



Regina Jonas: The First Female Rabbi

Regina Jonas' Legacy

Stefanie Sinclair:

So thank you very much Rabbi Sybil Sheridan and Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah to come here and talk to me. In 1993 you both attended an event when Hans Hirschbach and Herman Simon presented copies of Rabbi Regina Jonas' Certificate of Ordination and one of her photographs to Leo Baeck College in London. And you Sybil have described this event as a momentous occasion. And why do you think this event was so significant?

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

I was one of the first generation of rabbis ordained in this country. And it gave us a heritage. Judaism itself has such a long tradition. You're always looking back at where you come from at previous Rabbis and their statements and their understanding and there was nothing for women rabbis at all. There was just a blank page. And so really the discovery of Rabbi Regina Jonas gave us the first link as it were to go back. And it also opened up the possibilities that since she who'd been ordained so recently within the living memory of people could be forgotten. Then how many more people could there be out there that we didn't know. It opened up a huge possibility to explore the possibility of women's leadership roles within Judaism that just wasn't there before.

Stefanie Sinclair:

Elli, you were there as well. How did you feel about the event?

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

Well the same that Sybil felt. She was the first generation of women Rabbis but I was the first generation of lesbian rabbis. And had had an enormous struggle to get to that point. And by this time in 1993 I'd been a rabbi for four years. And there was somebody who obviously had been involved in something incredibly momentous. Had to show an enormous amount of determination. Imagination ran wild about this person who back in 1935 was ordained as a rabbi. And nobody mentioned her. She was erased from everybody's memory. And so I was fascinated. In fact I, very quickly, I went up to Herman Simon and I said I want to come and see you in Berlin. And I did. I think this was like the beginning of the year wasn't it, it was October. And I went in November. And to go and see him. And he gave me the microfilm that had everything. Obviously all in German including her thesis. And I don't have German but my partner at that time came from Germany so she was able to do translation. But it was that sense that here was somebody who was part of our inheritance and that inheritance had not

been available to us. It was because there were now women rabbis who could do something with that inheritance that made all the difference.

Stefanie Sinclair:

So had you heard of Regina Jonas before this event or was this the first time you actually heard of her?

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

To my shame, yes I had. In fact it is only quite recently I came across a copy of the book that was written by Rabbi Sally Priesand who was the first woman rabbi ordained in the States. And I'd marked because she writes about Regina Jonas and says Rabbi Regina Jonas was ordained in Germany but not by an institution. I'm the first person to have been ordained by an academic institution. And I'd marked it to look at. But what was very interesting is that having started my studies it became very clear that this was not kind of an avenue to go down. We were struggling so hard to be accepted, taken seriously as women within a male environment. But we weren't interested. I certainly wasn't interested at that point then to look at women rabbis. I didn't want to be a woman rabbi, I wanted to be a rabbi. And so I know that many of my colleagues, and I certainly did, tried very hard to be like a man in everything. You know dressing in black and white suits. You know black suit on the bema. You know low heels. Nothing that would sort of suggest any femininity at all. And the thought of looking at Regina Jonas would immediately have marginalised me. So I didn't.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

I came and was automatically controversial. So I didn't have a choice about that. I couldn't play the safe route of I'll be a rabbi first and then I'll be a lesbian. Because I was who I was and I couldn't not be who I was because there would have been lots of problems if it had come out. So I had to be out. So for me I actually went in to the Rabbinate in order to help transform Judaism into an inclusive egalitarian inheritance. So I had an agenda which I was pushing from the beginning. And in fact got it in the neck a lot. So I suppose I heard about it for the first time. Well we knew that he was coming and we knew he was bringing something of this but obviously that was the name.

Stefanie Sinclair:

You hadn't heard of her before?

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

No I hadn't heard.

Stefanie Sinclair:

So I remember you describing a moment when you were invited to give a presentation about Regina Jonas and you were forgotten. Someone didn't give you the opportunity to speak. This was at the event when Hans Hirschbach and Herman Simon presented it. It was presented to

the Principal of Leo Baeck College who was Rabbi Dr Jonathan Magonet. So it was two men handing over the artefacts of the first woman rabbi to another man. I was meant then to stand up and give a thanks because Jonathan had asked me to do that. And as I opened my mouth he launched into a speech. So yes.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

We were just all looking, you know, we were furious.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

It really absolutely pointed out the position of women in the Rabbinate at that point. That women could be forgotten. If we were there and could be forgotten, that my speech could be forgotten. You could see how it was possible that an entire life could be forgotten.

Stefanie Sinclair:

How is that possible?

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

Well I think partly it's the trauma of the Shoah. People who came over, people who survived were traumatised and having so much going on that I can understand that unless you were best friends, or someone you... so many people died. How do you think?

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

Well, I don't go for that. Regina Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, November 42. And she worked with Viktor Frankl for two years. She looked after the people who came off the transports. We've got the record of her list of various lectures she gave in the camp as well as the actual whole sermon. Clearly she was a figure but Viktor Frankl never mentioned her. Now he mentions lots of other people.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

I think though probably the reason that Leo Baeck didn't talk about her was because at the time it wasn't an issue. Had he lived on to the controversy or when women started applying to the college I'm sure at that point he would have spoken about it. But at the time I don't think in the 1950s anybody was thinking about women's ordination.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

I gave the first lecture at the college about Regina Jonas and in that I'm afraid I had to mention a few people. And one of them was a rabbi who also came out of the Shoah. Who I went to see because he was still alive. And I said to him why didn't you mention, because he was still alive. So Leo Baeck we couldn't ask. But we could ask him. He said, oh she didn't interest me.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

There were a lot of women who studied with her in Berlin, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. And they didn't like her. She was the only one who wanted to be a rabbi. They were studying to be teachers. They found her slightly odd, very difficult. And so I think in a sense it wasn't a deliberate conspiracy but again they didn't rate her.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

And I still feel there may be something else still. We don't know a lot about her private life. But for it to be such a silence. Such a deafening silence you'd think that there was something. Something happened and that was part of the, we can't talk about it. I just have this feeling. I may be wrong. I'm not a scandal merchant and this isn't for the Sun newspaper. But there's something that makes me feel that there was something else that went on that we don't know about.

Stefanie Sinclair:

So why do you think there has been a much more receptive audience for Regina Jonas' story since the 1990s? Do you think that was kind of a turning point?

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

One of the turning points certainly was that we had proof. And we had because with the fall of the Berlin Wall we had access to her documents.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

I think it's more than that. I think it's to do with the fact that we are a community of women rabbis. There's somewhere for this knowledge and information to be placed. You know when you say that it's more receptive. I mean I don't actually see a more receptive audience. What I see is women rabbis being interested in her.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

That's probably true. The fact that you have an interest in this. I don't know if there's any man who is actually doing any research into her at all.

Stefanie Sinclair:

Could you tell me a little bit more about what Regina Jonas means to you personally?

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

It's so interesting that Sybil mentions that a lot of her female colleagues didn't like her and she was seen as difficult. Well I have to say when I was at college a lot of my female colleagues did not like me. And I was seen as difficult. Because I was a radical feminist. Because I was a lesbian. Because for people who just wanted at last to be somewhere where they could become rabbis I was going on about being a woman all the time. I was going on about being a lesbian. So I really identified with her struggle.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

My experience was very different but I had this sense of enormous familiarity when I saw her photo. My family came from Germany as indeed did Elli's. And a sort of sense of a sort of reconnection that had there been no Shoah, I would have been a rabbi in Germany. With many women before. That there would have been. A sort of untroubled line. And the problems and the difficulties that Elli had faced. That we all faced should not have been there because there would have been so many more decades of women rabbis. So I felt that very, very keenly that this was a reconnection with a tradition that had been disrupted.

Stefanie Sinclair:

In what way is the memory of Regina Jonas relevant to female rabbis in 21st Century Britain?

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

She's a role model without doubt which was something that I didn't have as I was training. And an example I think of enormous courage. Somebody who really did buck the trend. And it appears had really very little or almost no support. And that I think is something that is really very important for rabbis training today, really both men and women.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

Absolutely because we feel like we've invented ourselves and yet there's this woman who did it. She even had the chutzpah to write her dissertation on why women should be rabbis. So she did all that work as well. And so it sort of puts this whole notion of this new fangled idea of women being rabbis. It puts it in another context. At the same time of course the context we've been in is also about our growing understanding that we're also a product of the Women's Liberation Movement. We haven't made those direct connections but you wouldn't have women deciding to study for the Rabbinat if the Women's Liberation Movement had not taken place. So we've got our own particular hinterland and background to what we're doing. And over the years there's been more claim that women rabbis have made to being feminists and being part of that. But being able to connect with her is also about the wider sense of what it is to be part of the Jewish people in the 20th and 21st century. And what that has meant to us. And certainly for me two big things propelled me into the Rabbinat. One of them was to make Jewish life more egalitarian and inclusive. And the other was not to give Hitler a posthumous victory as Emil Fackenheim put it. I had some kind of responsibility to help recreate Jewish life. And I think there are others who also felt that sense of we had work to do in the aftermath of that destruction. In that sense she's not just relevant to female rabbis.

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan:

Absolutely.

Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah:

But much beyond.

