

LILITH'S FIRE

Reclaiming Our Sacred Lifeforce

Deborah Grenn-Scott

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Lilith's Fire: Reclaiming Our Sacred Lifeforce

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The Lilith Institute
P. O. Box 1705
San Mateo, CA 94401

www.lilithinstitute.com
650-345-5449

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For all my mothers, sisters and daughters

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They have set forth myriad new models of leadership; many have broken and continue to break unexplored, often explosive ground to create new culture, regardless of the personal cost. Their work, in all its forms, gives me inspiration and great fulfillment in the present and illuminates the possibility of a future once again based on partnership and spiritual reason.

Deborah Grenn-Scott

FOREWORD

Read this book at your own peril! So clearly and passionately does Deborah Grenn-Scott invoke Lilith that the reader cannot help but be changed – moved into a place of ancient power and new strength.

Lilith's Fire demonstrates that scholarship is prayer, the intellect an active participant, in what Carl Jung described as “the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God”. But it is the voice of the female Divine – strong, erotic, autonomous – that we hear in this book. The voice of women’s lost souls. A language for our questions.

Tracing the mythic figure Lilith over the last five thousand years, from Inanna to contemporary “witch” and “whore”, this volume lays before us the parallel story of women in male-voiced cultures – Lilith’s demonization is *our* demonization. We are shown how women’s original confident, creative selves have been subsumed by the shame and guilt imposed upon us by the very religions we adhered to.

By reclaiming the Lilith in each of us, we can fly free of our imposed “sins”: of being sexual, of not being silent, of being women. Lilith’s divine rage is a transformative energy. She demands to be embodied, to be experienced. Deborah Grenn-Scott brings her *experience* of Lilith – ritualistic, personal, professional, and of the heart – to these pages, along with her rigorous scholarship. A voice of extraordinary integrity emerges to inspire us all.

Cosi Fabian
San Francisco

**“Never, ever, for the sake of peace and quiet,
deny your own experience”**

- Dag Hammerskjold

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**And Lilith left Adam and went to seek her own place
And the gates were closed behind her and her name
Was stricken from the Book of Life**

- *from the poem "Lilith of the Wildwood,
of the Fair Places" by Susan Sherman*

II. PREFACE

This book was inspired by my MA thesis, which focused on Lilith--the First Woman created by God, according to Jewish folklore--and draws on her as both role model and symbol. Here, I examine why and how modern women are often demonized—identified as “bad” for actions perceived as reasonable for men, or simply by virtue of being female—through the same techniques used to silence our foremothers. I also investigate how contemporary women have started to reverse the effects of this demonization by redefining for themselves what is right and wrong.

In so doing, I try to counter existing myths and raise new questions about behavior usually classified by our society as sinful or shameful. I hope that you will come to see how urgent it is for us to work together to change a system that equates sex with sin, things erotic with things pornographic or violent.

As a basis for the discussion, I draw on the work of women who provide strong models for a more proud, sensual, confident way of being than that espoused by Western social and religious structures.

‘Sacred’ texts, art, mythological tales and writings, oral traditions, and ritual objects such as amulets have been

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among the primary vehicles used to demonize Lilith from ancient times through the Middle Ages and even today.

Demonization, an insidious technique at best, is an effective literary, religious and social weapon, a subtle tool of social control and psychological manipulation often wielded with such dexterity as to be invisible to the very people bound by it. I think it is important to also look at current uses of this weapon in the modern workplace, in religious structures, within families and in our own neighborhoods.

I refer, for instance, to those things which are *deeply disturbing* but are still embedded in this society and therefore taken as 'normal', such as ads and movies which characterize sexually healthy women as sluts, and oral or written texts which accuse independent women of a variety of mental health problems from nymphomania to paranoia.

Even worse is the telling of rape 'jokes'. One may feel vaguely uncomfortable at the telling, but rarely do people speak out against such so-called humor. Women themselves pass along such degrading 'jokes' in e-mail; women themselves laugh daily at a plethora of other misogynist and homophobic psychological put-downs in bars and offices without realizing that they are perpetuating their own negative self-image and widening the schisms between women.

Unless we are vigilant, using critical listening skills and speaking out against this use of language, we will not see our "civilization" evolve. Instead, we will pass on to our children a culture still rooted in violence and inequality.

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Calling attention to the effects of tasteless, hurtful 'jokes', of a society in which 'might makes right' is a necessary if unpopular step toward changing these behaviors. While some may think they are immune to their effects, no one is exempt.

Demonization, both a cause and a by-product of these actions, is perpetrated through written, visual, oral and aural images, in text, art, icons, photographs, commercials, newspaper copy, advertisements, promotions, point-of-sale materials in retail stores, magazines, music lyrics and videos, billboards, movies, radio talk shows, news broadcasts, television shows and to an alarming degree on the Internet. The thousands of messages, subliminal and otherwise, which each of us take in daily make demonization, like any deeply-ingrained social phenomenon, hard to escape--difficult to identify and thus hard to reverse. Most worrisome is the possibility that we have grown numb to it.

Why have men and many *women* joined to collaborate in this ongoing negative use of language that stereotypes and confines both women and men? As a means of scapegoating, of evading responsibility for one's own actions; as a result of human insecurity; as a convenient way for people to rationalize to themselves the 'lusting in their hearts'. The need for humans to create a figure onto whom they can project their 'darker' impulses and their ensuing guilt seems to run throughout time and across cultures.

Ancient and modern societies have used the tactic of demonization for:

- its effectiveness in controlling, manipulating, exploiting and dividing girls and women to keep them powerless, pitting

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Lilith against Eve, “good girl” against “bad girl”; its equal efficacy as a means of keeping one group, religion, or political party dominant over another;

- satisfying the human need to explain frightening or tragic events through the use of myth;

- rationalizing a mistrust of those who go their own way, those who are ‘too independent’ or risk being in the vanguard of new movements—and as a means of keeping them ‘in their place’;

- as a response to the jealousies and insecurities that lead to suspicion, fear of loss and ultimately the passing of moral and legal judgments on one’s peers or perceived inferiors. This was illustrated in the extreme by the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, when healers were accused of being witches simply for growing herbs or performing the functions of a midwife; witch hunts continue today in many modified forms which may not always end lives but surely ruin them.

I hope to help bring about a greater understanding that portrayals of mythical or real women as innately evil undermine the self-confidence of all women, and in turn their ability to take risks, assume leadership or claim power, from bedroom to boardroom.

As I move through this work, I look at the ‘power over’ systems first named by Starhawk (1982), and examine the use, rationale and soul-killing effects of behaviors sanctioned by the dominator model we inherited (Eisler, 1987). I share their belief that the psychological patterns of domination and submission created by this model and played out daily--at home, in the workplace, within our legal system, and in relationships--distort what is beautiful, create

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artificial constraints and dis-color our perceptions of natural Life processes.

I conclude with a hopeful look towards the future, which for me includes a vision of women serving as change agents within their religious, civic, social and business communities—a process which has already begun. It is hoped that this document will help women to name and value functions they already perform, and as a transformational tool to help women recognize, use, and appreciate their own erotic life force to create positive change in their lives. I trust that in the process, I shall also define what, for this modern-day Lilith, is sacred and what is profane.

“There are no facts, only interpretations”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

III. INTRODUCTION

Whose worldviews shape our own values and belief systems? Whose history and judgments do we live by? These are critical questions thinking people must ask themselves again and again as they move through life. I believe that the very foundations of our lives are built on a deceptively safe legacy of carefully filtered information and biased translation, on data often distorted by the interpreter. The resulting ‘history’, whether carved in stone, written on papyri or printed electronically has had such incredible, at times imperceptible power to inform and persuade it has rarely been questioned.

This body of knowledge on which our culture rests has been created and handed down by a long line of largely white male or male-centered historians, archaeologists, theologians, clergy, anthropologists, scientists, psychiatrists, artists who identified with the dominant culture and sociologists. Their view of the world—often held out as “objective” and scientific--carries their own personal viewpoint, as is inevitable in any writing or reporting endeavor (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992). Yet it is this knowledge base from which all our thinking and social behavior emerge. I believe this necessitates an ongoing re-evaluation of the texts and images on which we reflexively base our lives.

There is a need to educate people—all people—to understand that we also derive our values based on the creation myths on which we are raised. In the Jewish and

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Christian traditions that formed most of us in the West, these myths and their interpretations are male-dominated and often misogynistic.

Feminist liberation theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza puts it this way in her anthology The Power of Naming: “While androcentric scholarship takes man (male) as the paradigmatic human being, feminist scholarship insists on the reconceptualization of our intellectual frameworks in such a way that they become truly inclusive of women as subjects of human scholarship and knowledge on the one hand and articulate male experience and insights as a particular experience and perception of reality and truth on the other hand” (Fiorenza, 1996). It is our responsibility to hold this awareness at all times, and to communicate it to others, whether or not they agree or understand. It is not an easy task.

Dale Spender expresses a similar awareness when she writes: “Many of my concerns are not only with what men have left out of their records, but with their assertion that what they have created is a full and accurate account...All knowledge, every record, is by definition partial...there can be no *one* view, no *one* answer, no *one* record that can take all the diversity of human experience into account” (Spender, 1985).

Since my inspiration for this work has been the mythical figure of the 'dark goddess' Lilith—a symbol of the independent, rebellious, sensual, courageous, passionate, truth-seeking, activist potential in us all—she is my starting and focal point. According to Jewish legend, Lilith was Adam's first wife and Eve's predecessor. In the most

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commonly-told version of the tale, she is made from the earth, as is Adam. For this reason, she refuses to lie beneath Adam sexually, and when he insists, she mutters God's secret name, leaves the Garden of Eden and Adam, and flies off to the Reed Sea [today called the Red Sea] to live her own life. After Adam complains to God about being alone and Eve comes into the picture, we learn—in traditional patriarchal recountings—that she is warned against the 'evil' Lilith and feels Lilith is a rival competing for Adam's affections. In a contemporary feminist *midrash* or reinterpretation of this legend, however, we see Lilith painted as Eve's counterpart, confidante and friend (Plaskow, 1979; in Umansky, 1992).

Lilith is present in many cultures, occasionally as a goddess, child-stealer or demon, who might have been good or bad, then as child-killer and temptress; she has, at times, even been thought to embody or symbolize the devil and is often personified by Eden's serpent¹. She is clearly intended to represent the "evil" inherent in all women—while male symbols of this side of our humanity often remain far in the background. Yet many contemporary women see in her the embodiment of the Goddess, Queen of Heaven and Earth, goddess of love and war, designations she shares to varying degrees with the Sumerian goddess Inanna, the Semitic Ishtar, the Canaanite-Hebrew goddesses Asherah and Anath, and Egypt's Isis. As a goddess of love, beauty and things erotic she is akin to the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus; in her wildness and thirst for justice she and Bhadra Kali, the Hindu goddess, could be thought of as bloodsisters.

Lilith was created from the same earth as Adam, as stated earlier, but he expected her to submit to him sexually

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and one imagines intellectually and in every other way as well². Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, in her landmark work Black Madonnas (1993), calls Adam's treatment of Lilith "the first violence done to women". If one reads this as rape, as some writers do (Philips, 1984; Ostriker, 1993), one begins to view the Garden of Eden as more prison than paradise. No wonder, then, that Lilith left Adam and Eden.

In so doing--as Aviva Cantor wrote in the first issue of LILITH Magazine (1972)—Lilith chose loneliness over subservience.

The patriarchy's treatment of Lilith has been similar to its treatment of Eve. Both have been demonized - Lilith for her independence and open sexuality, and Eve for her quest for knowledge. The Zohar, the "Book of Enlightenment" from which late 13th Century Spanish-Jewish Kabbalistic teachings emanated, repeatedly links Lilith and Eve in their 'sinfulness', according to Barbara Black Koltuv in The Book of Lilith (1986).

We can trace Lilith's development through both art and text; through mythological as well as talmudic and apocryphal sources. They include: the ancient epic of Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree (Johnson, 1988); a 2400 BCE text referring to a Sumerian storm demon; the famous terracotta relief of a figure usually identified as Lilith (now thought by many to represent Inanna) known as the Burley plaque, circa 2300-2000 BCE; in Babylonian legends dating from roughly 1800 BC forward; in Aramaic incantation texts found in bowls around 600 CE in Nippur, Babylonia (Iraq), Arslan Tash (Syria) and Persia; in Talmudic references written around 400-500 CE and additional Rabbinic literature, midrashim and folklore from the 7th to the 12th

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Centuries CE, in 15th and 16th Century European sculpture and woodcuts, in Kabbalistic sources beginning in the 12th and appearing through the 17th Century CE, in literature carrying her through to the present day.

The only actual Biblical reference to Lilith or ‘the liliths’ (male *or* female demons) is in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 34:14); whether or not it truly represents this mysterious figure is a matter of conjecture (see section on “The Biblical Portrayal”).

I find Lilith endlessly fascinating, and whichever legends about her one chooses to believe, she symbolizes both the best and the worst in women, both the desirable and the socially unacceptable attributes of ‘the dark’.³

She is, for example, a sexy temptress on one hand; on the other, we have this notation from the Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend (1991): “In the Middle Ages it was considered dangerous to drink water at the solstices and equinoxes because then Lilith’s menstrual blood drops down and pollutes exposed liquids”!

As Judy Grahn notes in Blood, Bread and Roses (1993), fear of menstrual blood and menstruants has been rampant in many cultures over many centuries; all are part of the backdrop which paint women’s natural processes as dirty, ‘unclean’ or ‘impure’, frightening, dangerous, even deadly. Ironically, even as men, and women, gave this power to the menstruant, it made them feel revulsion. It is this kind of thinking which helps to break down young girls’ natural pride and confidence, converting it to shame and embarrassment.

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This is nowhere more clear than in Jewish tradition, which forbids a menstruant from making love with her husband. “To the Rabbis, sex at the period when the blood is flowing, was most strictly taboo. It made monsters...It attracted Adam’s other dark bride, Lilith” (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978). “This is only one instance of a taboo against sex at menstruation which is spread throughout all cultures dominated by men, both historically and at the present time...a taboo which approves only that half of the woman’s nature which is concerned with childbirth and pregnancy (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978).

Demonizing Lilith, and in turn all women, coupled with demonizing menstruation, creates a never-ending negative cycle of low self-esteem which will continue to perpetuate itself unless we recognize, name and reverse it.

And yet I find hope in new interpretations of the Lilith myth, such as those written by poet and mythologist Cosi Fabian. For example, in one of her talks, “The Banished Goddess: In Praise of Lilith“ (1992), she notes: “Like Adam, she was made out of dust and menstrual blood-Adamah means bloody clay...” This reference to Adamah, “the female of Adam...the Hebrew feminine word for earth or soil” (Koltuv, 1986) shows menstrual blood as sacred, for it is part of that which gives Lilith life. As such, this passage provides quite a different reading of the Creation story, with vastly different consequences for women, from that of 17th Century Kabbalists who wrote that Lilith was created from ‘filth and sediment’.

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I also find hope in the genuine joy and comfort many Orthodox and some Conservative Jewish women claim to feel in continuing the tradition of menstrual separation. Orthodox Jewish tradition mandates total physical separation from one's husband for two weeks each month, concluding with a *mikvah*, a fresh water bath in which the woman must immerse herself before returning home for a sexual reunion with her mate. Many say this two weeks of abstinence is a time of rest, reflection and deepened spirituality rather than what might appear to the outside observer, myself included, as a shame-based or shame-inducing practice.

**“Wings of Shekhinah, bringing flights of wisdom,
journeys of learning, the pursuit of truth...”**

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I was first introduced to Lilith at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York 13 years ago. I studied her for a short time, left her to return to corporate life, then came back to this work in 1995, largely as the result of having been transformed by several major descents, times in which I rode on “waves of disorientation, despair and chaotic turmoil” (Meador, 1994).

I viewed Lilith at first with both curiosity and delight. Hearing about a female rebel within Judaism, a woman with a free spirit and liberated voice within what had been both my religion and my lifestyle, was exhilarating. As a religion, Judaism had long inculcated me with its image of a male god, its patriarchal myths and history; as a lifestyle, it had of course completely shaped my worldview. In addition

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it was filled with the reward/punishment schema and the judgmental attitudes that seem to accompany any major organized religion. Another legacy I inherited was my father's mindset--as a refugee who fled Nazi Germany--to 'never make waves'. It was to be a highly detrimental mindset for me for many years, one strongly reinforced by this society's expectations for a girl's behavior.

I found Lilith's fearlessness to be a refreshing change of pace, a delectable breath of fresh air. If she was a windstorm, she was one I was willing and ready to encounter. Somewhere deep within me echoed the truth of her rebellion, her refusal to submit, her sexual desires, her liberation - of self, by self, for self. I recognized her love of life and search for truth, and found myself drawn to her like a magnet without being fully conscious as to why.

The need to plunge myself into Jewish studies at that point in my life was borne of an urge to connect to something more meaningful than a workaholic existence. I worked as a Senior Vice President in a public relations firm in Manhattan and led an extremely stressful life, most of which I loved at the time. It was not until I visited my sister for ten days on Kibbutz Ga'aton in the north of Israel in 1985 that I realized how burned out I was. To my surprise, I loved being in this garden paradise on the outskirts of terrorism, this Eden within a war zone. This reaction struck me and those I worked with as ironic, since I was an aggressive corporate executive with an admitted taste for the jugular.

In Israel I met my three-month old niece for the first time. Though I was at that point childless by choice, I felt for the first time that great void women without children are

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'supposed' to feel. It came, I believe, not so much from maternal instinct as from the fact that I found myself caught in a frequently dissatisfying and very predictable life with almost no spiritual dimension.

On my return to the States I decided to throw myself into studying to mask the void. I chose Jewish Studies in particular because I had been so awestruck by the natural beauty and miraculous oasis of peace my sister had found within Israel, a country always at war.

I occasionally wonder why I broke off my connection with scholarly pursuits to return to a full-time business life. Perhaps it was partly because I enjoyed the power I imagined I had there, even though it was clear when I left my office that I did not carry that power in the outside world. Outside my concrete corporate tower, I was 'just another woman' to the man in the street. Still, I thought of myself as a person of privilege, and only later realized the meaninglessness of such privilege.

In 1986 a variety of circumstances led my husband and me to adopt a son. Three years later my husband was diagnosed with cancer, from which he died fifteen months later. Both were turning points after which my life was never the same. One event was life-affirming and magical; the other brought me face-to-face with Death in a way that was far more devastating than I could ever have anticipated.

Several other traumatic losses between 1991 and 1993 combined to force me to re-evaluate the ephemeral, precious nature of Life. Suddenly feeling I had no psychic or spiritual choice but to cut ties to the familiar and leap into