

## **Night Two: Women, the Hidden Heroes of Hanukkah** **Yehudit Mazur-Shlomi, Class of 2027**

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At certain moments in Jewish history, it has been easy to confuse what is darkness and what is light. In the time of the Hasmoneans, the Jewish community faced exactly this confusion. Some Jews had fallen for the sheen of Hellenism, thinking it represented true light. But the Maccabees, supported by the courage of some extraordinary women, knew that the true light was Torah. Their job was to help the rest of the Jewish community realize it as well.

People rarely think about women as active participants in war, but the Hanukkah story highlights the crucial roles that women have played in the battle for Jewish self determination. It showcases several heroic women whose wit, courage, and perseverance played a significant part in the victory that ultimately led to more than two hundred more years of Jewish independence before Judea was finally destroyed by the Romans.

In the Mishneh Torah [Megillat Esther and Hanukkah 3:1](#), the Rambam calls attention to these women, writing:

In [the era of] the Second Temple, the Greek kingdom issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments. They extended their hands against their property and their daughters; they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc within, and made the sacraments impure.<sup>1</sup>

Who are these daughters about whom the Rambam is referring, and why are they so crucial to the Hanukkah story? The first story is that of Judith (Yehudit), which is found in two different books. The first is in the apocryphal book of Judith, which currently exists only in Greek, even though it is a translation of an earlier book in Hebrew written

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<sup>1</sup> Mishneh Torah, Scroll of Esther and Hanukkah 3:1.  
[https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah%2C\\_Scroll\\_of\\_Esther\\_and\\_Hanukkah.3.1?vhe=Torat\\_Emet\\_363&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Scroll_of_Esther_and_Hanukkah.3.1?vhe=Torat_Emet_363&lang=bi)

some time before 100 CE.<sup>2</sup> The second is Megillat Judith, which was written by an unknown author(s) some time prior to 1402 CE.

Although the narratives diverge in some ways, both versions tell the story of the woman-savior of her nation, Judith (a pious widow in the apocryphal Judith or “woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets”<sup>3</sup> in the Megillat Judith.) She is a wise, beautiful, and pious woman who asks God to grant her, “a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan.”<sup>4</sup> Carefully planning her every step, Judith is able to outsmart the enemy general, playing up her attractiveness and coming right to the verge of brutal sexual assault before finally being able to cut the general’s head and bring it to her town. This leads to panic in the enemy camp, and allows Jews to pursue their enemies and be free from further persecution.

In addition to the story of Judith, “Hannah, the daughter of Matityahu” was a central figure in the war against the Greeks. Like other brides of the time, she was to spend her first night of marriage with a Greek general, according to a terrible decree issued by the ruling power. At her wedding feast she bravely stood up and tore away her clothes as a means of bringing attention to the plight of all young women that were not able to marry if they weren’t first defiled by the Greeks. Her cry is recorded by the Midrash:

And you're not becoming incensed about sending me into the hands of an uncircumcised man who will abuse me?! You've got something to learn from Shimon and Levi, the brothers of Dina, who were just two men who became incensed/vengeful on behalf of their sister and they murdered a walled city such as Shechem and gave up their souls for the sake of God! And Hashem helped them and they were not destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Midrash, after Hannah’s speech, the Jews rose up to defend the honor of their daughters, and ultimately their religion and way of life. The Hasmoneans

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<sup>2</sup> Jewish Annotated Apocrypha. Oxford University Press USA. 2020. P.177

<sup>3</sup><https://opensiddur.org/readings-and-sourcetexts/festival-and-fast-day-readings/jewish-readings/hanukkah-readings/megillat-yehudit-for-hanukkah/>

<sup>4</sup> Jewish Annotated Apocrypha. Oxford University Press USA. 2020. P.192

<sup>5</sup><https://opensiddur.org/readings-and-sourcetexts/festival-and-fast-day-readings/jewish-readings/hanukkah-readings/midrash-maaseh-hanukkah/>

decided to kill the Greek general and go to war after so many years of subjugation because they were galvanized by Hannah's cry.

Finally, II Maccabees tells a story of an unnamed mother of seven sons being tortured and killed at the hand of the king, Antiochus IV.<sup>6</sup> Not only does the mother refuse to plead for her sons' release, she actually encourages them to withstand all the horrors of the torture with the promise of a place in the World to Come. She entreats them, "Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers, says she speaking to her youngest—Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers."<sup>7</sup>

These women were heroes, but their stories are devastating. With all these tragic stories in front of us, where and how can we see light? While these women changed the course of Jewish history, ultimately we know that the independence that Hasmonean brothers brought was short lived. Were the sacrifices made by these brave women ultimately worthwhile? Why do we focus on the light of Hanukkah still shining when it reflects so much tragedy?

The answer comes in the story of what lies in between the loses, the victory, and the later destruction. Before the end of the Hasmonean kingdom of Judah, there was a period of Judean independence when they were led by a woman. Even the rabbis, usually scarce on praise for women, deem it a golden age, stating in the Midrash:

It happened in the days of Shimon ben Shetach and in the days of Queen Shlomzion that the rains descended from the nights of Sabbath to the nights of Sabbath until the wheat became like kidneys, and the barley like olive-stones, and the lentils like golden dinars. ([Sifra Bechukotai 1:1](#))

According to the Talmud, Shlomzion's brother Shimon ben Shetah, instituted some of the laws and ordinances that have kept the Jewish people alive to this day. In the Yerushalmi it says:

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<sup>6</sup> Other sources (Yossipon, the book attributed to Josephus) mention her by the name, Chanah, and say that she was a widow

<sup>7</sup> Jewish Annotated Apocrypha. Oxford University Press USA. 2020. P.269

Simeon ben Sheṭaḥ decreed three things: That a person should use his wife's *ketubah* in his business dealings. And that children have to go to school. Also, he decreed impurity for glassware. ([Talmud Yerushalmi Ketubot 8:1](#))

Even though Shimon ben Shetach is credited with these achievements, no decision involving the whole nation would have been implemented without the support of the ruling monarch, Salome Alexandra–Shulamit or queen Shlomzion (peace of Zion) named this way by her people. Even Josephus, who like the Rabbis is not known for his praise of women, says, “this woman kept the dominion, by the opinion that the people had of her piety; for she chiefly studied the ancient customs of her country and cast those men out of the government that offended against their holy laws.”<sup>8</sup>

At the time of her husband's reign, the wars between Sadducees and Pharisees were brutal, and King Yannai executed many sages, forcing the remnant of them into hiding. Once fully in power, Shlomzion brought back those sages, including her brother, reinstated Sanhedrin, and ultimately brought the rabbis to power, helping to create the foundation for the Judaism we follow even to this day.

Even through so many tragedies and so much darkness, these heroic women fostered the system of learning and laws that outlived both short sovereignty and long exiles, and helped our nation survive both spiritually and physically. One can hope and pray that women like Judith, Hannah, and Shlomzion can rise up again and guide our nation to real lasting peace with the help and guidance of God of Israel.

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<sup>8</sup> Josephus. The Jewish War. Book 1; 5:1