

THE JUDITH STORY

Most of us are familiar with the story of Hanukkah.

Around 165 BCE, in the land of Judea, a great miracle happened. After being conquered by several different powerful rulers, the land of Judea (and all of its inhabitants) was taken and controlled by a king called Antiochus IV or Antiochus Epiphanes.

Unlike previous rulers, who were known for supporting religious tolerance and cultural freedom, Antiochus and his supporters outlawed Judaism and repressed Jewish practice, often with violence.

Unsurprisingly this led to a large-scale revolt led by a Jewish priest and his sons (the Maccabees). After many struggles and battles, the Jews won back their religious freedom and rededicated the temple. There was only enough oil to light the menorah for one day, but miraculously, it lasted for eight. This is what we celebrate each year on Hanukkah.

Did you know that there is another story Jews tell on Hanukkah? It is the story of a Jewish widow named Judith and how her courage helped to free the Jewish people from religious persecution and, quite possibly, death.

In rabbinic times, Jews told her story on Hanukkah, and some communities still do, but for the most part Judith's story has been lost. In fact, Judith's story isn't even included in the *Tanach*, the codified collection of Jewish biblical texts.

It goes like this:

Most historians believe that the story of Judith took place a few hundred years before the story of the Maccabean revolt, in a town called Bethulia in the land of Judea. Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Babylonian Empire, sent one of his generals Holofernes, to conquer Judea and the Jews who lived there. During this campaign, he camped outside of Bethulia with thousands of troops, blocking off water, food, and other supplies from the city. Though the Jews had been fighting back, their situation was becoming desperate and they were ready to surrender. It was then that Judith, a wise and beautiful widow, said that she had a plan to save them.

Under the cover of night, Judith and her handmaid snuck out of Bethulia and into Holofernes' camp, pretending to surrender. The general was smitten by her beauty and grace. He took her to his tent where she offered him cheese

and wine. Lots of wine. Holofernes fell into a deep sleep, and when he was finally out cold, Judith took his sword and chopped off his head.

Judith and her handmaiden snuck out of the camp, taking Holofernes' head back to Bethulia. The Jews were emboldened by their bravery. Meanwhile, the enemy army discovered Holofernes' headless body and fell into a state of panic and confusion. This created the opening for the Jews to launch a successful attack and to defeat the Assyrian forces.

Though her story most likely took place at a different time in history than the Maccabean revolt, there are obvious parallels between Judith's triumph over Holofernes and the traditional tale of the miracle of oil: the tale of military victory, the ability of the weak to overcome the strong (also like David and Goliath), and the parallel between the names Judith and Judah (*Yehudit* and *Yehudah* in Hebrew, meaning "Jew"). Judith's story also highlights a discussion about finding strength in a community—she did not venture to Holofernes' camp alone, but instead to her handmaiden with her.

Another fun fact: Early rabbinic texts document the practice of eating dairy on Hanukkah to commemorate the salty cheese that Judith fed to Holofernes to make him thirsty. It is even likely that the first latkes weren't made from potatoes, but were instead fried cheese pancakes that were popular in the middle ages.

While some communities continue the tradition of eating dairy on Hanukkah and telling Judith's story, her bravery has been largely left out of the celebration in mainstream American Judaism. It makes you wonder—why don't we tell her story? What other stories don't we know?

WEB RESOURCES ABOUT JUDITH

On jwa.org

Craven, Toni. "Judith: Apocrypha." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 20 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on November 7, 2013) <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/judith-apocrypha>

Web feature on Judiths throughout history from the Jewish Women's Archive:
<http://jwa.org/discover/throughtheyear/december/judith>

Elsewhere on the web

Brine, Kevin R. , Elena Ciletti and Henrike L hneemann (eds.). *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*. OpenBook Publishers, Cambridge: 2010. (Viewed on November 7, 2013) <http://musicweb.ucsd.edu/~jpasler/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/SwordofJudith.pdf>

"The Book of Judith." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (Viewed on November 9, 2013) <http://www.usccb.org/bible/judith/1>

"Book of Judith." Wikipedia. (Viewed on November 7, 2013)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Judith

Groner, Jonathan. "Hanukkah Heroines: Antidotes to the male-dominated story of Hanukkah." Beliefnet. (Viewed November 7, 2013).
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/Hanukkah/Hanukkah-Heroines.aspx?p=2>

"Yehudit: The Woman Who Saved the Day. Chabad. Org. (Viewed on November 7, 2013)
http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/103019/jewish/Yehudit.htm

Zelinski, Sarah. "A Hidden Hanukkah Tale Of A Woman, An Army, and Some Killer Cheese." *The Salt*. National Public Radio. December 4, 2012. (Viewed on November 7, 2013) <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/12/04/166486095/a-hidden-hanukkah-tale-of-a-woman-an-army-and-some-killer-cheese>