

THE FACES OF LILITH: FINDING YOUR OWN VOICE IN MIDRASH**Lesson plan for adults**

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Lilith Evolved: Writing Midrash,” which can be found at

<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/sep07/>.

Bring enough copies of the Tanakh/Bible to class for each participant to have one.

- 1. Explain what a *midrash* is.** For what purpose do people write them? You may want to tell the class the following information:

Historically, rabbis wrote *midrash* to explain parts of the biblical text that aren't clear. If there seemed to be a missing piece to a story, or an inconsistency between two different passages, a redundant word or verse, the rabbis would explain the problem by writing a new *midrash*, filling in the missing dialogue, reconciling the seeming contradiction, or showing how there is no redundancy since each word is there to teach a different lesson or practice.

- 2. Read** Genesis chapter 1, verse 24 through the end of chapter 2, and chapter 3, verses 16-21, either aloud or silently. (Optionally, read the rest of chapter 3 for the full account of Adam and Eve's interactions with the apple and the snake.)

- 3. Discuss the following questions:**

- Why are there two creation stories in the Bible, one chapter after another?
- When are men and woman created in each story, and how does their creation differ from chapter 1 to chapter 2?
- What does it mean for Eve to be a fitting helper to Adam?

- Why do you think God punishes Eve by saying “your husband shall rule over you” in chapter 3, verse 16?
- 4. Explain** that the rabbis wrote the Lilith *midrash* to resolve the mystery of why there are two creation stories in Genesis, and to answer some of the questions you have just discussed. The rabbis invented the legend of Lilith as the first woman, in order to reconcile the two creation stories into one coherent narrative. According to the Lilith *midrash*, in Genesis 1, on day six of creation, God created Adam and Lilith at the same moment. Lilith expected full equality with Adam, but when he refused to accept that, she left him. In Genesis 2, God created Eve, because Adam was lonely. Since she was created from Adam’s side, she was more willing to be submissive to him.
- 5. Read the rabbinic Lilith *midrash* together.** (This is available at the end of the lesson as a free-standing handout.)

The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (below) is a midrashic work from 9th-10th century Babylonia, which is written partially in Hebrew and partially in Aramaic. Its tone is satiric, and themes include the lighter aspects of life, and many proverbs.

Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith

When God created the first man Adam alone, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” [So] God created a woman for him, from the earth like him, and called her Lilith. They [Adam and Lilith] promptly began to argue with each other: She said, “I will not lie below,” and he said, “I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above.” She said to him, “The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth.” And they would not listen to each other. Since Lilith saw [how it was], she uttered

God's ineffable name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Maker and said, "Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me fled from me!"

The Holy Blessed one immediately dispatched the three angels Sanoy, Sansenoy, and Samangelof after her, to bring her back. God said, "If she wants to return, well and good. And if not, she must accept that a hundred of her children will die every day." The angels pursued her and overtook her in the sea, in raging waters, (the same waters in which the Egyptians would one day drown), and told her God's orders. And yet she did not want to return. They told her they would drown her in the sea, and she replied. "Leave me alone! I was only created in order to sicken babies: if they are boys, from birth to day eight I will have power over them; if they are girls, from birth to day twenty." When they heard her reply, they pleaded with her to come back. She swore to them in the name of the living God that whenever she would see them or their names or their images on an amulet, she would not overpower that baby, and she accepted that a hundred of her children would die every day. Therefore, a hundred of the demons die every day, and therefore, we write the names [of the three angels] on amulets of young children. When Lilith sees them, she remembers her oath and the child is [protected and] healed.

6. Discuss the *midrash* of Lilith:

- What do you think about this story?
- Is Lilith portrayed positively or negatively?
- Did she deserve to be punished for leaving and not returning to the Garden and to Adam?
- Do you think it is important for relationships between women and men to be equal? What does that mean?
- Does this story offer a plausible way to reconcile the two stories of creation in the Bible?

- 7. Explain the modern explosion of new *midrashim*.** In the last 40 years, there has been a transformation in how people think about *midrash*. More people now begin a conversation with the biblical text from their own responses and experiences, rather than looking to the rabbis to tell them what the text means. Thus, not only rabbis from past centuries, but Jews today from diverse backgrounds and experiences feel empowered to write *midrashim*, expressing new perspectives on our texts.

The women's movement and Jewish feminists were central to this transformation. In the 1970s, women started to notice that many traditional texts of Judaism and all rabbinic responsa were written by men (as far as we know). Women searched for glimpses of female viewpoints but they were difficult to find. They realized that the experiences of half of the Jewish population are absent from the official record of the Jewish people. To remedy this imbalance, women began to create their own *midrashim*, retelling biblical stories from the perspectives of female characters.

In 1972, one such woman -- feminist theologian Judith Plaskow -- wrote "The Coming of Lilith." Plaskow was interested in figuring out ways to include women's perspectives and experiences in Judaism and Jewish texts.

- 8. Read "The Coming of Lilith" and discuss it.** (You can download and print "The Coming of Lilith" from the main page of this edition of *Go & Learn*, found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/sep07/>.)

- How is this different from the original creation stories and the original *midrash* about Lilith?
- What do you like about this new version of Lilith? What don't you like about it?
- Does the *midrash* change your view of God? Of Adam? Of Eve?

- What do you think Judith Plaskow is trying to communicate in this *midrash*?
- What do you think gave Plaskow the authority and courage to rewrite biblical texts to express her experiences and thoughts?
- What does this story teach us about friendships (both with people of the same gender and with people of the opposite gender)?
- This *midrash* was written in 1972. How might a feminist *midrash* written today be different?
- Who do you think has the authority to write *midrashim*?

Plaskow wrote this *midrash* to communicate her thoughts about:

- a. The place of women in Judaism and in Jewish texts.
- b. How including women's voices would transform the way we think about Judaism.
- c. The process of consciousness raising: women coming together to talk about their personal experiences, and in the process coming to understand that their experiences are not unique, but are part of a bigger social structure that impacts whole groups of people in similar ways.
- d. How human actions can change God and God's perspective.

8b. [Optional] **Read and discuss Plaskow's 1995 essay "Lilith Revisited"** to learn more

about her process and goals in writing this *midrash*, and her reflections on it 23 years later. (This essay can be found in her collection, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2005], pp. 81-86.)

- What historical moment does "The Coming of Lilith" capture? Does this *midrash* feel dated to you? If so, how? Do you feel it stands the test of time?

- Plaskow writes that she is often criticized for making God male in “The Coming of Lilith.” How do you feel about the characterization of God in this *midrash*?
- Plaskow writes that she did not intend to write *midrash* – do you think her intention matters?
- What does this *midrash*, and Plaskow’s reflection on it, teach you about feminism? What does it teach you about *midrash*?

9. Offer everyone a chance to write their own *midrash* on Genesis or on another biblical passage of their choice. They can write individually or in small groups. Depending on timing, this might be a good project to invite participants to work on at home, and to bring in for a second session, if you can schedule two sessions on this topic. Explain that it does not have to be a scholarly document, but their personal take on a Biblical text.

Here are some suggested texts for *midrashim* to be written about or you can choose your own source of inspiration:

- a. What was life like on the ark? How did it feel to be Noah’s wife or a son or daughter-in-law, taken along without having heard from God about the flood yourself? (See Genesis 6:9-9:17)
- b. How did Isaac or Rebecca feel when they first met? (See Genesis 24)
- c. What was it like to be either Leah or Rachel, sisters who share one husband? How was it from Jacob’s perspective to be married to two women? (See Genesis 29:9-30:24)
- d. What was Miriam’s life like? (See Exodus 2:1-10, Numbers 12)
- e. Why did Aaron build the golden calf? (See Exodus 32)

- f. What was it like to be an Israelite slave in Egypt and then taken on a journey with Moses into the wilderness, where there was limited food and water? (See Exodus 1:13-14, 5:6-23, Exodus 16:1-4)

10. [Optional] Come back together and read aloud the new *midrashim* of those who would like to share with the class. Presenters should explain why they felt this particular biblical passage needed a *midrash*, and then answer any subsequent questions. Discuss how everyone's perspectives have added to our collective understanding of, and acceptance of, biblical texts.

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