

‘IN THE MERIT OF A WOMAN – THE MIRACLE HAPPENED’:
CONFORMISM AND SUBVERSION IN THE STORY OF JUDITH AS TOLD
BY AN ULTRA-ORTHODOX WOMAN

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The story of Judith deals with a pious and beautiful Jewish woman who saves her brethren from the threats of the Assyrian enemy Holofernes. Using beauty and guile she enters the enemy camp, approaches Holofernes, and during a feast arranged by him in order to sleep with her she succeeds in killing him. The source of the story is in the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith*, written in the Second Temple period, probably in the Hasmonean era. The book was not included in the biblical canon sacred to Jews. Even though the book was excluded from the Jewish canon, the story reappeared in the Middle Ages in various Hebrew versions, probably taken from Christian sources. In the most popular medieval versions the story is connected with the Hasmonean rebellion, and the enemy is identified as a Greek king. It is in this form that the story is retold both orally and in literary versions since then. Today the story of Judith is an accepted traditional and even sacred story among Orthodox Jews.

This study focuses on one story-telling event that occurred in Beth Ya'akov – an ultra-orthodox school for girls, when the story of Judith was told by the teacher, an ultra-Orthodox woman, to her class – girls in the third grade. Using the methods of contextual literary analysis and gendered interpretation, the article shows that this event expresses a tension between the traditional conservative indoctrination in the school, that the teacher is committed to, and the subversive materials that exist in the story of Judith. The article offers a challenge to the accepted assumption about the contrast between hegemonic written stories and feminine folklore, and to the ability of feminine folklore to express the feminine voice, inasmuch as a close comparison between the ancient written version and the modern oral version shows how the ultra-Orthodox teller tries to restrain and even conceal some of the feminist messages that can be found in the ancient story.