

The Story of Judith and the Custom of Eating Dairy Foods on Ḥanukkah

Rema (R. Moshe Isserles) writes in his glosses to the *Shulḥan Arukh*: “Some say it is customary to eat cheese on Ḥanukkah because the miracle was done with the milk that Judith fed the enemy.”¹

The sources given for this ruling of Rema in the parentheses following his gloss are the commentary of R. Nissim (Ran) to Rif and *Kol Bo*. These sources were not provided by R. Isserles himself, but rather by the printers of the *Shulḥan Arukh* beginning in the early 1600s.² Although these sources are sometimes imprecise, in this case they appear to be accurate.

R. Nissim discusses this story in the context of explaining that women are also obligated to light Ḥanukkah candles because they were involved in the miracle of Ḥanukkah:

The Greeks decreed that all virgins getting married must sleep with the governor (*hegmon*) first, and through a woman a miracle occurred, as it is said in the *midrash* that the daughter of Yoḥanan fed the chief of the enemies cheese in order to get him [to drink wine, and so make him]

1. Rema, *Orah Ḥayyim* 670:2.

2. See Yitzchak Nissim, “*Ha-Haggahot al Shulḥan Arukh*,” in *Rabbi Yosef Karo*, ed. Yitzhak Rafael (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969), 70-71.

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drunk, and she cut off his head and they all fled, and because of this it is customary to eat cheese on Ḥanukkah.³

Kol Bo has a slightly expanded version of the story in his explanation of the obligation of women to light Ḥanukkah candles and the custom to eat cheese on Ḥanukkah:

Yohanan the High Priest had a very, very beautiful daughter, and the king of Greece wanted to sleep with her. She fed him a dish of cheese in order to make him thirsty, so that he would drink a lot and get drunk and lie down and fall asleep. That is what happened; he lay down and fell asleep. She took his sword and cut off his head and brought it to Jerusalem. When the army saw that their hero was dead, they fled.⁴

What is the source of this story found in Rema, Ran, and *Kol Bo*? The story of Judith is mentioned by numerous early authorities as the reason that women are obligated to light Ḥanukkah candles “because they were involved in the miracle.” Without elaborating on the details of the story, Judith is mentioned in Tosafot in the name of Rashbam,⁵ *Sefer Miẓvot Gadol*,⁶ Mordechai,⁷ Ritva, and Meiri,⁸ and well as in many other early sources.⁹ However, none of these sources mention that she

3. Ran (1320-1376), *Shabbat* 10a in the Rif’s pages, s.v. *she-af hen*, commenting on *Shabbat* 23b. Ran also mentions this in his commentary to *Megillah* 4a, but without mentioning many of the details found in his comments on *Shabbat*. See the overview in Deborah Levine Gera, “The Jewish Textual Traditions,” in *The Sword of Judith: Jewish Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin Brine, Elena Ciletti, and HERNIKE LÄHNEMANN (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 35-36.

4. David Abraham, ed., *Kol Bo* (Jerusalem: 2007), vol. 1, p. 162, *siman* 44. The date and authorship of *Kol Bo* is uncertain, but it seems to be from the thirteenth century. See the Introduction by R. Shlomo Zalman Havlin in *Sefer Kol Bo* (Jerusalem: Even Yisroel, 1997), 7-10. The same story, with very similar wording, is found in *Orehot Ḥayyim*, *Hilkhot Ḥanukkah*, *siman* 12 (Jerusalem: Sela Publishers, 1956), 262.

5. Tosafot, *Megillah* 4a, s.v. *she-af hen*. See also Tosafot, *Pesaḥim* 108b, s.v. *hayu*.

6. *Sefer Miẓvot Gadol*, positive commandments, rabbinic commandment 5.

7. Mordechai, in the additions to *Pesaḥim* 108b.

8. Ritva and Meiri, *Megillah* 4a.

9. Judith is also mentioned in *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem, 1995), 32, in the context of the obligation of women to light Ḥanukkah candles with a blessing. There it is stated that she cut off the head of Antiokhus. Judith is mentioned as a member of the Hasmonean family *Sefer ha-Manhig*, ed. Yitzhak Rafael (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1978), *Hilkhot Megillah*, p. 249. The story is also cited in Moshe and Yehudah Hershler, eds., *Peirushei Siddur Ha-Tefillah Le-Rokeaḥ* (Jerusalem: Machon HaRav Hershler, 1992), vol. 2, *siman* 141, pp. 717-18. There the story is abbreviated and stops before the dairy element of the story. However, Judith is definitively not presented as the daughter of the High Priest, and in some manuscripts her name is given as Hannah, not Judith.

was the daughter of the High Priest or that she gave the Greek leader milk or cheese; their only concern is using Judith as a proof that women participated in the Hanukkah miracle.

The Book of Judith

The *Book of Judith* is a book of the Apocrypha that recounts the story of how Nebuchadnezzar sent his general Holofernes to attack Israel, and how Judith, a pious and beautiful widow, saved her town of Betulia. Using her beauty and cunning, she ingratiates herself with Holofernes and then manages to behead him with his own sword after he falls into a drunken slumber at a party. Taking the severed head with her, Judith uses it to inspire the Jews and demoralize the enemy troops, leading to a Jewish victory. Judith is identified as the daughter of Merari and the widow of Menashe (*Judith* 8:1-2), from the tribe of Shimon (*ibid.* 9:2).¹⁰

The story itself has no obvious connection to Hanukkah or the Greeks; the enemies are identified as Assyrians, although the book was probably written around the second century B.C.E.¹¹ and seems to reflect the Maccabean times.¹² The *Book of Judith* follows the style of many Apocryphal works in that it is based on plot elements already found in the Bible and contains many parts that are essentially rewritten Biblical narratives.¹³ These elements are also found in abundance in later retellings of the story.¹⁴ The work is generally considered a historical drama, or at best a fictionalized account of an historical event,¹⁵ filled with literary artistry.¹⁶

10. In some versions, she is from the tribe of Reuven; see A.M. Dubarle, *Judith: Formes et Sens des Diverses Traditions—Tome II: Textes* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1966), 47, version E. She is also described as being from the tribe of Reuven in some midrashic and liturgical versions of the story (*ibid.*, 126, *midrash* 7a; 132, *midrash* 7b; 168).

11. Lawrence M. Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89.

12. See Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 57, 78, 86, 96, 132-4.

13. See, for example, Erich Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 124-5.

14. Susan Weingarten, "Food, Sex, and Redemption in *Megillat Yehudit* (the "Scroll of Judith")," in Kevin Brine et al., eds., *The Sword of Judith*, 97-109.

15. Carey A. Moore, *Judith—Anchor Bible Series* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 46-49; see Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 81-87, particularly 82, n. d; Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 26-30.

16. For a detailed discussion of the literary elements, see Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 47-112.

The *Book of Judith* cannot be the source of Rema, Ran, or *Kol Bo*, as it is missing some key elements that they mention—the most prominent being that the enemies in the *Book of Judith* are not Greeks. While some versions of the *Book of Judith* have her bringing cheese along as part of her personal food supply when going to the camp of Holofernes, in no version is she reported to have fed him milk or cheese.¹⁷ Furthermore, while the *Book of Judith* does include the character of a high priest, he is named Joakim,¹⁸ or in some versions Eliakim,¹⁹ and is a minor character, with no family relation to Judith.

Medieval Judith Stories

Although there is no mention of Judith in the Talmud or standard collections of *midrash*,²⁰ there are more than a dozen variants of the Judith story that have been published in more recent collections of midrashic material, some only fragments.²¹ These have been categorized into a few basic versions.²² These retellings and reworkings of the material in the Apocrypha generally place the story of Judith in Maccabean times, switching the enemies from Assyrians to Greeks,²³ and they were known to the *rishonim*.²⁴

The central element of the beautiful Jewish woman beheading the enemy leader appears in all of the versions, but just about every other plot element is subject to change. For example, in the version recorded by R. David Ha-Naggid, grandson of Rambam, the woman is not named, but only identified as from the priestly Hasmonean family, the villain is the Greek general Nicanor, and the Jewish woman put sleep-inducing drugs into the wine to knock out Nicanor.²⁵

17. Gera, *Judith*, 333-34.

18. Ibid. 174-75.

19. Solomon Zeitlin, ed., *The Book of Judith* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 45.

20. Moshe Leiter, *Mamleket Kohanim* (Modiin Illit: 2002), 361.

21. See the introduction and bibliography in Michael Higger, *Halakhot va-Aggadot* (New York, 1933), 91-94; Dubarle, *Judith*, 98-100; and the overview in Moore, *Judith—Anchor Bible Series*, 103-107.

22. Yehoshua Grintz, *Sefer Yehudit* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1957), 197-208; Gera, "The Jewish Textual Traditions," 32-34.

23. David Samuel Lowinger, *Yehudit-Shoshana* (Budapest, 1940), 5-6; Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 139.

24. Moshe Hershler, *Ma'aseh Yehudit*, in *Genuzot I* (Jerusalem: Moznaim, 1984), 165.

25. *Midrash Rabbi David ha-Naggid—Bereshit*, ed. Avraham Yitzchak Katz (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964), 199.

Most of the Judith narratives can be immediately ruled out as the source of Rema, Ran, and *Kol Bo*, because they do not mention that Judith gave the enemy leader milk or cheese.²⁶ Rather, in these accounts, as in the Apocryphal *Book of Judith*, the Greek leader falls asleep from getting drunk, without the help of a dairy product.²⁷ While the Syriac version of Judith includes cheese (*gavta*) as one of the foods that Judith brings, it is not connected with making the villain thirsty and then drunk.²⁸

Furthermore, in these versions, Judith is generally identified as the daughter of Merari, as she appears in the Vulgate of the Apocryphal *Book of Judith*,²⁹ and sometimes as the daughter of Bē'eri (such that she has the same name as Judith the daughter of Bē'eri, the wife of Esau, Gen. 26:34),³⁰ or the daughter of Mordekhai,³¹ or even the daughter of Matityahu³²—but never as the daughter of the High Priest Yoḥanan.³³ For example, in *Midrash le-Ḥanukkah*, included in the collection *Batei Midrash*, although the story takes place during the time of Greek oppression, Judith is identified only as a widow, and the enemy gets drunk at his party, without eating cheese or drinking milk first.³⁴

What, then, is the source of the oft quoted story that serves as the reason for eating dairy on Ḥanukkah?

There is one extant version of the Judith story in which she gives the Greek leader milk prior to him getting drunk. This version, *Ma'aseh*

26. Samuel Mirsky, *She'iltot—Genesis 2* (Jerusalem: Sura, 1961), 189; J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim* (New York: 1915), vol. 1, pp. 192-93; Higger, *Halakhot ve-Aggadot*, 99-100, 110-113; A. Habermann, *Ḥaddashim Gam Yeshanim* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1971), 52, 56, 60; Hershler, *Ma'aseh Yehudit*, 167. In the version found in the writings of Rambam's grandson, R. David ha-Naggid, the Jewish heroine (unnamed in that version) puts a sleep-inducing drug in the wine of the Greek general (Nicanor in that version); see Leiter, *Mamlekhet Kohanim*, 419.

27. Moshe Chaim Leiter, "She'iltot be-Inyanei Ḥanukkah," *Yeshurun* 19 (2007): 42.

28. Weingarten, "Food, Sex, and Redemption," 98, n. 8. Cheese appears also in the Latin version, but as in the Syriac, it is not connected with getting Holofernes drunk. See Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 35.

29. Habermann, *Ḥaddashim Gam Yeshanim*, 52; Dubarle, *Judith*, 46-47, Vulgate and version B.

30. Adolph Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1967), 2:15; Dubarle, *Judith*, 46, version C. On this identification of Judith, see Grintz, *Sefer Yehudit*, 204.

31. Dubarle, *Judith*, 47, version E, and 126, *midrash 7a*; *Likkutei Aggadot* (Oxford, Bodelian Library, Heb. D.47), 36-39.

32. Dubarle, *Judith*, 170, *midrash 12*.

33. It has also been suggested that when Judith is described as the daughter of the High Priest Yoḥanan, what is meant that she is his descendant; he was actually her grandfather or some other ancestor. See Leiter, *Mamlekhet Kohanim*, 375.

34. Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* 1:133-34.

Yehudit, states that Judith gave Holofernes³⁵ a skin of milk (*nod*) to drink from.³⁶ This is a reference to Yael's actions in Judges 4:19, where Yael gets Sisera sleepy by feeding him milk from a skin and then killing him with a tent peg to his head.³⁷ This version seems to have been used by Menaḥem ben Makhir of Ratisbon (11th century) when composing the poem *Ein Moshia ve-Go'el*.³⁸

Note that while Rema writes that it is customary to eat cheese on Ḥanukkah, he states that it is “because the miracle was done with milk that Judith fed the enemy,” unlike Ran and *Kol Bo*, who write that Judith fed the enemy cheese.³⁹ Thus, the story that fits with the statement of Rema is this version of *Ma'aseh Yehudit*. This also may have been the narrative source for the authorities who note a custom to eat dairy on Ḥanukkah but do not specifically mention cheese.⁴⁰

We now see that it is imprecise to say that the source of this statement of Rema is Ran and *Kol Bo*, as recorded in the parentheses in the published editions of *Shulḥan Arukh*. In Rema's version, Judith fed the enemy milk, as recorded in *Ma'aseh Yehudit*, not cheese, as stated by Ran and *Kol Bo*. Having found the narrative source for the custom noted by Rema, we must still locate the source of Ran and *Kol Bo*.⁴¹

In the medieval *Megillat Yehudit*, the feeding of cheese does appear. There we are told that Judith's maidservant prepared two fritters

35. In the Hebrew text, his name is Eliporni, a Hebrew version of Holofernes, the general in the Apocryphal *Book of Judith*; see Dubarle, *Judith*, 24-25, 140. He is sometimes referred to as Olopirno or Oliporno (see Grintz, *Sefer Yehudit*, 6, 201), Olopirnes (Dubarle, 120), Elipirni (ibid., 152), or Elporna (see David Ganz, *Zemach David* [Warsaw, 1878], vol. 1, p. 29).

36. Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* 2:19; Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*, 1:207. In this version of the story, Judith is identified as the daughter of Be'eri.

37. Another variant of the Yael and Judith plot is found in the pseudepigraphal *Words of Gad the Seer*, chap. 13, where Tamar kills Pirshaz, king of Geshur, after lulling him to sleep with her harp-playing. See Meir Bar-Ilan, *Divrei Gad ha-Hozeh* (Rehovot: Meir Bar-Ilan, 2015), 301-303.

38. Grintz, *Sefer Yehudit*, 198. However, the poem does not contain a reference to milk. This poem has also been attributed to Ephraim ben Isaac of Regensburg (12th century); see Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996), 74.

39. Moshe Rosenwasser, “Hidden *Midrashim* as Sources for the *Piyyut Odekha*,” *Ha-Ma'ayan* 43:2 (2002): 30.

40. See the list in Chaim Simons, “Eating Cheese and *Levivot* on Chanukah,” *Sinai* 115 (1995): 62-63.

41. Note that the specific motif of cheese, rather than milk, is so strong that Menaḥem Azariah de Fano—who in his *Sefer Gilgulei Neshamot* (Lublin, 1907), 25-26, writes that Judith was a reincarnation of Yael—still points out that Yael gave Sisera milk, while Judith gave the enemy cheese.

(*levivot*)⁴² that were overly salted and cheese (*ḥarizeī ḥalav*) before the feast. Judith gives these foods to Holofernes, who then drinks wine, gets drunk, and falls asleep.⁴³ The manuscript this was taken from ends with a colophon giving the scribe's name as Moshe Dascola, and the year it was written, or copied from an earlier document, as 1402.⁴⁴ This seems to be the only currently known version of the story to record that Judith fed the enemy cheese specifically.⁴⁵

The term for cheese here, *ḥarizeī ḥalav*, appears as one of the foods that David brought to the captain at the beginning of the Goliath episode (I Sam. 17:18). Its use in Judith is just one of the many allusions to Goliath, who was also beheaded by his own sword (ibid. 17:50).⁴⁶

However, even this version cannot be the source for Ran and *Kol Bo*, since here Judith is not identified as the daughter of the High Priest Yoḥanan, but only as “one of the wives of the *benei ha-nevi'im*.”⁴⁷

A Possible Source?

In the beginning of his account of the story of Judith, Ran mentions a decree that virgin brides had to sleep with the Greek governor before going to their husbands. This plot element is not found in the Apocryphal *Book of Judith*, and only appears in a few of the later versions. It also does not appear in the version of the story in *Kol Bo*, which simply states that the Greek leader desired her, a plot element found in all versions from the Apocrypha on.⁴⁸ However, the decree on virgin brides is found in other midrashic works related to Ḥanukkah.⁴⁹ For example, *Midrash le-Ḥanukkah* (version 3) tells how the daughter of the High Priest Matityahu, named as Ḥannah later in the story, inspired her brothers, led by Judah, to kill the Greek leader rather than having her sleep with him

42. A reference to the two *levivot* that Tamar prepared for Amnon (II Sam. 13:6,8,10). See Weingarten, “Food, Sex, and Redemption,” 104.

43. Dubarle, *Judith*, 148, *midrash* 8; Habermann, *Ḥadashim Gam Yeshanim*, 45.

44. Susan Weingarten, “Appendix to Chapter 6: *Megillat Yehudit* (the Scroll of Judith),” in Kevin Brine et al., *The Sword of Judith*, 110; Habermann, *Ḥadashim Gam Yeshanim*, 46.

45. Dubarle, *Judith*, 93; Simons, “Eating Cheese and *Levivot* on Hanukkah,” 60; Weingarten, “Food, Sex, and Redemption,” 100. See also Catherine Donnelly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Cheese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 68.

46. Weingarten, “Food, Sex, and Redemption,” 100.

47. Habermann, *Ḥadashim Gam Yeshanim*, 43.

48. Simons, “Eating Cheese and *Levivot* on Hanukkah,” 61.

49. See the overview in *HaMaayan*, 28.

on her wedding night.⁵⁰ Another version of *Midrash le-Ḥanukkah* does not give the bride's name at all, but identifies her father as the High Priest Yoḥanan and her brother as Judah. The story then segues into a second story, a version of the Judith narrative,⁵¹ something found in other versions as well with certain variations.⁵² This is the closest connection we have between Yoḥanan and Judith in a single narrative,⁵³ and even here it is in a place where two distinct narratives were strung together.

It is possible that a version of *Midrash le-Ḥanukkah* that we do not currently have further conflates the two episodes, inserting the name Judith as the name of the bride, the daughter of the High Priest Yoḥanan, in the first part of the story.⁵⁴ Conflation of narrative elements from similar stories is not unusual in ancient literature.⁵⁵ Even so, the cheese element only appears in *Megillat Yehudit* and not in *Midrash le-Ḥanukkah*.

In order for all elements noted by Ran to be included—the decree on brides, the cheese, and the daughter of Yoḥanan—the most probable assumption is that there was another version of the story that he had that is lost to us today. This holds true for *Kol Bo* as well, since there is

50. Adolph Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* (Vienna, 1878), 6: 2; Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*, vol. 1, p. 190 (as *Midrash Ma'aseh Hanukkah*). The story also appears in *Megillat Ta'anit* (regarding Elul 17), but there the bride is not named; she is identified only as the daughter of the High Priest Matityahu. Note that a version of the Judith story brought by Rokeah, the heroine is called Hannah. See Moshe and Yehudah Hershler (eds.), *Perushei Siddur ha-Tefillah la-Rokeah*, vol. 2, *siman* 141, pp. 717-18; Leiter, *Mamlekheth Kohanim*, 418.

51. Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* 6: 133-34. In this version, there is no mention of cheese or milk given by Judith to the Greek general.

52. Deborah Levine Gera, "Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales of Judith," in *The Sword of Judith*, ed. Kevin Brine e. al., 87-88; Leiter, *Mamlekheth Kohanim* 371. See, for example, Hershler, "*Ma'aseh Yehudit*," 165, where the bride is not named and is identified as "a daughter of the Hasmoneans," and Judah comes to her aid, although he is not her brother.

53. Tuvia Friend, *Mo'adim le-Simḥah* (Jerusalem: Otzar HaPoskim, 2000), 2: 286-87.

54. Simons, "Eating Cheese and *Levivot* on Hanukkah," 61. Azariah de Rossi, *Me'or Enayim* (Vilna, 1865), vol. 2, p. 159, suggests that once the special days in *Megillat Ta'anit* were cancelled, all of the miraculous salvations from the Greek period were commemorated on Ḥanukkah, leading to a possible conflation of what were completely different events—the Judith story and the story about the bride who was the daughter of the High Priest. R. Yaakov Emden takes this idea further and proposes that there was a conflation of the Judith episode from Assyrian times with events from the Greek period; see *Mor u-Kezi'ah*, ed. Avraham Bombach (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1996), *Orah Hayyim* 670, p. 520.

55. See, for example, Frank Docken, *Herod as a Composite Character in Luke-Acts* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 70.

currently no known version that includes both cheese and the daughter of Yoḥanan.⁵⁶

The conflated narrative became more widespread after the advent of printing. For example, it can be found in the book *Ḥanukkat ha-Bayit* by R. Shaul ben David (c.1570 – c.1641), first published in 1616.⁵⁷ He mentions Judith in a few places, and putting the references together, we see that he understood that Judith was the sister of Judah the Maccabee, who as a bride refused to sleep first with the Greek leader and instead cut off his head, inspiring her brother to wage war against the Greeks,⁵⁸ and that she gave the Greek leader cheese.⁵⁹

This is the version of the story familiar to many today through its inclusion in *Mishnah Berurah*.⁶⁰ All the elements from Ran are included there, even those not mentioned by Rema:

Judith was the daughter of Yoḥanan the High Priest, and there was a decree that every engaged woman must first sleep with the governor, and she gave cheese to the leader of the enemy to get him [to drink wine, and so make him] drunk and cut off his head, and they all fled.

In this way, Ran's version of the story of Judith became the most familiar to contemporary Jews, even though it does not match any early versions of the Judith story that we have in our possession today.

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56. Leiter, *Mamlekheth Kohanim*, 374.

57. Very little biographical data is known about him. See the introduction to the new edition of his work *Tal Orot ha-Kadmon*, ed. Menachem Adler (Jerusalem: 1996), 8-9.

58. Hershler, *Ḥanukkat ha-Bayit*, 79, 85.

59. *Ibid.*, 94.

60. *Mishnah Berurah* 670:10.