Title of Paper: **Recentering Victorian Jewish Education: Grace Aguilar’s Call for Reform in *The Spirit of Judaism***

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Abstract:  
Anglo-Jewish novelist and theologian Grace Aguilar (1816-47) gained an admirable reputation with a mixed readership of Christians and Jews by elucidating fundamental similarities between Judaism and Christianity in her literary works. However, in *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842), an extended commentary on the spiritual significance of the Shema, Aguilar argues that the central tenets of Judaism and Christianity are ultimately irreconcilable. While her works certainly demonstrate Evangelical influence, I argue that Aguilar’s *The Spirit of Judaism* foregrounds an emancipatory project that allows Anglo Jews to assert their identity as specifically English and uncompromisingly Jewish. Aguilar contends that a renewed focus on Jewish education, particularly in the home, would allow Jewish communities to overcome the threat of conversionism. Her focus on domestic education places women at the forefront of the battle for Anglo-Jewish identity and for Jewish emancipation in England.

Keywords:  
Grace Aguilar, The Spirit of Judaism, Education, Jewish Naturalization, Jewish Reform

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Anglo-Jewish novelist and theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–47) gained an admirable reputation with a mixed readership of Christians and Jews by elucidating fundamental similarities between Judaism and Christianity in her literary works. However, in *The Spirit of Judaism* (1842), an extended commentary on the spiritual significance of the *Shema*, Aguilar argues that the central tenants of Judaism and Christianity are ultimately irreconcilable. But Jews and Christians alike, she reasons, can agree on the divinity of their shared text, the Hebrew Bible. Her insistence on the shared textual heritage of Christians and Jews has caused no shortage of confusion regarding her religious affiliation both among her contemporaries and among modern critics.

Christian readers relished Aguilar’s domestic tales and romances, and her universalist approach to the Bible ensured the success of her theological works with Protestant audiences. But her rejection of “the trammels of tradition,” or Jewish legalism, in her theological works earned her the derisive designation “Jewish Protestant” from some prominent voices of the Anglo-Jewish press. Most critics point to an event in her early life as the genesis of Aguilar’s affinity for Anglicanism. Emanuel Aguilar’s failing health prompted the family’s move to the Devonshire coast during his daughter’s teenage years, and Elizabeth Fay writes that young Grace relied on “Christian friends and Christian tools of worship during that period.”

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carried over into her professional writing, as the biblical passages in her theological writings usually correspond with the King James Version of the Bible. Aguilar does provide her own translations for Hebrew words throughout *The Spirit of Judaism* and elsewhere, although the extent of her knowledge of Hebrew is generally unknown. Throughout the nineteenth century, rabbis and other learned Jewish men complained of poor Hebrew literacy in England. In *The Spirit of Judaism* Aguilar encourages Jews to learn Hebrew, and she repeatedly calls for a specifically Jewish English translation of the Bible. Michael Galchinsky points out that because “there was as yet no Jewish vernacular translation of the Bible” during Aguilar’s lifetime, she attended church services in order to “satisfy her religious yearnings.”

Christians reviewing Aguilar’s works interpreted her theology as supportive of supersessionism, while her Jewish reviewers expressed anxiety over what they saw as her misunderstanding of Judaism and her use of Protestant hermeneutics. Aguilar’s seemingly ambiguous religious identification caused consternation among her contemporaries and continues to confound current criticism. Beyond the Christian/Jewish divide, scholars of Judaism find it difficult to classify Aguilar’s religious identification because of what Miriam Elizabeth Burstein calls “the idiosyncratic nature of her religious thought in both her fiction and her theology.”

Although her theological works reveal some inconsistencies and ambiguities, Aguilar

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Fay attributes some contemporaries’ labeling of Aguilar as an “inauthentic Jew” to her “adolescent years spent outside the Jewish community due to her father’s health” (216).


4 Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, “‘Not the Superiority of Belief, But Superiority of True Devotion’: Grace Aguilar’s Histories of the Spirit” in *Silent Voices: Forgotten Novels by Victorian Women Writers*, ed. Brenda Ayres (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 2. Burstein explains that Jewish studies scholars variously categorize Aguilar as “(a) orthodox; (b) a nominally orthodox neo-Karaite; or (c) moderately reformed” (2).
didn’t struggle to define herself within or against Jewish tradition. Rather, Aguilar sought to establish a Jewish identity that was inherently English.

Despite Aguilar’s wide-spread popularity with both American and British Protestants, the Jewish subject matter of *The Spirit of Judaism* inevitably conveys the tension between her specifically Jewish literary agenda and the expectations of Christian audiences. Aguilar intends to deter conversionist activities targeting those Jews unschooled in the Jewish tradition—women and children especially—and correct inaccurate beliefs about Judaism without offending her Christian readership. *Spirit* presents Aguilar’s unorthodox theory of Jewish religious education as a viable defense against conversionist manipulation. But in so doing, Aguilar alienates more traditionally-minded Jews who object to her markedly individualistic approach to Judaism. While her works exhibit considerable Evangelical influence, I argue that in *The Spirit of Judaism* Aguilar provides a system for affirming Jewish identity in children as a solution to the problem of Jewish education in England. Aguilar features Jewish mothers in her emancipation project, and *Spirit* encourages mothers to facilitate the development of a specifically Anglo-Jewish identity through a Jewish education founded on religious texts in English.

**Jewish Emancipation and Christian Conversionism**

A confluence of issues converged to create Anglo-Jewish culture of the 1830s and 40s, including evangelism, millenarian Philo-Semitism, Mendelssohnian enlightenment, secularization, modernization of European Jewry, anti-Semitism, English political culture, assimilation, intermarriage, Jewish reform, synagogue
politics, and the role of women more broadly. Despite disagreements among historians on the extent to which these issues shaped the intellectual activity of Anglo-Jewish writers, Aguilar’s work clearly shows that mid-century Anglo-Jews responded to three major challenges: Jewish emancipation, conversionism, and reforms in Jewish religious belief and practice.

The first attempt to relieve Jewish disabilities came in the mid-eighteenth century. The Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753 would have alleviated some of the legal and economic suffering of Jews living in Britain by allowing practicing Jews to circumvent the Christian oaths when undertaking private acts of naturalization. But as Alan H. Singer reminds us, the so-called “Jew Bill” was not “a general naturalization” and Jews were still prohibited from holding many forms of property and public offices. Todd M. Endelman similarly identifies the bill as merely “a favor to some of the Sephardi mercantile elite who had been active in supporting the financial policies of the ministry and who had now solicited a favor from the government.” The Jewish Naturalization Act passed but was repealed some months later. Lay leaders and notable business men of London’s Jewish community began pushing for emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century; the first Jewish Emancipation Bill came before Parliament in 1830 and Jewish disabilities were debated throughout the 1830s, 40s, and 50s.

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5 For example, Todd M. Endelman rejects Cecil Roth’s argument that English Jews had a Haskalah. David B. Ruderman traces Enlightenment thought in the works of specific Anglo-Jewish writers. Michael Ragussis examines the impact of conversionism in Anglo-Jewish literature. And Aguilar’s own editor questioned the extent to which conversionism was an actual threat to Anglo-Jewish identity.
The opposition variously invoked either Christian prejudices or Jewish racial difference in support of their arguments against Jewish citizenship. Singer’s reading of anti-Jew Bill pamphlets and newspaper articles suggests that the opposition used religious stereotypes to induce fear of Jews as a separate, foreign nation that would threaten England’s Protestant identity if granted citizenship. And according to Endelman, during the 1830s the opposition relaxed religious rhetoric and relied more on the distinctness of Jews as a people to argue that Jews could never be integrated into the English nation—that Jewish difference undermined the social basis of English life.8

Emancipation mattered to Aguilar insofar as it provided Jews with the means to validate their claim to Englishness. In “History of the Jews in England,” published posthumously by her mother Sarah in Essays and Miscellanies, Aguilar laments that in England, “the Jews are still considered aliens and foreigners; supposed to be separated by an antiquated creed and peculiar customs from sympathy and fellowship—little known and still less understood” (272). By encouraging English citizens to consider their history free of anti-Semitism, Aguilar further underscores the injustice of Jewish disabilities as “the last relic of religious intolerance” in England (272). Aguilar erases Jewish racial difference and distinguishes Jews from Britons in “creed and customs” only, and her insistence on attenuating racial distinction between Jews and Britons allows her to focus the trajectory of her argument for citizenship on the nuances of culture rather than what might have been conceived of as the unbridgeable otherness of racial difference. Aguilar’s entire

8 Ibid, 93-4.
The Victorian literary project is an attempt to prove to her countrymen that Jews could integrate into English society; indeed, she argues that the integration was complete in all but English law.

According to Michael Ragussis, the ideology of conversion played an important role throughout nineteenth-century parliamentary debates on Jewish civil and political disabilities. Philo-Semitic conversionists believed that granting Jews English citizenship would ensure their eventual conversion to Christianity. In fact, rhetorical appeals in support of Jewish emancipation incorporated conversion so thoroughly that, as Galchinsky suggests, Aguilar’s work on behalf of Jewish emancipation and her attempts to “to safeguard Jews against conversion efforts” were not mutually exclusive. Attempts to convert London’s Jewish population to Christianity came largely through the press. Linda Gertner Zatlin points out that conversionist pamphlets and novels included “details of Jewish liturgy, rituals, and household practices.” In her account of conversionist literature, Zatlin claims that by incorporating superficial Jewish elements into their works, conversionists present Judaism as complicit with Christianity. Aguilar’s push for comprehensive Jewish education beyond the rote learning of Hebrew prayers and blessings is a response to conversionist literature that uses the trappings of Judaism in order to make Jews receptive to the idea of the fulfillment of Judaism through Christianity.

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To successfully argue for Jewish emancipation in England, Aguilar first had to establish that a religiously tolerant culture is a uniquely English trait. Those in favor of Jewish emancipation, including Aguilar, drew comparisons between Jews and Protestants against a Catholic “other.” In *The Spirit of Judaism* Aguilar draws on Catholic hatred to gain Protestant sympathy for the Jewish cause. Jews, she observes, prefer to seek asylum in “free and happy” England since the English didn’t expect Jews to shamefully conceal their religion as had been the requirement in Catholic countries (9). In her popular romance *The Vale of Cedars; or, the Martyr*, written in the early 1830s, Aguilar’s Spanish heroine Marie conceals her Jewishness from Ferdinand and Isabella and, once discovered, chooses to die at the hands of the Inquisitors rather than forsake her faith.

Her praise of England’s relatively tolerant atmosphere notwithstanding, Aguilar acknowledges that Protestants and Catholics share the same theological impulse to convert Jews to Christianity. However, she clearly distinguishes between Catholic Inquisitors’ torturous methods for procuring Jewish converts and English Protestants’ misguided, though well-meaning, conversionist pressures:

> 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.

(*The Spirit of Judaism* 57)

The nebulous use of the Hebrew Scriptures as a means of converting uneducated Jews provides the catalyst for reform in Jewish education. Public Jewish education in
England was then unorganized and ineffective, and Aguilar advocates an altogether different sort of Jewish education in order to counteract conversion efforts.

Aguilar’s *The Spirit of Judaism* establishes a sense of Anglo-Jewish identity via an explication of the *Shema* while it encourages using Jewish education to guard against conversion. Her prefatory statements evince her anxiety about conversionism, which her American editor Isaac Leeser believed to be an exaggeration. “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 theologians must take care that their tracts do not inflame Christians, but also “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 should prepare 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*, an expression of belief in the unity of God, is the central statement of Jewish belief. The *Shema* is central to Jewish identity, so it is appropriate that Aguilar’s commentary on this prayer affirms Jewish identity. According to

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13 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.

14 Isaac Leeser was a Jewish-American lay leader, author, translator, editor, and founder of the Jewish periodical *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*. Aguilar contacted Leeser about publishing her work, and he agreed 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 issued the second draft in 1842, but Aguilar was unhappy to discover that he had written a preface, as well as notes, highlighting their theological differences. Leeser disapproved of Aguilar’s reformist leanings.
Aguilar, the *Shema* contains all that is necessary for a Jew to refute Christian arguments: “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 culture of conversion as a war and understands God as having provided the Jewish people with the *Shema* as a means of defense. Moreover, children must be taught the words of the *Shema* in their native language, as well as a respect for and understanding of the meaning of the words in order to adequately defend the Jewish faith.

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. These well-meaning but misguided Christian conversionists may cease to proselytize if they could but understand that Judaism provides its adherents with spiritual fulfillment. But 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 Reform and Education**

Aguilar’s theological works argue for reforms in Jewish religious belief and practice, especially concerning the use of English during religious services. Like most reform-minded Jews of the mid-Victorian period, Aguilar was nominally Orthodox
and accepted all the Bible’s ceremonial laws as divine and binding. For example, Aguilar encourages wearing tefillin and tzitzit and refusing non-kosher food. She believes the Bible represents an unquestioned authority and repeats throughout her work that Jews must accept the entire Bible, or none. However, her works articulate radical ideas for reforming Judaism for the benefit of women and children. In addition to her radical arguments for prayers in English, Aguilar recommended changes specifically where women and girls were concerned. For example, she suggested that girls receive as comprehensive a religious education as boys. But Aguilar departs most significantly from Orthodox belief in rejecting the interpretational authority of the rabbinical tradition.

Aguilar’s ideology closely aligns with that of the early British Jewish Reform movement in her rejection of the Talmud as divinely inspired. Throughout her theological works, Aguilar rejects and challenges the authenticity of the rabbinical legal code, which was during her lifetime under attack from Evangelicals. For Evangelicals, “rabbinism” reflected distrust of the mediation of God’s word, and represented interference between the individual and the Scriptures. Aguilar repeatedly insists that women, as well as children, are capable of interpreting the Bible without a rabbinic intermediary. Aguilar denies the divinity of the Oral Law in *The Women of Israel* with the brief yet emphatic claim, “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).
Aguilar’s theology, especially her devaluation of the “trammels of tradition” throughout *The Spirit of Judaism*, virtually mirrors that of the notable Jewish Reformer, David Woolf Marks. Aguilar encourages her Jewish readers to rely on “the Bible and reason” as guides for behavior, since “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” by applauding “the boldness with which he had flung aside the trammels of rabbinism, and the prejudices arising from long ages of persecution” (293). Aguilar desires to return to a “pure” version of Judaism by relying on the Bible alone. Like Aguilar, Marks dichotomizes the “purity” of Mosaic Law versus the “polluted” history of rabbinic interpretation. In 1840 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 stand boldly forward, clothed in all the native purity and pristine majesty of the eternal Law of Moses.” Marks’ and Aguilar’s hostility toward the “trammels of tradition” reflects the dissatisfaction with rabbinic Judaism felt by many mid-century Jewish men and women. 

Like other reformers of the mid-century, Aguilar rejected the belief that the study of rabbinical texts should be the foundation of Jewish education and that all

15 The West London Synagogue of British Jews, the first Reform synagogue in England, was consecrated in 1842, the same year as the publication of *The Spirit of Judaism*.
other learning should be peripheral to that. Aguilar recenters the focus of Judaism to
the Bible alone, and argues that the Bible be universally accessible. This goal is partly
to be achieved with an English translation of the Bible for Jews—that is, an English
Bible without a Christian agenda.

According to Steven Singer, education was a point of dispute between
traditionalists and progressives in the early Victorian Jewish community, specifically
as it concerned instruction for the children of the middle and upper classes. A
network of free communal schools serviced London’s needy Jewish children. But
these students did not learn much of either the religious or secular since, as Singer
claims, the free schools were meant to teach poor children “to be respectable
members of adult society.” Most Jewish parents desired at least some Jewish
education for their children, and the free schools presented an appealing alternative to
institutions with established Christian curriculums. The Jewish middle and upper
classes avoided sending their children to the communal institutions meant for the poor
and maintained a much less cohesive system of education. Rather, they generally
relied on private academies, boarding schools, public or endowed schools, and private
tutors for their children’s Jewish and secular education.

Acculturation of the Jewish upper classes did not necessarily indicate desire
on the part of the community’s prosperous members to disassociate their sons from
Judaism by sending them to non-Jewish schools. Regardless, Jewish education in
London was not particularly successful. A writer for the Voice of Jacob in 1845

17 Steven Singer, “Jewish Education in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: A Study of the Early Victorian
18 Ibid, 164-5.
The Victorian attributed “the comparative ignorance respecting Judaism which pervades all classes of our Jewish population” to their ineffective system of education.\(^{19}\) Observers remarked on how many people in London’s community were ignorant of Judaism’s most basic ideas. 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.\(^{20}\) Aguilar devotes a section in The Spirit of Judaism to the problem of Hebrew literacy. Reciting prayers in a language one does not understand is, for her, perhaps the greatest evil and it is clear that her comments about literacy in Spirit respond to these issues.

In The Spirit of Judaism, Aguilar voices one of her central complaints: that many observant Jews don’t take to heart their daily prayers because they either don’t understand Hebrew or don’t put much value on a practice performed so routinely. In the opening chapter, Aguilar admonishes Jews to recall that they take on an “awful responsibility” each time they recite the Shema, and rebukes those who “neither knows what that covenant is, nor cares what it includes” (8). Rote recitation of Hebrew is problematic for Aguilar because such practice implies that the speaker daily relinquishes their emotional connection to Judaism. “The faith we receive merely as an inheritance,” Aguilar insists, “will not enable us to defend it from insidious attack or open warfare” (8), or conversionist appeals. Aguilar reasons that Jews will cease to identify as Jews if they don’t feel emotionally invested in their own identities.

\(^{19}\) Qtd. in Steven Singer, “Jewish Education,” 166. 
Middle and upper-class Jewish traditionalists and progressives clashed over the establishment of a private Jewish day school in London. The traditionalists believed such a school would ensure that their children received a high quality Jewish education and committed to their religious identity and an acceptable level of ritual observance. Jewish progressives supported communal schools for the poor members of the community since Jewish schools, progressives reasoned, were better than the conversionist missionary schools that would trade food for conversion. But the progressives rejected the establishment of a private Jewish day school for the wealthier classes. According to Singer, the progressives were content with limited religious education given to higher-class children and were unconcerned with their ignorance of the Talmud and Hebrew literature. Progressives feared that the establishment of an exclusive Jewish school would interfere with the achievement of full emancipation and integration into English society.\(^{21}\) Acknowledging Jewish exclusiveness and difference via the establishment of specifically Jewish schools countered the progressives’ collective desire to achieve full political rights.

Though scholars of Anglo-Jewish literature don’t seem to agree on Aguilar’s religious identification, most agree that Aguilar belongs in the reformist, progressive, liberal\(^{22}\) faction of the Victorian Jewish community. I argue that Aguilar 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. She believed that the practice of Judaism

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 171-2.

\(^{22}\) These terms are used interchangeably by academics writing on this period in Jewish history.
belonged within the private sphere, not the public, so as to minimize difference between the Jewish community and the dominant culture. Consequently, Aguilar advocates a system of Jewish education for both boys and girls that takes place in a domestic setting and is administered by pious and devoted mothers.

**Emancipation, Conversion, Education, and Domesticity**

The failed 1758 attempt at naturalization generated debate over civil emancipation for Jews for the next one hundred years. Much of the debate occurred in the press and included input from literary celebrities. For example, William Hazlitt publicly advocated Jewish emancipation in his 1831 essay “The Emancipation of the Jews.” 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.” He then describes the contradictory ways Britons have 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.” Hazlitt laments that Europeans “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

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24 Ibid.
Hazlitt gives voice to many of the concerns of nineteenth-century Anglo-Jews in a public forum and successfully channels the sympathetic imagination in his arguments for Jewish emancipation.

In emphasizing the importance of education for poor Jews, Aguilar’s *The Spirit of Judaism* echoes Hazlitt’s observations regarding the difficulties Jews face in trying to procure honest and lucrative employment:

> 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)

Hazlitt and Aguilar both argue that oppression 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). Here, the convergence of Aguilar’s anxieties becomes clear. If Jews are to thrive financially, they must be emancipated, and successful interactions with the

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25 Ibid.
dominant culture are predicated on thorough religious education. Lacking a proper religious education leads to a dullness of “spirit” and the practicing of “mere forms” of religion, which contributes to the detestation of Jews by Christians. 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, a custom that can only be learned from devoted mothers, leaves Jews defenseless and susceptible to conversion.

Aguilar insists that individuals have the capacity to comprehend the Bible without the aid of rabbinic tradition. Her universalist approach to Judaism, as well as her Romantic emphasis on the individual and devaluation of rabbinical authority puts her at odds with traditionalists like Leeser, for whom her individualistic and Reformist rhetoric comes across as too “Protestant.” 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). Aguilar believes that English Bibles make the word of God universally available to Jews who cannot read Hebrew. But 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). Leeser’s editorial comments are peppered with his insistence that Jews maintain Jewish difference as a way to distinguish themselves from their non-Jewish neighbors. But Aguilar seeks to
eradicate Jewish difference, partially through the adoption of traditionally English styles of worship.

Aguilar does not deny the importance of Hebrew, but she and Leeser differ on its relevance. For Aguilar, Jewish children should learn Hebrew in order to connect and communicate with Jews whose native languages are not English. Making Hebrew a conversational language matters, 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). Aguilar suggests that Hebrew must be learned “grammatically” like other languages so that children will understand it; otherwise, children will hate the language and consequently hate praying, “divesting the sacred words from all holiness” (174). So while the rote memorization of Hebrew prayers is a detriment to the spirit of Judaism, learning Hebrew provides for a valuable defense against the tactics of conversionists.

In *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar’s character sketches of biblical women, 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), Aguilar “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.”

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domestic space as the place for religious education is illustrated in her novels and
spelled out in her theological writings. Aguilar’s domestic ideology emulates that of
the Victorian Protestant middle class and she believed that domesticity was crucial in
the fight against Christian conversionists. Like Jochebed before them, Jewish
mothers, not schools organized around male teachers, are responsible for the religious
education of Jewish youth.

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 falls “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,” or by the mother rather than the father. Sons will eventually 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 become, like Jochebed, perfect mothers to “regenerated Israel” (x-xi). Engaging
the Jewish heart in youth will create lifelong Jews who are intellectually 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 might seem like an odd contradiction considering that 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). Jewish education engages the Jewish heart, and a comprehensive education based on Bibles in English as directed by Jewish mothers will allow Jews to integrate 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 emphasizes the importance of the spirit in The Women of Israel, where images of the heart join 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” (1: 125). Throughout The Spirit of Judaism, Aguilar makes a distinction between the “forms” of Judaism and the “spirit” of Judaism, a move which historically has been a Christian go-to criticism of Judaism.
From its beginnings to its current manifestations, Christianity has denounced Judaism as legalistic and heartless. Jews are to be pitied by Christians for their short-sightedness and stubborn adherence to their laws. To make Judaism acceptable to British Christians, Aguilar reverses the law/love dichotomy so that Judaism becomes a religion of love instead of the popular view of Judaism as an uncompromising devotion to legalism. Victorians viewed Christianity as a religion of love, and thus, more appealing to women and Aguilar echoes this same sentiment: “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
The Victorian

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 allows 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 binary of law versus love. The Spirit of Judaism makes a distinction between form and spirit and emphasizes the “spirit” of Judaism in order to defend Judaism against Christian claims that Judaism is emotionless and relies on antiquated rabbinical decrees. But even while she defends Judaism against Christianity, she draws connections between the two religions. Aguilar points out, “the God the Nazarene emphatically calleth love; this is their God and OUR God” (36). Aguilar places Judaism on par with Christianity by equating the God of the Jews with love.

Historically, Christians have used “Pharisee” and “Pharisaic” as terms of opprobrium. Aguilar upsets Leeser when she applies the term “Pharisee” to the Victorian Jewish establishment, and 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 echoes Evangelical concerns when she contrasts the needs of the poor with the actions of the “haughty Pharisees”; however, her valuation 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).

Though she always privileges spirit, Aguilar occasionally accedes to Leeser’s view on the importance of legalism. Referring to the practice of wrapping tefillin, 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 excessively strict Jews (215).

For Aguilar, “form” includes rabbinical literature. Education should revolve around study of the Bible alone. 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” (*The Spirit of Judaism* 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.

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27 Jewish men traditionally wear tefillin, or phylacteries, wrapped around their arm and placed on their foreheads during prayer.
Leeser’s anxious commentary suggests his concern over what Aguilar may be unwittingly encouraging, that Jews completely assimilate into the dominant culture and eschew all forms of religious distinctiveness.

**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 Cynthia 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 structured exclusively on gendered dualism, the ‘heart’ belongs to women.”

Furthermore, as Scheinberg points out, in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians images of the “heart” signify complete Christian identity in contradistinction to the incomplete heart, 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 notes similarities between these sharp categorical distinctions and that of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres.

The Spirit of Judaism recenters the emphasis of traditional Judaism. In the guise of revealing, Aguilar creates “feminine,” heartfelt aspects of Judaism in order to

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29 Ibid, 43.
create a religion with a space for women. Throughout her theology, Aguilar uses 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 while integrating into English society. A Victorian woman advocating the place of women in the domestic sphere is not unique. What is unique is how Aguilar takes these binaries—form/sprit, 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, who are traditionally educated in a school setting. In Aguilar’s system, Judaism is not a public religion devoted to rituals and law and emblematized by the studious Jewish man, but a religion of the heart to rival Victorian Christianity.

Public reaction to *The Spirit of Judaism* reflects the changing status of women in the nineteenth-century Jewish world. 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 “from 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,

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with an author’s concurrence, and to protect his own reputation, by frequent protests against the views he helps to disseminate.\footnote{Jacob Franklin, “Review of The Spirit of Judaism,” in Grace Aguilar: Selected Writings, ed. Michael Galchinsky (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2003), 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 can only generalize Judaism. 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.\footnote{Ibid, 366.}

Though Lesser is quite critical of Aguilar’s theological perspective in \textit{The Spirit of Judaism}, he elsewhere praises the literary efforts of Aguilar, and her poetry was a fixture in his \textit{Occident}, even after her death in 1847. Aguilar’s reformist theories elude categorization and clearly troubled Leeser, Franklin, and other Jewish men. Aguilar’s work is valuable for exactly this reason. Dismantling traditional Judaism through subtle yet 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 who read her works. 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, and Aguilar approaches emancipation, conversionism, and reform by emphasizing the role of women in what is essentially an English cultural battle for Judaism.


