

LILITH STORIES: EXPLORING AND WRITING MIDRASHIM

Lesson plan for youth

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/>.

Note to teacher: The original Lilith story contains sexual language. You could use this version or omit the sexual language and merely say that Adam wanted to be in a superior role to Lilith and Lilith left him because of this. If you decide to read the original, be sure to allow your students to giggle and laugh about their embarrassment over the sexual content. You may also want to send a note home ahead of time telling parents what you will be studying. If you want to use this as an opportunity to have a conversation about sex, Lilith provides a context from which to start.

Bring enough copies of the Tanakh/Bible to class for each student 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, an inconsistency between two different passages, or 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. 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 Torah. Explain that this story is a *midrash* that has become so well known that it is hard to imagine the story possibly happening any other way. Discuss why the rabbis felt the need to create this *midrash* – 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 Torah itself.)

- 3. 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.)

- 4. Discuss the following questions:**
 - Why are there two creation stories in the Bible, one chapter after another? Do they seem to be one story told twice or two completely separate stories?
 - When are men and woman created in each story, and how does their creation differ from chapter 1 to chapter 2?
 - When the Hebrew text says "Let us create a *dam*/man/humans" in chapter 1, do you think this is a generic statement about the creation of humanity or a specific statement about the creation of one human man named Adam? The word *adam* means both humanity and the man Adam in Hebrew, but which is intended here?
 - How do Adam and Eve relate to each other in chapters 2 and 3? 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? How do you feel about this as a punishment?
- 5. Explain** that the rabbis wrote the Lilith story to resolve the mystery of why there were 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 *midrash* about Lilith, 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, since Adam was lonely. Because she was created from Adam’s side, she was more willing to be submissive to him. You can either give out the original Lilith *midrash* story quoted here and on Text sheet A, or a slightly edited and desexualized version on Text sheet B.

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 it mean for women and men to be equal?
- 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 look inside themselves, at their own experiences, in order to begin a conversation with the biblical text, 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. Tell your students that Judith Plaskow, a Jewish feminist theologian, decided to write a *midrash* about the original Lilith *midrash*, reclaiming Lilith as a heroine.

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?
- What do you think Judith Plaskow is trying to communicate in this *midrash*?
- What does this story teach us about friendships (both with people of the same gender and with people of the opposite gender)?
- What do you think are the most important ingredients of a friendship?
- What do you think gave Plaskow the authority and courage to rewrite biblical texts to express her experiences and thoughts?
- Who do you think has the authority to write *midrashim*?

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

- a. The equality of women in Judaism and in Jewish texts
- b. How 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

9. Give the students a chance to write their own *midrash* on Genesis. They can write individually or in small groups. They can share their *midrashim* with the whole group if time allows.

Optional Part 2: A follow-up activity at another meeting time for writing *midrashim*.

1. **Ask** students to write a *midrash* on a biblical passage of their choice (see suggestions below). They can write individually or in small groups. You may want to study the text(s) together first, before assigning the *midrash*-writing exercise.

Again, have enough copies of the Tanakh/Bible so each student can have one.

2. **Explain** that their *midrash* does not have to be a scholarly document, but their personal take on a Biblical text. You can use the following paragraph of explanation:

“What is important here is that anyone can write a *midrash* that explains a biblical text from a modern day perspective. You can write a story that expresses your idea of what should have happened or explains a part that doesn’t quite make sense. *You* have something to say. Your experiences and ideas may strike a chord with others who had a similar question when they read a text or felt there was a missing piece that wasn’t expressed.”

You might suggest they begin by identifying a question or problem in the text that the *midrash* will address/answer.

Suggested texts for use in the *midrash*-writing exercise:

- 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? (Genesis 24)
- c. What was it like to be either Leah or Rachel, sisters who share one husband? (Genesis 29:9-30:24)
- d. What was Miriam’s life like? (Exodus 2:1-10, Numbers 12)
- e. Why did Aaron build the golden calf? (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? (Exodus 1:13-14, 5:6-23, Exodus 16:1-4)

3. [Optional] Come back together and read aloud the *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.

Copyright © 2007 Jewish Women's Archive
Contact JWA at: education@jwa.org

Text Sheet on Lilith A

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.

Text Sheet on Lilith B

Adapted from *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. 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, (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.