

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
5780 Rosh HaShana Day Two
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The Power and Potential of Lilith

As some of you may know, Sojourner Truth was a 19th century African American preacher, activist, author and former slave. She wrote:

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, [we] ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again."

This morning, we read of the first woman created; or did we?

As we do every Rosh Hashana, I read these words from Genesis: "*Bereshit Barah Elohim*, In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth... On the sixth day, God said, 'Let us make a being in our image, after our likeness...' God created us in the divine image, *zachar u'nekavah*, male and female." The first two human beings were created simultaneously, equally 'in the image of God.' As I have pointed out before and as you may notice as well, this is the first of two creation stories in Genesis. In the verses that follow today's portion, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden and takes one of his ribs to fashion an *isha*, a woman, who will be called Eve.

In that version of the creation story, as you will surely recall, we meet the serpent, we see the tempting but forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve are expelled forever from the Garden.

Why two stories? Is there something missing here? A legend that links the two Genesis stories? A character that changed the course of humanity. A figure that continues to inspire the Eves and the Adams of our world. Yes, of course, there is. And, yes, of course, she does. And her name is Lilith.

You may have heard her name. Its name may be familiar from the TV shows, "Cheers" and "Frasier;" Lilith is the quirky wife of Dr. Frasier Crane. Perhaps you have heard of a magazine called, "Lilith." Or you have seen artwork depicting her – as a demon or as a hero, depending upon the artist. Indeed, the literary character of Lilith and the interpretation of her message have changed dramatically over time.

There are several ancient myths about Lilith; the seminal Jewish story is in a text called, The Alphabet of ben Sira, dated between the 8th and 10th centuries:

"After the Holy One created the first human being, Adam, God said, 'It is not good for Adam to be alone.' God created a woman, also from the earth, and called her Lilith. They quarreled immediately. She said, 'I will not lie below you.' He said, 'I will not lie below you.' She replied, 'We are both equal because we come from the [same] earth.'

Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized [that he would not treat her as an equal], she flew off into the air. Adam rose in prayer before the Creator, saying, 'The woman you gave to me has fled from me.' Immediately the Holy One sent three angels after her. The Holy One said to Adam, 'If she wants to return, all the better. If not, she will have to accept [the punishment,] her children will die.' The angels went after her, finally locating her in the sea. They told her what God had said. But she did not want to return."(23A-B, excerpted)

For generations, Lilith was depicted as a wild-haired demon, willing to allow babies to die. In fact, amulets are created to protect babies from her. The legend of Lilith is the reason some tie a red ribbon to a crib, to ward off this stealer of babies. Literary historians note that these gruesome images were most likely written by men; men who did not want to praise her as a woman who defied a man, a woman willing to leave the security of the Garden in favor of her own freedom and her own power.

This aspect of Lilith's character has been reclaimed and celebrated in recent generations. The first contemporary scholar to describe Lilith in a positive light was Lilly Rivlin, a feminist journalist and filmmaker, in a 1972 article in **Ms. Magazine**, the magazine just a year old at the time. Rivlin's article came about at a time in our nation when women and feminist voices were being heard in many arenas by women and by men. 1972 was also the year the first female rabbi, my friend and colleague, Rabbi Sally Priesand, was ordained by our Reform movement's seminary. Inspired by this renewed vision, also in 1972, Judith Plaskow, a feminist scholar, wrote a modern Midrash, called, "The Coming of Lilith." It is a story about a story about a story, which continues to be cited as a transformational piece in the history of women in Jewish life in the 20th century:

Plaskow begins:

"In the beginning, the Lord God formed Adam and Lilith from the dust of the ground ... they were equal in all ways. Adam didn't like this situation, and he looked for ways to change it. He said, 'I'll have my figs now, Lilith,' ordering her to wait on him, and he tried to leave to her the daily tasks of life in the garden. But Lilith wasn't one to take any nonsense; she picked herself up and flew away. 'Well now, Lord,' complained Adam, 'that uppity woman you sent me has gone and deserted me.' The Lord, inclined to be sympathetic, sent his messengers after Lilith, telling her to shape up and return to Adam or face dire punishment. She, however, preferring anything to living with Adam, decided to stay where she was."

As Plaskow's Midrash unfolds, Lilith is portrayed as a wise and bold woman who becomes Eve's friend. "The Coming of Lilith" continues:

"Lilith, all alone, attempted from time to time to rejoin the community in the garden.. [there] Eve got a glimpse of her and saw that she was a woman like herself. [Eve noticed] how bravely Lilith fought. Slowly, slowly, Eve began to think about the limits of her own life within the garden. [One day] Lilith and Eve greeted [one another.] 'Who are you?' they asked each other, 'What is your story?' And they sat and spoke together of the past and of the future."

The sense of power and the sisterhood of women presented here led to the founding of the Jewish feminist magazine, **Lilith**, in the fall of 1976. It's tag line in print and online is "Independent, Jewish and Frankly Feminist."

Since Lilith got her voice 50 years ago, she has inspired poets and artists and thinkers. As an example, in the late 80's poet and academic, Enid Dame published a series of poems. The first, titled, appropriately, "Lilith:" (excerpts)

*kicked myself out of paradise
left a hole in the morning
no note no goodbye
the man I lived with
was patient and hairy
he cared for the animals
worked late at night
planting vegetables
under the moon*

*...
it was
always safe there
but safety
wasn't enough....
I cried
and stormed out of Eden
into history:*

*the Middle Ages
were sort of fun
they called me a witch*

*now
I work in New Jersey
take art lessons
live with a cabdriver
he says, baby
what I like about you
is your sense of humor
sometimes
I cry in the bathroom
remembering Eden
and the man and the god
I couldn't live with*

We could explore many more uses of her name. There is a women's music festival called the "Lilith Fair." An online site called, "The Lilith Gallery of Toronto," displays and shares artwork and poetry; most of their work is produced by women.

There are more, so many more words of poetry and prose. Among the newest is a modern Midrash crafted by a team of two rabbis, friends of mine: Rabbi Paul Kipnes and Rabbi Rachel Bearman. They write what they call "Midrash Monologues." This is an excerpt from one called, "**Lilith: Resisting Since Day 1.**" (excerpts and adapted)

I'm leaving. Your son, Adam, treats me with contempt and disrespect.

*I had imagined a life of partnership,
but he has proclaimed himself king.
When I tried to explain, to make him understand,
he mocked me,
sneering as he told me that he does not have to listen.*

...

*I have made my decision.
I leave tonight.
Let [him] see that his words and his actions have consequences.
Let him understand that if he wants a companion,
he must treat me with the respect that I deserve.*

Lilith surely did resist and persist. She resisted the narrative prescribed for her at first in Genesis and she persisted in making the daring and dramatic decision to live her life alone out of the Garden of Eden. As a literary figure and folk-hero she has also resisted and persisted. She resisted being placed in a corner as a demonic figure and she persisted as a woman of independence.

It has been almost 50 years since Lilith's life as a powerful, independent woman was revived. Her message continues to resonate for us in 5780/2019. We are living in a time of the #MeToo Movement, of the ongoing struggle for pay-equity and equal representation and rights. A time when women's reproductive freedoms are being threatened.

The world needs to hear Lilith's voice, loud and clear. Her fabled life is an example to people, women and men, of all generations. To create our own lives of meaning and not be defined by others. To assert ourselves in a world which sometimes wants to silence us. To be bold and to be diligent as we work to bring equality and justice to all human beings into this world.

As Sojourner Truth wrote:

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, [we] ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again."

That first woman's name was Lilith. May her lesson and her legacy inspire us to get this world turned 'right side up again.' AMEN

SOURCES INCLUDE:

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- "The Lilith Question," Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, in On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader, Susannah Heschel, ed., 1983.
- Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-Crete the World's First Woman. Lilly Rivlin, Enid Dame and Henry Wenkart, eds., 1988