

## **Lara Dämmig**

### **Bet Debora – A woman’s movement as an expression of Jewish renewal in Europe**

A group of Jewish women launched a Jewish-feminist initiative in 1998 which they called “Bet Debora” – “House of Debora”.<sup>1</sup> The initiative was born from the idea of offering a forum to women who were committed to gender-equal Judaism. The starting point was a desire to return to the history and tradition from which European Jewish women – unlike Jewish women in the United States, for example – were cut off due to the Shoah. Bet Debora consciously defined itself as European from the outset, an indication of the independent nature of European Judaism which, following decades of dominance by American and Israeli Judaism, had begun to once again recall its own culture and tradition.

The foundation of this initiative is an expression of an extensive renewal of Judaism which took place in many European countries in the 1990s. The Jewish community in Germany was not only transformed in the 1990s by the influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Many “long-time” Jews finally unpacked their bags and accepted that Jewish life had a future in the “land of the perpetrators”, a future which they wanted to help shape. They criticized the spiritual and religious inflexibility of Judaism in Germany and championed plurality, which has long been self-evident in the United Kingdom or the USA. In many towns and cities of Germany, they set up liberal and conservative Jewish groups and egalitarian church services – some as private initiatives, others as new communities. They all shared the common goal of striving for a contemporary renewal of Judaism. At the same time, they above all modelled themselves on the USA, but also followed the tradition of liberal German Judaism which had been thought to have been lost. The equal participation of women and men in cultural affairs played a central role. This new movement was above all supported and sustained by women. It stands for critical debate with the Jewish tradition and the search for means of creating greater gender equality in Judaism.

**In Germany especially, however, the issue of the starting point needs to be broached given the relatively late commitment to gender-equal Judaism and the foundation of a Jewish-feminist initiative. Where can Jewish women capitalize half a century after the Shoah? Only at first glance did the women who had founded Rosh Chodesh groups<sup>2</sup> and egalitarian Minianim<sup>3</sup> in the 1990s appear merely to have caught up on what Jewish women in the USA or the United Kingdom had long since achieved in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Bet Debora consciously took up the almost forgotten tradition of the Jewish women’s**

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<sup>1</sup> “Bet” denotes “house”. When the Talmud differentiates between the traditions of interpretation, it defines them as “houses”, as houses of learning for great scholars – for example: “Bet Hillel” and “Bet Schammai”. When Jewish women embark on new ways in the present day, they seek to found a “house” with their own tradition of interpretation. “Bet Debora” is named after the biblical heroine Debora. She was a prophet, judge and politician.

<sup>2</sup> Rosh Chodesh [Hebr.]: new moon festival, a traditional holiday for women

<sup>3</sup> Sing. Minianim, quorum of ten people (traditionally men) which is required in order to hold a public church service

<sup>4</sup> Jewish women in the USA had fought for equal rights in the Jewish communities back in the 1960s. In 1972, Sally Priesand was ordained as the first female Jewish Rabbi in the USA after the Shoah. Almost three hundred other women followed her. In Europe, over thirty women hold the position of female Rabbi, the majority of them in the United Kingdom.

**movement in Germany prior to the Shoah. Back in 1904, Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936) founded the *Jüdischer Frauenbund* (Jewish Women's Association). In addition to performing social work, its goals were to achieve the equal participation of women in the communities, to combat the trafficking of women and to improve education among women. Regina Jonas (1902-1944), the world's first female Rabbi, completed her studies at Berlin's *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Academy for the Science of Judaism) in 1930 by writing a Halakhic<sup>5</sup> work entitled "*Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?*" (Can a woman hold the position of Rabbi?). Both Bertha Pappenheim und Regina Jonas expressed in different ways what many Jewish women were prepared to do in Germany before and after the First World War, namely to vest themselves with the authority to uphold Jewish teachings which they now intended to update on their own initiative from the woman's perspective. The Shoah put an end to this departure, however. In the aftermath of 1945, Jewish self-esteem had been shattered to the extent that survivors living in the Federal Republic of Germany (and indeed those in the GDR) clung stubbornly to the traditional cliché that the ideal world was to be found in the orthodox stetl. They viewed impetus to renewal as a threat and fended these off as a knee-jerk reaction.**

In 1999, Bet Debora inaugurated a conference for European female Rabbis, cantors, as well as Jewish rabbinic scholars and interested Jews. At that time, the self-image of active women in the Jewish community took centre stage. The conference no longer sought to address the issue of whether women are allowed to conquer the male domains in Judaism. Beginning with the fact that women are a driving force behind the renewal of Jewish life in Europe, the possible ways of shaping gender-equal Judaism in the European context was discussed. A second conference followed in 2001 under the banner of "*Die jüdische Familie – Mythos und Realität*" (The Jewish family –myth and reality) which took a critical look at the Jewish family, the woman's ideal and the concrete concepts of life of Jewish women. The third conference, held in 2003, was devoted to the subject of "*Macht und Verantwortung aus jüdischen Frauenperspektiven*" (Power and responsibility as seen from the Jewish women's perspective). The discussions centred on the question of how Jewish women become active in the synagogues, communities and institutions and what influence they exert there. The participants also exchanged views and opinions on new fields of policy, female policy styles, solidarity and competition among women. The debate not only focused on the mainly unbroken power relations between women and men in many areas of Jewish life but also on dominance structures which characterize the partnership between Jewish women from eastern and western Europe. The conclusion drawn was that the actions of Jewish women include cultural and political engagement.

**The discussions conducted at the conferences brought the Jewish women's movement in Germany and Europe a vital step forward. They have helped to encourage women to articulate, engage and organize themselves. A European network of Jewish women has been established which is now showing the first signs of fruition. A variety of transnational initiatives are working on joint projects. The fourth Bet Debora conference took place in Budapest in August 2006 and was organized by Jewish-Hungarian feminists. Plans for a fifth**

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<sup>5</sup> Religious law

conference on “Migration, Communication and Home”, to be held in Sofia, are already in the pipeline.

The egalitarian Miniamin and communities founded in the 1990s have long since established themselves. The majority of them are incorporated in the Union of Progressive Jews (sic!) which was founded in 1997 and unites around twenty liberal communities. The conservative communities have meanwhile also created their own umbrella organization. Under the umbrella of the unified community, egalitarian synagogues exist in Frankfurt/Main and Berlin. For several years, female Rabbis could be found working in communities in Oldenburg and Weiden. 2007 saw the first female Rabbi employed in Berlin after the Shoah. Bet Debora played a crucial role in all of these developments.

The Central Council for Jews in Germany has since also recognized that times have changed and now prioritizes pluralism. Only ten years ago, the then chairman of the Central Council, Ignatz Bubis, vehemently resisted all calls for pluralism and renewal.<sup>6</sup> The *“Jüdische Allgemeine”*, a weekly newspaper funded by the Central Council, published a damning article on the first Bet Debora conference in 1999. Liberal communities have since become members of the Central Council. The Central Council supports the education of liberal Rabbis at the Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg in Potsdam. The third Bet Debora conference was sponsored by the Central Council and inaugurated by the then vice-president, Charlotte Knobloch.

This is only the beginning, however. Orthodox synagogues, where women are prohibited from exercising any religious functions, continue to dominate in the unified communities. Women are underrepresented on the synagogue boards or local councils. For women to exercise greater responsibility and power, they must be given more opportunities to practice functions within the established structures. Accomplishing this also requires that the “powers that be” formulate and implement the goal of equal participation for women and men. Here, consideration must be given to whether or not it might be possible to adapt strategies which have proven their worth in other social contexts, such as gender mainstreaming.

The text is based on: Dämmig; Lara; Klapheck, Elisa: *Debora's Disciples: A Women's Movement as an Expression of Jewish Renewal in Europe*. In:

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<sup>6</sup> See Katlewski, Heinz Peter: *Judentum im Aufbruch. Von der neuen Vielfalt jüdischen Lebens in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz, (Judaism on the move into a new age. The new diversity of Jewish life in Germany, Austria and Switzerland)* Berlin: Jüd. Verlagsanstalt 2002, pp. 195-107

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