

Powerful Women

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week we read about two great biblical women who sang songs! In the Torah Miriam, leads the women of Israel in a song and a dance to validate their role in the Exodus. We have already seen the nurturing side of her character in the way she protected her brother. And the Haftarah is about Deborah, a powerful judge. Both are prophets.

The Bible has a remarkable number of narratives about strong women. Which is all the more significant given the context of the times and relatively subservient position of most females. It is true that most males were subservient too, either through slavery, indentured servitude, feudalism, or just poverty. The rich could always lord it over the poor and that went for women too. The strong always took (take) advantage of the poor. The issue of big fish eats little fish has permeated human society regardless of attempts to make all men and women equal. I don't know that the Bible worried about the politics of gender differences. But it did emphasize the importance of considering, helping and feeling for the poor and downtrodden.

I believe the biblical examples of strong women was an intentional emphasis. Individual women are mentioned with no indication as to why. Why were Lemech's two wives Adah and Zillah mentioned? Who were they? And Na'amah, Tuval Cain's sister? We might understand Sarah's prominence as the partner of Avraham. And Rebecca as the epitome of kindness and hospitality, as well as strength in defying her husband. And poor, sweet Rachel. Why mention Deborah the nursemaid of Rebecca? Who was Timna the concubine? Or Meheytavel? Zipporah was not just the wife of Moses. She saved his life. So, in a way, did Miriam. I could go on, but this is not an academic essay.

Men dominate all the narratives, all the genealogies and preserve all aristocratic and priestly positions for themselves. But when it comes to charisma and personal merit, women, while not competing numerically or proportionally, at least get a bite of the cherry. Prophecy which was not hereditary or subject to appointment. It was based exclusively on personal qualities was open to women. Miriam is called a prophetess, so were Hulda, Noadiah, Isaiah's wife and traditionally Abigail. Outstanding was Deborah, because she was not just a prophet—she was also a judge, a position then and later confined to men only. She refers to Yael as another judge although we do not know if she was the same woman who smashed the Canaanite general Sisera's skull in. Queen Esther of course, was a heroine and she used drink to soften up King Ahasuerus. Although her target was Haman.

Hannah the mother of Samuel is the one I feel for most. A barren wife, mocked by her fruitful rival, there is something of Rachel in her without the anger. Her husband loves her but doesn't understand her. As many husbands fail to fathom the depth of a woman's pain.

When she goes to pour her heart out at the Tabernacle, the priest Eli, also

misreads her suffering and thinks she is drunk. Like Deborah, she composes a song of exceptional beauty in sentiment and language. Hanna is taken in the Talmud as the most important source for Hebrew prayer other than Psalms as well as the mechanics of praying.

So much of her song has found its way into our liturgy. But like Deborah's song there is an element of triumphalism, not just of surviving and overcoming, but also of crushing one's opponents. The theme of resurrection figures in this song. A theology that gained prominence long after her time. The messianic ending has led many to suggest that this a song about the monarchy surviving the threats to its survival. It sounds more like king David than a housewife. Or in the modern context, like a woman on Wall Street or Hollywood who has had to submit to glass ceilings, sexual harassment and worse, to achieve her goals.

This mood seems to apply to Yael, in Deborah's story. She kills Sisera, the Canaanite general who oppressed the Israelites. After his defeat, he flees into her tent. She welcomes him, inviting him elegantly to take refreshment and milk and allowing him to fall asleep on her bed. There is a hint of rape. As soon as he is helpless, she hammers a tent peg into his head. In Deborah's song about the event, she is described as violently smashing his skull repeatedly and having him fall at her feet in a final act of triumph.

In her song (1 Samuel 2), Hannah refers to the barren woman who produces seven children. A theme that is taken up by Jeremiah, the mother who gives birth to seven sons (Jeremiah 15:9) who have all died. And it recurs in the apocryphal story of another Jewish mother whose seven sons were put to death before her eyes by the evil Greek monarch. The story can be found in 2 Maccabees 7:22–23. Here the mother is not named. And it is not until the 16th century Jewish response to Josephus's version, called *Josippon*, that she is named Hannah. There too the theme of resurrection figures large, possibly in response to Christianity.

The next example of a Jewish woman resorting to violence to save her people, also occurs in the Apocrypha, outside of the Jewish bible. In the Book of Judith, we have the narrative of another oppressor, Holofernes, an Assyrian general which would put him post Alexander. Some versions have a Babylonian at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. He intends to destroy the Jewish town. But he lusts after Judith who uses his desire for her to get him drunk. Passed out, she decapitates him. She or a servant then take his head away in a basket and thus saves her people. Resurrection again. A variation of this story comes in a later book called Megillat Yehudit which was (sometimes is) read on Hanukah and the story is set at the time of Antiochus.

The nearest traditional source we have for this story is mentioned in Rashi on the Gemara in Shabbat 23a that deals with Hanukah. There he says a Greek Tafsar (Royalty) initiated a law of *Prima Noctis*, that the King or General had the right to deflower virgins before their marriage. One woman, he doesn't say who, was able to get unto his tent and decapitate him and save her Jewish sisters. This myth of the Right of the First Night of Marriage is in a fact a legend with no trace of such a law. Though that doesn't mean that powerful rulers did not and still do not do such things or worse. This story

of decapitating someone is also an important myth in Christianity, where a Jewish Salome demands the decapitation of John the Baptist after her Dance of the Seven Veils seduces a King Herod into agreeing to the murder. Both decapitations figure prominently in Renaissance and Baroque art.

The Talmud mentions significant women within the rabbinic tradition. Beruria of course, Imma Shalom, and Queen Hileni. But it gives little credit to Salome Alexandra (Shlomzion) the Hasmonean queen who was probably the most successful monarch of the Hasmonean dynasty. As far as we know, she used neither decapitation nor getting men drunk to get her way and rule effectively. I do not know why Maimonides ignored both Deborah and Shlomzion when he wrote much later that only men could be appointed rulers. I like to think we can blame the Muslim court he served in for his misogyny.

The literary symbols of drink—of wine for seduction, think also of Samson, and milk for maternal care—underline the two sides of women that the Bible is emphasizing. Society is only now beginning to validate the power as well as the nurturing.