

INSTALLATION OF RABBI GESA EDERBERG, BERLIN, JUNE 3, 2007

Alice Shalvi

Dear Gesa, Honoured Congregants of the Oranienburgerstrasse Gemeinde and Distinguished Guests,

Seventy-two years ago, in 1935, the world's first woman rabbi was ordained, here in Berlin. Five years earlier, in June 1930, she had submitted her final thesis at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Its title was "Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?" In it, the pioneering author argued that "almost nothing halakhically, only prejudice and lack of familiarity, stand against women holding rabbinic office." "Fraülein Rabbiner Jonas," as she was called, was fated to serve as spiritual guide and pastor of a constantly diminishing flock for only a very few years. Deported to Theresienstadt together with her mother in November 1942, she even there continued her work as a rabbi, preaching and counseling for two years until, on October 12, 1944, she and her mother were dispatched to their death in Auschwitz.

In June 1938, Regina Jonas had written: "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." (C.-V.-Zeitung, June 23, 1938.)

Jonas's question regarding the possibility of women becoming rabbis has been answered. Today, many women – though still not enough – have been ordained and are diligently serving their communities and congregations. Like Jonas, they are preachers, teachers, spiritual counselors. Learned in Torah, they serve as models of devoutness, observing not only the God-related mitzvot (בין אדם למקום), but – in an inspired and inspiring manner – the essential mitzvot להברו בין אדם להברו, the principles that guide us in our relations with our fellow men and women, Jews and non-Jews alike. They pursue peace; they pursue justice. As Jonas recognized, women are

especially fit to be rabbis, since what she called "female qualities," such as compassion, social skills, psychological intuition and accessibility to the young are essential in this vocation.

The woman we are honouring today, Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, possesses all the qualities that Regina Jonas enumerated. I first met Rabbi Ederberg when she was interviewed for entrance to the Schechter Institute's rabbinical school in Jerusalem. Already then, she impressed me with her commitment to Judaism, her fine intellect, her command of Hebrew. I followed her progress throughout her studies. I was present at the ברית מילה and טובד בת of her beautiful twins. I rejoiced at her ordination. She is a devout Jew, a fine scholar, a diligent and sympathetic spiritual guide, an excellent and dedicated teacher of both the young and older generations. I feel very privileged to have been able to accompany her on her way, both at the Schechter Rabbinical School in Jerusalem and now, here, today.

Dear Gesa, two weeks ago we read the beautiful story of Ruth the Moabite, a model of loving kindness and fidelity. Everybody is familiar with her words of commitment to her mother-in-law Naomi and, through her, to the people of Israel: "Wherever you will go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God." Like Ruth, you have made yourself one of our people and have embraced the God of Israel as your God.

The leaders of the Berlin Jewish Community have made a courageous and very wise decision in appointing you to serve at this beautiful, historic synagogue. I am convinced that nobody will ever have cause to regret your appointment and I wish you much success and your congregants much joy in your presence among them.

עלי והצליחי ויהי גועם הי עמך!

May you go from strength to strength and may God's grace accompany you always.