

Women in the Rabbinate¹

Compiled in honor of the yahrzeit of Rabbi Regina Jonas
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Temple Shalom Lafayette, LA



Rabbi Regina Jonas (August 1902- October 1944)²

“If I confess what motivated me, a woman, to become a rabbi, two things come to mind. My belief in God’s calling and my love of humans. 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.” Regina Jonas, C.-V.-Zeitung, June 23, 1938

Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi, was killed in Auschwitz in October 1944. From 1942–1944 she performed rabbinical functions in Theresienstadt. She would probably have been completely forgotten, had she not left traces both in Theresienstadt and in her native city, Berlin. None of her male colleagues, among them Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873–1956) and the psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), ever mentioned her after the Shoah. In 1972, when Sally Priesand was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, she was referred to as the “first female rabbi ever”—misinformation which was never corrected by those who knew better. Only when the Berlin Wall came down and the archives in East Germany became accessible was Regina Jonas’s legacy found in the *Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden*.

In the archives of Terezín there remains a handwritten document that summarizes her religious worldview and her legacy. Under the title “Lectures by the only female rabbi Regina Jonas,” it lists twenty-four topics for lectures, followed by notes on a sermon which she delivered in Terezin. Here she summarizes her religious outlook and testament: “Our Jewish people was planted by God into history as a blessed nation. ‘Blessed by God’ means to offer blessings, lovingkindness and loyalty, regardless of place and situation. Humility before God, selfless love for His creatures, sustain the world. It is Israel’s task to build these pillars of the world— man and woman, woman and man alike have taken this upon themselves in Jewish loyalty. Our work

¹ This compilation is a distillation of information gathered from the website of the Jewish Women’s Archive, the article “Rabbis in the United States” by Dr. Pamela S. Nadell, and the seminar “History of Women in the Rabbinate: A Case of Communal Amnesia” written by Rabbi Dr. Sybil Sheridan.

² <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jonas-regina>.

in Theresienstadt, serious and full of trials as it is, also serves this end: to be God's servants and as such to move from earthly spheres to eternal ones. May all our work be a blessing for Israel's future (and the future of humanity) ... Upright 'Jewish men' and 'brave, noble women' were always the sustainers of our people. May we be found worthy by God to be numbered in the circle of these women and men ... The reward of a mitzvah is the recognition of the great deed by God. Rabbi Regina Jonas, formerly of Berlin."



Mary M. Cohen (February 1854- July 1911)³

In 1889, the journalist Mary M. Cohen, a leading member of her traditional Philadelphia synagogue, broached the topic of women rabbis in "A Problem for Purim" on the front page of *The Jewish Exponent*. In this short story crafted for the Jewish holiday of masquerade, Cohen asked whether or not women could contribute to the development of American Judaism by becoming rabbis. The arguments she gave revealed a climate of rising expectations for changing female roles in American Judaism.



Ray Frank (April 1861- October 1948)

"My position this evening is a novel one.... To be at any time asked to give counsel to my people would be a mark of esteem; but on this night of nights, on Yom Kippur eve, to be requested to

³ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rabbis-in-united-states>.

talk to you, to advise you, to think that perhaps I am to-night the one Jewish woman in the world, mayhap the first since the time of the prophets to be called on to speak to such an audience as I now see before me, is indeed a great honor..." Ray Frank

Born in San Francisco in 1861 her career as a journalist, took her to Spokane, Washington where on the Yom Kippur of 1890, she set about arranging services for the community. There being no Rabbi, Frank was invited to preach. The result was so electric that from then on, until her marriage in 1901 she toured all over the country as a popular and charismatic preacher. She was in such demand that she employed an agent to arrange her appearances and manage her travelling. Ray Frank studied at the Hebrew Union College, receiving a Bachelor of Hebrew Letters. Of her, Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, president of H.U.C. said: *'We glory in her zeal and moral courage to break down the last remains of the barriers erected in the synagogue against woman.....In the laws governing the Hebrew Union College the question of sex of race of confession is not touched upon at all.....we can only encourage Miss Ray Frank or any other gifted lady who takes the theological course, to assist the cause of emancipating woman in the synagogue and congregation.'*⁴



Henrietta Szold (1860-1945)

Henrietta Szold enlisted generations of American Jewish women in the practical work of supporting Jewish settlement in Palestine and Israel. Born in 1860, Henrietta was raised by her rabbi father to be deeply committed to the Jewish people and the world of Jewish tradition and scholarship. As an essayist, translator, and editor, she became one of the few women to play a foundational role in creating a meaningful American Jewish culture. Still, Szold was constrained by the limited opportunities that the Jewish world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could offer a woman of her brilliance, organizational abilities, and vision.⁵

Henrietta Szold, who was to become one of the first women to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote: *'I believe that woman can best serve the interests of the synagogue by devoting herself to her homeand by occupying the pulpit only when her knowledge of the law, history, and literature of Judaism is masterful, and her natural gift so extraordinary as to forbid hesitation, though even then it were the part of wisdom not to make a profession of*

⁴ <http://www.hagalil.com/deutschland/berlin/bet-debora/history.htm>.

⁵ <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/szold>.

*public preaching and teachingIn other words, the Deborahs and Miriams need not hide their light under a bushel, but they and the world must be pretty sure that they are Deborahs and Miriams, not equally admirable Hannahs and Ruths.'*⁶

Martha Neumark (1904-1981)

In 1921, the seventeen-year-old student at Hebrew Union College launched a two-year-long debate over whether or not the college would ordain women rabbis. In the course of that debate Reform rabbis affirmed, in principle, that “woman cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination” (Central Conf. of Amer. Rabbis, p. 51). But the college’s board of governors, fearing this act would constitute an irrevocable break with the more traditional sectors of American Jewry, prevented her from achieving her goal.⁷

Helen Levinthal (1910-1989)⁸

In 1939, the Jewish Institute of Religion awarded Helen Levinthal a master of Hebrew literature, not the rabbinical ordination she had sought. By then she had completed the entire rabbinical curriculum and written a thesis on woman suffrage from the point of view of Jewish law. Subsequently, like Ray Frank, Levinthal for a time exercised informal rabbinic leadership, preaching at High Holiday services in Brooklyn in 1939. But eventually she, like many of the other pioneers before and after her, settled down to a life as wife, mother, and exemplary Jewish volunteer.

The failure of each of these women to become a rabbi illustrates the roles—student, teacher, and principal; volunteer, especially for Jewish women’s organizations; and most importantly, wife and mother—sanctioned for American Jewish women at mid-century. Women could do many things in American Judaism, but they could not become rabbis.



Rabbi Sally Priesand (1946- present)

⁶ <http://www.hagalil.com/deutschland/berlin/bet-debora/history.htm>.

⁷ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rabbis-in-united-states>.

⁸ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rabbis-in-united-states>.

In 1964, when Sally Priesand crossed the threshold of the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion as a freshman in its undergraduate program, she followed the path of the pioneers, like Martha Neumark, who had already raised the question in the very same halls. But while the earlier unsuccessful challengers stood largely in isolation, the future Rabbi Priesand found an ever-widening circle of supporters, whose imaginations were sparked by the nascent feminist movement. Most important, she won the favor of Hebrew Union College president Nelson Glueck, who decided to act on what his predecessors had simply asserted, woman’s right to ordination. At the same time, both the Anglo-Jewish and the national press carefully monitored Priesand’s progress as a symbol of women’s liberation and the inroads it was making in American religion. In June 1972, Priesand became the first woman in America ordained a rabbi. (In 1935, in Germany, REGINA JONAS, who later perished in the Holocaust, had received private Reform ordination.) Already it was clear she would not be the last.