

Judith / יהודית

Selections from the original text (Apocrypha, 2nd century BCE)

Now in those days Judith heard about these things... her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest....Judith remained as a widow for three years and four months at home where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow's clothing. She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel. She was beautiful in appearance and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained this estate. No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion. (8:1-8)

Then Judith said to them, "Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants. ³³ Stand at the town gate tonight so that I may go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. ³ Only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do." (8:32)

She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. ⁴ She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. ⁵ She gave her maid a skin of wine and a flask of oil, and filled a bag with roasted grain, dried fig cakes, and fine bread, then she wrapped up all her dishes and gave them to her to carry. (1:3-5)

¹ On the fourth day Holofernes held a banquet for his personal attendants only, and did not invite any of his officers. ¹¹ He said to Bagoas, the eunuch who had charge of his personal affairs, "Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in your care to join us and to eat and drink with us. ¹² For it would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us."

¹³ So Bagoas left the presence of Holofernes, and approached her and said, "Let this pretty girl not hesitate to come to my lord to be honored in his presence, and to enjoy drinking wine with us, and to become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar." ¹⁴ Judith replied, "Who am I to refuse my lord? Whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death." ¹⁵ So she proceeded to dress herself in all her woman's finery. Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining. ¹⁶ Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes' heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her. ¹⁷ So Holofernes said to her, "Have a drink and be merry with us!" ¹⁸ Judith said, "I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life." ¹⁹ Then she took what her maid had prepared and ate and drank before him. ² Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born. (12:1-2)

⁶ She went up to the bedpost near Holofernes' head, and took down his sword that hung there. ⁷ She came close to his bed, took hold of the hair of his head, and said, "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" ⁸ Then she struck his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head. ⁹ Next she rolled his body off the bed and pulled down the canopy from the posts. Soon afterward she went out and gave Holofernes' head to her maid, ¹ who placed it in her food bag. (13:6-8)

Then she pulled the head out of the bag and showed it to them, and said, "See here, the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman. ¹⁶ As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, I swear that it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame me." ¹⁷ All the people were greatly astonished. They bowed down and worshiped God, and said with one accord, "Blessed are you our God, who have this day humiliated the enemies of your people." (13:15-17)

And Judith sang: Begin a song to my God with tambourines, sing to my Lord with cymbals. Raise to him a new psalm; exalt him, and call upon his name. For the Lord is a God who crushes wars; he sets up his camp among his people; he delivered me from the hands of my pursuers...But the Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman. (16:1-2,4)

After this they all returned home to their own inheritances. Judith went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate. For the rest of her life she was honored throughout the whole country. ²² Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people. ²³ She became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband's house, reaching the age of one hundred five. She set her maid free. She died in Bethulia, and they buried her in the cave of her husband Manasseh; ²⁴ and the house of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before she died she distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred. ²⁵ No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death. (16:21-25)

Selections from Medieval Narrative

Megillat Yehudit

Then Judith said: "I am thirsty and have been humbling my soul with fasting." So she said to her maid: "Cook me two pancakes (לביבות) so I can eat at your hands:" She made her the pancakes and salted them heavily and poured them into the pot with pieces of cheese. She took them and brought them to the room where Holofernes was. And Holofernes made a great banquet, the feast of Judith, and he ate the pancakes and the pieces of cheese. He drank too, and his heart was merry. He got drunk and he uncovered himself in his tent, and he lay down and slept.

Midrash Ma'asei Yehudit

Afterwards, all the king's slaves retired, each to their places, and the King's eunuch closed the door of the tent, leaving Judith alone with King Holofernes (Hebrew: אליפורני) who was in his

bed, dead asleep. Judith instructed her maid to stand guard outside the tent, and Judith stood before the bed, tearfully praying – only her lips moved, and her voice was inaudible. And this is what she said in her prayer:

Make me strong, my God of Israel, and may I avenge Your vengeance as your servant Israel, to strengthen the --- of the gates of Jerusalem, city of Your holy sanctuary – support me as You have said You would, do not brush me aside or shatter my resolve with Your great strength.

And as she prayed, she drew near to the head of the bed, and pulled out the sword of Holofernes himself, which hung on the pillar.

Megillat Yehudit

Then she held up her right hand and her left hand and she smote his head, she smote him and killed him, and she cut off his head and she put it wrapped up in her clothes. Then she went with her maids beating timbrels and rejoicing to the crossroads. The people of the camp saw her and they were afraid to come nigh to her. And they came to the gates of Jerusalem. They cried to the gatekeeper: “Open for the woman, beloved of her friend!” and he opened for her and she showed him the head. He gathered together all the people of the city, and they did not believe it! They said: “Perhaps she found a head thrown onto the road and brought it to us.”

Then she said: “If you will not listen to me and my voice, I will take faithful witnesses.... Then Judith became queen over the land and judged Israel. Because of this the children of Israel shall make a very great feast in their pots and cauldrons, with pieces of cheese, gladness and feasting, a good day, of sending portions to one another, baked pieces, food from the frying pan and dough kneaded until it is leavened so its glory will grow with honey, all manner of baked goods...

Judith and Chanukah



Women are obligated to light Hanukkah candles, for they too were included in the miracle. This means that the enemies came to destroy everyone, men, women, and children, and there are those who say that the great miracle occurred through a woman. Her name was Judith, as the story goes, and she was the daughter of Yochanan, the high priest. She was extremely beautiful, and the Greek king wanted her to lay with him. She fed him a dish of cheese to make him thirsty, so that he would drink a great deal and become drunk, and recline and fall asleep. And it happened just that way, and

once he was asleep, she took his sword and cut off his head. She brought his head to Jerusalem, and when the armies saw that their leader had been killed, they fled. For this reason, we have the custom of eating a cheese dish on Hanukkah.

-KolBo - 14c. Jewish Law Compendium

Some say that cheese should be eaten on Hanukkah, because the miracle was done with milk, which Judith fed to the enemy.” -*Shulchan Aruch (Legal Codes), Orach Hayim 670:2*

In North African countries, the seventh night of Chanukah, Judith's night of triumph, was set aside as *Chag haBanot*, the Festival of the Daughters. *Chag haBanot* falls on the new moon of the Hebrew month of Tevet, which is the sixth or seventh night of Chanukah. In countries such as Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco, a variety of customs surrounded *Chag haBanot*. One tradition was that women would come to the synagogue, touch the Torah, and pray for the health of their daughters. Mothers would give their daughters gifts, and bridegrooms would give gifts to their brides. Girls who were fighting were expected to reconcile on *Chag haBanot*. Old women and young women would come together to dance. There might be a feast in honor of Judith, where participants would eat cheese to remember Judith's subterfuge, or women might take food from a ritual meal of Talmud scholars and give it to their daughters as protection from harm. There was also a custom of passing down inheritances on *Chag haBanot*.

-*Rabbi Jill Hammer, RitualWell*

Contemporary Midrash

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*



Susan Weingarten's Levivot (Latkes) With Cheese

3/4 cup matzo meal

1 cup milk

2 eggs

100 to 150 grams hard cheese (Edam or mozzarella or even an unripe Camembert)

Salt

Oil for frying

Cut the cheese into 1-centimeter cubes. Heat the oil in a heavy frying pan until it is just beginning to smoke. Mix the matzo meal, milk and eggs until it looks like thick but liquid cream. If the batter is too thick, add more milk.

Add the cubes of cheese and mix well — they have to be covered in the batter.

Add the batter to the hot oil with a large spoon or ladle. Check that the levivot are not sticking to the frying pan, and turn them over when you see a brown line around them.

Take them out with a slotted spoon to drain off as much oil as possible.

Eat hot.

Marcia A. Friedman's Italian-Inspired Ricotta-Lemon Latkes

Makes 20 to 22 small pancakes

1½ cups all-purpose flour

1 tsp. baking powder

½ tsp. baking soda

¼ tsp. nutmeg

½ tsp. salt

3 large eggs, separated

1½ cups buttermilk

1 cup whole milk ricotta cheese

3 Tbsp. sugar

1 tsp. vanilla extract

2 Tbsp. lemon zest (from 2 large lemons)

Cooking spray or extra-virgin olive oil for greasing the griddle or pan

1. Lightly whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, nutmeg and salt in a bowl or on a sheet of wax paper. In a large mixing bowl, whisk egg yolks, buttermilk, ricotta cheese, sugar, vanilla and lemon zest.
2. In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites with an electric mixer on high speed until they hold stiff peaks, about 1 minute.
3. Sprinkle the dry ingredients over the ricotta mixture and stir until just incorporated (will still be a bit lumpy). Fold in the egg whites until just a few stray streaks of white remain. The batter will be fluffy and lumpy.
4. Heat a griddle to medium-high and brush with olive oil or spray with cooking spray. Drop ¼ cupfuls of batter onto griddle; spread gently with the back of a spoon to make an approximate 3½-inch circle. Cook until golden brown on both sides and transfer to a wire rack to cool. Repeat with remaining batter.
5. Either serve immediately (with whipped cream!), or when pancakes are completely cool, wrap and freeze. They reheat beautifully in the oven.