

# A Tale of Two Women

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*Through the merit of righteous women of the generation were the Israelites redeemed [from Egypt]*

**Sotah 11a**

בשכר נשים צדקניות שבאותו  
הדור נגאלו  
סוטה יא.

That our tradition has preserved the memory of Judith (Yehudit) and Chana, two women, as the heroines of Chanuka alongside the memory of Yehuda HaMaccabee and his family of warriors is quite natural, at one level. After all, we associate Esther alongside Mordechai with the holiday of Purim, the righteous women who kept alive the flame of Judaism along with Moshe and Aharon with Pesach, and Ruth, the convert whose descendant was King David, together with Boaz with the holiday of Shavuot, and we remember Sarah and Chana, the mother of Shmuel HaNavi, on Rosh Hashana.

And yet, perhaps the matter is not so simple. Who was Chana (or Miriam as she is sometimes called)? Her story appears in *2 Maccabees* 7 where she, along with her seven sons, has been arrested by the king's men and is being tortured in the presence of the king for refusing "to touch [!] the forbidden flesh of swine."<sup>33</sup> The mother, described as "awakening her womanly power with masculine fervor" (7: 21), encourages her sons to defy the king and offer their lives to preserve God's laws. Soon after her last son is murdered, she too dies. In going beyond- one might say overcoming- her role as mother and standing tall as a defender of the faith the "mother was exceedingly amazing and worthy of being remembered" (7:20). And remembered she is.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> This verb is sometimes translated as to eat. Is this ambiguity in the Greek meant to recall Gen 3:3?

<sup>33</sup> Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, 2008), 7:1, page 296, and footnote on p. 300. Whatever historical memory of persecution by Antiochus is reflected here, the text, as Professor Schwartz and others have pointed out, seems to refer to Jeremiah 15:9 and the bereft mother who loses her seven sons in war, as well as the Song of Chana (the other Chana), in 1 Samuel 2:5 who speaks of a barren woman who finally gives birth to seven (that is many) sons. It is not impossible that the martyred mother over time became identified by the name Chana precisely because of the seven sons.

<sup>34</sup> Eleazar, whose heroic martyrdom is described in detail in Chapter 6 of *2 Maccabees*, is mentioned by name in the piyyut "*Odekha Ki Anafta*" by R. Joseph B. Solomon of Carcassone (11<sup>th</sup> century) (I. Davidson, *Otsar ha-Shir veHa-Piyyut*, (1970, Vol I, #1651) recited for centuries as a Yotzer for the (first) Shabbat of Chanuka. See *Sefer Maharil – Minhagim* Hilkhos Chanuka section 10. For the opening phrase compare Isaiah 12:1). His story is not as widely known as the story of the mother and her seven sons. This is all the more interesting in light of the Sigrid Peterson's observation that calling a person by name is reflective of the status of the person. The fact that Eleazar is given a name, and a priestly name at that, helps to demonstrate his elevated status. The mother, of lower societal status, remains anonymous. Peterson concludes that the two stories, found consecutively in *2 Maccabees* form an *inclusio* to describe acts of martyrdom from the highest members of society, to the lowest. See Sigrid Peterson, "Naming the Anonymous: HB/OT and Other Sources for Naming the Mother with Seven Sons of the Maccabean Martyrdoms." Paper presented to the PSCO, May 14, 2004.

Judith is, if anything, even more fierce and filled with “masculine fervor.” Since the *Book of Judith* is not part of the standard day school curriculum, it may be useful to summarize its contents. The story (and scholars have long debated whether it is entirely fictional or contains at least elements of historical truth) is set in Assyria<sup>35</sup> during the reign of its king Nevuchadnetzar (not to be confused, clearly, with the Babylonian Nevuchadnetzar, the destroyer of the [First] Temple in Jerusalem.) The time frame of the story is some point after the rebuilding of the Temple, and some scholars believe that the book was composed during the late Persian or more likely the Hellenistic period. Others believe it was composed, or at least revised, after the Maccabean revolt. The Assyrians, in any event, were engaged in a war with Arphaxad, the King of Medes, and Nevuchadnetzar demanded that various city-states send troops to support his war efforts. We are not told about any formal alliance requiring that such assistance be offered, or why he believed that he was entitled to this help. The putative allies, who we are told did not fear Nevuchadnetzar, ignored his command leaving the Assyrians to fight on their own. The Jews, inhabitants of Palestine, were among the many nations who failed to send help. Once the war with Medes was over, Nevuchadnetzar vowed to seek revenge against those who had not come to his aid, and sent his general Holofores to exact that revenge.

As Holofores made short work of the coastal (non-Jewish) cities, the Jews of Judea (here expanded geographically to include much of Samaria) fortified their cities and prepared for battle. They were worried that, having only recently returned from the Babylonian exile and rebuilt their Temple, will be exiled yet again. Hope is dimmed as Holofores besieges the city of Bethulia (a city unknown to history, although the name is suggestive) and cuts off its water supply. The leaders of the city, in desperation, call for five days of prayer. If God does not provide salvation during that time frame, the leadership would then surrender the city.

It is at this point that Judith is introduced. She is “of goodly countenance and very beautiful to behold” (*Judith* 8:7). She has been widowed for three years and but continues to wear her mourning clothes. Unlike the city leaders who have all but surrendered, Judith believes that God will help those who trust in Him and are willing to fight. Judith dons her “armor”- the fine clothing she wore when she was married- and prepares for “battle”.

Judith has lived her life to this point as an exemplary Jewish woman, and will return to the role of virtuous widow at the close of the story. With her city and her people in grave danger, though, Judith, like the mother of the seven boys, rises to the occasion. It is she, and not the male leaders, who develops a plan to save the city and the country.

As a first step, Judith offers a heartfelt prayer asking God’s help so that her mission will be successful. She then removes her widow’s clothes, bathes and perfumes herself, and puts on her finest clothes. Armed only with a basket of food, Judith and her maid pass out of the city and make their way to the enemy’s camp. She convinces the Assyrian soldiers that she has escaped

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<sup>35</sup> Assuming a Second Temple period setting for the story (as seems plain from the text, though not, apparently to all readers), Assyria is an anachronism since the Assyrian Empire weakened and then fell (to the Medes and Babylonians) in the final decades of the First Temple period. Historians have essentially thrown up their hands and the book is not viewed as being historically accurate.

from the city and that she has information (which she will only share with the general) that will enable them to capture the city.

Judith is permitted to enter and leave the city over the next several days having won the confidence of the Assyrians. Holofernes, whose passion for Judith has increased over the course of these days, arranges a small dinner party to which she is invited and slowly drinks himself into a stupor. Since Holofernes had arranged to spend the night with Judith, his servants have taken the night off and Judith and her maid find themselves alone with the sleeping general. Judith takes the general's sword, swings it with all of her might, and cuts off Holofernes' head. She and her maid then wrap the head, place it in her basket, and depart the Assyrian camp. At this point, they return to the city, show the Jewish leaders the severed head of the enemy's general and urge an attack against the enemy camp. In reality, by the time the Israelites arrive at the enemy camp they find that the Assyrians, upon discovering that their leader has been killed, have fled the scene. Having succeeded in her mission, Judith removes her festive clothing and resumes the life of the virtuous widow until her death at the ripe old age of 105. Chana, the martyred and heroic mother, and Judith, the clear-eyed and brave warrior, stand alongside- or perhaps behind- Judah Maccabee and his brothers as symbols of the story of Chanuka. But what sort of role models are these? Moreover, what are we to make of the fact that these characters emerge from extra-biblical or non-rabbinic sources?

The earliest source of the story of Chana is *2 Maccabees*, a work apparently written by a religious and passionate Jew living in the Diaspora shortly after Judah's victory over Nicanor and his army (and supposedly based upon an earlier work).<sup>36</sup> The original language of composition is thought by some to be Hebrew, but only the Greek version remains. Variations of the "Chana" story appear with certain modifications in three rabbinic sources- in the Talmud, *Gittin* 57b, and in the midrash, *Eicha Rabbah* 1 and *Pesikta Rabbati* 43. In *2 Maccabees*, the brave mother is known simply as a woman. She remains anonymous in the Talmud, and is referred to as Miriam in the two midrashim. Interestingly enough, the *Pesikta Rabbati* version is found in a discussion of *Shirat Chana* (from the *Book of Samuel*) on the phrase (Psalms 113:9) *moshivi akeret habayit*, (He restores the barren woman to her home) which likely explains how the name of the martyred mother morphed into Chana.

Judith's story is even harder to find in rabbinic sources. There is no mention of Judith in the Talmud and in the classic Midrashim (though there are several versions of her story in midrashim written in the Middle Ages.) One should also note that the *Book of Judith* is not set during the Hasmonean period and there is no obvious connection between the narrative of *Judith* and the narrative of *The Book of Maccabees*. As we shall see momentarily, though, later versions of the story transport her to the time of the Maccabees and from Bethulia to Jerusalem.

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<sup>36</sup> See Professor Schwartz's introduction to his edition of *2 Maccabees* (footnote 2) for his view that the original intent of the book was to celebrate "Nicanor day" and that the book was reorganized and supplemented at a later point so that it now appears to celebrate primarily the cleansing of the Temple. An extensive bibliography is appended to the introduction. For an alternative view of *2 Maccabees*, and how its perspective and attitude differs from those of *1 Maccabees*, see Joseph Efron, "The Hasmonean Revolt in Modern Historiography," in his *Studies on the Hasmonean Period* (Brill 1987), pp.14-20.

From the time of the rishonim on, we see numerous references to the two women especially in halakhic literature, but also in late midrashim, discussing the laws and customs of Chanuka. For example, there are versions of the Judith story found in J. Eisenstein's *Otzar Ha-Midrashim* (New York, 1915)<sup>37</sup>, which place Judith as living in Jerusalem during the Greek siege of the city, and transforms Holorfornes into a Greek general. There is also some development in Judith's role during the feast itself – in *The Book of Judith* it appears that Judith herself consumed the food that she brought from home (kosher food being in short supply at the Assyrian camp), whereas the extended version that Eisenstein quotes (p. 207) from *Hemdat ha-Yamim* has her giving him milk from her goatskin container. (Some halakhic sources mention cheese rather than milk). This seems clearly to echo the story of Yael and Sisrah (*Shoftim* 4:19) where Yael indeed fed the fleeing general and gave him milk from a goatskin (*nod ha-halav*). There is also a reference to her in *Sefer Kol Bo*, a frequently cited (anonymous) halakhic work from 13th-14th century Provence,<sup>38</sup> which identifies Judith as the daughter of Yochanan, the High Priest (cohen gadol) (thus elevating her social status – see footnote 3, above). These listings, and others,<sup>39</sup> either help to explain the custom of eating dairy during the holiday of Chanuka or to explain why women refrain from doing *melacha* (labor) on Chanuka, especially while the candles remain lit.

The emergence of the stories of these women in later literature intensifies the original question-why resurrect the stories of these women? Why specifically connect them to the holiday of Chanuka? And why, by highlighting them, downplay the military victory won by the Maccabees? (As is well known, Chaza"l also downplayed the role of the Hashmonaim – see the primary Talmudic sugya dealing with Chanuka, discussed by others in this publication). Perhaps a look into the biblical figures that Chana and Judith most parallel may help us find the meaning that our ancestors identified in these stories.

Chana, as the mother who witnesses the brutal death of her seven sons, resembles Avraham when he went to perform the *Akedah* on his son. Indeed, in *Gittin* 57b a conversation is recorded between the mother and her youngest son, just prior to his demise, in which she instructs her son to deliver the following message to Avraham. You, Avraham, had only one son to offer; I had seven. Your son was spared at the last moment; mine were not. The implicit message is that the service of God is not without sacrifice or pain.

For the story of Judith there are many biblical parallels. Like Devorah, Judith sends men out to battle the enemy (although Judith herself, unlike Deborah, has already struck the key blow). Like Miriam, Judith leads the women in song and dance after a military victory. Like the

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<sup>37</sup> See under Yehudit, pp. 203 and ff.

<sup>38</sup> *Siman* no. 44, *Din Hilchot Chanukah veDin ha-Tefillah*.

<sup>39</sup> See also *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 670:2, where the custom of eating cheese is mentioned in the gloss by Rav Moshe Isserles, known as the Ramah, and in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 139:3. The custom is not found in the *Mishneh Torah* or the *Shulchan Aruch*, both primary sources of halakha for the Sefaradic communities. This is interesting in light of a comment made by Leora Eren Frucht, in "Letter from Modi'in: Hanukka With Two Genders", December 2009/January 2010 Vol. 91 No. 3, that in previous centuries many Sefaradim would set aside one day of Chanuka, often Rosh Chodesh Tevet, for the celebration of women, and that in some communities the deeds of Judith would be recalled.

<http://www.hadassahmagazine.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=twl6LmN7IzF&b=5724115&ct=7809843>

daughter of Yiftach, Judith spends the rest of her life alone- with no husband and no children. Like Yael, Judith kills the opposing general (although Sisrah is killed after the battle, Holofernes in the midst of the siege and prior to the final battle of the campaign). But perhaps the story that offers the most compelling parallel is one involving Yonatan, the son of Saul (Shaul ha-Melekh). In I Samuel 14, Yonatan is seen as taking matters into his own hands. Frustrated with the cautious battle plan adopted by his father against the Plishtim, Yonatan concludes that if God is on his side, it does not matter if the group of fighters is large or small. Yonatan, with only his apprentice to assist him, creeps into the Plishti camp and waits for the sign that God is going to help. When the sign comes, Yonatan proceeds to attack and in a very short time, manages to kill 20 Plishtim which causes great panic in the Plishti camp and leads to the enemy's full scale. The essence of the character of Judith and Yonatan is the same- they are guided by belief in God, and an unflinching willingness to risk everything for one's people. Their bravery – acting alone against overwhelming odds – leads to the salvation of the nation.

Even after looking at the biblical parallels, we are still left with unanswered questions. The common theme between the two stories of women is that both women exhibit an unswerving belief in God. One dies along with her children as a result of her belief and her refusal to compromise her principles. The other risks her reputation as a God fearing woman in her desire to save her people. But do we wish to elevate martyrdom to be an *a priori* life choice? And do we wish to demonstrate that placing one's life and reputation at risk is admirable? Is that why the stories retained or regained popularity in the Middle Ages and into the modern period? (One might argue that in a sense Chana and Judith drew opposite lessons - would Chana, in Judith's position, have either thought of or have been willing to carry out the bold plan involving, or at least feigned, seduction and abandonment of chastity? Is Chana a religious martyr and Judith a nationalist heroine?)

The holiday of Purim, it is often pointed out, celebrates our physical freedom. There was a decree to kill every Jewish man, woman and child, and through the efforts of Esther and Mordechai and through God's hidden hand, the decree was annulled and the Jews were able to fight off their enemies. Chanuka, on the other hand, celebrates our freedom from religious persecution. But the redemption is not so clear cut. Antiochus (or the Hellenizers) took away our rights to practice mitzvoth, and after Chanuka we were once again able to observe the laws. But even after the wars fought by the Maccabees, many Jews of the time continued their Hellenizing ways including, eventually, members of the Hasmonean dynasty itself. Rabbinic attitudes to the reign of the Hasmoneans - at least those that strayed from traditional practices – may have been impacted by the tradition, later emphasized by the Ramban, that kings of Israel should descend from the tribe of Yehudah.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the authors of *The Book of Judith* and of *2 Maccabees* wished to highlight that yes, there are times when great risks or great sacrifices and martyrdom are justified. And perhaps, a millennium and more later, the rishonim, facing similar choices of martyrdom and risk to reputation sought to find reassurance in the decisions they had to make as well. Either way, these two stories of women have entered into the mainstream Jewish literature and highlight, above all, that women played a key role in the redemption of the Jews during Chanuka.

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<sup>40</sup> See Ramban to Gen. 49:10, "*Lo yassar shevet mi-Yehuda*".