

Regina Jonas: a life of aspiration and inspiration

Regina Jonas

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Abstract

Purpose – Leadership educators have the responsibility to help students hear the stories of those who may otherwise be forgotten. There is great value to unearthing the stories of those who have been cast aside due to neglect or malice, both historically and in contemporary society. Given the interdisciplinary nature of leadership education, we benefit from a historical lens which helps us to understand who we are and where we come from. One transformative leader whose story impacts us immensely and whose story we believe would benefit leadership educators to learn about is the story of Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a Rabbi.

Design/methodology/approach – The article offers a rich narrative account of experiences, people and lessons learned when considering an impactful leader.

Findings – The often untold story of the first known woman rabbi shifts the male dominated narrative of leadership, particularly leadership in religious communities.

Originality/value – Though we have never met Regina Jonas, her story has shaped our study and practice of leadership and her triumphs live on in the spirits of women who lead with resilience, tenacity and fortitude today.

Keywords Leadership education, Women in leadership, Feminism, Teaching and learning of leadership, Judaism/Rabbi

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Leadership educators have the power to show our students that they “have value, and all have a story to share” (Buschlen, 2022, p. 184). Helping students recognize that they matter, they belong and they are accepted is foundational to the profession of leadership education. To build upon that foundation and reach the potential for leadership education, leadership pedagogues must also help students to recognize, listen to and respond thoughtfully to the stories of others, particularly those whose stories are often forgotten or marginalized. There is great value to unearthing the stories of those who have been cast aside due to neglect or malice, both historically and in contemporary society. Given the interdisciplinary nature of leadership education, leadership learners benefit from a historical lens which helps us to understand our shared humanity. In doing so, leadership education can also honor the particularities of each person’s story as it connects to a myriad of cultures and communities. Additionally, such stories can serve the pedagogical goal of applying differing theoretical models of leadership to lived experiences.

The three co-authors of this piece have collaborated on interfaith leadership initiatives at the campus of a mid-sized state university in Pennsylvania. Interfaith work is important for a variety of reasons, including the development of religious literacy in a pluralistic and

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globalized world and the cultural competency to work with diverse others and lead positive social change. Such work can also be a catalyst for the exploration and development of one's ability to find meaning through spiritual and cultural seeking and questioning. One of our authors is a student who recently took on the transformational experience of reconnecting with her Jewish heritage and identity, and she was moved by discovering the story of Rabbi Regina Jonas. From this experience, we wish to amplify her story in circles who may not have heard her story before.

The life of Rabbi Regina Jonas

Rabbi Regina Jonas was the first woman to be ordained a rabbi and stands as a transformative leader of immense impact. Leadership educators would richly benefit by becoming familiar with her narrative. Rabbi Jonas' story was inspirational to many both during and after her life. Bringing this often-untold story of the first woman rabbi to our attention shifts the too often male-dominated narrative of leadership, particularly in the context of religious communities. Until 1991 when Professor Katerina von Kellenbach found documents in the Central Archives for German Jewry that provided insight into Jonas' life and verified her status, she was largely unknown. She was not mentioned by survivors who knew her, as if to be kept secret, surfacing mostly as a rumor thought lost to history (Reimer, 2014). Her journey towards ordination did not come easily, an all too familiar pattern for women in positions of religious leadership. As with many religious communities around the world even to this day, traditional practice and interpretation of ancient texts in Judaism barred women from positional leadership. Her story illustrates how passion and determination can overcome barriers when one takes on challenges at the right time and with the right support.

Early life and education

Regina Jonas was born in Berlin, Germany on August 3rd, 1902. According to [Elsby \(n.d.\)](#), she was born into a poor but "close knit Orthodox Jewish family" (para. 6). She and her brother, Abraham, who was two years her senior, were raised by her parents, Wolf and Sarah, who instilled a love for the Jewish religion into their two children. While historians do not know much about her early years, they do know that both she and Abraham would go on to pursue careers as religious teachers, most likely due to their parents' religious influences.

The Jonas family attended the *Rykestraße* Synagogue, led by a moderate orthodox Rabbi Dr Max Weyl ([Elsby, n.d.](#), para. 6). In the early 20th century:

Jewish life was going through a change in Germany. . . [by shifting] away from strict orthodoxy to a more liberal Judaism. . . The classical *alter ritus* ("old way") was replaced in many congregations with the *neuer ritus* ("new way"), which would often include mixed choral singing accompanied by organ music in the synagogue. ([Elsby, n.d.](#), para. 7).

Rabbi Weyl elevated the status of women in the synagogue, which would become pivotal to Jonas' journey ([Elsby, n.d.](#), para. 7).

After Jonas' father passed in 1913, Jonas attended the *Jüdische Mädchen Mittelschule* ("Jewish Girls School") of *Rykestraße*, an orthodox synagogue ([Elsby, n.d.](#), para. 6). Jonas was an exemplary student in all coursework relating to Judaism, Jewish culture and language. Even by this young age of 11, Jonas had already discerned that she wanted to become a rabbi, having had a strong vocation throughout her childhood. Classmates even remembered that Jonas aspired to become a rabbi at this time, as she was very vocal about it, but it was not yet an attainable goal for her. The changing times would soon make it a real possibility. By 1917, through Rabbi Weyl's leadership, girls were able to receive formal religious education and

celebrate a bat mitzvah (Elsby, n.d., para. 7). Women participating in bat mitzvah were still a recent and rare phenomenon at this time (Waskow, n.d.). Rabbi Weyl saw much promise in Jonas; he became her mentor, and they met weekly to study the Talmud, the Shulhan Arukh and rabbinic texts for decades to follow.

Higher education

In 1923, Jonas would go on to pass her *Abitur* (final exam) at the *Oberlyzeum Weissensee* (a secondary or high school) in order to attend university. “The following year, she attended a teachers’ seminar, enabling her to teach Jewish religion in girls’ schools in Berlin” (Klapheck, 1999, para. 5). Then, she entered the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Higher Institute for Jewish Studies”) where she trained to become a rabbi. Out of her entire class, she was the only woman enrolled who hoped to be ordained as a rabbi. Jonas’ other classmates who were women were studying for an academic teacher’s degree. Eduard Baneth was the “professor of Talmud at the *Hochschule* and was responsible for rabbinic ordination” (Klapheck, 1999, para. 7), and he agreed to supervise Jonas’ thesis, a formal part of her appeal to become a rabbi.

Her thesis topic was *Can a Woman Be a Rabbi According to Halachic Sources?* (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). She submitted her thesis in June 1930, and it is the first thesis we know of to argue on a *halakhic* (“Jewish law”) basis for the ordination of women (Klapheck, 1999). Jonas wrote her thesis by grounding her modern attitude toward women in this traditional *halakhic* line of argument, with significant emphasis on what she described as feminine qualities that are suitable for rabbinic work, as well as women’s accessibility to the young, which aligned with feminist arguments of that time. She also focused on the “duties a rabbi must embrace in Germany - not only spiritual advisor, judge, and religious leader, but also a preacher” (Elsby, n.d., para. 14). One can see in her work the modern view that part of the pastoral care performed by a rabbi involves community outreach and youth work. Jonas’ thesis earned approval, but Eduard Baneth unfortunately passed away soon after this good news. Hanokh Albeck succeeded him, but sadly was not willing to ordain a woman, upholding the dominant view in the community that only men should be rabbis. Although many of her teachers praised her thesis, none proved courageous enough to speak up and disagree with Albeck (Geller, 2014). This must have been a time of tremendous personal grief and loss, as well as frustration at such a setback after all her hard work. Nonetheless, Jonas would go on to teach “religion at several girls’ schools in Berlin where she was known to be a very popular and committed teacher” (Klapheck, 1999, para. 13).

Rabbinical work

In 1933, tensions began to arise, and students had to leave public schools when the Nazis came to power. Those in power passed antisemitic legislation, including the Nuremberg Race Laws, taking away basic freedoms of education, religion and movement from German Jews. Despite these obstacles, Jonas continued to pursue ordination amidst the escalating antisemitic climate in Germany. She remained vocal about the importance of women in their religious community and the roles they fulfill. Finally, in 1935, Rabbi Max Dienemann controversially agreed to test her for ordination, and on December 27th she earned her *semikha* (ordination) in a private service. Her persistence, her education and her exemplary work in teaching and pastoral care were finally being officially affirmed. This did not mean the wider community would take her in, and her requests for employment at synagogues were rejected. Some papers described her ordination as “treason” and making a “caricature of Judaism” (Geller, 2014, para. 4). In the years following, Jonas performed rabbinic work in Berlin within welfare institutions, Jewish hospitals and preaching in liberal synagogues.

Jonas nurtured elderly Jewish people, attending to their spiritual needs and spending much needed time with them. Responding to what motivated her to become a rabbi, she reported:

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. (Lerner, 2014, para. 13)

Even though Nazi propaganda sought to demonize German Jews, countless Jews in Germany found a renewed interest in their own religion and culture, leading to a brief but doomed flourishing of Jewish life and study. In 1942, Jonas and her mother were deported to Theresienstadt, a ghetto-labor camp that also served as a holding pen in which the sick were expected to die and the surviving prisoners would later be sent to death camps. While there, she worked as a rabbi, preaching and counseling, including working with Viktor Frankl to care for incoming prisoners (Klapheck, 1999). The Nazis deported Jonas and her mother to Auschwitz on October 12, 1944, and they were later murdered in the Auschwitz gas chambers (Kellenbach, 2001, p. 254).

Just before her first deportation to Theresienstadt, Jonas gathered a photo of her in her rabbinical robes, a copy of her thesis and her ordination certificate, along with newspaper clippings about her and letters to her from those that she had helped. She gave these to an acquaintance, understanding the importance of her achievement and the fate she was heading toward (Geller, 2014, para. 8). These documents that were found in 1991.

Jonas served as a light and form of support for countless Jewish people in Germany and the Nazi concentration camps during Second World War. She was a teacher and rabbi in her final years before being deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto. Jonas was a trailblazer and leader for all the women rabbis that succeeded her. She was a forgotten woman leader in history. She served as a transformational leader, modeling vision and offering hope for countless Jewish people before, during and beyond Second World War.

The leadership legacy of Rabbi Regina Jonas: significance for leadership education

Our "origins" are more than those whom we have encountered in the flesh. We are also shaped by those from the past whom we "meet" by studying history and uncovering the forgotten stories within history. These individuals, especially those others aimed to erase, have the power to shape or mold us into who we are today. This is certainly true for us in our encounter of Rabbi Jonas. Many contemporary women Jewish leaders, including Sally Priesand, the first woman to be ordained by a rabbinical seminary, have expressed how much it means to them to learn about Jonas. To honor the 70th anniversary of her death, a group of women rabbis and scholars retraced her journey in Germany and commemorated her death in Theresienstadt ([Jewish Women's Archive](#), n.d.). Specifically, by learning about and celebrating the life of Rabbi Jonas, we are – in Jewish parlance – seeing her memory as a blessing. People with Jewish heritage will particularly find Jonas' leadership inspiring because of the long-standing marginalization of Jews worldwide. The historical presence of Jonas paves a future for marginalized individuals to blossom into leaders who goes on to rewrite conventional belief systems.

One reason leadership educators may wish to include Jonas' story (and others like hers) into their work is to further intercultural competence, which Irving (2009) claims is "an essential skill necessary for leaders and organizations that desire to meet the unique demands of global interconnectedness" (p. 12), and to help leaders understand both their own cultural lens and those of others they wish to influence cross-culturally (see Javidan, 2008a).

Irving (2009) distinguished “intercultural sensitivity” as “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences,” while “intercultural competence” is “the ability to think and act in intercultural appropriate ways” (pp. 7–8). The former empowers the latter (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). If leadership today increasingly requires a “Global Mindset” as Javidan (2008b, c) described, then educators should aim to foster skills like a “general cultural acumen. . . [and a] passion for diversity” (Irving, 2009, p. 7). Similarly, furthering the progression from “ethnocentric” to “ethnorelative” orientations along the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (see Bennett, 1993) is valuable to today’s leaders. Intentionality around interfaith inclusivity in our curricula helps achieve this aim. In this case, our student author discovered more about her own tradition and strengthened her own identity by learning about Regina Jonas, which helped her clarify her own lens. Our student-led interfaith campus peer educators now share Regina Jonas’ story with individuals in the campus and community who orient differently around religion and worldview. Students who do not share Jonas’ cultural and religious tradition can gain awareness and build their cultural sensitivity and competence through her inspiring story, helping them become better at appreciating another’s lens.

Leadership educators may choose to utilize the life of Rabbi Regina Jonas as a case study on transformational leadership outside of paternalistic paradigms. Jonas’ transformative leadership opened an original narrative to the Jewish communities during her lifetime and continues to develop the transformational nature of religion. Rabbi Regina Jonas embodied the courage and ethicality associated with Burns’ ideas of transforming leadership and the subsequent scholarship on transformational leadership established by Bass and colleagues (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978). With reference to the four transformational “I”s (Burns, 1978), Jonas’ life maps squarely onto the Full Range of Leadership Model (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Jonas embodies “idealized influence,” as she lived out her vocation, leading by example and setting the expectations for those who would follow in her footsteps. She dedicated herself to teaching, remaining vocal about her beliefs, which underscores “individualized consideration” as she challenged and empowered her students to rethink the limitations placed on women in the community. Her teaching and her thesis itself served as “intellectual stimulation” to foster growth and change for Jewish women. Finally, by definition, she provides “inspirational motivation” for others to reach new heights, as she persevered to attain what was commonly held as unthinkable.

Her life is remarkable enough to connect to many different approaches in leadership education and leadership studies. For example, narrative researchers and historians will find Rabbi Jonas’ story fascinating, perhaps considering additional studies on the connections between her life and the leadership of other women rabbis or religious leaders (e.g. Silverman, 2013). To critical leadership scholars, Rabbi Jonas serves as an exemplar of how leaders from marginalized communities are often forgotten by history due to oppressive erasure (e.g. Sinclair, 2013; Jones, 2009). Feminist scholars may note that the argumentation employed by Jonas to advocate within a patriarchal system required her to leverage an understanding of gender as binary and essentialist to explain the advantageous nature of “traditionally feminine” qualities for leadership. To scholars of leadership and religion, Jonas’ life and work is an important example of how women have historically had to understand, work within and subvert existing organizational and cultural scripts to influence their communities for positive social change (e.g. Kellenbach, 2001). Feminist leaders and allies may utilize Jonas’ life as a source of continued motivation to fight for their rights in a patriarchal society.

As scholarly collaborators, we, the authors of the piece, have incorporated Rabbi Jonas’ story into our interfaith leadership efforts on campus, in the classroom and beyond it. We often use Rabbi Jonas’ story as an exemplar in leadership in educational presentations, and in doing so invite others into the process of deep listening to the stories of those around us who have given light and shape to the paths we walk today. Rabbi Jonas serves as an enactment of

what Patel, in his work on interfaith leadership, calls “grit.” Patel (2016) characterized “grit” as the “. . .foundational quality for effective interfaith leadership. You have to play the long game and know that you are going to encounter prejudice, tension, disagreement, and conflict along the way” (pp. 156–157). This was certainly true for Rabbi Jonas, and we have found that her story serves as an apt inspiration for students encountering contemporary crises, injustices and sources of violence and oppression.

By focusing on the stories of those who, like Rabbi Jonas, have been marginalized, we also have renewed our interest in studying and practicing leadership, seeing her story as a symbol for the work that must be done in the present to seek justice, resist systems of oppression and tell and retell the stories of leaders who shape our own leader identity. In her own words, found in the archives of Theresienstadt, Rabbi Jonas encourages us to continue the work, even in the direst of circumstances:

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 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). (Lerner, 2014, para. 17)

Though we have never met Regina Jonas, her story has shaped our study and practice of leadership and her triumphs live on in the spirits of women who lead with resilience, tenacity and fortitude today.

May her memory be a blessing.

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