

“Shlom Zion Ha Malkah” – A model of rulership for our time

By Rabbi Leah Novick

Shlom Zion Ha Malkah (Queen Salome Alexandra) was the last of the great Hasmonean rulers, who brought peace and prosperity to Israel for nine years; shortly before the Roman takeover of Judea. She became Queen, at the age of 62, after the death of her second husband Alexander Jannai (known as a tyrannical ruler with close association to the Sadducees.) Once she assumed the throne, Shlom Zion instituted a wide range of reforms, in conjunction with Rabbi Shimon Ben Shetach, head of the re-constituted Sanhedrin. Praised in the Talmud for her piety and caring for people, Shlom Zion’s reign is connected with initiating public education, the marriage Ketubah and reform of the Sandhedrin. She is also credited with maintaining peace through negotiations with the neighboring countries, and ruling over a time of great abundance and fairness.

Here is a dramatized rendition of the Queen as she might have spoken to her religious Parliament; drawn from the performance piece “The Peaceful Maccabee” – the story of Shlom Zion and eight other remarkable Jewish women. (now available on video.)

Sages of the Sanhedrin: “Bruchim ha baim b’shem Adonai” you are welcome at the palace; and from this day forward please consider yourselves my honored guests. I have called you here not just to celebrate my accession to the throne of Judea, but to announce some very important reforms which I will be instituting.

As you know, our country has been divided for some time between two major parties; the Saducees and Pharisees. Although my late husband, Alexander Yannai, was a strong supporter of the Saducee party. before his death, of a debilitating illness that afflicted him for three years, he saw how harmful the divisions had become. In his final words, he entrusted me with the monarchy to make the necessary changes for healing the country.

Therefore, with the power invested in me by the people of Israel
I am now taking the following actions:

- 1) The Sanhedrin will be immediately re-convened so that the religious Parliament will once again have the full powers it is entitled to; and I am today appointing Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, as head of the Sanhedrin.

Rabbi Shimon, who you all know, is a strict Halachist, a man of great integrity and profound faith. Many in the country refer to him as my brother and I have always respected his religious judgement. During my late husband's reign, Rabbi Shimon- a well known Pharisee leader, was forced into exile and lived in Egypt until it was safe for him to return. We are delighted to have him back in good health.)

2) All political prisoners will be released immediately. Effective today, I am freeing thousands of Pharisees from prison to take their rightful place in the teaching and governing of our society. I am empowering Rabbi Shimon and the Sanhedrin to develop a plan for re-instating them to their previous positions and to make some economic restitution to their families for lost income and their suffering during these difficult years.

3) It has come to my attention that seasonal agricultural laborers in our country are still underpaid and sometimes exploited. My friends, the produce we enjoy on our tables, comes through the hard work of the poor. From here on those who employ day-workers must compensate them at the end of the day, and insure that even short term employees are given the same protections as others.

4) I am deeply concerned about the plight of women who have no voice in issues of marriage and divorce. I am hereby instructed Rabbi Shimon to develop a written "Ketubah" a marriage contract that will stipulate the conditions of marriage and guarantee that women whose husbands put them aside will not go away from their homes empty-handed. A ketubah settlement must become the right of every married woman.

5) I know that many of you questioned our Maccabean predecessors, who took upon themselves both the religious and the political leadership of the country. In the hopes of remedying this situation, I am appointing my eldest son Hyrcanus II, a peaceful young man in sympathy with the Pharisees, to the high priesthood. My younger son, Aristobolus II who is known for his high energy, will be the leader of our military forces.

6) Although we will continue to maintain a standing army, our emphasis will be on negotiation and peaceful methods for dealing with foreign policy concerns. To that end I am sending emissaries to King Tiranes of Armenia who is already in Syria with his armies, offering to have our

representatives meet with him to avoid any potential bloodshed. Gentleman, I have spent most of my adult life surrounded by constant wars and internal violence. Since the days of first husband, Judah Aristobolus, I have seen the Hasmonean family drawn into one battle after another.

My friends, Israel is always in danger from the surrounding empires who seek to control us. We know that the Roman Empire is expanding and also eyes our tiny state with hungry eyes. We have always been here at the crossroads to all the trade routes. We are always vulnerable. The Maccabean ancestors saw the danger of Greek domination and were able to defeat superior armies. Unfortunately, they were not able to overcome the continuing Greek influence on our cultural life. Our family had Greek names we wore Grecian clothes, learned the Greek games and absorbed the attitudes of our captors. The worst of these was the addiction to power, territorial expansion, and the military violence that became part of our political life. Under my rule, there will be no more acquisitions of neighboring territories, and no more forced conversions as we did with the Idumean people.

It is my sincere hope that we can return Judea to a more peaceful state in which there is love of learning and respect for Torah. In that context, I want the honored Rabbis here to know that the kitchen in the palace has been totally kashered to ensure total conformity with the laws of Kashrut. Some of the golden dishes that could not be properly cleansed have been discarded or sold to nonJews with the proceeds going to charity.

While I am Queen, our Temple will be a house of prayer for all people and this palace will be the house of the Shekhinah.

All will be welcomed here. In the many years of suffering we all have endured , I always had one prayer; the prayer of King David from the Psalms:

Achat shaalti- me eyt adonai, otah avakesh
shivti b'veit ha Shekhinah kol y 'mai chai-ai
lachazot b' noam. b' noam Adonai u l'vakeir b'Hechalo

This thing I asked, I asked of my God, this and nothing more
to live in the house of Shekhinah all the days of my life
to abide within the divine pleasure of God
and to visit the heavenly palaces.

This has been my wish and God willing it will be granted to me in the autumn of my life and to all of you.