

TELLING STORIES, DISCOVERING MIDRASH, AND LEARNING ABOUT LILITH

Lesson plan for families

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/>.

1. Opening activity – Journey Game

Form a circle (or a few separate circles if your group is really large) and play the following game. The first person says, "I'm going on a journey and I am going to take along a ____ (an item, for example, a dog)." The second person says "I am going on a journey and I am going to take along a dog and a ____ (her new item)." The third person must repeat the previous two and add one, and so forth. No one should be criticized for not being able to remember the chain of items once it gets long – instead invite the group to offer friendly reminders. When you have gotten around the circle, invite anyone who wants to make up a story explaining why you need the specific sundry items your group has mentioned for its journey. A few versions of the story can be offered, if there are multiple volunteers. Then you can explain how this game is like the Bible and *midrash*. Many Bible stories may have originally been conveyed orally from one generation to another, and like in the circle, sometimes details get forgotten or changed in the retelling. Meanwhile, sometimes the story needs interpretation to understand it – why do you need these particular items? The text itself does not tell you, but it is fun to speculate. The story told about using the items on the journey is like a *midrash*.

2. Explain what a *midrash* is. Historically, rabbis wrote *midrashim* to explain parts of the biblical text that aren't clear. If there seemed to be a missing piece to a story, or a contradiction between two biblical

- passages, an unnecessary word or verse, the rabbis would explain the problem by writing a new *midrash*, filling in the missing dialogue, explaining how the seeming contradiction could be resolved, or showing how each word in the Bible is there to teach a specific lesson or practice.
- 3. Ask if anyone knows an example of a *midrash*** that they would like to share with the class. Allow time for a few examples to be brought. If no one has any to share, ask if they know the story about Abraham smashing the idols in his father's shop. Tell the story and ask if they think this story is in the Bible. Explain that this story is a *midrash* that has become so well known that it is hard to imagine it possibly happening any other way. Discuss why the rabbis felt the need to tell this story – what questions does it answer or problems does it solve? (It answers the question of why God chose Abraham in particular to be the father of a new people, which is never explained in the Bible itself.)
 - 4. Review the two creation stories** covered in Genesis 1-3, either by telling the two stories aloud or reading them together from the Bible.
 - 5. Discuss** which story people like better and why.
 - 6. Introduce everyone to the rabbinic *midrash* about Lilith** from the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* 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.

Explain that the rabbis wrote the Lilith story to resolve the mystery of why there were two creation stories in Genesis. 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. Then God created Eve later, because Adam was lonely. Since she was created from Adam's side, she was more willing to be submissive to him. An adapted version appears here, which you can read directly aloud, or retell as a story as you choose. (A full translation of the Lilith *midrash* is available in an appendix, but it may be too racy for family ed.)

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. Adam and Lilith promptly began to argue with each other. She said to him, "The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth." And he would not agree to treat her as an equal – he wanted to be in control. 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, and told her God's orders. And yet she did not want to return.

- 7. Discuss the rabbinic *midrash* about Lilith.** Ask, "If you had been Lilith facing the options presented, would you have gone back to Adam or not?" Explain that this *midrash* is one version of a story invented by the ancient rabbis to explain why there are two different creations of women mentioned in Genesis. It is not necessarily a true story.

There are other stories that can be told that also explain why there are two creation stories and two creations of woman.

- 8. Distribute to everyone and invite a parent to read aloud** Judith Plaskow's version of Lilith, entitled "The Coming of Lilith." (You can download and print "The Coming of Lilith" from the main page of this edition of *Go & Learn*.) Discuss this *midrash*. What does everyone think of it? What do they like about it? What don't they like? How is it different from the rabbinic version they just heard? How do they imagine Eve and Lilith might have actually gotten along if they had met? Does the story make them see God differently?

- 9. Allow people to invent their own versions of what might have happened** in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve, or Adam and Lilith, or Lilith and Eve. People can work individually or in groups, as they choose. They can have up to 15 minutes to write, draw, or plan a skit together. Then those who would like to present their own modern *midrash* about creation can share with the group.

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Appendix – Full text of rabbinic Lilith *midrash*

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.

Additional resources for family education

The Seventh Day, by Deborah Bodin Cohen (Kar-Ben Publishing, Inc., 2005)
This is a picture book story of God creating the world in seven days.

The Kids' Cartoon Bible, by Chaya M. Burstein (The Jewish Publication Society, 2002)
This tells the traditional version of Eve's creation from Adam's rib.

A First Book of Jewish Bible Stories, retold by Mary Hoffman (Dorling Kindersley Limited, 1994)
This tells that Adam and Eve are created at the same time, on the sixth day.

But God Remembered: Stories of Women from Creation to the Promised Land, by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995)
This includes another *midrash* on Lilith from a feminist point of view.