

Video Clip: Rabbanit Flora Farha Sassoon

Famed philanthropist, scholar, and hostess

Born into an Iraqi family, Rabbanit Flora (Farha) Sassoon (1859-1936) was raised in a bustling, dynamic Jewish community in Bombay. She was a successful business woman, an active philanthropist, a social-intellectual Jewish leader, and beloved hostess in Bombay, and continued in this vein after her move to London. Despite growing up at a time when female Torah learning wasn't promoted, Sassoon could expertly discuss intricacies of Jewish text and Sephardic law with rabbis, and prove herself equal in these conversations. Accordingly, Flora was able to hold communal religious leadership roles, atypical for contemporary Orthodox women, and perform rites like publicly reading from the Torah.

Suggested Implementations

TaNakh

1. Proverbs 31:10-31 – the concept of an “Eshet Hayil.”

Philosophy/Hashkafa

1. Women and Torah reading
2. Women and learning Torah – Massekhet Sotah: “better to burn the Torah than teach it to a woman”
3. Working for the greater good within a pandemic
4. “*Torah im derekh erez*” – Torah together with the “way of the land” (“the interface between Judaism and its enviroing culture” – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

Background

Flora's mother was from the Sassoon family, also known as the “Rothschilds of the East.” The Sassoons had family representatives across the east and would establish themselves as communal leaders and businesspeople. They moved eastward, from Baghdad, in the early 19th century. Flora was born in Bombay in 1859, the eldest of twelve.

Flora was raised by scholarly parents. Ezekiel Gubbay and Aziza Sassoon ensured that Flora received the best education possible. She attended a prestigious Catholic school. From a very young age they saw in her a great mind, and brought Jewish scholars to come and learn with her. In fact, people who visited Bombay wrote of her knowledge, brilliance, and personality from a young age. This well-rounded, bi-cultural education that her parents deeply invested in, gave her the tools to be fluent in Hebrew, Aramaic, Hindustani, English, French, and German - all by age seventeen. The rabbis hired as her private tutors ensured that she was fluent in her ancestral texts, as well.

In 1876, Flora married Solomon David Sassoon, son of David Sassoon. He'd recently come from leading his family business in China, returning to Bombay to manage its office and the Sassoon cotton mill

industry. Flora helped her husband with the family business and created a name for herself by hosting lavish balls that strictly adhered to *kashrut*. David died in 1894.

While raising her three children, she assumed David's business responsibilities becoming a very impressive and sought-after businesswoman. Flora began her lifelong philanthropy by supporting a young Jewish bacteriologist, Waldemar Mordecai Haffkine, who developed vaccines to combat both a severe plague in Bombay and the spread of cholera throughout Asia. She spearheaded a campaign to convince the population, amidst serious opposition from the Hindu and Muslim communities, to inoculate. Flora was also an active member of the anti-purdah movement.¹

In 1901, Flora decided to move her family to London where her disabled daughter Mozelle could receive superior medical assistance. Flora soon became a legendary hostess there as well. She had many relatives from her husband's family already well-settled into English society but who had not preserved their Eastern (i.e. Iraqi and Indian) culture and traditions, like Flora and her immediate family did. Flora was very well traveled, jet setting to distant exotic locations, but this never impeded her serious religious observance; indeed, she never traveled without her own *minyán* (quorum of 10 men) and *shohet* (ritual slaughterer).

Flora Sassoon became such a famous benefactor that thousands of people would appeal to her for funds or with urgent requests for help, inspiring hope, admiration, and inspiration, especially amongst Sephardic Jewry. Flora also declared her steadfast support for the Zionist cause, officially standing by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and in 1925, visiting Jerusalem.

Sassoon was also an expert on Rashi, the brilliant 11th-century biblical commentator, analyzing his responsa and exegesis. She was particularly interested in Rashi's daughters, who were famously serious scholars, and the points within his responsa in which he defends women. Flora also published a piece in *The Jewish Forum* in its thirteenth anniversary issue, wherein she explicates the special meaning Judaism attaches to the number thirteen. There are many letters of correspondence discussing Torah and *halakhah* between her and Rav Yitzhak Nissim when she was in London and he was in Iraq, along with many other well-known and important scholars of the time from across the Ashkenazi and Sephardi worlds.

Not only did Flora master Jewish scholarly sources, she also read from the Torah in a Baghdad synagogue. In 1924, she was elected the first chairwoman of London's Jews' College and delivered an erudite speech whereby she stressed the importance of a serious Jewish education. Chief Rabbi Herzog incorporated part of her speech, attributed to her, as part of his book of weekly sermons.

Flora Sassoon died in London in 1936. When he eulogized her, Chief Rabbi Herzog described her as "a living well of Torah, of piety, of wisdom, of goodness and charity, of the staunchest loyalty to tradition, and out of her wonderful well Israel could draw in abundance noble incentives and lofty inspiration."²

¹ Purdah is the religious-social phenomenon common in both Muslim and Hindu communities whereby the genders were officially physically segregated and women were forced to cover their skin and conceal their form.

² Jewish Women's Archive. 2021. *Flora Sassoon* | *Jewish Women's Archive*. [online] Available at: <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sassoon-flora>> [Accessed 28 August 2021].

British Jewish historian Cecil Roth later wrote that people viewed Sassoon as one who “walked like a queen, talked like a sage and entertained like an Oriental potentate.”³

Questions for Discussion

1. Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim printed some of his correspondences with Flora Sassoon in his publications, attributing it to her by name. Originally, she refused to allow it, but he convinced her by saying that it is so important for her to be a role model out there. He convinced her that it is important to let the world know that women can be these scholars. Why is her name still not out there? What is the significance of sharing her name?
2. Today the term Rabbanit is quite contentious, yet at that point the rabbis corresponding with her openly referred to her as Rabbanit – including Rabbi Gaugine. What is the significance in the terminology?
3. If Rabbanit Sassoon was living today, what do you think the reaction to her activities and knowledge would be?
4. In her speech to Jews’ College, Flora warns the rabbinical students that once they leave the bubble of studying all day, they should be aware of the world around them, and be open to supporting the people around them. How do we see that in her life? How do we see that in Jewish institutions today?
5. Create a responsa based on Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim and Rabbi Herzog as well as Talmudic sources as to the importance of women learning Torah.

Suggested Readings

Jewish Women's Archive. 2021. *Flora Sassoon* | *Jewish Women's Archive*. [online] Available at: <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sassoon-flora>>

<https://forward.com/life/440608/flora-sassoon/>

<https://shiviti.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Pirke-Shira-1-11-Rabbi-Shemtob-Gaguine.pdf> (Hebrew, second write up by Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine)

https://youtu.be/bJFcF_h26ko - Rabbi Yonatan Halevy on Rabbanit Farha Sassoon

<http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/1935/>

³ Ibid