

A Forgotten Queen

In picking up the newspaper recently, one could not help but notice the controversy over the latest Cleopatra movie. The new Cleopatra is an African American beauty. The authorities in Egypt, about as anti-progressive a country as one can find, objected to a Black woman representing the Egyptian Queen. Racism knows no bounds in the Arab world.

The Egyptians pointed out that the real Cleopatra, better known as Cleopatra VIII, was of Greek origin, having been related to the world conqueror, Alexander the Great. However, Cleopatra was somewhat unique in that she adopted Egyptian mores and customs, declaring herself a goddess who was the virgin mother to Julius Caesar's son. That was an explanation that might leave some scratching their heads, but Cleopatra cleverly came up with the idea that since Julius Caesar was god, she was simply impregnated without any particular physical conduct.

The Romans did not buy this and hated Cleopatra who they believed not only undermined Julius Caesar, but also was responsible for destroying dreams harbored by Mark Anthony.

Cleopatra VIII seems to provide uncompromised curiosity on the part of the western world.

Ignored in this most boring about-to-be-made movie are other women who ruled their words and had a major influence on the future of culture, society, and religion.

One of those remarkable women was Salome Alexandra, known to the Talmud as Shalom Tzion.

This is the largely untold story of a remarkable woman of royalty. She was the last ruler of an independent Israel until 1948, although her granddaughter followed in her footsteps and can claim independence for a small portion of the land of Israel.

Judah the Maccabee ("the Hammer") was the man who gave rise to the holiday of Hanukkah. People know of Hanukkah as representing the uprising of the Jewish people against the Greek Empire. The Menorah has become a worldwide symbol of the fight for liberty and freedom. These brave and heroic leaders in the fight for Israel independence were the direct ancestors of Salome Alexandra.

While fighting the corrosive and assimilative effects of Hellenism, Salome Alexandra found a way to live with Hellenism, some would say to embrace it. At the same time, she restored the national religious pride and the observance of Judaism. She was instrumental in shaping and altering Judaism by supporting the Pharisees against the Sadducees. It was the Pharisees who became ancestors of the Rabbis. The Pharisaiic

tradition also shaped Christianity. Queen Salome positively affected women's rights in a way that has permanently affected the cultural matrix. She even led troops in battle.

Her leadership was highly praised not only by the authors of the Talmud, the authoritative source of the Bible, but by others as well. She is said to have ended an unpopular war, doubled down on religious strife, stabilized the economy and, according to the author Kenneth Atkinson: "Presided over the greatest period of peace and prosperity in her nation's history." She is placed among the likes of King David and King Solomon.

The Psalm from Proverbs, A Woman of Valor, read every Friday night by Jews, and frequently heard at both Christian and Jewish funerals for women may have been written about Salome Alexandra. At the very least, it was said to have constituted advice that the Queen was giving to her two sons as to the kind of woman that they should find and marry; someone just like Mom.

Researching the Queen's life is not an easy task since there were conflicting views about her. Josephus, a Jewish General, who turned himself over to the Romans and lived comfortably in Rome, was both cryptic and inconsistent in his view of the Jewish Queen. He wrote 7-1/2 pages of printed text about her. The Rabbis of the Talmud took a completely different view and were extraordinarily complimentary of the Jewish Queen. Interestingly, the Rabbis also had positive things to say about the famous Cleopatra known to history.

So fascinated have I become with this unique character that I created a storybook for a possible movie about her. After all, The Rieders Foundation, which I head as President, did outstanding work entitled Golden Treasures: The Vatican Jewish Collection (Vatican Judaica) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96nx9E7bW9E>.

Queen Shalom Tzion was a warrior queen, who led the troops in battle while her weak, bumbling, incompetent husband was back at the castle in Jerusalem. She was wed to Aristobulus, a ruler prior to the Queen who was known for his cruelty and stupidity.

One of the many components of the Queen's life which made her unusual is that she was 29 years old when she got married, quite elderly for a woman of the time. Her husband died at approximately 50 years of age, giving Queen Shalom Tzion the power to rule the Middle East.

The reign of Queen Shalom Tzion was not without dispute. She organized the murder of the Witches of Ashkelon, a stain on her rule that was never completely forgotten. There was not going to be any sorcery in her kingdom under her rule.

The Romans were frustrated in their efforts to gain control over the Holy Land during the period that the Queen served. After her death, warring factions invited the Romans into the country and the invaders never left. The Romans murdered somewhere between 1 million and 1 ½ million Jews, reducing their numbers to the tiny proportion of civilization that we have seen ever since.

Alexandra Salome, her Greek name, acquired her greatest degree of power after the death of her much hated husband. The people were in turmoil and rebellion

seethed. Alexander Jannaeus was a lousy ruler showing no respect for the Pharisees. He waged war unsuccessfully.

Even Josephus, the turncoat Jewish General, wrote in his well-known histories about the Queen: "She was a woman who showed none of the weakness of her sex; for being one of those inordinately desirous of the power to rule, she showed by her deeds her ability to carry out her plans, and at the same time she exposed the stupidity of those men who continually failed to maintain sovereign power." Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.430.

It is known that Queen Salome empowered and supported other female monarchs. Her relationship with Cleopatra Thea, to the north, and other Queens was not based upon love or even respect, but rather national interest. Salome Alexandra grew up in a region dominated by women. During her childhood, the mother/daughter team of Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III ruled Egypt while Cleopatra Thea governed the Seleucid (Greek) Empire.

It is not known whether Salome Alexandra met the Cleopatra popularized in the movies, but without question the Jewish monarch supplied Cleopatra of Egypt with experienced Jewish generals so that Cleopatra was able to fend off rivals and foreigners. The two women clearly had a close alliance.

Perhaps the Jewish Queen's most enduring legacy was her Kennedy-like move of placing her brother Yahoshua in the position of High Priest. Just as John Kennedy wanted his brother Robert as Attorney General, Shalom Tzion wanted the "liberal" policies of her brother to govern over the more rigid literalist views of the Sadducees.

The Talmud in Leviticus Rabbah 35:10 had the following to say about the Queen:

In a time of...Queen Salome Alexandra, the rain would fall on Friday nights, from one week to the next until the wheat grew to the size of kidneys, the barleys the size of olive pits, and the lentils the size of golden denars.

The Queen was a devoted Pharisee, giving rise to the religious traditions we in the West enjoy today. She was pious in observance and did not give into the greed, gluttony, and destructiveness which characterized the rulers of her time.

Steven Spielberg, you should make a movie about Salome Alexandra, Shalom Tzion!

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