

WOMEN AND CHANUKKAH

Judith and Holofernes

The Apocrypha is a collection of books from the biblical period which were not chosen to be part of the Jewish Bible (but were accepted in the Catholic collection). In addition to the First and Second Books of Maccabees, the Apocrypha contains the Book of Judith, a book preserved in the Greek but not in the Hebrew Bible. It tells the story of a beautiful Jewish woman by the name of Judith, who single-handedly saved the Jewish town of Bethulia....

The story goes like this. An evil general, Holofernes, lays siege to the town. All seems lost until Judith tells the elders of the town that she has a plan to defeat the enemy. They dismiss her offer as foolish and prepare to surrender to Holofernes. Judith tries once more to convince the elders that she can save them, and this time they reluctantly agree to allow her to leave the camp for one day.

Judith prepares herself for her bold scheme. She dresses provocatively and prepares a sack containing food and wine. She approaches the enemy camp and is immediately captured and brought to Holofernes. He is very impressed with her beauty and her prediction that he will capture Bethulia. She suggests they go to his tent alone and celebrate.

Once in Holofernes' tent, Judith feeds him the salty cheese she has brought with her. Holofernes becomes quite thirsty and drinks large quantities of wine until he falls asleep, drunk. Judith takes Holofernes' sword and cuts off his head. She covers the body with a blanket, puts the head in a sack, and returns through the sleeping camp to Bethulia.

The elders cannot believe that Judith has returned safely. She reveals the severed head of Holofernes and the elders place it on the walls of the city. Meanwhile, the enemy soldiers awake and discover the decapitated body of their leader. In the distance, they see Holofernes' head hanging from the walls of Bethulia. They decide that if a Jewish woman could be so ruthless, they do not want to fight Jewish men in battle, and so the army retreats and the city of Bethulia is saved.

A midrash (in Hebrew) dealing with a variation of the Judith story was read on the Shabbat or Shabbatot of Hanukkah during the Middle Ages. Dated sometime after the 10th century CE, the midrash is remarkably similar to the narrative of the Greek version.

Hannah and Her Sons

Another story of heroism involving a woman is associated with Hanukkah. The story of Hannah and her seven sons is recorded in the Second Book of Maccabees 7:1-41. [Hannah is a name from Rabbinic midrash; the Second Book of Maccabees refers to her as "the mother."] Unlike the militant story of Judith, Hannah's story is a tale of martyrdom.

It seems that Antiochus meets Hannah and her sons, who refuse to eat pig in public. As each son refuses, he is tortured and put to death in front of Hannah. Finally, before the last child is to be killed, Antiochus appeals to Hannah to direct him to eat the meat and be saved. Hannah asks her son what he wishes to do. He replies that he is only sorry that he had to wait so long to show his love of Torah. Hannah praises him and he is then martyred.

Hannah dies, too. In different versions, Hannah is killed by Antiochus, throws herself from the city walls, or dies of grief over her beloved sons.

These stories of heroism shed light on the role of Jewish women in times of crisis. From the time of the Israelite midwives' refusal to accede to Pharaoh's decree to kill the firstborn Jewish males (Exodus 1:15-22) to the leadership of Deborah (Judges 4 and 5), the Jewish woman understands the severity of the situation and rallies the Jewish people to victory. In the Judith story, the Israelite men are depicted as weak and indecisive while she is willing to risk her own life to turn the tide.