

Rebecca Aronson Brickner (1894-1988)

Jewish Educator and Community Leader



Rebecca Aronson Brickner circa 1924 and 1960

Rebecca Ena Aronson Brickner was the first woman to complete a new program in Jewish education at The Jewish Theological Seminary, becoming the first woman with a professional degree in Jewish education in the United States.

She was born in Baltimore, Maryland to parents, Max and Dora Aronson, who followed Orthodox Jewish practices and had strong ties to the Zionist movement. When she came to America at age 5, the eldest of, eventually, 13 children, her parents enrolled her in a German-English school. After school and on the Sabbath, she went to a Jewish Hebrew school whose principal was a young educator from then-Palestine, Dr. Samson Benderly. There she developed her lifelong love of Hebrew, Jewish education and (what would become) Israel.

In 1910 Benderly was invited to establish the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City, and Aronson accompanied him as his Hebrew secretary. During her years in New York, Aronson continued her studies at Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. She was one of the founders of Hadassah with Henrietta Szold, her lifelong friend and established its League of Jewish Youth.

She taught at the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary and also organized a preparatory school in New York for high school girls to prepare them for careers in teaching and group work. Additionally, Aronson introduced the study of Hebrew into the entire Sunday School of Temple Emanu-El in New York.

On August 10, 1919, Aronson married Barnett R. Brickner, a coworker at the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York. The couple moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where Barnett studied for the Reform rabbinate at Hebrew Union College. His first pulpit was in Toronto, Ontario. While living there, Rebecca Brickner established Hadassah in Canada. She also organized the first Sisterhood of a Reform congregation in Canada. The Brickners came to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1925, where Rabbi Brickner was to lead the Euclid Avenue Temple (Anshe Chesed), today Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple, until his death in 1958.

In 1925 at Congregation Anshe Chesed in Cleveland, Ohio, Mrs. Brickner became the first woman in the United States to conduct an entire temple service and read from the Torah in Hebrew. In 1932, Brickner traveled to Palestine with her children, Joy and Balfour, from March to August. She was practicing what she preached, providing an individualized, child-centered, experiential, Hebrew language, and Zionist education for her own children. As well as fulfilling her own high personal aspirations improving her own Hebrew language skills and taking classes at Hebrew University for fifteen hours a week. When she returned to Cleveland, she incorporated her new learning and passion into her courses, invocations, and sermons and redoubled her efforts to enhance the Jewishness of the congregation's women.

Rebecca Brickner promoted Jewish education and women's Jewish organizations. By her impetus, in 1963 the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies became an agency independent of the Bureau of Jewish Education of Cleveland, and she established the college's Women's Association. She continued to teach and study through 1980s. In 1971, the College of Jewish Studies awarded Brickner an honorary Doctorate of Hebrew Letters.

Ever the student, Brickner was not content with just an honorary degree. The following spring, she earned a master's of Hebrew literature from the college. Her thesis, submitted in the spring of 1972 and written entirely in Hebrew, is titled "Prophecy, Ethics, and Messianism in the Teachings of Professor Joseph Klausner". In 1973, she earned a Masters of Hebrew Letters. In 1974, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in lieu of ordination, gave a tribute to Mrs. Brickner, signed by President Alfred Gottschalk, at a formal religious service in New York. This special citation, coinciding with Brickner's 80th birthday, proclaimed Brickner's accomplishments as being "in the forefront of those who have helped indoctrinate a whole generation of Jews with the ideals, the hopes, and the aspirations of our people and our faith."

Locally, Mrs. Brickner was a board member of all major Jewish women's organization, including Women's American ORT, Brandeis Women's Committee, and the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress. She was founder of the Grandmothers Club for Bonds for Israel, and was active in the American Association for Jewish Education and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

For more than half a century, Mrs. Brickner was an active force in the Jewish community, garnering an incredible list of accolades and awards during her lifetime. She left Cleveland in 1981 to make her home in Boston with her daughter Joy Rabinovitz. She had resided at Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged, Rosindale, MA, since August 1987.

More on Rebecca Aronson Brickner

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