

1935 and Now; A Woman's Journey is Ours

Once, a woman who loved Torah, devoted to Gd and the Jewish people, found a way, her way, to learn and to teach Torah. Inspired by the journey of the Jewish people, the lessons learned by Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Aaron and Miriam the prophet, this woman became an inspired, renown, and inspirational teacher.

Bruria was and remains a hero for Jewish women of old and today's time. For feminists who yearn to pursue Torah study, the sage Bruria, who lived 2,000 years ago, is an exemplar of a female Torah sage. Schools for women's Torah study, one of which I attended back in 1982, have been named for her. Bruria, the Tannaite, was the only female sage of the Talmud. She lived in the land of Israel during a tense time of Roman rule. Her father, the famous Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion, was one of the Ten Martyrs whose names we read in memory on Yom Kippur, was burned to death for his faith, as was Bruria's mother.

In the male world of the Talmud, Bruria was admired for her breadth of knowledge – she is said to have learned 300 *halachot*-laws on a single day. She was so extraordinary she earned the praise of great rabbis of her time. Bruria was known for her sharp wit and often caustic jibes, as well as her caring heart. She notably instructed her husband, the great Rabbi Meir, to pray for the repentance of the wicked, rather than for their destruction.

A famous, painful midrash/story relates that her two sons died suddenly – on a Shabbat. In a demonstration of enormous inner strength Bruria hid their death from her husband until Shabbat ended so she could comfort him. In response, Rabbi Meir responded, "A woman of valor, who can find?"

Bruria was most notable, but only one of many women of valor across centuries of Jewish experience, many of whose stories were hidden over time. Certainly, there were other women who broke the mold, and one of my favorites was Glückel of Hameln, who was born in 1646 in Germany. Glückel was a businesswoman whose diaries, *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*, written over the course of thirty years, are the only known Yiddish memoirs authored by a woman in her day. Through her memoirs, Glückel provided us an intimate portrait of German-Jewish life in her time. Although not permitted to study the Torah, Glückel had learned Hebrew and the basics of Judaism in a traditional Jewish primary school.

Married at age 14 to an affluent businessman, Glückel assisted her husband in trading seed pearls, eventually taking over the family business when he died in 1689. Even while raising 13 children, Glückel was one of few women who traveled by themselves to conduct trade across Europe.

Fast-forward to the twentieth century, and we meet one of the most influential and courageous women leaders of her generation, Regina Jonas. Born in Germany in 1902, Frau Jonas became the *first woman to be ordained as a rabbi in 1935*. After centuries when female leaders were confined to serve as teachers, even in roles similar to rabbis, it was not until Regina Jonas that rabbinic ordination for women happened. Rabbi Jonas climbed the ladder to this goal with faith and courage; she wouldn't take "no" for an answer from her teachers who had trained her but refused to ordain her.

Rabbi Jonas explained: "God planted in our heart skills and a vocation without asking about gender. Therefore it is the duty of men and women alike to work and create according to the skills given by God."

Rabbi Jonas' 1930 seminary thesis, "Can women serve as rabbis?" skillfully drew upon sacred texts and halachic/legal codes, arguing that only custom and tradition had limited s'micha/ordination to men.

Still, her rabbis, her teachers, who admired her scholarship and abilities, would not ordain her. Finally, the liberal Rabbi Max Dienemann ordained her in 1935, proclaiming that “she is suitable to serve as a rabbi.”¹ **That statement shattered an almost 2,000-year-old glass ceiling. It was “an earthshaking event,” one observer said.**

Jonas sought work as a teacher in Jewish Berlin, but no synagogue would employ her as a rabbi. So she joined the Jewish Community of Berlin as a chaplain, caring for Jews in need.

Rabbi Jonas had one goal: to teach and inspire a secularizing German Jewish community to know and honor Jewish traditions. She didn’t set out to revolutionize Judaism, but in her humble way, she certainly did. Rabbi Jonas embraced this spirit of innovation within Jewish tradition, arguing that Halacha already had room for female rabbis. She said, “For me it was never about being the first. I wish I had been the hundred thousandth!”²

A biographer of Rabbi Jonas, Rabbi Elisa Klapheck, told an interviewer, “She made a radical point to be the first woman rabbi, but for conservative reasons.” Rabbi Jonas was, she wrote, “*a very strong, authoritative voice, very pious, very devoted, very, very serious.*”³

Rabbi Jonas sadly came onto the scene at the worst of times. The Nuremberg Laws were passed the same year that Jonas received her ordination. As other rabbis fled, Jonas gained prominence, traveling to communities whose rabbis had left.

In early November 1942, Jonas and her mother were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Her thesis was preserved there in an archive of German Jews,

¹ Rabbi Max Dienemann, “I testify to her that she is capable to answer questions of religious law (the Halacha.)

² Jonas told Berna, a Swiss women’s newspaper

³ Elizabeth Sarah, rabbi emerita of Brighton & Hove Progressive Synagogue in England, who has written about Jonas

where it sat untouched for almost 50 years behind the Iron Curtain, until unearthed by Katharina von Kellenbach, a German religion scholar, after the Berlin Wall fell.

At Theresienstadt, Jonas greeted new arrivals by train, orienting them and trying to dissuade thoughts of suicide. Her sermons urged prisoners to find meaning in their lives, even under dire circumstances. “What I find most extraordinary about her,” von Kellenbach said, “is that *she decided to deny the Nazis the power to define Jewish life.*”⁴

Rabbi Jonas was deported to Auschwitz on Oct. 12, 1944, murdered by the Nazis when she was she was 42 years old.

Several prominent male survivors who knew Jonas well *remarkably* failed to tell her story after the Holocaust. I became aware of her in 1987, before almost no one had heard of Rabbi Jonas. I was serving in my first congregation in South Bend, Indiana. As some of you have heard me tell, a kind man who knew her back in Berlin and had settled in South Bend, came to visit at my shul, coincidentally in a 19th century building similar to the original Ohavi Zedek. But that is a story for another day. Mr. Warburg brought me a gift: a small photo he had taken of Rabbi Jonas and saved over all the years. Still, up to that time, almost no one knew of her story. Rabbi Jonas’ papers, which had been stashed away in East Germany, remained hidden for decades. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1994, her papers were found where she had hidden them. At last, she was to be known to us, and her courage and resilience stand as an enduring inspiration for all of us.

Since then, there has been a surge of interest in Jonas. There is now a children’s book, a documentary film, and even an opera about Jonas. She is memorialized at Theresienstadt; at Yad Vashem in Israel; and at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, among

⁴ NY times article August 2022

other places. Female rabbis everywhere, myself included, now embrace her as our beloved pioneer.

Thirty-seven years later Sally Priesand became the first woman ordained as a rabbi in the United States. She was thought to be the first woman ordained as a rabbi until news of Jonas spread in the 1990's. Rabbi Priesand was ordained in 1972 at Hebrew Union College, the pioneer of our generation. The day I saw the article about her in our Philadelphia Jewish newspaper, the Exponent, I immediately clipped the article to hang in my bedroom, proclaiming that I would pursue the same path. Rabbi Priesand reflected on Regina Jonas, "We really cannot help but stand in awe of her courage. All female rabbis stand on her shoulders."

As a recent NYTimes story memorializing Rabbi Jonas concluded: "Women now make up more than half the students in many rabbinical schools in the United States and Britain, and occupy some of the most prominent positions in Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Judaism. Several years ago, women started to be ordained as rabbis in the Modern Orthodox tradition as well."

Rabbi Jonas and Rabbi Priesand, the firsts, were just the start. Next came my beloved colleagues Rabbi Sandy Sasso, ordained two years later at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and then Rabbi Amy Eilberg, ordained a bit over a decade later at JTS – I still recall celebrating with her the day after her ordination in 1985.

Remarkably, the next *first* was Rabbi Sarah Hurwitz, the first woman ordained modern Orthodox world.

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Some of you may recall the 1983 film, *Yentl*, starring Barbra Streisand as a woman passing as a man so she could study in yeshiva in Poland. Based on an Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story, set in 1904, *Yentl* recalls a world where study of Talmud, the centerpiece of yeshiva learning, was enticing and inspiring. *Yeshiva buchers*/Yeshiva boys learned Talmud intensively and were the most respected and revered members of traditional Jewish culture.

My rabbinical school classmates and I, in the second year of our 5 year rabbinic program, jumped at the chance to see the movie *Yentl* as soon as it was released. We cried and hugged as *Yentl* prevailed as a scholar. Some of us went on to see the film repeatedly—corny as that is now. **We** had prevailed — there was no need to pretend to be men; the world of the yeshiva, the joy of Jewish learning, of Talmud and texts was ours to grasp. “Papa can you hear me?”....

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Now it is no longer just “once” – it is tangible, real, nearly ubiquitous to find women learning Torah, teaching Torah and serving in a variety of capacities as rabbis for the Jewish community. Female leadership, once viewed with suspicion by many, is positively normative. And it makes a difference. From scholars to rabbis to executives of Jewish community organizations, our world has seen women lead, sharing wisdom with an evolving Jewish community, increasingly open to women’s leadership.

Why is all this important on this holy night of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year? The rabbis taught that on Rosh Hashanah, we recall that “today the world was born.” The world was not formed completed. The world has evolved through so many stages of

understanding what God wants from us—it is our task to raise and nurture this world, as a parent teaches and cares for and raises a child. “Today the world was born” is not only an event in the past—each Rosh Hashanah the world is *reborn anew* with our best understandings of the sacred path offered to us—a creative and *creating* path. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan taught, “The past has a vote but not a veto.”

This creating continues today with guidance and wisdom contributed by women *and* men; the imagination of our evolving Jewish community is now shared by all of us. The dynamic process of learning, adaptation, wisdom-seeking, God-inspired Judaism, is ours to share. Look at the power of transformation occasioned by the inclusion of women!

Rabbi Jonas, wishing she has been the “the hundred thousandth!” wrote that “God planted in our heart skills and a vocation without asking about gender. Therefore it is the duty of men and women alike to work and create according to the skills given by God.” This is a year, perhaps more than any other in our lifetimes, is a time for creating anew. This Rosh Hashanah we embrace the New Year unlike any other, after the trials of pandemic isolation, loss, illness, separation, and shifting needs. This is a time to reimagine what is possible as we come back together. This fall, we can reflect on what we have learned during nearly three pandemic years, a transformative time, while I -- and we – also reflect on my years here at Ohavi Zedek.

What lessons and accomplishments and traditions have we held close and treasure to this day, a *new year* from 137 years of Ohavi Zedek’s illustrious history? This is a worthwhile opportunity to notice how we continue to honor and celebrate our history as we imagine ourselves moving forward, joyously, into our future.

I am standing on the shoulders of Bruria, Gluckel, Rabbi Jonas, Rabbis Priesand and Sasso and Eilberg and Hurwitz. Stand with me as we journey forward in this New Year together. Leshanah Tovah Tikateivu!