

IN SOME MYTHOLOGY, LILITH, NOT EVE,
WAS THE FIRST WOMAN, CREATED SIMUL-
TANEOUSLY WITH ADAM. WHO IS SHE?

LILITH



In the beginning "male and female created He them." God formed Lilith, the first woman, just as He had formed Adam, from pure dust. Adam and Lilith never found peace together because Lilith contested Adam's claim to be supreme. They were created simultaneously from the same dust, she reasoned, and were therefore equal. When he asserted he was to be her master, she insisted there was no justification for his supremacy. When he wished to lie with her, she took offense at having to lie beneath him. Adam tried to force her obedience. Rather than accept subjugation, Lilith chose to leave Adam and live alone by the Red Sea. She found peace there on the hard-rock-sand lining the deep blue Gulf of Aqaba, making love with satyrs, minotaurs, and centaurs.

BY LILLY RIVLIN

I first became aware of the cosmic sexist conspiracy when I realized that nothing of my personal sense of woman derived from any historic female hero—mythic or real. I knew about Lilith, dimly, like an archetypal memory, as a predecessor to Eve. And I was repelled by Eve, that submissive blonde creature wiled by a snake, falling for a line. My own instinct told me Eve should have—could have—walked to the Tree of Knowledge of her own free will, picked the fruit, felt its texture, and—weighing the consequences—eaten if she so desired.

Most of all, I felt deceived by the myth of Eve. It seemed to me that the reaching out for knowledge in the form of the symbolic fruit was both a sensual and a courageous act, an adventure of the spirit and a desire for experience, which the story of Genesis somehow had turned into a debasing act of shame and guilt.

I felt uncomfortable in the Eve role. I twisted at the bit; I felt Dionysian impulses. My personal images were not of an infantile paradise, a protected garden of Eden, but of rough yellow and brown deserts, of iron gray molten rock, of golden thistles and thorned brambles. Also, I could not understand the shame of nakedness. I was animal, I was God: I was substance and pulsing orifice. Beneath layers of civilization, I was fur throbbing, and echoes of deep-welled animal cries. If I was not Eve's daughter, whose daughter was I?

In setting out to discover Lilith, the first Woman, I followed in the footsteps of all mythic heroes. The first step was to assimilate my opposite, in this case, Eve. For in the journey backward through time, I hoped to arrive at self.

The earliest extant European cosmogony of Lilith (though by no means the earliest of all) is in the *Alphabet Ben Sira*, an early Jewish commentary on the Bible compiled in the 15th century. We know that the author drew upon very early Hebrew legends elaborating on the discrepancy that exists between the two Genesis versions of creation (a discrepancy which allows Lilith to be presumed as Adam's first wife). In Genesis II, Eve is an afterthought, an appendage of man. In Genesis I, male and female are created simultaneously. The discrepancy itself is easily explained. Divergences between the two Genesis versions result from a careless weaving together of an early pre-Exile version and a post-Exile Babylonian account of creation.

Genesis, which was far more influenced by earlier polytheistic and matriarchal cults than most pious Jews and Christians would like to admit, was edited from the sixth century B.C. onward for moralistic reasons. Zealous Jewish priest editors tried to expurgate all vestiges of the Canaanite goddess cults which the Israelites themselves had assimilated. The remnant, "male and female created He them" (Genesis I), slipped by those editors. The later legend of the rib is clearly what Joseph Campbell (contemporary scholar of ancient myth) refers to as a patriarchal inversion (giving precedence to the male) of earlier myths of the hero born from the goddess Earth.

Rabbinical tradition developed the Genesis I version of creation to indicate that God made Adam and Lilith from dust at the same time—some say as twins joined back to back. As there is no philological explanation why the female is called Lilith, we can only conclude that the name was associated with an atavistic female spirit that had to be assimilated or dealt with in some way.

Still, if Adam and Lilith were created at the same time, they were, *ipso facto*, equal, and this was too subversive a concept to leave unqualified. The author of the *Alphabet Ben Sira* compiled the "official" myth of Lilith, a story designed to quell any hope for equality:

God then formed Lilith, the first woman, just as He had formed Adam, except that He used filth and sediment instead of pure dust. From Adam's union with this demoness . . . sprang innumerable demons that still plague mankind. . . . Adam and Lilith never found peace together; for when he wished to lie with her, she took offense at the recumbent posture he demanded. "Why must I lie beneath you?" she asked. "I also was made from dust, and am therefore your equal." Because Adam tried to compel her obedience by force, Lilith, in a rage, uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air and left him. (Alphabet, as quoted in The Book of Genesis, by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai)

She finds peace along the Red Sea. But this idyll is rudely interrupted. Adam appeals to God, and He sends forth (*text continued on page 96*)

Inspired by demonic medieval tales about Lilith, Yuval Yariv, an Israeli artist, conceived the night vision of her on the following page.

LILITH

three angels to persuade Lilith to return. (Why God and Adam team up is another matter for speculation. Either God was used to support earthly masculine fears, or both God and Adam were threatened by Lilith's sexual demands and independence.) Lilith prefers life without a mate—at least a mate like Adam—to giving up her integrity and independence. Besides, she has tasted the sensual free life beside the Red Sea. The angels threaten her with death for her refusal, but, as the *Alphabet* tells the story, she has a logical response.

"How can I die when God has ordered me to take charge of all newborn children: boys up to the eighth day of life . . . girls up to the twentieth day. Nonetheless, if ever I see your three names or likenesses displayed in an amulet above a newborn child, I promise to spare it." To this they agreed; but God punished Lilith by making one hundred of her demon children perish daily.

By taking fragments of earlier myths and placing them within a Judeo-Christian framework, the author of the *Alphabet* has transformed a creation myth of male-female equality into a morality play, and the independent woman into a jealous avenger. Lilith may be independent and strong-willed, but she is punished for this sin: is the severity of her punishment connected to Lilith's sexual openness? The Adam and Eve myth clearly avoids sex. In fact, having eaten the fruit of knowledge, the protagonists, for the first time cognizant of nakedness and sex, quickly make for the leaves.

Lilith, on the other hand, seems to have had no compunctions. On the contrary, she is unself-conscious and quite active. Can Adam not cope with her activity? Should we assume he is asexual or undersexed? No, it is that he cannot cope with equality. It might appear unreasonable that sexual independence would call forth such punishment, but the entire patriarchal system, which inverted an earlier supremacy of woman, would be threatened by such a declaration of equality.

In one blow then, Lilith is transformed from a co-progenitor into a mother-creator-destroyer,

similar in some respects to a sister mythic figure, the Indian Mother Kali, who is depicted simultaneously as an awesome force of life and death. Two right hands of the many-armed Kali hold the sword and scissors of physical death, and her two left hands hold a bowl filled with food and the lotus of generation. But whereas Kali remains a harmonizer of opposites, the divisive Western mind reduces Lilith to her negative and destructive attributes. Lilith is not allowed the depth and multiple reality that Kali's ever-moving hands symbolize. She becomes her opposite: a one-dimensional personification of the destructive life force.

It is not accidental that this myth of Lilith gained popularity among Christians and Jews during the Middle Ages (the time of the height of witchcraft and the cult of the Virgin Mary). Both cultures were threatened by the disintegration of the feudal structure, and in both religions, the orthodox authorities were fighting against liberalizing tendencies. The establishments were involved in esoteric disputations, while the helpless masses sought comfort in superstition.

In medieval Europe (especially in Germany), Lilith became a popular man-devouring creature, a threat to Christian and Jewish homes. She is the envious estranged wife and mother who covets other women's children, and threatens to steal them, unless prevented by charms. In those dark days of man, Lilith also underwent a physical change. Instead of the great beauty of her earlier incarnations (one oriental version depicts her overpowering physical and intellectual gifts), she becomes in the Middle Ages a scraggy-toothed hag. Apparently even Lilith could not withstand the ravages of time. Though ugly and malformed she still prevails, however, as the seductress of sleeping men.

According to the sources of cabalism, a 13th-century mystical movement, Lilith had a very important position indeed. In the *Zohar*, the "bible" of the cabalists, Lilith is the harlot, the wicked, the false, or the black. Here Lilith reaches the pinnacle of evil and becomes Queen of the Underworld. As the permanent partner of Satan, known here as Samael, Lilith is the quintessence of darkness. In that world, she fulfills a function parallel to that of the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, in the world of sanctity. Just as Shekhinah is the mother of the House of Israel, so Lilith is the mother of the unholy fold called the "mixed multitudes."

Her ultimate vilification is man's vindication.

Ironically, the very same source—the *Zohar*—also credits Lilith with her greatest hour: she becomes the mistress of God. This unholy alliance is the outcome of the destruction of the Temple and the Exile of Israel. Israel's mother, the wife of God, had to leave her husband to go into exile with their children. As a result of His broken marriage, God consorts with the Other, "the slavewoman Lilith." Only the coming of the Messiah will put an end to God's degrading coupling with Lilith, and will bring an end to Lilith's existence.

The notoriety of the Lilith myth was accompanied by the wholehearted acceptance and use, by medieval women, of amulets to ward off Lilith. Scribes were designing amulets (below) which evoked the names of the three angels sent to bring Lilith back to Adam. The angels circling the bulbous symbol of Lilith guaranteed the safety of the newborn infant. If the amulet was defective, a circle drawn about the parturient female assured an absolute defense against the evil strangler of babes. These amulets have a long history. A prototype medieval amulet used to ward off Lilith is found on a Persian clay bowl. (Apparently Lilith was no respecter of cultural boundaries.) The incantation on the bowl, which dates back to about 600 A.D., is enough to shackle all the demonic broods in existence.

Bound is the bewitching Lilith with a peg of iron in her nose; bound is the bewitching Lilith with pinchers of iron in her mouth; bound is the bewitching Lilith with fetters of iron on her hands; bound is the bewitching Lilith with socks of stone on her feet . . .



(Amulets still exist today. A few years ago, a Moroccan woman concerned about my barren state presented me with one. Ironically, Lilith had become for her a fertility symbol.)

Clearly, the myth served as a carrier of social values, as a boundary for straying females, and as a convenient totem for men and women frightened by their inner desires. Lilith, in her many guises, was a scapegoat for instinctual (and thus evil) drives. Males could attribute

their natural nocturnal emissions to Lilith. How else could they justify this "sinful" flow? Women, half-souls by the going standards, living in a world of supernatural spirits and religious dogmas, could find solace in venting their prosaic frustrations on this symbol of distorted womanhood. It is a commentary on woman's self-hatred that she so readily embraced this deformed and evil archetype.

If infant mortality caused not only personal despair but social stigma, what better way to avoid responsibility than to shift the onus on to Lilith? Ineffectual males, frightened by their own fantasies of the seductive and nightmarish, drew upon the myth and encouraged appendage-complexed Eves to weave charms and carry amulets for protection against their repressed instincts. Lilith's omnipresence, it was believed, could even threaten a man who wished to engage in lawful sexual intercourse with his wife. "Lilith is always present in the bed linen of man and wife when they copulate, in order to take hold of the sparks of the drops of semen which are lost . . . and she creates out of them demons."

Most damaging, the myth of Lilith prevented community among women. Vital female qualities—sensuality, passion, independence—were associated with a feared, hated, and perhaps secretly envied, female symbol. If any sister-woman exhibited such attributes, she was to be regarded with suspicion. Unable to exalt their mutual qualities and claim kinship, women remained isolated—shackled in the magic circle.

But no amount of distortion by patriarchal rewritings can suppress the ambivalence buried in the symbol of Lilith. In fact, some scholars suggest that the extant myths may have been rewritten from an earlier gynocratic mythology. Is it not possible that Lilith's intention of visiting babies is not to harm them but to sustain them? This other Lilith could have been attending mothers in labor to give comfort, to share pain, to present passion to the newborn child and to welcome life. There were all these possibilities. Perhaps some women sensed them, as I did.

Unsatisfied by the negative personification of Lilith found in the Middle Ages, I resolved to go further back and look closer at the fragments compiled in the *Alphabet Ben Sira*, to search for a primal form of Lilith (*continued on page 114*)

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which would satisfy that self which had rejected the restrictive myth of Eve.

I encountered Lilith in many guises, taking on many forms, but clearly occupying a central position in Jewish demonology. The lady definitely got around. Some writings identify the two harlots who appeared in judgment before Solomon as Lilith and a sister demoness, Naamah. Widespread, too, is the identification of Lilith with the Queen of Sheba. This notion which dates back to a third-century source is based on a Jewish and Arab myth that the Queen of Sheba was actually a jinn, half-human and half-demon. As proof of Lilith's masquerade, it is maintained that the riddles that the Queen of Sheba posed to Solomon are a repetition of the words of seduction which the first Lilith spoke to Adam.

It appears that the male mind, in order to cope with sharp-witted females, could only imagine a demonic explanation: since the Queen of Sheba was very clever, she must have been Lilith reincarnated. The assumption: a clever woman is unnatural; therefore all intelligent women must be allied with demonic powers. But what about the women who took pride in their intellect or were excited by thought? Such women were possibly the forerunners of the Faustian pact with Mephistopheles. Others might have ridden the crest to become shamanesses, witches, and spell fixers—all accepted outlets for female intelligence.

In a further transformation of the third century, Lilith becomes a female demon who is known by many names and moves about the world at night, visiting women in childbirth and trying to strangle their newborn babies. The Talmudic tradition confused this spirit's name with the Hebrew word for night (*laylah*) and turned Lilith into a night demon, a succubus who attacked men sleeping alone. The offsprings of Lilith's nocturnal rapes were the demons that plague the world. Here we have two very separate ancient themes: a seductress who attacks sleeping men and a Mother Goddess with destructive powers, combined for the first time in the moral myth of the *Alphabet*.

Lilith's conversion into a Hebrew demoness probably occurred back in the early part of the first millennium B.C. It was at this time that the Hebrews invaded and conquered Canaan. Un-

doubtedly they were influenced by the Canaanites' indigenous goddess worship and matriarchal view of creation. We know, for example, from Deuteronomy that the priests of ancient Israel could not dissuade their females from praying to the Canaanite fertility goddess, Anath. Time after time the prophets denounced Israelite women for following Canaanite practices such as prenuptial promiscuity.

Thus, in establishing their genealogy in Genesis, the Hebrews had to deal with these assimilated beliefs. Joseph Campbell explains the changes this way: the Hebrew patriarchy of the first millennium adapted the mythology of the lands they occupied only to invert it so that a myth or symbol became the opposite of its origin. "Yet," says Campbell, "there remains an ambivalence in the basic symbols of the Bible that no amount of stress in patriarchal interpretation can suppress."

Classicist Robert Graves and anthropologist Raphael Patai note that "it is characteristic of civilizations where women are treated as chattels that they must adopt the recumbent posture during intercourse." Lilith's refusal to lie beneath became the central issue in the revised Lilith myth. It was obviously a glaring challenge to the accepted sexual mores of the Hebrews. This "unnatural" position, passed from oral tradition to recorded legends, was a stick in the craw of the ancient patriarchs. It had to be suppressed. What better way to put Lilith in her place and to squelch her strange and threatening sexuality than to inscribe her in the nation's codex as an evil and unnatural spirit? For the *only* appearance of Lilith in the Bible is among the beasts of prey and the spirits that will lay waste the land on the day of vengeance. (Isaiah 34:14)

Earlier narratives of Creation sought to embody the relationship between man and woman as a mirror of nature; i.e., the universe created by a union of Father Sky and Mother Earth. The monotheistic editor of Genesis could assign no part in Creation to anyone but the transcendental God. This meant a radical removal of the ancient matriarchal deities and a total repression of the surrounding goddess cults. The goddess and priestess had no place in the Hebrew religion. Female worship had to go underground or within the psyche. Lilith lived on under monotheism as the reposi-

tory for all suppressed matriarchal yearnings.

Lilith lived on within me, and when she disappeared from the Hebrew landscape, I tracked her to still earlier sources. Whence, for example, the name Lilith? In Babylonian and Sumerian demonology of the third millennium B.C., "Ardat Lilith" appears as a "maid of desolation," one of several "harmful spirits" occupying mythological space. She is a demon of waste places who preys on males.

In the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree* (ca. 2000 B.C.), Lilith lives in a primeval willow tree on the banks of the Euphrates. At the base of the tree is a dragon; in his crown lives a Zu-bird and its young. Gilgamesh, the hero, slays the dragon, whereupon the Zu-bird escapes with its young to the mountain, and Lilith, terror-stricken, flees to the desert. And is that the end of the journey? Can I rest in the desert?

I trace her back even further to the Assyrian belief that Lilith is a wind spirit, wild-haired and winged. I cling to this image of a lithe female aspect of nature, sometimes calm, sometimes tumultuously sweeping all in her path, lingering over blooming cacti, pressing through shifting sand.

In following Lilith backward through time, I had sought a female archetype which is creative and self-liberating. I found the wind. My journey ended at the beginning—only the wind, moving upon the void (containing nothing and everything within it). And I harness in time the wind spirit and I write a new Creation.



n the Beginning

When God set out to create Heaven and Earth, He found nothing but Tohu Va'Vohu, namely Chaos and Emptiness. Faced by the Deep, God's spirit wavered. In that atomic second, He became aware of Another. It was the pulse of the Universe: a Throbbing Spirit whirling in the Chaos. In that space I and Thou encountered. During that Absence, Energy was born. And He wanted to replicate that second, that memory of creation which

He called Order. The Throbbing Spirit called it Love. And the Throbbing Spirit directed Love toward the Chaos, and the Heavens and the Seas divided. And God gave Order to the Energy, and there was Light. And the Throbbing Spirit danced in a golden light until there was Fire. God watched the Fire glow within the Seas and dreamed Jewels. And God and the Throbbing Spirit embraced in Dream and Reality, and there was Spirit and Matter. And God pulled the Light from the bowels of the Fire, and there was Day and Night. Throbbing Spirit loved with such force that the Skies trembled and the Seas boiled, and there was Lightning. The Heavens wept with joy, and there was rapture in the universe.

Throbbing Spirit and God combined Love and Order. She created the Grass, Herbs, and Trees to reciprocate to the Sun, Moon, and Stars. And on growing globules of Energy, He placed land-beasts and creeping things, while the Throbbing Spirit pulsed and kept time. The Throbbing Spirit changed Her rhythm as She encountered the growing globules of Energy, gaining momentum and movement. And the Wind moved among the Heavens and the Seas, along globular islands of Energies sowing grass, herbs, and trees, stroking land-beasts and creeping things with life. And Earth revolved in the Deep.

God sought the Throbbing Spirit in the Wind to ask Her: "What final Order?" "An image of you," She replied. And so God took some of every Element He had created and made Adam. But He took nothing from the Wind. And Adam who was but an image of God existed. And the Throbbing Spirit of Chaos and Emptiness had also faced the Deep and created. She took the Elements and made an image. And She breathed life into Lilith. But the Wind had not passed through Adam, and He could not remember the birth of Love which gave forth Energy. You know the rest of the myth. Adam now knows the myth. He has felt the Throbbing Spirit in the Wind.

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