

„How I'd love to be number 100 000“ (Regina Jonas)

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Is „feminism“ a language? How else can one possibly explain that these women from all over Europe, Norway to Serbia, Russia to Great Britain, from Israel and the United States have no problem communicating with each other, despite their different mother-tongues and diverse political and Jewish socialization?

The fifty women who came to Hoddesdon near London from 16-19 April 2015 for the 7th International Bet Debora conference were surprised how similar many of their experiences of critically engaging with patriarchal structures in their respective home countries and communities had been, and how many questions had remained unanswered and so kept resurfacing, frustrating the assumption that things would be different for „the younger generations“, the „women in Western Europe“ etc. Despite an improvement in women's socio-economic status and several decades of activity, struggle and discussion, structures dominated by male outlook and networks remain; structures that deny women equal shares and power in committees, social influence and cultural remembrance.

The conference ran under the title „Engendering Jewish Politics – Redefining the Role of Women“, with support from the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Ernst Ludwig Foundation. Participants were from an immense spectrum, ranging from secular Jewish women to Reform rabbis to women from an ultra orthodox Jewish background. Despite the religious, political and cultural differences, as feminists the women were all speaking the same language, a language that speaks of equal opportunities and equality of men and women in the Jewish community, and is carried by the unique voices of the women themselves.

A number of contributions by the visiting rabbis, readers, academics and artists focused on rediscovering women's biographies and their great achievements in scholarship and academics, and in the Jewish community, as well as in the resistance against the Nazis, which often go unacknowledged. Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi in Berlin in 1935 and who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, is one story of a forgotten or invisible woman. Despite the fact that there were people who could have remembered her unusual life, such as Leo Baeck or other lecturers from the Academy of the Study of Judaism, it was not until the 1980s that her legacy was rediscovered and is now being revisited.

The idea of pioneering male-dominated realms permeated the presentations. Many of the speakers are themselves protagonists of emancipatory struggles, including Jackie Tabick who was the first female rabbi to be ordained in Great Britain and is today the president of Bet Din. The director of Leo Baeck College, London, Rabbi Deborah Kahn-Harris, spoke of the particular challenges of running a rabbinical training center as a woman. Former Chabad member Dina Brawer recounted the path that lead her to her current studies to Maharat, the orthodox equivalent of a rabbi. Beyond rabbinical vocations there was much discussion of

the ways in which women's changed societal position could be reflected in the liturgy – followed by a direct application of these ideas in Shabbat services and a Rosh Chodesh ritual.

It is not just in the Jewish community but also in politics that women are trying to make their voices heard by offering new and often creative forms of work and organization. Women's initiatives from Israel, South Africa, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, Serbia and Russia were introduced, all of which place their emphasis on the preservation of the Jewish historical heritage as well as a more gender-sensitive education at Jewish schools.

Rabbi Elisa Klapheck introduced Margarethe Susman, a philosopher who is practically unknown today while her intellectual contemporaries Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber have reaped acclaim and fame en masse. Films about Regina Jonas and Israeli family law, an art project investigating Jewish traces in Tchernobyl and a concert by singer Bente Kahan took a more artistic approach to engaging with women's biographies. The one question that tied together all aspects of the conference, however, was how the lives, achievements and contributions of Jewish women can become part of our canonical cultural memory.

With support from the foundation „Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft“, several panels were dedicated to the unique fate of forced laborers, a topic that has so far suffered neglect in Holocaust research. Stories of women and the Shoah are often overlooked or silenced. How an understanding of historical persecution can make the present appear in a new light was illuminated by the example of a Polish Roma woman's experience. The conference participants were shocked to hear her personal story which attested to the continuation of prejudices and emotive denial in Central Europe today. Compared to other countries in Europe, for example Great Britain, and the Jewish living situation in Germany before the Shoah, when the German Jewish community was supporting the emancipatory struggle of women, the conservatism of current Germany is strongly noticeable. The majority of Jewish organizations are fronted by a male voice. Even in organizations that see themselves as „pluralistic“ women still find themselves confronted with having to demand equal opportunities.

In the spirit of an enlightened and inclusive Judaism, in the spirit of Tikkun Olam, it is high time for all genders to be given a voice. This conference is evidence for how much content and how much political and religious potential the perspectives of Jewish women can bring to a community.