

**THE RABBI'S ATHEIST DAUGHTER:
Ernestine Rose International Feminist Pioneer
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Oxford University Press, 2016**

**INTRODUCTION:
HER UNSURPASSED SPEECH**

The audience at the Second National Woman's Rights Convention that gathered on the morning of October 15, 1851 was so large that the organizers moved the evening session to the city's biggest auditorium. By 7 p.m., close to a thousand people crammed into Worcester, Massachusetts's City Hall, which itself "was crowded long before the hour of the meeting, many being unable to gain access." The evening session began with a clergyman reading a letter from two imprisoned French feminists to their "Sisters in America." After him, Ernestine L. Rose of New York City, the only woman scheduled to lecture that night, mounted the platform to address the crowd. Rose had come to the fore at the first national convention the previous year, where she had spoken frequently, presented resolutions, and become head of an important committee. On this night, Rose gave "an address of an hour in length, which has never been surpassed," a co-worker wrote in an 1870 history of the women's movement.

Her audience, responding to a call "to consider the Rights, Duties and Relations of Woman," confirmed the growing strength of a truly national reform movement for female equality. Only about 300 people had attended the 1848 meeting in the village of Seneca Falls, N.Y. The same number convened in Worcester in 1850. The city had been chosen because it was a fast-growing center of manufacturing, culture, and reform. When the second National Woman's Rights Convention met there again in 1851, the crowd tripled and women were in the majority. Wide publicity about the first national meeting, even though much was hostile, attracted an impressive audience that had been warned in the announcement summoning participants that "the work contemplated is no child's play. It was directly with the thought so deeply rooted and so hoary, that Woman is only an appendage, and not an integral part in the fabric of human society. It is in full conflict with the world's teachers, its preachers, its lawgivers, its poets and its painters."

Women speaking in public still shocked a society that wanted to confine respectable females to the home. Men reserved oration for themselves; if women usurped this privilege, condemnations of their shameful, unnatural, unfeminine behavior quickly followed. Public speaking under such conditions

took a toll, even for those experienced at it. "I did not rise to make a speech," the abolitionist lecturer Abby Kelley declared at the 1851 convention, "My life has been my speech. For fourteen years I have advocated this cause by my daily life. Bloody feet, Sisters, have worn smooth the path by which you have come up hither." Ernestine Rose had also been lecturing for fourteen years, but she remembered the experience much more positively. "I look back to that time," she wrote in old age, "When a stranger and alone, I went from place to place, in high-ways and by-ways, did the work and paid my bills with great pleasure and satisfaction; for the cause gained ground, and in spite of my heresies I always had good audiences, attentive listeners, and was well-received wherever I went."

Forty-one years old in 1851, Rose was then "in her prime -- an excellent lecturer, liberal, eloquent, witty," a radical newspaper later wrote. She "tactfully avoids any appearance of eccentricity," a German reporter approvingly commented, since she never wore the controversial "Bloomer costume" -- ankle-length pants under a knee-length dress -- which a number of her associates donned in these years to protest the restrictive female clothing of their day. Instead, Ernestine Rose presented herself as a respectable, middle-class woman, in somber-colored, tight-waisted, long-skirted dresses, enlivened by white lace collars and cuffs. "Her costume reflects her personality," the Frenchwoman Jenny d'Héricourt wrote after meeting her a few years later, she "does not pose because she does not try to please...she wishes only to persuade and convince." Praising Rose for neither dyeing her hair nor hiding it under a bonnet, d'Héricourt admired her distinctive coiffure of a knot at the back of her head with "long clusters of curls on either side of her face."

Her passionate eloquence distinguished her. Praising a speech she gave at the first Worcester convention, a local newspaper reported that no one could hear her without respecting her talent as an orator, whatever they might think of the merits of her cause, since her "strong, compact, and lucid argument" was "delivered in a manner that few practiced public speakers can equal." "Her eloquence is irresistible," a British sympathizer declared, "It shakes, it awes, it thrills, it melts -- it fills you with horror, it drowns you with tears." What most astonished her contemporaries was how well she could engage an audience. "She is far before any woman speaker I ever heard," a female anti-slavery activist wrote in 1853, "She is splendidly clear and logical. But oh! I cannot give any idea of the power and beauty of her speech. I can only stammer about it a little."

Rose began her address at Worcester by segueing gracefully from the oppression suffered by women in post-revolutionary France, where 1848 claims for their rights had been crushed, to the identical situation of American women, "in this far-famed land of freedom." Asserting that either the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" applied to women, or that American men were hypocrites for denying their female relatives rights they awarded themselves, Rose turned rapidly to her main

thesis: that women as human beings deserved equal rights:

Humanity recognizes no sex -- virtue recognizes no sex -- mind recognizes no sex -- life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers, on the proper cultivation of which depends her happiness; like him, she is subject to all the vicissitudes of life....Yet she is not recognized as his equal! In the laws of the land she has no rights, in government she has no voice.

Stressing the sexes' common humanity, Rose insisted that women's equality followed from that bond. She challenged the legal "non-existence" of women, especially wives. "From the cradle to the grave she is subject to the power and control of men. Father, guardian, or husband, one conveys her like some piece of merchandise over to the other." Referring to the established Anglo-American doctrine that upon marriage "husband and wife become one person and that person is the husband," Rose unleashed her scorn on this formula for discrimination. "What an inconsistency, that from the moment she enters that compact, in which she assumes the high responsibility of wife and mother, she ceases legally to exist, and becomes a purely submissive being. Blind submission in woman is considered a virtue, while submission to wrong is itself wrong, and resistance to wrong is virtue alike in woman as in man." Employing sarcasm and humor, Rose questioned the familiar arguments that the husband was "presumed" to provide for his wife and be kind to her. "Yes!, he keeps her and so he does a favorite horse; by law they are both considered his property....But what right, I ask, has the law to presume at all on the subject?" If the married couple became one person, "why should woman always remain on the losing side? Turn the tables. Let the identity and interest of the husband be merged in the wife. Think you she would act less generously towards him, than he towards her?"

Mothers educated their children; if they themselves lacked education, then not just the children, but the entire nation would suffer. Why should a mother be deprived of her home, her property, and her children if her husband died, while he kept all if she did? Why should the theft of a pair of boots bring a jail term, when a husband who beat his wife received only a reprimand? Countering the common objection that women voting would "expose" them "to the contact of rough, rude, drinking, swearing, fighting men at the ballot-box," Rose argued that women's presence could only improve both the voting process and society as a whole:

How much more beneficial would be woman's influence, if, as the equal with man, she should take her stand by his side...in the Legislative halls, in the Senate chamber, in the Judge's chair, in the jury box, in the Forum, in the Laboratory of the arts and sciences, and wherever duty would call her for the benefit of herself, her country, her race. For at every step, she would carry with her a

humanizing influence.

In the final section of her lecture, Rose insisted that if women were given equal opportunities, their intellectual and artistic achievements would rival those of men. Turning to man's physical strength, she joked that if that were the only criterion, "the inmates of the forest are his superior." Asserting that proper exercise would produce healthy women, she deplored the strictures that limited middle- and upper-class girls. "A robust development in a girl is unfashionable, a healthy, sound, voice is vulgar, a ruddy glow on the cheek is coarse; and when vitality is so strong within her as to show itself in spite of bolts and bars, then she has to undergo a bleaching process, eat lemons, drink vinegar, and keep in the shade." Such practices led to "that nervous sensibility which sees a ghost in every passing shadow, that beautiful diffidence which dares not take a step without the protecting arm of a man to support her tender frame, and that shrinking mock-modesty that faints at the mention of a leg of a table."viii

The solution? Education -- through "this and many more Conventions." Men must be made to realize that their subordination of women led to the misery of both sexes, since "Nature has too closely united them to permit one to oppress the other with impunity." Rose rejected dividing humanity into villainous men and victimized women. The female sex needed to end its complicity in its own degradation. "Man may remove her legal shackles, and recognize her as his equal...but the law cannot compel her to cultivate her mind and take an independent stand as a free being." Rose concluded by urging women to ignore "the taunts, ridicule, and stigmas cast upon us," to "cast off that mountain weight, that intimidating cowardly question...`What will people say?'" The result would be a new era, "the grandest step forward in the onward progress," leading to woman occupying that "high and lofty position, for which nature has so eminently fitted her, in the destinies of humanity."

The success of this speech, coupled with her energy and dedication, catapulted Rose to the inner circles of the new women's rights movement. This movement circulated a printed version of her lecture widely. Rose spoke at scores of U.S. venues throughout the 1850s, ranging from Maine to Virginia and from the East Coast to Michigan. She became a chief organizer of the yearly Woman's Rights Conventions that met until the Civil War and she carried their message to Europe on an extended tour in 1856. "Mrs. Rose is the queen of the company," the Albany Transcript asserted about her role at an 1854 convention in the New York capital, "She has as great a power to chain an audience as any of our best male speakers." More famous than either Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony in the mid-nineteenth century, Rose received heartfelt praise from Anthony, who became a good friend. "They who sat with her in bygone days on the platform will remember her matchless powers as a speaker," Anthony reminisced near the end of Rose's life:

and how safe we all felt when she had the floor that neither in manner, sentiment, argument, nor

repartee would she in any way compromise the dignity of the occasion. She had the advantage of rare grace and beauty, which in a measure heightened the effect of all she said. She had a rich, musical voice and a ready flow of choice language. In style she was clear, logical, and impassioned.

In order to participate in conventions advocating their rights, women had to break with everything they had been taught. Raised to be modest, domestic, unassertive creatures, accepting their own subordination and deferring to men, they needed to reject the roles their mothers embodied, the roles their religions preached to them, the roles their reading and education glorified. “A virtuous woman is little lower than the angels,” the French philosopher Rousseau rhapsodized in his immensely influential novel *Emile*,

I would a thousand times rather have a home-loving girl, simply brought up, than a learned lady....A female wit is a scourge to her husband, her children, her friends, her servants, to everybody. From the lofty height of her genius, she scorns every womanly duty, and she is always trying to make a man of herself.

Early feminists questioned this division of life into “separate spheres,” which allotted women home and the family while giving the rest of the world to men. They challenged their period’s assumption that they lost their femininity if they spoke in public, wanted to vote, or yearned for higher education. “The reformation we propose, in its utmost scope, is radical and universal,” Paulina Wright Davis asserted in her Opening Address to the Worcester Convention of 1850, “It is not the mere perfecting of a progress already in motion, a detail of some established plan, but it is an epochal movement -- the emancipation of half the world, and a conforming re-organization of all social, political, and industrial interests and institutions.”

To arrive at this perspective, to become a “woman’s rights woman” required an immense imaginative and moral journey. No participant in the 1851 convention travelled farther in this regard than Ernestine Rose. She was the only foreigner in this group of native-born Americans. Unlike them, she had lived in numerous countries -- Poland, Prussia, France, and England -- before coming to the United States in 1836. Among these religious Protestants, she was the only atheist; as an adult she believed in no religion and took an active part in freethought organizations. She had been brought up as the daughter of a rabbi in the small Polish city of Piótrkow Trybunalski, where she was born in 1810. Instead of leading the traditional life expected of her, she defied her father’s attempt to marry her off, abandoned her religion, and left Poland. Her lengthy travels brought her to different cultures where she absorbed new concepts and values. In Berlin, she encountered the Enlightenment ideals of reason, progress, and equality which remained guideposts throughout her career. In Paris, she witnessed the

Revolution of 1830, which overthrew an attempt to restore divine right monarchy and absolute church power. This strengthened her belief in non-monarchical, republican government and the dangers of religious rule.

In London, where she lived for five years in her twenties, she found the philosophy that illumined her life: the teachings of the radical industrialist Robert Owen. Owen believed in social rather than individual responsibility for evil and crime, attempted to engineer improved societies, supported democratic socialism, and championed women's equality. In his movement she met the man who shared her beliefs and became her devoted and beloved husband. Together, she and William Rose immigrated to the United States of America, which they considered the best society on earth. They lived there from 1836 to 1869.

In the states, William financially and emotionally supported Ernestine's unusual career as an activist and public speaker. (The couple also did not hire a servant in order to free more money for her travels.) She fought ardently for three causes: free thought, antislavery, and women's rights. "To enlighten and to free all slaves – that has been the object of Mrs. Rose's life and labors," a female journalist wrote in 1876, "Slaves of race, slaves of faith, slaves of sex" and "to each she preached from the same text, 'Knowledge – Liberty.'" Rose consistently maintained that her basic creed was "emancipation" and that freedom from religion, from female subordination, and from any kind of slavery constituted a single great demand for human rights. Her unification of these three causes did not succeed, but she continued to champion them throughout her life. As a successful lecturer and activist, Ernestine Rose argued for and lived out her ideals, both in America and then in England, which she and William returned to in 1869.

In the United States, she became central to the women's movement of the 1850s, serving on important committees, giving keynote speeches at conventions, and advocating equal rights throughout the Northeast and Midwest. She also lectured frequently for abolition. From the late 1840s through the years following the Civil War, she claimed equal rights for all blacks, both female and male, and battled for integration as well as equality. Her labors for free thought, although less well-known, were equally impassioned. From her arrival in New York City until her last days in London, she forcefully spoke and wrote about the evils of religion, which she always called "superstition." Living in an era in which many governments ruled by "divine right," she maintained that all religions, including the popular new belief in spiritualism, represented a outgrown stage of human development. Feeding on ignorance, religions perpetuated both oppression and bigotry. The only book she wrote was her 1861 *Defence of Atheism*. Her outspoken endorsements of free thought handicapped her in this period of devout belief. "There can be little doubt that if Mrs. Rose had...denied her honest, earnest convictions in regard

to theological matters,” the journalist wrote, “She would today occupy a far higher position in public favor than she does. Her name...would not have been omitted in the list of those ‘eminent women’ who have distinguished themselves on the lecture platform, in their chivalric crusade against all forms of slavery....”

As a “foreigner,” which she was often called, Ernestine Rose brought a unique background and perspective to her three related causes. Her overseas travels and views illuminated the transatlantic conversations about women’s rights, religion, slavery, and democracy that shaped American growth. In the U.S. women’s movement, she contributed her internationalism to its efforts for equal rights, always maintaining that “We are not contending here for the rights of New England, nor of old England, but of the world.”^{xv} Her years in England convinced her that the vote was all important, while her Owenism taught her that prostitution and unhappy marriages could be eliminated by providing women with decent, well-paying jobs and equitable divorce and child custody laws. The sole female orator for atheism throughout her years in the United States, she provided American free thought – a cause often stigmatized as “infidelism” – with the presence of a respectable, married, female advocate who had connections to Western European non-believers. Believing that the most crucial justification for slavery came from the Bible verses so many southerners cited, most U.S. freethinkers did not support abolitionism. To them, it followed that ending religion had to come before ending slavery. In contrast, Rose insisted that free thinkers must support “Universal Mental Liberty,” and so, abolitionism. She became equally active in British free thought after she moved there, giving her last powerful speeches at the 1878 London Conference of Liberal Thinkers.

In the U.S. antislavery movement, she joined with the most committed, again bringing a unique perspective to the cause. Because of her Owenite socialism, she denounced wage slavery and poverty as well as race-based and chattel slavery. She supported not only abolitionism, but also integration, complete equality, and if necessary, disunion from the slave-holding southern states. She always held that “A Union of freedom and slavery cannot exist any more than fire and water.” After the Civil War, when many pushed for “the black man’s vote,” she consistently championed equality for black women and democracy for all. “We have proclaimed to the world universal suffrage, but it is universal suffrage with a vengeance attached to it – universal suffrage excluding the negro and the woman, who are by far the largest majority in this country,” she declared in 1867, “White men are the minority in this nation. White women, black men, and black women compose the large majority.”^{xvi}

The fact that such an assertion is still pertinent today makes Rose seem amazingly contemporary. But in the nineteenth century, her radical views isolated her into becoming “a minority of one,” as she often stated. Used to being the only atheist in feminism and antislavery and the only woman within

the activist free thought movement, she reacted by always needing to be correct, a defense against the stigmatization and criticism she invariably received. This righteousness easily became self-righteousness, Rose's chief fault. She condescended to those who disagreed with her, like a Wisconsin woman at an 1863 convention who argued – correctly – that a resolution advocating rights for women would diminish support for black emancipation. “It is exceedingly amusing to hear persons talk about throwing out Woman's Rights, when, if it had not been for Woman's Rights, that lady would not have had the courage to stand here and say what she did,” Rose replied, “It will be exceedingly inconsistent if, because some women out in the West are opposed to the Women's Rights movement – though at the same time they take advantage of it – that therefore we shall throw it out of this resolution.” At a Boston antislavery convention the previous year, Rose harshly denounced Abraham Lincoln as “dishonest,” which caused her abolitionist audience to hiss her. She responded by saying that the hissing was a sign that “I have said the best thing in the Convention” and proof she was correct. When she left on a trip to Europe in 1856, she justified her sense of superiority by writing “If, in expressing my opinions, I have been severe alike on friend and foe, it is because in principle I know no compromise, I expect no reward, I fear no opposition – but with an earnest desire my aim has been steadily directed onward and upward....”

And yet, self-righteousness aside, how refreshing she remains! She had an excellent sense of humor, which she often turned against herself. When an evangelical antislavery colleague said she hoped to meet her in heaven, Rose answered, “Then you will say to me, ‘I told you so,’ and I shall reply, ‘How very stupid I was!’” She ridiculed an English member of parliament who declared he could not support women voting because he needed his wife to provide “the perfect, soothing, gentle peace which a mind sullied by politics cannot feel” by jesting that “his happiness must be balanced on the very verge of a precipice, when the simple act of depositing a vote by the hand of a woman, would overthrow and destroy it forever.” Sarcastically rebutting a clergyman who insisted that women should remain in the domestic sphere, providing “ornamentation,” she wrote “New Jersey is said to be out of the world; but where, Oh! Where has Dr. J.T. resided? For if he had ever lived within sound, sight, or smell of a human habitation, he would have found out before 1869 that...poor woman like poor man has always been ‘doomed to labor,’ only she has not yet been doomed to be paid for it as well as he.”

Ernestine Rose wrote very little that was personal. In addition to her speeches and letters, three lengthy articles written by nineteenth-century journalists who interviewed her provide the most information about her. The first was Lemuel E. Barnard's “Ernestine L. Rose.” He met Rose in 1855 in his home city of Cleveland and published his portrait of her the following year. His piece was widely disseminated by being reprinted in volume I of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's, Susan B. Anthony's, and Matilda Joslyn Gage's *History of Woman Suffrage* in 1881. The second article was French feminist

Jenny P. d'Héricourt's "Madame Rose," published in September, 1856. D'Héricourt met Rose in Paris during her travels in Europe that year. I wrote about d'Héricourt and Rose in my previous book, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860*. Ernestine Rose played a major role in this movement and what I learned convinced me that I had to write more about this fascinating woman. The third contemporary interview was done in 1868 by the writer Sara Underwood in New York City. She later published a chapter on Rose in her 1876 anthology, *Heroines of Free Thought*, placing Rose in a cluster of eleven French and English women, among them Mary Wollstonecraft, George Sand, and George Eliot.^{xix} The other major sources for Rose's life are the two atheist newspapers she avidly read, which printed both her letters and articles about her: the *Boston Investigator*, published weekly from 1831 to 1895 in eight four-columned pages crowded with tiny print, and the equally crammed pages of its English counterpart, the weekly *National Reformer*, in print from 1860 to 1893. Here, in *The Rabbi's Atheist Daughter*, I have included every scrap of personal history about her I have found.