

# For a Feminist Chanukah, Eat Cheese and Remember Brave Judith

By SHMUEL HERZFELD

**S**o you've kindled the Chanukah candles and you're about to sit down to eat your potato latkes. Now grab a piece of cheese — and strike a blow for the role of women in Judaism. Once upon a time (and still in some communities today) Jews made a custom of eating cheese on Chanukah, a practice some sources trace to stories about brave, crafty women of the biblical period. The 16th-century Polish scholar Rabbi Moshe Isserles, for example, writes in his work "*Orah Hayyim*" that the custom of eating cheese commemorates the idea that the Chanukah miracle "happened on account of the milk that Judith fed to the enemy," presumably to make him drowsy so that she could kill him. (The Book of Judith, an apocryphal work that probably dates to the Second Temple period, tells the story of a widow named Judith who fed wine to Holofernes,

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*The way to a man's  
head is through  
his stomach.*

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the commander-in-chief of Nebuchadnezzar's army, making him fall asleep so that she could cut off his head.) Some go so far as to declare that the origin of Chanukah latkes is in part a tribute to this Judith's heroics. A modern work, "The Jewish Festivals," by Hayyim Schauss, suggests how the practice of eating cheese evolved into our current custom of eating latkes: "The custom of eating cheese delicacies on Chanukah is...as old, perhaps, as the Chanukah lights. Pancakes made with cheese were used. From this developed the custom of eating pancakes of all kinds."

Culinary history aside, the custom of eating cheese on Chanukah highlights the role of women in the miracles of the holiday, an idea that was also developed by the rabbis of the Talmud. In traditional Judaism, women normally are exempt from time-bound positive commandments such as lighting candles on Chanukah. Yet, the Talmud in tractate Shabbat affirms that the obligation to kindle lights on Chanukah "certainly" applies to women because, as



FROM 'A DIFFERENT LIGHT: THE HANUKKAH BOOK OF CELEBRATION'  
**SHARP LADY:** Judith, depicted above in an etching by Gustav Dore, used her quick wits, feminine wiles, wine and salty cheese to cut off the head of enemy general Holofernes.

the sage Rabbi Joshua ben Levi argues there, "They, too, were involved in the miracle."

The medieval commentators struggle to understand this teaching. The great 11th century French commentator Rashi explains somewhat cryptically that "The Greeks decreed that all [Jewish] virgins about to marry must first submit themselves to the pleasure of the prince. And through a woman the miracle happened." Some 300 years later the Spanish scholar Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi gives yet another account of the story:

"For the Greeks decreed that all virgins about to marry should first submit themselves to the pleasure of the prince. And through a woman the miracle happened. For we said in the Midrash that the daughter [Judith] of Yochanan [the High Priest] fed cheese to the leader of the enemies in order to make him [thirsty so that he would become] drunk, and [then] she cut off his head and everyone fled. As a result, the custom developed to eat cheese on Chanukah."

Some scholars date the custom of eating cheese on Chanukah to well before the 14th century and even to the time of the Talmud. I suspect, however, that the custom originated in the 14th century. Before the 14th century no source even hints at a custom of eating dairy on Chanukah, although many earlier authorities do refer to the role of women in the miracle of Chanukah and to special customs that commemorate that role. For example, in those days, women customarily refrained from working during the holiday or at least while the Chanukah lights were burning because of their supposed role in the miracle. The absence of reference to the custom of eating cheese indicates that the custom either did not exist or else existed without rabbinical support.

Finally, the Judith story strikingly parallels the biblical incident in Judges in which Yael feeds milk to the Canaanite general Sisera, putting him to sleep so that she can kill him with a tent peg. Together, the stories show that the custom of eating cheese on Chanukah is intended to teach us a valuable lesson: that even the most powerful forces can, with the help of God, be defeated by those who may be seen as physically weak but are in fact spiritually strong, an idea modern Jewish women well know.

*Rabbi Herzfeld is associate rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, N.Y.*

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