilar's own identity, these contexts blur and each chapter does not maintain rigid distinctions. In Chapter 1, I examine *The Women of Israel* through the lens of Victorian domestic ideology. Though I position Aguilar's work within the context of the Victorian "cult of true womanhood," it would be impossible to neglect a discussion of Jewish interaction with the non-Jewish (mostly Christian) world here, which is a focal point of Chapter 2. It is similarly impossible to leave Aguilar's domestic ideology behind in

Chapter 2, as well as in my discussion of her ideas about the status of women in Judaism, one of the main foci of Chapter 3. Aguilar's domestic rhetoric influences the way she understands Jews' interactions with the dominant culture and interactions within the Jewish community, and binds together her seemingly disparate identities. Aguilar's "Jewish spirit" is fueled by and inseparable from domesticity, the home, and the heart.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Elyse D. Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'Filah: A Reform Siddur: Weekdays, Shabbat, Festivals, and Other Occasions of Public Worship* (New York: CCAR Press, 2007), 155.

² The Tosefta is a collection of oral traditions related to Jewish law. It is similar in form and content to the Mishnah, the first authoritative codification of laws. Jewish men wear tzitzit (fringes) at the corners of their prayer shawls in fulfillment of the commandment found in the Shema (Numbers 15:38). Jewish men traditionally wear tefillin, or phylacteries, during prayer wrapped around their arm and placed on their foreheads.

³ The additional two blessings thank God for not making the speaker either a Gentile or slave.

⁴ "Midrash" is the generic term for the collection of interpretations of specific biblical books that was compiled over several centuries and includes some content in common with the Mishnah and Talmud (Wegner 74). But "midrash" also refers to a method of biblical exegesis. Writers of midrash retold stories in order to answer for gaps in the biblical text, gaps which they would fill in with details taken from Jewish oral tradition or their own imaginations.

⁵ In *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (2000), David B. Ruderman points out that the English development of the Jewish Enlightenment differs from that of the German. Mendelssohn initiated the German Jewish Enlightenment, but as Ruderman argues, in thought Mendelssohn paralleled more the English Jewish intellectuals than he did the Berlin *maskilim*. So, while the German Jewish Haskalah differed from the English Haskalah—and I will argue that Aguilar participated in this movement—it follows that English Jews would be inspired by and resemble in their own works Mendelssohn's work.

Chapter 1

“On the spirit awakening in England”: Aguilar’s Encounter with Victorian England’s

Literary and Christian Cultures

This is to be spiritual; this is to be an Israelite; this is to be WOMAN. We are quite aware that many of our English readers will exclaim, ‘Why this is to be Christian!’ and refuse to believe that such emotions can have existence in a Jewish heart. While our Jewish readers will, in consequence, refuse to seek its attainment, because, if it resemble Christianity, it cannot be Jewish; both parties choosing to forget that the SPIRIT of their widely differing creeds has exactly the same origin, the word of God: whence all of Christian, save its doctrine of belief, originally came. (Aguilar, *The Women of Israel* 2: 476)

Grace Aguilar wrote from a Jewish perspective. In her centenary tribute to the writer, Rachel Beth-Zion Lask Abrahams claimed that Aguilar’s work is “permeated with the spirit of Judaism” (137). England’s Jewish community read Aguilar’s novels, poetry, essays, and theology, and much current critical attention focuses on Aguilar’s importance as a specifically *Jewish* author. Indeed, Aguilar’s contemporary significance largely stems not only from her position as one of the few—and most prominent—Jews writing and publishing in England in the nineteenth century, but also her unique approach to Jewish tradition. While I agree that Aguilar’s work is important to the history of Jewish literature, I also situate Aguilar in the Victorian literary tradition. Contextualizing Aguilar with Victorian culture and literary trends encourages a wider variety of contemporary critical engagement with her work.

Aguilar was born in the northeast London suburb of Hackney on June 2, 1816. Her parents, Emanuel and Sarah, were both Sephardim, and tradition claims that the two immigrated to England in order to escape persecution (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 17). In

the “Memoir of Grace Aguilar,” written by her mother and affixed to the beginning of Aguilar’s domestic novel *Home Influence*, Sarah describes Emanuel as “one of those merchants descended from the Jews of Spain, who, almost within the memory of man, fled from persecution in that country, and sought and found an asylum in England” (ix). Sarah descended from a family of Portuguese Jews named Dias Fernandez, who came to England via Jamaica (Abrahams 138). The Aguilars were active participants in London’s Sephardic community, and Emanuel served as the lay leader of London’s Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 17).

Aguilar’s connections in the Sephardic community allowed her access to the British literary scene. In 1840 she decided to secure an English publisher for her books, and she wrote to Isaac D’Israeli for assistance. The young Benjamin Disraeli carried her letter to his father (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 21). Isaac D’Israeli, himself the son of exiled Sephardim who settled in England in 1748, was by this time a prominent man of letters in England (Peterfreund 128, 130). D’Israeli’s fame as a well-known writer increased with the publication of his book *The Curiosities of Literature* (1791). D’Israeli’s Jewishness did not hinder his early literary prominence; David S. Katz situates D’Israeli as “a central part of the London literary scene” who was “praised by fellow writers such as Scott, Byron, and Southey” (Katz 331). Not only was D’Israeli well connected in the literary world, but also in the Jewish world, “having married in his mid-thirties Maria Basevi of the family of Jewish merchants from Verona who settled in England in 1762” (331). D’Israeli’s established position within both the Jewish and Gentile communities made him the perfect person to introduce Aguilar to publishers. Initially, D’Israeli declined Aguilar’s request for aid, but he eventually introduced her to

an editor at R. Groombridge & Sons, the publishing firm that produced much of her work for the English market (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 22).

Periodical publishing also advanced Aguilar's literary career. The two most prominent Anglo-Jewish periodicals, the *Voice of Jacob* and the *Jewish Chronicle*, began publishing Aguilar's poetry in 1841, but her goal had always been to cultivate a readership outside of the Jewish community. Some of her shorter works appeared in popular women's journals like *The Keepsake*, *Friendship's Offering*, and *La Belle Assemblée*. These publications resulted in the development of relationships with Romantic and early Victorian writers of poetry, domestic fiction, and historical romance. Anna Maria Hall admired Aguilar's work so much that, upon Aguilar's death in 1847, Hall wrote an essay in memoriam that was later printed in her book *Pilgrimage to English Shrines*. Michael Galchinsky claims that this memorial acts as a testament to Aguilar's place as an English writer (*Grace Aguilar* 22-3). Aguilar did not write only for other Jews, so she is important not just to Jews, but to everyone concerned with the study of nineteenth-century British women's literature.

Aguilar's Romantic Individualism

A few critics have observed elements of Romanticism in Aguilar's writing. For example, Elizabeth Fay calls Aguilar a "bridge writer," a group that consists of women writers whose publications during the 1830s and 40s bridged the gap between the Romantic and Victorian eras and ideologies "in much the same fashion as those women poets who turned out verse in such quantity at the end of the eighteenth century bridged the gap between the Enlightenment and Romantic movements" (215). In addition to her publications in popular nineteenth-century women's magazines, Aguilar "began

publishing in the vein of Mary Shelley, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, and other women Romantics, writings for the keepsake annuals, books that targeted the Christmas gift market” (216). Putting aside the irony of a devout Jewish woman writing books of poetry marketed as Christmas gifts, this literary activity shows how seriously Aguilar pursued writing as a career and how her activity intentionally paralleled that of non-Jewish women writers.

Fay pays little more attention to Aguilar’s Romantic inspiration, or her place as a Victorian writer. Fay remarks that Aguilar bridges “a more significant gap,” that between the Anglo and Jewish communities and Anglo and Jewish readerships (216). I question why it is necessary to differentiate Aguilar’s literary style from the audiences with whom her work was popular. To contemporary readers, Aguilar may seem fractured since she, as a Jew, markets her work to non-Jews. Her theological work intends to appeal to Christians while making direct arguments for Jewish emancipation in England, as well as women’s emancipation in the Jewish world. But these fractures aren’t really fractures at all. In this work, I mean to demonstrate how, for Aguilar, these categorical identities are complex, contradictory, yet cohesive. Everything Aguilar writes, no matter how contradictory it appears, contributes to her unified literary project and human identity. For her, no identification—woman, Jew, or Briton—is more or less important than the next. Some critics choose to emphasize Aguilar as a Jewish writer over Aguilar as a woman writing in the Romantic and Victorian traditions, yet to reduce her to one identity alone robs the reader of a more complete understanding of her fascinating complexity.

Fay’s article focuses on Aguilar’s novel *Vale of Cedars; or, The Martyr*, and Cynthia Scheinberg’s treatment of Aguilar’s Romanticism deals primarily with Aguilar’s

poetry. Some attention has been paid to Aguilar's Romantic poetry and fiction, but less attention has been paid to the Romanticism of her non-fiction prose and theological and midrashic essays. Scheinberg points out Aguilar's admiration of and affinities with Wordsworth; for example, in the conclusion to *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar quotes from the "Intimations of Immortality" ode to legitimize the spiritual experiences of Jewish women. Scheinberg explains that, in citing Wordsworth, Aguilar reveals the Jewish woman's capacity to recognize God in nature just as the Romantic poet does (*Women's Poetry* 161-62).

Aguilar's place in time—as well as her class—allowed her to synthesize the seemingly disparate traditions of Judaism and Romanticism. Scheinberg claims that "Aguilar's ability to combine discourses of Judaism, Romanticism, and 'the poetess' marks her as a crucial figure not only in Anglo-Jewish literary history, but also in Victorian literary history" (147). Similarly, Galchinsky asserts that Aguilar's long publishing relationship with American rabbi Isaac Leeser "gave her the opportunity to develop her own poetics, so that, while continuing to draw on the traditions of Romantic nature poetry, Romantic era sensibility and sentimentality, midrash, and prophecy, she began to be able to turn their conventions in innovative directions" (*Grace Aguilar* 24). These observations further demonstrate that Aguilar presented Judaism to her audiences by writing within the framework of nineteenth-century literary conventions.

In 1828, Aguilar's family moved to Devonshire due to Emanuel's failing health. Rachel Beth-Zion Lask Abrahams describes the effects of a difference in environment on twelve-year-old Grace: "The expanse of sea, moor, occasional visits to the architectural beauties of the country towns enriched her perceptions and gave to her writing a breadth

which found expression in her descriptions of nature, notably in the little book of verse, *The Magic Wreath*" (2). *The Magic Wreath* is the aforementioned Christmas book. In addition to Aguilar's poetry, *The Women of Israel* also reflects her concern with nature. Primordial man did not require modern man's manufactured reason ("sources of what is now termed wisdom, that of books and man") to be truly wise (1: 16). God's newly created and perfect world provides all the "wisdom, imagination, and knowledge" needed by Adam and Eve to be happy:

In the wonders of creation, the tree, the herb, the flower, the gushing rivers, the breezy winds; nay, from the mighty form of the largest river to the globule of the dew, which watered the face of the whole earth, there was enough to excite and satisfy their mental powers; enough to excite emotions alike of wonder and adoration. Their commune with the angelic messengers of their benevolent Creator, their tidings of Heaven and its hosts, must have excited the highest and purest pleasure of imagination, and so diversified and lightened the mental exercises of wisdom, which the palpable and visible objects of creation so continually call forth. (*The Women of Israel* 1: 16)

Natural settings and immediate divine interaction stimulates Adam's and Eve's intellect, emotions, imagination, and affords pleasure. This description also factors into Aguilar's project to show Christians that Judaism values women as well as men. Women's spirituality and ability to contact God equals that of men.

In her analysis of Aguilar's theology as it is expressed in her poetry, Scheinberg shows how Romantic poetic discourse provided Aguilar with both poetic models and theories of experience that conformed to her own religious thinking (*Women's Poetry* 155-56). I will be discussing more thoroughly Aguilar's complicated relationship with rabbinical Judaism throughout this work, but it is important here to note Aguilar's repeated emphasis on *individual* rather than *communal* connections with the divine. Scheinberg outlines Aguilar's individualistic approach to Judaism: "In place of an

emphasis on the public, communal, and scholarly aspects of Judaism, Aguilar's theology suggests that it is the private, individual aspects of Jewish worship that are at the core of Jewish religious identity" (*Women's Poetry* 160). By restructuring the emphasis—removing religious activity from the public to the private sphere—Aguilar illuminates the Romantic qualities she understands as inherent to Judaism while she provides a space for women's religious experiences.

Though Scheinberg refers specifically to Aguilar's poetry, Aguilar explores and reiterates the theme of the immediate possibility of an individual spiritual connection with God throughout both her major works of theology: *The Spirit of Judaism* and *The Women of Israel*. The Introduction to the latter initiates Aguilar's belief that Jewish women have direct access to the divine via an unfiltered experience with the Scriptures by devaluing rabbinical commentary: "To desert the Bible for its commentators; never to peruse its pages without notes of explanation: to regard it as a work which of itself is incomprehensible, is, indeed, a practice as hurtful as injudicious" (1: 1). Aguilar refers here to Talmudic commentary, which her theological works radically reduce to uninspired literature and reject in favor of individual interpretations of the Bible. Women do not need the intermediacy of men (or Christianity). The Bible was sent by God to women "as a message of love to our own souls, as written and addressed, not to nations alone, but at the voice of God to individuals—whispering to each of us that which we most need; thus it is we should first regard and venerate it" (1: 1). Aguilar views Jewish sages and Jesus as equally unnecessary to the Jewish woman's spiritual life.

Aguilar's midrash on Sarah further evinces the theme of individual spirituality taking precedent. Human beings have lost the ability to *directly* communicate with the

divine “by voice or sign, or through angelic messengers,” but “those that seek to love and serve Him may yet hear His still small voice breathing in the solemn whisper of their own hearts, and through the *individual* promises of His word” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 52). This passage serves a dual purpose; not only does it demonstrate her preference for an individualistic Judaism, but in the context of her discussion of Sarah, it dispels the idea that Judaism does not accord individual souls to its women, a misconception amongst Christians even in the nineteenth century.

It is perhaps confusing that Aguilar, considered traditional in practice by most of the scholars this work consults, would emphasize an individualistic approach to Judaism when traditional Judaism places the highest value on the communal devotional practices of the synagogue and the traditions of male rabbinical scholarship. Scheinberg explains that Aguilar’s emphasis on the individual creates a parallel between her own work and that of the Romantic poets:

Aguilar’s attitude toward Rabbinical scholarship puts her in a position analogous to the ways first-generation Romantic poets positioned themselves vis-à-vis traditions of literary/scholarly authority. Just as the hegemonic Romantic poets defined their poetic project against the courtly and scholarly conventions of the eighteenth-century neo-classicists in order to represent the philosophical truths of common experience, Aguilar defines her theological project against the traditions of Jewish scholarship in order to represent the truth of women’s Jewish experience. In Romantic poetics, authoritative privilege is granted to the expression of personal, private experience which can claim authority not on the basis of scholarly learning (as in an eighteenth-century model of poetry), but rather in its relative freedom from the weight of traditional literary learning. (160-61)

Aguilar’s emphasis on individual spiritual experiences and interpretations of the Bible throughout her theological writings situates her midrashic essays within Romantic tradition. Her reaction to Jewish (male) tradition places her in the same category as Hyman Hurwitz—nineteenth-century Talmudic scholar, professor of Hebrew, writer,

Enlightenment thinker—for whom, like Aguilar, Enlightenment emphasis on reason and progress encouraged to consider Judaism an intellectual endeavor fit for secular spheres. The Romantic break-down of hierarchies allowed for the convergence of cultures that fostered these writers' literary pursuits.

Aguilar, Anglo-Jews, and Victorian Ideals

An estimated 20,000 Jews lived in London at the end of the eighteenth century due to a substantial immigration of Jews from other European nations between 1750 and 1815. Settling largely in London's East End, Jews rapidly became associated with street trades, such as peddling old clothes, or with criminal activities like swindling. These Jews were predominantly poor Ashkenazim from Germany, Poland, and Holland. A smaller proportion of more financially secure Sephardim—like Aguilar's parents—from Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy also settled in London (McCalman 563). During this immigration influx, the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities functioned separately, each maintaining their own synagogues, prayer rituals, languages, and dress (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 33-4)

The Sephardim managed to assimilate into English culture in a way that the Ashkenazim did not—at least not immediately. The Sephardic immigrants had absorbed more of mainland European culture prior to settling in England, perhaps due to their lives as crypto-Jews—an existence that required the adoption of external marks of European culture—in Spain, Portugal, and southwestern France. Todd Endelman points out that “[e]ven those Sephardim who had not lived the dual life of Marranos were immersed in the social and cultural life of the non-Jewish world, for the Sephardi centers in Europe

preserved and passed on the cultural receptivity of the Iberian Jewish traditions to later generations of Sephardim” (*Georgian England* 120).

Bourgeois Sephardim imitated the dress, speech, and manners of the dominant non-Jewish culture. The dominant ideology behind both *The Women of Israel* and *The Spirit of Judaism*—that Jews living in England in the nineteenth century could remain Jewish while also being English—reflects Aguilar’s attempts to maintain a strong sense of Jewish identity while acculturating, and is indicative of a greater cultural phenomenon: the cultivation of non-Jewish learning, including the composition of poetry, plays, and philosophical treatises in European languages (all activity considered part of the Jewish Enlightenment), juxtaposed with the preservation of the languages, learning and customs of traditional Judaism. For the Sephardic community, the acquisition of English manners and attitudes represented a continuous, evolving Jewish experience, and not a break with the past, as Endelman claims it did for the Ashkenazim (120-21). The Anglo-Jewish elite embraced the English way of life, and were driven by the psychological need to feel at home in England (121).

In Volume II of *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar points out that the adoption of English customs will naturally lead to Jewish acculturation and eventual unity between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities. Aguilar enthusiastically proclaims England as a welcoming “home of perfect freedom to the exile and oppressed.” Aguilar remarks on the differences “in the characteristics of German and Portuguese,” but considered these differences “mistaken distinction[s]” wrought only by circumstances (2: 453).

Diaspora effected these differences:

[. . .] seventeen centuries of assimilation with the manners and customs of Germany and Spain, [. . .] but reason tells us, that *two* centuries in England

is not quite sufficient to banish the prejudices of fifteen centuries spent in other lands. We have neither of us yet become English in feeling; nay very many take pleasure in fostering as a heritage the remnant of Spanish feelings, forgetting that such characteristics have nothing to do with Judaism; and till we are really English Jews, the distinction which has existed so many centuries will never be entirely lost. (2: 454)

Aguilar advocates assimilation into English culture without losing a sense of Jewish identity. But she does encourage abandoning differences in Sephardic and Ashkenazic practices and liturgy in order that all Jews in England might be called *English* Jews. Her community—the Sephardim—wanted to emulate wealthy Christians without having to renounce their identity as Jews. Endelman points out that the Sephardim “internalized—in some cases, slowly and hesitatingly, in others, with speed and abandon—the values of the English ruling class and then applied these values to refashioning their own lives and the life of the community” (121). If the Ashkenazim would but follow suit, “how glorious would be that consolidation, that unity, which, the moment a Jew of any land sets foot in England there to make his home, would hail him brother, and open to him at once our synagogues and our charities, without one question as to what congregation he belonged to!” (Aguilar, *The Women of Israel* 2: 459).

In her work on the depiction of Jewish women in nineteenth-century literature, Nadia Valman touches on what British citizens perceived as “Jewish difference.” Jewish women specifically proved difficult to categorize; oscillating in the public consciousness between her “erotic appeal” and her “superior, self-sacrificing love,” the idea of “the Jewess” compelled and provoked nineteenth-century writers because she “threw into disarray clear categories of difference” (2). Rebecca, from Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, fits Valman’s description perfectly; she possesses purity and selflessness, qualities valued by the Victorians. Critics find fault, to different extents, with Scott’s portrayal of Rebecca.

She is erotic, exotic, ideal, or some combination of these elements. At the same time, she is incredibly self-sacrificing in her piety. Her style of speaking is emulated—intentionally or unintentionally, I cannot be sure—by Aguilar’s biblical women. For example, at Torquilstone, Rebecca demonstrates, as Aguilar phrases it, her willingness “to *die* for [her] faith, but not to sully or degrade it” (1: 184): “[. . .] tell me what I am to expect as the conclusion of the violence which hath dragged me hither! Is it my life they seek, to atone for my religion? I will lay it down cheerfully” (Scott 251). The similarity between popular nineteenth-century novels and Aguilar’s work is not surprising considering that she was raised in a solidly English environment. She was indoctrinated with newly developed middle class ideologies like any other writer raised in the same tradition.

Aguilar was the daughter of middle class parents, and as a child she played the piano and the harp like other girls of the English middle class (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 18). Schools for daughters of middle- and upper-class families emphasized these decidedly “female” accomplishments (music and drawing), and these women were either educated at these sorts of schools or at home by tutors; however, the unreliability of most home education supplied inconsistent education for girls (Brown 55). While Aguilar participated in activities common to middle-class Victorian girls, her parents provided her with an unorthodox home education, the influences of which can be observed throughout her theological works.

By the time Aguilar was twelve her mother had been instructing her in religion for years. After Emanuel contracted tuberculosis and was prescribed prolonged rest, he began educating Grace in Jewish history (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 18). Sephardic women and men who had lived through the Inquisition commonly educated their

daughters, and women more specifically took on the responsibility of transmitting Jewish culture and history to children: “The crypto-Jewish woman played a crucial role in the perpetuation of Judaism in the postexpulsion period. With no Jewish community available to provide teachers, rabbis, schools, or texts, the only institution that remained more or less intact and viable was the family. As a result, the home was transformed into the one and only center of crypto-Jewish life” (Melammed 139). Renee Levine Melammed observes that an analysis of Inquisition documents reveals women devoted to Judaism and religious observances who desired to perpetuate their traditions (139). Arnold Witznitzer writes that Jewish women “played an enormous part in holding the torch of Judaism for centuries after the forced conversion to Catholicism at the end of the fifteenth century” and taught their children Jewish rites and prayers (qtd. in Melammed 139). In addition to Sephardic history, Aguilar’s academic interests included science, religion, and literature. She began writing her first novel, *Vale of Cedars; or, The Martyr*—a historical romance set in Inquisitorial Spain—in 1831 at the age of fourteen after having absorbed much of this history from her father. These childhood and early adolescent experiences fueled Aguilar’s promotion of the idea of comprehensive education for girls present in *The Spirit of Judaism*.

After Emanuel contracted tuberculosis when Grace was twelve, Sarah underwent an operation for an unspecified ailment during the composition of *Vale of Cedars*. During this period Aguilar took financial responsibility for her family, which included two younger brothers. Ever the self-sacrificing Victorian woman, Aguilar saw it as her duty to support financially her family, so by 1834 she began to pursue a professional career as a writer (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 20). Financial responsibility as an honorable domestic

characteristic appears in her novella *The Perez Family*. Reuben Perez leaves Liverpool, the home of the Perez family and site of their domestic happiness, for “one of the smaller towns in Yorkshire” in order to manage a bank. His visits home decrease, to the despair of his mother, but Reuben ensures that “his mother’s allowance was regularly paid” (Aguilar, *The Perez Family* 174). By 1843 Aguilar’s professional association with Isaac Leeser provided her with a steady source of income. She became listed as the highest paid writer for Leeser’s *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, her wage increasing from £3.1.4 in June, 1843, to £11.7.10 in May, 1847 (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 23).

The production of domestic fiction increased significantly during the time Aguilar wrote, and this type of novel was, of course, female dominated. Domestic novels were written for and by women. Considering the bourgeois orientation of domestic fiction, its values, subjects, and principal characters are drawn from middle-class life. Domestic fiction deals almost exclusively with human relationships within small social communities, featuring subjects mainly from the daily life and work of ordinary people: “courtship, marriage, children, earning a living, adjusting to reality, learning to conform to the conventions of established society and to live within it tranquilly, if not always happily” (Colby 4). The popularity of domestic fiction provided Aguilar the opportunity to write within the parameters of another Victorian literary genre, and *The Perez Family*, the first fictional representation of English Jews written by a Jew, was the result.

Aguilar turned from writing historical romance to domestic fiction in order to depict *contemporary* Jewish life. In 1843, Charlotte Montefiore—a Jewish philanthropist, editor, satirist, essayist, and member of the famous Montefiore family—offered Aguilar

the chance to participate in a new literary series called the Cheap Jewish Library. Montefiore intended this series to provide the Jewish working class with inexpensive moral and domestic tales (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 58). Aguilar's novella *The Perez Family* opens up the world of working-class Jews for her audience and, according to Judith Page, establishes their identity as British Jews "by placing them in the domestic context of gardens" ("Anglo-Jewish Identity" 155). The Perez family is working class, but Aguilar's descriptions of this poor Jewish family emphasize their clean and ordered existence, attributing to them the middle-class respectability so integral to Aguilar's own life. Page points out that Aguilar frames the family's life in relation to nature (reiterating Aguilar's penchant for Romanticism), and "with an emphasis on ordinary folk, Aguilar draws a tie between cultivating the earth, domestic happiness, and Anglo-Jewish identity" (155). The Perez family maintains a lovely garden, which, as Page suggests, emphasizes Aguilar's Jewish characters' connection to British land (160).

Portrayals of perfect domesticity are not limited to Aguilar's fiction. Her theological prose is infused with middle-class Victorian domestic ideology. For example, Aguilar emphasizes the importance of domestic harmony in her rendition of Ruth's story. More specifically, her characterization of Ruth and Naomi's relationship coheres with the middle-class idea that women were to preside over socialization by nurturing sympathy in family members (Kelly 8). *The Women of Israel* is composed of character sketches of biblical women, but these women must be "Jewish" in order to suit Aguilar's goals. Aguilar explains that Ruth "does not properly belong, by birth and ancestry, to the women of Israel," so she makes Naomi "the subject of [her] consideration" (1: 333). Indeed, the chapter titled "Naomi" deals at length with Naomi's admirable qualities.

Ruth's value, for Aguilar, lies not in her individual merit, but that she appears in a story emphasizing ideal domestic relations. The book of Ruth inculcates "beautiful lessons of domestic life" (1: 350). Since Ruth is a convert to Judaism, Aguilar will not use her as an example of ideal Jewish womanhood. But the book of Ruth can reach a far greater audience because it "concerns women in general" wherein the reader is "particularly struck with the exquisite lesson of maternal and filial affection which it teaches" (1: 355). Aguilar claims that readers focus too much attention on Ruth's beautiful words and touching actions to the exclusion of Naomi's equally impressive love for her daughter-in-law.

Duty alone is not enough to perfect domestic harmony. Aguilar explains that Ruth did not follow Naomi out of a sense of duty, but because she loved her mother-in-law. Dianne Ashton situates Aguilar within the rhetoric behind the nineteenth-century cult of "true womanhood," which placed the spiritual pleasures of motherhood as central to this type of literature, claiming that "Aguilar urged her readers to be emotionally demonstrative mothers" (Ashton 83). Ruth loved Naomi because Naomi modeled perfect domestic love for her: "seldom is the love of the young excited to such an extent towards an elder, unless by affection and appreciation from that elder, invited so to love" (*The Women of Israel* 1: 355). The love between family members must be "unselfish," and parents cannot expect their children to "imitate [. . .] the conduct of Ruth" unless parents both *feel* and *display* the kindness expected from their children. Duty without love is not a domestic value because "duty done on either side is not enough, for it is not according to the spirit of the Lord, and of His Word" (1: 356), which Jewish and Christian women alike can access.

Most importantly, parents should demonstrate this love in the context of the home. Since love predominates in the word of God, “so should it predominate in the homes of his children. We do not deny that it does, but we would have it *displayed* as well as *felt*, by every member of that hallowed temple, HOME” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 356). Aguilar strongly warns against cold-heartedness in a domestic setting:

It is the icy surface we must doubt, for never yet were there warm and unselfish loving hearts who could think it necessary to suppress such fond emotions in the sweet sanctuary of *home*. It is the cold at heart who never give *domestic* affections vent, and can therefore never hope so to attract the young, as to rouse them to evince the love they could have felt, or proffer more than the cold, dull routine of daily duty. (1: 358)

For Aguilar, the idealized home, the private sphere, is a space safe for affection between family members. And while she does not explicitly address the public sphere in “Naomi,” I infer from Aguilar’s emphasis on affections in the home that she leaves this space open for emotion because emotion is excluded from the public sphere. The home became sentimentalized and idealized in the Victorian period, thanks in part to Coventry Patmore’s famous poem “The Angel in the House,” as the last preserve of moral values in an increasingly ruthless, commercial culture (Brown 71).

The Role of the Home in *The Women of Israel*

Not only did Aguilar’s prose conform to the literary genres of her non-Jewish contemporaries, but she also published works similar to Victorian-era literature that played a key role in developing an ideology about the nature of womanhood. “The passionless, pious, self-sacrificing Victorian woman of our imaginations,” claims Dianne Ashton, “grew out of nineteenth-century literature, art, medicine, and religion, all of which asserted womanly modes of pleasure based on self-control,” an ideology cultivated especially by middle-class women (80). The “true woman” heralded by the rising middle

class exemplified moral authority through spirituality and sacrifice (80). Of course, as we have already seen, the idea of “pleasure based on self-control” is not limited to Christian women. These qualities were evidently valued by Aguilar, as we have seen from her personal life, and they are also evident in Aguilar’s literary portrayals of domesticity and the home.

The Victorian middle class valued and idealized domesticity and the Victorian home was the exclusive territory of the woman. According to Vanessa Dickerson, the house “had never so powerfully, explicitly, and strictly defined society as it would in nineteenth-century Britain” (Dickerson *Victorian House* xiii), and images of the home are central to Aguilar’s domestic ideology. The Victorians used “biology” to legitimize the confinement of women to the home (xiii-xiv), and Aguilar is no exception to this rule. Throughout *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar emphasizes woman’s “more delicate nature,” which directly contributes to her joy in performing her domestic duties. While Aguilar frequently acknowledges the differences in situation between contemporary Jewish women and their biblical forebears, she does point out that these groups of women are similar in that they all have “domestic duties to perform, and a station not only to fulfill but to adorn, so as to excite towards us respect and love” (1: 108). Domestic harmony is all important to Aguilar, so it is necessary that the Victorian woman perform her duties with love in her heart in order to receive love from those in her household.

Aguilar repeatedly remarks on the love the Victorian woman feels for her husband, children, home, and domestic duties, which positions her *Women* as “angels” in the tradition of Coventry Patmore’s famous poem. Patmore’s ideal woman, “The Angel in the House,” is “saintly, submissive” and, by virtue of her love, an “indispensable

civilizing power” (Dickerson, *Victorian House* xiv). She has the power “to soften and attract,” and is a moral force in the home who ministers to the comfort of her husband, tends to her children, and manages the household (Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts* 29). Not all of Aguilar’s biblical women are examples of ideal women; however, a number of them embody the qualities described in Patmore’s poem. Aguilar’s Eve is the ideal helper for Adam; Rebekah, Jochebed, and Naomi are ideal mothers; and Sarah demonstrates concern for domestic harmony. According to Ashton, *The Women of Israel* portrays the biblical Hebrew matriarchs, a point of similarity for all readers, as “Victorian women faithful to Judaism. Though her book spoke with a Victorian voice to a Victorian audience, its focus on the matriarchs of the Hebrew Bible participated in an old, popular Jewish tradition that clothed the biblical tales in contemporary garb” (81). Aguilar sought to construct a Judaism and a Jewish identity that emulated the dominant evangelical Christian women’s experiences and tradition. She wanted the Jewish women among her readership to view themselves as Victorian, just like their Christian counterparts, differing only in points of religion.

Aguilar uses Sarah as a way to incorporate Jewish values into an already predetermined Victorian cultural mode and to demonstrate how Jews and Victorians maintain complicit ideals. Aguilar’s Sarah demonstrates concern for *shalom bayit* (peace at home), a concern that would resonate with Aguilar’s Victorian readers. Ashton suggests that Aguilar expanded the Jewish regard for *shalom bayit* to assert that Jewish women prefer domesticity to public life (83). I do not take issue with Ashton’s suggestion that Aguilar emphasizes separate spheres for men and women; the concept of separate spheres is a consistent theme in Aguilar’s work. Rather, I would like to expand on

Ashton's point that Aguilar considers domesticity as it concerns Jewish women *alone*; on the contrary, Aguilar's portrayal of Sarah's concern for domestic harmony serves as an example for *all* women, not just Jewish women. Aguilar's Sarah "is a strong, spiritual woman devoted to domestic life" and is used by Aguilar to portray "domesticity as the basis for women's spiritual and psychological satisfactions" (Ashton 83). Ashton argues that Aguilar chooses to emphasize women's spiritual and psychological satisfactions over rabbinic decrees that husbands are responsible for the sexual satisfaction of their wives because she looks at Aguilar's Sarah in a specifically Jewish context. But Aguilar's preoccupation with the satisfaction women get from domestic harmony has significance for Victorian women outside of Jewish circles.

Ashton points out that the Victorian middle-class ideal of womanhood is a life bounded by domesticity and Aguilar's Sarah is no exception. Her life revolves around her home. Aguilar's midrash on Sarah's story includes her assurance that when Sarai/Sarah's name is absent from the text and the narrative focuses on Abram/Abraham, she is behind the scenes "performing those duties of an affectionate wife and gentle mistress of her husband's immense establishment, which are nothing to write about, but which make up the sum of woman's life, create her dearest and purest sources of happiness, and bring her acceptably before God" (*The Women of Israel* 1: 54-5). Sarah's emotional state is intimately associated with her home life. Aguilar argues that Sarai finds it much more difficult than Abram initially to leave Haran when God commands Abram to go "to the land that [He] will show him": "She was to go forth with him indeed; but it is woman's peculiar nature to cling to home, home ties, and home affections—to shrink from encountering a strange world, teeming with unknown trials and dangers" (1: 50). Aguilar

regrets that Sarah's home life is often unstable, as must be the case in the lives of nomads, because a woman's happiness is so bound up in the state of her domestic affairs.

Dwelling inside the home is not simply a matter of preferences or affections; it is woman's *nature*, her biology, to do so. A woman who leaves her home "without regret" has a heart "too often wrapped in a chilling indifference, which prevents strong emotions on any subject whatever," but Aguilar assures her reader that "We have enough of Sarai in the Bible to satisfy us that such is not her character" (1: 51). The woman who does not feel as Sarai does is, of course, an aberration of nature. By nature, a woman is "unfitted by the weakness and infirmities of her frame from active toil," and the "right-feeling woman" loves her "home ties and associations" because she believes that here "she can yet benefit her friends, children, and domestics, in the hallowed circle of home: and better manifest the blessings of the Lord and the love she bears Him, there than amongst strangers" (*The Women of Israel* 1: 51). Aguilar's Sarai fits this description. She is a gentlewoman who prefers home life to the toils of the outside world, which coheres with the Victorian tendency to create a haven in the home against the outside world (i.e., the marketplace).

The depictions of Hagar found in both Aguilar's poem "The Wanderers" (1838) and *The Women of Israel* (1845) show another woman motivated and driven by the desire for a home. Daniel Harris convincingly argues that Aguilar "finds in Hagar her emblem for the Jew battered from place to place" (144), hence her more sympathetic portrayal of Hagar in "The Wanderers." Hagar is not a Jew, but Aguilar's Hebraicized Hagar, Harris asserts, "epitomizes the double displacement that echoes the Marrano sense of repeated exile," and that Aguilar "presents Hagar's psychic and dramatic displacement as the

poetic trope of Jewish geographic and politico-religious diaspora” for political ends (144). I would like to suggest that Aguilar’s depictions of Hagar also solidify her domestic stance; Hagar is obviously not Jewish, so like Ruth, Aguilar’s representations of Hagar demonstrate that this desire for a peaceful home life is, according to Aguilar, universal woman’s experience.

Harris and Galchinsky both note inconsistencies in Aguilar’s Hagar from 1838 to 1845. “The Wanderers” presents a woman “full of grief” (10), with “tears swell’d in her eye” (13), desolate in her exile from her home. This Hagar cares nothing for herself, but only for the survival of her child. She is utterly self-sacrificing, the “right-feeling woman.” While Aguilar does maintain some sympathy for Hagar by 1845, her emphasis switches to Sarah’s desire to maintain a peaceful household, a desire that Aguilar considers noble. Aguilar remarks on the usual interpretation of Sarah’s expulsion of Hagar: “We are apt to think more poetically than justly of this part of the Bible. Hagar and her young son, expelled from their luxurious and happy home, almost perishing in the desert from thirst, are infinitely more interesting objects of consideration and sympathy, than the harsh and jealous Sarah, who, for seemingly such trifling offence, demanded and obtained such severe retribution” (1: 82). Aguilar’s 1844 Hagar is selfish.

Aguilar defends Sarai/Sarah against the usual accusations, and refers to her painstaking demonstration of Sarai’s warm-heartedness. For Aguilar, Sarai had to correct Hagar’s behavior because Hagar’s mocking of Sarai’s barrenness upset the carefully cultivated domestic harmony: “It must indeed have been a bitterly painful disappointment to Sarai, that instead of receiving increased gratitude and affection from one whom she had so raised and cherished, she was despised with an insolence that, unless checked,

might bring discord and misery into a household which had before been so blessed with peace and love” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 63). Aguilar does not acknowledge that Sarai was too harsh to Hagar. Sarai really had no choice in the matter; she had to act *justly* (Aguilar’s emphasis) toward her ungrateful inferior, a striking inconsistency from her depiction of Hagar in “The Wanderers,” who is deserving of sympathy. Domestic harmony is all important, and Sarai/Sarah acts as she must to restore order. It isn’t necessarily that Aguilar’s view of Hagar or Sarah changes over the years—rather, her emphasis changes in order to prove her point about the necessity of stable home life. Both characters, in 1838 and 1845, need a stable home to thrive.

Eve, the perfect “help meet” for Adam, similarly relishes and requires a stable home life. In Chapter 1 of the first volume of *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar reimagines Eve’s feelings upon the expulsion from Eden. If Adam and Eve could “but remain in the home of their past innocence and joy,” the anguish they felt at having disobeyed God “might be sooner healed” (1: 29). Like Sarah, Eve’s emotional state is inextricable from the state of her domestic affairs. Aguilar holds Eve responsible for her actions but desires that women recall their own domestic happiness when they wish to look unsympathetically on Eve:

Who that thinks a moment of what we now feel in turning from a beloved home, the scene of all our early hopes and joy and love, adorned with all of nature and of art, to seek another, impoverished, and fraught with toil and danger, apart from every object, animate or inanimate, which has twined round our hearts and bound us there,—who, that pictures scenes like these, will refuse our general mother the need of sympathy as she turned from Eden? (1: 29)

The tragedy of the expulsion revolves around the fact that Eve will never see Eden (“yet to that woman’s heart Eden was Eden still—her *home*”) again (1: 30). By describing her

Jewish women characters “in a manner that brought her readers into a fully Jewish, yet Victorian, femininity” (Ashton 80), Aguilar reinforces the idea of an ideal and harmonious home life as integral to universal woman’s psychological well-being. Aguilar illustrates her Jewish women characters in a way that would have been relatable for Victorian women readers.¹

Aguilar, the Victorians, and many of the rabbis understood woman’s “nature” as innately more spiritual than that of man. God created women “to endeavor so to help and influence man, that her more spiritual and unselfish nature shall gradually be infused into him, and, raising him above mere worldly thought and sensual pleasures” (Aguilar, *The Women of Israel* 1: 14). This “more spiritual and unselfish nature” was put to use in the Victorian home—a place for the “true woman” to spiritualize space. The true woman fostered “life, love, stability,” and created “a sacred space [. . .] apart from the flux of [. . .] the marketplace” (Dickerson, *Victorian House* xvi), or as Aguilar calls the public sphere, “worldly thought and sensual pleasures.” By utilizing this English Protestant conception of women’s spirituality, Aguilar claims the home as a space for Jewish women to both empower the “women of Israel” and to further demonstrate how Jews could and did fit into Victorian society. Aguilar claims the home as the most significant place for women to act and experience spirituality. She encourages her readers to find empowerment and affirmation in the home.

Spirituality and Separate Spheres in *The Women of Israel*

Few professional options were open to middle-class Victorian women. The increase in male professions outside of the home isolated wives from husbands and excluded women from active participation in society (Brown, 63-4, 68). Simultaneously,

Victorian scientists, doctors, lawyers, and other public figures grounded themselves in the physical, rational, and material world, effectively positioning women in a more “spiritual” realm (Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts* 27). The popular concept of separate spheres for men and women arose from these phenomena. Men occupied the “public” sphere, that of business and commerce. The home, the domestic realm, belonged to women. But more than a division of marketplace/home, the dominant Victorian Christian domestic ideology considered the public sphere of business and government as the “secular” sphere, while the private domestic sphere was associated with emotionality and spirituality. Since the Victorians began to view the home as a space for religious activity, early nineteenth-century women were increasingly identified with religiosity: “women were to be caretakers of a higher, more spiritual feeling than their husbands could afford for themselves, their hands constantly mired in the muck of the marketplace” (Galchinsky, *Origin* 35). This division differs slightly from the separate spheres of the traditional Jewish world, where religious activity occurs in the public (male) sphere, but coheres with Melammed’s reporting on the lives of Sephardic crypto-Jewish life.

Victorian society located woman between man and angel as a handmaid to “male genius” (Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts* 28). Aguilar grants women this higher degree of spirituality in Eve’s story. Eve was created with “gentler qualities and endearing sympathy” so that she might “soften [Adam’s] rougher and prouder nature” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 14). Aguilar argues that Eve both feels happiness and creates it for others, just like Victorian women do for their husbands and families:

[A]nd if that was the design of her existence in Eden, how deeply should we feel the solemn truth, that it is equally so now, and that woman has a higher and holier mission than the mere pursuit of pleasure and individual enjoyment; that to flutter through life without one serious thought or aim,

without a dream beyond the present moment, without a feeling higher than temporal gratification, or as aspiration rising beyond this world, can never answer the purpose of her divine creation, or make her a help meet for man. (1: 14)

The “right feeling woman” is not frivolous. She is good, pure, and spiritual. She never thinks of worldly things, or of herself; she is happy because her higher purpose is to support others. Aguilar then explains that this divine mandate, to be a helper for man, is not solely for wives, but all women. Woman is more spiritual and she is a comfort to man, who is anchored in the physical realm.

Further evidence of her Victorian Sarah’s satisfaction with separate spheres occurs in Aguilar’s treatment of Gen. 18-19. When the angels come to dine, “Sarah joined not her husband or his guests” because “[u]nless particularly asked for, the place of the Eastern and Jewish wife was in the retirement of home; not from any inferiority of rank, or servitude of station, but simply because their inclination so prompted” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 75). Here, Judaism does not *force* women to remain in the home; biology dictates it. Sarah prefers the home to accompanying Abraham on business ventures, and Aguilar understands this to be in accord with women’s nature. And in her chapter on Rebekah, Aguilar warns against quitting woman’s “natural sphere”: “We see, therefore, that to act kindly demands not the forsaking our natural sphere. We are not to *look abroad* for opportunities to act as Rebekah did; but, like her, we shall find them without leaving our home, in the domestic and social intercourse of daily life” (1: 113). Aguilar reiterates throughout *Women* that women should not quit their sphere.

Scheinberg points out that religion has played a powerful role in shaping women’s public identity, but that many scholars see religion as a negative force in women’s history. “Scholars who see religion as fully contained within the private sphere,” she

claims, “are unable to see the larger function of religion and theology in women’s historical agency” (*Women’s Poetry* 8). A fault with contemporary scholarship lies in assuming “a certain understanding of ‘public’ identity” that automatically labels the religious as a “‘private’ category that did not contribute to women’s emergence as public writers” (9). Aguilar used religion to justify the placement of women in the private sphere, yet paradoxically occupied the public world of professional writing and publishing herself. As Gary Kelly points out, women publishing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries put themselves in a “double bind”: “as a woman she was supposed to be domestic; once published she became public, risking loss of femininity” (10). But I am not so sure that Aguilar would view her vocation as a violation of separate spheres since she assumes an authorial voice in order to transmit truths of womanhood to women who needed her guidance. A higher purpose supports her professional work.

Both Miriam and Deborah problematize the concept of separate spheres for Aguilar. Scheinberg argues that Christian women writers claimed figures like Miriam and Deborah as “exemplary models for women’s public and literary identity” (*Women’s Poetry* 69). Scheinberg points out that these characters, “often explicitly named as leaders, poets, and prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, could quite easily be claimed as forerunners to the Christian women poets and leaders emerging in Victorian England” (69). But Aguilar does not encourage modern Jewish women to act in the public sphere, where Miriam and Deborah both appear.

Aguilar’s Miriam is not a prophetess, nor is her character depicted admirably. Miriam sings when struck with religious enthusiasm, but is a false prophet who lacks “true piety” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 287). In fact, Aguilar claims that Miriam was not

admitted into the Promised Land because she “‘had not followed the Lord fully,’ but had probably joined in the rebellions and murmurings which characterized almost the whole body of the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness” (1: 287). Miriam, with her “proud spirit” and “presumptuous self-importance” (1: 291), disregards separate spheres and pays the price. Her pride, a characteristic to be avoided at all costs by women, causes her to be stricken with leprosy, and Aguilar insists that “[had] Miriam’s heart been perfect towards God, neither her sin nor her punishment would have taken place” (1: 293). Aguilar uses Miriam as a warning against occupying the public sphere. In Miriam’s case, a public presence contributed to her prideful nature, which generated severe consequences.

Galchinsky observes that recent Jewish feminist scholarship imagines Miriam as a prophet on the level of Moses. I have also noted this elevation of Miriam, especially in my experiences in the American Jewish Reform movement. Galchinsky points out that Aguilar’s Miriam is not the celebrated figure of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jewish feminism, or American Reform; rather, she “resembles the Victorian stereotype of the ‘old maid,’ jealous of both her brother’s wife and his power” (*Grace Aguilar* 212). Interestingly, Aguilar argues that Miriam’s jealousy for Zipporah comes from her celibacy. Single women are “more liable to petty failings than men” because “they have less to engross their minds, and less of consequence to employ their hands” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 288). Single women may prevent naturally occurring jealousy by focusing on their spiritual lives, effectually deflecting tendencies toward gossip. In all cases, active spirituality creates the ideal woman.

Aguilar herself was never married before her death at thirty-one, and in her chapter on Deborah, she contradicts those qualities that she attributes to single women in “Miriam.” She questions negative opinions of single women:

Because unmarried, is woman still to believe herself a girl, hoping for, and looking for, a change in her existence, which will in reality never come? [. . .] If she sought prayerfully some new objects of interest, affection, and employment, which she might justly hope would become a stay and support in rapidly advancing years, and thus entirely prevent ennui, and its attendants, love of gossip, frivolity, and often sourness and irritability, which are too generally believed to be the sole characteristics of single (and so of course supposed disappointed) women? (*The Women of Israel* 1: 318-19).

Deborah is problematic because she outshines her husband and is herself a prophetess, unlike Miriam. Deborah has infiltrated the public sphere, and Aguilar has a more difficult time reconciling Deborah’s public involvement with her belief that women should remain in the private sphere. She uses this more positive depiction of single women to argue that all women, regardless of marital status, have talents that should be put to use in the service of God. “Deborahs in truth we cannot be,” she claims, but if women put their talents to use in their proper sphere, “like her, all have it in their power, in the good performed towards man, to use the one, and consecrate the other to the service of their God” (1: 319).

Conclusion

In much of her theological work, Aguilar articulates a unique theology that distances her from Jewish tradition. Many of her contemporaries called her a “Jewish Protestant,” and a Protestant perspective resonates in her theological prose. For example, she values the goal of the Protestant Reformation: “We see no proofs of the humanising and elevating influence of Christianity, either on man or woman, till the reformation

opened the BIBLE, the whole BIBLE, to the nations at large; when civilisation gradually followed” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 4). As we shall see, Aguilar endeavors to effect a similar reformation in Judaism.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Aguilar provides unusual interpretations of biblical characters like Sarah, Miriam, and Eve. She differed from Christian women writing on biblical women in some respects, but Aguilar also used conventional Protestant Victorian discourse in order to model spirituality for Jewish women, who were often seen by their own brethren as lacking in spiritual drive. For example, William Wilberforce, the most prominent Anglican Evangelical of his day, provides an early expression of what was to become a dominant view: “[. . .] that [female] sex seems, by the very constitution of nature, to be more favorably disposed than ours to the feelings and offices of Religion” (289). As previously mentioned, Aguilar claims that all women possess a “more spiritual nature” than men, which exactly articulates Wilberforce’s position.

Aguilar was not the only Jew writing to defend Jewish women against claims that Christian women were somehow “better” or more “complete.” Abraham Benisch, editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* from 1854-69 and 1875-8, argued that Jewish women were not “less domesticated, fonder of pleasure, or more extravagant than their Christian neighbors” (387). But Aguilar defended Jewish women’s spiritual devotion when men like Benisch did not. Benisch claimed that “[w]hilst in every other respect our women need not fear comparison with those of other communities, and may be pronounced to form the elements of our strength, they, in a religious point of view, unfortunately constitute the weakness of our camp” (387). According to Benisch, Jewish women “as a

rule, are devoid of religious enthusiasm, and not rarely indifferent, if not absolutely hostile, to all religious aspirations” (387). Benisch compares Jewish women to Christian women and finds them lacking: more Christian women attend church services than Jewish women attend synagogue services, and Jewish women, he claims, are educated less in religion and the Bible than are Christian women. Benisch suggests that “the order of religious instruction to our women must be reversed” in order to combat the “spiritual deadness” of Jewish women (388).

It does not seem, from his commentary in the *Jewish Chronicle* on the subject of Jewish women, that Benisch really addresses the fact that, traditionally, women are discouraged from synagogue attendance and barred from the study of Jewish religious texts. Aguilar both recognizes and comments on these issues in her works, and constructs an image of Jews and Judaism complicit with Victorian values—which includes women reading the Bible and attending religious services, just like their Christian counterparts. For Aguilar, Jews differ from Christian Britons in points of religion only—a common British Reform Jewish argument. Ashton points out that Aguilar “articulated a Jewish theology that merged Victorian values with popular Jewish beliefs” (81). In her chapter on Sarah, Aguilar’s quintessential Victorian gentlewoman, Aguilar refers to Jews as “God’s aristocracy,” not only to point out that Jews are more similar to their fellow Britons than may have been supposed, but also to subtly argue for the emancipation of the Jews.

Endnotes

¹ Aguilar depicts Eve’s perfect innocence, for which she claims there is “sufficient scriptural authority” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 15). Christian and Jewish interpretations

differ in their considerations of “the fall” of humankind. Specifically, Christianity developed a doctrine of “the fall”—resolved by Jesus’ cosmic reconciliation—whereas Judaism did not. The doctrine of “sin” and a “fall” based on Eve’s disobedience accompanies the Christian Eve, not the Jewish Eve. Jewish theological tradition does not possess one consistent interpretation of Eve’s actions. The Talmud demonstrates diverse views on Eve, and rabbinical tradition does not fault Eve for the presence of sin in the world. *Midrash Rabbah* incorporates the Garden of Eden narrative because the story reflects ideas about the human condition, but Adam and Eve are less central to Judaism than they are to Christianity (Blidstein xii). Midrashic and Talmudic materials do present uncomplimentary images of Eve, but other rabbinical commentators offer a more egalitarian vision of gender relations to temper these images (Kvam 8). Ultimately, the compilers of the Talmud and *Midrash Rabbah* do not expect readers to arrive at one specific reading of Genesis 1-3. From the Renaissance, Christians assumed that the two disparate creation accounts in Genesis 1-3 provided a continuous narrative, and that these accounts were in harmony with New Testament descriptions of Eve and her daughters. The seemingly seamless account of creation allowed Christian theologians to subordinate Eve to Adam (Kvam 4). Christian tradition places more emphasis on Eve as the reason for the subordinate position of women in society than does Judaism. Aguilar does not subordinate Eve to Adam. Eve is equal to Adam, and each possesses unique and complementary characteristics. Aguilar’s Eve sinned, but her sin is not the orchestration of the fall of mankind for which subsequent generations of women must be punished. Rather, Aguilar’s Eve sinned when she did not seek God’s guidance, to which she had constant and immediate access.

Chapter 2

“Yet wherever the Hebrew is FREE a new spirit is awakening”: Conflict with Christian

Culture and the Revival of the Jewish Heart in *The Spirit of Judaism*

Reviews of Aguilar’s *The Women of Israel* and *A Mother’s Recompense* appeared in the April 1851 edition of *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register*. The reviewer praises *The Women of Israel*, claiming that “[i]f we were a Jew, we know of no work which would be more likely to confirm us in Judaism, than this” (142). The reviewer recognizes the public disparagement of Judaism and approves of Aguilar’s vindication of the Jewish religion “from those reflections and aspersions which Christian writers have often cast upon it” (142). But *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* is an Episcopalian journal, and regardless of his praise, the reviewer does not hesitate to argue that *The Women of Israel* unwittingly professes the truth of Christianity, which Aguilar “so blindly rejects.” The reviewer insists that Jews’ rejection of the divinity of the New Testament is short-sighted, arguing that “the religion of the Old and New Testaments, is one” (142).

In *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842), an extended commentary on the spiritual significance of the Shema, Aguilar acknowledges the irreconcilability of Judaism’s and Christianity’s central tenets.¹ But *Spirit* does establish commonality between the two religions with frequent references to the divinity of the Hebrew Bible: “Those who deny its divine truths are neither Jew nor Christian; for the acknowledgment of its divinity is equally binding to the one as to the other” (51). This acknowledgement should allow Jews and Christians to coexist peacefully. “The enlightened Christian should not,” according to Isaac D’Israeli, “persecute his ancient brother, since Christianity and

Judaism rest on the same foundation” (211). Jews and Christians share the same spirit but express it differently (Galchinsky, “Engendering” 213). The Hebrew Bible provides the source for that shared spirit; Jews and Christians “will alike unite in proclaiming it DIVINE” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 60). Aguilar wrote for a dual readership, which perhaps explains her use of her writing to close the gap between Christians and Jews. Abrahams points out that Aguilar’s readership “was in the main non-Jewish.” Nineteenth-century British and American Jewish communities “could contribute only in small measure” to Aguilar’s “strong and widely spread” popularity (137). Christians accounted for the majority of Aguilar’s readership, and *The Spirit of Judaism* was well received by Jews and Christians in both America and Britain (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 22).

It is possible that Aguilar’s universalist approach to the Bible contributed to her popularity with Protestants. Her rejection of “the trammels of tradition” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 100), or rabbinical commentary, won her the derisive appellation “Jewish Protestant” from some members of London’s Jewish community. Aguilar and her family spent time outside of London’s Jewish community due to her father’s failing health, and it is worth noting that, during this time, she relied on Christian friends and Christian tools of worship (Fay 216). Aguilar was clearly familiar with the King James Version of the Bible, to which the biblical translations in her theological writings usually refer. The KJV was popular with the English in the nineteenth century. Charlotte Bronte used this version in *Jane Eyre* (Norton 303), and Hartley Coleridge described the language of the KJV as “the perfection of English” (718).

Aguilar’s reliance on the KJV might also indicate unfamiliarity with Hebrew, although the extent to which Aguilar was familiar with Hebrew is generally unknown.

We do know that Aguilar ran a Jewish boys' boarding school with her mother, and that Hebrew was advertized as one of the subjects taught. Rabbis and other learned English Jews complained bitterly of Hebrew literacy in England. In *The Spirit of Judaism*, Aguilar enumerates reasons that Jews should learn Hebrew, but she also uses this work to argue for a Jewish vernacular translation of the Bible so that Jews might become more familiar with their own religious texts in a language they could actually read. There was as yet no Jewish vernacular translation of the Bible, and Galchinsky points out that during her time outside of London, "Aguilar often felt she could only satisfy her religious yearnings by going to hear sermons in Protestant churches" (*Grace Aguilar* 19). Additionally, religious use does not factor into Aguilar's reasons for the relevance of Hebrew.

Her various identifications contributed to her conflicting claims about Judaism and Englishness. Aguilar desired to be English at a time when Englishness was intimately intertwined with Anglicanism. Aguilar loved England but desired a Jewish environment. One church visit resulted in Aguilar's poem that has received perhaps the most scholarly attention: "A Vision of Jerusalem." Printed in Leeser's *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* in February 1844, Aguilar describes feeling isolated in the "Gentile Shrine": "I stood ALONE 'mid thronging crowds who filled that stranger shrine, / For there were none who kept the faith I hold so dearly mine: / An exile felt I, in that house, from Israel's native sod,— / An exile yearning for my *home*,—yet loved still by my God" (21-24). These lines demonstrate some of Aguilar's recurrent themes—exile, the importance of home to her as a woman *and* as a Jew without a land—as well as the conflict between her Jewish spirit and her Christian environment.

The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register's review of *The Women of Israel* evinces Aguilar's immense popularity both in America and with Protestants. However, the review also characterizes the tension between Aguilar's Jewish works and her Christian audiences. In her writings, Aguilar had to toe a very fine line: she had to combat conversion and correct Christian beliefs about Judaism without offending her Christian readership. Despite her close association with Christians, she remained a foe of conversionists who would seek to convert uneducated Jews. *The Spirit of Judaism* is a multi-layered defense of Judaism in which Aguilar advocates religious education for Jews to combat conversionist manipulation. But tension within Aguilar's theology is not only between her philo-Protestantism and her hostility toward Christian conversionists. While Aguilar's individualistic approach to Judaism may have appealed to some Christians, it alienated some Jews, which is ironic when recalling Abrahams' belief that Aguilar's work is permeated with the "spirit of Judaism." *The Spirit of Judaism* seeks to enforce a sense of Jewish identity while it breaks with Jewish tradition, remarkably, in a meditation on Judaism's central prayer.

Emancipation, Anxiety, and the Culture of Conversion

In 1806, James Bicheno called Jews living in England a "nation within a nation" (2). Jewish communities all over Europe existed as separate nations within the larger geographical entities that made up the Continent. As Enlightenment rationality spread, Europeans began to reconsider the morality and practicality of retaining separate—and unequal—communities within their boundaries. Eighteenth-century European Christians became increasingly aware of the moral and rational unacceptability of maintaining separate ethnic communities whose members were tolerated but denied the rights of

citizenship (Spector, "Politics" 1). Galchinsky advises using the word "toleration" with care: "While it might mean the abrogation of legal and political disabilities, it did not mean the complete social acceptance of Jews" ("Engendering" 210). Christians "tolerated" Jews legally but desired their conversion nonetheless.

The proliferation of Enlightenment ideals prompted British Parliamentarians to debate Jewish naturalization. The Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753, a document that proposed to alleviate the legal and economic suffering of Jews living in Britain, intended to afford adherents of Judaism the opportunity to apply for a private act of naturalization without having to swear allegiance to the Anglican Church. But the proposed bill did not dispense with the restriction against Jews holding many forms of property and public offices. Parliament ratified the bill, but the opposition quickly succeeded in effecting its withdrawal (Singer, "Great Britain" 19-20).

Relatively few Jews lived in Great Britain in 1753, but the idea of a Jewish *other* was strong. The anti-Jewish Naturalization opposition added Jews to the list of dangerous *others* by conflating them with preexisting religious fears of Catholics and Protestant dissenters, fears which these propagandists exploited in order to convince the British public to view themselves as "British nationals" and to fear and distrust "foreign" Jews (21). The opposition used religious stereotypes to induce fear of Jews as a separate, foreign nation that would prove toxic if granted citizenship. Publications exemplified what British writers believed would happen should Jews become naturalized: this foreign body would threaten the British nation and the emerging concept of British Protestant—specifically Anglican—identity. Many opposition writers viewed religion and state as

absolutely inseparable, an idea that turned non-Protestant Jews into a foreign enemy that threatened the constructed concept of nation and national identity (24).

English Jews faced different threats than their coreligionists on the Continent. To continue existing as a “nation within a nation,” English Jews sought to attract little attention, eschewing the establishment of religious institutions that would consolidate their Jewish identities (Spector, “Politics” 5). Rather, many Jewish immigrants chose to assimilate. Assimilating meant appearing as “English” as possible, but it did not (always) mean abandoning Judaism in favor of Christianity. Appearing English often meant *speaking* English. Proponents of Enlightenment in the Jewish world like Hyman Hurwitz understood the intellectual and practical value of the English language. Hurwitz, a Polish immigrant arriving in England sometime in the 1790s, authored *Hebrew Tales* (1826), the first anthology of Hebrew literature in English. Hurwitz, like other learned Jews, despaired over the state of Hebrew education in England, but advocated Jews’ use of English.

In *The Spirit of Judaism*, Aguilar insists on making the Bible universally accessible. This goal is partly to be achieved with an English translation of the Bible for Jews—that is, a Bible without a Christian agenda. Being English meant using English. For Hurwitz, Aguilar, and others, Judaism was to be practiced at home—in the private sphere—and not exhibited publicly either through foreign languages or distinguishing dress. The Anglo-Jewish community wanted to become modern, middle class, and liberal. English Jews—both Sephardi and Ashkenazi—sought a closer identification with the British than with other Jewish communities, and English Jews resembled more the British nation than their ethnic counterparts on the Continent (Spector, “Politics” 6).

But despite this radical assimilation, Jews remained Jewish, not Christian. For many Britons, Jews needed to convert to be really English. An influx of poor and uneducated Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe provoked a combination of anti- and philo-Semitic conversionist activities from the British (Spector, “Politics” 6). According to Michael Ragussis, the conversion of Jews—an obsession brought on by the Evangelical Revival—assumed a pivotal role in nineteenth-century society. The “Jewish question” helped to define the national identity of England during this time (2). The ideology of conversion played an important role in the parliamentary debates on Jewish civil and political disabilities during the 1830s when Jewish disabilities were being reexamined (16). Aguilar was “one of the most visible spokespersons in the struggle for English Jews’ ‘emancipation,’” which meant “arguing for their full social acceptance, pleading for the reform of the legal and political constraints on their citizenship,” and “seeking to safeguard Jews against conversion efforts” (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 13-4).

Aguilar’s writings, especially *The Spirit of Judaism*, demonstrate considerable anxiety about England’s culture of conversion, or as D’Israeli calls it, the “trade of conversion” (208). Throughout her work, Aguilar makes many distinctions between the Christian climates of England and Spain, or between Protestants and Catholics. England, she observes, is the preferred residence of Jewish exiles. In “free and happy” England, Jews may “go forth, no longer striving to conceal [their] religion through shame” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 9). Isaac Leeser, who edited and published the American edition of *Spirit*, adds to Aguilar’s statement that America also encourages “the Israelite [to] worship his God unawed by the malign influence of persecution” (9).²

Despite her praise of England's relatively tolerant atmosphere, Aguilar recognizes pressures to convert. In *The Spirit of Judaism*, she makes a clear distinction between the violent means of conversion used during the Inquisition, and the "well-meaning" conversionist pressures used by Christians in England:

Now, when surrounded by nations who know the Lord and serve Him, though not as we do: we are daily in danger of being lured to desert our faith, or of being called upon to arise and defend our belief, not against the sword of slaughter, but against that kindly though mistaken zeal which would endeavour to convince and to convert, by the means of that very book we have wilfully neglected. (57)

If Jews are, in England as well as in Spain, "in danger of being lured to desert our faith," how different can Protestants really be from Catholics? But of course, Aguilar can't explicitly equate Protestantism's evangelizing with Catholicism's methods of procuring converts during the Inquisition, as that would hardly appeal to the Protestants in her English readership who reviled Catholicism. Also, Aguilar didn't dislike Protestantism in the way she did Catholicism. Protestantism is a branch of Christianity divorced from the associations between Catholicism and persecution that Aguilar learned in her childhood, and consequently, is a Christianity worth admiring. Nonetheless, conversionism is something to fear.

Worse still, Christians use the text the two religions share to convince Jews of the truth of Christianity. Conversionists used the Hebrew Scriptures as a means of converting Jews who were uneducated in Judaism. In this passage, knowledge of the Bible, which English Jews have "wilfully neglected," is the only means of combating conversion. Leiser, almost believing that Aguilar might perhaps exaggerate England's obsession with conversion, remarks here that "[i]f my friend's picture of the ignorance of our blessed religion among her countrymen and women is not highly overdrawn, [. . .], how fearful a

responsibility does rest upon them, if they do not arise in their might and counteract by a thorough system of religious education the evil so eloquently exposed in the text!” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 57). Public Jewish education was then chaotic and ineffective, and as we shall see, Aguilar advocates an altogether different sort of Jewish education to counteract conversion.

Though the liberal English culture did not employ coercive measures against Jews, Christians still exerted noncoercive pressures to conform to prevailing Protestant standards. Galchinsky points out that “[b]y the early nineteenth century, this sort of persuasive conversionism had taken a broad hold in English society” and that “Victorian Jews faced several powerful conversionist societies” (“Engendering” 210). The dominant conversionist society was Joseph Fry’s London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews, which was founded in 1809 and sanctioned by the Crown, prominent politicians from both political parties, and from both Houses of Parliament (“Engendering” 210). The London Society is well-known for employing dubious methods to procure converts, which D’Israeli describes in *The Genius of Judaism* (1833):

[. . .] indirect or subdulous practices, which have been often employed by inferior agents in the trade of conversion; by hunting after miserable proselytes in the dark purlieus of filthy quarters, parentless children, or torn from their disconsolate parents; by agonising the conscience of thoughtless persons; or importing young Polanders, who lose their Jewish complexion by fattening at the tables of their generous hosts; (207-8)

Michael Ragussis claims that the existence of these institutions is the clearest indicator of the presence of the ideology of Jewish conversion during the nineteenth century (15).

Another society, the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews, was founded in 1842, the year in which *The Spirit of Judaism* appeared in America.

Ragussis points out that much of this conversionist activity occurred through literature.³ Anglo-Jews produced texts to counter the conversionist literature—which included memoirs and novels advocating the conversion of the Jews, often authored by “successful” converts—generated by the conversion crisis (7-8). While Jewish women were the most targeted, they were also some of the first to respond and among the most devoted to defense. Middle-class writers like Maria Polack, the Moss sisters, and Aguilar wrote romance novels in response to conversionist romances like Maria Edgeworth’s *Harrington* (1817) (Galchinsky, “Engendering” 212). Many scholars of nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish literature examine Aguilar’s romances, especially *Vale of Cedars*, as a response to conversionism; however, they overlook warnings against conversion in her theological works.

Aguilar’s *The Spirit of Judaism* establishes a sense of Jewish national unity through an explication of the Shema while it encourages using Jewish education to guard against conversion. Her prefatory statements evince her conversion anxiety. “The Hebrew theologian” faces “both open and covered attacks of the religions around him”; consequently, “he must prepare defence for all that he has promulgated concerning his peculiar belief” (x). Jewish theological writers had to take care that their tracts did not inflame Christians. The defender of Judaism “must not be surprised to find all that he has brought forward simply to demonstrate the difference between his creed and that of others treated as attacks” (x). A Jewish writer must be prepared to see his or her words, or “all that he fondly hoped would aid the cause of love to God and charity to man,” turned into “weapons of bitterness and strife” (x). Conversion becomes a war, and Aguilar means to provide Jews with weapons for the fight.

The Shema is the central statement of Jewish belief. It expresses belief in the unity of God. The Shema is central to Jewish identity, so it is appropriate that Aguilar uses commentary on this prayer to affirm Jewish identification in light of conversionist tactics. The Shema contains all that is necessary for a Jew to refute Christian arguments:

[. . .] not alone did our Father so reveal Himself, in the impressive words, with which he answered Moses I AM THAT I AM—or lit. I will be that I will be; but that also in the repetition of His laws He inspired that faithful servant with wisdom to proclaim His unity, in terms so powerful and clear, that it would almost seem as if His all penetrating eye, marking the war of argument which would assail His people, provided them in these simple words with an armour of proof, no weapon can assail. (*The Spirit of Judaism* 7)

Aguilar conceives of England's rampant conversionism as a war, so much so that God Himself has provided the Jewish people with the Shema as a way to defend themselves. Children must be taught the Shema in any language they understand, and not only the words, but also a respect for and understanding of their meaning in order to properly defend the Jewish faith.

One of Aguilar's major complaints in *The Spirit of Judaism* is that a Jew, in accordance with Halakhah, recites the Shema two to three times daily, but in his heart does not comprehend "the awful responsibility he takes upon himself everytime he repeats the first verse of the Shema" (8), "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." He daily renews his covenant with God, but "he neither knows what that covenant is, nor cares what it includes" (8). Aguilar is distressed by Jews who observe Jewish law mechanically without actively engaging their hearts in Jewish practice. These Jews remain Jewish because it is their heritage, and they do not take it upon themselves to learn anything about Judaism. "We must not remain Hebrews, only because our fathers were," Aguilar insists, "The faith we receive merely as an inheritance, will not enable us

to defend it from insidious attack or open warfare” (8). But more than that, such a superficial identification will not enrich the Jewish spirit. Spirit—engaging the heart—keeps Jews Jewish, not practice and tradition.

While not its chief concern, *The Spirit of Judaism* intends to educate Christians in Jewish beliefs and customs in the hope that Christians will halt their conversionist efforts. Aguilar hopes that her tract will “assist the followers of other creeds in obtaining a truer and kinder estimate of the Jewish religion” (xi). These well-meaning but misguided Christian conversionists may cease to proselytize if they could but understand that Judaism provides its adherents with spiritual fulfillment:

Could Christians once properly understand the pure spirit of the Mosaic faith, the real intent of all its ceremonies, the immortal hopes, the universal benevolence it breathes, the strength it infuses, the comfort it bestows: they would perhaps see how perfectly unnecessary it is, either for the Hebrew's happiness in heaven or his spiritual welfare upon earth, to make him a convert to their faith. (xii)

If *The Spirit of Judaism* cannot sway Christians from their “efforts towards conversion,” then “the youthful Hebrew would at least be preserved from the danger arising” if given a thorough Jewish education (xii).

Jewish Education in Victorian England

Rabbis and other learned Jewish men criticized the state of Jewish education in England in the nineteenth century. Praising the history of Jewish education in the *Report of the Commissioner of Education* (1870), J. Noah asserts that “although the Israelites are of all nationalities, and scattered promiscuously over the face of the world, they are the only people who can be fairly classed as universally educated. There may be a few who cannot read or write, but this number is insignificant” (359). Jews can, if not in their “modern or domiciliary language,” at least read and write in Hebrew. But Noah points

out that if there are any Jewish communities he cannot claim literacy for, “they may be found principally in London, or in other large cities of Great Britain, where, from degraded associations, they have been outcast from the society of their own people” (359). By “degraded associations” Noah perhaps refers to the unsavory occupations of some lower class Ashkenazim, or of rampant crime in general. In discussing the superiority of Jewish education, Noah numbers Aguilar—the only woman on his list—among the greatest scholars produced by Judaism, including Josephus, Maimonides, Judah Halevi, Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Disraeli, Moses Montefiore, and Rabbi Isaac Leeser (367). But Aguilar’s own male contemporaries criticized her lack of knowledge of or misunderstanding of Judaism.

Steven Singer positions education as a point of dispute between traditionalists and progressives in the early Victorian Jewish community. Tensions developed between these factions as Jews were emancipated and became acculturated to their surroundings, and Jewish education caused controversy within the community. According to Singer, “the conflict between the two factions revolved around the instruction provided for the children of the middle and upper classes rather than that given to the indigent” (“Jewish Education” 163). A network of free communal schools provided education for London Jewry’s needy. But students who attended these schools, like Jewish children across class lines, “emerged with a very limited knowledge of both religious and secular subjects” since the free schools were largely meant “to be the means of educating the children of the poor to be respectable members of adult society” (164-65). Most Jewish parents wanted their children to have some Jewish education, and the free schools served as an alternative to schools which included their curriculum instruction in the tenets of the

Church of England, or schools created by the Dissenters that offered education in the spirit of their teachings.

With a few exceptions, the Jewish middle and upper classes did not send their children to the communal institutions meant for the poor and had a much less cohesive system of education. Singer points out that a small number of more well-off Jews sent their children to the various private Jewish boarding schools existing at this time and gives “Leopold Neumegen’s academy at Highgate” as an example (“Jewish Education” 165). I would like to add that the Jewish academy at Highgate was actually established in 1802 by Hyman Hurwitz. Hurwitz’s success in England and outstanding character garnered financial support for the establishment of his own seminary for Jewish boys. The new academy was the only school of its kind, and Hurwitz typically had about one hundred pupils from some of the chief Jewish families of London enrolled (Hyman, “Hyman Hurwitz” 232). But attendance was usually low, and one can trace the beginning of Hurwitz’s lifelong disappointment with Jewish and Hebrew education in England to this early frustration. In 1821 Hurwitz, who would in 1828 become the first professor of Hebrew at University College, London, renewed the property’s lease for the benefit of his successor Leopold Neumegen, who took over the Jewish academy after Hurwitz’s departure. Neumegen’s school survived until 1832, or possibly until the lease expired in 1837 (“Hornsey, Including Highgate”).

The Jewish middle and upper classes generally relied on a private academy, a public or endowed school, or a private tutor for their children’s Jewish and secular education. Though much of these classes were becoming increasingly assimilated and secularized, “the great majority of the prosperous members of the community were not

willing at this time to cut off their sons completely from contact with Judaism and Jewish observance by sending them to non-Jewish boarding schools” (Singer, “Jewish Education” 166). Despite these desires to remain connected to Judaism, Jewish education in London was not particularly successful. Singer illuminates Victorian dissatisfaction with Jewish education by quoting from the 1845 edition of the influential periodical the *Voice of Jacob*. “The comparative ignorance respecting Judaism which pervades all classes of our Jewish population” was attributed it to the current system of education. Contemporary observers remarked on how many people in London’s community were ignorant of the most basic ideas of Judaism. Hundreds of Jews in the community could not read Hebrew, and parents were usually satisfied if their children could at least read their Hebrew prayers mechanically (167-68). Aguilar devotes a section in *The Spirit of Judaism* to the problem of Hebrew literacy. Reciting prayers in a language one does not understand, for her, is perhaps the greatest evil and it is clear that her comments about literacy in *Spirit* respond to these issues.

The communal schools for the poor were not acceptable to middle and upper-class traditionalists. This faction desired the foundation of a private Jewish day school in London so that their children could receive a high quality Jewish education. But perhaps of most importance to the wealthier traditionalists was that private Jewish day schools would “insure that the community’s youth maintained their religious identity and commitment, as well as an acceptable level of ritual observance.” Jewish progressives supported communal schools for the poor members of the community. Jewish schools, progressives reasoned, were better than the conversionist missionary schools that would

trade food for conversion; aside from the communal schools, there were no other institutions available (Singer, “Jewish Education” 171-72).

The progressives rejected the establishment of a private Jewish day school. Singer points out that this faction was “quite satisfied with the extremely limited religious education given to higher-class children, either at Jewish boarding schools or at home, and were completely unconcerned about their offspring remaining ignorant of both the Talmud and Hebrew literature” (“Jewish Education” 172). Progressives feared that the establishment of an exclusive Jewish school would interfere with the achievement of full emancipation and integration into English society. According to Singer, progressives believed that “[c]omplete acceptance of the Jews was possible [. . .] only if all social barriers between Jew and Gentile were eliminated so that feelings of religious distinctiveness and separateness would be muted” (172). Acknowledging Jewish exclusiveness and difference via the establishment of specifically Jewish schools countered the progressives’ desire to achieve full Jewish political rights.

Singer asserts that these Jewish progressives were comfortable with their children receiving a limited amount of education in Judaism. I would argue that Aguilar, “progressive” as she was, did not oppose Jewish and Hebrew education. In fact, Aguilar was passionately committed to furthering Jewish education. She certainly would not have been satisfied with limited Jewish education for children. But Aguilar is not a champion of the fledgling middle and upper-class Jewish schooling system. For boys and for girls, Jewish education—like women, domesticity, and Judaism itself—belongs in the home and should be undertaken by pious and devoted mothers.

Convergence of Emancipation, Conversion, Education, and Domesticity

Understanding the complex relationship between Jewish and Christian cultures from 1750 to 1850 requires a discussion of Enlightenment. This collection of intellectual movements concerned itself with the application of critical reasoning to human problems for the purpose of improving the human condition, which, as Enlightenment proponents understood, would create a more equal and tolerant society and government (Fitzpatrick 299). The late eighteenth-century development of Romantic sensibilities conflicted with Enlightenment ideals (301). But William Hazlitt, an advocate of Jewish naturalization, managed to balance respect for the Enlightenment ideals he learned as a youth while fully embracing new Romantic sensibilities in order to sympathize with the political plight and social standing of England's Jewish minority.

Enlightenment ideals alone could not generate the sense of sympathy for the oppressed evident in Hazlitt's political writings, since Enlightenment emphasis on reason contributed to the disparagement of rabbinic literature. Both Judaism and Christianity claim that the Bible validates their doctrines, but Judaism relies on the rabbis' exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is rejected by Christianity. If man has reason, then reason can be used to understand Biblical passages that are unclear, making rabbinical exegesis unnecessary and the Talmud a target of criticism. Aguilar insists that individuals have the capacity to comprehend the Bible without the aid of "tradition," a claim rejected by her traditionally Orthodox editor Isaac Leeser.

The failed 1758 attempt at naturalization generated debate over civil emancipation for Jews in the nineteenth century, and Hazlitt supported Jewish emancipation. Hazlitt's 1831 essay "The Emancipation of the Jews" presents the idea that "civil emancipation

would be the logical result of the triumph of sympathetic imagination over [. . .] the ancient and persistent myths and stereotypes about Jews in European culture” (Page, *Imperfect Sympathies* 46). Hazlitt argues that British citizens are to blame for Jewish hostility, claiming, “If they are vicious it is we who have made them so. Shut out any class of people from the path to fair fame, and you reduce them to grovel in the pursuit of riches and the means to live” (462). He then describes the contradictory ways Britons treated the Jews who lived among them, explaining that British citizens “object to their trades and modes of life; that is, we shut people up in close confinement and complain that they do not live in the open air” (462). Hazlitt laments that the British “tear people up by the roots and trample on them like noxious weeds, and then make an outcry that they do not take root in the soil like wholesome plants,” and how they “drive [Jews] like a pest from city to city, from kingdom to kingdom, and then call them vagabonds and aliens” (462).

For Aguilar, emancipation, conversion, Jewish education and domestic values converge, and are all parts of the same issue: being Jewish in Victorian England. In emphasizing the importance of education for poor Jews, Aguilar’s *The Spirit of Judaism* echoes Hazlitt’s earlier observations:

There are difficulties, barriers around the Jewish poor, almost unknown to other nations. Confined to one quarter of large cities, often to trades of the meanest and lowest kind, without the power of seeking employment in other parts of the country, even if their inclinations so prompted: their minds become narrowed, prejudiced, and puffed up with a sort of pride, or self-consequence, which sets at defiance every benevolent intention, and frustrates all attempts for their spiritual and temporal improvement. (101)

For Hazlitt and Aguilar both, oppression of Jews causes Jews to distance themselves from and even hate their English oppressors. But what is particularly odious for Aguilar is that

oppression causes Jews to reject attempts at “spiritual improvement,” or Jewish education. The Jewish poor have “[a] superficial knowledge of the Hebrew tongue, just sufficient to repeat their prayers and blessings at stated hours, conscious they are doing a necessary duty, but utterly unconscious of the nature of him they thus address; well versed in traditional lore, but wholly ignorant of the spirit of the Bible” (101). Evident in these lines is the convergence of Aguilar’s preoccupations and anxieties. Jews must be emancipated in order to thrive. Thriving implies the possession of a religious education. Lacking a proper religious education leads to a dullness of “spirit” and the practicing of “mere forms” of religion. And finally, what is not included in these lines but is so carefully extrapolated throughout *The Spirit of Judaism* is that practicing Judaism without engaging the heart, which can only be learnt from devoted mothers, leaves Jews defenseless and susceptible to conversion.

Aguilar’s universalist approach to Judaism, as well as her Romantic emphasis on the individual and devaluation of rabbinical authority, aligns her with liberal Jewish thinkers like Hurwitz who are considered adherents of the Jewish Enlightenment in England. Her individualistic and assimilationist rhetoric—as well as much of the rhetoric of the Reform movement of Judaism—comes across as too “Protestant” for traditional-minded Jews like Leeser. Aguilar’s “reformation” stresses the need for Jewish bibles in English: “the Hebrew poor [. . .] need religion, simple, heartfelt, yet ever guiding religion; and this can only be obtained by *teaching* them their *English Bibles*” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 101-2). Leeser anxiously responds that since Jews are “inheritors of the Hebrew language no less than the Scriptures, it is evidently our duty to make ourselves, if possible, familiar with the original, so as to enable us to judge with some knowledge of

the correctness or otherwise of the translation” (102). For Aguilar, English Bibles make the word of God universally available to Jews who cannot read Hebrew.

Aguilar does not deny the importance of Hebrew, but she and Leeser have very different ideas regarding Hebrew’s relevance. For Aguilar, Jewish children should learn Hebrew in order to feel connected with other Jews and to be able to communicate with Jews whose native languages are not English. Making Hebrew a conversational language is important, but “this end cannot be attained if the Hebrew child is merely taught to read and translate his prayers, as was formerly the case, and his aptitude in the language judged according to his proficiency in following the service of the Synagogues” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 174). Again, mechanically repeating Hebrew is at the heart of the conversion problem. Hebrew must be learned “grammatically” like other languages so that children will understand it; otherwise, children will hate the language and consequently hate *siddurim*, “divesting the sacred words from all holiness” (174). In Aguilar’s view, a number of issues are a detriment to the *spirit* of Judaism. But learning Hebrew becomes of practical value for Aguilar when she acquiesces to Leeser’s view that knowing the language of the Bible will help Jews’ defense against Christians.

In *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar’s Jochebed is depicted as an ideal mother who properly educated her son Moses in Judaism. If it weren’t for Jochebed, Moses might never have cared enough about Judaism and the Jewish people to take up their cause. Galchinsky points out that in Aguilar’s novels *Home Influence* (1847), *A Mother’s Recompense* (1851), and *Woman’s Friendship* (1850), “she offered her ideal models of the domestic woman: the woman who cared for husband and home, and, above all, the mother who inculcated religion and morality into the hearts of her children” (*Grace*

Aguilar 21). Emphasizing the domestic space—the private sphere—as the place for religious education is illustrated in her novels and spelled out in her theological writings. I explained how Aguilar’s domestic ideology emulates that of the Victorian Protestant middle class, but—ironically, in fact, since she models it after the Christian majority—it takes on added force when considering how crucial she believed education to be in the fight against Christian conversionist efforts. Like Jochebed before them, Jewish mothers—not male teachers and yeshivas—are responsible for the religious education of Jewish youth.

When I was a religious school teacher, I was told that Jewish parents expect Jewish teachers to instill a sense of Jewish identity into their children. It was explained to me that Judaism is in a dire situation which must be remedied with religious school: too many children are growing up to be apathetic Jewish adults who intermarry and do not attend synagogue. It was as though the future survival of the Jewish people was in my hands. I questioned why my students’ parents expected me to make their children Jewish, and why they didn’t instead take it upon themselves. This anecdote reminds me that the situation of Jewish education has not changed much since the nineteenth century. Jewish parents are still ambivalent, Jewish children become disinterested, teachers can’t read Hebrew, and everyone fears that the future of the Jewish people is in jeopardy.

Aguilar would have been appalled at the idea of teachers being responsible for what she calls in her Preface “the regeneration of Israel.” Theories of education in *The Spirit of Judaism* are meant for mothers and future mothers since “to them is more especially entrusted the regeneration of Israel” (x). On mothers devolves “the task of infusing that all-important but too often neglected branch of education, religion” (x).

Aguilar acknowledges that her version of Judaism may be too “heartspringing” and “feminine” for men, but that in the end, her version of Jewish education will assuredly create lifelong Jews since children are more influenced by the “heart” than the “head.” Sons will, appropriately, discard the feminine aspects of their childhood religion and “bear [Judaism] with [them] as a shield of defence and robe of glory” in their adulthood. Daughters will absorb their mothers’ “piety of the heart,” and their mothers’ affections “will at once give strength for the trials of life, hallow domestic and social duty, purify their simplest pleasures,” and most importantly, become—like Aguilar’s Eve—perfect helpmates, and—like Jochebed—perfect mothers to “regenerated Israel” (x-xi). Engaging the Jewish heart in youth will create lifelong Jews who are capable of defending their beliefs.

Jewish education should engage the Jewish heart. Jews cannot love God “without employing our intellect, the whole energy of our minds, in the study of His law; not alone of the Pentateuch, but of our religion generally” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 49). This is an odd contradiction considering how throughout *The Spirit of Judaism*, Aguilar insists that the Bible is the only necessary component of a child’s education, and that rabbinic literature serves only to obscure issues that the Bible makes perfectly clear. Nevertheless, study of all elements of Judaism “will assist us in becoming firm and consistent followers of the faith we profess, and enable us to mingle amongst those of another creed, without fearing to imbibe it” (50). The Bible “must be our constant study. Nor will that be of itself sufficient. The Bible is the reflection of that fountain of light dwelling with God on high, and prayer alone will give us the emanating ray, which will illumine the darkness, in which to natural man that blessed book is plunged” (50). Jewish education engages the

Jewish heart, and it allows Jews to assimilate into Christian societies without being swayed by their attempts at evangelizing.

Form versus Spirit, Law versus Love

Jewish education, directed by Jewish mothers, counteracts the dulling of the “spirit” brought on by the mechanical repetition of prayers, or “forms,” or the ritual aspects of the religion. Aguilar later emphasizes the importance of the heart/spirit in *The Women of Israel*, where it joins with her emphasis on individualism: “We must pray to Him in our hearts as well as with our lips; we must *think* individual prayer as well as those public petitions framed for us” (125). Throughout *The Spirit of Judaism*, Aguilar makes a distinction between the “forms” of Judaism and the “spirit” of Judaism, a move which has been historically a Christian go-to criticism of Judaism.

To make Judaism acceptable to British Christians, Aguilar reverses the law/love dichotomy so that Judaism becomes a religion of love. Victorians viewed Christianity as a religion of love, which is more appealing to women than a formalistic religion: “A religion of love is indeed necessary to woman, yet more so than to man. Even in her happiest lot there must be a void in her heart, which ever-acting piety alone can fill” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 8). To construct Judaism as a religion of love, a Jewish mother must “teach the religion of the heart unto her children, instead of merely inculcating peculiar forms, and desiring them to observe peculiar rites” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 156). “Adherence to instituted forms,” Aguilar admonishes, “will not be sufficient of itself to make religion a vital principle, or open to the youthful heart its ever-springing fount of comfort and of love.” The “spirit of piety” must also be “inculcated in the minds of [Jewish] children” (173).

The Shema expresses Aguilar's ideal of the "spirit of piety," but recitation of this prayer can become mechanical. Observant Jews recite the Shema twice or three times daily, and it is "the first [prayer] taught to our children; either in Hebrew or in English, [. . .] the first ideas of prayer which the infant mind receives" (*The Spirit of Judaism* 1). Since the Shema is repeated so often, the words may "slip from our lips, so heedlessly, so lifelessly, that we are scarcely conscious, when we begin and when we end them" (2). "The thoughts wander, the heart is deadened," which is the greatest evil since a heart dead to Judaism opens the heart to Christianity (2). If Jews but realize that the Shema is "a brief emphatic summary of all those laws which God himself inspired Moses to impart," then it follows that thoughts will not wander during the recitation because "the affections and the intellect will alike be fully stored" (3). The Shema is "the avowal of belief, belief in the unparalleled, unchanging, incomprehensible unity of God," and Aguilar claims that God finds an avowal of belief "when we neither know, nor care, what that belief includes" unacceptable. Mere "forms," including the mechanical repetition of the Shema, contribute to the embrasure of Christianity when Jews are "hovering between Judaism and Christianity" (4). Her distinction between forms and spirit allow Aguilar to pinpoint the exact moment when Jews are tempted to convert to Christianity.

Aguilar clearly recognized that Christians tended to force Judaism into the false binary of law versus love. *The Spirit of Judaism* makes a distinction between the form and spirit of Judaism in order to defend Judaism against Christian claims that Judaism has no heart and relies too heavily on antiquated rabbinical decrees. But even while she defends Judaism against Christianity, she draws connections between the two religions. The Lord, "merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth,

keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin,” Aguilar points out, “is the God the Nazarene emphatically calleth love; this is their God and OUR God” (36). Christians have historically claimed Jesus as the God of love, and criticism of Judaism as a religion of law has a long history.

Christianity—from its beginnings to its current manifestations—has denounced Judaism as legalistic and heartless. Jews are to be pitied by Christians for their short-sightedness and stubborn adherence to their laws. Historically, Christians have used “Pharisee” and “Pharisaic” as terms of opprobrium (Lamm 7). Interestingly enough, Aguilar herself disparagingly uses the term “Pharisee” in a move that upsets Leeser, our voice of tradition. In an attempt to break down the law versus love binary, Aguilar emulates the Christian attitudes she seeks to combat:

And yet does the presumptuous and haughty Hebrew, imitating the Pharisee of old, dare to say, their prayers are less acceptable than his? The offerings of the meek and lowly, the earnest in the performance of his Maker’s will, in his duty to his fellow-men, these are acceptable and of sweet savour unto Him, who judgeth not as man judgeth, whatever may be the creed which dictates them. It is the spirit which He regardeth, demanding obedience according to the light His wisdom hath bestowed. If more light, more holiness, have been given us, more from us will be required ; and the self-satisfied Hebrew may perhaps have cause to envy the meek and lowly Christian or Moslem, he has in his heart despised.
(*The Spirit of Judaism* 19-20)

Aguilar emulates Evangelical concerns when she contrasts the needs of the poor with the actions of the “haughty Pharisees.” Her focus on the value of the poor is consistent with her Romantic tendencies. But Leeser expresses some anxiety over this passage. In his editorial note, Leeser criticizes Aguilar’s use of the term “Pharisee,” pointing out that invoking such terms is a detriment to Judaism’s reputation. Leeser fears “that my friend has adopted without sufficient care the opinions which our opponents entertain of these

people.” The Pharisees “may have been overstrict in their observances; but honest they were, and I do not think that they ever inculcated illiberality towards others” (19).

American Modern Orthodox rabbi Norman Lamm responds to the viewpoint that traditionally observant Judaism is dry and legal, not spiritual and meaningful. Lamm wanted to make his students aware of “the complex and mutually fructifying relationship between spirituality and Halakha (Jewish law),” and he uses the Shema as a detailed illustration of this phenomenon (xi). In order to discuss this tension, Lamm defines both “spirituality” and “law”:

By “spirituality” I mean the intention we bring to our religious acts, the focusing of our mind and thoughts on the transcendent, the entire range of mindfulness—whether simple awareness of what we are doing, in contrast to rote performance, or elaborate mystical meditations—that spells a groping for the Source of all existence and the Giver of Torah. By “law” I refer to the Halakha, the corpus of Jewish law that has its origin in the Oral Law beginning with Sinai and that was eventually written down in the Mishnah and Gemara—i.e., the Talmud—and codified by later rabbinic authorities. (6)

Lamm points out that the Shema communicates the tension between spirituality and law that is at the center of the Jewish religious enterprise.

Lamm explains that both spirituality and law are mutually dependent on one another, equally important and necessary to the practice of Judaism. Since Judaism considers these elements as inseparable and are not considered separately, reducing elements like “law” and “love” to a simplistic binary misses the point: “In Judaism, each side—spirit and law—shows understanding for the other; we are not asked to choose one over the other, but to practice a proper balance that respects and reconciles the demands of each” (7). There are times when spirituality is necessarily subordinated to Halakhah, and there are those from the Orthodox position who would maintain that Halakhah

always takes precedence over spirituality. Aguilar startles Leeser when she subordinates law to spirit in all cases.

Though she always privileges spirit, Aguilar agrees that law and spirit work together. Referring to the practice of wrapping tefillin—male Jews traditionally wear tefillin, or phylacteries, during prayer wrapped around their arm and placed on their foreheads—Aguilar asserts that “all these directions, trifling as they may seem, are but unanswerable proofs [. . .] how entirely and completely religion, the spirit of religion, the whisperings of the eternal, was to be associated with the actions of man” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 214-15). While she describes this legally required process as inseparable from the spirit, she emphasizes the spiritual, claiming that “[i]t is not the mere obedience to the letter of the law, the mere adoption of ancient dress in the hour of prayer, which will render our prayers acceptable” (216). Forms are to aid “the spirit of piety.” Form is subordinate to spirit, and the spirit is “not to be kept at that immense distance which is by some deemed the only way to retain holiness” by overly strict Jews (215).

For Aguilar, form includes rabbinical literature, the “trammels of tradition.” Education should revolve around study of the Bible alone. Jews must find a firm foundation in the Bible. The Talmud obscures, but the Bible provides Jews with the means to illuminate the Jewish spirit in order to gain the respect and admiration of worthy Christians (*The Spirit of Judaism* 21-22). Aguilar’s distinction between “form” and “spirit” emulates Christian complaints about Judaism’s ritualistic framework lacking heart. At Aguilar’s mention of “tradition,” Leeser claims that she has imbibed “too strong a prejudice against tradition,” which is “mainly our general acquiescence in the received mode of interpretation which forms the characteristic distinction between us and others”

(21). This idea of “distinction” appears to be at the heart of Leeser’s complaints. Jews must maintain a distinct way of interpreting the Scriptures—since, as he remarks, the text cannot speak for itself—to maintain distinctness. In his commentary, Leeser identifies the Christian subtexts of a universalist approach that is predicated on Aguilar’s rejection of rabbinical authority: “How else are we to read Scripture, unless it be in accordance with the views of our predecessors? What else forms the distinction between us and Christians?” (100). It appears that for Leeser, Aguilar’s absorption of English cultural values is problematic.

Conclusion

The Victorian system of separate complementary gendered roles, one of the primary systems for categorizing human experience in Victorian England, grants to men “intellect” and to women “the heart.” According to Scheinberg, in this context, “the figure of the heart becomes a metonym for femininity or femaleness, a sign of heightened sensibility and emotion, and even symbolic of a specific connection to the body which stands in opposition to the more abstracted intellect, which is cast as a specifically male quality. In an ideology understood to be structured exclusively on gendered dualism,” the “heart” belongs to women (*Women’s Poetry* 40). Furthermore, as Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians reminds us, images of the “heart” signify complete Christian identity in contradistinction to the incomplete heart which is the sign of Jewish difference. In this theological system, the heart belongs to women and to Christians. Christian identity in the New Testament is defined by these strict categories and Scheinberg notices similarities between these sharp categorical distinctions and that of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres (43).

The Spirit of Judaism makes Judaism a religion of the heart. In the guise of revealing, Aguilar creates “feminine,” heartfelt aspects of Judaism in order to create a religion with a space for women. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Aguilar used a Protestant Victorian framework to create a space for Jewish women within the dominant domestic rhetoric, teaching Jewish women how to remain devoted to Judaism yet assimilate into English society. A Victorian woman advocating that women belong in the domestic sphere—the home—is not unique. What *is* unique is how Aguilar takes these binaries—form/spirit, law/love, public/private—to create devotional practices for women, and to suggest a rather radical view of children’s education, especially that of boys. In Aguilar’s system, Judaism is not a public religion devoted to rituals and law and emblemized by the studious Jewish man, but a religion of the heart to rival the Victorian conception of Christianity.

The reviewer for the *Church Review* understands Aguilar’s spiritual version of Judaism as likely to confirm Jews in Judaism. Solomon Solis, in his review of *The Women of Israel* in Leeser’s *Occident*, comments that Aguilar’s vision of Judaism confirms the spiritual equality of women to men evident “[f]rom the first page of the Bible to the last.” But in his review of *The Spirit of Judaism* for his own periodical *The Voice of Jacob*, Jacob Franklin attributes Aguilar’s idealism and excessive spirituality to a fundamental misunderstanding of Judaism that must be corrected by her editor:

[Leeser] is forced [...] by the necessity of counteracting the erroneous impressions which the text would else produce on the ordinary reader. The deeper research, the wider, experience, and, therefore, sounder judgment of the Rev. Editor, impels him to break through the stricter line usually observed, with an author’s concurrence, and to protect his own reputation, by frequent protests against the views he helps to disseminate. (365-66)

Franklin warns that Aguilar might mislead her readers, and points out that “[a] lady, and that too a young lady, whatever the advantages of quick perception conceded to her sex, is, by the iron rule of custom, limited to fewer opportunities of acquiring that information,” and thus, she generalizes. Since, as a woman, she is barred from Talmudic study, what she knows of the Talmud, Franklin claims, is merely secondhand and likely to misinform (366).

I think it would be hasty to write Rabbi Leeser off as a patriarchal Pharisee who cruelly criticizes the misguided theology of an enthusiastic young Jewish woman. Leeser elsewhere praises the literary efforts of Aguilar, and she was a constant presence in his *Occident*, even after her death in 1847. Aguilar’s Jewish Romanticism eludes categorization and clearly troubled Leeser, Franklin, and other Jewish men. Aguilar’s work is valuable exactly for this reason. Dismantling traditional Judaism through subtly radical methods allows Aguilar to appeal to different audiences in order to achieve her ultimate purpose: the elevation of Jewish women in the eyes of all her audiences. Franklin points out women are discouraged from Talmudic study, a fact of traditional Jewish life that Aguilar condemns. Aguilar’s concept of the individualism inherent in the Jewish spirit aligns her with early Reformers who instituted measures to ensure equality between the sexes.

Endnotes

¹ The Shema is recited twice, sometimes three times, daily by observant Jews. The first verse, Deuteronomy 6:4, affirms monotheism: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” The term “Shema” is used to indicate a longer part of the daily prayers, which includes Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41.

² Isaac Leeser was an American lay leader, author, translator, editor, and founder of the Jewish periodical *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Aguilar contacted Leeser to publish her work. He decided to publish *The Spirit of Judaism* through The Jewish Publication Society of America. The first manuscript was lost at sea, so Aguilar rewrote it in its entirety from her notes. Leeser published it in 1842. But Aguilar was unhappy to discover that Leeser had written a preface, as well as notes, pointing out their theological differences. Leeser did not sanction Aguilar's tendency toward religious reform.

³ Ragussis points out that "What had been throughout most of the eighteenth century a steady [. . .] stream of literature on the conversion of the Jews and their restoration to Palestine became nothing short of a torrent in the 1790s" (*Figures of Conversion* 4).

Chapter 3

“Make you a new heart, and a new spirit”: Women, the Rabbis, and the Spirit of Reform

in *The Women of Israel*

While Jewish men criticized Aguilar’s theological writings, Jewish women praised her efforts to affirm women’s spiritual experiences. According to many contemporary Jewish feminist theologians, rabbinical literature does not accord importance to women’s spiritual lives (Hauptman 221). *The Women of Israel* challenges male assumptions about women’s spiritual capacities by illuminating the spiritual equality of men and women. For example, in her Introduction Aguilar claims that men insist their female relatives adhere to Jewish law because women are their spiritual equals: “if [women] have no soul, no portion in the world to come, it surely cannot signify how they act, or what they believe in this.” Similarly, she reasons, women must not be blamed or shunned for intermarrying “if they have no spiritual responsibility, no claim, no part in the law of God” (1: 5). These and many more examples indicate Aguilar’s beliefs about the spiritual equality between the sexes.

Aguilar’s fervent belief in the presence of the spiritual lives of women impacted those Jewish women who responded to her death with a collective letter of appreciation: “You have taught us to know and appreciate our dignity [...] you have vindicated our social and spiritual equality” (qtd. in Kuzmack 15). Jewish women, like men, Aguilar wrote, “have a station to uphold,” and “not alone as daughters, wives, and mothers, but as witnesses of that God who has called them His” (1: 7). Devaluing women’s domestic place in Judaism is not Aguilar’s intention here; rather, she emphasizes that women and

men participate equally in Judaism, and that Jewish women's value extends beyond domestic services, however willingly they provide these services.

Nadia Valman suggests that non-Jewish nineteenth-century literature and culture presented Jewish women as exceptionally spiritual, and consequently, amenable to conversion (1). Conversionists targeted Jewish women because they believed that not only were Jewish women kept ignorant of their own religion (and hence, easy to convince of the truth of Christianity), but Jewish women were degraded by Jewish men and Jewish law. *The Women of Israel* argues that “no law transmitted to us by Moses commanded [women's] degradation” (2: 5). If Jewish women are degraded socially or individually “in the mind of any man bearing the honored name of Jew,” he contradicts the Bible and opposes the spirit of Judaism (2: 5). Aguilar's ability to convince Jewish women of their value in the eyes of God and their honored place in their religion is important at a time when these women were depicted and imagined as oppressed, uneducated, and therefore especially susceptible to the influences of Christianity.

But *The Women of Israel* isn't meant only as a deterrent to Christian conversion. Believing the charge that Judaism oppresses women detracts from the self-esteem of Jewish women. In her Introduction to *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar advances the idea of the Bible as a mirror, and when Jewish women read it, they will see themselves in it. The Bible is “a true and perfect mirror of themselves” (1: 1). The women of the Hebrew Bible are admirable, and by implication, contemporary Jewish women are admirable because, according to Aguilar, we have all inherited the commendable qualities possessed by the matriarchs.

The Bible is the primary foundation for Aguilar's goals to prove the worth of Jewish women to themselves and to vindicate their status in Judaism. Reading the Bible provides emotional support, and the Bible is all that is needed for women to connect with the divine. Jewish women must "look earnestly and believingly into the history of every woman in the Bible, and trace there the influence of God's holy and compassionating love" (*The Women of Israel* 1: 9) and "draw comfort and encouragement and faith from the biographies we read" (1: 10). To simply deny that the Rabbis intended to oppress women or to affirm that Jewish law exalts women is not sufficient: "The women of Israel must themselves arise, and prove the truth of what we urge—by their own conduct, their own belief, their own ever-acting and ever-influencing religion, prove without doubt or question that we need not Christianity to teach us our mission" (1: 6). *The Women of Israel* purports to intellectually and emotionally enlighten Jewish women via Aguilar's elucidation of the Bible's truths in a simple way that will vivify the youthful heart.

Galchinsky calls Aguilar a "religious reformer," pointing out that not only did her readership include both Jews and Christians, but also religious traditionalists and reformers (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 11). *The Women of Israel*—as well as *The Spirit of Judaism*—provides models of women's full participation in Jewish life and learning, while, of course, remaining within their appropriate sphere (16). In consigning the genders to separate spheres, Aguilar constructs a space for women to discover their value, equality with men, and spiritual independence, as well as to experience Judaism and the Bible without any interference, rabbinical or otherwise. Steven Singer points out that "In her writings Aguilar continually placed the Bible on a pedestal of unquestioned authority and simultaneously downgraded the Oral Law as having little importance" ("Jewish

Religious Thought” 189). While Aguilar uses the Bible to achieve her outlined goals, she devalues rabbinical authority and relies on Jewish Reform rhetoric to argue for the spiritual equality of women, a remarkable tactic for a pious and devout Jewish woman, progressive or otherwise.

Haskalah, Anglo-Jewish Identity, and Women in Enlightenment

Historical and critical depictions of the Jewish social world in England often include only assimilated aristocracy, middle-class businessmen, rag merchants, and pickpockets, excluding Jewish intellectuals—observant or secular—and how they constructed the Jewish Enlightenment in England. Jewish intellectuals produced Haskalah, a response to the Enlightenment, and its origins are traced to Germany. Moses Mendelssohn, the son of a Torah scribe from Dessau, worked from the 1750s onward to reevaluate Judaism in accordance with the natural philosophy of non-Jewish Enlightenment thinkers. Proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment on the Continent advanced reforms that altered the framework of traditional Jewish life; consequently, Jewish intellectuals in England both defended and rethought Judaism during the shifting intellectual and political climate of the late eighteenth century (Sutcliffe 10).

In the previous chapter I briefly discussed reason as an Enlightenment value in the context of Hazlitt’s call for the removal of Jewish disabilities. Haskalah, taken from the Hebrew word *sekhel* meaning “reason” or “intellect,” was, like the European Enlightenment, based on rationality. Haskalah adopted Enlightenment values, encouraged Jews to integrate into secular society, and study secular subjects in addition to subjects written in Hebrew. Mendelssohn, who was “supported by distinguished Christian scholars,” exemplified the “new Jew” who was religiously observant but

pursued a secular education and valued reason (Taitz 201). Galchinsky observes Aguilar's efforts on behalf of emancipation and Jewish religious reform, and consequently, positions her as an active participant in the Anglo-Jewish Haskalah (*Grace Aguilar* 14). I am inclined to agree with his assessment, especially given Aguilar's reliance on reason to determine scriptural intent.

Like the established church of her time, Aguilar rejects rabbinic authority. She relies on "the Bible and reason" as a guide for behavior. The Bible and reason are "the only guides to which the child of Israel can look in security. The laws for which we can find no foundation in one, and which will not stand the test of the other [...] are wanderings from the true and only law, the inventions of man and not the words of God" (*The Spirit of Judaism* 228). In fact, Aguilar enlists Mendelssohn's views in her essay "History of the Jews in England," published two years after *The Women of Israel*, by applauding "the boldness with which he had flung aside the trammels of rabbinism, and the prejudices arising from long ages of persecution" (qtd. in Valman 94). Aguilar desires to return to a "pure" version of Judaism by relying on the Bible alone; furthermore, Aguilar argues that women possess reason, which is all they need to access God. Enlightenment emphasis on reason allows Aguilar to create a way for women to independently interpret the Bible.

While many *maskilim*—adherents of the Haskalah—defended Judaism, not all Anglo-Jewish intellectuals could reconcile the makeup of traditional Judaism with their Enlightenment ideals. For example, Isaac D'Israeli explicitly articulated his reasons for disassociating himself from London's Jewish community, which he found too rigid and controlling. The autocratic attitude of the Elders of Bevis Marks drove D'Israeli from the

synagogue and from Judaism. In 1813 D'Israeli declined the appointed position of *Mahamad*, incurred a fine as the result of his refusal, and neglected to pay the fine imposed upon him by the Elders. Four years later he withdrew from the Jewish community and had his children baptized (Kershen 7).

Of course, not all *maskilim* turned apostate. Many Anglo-Jewish intellectuals and proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment endeavored to balance respect for Jewish tradition with the change in political and intellectual atmosphere. Aguilar obviously remained devoted to Judaism, albeit working for Jews' internal religious reform and adopting Evangelical rhetoric. As explored in the previous chapter, Aguilar used her theological writings to advance arguments for prayers spoken, prayer books written, and sermons delivered in English. Hyman Hurwitz, whom David Ruderman refers to as an Enlightenment thinker, realized the practical value of the English language soon after immigrating to England. According to Leonard Hyman, Hurwitz was "undoubtedly a pious and observant Jew, though not unaffected by the liberalising processes which were very much in the air" ("Hyman Hurwitz" 234). D'Israeli, Hurwitz, Aguilar, and other Jews who lived and wrote in England during the heyday of the Jewish Enlightenment expressed their Jewish identities through an encounter with English intellectual and religious currents of the period (Ruderman 3). The *maskilim* sought to assimilate into European societies via language, and these writers contributed to Jewish thought in English terms.

Unlike Germany, England allowed its Jewish minority a relatively higher degree of social integration than anywhere else in Europe. Many professional, educational, and social barriers had nearly disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century despite the

failure of the Jewish Naturalization Bill. While public hostility towards both the Jewish upper and lower classes continued, all classes of English Jews began to assimilate linguistically (Ruderman 7). The process of translating religious texts into English and composing new texts in the language contributed significantly to the development of Anglo-Jewish intellectual life. English Jews during this period were increasingly native born, and recognized the need for approaching the literary sources of their culture in English. With the relative decline of Hebrew and Yiddish as spoken and written languages for the Jews, Anglo-Jews became virtually monolingual (6). By the end of the eighteenth century, most English Jews thought about their identity almost entirely in English terms. The brand of Haskalah experienced by Anglo-Jews was uniquely English. Anglo-Jews defined their religious and cultural identity within an English language frame of reference (7).

According to Galchinsky, the roles played by women in the Anglo-Jewish Haskalah markedly differentiated it from the version experienced in Germany and elsewhere on the Continent. Victorian Jewish women were the most important public spokespersons for English Jewry's emancipation and reform (Galchinsky, "Engendering" 208). The Anglo-Jewish Haskalah occasioned "the emergence of the Jewish woman into modern cultural history." Their works argue for women's emancipation in the Jewish world—increasing women's education and communal participation—and influenced American, German, and French Jews (209). But aside from their writings, the very image of Jewish women marked the enlightened—or unenlightened—state of English and European Jewry.

The *Jewish Chronicle* viewed the publication of *The Women of Israel* as a step toward the improvement of Anglo-Jewish culture, essentially as an Enlightenment act. *Women* would, according to the *Chronicle*'s review, develop respectability and refinement in Jewish readers (Valman 91). The Enlightenment, Paula Hyman claims, advanced the status of women in Judaism as an issue for debate by Jewish leaders who asserted that Jews constituted part of civilized European society:

For opponents of the conferral of civic rights on Jews, the treatment of women within Jewish tradition demonstrated that Jews remained "Orientals," perpetually other to European society. When German-Jewish reformers addressed the "woman question" at the 1844 Braunschweig conference and suggested some changes in women's status in marriage and divorce, their report reflected not a nascent feminist sensibility but a concern for establishing their claim to Western norms of civilization. Similarly, rabbis, journalists, and writers produced apologetic articles and books asserting that the position of women had always been higher among Jews than among their neighbors, whether in biblical Israel or in medieval Jewish communities under both Christian and Muslim rule. ("Gender" 155)

Hyman points out that Aguilar "trumpeted" the high status of women in Judaism in a way that suggests Hyman hardly views Aguilar as a proper feminist. Rather, Hyman interprets Aguilar as a woman who toed the Orthodox line. While Aguilar does, in *The Women of Israel*, illuminate what she sees as the esteem of women in Judaism (and women's esteem by the Bible, more significantly), at the same time, Aguilar did stress the need for reform in the Jewish world.

For the outside world, the status of Jewish women in Jewish tradition, as well as Jewish women's behavior, marked whether or not Jews had managed to become "respectable" and "refined," to use the words of the *Jewish Chronicle*'s review. *Maskilim* realized that "how Jewish women comported themselves was a central marker of the successful adaptation of Jews to bourgeois culture" (Hyman, "Gender" 155). Nineteenth-

century Jewish leaders who aspired to middle-class status and privilege commented on women's behavior, which was to reflect their part as "creators of a peaceful and decorous home and as transmitters of morality and domestic Judaism" (Hyman, "Gender" 155). As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Aguilar performed this part perfectly, and encouraged all other Jewish women to emulate her proposed standards of behavior, earning her the title "moral governess of the Hebrew family" from the Ladies of the Society for the Religious Instruction at her death ("American Women").

The Enlightenment(s) forced Jews to endeavor to solve the question of how to leave behind medieval Judaism while remaining Jewish in the modern world. Enlightenment thought prompted nineteenth-century attempts at religious reform (Singer, "Jewish Religious Thought" 182). The divisions that existed within the established mid-Victorian Anglo-Jewish community were the results of Jews' "coming to terms with the demands of the modern, industrializing world and its religious questioning" (Kershen xiii). Aguilar confronts modernity with her unique blend of theological positions, most of which were inspired by the various political and social currents of the early nineteenth century. Nadia Valman disputes Michael Galchinsky's assertion that Aguilar participated in the Haskalah with the claim that Aguilar's writing was more significantly inspired by the Evangelical Revival (95). But Ruderman points out that in England, unlike any other European state, Jewish Enlightenment thought was actually inspired by English Evangelicalism, as Christian religious figures comprised much of the voices of the standard Enlightenment in England. Ruderman also suggests that Jewish Enlightenments followed the patterns of their country's Enlightenments. Both influences are evident in her work, and both contribute to Aguilar's unique theology. I have explored Aguilar's

emulation of Victorian thought, and I will further explore Aguilar's Evangelical influences. I have also explored how Aguilar was influenced by emancipation attempts, Enlightenment, and as we shall see, Reform Jewish ideology. Enlightenment ideals and Reform Jewish and Protestant theologies contribute significantly to Aguilar's views on the religious spirit of the individual.

Aguilar and the London Reform Movement

The Spirit of Judaism and *The Women of Israel* argue for reforms in Jewish religious belief and practice. In addition to her radical arguments for prayers in English—a concept condemned in 1845 by the *Jewish Chronicle*, the “leading progressive voice in the Jewish community” (Singer, “Jewish Religious Thought” 188)—Aguilar recommended changes specifically where women and girls were concerned. For example, she “opposed the traditional physical separation of men and women in the synagogue and suggested that girls receive as comprehensive a religious education as boys” (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 14).

Ascribing a label to Aguilar's religious identification is complicated by her unconventional theology. Like most reform-minded Jews of the early to mid nineteenth century, Aguilar was nominally Orthodox, and some critics consider her completely traditional in both practice and belief. How, then, can I justify the claim that Aguilar, ostensibly Orthodox, ideologically affiliated with nineteenth-century English Reform Judaism? The answer might lie in the fact that English Reform's development remained closer to Orthodox practices than did Reform Judaism on the Continent or in America. A nominally Orthodox English Jew with Reform leanings is not as contradictory as one might assume. British Reformers “did not advocate the acceptance of Reform Judaism as

a result of their own lack of conformity to tradition” (Singer, “Jewish Religious Thought” 185). For example, Aguilar encourages wearing phylacteries and fringes and refusing non-kosher food, and these positions align with the British Reform acceptance of the Bible’s ceremonial laws. But my claim is also supported by Aguilar’s clear absorption of Evangelical discourse, which also influenced the early Reform movement.

No existing evidence indicates that Aguilar had any connection to the London Reformers. But she maintained several theological positions that distance her from Orthodox tradition. While Reform Judaism does not emphasize Talmudic study and Aguilar herself—as pointed out in the previous chapter—assigns little importance to rabbinic literature, she condemns the traditional practice of discouraging women from studying Talmud. In addition to Aguilar’s belief that prayer books, the Bible, and the Talmud should be printed in English, her ideology perfectly aligns with that of the British Reformers in her rejection of the Talmud as divinely inspired.

Steven Singer argues that London’s nineteenth-century Jewish community consisted of two groups of Jews: traditionalists—adherents to classical Orthodoxy—and progressives. The latter faction were ostensibly Orthodox Jews who had developed an original view of Jewish belief and practice unique to the early nineteenth-century London community. Singer points out that the progressives “accepted all the biblical laws as divine and binding while rejecting the entire interpretative body of rabbinic tradition embodied in the Talmud” (“Jewish Religious Thought” 187-188). For Aguilar, the Bible is an unquestioned authority, and a refrain throughout her work is that Jews must accept the entire Bible, or none. Generally she devalues rabbinic literature, but interestingly enough, Aguilar reveres the Talmud when it suits her purpose.

The progressives' rejection of the Oral Law and rabbinic tradition—a stance also taken by the Reformers—caused their eventual break with Orthodoxy (“Jewish Religious Thought” 188). Singer distinguishes between progressives and the early Reformers and calls Aguilar a progressive, citing her father’s participation at Bevis Marks as evidence for this claim. But Singer also asserts that “the London Reformers espoused a view of Judaism that was basically identical with that of the progressives” (193). It seems to me there is little point in labeling Aguilar in one way and denying the possibility of the other when the ideologies are so similar. At times, Aguilar exactly articulates comments made by the early Reformers. I trace Aguilar’s Reform leanings in order to demonstrate how radical the famous Jewish “Angel in the House” can be.

In 1840 nineteen Sephardim and five Ashkenazim dissatisfied with traditional religious observance founded the West London Synagogue of British Jews (Kershen 3). Like the emancipation of the Jews in 1858, the establishment of the first Reform synagogue in Great Britain traces its genesis to the late eighteenth century, during which time “[d]emands for religious change and the increase in religious apathy were manifest in [both] synagogue and church” (6). Some Jews tried to maintain a balance between assuming English cultural norms and adhering to Jewish religious law, while others grew lax in religious observance or simply became apostate (6). Ritual reform and a West End location comprised the early demands of the would-be Reformers. Jacob Mocatta recognized the changing structure of the Anglo-Jewish community, and as early as 1803, requested the Sephardic synagogue replace the Portuguese vernacular with English and examine the educational role of the synagogue, but little changed (7).

In 1842, at the consecration of the first Reform synagogue, D'Israeli supposedly remarked that he would have remained Jewish had Reform existed during his period of disagreement with Bevis Marks (Kershen 8). During the early nineteenth century, some Anglo-Jews questioned the relevance of rabbinic tradition in the modern world, and the very public denial of the Oral Law appealed to D'Israeli's anti-rabbinism (8). Kershen emphasizes the influences of Protestant Christianity on Reform Judaism:

In the 1830s, as the differences between the traditionalists and the reformers were heightening, and the Protestant Church, most particularly evangelicals, was articulating both its belief in the authority of the Bible and its criticisms of the rabbinic laws. The influence of Protestant bibliocentricity cannot be ignored in the origins of Reform Judaism in Britain. (8)

Aguilar rejects and challenges the authenticity of the rabbinical legal code, which was during her lifetime under severe attack from Evangelicals. For Evangelicals, "rabbinism" reflected distrust of the mediation of God's word, and represented interference between the individual and the Scriptures (Valman 94). Aguilar repeatedly insists that no Jew, specifically the Jewish woman, needs mediation between herself and the Word of God. Women, as well as children, are capable of interpreting the Bible without aid.

Although there is no evidence directly linking Aguilar to the Reform movement, she associated with Reform sympathizers. Moses Mocatta, one of the founders of Reform in England and a member of an eminent Anglo-Jewish family, patronized Aguilar's writing. Kershen calls Aguilar a "progressive writer" whose "novels projected the liberal view of the English Jew." Both Moses Mocatta and fellow Reform Founder Horatio Montefiore—brother of Sir Moses—believed that the practice of Judaism should be *understood* as well as followed, one of the exact arguments advanced by Aguilar in *Spirit*. For this reason, Mocatta and Montefiore encouraged Morris Raphall and David de

Sola¹ to translate the Mishnah into English (Kershen 10). Aguilar relied on Raphall and de Sola's various translations in the writing of *Women*.

Not only did Aguilar associate with the Founders of Reform in England, but her rhetoric exactly emulates theirs, especially concerning the purity of Mosaic Law versus the “polluted” history of rabbinic interpretation. Debates over the relevance and divinity of the Talmud took place during the early 1840s when Aguilar was writing and publishing both *The Spirit of Judaism* and *The Women of Israel*. In 1842 John Simon “wrote a pamphlet in which he argued that the perfection of the Written Law negated any need for the Oral Law” (Kershen 15). Simon insisted that the Oral Law could not be divine since it often contradicts the Written Law. David Woolf Marks, a teacher from Simon's youth, “attributed his introduction to Reform Judaism and his initial doubts as to the immutability of the Oral Law to his discussions on this subject with the young John Simon” (Kershen 16).

In an 1840 letter to Simon, Marks, who would later become the first rabbi of the West London Synagogue, wrote that Jews can never free themselves of anti-Jewish accusations and insults—such as the pejorative term “Pharisaic”—until all Jews “throw off all the trammels of the Rabbins and stands boldly forward, clothed in all the native purity and pristine majesty of the eternal Law of Moses” (qtd. in Apple). Marks echoes Aguilar's hostility toward the “trammels of tradition,” reflecting the dissatisfaction with rabbinic Judaism felt by many mid-century Jewish women *and* men. During a meeting at the Bedford Hotel in Southampton Row on April 15, 1840, the Reformers decided to “form a United Congregation under the denomination of British Jews” (qtd. in Apple),

echoing Aguilar's hopes that Jews will cease to make distinctions between "German" and "Portuguese" in favor of being "English."

The Orthodox establishment criticized the creation of a Reform synagogue on the grounds that the Reformers' proposed changes in liturgy and practice reflected Protestant influence. For example, the *Voice of Jacob* proclaimed that the Reformers intended to establish a synagogue "on principles opposed to our laws and customs," viewing West London as the "Progress of London Jews Towards Christianity" (qtd. in Apple). If Reform in the Jewish world inevitably leads to the embrace of Christianity, it should come as no surprise that so many have criticized Aguilar for her so-called "Jewish Protestantism." Proselytizers saw the "light" of the gospels in her work, and Jewish traditionalists who objected to her individualistic approach to biblical interpretation used her practice of attending church against her, claiming that she was not "authentically" Jewish (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 19).

In 1847 a review of *The Spirit of Judaism* appeared in *The Jewish Herald and Record of Christian Effort for the Spiritual Good of God's Ancient People*, a periodical published by the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews. The reviewer establishes a connection between Jews and Christians by positioning Aguilar as "the champion of that religion which all true Christians revere as of Divine origin"; however, Aguilar lacks the sight of "true Christians" who view Judaism as "developed, and perfected, and, in a measure, superseded by that nobler manifestation of his character, and that fuller revelation of his will, which he has given to us in the Gospel of his Son" (29). But "the champions of Judaism" are nevertheless "the champions of Christianity" since "every attempt to prove the divinity of the former tends to confirm the

divinity of the latter” (29). Aguilar and other “Jewish advocates of Christianity” are, of course, unaware of their advocacy, which, according to the reviewer, makes their advocacy of Christianity “all the more powerful on that account” (29).

Like the reviewer from *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register*, the *Jewish Herald*'s reviewer sees Christian influences in *The Spirit of Judaism*. “Some of the peculiar turns of thought and modes of expression,” he writes, “are Christian to the very core,” and the reviewer doubts that Aguilar could have “produced such a work had she not been preceded by Christian writers” (39). While Aguilar wrote her theological work, especially *The Women of Israel*, in response to the works of Christian women writers, it stands to reason that she could have produced both *Spirit* and *Women* without emulating Christian writers since that which Christian reviewers often understand to be Evangelical theology is strikingly similar to the theology of the London Reformers.

Kershner argues that the English Protestant bibliocentricity found in the origins of Reform Judaism in London and mediated through upper-class Anglo-Jewry proved much more influential on the first Reformers than did any Jewish religious thought from abroad (22-3). The reformers “doubtless considered the criticisms of ‘rabbinitism’ that were directed at Judaism, most specifically from evangelical sources, and were very much aware of the current debates about the powers of church and state and thus about citizenship” (27). David Feldman, in *Englishmen and Jews*, similarly argues that the Evangelicals’ charge of “rabbinitism” was a major factor in the birth of Reform Judaism in England, making Aguilar’s Evangelicalism and Reformist leanings less contradictory than supposed.

In *The Spirit of Judaism*, Aguilar explains that questions of the Oral Law's relevance were "agitating the whole Jewish nation" during the 1830s and 40s (31). The London Reformers formally denied the divinity of the Oral Law during the consecration of the West London Synagogue on 27 January, 1842 (Kershen 18). Marks believed that both Mishnah and Talmud are human compositions, and in a sermon delivered at the consecration, Marks clarified his views. Aguilar denies the divinity of the Oral Law in *The Women of Israel*, using her familiar term "forms" to describe rabbinic practice: "Let us first consider the origin and real intent of these most venerable and often falsely abused forms. Divine, they are not." Aguilar reasons that there are "comparatively but few now, who will place them, in point of divinity and dignity, with the written oracles of God" since "the same honor and reverence" is not paid to them (2: 414).

Marks argued that the Oral Law is not immutable or binding like Mosaic Law, and may be changed. Aguilar articulates this exact position in Volume II of *The Women of Israel*:

Circumstances might demand the modification, even the alteration, of some of these Rabbinical statutes; and could their wise and pious originators have been consulted on the subject, they would have unhesitatingly adopted those measures most likely to advance and aid spiritual improvement, even if to do so demanded a modification of some of their previously instituted statutes. We have but to glance over the life and writings of the great Maimonides to prove this assertion. (2: 416)

The Rabbis, she argues, "never preached or intended that their ordinances were to be considered divine or perpetual." Their intent was "to preserve the purity, the spiritual purity, of the Law unsullied" not to create documents that would "take its place and be considered in the same unalterable and changeless light with which we look on the law of God" (2: 416). Marks "described how Hebrew ritual and prayer had undergone many

changes and how some items previously considered ‘genuine remnants of our ancient temple worship’ were in fact the outcome of later persecutions and suffering ‘now fast disappearing’” (Kershen 18). Like Marks, Aguilar values the preservation of the “purity” of the Written Law, and similarly blames the persecution of Jews for any degrading or outdated modes of Jewish practice.

During the 1830s and 40s, reform-minded Jews argued that the Oral Law, or the commentaries contained in the Mishnah and Talmud, could be set aside in favor of the Bible, and Aguilar’s works take sides in favor of reform (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 27). Aguilar argues that women need not rely on Christianity, rabbinic tradition, or men for interpretations of the sacred scriptures. So long as women follow their own reason, and are properly educated so they won’t misuse that reason, they will not misinterpret the Bible or violate divine precepts (211). For Aguilar, Reform ideas that the Talmud is the production of fallible human beings, and thus, is not sacred, allows women to forge a closer relationship with Judaism via its central text. If the Talmud is not divine and should not be consulted above the Bible, then rabbinical ordinances governing what women can and cannot learn are not applicable.

Women and the Talmud

Aguilar and other Jewish women writers of the nineteenth century wrote liturgy and theology that addressed the spiritual needs of women. According to Galchinsky, many male leaders in the religious world acknowledged Aguilar’s intelligence, but found this difficult to reconcile with their assumptions about women’s intellectual capacities (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 38). These men appreciated Aguilar’s efforts to provide women with spiritual models, but believed her theology and liturgy transgressed on

genres that men, with the appropriate experience and training, were better equipped to handle (39). For example, Jacob Franklin's review of *The Spirit of Judaism* for the *Voice of Jacob* evinces skepticism concerning Aguilar's ability to write using traditional Jewish forms.

The Women of Israel includes essays on modern subjects, but mostly consists of biographical midrashim. "Midrash" is the generic term for the collection of interpretations of specific biblical books that was compiled over several centuries and includes some content in common with the Mishnah and Talmud (Wegner 74). But "midrash" also refers to a method of biblical exegesis. Aguilar wrote *The Women of Israel* within the genre of midrash aggadah, which had developed almost 2000 years before as a way for Jewish writers to interpret the Bible. Writers of midrash retold stories in order to answer for gaps in the biblical text, gaps which they would fill in with details taken from Jewish oral tradition or their own imaginations. Through rewriting the text, these writers interpreted the text. Aguilar retells and interprets biblical stories in emulation of these and other writers of midrashim, including her contemporary, Raphall. In addition to his translation work with de Sola, Raphall translated ancient midrashim into English. Throughout the translation process, Raphall altered these stories and published them in his periodical *The Hebrew Review and Magazine of Rabbinical Literature* (1834-36) (Galchinsky, *Grace Aguilar* 58).

A main purport of Aguilar's collection of midrashic biographies contained within *The Women of Israel* includes countering Christian contentions that Judaism oppresses women. In addition to the Bible, Aguilar makes use of a text that nineteenth-century Christians as well as contemporary feminist scholarship claim contributes to the

degradation of Jewish women—the Talmud—to, ironically, counter accusations of oppression. While she does not retract her belief in the non-divinity of the Talmud, she does defend it against charges that its laws are responsible for the oppression of women in Judaism. She is almost hesitant to even discuss the subject which had, by this point, contributed to the schism within London’s Jewish community, but admits that a discussion of the Talmud is “of real importance to the confirmation of our asserted point, the perfect freedom and equality of the Hebrew female” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 413).

This slight discrepancy in Aguilar’s attitude toward “tradition” from 1842 to 1845 causes me to question whether or not she realized that rabbinic tradition actually allowed her to experiment with forms like midrash. She calls the Rabbis “venerable sages,” but clearly rejects the idea that one can only understand Judaism through the framework of rabbinic commentary. Throughout her work, Aguilar never changes her stance on the Bible, which is, for her, a self-evident document requiring no explanation that clearly preaches “perfect equality” between the sexes. The Bible is Divine. The Talmud is human-authored, and thus, corruptible.

The classical rabbinic texts include the Mishnah—a compilation of legal rulings organized by subject matter into six major divisions, called “orders”—Tosefta, Talmud, and Midrash collections. Aguilar defines the rabbinic texts as emanations of “the minor ordinance and learned explanations of the written word, which were afterwards collected and compiled under the different names of Gemara, Mishna, and, later, the Talmud” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 410), which demonstrates that she had knowledge of the workings of the texts. The Gemara, produced in the rabbinic academies of Iraq, combined with the Mishnah to form the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud, known as the Bavli,

is commentary on the Mishnah, and was produced in Babylonia from about 200 until 750 Common Era (Hauptman 8).

Rabbinic Judaism is the basis for all contemporary forms of Jewish religious practice.² Its interpreters and expositors were men who imagined an ideal human society that was oriented toward their sex. Rabbinic literature generally lacks female voices. Their exceptional inclusion is, according to Judith Baskin, “usually mediated through the male assumption that women differ from men in intellectual, spiritual, and social capacities, as well as legal obligations and status” (Baskin 19). Rabbinic statements about the nature and role of women do not provide an objective view of women’s history. Comments about women contained in the Mishnaic and Talmudic texts offer an androcentric vision of women from the perspective of the male framers and interpreters (Wegner 74).

Because many different men compiled these texts, their images of women vary, and even appear polarized. Rabbinic literature portrays women as both subservient to men and as “beings of independent value and substance” (Hauptman 2). The rabbinic portrayal of women’s place in the life of Israel evinces a system in which women’s cultural image, social function, and legal status combined to perpetuate the patriarchal norms that governed Jewish society (Wegner 73). In her work on the rabbis, Judith Hauptman neither vindicates nor condemns their comments on women. She writes that “the rabbis upheld patriarchy as the preordained mode of social organization, as dictated by the Torah,” and that they perpetuated women’s second-class, subordinate status. They did not seek for or achieve equality for women. However, Hauptman argues that, when assessing the portrayal of women by the rabbis, it is of critical importance to recognize

that they began “to introduce numerous, significant, and occasionally bold corrective measures to ameliorate the lot of women” (Hauptman 4).

Aguilar attempts to vindicate the rabbis, but her ambivalence on this subject is clear. Though she claims to avoid it because of “the opposition and wilful misconception which it is likely to produce,” her reluctance to deal with the images of women in the Mishnaic and Talmudic texts implies that she may recognize some truth in the accusations “amongst the Gentiles, and we fear amongst some few of ourselves, that it is the Talmud which, promoting the spirit of Mosaic law, authorizes, nay commands, the degradation and enslaving of the Jewish female” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 413-14). While Aguilar elsewhere admits that Jewish history does not boast a spotless record in regards to the treatment of Jewish women, she here rejects the aforementioned accusations since they mostly come from “zealous conversionists who bring forward, as translations from the Talmud, detached verses and portions, which appear to strongly to support their assertion, as to prevent all reply” (2: 414).

Aguilar’s vindication of the Talmud rests on the position that “much which is called the Talmud,” or ideas and laws attributed to “its original venerable compilers,” are “the speculations, inquiries, and even ordinance of much later writers, whose opinions were no doubt often biased (though unconsciously) by the habits and customs of their own darkened age” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 414) This daughter of Sephardic immigrants, who, as a girl, listened to her father’s tales of Jewish persecution in Spanish lands, blames this “darkened age” for anything questionable found in Jewish literature, practice, or belief. But that she feels the need to visit the Talmudic texts themselves implies the recognition on her part that all is not so simply concluded. Aguilar recognizes, as

Hauptman does, that the Talmud is not “an arcane body of ancient texts,” nor is it simply the record of past communities’ beliefs. Hauptman points out that “the rabbis’ literary and legal legacy rests at the foundation of Judaism as it is practiced today” (3) and anyone who desires to assess or defend the status of women in Judaism must confront this reality.

Spirituality and the Private and Public Realms

The Mishnah depicts a society with a strong sense of separation between public and private arenas of activity. Men occupy the public (sacred) space, and women spend their lives in the domestic realm (Wegner 81). According to Wegner, Baskin, and Hauptman, the Mishnah generally accords autonomy to women in the private realm, or as Wegner says, “in private transactions generally, the law treats women unequivocally as persons” (77). The rabbis, like Aguilar and the Victorians, assigned domestic roles to women. Wives are to provide for their husband’s needs, nurture children, and participate in family-based economic endeavors (Baskin 22). The Mishnah reflects “considerable honor and respect for the spouse who fulfills her domestic roles” (Baskin 23). In *The Women of Israel*, the happiest biblical characters are those who fulfill and take pleasure in their domestic duties. Leah, for example, finds fulfillment in a mother’s duties.

For Aguilar, the clear division of characteristics and duties valued in rabbinic literature and Victorian culture is not intended to degrade women. Aguilar’s Eve recognizes Adam’s God-given authority, and Aguilar writes that “Nor would this acknowledgement tend to degrade woman in the scale of creation” (*The Women of Israel* 1: 16-7). Adam and Eve were created “separate but equal”: “Formed, like man, in the immortal likeness of the Lord, she was his equal in his responsibilities towards God and

in the care of his creatures; endowed *equally* with man, but *differently* as to the nature of those endowments. His mission was to protect and guide and have dominion—hers to soothe, bless, persuade to right, and ‘help’ in all things ‘meet’ for immortal beings” (1: 17). This type of equality in marriage is also evident in Aguilar’s depiction of Abraham and Sarah. Classical Judaism assigns domestic roles to women, and Aguilar intends to show Christians how the two cultures are alike in that respect.

Mishnaic rules governing women in the public domain differ from those governing women in private. According to Judith Baskin, the Mishnah systematically excludes women from the life of the mind and spirit. That life belongs solely to men because intellectual and spiritual activity takes place in the public space (Baskin 22). Generally, the rabbis excluded women from participation in religious obligations such as communal prayer and study, and placed them in home-based roles. Women have been arbitrarily exempted from the performance of “time-contingent positive precepts” (M. Qid. 1:7), including the recitation of specified prayers (M. Ber. 3:3). Some rabbis even objected to women’s studying Torah (M. Sot. 3:4). Women are barred from leadership roles in synagogue, study house, and courthouse. According to Wegner, this “array of devices deprives women of the most intellectually and spiritually rewarding practices of traditional Judaism, which were also the most prestigious enterprises of rabbinic culture” (80). Rabbinic Judaism views public sacred space as male space. Women are not its natural occupants.

Rabbinic law does not require women to attend regular synagogue services because they were not obligated to perform time-bound religious tasks (Kuzmack 4). Judith Cohen Montefiore became a role model for Jewish women who wanted a public

presence (7). Not only did she represent the ideal nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish woman—devoted to her husband, the renowned Jewish philanthropist and diplomat Moses Montefiore, to God, and to duty—but she regularly attended synagogue services. Linda Kuzmack points out that while historically some Jewish women have always attended services, few attended with the regularity of Lady Montefiore since “tradition told women their family duties did not require regular worship, confined them to separate section and forbade them to take part in synagogue management” (9). Many Jewish women emulated the example of Christian women who had increasingly been attending worship services. Interestingly enough, Jewish women like Judith Montefiore emulated Christian women who were spurred by the same Evangelical revival that demanded the conversion of the Jews. Lady Montefiore’s male family members tried to keep her at home, claiming Jewish tradition decreed that it was not essential for women to attend synagogue services (9).

Aguilar does not object to the division of gendered spaces. She even finds a way to defend the practice of seating women in a gallery separated from the men—and thus, separated from the public space—a practice questioned by Amy Meyrick, “who was much of a practical reformer,” in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*: “Excuse me, Mirah, but *does* it seem quite right to you that the women should sit behind rails in a gallery apart?” Mirah responds that she had “never thought of anything else” (317). For Aguilar, the galleries are intended to benefit “the Hebrew females, that they too might partake the spiritual instruction and privileges offered to their brethren” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 410).

Obviously Aguilar’s publishing career transgresses women’s “exemption” from participating in Jewish intellectual life. She draws no attention to her own public activity,

nor does she encourage women to follow her example in this respect. But the traditional denial of the importance of women's spiritual lives presents a problem for Aguilar. She fervently argues for the presence of women's spiritual lives. Aguilar's body of work is a refutation of claims advanced by Jewish men like Abraham Benisch that women are simply uninterested in spiritual matters

Unlike Judith Montefiore, Aguilar did not actively seek a public religious life. At least, her work does not betray any such desire. However, she did seek educational opportunities for women. Among many other ends, *The Women of Israel* seeks to increase Jewish women's appreciation for and knowledge of the Hebrew Bible (Ashton 80). Her knowledge of Judaism was not comparable to that of an educated male, but she had been taught the Jewish religion and the Hebrew language, and in her youth, she helped her mother run a girl's school to support the family (Taitz 204). In fact, Aguilar seems remarkably well-educated in religion. She had familiarized herself with a Hebrew-English Bible translation, *The Sacred Scriptures, Hebrew and English*, which was begun by de Sola and Raphall in 1844, and used it in the writing of *Women*. Furthermore, *The Women of Israel* indicates that Aguilar knew the work of Josephus, and references to Rashi appear in the text. Additionally, Aguilar provides her own translations of Hebrew throughout *Women* and *Spirit*.

But the extent to which women should be educated in religion was a topic for debate in the Jewish community. Galchinsky relays a compromise within the community: "If men would attempt to provide greater female education and other reforms in the community, women would agree to restrict their activities to the domestic sphere and charitable work" ("Engendering" 214). Benisch and other Jewish men, reformers and

traditionalists alike, promoted increased education for women and greater access for women to communal entitlements. At the same time “the idea of educating women like men might mean merging the spheres that separated the genders” (214).

Aguilar, always managing to appeal to multiple sides of any issue, quells this fear by safely positioning women in domestic roles. “Increased education for women” means women will use education for the fulfillment of their own individual spiritual needs, as well as for the education of children. According to Aguilar, “the ancient fathers looked on ‘Woman’s mission’ to be principally the education of her family, an idea borne out by the whole history of the Jews, in the particular mention of the mothers of kings, and other exalted persons” (*The Women of Israel 2: 425*). By claiming that the rabbis supported women as the primary educators of children, she allows the Talmud to factor into her domestic ideology. As I have previously stated, Aguilar writes that a woman’s natural place is in the home. Woman does not feel whole without a home. Women take pleasure in accomplishing domestic duties, and for Aguilar, education is a domestic duty.

Jewish activity revolves around public prayer and textual study. These activities are performed communally by men. Even though Orthodox Jewish women today are enrolled in Jewish schools, many are not allowed to study Talmud (Hauptman 221). In order to “ascertain whether or not our venerable sages so completely contradicted the spirit of the law of Moses, as to hint, countenance, or ordain the degradation of the Hebrew female” (*The Women of Israel 2: 421*), Aguilar must rely on extraneous sources for her discussion of the Talmud. “The Talmud itself should be [her endeavor’s] foundation,” but it cannot be, since she “as a female, [is] unhappily debarred” (2: 421) from studying. Despite this complaint, Aguilar endeavors to defend the Talmud against

Christians who would use it as a weapon again women in their conversionist activities. She looks at rabbinical maxims which she has transcribed with the help of a friend “whose sound knowledge of the Hebrew, both Biblical and Talmudical, and deep research, render his information on the subject indeed invaluable” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 421). She also refers to *The Hebrew Review, and Magazine of Rabbinical Literature*, edited by Raphall from October, 1834-March, 1835, as a source of aid.

From these extracted passages, Aguilar concludes that “instead of contradicting, every statute given by Moses relative to mothers, wives, daughters, and maid servants in Israel, is *confirmed* by the Talmudic precepts” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 294). In a remarkable near reversal of her stance in *Spirit*, she continues that these precepts are “so simplified, that it is impossible even for wilful misconception to mistake their meaning” (2: 428). Aguilar acknowledges that the rabbis may appear to contradict one another in places, but that their writings are in keeping with the spirit of the Bible as she sees it:

We *know* that they must have been written by men well versed, not only in the ordinances but in the *spirit* of the law written by Moses, simply because of their exact accordance; that at the time such precepts were collected and written, the social or domestic position of woman *could not* have been the degraded and frivolous one assigned in general to the females of the East. That the Talmud *must* have regarded them as companions and friends of their husbands—educators of their children—mistresses of their household [. . .]” (2: 428-29)

Here, the Talmud, in addition to the Bible, supports Aguilar’s domestic perspective. Jewish women are educated and sensitive, not “degraded and frivolous,” and they perform their domestic duties happily.

Aguilar uses two primary examples to support her claim that women are not degraded by Talmudic precepts. Firstly, she remarks that if one simply took the time to look at the “portions in our Talmud apparently derogatory to women,” those “on which

our opponents argue most eloquently,” one will find that these passages actually “have nothing to do with the contempt towards females with which they are charged” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 430-31). Her example is a justification for the decree that women are incompetent as witnesses in a public trial (M. Shebu. 4:1). The Mishnah permits women to bring and defend lawsuits since lawsuits are considered transactions between *private* parties. But it denies them the right to testify personally in the public courthouse since the courthouse—like the synagogue or study house—is a *public* space (Wegner 88-9). Aguilar justifies this prohibition by claiming that the rabbis were considering women’s sensitive nature in their ruling, a “forcible proof of the care taken in the Talmud to preserve her feminine nature in all its original gentleness and purity, even if the restriction should be thought a harsh one” (2: 432). Allowing men to plead cases in place of the female complainant is the Talmud’s way of ensuring the preservation of valued feminine qualities.

Aguilar’s second example is the presence of Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir. Beruriah is the unique woman scholar mentioned in several places by the Talmud (B. Ber. 10a; ‘Eruv. 53b-54a; B. Pes. 62b). Rabbi Meir figures prominently in the Mishnah, but Beruriah is nowhere mentioned there. Wegner points out that her existence, like that of other women named in the Talmud, cannot be corroborated, and may be “a figment of the Talmudic imagination.” Wegner questions the literary purpose of Beruriah, the “sole Talmudic instance of a woman well versed in both written and oral law, who learned three hundred halakhot from three hundred scholars in a single day” (81). Is she meant demonstrate that women can study Torah, or is she an example of why they cannot?

Aguilar uses Beruriah as evidence to support how highly the Talmud values women. Since Beruriah studied Torah, so too can modern Jewish women:

She not only understood the written word, but left three hundred traditions, and is placed amongst the Tanaites, or expositors of the Mishna. Now, how could such an assurance be found in the Talmud, if religious knowledge and opportunities of deep and severe study were, either by a law of the state or public opinion, denied to woman? It is folly to suppose it, even for a moment” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 435).

Aguilar again invokes persecution as the source of Jewish women’s prohibitions:

If some *modern* Jewish opinions, concerning the impossibility of woman comprehending the Law, or the presumption and folly of her attempting to make religion her study, had had existence then, why poor Beruria might have shared the fate of some of the hapless learned of the middle ages, who were persecuted and burned, simply because their minds out stripped their age. (2: 435)

Indeed, by medieval times Beruriah had come to symbolize the folly of permitting women access to sacred learning (Wegner 81), but Aguilar insists that “the memorable chroniclers of Beruria knew too well both the position and the capabilities of their countrywomen to refuse their appreciation and reverence when called upon to give them” (2: 435-36). Aguilar explains that the rabbis valued Beruriah’s “essentially feminine” character and that their apologies mentioning her demonstrate “how completely they believed in the perfect compatibility of learning with every womanly feeling and attribute” (2: 436). Here, learning becomes an essentially feminine quality. Beruriah seems to be an anomaly among women referenced in the Talmud, but Aguilar enlists her, quite convincingly, in defense of the Talmud.

Conclusion

The Haskalah served as the conduit for early nineteenth-century Jews to confront modernity. Emancipation and Enlightenment caused many Jews to question Judaism’s

place in the modern world and respond with the Reform movement. Progressives and Reformers distanced themselves from the “trammels of rabbinism,” perhaps as a way to achieve emancipation, but certainly as a way to transform the Judaism that had, as they saw it, become polluted. Over the centuries, ordinances arose which clogged “with dead and soulless weight the pure and spiritual Law of God” (*The Women of Israel* 2: 416), at least according to Aguilar, Marks, and many other Reform-minded Jews. Like the Evangelicals who advocated a return to God and the Bible, the Jewish Reformers found freedom in the “pure and spiritual Law of God,” or the Bible as it exists independently of rabbinic tradition.

In *The Spirit of Judaism* and *The Women of Israel*, especially, Aguilar adopts the Reform mindset that persecution is responsible for the tainting of God’s pure law to claim that any oppression of women found in Judaism is similarly the result of persecution. Enlightenment and Reform granted women access to religion and education, and provided them the means to express their thoughts, feelings, and personal theology via writing. Aguilar adopted midrash, a tool of the rabbis, in order to explore women’s spiritual experiences, but, as a woman, was free to interpret Judaism in a way that men, who are bound to view Judaism within the framework of the rabbinic literature that she and the Reformers devalued, were not. Since women were not allowed access to these texts, they were free to interpret the religion however they wanted, and to encourage other women to do so as well. At a time when male Reformers were trying to break free from the “trammels of rabbinism,” Aguilar used the spirit of Reform to encourage freedom in interpretation. When no longer subject to tradition, women—all Jews—are

free to experience Judaism in ways that cohere with the dictates of their own conscience and reason.

Endnotes

¹ De Sola was instrumental in organizing the Association for the Promotion of Jewish Literature and other societies of a similar character. In 1857 he published *The Ancient Melodies of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*, including a historical account of the poets, poetry, and melodies of the Sephardic liturgy. In the notation of the melodies he was assisted by Emanuel Aguilar, the composer.

² The legal-cultural-social system now called rabbinic Judaism, which developed in Palestine and Babylonia during the first 6 centuries CE, was destined to become normative for virtually all Jewish communities for the next twelve hundred years (Wegner 74).

Conclusion

Victorian women were encouraged to write about religion—but these writings were limited to devotionals and conduct manuals. Julie Melnyk points out that this encouragement of women's religious work and literature did not extend to theological writing. As I have demonstrated, the Victorian period perceived religion in feminized terms, and though women were the innately more spiritual household arbiters of religion, theology, “the study of or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations with man and the universe” (OED), remained in the Victorian period a clearly masculine discourse (Melnyk xi).

Grace Aguilar's writing is valuable to the study of literature for many reasons. What I instantly found appealing about this unique writer is that she endeavored to write theology—a traditionally masculine medium—and that these works were well-received and incredibly popular in her day. I chose to consider her theological writings in this project for this reason, as well as the fact that the few critics writing on Aguilar—Michael Galchinsky, Cynthia Scheinberg, Michael Ragussis, Elizabeth Fay, and Daniel Harris to name a few of the more prominent—chose to focus more on her poetry and novels and merely gloss over her theology, often repeating the same generalities. As Melnyk points out, Victorian women were not encouraged to write theology, and it is remarkable that a woman who lived only thirty-one years became a respected writer of theology, despite that some men spoke condescendingly of some of her theological points. It is even more remarkable to me that a woman who loved a religion generally conceived of as patriarchal wrote theology for a community that generally did not approve of women participating in religious and intellectual life. If Victorian women were debarred from

writing theology, Victorian Jewish women were doubly so. I have highlighted those passages most relevant to my project—revealing Aguilar’s Jewish domestic perspective—but *The Women of Israel* and *The Spirit of Judaism* both provide much for further study.

Aguilar speaks for women of her time, and is truly a valuable—passed over—artifact for those interested in a comprehensive study of Victorian women’s writings. She is a challenging writer. She is too progressive to be considered wholly traditional, and feminists often consider her too traditional to be worth a feminist reading. Aguilar appeals to those women who struggle with self-identification. Contemporary women struggle with complex identifications and loyalties, and I think Aguilar demonstrates that, while it isn’t always easy, religious women can be progressive, and vice versa. Aguilar defined Judaism for herself and provides an example for women who desire to explore their spirituality.

My first goal for this project was to situate Aguilar within an established literary tradition. I have attempted to show that Aguilar’s works align with much writing by women in the nineteenth century. She also participated in literary trends, such as the writing of Romantic poetry. I have illuminated Aguilar’s complicated religious position: namely, that she associated with Christians, yet still feared Evangelical conversion efforts directed at Jews. Finally, and most importantly, I have clarified Aguilar’s vision of the “Jewish spirit.” Aguilar shifts the focus of Judaism from a communal, synagogue setting controlled by learned men, to a private, home-centered religion directed by women. Jewish spirituality is, for Aguilar, not conceived of in masculine, legal terms, but

expressed by women with domestic concerns. The individual articulates his or her own spirituality, which aligns Aguilar with Reform ideology.

There appears to be a current, blossoming interest in the works of hitherto unstudied nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish writers. New works on writers like Aguilar are being published every year, but there is still much to be researched and written. Some areas of interest for future research include the extent to which Aguilar was familiar with and used the Hebrew language, her remarks concerning Jewish nationalism, or what we now call “Zionism,” and the curriculum used in the school for Jewish girls that she ran briefly with her mother, Sarah Aguilar. Additionally, the writings of similar writers, such as the Moss sisters, Celia and Marion, Hyman Hurwitz, David Levi, and Maria Polack merit close study.

Aguilar’s work belongs to a subgenre of literature that is only just beginning to be explored. When people imagine Jewish experiences, they often imagine a limited range of experiences. Scholars write about the American Jewish experience, or the German and European Continental Jewish experience, both of which fall into a white, Ashkenazic frame of reference. Aguilar’s Sephardic heritage places her outside of the Jewish “norm,” and this very unique culture is worth exploring. Furthermore, it seems as though the scholarly community assumes that England’s Jewish history follows similar patterns as either American or Continental European Jewish histories, but the fact is, England’s small Jewish community developed differently than these other communities. Of course, it was influenced by other external ideas, but really has a unique history. The culture, literature, and experiences of London’s Jewish community that I have depicted in this project should be studied independently of historical, cultural, and ideological

developments experienced by Jews elsewhere. This work is significant not only as a study of a woman and minority writer, but also in that it examines a participant in literary and religious trends that have hitherto been marginalized or ignored in the study of English, women's, or Jewish studies.

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