



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Hanukah

By Rachel Dulitz
Karen Miller, Editor

*JOFA strives to promote women's learning and scholarship,
and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to
increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

On Women's Obligation to Light Hanukah Candles

By Rachel Dulitz¹

There are three holiday-related *mitzvot* which women, like men, have an obligation to take part in because, the Talmud tells us, “*she’af hein hayu be’oto hanes*,” “for they too were included in the miracle.”² On Pesach, women are required to drink the four cups of wine; on Hanukah, women are commanded to light the menorah; and, on Purim women are obligated in the reading of *megillat* Esther.

In a number of cases, women are exempt from fulfilling Jewish rituals because they fall into the category of “*mitzvot asei she’hazman grama*,”³ “positive, time-bound obligations.” The rabbis established this precept ostensibly to aid women who were busy with household and child rearing duties. They understood the innate distractions in these roles and realized that it was unreasonable to expect women to be able to abandon their responsibilities in order to perform a *mitzvah* which had a time limit set upon it. However, the Gemara also acknowledges that there are certain circumstances under which this rule does not apply. For instance, in cases where the Torah specifically obligates women in a time-bound *mitzvah* (such as eating *matzah* on Pesach or making *kiddush* on Shabbat), women are no longer exempt. The rabbinic concept of “*she’af hein hayu be’oto hanes*” is another exception to women’s general exemption from time-bound *mitzvot*. The rabbis established that for these three *mitzvot*, women’s obligation to participate was on par with men.

Rashbam and *Tosafot*, two medieval commentators, debate the meaning of the phrase “for they too were included in the miracle.” They have different opinions as to the common thread which ties these three rituals together. *Rashbam*, a 12th century commentator from France writes in tractate *Pesachim*:

שאף הן היו באותו הנס-דאמר במסכת סוטה (דף יא) בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו וכן גבי מקרא מגילה אמר הכי משום דעל ידי אסתר הוה וכן גבי חנוכה במסכת שבת (דף כג).

Because they too were included in the miracle – as it says in Tractate *Sotah*, “in the merit of righteous women in that generation they were redeemed.” And also with regard to reading the *megillah* it says this because through Esther it occurred, and also with regard to Hanukah in Tractate *Shabbat*.⁴

According to *Rashbam*, in each holiday there were women who (either individually or collectively) had integral roles in bringing about the miracles that led to the salvation of the Jewish people.

In the miracle of Purim, Esther is the one who instructs Mordechai to gather all the Jews of Shushan and tell them to fast for three days before she meets with the king. She approaches Achashverosh fully cognizant of the fact that she is putting her life on the line to save the Jewish people, and that he may refuse to speak to her or might even have her killed. In the end, the king does permit her to speak and she is able to convince him to help her save the Jewish people from Haman’s evil decree.

In the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt the Talmud clearly states that because of the righteous

women, the Jewish people were redeemed.⁵ Both the biblical narrative and the Midrash highlight the courageous acts of the Jewish women in Egypt. The midwives defy Pharaoh's command to kill all first-born males; Yocheved and Miriam help save Moses' life by sending him down the Nile in a basket; and according to the Midrash, the righteous women went out of their way to beautify themselves and encouraged their husbands to continue to build their families in the face of Pharaoh's oppression.

Finally, in the story of Hanukah, the heroine to whom *Rashbam* refers is Judith. Our Sages tell us that Judith was the daughter of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, the High Priest during the story of Hanukah. During her time there was a decree that every betrothed woman had to live with the Greek governor before getting married. One night, Judith fed him cheese until he was overcome with thirst and drank copious amounts of wine. While he was in a drunken stupor she beheaded him and caused the entire enemy army to flee. She then called out to the people, "Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has destroyed our enemies by my hand this very night."⁶

Tosafot disagree with *Rashbam* and argue that the phrase "for they too were included in the miracle" does not refer to the women who took initiative in each generation to bring about the various miracles. Rather, they write:

...קשה דלשון שאף הן משמע שהן טפלות ולפירושו היה לו לומר שהן לכך
נראה לי שאף הן היו בספק דלהשמיד ולהרוג וכן בפסח שהיו משועבדות לפרעה
במצרים וכן חנוכה הגזירה היתה מאד עליהן...

...This is difficult for the language "For they **too**" sounds as though they were secondary. And according to his [the *Rashbam's*] interpretation it should have just said "they." Therefore it appears [the meaning is] that since they also were included in the decree "to destroy and kill," and also for Passover, because they were slaves to Pharaoh, and also for Hanukah because the decree was also about them...⁷

Tosafot are claiming that the language of "for they too were involved in the miracle," seems to imply an afterthought of a secondary nature. Since the women in each of these stories were also included in the decrees to kill and persecute the Jewish people, women today are obligated to commemorate what happened many years ago. They maintain it is not the case that individual heroic women led the path to redemption or that through these women the entire miracle and salvation occurred. Rather, like the men, the women were saved and should show their gratitude to God.

Perhaps this medieval debate is echoed in different approaches to our role as Jewish women today. Building on *Tosafot*, one perspective on women's roles in halakha and Jewish life today, is that women are integral members of the community even if they do not play an active leadership role within it. However, *Rashbam's* perspective presents a different model, one in which the women themselves took the initiative and led the Jewish people toward salvation. In each story the woman (or women) realized a situation needed to be ameliorated and stepped forward to do it. They put their lives in danger and made assumptions about what would be expected of them even in cases where it was not spelled out. The rabbinic texts imply that without the intervention of these women the Jewish people would have been destroyed. The rabbis, when recognizing and responding to these situations, noted their behavior and decided to legislate Jewish law in response to these great women. The existence of this debate between two great sages demonstrates that both of these paths are considered to be legitimate and venerated roles within Judaism.

This debate is also expressed in the different ways contemporary families light Hanukah candles. In some families wives are more comfortable fulfilling the *mitzvah* through their husband's lighting. They rely on the Talmudic principle of "*ishto kegufo*," the idea that a husband and wife are considered a single individual, and therefore a husband can light the menorah on behalf of his wife. However, it is interesting to note that a wife is fully able to light the candles on behalf of her husband, since her obligation is parallel to that of her husband's. The *Shulkhan Arukh* clearly states, "a woman lights the Hanukah candles since she too is obligated in it." The *Mishna Berura* adds, "and even a man is able to appoint her as a messenger to fulfill his obligation if he stands there when she lights and hears her blessing."⁸

As descendants of the great tradition of Judith, Esther and the righteous women of Egypt, women can integrate the mitzvah of Hanukah lighting into their personal practice. As we light the candles this year, let us reflect upon the courage and strength of our heroic female ancestors.

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² This statement is repeated throughout the Talmud: In Talmud Bavli *Megillah* 4a, Talmud Bavli *Pesachim* 108a, Talmud Bavli *Shabbos* 23a, *Arahin* 3a.

³ A discussion on the topic of women's exemption from positive time-bound *mitzvot* can be found in the Mishnah in Talmud Bavli *Kiddushin* 29a, Gemara 33b-34a.

⁴ *Rashbam* on "*she'af hein hayu be'oto hanes*" Talmud Bavli *Pesachim* 108a.

⁵ Talmud Bavli *Sotah* 11b.

⁶ This story appears in the book of Judith, Chapter 13. Judith is part of the Apocrypha and not included in the canonized text, but is referred to by rabbinic commentaries. This explanation of the heroism of Judith can be found in the *Mishna Berura*, Laws of *Hanukah*, siman 670, se'if 10.

⁷ *Tosafot* "*she'af hein hayu be'oto hanes*" Talmud Bavli *Megillah* 4a.

⁸ *Shulkhan Arukh*, Laws of *Hanukah*, siman 675, se'if 3 and the *Mishna Berura* on this section.

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