

Women of faith 3: Francesa Sarah of Safed and Theresa of Àvila

The Rhinebeck Reformed Church

in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Dutchess County
and the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College

For millennia, since the time of the foundation of the first cities around 8,000 BCE, women have been relegated to a secondary position. Cities prioritized standing armies of men, male kings considered to be sons of gods, and an understanding of genealogical descent from fathers. Despite that clear bias, women from the biblical period until our time have emerged as the instruments of change, mandated not by society but from a power greater than society. This series will investigate examples of such women, from Miriam (the sister of Moses) to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Francesa Sarah of Safed (sixteenth century)

Toledot ha-'Ari

“Behold, now I know that he is a holy man of God, of whom the Lord has said, ‘I will be sanctified by those close to me’ (Leviticus 10:3).”

—Hear now the word of the Lord! The man whom you seek is certainly dead, but should you desire to go, the Lord will make your journey successful.

—Yesterday you told me not to go, since I would not succeed, and now you tell me to go, for the Lord will make my journey successful!

—That is true. Yesterday you thought to leave the Land of Israel and dwell abroad, while last night you repented and made the Lord your witness that if he grants you success, you will return to Safed. Since the will of the Lord is that you not uproot your home from the Land of Israel, he will grant you success.

Upon hearing the words of the woman, he fell flat on the ground, and bowed in worship to the Lord for having given his wisdom to this woman of valor....From then on, faith in her was fixed like a trusty stake, and he believed her, and she said many different things.

Teresa of Àvila (1515-1582)

The Interior Castle (1577)

A soul which gives itself to prayer, either much or little, should on no account be kept within narrow bounds. Since God has given it such great dignity, permit it to wander at will through the rooms of the castle, from the lowest to the highest. Let it not force itself to remain for very long in the same mansion, even that of self-knowledge. Mark well, however, that self-knowledge is indispensable, even for those whom God takes to dwell in the same mansion with Himself. Nothing else, however elevated, perfects the soul which must never seek to forget its own nothingness. Let humility be always at work, like the bee at the honeycomb, or all will be lost. But, remember, the bee leaves its hive to fly in search of flowers and the soul should sometimes cease thinking of itself to rise in meditation on the grandeur and majesty of its God. It will learn its own baseness better thus than by self-contemplation, and will be freer from the reptiles which enter the first room where self-knowledge is acquired.

Although it is a great grace from God to practise self-examination, yet 'too much is as bad as too little,' as they say; believe me, by God's help, we shall advance more by contemplating the divinity than by keeping our eyes fixed on ourselves, poor creatures of earth that we are.

Bruce Chilton
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