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On the Stories We Tell About Women

Arielle Levites

Introduction and Q&A: Sarah Mulhern

- Sarah Mulhern: Welcome to the third session of Judaism, #MeToo, and Ethical Leadership, a web series on how Jewish ideas can inform the current discourse on power, privilege, and sexual assault from the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. My name is Sarah Mulhern, a member of the Created Equal Research Team, a group of scholars who research issues of gender and ethical leadership in the Jewish tradition.
- Sarah Mulhern: The #MeToo movement has brought increasing awareness to the sexual violence and discrimination faced by women and others in the workplace and beyond. Among the multitude of important questions this awareness raises. As the Created Equal Research Team, we have turned our attention to the ways, both positive and negative, in which Jewish tradition intersects with these issues.
- Sarah Mulhern: Today's webinar will be the final of a three-part series of presentations resulting from this work. In our previous class, we examined how ideals of masculinity have changed over time and asked how to best refine today's images of manhood given the awareness generated by #MeToo. In this third session in our series, Dr. Arielle Levites will examine how our cultural ideas of who women are and who they can be impact how women who come forward with claims of sexual violence are perceived. In this context, she will explore the deep story of the monstrous feminine within Jewish tradition and within contemporary culture.
- Arielle Levites: I want to begin with a question that is core to #MeToo and its cultural reception. What happens to the identities of women when they speak out about abuse and harassment? How is it that women with credible accounts of harassment and assault can become so vulnerable when speaking up? Why are they subject to so much cross-examination? "Why didn't they just leave? Why didn't they say something sooner? Why did they wear that? Aren't they making the whole thing up? What do they really want?" How do women go from bringing charges to being the one seemingly on trial so quickly? It has to do, of course, with the basic fact that women as a whole have less economic and social power than men do, but it's also, and this is what I want to address today, an

effect of how a woman's motivations will be seen and interpreted by others once she comes forward.

Arielle Levites: I want to propose that our culture allows limited available roles or categories for women and in speaking out and in challenging the status quo, a woman's category can suddenly shift. The role you were playing changes. In the array of possible selves for women, it marks you as another kind of woman. You may have been an esteemed law professor, let's say like Anita Hill, but when you share publicly an account of harassment or assault, you become another kind of woman altogether. You're all of a sudden "a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty," to put it in the terms that pundit David Brock used about Anita Hill after she testified in the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. You may have been playing the role of the virtuous woman, the smart woman, the woman who follows the rules of the game; but when you speak up, all of a sudden you are recast. Like Professor Hill, you are crazy. You yourself are the predator through your own provocation. You, in calling out the problem, become the problem. You have become newly cast in the role of the monstrous feminine.

Arielle Levites: So, what is the monstrous feminine? The monstrous feminine is an archetype identified in folklore studies, literary theory, and psychoanalytic theory. It posits that deep in the human imagination is a fear of women, their needs, and their desires. It's a motif in folklore around the world: a woman of all-consuming appetite that eats her own. Perhaps predictably, this trope is raising its ugly head now in the public accounting around #MeToo, in which women seeking fair treatment and justice are cast by some as evil demons. I believe it's crucial to recognize the legacy of the monstrous feminine because this image of demonic women is a shared cultural legacy that runs through our present day national conversation about #MeToo. The image of the monstrous feminine and the fear this image transmits of women wanting as an all-consuming and destructive possibility infects and undermines our capacity to assess women's claims without bias.

Arielle Levites: Images of the monstrous feminine that surface in the backlash against #MeToo are playing out in real time. A number of observers, some with careers on the line, have warned against a witch hunt. Woody Allen is quoted as warning us, "You don't want it to lead to a witch hunt atmosphere, where every guy in an office who winks at a woman is suddenly having to call a lawyer to defend himself." Allen implies that women not wanting to be assaulted or harassed can easily end to the destruction of flirty, the end of sex, even, and certainly the death of some men's careers. To compare this moment to a witch hunt means in a fundamental sense to argue that #MeToo is about fighting an entirely imagined enemy, that sexual assailants and harassers, like witches, don't really exist. If #MeToo is a witch hunt, simply trumped up charges against an imagined enemy, then the real monster, the one to be afraid of, is the accuser herself.

Arielle Levites: In Pennsylvania where I live, state Senator and Senate candidate Daylin Leach, a darling of the progressive movement, suspended his campaign after multiple

accusations of misconduct. Having put his Senate campaign on hold, he posted on social media, publicly addressing one of his accusers. He wrote for all to see, "You are truly a horrific monster. You fabricate insane attacks. In a world where making progress is so freaking hard, you are just a human wrecking ball of hate."

Arielle Levites: So, let's look at his language. "Horrific," "monster," "insane," "wrecking." Leach's accuser arouses horror and is a monster, placing her outside of the human community. Importantly, she is "insane." That is, her motivations have no reasonable basis and have nothing to do at all with reality or any principled stance. Further, this whistleblower seemingly has tremendous power as an individual. As a "wrecking ball of hate," she is specially designed to single-handedly destroy not only Leach, but the entire progressive political movement that Leach argues he champions. She's a monster operating outside of reason, designed to wreck what is good in human society. She is, in short, a demon.

Arielle Levites: It's as if Daylin Leach is such a great feminist ally that he's taken a woman's studies class and is now citing Julia Kristeva herself. The Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva and her classic work "Powers of Horror" has a whole chapter entitled "Those Females Can Wreck the Infinite." The core idea here is that the category "female" is not only in direct opposition to all that which is enduring and lofty about human culture and experience, but that women are actually a direct threat to any good humans can do or create. This same concept seems to underlie Leach's rhetoric.

Arielle Levites: This idea of the destructive power of monstrous women is key to understanding much of the backlash against #MeToo. Repeatedly, we hear voices in the public sphere calling for caution, warning us against letting #MeToo go too far. They fear that women, angry women, if left to their own devices in their crazed rage can tear the whole thing down. They could destroy everything men see themselves as having created: great art, government institutions, everything lasting that humans, or men, see themselves as having built to endure beyond themselves. Women, Leach and Allen warn us, can casually wreck.

Arielle Levites: From this lens, women seeking justice or fair treatment are in fact circulating crazy, hysterical lies, motivated by monstrous nature that causes them to victimize the innocent creators of higher human culture. The trope of the monstrous feminine tells us that when women ask for things, in this case not to be sexually harassed and to be treated justly, it can trigger a default suspicion that underlying a woman's request is an evil pursuit to destroy the best our culture has to offer. Women's wanting is a direct threat to civilization, and that wanting is part of something more because they want more for themselves than has historically been allowed for women. They imagine more for themselves, new roles, new possibilities. Both kinds of women wanting, women wanting justice and women wanting a new role, push our ideas of who women are and what they're for. In pushing, we push up against the monstrous feminine.

Arielle Levites: The #MeToo story entered popular culture through reckoning taking place in Hollywood, but movies are only a very recent storytelling modality in human

history. Stories about possible selves have been transmitted since the beginning of human time, woven into our very foundational texts, both the formal canon in high culture, like Torah, as well as our folklore, like fairytales. Today, I want to look at some of our most treasured stories as sites where the motif of the monstrous feminine plays out in Jewish tradition and think together about how this cultural heritage impacts our community's experience of this #MeToo moment. We'll think about consuming females, those with voracious appetites, women who want things, women who are hungry, women who are hungry enough and want enough to be willing to upset the order. They are women whose hunger has the power to tear down civilization. We'll begin with the foremothers of these witches on witch hunts that Allen conjures: Eve and Lilith.

Arielle Levites: As we look at these texts, I want to think about the categories we've inherited for types of women. What are the available roles for women in these stories, and when and how does a woman get assigned a category? Once she does, can she ever get out of it?

Arielle Levites: So, text number one. The first text I want to talk about is about the first woman: Chava, Eve, and her imagination. It's important to note that the first story of gender difference in the Torah paints a very different idea of what men and women naturally want. The story of Bereshit, of Genesis, shows us the first wants, the first desires of man and woman. Adam, the text tells us, wants a companion. He's lonely and asks God to create for him a friend, someone to be in a relationship with. Adam's a bit of a passive character here. He does not seek to create his own companion, but turns to God to do that for him, so that's what Adam wants. Let's see what Chava wants.

Arielle Levites: Okay, so this is Genesis 3:06, our first text. "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." So, this is Chava's basic transgression: eating from the Tree of Knowledge and sharing the fruit with her husband. But her transgression is more than that, deeper than that. Chava, we see from verse six, wants knowledge. We see the world in this verse through Chava's gaze. She is, it seems, ravenous here. She's taking everything in and wanting it all, looking and hungering and desiring and wanting. She wants beauty and pleasure and knowledge.

Arielle Levites: The Italian philosopher and Biblical commentator Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno writes about the unusual quality and aura of the Tree of Knowledge. He explains that the Tree of Knowledge had a power inherent in it such that any person who looked at it experienced a transformative opening of the heart and mind that dazzled and stimulated. To truly look at the Tree of Knowledge is to be struck with inspiration. That's what happens in gazing at it. In looking at that tree, Chava feels the pull of that experience, right? He writes in text number two, "Looking at these trees resulted in the viewer experiencing intellectual stimulation of both his heart and his brain." But who in this story actively looks

at the tree and seems to be impacted by the tree's overflow and abundance of spiritual and intellectual inspiration? Chava.

Arielle Levites: Sforno explains that Chava, having looked and experienced the transformative power of inspiration, cannot give up the tree. Through the power of her looking, noticing, and seeing the tree, the horizon of her mind and her heart are expanded. She's inspired. Sforno writes that Chava and her act of eating from the tree is moved by the power of her *Dimayon*, her imagination. Her imagination is captivated, her desire to know is strengthened, and she must know more. The Biblical text itself hints at the dazzling, intellectual, creative, aesthetic experience the tree offers to human beings. Chava's imagination is awakened and she begins to wonder if there's more to the world and the universe than God has shared with her. She imagines more. Her horizons widen. She imagines more, not just for herself, but for Adam too, and she wants to share her new view on the world with him.

Arielle Levites: What is Chava's punishment, the consequences for her actions? How does Chava's punishment fit her crime of imagining more for herself? What can we understand about Chava's crime by reading her punishment? What is revealed about her transgression through her sentence? Later in this chapter, God speaks to Chava. This is our text number three. To the woman, He said, "I'll make most severe your pains in childbearing. In pain shall you bear children, yet your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." I want to argue the Chava's punishment is that her desires are now redirected. She wanted too much and her wanting threatened the order of human society. It threatened to undo the hierarchy between man and God. Through this lens, Chava's punishment makes perfect sense. Her act of imagination, of intellectual wanting, is fundamentally threatening, and so in her punishment, Chava's desires are rewired. It's no longer an aesthetic, philosophical, or intellectual desire, but carnal desire for her husband. All of her desire, all of her wanting will now get channeled into sex and reproduction, and specifically reproduction within the institutions of marriage and patriarchy.

Arielle Levites: If Chava's crime was a threat of pulling down the system because of her wanting, now the system will be built on her burdens of reproduction. Instead of women pulling down the system, the system will be built on women's bodies, and so Chava's punishment, becoming the very vehicle by which the patriarchy is reproduced, fits her so-called "crime" of being inspired and wanting more. From this point forward in human relationship, there's going to be a hierarchy, a naturalized order, and someone is going to be on the top and someone is going to be on the bottom. The story recounted in the Bible from this point on becomes a story focused on men's desires as women's imagination and wants become subsumed to men's wants and dreams.

Arielle Levites: So, here's my question: after Chava is tamed through reproduction and carnal desire for a male ruling partner, what happens to female wanting, female anger, female power? Chava here is disarmed through her shackling in the reproductive system, but the potential for female wanting and desire doesn't go

away. What happens to that part of Chava that imagined, that wanted? She doesn't disappear. Eventually, she's bottled up in a new character, and that new character is irredeemably evil.

Arielle Levites: Lilith is a later invention. She gets written back into the story. The story of Lilith has a different canonical status than that of Chava. Eve is written into the foundational sacred text. Lilith is more of a folktale character. The Lilith text that we bring here in the Aleph Bet Ben Sira dates from possibly the eighth century, but the story of Lilith is much older than that. There's little mention of her in canonical text. The legacy of Lilith and the popularity of her story is perhaps better captured in material culture, amulets, incantation bowls, that suggests she was a recognizable and important figure in ancient Jewish folk culture. She appears in rabbinic texts and mystical texts as well as the incarnation of evil. Just as we read in the text from Bereshit, I also want us to think about the story of Lilith and try and understand Lilith's crime through the light of her punishment. What did Lilith do that was so wrong? How did she get to be so bad?

Arielle Levites: "When God created the first man, Adam, alone, God said, 'It's not good for man to be alone,' so God created a woman for him, from the earth like him, and called her Lilith. Then 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 above.'" So, sort of at the very beginning, there's already a kind of battle of the sexes going on here that theoretically is actually maybe about sex and positions and sexual relations, but has to do with the instantiation of the first hierarchy, okay? The minute we have two people, somebody has to be in charge and somebody has to be beneath that person. Lilith thinks that this setup is fundamentally unfair.

Arielle Levites: "She says to him, 'The two of us are equal since we're both from the earth.'" That's her case that she makes. Why does anybody have to be on the top and why does anyone have to be on the bottom? Shouldn't we be the same? We're made from the same material. We are the same kind of being. They won't listen to each other. "Since Lilith saw how it was, she uttered God's ineffable name and flew away into the air." So, Lilith assesses the situation, she sort of sees what's going on, and she makes some kind of judgment call about how this is going to go. I guess she decides that it's not going to go in her favor or it's not going to change. She possesses some kind of power. She has some kind of knowledge of God's name that gives her the ability to fly in the air, and she takes herself out of the garden and she takes herself out of that situation.

Arielle Levites: Adam is not pleased with this. "Adam stood in prayer before his maker and said, "Master of the universe, the woman you gave me fled from me." This whole sort of Adam who wanted a partner, the partnership, the terms that he wanted the partner on don't seem to be working out very well for him. Now he's alone again, and we know that Adam does not like being alone.

Arielle Levites: "So the Holy One immediately dispatched three angels after Lilith to bring her back. They chase her down and God delivers a message. 'Tell her right if she wants to return well and good.'" Okay? She can come back. It doesn't seem like the terms of the agreement between her and Adam will be any different, but if she wants to come back and accept those terms, she's welcome to do that. ""But if not, she must accept that a hundred of her children will die every day." Okay? That is the consequences that Lilith will face if she does not want to go back to the garden and does not want to go back to a relationship with Adam given the way she's been told that relationship is going to be structured, that hierarchy of him on top and her on the bottom.

Arielle Levites: The angels pursue her and they tell her God's orders. They deliver that threat. They said, "You can come back and accept the way things are going to be and need to be, or you can face this curse of having one hundred of your children die every day," and yet she did not want to return. Lilith decides that the consequences that God has put before her, the death of one hundred children is, to her, a better option than returning to the garden and returning to be in a relationship with Adam given the terms of how that relationship is going to play out.

Arielle Levites: So, let's review the basic plot of the Lilith Midrashic story. This Midrash imagines a woman created before Eve at the moment of human creation. Lilith refuses to submit to Adam sexually. In fact, it would seem she may even want him to submit to her. If there's going to be a hierarchy, someone has to take the bottom role, and the two argue. Lilith suddenly comes to see something — what, I don't know — and she decides to leave the situation. She takes herself out of the garden with Adam, out of the argument. She seems to have some power or some claim on power by virtue of her knowledge of God's holy name to extricate herself from this situation, so she uses it. Adam complains to God that the woman that God created for him, for Adam's sake, has run away. Lilith is pursued by three angels, agents of God, who say if she will go along and return, everything will be just fine; but if she refuses to return, she will be cursed to have one hundred of her babies die every day. She refuses to return. In that moment, Lilith takes up the mantle of the monstrous feminine.

Arielle Levites: Lilith refuses to accept the terms that Adam and God proposed. Rather than accept that she must lie beneath, she leaves. In leaving, she does not join another community. She takes herself outside of human society. Lilith leaves even though she's told the price will be that a hundred of her own children will die every day. In leaving, Lilith asserts that she values her own sense of what she deserves more than she values her reproductive role, and I think that's worth repeating. Lilith's crime is that she values her own sense of what she deserves more than she values her reproductive role. That is the essence of a female demon. That choice disrupts the natural order and is such a threat that the only place for Lilith to exist after that choice is outside of the human community forever. You cannot refuse to submit to male desire and be a good human woman. To refuse to submit, to refuse to bear that burden quietly is to be a demon.

Arielle Levites: Lilith's punishment is that in choosing to leave human society rather than to submit to her husband's desire, her children cannot survive. So, what does it mean to say that Lilith will bear and lose a hundred children each day? Who or what are these children? Are they flesh and blood children? I want to suggest that Lilith's children are the babies that might have been. They are perhaps the children that she refuses to bear because she refuses to sleep with her husband, the offspring of all the babies she didn't or wouldn't have. If Jewish tradition asserts that to kill a person is as if one has killed a world, in Mishna Sanhedrin, what is delimited in choosing not to have a child in the first place? Is there something murderous or demonic in that choice, accepting that outcome, that you won't bear that baby in order to assert something about your own worth or power or dreams?

Arielle Levites: Both of these texts about Chava and Lilith suggest a fundamental incompatibility between women's independence and their reproductive roles. Lilith in some ways is the inverse of Chava. If Chava will ultimately submit to being the reproductive system of patriarchy, Lilith will refuse the role. Instead of producing children, she will lose her own children and consume those of other women, but the system in which their choices take on meaning is the same. The Midrash of Lilith, like the text of Bereshit, puts women's imagination and independence in opposition in some way to the creation of babies, reproduction, of people's survival.

Arielle Levites: There is a great deal of data that suggests that women with higher educational attainment, with their own earning power, with access to contraception, with power over their bodies and bank accounts have fewer children. Some choose not to become mothers at all. Female power is, in fact, linked to lower reproductive rates. There's certainly something to be said for looking around at the choices educated, well-resourced women make and argue that women's power does actually consume babies that might have been, that women's power has consequences for reproductive rates.

Arielle Levites: The writer Claire Dederer recently wrote an essay in the Paris Review in response to #MeToo that looked at what she sees to be the monstrous impulse necessary to be creative and make artistic and intellectual contributions. She argues that all artists, male and female, have something inside them that compels them or permits them to put their own needs and desires before those of others. In men, she argues, this single-minded selfishness looks like harassment and assault. In women, she argues, it looks like making space for oneself.

Arielle Levites: She writes in the Paris Review, this was in November of 2017, "This is what female monstrosity looks like: abandoning the kids, always. 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."

Arielle Levites: She continues, "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." That's the end of her quote.

Arielle Levites: So, I found Dederer's argument both compelling and appalling. What have we built where we can plausibly imagine these types of behavior as analogous in any way? Is harassment and predation akin to the monstrousness of wanting to simply follow an idea through? Is the working, thinking woman on some level, on any level, the same as the sexual predator? Dederer points out that on some basic archetypal level, for a woman to not be endlessly and completely available for others is to be a monster. Only for women are basic creative acts, the basic assertion of the need for their own time and space to produce something lasting, seen as a selfish act on the level of eating babies. As crazy and outlandish as this linkage may seem, I think she's tapping in here to a powerful cultural trope, a deep-seated human story in which a monstrous woman is a woman who values her own vision and imagination as much, if not more, than she values her reproductive role, her place in the order in patriarchy.

Arielle Levites: For a woman to finish her work, write her book, say her piece, is to insist on pausing, even if for a moment, her role as a nurturer, her job to give care to men and babies. To put a pause on nurturing as the fundamental role of a woman on Earth is to say, "Chava's curse was unfair and unjust, and I want to live outside the shadow of that curse for one hour, one day." Too often, as Dederer notes, women who ask simply for what's fair, for the room to finish a thought, are cast as monsters. In refusing to be Chava for a moment, it's like the only choice is to be Lilith.

Arielle Levites: I want to look now at a more contemporary telling of Lilith's story. This is text number five. It's written by the feminist theologian Judith Plaskow over 30 years ago. Why is Lilith so important to second-wave Jewish feminism? She's probably the foundation myth of that movement. As we read this text together, I want us to ask: what's the vision that animates Plaskow's retelling? What's the fantasy? What do feminists want first and foremost according to this contemporary Midrash?

Arielle Levites: Lilith has already left the Garden of Eden and Eve has been created to be a better partner to Adam. Everything is happy. Everyone is more or less jolly and content. "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."

Arielle Levites: I think in this paragraph, we sort of begin to understand sort of the ... what Lilith wants and what Eve wants. Here, Lilith wants to return and be in companionship with other human beings. Maybe she regrets her earlier choice, that she could be alone and go it alone, and she wants companionship. As she tries to sort of fight her way back into human sympathy and human company, Adam uses stories that he tells to Eve about how Lilith is actually her enemy, and the kind of woman that Lilith is is someone who will hurt her and try and take away the things that she values and treasures most. But in the second battle, something happens that Adam didn't count on, and that is Eve actually has a moment of seeing Lilith and recognizing Lilith. She realizes for the first time that Lilith isn't actually some kind of demon monster, but Lilith is actually only just another human woman like herself.

Arielle Levites: So, I'm going to skip a little bit further down because I think this gives us a sense of the happy ending that Plaskow imagined, what world she wanted to see, what the sort of feminist fantasy here is. "'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, 'til the bond of sisterhood grew between them."

Arielle Levites: One way, of course, to read the Midrash of Lilith is as a story of a battle of the sexes. Billie Jean King versus Bobby Riggs. Another reading, though, and one that I think Plaskow's Midrash follows is that of the false demonization of a woman who simply wanted. Lilith, as we saw in the eighth century Midrash, is a woman who couldn't be reabsorbed into human society. She put her own sense of self and what she deserved ahead of the reproductive role that God and Adam's "natural order" demanded of her. The consequence was that there was no role for her in human culture. She had to exist outside the bounds of humanity.

Arielle Levites: Here in Plaskow's imagining, we see the project of Jewish feminism is not to put Lilith on top. It is a restoration, but not of women over man or a new hierarchy. It's a restoration to bring back the demon woman into human company and sympathy. Mostly, it's the yearning to reunite Eve and Lilith. We could imagine that Lilith has plenty to be angry about and might want to take vengeance. She might want to see a world where she gets to be on top. That doesn't seem to be her interest at all here. Lilith can't be human until Eve recognizes her as such. That's the validation Lilith needs. It comes from Eve. She doesn't need it from Adam, and strikingly she doesn't seem to need it from God. There's no sense here of reconciliation between Lilith and God or Lilith and Adam. Frankly, she

doesn't seem all that interested in them at all. It seems to be about women reconciling themselves to themselves.

Arielle Levites: I want to suggest a little bit more of a psychodynamic reading, that perhaps Lilith is not another character altogether, but rather Lilith is the original character of Eve that was split off from herself. Chavah in the text of Bereishit as we saw when we looked earlier was not a passive, child-producing dullard as Plaskow's retelling might suggest. The Eve Plaskow shows us is missing an integral part of her own personality. Perhaps the part of women that wanted and were angry and banished along with Lilith, not only forced out of the human community, but forced outside the bounds of what a good, virtuous woman could think or imagine. In reuniting with Lilith, perhaps Eve is reuniting with her own original self and wants.

Arielle Levites: I want to argue that the feminist project is not part of a desire ... is actually a desire to reintegrate the demon woman into the human story and the story of what it means to be a good, full human being; to say as a woman that I can have these feelings of what I deserve and of what I am worth and even be overwhelmed and consumed with rage and hurt; that I could desire my own power, even the power to punish those who have hurt me; that I can share those feelings of angry and disappointment and betrayal, and still be part of the human community and of the Jewish community; that I can be a whole, integrated self; that I can choose a life of integrity where I don't have to make any compromises about my own self-worth or the self-worth of other women.

Arielle Levites: We don't have to have a split between the virtuous woman inside the walls of the garden and the demon woman on the outside, and we don't have to split between the woman who bears children and the woman who eats them. Okay? There's a possible self of sometimes being Lilith and sometimes being Eve, and maybe sometimes being somebody else entirely different, right? Why not sometimes Devorah or Moshe? Importantly, wanting what you're worth and getting angry when you don't get it doesn't mean being cast out of human society forever.

Arielle Levites: When I read the text of Bereshit, what I saw is that Chava's curse was essentially to have a role on earth that was entirely at odds with her own true nature. Lilith was that part of her that had to be disowned, dissociated from herself. Chava's curse and women's curse is to be separated from our own true nature, and I think we could say conversely that Adam's curse was the same as Chava's. He also must, in leaving the garden, become a creature that had to operate in the world in a mode that was against his own nature. Adam, the man who above all was lonely, the man who wanted companionship, the man who wanted a friend, must now be a ruler and an overlord. I think that's the possibility that we need to cling to, that within our tradition is evidence that disrupts our ability to say, "This is the essential nature of man or woman. This is how man or woman always is, always has been, and always must be," because embedded within the story that naturalizes all of these gender roles is the very proof that simultaneously destabilizes it as well.

Arielle Levites: What I want to emphasize today is the idea that who we are, the repertoires available to us as human actors in an ongoing social drama, the roles we can play, are always at least in part socially produced. As much as we are unique individuals with agency and creativity, we also act out inherited scripts and genres. That is a social process. It's not the job of only one person to bravely go it alone because one person can't do it. If someone will take a risk and speak up, there needs to be an audience that could hear and accept their message. Even if we aren't speaking ourselves right now, if we want to make possible a female self who is brave, angry, and righteous, and a male self who is caring and wants equitable partnership above all else, if we want to bring these selves into realities, we as listeners have to hear and receive their voices as such and make room in our imagination for the possible selves of such people.

Arielle Levites: Women who come forward with claims of assault and harassment suffer real consequences of many kinds: violence, economic hardship, loss of opportunity, loss of relationships, and that is partly because we quickly move way too fast in our own imagination to connect women who can test the order of things to monsters. We have to put a check on that automatic association, that a female who wants will rage out of control, that her wanting will consume us all.

Arielle Levites: How do we break that cycle in our own imagination? There are many different strategies, but I want to finish up by highlighting two. First, we have to look for the female monster lurking, ready to pounce, not in reality, but in our own language and how we talk about #MeToo and this moment. In our own speech and the speech of others, we can look for the impulse to slide into the image of the monstrous feminine, the woman who wants so much, she will consume it all, and call it out when we see it. That is not to say that all women are perfectly virtuous and that claims should not be investigated or fair channels of justice not pursued. But let's examine and reflect on how we speak about women who come forth with claims. Why are we quick to question the voracity of their stories? Why do we question their motivations? Who exactly are we afraid we are dealing with here?

Arielle Levites: Nobody owns the story of the monstrous feminine. No one person is responsible or can be blamed for unleashing it because it's lodged in all of us in very deep crevices. It's a form of implicit bias and we all bear responsibility for acknowledging that it exists, recognizing it when it causes us to demonize others, and noticing it when it brings us to question ourselves for wanting simply what's fair.

Arielle Levites: Second, we need new stories. This is another insight of the #MeToo campaign. Research across many fields — neurobiology, psychology, sociology, literary studies, anthropology, trauma studies — tell us the important not only of storytelling, but of story editing and shaping who we are, how we see the world, and who we think ourselves to be. Stories take on power, not just in how we receive them, but in what we do with them, how we produce or remake them when we pass them on. I think we should tell lots of new stories. Let's also retell old stories, love stories, in slightly off and unexpected ways.

Arielle Levites: You can tell your true story. If you have a story to tell and you feel it's the right time for you to tell it, then you can come forward. Or you can amplify the voices of other women speaking. I just want to highlight the example in the news just this last week of the Honorable Judge Rosemarie Aquilina, right? She let the U.S. gymnastics hearing go on for days longer than scheduled because she used her power and authority to say that in her courtroom, every woman with a claim would speak as long as she wanted. That's powerful and that's what women's power can do.

Arielle Levites: Or you can retell a fairytale you once heard and insert new and unexpected ideas of who men and women are and what they can be. There's a tremendous bias in the stories we think are worth hearing. Only one woman in the history of the Academy Awards has ever won an Oscar for best director. Between 2000 and 2015, not one book-length work about a woman or written from a woman's perspective won a Pulitzer Prize. Who do we think can tell great stories and what do we think great stories are about?

Arielle Levites: Let's tell stories about angry, sane, kind women seeking justice; about furious, competent women who build up their society and communities because they want more and better for themselves; and let's tell stories of the caring me who value partnership above all else, nurturing the women in their lives all along the way. When we meet such people, let's embrace who they are and the possibilities of new ways of being that they give to all of us.

Sarah Mulhern: What is a woman allowed to be? In this session, Arielle offered that there exists a deep-seated, cross-cultural story that women are either the obedient mother or the demanding monster, but nothing in between. She proposed that this story impacts how we perceive both ambitious women and women who come forward with claims of sexual violence. She argues that we need to examine our old stories and to create new stories that offer more diverse and surprising roles for people of all genders.

Sarah Mulhern: We want to offer you some questions for further consideration. What stories shape our vision of what being a so-called "good Jewish woman" means today? What happens if there is a gap between what being a "good Jewish woman" has come to mean and what we believe it should mean? What are the interventions necessary to shift our paradigms on this important question? Finally, what kinds of responsibilities do different people bear in this project? What steps may we take as women or as people of other genders, as parents, as employers, as citizens, or as educators?

Sarah Mulhern: Thank you for joining us for this important series on Judaism, #MeToo, and Ethical Leadership. We look forward to continuing this conversation with you.