

DOCUMENT

Rebecca Aaronson Brickner: Preacher, Teacher, and *Rebbetzin* in Israel

Shuly Rubin Schwartz

Barnett Brickner was one of the foremost Reform rabbis of the first part of the twentieth century. Senior rabbi of one of the most prominent congregations in the movement, he also served as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Brickner was ahead of his time as one of the few Reform rabbis who championed the cause of Zionism in the interwar period.¹ Yet little has been known of the important role that his helpmate and partner, Rebecca Aaronson Brickner, also played in shaping the course of American Jewish life. Indeed, Rebecca Brickner—*rebbetzin*, teacher, educator, lecturer, and organizer, the first professional woman in Jewish education—was a formidable leader in her own right. In examining her life and achievements, one gains insight not only into her own accomplishments, but also into the way rabbinic couples worked together to build up American Judaism in twentieth-century America.²

Born and reared in Baltimore, Md., Rebecca Aaronson was one of thirteen children. Her parents were Jewishly knowledgeable and involved, and they transmitted that love to her. Brickner attended a German-English school during the day; after school and on the Sabbath she went to the Jewish school whose principal was the young, brilliant Jewish educator Samson Benderly.³ Brickner was deeply influenced by both Benderly and his school. Here, she developed her life-long love of Hebrew language and literature and of the land of Israel. Early on Brickner decided to devote herself to promoting the Hebrew language and the Zionist cause. When Benderly was appointed director of the first Bureau of Jewish Education in the United States in New York City in 1910, Brickner moved to New York to serve as his secretary and curriculum writer while attending college. A member of the initial group of Benderly trainees, Rebecca studied at Columbia University with John Dewey; at the Jewish Theological Seminary's Teachers Institute, she took classes with Mordecai M. Kaplan and Israel Friedlaender. Though female,



*Inside the old city of Jerusalem during the late 1920s.
(American Jewish Archives)*

Brickner was very much part of the original group of maverick Jewish educators known as the “Benderly boys.” Barnett Brickner was also among the original “Benderly boys,” and he and Rebecca met when seated next to each other in class. They were married in 1919, the year of Barnett Brickner’s ordination from the Hebrew Union College.⁴

In 1920 the Brickners moved to Toronto, where Barnett Brickner became rabbi of the Holy Blossom Temple. Five years later they moved to Cleveland, where Barnett served as rabbi of the Euclid Avenue Temple (later called Fairmount Temple) until his death in 1958. Here, the Brickners perfected their two-person career, and the synagogue flourished under their leadership. Rebecca entertained, did pastoral work, helped found the Young People’s Congregation of the Temple, and served in the role of spiritual leader to the Temple’s Sisterhood. She gave countless invocations, talks, lessons, and speeches to its members on a wide variety of topics in Jewish life.⁵ Brickner also became active in Jewish organizational life in the larger Cleveland community. She was active in the Cleveland branches of the traditional Jewish women’s organizations of the period, including the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT). She was especially devoted to Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization, with which she had been involved since its founding in 1912.⁶

Rebecca Brickner, always conscious of the significance of her life,

saved both her sermons and her letters, several of which are excerpted below. Since so few rabbis' wives saved their papers, this combination of both public sermons and private correspondence gives us a unique glimpse into the inner workings of this role. From the personal correspondence between husband and wife written during times when they were apart, we learn how this particular rabbinic couple worked out their partnership. The sermons printed below illustrate Rebecca Brickner's oratorical skills, pedagogical prowess, and political savvy. Many *rebbetzins* served in similar capacities; thanks to Brickner's own words, we have a deeper understanding of the power and pitfalls of their precarious position. Dozens of Brickner's sermons, course outlines, and talks, as well as other published newspaper clippings and brochures, can be found in a rich collection at the American Jewish Archives. For her personal correspondence I am grateful to her son, Balfour Brickner, who generously shared this priceless scrapbook with me. I feel privileged to be able to give these letters a wider audience of readers.

The first two excerpts date from 1927, when Barnett traveled to visit Jewish communities in Europe and Palestine and to attend the Fifteenth Zionist Congress in Basle (which took place August 30–September 11). Rebecca's letters to Barnett reveal her ambivalence about her helpmate role. On the one hand, though she missed him terribly, his absence gave her increased power and influence in the congregation. As the one on site at the Temple and in the community, she served as Barnett's eyes and ears, giving her the power to shape his rabbinate. She reminded him to keep up with social graces by corresponding with various congregants and the office staff. Yet she also expanded her own leadership role, especially with regard to her area of expertise—Jewish education. She met in her husband's office to hire a new principal, Nathan Brilliant. She also engaged new teachers and prepared curricula for the coming school year. And, as Barnett himself wrote, "I am relying on you to see that Brilliant gets started." On the other hand, Barnett's absence forced Rebecca to come to terms with the limitations of her subordinate role. Asked to perform a wedding in his stead, Rebecca declined; she was not herself an ordained rabbi. Moreover, her generous spirit began to wear thin as her husband's long trip dragged on. She chafed under the gender expectations of her time and resented playing a secondary role in their partnership. She bridled at being the one left behind with the children

while her husband pursued *their* shared Zionist dreams. Rebecca's hopes for a different future come through even as she expresses happiness for him.

Saturday, July 15, 1927:
My dearest darling:

I can't imagine that this letter is going to reach you in the land of our hopes and dreams. Even though I shall not be there with you, I eagerly look forward to the time when we will all travel there together, even our little Arthur Balfour and Joy. I hope you will not be the least bit disappointed because that is one of my hopes that I refuse to have shattered. I feel that even the, *הרעות*⁸, you'll meet in the land will be covered with gleams of hope and optimism. Here is where I begin to feel sorry for myself and only a feeling that we shall travel it together makes me bear up...Those cards you have been sending to friends mean more than you will ever know. Don't forget Dr. & Mrs...The girls in the office should hear from you again. David Dietz had wanted to know why the Press had not as yet had something from you.

We have been living in hopes and fears. The Palestine earthquake made me feel very uneasy, and I'm thankful for the fact that you chose to go to Russia first. Then today's papers tell of a new outbreak in Vienna. God certainly is with you Beryl dear. It is most wonderful how He guides you, I have still about two months wait, but I am not lonely. I fill my time to the utmost and our many friends are being over-kind to me. I just miss you so terribly that some nights feel as though the day will never come....If I don't look out I'll be m[aking] you homesick and that would [not] be fair with you so far from h[ome.] I want you to know that I feel every moment away means wealth gained for you and therefore I am happy.

....To business:

[Nathan] Brilliant, as I cabled you was elected at [\$]5000, to begin his work [as educational director] on Sept. 15th. If

necessary we will begin our school a week later because we don't want to start without you here. Everything will be running smoothly by the time you get back. I have engaged quite a few good teachers both for school and High School and also Hebrew. Only 2 more to get. Brilliant came to Cleveland on the morning of July 14th. I met him and had him on my hands all day and he left again on the 6:15. Dave Kohn called a meeting for the same afternoon at 2, in your study....Max Rosenblum and Judge Blum? had a deal on for Benny Friedman at that same time & could not come. However, I took Brilliant to Rosenblum's office before the meeting and R. [Rosenblum] had a session with him then. I am mailing Brilliant the curriculum and all the school stuff for his perusal during the summer....

Kisses & Kisses
from Rivk

August 3, 1927:

My dearest beloved Beryl,

....As hard as it has been to be without you this summer there had been a joy in spite of separation to know that what you have done has been to enhance your outlook and will in time redound to the glory of our children....

No wonder you did not understand the word Brilliant in the cable. Surely by now you must know that Nathan Brilliant of New York was elected to take Pearlman's place as educational director. He will be here Sept. 15th when all announcements will be made. Things at the Temple are very quiet right now. All those who received cards from you were flattered beyond words. Jasha Veissi? & Hilda Bloch, Will Kohn's daughter, got married today. In your absence they wanted me to perform the ceremony, but I in turn recommended Dr. Huebsch.

....Naturally I should like to be with you in Basle. If we had the money to spare I might have surprised you. I feel more and more daily that Palestine and Palestine only is the solution. Jewish life in America is so empty. All our idealism is on the

minus side. Perhaps persecution is the only thing that keeps us Jewish. I'm anxious to hear what you have to say.

....My very fondest fondest love and beautiful yearnings to you my precious. God keep you well and unite us all in safety.

Your eternal love girl.

Rivkah



Jerusalem in the late 1920s.
(American Jewish Archives)

Five years later Rebecca Brickner took action to make her dreams a reality. She left her beloved Beryl for six months and took her children with her for her own sabbatical to Palestine. The next set of letters reveals how restorative the trip was—not only in that it fulfilled her Zionist longings, but also because it restored her sense of herself as a competent, engaging woman in her own right. In keeping with the expectations of her era, Rebecca justified the trip as having been necessary for the children—so that they would learn Hebrew and become devoted to the land. Her letters, however, also reveal how essential the trip was for her own well-being. Joy and Balfour did learn Hebrew in Palestine, but, more to the point, Brickner also accomplished her personal goals. One senses how starved Brickner, as a *rebbetzin* in Cleveland, must have felt for intellectual stimulation and validation. Once in Palestine she took it all in—sightseeing, university

study, lectures, reconnecting with old friends, and finding a place for herself within the intellectual elite of the period. She took advantage of every opportunity with an almost desperate urgency. Stretching herself academically, Brickner loved discovering S. Y. Agnon and Rahel⁹ before they were well known. She basked in the sense of liberation that she felt being on her own and especially in the knowledge that she was appreciated for her own intellectual gifts. Living among scholars and educators, she established herself squarely at the center of Jewish cultural and intellectual life of the period—and she did so in her own right, not as a rabbi's wife.

13 Apr. 1932.

....I am getting to like Jerusalem more and more every day....and when I can arrange for my lessons and get in swing, then I know I shall be in my element. At present, I seem to be the wonder to all those at this Pension [Goldsmith], coming from America and speaking Hebrew.

2 May 1932.

....I had my first lesson with Livnie my Hebrew teacher today and what a teacher he is. Simply wonderful....He sat with me for two and one half hours steadily today and marveled at my thorough knowledge of Bible, Literature, and Hebrew but thinks nothing of my Ashkenazic pronunciation. He swears that the Jews should never have adopted the Ashkenazic one since the Spanish is the truer one according to all the rules of grammar. However, he has no fears for me because he says I am the most talented student that has ever come to him Michutx La-Aretz and he will hate to give me up....I read the morning paper with him, then Bialik's *Aggadah*¹⁰ since I want to learn all the Midrashim and then now I am reading Agnon [whom she earlier described as "the Hebrew modern Ilue {prodigy} and writer who is a neighbor of mine and whose works I am now reading"] and Devorah Baron¹¹, the two Iluyim in the land that everyone raves about. I am simply delighted with Agnon's style. He is a Chassid and such spirituality that I get from him is indescribable. After I have

read some more of his stuff I'll go and call on him and tell him how much I enjoy him.

...I feel myself rejuvenated every day. Much fresher in spirit and lighter in body and keener of whatever mind I have. I love Palestine with all its lack of much that it deserves.

Yet even in the midst of her glory, Brickner couldn't completely shed her old role. Still worried about her work at home, she responded to her husband's letter to her about the possibility of salary cuts for Temple personnel because of the Depression. Focused on what she referred to as "our school," Rebecca responded,

Maybe you can have a real talk with B. [Brilliant] and ask him to wake up to facts and reduce his salary radically. Maybe he could get some part time position elsewhere. I hate to have our school get a shaking down. I'm so afraid of undoing a lot of good work.

Aware of how limited her time in Palestine was, she remained acutely conscious of the significance of every moment. She noted wistfully that

8 May 1932:

...I shall hate to leave Palestine because I love it so and the children are just beginning to get the feel of the language and the land and everything....

Of course I feel that this trip has already done so much for me. It has opened up new vistas for me and lifted me out of the rut I was falling into.

But such an attitude merely emboldened her to make the most of her stay. And in so doing, she focused especially on furthering her knowledge. She took full advantage of the advanced resources at the Hebrew University, for nothing of this caliber was available to her in Cleveland.

17 May 1932.

....I went to see [Joseph] Klausner¹² yesterday and after talking to me one minute he gave me his letter of admission not only to his classes but also to his Seminar and the same thing with Yellin.¹³ I will be carrying 15 hours of University work and 4 hours of private work in Haggadah and modern Hebrew essays. The university is wonderful. It makes me feel as though I were living those [Israel] Friedlander days over again....He [Klausner] was amazed to know how much Hebrew I knew. It was thrilling to find yourself finally acknowledged. When the students saw me taking down my notes with accuracy and speed, they didn't believe their eyes.

6 June 1932:

Everybody is simply astounded at my knowledge of Jewish culture and Hebrew. They can't understand how it could have been done in America. Even Dr. Klausner marvels at me. And how I enjoy my work at the University. I don't know how I shall be able to g[o] on without this fresh stream of Mekor Mayim Chayim [this source of living waters] when I get back. It will be hard.

14 June 1932:

Since my being in the Land I accidently came across some of the poems of Ra-hel [*sic*], while browsing in a bookshop. I tell you Beryl that I couldn't leave them. I practically stood in that store and read a whole volume and then she haunted me by her beauty and images of Palestine. Beside[s] her vocabulary is so rich. Suddenly I saw modern Hebrew used in all her riches and glory and I made it my business at once to find out who this Rachel was. To my great sorrow I learned that she had died last year at the age of 40, had come from Russia where at the age of 26 she became imbued with Zionism not having heard a single Hebrew word before and came on to Palestine, worked in the fields in the colonies by day and wrote poems

by night. She had tuberculosis I think when she came because her poems are full of her lack of physical strength and [she] finally dies at so early an age. The reason I think of her is because she has a beautiful poem to Kinnereth that haunted me all the while I was there. I have it and have got the music to it by now. It wasn't until I got to Haifa and was talking to Ussishkin¹⁴ when he told me all about her....I have her poetry now and will tell you more about it when I see you.

Once back from Palestine, Brickner channeled her new knowledge and energy into teaching and fund raising. Her talents blossomed still further in the years following her husband's death. Brickner grew more and more polished as a speaker, and she continually incorporated her learning and experiences into her words. The collection of her papers at the American Jewish Archives provides a powerful counterpoint to the personal letters. Here we see a powerful preacher, as effective as any of the male rabbinic counterparts of her era. As the following two examples demonstrate, Rebecca was erudite and inspirational. Her talks were continually enriched with Hebrew quotes from biblical and rabbinic sources, as well as popular citations from American literature and government. At the same time, she continually referred to the significance of the role of Jewish women both in history and in her own day.

Temple Sisterhood—Chicago—March 27, 1959¹⁵

Dear Friends: This is Sisterhood Sabbath, when we, presumably the WEAKER SEX, take over our responsibilities as JEWISH WOMEN along RELIGIOUS LINES in a worship service this evening.

This is really in keeping with the week just ending, when we celebrated the FESTIVAL of PURIM, when the heroin [sic] of the story QUEEN ESTHER, rose at the right moment to help her people from the cruelties of the Hitler of that day, HAMAN the AGAGITE. Mordecai her cousin admonished her in the famous lines contained in the BOOK OF ESTHER "think not with THYSELF, that thou shalt escape in the King's house, more than all the Jews. For if Thou altogether holdest

thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance come to the Jews from another source, but Thou and thy father's house will go down in shame, and who knoweth whether thou art not come to royal estate for such a time as this?"

Her answer was "I will go to the king even though unbidden, and if I perish, I perish. **כִּאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי, אֲבַדְתִּי**"¹⁶

Her name was Esther, Her Persian name was ASHTORES, the morning star, the star that shines all through the night into the dawn of the new day, and is not extinguished until the sun rises, the Venus of the Skies, and we Jewish women can be likened to that star, that shined [*sic*] throughout the darkness of history, and preserved our loyalty until the dawn of our new day. The Hebrew name for Esther is Hadassah, Myrtle, the healing balm, whose mission it was and is to heal the daughter of our people (taken from the book of Jeremiah) and it was Hadassah who accepted HEALING as their mission even before the beginnings of Statehood. Hadassah has a very real connection with Queen Esther.

Let me go back a little in History. In 1873, about 85 yrs. ago, A Rabbi, who ws [*sic*] ministering in Albany, New York, was reprimanded by his Cong[regation] because he had WOMEN singing in the choir of that Synagogue. Who ever heard of women singing in a Temple at a religious service.

That reprimand was heard around the world, and that Rabbi wa[s] no other that [*sic*] the sainted and far visioned Isaac M. Wise, who promptly left Albany, came to Cincinnati and founded the Union of American Hebrew Cong[regation]s, and thus Reform Judaism was launched, and dedicated to a liberal and progressive interpretation of our Religion.

Nowhere has the position of WOMEN IN THE SYNAGOGUE been as strong as it has been here in America.

Reform Judaism has removed her from the BALCONY, and from behind the curtains, and brought her down to an equal footing with men in every phase of our religious and

educational life, even to a place on the Boards of Trustees of the congregations and today we have a woman, our immediate past President of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods acting in the capacity of President of one of the oldest and most respected Congregations in America. I am referring to Mrs. Hugo Dalshimer [sic] of Baltimore.

She did not have to take any risks for her Judaism as did Queen Esther. She came to her position as of rights, for we in Reform believe that women are not the WEAKER SEX, that the MIND HAS NO GENDER...

Sisterhood- 60th Anniversary, Jan. 20-1970¹⁷

אלוהינו ואלהי אבותינו

Our God & God of Our Fathers, who are the source of all life, We Thy daughters in Israel stand before Thee at this great moment of our history, with hearts filled with gratitude, for 60 full years, dedicated to Thy service.

Thy divine guidance has been our inspiration & our trust.

Our trust has not been in man, nor in princes, but in Thee alone.

Thou who art the Source of all Sources, & the root of all roots hast been our mighty rock & fortress of strength.

Thou hast been the guiding light of our spiritual life.

We Jewish women have always been sensitive to the purposes of our religion.

With awe & humility did we ever seek to fathom Thy great mystery which has sustained our fathers, & has preserved us & our people against hatred, persecution, & death.

Again we stand ready to re-dedicate ourselves anew to the principles of our faith even in this turbulent decade now aborning, & we ask for Thy continued inspiration & guidance. Help us to realize that that great Moral Ideal, which is the basis of our faith, may again be established in our world of strife with safety & security for all & hunger for none. We are our brother's keepers.

Many have lost their way & are stumbling in the dark.

But we, the Ladies of the lamp, still carry Thy torch, the torch of Judaism.

Help us we pray Thee to lift that torch high again for our children & for our unborn generations, for Israel is **נצח**, eternal.

Therefore We beseech Thee O Heavenly Father to endow us again with warm heartedness,—with sympathy—with knowledge & understanding & wisdom reaching out to all who would come to us for Thy inspiration & Thy guidance.

Grant us we pray Thee pride & dignity in the days ahead, & make our task again divine & grant us Thy blessing.

Amen.

In 1971 Brickner was the first recipient of an honorary doctorate in Hebrew Letters from the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, in recognition of her pivotal role in establishing that institution some twenty-five years earlier. In her response to the degree, Brickner again championed the causes she held dear, again singling out the importance of women. One can still see the impact of her 1932 trip on these words spoken almost forty years later, for Brickner began her remarks by quoting from the poet Rahel.

December 13 1971.¹⁸

Dr. Goldstein, Rabbis, Teachers, Family, & Friends

I am deeply moved as I stand before you, here in my spiritual home, so dear to me in gratefulness & deep appreciation for the honor you have just bestowed upon [me]. I shall carry this honor with humility & dignity, ever grateful to God almighty for

- 1) having kept me alive all these years, for
- 2) having opened my eyes to life's values, contained in my rich heritage &
- 3) who has endowed me with some responsibility to work for the future fulfillment of our ideals.

I feel like our own Poetess **רחל** felt, when she saw the Sea of Galilee for the first time

“ההייתי, אם חלמתי חלום,”

Is this real? Or am I dreaming? Seeing you before me is believing. This is real.

I have been a student, a wife, a mother, a teacher, but never a doctor. I shall never be able to cure the body, but I shall continue to try & heal the Jewish Soul. Not alone, but with all of you here this day. Therefore I share this honor with our

1) Community - Federation

2) our Bureau of Jewish Education

3) our College of Jewish Studies &

4) **אחולין אחולין חביב**¹⁹ with our Women's Association

... אבן מאסו הבונים היתה לראש פנה. this stone which the Builders had neglected, nay rejected, has become the Chief Cornerstone.

We are determined that our Survival as Jews in America must be a qualitative survival & not merely a numerical one.

We are the people of the Book & we want to keep it so.

We want to create a Jewish cultural environment for ourselves, for our children, for our unborn generations & above all for our country & for democracy. For Judaism & Democracy are the 2 sides of the same coin.

Our Founding Fathers based the future of America upon precepts contained in our Torah, in our Religious Constitution. The inscription on the Liberty Bell is taken from our Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim ye Liberty throughout the land, to All the inhabitants thereof."

As Jews in America we must survive, spiritually & that we can only do through a well planned continuing system [of] Jewish Ed[ucation], which is the life-blood of our survival. We have a long chain of tradition, & we are here today, because we are a link in that chain.

We want to perpetuate something so real & so vital, yet to many so abstract & so remote. Our problem then is to survive spiritually in America & to cultivate a qualitative Jewish environment.

For our Brethren in Israel, survival presents a different aspect. Their problem is to survive physically. They are beset by hostile enemies & With God's help, they too will survive.

כי עם ישראל נצח , Israel is eternal.

....When we say "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," we affirm the Universality of the One True God & we accept Obedience to the תורה & His Commandments—His Moral Law—which has become our Jewish way of life.

This Torah, This Moral Law was transmitted to us by Moses Our law-giver nearly 3000 yrs. ago at Mt. Sinai. No word in this Sacred Law dares to be changed. It was inscribed on tablets of stone forever & to be inscribed in our hearts in the same way. Though no word in Torah can be changed, the spirit of the Torah can be changed from time to time only by interpretation & re-interpretation as is manifested in the Mish[n]a-Talmud & Oral Law not as strict constructionism but as Re-constructionism, pointing to a way of moral life & living in every age. This Torah reveals our secret weapon. It is not the A Bomb nor the H Bomb but the God Bomb. Which means our faith in God.

Our people in the Nazi gas chambers, marched to their death with tears streaming down their cheeks & kept on singing אני מאמין I still believe. This is real faith. This is the kind of faith we want to transmit to our children. We Jews make every sacrifice that our children be given a religious education not to die as slaves but to live with dignity as free human beings & in a better world. There are Bureaus of Jewish education now 60 yrs. old in every large & small community all over America. These Bureaus have converted an uncharted ocean of Jewish knowledge & wisdom & Inspiration into a well organized system of Jewish Education that continues for American children born in an American environment....

It takes a leap of money & skills to transmit a 4000 yr. old heritage to American children who have to go to classes after Public School hours, when baseball & football beckon. But—We have not fought a losing battle.

We have been successful. We in this city have just succeeded in establishing a Hebrew High School, & our plan to keep on teaching during the summer in the camps, & via tours to Israel, have been a boon with good results. As for qualified teachers—you have the answer today. Teacher training schools were organized which today are developing into colleges for

Higher Jewish learning, as this college has developed. There are today 11 such accredited colleges in the U.S. Our College, though barely 20 yrs old has this year become accredited by the State of Ohio & can boast 400 students—

- a) dedicated Dean and Pres. &
- b) an outstanding Faculty.

Last year, our College granted 2 Masters Degrees. This Honorary degree today is the first & I'm very honored to be the recipient. We share our College with the entire community & with all who wish to learn. We have students of every age. Learning is a Jewish sport. One can become a Professional or just an Educated Jew. We never stop learning. This College augers to become a diadem in the crown of Cleveland's Jewish Community.

The College badly needs a home of its own—a new facility, & toward this new home, we shall bend every effort. We are literally bursting at the seams. In some classes, there is standing room only.

Last but by no means least, I want to share my honor with the Women's Asso[ciation] of the College who have helped mightily to bring this convocation before you. Under its inspired & most capable leader & President, together with a consecrated & dedicated Cabinet of Women with vision, this Asso[ciation] barely 2 yrs old, has already shown great strength. It is already the Right Arm of the College. It is working 1) for scholarships....It was the Jewish Woman at Mt. Sinai over 3000 yrs. ago, who assumed the responsibility of implementing the teachings of the Torah. They knew that Mothers were the best teachers. They knew the job would be theirs. They had no choice. These women are continuing in their original role....

Today is the first day of Chanuka, a time when we commemorate the ancient victory of 2000 years ago, when a small band of Maccabees won the first victory in the world for religious freedom over the mighty Syrian hordes & over Antiochus, the Hitler of that day, who dared to uproot the Jews

& Judaism but failed. Tonight we shall light Chanuka candles in every Jewish home. Chanuka means Re-dedication, Education. Light means freedom. Education means Learning & commitment....God of Might. God of right. We pray for Thy help & may Peace come soon to the entire world.

Brickner remained exquisitely attuned both to the possibilities and limitations of her era and her gender. In choosing to marry a rabbi, she ensured that she would attain status and authority in her community. As her husband's partner, she affected the congregation and community in ways far beyond what she might have been able to accomplish on her own. She especially exerted an enormous influence on the women in her synagogue, on Jewish education in Cleveland, and on Reform Zionism. When Brickner traveled on her own, she pushed the envelope of gender limitations still further. She moved beyond the constraints of her role, renewing her learning, self-confidence, and independence. Thanks to her own words, we gain special insight into the *rebbetzin* role. Surely countless other rabbis' wives experienced similar frustration as they walked the tightrope of female leadership within the constraints of the helpmate role. It is through her own words that Rebecca's unique talents, passions, commitments, and achievements shine most brightly.

Shuly Rubin Schwartz is Irving Lehrman Research Assistant Professor of American Jewish History and Dean of the Albert A. List College of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. She is the author of The Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia published by Hebrew Union College Press in 1991.

NOTES:

1. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 318-19.
2. For more on the rabbinate as a two-person career see Shuly Rubin Schwartz, "We Married What We Wanted to Be": The *Rebbetzin* in Twentieth-Century America," *American Jewish History* 83(June 1995): 223-46; and idem, "Ambassadors without Portfolio: The Religious Leadership of *Rebbetzins* in Late Twentieth Century American Jewish Life," in *Women in American Judaism: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001).
3. Samson Benderly (1876-1944) emigrated from Safed, Palestine to Baltimore in 1898. He earned a medical degree at Johns Hopkins University but abandoned the field of medicine to pursue a career in Jewish education. In 1910, he became director of the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City, the first such organization in the United States. He pioneered the *Ivrit-be-Ivrit* methodology of teaching Hebrew by

using Hebrew as the language of instruction, and also took a special interest in the education of Jewish girls, in adolescent and secondary Jewish education and in Jewish camping. Benderly's influence was far-flung and long lasting. His bureaus became the prototype for similar institutions in other cities, and the individuals that he trained became nationally renowned Jewish educators in the decades that followed.

4. Rebecca A. Brickner, "As I Remember Dr. Benderly," *Jewish Education* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1949): 53; interview with Rebecca Ena Aaronson Brickner, February 23–24, 1983; notes for "B'nai B'rith Great Books Series" talk, undated, 7/1; and "Biography—Rebecca A. Brickner," 8/7, Barnett R. and Rebecca A. Brickner papers, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (hereafter, AJA); *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917–18* (New York: Kehillah of New York City, 1918), 459; Jacob Kohn to Herman Rubenovitz, February 18, 1914, in Herman H. Rubenovitz and Mignon L. Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, Mass.: Nathaniel Dame & Co., 1967), 135–36; Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 392, n. 56; Alexander M. Dushkin, *Living Bridges: Memoirs of an Educator* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 10, n. 11. Dushkin lists the Benderly boys and then after an "also," he lists the women; and Samuel M. Silver, *Portrait of a Rabbi: An Affectionate Memoir on the Life of Barnett R. Brickner* (Cleveland: Barnett R. Brickner Memorial Foundation, 1959), 13.

5. Balfour Brickner, "Rebecca Brickner: Luncheon in honor of her Seventy-fifth birthday," Fairmount Temple, January 28, 1969, tape recording, AJA; Helen-Rose Klausner to Rebecca Brickner, February 13, 1964, 8/8; "Y.P.C.s 15th Anniversary," 8/2; and "YPC Celebrates 15th Anniversary on March 21st," *Mosaic* (March 1964), 1, in 9/2; "Mrs. Brickner Tells of Her Faith in Girls of Today," *Cleveland News*, April 25, 1926, in 9/3; 7/1–6, Brickner papers; and Balfour Brickner, taped interview by author, New York, N.Y., February 3, 2000.

6. Lauren B. Tishkoff, "Jewish Scholar Rebecca Brickner leaving Cleveland," *Cleveland Press*, October 25, 1981; "Biography—Rebecca A. Brickner," 8/7; 7/1–6; 8/5; Stephen S. Wise to Rifkahleben, April 27, 1936, 6/10; and "How Hadassah Was Born," April 20, 1950, 6/8, Brickner papers; Irving I. Katz, *The Beth El Story, with a History of the Jews in Michigan before 1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1955), n.p.; and Transcript of Ninth Biennial Assembly (1931), Box 2, Folder 4, *PNFTS*, Women of Reform Judaism Collection, AJA.

7. Barnett Brickner to Rebecca Brickner, August 10, 1927, personal files of Balfour Brickner.

8. Poverty. The Hebrew word that Brickner uses is of rabbinic origin.

9. Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) became a renowned Hebrew writer who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966, the first granted to a Hebrew writer. The first edition of his collected works in four volumes appeared in 1931. Rahel Bluwstein (1890–1931) was a Hebrew poet whose clear, uncomplicated style made her very popular with the public. She died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-one. At that time, the writers were virtually unknown in the United States except among a select group of Jewish Studies scholars and Hebraists.

10. Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), renowned Hebrew poet, settled in Palestine in 1924 and was a dominant figure in the creation of Jewish cultural life in Palestine. *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, compiled with Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki between 1908–11, is a collection of rabbinic lore.

11. Devorah Baron (1887–1956), was known for her Hebrew short stories depicting Jewish life in the small towns of Eastern Europe and in Palestine. Her first

volume of short stories was published in 1927, and she was the first recipient of the Bialik Prize in 1934.

12. Joseph G. Klausner (1874–1958) was a literary critic, historian, and Zionist who settled in Palestine in 1919. When the Hebrew University was established, he was appointed to the chair of Hebrew literature. Klausner was especially interested in the transformation of the Hebrew language into a modern spoken tongue.

13. David Yellin (1864–1941) was a distinguished scholar, writer, and teacher. From 1926 on, he served as professor of Hebrew poetry of the Spanish period at the Hebrew University.

14. Abraham Ussishkin (1863–1941) was a Zionist leader and president of the Jewish National Fund from 1923 until his death. He settled in Palestine in 1919 as head of the Zionist Commission and was instrumental in establishing the country's Hebrew school network and the Hebrew University.

15. Brickner papers, 8/1.

16. The English translation precedes the Hebrew, which is a quote from Esther 4:16.

17. Ibid, 8/1.

18. Ibid, 7/1.

19. "The very last is dearest." This is a well known maxim from the Midrash.