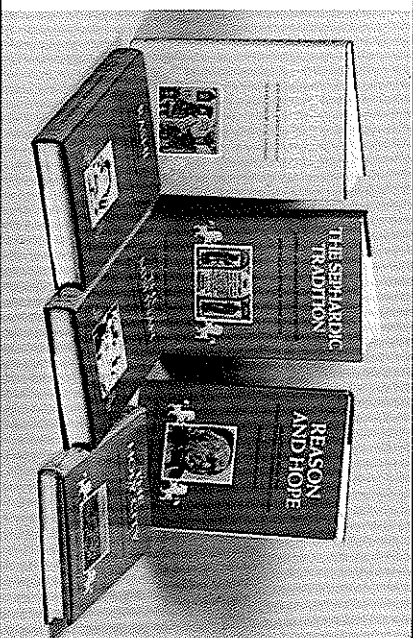


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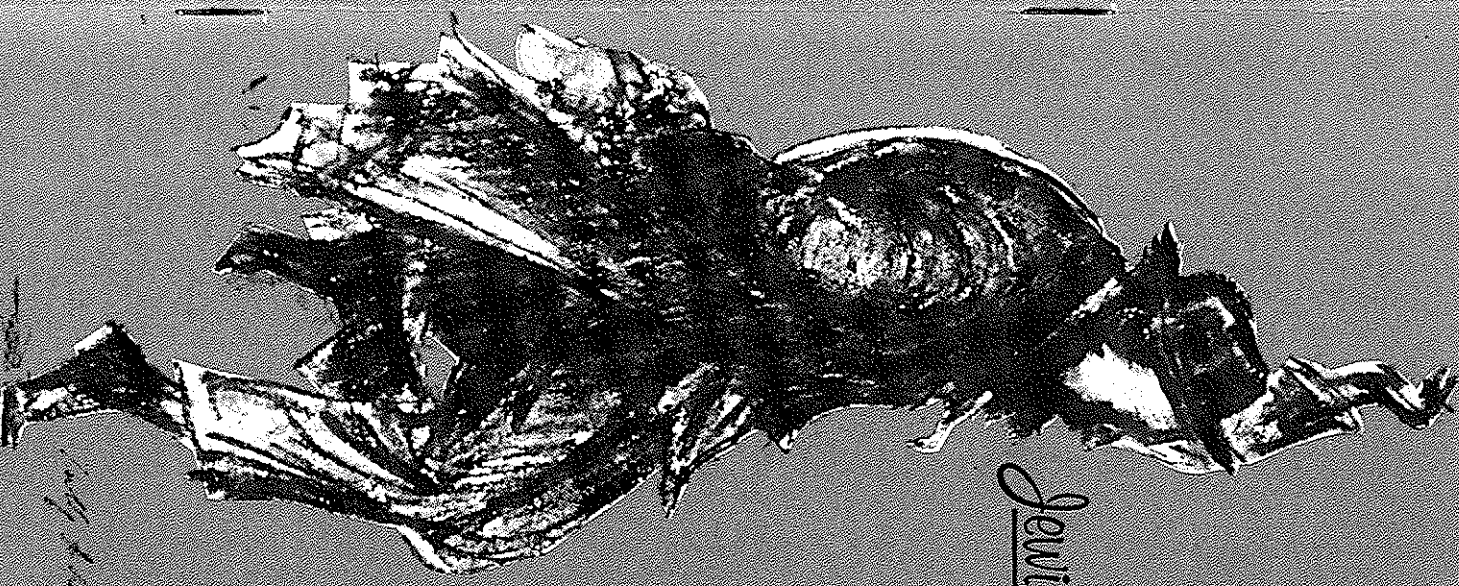
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# "MALE AND FEMALE CREATED HE THEM"

## A Feminist View

By Mary Gendler

**H**ow does Jewish tradition conceive of woman and her relationship to man? The origins of these attitudes are imbedded in three myths and legends.

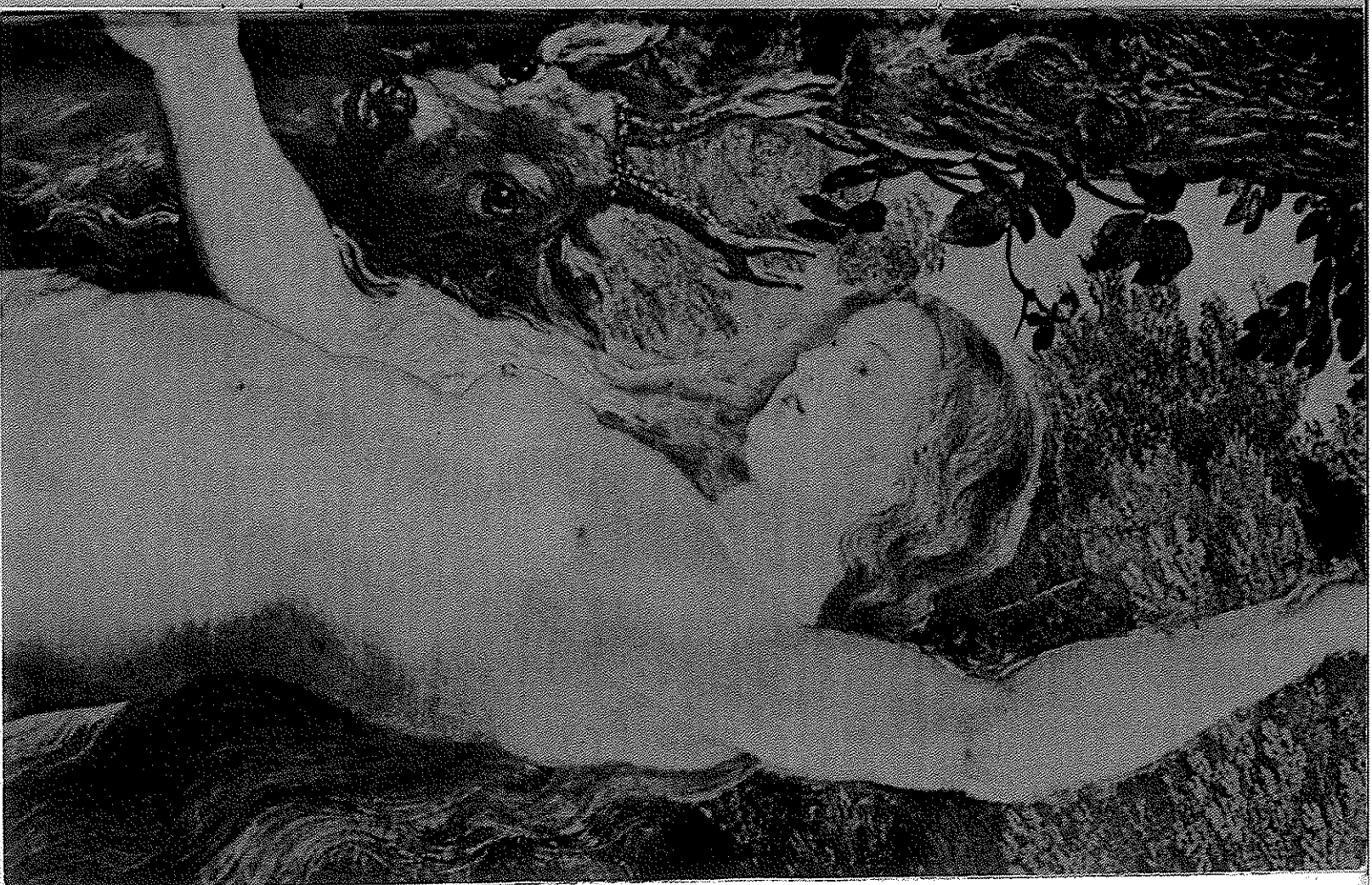
First there was Lilith.

The Divine resolution to bestow a companion on Adam met the wishes of man, who had become overcome by a feeling of isolation when the animals came to him in pairs to be named. To banish his loneliness, Lilith was first given to Adam as wife. Like him she had been created out of the dust of the ground. But she remained with him only a short time because she insisted upon enjoying full equality with her husband (Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1).

Adam and Lilith never found peace together, for when he wished to lie with her, she took offense at the recumbent posture he demanded. "Why must I lie beneath you?" she asked. "I also was made from dust, and am therefore your equal." Because Adam tried to compel her obedience by force,

Mrs. Gendler, who lives in Andover, Massachusetts, and is the mother of two children, is active in the women's movement. Illustrations are from a supereffectively beautiful new art book, *The Law and the Prophets* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, \$25.00).

JEWISH HERITAGE



*Liith, in a rage, uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air and left him. (Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis).*

God sends angels after Liith, who still refuses to return. He then threatens to kill one hundred of her demon children daily if she does not obey, a punishment she accepts rather than give up her freedom. She even goes one step further, the legends tell us, and tortures babies herself (especially boy babies) until they are circumcised. Only children who are protected by an amulet bearing the names of the three angels who followed her or by a ring drawn on the wall of the birthroom inside of which are the words "Adam and Eve. Out, Liith!" are safe from her evil (Patai, *Hebrew Myths*). Since she departed before the Fall, she is not subject to death and has thus been able to plague men throughout history. She is seen as a demoness, a child-snatcher, a seducer of sleeping men. She is heartless, devouring, tempting and destructive; a force against which it is necessary to protect oneself at all costs.

After Liith's disappearance, Adam, of course, is lonely again. When it is clear that she will not return, God places Adam in a deep sleep and removes his sixth rib from which He fashions Eve. This is the substance of the second myth. Adam is delirious when he awakens, for Eve is charming and beautiful. Unfortunately, however, she is also easily beguiled. God has given Adam and Eve full access to the Garden of Eden, placing but one restriction upon them. They are forbidden to eat the fruit of one particular tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If they disobey they will be expelled from the Garden and they will know death.

Eve, who is pretty but naive, vain, a bit weak and easily confused, is tricked by the serpent into disobeying this prohibition. She eats the forbidden fruit and persuades Adam to do likewise, thereby plunging them and their descendants into a world of pain, suffering and death.

The third myth is reflected in the words of Genesis 1:27 "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." According to this myth, man and woman were originally joined in one body but were later separated because locomotion was difficult and conversation awkward (Patai).

Myths and legends are powerful, serving both a reflective and an active function in our lives. On the one hand, they tell us of past attitudes, ideas and ideals, serving as a pseudo-historical record of popular life and thought. (At a deep, unconscious level, they may, indeed, constitute the most valid history available to us.) On the other hand, as long as myths are actively told and retold, as long as they serve as a reference point in a particular society, they also set norms for behavior and expectations.

The historical period during which the preceding myths were developing may have been one in which the patriarchy was slowly giving way to the patriarchy. The difference between the Genesis I (androgynous man) and the Genesis II (Adam and Eve) myths certainly suggests an ambivalence with regard to the way in which women were viewed. A struggle was going on at the formative period of Judaism, and the resolution of the ambivalence was both reflective of and creative of consequent attitudes toward women in Jewish life and theology.

Even a superficial reading of Jewish

history shows that ambivalence rather quickly and resoundingly resolved in favor of the patriarchy. Mythically this is seen in the fact that Liith, unquestionably a powerful woman, who may even have been a remnant of the very ancient fertility goddesses, is not only banished and demonized, but she never even makes it into the Bible.

The myth of Genesis I is almost completely ignored and forgotten: we have no idea what shape the woman created out of Adam's rib might have taken. It is, ironically, that very Eve who brought such suffering to mankind who becomes the prototype and stereotype of "woman." Theologically, the triumph of the patriarchy resulted in an almost total masculinization of YAHWEH. His "masculine" characteristics such as "justice" are often seen as tempered by "feminine" characteristics such as "mercy," but there is never any doubt that "He" is all male. Socially and culturally the demise of the patriarchy resulted in the exclusion of women from power and influence.

How does something like this happen? The explanations are undoubtedly complex, including economic and sociological considerations beyond our present scope. It is interesting, however, to trace these attitudes through the development of commentaries on the myths. We can gain profound insight into issues which affect our lives today.

Let's look first at Liith. She was Adam's equal, she knew it, and she therefore refused to lie beneath him either literally or symbolically. Patai tells us in his notes that "it is characteristic of civilizations where women are treated as chattels that they must adopt the recumbent posture during intercourse, which Liith refused" (*Myths*). Such a woman, of course, presented (and still presents) a tremendous threat to the patriarchal

society; her independence cannot be tolerated. It is interesting to note that Liith is pictured as an unnatural monster who tortures babies and defies God rather than surrender her independence. There is no suggestion that autonomy might be linked with loving or caring.

The myth of Adam and Eve, by far the best known and most influential of the three, presents a rather different view of the female. Eve, as we know, was created from Adam's rib to appease his loneliness and isolation. She was his helpmate; there was never any question as to who was "on top." The legend portrays Eve as weaker, less intelligent, more susceptible to flattery, less steadfast than Adam. The serpent approached her initially because "he was too well acquainted with the character of the man to attempt to exercise tricks of persuasion upon him, and he approached the woman, knowing that women are beguiled easily" (Ginzberg, *op. cit.*). (How, we might ask, did he know this when Eve, the first woman, was only a few hours old!) And so Eve, deceived by the snake who promises her that there will be no consequences, and greedy for the promised wisdom, eats the forbidden fruit.

Scarce has she finished, when she saw the Angel of Death before her. Expecting her end to come immediately, she resolved to make Adam eat of the forbidden fruit too, lest he espouse another wife after her death. It required tears and lamentations on her part to prevail upon Adam to take the baitful step. Not yet satisfied, she gave of the fruit to all other living beings, that they, too, might be subject to death (*ibid.*).

Poor Adam! Such a noble creature,

cajoled by the tears of a jealous woman whom he loves, hesitates for three many hours and then follows her into disobedience, death and exile! (In their commentary on the legends, Patai and Graves say the following: "Eve's creation by God from Adam's rib—a myth establishing male supremacy and disguising Eve's divinity—lacks parallels in Mediterranean or early Middle Eastern myths" (*Myths*). It might be interesting to probe into why this myth became so popular throughout the course of western history.)

What is most objectionable in the legend is not that Eve eats the forbidden fruit first and thereby causes their expulsion from Eden, but rather the characterization of her and her motives. Seen from another point of view, Eve might have been portrayed as a hero—another like Prometheus, for there are parallels between them.\* Prometheus defies the gods and brings fire, that is, knowledge, to mankind. For this deed he is severely and eternally punished; but he is also a hero. Eve might have been pictured somewhat similarly. Instead of seeing her as "easily beguiled," legend could have emphasized her curiosity, her imagination, her questioning even of God's Word. She could have been imagined as reckless and foolish, perhaps, but with a kind of raw courage which preferred wisdom to immortality. She could have been imagined this way, but she was not, of course, because it was in the interest of men to portray her as weak and glib in order to secure and maintain their superior position.\*\*

This image of women, I suggest, is a box into which women have been placed for thousands of years. Men believe that women are weaker, more naive, less trustworthy, less intelligent than themselves, and a girl

is taught from infancy to believe this of herself. The myth of Eve thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And as more and more women project this image of themselves, the more men can point their fingers and say "I told you so!"

As for the first Genesis myth, its implications are clear but undeveloped. If men and women were originally one and separated only so that they might be able to enjoy each other more, then their inner striving should always be toward unification, not domination. If, as Ginzberg indicates from the legends, "Adam originally had two faces, which were separated at the birth of Eve," then one face can never be greater or lesser than the other. For when she looks at him, she sees but a reflection of herself, and when he looks at her, he sees the same. Each is but one half (no more, no less) of a whole.

Elise Thomas Culver puts this more theologically in her superb book, *Women in the World of Religion*:

*"God created man in his own image...male and female he created them"—co-relative, equally responsible, equally manifestations of the one Creator-God. This God was not just one of a pantheon of gods, each representing a cer-*

\*I would not want to stretch the analogy too far, for I realize that there are also many differences, including the whole concept of the Divine and the consequent evaluation of obedience. The central point is still valid, however, that Eve's disobedience could have been interpreted differently.

\*\*It might be argued that legends reflect beliefs and attitudes of a whole people and that, consequently, it is unfair to say that the Adam and Eve myth is solely a put-down of women by men. I would contend, however, that the patriarchal was either already in full force by the time these legends were growing or that it was trying desperately to establish itself. If women agreed to this image of themselves, I would suppose they had no real power to oppose it.

tain human quality. He combined all attributes, and in his own image created man and woman, who together reflected their Creator. To both and together he delegated his dominion over the earth....it was when man and woman forgot their essential unity in God, and began dwelling on their differences and envying each other, that trouble began.

Perhaps it is time to reclaim this third and sadly neglected myth in Genesis: "male and female created He them." There is remarkably little commentary on this phrase, which is to be regretted, for this model projects the fairest, most mature, most acceptable view of men and women and their relationship. A free woman does not have to be a demonic Lilith; a free man does not have to be master Adam. Men and women were created equal and one flesh. They were created together, not one before the other. Each has equal need of the other, for alone each is only a half.

But this complementary relationship can work only if there were actually full equality. Laws and customs which prohibit women from participation in religious and secular activities and from adult status before the law would have to be abolished. For Jews (Conservative and Orthodox) this would mean particularly the abolition of restrictions upon women in the synagogue, including exclusion from *aliyot* and being numbered in a *minyan*, exclusion from rabbinical seminars, and so on. It would also mean reexamination of some of the laws, as, for example, those governing divorce. All women (as well as men, of course) would have to be encouraged to develop their full potentialities. This means that no longer would it be as-

sumed that the innate yearning of every woman is to devote herself to husband, children and the home. Many might still choose to do so, many might not. For with the weight of law and prejudice lifted, more might choose intellectual and spiritual careers. Men, on the other hand, might find it possible and rewarding to develop their softer, more rhythmic sides. Great liberation might come if men were encouraged to feel and to express their feelings more openly. For men, too, are caught in destructive stereotypes. With increased openness and less rigid stratification of roles and expectations, males might even derive pleasure and a greater sense of wholeness from more contact with real life-supportive activities such as child rearing, food-preparation, and the like.

What would be the shape of the new Adam and Eve? What would they look like? This is difficult to know, but there are increasing signs that the old model Eve will no longer do for our times. Fully educated for the first time in history, women are beginning to reject that image which portrays them as pretty little naive things whose only purpose in life is to serve men. They are beginning to refuse to "go to the back of the synagogue," to accept meekly legal, social and economic discrimination, to be regarded as "non-persons" in Jewish spiritual and communal life. Women have, indeed, tasted the fruit of knowledge and there is no going back. Whether or not the new Eve finds herself identifying with and becoming Lilith depends upon how hard we search to find a common ground, our "essential unity in God." Then and then only can we perhaps begin to bring to life the half-forgotten, crucially important myth of Genesis I: "male and female created He them." END