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FROM DEMONESS TO GOD'S PARTNER:

**THE ASTONISHING CAREER OF THE WORLD'S
FIRST FEMINIST, LILITH**

It all started from an uncertain verse in Isaiah 34:14: "The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island and the satyr shall cry to his fellow; the screech owl (Lilith) shall also rest there, and find for herself a place of rest."¹ Uncertain because, as the attempts to analyze the verse by various scholars who have ventured on this territory show, the Hebrew word "lilith" used in this biblical passage does not appear anywhere else. There is, however, in Hebrew, the word "lilin," which may be generically translated as demons. Etymologists have found a possible source in the Assyrian-Babylonian word "lilitu," female demon or wind spirit, part of a triad used in magic invocations.² In this assumption it probably entered the Hebrew language also because of its similarity with the Hebrew word "layla," night. As for the translation of the Bible, in some versions Lilith was considered a proper name and kept as such, in others it was translated as "screech owl" or "creature of the night."

Notwithstanding the lack of clarity regarding her origin, Lilith was conceptualized to embody the most diverse negative aspects. The Babylonian Talmud depicted her as a demoness with a human appearance, except that she had wings (which made her look suspiciously similar to the Cherubim, a detail that was to become very significant in later kabbalistic literature.) The text described how she would steal the seed of men who slept alone in their house, as a result of "wet dreams," to bear new demons. It also mentioned that having realized the gravity of what he had done, Adam was separated from Eve for 130 years, during which time he fathered demons with Lilith. By the end of the Talmudic period, the Lilith legend was already extensively developed. In an attempt to find its source, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai pointed to a "careless weaving together of an early Judean and a late priestly tradition."³ In their view, Lilith typified the Anath-worshipping Canaanite women, who were allowed pre-nuptial promiscuity, and whose example the Israelite women followed, to the despair of prophets who kept denouncing these practices to no avail.

1 All translations of the Hebrew Bible are taken from *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945).

2 Some scholars (like Raphael Patai) have gone even further, considering that a possible original source of the notion might be found in a Sumerian table of 2000 BC, from the citadel of Ur, which speaks of the encounter between Gilgamesh and the female spirit/demon of the willow, Lillake, bound under the power of goddess Inanna (Anath in Canaanite and Hebrew).

3 Robert Graves, Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis* (New York, Greenwich House: Crown Publishers, 1983), p. 67.

Amulets designed to keep the demon Lilith away, bearing the names of three angels (Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangeloph) have been found in a number of Jewish communities during the Talmudic period, demonstrating that, far from being a mythological character only, Lilith was also involved in magical incantations. Gershom Scholem identified such practices as early as the sixth century, while Raphael Patai went back even further, showing that the magical aspects preceded the Talmudic period. In turn, Israel Gutwirth mentioned a practice of hanging cards above the bed of women in childbirth with the words of *Shir ha-Ma'alot* (Song of Steps) and a prayer that both mother and child be protected from Lilith.⁴ Moreover, some incantations found on bowls introduced an additional character in the already complicated script: the prophet Elijah, who is said to have met with Lilith while walking on the road and to have managed to stop her from injuring a woman.⁵

It is obvious that in her mythological and magical capacity, Lilith was meant to represent that which distracted man from the right path, and all related dangers befalling him. The Talmudic references show, however, that following the right path did not mean just studying and observing the tradition and the Torah in general, but also fulfilling the first divine commandment in particular: to be fruitful. That is, have a family and bear children. Hence the need felt by the Talmudic masters to launch a warning concerning the "threat" posed by Lilith to those who "sleep alone" or "are separated" from their wives, which may result in "wet dreams" that "bear demons."

Moreover, in order to be a convincing threat, Lilith had to have some attractiveness to herself. From the book *Kav ha-Yashar*, which contains several stories about Lilith, we find out, for instance, that she used to appear in the guise of a beautiful woman to attract men and turn their heads.⁶ In other works she was imagined as a beauty from waist up and as a monster, ugly and hairy, from waist down, or even as half woman half man. In this version she was also identified by the biblical exegesis in the image of the legendary Queen of Sheba, who tried to seduce King Solomon. Suspecting who he was dealing with, Solomon had her believe the floor was covered in water and made her raise her skirts thus revealing her hairy legs. Of course, this was ultimately just a metaphor. Lilith represented that which appeared beautiful on the outside. She was sex, indulgence, and everything one desired to do that was against the Laws of God. She stood for all the things in life that distracted man from the true path, showing her real face only after having seduced him.

All this symbolism related to Lilith was further refined and given new significance by the kabbalists. In the mystical approach, however, the problem with Isaiah 34:14 was further complicated by the problem with the contra-

⁴ Israel Gutwirth, *The Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987), pp. 111–112.

⁵ Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 227–228.

⁶ Israel Gutwirth, *The Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 111–112.

diction between Genesis 1:27, which states that: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them," and Genesis 2:18 and 22, which mention that: "the Lord God said: it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a help mate for him;" "And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man."

We know that this is due to the fact that the canonical form of the Hebrew Bible drew on several very different sources. But in Jewish tradition the Torah is of divine origin and therefore perfect. So, to reconcile the seemingly contradictory verses, a logically acceptable solution had to be found. The first explanation started from the fact that Adam was created in the image of the divinity, and God was male and female at the same time. As the human archetype, *Adam Kadmon* (the primordial man) would then have to have had both male and female features. Just as the divine unity was divided in two (the separation of the Waters by the Firmament) to create the universe, so too was mankind created by the separation of the Primordial Man into its two halves, male and female. It is no mere chance that the female part was called Eve (Hava is life in Hebrew; nevertheless, as Patai and Graves note, the name may have been a Hebraicized form of the divine name Heba, Hebat, Khebat or Khiba).⁷

The second, much more attractive explanation posits the existence of an occulted story, vaguely hinted at in Genesis: the story of Adam's first wife. The problem with this primordial marriage, which did not seem to differ much from those that followed, was the interpretation of the position of the two partners in relation to each other, from all points of view (including sexually). This had to do primarily with the fact that Adam apparently thought that only he was created in God's image and was therefore superior to Lilith. Consequently, he tried to dominate her. And this is how the first feminist issue emerged. Lilith's reaction was prompt. She went straight to God and convinced him to reveal His Ineffable Name to her. Uttering it, she was freed and fled Eden, finding her refuge in a cavern by the Red Sea, where she gave birth to legions of demons. Meanwhile, Adam started to regret his loneliness. Upon his request, God sent three angels to persuade Lilith to return to the conjugal home. Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangeloph informed her that if she refused, her children would be killed at a rate of one hundred a day. Even this fate was preferable to Lilith who, in exchange, promised to kill Adam's children. The danger was to girls in the first twenty days of their life (when they were frailer and more prone to infantile death), boys during the first eight days (until circumcision, when they would enter God's protection), mothers in labor (who were, again, more prone to childbirth death) and men while asleep, when she could steal their seed to bear new demons. Nevertheless, not being entirely insensitive, Lilith agreed to spare those protected by amulets bearing the names of the three angels.

7 Robert Graves, Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis*, p. 69.

But Adam was not much luckier with Eve. If Lilith was (and remained in mythology) a seductress, Eve remained legendary for being (much too) easy to seduce. Lilith, representing the will, did not agree to be manipulated; Eve, representing lack of will and submission, was easy to manipulate. To explain the easiness with which Eve gave in to the snake, another interpretation posits Lilith's return to take revenge. Thus, under the name of Lilith the Elder, or the Northern, she was seen as the wife of Samael, the fallen angel, with whom she plotted to punish Adam. In this version, Lilith was the snake's body and Samael its voice. The result of this joint venture was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Reacting like any normal man, Adam blamed Eve and left her for a while in order to find himself (we know from the Talmud that, whether he did find himself or not, his patience ran out after 130 years). But, as he could not stay alone during the temporary separation, Adam lived again with Lilith, bearing new demons.

The first written mention of this legend, in which it was clearly stated that Lilith was Adam's first wife, thereby merging the two different stories, was the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (c. 8th–10th century C.E.).⁸ Gershom Scholem assumed the *Alphabet* was the source of inspiration for Moses of Leon, who incorporated the Lilith symbolism into the Zohar.⁹ (Scholem was convinced the Zohar was written by Moses of Leon as a reaction to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, an opinion which has since been questioned, among others by Yehuda Liebes, who argues the Zohar was in fact a compilation edited and prefaced by Moses of Leon).¹⁰ However, between the *Alphabet* and the Zohar there was another book, *Treatise on the Left Emanation*,¹¹ written by Rabbi Isaac Cohen during the thirteenth century, in which a vast body of symbolism related to Lilith was exploited and explained. Although the *Treatise* does not seem to have been directly influenced by the *Alphabet*, it is highly probable that Rabbi Cohen was familiar with the latter work.

It was in fact the *Treatise* that made Lilith a star. Rabbi Isaac was the first Jewish mystic in the Middle Ages to present a mystical mythology in the form of an eschatology. Moreover, as the title shows, he connected the older demonology with the emanation theories of the Kabbalah. In fact, the *Treatise* was one of the most important books in the evolution of the Kabbalah, as it introduced a Gnostic dualism into kabbalistic symbolism. As Joseph

⁸ *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, translated by Norman Broznick, in David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990)

⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) p. 174. Nevertheless, other, more recent, scholars, such as Eliezer Segal of the University of Calgary, consider that the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* was an anti-Jewish (antisemitic?) satire, since all biblical characters mentioned therein seem to be referred to ironically (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/950206_Lilith.html)

¹⁰ Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) p. 85.

¹¹ R. Isaac b. Jacob ha-Kohen, *Treatise on the left emanation*, in *The Early Kabbalah* ed. Joseph Dan (New York, Mahwah, Toronto: New York, Paulist Press, 1986).

Dan puts it, "while earlier Kabbalists treated the problem of evil in a manner very similar to that of the philosophers, Rabbi Isaac created a demonological parallel structure of evil powers of emanation ruled by Asmodeus, Satan, Lilith, and their hosts, deriving from the left side of the *Sefirotic* tree. And in fine mythic form, these various demons are seething with lusts and desires, jealousies and hatreds, flailing about madly in their demon world, waiting to pounce on the hapless humans below."¹² Of course, this is reminiscent of the Greek Olympian gods.

The *Treatise* thus brought a new outlook that saw Lilith as the partner of Samael, and therefore the queen of the *sitra abra* (the other side, the realm of evil), fulfilling a function parallel to the *Shekbinah*, the divine presence in the world. Just as the *Shekbinah* was the mother of the House of Israel, Lilith was the mother of the unholy folk and ruled over all that was impure.¹³ At the same time, in the *Treatise* the symbolism related to Lilith appeared for the first time in combination with the symbolism of *Merkabah* mysticism (the mystical preoccupation with the ecstatic ascension to the Divine Chariot and the Throne of Glory described in the biblical story of Ezekiel). Thus, Lilith and Samael (seen in perfect parallelism with Adam and Eve) were emanations from under the Throne of Glory (from the left side, as the book's title indicates) and lived in the Inferior Palaces crossed by the mystic on his way to the Throne.

The Zohar continued this tradition, taking over most of the motifs and symbols but also adding new dimensions. Thus, following a Talmudic legend, the Zohar stressed the origin of certain classes of demons in sexual intercourse between humans and demons.¹⁴ On the other hand, from older times the evil spirits could be driven away not only with the names of the three angels but also with the divine name *Shaddai* crowned with the Supreme Crown.¹⁵ The seduction of Eve by the Snake (as a representation of Samael) was seen not only as a verbal manifestation but as a physical one as well, leading to the birth of Cain in his capacity as an assassin. A reverse model appears in *Sitrei Torah* (1:147 b–148 a) in the chapter entitled *Jacob's Journey*, with Adam being seduced by the Snake (as a representation of Lilith). Further on, however, the seeming contradiction was solved by the attribution of an implicit double aspect to the Snake as representation of the demonic: female and male at the same time. Developing this motif, Moses Cordovero showed in *Pardes Rimmonim*¹⁶ (186 d) that Samael and Lilith could only exist through the emanation of evil from one another.

In the world imagined by the kabbalists, Lilith came to represent all things that God frowned upon, not only with regard to the Israelites but also with

12 Joseph Dan (ed.), *The Early Kabbalah*, Introduction, p. 37.

13 Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), p. 358.

14 Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 321.

15 Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 227.

16 Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* (Pomegranate Orchard), quoted by Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 246.

regard to the world at large. By extension, Lilith symbolized the ways of the Pagans living around the Jews. She also symbolized anyone who violated the Torah or attacked the Israelites. From this perspective, Lilith was identified as the apotheosis of Babylon itself. Not by chance does the Zohar link the end of Lilith to the fall of Rome: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring about the destruction of the wicked Rome, and turn it into a ruin for all eternity, He will send Lilith there, and let her dwell in that ruin, for she is the ruination of the world. And to this refers the verse, 'And there shall repose Lilith and find her a place of rest' (Isaiah 34:14)."¹⁷

Surprisingly, the Kabbalah also saw Lilith as God's partner. In order to understand this notion, we must recall that in the kabbalistic view, God, whose infinity cannot be perceived by man, manifests Himself through his ten attributes or aspects (*keter* – crown, *chokhmah* – wisdom, *binah* – intelligence / understanding, *chesed* – loving kindness / mercy, *gevurah* – might / rigor, *tipheret* – beauty / harmony, *netzach* – victory / endurance, *hod* – splendor / glory, *yesod* – foundation and *malkhut* kingdom / sovereignty / god's presence), which correspond to the ten commandments. Furthermore, in Jewish mysticism the relation between the male and female aspects of the divine has a special significance, based on the separation between the creative, generative potency of the divinity and the recipient potency, which also stands for the *Shekhinah*, God's presence in the world. The kabbalistic evolution of the notion of *Shekhinah* is perhaps the most interesting example of the manner in which mysticism combined theology with mythology. If in Talmudic literature and Rabbinic Judaism *Shekhinah* simply meant God's presence in the world, in the Kabbalah this notion rendered an attribute / aspect of the divine from two different but complementary perspectives. The third attribute of the divine, *binah*, intelligence/understanding, represented the female aspect of the demiurgic potency, while the last attribute, *Shekhinah*, represented the feminine in general, seen as mother, wife and daughter. If the six attributes right before it were seen as the main members of the original man and conceived as the male foundation, which explains why the last of them, the foundation proper, was sometimes identified with the *Tzaddik* (wise/righteous man), *Malkhut/Shekhinah* appeared as a completion of the virile manhood and as a providential guidance of creation. Moreover, in the Kabbalah *Shekhinah* was identified with the Community of Israel on the one side and with the *Neshamah* (moral) level of the soul on the other side. Starting from the Talmudic interpretation of the Song of Songs, according to which the mother and daughter mentioned there were symbols of the Community of Israel, the kabbalists transferred this symbolism upon the *Shekhinah*, thus proposing an identity previously inexistent.

Thus, in her capacity as both God's presence in the world and Israel's mystical community, the *Shekhinah* was regarded as the wife of the wise man (*Tzaddik*) and by extrapolation of God Himself, seen, however, in one

¹⁷ Zohar 3:19a, quoted by Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 237.

of his ten aspects. In these circumstances, there was only one place where such a divine union could be consummated: the Temple of Solomon. Once the Temple was destroyed (70 CE) the *Shekbinah* (i.e., the Israelite people) was "taken captive" by the pagans and "raped" continuously. God refused to meet her in impurity. On the other hand, however, a God without a partner / female aspect was an incomplete divinity, which was impossible. This was again reminiscent of Canaanite mythology with its deities Baal and Anath. That was why, in order to maintain the balance, Adonay took Lilith (i.e., the peoples who kept the *Shekbinah* captive)¹⁸ as his partner. Given her impurity, God would have had no reason to regret his union with Lilith who was thus not his wife but only his harlot. Lilith thus became the *Dark Shekbinah*, the polar opposite of God's demiurgic female aspect, preserving however, at the same time, her quality of image (presence) that mankind reserved for God. Once again, it was the kabbalist's task to participate in the *Tikkun Olam* (repair of the world). Through his actions – meditation, contemplation, fasting, prayer, charity, etc. – the mystic helped reunite God with His *Shekbinah* on the Sabbath and on holy days, when Lilith could not remain near the divinity. Moreover, in kabbalistic thinking there was a close connection between the divine reunion of God and the *Shekbinah* on the one hand and the relation between man and his wife on the other. Just as God was complete only when both his male and female aspects were together, a human being was complete only when man and woman were together. Furthermore, the very coupling of man and wife – if done properly, of course – was believed to exert a mystical influence on the divine realm and bring together the male and female aspects of the divine.

But this was not the end of Lilith's story.

Fashionable and adaptable as always, Lilith did not miss the chance to move forward with the world, and eventually ended up in the land of opportunities, America, where she has been adopted by the feminist movement.

Even here, however, the open-ended nature of the Lilith symbol has allowed its use in the most diverse and even contradictory manners, from a symbol of feminine power to a destructive female symbol. If feminists see Lilith as the first independent woman created and there is a well-known Jewish feminist magazine called *Lilith*, which labels itself as an "Independent Jewish Woman's Magazine," there are still people who still see her as demoness, wicked and dangerous for men and children, and as such think of feminists as men-haters.

Whether or not the Lilith legend has any basis is beside the point. The truth is, any symbol used by feminists, especially within a religious context, will raise controversy and opposition. Obviously, the "first Eve" version of the story gives women a role to identify with in many religious traditions. Lilith provides the model of an independent woman who challenges the

18 Zohar 3:69a, quoted by Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 249.

system in which she is placed. Killing children only represents the expectable amount of madness that results from her solitude and exclusion.¹⁹ Moreover, her career would make any woman envious: from a lowly she-demon associated with nocturnal animals she worked herself up to the rank of God's consort. On the other hand, the fact that her advancement was based on her power of seduction can, again, be held against feminism!

Thus, crossing borders between countries/continents (from Sumer and Babylon to the Land of Israel, and from Europe to America), and religions (from Judaism to Christianity and Islam), but also from mythology to religion, philosophy and ultimately literature and arts, Lilith has become the symbol and embodiment of the most varied, sometimes even opposite, conceptions.

Today, Lilith remains a symbol of power simply by her survival. To close the circle, let us quote Raphael Patai:

A citizen of Sumer ca. 2500 BCE and an East European Hassidic Jew in 1880 CE had very little in common as far as the higher levels of religion were concerned. But they would have readily recognized each other's beliefs about the pernicious machinations of Lilith, and each other's apotropaic measures for driving her away or escaping her enticements.²⁰

19 <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Projects/Reln91/Power/lilith.htm>

20 Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 251.