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*MiNashim ba'Ohel  
Tevorakh: Women, Tents,  
and Blessings*

by Amy Newman

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*Dedicated to commemorate the second Yahrzeit of  
Dr. Emanuel Mordecai Stadlan by his loving family,*

*Noam Stadlan & Marianne Novak*

*Zehavya, Batsheva, and Hillel*

# MiNashim ba'Ohel Tevorakh: Women, Tents, and Blessings

By Amy Newman<sup>1</sup>

If you were to ask me to create a mental picture of a stereotypical Jewish woman, I would conjure an image of a woman, head and eyes covered, lighting Shabbat candles. It is a classic image of the female Jewish experience. Our first matriarch, Sarah, is remembered in the midrash as having brought extra Shabbat light into the tent she shared with Abraham. In Sarah's merit, her Shabbat candles burned all week long: "The lamp used to burn from the evening of the Shabbat until the evening of the following Shabbat" (Genesis Rabbah 60:1). That light burned out when Sarah died, and returned when Isaac brought Rebecca to the tent and they began their married life there. Shabbat candles are a fitting symbol for our matriarchs' tent. As we see in *Shabbat* 21b, Shabbat candles provide *shalom bayit*, tranquility in the home. Perhaps we can read the midrash to imply that these righteous women also worked to enhance *shalom bayit* for their families. To be sure, our matriarchs' tents were not always pictures of marital harmony—Sarah struggled with Abraham to remove Hagar and Ishmael from their home, and Rebecca deliberately deceived Isaac, to name just a few fraught moments—but maybe their choices were their best attempts to protect the sanctity of their households, and the midrash describing their enhanced Shabbat light can help us see them in that way. Symbolically, they—and centuries of Jewish women who followed them—were invested in "lighting their tents," by caring for their homes and families.

Hanukkah candles, of course, serve a

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different purpose from Shabbat candles. Hanukkah candles are meant to shine their light outward, illuminating the world beyond our homes, with the requirement of *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the Hanukkah miracles. Women are obligated in the mitzvah of kindling Hanukkah lights, but their inclusion in this mitzvah isn't as automatic or intuitive as in the case of Shabbat candles. One might think women would be exempt from lighting Hanukkah candles on the grounds that it is a positive time-bound mitzvah, but the Gemara points out that "*af hen hayu b'oto haNes*"—they, too, were included in that miracle.

הדליקה חרש שוטה וקטן לא עשה ולא כלום אשה ודאי  
מדליקה דא"ר יהושע בן לוי נשים חייבות בנר חנוכה שאף  
הן היו באותו הנס.

And now that we say that the kindling constitutes the precept, if a deaf-mute, idiot, or minor lights it, he does nothing. But a woman may certainly light [it], for R. Joshua b. Levi said: The [precept of the] Hanukkah lamp is obligatory upon women, for they too were concerned in that miracle.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of shining light toward the public domain, outside the tent, seems less aligned with the experiences of our ancient foremothers, than the Shabbat candles' goal of providing a tranquil interior space.

But not all of our ancient female role models kept their light inside their homes. The apocryphal book of Judith—often associated with Hanukkah—describes the title character venturing into the territory of the enemy general Holofernes, slyly making her way into his tent, and decapitating him. Throughout the Jewish world there are various Hanukkah rituals that celebrate Judith's bravery; my mother always served figs on Hanukkah in remembrance of the figs Judith brought with her into Holofernes' territory. The story of Judith of course has many parallels with the story of Yael, which is not generally regarded

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 23a. Translation from <http://halakhah.com>

as a Hanukkah story, but which is connected to the earlier matriarchs mentioned above. In Judges chapter 4, Yael, the wife of Hever the Kenite, leaves her tent to greet Sisera, the general of the Israelites' enemy, and lures him inside.

יח ותצא יעל לקראת סיסרא ותאמר אליו סורה אדני  
 סורה אלי אל-תיקרא ויסר אליה האהלה ותכסהו בשמיכה.  
 יט ויאמר אליה השקיני-נא מעט-מים כי צמאתי ותפתח  
 את-נאוד הקלב ותשקהו ותכסהו. כ ויאמר אליה עמד  
 פתח האהל והיה אם-איש יבא ושאלך ואמר היש-פה איש  
 ואמרת אין. כא ותקח יעל אשת-חבר את-יתד האהל ותשם  
 את-המקבת בידה ותבוא אליו בלאט ותתקע את-היתד  
 ברקתו ותצנח בארץ והוא-גרדם ויער וימת. כב. והנה ברק  
 רדף את סיסרא ותצא יעל לקראתו ותאמר לו לך ואראך את  
 האיש אשר אתה מבקש ויבא אליה והנה סיסרא נפל מת  
 והיתד ברקתו:

18. Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, "Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. 19. He said to her, "Please let me have some water; I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink; and she covered him again. 20. He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody here, say 'No.'" 21. Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground. Thus he died. 22. Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, "Come, I will show you the man you are looking for." He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple.<sup>3</sup>

Yael lulls Sisera to sleep with milk and then drives a tent peg into his head. She then exits the tent once again to bring Barak, the Israelites' general, inside to show him Sisera lying dead on the floor. Yael took initiative, ventured out, used her smarts, and brought about the Israelites' victory over their oppressors. Whereas Sarah and Rebecca did the

<sup>3</sup> Judges 4:18–22. Translation from JPS Tanakh.

holy and praiseworthy work of generating *shalom bayit*, peace in their homes, symbolized by their extra powerful Shabbat lights, Yael's impact extended far beyond her tent; Yael is, in a way, like the Hanukkah candles, which illuminate the public domain and spread God's miracles.

Yael behaved in a way that might not have been typical of biblical women, but she is celebrated for it. In the next chapter of Judges, we read the victory song that Deborah, the prophetess and judge, sang along with Barak. Deborah was definitely not a woman who stayed home; the text describes her as delivering judgments to Israel from her seat beneath a palm tree, and she is called "*eishet lapidot*," which might mean the wife of Lapidot, but may also be read as Woman of Torches. Deborah's song includes the lines:

תברך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני באהל תברך.  
 Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber the  
 Kenite, Most blessed of women in tents.<sup>4</sup>

Rashi explains that the "*nashim ba'ohel*" mentioned here are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, each of whom is described as being in a tent at least once in Genesis:

מנשים באהל שרה, שנאמר בה (בראשית יח:ט), הנה  
 באהל, רבקה, שנאמר בה (שם כד:סז), ויביאה יצחק  
 האהלה, רחל ולאה, שנאמר בהן (שם לא:לג), ויצא מאהל  
 לאה וגר.

Sarah of whom it is said, (Gen. 18:0) "She is in the tent," Rebecca of whom it is said, (ibid. 24:67) "And Isaac brought her into the tent," and Rachel and Leah of whom it is said, (ibid. 31:33) "And he went out of Leah's tent and he entered Rachel's tent."<sup>5</sup>

So this line from Deborah's song—*miNashim ba'ohel tevorakh*—is a bit enigmatic. It could mean that Yael is blessed above the women in the tent, that she is more worthy of blessing than they are. Or it could mean that Yael is blessed by

<sup>4</sup> Judges 5:24. Translation from JPS Tanakh.

<sup>5</sup> Rashi on Judges 5:24.

the women in the tent. Yael and the women of Genesis achieved their impacts in different ways; Yael went outside, brought the enemy in, took the tent peg in her hand, and killed him. Sarah and Rebecca both showed wisdom in knowing which son ought to carry on God's covenant, and they nudged Abraham and Isaac toward the right choices. And they also recognize the valor of the woman who acted differently: *miNashim ba'ohel tevorakh*. The women in the tent bless the woman who leaves her tent.

We are living in the age of the Mommy Wars. We are bombarded with messages telling us to lean in, out, and in every direction. We assign Hero or Supermom status to women who seem to be successful both at work and at home. We wonder how—and whether—we can Have It All. But maybe we should look to Yael, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah for guidance on how to be kind to ourselves and each other. All of these women are remembered as righteous. We don't know if Yael was a mother—the question of children is not relevant to her narrative—but we know she ventured outside her tent and took matters into her own hands, quite literally, killing Israel's enemy. Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel prayed to become mothers; they remained close to home.

The two types of candles—Shabbat and Hanukkah—symbolize two different models of how women can choose to make their impact on their world. In answer to the question posed in seemingly ubiquitous magazine articles, we probably can't Have It All. But perhaps one message we should take away from the stories of these biblical women is *miNashim ba'ohel tevorakh*—the women in their tents blessed the woman who ventured outside her tent. I like to think that had the roles been reversed, the woman who left her tent would also have blessed the women who stayed inside. Since the rituals of Shabbat and Hanukkah candles are both part of our lives as Jewish women, we should feel encouraged to shine different lights and play different roles according

to what we and those around us need.

At Hanukkah, we are all obligated to shine our light outward, to publicize God's miracles to our greater communities. (The exception is if it is Shabbat and we lack the resources to light both sets of candles, in which case the text is clear that we need to take care of lighting the Shabbat candles, ensuring our *shalom bayit*, before worrying about *pirsumei nisa*.) This Hanukkah, may we learn from our biblical women, each of whom had her own way of shining her unique light, and who blessed the woman—Yael—who did things differently. May we all shine our unique lights outward, and may we learn to have the strength and wisdom to bless those women among us whose paths and lights are different from ours. *Hag urim sameah*.

חג אורים שמח!



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