

shema bekolah. hear her voice  
שמע בקולה

In Those Days  
and in Ours:  
The Eight Days  
of Hanukkah  
with Hava Shapiro  
(1878–1943)

By Dr. Wendy Zierler

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# In Those Days and in Ours: The Eight Days of Hanukkah with Hava Shapiro (1878–1943)

By Dr. Wendy Zierler<sup>1</sup>

There is a grammatical anomaly that pervades the traditional Hanukkah liturgy. In the *She'asah nissim* blessing, in *haNerot hallalu*, and in *Al haNissim* (the Hanukkah addition to the *Amidah* prayer and to the Grace After Meals), we acknowledge the miracles and battles that God performed for our ancestors in the repetitive language: “*baYamim haHem baZeman haZeh*” — in those days in this time. This peculiar phrase is often translated in prayer books as “in those days at this season;” nevertheless, why would the liturgy need to repeat or separate days and season in this manner?

In the *Arukh haShulhan*, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829–1908) notes the peculiarity of this doubled language and suggests that the reason for it is that the battle against Antiochus stretched out over a number of days and months (“in those days”), whereas the miracle of the cruse of oil specifically occurred on the 25th of Kislev (“at this time”). For Epstein, the doubled language of the prayer signals a dual commemoration of the Hasmonean military victory and the miraculous kindling of the menorah in the Temple.<sup>2</sup>

In *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (ninth century C.E.), the earliest extant prayer book, the oddness of this phrasing is addressed in another way, through an addendum to the *Al haNissim* prayer:

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<sup>2</sup> *Arukh haShulhan*, O.H. 676:3.

וכשם שעשית עמהם נס, כן עשה עמנו ה'  
אלקינו נסים ונפלאות בעת הזאת.

In the same way that You performed miracles for them [in those days], so too our God performed miracles for us in this time.<sup>3</sup>

Here the doubled language serves to collapse the time gap between the Hasmonean era and our own times, urging us to re-inhabit the Hanukkah story and to see ourselves as continual beneficiaries of God's miracles.

In many respects, my field of expertise, modern Hebrew literature — especially those works that explicitly engage classical Jewish texts and traditions — makes a similar experiential if not theological claim. Many of the great early-twentieth-century modern Hebrew poets and prose writers insisted on casting their own contemporary experiences of *baZeman hazeh* using the terms and motifs of *yamim haHem* (those days), even as they rebelled against tradition or doubted the notion of God as continual savior of the Jews. As such, their poems and stories provide a new layer of interpretation or re-imagining of classical sources. Given the almost complete absence of women writers from the Hebrew literary tradition after the biblical period and until the late-nineteenth century, the contributions of the earliest modern Hebrew women writers to this project of making the texts of the past relevant to the present day are especially noteworthy. In some cases, they have done the work of exposing, rather than covering over, the gap between then and now, pointing out the need for innovation and adaptation.

In the context of this specific discussion of the meaning of the phrase “*baYamim haHem baZeman haZeh*,” one particular early Hebrew woman writer, Hava Shapiro (1878–1943), comes to mind. Unlike many of her contemporaries — for example, the prose writer Dvora Baron or the poets Rachel Bluwstein and Esther Raab — Shapiro, who never immigrated to Palestine and who died during the Holocaust, is a virtually

<sup>3</sup> *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, The Prayers of Hanukkah, “And on Hanukkah we pray...”.

forgotten figure. One of the first female Hebrew prose writers and essayists, the first female Hebrew diarist and feminist critic, a committed (secular) Zionist and Hebraist in the Diaspora, an artist, and a proud Jew, Shapiro deserves to be remembered for her many pioneering achievements, including her depiction of Hanukkah, then and now.

Shapiro's 1924 sketch, "Yemei Hanukkah" ("Hanukkah Days"),<sup>4</sup> together with a companion piece entitled "Bein ha'Amim" ("Among the Nations") provide eight individual vignettes, corresponding to the eight days of Hanukkah. These vignettes compare and contrast "those Hanukkah days" — the time of the Maccabees as well as the days of Shapiro's more pious youth — with modern Jewish life. Having grown up in a tight-knit Hassidic community in Slavuta, Ukraine, the descendant of the Hassidic master Pinchas of Koretz, and now living a detached, secular life in Prague, Shapiro expresses a nostalgic yearning for "those days" of her youth, which she imaginatively conjures up through memories of the holidays:

And the women inside the room listen to the blessing with great devotion and watch my grandfather bend over to light all the wicks and hums a continuing melody, "These lights are holy" — and every line on his face conveys devotion to the performance of this mitzvah....

From behind the door the servant women are laughing and smiling, for the time has come for cards and latkes — and their extra wages.

These days, in our surroundings, there is no such atmosphere, even in those places where they still light Hanukkah candles. That tradition has now disappeared along with all of its attendant memories. Back then, everything was steeped in spiritual exaltation.... Somehow, it seems, we were the offspring of that same Mattathias and Johanan the High Priest, that same Judah Maccabee who stood strong like a lion and fought with great personal sacrifice for the sake of what

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in *Ha'olam* 12:52 (Friday, September 26, 1924): 1046–1048. Reprinted in Hava Shapiro, *Behikansi Atah*, Carole B. Balin and Wendy I. Zierler, eds. (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), pp. 147–149.

was holy to us. Pride in the face of our enemies: See we weren't always so weak...Here are our brave warriors; and we — a [nation of] priests!

And yet from this same joyful thought comes the sorrow and pain of a nation exiled from its Father's table, given over to be trod upon by every passerby....<sup>5</sup>

This passage is extraordinary for the way it both elides and exposes the chasm between past and present. On the one hand, Shapiro exalts the old days, as presided over by the Maccabees in antiquity and her grandfather, in her youth; on the other hand, she depicts a sense of disparity between that story of Hasmonean bravery and the recent Eastern European experience of brutal pogroms in the wake of the Ukrainian Civil War. As a woman writer, attentive to the exclusion of women in traditional practice, she also calls attention to the marginality of the women in the candle-lighting ceremony, despite the unequivocal assertion by R. Joshua ben Levi, that women are obligated to light Hanukkah candles.<sup>6</sup>

In the next section of the sketch, however, Shapiro brings women into the center of the Hanukkah experience by shifting focus to her memories of her extraordinary mother, Menuhah Shapiro, a pious Jew but also a *maskilah* (female proponent of the Hebrew Enlightenment), indeed, Hava's chief spiritual mentor:

And here's a picture of my beloved mother....

A well-read woman who derived her chief pleasure and comfort from reading her Hebrew books and newspapers, which were completely "pesulim" (invalid) in the eyes of the rest of her family. There was a silent, unspoken covenant between us children and her not to bother her while she was reading; in exchange for this she would always do our bidding. On Fridays nights, by the light of the great chandelier that hung in the middle of the dining room and by the light of the many burning Sabbath candles on the table she would sit,... completely absorbed in her reading and in her world — and we in our corner, quietly and contentedly, would look jealously from afar at

<sup>5</sup> My translation.

<sup>6</sup> B. Talmud Shabbat 23a.

those small letters that our mother commanded as well as any of the men. However, on Hanukkah evenings, even she, usually so focused, would shrug off her seriousness and give herself over a little to the light-hearted frivolity of the mitzvah.

In this passage, Shapiro creates a bridge between the cultural conflicts of Hasmonean times (between the Hellenists and the traditionalists) and those in Shapiro's own day. Here is Shapiro's mother, singularly devoted to the project of the Hebrew *Haskalah*, including its call for a shift in the role of women in Judaism, a project considered heretical and perfidious by many traditionalists in her community. Note the plethora of light-related images in this passage — the glow of the chandelier, the many Shabbat candles. In presenting this glowing image of Menuhah Shapiro as a scholar, Shapiro sheds critical light on the Hassidic community of her youth, but also on the consequences of modernity and the quest for enlightenment.

Note that Menuhah is willing to forego her serious intellectualism in the Hanukkah context, giving herself over to *kalut da'at* (light-hearted frivolity), an ironic overturning of the rabbinic assertion of the frivolity of women.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in the sketch, however, Shapiro describes the (non-) observance of Hanukkah among young Jews at the university, and she laments the crude frivolity of the occasion, and the loss of religious “authenticity.” It is truly difficult in the assimilationist *zeman haZeh* context of the university to conjure up the Hanukkah mood of yesteryear. And yet, doesn't that very conflict between religious and intellectual life itself recapitulate the ancient conflict between the Hellenists and the Hasmoneans, thus bringing together past and present?

In many respects, Shapiro's sketch also anticipates many of the concerns of Orthodox feminism: how to maintain continuity with the past without repeating its inequities, in a way that is socially equitable, spiritually uplifting, and enlightening. Shapiro's life and writings reflect many of our ongoing challenges *baZeman haZeh* as Jews committed to tradition as

<sup>7</sup> See B. Talmud *Kiddushin* 80b.

well as feminist innovation. Shapiro did not manage in her lifetime, despite the presence of her mother, to integrate the disparate parts of her self into one whole. Her Hanukkah vignettes dramatize her sense of disconnectedness from a religious past that she loved but could not carry into the future. Her evocation of her mother, as role model, indicates, however, the significance of women's scholarship as a vehicle both to maintain and transform the tradition.

As we recite our Hanukkah prayers, let us consciously utter the words “*baYamim haHem baZeman haZeh*.” Like our modern Hebrew foremothers, let us try to view our past with our present-day eyes, and to use our history and tradition to inform and transform our outlook for the future.

*Hag sameah!*

חג שמח

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*This issue of Shema Bekolah is dedicated  
in honor of  
three JOFA founders and visionaries*

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