

# LITERARY THEMES

## Lilith in Jewish Literature

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### Significance

In the Spring 1984 issue of *Judaica Librarianship*, the recent revival of interest in the Golem was discussed. In this issue, another legendary figure is considered, one whose roots, like the Golem's, also extend back to *Bereshit*. Lilith, alleged to be Adam's first wife, and who later became Queen of the Demons after refusing to submit to her husband's will, is also enjoying renewed popularity.

Although the influence of the Lilith legend may be somewhat less direct than that of the Golem, it is no less powerful. In the last ten years, Lilith was the subject of one long poem by Pamela White Hadas (1980), and at least half a dozen others appearing in Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf's fine anthology, *Voices Within the Ark* (1980). She has also inspired several pieces of short fiction, many of which are gathered in a collection of modern Jewish tales, *Gates to the New City*, also edited by Schwartz (1983). More significant has been the recent influence of the Lilith legend on the Jewish women's movement. This legend has been drawn upon in a feminist literary study by Barbara Hill Rigney (1982), and in critical essays by Judith Plaskow (1979), Aviva Cantor (1983), Marge Piercy (1984), and others. Indeed, an important Jewish feminist quarterly, published since 1976, takes the name *Lilith*. And it is not unlikely that the figure of Lilith had some influence in the development of Barbra Streisand's portrayal of Yentl in her filmed adaptation of I.B. Singer's short story.

Beyond a similar resurgence in popularity, Lilith shares with the Golem another intriguing quality: she has been subject to a remarkably broad variety of incarnations. She is, for example, represented as the wife of Satan (Samael); a howling night-demon; the Queen of Sheba, half-human and half-demon; a beautiful but deadly succubus who attacked men sleeping alone; a jealous witch who destroys infants and pregnant women; the Muse; a symbol of "swift

and unequivocal resistance to tyranny and the fortitude to face the consequences" (Schneider, p. 123); a figure affirming women's rights in a traditionally patriarchal society; and the surrogate-wife of God during the Diaspora and subsequent exile of the Shekhinah. Thus, depending upon what one reads, Lilith is portrayed in radically conflicting ways, appearing sometimes as destroyer and sometimes as champion of independence.

We can account for these variant portrayals in several ways. The audience for whom Lilith is depicted has considerable impact on how she is characterized: the Orthodox Polish shtetl Jews who heard or read Ayzik-Meyer Dik's "Watch Night" certainly had different expectations than contemporary readers of *Ms.* encountering Lilith in Lilly Rivlin's (1972) fine essay. Authors themselves bring differing personal and cultural values and experiences to their interpretations of the Lilith legend. Consequently, Wendy Frisch's sympathetic conception of Lilith, as a victim of male sexual greed, is quite different from that of the Jewish cabalist who wrote of Lilith the Seducer in the Zohar 1:148a-b (quoted in Schwartz, *Gates*, p. 129 and p. 707).

The primary reason for so varied an assortment of Liliths has less to do with authors' biases or efforts to win audiences than it does with the cultural function of Jewish literature and how writers consciously or unconsciously make use of that function. As noted in the discussion of the Golem, Jewish literature has an important socializing function. It serves to shape and define society's values. As a society's needs and values change, its literature, folklore, and mythology are transformed as well. For that reason, it is unlikely that the characterization of any legendary figure (i.e., one who functions as an exemplary or cautionary role model) will remain fixed. The multiple transformations of Lilith offer a fine case in point.

### Traditional Images

Lilith has a long history—her origin can be traced back to fertility goddesses of Babylonian or Sumerian demonology. She is referred to *directly* only once in the Bible. The passage occurs in Isaiah 34:14 where Lilith is numbered among the beasts of prey and spirits that will destroy the earth on the Day of Judgment. The verse reads, "Yea, the night-monster shall repose there, and shall find her a place of rest." The night-monster has been identified as Lilith, possibly because of the connection between her name and the Hebrew word for night (*lailah*). This biblical reference is, to say the least, oblique, and it is not until post-biblical writing (the Talmud and the Zohar) that the figure of Lilith really comes to life.

As with the legends of the Golem, many of the Lilith legends are based on a passage out of *Bereshit*, namely Genesis 1:27, "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." The key words here are: *male and female created He them*. The suggestion is that male and female were created simultaneously, that the first female was created not from Adam's rib, but, like him, from the dust. One Talmudic commentary, B. Eruv 18a, implies that the first man and woman were created joined back-to-back to be separated by God at a later time. From the suggestion of the simultaneous creation of female with male grew a host of Lilith legends.

Perhaps the most coherent early rendition of Lilith's history occurs in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (23a-b), an extraordinary tenth-century compilation of folk-tales composed in Persia or Arabia. It is this version that serves as the source of so much modern writing on Lilith, including Italian writer Primo Levi's "Lilith in the Lager" (a tale set in a Nazi concentration camp, an appropriate place for the appearance of demons), and a delightfully told account by Nathan Ausubel (1980, p. 420-421), which focuses on Lilith's defiance of Adam and her vow of vengeance for his abuse.

Lilith has been described physically in various ways. In the popular imagination, she was either a wind-demon ("the Howling One") or a nocturnal demon taking the shape of a screech owl. The commentator Rashi claimed that she had the human shape of a woman, but the wings of an angel. The English poet Rossetti, in his poem "Eden Bower," depicted Lilith as a serpent. Some said she was a beautiful woman above the waist and nothing but flames below. Others described her as an incredibly seductive woman whose beauty is marred only by the fact that her feet are great claws, like those of a giant bird of prey. According to Jorge Luis Borges, she is a tall, silent woman with long black hair worn loose. Others claim her hair was blond, representing the "forbidden fruit" of a non-Jewish woman (Schwartz, *Gates*, p. 708).

Regardless of how she is described, the projection of Lilith as a demonic figure has, until recently, overshadowed that of Lilith as an independent spirit. Her threat to pregnant mothers and newborn infants has been amply embroidered upon through centuries of Jewish legend. It is understandable from a psychological point of view that Lilith would seek revenge on Adam by attacking his offspring and the women who have displaced her. Human infants were fair prey for Lilith when they had been sinfully begotten or were unprotected by amulets.

As a result of her reputation as a baby-killer, Lilith is the object of various amulets to be hung on walls of rooms of expectant or lying-in mothers. (Such protective practices date from the publication of the mystical twelfth-century treatise *Sefer Raziel*. See Patai's *Hebrew Goddess* (1967) for a fuller account.) Most of these amulets, some of which are very elaborately inscribed, contain accounts of prior confrontations with Lilith in which she was successfully banished. Nearly all contain adjurations for Lilith to flee. According to Nathan Ausubel (1980, p. 421), some philologists believe that the English word "lullaby" is a corruption of one such Yiddish adjuration, "Lilla—abi," which translates into "Lilith—Begone!" The infant-destroying Lilith is also the source of many superstitions relating to childbirth and children. One such legend has it that if a sleeping child laughs during the night, it is a sign that Lilith has been playing with him. In such cases, parents are advised to tap their infant's nose three times and to drive Lilith away with harsh words (cited from Raphael Ohana's *Mareh Ha-Yeladim* in Patai's *Hebrew Goddess*, p. 228).

### Modern Images

In more recent Jewish literature, an excellent account of how people held vigil for

Lilith—studying and reciting prayers and Psalms, especially on the eighth night after the birth of a male child—occurs in "Watch Night," a nineteenth-century East European tale by Ayzik-Meyer Dik. Another much more recent tale of Lilith as child-killer is David Meltzer's "From the Rabbi's Dream Book."

Meltzer's story introduces a new aspect of Lilith, one that was not brought out much in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, but which figures prominently in Talmudic writing (e.g., B. Eruv. 18b; Shab. 151b). This is the characterization of Lilith as the archetypal seductress, a personification of men's erotic dreams and suppressed desires.

**The . . . reason for so varied an assortment of Liliths has . . . to do . . . with the cultural functions of Jewish literature . . .**

Lilith as seductress has been the inspiration of many Jewish writers. The poet Donald Finkel, calling Lilith the "demon of lonely sleepers," writes that she "held open house/in her round bed/without a foot/without a head" (Schwartz and Rudolf, 1980, p. 460). Czech writer Jiri Langer, though he does not mention her by name, also models his seductress after Lilith in his "The Woman in the Forest." In his short story, "Lilith," Russian-Yiddish writer Moyshe Kulbak portrays her in dual roles as a projection of male sexual fantasies and as the Angel of Death in disguise. On a more secular plane, Lilith has been the inspiration for an 1895 novel by the English fantasist, George MacDonald, and for a 1961 novel by American writer J.R. Salamanca. This later work was made into a motion picture, entitled *Lilith*, directed by Robert Rossen, starring Warren Beatty, Peter Fonda, and Jean Seberg in the title role.

### The Lessons of Lilith

A number of explanations can be advanced for the preponderance of negative interpre-

tations given to Lilith's character. At the simplest level, she became an outlet upon which people could project blame for a variety of problems: infant mortality, infertility, pre- and post-partum neuroses, children's sleeplessness, female jealousy, and male erotic fantasies or fears of emasculation. At a more theological level, since God is infallible, He must have destined the match of Lilith and Adam to fail so as to provide a negative example for the more positive pairing of Adam and Eve (Schwartz, *Gates*, p. 96–97n.). Thus, English poet Ruth Fainlight writes, "Lilith's disgrace thus defined/Good and evil. She would be/Outside, the feared, the alien,/Hungry and dangerous" (Schwartz and Rudolf, p. 698). In this sense, Lilith joins Cain and others as an archetypal scapegoat figure (for poetry which offers a sympathetic rendering of Lilith as scapegoat, see works by Grossman and Feldman; the latter also translated the work of Primo Levi).

Lilith's fate—her eternal alienation and the negative characteristics associated with her—is a moral lesson for those who refuse to submit to authority. Traditional Jewish literature cast Lilith in a negative light because her insistence upon equality with Adam challenged a basic principle of Jewish tradition—the principle of separation: Sabbath from the other days of the week, milk from meat, male from female. As feminist writers are quick to point out, the traditional concept of Lilith is a product of male bias. It is, according to Lilly Rivlin (1972, p. 96), a "patriarchal inversion" of early goddess worship by which Lilith is transformed from Adam's co-progenitor to "a one-dimensional personification of the destructive life force." If early works about Lilith by female writers ever existed, which is doubtful, they were destroyed long ago, and only the myths propagated by men survived. These myths used Lilith to demonstrate "the price women have . . . to pay for attempting to define themselves" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 34).

According to Aviva Cantor (1983), the use of Lilith as a cautionary role model served to keep women from developing and using their power. The tradition, Cantor maintains, is the result of the stressful situations in which the Jewish people found themselves following the destruction of the Second Temple and their subsequent Exile in 70 C.E. The vilification of Lilith, and by extension, of any woman who refused to submit to male domination, represented an effort to discredit attempts to undermine the patriarchal Jewish tradition, which threatened Jewish survival. In that tradition, men were to be the scholars and decision-makers; women were to do whatever needed to be done to enable men to study and make decisions.

Lilith, therefore, became the prototype of the female who refused her role as enabler; Eve, after a brief lapse of character, became the prototype of the woman accepting this role.

### Feminist Interpretations

In the last several years, the image many male writers have traditionally assigned to Lilith has been challenged by male and female writers alike. In a broad sense, she has come to represent what Theodore Ziolkowski calls "the quixotic insistence on pursuing one's own goals in opposition to the establishment" (quoted in Rigney, 1982, p. 18). As represented in "The Passion of Lilith," by Pamela White Hadas (1980), she is the first free-spirit.

In a somewhat narrower sense, Lilith has become a prime force in the women's movement to combat sexism and exorcise archetypal images of women held by traditionally patriarchal religions. Thus, Lilith becomes a challenge to any religion that enforces traditions of male leadership in the church, society, or family. Conceived positively, Lilith has become the embodiment of independent womanhood, a role model for "women who have rejected the myth of their own powerlessness" (Plaskow, 1979, p. 202), and who are willing to take total responsibility for their own lives. As Aviva Cantor (1983, p. 42) reminds us, Lilith, unlike Adam, does not appeal to God to straighten out their relationship.

Given this feminist interpretation of Lilith, one might expect more recent literature to depict her as the rebellious displacer of her polar opposite, the submissive Eve. Such, however, has not been the case, and most writers have used Lilith as a vehicle for effecting some kind of reconciliation between the two figures, women whom Barbara Rigney (1982, p. 94) sees as representing "the two conflicting necessities of submission and rebellion." In "Eve's Side of It," for example, Laura Riding recreates an interior monologue in which Eve and Lilith are expressed as two sides of the same personality. German writer Jakob Lind's recent "The Story of Lilith and Eve" represents an enlightened male's attempt to end the polarization of the loyal, passive, and acquiescent Eve and the independent, active, and non-submissive Lilith.

Perhaps the best of the revisionist legends, entitled "The Coming of Lilith," is the product of a group of feminist theologians, recorded by Judith Plaskow (1979, p. 206-7), in which the bonds of sisterhood of Eve and Lilith are described. More than any other story, this particular retelling of the Lilith tale represents, in Susan Weidman Schneider's

terms, "one attempt to find spiritual antecedents for the present day searchings and yearnings of Jewish women" (Schneider, 1985, p. 189).

### Conclusions

There are many ways of coming to know a culture. One can examine the public record or study private documents. Or, one can study the kinds of literary heroes that grip the popular imagination. If one chooses the latter, it is critical to keep in mind that culture heroes (or villains) never remain constant; they change according to the needs of the societies that create them. Joseph Campbell, a leading authority on myth, has observed, "When a society changes, it loses its symbols and has to invent new ones to reflect its new situation" (*U.S. News and World Report*, April 16, 1984, p. 72). The conditions of the time determine which symbols are invented; the symbols help to explain the conditions of the time.

### **Clearly, the various incarnations of Lilith through the centuries illustrate the potential locked in symbols, or in this case in legendary figures, for revealing the conditions of the times.**

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## Notes of A Jewish Women's Studies Publisher

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### Beginnings

"Yes, Henrietta, there is a Jewish women studies publisher," ran our classified ad in *Hadassah magazine* four years ago. Queries trickled in, asking for our publications list, and at least two were addressed "Attention: Henrietta, BIBLIO PRESS." We had overlooked the generation or knowledge gap regarding instant recognition of the forename of Henrietta Szold, the founder of *Hadassah*. This anecdote illustrates the potency of the printed word—our "product," and fortunately, one still held in high regard by the Jewish people.

We later wrote to women's organizations, suggesting that they, too, had a history; that there were books and materials they could use during March, National Women's History Month, and that some of them were available from us, Biblio Press.

Biblio Press was founded with private capital by a professional Jewish publicist, simultaneously a part-timer at a major reference publisher. The founders were influenced by the small press "movement" in New York City and across the country—particularly the West, where we had visited. The Press was an outgrowth of *Lilith* magazine, which "inspired" us, but without its non-profit status; we needed faster output. Our first publication was Aviva Cantor's *Bibliography on the Jewish Woman: 1900-1978* (hence the name Biblio Press), which was to become one of the basic tools in the field—study materials and guides to help individual Jewish women and groups learn more about themselves. This work went through two printings and two supplements, and is being reissued and updated this Spring 1987 to cover 1900-1985, with an added list of 1986 books and articles. By the end of 1987, we will have published 10 titles on heretofore neglected subjects—sex, politics, and religion. Among our publications are a first book of women's ritual, *Miriam's Well* by Penina V. Adelman (1986), *The Political Life of American Jewish Women* by Susan Welch and Fred Ullrich (1984), and the ever-popular revised edition of *Written Out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers*, by Emily Taitz and Sondra Henry (whose young people's biography of Gloria Steinem from Dillon Press will make its appearance this Spring). Soon to be announced is a second edition of Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell's *Jewish Women's*

*Studies Guide* (first edition 1982), and a new important biography, translated from the Hebrew, of an Israeli woman of the pre-State period.

Biblio Press began to fill the gap in sex information with Joan Scherer Brewer's (recently of Kinsey Institute) annotated bibliography, *Sex and the Modern Jewish Woman* (1986), which contains essays by two academics. Throughout the nine years of our development, we have attempted to serve the needs of both the general reader and the student by supplying information which to us seemed in short supply via approaches that had not been formerly attempted by either Judaica or trade publishers.

### Achievements

We assess the pleasure and pain of our experiences thus:

—The most gratifying achievement is a personal sense of intellectual competence, and even "power and influence" in using ideas and words. This is especially welcome after years of being blocked by male managers and plodding voluntarism dedicated to the Jewish *status quo*.

—The satisfaction of "inventing" Jewish women studies in publication form, and adding to the raised consciousness of our "sisters," even where a sense of such sisterhood is often missing.

—Pioneering: Achieving recognition from National Women's History Month Project, in that nationwide materials for schools now include information about Jewish women—among "other minorities"; making available to the many women's bookstores from New York to California Jewish women's books alongside those of other groups; joining with the newly formed Jewish Women's Caucus of the National Women's Studies Association, as well as women students and academics in the Modern Language Association, to make all aware of "Jewish women studies"; seeing Biblio books in Judaica bookstores whose proprietors are often Orthodox, and possibly unsympathetic to feminism; joining the Association of Jewish Book Publishers, where there are few women publishers, and sending Biblio books for display to the Moscow Book Fair,