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## Sacred Partnership: A Visual Ethnographic Study of Rabbi Rebecca L. Dubowe

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**Sacred Partnership: A Visual Ethnographic Study of Rabbi Rebecca L.  
Dubowe**

By: Anna Kerr-Carpenter

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Dr. Gearhart Mafazy  
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**Introduction: California,  
Communication, and Initial  
Assumptions**

Rabbi Rebecca L. Dubowe, is known most prominently as the first female, deaf rabbi in the world, however she would tell you this label means nothing compared to her most preferred title—best revealed in her warm and gentle, yet vibrant presence—that of, “Mom”. Dubowe currently presides as interim rabbi at Moses Montefiore Temple, the only synagogue in Bloomington-Normal. After serving a large congregation in Los Angeles, California for eighteen years, she found herself in the middle of central Illinois tasked with leading a significantly smaller congregation through a process of change and transformation.

Through my research I sought to understand what kind of leader Dubowe is, and what her various identities— rabbi, deaf, female, mother— mean to her; how they influence each other, interconnect, and ultimately define who she is. From my observation, research, and most importantly my

one-on-one interactions with Rabbi Dubowe, I learned that she ultimately aspires to lead a life of acceptance and compassion for all humanity. She hopes that people may learn from her example and lead lives of compassion for other people as well as themselves, so that they may be able to “truly believe in themselves”.

I first met Rabbi Dubowe over a year ago when she came to an on-campus, Interfaith Club meeting to teach about the Jewish high holidays. Indeed my initial interest in working with her was because of my passion for interfaith education and dialogue. When we met for the purpose of this project, she asked me all about California, as we are both proud California girls, and she was eager for me to meet her daughter who would be visiting in the coming week, so that she and I could compare our experiences as “clergy kids.”

I was initially intimidated by the fact that she was deaf, unsure how to effectively communicate with her in such a nuanced endeavor as ethnography. How would she

understand my intentions, and how would I adequately come to know who she is as a person and as a leader? However, instead of feeling misunderstood, from our very first meeting I felt she was just as eager to get to know who I am as I was to understand her. Dubowe is fluent in reading lips, and aside from having a cochlear implant, this is how she understands individuals on a regular basis. This requires being within her line of vision, if not face-to-face and utilizing eye contact, which creates intimate interaction. This both reassured me that my ideas as the anthropologist were understood, while reminding me of the importance of intimate, one-on-one connection in fieldwork.

I assumed that being a female in the rabbinate, on top of being deaf, would be the most difficult aspect of Dubowe's leadership journey, and therefore at the focus of who she is. This assumption came from my background as a "Pastor's kid." Growing up especially having a mother who is a Pastor, I learned

Figure 1. When I asked Dubowe what it feels like while she is talking with someone, she said the outside fades away and she is fully immersed in listening to the other person. She believes these moments are "potential holy moments." (Photo by author).



that female representation in religious leadership is still frowned upon within some Christian denominations, and otherwise uncommon in others. I assumed it was the same in Judaism. While my personal background may have created biases, it helped me to build rapport with Dubowe through our similarities, and formed the basis of my research.

### **Literature Review: Women in the Rabbinate and Deaf Leadership**

Before conducting my fieldwork, I consulted literature focusing on female religious

leadership and deaf leadership. I found two chapters in David Ellenson's book, *Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice*, to be useful in understanding Jewish views of women's roles in religious education and leadership. The chapters discuss the history and transformation of the education of girls and women in Jewish texts. Initially intended for women to better raise Jewish children and further the faith onto future generations, Jewish education of women transformed into allowing women in the rabbinate. Today Reform Judaism is celebrating over forty years of female rabbis. Due to my initial assumption that female leadership within Judaism was still as unorthodox as in Christianity, this surprised me. The next text I consulted *Leadership Style in the Deaf Community: An Exploratory Case Study of a University President*, studies the leadership styles of I. King Jordan, former president of the deaf Gallaudet University. Researchers found him to have a mix of

transformational leadership, and path-goal leadership styles, outlining the specific traits of each. The study offered insight, not only into the increasingly valued transformational style in society, but also leadership in the deaf community, of which there is still very little research. Lastly, the most informative initial research came from a Pantagraph article written shortly after Dubowe was instated as interim rabbi at Moses Montefiore, highlighting her already positive effect on the congregation.

### Ethnographic Methods

I used visual ethnographic



**Figure 2.** I conduct an ethnographic interview with Rabbi Dubowe, discussing an image I took of her at the Yom Kippur feast. I point out the way in which Rabbi Dubowe seamlessly interacted with her congregation while still visiting with her daughter on her last night in town. (Photo by author).

methods through out my research. These included an hour and a half long ethnographic interview, utilizing images, and participant observation, involving picture taking and video recording. Additionally, I informally interviewed members of the Moses Montefiore temple, and Rabbi Dubowe's daughter.

I conducted participant observation of a Yom Kippur service as my first fieldwork research. This project coincided perfectly with the Jewish high holidays, allowing me to witness Rabbi Dubowe at her most intense and important time of the year. I sat in the back row of pews

during the service jotting down notes of Dubowe's specific duties as she led the congregation through a series of Hebrew and English verses, followed along by the cantor who would chant them. Afterward, she mingled and talked with members as they broke their twenty-four hour fast. During this time I took pictures, and interviewed various congregants, as well as her daughter, Rachel.

Before my interview with Dubowe, I asked her to send me a collection of photos that she thought were important to her role as a leader. Additionally, I showed her the pictures I took during my observation the previous day. I asked her questions I developed from my research literature, as well as asked her to explain the photos she provided. This conversation was a crucial component of this project, in understanding the essence of who Dubowe is as a person and as a leader. Asking her to analyze her own pictures as well as pictures I took allowed me to understand more

**Figure 3. Besides speaking English, Rabbi Dubowe is fluent in Hebrew and American Sign Language, reflecting her various identities. She reads Hebrew effortlessly and although the way she talks is the only perceptible indication of her deafness, she says, just because "[my ears] don't work, doesn't mean I don't have much to say." (Photo by author).**



completely, how she views herself.

### **Data: Motherhood, Connection, and Compassion**

Rabbi Dubowe was raised to accept who she was from a very young age and encouraged to pursue whatever she wanted to do. She grew up in a hearing family, with her brother and two parents. She



**Figure 4.** Dubowe has had to prove herself to men, and even some women, that she can balance her role on the pulpit while still being an effective and present parent. The Torah and a picture of her daughters both symbolize her two most important roles. (Photo by author).

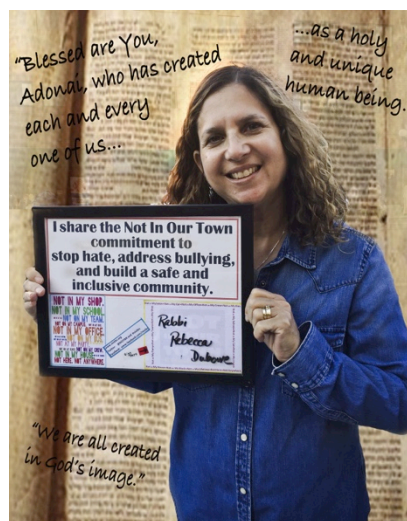
says, “she can’t do that” was never in their vocabulary and her parents showed her the world as if she was “hearing” (Interview of, October 13, 2016). After a visit to Israel in her early adulthood, Dubowe decided to attend the American Jewish University and later the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion to become a Rabbi. Upon her arrival at HUC she met with the Dean who, unsure about her linguistic abilities as a deaf person, asked her to read a few lines of Hebrew from the Torah. Infamously, Dubowe read the lines then asked, “would you like me to translate them for you?” This memory, and memories of her upbringing, color Dubowe’s tenacity, and her passion as a religious teacher, and role model, both on and off the pulpit.

Rabbi Dubowe values motherhood as her most important role as it has both challenged and strengthened her role as a Rabbi. Raised to believe she could do anything she wanted to do she says, as a woman in the rabbinate she

strives to prove she can “be a parent and be on the pulpit.” And she is undeniably succeeding, according to her eldest daughter Rachel Dubowe. Being a “Rabbi’s Kid,” while difficult at times because her mother worked on weekends, Dubowe was nevertheless very present in both Rachel’s and her sister’s life. Rachel says her mother would almost never miss her games and would sometimes “show up [to her events] in her suit” coming from a service, or meetings at the synagogue (Interview of, October 14, 2016). Dubowe’s dedication to being present in her daughters’ lives echoes the value she places on being present with her congregation.

Dubowe sees her role as a rabbi to be forming connection with people, by being physically and emotionally open, validating members of her congregation and the community. She calls this “a sacred partnership”. Dubowe’s deaf identity lends itself seamlessly to this goal. As I discovered myself, communication for Dubowe

necessitates being fully present in conversation. Eye contact is not simply a nonverbal cue for Dubowe, but a primary means of verbal comprehension, which inherently creates a profound interaction no matter the situation. She literally listens with her eyes. While what is being said in the interaction is important, for Dubowe, it is whoever is talking and whether they feel heard and understood that is most important, because it “emulates the face-to-face relationship” between God and Moses. I observed her



**Figure 1.** Dubowe is inspired by the work of movements like Not In Our Town because she believes God created everyone uniquely and divinely and it's important to accept and celebrate our differences. The quotes in this image come from Dubowe's writings and the teachings in the Torah. (Photo by Rabbi Dubowe).



living this out with members of her congregation. At the Yom Kippur feast I watched her converse and mingle among members, often leaning in close to their faces to listen, or placing her hand on their arm. While she may be deaf, it should not be mistaken she is listening, not only to the words you say, but most importantly to your personal, human story.

Dubowe sees her life and career as a chance to spread compassion and acceptance with whomever she meets. She not only spends time nurturing the individual needs of her congregants, teaching religious text, leading services, and being present for ceremonies and life events, but also reaches out to the larger Jewish Reform movement, and the Bloomington-Normal

community. She is actively involved in the Jewish Disabilities Initiative to raise “awareness of inclusion in the Jewish community” and teach Jewish leaders how to accommodate for, and raise up their deaf

congregants. She has written articles on the Union for Reform Judaism website, led webinars, and given talks. Additionally, Dubowe is passionate about the “Not In Our Town” initiative in Bloomington, which encourages diversity, acceptance, and inclusion to combat racism and bigotry in the community. She says the organization helps her “to recognize the goodness in

people” especially being “in a congregation with very diverse opinions [where her] job is to help them find what [they] all have in common” (Interview of, October 13,



**Figure 6. Rabbi Dubowe poses with her husband o Figure 6. Rabbi Dubowe poses with her husband, touching the Western Wall in Israel. To Rebecca “this wall symbolizes history and conflict between gender and tradition within the Ultra Orthodox community.” This photo is a symbol of the importance of equality, and another example of sacred partnership. The other hands sign equality and partnership in ASL.**

Figure 7. Being a rabbi means Dubowe has devoted her life to having a close relationship with God, but she aims to make that relationship accessible to others. God isn't just in the Torah; he is among every person she meets. (Photo by author).



2016). Dubowe believes that by showing acceptance and compassion toward people of all viewpoints and backgrounds, they will learn by her example and learn to live compassionately as well.

### Data Analysis: A Shared Vision

In his chapter “Transformation of the Rabbinate” Ellenson discusses

how the emergence of women in leadership positions within Judaism promotes feminist thoughts such as “the self [coming] to be defined in interactions with others and, in so doing, [being] open to the possibility of transformation that responsiveness in human engagement offers” (2014). Rabbi Dubowe’s communication and listening style naturally lends itself to this concept, offering her congregants the space and encouragement to be understood and validated. In his chapter on the “Jewish Textual Education of Women”, Ellenson discusses the historical role of women in Judaism as once only to be the “domestic facilitator” of Jewish education, but this made way for later female inclusion and gender reform within the faith (2014). Similarly, to Dubowe motherhood is an avenue to prove her strength as a woman, by balancing domestic life and her professional life.

According to *Leadership Style in the Deaf Community*, an effective

transformational leader “creates a shared vision” and “inspires confidence and excellence in followers by touching their innermost needs of self-actualization” (2008). To Dubowe, not only must people live compassionately for other people, but they must also live compassionately for themselves, “to recognize the goodness and gifts they have.” She has found that over her career, “it is becoming more of a challenge for people to be committed to a faith community” and especially within Moses Montefiore, she wants to foster the younger generation of Jews. Her shared vision is that “it is ok to have doubts in God. There is still a place for [you]” in the congregation and in the larger faith. Only through compassion is this accomplished. Dubowe says, “in order to be compassionate you have to accept. When people see me do that they can learn to do it too and that is where God is.”

### **Conclusion**

When I began my research I sought to learn how Rabbi Dubowe’s



**Figure 8. Dubowe sees herself as a person first. She is the first female, deaf rabbi in the world, but most importantly, she is Rebecca. (Photo by author).**

various identities of mother, rabbi, female, and deaf, influence each other, as well as what they mean to her. I was concerned about communication barriers with Dubowe while conducting my research, but I quickly discovered that she had much to teach me about communication, including the importance of being present, and developing “sacred partnerships”

with others. Through our time together, I believe the two of us developed a sacred partnership, coming to understand each other not only as anthropologist and subject, but also as people. I assumed that being a woman in the rabbinate, on top of being deaf, were sources of struggle and therefore defined her the most. Rabbi Dubowe taught me to broaden my focus toward her

actions in the community and her values of acceptance and compassion, as “[she] is a person” first and foremost. And in the end, that is all any female leader is. Behind her accomplishments, her various roles and titles, she is a person learning to lead by example and trusting that what she has to offer is enough.

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