



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון
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On the Stories We Tell About Women: The Monstrous-Feminine in Jewish Tradition

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Judaism, #metoo and Ethical Leadership:
Perspectives from the Created Equal Project

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1. Bereishit 3:6

וַתֵּרֶא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמֵאֲכָל וְכִי תִאֲוֶה-הוּא לְעֵינַיִם, וְנִחְמָד הָעֵץ לְהִשְׁכִּיל, וַתִּקַּח מִפְּרִיו, וַתֹּאכַל; וַתִּתֵּן גַּם-לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ, וַיֹּאכַל.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

2. Sforno on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad

Bereishit 2:9

נחמד למראה משמח ומרחיב הלב להכינו לקבלת השפע השכלי כאמרו והיה כנגן המנגן ותהי עליו רוח ה' :

Looking at these trees resulted In the viewer experiencing intellectual stimulation both of his heart and his brain. He would thus be capable of “digesting” the additional intellectual insights granted him by G’d.

Bereishit 3:2

מכל עץ הגן נאכל ואין לנו צורך להכנס בסכנת אכילי עץ שהאל ית' אמר לנו שבאכלנו ממנו נמות. אמנם הדמיון התחזק ליחס קנאה ושקר ח'יו לאל ית' וצייר שאמר אותו הפרקי כדי שלא ישיגו בו התועלת להיות כאלהים ושלא יסבב מות כלל.

“we can eat from the trees of the garden and do not need to endanger our lives by eating from the tree that G’d has prohibited us to eat from on pain of death.” Having said this, however, her power of imagination kept nagging at her weighing the possibility that G’d might indeed be jealous of competition from his creature.

3. Bereishit 3:16

טז אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר, הֲרַבָּה אֲרַבָּה עֲצָבוֹנֶךָ וְהֲרַנְךָ--בְּעֵצָב, תֵּלְדֵי בָנִים; וְאֶל-אִישָׁךְ, תִּשְׁוֹקֶתְךָ, וְהוּא, יִמְשָׁל-בְּךָ. { ס }

And to the woman He said, “I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.”

4. The Alef Bet of Ben Sirah, Alternate Version, 34 סירא לבן אחרת אלפא ביתא

כשברא הקב"ה אדם הראשון יחיד, אמר לא טוב היות האדם לבדו, ברא לו אשה מן האדמה כמהו וקראה לילית. מיד התחילו מתגרין זה בזה, אמרה היא איני שוכבת למטה, והוא אומר איני שוכב למטה אלא למעלה שאת ראויה למטה ואני למעלה, אמרה לו שנינו שוין לפי ששנינו מאדמה, ולא היו שומעין זה לזה, כיון שראתה לילית אמרה שם המפורש ופרחה באויר העולם. עמד אדם הראשון בתפילה לפני קונו ואמר: רבונו של עולם, הרי האשה שנתת לי ברחה כבר. מיד שגר הקב"ה שלשה מלאכים הללו אחריה להחזירה. אמר הקב"ה אם תרצה לחזור מוטב. ואם לאו תקבל על עצמה שימותו מבניה בכל יום מאה בנים. והלכו אחריה והשימה בתוך הים במים עזים שעתידין המצריים למות שם. וספרו לה דבר ה' ולא רצתה לחזור. אמרו לה אנו נטביעך בים. אמרה להם הנחוני שלא נבראתי אלא להחליש התינוקות כשהן משמונה ימים, מיום שיוולד אשלוט בו אם היה זכר, ואם נקבה מיום ילדותה עד עשרים יום, וכששמעו דבריה הפצירו לקחת אותה, נשבעה להם בשם אל חי וקים שכל זמן שאני רואה אתכם או שמכם או תכניתכם בקמיע לא אשלוט באותו התינוק, וקבלה על עצמה שימותו מבניה מאה בכל יום, לפיכך בכל יום מתים מאה מן השדים, ולכך אנו כותבים שמותם בקמיע של נערים קטנים ורואה אותם וזוכרת השבועה ומתרפא הילד.

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.

5. Claire Dederer, *The Paris Review*, Nov 20, 2017

“This is what female monstrosity looks like: abandoning the kids. Always. The female monster is Doris Lessing leaving her children behind to go live the writer’s life in London. The female monster is Sylvia Plath, whose self-crime was bad enough, but worse still: the children whose nursery she taped off beforehand. Never mind the bread and milk she set out for them, a kind of terrible poem unto itself. She dreamed of eating men like air, but what was truly monstrous was simply leaving her children motherless.

Maybe, as a female writer, you don’t kill yourself, or abandon your children. But you abandon *something*, some nurturing part of yourself. When you finish a book, what lies littered on the ground are small broken things: broken dates, broken promises, broken engagements. Also other, more important forgettings and failures: children’s homework left unchecked, parents left untelephoned, spousal sex unhad. Those things have to get broken for the book to get written.

...My friend and I had done nothing more monstrous than expecting someone to mind our children while we finished our work. That’s not as bad as rape or even, say, forcing someone to watch while you jerk off into a potted plant. It might sound as though I’m conflating two things—male predators and female finishers—in a troubling way. And I am. Because when women do what needs to be done in order to write or make art, we sometimes feel monstrous. And others are quick to describe us that way.”

6. Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith", 1972

In the beginning, the Lord God formed Adam and Lilith from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. Created from the same source, both having been formed from the ground, they were equal in all ways. Adam, being a man, didn’t like this situation, and he looked for ways to change it. He said, “I’ll have my figs now, Lilith,” ordering her to wait on him, and he tried to leave to her the daily tasks of life in the garden. But Lilith wasn’t one to take any nonsense; she picked herself up, uttered God’s holy name, and flew away. “Well now, Lord,” complained Adam, “that uppity woman you sent me has gone and deserted me.” The Lord, inclined to be sympathetic, sent his messengers after Lilith, telling her to shape up and return to Adam or face dire punishment. She, however, preferring anything to living with Adam, decided to stay where she was. And so God, after more careful consideration this time, caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and out of one of his ribs created for him a second companion, Eve.

For a time, Eve and Adam had a good thing going. Adam was happy now, and Eve, though she occasionally sensed capacities within herself that remained undeveloped, was basically satisfied with the role of Adam’s wife and helper. The only thing that really disturbed her was the excluding closeness of the relationship between Adam and God. Adam and God just seemed to have more in common, both being men, and Adam came to identify with God more and more. After a while, that made God a bit uncomfortable too, and he started going over in his mind whether he may not have made a mistake letting Adam talk him into banishing Lilith and creating Eve, seeing the power that gave Adam.

Meanwhile Lilith, all alone, attempted from time to time to rejoin the human community in the garden. After her first fruitless attempt to breach its walls, Adam worked hard to build them stronger, even getting Eve to help him. He told her fearsome stories of the demon

Lilith who threatens women in childbirth and steals children from their cradles in the middle of the night. The second time Lilith came, she stormed the garden's main gate, and a great battle ensued between her and Adam in which she was finally defeated. This time, however, before Lilith got away, Eve got a glimpse of her and saw she was a woman like herself. After this encounter, seeds of curiosity and doubt began to grow in Eve's mind. Was Lilith indeed just another woman? Adam had said she was a demon. Another woman! The very idea attracted Eve. She had never seen another creature like herself before. And how beautiful and strong Lilith looked! How bravely she had fought! Slowly, slowly, Eve began to think about the limits of her own life within the garden.

One day, after many months of strange and disturbing thoughts, Eve, wandering around the edge of the garden, noticed a young apple tree she and Adam had planted, and saw that one of its branches stretched over the garden wall. Spontaneously, she tried to climb it, and struggling to the top, swung herself over the wall.

She did not wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. At first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. "Who are you?" they asked each other, "What is your story?" And they sat and spoke together of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.

Meanwhile, back in the garden, Adam was puzzled by Eve's comings and goings, and disturbed by what he sensed to be her new attitude toward him. He talked to God about it, and God, having his own problems with Adam and a somewhat broader perspective, was able to help out a little—but he was confused, too. Something had failed to go according to plan. As in the days of Abraham, he needed counsel from his children. "I am who I am," thought God, "but I must become who I will become."

And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together.

Additional Texts

7. Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, 1986, *American Psychologist*, Excerpt from *Possible Selves*, p. 954

“Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. .. they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies...These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social. Many of these possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become.

An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained (el. Elder, 1980; Meyer, 1985; Stryker, 1984).”

8. Kate Manne, Excerpt from *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, 2018, p. 169

“Part of being recognized as human involves the potential to be cast in social scripts in specific roles and relationships, in virtue (among other things) of one’s group memberships or identities...But a *failure* to play one’s assigned part in the script, or to attempt some kind of role *reversal*, is prone to give rise to *startled* reactions-- a sense of being “taken aback.” The person may even be perceived as “off,” off-putting peculiar, and creepy. They may even be perceived as uncanny or robotic: as if they are an imposter in the role, merely “going through the motions...” They are viewed with the kind of *suspicion* and even disgust or horror liable to arise when someone’s behavior seems socially anomalous. She is not playing her part in the script. And so we have grave doubts about her character or personal-- or even doubt she has one.”

9. Barbara Creed, Excerpt from *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, 1993

“All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject... The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience...When woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions.”