

Hasmonean Women

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I realize what a patriarchal society we, like the rest of the world, have been until very recently. Sadly, many still are. But there are three heroines connected to the Chanukah festival I'd like to celebrate even if the festival itself is over for this year.

The Hasmonean dynasty after its glory period, soon descended, into a pretty nasty collection of aggressive, internecine, and corrupt leaders, thinking nothing of imprisoning or killing their own family rivals. The one shining star and redeeming feature of the dynasty, of a peacemaking, tolerant religious leader, both at home and abroad, was Salome Alexandra (141-67 BCE) also known as Shlomzion (Peace in Zion) the Queen.

John Hyrcanus, (164-104 BCE) the nephew of Judah Maccabee, had expanded the Hasmonean Kingdom. Salome Alexandra, from a noble family, had married Aristobulus, the eldest of John Hyrcanus's five sons. When he died Aristobulus threw his mother and rival brothers into prison leaving only Antigonus to share his burden. He soon assassinated him too. Barely a year later, Aristobulus died (103 BCE). His widow Salome Alexandra became regent and ruled effectively for a while before marrying her first husband's brother, Alexander Yannai, and making the mistake of completely handing rule over to him.

Alexander Yannai was an aggressive and militaristic leader invading and conquering local tribes and cities. He exacerbated the rift between the corrupt priestly Sadducees who he supported and the more popular Pharisee, rabbis. According to the Talmud, he harassed and exiled the rabbinic leadership. Shimon Ben Shetach who stood up to him, survived only because he was the queen's brother.

On his deathbed, Alexander Yannai entrusted the government, not to his sons, but to his wife. When he died (76 BCE) Salome Alexandra (139-67) became the ruling Queen of Judea. She, together with Shimon ben Shetach, restored rabbinic authority and reorganized the Sanhedrin which became the supreme court for civil and religious matters.

She succeeded in calming the internal dissensions of the kingdom peacefully and repaired the political relations of the Judean state with the outside

world. The Talmud (Ta'anit, 23a) refers in hyperbolic terms to the prosperity which Judea enjoyed under Salome Alexandra. Thanks to her rain fell only on Shabbat so that the poor did not suffer loss through rain falling during their working week. The fertility of the soil was so great that the grains of wheat grew as large as kidney beans, oats as large as olives, and lentils as large as gold denarii.

Her second big mistake was that, like so many Jewish mothers, she completely indulged her two sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. She installed her eldest son Hyrcanus as High Priest and the second, Aristobulus as the Military leader. They hated each other. The last days of her reign were tumultuous. Aristobulus tried to seize power and wrest the High Priesthood from his brother.

After her death, the rivalry between the brothers so de-stabilized Judea that Pompey of Rome had to intervene to impose control in 63 BCE. Even so, those medieval rabbis who declared that one could not appoint a woman to a leadership position in Jewish Law obviously did not know their history. Otherwise, they would have known that a woman is perfectly capable of doing a better job than a man.

Don't confuse Salome Alexandra with the New Testament character Salome, the granddaughter of Herod the Great. One of the most iconic figures of Christian Art and Music. She was not a nice girl and lived a hundred years later. She demanded the head of John the Baptist on a plate and danced with seven veils to get her way. There is a 1953 Hollywood version of Salome Salome (1953 film) – Wikipedia.

But there are two other women connected indirectly with Chanukah. Hannah is mentioned in the Books of the Maccabees where she is also known variously as Miriam and Solomonia. Antiochus IV of Chanukah infamy arrested a mother and her seven sons and tried to force them to eat pork. When they refused, he had them tortured and killed one by one. Each of the sons made a speech affirming his faith before he died. She was forced to watch her seven sons die, yet she bore it bravely. The text says that the mother died, without saying whether she was executed or died of sorrow. This is the first example of martyrdom that explains why she became such an important figure in Christian lore.

The Talmud tells a similar story, (Gittin 57 b) but with the refusal to worship an idol replacing refusal to eat pork. Rabbi Judah talks about the woman and her seven sons. The unnamed king is referred to as the "Emperor" and "Caesar", not Antiochus. The mother committed suicide by throwing herself off her roof.

And finally, Judith, not mentioned in Jewish literature. Her story was told in the Christian pseudepigraphical Book of Judith. She was a beautiful widow, at a time when a Syrian Greek General Holofernes was laying waste to her hometown of Bethulia in Judea. He tried to have his way with her. She got him drunk. He passes out and she decapitated him, smuggled his head away in a basket, and saved her people. It sounds like a variation on the story of Yael and the General Sisera in the Book of Judges. Judith like the second Salome is celebrated in Christian art. For example (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/artemisia-gentileschi>).

Going back to the great Biblical women and on through Deborah and other prophetesses there is a powerful tradition of strong Jewish women. I suggest Chanukah could do with another facelift and become the festival celebrating strong Jewish women, liberation, and empowerment.