

**Rebecca Gratz** (1781-1869) was the sixth of 10 children born to Michael and Miriam Gratz. Her father had immigrated to the colonies in 1759 from Europe, and the couple married and moved to Philadelphia in 1769. Her father's business success brought them a comfortable life. The family attended Shabbat services together at Mikveh Israel Congregation in the area of Philadelphia now called Old City. An avid reader, Rebecca educated herself by reading biographical novels, essays and literature. Her Jewish education came from her father's private library, which was rich in English translations of Hebrew prayer books and texts.

In 1801, influenced by her female Christian friends who engaged in charitable activities, Rebecca sought ways to create *tikkum olam*. With 14 of her well-to-do friends, she helped establish a non-sectarian charity, the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances, to aid women in poverty, often due to the loss of the breadwinner. Their activities were conducted with privacy and compassion so as not to embarrass the women in need. At the age of 22, plying her warm, congenial social skills, Rebecca raised more money for this charity than any other member - a total of \$36. She also used her fine writing skills as secretary of the charity to apprise the community of their efforts.

As a young woman with beauty, charm and brains, Rebecca led a very active social life with both Jews and Christians in prominent positions. At age 18, she met Samuel Ewing with whom she shared a love of literature, writing and conversation. Though she never expressed her true feelings for him, she was always his "Becky." In 1805 when he proposed marriage, her heart said "yes," but she declined because they didn't share the same religion. She felt a shared spirituality was essential in raising a family. She was distraught at the thought of hurting his feelings, but saw Judaism as the center of family life.

The years that followed this heartbreak were filled with other disappointments and challenging responsibilities: her mother passed away; she assumed care of her ailing father and his household; she helped her sisters as they gave birth; and when her dear sister, Sara, died in 1817, she took on responsibility for raising her six children. She was unmarried and without her own children, at the bottom of the social order, but her communal activities gave her a stature that was uncommon for a woman of her time.

In 1819, at 39-years-old, she was asked by her New York friend, Washington Irving, to entertain the British author, Walter Scott, who was arriving in Philadelphia. Scott was impressed by Rebecca's beauty and grace, and he created a Jewess in his next novel, *Ivanhoe*, who many think was inspired by Rebecca Gratz herself. He portrayed the Jewess as a character morally superior to all others. Though Rebecca herself never embraced this notion, she was an instant national celebrity.

That same year of fame, Rebecca re-directed her single life to good deeds. When the first economic depression hit America hard, Rebecca turned her attention to the growing number of Jewish poor in Philadelphia. She and her Mikveh Israel sisters applied all that they had learned in the Female Association to establish the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. A board of 13

managers and many volunteers offered food, fuel and clothing to Jews in need. It was the first non-synagogal Jewish charity in the United States.

The women expanded the services they offered as the needs demanded. Beyond their physical needs, Rebecca yearned to give them a Jewish identity and spiritual base. By 1838, the Hebrew Sunday School Society was born. Again, it was not a part of a congregation but a community Sunday school with children from all economic quarters. For the first time in Jewish history, women were the educational leaders and teachers. For the destitute children, Rebecca fought to provide a home as well and thus the Jewish Foster Home was born. Men focused on raising the money, and the women concentrated on rescuing children and giving them a loving, moral environment in which to grow.

Though Rebecca's spirit inspired her mother, her sisters, her nieces and fellow female congregants, her beauty often garnered more attention. Noting her fashion sense and love for beautiful clothes, her brother paid for Thomas Sully to paint a portrait miniature of her in 1830. This portrait and others that followed as well as the previous association with the Jewess in *Ivanhoe* became the more popular references to Rebecca.

Rebecca Gratz is living proof that one woman can make a difference in the world.

Judy Richards