

LILITH: A Midrash

Based on Sumerian Myth
and the Talmud

By

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In the first days, in the very first days,
In the first nights, in the very first nights,
In the first years, in the very first years . . .ⁱ

Call me Lilith. Some, in my old home in Sumer, have called me Lillake or Lilitu.ⁱⁱ It matters not. The Creator carved my flesh from Adama, the Earth; but my spirit he created from Chaos and Emptiness, Tohu v'Bohu, the formless void of the first Aeon. Indeed, I am the darkness that remained after Ruach, the Spirit of Elohim, blew over the Deep.ⁱⁱⁱ He spoke: in a blazing instant his Word created light, and I fled into the shadows. But he permits me to remain because there cannot be light without darkness, nor life without death. Your rabbis say that I was created after Adam from filth and sediment – fools! My story is much older than their holy books, older even than Babylon, older than time itself. Come, child, sit next to me at my spider's loom and I will weave a tale for you of Man and Woman, the Tree, the Serpent, and the Anzu Bird. And, oh, yes, the goddess Inanna . . .

In the beginning, a tree, a single tree, a huluppu tree, was planted by the banks of the Euphrates and nurtured by its waters. The whirling South Wind arose, pulling at its roots and ripping at its branches until the waters of the Euphrates carried it away. Inanna, she of the laughing eyes, saw the tree and said, "I will rescue this tree and plant it in my holy garden." So she plucked it from the waters. The great Inanna cared for the tree with her own hand, stamped the earth around it with her own foot, and she planned: "I will make a throne for myself from its branches, and a couch from its trunk."^{iv}

Five years, ten years passed. The tree grew strong and mighty until finally it was ready to be cut down. But Inanna had not planned on me, the wrecker of all plans! For

on the very day she was to make her throne and couch, she found her tree occupied. The Serpent, who cannot be charmed, was coiled tightly around the roots preparing to shed his skin and be reborn. The Anzu Bird, who renews his life like the eagle^v, had made a nest for its young in the topmost branches.^{vi} And I, Lilith, taunted Inanna from my new home in the trunk! Poor Inanna, the once joyful Inanna, now wept.^{vii}

That is the story the old ones told in Sumer so long ago. They liked to say that Inanna prevailed upon the great Gilgamesh to get rid of me, but that's not exactly what happened. Be still, child, and I will tell you the real story!

In the Sixth Aeon of Creation, Elohim formed Adam from the dust of the ground. I watched. I was perched in my huluppu tree, my talons gripping the branch tight, my owl wings shuddering with excitement. "Look!" I whispered to Serpent peeking out from the roots of the tree. "Look there, how the dust and mist is swirling about—Elohim is creating again." I crouched down into the branches and covered myself with my wings.

Adam slowly emerged, like me carved from Adama, the Earth. Then, in a gust of Ruach, Elohim blew the breath of life into his nostrils. Adam gasped. He opened his eyes, then sat up and looked around in great curiosity. The animals came forward to greet him, carefully sniffing this strange new creature. Adam rose and walked about, his brown skin glistening in the sunlight, his black hair falling in curls about his shoulders. He was the most beautiful of all that had been created. "Serpent!" I hissed to my slithering friend. "I want him."

I watched Adam in silence for a long time. I watched him eat of the fruits of the earth; I watched him play with the animals. When he saw them go about two by two and couple together, his reaction was comical. He grabbed a female sheep and tried to sport with her himself, only to be butted hard by her angry mate.^{viii} Then I could not keep from laughing. I laughed so hard the huluppu tree rustled and shook, prompting Anzu Bird to spread his mighty wings over his little ones and screech a complaint. Serpent peeked out from under the tree roots and flickered his fiery tongue in annoyance.

Adam heard my laughter and looked up at me with astonishment. I unfurled my wings so he could see my naked body, my full breasts, my welcoming thighs. I smiled.

And that was the beginning of my adventures with Adam. What delights we explored together! He climbed on my back, I spread out my wings, and we flew about

the garden tasting of every delight made by the Creator – except, of course, the fruit of the huluppu tree. We coupled again and again in every imaginable place, in every imaginable position. Almost.

But Adam bored me. He had to eat with me, sleep with me, have me constantly at his side. If I flew off for a bit, he would complain mightily at my return. Where was I? Why did I leave him? But I have wings, I told him, and I must fly! Finally he became angry. He grabbed me and demanded to couple with me in the only position he knew I would refuse: I must lie on my back beneath him.

“No!” I cried. “Never! My wings will not allow it! Lie beneath you? Fool, you are beneath me! You were made like me from dust, but my spirit rules the darkness!” With that, I screamed aloud the ineffable Name of God and flew off in a rage to the wilderness, the Anzu bird and his young flapping their mighty wings behind me. We finally found our home at the shores of the Red Sea, where I later met . . . ah, but that’s another story for another day. ^{ix}

The wild-cat shall meet with the jackals
And the satyr shall cry to his fellow,
Yea, Lilith shall repose there
And find her a place of rest. ^x

Elohim sent three angels to bring me back. What did your rabbis call them? Oh, yes, Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof. ^{xi} Adam was lonely, they said. It was my job to comfort him, they said. I must submit to him, they said.

I laughed in their faces. I love the desert, the wild places where I can sport with the demons and create my offspring the lilim, hundreds of them every day. ^{xii} It’s not perfect here, like Eden. In the wilderness, death lurks in the scorpion’s lair and the jackal’s teeth, in the storms that churn the waters of the Red Sea, drowning the unwary. This is where I belong.

“Go back!” The angels cried. “Go back and submit to Adam, be his faithful wife, or we will drown you. ^{xiii}

I spat at them. “Be a dutiful housewife? I, Lilith, with wings to fly? Never. You cannot destroy me! I am Chaos, don’t you remember?” Then I smiled my prettiest smile.

“But surely you know I visit Adam? I come to him in the night to seduce him and make him spill his seed, from which my little demons spring.”^{xiv}

The air split with lightning and angry Elohim thundered, causing Anzu bird to tremble and spread his wings over his young. I sighed and shrugged in resignation, for the Creator is powerful. The rabbis say we finally came to an agreement: God gave me charge of newborn babes and their mothers in childbed, and all that is beloved I kill or let live as I please. What’s that, child? You are horrified? Yes, I know their deaths are tragic. But as I told you before, there can be no life without death. But the rabbis tried to break that bargain. They thought they could trick me by making amulets with the three angels’ names on them. Hang an amulet above the door, they said, and the evil Lilith would spare the mother and child.^{xv}

And they keep trying. From Babylon to Persia, the rabbis have crafted incantation bowls with charms written round and round inside, saying: “Fly away, Lilith! You are divorced from this family!” Ha! As if I were a poor housewife.^{xvi} Those prayers didn’t work any better than the amulets. As it stands, I can take the bodies of the innocents, but Elohim claims their souls. The rabbis say I still sport with men—when they lie alone, I come to them in tormenting dreams and steal their seed. As if men needed me for that. And my punishment for my disobedience? I must personally sacrifice a hundred of my lilim, my precious little demons, every day.^{xvii} What nonsense! They cannot comprehend I am Chaos and Chance, the bringer of temptation, the wrecker of plans—yes, I rival even the Angel of Death.

But what happened to Adam, you say? Ah, he was not lonely for long. Elohim gave him a new mate created not from the earth, but from his own flesh. Eve is her name, I believe. Poor thing, I can only imagine how he treats her! But she will know what to do—I left her the Serpent.

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- ⁱ The Sumerian story of Inanna, the tree, the Anzu Bird and the serpent are in Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*. New York, 1983, p. 4. Kramer's original translation, calling the bird the Zu-bird, is in his *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium BC*. Philadelphia, 1972, p. 33.
- ⁱⁱ The Talmud is the primary source in Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*. New York, 1964, p. 68.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Patai, Raphael. *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd Enlarged Edition. Detroit, 1990, p.230.
- ^{iv} Wolkstein and Kramer, pp. 5-6.
- ^v Psalm 103.
- ^{vi} The Babylonians provided more details about the bird (an eagle) and the serpent in Gaster, Theodore H. "Borrowed Plumes." *The Oldest Stories in the World*. Beacon Hill: 1958, p. 80. The Aztecs also had a myth about the eagle and the snake, as seen on the Mexican flag.
- ^{vii} Wolkstein and Kramer, pp. 5-6.
- ^{viii} Gen. Rab. 17.4; B. Yebamot 63a, in Graves and Patai, p. 65.
- ^{ix} Num. Rab. 16.25, in Graves and Patai, p. 65.
- ^x Isaiah 34:14
- ^{xi} Patai, p.223.
- ^{xii} Num. Rab. 16.25, in Graves and Patai, p. 65.
- ^{xiii} Alpha Beta diBen Sira, 47, in Graves and Patai, p. 66.
- ^{xiv} Patai, p. 224.
- ^{xv} Num. Rab. 16.25, in Graves and Patai, p. 65.
- ^{xvi} Patai, p. 224.
- ^{xvii} Graves and Patai, p. 66.