

Comments at Dedication of Regina Jonas Plaque
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Terezín Memorial
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כ"ב בתמוז, תשע"ד

On this singular occasion, as we formally dedicate this plaque in respectful memory of Rabbi Regina Jonas – doing so in the presence of her collegial heirs, the inheritors of her spiritual legacy, as well as in the presence of so many distinguished guests from the United States, Europe, and Israel – let us offer up one additional panegyric in Rabbi Jonas's honor.

Regina Jonas's life – her struggles and her attainments – constitute, above all else, an inspiring tribute to the grandeur of the human spirit. Indeed, Rabbi Jonas's most enduring legacy is found in an inspiring assurance that a truly earnest, selfless, and noble cause is utterly and always indefeasible. Those human beings whose spirit rouses us toward the ideals of righteousness and justice, of goodness and hope, these impulses can never be annulled or voided or undone.

The greatest achievements in the history of civilized society – the pursuit of liberty of conscience, the drive toward political emancipation, the struggle for the abolition of slavery, the campaign for suffrage, the triumph of democracy over autocracy – all of these and more testify to the veracity of this assertion. Regina Jonas's life exemplifies this truth, and there can be little doubt she was cognizant of this truth, and this is why she declared: "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."¹

I first learned about Regina Jonas several years before her archives had resurfaced and researchers began to reconstruct her life. Rabbi Dr. Alexander Guttman (1908-1988) taught Talmud and Rabbinical Literature at Hebrew Union College, but he had been one of Rabbi Jonas's teachers at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Dr. Guttman pointed out that Rabbi Jonas had been Rabbi Priesand's predecessor. Years later, after her documents and papers resurfaced in the early 1990s, scholars began to reconstruct Rabbi Jonas's biography. In reading their publications, the breadth and depth of her extraordinary persona and her undaunted courage were mesmerizing. From the moment of my appointment to the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad in 2011, I was intent on preserving her legacy as an exemplar for Americans.

Regina Jonas's life and her teachings unquestionably merit the Commission's recognition because she has become, without question, the beau ideal for hundreds of women rabbis in America. Her legacy constitutes the personification of the lofty ideal's that our founders implanted into America's ethos: "all human beings have been created equal," they insisted, and

¹Elisa Klapheck, *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), 51.

every human being born into this world is imbued with the natural rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Rabbi Regina Jonas not only embodied these ideals for her successors, she advocated for them. These are her words:

- “[It is] the requirement of human beings to sustain the earth and to establish the rule of the Eternal One in the world”²; and,
- “. . . Be a blessing for Israel’s future and for that of humankind”³; and,
- “One [should take] woman and man for what they are: human beings”⁴; and,
- “. . . the searching and penetrating human mind . . . will guide the destiny of the mortal from darkness to light, from confusion to clarity.”⁵

Finally, it should be noted that Rabbi Jonas fervently embraced the conviction that all learning is purposeful. In her opinion, we learn in order to do. Or, as she put it: “Learning is a commandment which applies to men and women in the same way. Learning, however, is not pure theory. At the end of learning lies the deed.”⁶

What deed lies at the end of the learning we have acquired during this week and on this day? Surely that deed comes to us from the immortal words of David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of the State of Israel, who left us with a charge that is a fitting exhortation as we dedicate this memorial. Ben Gurion said, “let us never, *never* live in the past, but let the past *always* live within us.”⁷

With this task in mind, we reverently and gratefully dedicate this memorial plaque on behalf of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad, for the government of the people of the United States of America and, indeed, as a sign for good people everywhere who fulfill Rabbi Jonas’s conviction that together, we – men and women – will one day “guide the destiny of the mortal from darkness to light, from confusion to clarity.”

²Katharina von Kellenbach, “Denial and Defiance in the Work of Rabbi Regina Jonas” in Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (eds.), *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2001), 253.

³Ibid., 255.

⁴Ibid., 245.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 253.

⁷Cf. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, *A Treasury of The Art of Living* (Hollywood, California: Wilshire Book Company, 1963), 246.