

Parashat Bereshit 5781 Regina Jonas

Source Sheet by Rabbi Marina Yergin

Who was Rabbi Regina Jonas?



Regina Jonas was the first woman ever ordained as a rabbi. "Born in Berlin in 1902, Jonas began talking to friends about her desire to become a rabbi when she was still a teen, and later studied under Eduard Banath, who oversaw ordination for... a liberal, nondenominational seminary in Berlin. But when Banath died in 1930, Jonas struggled to find another rabbi willing to ordain her. She argued brilliantly for the possibility of women becoming rabbis and eventually won over Rabbi Max Dienemann, executive director of the Conference of Liberal Rabbis, in 1935. Over the next few years, Jonas preached at the Neue Synagogue and lectured to WIZO (the Women's International Zionist Organization) and local sisterhoods in Berlin, gradually becoming accepted as a spiritual leader for the Jewish community. Even after her deportation to Terezin, she continued to preach and to offer

spiritual comfort to her fellow prisoners.

But after her death in Auschwitz, Jonas was forgotten, unmentioned even by the theologian Leo Baeck and psychologist Viktor Frankl, who had known and worked with her. It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that her papers—and her story—came to light again." (<https://jwa.org/blog/berlin-prague-2014/commemorating-regina-jonas>)

What is the connection with Parashat Bereshit?

Although Rabbi Jonas' exact date of death is not known, based on the time of her deportation to Auschwitz, the Shabbat on which we read Parashat Bereishit has been chosen as her *yahrzeit* date. This is especially appropriate because as the first woman rabbi, Rabbi Jonas represents an important new beginning in Jewish history, just as Parashat Bereishit tells of the beginning of creation and the beginnings of humanity. (<https://jwa.org/rabbis/regina-jonas-remembered/program-resources>)

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בראשית א': כ"ז

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

Genesis 1:27

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

This verse emphasizes that each human being, of whatever gender, is a reflection of the image of the Divine. Rabbi Regina Jonas herself powerfully reflected on the idea of the fundamental divinity of all people and the implications of this idea for her choice to pursue the rabbinate in her writings in the women's page of Central-Verein-Zeitung (June 23, 1938), a German Jewish newspaper:

I hope a time will come for all of us in which there will be no more questions on the subjects of "woman": for as long as there are questions, something is wrong. But if I must say what drove me as a woman to become a rabbi, two elements come to mind: My belief in the godly calling and my love for people. 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. (<https://jwa.org/rabbis/regina-jonas-remembered/program-resources>)

"I came to my profession with the religious feeling that God does not oppress any human being, and that man is not supposed to rule woman or hold a position of spiritual supremacy over her. I came to it thinking of final and complete mental, spiritual and moral equality between both sexes, created by a just and merciful God." (1939)

(<https://jwa.org/blog/excerpts-from-writings-of-regina-jonas?fbclid=IwAR1kpo52zHGE-gwh-n22gNWmN7O81-e-ZIBM63Wf2THivDMASeoU9MStlhU>)