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# DISARTICULATING LILITH: NOTIONS OF GOD'S EVIL IN JEWISH FOLKLORE

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## Lilith as Eden's Snake

Lilith, the vampire-like siren of Sephardic folklore, was not a proto-feminist archetype. All of the texts that spoke of her were strictly forbidden to women and also concealed from most men, except those belonging to fellowships of the *Kabbalah*. It is true that in the twentieth century, Lilith was often viewed as a symbol of female emancipation, even if, as Ellen Frankel has correctly noted, the legend had its origins as “a misogynist rationale for male supremacy.”<sup>1</sup> But Lilith's primary importance does not arise from her gender. Her significance is linked to her role as an arbiter of God's justice on earth.<sup>2</sup> She is the snake in the Garden of Eden, in a moral sense. She frightens and seduces, and even if she is cursed, she, like the snake, is placed in our world by God.

Her role in Sephardic folklore is indicative of a dilemma that plagued the Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Portuguese worlds following their respective expulsions. Why had God punished His chosen people, the Jews? Was Lilith an agent in a divine plan for redemption, a plan that included the punishment of *Gerush Sefarad* (“the exile from Spain/Portugal”)? Did the disaster of the Iberian Exile conceal a better destiny?

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Frankel, *The Jewish Spirit: A Celebration in Stories and Art* (New York: Stewart, Tabor and Chang, 1997), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Lilith is notably absent from Judeo-Portuguese Peninsular literature; it is generally in the post-Expulsion period when her figure begins to crop up in the shared Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) folklore of the Diaspora.

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*Magic, Marriage, and Midwifery: Eroticism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. by Ian Frederick Moulton, ASMAR 39 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 59–82.

Lilith is an agent of evil who was subservient to God, a role she shared with her male consort Samael. As a representation of necessary iniquity—the evil that God has placed in the universe so that mankind may choose the good—Lilith became, for the male authors of the *Talmud* and the *Zohar*, a masculine imagining of the forbidden, a fantasy of unconsecrated intercourse. In the early modern period, which coincides with the Jews' expulsion from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497), Lilith was designated as the scandalous non-maternal counterpart to Eve, humanity's "mother." In that dubious role, Lilith had borne children, but not human ones. Hers were the harmful spirits known as *mazikim*, literally "damage inflictors" in Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

Kabbalistic Judaism's many lesser demons, the above-mentioned *mazikim*, constituted an explanation for difficult events. Appropriately enough, the Lilith legend enjoyed its widest diffusion when Sephardic history entered its decline: beginning with the pogroms in Castile and Cataluña in 1391 and climaxing with the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula. News of the Inquisition's activities in Spain and the New World was followed by despair and confusion throughout the Sephardic Diaspora, until the demise of the Holy Office in the early nineteenth century. It was Lilith's presence that provided some sort of teleological reasoning for these events.<sup>4</sup>

The increased persecution of crypto-Jews in the Spain of Felipe II and the public burnings of "relapsed" Jews in Mexico City (1596) and in Lima, Peru (1639) created panic in the Sephardic world and demanded explanations of God's plan. Though marginal, the Lilith stories offered a teleology that included even the dread "auto-da-fe" within God's parameters. Certain sixteenth-century Cabbalists, including Hayyim Vitale, Abraham Galante, and Josef Karo, had viewed the Inquisition as a prerequisite for the Advent of the Messiah. Even non-Kabbalistic Jewish writers of the early modern period, such as Samuel Usque, reasoned that the Expulsion from Spain might be the first step towards returning the exiles to Zion.<sup>5</sup> Lilith was the second step, at which all men stumbled.

Lilith's story is comprised of three main components: 1) her expulsion from the Garden of Eden for resisting the submissive position Adam assigned her during intercourse; 2) her designation as Samael/Satan's wife; and 3) her seduction of the

<sup>3</sup> Siegmund Hurwitz, *Lilith, The First Eve: Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine* (Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1992), 33, describes the *mazikim* as "pests", as opposed to an entirely different group of spirits, the *khabalim* ("destroyers").

<sup>4</sup> Spain never formally ended the Inquisition in the Americas. Its demise was a lengthy process: the Liberators Jose de San Martin and Simon Bolivar finally abolished it formally during the Latin American Wars of Independence, (1812-1824).

<sup>5</sup> Usque's 1553 *Consolacam* devotes a great deal of attention to Isaiah 62:1-9, in which Jerusalem is compared to a virgin awaiting her bridegroom. In the *zeitgeist* of the Sephardic exiles, the Jewish people had become the groom and now Jerusalem, not Spain and Portugal, was the beloved bride.

male descendants of Adam and Eve.<sup>6</sup> Only when Lilith found a man capable of resisting her seduction would God send the Messiah and return the exiles to Zion. That hypothetical moment would redeem humanity and end the suffering of the Jewish people. That same moment would also end Lilith's axiological function as temptress of would-be Messiah bringers. Consequently, if human beings possessed agency—Jewish insistence on free will being undeniable—then they could have a hand in bringing, or thwarting, the Messianic Age. But when even the most righteous sage succumbed to Lilith, the Messianic Age would be long in coming.

### Origins of the Lilith Myth

The Jewish Lilith myth evolved from the older winged pair of Babylonian demons: Lilit and Lilitu, whose mission was strangling children. Akkadian texts also spoke of Lilitu, the female member of the pair, appearing as a nocturnal seductress.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the Old Testament, Lilith is mentioned only once, and it is not in relation to Adam, Eden, or baby-strangling. In *Isaiah* 34:14 she is named as one of the “desert beasts” who prowl the ruins of Jerusalem, the future destruction of which is envisioned by the prophet: “And the martens shall meet with the jackals, and one goat shall call to his fellow; only the screech owl (Lilith) shall rest there, and find for her a place of repose.”<sup>8</sup>

In early modern vernacular translations of the Old Testament (including the King James Version), the word *Lilith* is translated as “screech-owl.” The name “Lilith” per se does not appear in English, nor did it appear in Spanish, Portuguese, or French Bibles. It is possible that this is an attempt to obscure the Lilith personage, a way to avoid equating the Lilith character with the owl. Modern Hebrew uses the generic term *yanshuf* for “owl,”<sup>9</sup> although *Lilith* as a word may once have referred explicitly to the screeching variety.

During the Talmudic period, descriptions of the she-demon were embellished with references to her sexuality. The rabbis wrote of Lilith as a fully-recognizable, air-gliding female demon with “a woman's face, long hair, and wings” in *Talmud: Niddah*, 24b. Another Talmudic text, *Talmud: Pesach* 112b, finds a correlation

<sup>6</sup> Hurwitz remarks, in *Lilith, the First Eve*, 142: “But for the most part, Lilith is not concerned with killing men. She would rather seduce them, in order to conceive children by them. . . .” In other words, she is always attempting to recreate her own Eden.

<sup>7</sup> Hurwitz, in *Lilith, the First Eve*, 1999, 52, gives a detailed background of Lilith's pagan antecedents, which encompass Sumerian, Babylonian and Akkadian sources prior to her incorporation into Jewish folklore.

<sup>8</sup> All Biblical quotes in English are taken from David H. Stern's *The Jewish Bible* (Netherlands: Importania, 2006)

<sup>9</sup> Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew English Dictionary* (Ramat Gan: Masada Publishing House, 1981), 937.

between Lilith and another post-biblical she-demon: Agrath. Agrath-Lilith is the daughter of Mahalath, a malevolent female spirit whose name derives from the Hebrew lexical root, MEM-KHET-LAMED, for sickness and disease. In contrast, it is the root for forgiveness, pointing to the ambiguity of these fictional characters.<sup>10</sup> Talmudic quotes do in fact define Lilith as a distinctly nocturnal presence, concurring with the earlier “screech-owl” reference.

Like Isaiah’s screech-owl, Lilith portends doom, but her doom is laced with seduction. Unlike Satan in New Testament sources, who rebels against God, Lilith does not rebel against God, but rather against Adam. For this reason, God accepts Lilith’s sexual insubordination in the Cosmos, assuring her a prominent role in the fortunes of humanity. And while she is not the only malevolent spirit, Lilith indeed “occupies a central place among the demonic images of Judaism because she is by far the most distinctive figure among this religion’s numerous evil spirits.”<sup>11</sup>

Judeo-Spanish mystics implanted the Lilith myth within a gap between Genesis I and Genesis II. At the end of Genesis I: 27, an unnamed woman is co-created with Adam by God on the sixth day of Creation: “. . . male and female God created them. . . .” Inexplicably, the unnamed woman has disappeared by the middle of Genesis 2:22, where Adam’s rib is fashioned into the more obedient (if we discount her penchant for conversing with snakes) Eve. That unnamed, disappeared woman becomes, a posteriori, Lilith. Although divorced from Adam, Lilith achieves parity with him through semantics. Adam and Eve’s children are named for their father (*Bnei Adam*, the “sons of Adam”), whereas Lilith’s and Samael’s children bear the title of their mother: *Bnei Lilit* (in Hebrew: “sons of Lilith”). In the incarnation of Na’amah, one of her supernatural manifestations, Lilith could mother half-human, half-demon offspring. I will review this provocative motif, which fused human and diabolical motifs, below in my analysis of the folktale *The Father’s Testament*.<sup>12</sup>

A mystical Jewish mystical text of unknown authorship that surfaced in the eighth century, the *Aleph-Bet of Ben Sirah*, presented Lilith choosing banishment to the Red Sea rather than returning to Eden to play the submissive wife.<sup>13</sup> The *Aleph-Bet* contains Lilith’s vows to kill a hundred of her demon children every day while leaving human children unharmed, on the condition that they bear amulets inscribed with her name.<sup>14</sup> We will return to this point later on; but it stands as evidence that Lilith is more self-sacrificing than malevolent. Her unruly nature in

<sup>10</sup> Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew English Dictionary*, 1272-3.

<sup>11</sup> Hurwitz, *Lilith, the First Eve*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Zohar* I, 19b

<sup>13</sup> The *Aleph-Bet* has several extant versions, and while there is general agreement that it originated in the Eastern (Babylonian and/or Persian) Jewish communities during the Middle Ages, dates of its possible authorship vary widely, depending upon the scholar. Louis Ginzburg thought it dated to the tenth century; other theories see its origin in Southern France, and certain segments of it may have been written in Italy; it is a composite work.

<sup>14</sup> Hurwitz, *Lilith, The First Eve*, 120.

*Ben Sirah* seems to stem from the book's conception of all things female rather than something uniquely attributable to her. In *Ben-Sirah* 42:9–14 we read: "Daughters are trouble, let there be no window, do not expose her to any male and let her take not counsel among women." (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 180-1) So Lilith, it appears, is typical of her genre.

The Eastern Lilith texts would have been well-known to Jewish scholars in Omayyad Andalucía, who maintained active contact, via the *Responsa*, with the Babylonian rabbinical academies in Pumbeditza and Nehardea. But by the tenth century, Berber invasions had pushed Andalusian Jewish communities northward. This is the background to the foremost collection of the Lilith legends: Rabbi Moises De Leon's *Zohar*, or "Splendor" in Hebrew. Moises De Leon himself (1250–1305) claimed to have received the *Zohar* from an earlier Aramaic source, the Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. (This idea was discounted definitively by Gershom Scholem in the 1960s on the basis of linguistic analysis of the *Zohar*.)<sup>15</sup>

The *Zohar* fills in the interstices in the Old Testament, such as the previously mentioned gap between *Genesis* I and II. Although she is not the *Zohar*'s main character, Lilith's shadow predominates in the text. De Leon portrays a medieval femme fatale, couched in Mediterranean terminology and drawing on the earlier Babylonian folklore, but Sefarad surpassed anything found in the Babylonian Talmud or *The Alphabet of Ben Sirah*.

Lilith in the *Zohar* was seductive and aggressive, but always with divine license: "She stands at the entrance to roads and paths, in order to seduce men. She seizes the fool who approaches her, kisses him and fills him with a wine whose dregs contain snake venom. . . Those fools, who come to her and drink this wine, commit fornication with her. And what does she do then? She leaves the fool alone, sleeping in his bed, and ascends to Heaven. There, she gives a bad report of him. Then she obtains permission to descend again."<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of narrative function, Lilith is similar to Satan in the Book of Job. She tests virtue, and when it is found lacking, she hands in the report to God. God then promptly sends her back to the human world to pursue her activities and her men. Satan, the Accuser, also tests virtue. In Job I: 11-12, he mocks God's depiction of Job as an upright man, and challenges God to make life a bit harder for him: "But stretch only forth thy hand and touch all that he hath, and see whether he will not renounce thee to thy face." God assents and allows Satan to visit tribulations upon Job, on the condition that he spares the man himself from annihilation: "Then said the Lord unto the Accuser: Behold, all that is his is in

<sup>15</sup> Scholem and virtually every 20<sup>th</sup> century academic who has studied the text has affirmed the heavy prevalence of Spanish and even Latin grammar operating on the Aramaic syntax: why would Shimon Bar Yohai have spoken Spanish-tinged Aramaic if the Spanish language per-se did not yet exist when Bar Yohai was alive in the Holy Land?

<sup>16</sup> *Zohar* III, 19a

thy power; only against himself shalt thou not stretch forth thy hand. The Accuser went thereupon away from the presence of the Lord.”

Satan tests virtue through tribulations; Lilith does so through temptation. God grants *carte blanche* with certain conditions to Satan in canonical Judaism. In non-canonical, Kabbalistic Judaism, Lilith derives her power from the same source. Perhaps that is why Jewish mysticism married them together in a spiritual and textual sense.

Samael/Satan, Lilith’s eventual husband, was present in Judeo-Spanish folklore even prior to the *Zohar*, as Scholem has observed.<sup>17</sup> Although wayward, he functions within God’s parameters, as does Lilith. Samael was frequently identified with the Angel of Death or Satan, a terrible visitor, but one who comes knocking only when God determines it. Lilith, together with Samael, is designated to rule over a sort of Jewish Antipodes, a mock-mirror universe where the *Bnei Lilit* live a life that resembles that of their human cousins, the *Bnei Adam*, but is more magical. This “other realm” of Lilith and Samael is referred to by the *Zohar* using the Aramaic term *Sitra Abra*.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Sitra Abra*, women were not always the helpmates exemplified by the biblical Eve. Some were out and out whores. References to Lilith as a beautiful harlot abound in the *Zohar*: *Zohar* 1:14b, 2:111a, 3:76b.<sup>19</sup> As the female ruler of the forces of chaos, Lilith represents uncontrolled female sex. She is an embodiment of *Yetser hara*, in Hebrew: “the evil inclination.” The evil inclination does not defy God. Theologically, it is a prerequisite for defining the counterpoint of the Good, and it has no non-Godly origin, as Judaism’s God is all-encompassing.<sup>20</sup>

Sephardic mystical thought viewed each of the Divine Emanations, the *sefirot*, as possessing a dark underside, which Lilith and Samael exemplify. The unsettling pair served as a sort of shock-absorber to blunt questions that would raise doubt as to God’s goodness, since He had created Lilith and Samael no less than Adam and Eve. Samael and Lilith, seen as “evil” by common folk, are in reality the servants of God. Like many obedient employees, they are entrusted by their boss with the ugliest tasks. Samael terminates life at God’s behest. Lilith seduces, and exposes the weaknesses of the ostensibly pious, all at the Creator’s whim.

<sup>17</sup> Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism: Mysticism and the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 175: Scholem remarks that Moises de Burgos and his mentors Isaac and Jacob Ha Cohen of Soria already mentioned Samael in earlier literature; centuries before the *Zohar*, Samael’s character is well-established.

<sup>18</sup> Hurwitz refers to the *Sitra Abra* as being the sum total of impure emanations (*sefirot*) of God (147); we should note that, though impure, the dark side is nonetheless an integral part of the Godhead.

<sup>19</sup> See: Margot Pritzker, Ed., *The Zohar, Complete Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> According to Maimonides, the evil inclination is not inherent in human beings; it is consciously chosen. While Maimonides was in no way a Cabbalist, his observation fit in, a posteriori, with the Lilith tales.

## Scapegoating Lilith

Religiously based, non-academic study of the *Kabbalah* is cultivated primarily by the Hasidic communities in New York, Buenos Aires, Paris, and Jerusalem. The Hasidic anecdote of the “evil surgeon” illustrates the Lilith conundrum perfectly, centering on an invisible Good that transcends visible Evil. In the story, man with no knowledge of science enters a hospital and sees a surgeon operating on a patient. Horrified, the man screams. He believes the surgeon is killing the patient. When someone explains to him that what *appears* to be evil—plunging the scalpel into an open wound—is the only way to save the patient’s life, the man relaxes. What he thought he saw, empirically, did not contain the whole truth.<sup>21</sup>

This is also the message of the Lilith stories. What appears to our (human) limited vision as hurtful—evil—is in reality for our benefit. This interpretation of reality predominated in mystical circles in the post-Expulsion period, and reshaped Lilith’s role. Without the Inquisition, the Cabbalists reasoned, the Jews would have remained in Sefarad, the exiles would never return to Jerusalem (as foretold in Isaiah 56:8), and the biblical prerequisites for the coming of the Messiah would remain unfulfilled. If Lilith did not exist, the reasoning continued, there would be no way of discovering whoever was truly fit to hasten the Messiah. All religions have indulged in this sort of post-factum teleological justification, particularly during periods of crisis.

The Old Testament ends with Cyrus’s proclamation to the exiled Jews in Babylon. In 2 Chronicles 36: 23, the Emperor urges those who wished to return to Jerusalem to do so: “. . . All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.” Nonetheless, the majority of the Jews did not return to Judah; Babylon had become their home. But with Sefarad lost, and the Diaspora looking tenuous, perhaps the Jews would feel differently. If they could prepare a rabbi to withstand Lilith’s sexuality, God would send the Anointed One and torments would cease.

Therefore, Lilith does not signify Hell in the Christian sense. She is an agent of a greater design that only the righteous can perceive. She is the hypocrite’s downfall. Lilith, as Queen of the *Sitra Abra*, must test the moral fiber of Adam’s descendants. Abrahamic religions develop the rigor of their prophets through “testing periods” and ordeals: Moses in the wilderness, Jesus on the cross, Mohammed fighting the pagans of the Arabian Desert. To be deemed upstanding and “just”—*tsadik*—the Jewish man had to follow the 613 precepts contained in the *Shulkhan Arukh*.<sup>22</sup> This

<sup>21</sup> The story was heard by the author in a prayer-service led by Lubavitsche Rebbe Schneerson in New York in 1978.

<sup>22</sup> The *Shulkhan Arukh* which in Hebrew signifies “set table” is also of Sephardic origin, was codified in 1565 in Tzfat by one of the most prominent of Sephardic mystics, Josef Karo. He

was, in essence, a daily test of character. Predictably, Lilith caused even the most upright *tsadik* to violate Karo's code, particularly as regards adultery.

It is impossible to separate Lilith from sex, insofar as her expulsion from Eden arose from her demanding the dominant posture during intercourse with Adam. With the onset of the Sephardic Exile in 1492, it becomes equally impossible to separate Lilith's sexuality from the imperative of upholding Judaism's statutes. Disasters were attributed by the Cabbalists to having strayed from the sacred precepts. Human agency in the form of prescribed religious observance thus became a magical element in detonating or averting disasters.

### Lilith as the Anti-Mother

In this same manner, attribution of infant death to Lilith took its alibi from some flaw in Jewish behavior. The death of a child has always been the most horrid dilemma for the monotheist, who must see all things as coming from God. But why does God punish one who has not yet sinned, namely, the child? Premature death would have been a well-known facet of life prior to 1492 and after it as well. But how could one justify the death of an innocent being theologically? In the event of such a tragedy, it was easier to lambast Lilith's mania for human children as the primary cause than it was to question God's dictates, the most perverse of which were obediently enacted by Lilith.<sup>23</sup>

Prior to, during, and after childbirth, protective charms against the she-demon proliferated, and many may still be seen in North African Jewish communities. Use of these amulets against Lilith reached its height following the Iberian expulsions. This is no accident, for as Ausubel noted when referring to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the Sephardic Diaspora: "Superstition, excessive piety and delirious cabbalistic dreams proved excellent modes of escape from the unhappy reality of Jewish life."<sup>24</sup> In North Africa, where Spanish Jewish exiles began to resettle following the 1391 pogroms, amulets such as the five-fingered hand of Fatima, (the *hamsa*)<sup>25</sup>, large blue stones, and mirrors in the form of black-lined eyes were used by both Muslims and Jews in hopes of averting Lilith's (or any other

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claimed to have received it directly from an angel whom God sent on behalf of the Jewish people. Karo's thinking is typical of the Messianic wave that swept the first generations of Sephardic exiles. Human agency, in this case observance of the sacred precepts, the *mitzvot*, was believed to influence history: should all Jews follow the *mitzvot*, the Messiah would arrive.

<sup>23</sup> Hurwitz notes that in several early Greek and Aramaic texts, such as the *Testament of Solomon*, Lilith is placed in the role of child-strangler, but that "she does not do this on her own initiative but because she was created solely for this purpose" in *Lilith, the First Eve*, 118. Again, this points to Lilith as the servant of God, of He who created her.

<sup>24</sup> Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), 176.

<sup>25</sup> Hurwitz, *Lilith, the First Eve*, 150.

lesser demon's) "evil eye." If the amulets were not properly displayed, Lilith, it was rumored, would snatch the sleeping child.

However, if the parents displayed the names of the three names of the angels who had tried to return Lilith from her hiding place in the Red Sea, she would be powerless to harm the newborn (Schrire 1966, 118-120). Post-Expulsion folklore mentioned Lilith's merciful side, since it was she herself who had given the formula for the amulet: "But at heart she is not cruel. For out of compassion for her sister creatures, she has betrayed her own power. 'If you insert the names of the three angels, Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof, in an amulet and tie this charm around your children's neck,' she has whispered to the mothers of these innocent babies, 'I promise not to harm even one hair on their heads.' And she has never failed to keep her word."<sup>26</sup> As noted previously, The *Aleph-Bet of Ben Sirah* had stipulated that Lilith had provided the formula for the amulets, the *kmeyot*, to be used against her.

These *kmeyot* (the word is Aramaic) are ubiquitous during the most vulnerable period in the newborn's life: the eight days preceding the circumcision (for a boy) or the naming ceremony (for a girl). Red strings are tied around infants' wrists, in the hope that the imitation of blood will persuade Lilith not to shed the blood of the baby. Translucent blue beads and red *hamsa* ornaments hang over the baby's crib so that Lilith's magic will be deflected. Red boasts the already-cited identification with blood, the essence of life, while blue is an emblematic, universal symbol of the color of heaven. Pointedly, heaven is where Lilith, Queen of the *Sitra Ahra*, cannot ascend. Therefore, use of heaven's color on the cradle of the human child renders him or her invulnerable to the she-demon. Metaphorically, blue shields these portals where Lilith's presence is in transit between our world and her own. This is imitative magic in pure form.

The paradigm of Lilith as child-killer enabled the grieving parent to pin his or her rage on what was a coherent rationale. According to this mental construction, their child had died because they had not enacted the required precautions against the night-witch, precautions which Lilith herself had generously revealed. While nothing mitigated the tragedy of the baby's loss, this alibi at least transformed the child's death into a purposeful narrative. The persistence of the Lilith customs attested to the need for a coherent explanation of Evil, one that would avoid overtly blaming God, while simultaneously promising that human agency could counteract, via the amulets, God's mysterious and often cruel decrees.

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<sup>26</sup> Frankel, *The Jewish Spirit*, 22.

### Lilith's Functions in Early Modern Folklore

By the sixteenth century, Lilith's image had seeped into Jewish folklore, spreading outward with the Sephardic Diaspora. Spain's rabbinic academies had been destroyed, but due to the loss of those academies, certain elements previously limited to the recondite text — such as Lilith — entered the wider sphere of Jewish tradition. Beyond the prescribed spaces of institutional learning, the oral tradition of Lilith flourished. In fact, her folklore surmounted the chaos of the Expulsions precisely *because* it was unofficial. After all, folktales were their own self-perpetuating authority. “Although oral tales have often been regarded as the stepchildren of rabbinic authority, they have been lovingly embraced by the people, retold and singularly embellished by each community in the far-flung Jewish Diaspora”<sup>27</sup>. In addition, the written tradition that developed in the Sephardic Diaspora was less bound to rabbinical censorship than it had been in Sefarad. In the case of the Lilith stories, this is crucial, because some of them, including the *Father's Testament*, may actually have originated from earlier written sources, as did Lilith herself.

We know that as Queen of the *Sitra Abra*, Lilith can never successfully mother a fully human child, a fact that would have resonated powerfully with anyone listening to the Lilith stories. For a Jewish woman of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sterility was to be feared. Jewish physical and religious continuity was precarious in the post-Expulsion period, and the scattered refugee communities doubtless felt more vulnerable than when Sefarad had been their territorial and cultural center. Not to have biological children in the post-Expulsion period was assumed to be a disaster for the physical perpetuation of the Jewish community. This is why, paradoxically, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sephardic Jewish folklore, Lilith's status as “anti-mother” and “anti-wife” enabled her to play a utilitarian role in Messianic Redemption.

Lilith was God's instrument for judging the opportune moment of the Coming. By the mid-sixteenth century, Sephardic Jewish mystics based in the Galilean city of Tzfat began to turn their energies away from remembering the lost Sephardic Golden Age and towards hastening the Messianic Era. But before that could occur, God placed Lilith in their way. She was the litmus test of resisting the *yetser ha-ra*, “the evil inclination.” Surrounded by the petitions of would-be Messiah-bringers, Lilith had to winnow the candidates down until she discovered the stellar one who can withstand her charms. It is an ironic commentary on male virtue that, according to the Lilith legends, the Messiah has not yet arrived.

Oral tradition, taking its cue from earlier texts, presented Lilith as the dutiful wife of the Angel of Death, Satan/Samael. But in the new stories of the Sephardic Exile, Lilith was also a would-be happy housewife, if God and all the Messiah-obsessed rabbis would only let her be. It may be Lilith's status as Adam's divorcée

<sup>27</sup> Frankel, *The Jewish Spirit*, 9.

that explains why the Lilith stories proliferated in the post-Expulsion period. Once “divorced” from Iberian soil, it became possible to empathize with other “divorcées,” even ones as questionable as Lilith. De Leon surely did not intend for Lilith to become a symbol of empathy with the Jewish people when he authored the *Zohar* two centuries before the Expulsion, but the circumstances of the Sephardic exile modified Lilith’s character in oral transmission.

### Lilith and Rabbi Josef Della Reyna: A non-marriage of opposites

Folklorist Nathan Ausubel has given us a detailed retelling of the sixteenth-century legend pertaining to Lilith and the scholar Josef Della Reyna.<sup>28</sup> This is one of the most important of the “messianic” Lilith stories. The tale was still extant in Sephardic Greek and Italian communities in the mid-twentieth century, and it was particularly popular among the Spanish and Italian Jews of the *Old Yishuv* in Jerusalem one generation earlier. Historically, Della Reyna had been part of a group of cabbalistic rabbis based in Tzfat. That group, Ausubel reminds us, eschewed rationalism in their search for spiritual meaning, and “wove their web of morbid enchantment around Jewish daily thinking and feeling.”<sup>29</sup> Josef Della Reyna lived within that “morbid enchantment,” devoting himself obsessively to hastening the advent of the Messiah. Messianic obsession would be, fictionally and allegorically speaking, Della Reyna’s downfall.

The story appeared in print in 1519 in Jerusalem, in a Hebrew manuscript called *Igeret Sod HaGeulah* (News of the Secret of the Redemption), and it may have been viewed in its own time as a genuine news item. It later underwent a florid literary re-working by Salomon Novarro (b.1606), a Jewish convert to Christianity in Italy who augmented the Lilith role and made her a paramour of Della Reyna. Centuries later, Gershom Scholem found the story circulating orally among the Sephardic community during the British Mandate. He transcribed the spoken story in 1933, a classic example of the back and forth movement of oral and written traditions.<sup>30</sup> Scholem’s version appeared to adhere to the outlines of the 1519 text without Novarro’s additions. Ausubel recounts Scholem in a more animated and less “folkloric” fashion, while leaving details of the 1519 story intact.

Ausubel presents us with a she-demon who has managed to establish a stable home life with her second spouse, Satan. After her dire experience with Adam, married life with the Angel of Death must have been a relief. The Lilith of this story no longer flies through the air to kidnap human babies, and she is well-settled

<sup>28</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 206-15.

<sup>29</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 124-30.

into her home in the *Sitra Ahra*, leagues beneath the deepest ocean. But despite Lilith's acquiescence to her destiny in the Other Realm, her peace of mind and hearth are continually disturbed by Rabbi Joseph Della Reyna's attempts to summon the Messiah before God's appointed time. Such an event would nullify Lilith's and Satan's legitimacy, since no evil, or free choice between good and evil, will be necessary in the Messianic Age.<sup>31</sup>

After purifying his body and mind, Della Reyna is almost ready for the sacred task. Worried that their existence is in peril, Lilith goads Satan into action: "He then took counsel with his wife Lilith *who upbraided him for doing nothing* when their very existence was threatened."<sup>32</sup> [Italics mine] At Lilith's behest, Satan begs God to hinder the rabbi's plan. While insisting that the Other World pair refrain from action as long as Della Reyna adhered to his moral code, God concedes on a key issue: "however," added God, 'should Joseph Della Reyna stray from righteousness by even the thickness of a hair, *I will give you the power* to bring his plan to naught."<sup>33</sup> [Italics mine]

As in the previously cited quotes from Job, where Satan receives authorization from God to destroy Job's well-being (I, 11-12) and the *Zohar* (III, 19a), where God empowers Lilith descend to earth and tempt another would-be hero after she has finished seducing a previous one, God allows the otherworldly couple to work their will on His creatures. In this story, God could have protected Della Reyna if He chose to do so; narratively, He does not.

As for Lilith, her character reflects her task in the structure of the folktale.<sup>34</sup> She is an archetype resembling the conjoined characters of Virtue and Vice in a medieval morality play. Here, she must determine whether Della Reyna's high degree of religious faith is commensurate with his code of sexual conduct. Lilith is the barometer which God utilizes to determine the sincerity of intention, the *kavanah*.<sup>35</sup> Now she must ascertain that Della Reyna can withstand the one temptation

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<sup>31</sup> The *Zohar* remarks that Lilith will die on Judgment Day (55a), a fact which illustrates her desperation in the narrative, (assuming that this idea was tacitly understood by the story-tellers and their audiences).

<sup>32</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 212.

<sup>33</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> The structural analysis of folktales and the "tasks" of the characters are detailed in the writings of Tzvetan Todorov and of course, in the father of Structural Anthropology, Claude Levi Strauss, in his *Mythologies*.

<sup>35</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *The Faith of Maimonides* (Tel Aviv: Naidat Press, 1989), 74: Maimonides defined *kavanah* as being paramount "whether or not Man understands God's plan." However, his arch-critic, (and arch-mystic) Hasdai Crescas believed that *kavanah* was secondary to Divine determinism. The Lilith stories, while quoting neither Crescas nor Maimonides, strike a balance between the two: God has a plan, but is willing to negotiate with Lilith and Satan so as to better determine the intentions of His creation.

that has not yet stood in his way: Lilith herself. She embodies the castigating intent of the Almighty, and human free will is invariably weaker than she is.

Lilith and Satan are allowed by God to lead Della Reyna astray, so that they may verify whether he is truly as righteous as he purports to be.<sup>36</sup> In the meantime, Della Reyna already enjoys the support of Lilith's angelic foes in heaven, such as the arch-angel Metatron: "He [Metatron] warned him [Della Reyna] especially to guard himself against the weakness of pity towards evil after he had made captive Satan and Lilith."<sup>37</sup> Della Reyna even receives Metatron's gift, a plate inscribed with the Hebrew *Tetragrammaton*, the Name of God, composed of 72 letters. This is the trigger that makes Lilith spring into action, since the *Tetragrammaton* was thought to have such force that merely pronouncing it would summon the Messiah. Kabbalistic thought adds a caveat: the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton must never be attempted by one whose intention, whose *kavanah*, was questionable. Lilith's "professional duty" was to verify Della Reyna's *kavanah*, and his worthiness to pronounce the Name.

Contrary to our expectations, and to previous literary representations of her, the Lilith of this story does not employ sex in a conventional sense. She is, after all, a good wife, faithful to Satan. Instead, she tries a subterfuge. Rather than awakening the rabbi's venal instincts, she persuades her demon husband to play upon Della Reyna's sense of compassion. To that end, she stages a dramatic scene in which she and Satan are ostensibly starving to death. Humbly, the couple begs a few crumbs from Della Reyna. "All this time Satan and Lilith were moaning in heartbreaking voices, 'Help us! Give us something to eat! We're dying of hunger!'"<sup>38</sup>

Della Reyna initially resists the underworld pair. He recognizes their true nature when they appear in the guise of two black dogs, and he promptly binds them with magical amulets. But as opposed to the amulets whose power Lilith has granted to human mothers, Della Reyna's *kmeyot* prove ineffective. She may show sympathy to other females by revealing how to ward off her own destruction, but no similar mercy will be shown to Della Reyna, who is blasphemously attempting to force the Almighty's schedule for Redemption.

While enchained by the amulets, Lilith reverts to her human form, but with "wings and fiery eyes."<sup>39</sup> A recognizable, (if witch-like) woman, she exudes sexuality even while not being overtly sexual with Della Reyna. But instead of seducing the rabbi, she requests fragrant spices from him for herself and Satan. Although the rabbi had denied Lilith food and drink, surely he could not be so cruel as to deny

<sup>36</sup> In the *Book of Job* Satan entreats God to send Job hardship for the same reason: to test his righteousness.

<sup>37</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 215.

<sup>39</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 214

her a mere fragrance. Her reasoning is accurate, and she beseeches him: “At least give us a smell of your spices or we perish.”<sup>40</sup>

The sound of Lilith’s human-like female voice is too much for Josef Della Reyna.<sup>41</sup> He succumbs and offers her and Satan the chance to inhale some herbs.<sup>42</sup> Redemption is lost at this moment. As foreseen, all Hell breaks loose, quite literally: “Immediately, tongues of searing flames shot forth from their nostrils. . . Then the voice of the Almighty sounded, ‘Pay heed, o Joseph Della Reyna! No human has the power to end the Exile! I alone, God, will hasten the Redemption of the Jewish people when the right time comes.’”<sup>43</sup>

The rabbi is disgraced before God and shamed by Lilith, thereby constituting an admonition for all who heard the story. Morally, Della Reyna falters in his ability to choose between the Good Instinct and the Evil Instinct, the latter embodied by Lilith. By showing mercy to the she-demon, he reneges on his promise to God, whom Lilith serves. And because Judaism teaches that the adult individual is responsible for his or her actions, Lilith cannot be accused of corrupting Della Reyna. She merely exposes his unpreparedness for the objective that he has chosen, like a crystal that reflects clouded human motives. In the same way that Satan “tested” Job’s righteousness in the Old Testament, Lilith tested the moral stature of God’s (male) creation in Jewish folklore. If Creation failed, it was hardly Lilith’s, or Satan’s, fault.

Lilith’s representation of Evil, linked to male inability to resist her, gave the worshipper an object towards which he or she could direct or deflect his anger at God for delaying the Messiah. “Lilith as deflector” sidestepped the question that monotheism downplays: if there is only one God, and God’s ways are just, why does He allow evil to exist in the world? Is the Divine gift of free choice always a satisfactory answer for so much human suffering, when God must know beforehand that evil people will obviously not choose Good?<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 215.

<sup>41</sup> The equation of female voice and diabolical temptation was particularly common during the Early Modern Period in both England and Spain; Butler notes that “female musicians were frequently accused of inciting lust, and compared with courtesans and the Homeric sirens in their threat to male self-control.” Katherine Butler, “By Instruments her Powers Appear: Music and Authority in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012): 357. Historically, Talmudic Judaism denied women the right to chant from the *Torah* in male company on the same grounds.

<sup>42</sup> The inhalation of spices is a recognizable reference for the Jewish audience: it refers to the *Havdalah* ceremony which closes the Sabbath on Saturday night. Spices are used to wish the worshippers a good and sweet week. By inhaling the spices, Lilith acts as an “anti-Shekhinah” and burlesques the Sabbath, the day when she has no power.

<sup>43</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 215.

<sup>44</sup> The English poet Archibald MacLeish summed up this dilemma in his play about Job’s sufferings, where we read: “If God is God He is not good; If God is Good He is not God. . . .”

Whatever the answer, Lilith's omniscient "boss," God Almighty, demands obedience, and she enacts the Creator's terrible will. In this manner, Lilith redirects (and deflects towards herself) the worshipper's unease with some of God's dictates. Philosophically, she occupies the role of the excoriated middle woman between the Creator and His creation. Rather than confronting the manager, it was, and is, far easier to complain about His appointees. In a world in which God's immanence was taken to be present in all things, Lilith could receive all the unease and despair of the worshipper, while God's motives remained unquestioned.

### The She-Demon Forsaken: Lilith in "The Father's Testament"

*"She [Lilith] retorted, 'We are both equal, for we are both issued from dust. . .therefore I will not be submissive to you. . .they [the three angels] ordered her to return at once to Adam, but she refused.'"*<sup>45</sup>

As we have seen, insubordination to male commands meant that Lilith would never mother a child with a human husband. Yet there were hints of another possibility, as noted previously in this essay. In the role of another she-demon named Na'amah, Lilith could have semi-human children, though this aspect of her personality had not surfaced much in the Lilith folklore, because it was perhaps too horrifying to contemplate.<sup>46</sup> But in the folklore of the Expulsion, there is a notable exception to this tendency. It can be found in Matilda Koen Serrano's bilingual (Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish) collection of Sephardic legends, *Lejendas*. Although Lilith does, in "The Father's Testament," give birth to and care for a half-human baby, that story, like all the others, carries with it the warning against choosing the iniquity that Lilith exemplifies. The price of her child's humanity, his "better half" so to speak, will be Lilith's self-denial as a maternal figure. The impossibility of seeing Lilith as a fully normal maternal figure may be what impels the narrative to show Lilith handing the child over to his human family, while she returns to her Other World. Evil herself, she chooses Good.

Tamara Alexander, of Ben-Gurion University's Department of Hebrew Literature and Folklore, asserts that the framework story is of medieval Sephardic origin, predating the Expulsion. If that is so, then in this case, an older trope was adapted to the more chaotic circumstances of the Early Modern Period, during

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Lilith occupies that middle ground between God and the Goodness whose Purpose is far from clear to human beings; she avoids us thinking too deeply about why it is that God created Evil.

<sup>45</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 592-4.

<sup>46</sup> Popular tradition in "Spanish Sahara" Jewish communities in Melilla and Ceuta speaks of red hair, left-handedness, and green eyes as constituting characteristics of some of Lilith's half-demon descendants. Green eyes are also frequently attributed to Samael, so perhaps he too has infiltrated the human race.

what Ausubel correctly called Sephardic Judaism's superstitious "Dark Ages."<sup>47</sup> In 1949, the Israeli Institute for Folklore and Ethnology published, in Hebrew, "*Ma'aseh shel Yerushalmi*" (The Deeds of a Jerusalemite), a very popular folktale in the Jerusalem Sephardic community, and the one which is the basis for Koen-Serrano's version. It combines the witchcraft that Ausubel cites from the Jewish early modern period, with the medieval warning that "going to sea" will bring ruin.<sup>48</sup> The latter would have been a common admonition in stories from the Middle Ages, when sea-travel was more limited than during the Age of Exploration (also the Period of Expulsion).

Italian Jewish playwright Judah Leone Ben Isaac Sommo's sixteenth-century farce, *Zabut Bedihutab de Kidushin* ("Identifying the Mockery of Marriage"), may have provided an additional framework for the oral story which was first transcribed in 1949 (and was later transcribed by M. Koen Serrano in 1999). In Sommo's Hebrew theater piece, a son disobeys his dying father and goes to sea, as will occur again in our story. His disobedience leads to multiple romantic complications; but all is happily resolved, and Lilith is nowhere present in Sommo's text.

However, as is clear from the origins of the story of Della Reyna and Lilith, it was not unusual for oral tradition to borrow what it wanted from literature, and vice-versa. Sephardic Jews who settled in the Italian city-states following the Expulsion could easily have inserted a popular motif from Sommo's Renaissance play within a matrix of an older story, which was itself adapted to post-Exile uncertainty and fears.

In "The Father's Testament," Lilith assumes multiple guises. She is the daughter of Ashmeday, himself traditionally a demon of chaos but here a loving Other World patriarch. She is the mother of an *almost* human child, and finally, she is the faithful and ultimately betrayed wife of a volatile mortal. That last role is a possible variant of the *Zobar* and *Ben Sirah's* archetype of Lilith as the divorced and expelled wife of Adam. Not so coincidentally, the term for divorce in Hebrew, *girushin*, shares its three root letters gimmel-resh-shin<sup>49</sup> with the term for Expulsion, *gerush*, as in the Expulsion from Spain: *Gerush Sefarad*. Lilith, "*ba-gerusha*" (the divorced woman) also signifies "the exiled woman," key terms that conflate their definitions in the she-demon narrative.

<sup>47</sup> Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> The *Ruby Serpent*, a Middle Eastern Jewish tale of the medieval period, also contains the father's command to the son to never embark on a ship, and there as well, the son violates his father's wishes, although to good effect: shipwrecked after a storm, the magical serpent leads him to his lady-love, none other than King Solomon's daughter. In both stories however, the sea is equated with the pathway to romance, sometimes doomed and sometimes felicitous. In our story the shipwreck leads to the demons' world; in the *Ruby Serpent*, to royalty and a happy end. The story is recounted in: Frankel, *The Jewish Spirit*, 114.

<sup>49</sup> Alcalay, *A Complete Hebrew English Dictionary*, 388-389.

As the impossible supernatural wife, Lilith shares her fate with many figures of folklore. She is a paradigm scattered throughout cultures the world over, a sort of Jungian archetype of the unconscious.<sup>50</sup> French medieval literature told of Melusine, the serpent woman forced to flee her knightly lover once he uncovered her reptilian nature; Mayan traditions from post-Conquest Yucatan told of the doomed union between the mortal man and the seductive Xtabay, enchantress of the crossroads who lures suitors into a forgetful sleep or eternal death.<sup>51</sup> At a much later date, in nineteenth-century Danish literature, Hans Christian Anderson reutilized the theme of an impossible human/supernatural union to great effect in “The Little Mermaid.” Throughout these tales, the commonality shared by the human male/supernatural woman pairings is sterility. Neither Melusine, nor the Xtabay, nor the Little Mermaid bears a child.<sup>52</sup> In these unions, there can be no biological continuity. These female “monster” stories instantiate, *a priori*, Roland Barthes’s principle of the “chimerical body” as he elaborated upon it in *S/Z*: a merging of incompatible entities, deemed “monstrous” by society because it produces no offspring.<sup>53</sup>

Unexpectedly in this Sephardic story from Jerusalem’s *Old Yishuv* community, Lilith breaches the boundaries of Barthes’s “monstrous” and crosses into it, where humans and demons embrace.<sup>54</sup> She gives birth to a “blended” child, albeit one she will ultimately pass over to the human side. By virtue of her temporary motherhood with her second human husband (Adam having been the first); Lilith tenuously unifies our world and the *Sitra Agra*. In the act of delivering her half-human child to the fully human side, where he becomes a learned man and raises a family, Lilith manages to inject some of the alien Other Realm into our own. By entreating them (the humans) to treat her child well, Lilith merges human and Other bloodlines: “I want you to take my child. Find him someone to marry, and give him all good things.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Sigmund Hurwitz to a greater degree, and Scholem to a lesser one, stress the role of Lilith in the (Freudian) Jewish subconscious, related to primal fears of castration and death.

<sup>51</sup> Antonio Mediz Bolio’s 1944 version of the Xtabay in *La tierra del faisán y del venado* [*Land of the Pheasant and the Deer*] (Mexico: Botas Publicaciones) is the definitive transcribed version of this Mayan femme fatale.

<sup>52</sup> The Xtabay theme contains a merciful variation; Mayan folklore also portrays her as the protectress of orphans.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes (1974), in *S/Z* analyzed the “impossible” body of the transvestite male, in the personage of the courtesan S/Zambinella. His use of the term “monstrous” referred to society’s vision of any union outside the heterosexual norm; it did not refer to any supernatural horror or mock any physical defect.

<sup>54</sup> The term *Old Yishuv*, “old settlement,” refers to the Sephardic Jews who lived in Jerusalem prior to the founding of the State of Israel, and who identified more with Judeo-Spanish culture than with New *Yishuv* Hebrew culture.

<sup>55</sup> Koen-Serrano, *Legendas: Kuentos Morales de la Tradicion Judeo-Espanyola*, (Jerusalem: Nur Akafot Publishers, 1999), 245.

Adequately enough for all things connected to Lilith, the *Father's Testament* commences with a transgression. A young man on the coast of the Holy Land defies a vow made to his father never to cross the sea; he embarks on a voyage and is shipwrecked in that Kabbalistic predecessor of the Antipodes, the *Sitra Abra*. Contrary to Counter-Reformation depictions of Hell, (or the Antipodes), the demonic denizens of the *Sitra Abra* are described in this story as adhering to a code of honor. They even guarantee an education to their children in accordance with Jewish religious precepts: "Ashmeday said: 'I have a child. I want this human being to teach him a bit of Torah. Then we will see what happens.'" (ibid, 239) Thanks to the demon's good faith, the wayward human is employed in the *Sitra Abra* as a tutor for Ashmeday's son.

Tragically it is Lilith, here called euphemistically "Ashmeday's daughter," who becomes the object of the shipwrecked man's desire. She in turn reciprocates eagerly, as though she has been impatiently waiting. There is more than a hint of desperation in her plea: "Look my love; I am a she-demon, but I know the ways of a woman, I can give birth to a child, I can do anything." (ibid, 241) In the narrative, the "chimerical body," to borrow Barthes's phrase, is breached, but at terrible cost to Lilith, whose intentions are more sincere than her lover's.

Ashmeday's daughter, the Lilith prototype who like her human husband remains unnamed throughout the tale, is quite anxious to have a human child. Notwithstanding her father's protestations that human men are never to be trusted, Lilith marries the alien newcomer, though she knows that he is already married to a human bride. Eventually, Lilith bears him a child named Solomon. (Since King Solomon is believed to have had power over the demons in Jewish folklore through the use of a magical ring, the name can hardly be arbitrary).

Blinded by love, Lilith allows her husband a journey to his human world in order to assuage his profound homesickness. Selflessly, she releases her Adam temporarily back to his former Eve: "I will let you go to your human wife for a year. Go and see her, and then come back to me."<sup>56</sup> Needless to add, once he escapes the demons' world, the fellow decides to remain with his first "Eve," and Lilith is abandoned in the *Sitra Abra*.

Heart-broken at being spurned, Lilith goes in search of her mortal spouse. She takes young Solomon in tow and ascends from the Deep Sea Other Realm to our human sphere. With the aid of some upstanding demons who are disgusted by human infidelity, Lilith discovers her perfidious lover. For the crimes to be properly judged—the man's adultery on one hand, and Lilith's revenge on the other—public testimony of the man's deceitfulness within the Jewish community, the *kehillah*, must be presented. Lilith complies with the legal conditions: "The she-demon

<sup>56</sup> Koen Serrano, *Legendas*, 241.

came; she came into his house, and said to him, 'I want all the people of the town to come forth. I want to speak with them. I want to tell them everything.'<sup>57</sup>

Now well reestablished in the human world, the man wishes to rid himself, quickly, of the embarrassing she-demon through a generous alimony: "I will hand you back our wedding certificate. You know that I am rich. My father has left me a fortune, amassed during his life. . . I'll give you the money, and you must go."<sup>58</sup> Shaken, Lilith realizes that her hope of a human family has been dashed. It seems that despite the *Zohar's* descriptions of Lilith as the beautiful harlot (*Zohar* 1:14b), in this story, she is offended at being treated as such.

Appearing to accept the deal, Lilith asks her husband one boon only: a final farewell kiss. The man yields to his demon-wife one last time, and the narrative turns on a fatal mix of sex and death. Lilith drowns or suffocates him in the kiss, whereupon the bigamous lover drops down dead.<sup>59</sup> "And while he was kissing her, she turned and drowned/strangled<sup>60</sup> him and left him there dead."

Her revenge is concluded. Lilith does not extract any collective punishment from her ex-husband's kin. On the contrary, she bequeaths her child to them, and then sadly returns to the *Sitra Agra*. Within the logic of the narrative, her "crime of passion," that last deadly kiss, is entirely understandable, if not indirectly justified. The most sympathetic characters in this tale are the demons, and so it is logical that the villagers agree to raise the half-demon child.

As previously stated, with the exception of Ashmeday and the boy Solomon, neither of the romantic protagonists is named, but it seems self-evident that Ashmeday's daughter is Lilith.<sup>61</sup> Who else could it be? Who else dwells in the "Other Realm" and has a tendency to seduce, and be seduced by, mortal men? It is probable that the Lilith legend was so well known by the post-Expulsion period that names were superfluous, because the archetypes were recognizable. This anonymity may itself be a nod to Lilith's insinuated role in *Genesis*, as reread through

<sup>57</sup> Koen-Serrano, *Legendas*, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Koen-Serrano, *Legendas*, 245.

<sup>59</sup> By the 14<sup>th</sup> century polygamy had ended among Sephardic Jews; while it existed on a very limited scale in some of the Jewish communities of Yemen, the lover in this Sephardic story is definitely viewed as a false bigamist.

<sup>60</sup> Koen-Serrano, *Legendas*, 245. The word in Judeo-Espanyol used by Koen-Serrano is "aogo" which in Spanish would be "ahogo" (the 'h' always being silent), meaning "drowned." However, as no one is under water at this point, it would be logical to assume that strangulation is implied, and this is indeed given as the term in the Hebrew translation, "khankah."

<sup>61</sup> That the two named protagonists are Solomon and Ashmeday cannot be coincidence. Judeo-Spanish folklore tells of Ashmeday the demon granting a boon to King Solomon: a magical worm that can bore through stone, and helps Solomon build the Temple in Jerusalem. The story can be seen to insinuate an "otherworldly" origin to King Solomon, and the impact of these two names would not have been lost on Sephardic Jews of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

the lens of the *Zohar*: Lilith is that first “unnamed” woman created with Adam on the sixth day of Creation.

Nonetheless, since the demon Ashmeday is explicitly “named” in his paternal function, and Ashmeday is often Lilith’s husband/lover, it is equally possible that the she-demon in the story may in fact be Lilith’s *daughter*. Throughout the *Targum Jonathan*, an Aramaic commentary and translation of the Bible from the third century, Ashmeday is interchangeable with Satan/Samael, Lilith’s Other World consort. Following this line of reasoning, Lilith would be the unnamed and unmentioned wife of Ashmeday. By default, this would make Lilith the implied *mother* of the unhappy female protagonist.

In that case, Lilith’s incapacity to raise a human family is generationally transmitted. Demonic sterility is a hereditary disease. Ominously, not only Lilith was condemned to never raise a fully human child. Even her demon-daughter was consigned to the same unjust fate. In the framework of this supernatural tragedy, the figures of Lilith (and her daughter) prove how unworthy human beings are to enter the Messianic Age. Not only do men submit to Lilith’s and her daughter’s sexual charms, but afterwards, those same men refuse to fully assume the consequences of their actions. Human beings were proven to be sexually and emotionally abusive, untrustworthy, and false. Put simply, they did not yet deserve the Messiah. In accordance with the teleology that dominated the monotheistic vision of history, humanity in general, and the Jews in particular, must be “tested” many more centuries until they were worthy of redemption. Until then, the Jews, and the rest of humanity, must suffer and wait.

### Lilith in the post-Enlightenment imagination

Lilith is conspicuously absent from the flowering of Sephardic literature of the eighteenth century, a renaissance begun by Istanbul’s Rabbi Culli’s publication of *Meam Loez* in 1730. Her invisibility on the written Enlightenment-era page is not surprising, since Lilith is not part of the acceptable canon in Jewish tradition. The *Meam Loez* is a biblical commentary which, in the tradition of Samuel Usque’s earlier biblical commentary, adheres to text. It is not concerned with the mystical (or imaginary) spaces between the letters, as is the Kabbalah.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, the increasing incorporation of Jews into all spheres of social and political life in Europe and the Mediterranean meant that Lilith began to grace non-Jewish texts. Robert Browning published his poem *Adam, Lilith and Eve* in 1883, demonstrating a firm grasp of Lilith’s *Zohar*-based story; in Browning’s

<sup>62</sup> The allusion here is to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jewish mystic Jose Chicotilla, famous for having referred to the Torah as “black fire” (the letters) on “white fire” (the parchment). Cabalistic mystics, obviously, preferred the white fire, as it was only there that they could dare to insert, or perceive, the Lilith legend in Genesis’ account.

famous phrase, “the Paradise-door proved locked” for Lilith. Her first major apparition of the twentieth century was in the Armenian poet Avetic Isakyan’s poem *Lilith* in 1921. Written while Isakyan was in Italy, the poem reflects the typical femme fatale of Romantic poetry, made more threatening thanks to her God-given talents, and the God-given backing she enjoys for all her exploits.

In the mid- and late-twentieth century, textual study of Lilith had begun to shift from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe. Fascination with Lilith’s eroticism spilled over from the popular to the academic world, in a reverse motion from what had characterized the extension of the Lilith figure, from hermetic texts to folklore, during the early modern period. German Jewish scholars Gershom Scholem and, later, Sigmund Hurwitz devoted sizable portions of their analysis of the Kabbalah to the Lilith figure. Hurwitz focused on the more cannibalistic aspects of the child-eating anti-maternal figure. (Hurwitz, 221-224), while Scholem’s work presents Lilith as the Dark Mother. She is the underside of God’s maternal presence, the *Shekhinah*.

The *Shekhinah* or “presence” in Hebrew is a feminized version of the three-letter Hebrew root shin-kaf-nun, “shakhen,” to be present, to be immanent in the world. The *Shekhinah* was the feminine aspect of God, but, like Lilith, never independent of God Himself. She is the divine maternal emanation. As with her counterpart Lilith, the *Shekhinah* had found her way into Sephardic tradition via the Babylonian Talmud. (*Mishnah Bereshit*: 7: a and 17: a) According to the vision of the Sephardic mystics who settled in Tzfat post-1492, the *Shekhinah* descended to the sphere of human beings, the Bnei *Adam*, once every seventh day on the eve of the Jewish day of rest, the *Shabbat*. Like Lilith, she too goes into Exile, although the *Shekhinah* chooses the exile of her own free will, whereas Lilith is spurned.<sup>63</sup>

Salomon Alfasi enshrined the *Shekhinah* in his sixteenth-century Sabbath acrostic prayer, *Licha Dodi*. In it, Alfasi calls the *Shekhinah* by the term “my beloved” (*dodi*) a term interchangeable in early modern Hebrew with “bride.” He then describes how he (the male worshipper) and she (the *Shekhinah*) will be husband and wife on the Sabbath. *Licha Dodi / Likrat Calah / Pnei Shabbat / Nikablah*, the poem’s refrain, translates as “Come, my beloved / you will be as the wedding’s bride / and together we shall receive the Sabbath Day.” This is the Jewish alchemical divine wedding.

According to Sephardic folklore, Lilith, Queen of the Other Realm, was immobilized on the Sabbath Day by the *Shekhinah*, the Sabbath Queen. On Shabbat, the anti-mother was overcome by the supreme motherly aspect of the Almighty. Lilith, therefore, represented the days without redemption, the exile without end

<sup>63</sup> A Midrashic tale, from *Lamentations Raba* 1:6, states that the Shekhinah followed the children of Israel into Exile following the Babylonian invasion of Judah, and specifically after Nebuchadnezzar kidnapped the Israelite children.

during the week, whereas the *Shekhinah*, Lilith's antithesis, offered a glimpse of the Messianic Age.

In Jewish thought, the *Shekhinah*, who is an emanation of the divine, remains impersonalized, since personalizing the divine would be tantamount to idolatry. Lilith, on the other hand, is profane and highly personal. We, the "folk," live with her six days a week. We know her "lore" and spend more time with her than we do with the *Shekhinah*. Once we begin to understand the pain of her symbolic exile from Eden through the example of the Expulsions from Sefarad, we can begin to pity Lilith's unenviable fate. In the modern literary sense, we can do something unimaginable in the religious sense: we can "identify" with Lilith.

### Conclusion

Literarily speaking, Lilith is an unfinished trope. Despite her longing to become the mother of the human race, God has consigned her to the Other Sphere. From that unhappy vantage point, Lilith uncovers the failings of all men, from the most vile to the most righteous. Ethically, this is the reason that the Other Sphere is always impinging on our human existence: we must define ourselves against it, in order to do good. Lilith thus represented the Expulsion, not only from Sefarad, but from Paradise. She is the negative model, the one that we must shy away from. And she must be there, or else free will, the most important condition that God has given to man, is meaningless.

Lilith is placed (by God) in our world in the same manner that the serpent is placed (by God) in Eden. Jewish tradition does not see a diabolical presence in the serpent. God ordained the snake to tempt Eve, who in turn tempted Adam. Adam and Eve had the power to refuse, but they succumbed, and their punishment was expulsion. Decontextualized, the Eden story provided an axiological justification for human wanderings and pain. Lilith's stories explained why this suffering continued.

Judaism does not believe in evil or good beyond the sphere of God's intent. Therefore, the Expulsion could not be attributed to Satan's or Lilith's own volition. Somehow, reasoned the mystics, these disasters must conceal a divine intent. That intent would be redemption. Consequently Lilith became, willy-nilly, a collaborator in the divine plan. Designated by God as the eternal temptress, she, like Satan in the Book of Job, would define Man's worthiness for the Day of Judgment and the Messianic Age.

Lilith is Eve's antithesis for all eternity. Still, far from being a Kabbalistic suffragette, the messy, fascinating, and complex Lilith construction illustrates an anti-behavioral code for the Jewish woman of the late medieval Sephardic world. Her character does not champion women. On the contrary, it exemplifies patriarchal thought. Through Lilith we learn that a strong woman is unmarriageable (at least for *human* males) and that she impedes Redemption as well. Samael is no substitute

for a human bridegroom, because there could be no (human) Jewish community, practically speaking, in the *Sitra Agra*.

Lilith thus becomes the shadow example. She is what we must avoid so as not to prolong the hell of expulsion. Otherwise, we risk being expelled forever from Eden, Sefarad, or wherever, just as Lilith was expelled from Eden. In this way, Lilith supplied an alibi for the existence of torments that she herself had not caused. This is the axiological point at which Lilith diverges radically from Christianized conceptions of evil. Unlike the New Testament devil, she remains firmly within the divine plan. Her malice is directed toward Adam, and Adam's annoying descendants. In contrast, Lilith remains unquestionably a loyal servant of God.

