

# “Without Regard to Gender”

A Halachic Treatise by  
the First Woman Rabbi



The name Regina Jonas is not well known, though it should be. Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas, as she preferred to be called, received her rabbinical ordination in Berlin in 1935: she was the first woman rabbi. The second was Sally Priesand, who was famously ordained 37 years later at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

{ By **LAURA MAJOR**

Jonas died in Auschwitz in 1944. It was only after the Berlin Wall fell in 1991, and previously inaccessible archives suddenly became available, that she Jonas was fully returned to history. Her ordination certificate, her contract with the Berlin Jewish community, newspaper articles by and about her, photos, and personal correspondence all shed light on this intriguing character and establish her historical status as the first female rabbi. These materials form the basis of an excellent biography, *Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi*, by Elisa Klapheck, a German-born scholar now serving as rabbi of the Egalitarian Minyan of Frankfurt am Main

Regina Jonas, born in Berlin in 1902, originally became a teacher, as was common for young women. Soon enough, striving higher, she enrolled in the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Berlin’s Academy for the Science of Judaism, an academic seminary for liberal rabbis and educators. A traditionalist, Jonas did not completely identify with the liberal stream of Judaism, but knew that the Orthodox rabbinical seminaries were closed to her. She graduated in 1930, having completed the same course of study as her male colleagues and written a halachic treatise entitled “Can Women Serve as Rabbis?” But it was not until 1935 – just after the Nazi Nuremberg Laws had revoked her rights as a Jew – that she received ordination, privately, from Max Dienemann, the liberal rabbi of Frankfurt am Main.

Her acceptance as a rabbi was certainly not immediate or universal, and she struggled to find a pulpit position in Berlin. Quite surprisingly, Berlin’s Orthodox rabbi, Felix Singermann, not only addressed her as Rabbinerin, but also sent her a letter expressing his “deeply felt congratulations” at the “good news.” In 1937 she was contracted by the Berlin Jewish Community to serve as a teacher with academic qualifications and to “provide rabbinic pastoral care in the social

institutions of the community.” But as rabbis began to flee abroad with the worsening Nazi persecution and men were taken to concentration camps, Jonas, who refused to leave Germany, found herself filling a gap in Berlin synagogues. As the situation for Jews deteriorated, Jonas too had to perform forced labor in a factory, where she continued to preach and lift the spirits of those that came to listen.

In 1942 Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt, the Nazi’s “model” ghetto. There she met the psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl, the future Auschwitz survivor and acclaimed author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl, who was in charge of “psychic hygiene” at the camp, appointed Jonas to receive new trainloads of Jews and comfort the shocked and frightened passengers. She worked indefatigably until, in October 1944, she and her mother were sent to Auschwitz. Before her deportation to Theresienstadt, Jonas had placed her documents in the care of the Berlin Jewish community. These files, which collected dust for fifty years, include Jonas’s halachic treatise, a few highlights of which are discussed below.\*

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In this treatise, Jonas searches traditional sources for reasons why a woman can hold religious office. While the Reform movement abandoned the binding nature of halacha in order to allow innovation – which eventually

\* The full text of “Can Women Serve as Rabbis?” appears in Elisa Klapheck, *Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (Jossey-Bass/John Wiley & Sons, 2004.) Translated from the German by Toby Axelrod.

included the ordination of women – Jonas supports no such rejection. She uses biblical and rabbinic texts to prove why women’s participation in public life is permissible and desirable. She is thus a forerunner of contemporary Orthodox women who now seek ways to reconcile women’s public and liturgical roles with Jewish law.

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Then as now, this was a controversial stance, as evidenced by an editorial published in 1931 on the “women’s page” of the liberal journal *Israelitisches Familienblatt* in response to a lecture delivered by Jonas on the ordination of women:

One may say: neither we nor many valuable rabbis keep the tradition anyway – why then should we be especially prevented from ordaining women as rabbis, if we want and think we must do so. But one can *not* say: women as rabbis – that is in the spirit of the Talmud and Torah.

Jonas bowed neither to the criticism from the liberal stream nor the Orthodox community. As she wrote in an article (also for the “women’s page”) of the *Central-Verein Zeitung* in 1938, she believed firmly that:

God has placed abilities and callings in our hearts, without regard to gender. Thus each of us has the duty, whether man or woman, to realize those gifts God has given. If you look at things this way, one takes woman and man for what they are; human beings.

## **Regina Jonas, “Can Women Serve as Rabbis?”**

Jonas’s treatise is structured around the duties of a rabbi. She begins by listing nine such obligations:

1. The rabbi must be well versed in the most important Jewish writings of both a spiritual and secular nature, particularly the Torah shebichtav [written Torah] and Torah sheba’al peh [Oral Torah].
2. He must teach others, both children and adults.
3. He must be active as a preacher in the synagogue and in addition must deliver religious addresses for funerals, weddings and bar mitzvahs.
4. He must fulfill actively the requirements for marriages and for the get [divorce decree], chalitza [the ceremony in which a shoe is removed, symbolically freeing a brother-in-law from marrying his deceased brother’s widow], and the acceptance of gerim [converts].
5. He must make halachic decisions, pasken.
6. He should deliver talks outside the synagogue to arouse interest in Jewish subjects among the Jewish community.
7. He should be available to help congregants with personal matters related to any distress of their soul.
8. He must work for social welfare, for youth welfare, and for general communal welfare, as well as arbitrate in conflicts between members.
9. And last but not least, obviously, he must lead an appropriate lifestyle by following the religious teachings of Judaism and fulfilling the tasks given him as leader of the community.

Jonas sets out to prove that “these tasks apply to the male rabbi and therefore to the female rabbi as well.” To that end, she first surveys the Talmudic attitude to women as well as biblical examples of how “when women wished to and were able to express themselves, no obstacle was placed in their way as long as their work was valuable and carried out in a solid way.” Interestingly, throughout her treatise, she places great emphasis on the notion of *tsni’ut* (modesty), arguing that if women are to assume public roles, they need to keep the traditional ideal of modesty intact. On the other hand, she subtly notes how modesty is sometimes cynically invoked as an excuse to prevent the participation of women in public religious life. She also claims that modesty must be considered in a cultural context:

[W]omen eagerly assumed religious responsibility and were active alongside men in public religious life, despite the wonderful and ever-true Jewish term *tsni’ut*, and the serious demeanor of women meant that *tsni’ut* was never disrespected by them. How wonderful would it be if today’s women still wished to keep the values of *tsni’ut* as already shown by the quote of Rambam [Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut, 24.12*], which hints at contact between boys and girls and discusses modest fashion, according to which it was improper to reveal body parts. Here, too, the sensibilities of Jewry have apparently changed, unfortunately, to the disadvantage of Jewish ideals. Unfortunately, in strict halachically observant circles, when these bounds in particular are overstepped it is not seen as a transgression against the law, though the transgression is stated clearly.

But when it comes to a relaxing of the religious ban [against women participating in public religious life] in the loosest sense of the word, in which the justification of



“God has placed abilities and callings in our hearts”: Memorial plaque, Berlin, 2001. Text by Jonas from the *Central-Verein Zeitung* in 1938.



Rabbi Sally Priesand at her ordination, Cincinnati, 1972. Photo courtesy of American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati.

*tsni'ut* is given, as regarding the religious activity of a woman in the service, whereas certainly seriousness, good manners, and pure motivation are guiding her, because most women long for this, *it nevertheless* is looked upon as a “destruction” of Judaism.

How beneficial it could be to have a woman in the rabbinic role to reclaim the lost meaning of *tsni'ut* by example and through teaching.

In spite of everything, in dealing with the theme at hand, one must, as is often repeated here, take both the changing times and the sensibilities of earlier times into account. In previous days, the decrees of our sages of blessed memory, which

restricted women from certain religious responsibilities and actions, were quite fitting and earn the highest respect – however, today, where woman is clearly present in public life and accomplishes practical tasks in cooperation with men, contact has become casual. As a result, her presence among men, even in a house of God, is no longer sexually stimulating to men and certainly not to women. Many decrees of our sages were withdrawn, as we earlier have seen; particularly concerning this kind of *tsni'ut*, they lose much of their severity.

To support this argument, Jonas quotes the book *Derech Pikudecha* (*The Path of Your Commandments*), a commentary on Torah law by the Hasidic master Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov, published in 1874. The quoted passage displays a strikingly pragmatic understanding of the issue at hand:

[I]t must be said that during the time when the “*Keren Yisrael*” [glory of Israel] was in its proper place (that is when all was well in Yisrael), and the economic situation of Israel was excellent, one saw no woman outside the house, because, they were not involved in trade. If a man had an opportunity to see a woman it was something special, it seized his thoughts and his heart with fantasies – which does not happen anymore; today under the burden of life in the Diaspora and the difficulties of earning a living, women work in the trades. It is nothing special to see women, it is a matter of being accustomed, it does not excite the fantasies of a man.

Jonas rejected the notion that women were intellectually incapable of performing rabbinic duties. She responds to Maimonides’ contention that women cannot learn Torah “*lefi ani'ut da'atan*” [because of the poorness of their intellect]:

First of all, if she displays “intellectual poorness” or inferior appreciation for the things to be learned, she cannot be condemned [for this] . . . Is it any wonder, given that women were kept so long from free exercise of their intellectual powers, that [a woman’s] lack of education resulted in her being less able than the man to follow a subject deeply when confronted with it. Is it any wonder that she remains intellectually awkward . . . if her only occupation were in the home and her education only oriented toward family matters?! Too often, others directed her attention to superficial matters, leaving no room for anything more difficult. But as we have seen, nevertheless, important women have lifted themselves from the rest exactly with regard to this. There is one single remedy for all these deficits that “cling” to the woman, and that is intellectual education; because the powers available to humans will atrophy if not used!

Jonas cites numerous examples of learned women in history, focusing particularly on the famous Beruria, wife of Rabbi Meir. Talmudic accounts prove Beruria to be intelligent, witty, and “showing no *tiflut* (frivolity) or *divrey hevel* (trivial words), as is so often said in later discussions about the intelligence of women.” Jonas was apparently also gifted in wit and humor, yet, like Beruria, disdained frivolity. As evidence of Beruria’s erudition, Jonas cites Rabbi Yohanan’s response to a “young disciple” (BT Pesahim 62b):

Now if Beruria, the wife of R. Meir and the daughter of Hananya ben Teradyon, who would learn in a day three hundred rulings from three hundred myriad rulings, and even she did not succeed in learning it in three years, and you say that you want to finish it in three months!

She quotes a passage from Berakhot 10a that testifies to Beruria’s “talmudic agility and the delicacy of her soul:”

In the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir there lived some thugs who tormented him greatly, and Rabbi Meir prayed that they should die. Then his wife Beruria said to him: “How do you justify this? It is written (Psalms 104:35), ‘Let sins cease,’ but that does not mean the sinners, only the sins. Furthermore, look at the end of the verse, ‘and let the wicked be no more.’ If the sins are eradicated, does it mean that there are no more evildoers? You should rather pray for mercy for them, so that they will repent.” From then on he prayed for mercy for them, and they repented.

One of Jonas’s most inventive arguments was her contention that women, as housekeepers, were well-suited to the role of *pasken*, i.e. the making of halachic decisions.

Their entire work as household “supervisor” is [in effect] *pasken*. This is possible for in this area she knows something: no one else can represent her and therefore she had the chance to demonstrate in practice that she can summon the requisite understanding and seriousness for such matters.

If she now has a career as a rabbi and must make decisions in other areas in which she has studied, then nothing revolutionary has happened. With the seriousness that her job entails, she puts into practice something that women long were allowed to do in the household, only to a greater extent . . . and therefore does not offend Jewish sensibilities. It is written that “one relies upon women,” so it is not foreign to Judaism if this “support” is broadened from the narrow, permitted range into a larger one of *pasken*, to which in principle there is no objection.

Jonas then discusses the matter of sermons delivered by women. Once again, she addresses the issue of *tsni'ut*, shifting some of the burden to men:

**That something such as *tsni'ut* should prevent her from preaching is also not acceptable, for certainly in her dress she would not be taken in by the “fashionable frivolity” to which unfortunately the world of our women today have surrendered, as she must wear the clothing befitting to her job. Her hair likewise is covered and the appearance of the woman to men during the sermon need not give rise to any halachic objections as it can only be a fleeting glimpse, and it is to be expected that a serious man pays attention in a strictly religious mood during the services.**

Jonas indeed dressed according to the highest standards of modesty, and also believed, according to her biographer Elisa Klapheck, that a woman rabbi should remain single and chaste. In the summer of 1939, however, Jonas fell in love with Rabbi Dr. Joseph Norden, a widower thirty years her senior. The feelings were mutual, as evidenced by Norden's correspondence with Jonas. Klapheck documents their love affair, but admits that “it is hard to know how far the relationship went.” Her personal conflicts aside, Jonas was firmly convinced that women rabbis are a necessity, bringing to the pulpit qualities that men cannot deliver:

**Just as both female doctors and teachers in time have become a necessity from a psychological standpoint, so has the female rabbi. There are even some things that women can say to youth, which cannot be said by the man in the pulpit. Her experiences, her psychological observations are profoundly different from those of a man, therefore she has a different style.**

The final issue that Jonas tackles in depth involves issues of marriage and divorce. Here, Jonas admits, the challenges are formidable, but they are not insurmountable. The difficulty mainly stems from the halachic prohibition against women serving as witnesses in a rabbinical court, a *beit din*. Jonas's strategy is to downplay the rabbi's role:

**What does the rabbi actually do *al pi din* [according to law] in these aforementioned cases? Properly speaking, *nothing* except for a minor involvement with the *get*. That he is present at marriages in his rabbinic capacity and delivers a talk is a modern custom that has *nothing* to do with halacha. Similarly with the *get*, his presence is not *absolutely* necessary . . .**

Where is it forbidden that women can be *mesader ha-get* [one who facilitates a divorce decree]? . . . One should not underestimate, with regard to this procedure in religious life, particularly with what precedes the delivery of the *get*, that women have a special ability to overcome some of the difficulties that arise through the ill will of one member of a couple, or even to prevent the divorce.

The concluding words of Jonas's treatise reflect the passion of her belief and her rabbinic mission:

**Finally, the lifestyle of the rabbi is addressed. It goes without saying, but it still much must be firmly emphasized, that only those men and women should devote themselves to the job of rabbi, teacher, and custodian of Jewish ideas who are suffused with Jewish spirit, Jewish self-confidence, Jewish morality, purity and Jewish holiness, who could say, together with the prophet Jeremiah (20:9): “But his word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones...”**

**I must fight for God.**