

**FEMALE HEBREW BENEVOLENT SOCIETY
BICENTENNIAL CEREMONY
MIKVEH ISRAEL CEMETERY – JUNE 2, 2019**

Welcome and History of FHBS

Judith Richards, Chair, FHBS 200 Committee

Good morning and welcome to this auspicious ceremony to commemorate the compassion and vision of our early 19th century Jewish sisters, who, 200-years ago, initiated the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in Philadelphia. As the name explains, these women focused their volunteer efforts on caring for impoverished Hebrew women and children. In colonial Philadelphia, Jews were called Hebrews and charities were referred to as benevolent societies. FHBS has evolved and expanded over the years and has the distinction of being the oldest, continuously run Jewish charitable organization in American history.

In 1819, Jewish communal life centered around the Mikveh Israel congregation in Old City. Though there were but a few indigent Hebrews at that time, they did not go unnoticed. As a matter of communal pride that Jews look after their own, the women of Mikveh Israel extended a helping hand. Rebecca Gratz and seven other congregants who had previous experience working with a non-sectarian charity, offered their leadership.

As the number of impoverished Jews in Philadelphia increased with time, Rebecca took the organizational structure she had learned in the non-sectarian charity and applied it to Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. There were those newcomers who couldn't adjust to economic life in America, others who had calamitous reversals and even more who had trouble adjusting to a new culture.

To meet these diverse needs, Rebecca divided the city into districts, the ladies then divided themselves into Visiting Committees to cover each district and set out to investigate the situation of the individual applicants and administer to their relief. They kept records in a small Visitors' Book, each page divided into quadrants indicating geographical location. To insure privacy, they entered the initials of the recipient in the quadrant in which she lived and the amount spent. Most relief was given in the form of food, fuel and clothing rather than money. As

the numbers of less fortunate increased, the ladies realized their individual, personal services would no longer suffice. So they provided the additional services of visiting nurses, doctors, travelers' aid societies and an employment bureau for women and children so they could learn to be economically self-sufficient!

Gratz, seeing the rewards of charity, expanded the services offered by FHBS. As early as 1835, Rebecca urged the women of FHBS to take action to improve the deplorable state of Jewish education in Philadelphia. She yearned to show the children how to blend popular American culture with Jewish traditions. Her plan was approved in 1838 when the first class of the Hebrew Sunday School Society was held and 50 pupils enrolled. Just as important, Jewish women were the Sunday School teachers; they taught religion publicly for the first time in Jewish history. Then as immigration expanded and more Jews came to Philadelphia, the women of FHBS founded the Jewish Foster Home insisting that "charity strengthens the bonds of society" and that the children of today become the leaders of the Jewish community of the future.

To illustrate further how truly awesome their accomplishments were, consider the reality that most women of this time had families of their own. They were communicating with each other without the benefit of phone or emails. They were traveling throughout the city to fulfill their volunteer duties by horse and buggy or on foot. This was a truly inspirational group of women who decided early on that they wanted to shape and direct the mission of their organization on their own. From the outset, FHBS was independent, unaffiliated with a synagogue or community group. The members raised their own money and directed their activities as they saw fit.

Over these two hundred years, FHBS has been replicated in towns and cities across America. From a simple Jewish value "to be thy sister's keeper" an entire system of social services has evolved. Our 19th century Jewish sisters unknowingly created a Department of Health, Education and Welfare without the support of political leaders or synagogue partnership, simply by acting on Jewish values and doing what they knew was right.

Many of those exceptional women who served on the first Board of FHBS are buried here in the Mikveh Israel Cemetery. We feel honored to have had the privilege to follow in their footsteps. We work to adhere to the original Constitution in which they set out to conduct themselves as a "quiet" charity; quietly, anonymously doing charitable deeds and making *tikkun olam* a reality.

FHBS Today

Pam Stein, Treasurer, FHBS Board of Managers

I wonder if the women of 1819 could have imagined The Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of 2019 (commonly referred to as FHBS).

Today's FHBS members are very different than our original founders. Our board is still an all-female, all volunteer Jewish board but I am not sure if anyone would qualify as a socialite as they did in 1819. The board of today have careers over a wide spectrum of professions. Some examples include social workers, lawyers, accountants, and even one who has run for a judgeship.

I believe it is safe to say that our annual budget is larger than it was in 1819. But it is still small. For our fiscal 2018 year, we distributed approximately \$122,000 to 190 recipients. The areas of assistance included emergency aid, monthly stipends, personal emergency response systems, a pharmacy stipend program and camp scholarships. This was all done with spending less than 1% on overhead.

Money is raised from a variety of sources. This includes a grant from our local Jewish Federation, grants from other foundations and monies raised from the general public through our fund raising campaigns such as our Mishloach Manot fundraiser and our annual campaign.

FHBS 2019 might have its differences from when it is started, but there are things that haven't changed. Poverty is still an issue today. There are still women in our community who suffer from financial insecurities and require assistance. And the woman of today's FHBS board are still committed to helping those in need and ensuring that FHBS will be here for another 200-years.

Living Tzedakah Readings

Carmel Levine, FHBS 200 Committee

1. Rabbi Elazar said, *No harm happens to people on Mitzvah missions.*
Pesachim 8b

2. *Give away a tenth so that you may be wealthy.*
Shabbat 119a, Deuteronomy 14:22
3. *We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.*
Winston Churchill
4. *No one ever becomes poor from doing Tzedakah.*
Maimonides, Matnot Ani'im 10:2
5. *Even a poor person who is supported by Tzedakah must give Tzedakah.*
Gitten 7b
6. *If a person sees that his or her [financial] resources are limited, he or she should use them for Tzedakah, and so much the more so when he or she has great [financial] resources.*
Gitten 7a
7. *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does.*
Margaret Mead
8. *One who works to get others to give is greater than one who only gives himself or herself, as the verse states, The end result of Tzedakah will be peace, and the Tzedakah work will yield eternal peace of mind and security.*
Baba Batra 9a, Isaiah 32:17
9. *A person who runs to do just, good and kind deeds attains life, success, and honor.*
Proverbs 21:21
10. *Most of the things worth doing in the world had been declared impossible before they were done.*
Justice Louis D. Brandeis
11. *Nothing is so contagious as an example. We never do great good or great evil without bringing about more of the same on the part of others.*
La Rochefoucauld

12. *To be is to stand for.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel

13. *To be is to do.*

Myriam Mendilow

14. *The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. Because of indifference one dies before one actually dies.*

Elie Wiesel

15. *Whatever I want for myself, I want the same for that other person. And whatever I do not want for myself or my friends, I do not want for that other person. This is the meaning of the verse, And you shall love the other person as yourself.*

Maimonides, Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah #206

16. *[God says:] Just as I create worlds and bring the dead back to life, you, human beings, are also capable of doing the same.*

Midrash Psalms 116:8

17. *It is not what one says, but rather what one does, that makes all the difference in the world.*

Pirke Avot 1:17

18. *Anyone who performs charity and justice is considered as if he filled the whole world in its entirety with kindness.*

Sukka 49b

Dor L'Dor – From Generation to Generation

Carol B. Shore, FHBS 200 Committee and The Next Generation

Dor L'Dor. Generation to Generation.

We are inspired by our past. We define our present.

Now we look to our future.

Standing on the shoulders of our foremothers, inspired by their *doogma*, their example, of serving their "indigent sisters in need", we conclude by looking to our future.

Unfortunately, all too many of our Jewish sisters continue to need assistance to live healthy lives in dignity.

As I read the names of the seven founders who rest here, a young woman of the next generation will place a stone on each headstone, honoring their foresight and legacy to us and committing to continue their vision. Might not be a coincidence that our young woman is aptly named Rebecca.

Closing the circle. Dor L'Dor. Generation to Generation.

Thank you very much.

Carol was assisted by Rebecca Pomeranz, Tammy Chasan Pomeranz's 10-year-old daughter, who very carefully and conscientiously placed a stone on the graves of each of our founding sisters buried in the Spruce Street Cemetery as Carol called their names.

Anna Marks Allen

Frances Gratz Etting

Rebecca Gratz

Richea Gratz Hays

Sarah Lyon

Phila Pesoa

Sarah Moss Phillips

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