

## Louisa B. Hart: An Orthodox Jewish Woman's Voice from the Civil War Era

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In saluting Blu Greenberg on her 80th birthday, I recall a teaching of my late father, Prof. Nahum M. Sarna ז"ל, a friend of the Greenbergs. He showed in one of his last public talks, delivered in honor of his own 80th birthday, that the famous line in the book of Psalms (90:10), "The span of our life is seventy years, or, given the strength, eighty years" has been widely misunderstood. The Hebrew word "*gevurot*," he demonstrated, invariably refers to the power ("mighty acts") of God, not to the strength of human beings. So to attain the age of eighty is a divine gift — a display of God's power. In a similar way, the rabbinic phrase, "*gevurot geshamim*" refers to the rain that comes through God's power (see BT *Ta'anit* 2a). When we congratulate an 80-year-old for attaining the age of *gevurot*, we are thus not just congratulating her on her own strength, but on the display of divine power with which she has been favored.

Surely, nobody is more deserving of *gevurot* than our honoree Blu Greenberg. She has devoted much of her long life to empowering women and the underprivileged. She has also spoken out courageously on behalf of feminist issues within Orthodox Judaism. In addition, she has reached across the spectrum of Jewish life, and also reached out to non-Jews, demonstrating by example that strict Jewish observance need not demand parochialism. An Orthodox Jew, she properly insists, can also be socially and politically engaged.

In Blu Greenberg's honor, I present here three extracts from the Civil War writings of a much earlier Orthodox Jewish woman, who was socially and politically engaged: Louisa Barnett Hart (1803-1874), diarist, professional volunteer, superintendent of the Hebrew Sunday School Society, and, like her mentor Rebecca Gratz, a broadly cultured, active figure in Philadelphia Jewish life, whose wide range of acquaintances included Jews and non-Jews alike.<sup>1</sup> Louisa was the product of a Sephardic-Ashkenazic

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<sup>1</sup> Brief published biographies of Louisa B. Hart can be found in Henry S. Morais, *The Jews of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Levytype, 1894, pp. 149-150) and Joshua Trachtenberg, *Consider the Years: The Story of the Jewish Community of Easton, 1752-1942* (Easton: Centennial Committee of Temple

union: her German-born father was the wealthy Easton, Pennsylvania merchant, Michael Hart (1738-1813); and her mother, his second<sup>2</sup> wife, was the proudly Sephardic and much younger Esther Cohen (1769-1855), daughter of *hazzan* Jacob Raphael Cohen, originally from the Barbary Coast in North Africa.

What united her parents was piety. According to Louisa, her father was "strictly observant of Sabbath and festivals; dietary laws were also adhered to, although he was obliged to be his own *shohet* [ritual slaughterer]."<sup>3</sup> Louisa and her mother maintained their strict religious observance following Michael Hart's death. They moved to Philadelphia and worshipped at the venerable Sephardic Congregation, Mikveh Israel. In Philadelphia, Louisa received a Jewish education that included Hebrew and "the history of her people."

Louisa Hart never married. According to her biographer, Mary M. Cohen (who also never married), "Louisa ... was so plain in personal appearance as to have been made aware of the fact to a very painful degree, and to have been convinced that she was not valued nor loved by any outside the family circle."<sup>4</sup> In fact, many of the philanthropic and cultural elite among Philadelphia's Jewish women — Rebecca Gratz, Simha Peixotto, Ellen and Emily Phillips, Evelyn Bomeisler, Katherine Cohen, Charity Solis Cohen, Esther Baum, and many others — likewise never married. Nor, for that matter, did some of Philadelphia's leading Jewish men, including Isaac Leeser, Mayer Sulzberger and Moses Dropsie. Ideology ("the cult of single blessedness"), sociology (a small number of available and appropriate committed young Jews), and sexuality (would some of them today have identified themselves as LGBTQ?) may explain this phenomenon, but Louisa Hart, at least, did not recommend her status to others. "Old maids may be very happy," she wrote to an unnamed female correspondent in 1862, "but the road is a very sad one to travel before one reaches the climacteric; so, young friends, I pray you get married."<sup>5</sup>

Brith Sholom, 1944, pp. 83-84). Both heavily rely on Mary Cohen's "A Memoir of Louisa B. Hart" (see n.3).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hart's first wife, Leah Marks (1753-1786) passed away at the age of 32.

<sup>3</sup> Mary M. Cohen, *A Memoir of Louisa B. Hart with Extracts from her Diary and Letters. The Jewish Record* (1878-1879), chapter I. The material was published serially beginning on October 11, 1878.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* on Mary Cohen, see Dianne Ashton, *Crossing Boundaries: The Career of Mary M. Cohen, American Jewish History* 83 (June 1995, pp. 153-176).

<sup>5</sup> Louisa B. Hart to unknown recipient (1862) reprinted in Cohen, *A Memoir of Louisa B. Hart*, chapter VI. On the many unmarried Jews in Philadelphia, see Ashton, "Crossing Boundaries," 154; Jonathan D. Sarna, *The Making of an American Jewish Culture, When Judaism Was the Capital of Jewish America*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: Balch Institute, 1993, p. 154, n.17); Sally L. Kitch, *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Charles Rosenberg, *No Other Gods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp.71-88); Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Louisa Hart maintained a diary for twenty years, from 1842 through 1862. Following the example of Rebecca Gratz, she also corresponded with a broad group of relatives, friends and former students. Hart's successor at the Hebrew Sunday School Society, Mary M. Cohen, who gained access to these materials upon Hart's 1874 death,<sup>6</sup> published seven chapters of excerpts from her diary and letters in the Philadelphia *Jewish Record* (1878-79), but what may have been a planned volume based on these writings never materialized. Subsequently, the articles were largely forgotten, even by students of American Jewish women's writing.

Dianne Ashton is unique, so far as I know, in analyzing this material. She argues that Cohen's goal in making her selections was "to promote Orthodoxy among American Jewish women" and to defend "the respectability of single Jewish women both as Jews and as women." The excerpts, she suggests, "placed Jewish women within an ideal that Christian society could understand and admire, and demonstrate a common standard of piety. But perhaps more important to Cohen," she concludes, "Hart's life could give Jewish women a means to value themselves both as Americans and as Jews, while offering them a language for talking about personal piety valued among their non-Jewish neighbors."<sup>7</sup>

Here I want to focus on Louisa Hart's little-noticed comments concerning the Civil War. Only a small corpus of Jewish women's writings on this subject survives, more from the South than from the North. Many Jewish women, a survey of extant material shows, veiled differences, carefully censoring themselves in order to preserve social and familial relationships. Even the aged Rebecca Gratz, who strongly supported the Union, "either veiled political disagreements," in writing to her far-flung family, or "displayed them in a way that supported and strengthened religious and familial ties."<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Louisa Hart was forthright in her defense of the Union. She paid lip service to Victorian constraints upon women, but tacitly subverted them, speaking freely about political affairs even, as we shall see, when she addressed a congressman.

<sup>6</sup> The original diaries and letters have apparently disappeared. The late Maxwell Whiteman once told me that he thought he had seen them, but I have not succeeded in locating them. Even copies of the published articles are extremely rare.

<sup>7</sup> Ashton, (pp.159-61).

<sup>8</sup> Dianne Ashton, *Shifting Veils: Religion, Politics and Womanhood in the Civil War Writings of American Jewish Women, Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001, pp. 81-106, esp. 84, 93); Stanley R. Brav, *The Jewish Woman, 1861-1865, American Jewish Archives*, 17 (April 1965, pp. 34-75); Hasia R. Diner, *Civil War in the United States. Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on April 27, 2016: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/civil-war-in-united-states>).

She invoked her faith, her gender, and her loyalty to the Union in her writings, far more than other religiously traditional Jewish women of her time.

So it was that on the last day of 1860, following the secession of South Carolina, she inscribed into her diary a "Union Prayer," almost certainly of her own composition, adding the comment "Alas for the discord that induces it." Rebecca Gratz had previously composed an English-language prayer for children, recited at her Hebrew Sunday School,<sup>9</sup> and the religiously Reform Jewish poet and educator, Penina Moise, wrote Jewish hymns in Charleston,<sup>10</sup> but prayers concerning contemporary events by Jewish women were at that time few and far between. Hart's prayer, probably written for a mixed audience of Jews and Christians, is notable for its universalistic tone, and the interweaving of American, Jewish and conventionally Protestant elements:

Father! When the wisdom of man is naught, when counsel breeds but strife, and knowledge seems turned to folly, oh then we look to Thee; Thou only canst save, Father, hear our cry. In Thy providence, an asylum was granted for the wayfarer and the weak, for the persecuted and the oppressed; Thy blessing o'ershadowed it, and that which gave refuge to all, gathered within its territories myriads of the wise in action, the gifted in thought, the noble in deed. Nations looked on and wondered 'whence comes this greatness, surely it were well to emulate it; we, too, will be freemen, we, too, will say "Love God and serve thy fellow-man," nor will we ask what art thou? Prayer and praise shall ascend from church, from synagogue, from tented camp or grand cathedral. God alone shall know its acceptance. But see the dark pall that threatens to overthrow that asylum, this glorious structure, our heaven-appointed Union; shall it cease to be? Father of all, by Thine own inspiration, do Thou endow the legislators of these States with a noble and wise patriotism; ennoble them with an infinite desire to perpetuate this glorious republic; make them to understand that to uphold an example of truth, of justice, of universal philanthropy, is more worthy, more sublime than aught of supremacy that the mightiest potentate could attain. Grant, oh Father, that the elements of discord may cease and harmony again reign.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "God Loves an Infant's Praise": Cultural Borrowing and Cultural Resistance in Two American-Jewish Sunday-School Texts," *Jewish History* 27 (March 2013), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Shira Wolosky, *The First Reform Liturgy: Penina Moise's Hymns and the Discourses of American Jewish Identity*, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 33 (2014), pp. 130-146.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *A Memoir of Louisa B. Hart*, chapter VI.

Hart repeated her defense of the Union,<sup>12</sup> invoking many more Jewish themes, in a March 1861 letter to an unnamed (male?) Jewish correspondent sympathetic to the Confederacy, who had apparently sent her a pro-Southern article:

You say 'read it without prejudice and you must approve.' Well, then, I must plead guilty to prejudice, for I do not approve nor admire; misstatements authoritatively uttered are nevertheless not fact, and my historical knowledge, albeit not beyond that of average female readers, enabled me to detect gross ones. Again, I must repeat that that Union was (or is) as nearly approaching perfectibility as aught that humanity has devised or is likely to devise, and when reflecting that to us as Israelites, it has been almost the realization of 'I am thy shield, thy reward is exceeding great,' [Gen.15:1] I tremble at the non-appreciation of it. Already we have seen a petition offered 'that the Constitution recognize a God and Jesus Christ' and if you should say that was Northern fanaticism, remember that some Southern statute-books display sectarianism, and but few years have elapsed since Israelites, feeling aggrieved by exclusion in the wording of a Thanksgiving call, in vain asked that it should be amended so as to enable them to join in its commemoration, whilst, on a like occasion, the Governor of our State promptly acceded to the request.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Hart expressed a fear common among Jews of that time that with the destruction of the Union, the Constitutional guarantee of religious liberty would be lost, transforming Jews into second-class citizens.<sup>14</sup> She pointed to a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution, initiated by the Reformed Presbyterian synod in Pennsylvania and advocated by Senator Charles Sumner in 1861, calling for acknowledgment of the authority of Christ and recognition of divine law.<sup>15</sup> She insisted, however, that the Confederacy was no better with regard to its treatment of Jews, noting "sectarianism" in some Southern state constitutions; she probably had North Carolina in mind.<sup>16</sup> She also recalled an infamous incident in 1844, when Governor James Hammond of South Carolina directed a Thanksgiving Day

<sup>12</sup> According to Mary Cohen (*Ibid.*), Hart's "judgment pronounced, then and always, against secession, and against slavery." Unfortunately, she included no anti-slavery comments in the extracts from Hart that she published.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> For a parallel fear in 1862, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 2012), pp. 35-37.

<sup>15</sup> Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 82-83.

proclamation only to the Christian citizens of his state, and refused to amend it following Jewish protests.<sup>17</sup> In Pennsylvania, she pointed out, a similar incident in 1848 ended far more happily, from a Jewish perspective. Governor William F. Johnston apologized for his phraseology and invited Jews to celebrate Thanksgiving alongside citizens of all other faiths.<sup>18</sup>

Hart's self-effacing depiction of her own historical knowledge in this letter — “not beyond that of average female readers” — acknowledged the gender boundaries of her day to which she outwardly conformed. In reality, though, her comment seems ironic, for she at once displayed a significant mastery of past events, especially insofar as they affected Jews. By evoking the gender boundary — the social order that constrained women to their place — she effectively pushed beyond it, subverting those very norms by proceeding to express her well-considered opinions on the Union's behalf.

Hart employed this same strategy in her remarkable letter to “Honorable W.E.L. —,” almost certainly Congressman William Eckart Lehman (1821-1895) of Pennsylvania, dated January 20, 1862. The context here was the “chaplaincy affair,” the Congressionally-passed law mandating that a military chaplain be a “regular ordained minister of a Christian denomination,” an eligibility requirement that excluded Jews.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish community mounted an organized and ultimately successful campaign to change this discriminatory legislation, and numerous petitions on this subject were filed with Congress. But only one letter seeking the law's change is known to have been written by a woman; the following letter by Louisa Hart to Congressman Lehman:

January 20<sup>th</sup> 1862

I comply with the request of Rev. I. Leeser, to say to you, dear sir, that he had posted a letter to you, supposing you to be in Washington; the letter refers to the Jewish chaplaincy. Without attributing to me ‘woman's rights,’ folly, or assumption, will you permit me to give

<sup>17</sup> Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*, 111-121; Jonathan D. Sarna, *Christians and Non-Christians in the Marketplace of American Religion, American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, eds. Catherine A. Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, pp. 119-122).

<sup>18</sup> *Occident* 6 (November 1848, pp. 403-410); online at <http://www.jewishhistory.com/occident/volume6/nov1848/thanksinpa.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015, pp. 100-110); Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (New York: Atheneum, 1970 [1951]), pp. 56-97).

expression to some views on that subject? It may be very difficult to seem to be impartial whilst avowing that I glory to belong to that (oft proscribed) race, and yet I think it is as a citizen of the United States as well as an Israelite, that I tremble at the beginning of that which, as an end, would o'ershadow the ultimate good and glory of our country — proscription for conscience' sake. Shall we darken the page of history with that from which, after the experience of centuries, other governments, slowly but surely, are disenthraling themselves? Shall we renew it after proclaiming to the world that to God alone is Jew or Christian amenable for faith or worship? Therefore, on that score, neither can claim exemption nor ask privilege; it is of little import to me whether or not an individual Jewish chaplain is appointed; it is the principle involved that has induced these (perhaps) crude remarks; had I not been asked by Mr. L. to inform you of his letter, you would probably not have been troubled with them.<sup>20</sup>

Here, as before, Hart wrote in a self-effacing manner, describing her remarks as “crude,” forswearing all interest in the nascent “women's rights” movement, admitting partiality as an “Israelite,” and apologizing for having “troubled” the Congressman with her missive, written at the request of the Philadelphia Jewish religious leader, Rev. Isaac Leeser. But the core of her letter belied these conventional sentiments. She stirringly appealed to *America's* principles in opposing the law, insisting that proscription on the basis of conscience would undermine “the ultimate good and glory of our country.” The major Jewish communal organization, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, in memorializing Congress argued that the Christian basis of the law was unconstitutional, and that “the said Acts are oppressive, inasmuch as they establish a prejudicial discrimination against a particular class of citizen, on account of their religious belief.”<sup>21</sup> Hart insisted, by contrast, that the issue was broader and more universal. It was not about an “individual Jewish chaplain,” she explained, but about the principle of liberty of conscience — in effect, whether America was being true to itself.

Hart's three contributions to Civil War discourse modify regnant generalizations concerning Jewish women and the debate over the Union, contributing both to the literature on Jewish women's prayers and to the (meager) literature on Jewish women's involvement in American politics. They also suggest that Hart's concerns as

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *A Memoir of Louisa B. Hart*, chapter VI.

<sup>21</sup> Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War*, p. 67 reproduces the text of the Board of Delegates' memorial, which Korn characterizes as being moderate in tone and cautious in wording.

an Orthodox Jewish woman reached beyond Victorian ideals of piety, respectability and modesty. Though she paid lip service to those ideals, she also demonstrated — as Blu Greenberg does in our day — that an Orthodox Jewish woman can in addition be well-informed, creative, and politically engaged.

## Yeshivish Women Clergy: The Secular State and Changing Roles for Women in *Haredi* Orthodoxy

Laura Shaw Frank

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of attending a *seudah* organized by the students of Yeshivat Maharat in celebration of the anniversary of the ordination of Rabba Sara Hurwitz. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg shared the following anecdote with the gathering: In 1984, Blu wrote an article in which she made the then-highly controversial argument that there would be Orthodox women rabbis in her lifetime.<sup>1</sup> As was their normal practice with one another, Blu gave the article to Yitz to review before submitting it. Yitz read the article and quipped, "I support everything you wrote...but you just said you're going to live forever!" While I do hope that Blu lives forever, the truth is that she was prescient back in 1984 because, thanks to visionary and courageous Orthodox rabbinic and lay leaders and to the founding of Yeshivat Maharat in America and a number of similar programs in Israel, there are a growing number of ordained Orthodox women clergy serving communities throughout North America.

Of course, while women continue to make inroads as ordained clergy in the Modern Orthodox world, formal *s'mikhah* for women remains unacceptable in the eyes of the vast majority of Orthodox leaders, particularly among those affiliated with *haredi* Orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the concept of women rabbis in right-wing Orthodoxy seems well-nigh impossible. In addition to fierce rabbinic opposition to women rabbis, yeshivish/*haredi* women are not permitted to study Talmud and therefore cannot learn the material required to obtain traditional *s'mikhah*. Furthermore, since the *haredi* Orthodox are more separate from, and therefore more immune to, external society's ideals of equality, *haredi* Orthodox women are not pushing for equity in religious leadership. However, beneath the wall of opposition to female religious leadership in the *haredi* community, a quiet sea-change is taking place. Whether it is spiritual leadership roles embraced by women in the *kiruv* (outreach) community, or whether it is certain legal stances that communal leaders have taken with respect to women clergy, there is no question that *haredi* women are increasingly serving and being

<sup>1</sup> Blu Greenberg, *Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?* *Judaism* 33 (Winter 1984), pp 23-33.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "*haredi*" in its broadest sense, encompassing both the yeshivish and hasidic communities.

שקמתי אם בישראל

You Arose, a Mother in Israel

A *Festschrift* in Honor of Blu Greenberg

Edited by  
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Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance