CRACKS IN THE CEILING
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom – January 8, 2016

Tomorrow morning we will celebrate the long overdue Bat Mitzvah for Jana Timko and Jo Skjodal. The B'not Mitzah is overdue for a number of reasons.

One is that we had planned to do it last year but scheduling conflicts and other commitments got in our way.

Secondly and more importantly it is overdue because had these remarkable women been born half a century later and in North America they would have been called to Torah as young girls have been called to Torah and to lead the congregation in prayer since the 1970s.

The first North American Bat Mitzvah was held in 1922 when Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, arranged for his daughter Judith to celebrate becoming a bat mitzvah at a public synagogue ceremony.

Its overdue for a third reason, perhaps most significant of all in that women have been trying to crack the Bat Mitzvah glass ceiling for more than 100 years before Judith Kaplan ascended the bima and proclaimed her version of "Today I am a Fountain Pen"

It has taken nearly 150 years of banging our heads in frustration against that glass ceiling before the barrier was shattered and a woman reading Torah and leading a service is no longer a novelty – though in some circles it of course still is and much worse.

I raise all of this history in part to celebrate Jo and Jana and their inspiring achievement, but also to make a larger point. Never in the history of human events have human beings managed to build a wall high enough or strong enough to keep out the flow of ideas.

The cause of human rights, the right of self-expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion will in time, and it can be a long time persevere and prevail.

Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

When we are in the midst of the fight, like those in North America for women's rights, racial equality, LGBTQ acceptance and so many more we may feel like Sisyphus, pushing a stone up a hill only to have it roll back down upon us, but history has shown light dispels the darkness, history bends towards justice.

I remind myself that almost every day as I read with great despair the violence that human beings are ravaging upon each other across the globe. The entrenchment of our politics, the smallness and pettiness of our grievances; the narrowness of our compassion and empathy.

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

And it is starting to bend.

This summer, Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox Seminary affiliated with a new stream within Orthodox Judaism called Open Orthodoxy ordained Lila Kagedan, as a Rabbi.

Lila, who was born in Canada and moved with her family to Ottawa when she was about 8 years old. She grew up in the orthodox Day school movement and has degrees from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the University of Toronto and Harvard University. She is a clinical ethicist and chaplain and sits on ethics committees of major hospitals, hospices and academic institutions.

She is not the first Orthodox woman to be ordained a Rabbi, but what makes her story 'glass shattering' is that a few weeks ago she was hired by an Orthodox synagogue to serve as their rabbi.

Graduates of the Yeshivat Maharat, which was founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss have so far avoided taking the title rabbi, though the school is explicit that its mission is to train female Orthodox "clergy." Most have taken on the title *maharat*, an acronym that translates roughly to female spiritual leader.

Kagedan, made the bold and courageous choice to no longer hide behind semantics and to proudly call herself Rabbi.

In doing so she in not only following in the foot steps of Sally Priesand, the first female Reform Rabbi who was ordained in 1972 and put a significant fissure in the rabbinic glass ceiling but she was also following in the footsteps of another woman rabbi who was ordained 80 years ago last week.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Jeff Salkin relates the story of Rabbi Regina Jonas who was born on August 3, 1902 in Berlin.

At the age of 21, Ms Jones began teaching in an Orthodox Jewish school in Berlin.

In Berlin, she enrolled in the *Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (their school bumper stickers required the entire bumper), the seminary for liberal rabbis and educators. There, she attained the qualification of "Academic Teacher of Religion."

But Regina Jonas wanted to be ordained as a rabbi. To that end, she wrote a thesis: "Can a Woman Be a Rabbi According to Halachic Sources?" Her conclusion, based on biblical, Talmudic, and rabbinic sources was an unqualified "yes."

Most of her professors supported her. But, the esteemed Talmud professor, Chanoch Albeck, flatly stated: "I do not ordain girls."

Regina then turned to Rabbi Leo Baeck, the spiritual leader of German Jewry.

Baeck greatly respected her, but he refused to ordain her. He sensed what lay ahead for the Jewish community of Germany, and he did not want to compromise communal unity.

Ultimately, Regina Jonas turned to Rabbi Dr. Max Dienemann, a distinguished liberal rabbi in Offenbach. On December 27, 1935, he ordained her as a "rabbi in Israel." Over six years later, on February 6, 1942, Leo Baeck himself signed a certificate confirming her semicha as well.

Rabbi Jonas found work as a chaplain in various Jewish homes for the aged and the orphaned.

And then, Kristallnacht — November, 1938. The Nazis sent many liberal rabbis to concentration camps. Others were able to flee. Regina Jonas was left behind, and because there was a shortage of rabbis, she was finally able to function as a rabbi.

How ironic: The Nazi onslaught destroyed countless rabbinates. And it created a rabbinate, as well.

Jonas was ordered into forced labour in a factory. And yet, she continued her pastoral work. She continued to teach and preach. One survivor remembers: "Whenever she preached to those who were to perform forced labour, they filled the place to capacity. Those who did not manage to get in stood in the doorways as far as the street."

On November 3, 1942, Regina Jonas was forced to fill out a declaration form by the Nazis. That declaration form listed her property — including all her books. Two days later, all her property was confiscated "for the benefit of the German Reich."

The next day, she was arrested by the Gestapo. It was November 6, 1942.

She was deported to the so-called model concentration camp at Theresienstadt. Even there her rabbinate did not end. In fact, her partner in pastoral psychology was the well-known psychologist, Viktor Frankl. Her job was to meet the transports at the railway station. There she would help people deal with their sense of shock and disorientation.

Viktor Frankl wrote a great deal about his experiences during the war. His work with human beings in the camps served as the very centerpiece of his philosophy, and the subject of his masterpiece, Man's Search for Meaning.

And yet, Viktor Frankl never mentioned Regina Jonas in his writings. Neither did Leo Baeck.

It took Frankl fifty years to remember her.

In 1991, the German-American theologian, Katharina von Kellenbach, asked Frankl directly about Regina Jonas. He admitted that he remembered her: as an energetic woman, with an impressive and powerful personality.

He was even able to recite one of her sermons from memory.

This is a section from one of Regina Jonas's sermons in Theresienstadt:

"Our Jewish people is sent from God into history as 'blessed.' This means that wherever one steps in every life situation, bestow blessing, goodness and faithfulness — humility before God's self-lessness, whose devotion-full love for his creatures maintains the world. To establish these pillars of the world was and is Israel's task. Men and women, women and men have undertaken this duty with the same Jewish faithfulness. We are God's servants and as such we are moving from earthly to eternal spheres. May all our work which we have tried to perform as God's servants be a blessing for Israel's future and humanity."

For two years, Regina Jonas worked tirelessly in Theresienstadt. Finally, she was deported to Auschwitz. Her exact date of death is not clear; sometime in October, November or December, 1944.

She was 42 years old.

And now, the even deeper tragedy.

Go back to the Hochschule in Berlin.

In 1932, there were 155 students.

27 of them were women.

Their names have disappeared. True, they were studying to become teachers. But, like Jonas, might they have become rabbis?

We weep for the lives that were lost.

We weep for the teaching and wisdom that was lost, as well.

How do we best honour Regina Jonas's memory?

By making sure that no woman's spiritual gifts will ever be forgotten again, or pushed aside as not worthy. We honour her and all the women leaders of our Jewish communities past and present by making sure that women are welcomed and celebrated and valued as full and equal members of our community and leaders of our people.

Jo and Jana – you stand on the shoulders of the women who came before you, and the women who will come after you will stand upon **your** shoulders reaching higher and higher because of you, because of your courage, your determination, your undeniable right to stand on this bima and read from this your Torah – not as a woman or as a man, but as a Jew.

Standing on your shoulders generations of women, women like you and Rabbi Kagedan will pound that glass ceiling into dust, to be swept away like so many misguided and close minded ideas have been throughout time. Opening up to roles and possibilities of women in Judaism as numerous as the starts of the heavens and the sands of the sea.

That is happening today because of them, and because of you.