

Hanukkah Heroines of Yore

Article by Dr. Rachel Adelman for the Jerusalem Post

-Dr. Rachel Adelman's column "Kol Isha" appears monthly in the Jerusalem Post magazine section.

-Dr. Adelman is a graduate of the Joan and Shael Bellows Masters Program in Tanakh at Matan. She founded Matan's Beit Shemesh branch, and teaches Tanakh, Parashat Shavu'a and Midrash at various institutes in Jerusalem and its environs, as well as lecturing widely abroad. She recently completed her PhD in Midrash at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. When she is not writing academic papers and divrei Torah, it is poetry that flows from her pen. She lives in Jerusalem with her husband and four children.

For me, part of the charm of Hanukkah is seeing the array of menorahs lined up by our window, some with olive oil, some with many-colored candles, all the flames flickering and dying down at different rates. Yet, the minimal requirement (not *hidur mitzvah*) is that a man and his household (*ish u'beito*) are obligated to light a single candle each day (*b. Shabbat* 21b). If the husband is not able to return at the proper time for lighting, soon after sunset when everyone is hurrying home from work, then a woman can light for the household (*beito*, here, is understood as a euphemism for wife; Shulhan Arukh, *Orah Haim* 675:3-4, cf. Taz *loc. cit.*). Women are as obligated as men in the commandment to light the Hanukkah candles because, according to the Talmud, "they too were involved in the miracle" (*b. Shabbat* 23a). The Tosafot ask whether that implies women were in the same dire straits as men (and, therefore, have equal cause to celebrate), or whether they played a pivotal role in bringing about the miracle. According to Rashbam, the latter is the case with regard to all three time-bound positive precepts for women – drinking the four cups at Passover because of the "Righteous Women of the Exodus", and hearing the Megillah at Purim because of Esther. With regard to lighting at Hanukkah, Yehudit is credited with being central to the miracle (cited in Tosafot on *b. Pesahim* 108b). Rashi, on the other hand, alludes to the story of Hannah, daughter of Mattathias: "'They too were involved in the miracle', refers to a time when the Greeks had decreed that a bride should be given over to the magistrate on her wedding night and a miracle was enacted at the hands of a woman" (Rashi on *b. Shabbat* 23a).

Who are these mysterious women, Yehudit and Hannah? The story of Yehudit (Judith) is not found in the Talmud or the classical midrashim, but, like the Book of Maccabees, in the Apocrypha.¹ The story begins with a seige upon the town of Bethulia, strategically placed at a narrow pass into the Judean hills. Holofernes, the Assyrian general, cut off access to the water sources in an attempt to force the town to surrender out of thirst and hunger. The residents, seized with panic, turned to their leaders, urging capitulation, but Uzziah, the town magistrate, begged them to hold out against the seige for another five days. In the meantime, the beautiful, wealthy and

¹ My retelling is based on an amalgam of "The Book of Judith" (from the Apocrypha), and the medieval Hebrew version, *Ma'aseh Yehudit*, first printed in the kabbalistic collection *Hemdat Yamim* (Livorno, 1793), found in Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash* 11.

highly respected widow, Yehudit, concocted a plan. After fasting and prayers, she beautified herself and went into the Assyrian camp with her faithful maid to “woo” the heart of Holofernes. Over the course of four days, under the pretext that she would act as an intercessor on the part of the Assyrians to God *against* the Jewish people, she visited their camp by day and left just before nightfall. On the last night, Holofernes planned a great banquet, hoping to satisfy his lust with her, and she dressed up in all her finery especially for the occasion. When the two were left alone, Yehudit gave the general milk to drink, just as Yael had given Sisera (Judges 4:19), and also urged him to drink much wine. As soon as he fell unconscious, in a drunken stupor, she drew his sword and lopped off his head. Off she and her maid went, through the army camp, just as they had on all the previous evenings, but this time Yehudit had the general’s head wrapped in a napkin inside her basket. When the Assyrian army discovered their decapitated general, they fled in terror. As long as Yehudit lived, no adversary arose against Israel, “And all the children of Israel enjoyed light in their dwellings” (Exod. 10:23).

The story of Hannah, daughter of Mattathias, is said to take place during the tyrannical rule of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175-163 B.C.E.).² At that time, the Greeks decreed that all the Jews should inscribe on their doorposts, “Israel has no relationship to the God of Israel.” In order to evade the edict, they took the doors off their posts and sacrificed their sense of honor (i.e. privacy). Then the Greeks decreed that any man who allowed his wife to go to the mikvah would be pierced by the sword, and so they ceased having marital relations to avoid the consequences of the decree. But then the Greek magistrates imposed “the right of the first night” (otherwise known as *ius primae noctis*, or *droit de seigneur*) – that every Jewish bride on her wedding night would be forced to have relations with the local Greek official first and only then return to her groom. Many Jews were afraid to marry. The decree continued for over three years, until Hannah, daughter of Mattathias, became engaged to marry Elazar the Hasmonean. On the night of her wedding feast, when they had all sat down to eat, Hannah stood up from her bridal chair, clapped her hands, and tore her clothing, exposing herself to her husband and relatives. Out of shame, her brothers tried to repress her, crying “take her out and burn her”,³ but she pointed to their hypocritical piety. “Hear me, my brothers and uncles. Yes, now I stand before the righteous naked, without transgression, and yet you are zealous against me. Why are you not zealous against handing me over to the gentile who will violate me?!? If only you would learn from Shimon and Levi, the brothers of Dina (and there were only two of them). They were zealous for their sister ... And you, you are five brothers – Yehuda, Yohanan, Yonatan, Shimon, and Elazar – and more than two hundred youthful priests. Place your trust in God and He will help you!” And so the Maccabean brothers were galvanized to fight the humiliating decree. They dressed Hannah up in royal apparel, as if to hand her over to the Greek magistrate but, upon presenting her to him, they entered his chambers, along with her, and slew him and all his henchmen. And

² The story of the daughter of Mattathias first appears in *Megillat Ta’anit* (an early tannaitic source, according to Vered Noam, circa 1st c., C.E.), though the heroine remains unnamed in that source. My retelling is based on *Midrash Ma’aseh Hanukka*, which appears in two different versions in Jellinek’s anthology, *Bet Ha-Midrash* 8:46.

³The allusion is to the law, in Lev. 21:9, that specifies that the daughter of priest should be burned if found guilty of harlotry. These are the same words that Judah declares when he finds out Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is pregnant, but he is forced to rescind them when she realizes he is responsible (Gen. 38:24).

so the battle began, with God on their side. At that time, a heavenly voice (*bat kol*) was heard from the Holy of Holies (*kodesh ha-kodashim*, the inner sanctum of the Temple): “All Israel has been victorious, the lamb against Antiochus, and so may God enact salvation in our day.”

This Hanukkah, when you light the candles, remember the story of Yehudit and Hannah, women who placed themselves in the breach, drawing only upon the unconventional weapons of women’s warfare, feminine wile and audacity. They cried out from the private interstices of their being, when that inner sanctum was most vulnerable. And the heavenly voice (*bat kol*), from the Holy of Holies, resonated with their cry and their courage. The miracle of Hanukkah begins from the inside – a little flask of oil, a woman’s sense of honor – and so the lighting of the menorah is on the border between home and public sphere, the *mitzvah* incumbent on the household [*ish u’beito*]. From the entrance to the house, the news of the miracle radiates outward. This Hanukkah, may the light in your homes dispel the dark, on the longest nights of the year, as in the time of Esther, when the Jews enjoyed “light and gladness, happiness and honor [*orah, ve-simha, ve-sasson, ve-yikar*]” (Esther 8:16). For there can be no light without also a sense of honor, the privacy of the inner sanctum.