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The Book of Judith and
the History of Hanukkah

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This edition of the Shema Bekolah is lovingly dedicated to Mrs. Vivian Scheaffer Stadlan by her children and grandchildren in honor of her 90th birthday (until 120 and beyond). Thank you for your boundless love, constant encouragement, and for showing us what it means to live a life of filled with love, dedication and principle. May we celebrate many more together in happiness and health.

The Book of Judith and the History of Hanukkah

Dr. Malka Simkovich¹

Many observant Jews today know that the ancient book of Judith,² which was likely written in the late-second or early-first century BCE, is connected with the holiday of Hanukkah. But most Jews are not clear on how this association came into being, or why it might be meaningful to them. The overt connection between Judith and the holiday of Hanukkah in Jewish sources is actually a late one; it was only cemented in the medieval period. The eleventh-century talmudist and exegete Rashi makes reference to a woman who brought about the Jews' rescue from the Greeks (b. *Shabbat* 23a), but he does not mention Judith by name. Rashi's grandson, Rashbam, however, notes explicitly that the miracle of Hanukkah was brought about by Judith (Tosafot, b. *Megillah* 4a). Later rabbinic sources add more information about Judith in what are known as the Judith midrashim, and we begin to find an association in fourteenth-century sources between Judith feeding the enemy general cheese and the tradition to serve dairy foods on Hanukkah (Rif, *Shabbat* 10a, Kol Bo, 44).³

The book of Judith itself, however, makes no explicit mention of the Hanukkah story. In fact, it seems to transcend any historical context whatsoever. In the book, a Judean town called Bethulia is besieged by enemy Assyrians. Desperate and starving, the people of the town are ready to

give up any hope of salvation. But a beautiful and wise widow named Judith summons the town elders and informs them that she will effect their salvation. She sneaks out of the town with her handmaid and boldly enters the Assyrian camp, where she seduces and soon murders the general Holofernes. When the Assyrians discover this act of sabotage, they dissolve their siege, abandon their encampment, and flee the region of Bethulia. Although the story of Judith has been taken as a historical narrative, it is striking that the enemy nation is Assyrian, while the king of the Assyrians bears the name of an infamous Babylonian king: Nebuchadnezzar. The Assyrians' general, meanwhile, bears a Greek name, Holofernes. And finally, there is no written or archaeological record of the existence of a town in Judea called Bethulia ("Virgin-town").

What are we to make of these incongruities? Most scholars believe that these details were meant to signal to the reader that the book should not be read as a historical document. And even if there are kernels of truth in the book of Judith, and there was in fact a historical woman who saved her people from imminent danger, the book as it was circulated and transmitted is not meant to be read historically. Describing a narrative in which the Assyrians are led by a king with a Babylonian name and a general with a Greek name would have sounded as absurd to Jews in the late Second Temple as someone today making reference to "The Prime Minister of Venezuela, Abraham Lincoln, assigned a task to his general Kim Kardashian." It just doesn't make sense.

This is not to say that the story of Judith is not profound. But to understand its profundity, we need to put history aside and consider its message. If the author did not want us to read the book as an archival history, was there a more abstract message that the author wanted to convey without getting into the details of a particular historical context?

I believe that when readers in the first century

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² Judith is a story that is preserved in the Apocrypha, a collection of works that comprise part of the Catholic Bible. The book is dated to the second century or early first century BCE and was likely written by an observant Jew living in the land of Israel.

³ Deborah Gera's article offers an excellent overview of this discussion at <http://thetorah.com/judith-a-chanukah-heroine/>.

BCE read the story of Judith, they immediately recognized connections between her character and storyline and the character and storyline of their ancestral hero, Judah the Maccabee. Judith, Yehudit, means “Jewess,” which is the feminized version of Judah, Yehudah. Both Judith and Judah are valiant heroes who are attractive and physically strong. Judah’s physical power lies in his brawn and might, his ability to defeat the Greek enemy in combat. Judith’s physical power is more subtle; the power that she wields over her Greek enemies, specifically Holofernes, derives from her sexual appeal. Both Judith and Judah transcend their physical power by acknowledging their vulnerability to the One True God, the God who controls their destinies. They therefore engage in extensive prayers before embarking on their missions, and their dedication to Jewish ancestral law is highlighted in both of their books.

Given that Judith is meant to be read ahistorically and that Judah was a historical figure, readers of Judith would have seen Judith as a mirror of Judah himself. Without explicitly lauding Judah’s opposition to Greek culture, the author of the book of Judith subtly applauds Judah’s achievements without taking on the political risk that saying so explicitly would bring, both from pro-Greek Jewish factions, and Greek authorities. Read this way, the book of Judith is a subversive book that applauds the Hasmonean dynasty’s initial separation from Greek culture in a way that is so historically disconnected from actual events that no one could truly accuse the author of being anti-Greek. Yet the the book of Judith’s endorsement of individualism and zealotry bear clear parallels with how Jews viewed the Maccabean story: The Greeks sought to impose a uniform, Hellenist culture over their subjects, which put the Jewish people and the religion that they sought to preserve at risk. It took one brave individual who was willing to stand up to the enemy to turn the tide in the Jews’ favor. In both the most historically reliable account regarding Judah, which is in 1 Maccabees, and the historically unreliable story of Judith, God’s favor

of this individual leads to God’s effecting a victory for the Jews. While the victory is galvanized by Judah/Judith in these books, God is pulling all of the strings.

What then, is the message of the book of Judith? Was it simply meant to be read as a fictionalized version of 1 Maccabees? I believe that the answer to how Judith’s story should be read lies in the historical context in which it was composed. If Judith was indeed written around 100 BCE , as scholars believe, then the author of Judith was likely writing his book to bolster public opinion regarding the Hasmonean dynasty. By this time, the aura of the great Hasmonean rebellion was waning, and was being replaced with wariness and distrust toward the Hasmonean leaders. For Jews committed to practicing their ancestral tradition, this mistrust was reasonably justified: Whereas the first generation of Hasmoneans avowed to preserve Jewish tradition, by the end of the second century BCE , the royal Jewish family was rife with plotting, collusion, and Hellenization. Perhaps the author of Judith wanted to argue for the legitimacy of the Hasmonean family and laud their bravery, and praise Judah in a way that would restore the integrity to the Hasmonean monarchy. Careful readers of the story would have appreciated the parallels between Judith and Judah, and her association with the Hanukkah story was probably well established by the early rabbinic period. It is striking, then, that while Jews knew that Judean autonomy was achieved by a man named Judah, they felt more comfortable overtly lauding the achievements of a woman named Judith.

The discomfort with celebrating Jewish rebellions against a host empire is manifest in rabbinic literature. The rabbis ignore the military achievements of the Hasmoneans altogether and instead add a theological dimension to the holiday of Hanukkah by making reference to a miracle regarding one day’s worth of oil that lasted for eight days. Given the rabbinic uneasiness with rebellion and interest in theological meaning, it is perhaps no surprise that by the medieval

period, the story of the miraculous oil came to the foreground of the holiday, and the figure of Judah was left to the periphery.

In reading the book of Judith not as a story that occurred parallel to the rebellion of the Maccabees but as a subversive retelling of the rebellion of the Maccabees, readers can better discern the values that drove supporters of the Maccabean dynasty. These values include extreme bravery, a dogged willingness to resist local authority on behalf of a higher religious cause, and an uncompromising devotion to ancestral law. Jewish transmitters of Judith's story, moreover, allowed gender

boundaries to dissolve by symbolically depicting a male historical figure as a woman, and by celebrating this woman as the embodiment of these ideals.



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