

# Lilith

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In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lillith. Lillith said, "We are equal; we come from the same earth." (Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b)

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This Scandinavian socialist embraced her boyfriend's NRA-supporting, right-wing Orthodox family when she converted to Judaism. After her 25-year marriage comes unglued, her Jewish identity is what sticks.

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*by Susan Silverman*

About to meet the baby who will become her son, her fears rise: Will I recognize him from his pictures? Am I a racist? Will he know I'm a fraud? And she moves through the holy work of adoption nonetheless.

## On Writing a Jewish Book

**I**f you had asked me almost 10 years ago, when I was starting out as a PhD student in English literature, what I planned to focus on for the next decade or so, the answer would have been, easily, women's literature. Not memoir, not comics. Most certainly not Jewish women's comics.

Of course, if you'd asked for a list of my favorite writers, the ones who had the strongest influence on me, it would have included, somewhere closest to the top, Anzia Yezierska, Grace Paley, Susan Sontag and Vivian Gornick.

Those are all Jewish women, you might have pointed out.

Oh? I guess... I mean, *Susan Sontag*? Does it count if she wouldn't have wanted it to?

Somewhere between my upbringing in a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in the Bronx, and the years of slowly replacing that orthodoxy with new modes of belief and practice—feminism, writing, literature and, yes, yoga—I decided that my Jewish history would never figure, could never figure, in my life as it—as I—had been remade. It would certainly never become a centerpiece.

And then, somehow, it did.

**At first it was a bit of a hobby, a distraction on the sly.** I started to dig deeper into the lives and works of these women whose characters seemed, somehow, against all odds, familiar. Sara Smolinsky? She, and her inventor, Anzia Yezierska, were nothing like my grandmothers, who immigrated half a century after and had never gone to college. What could they have in common besides that excessive, emotional language, those yiddishisms?

Grace Paley's "Faith"? She was nothing like my mother, who fled Brooklyn as quickly as possible without once looking back. I mean, sure, they're both mothers, and both grappled with their own tangled relationships to their immigrant parents. But what else did they have in common?

And what did any of these women have to do with me?

In many English Literature programs, delving into Jewish literature is not a particularly advisable turn. "You'll be marginalized," my mentor warned me when I told her about my plans to write on Jewish literature, though of course she was also the very person whose turn back to her Jewish roots had prompted my own. "Triply marginalized," she said when, later, I added women and comics to the fold. "But if it draws you, then that's what you should write about."

Explaining this shift to my family, my friends, and my colleagues, was maybe the hardest part. I had spent a lot of time reveling in my rejection of everything Jewish: complaining about the rampant homophobia of the rabbis (with exceptions, of course) who'd been charged with my early education, deriding the *kol isha* ruling that, at 14, had halted my burgeoning singing career in its tracks. Every time a person dressed in Hasidic garb and holding a *lulav* and *etrog* stopped me on a Brooklyn street corner, asking,



hopefully, "Are you Jewish?" I would respond with an adamant, "No," adding, under my breath, I'm certainly not your kind of Jewish.

In academia, as everyone knows, you're not supposed to research for personal reasons, and it quickly became apparent that writing about this literature, about Jewish women's identity, was clearly a way for me to work out a lifelong puzzle. What does it

mean to be Jewish without belief? And what does it mean to be a Jewish woman, when every bad memory I had from childhood was somehow tied to my supposed roles as a future Jewish American Princess, not to say Jewish wife and mother?

Writing about a Jewish topic also meant transforming myself into the very worst thing you could become as a graduate student: unmarketable. I was now too Jewish for English Literature programs, and I would never be Jewish enough for jobs in Jewish programs. This left me, as usual, between worlds; if you write your first book on a Jewish topic, after all, you've pigeonholed yourself: you're a Jewish writer. Haven't you seen how so many of those popular "canonical" Jewish writers (and actors, and painters, and critics) reject that title? Write about something else; take the word Jewish out of your title, for heaven's sake!

While I still admit to a heavy dose of cynicism when it comes to almost all modes of exposing and expressing my Jewish self—we've let our synagogue membership go, having attended only one service (very briefly), and my husband and I actively considered adopting a Christmas tree this year, despite our both having been raised Jewish and despite the hours of therapy both our mothers' reactions will cost us—there is something, dare I say, cathartic about this embrace of what I once so forcefully rejected. At a certain point, there comes a time when everyone has to face the fact that her career choices are, well, personal. This isn't to say that, for example, all oncologists grow up having witnessed loved one's lost battles in the face of cancer, or that television personalities emerge from childhoods spent being silenced, far from the spotlight. But it is inevitable that, if we take a close enough look, the paths that have led us to where we are, however winding, can be traced back to early burgeoning moments, even deeply disguised ones. The scholar of medieval history will, perhaps, be the first to admit this; it's those of us who feel most naked in researching and writing who we are, where we come from, that are the most active concealers, the most adamant deniers.

Why did I write a Jewish book? Because I was trying to reclaim my Jewish self, however unfamiliar its now ragged shape. ■

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