

# LILITH LOO

Turning 18 is different for a magazine. For us humans, it means we can vote, we can toast ourselves (though only with grape juice) for having attained a degree of adulthood. For LILITH, 18 almost feels like a dowager's birthday. We need a way to calculate magazine years, like dog years.

In Hebrew, the letters that mark the number 18 spell out *chai*—the word for life, so 18 is an especially auspicious birthday. How did this magazine get started? Though the story of LILITH's birth and early years has probably been sanitized a little by the kindnesses of memory, let's begin.

Although several women were involved in creating the magazine, and the ground-floor discussions included women who got on as the elevator was ascending to the mezzanine (to stretch an image), my name has been at the top of the masthead since LILITH's first issue, dated Fall 1976.

In the early 1970's I was freelancing for a range of popular and literary periodicals, and had written some pieces from a feminist perspective. Then, in 1972, after six months in Israel with my husband and toddler son, I was invited to give talks to women's groups about how Israeli women's lives differed from our own, and to write about Jewish subjects. In the summer of 1973, Aviva Cantor, then an editor at *Hadassah* magazine, where some of my writing had appeared, asked me to meet her for lunch.

I knew that most Jewish women's magazines in existence then were virtually house organs for Jewish women's organizations, that almost every Jewish magazine was edited by a man, and that the emerging feminist press was either not interested in—or was hostile to—Jewish women's issues (these were considered the cranky concerns of the privileged). Over coffee, Aviva mentioned that a small group of women—journalists, editors, writers, about six or eight in all—had spoken about starting a new feminist magazine for Jewish women.

"What a great idea!" I hollered, imagining (wrongly) that this embryonic magazine was already well on its way. And the elevator carried me upward too.

In the years when Aviva and I worked together on LILITH, we often reminded one another of that first conversation. In downcast moments, when we bewept not so much our outcast state as our lack of adequate funding, or adequate sleep, we would always agree that, "If we were

working at other jobs right now, and someone approached us to start a Jewish feminist magazine, we'd think it was the greatest idea in the world, and we'd quit our jobs to do it."

The magazine got named in one blink. Around a lunch table (food has continued to be central to our work) at the house of Judith Manelis (who left the LILITH collective before the magazine was launched to take on other jobs, including the directorship of Hadassah), Batya Bauman (now active in the animal rights movement and the proprietor of Feminist Voices, a speakers bureau) suggested, "Let's name the magazine LILITH." "OK," said someone else. And that was that.

The name has turned out to be a great consciousness raiser. Lilith, Adam's first companion, was her mate's full equal. When Adam got bossy and said, "I am your superior. I will lie on top of you. You will lie beneath me," and so on, Lilith fled the Garden of Eden. She refused to return, because Adam continued to insist that she be subservient. That's the core of the original story—which dates back about a millennium. Subsequently, Lilith got a very bad press. Later writers projected onto her all the evil a woman could embody. Paradoxically, she was both frigid and she



# KS BACK

by SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

seduced men who walked into dark houses alone at night. (You can still buy anti-Lilith amulets on the Lower East Side!) She was sterile, yet she gave birth to 100 demon children every day.

The legends of Lilith provide a window onto the paradoxical nature of the prejudices against all women, and of the stereotypes about women who speak out for their own equality. (Mind you, it does get a little wearing answering the question, "Wasn't Lilith a demon?" My husband, after having been asked innumerable times why the editors had named the magazine LILITH, finally started telling people, "It was either that or SHIRLEY.")

Sitting around the table at those first meetings were Elie Faust-Lévy, editor of the Women's American ORT Reporter; Ethel Fenig, a former teacher; Susan Dworkin, biographer and playwright. By Spring 1974, we were joined by Amy Stone, ex-reporter for the *Bangkok* (Thailand) *Post*, ex-Peace Corps volunteer. While our Jewish backgrounds ranged from Orthodox to assimilated, and our politics pretty much covered the map too, we all identified strongly as feminists and as Zionists. (That the latter word now sounds a little quaint is telling in itself.) A Jewish feminist magazine was the perfect amalgam of our Jewish identification, our feminist ideology and our professional skills.

We decided to list resources for Jewish women in each issue, and cover news that our readers would likely never learn about otherwise. We gave the sections of the magazine Hebrew names, both to mark ourselves clearly as a Jewish periodical and to do a little teaching on the side. Although various staffers over the years have toyed with the idea of calling the resources listings something other than Tsena-Rena (not wanting to turn away some readers), the Hebrew has stuck.

As with any fledgling project, LILITH had several hilariously naive moments before it got off the ground. Amy and I labored for days and nights in 1975 on a projected budget, having only a rough idea of what production costs might be by the time the magazine was a reality. We guessed how fast our circulation would grow, and carefully penciled these numbers onto green ledger paper someone had given us. We then photocopied the sheets (I still have the copies, with Amy's precise penwomanship) and sent

LILITH is named for the legendary predecessor of Eve who insisted on equality with Adam: "After the Holy One created the first human being, Adam, the Holy One created a woman, also from the earth, and called her Lilith. Lilith said, 'We are equal because we both come from the earth....'"

(From *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, 23a-b)

them off to The Max and Anna Levinson Foundation, which had given LILITH its first seed money, \$1200, in 1974.

A few weeks later the executive director of the foundation, who'd had lots of experience helping newly hatched projects steady themselves, called me. (We were planning, and later editing, out of various closets and crannies of my apartment). "Darling" (his very word), "I don't think you need our help at all. Your budget shows you expect a profit of \$94,000 in the first year." Amy and I had obviously not understood that we were supposed to total all those projections, and that that's what "bottom line" meant! Fortunately, The Levinson Foundation funded us anyway; without their initial grants the magazine might never have appeared. LILITH has been sustained since by other foundations and individuals, with tax-deductible contributions both large and small, but all giving us the feeling that the magazine had really touched people's lives, and that they wanted to be a part of it. The Covenant Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Lilly Endowment, Inc., are among more recent grantors, and individual donors and board members—especially Barbara Dobkin and Yvette Gralla—have seen to it that our small staff has been able to project future growth with a little more sophistication and accuracy!

That premiere issue (now a collector's item) began with an unsigned editorial in which I said: "In history, literature, religious practice and personal relations, Jewish women have come to accept the concepts of ourselves that others have created for us. Most of the pieces...describe in one form or another what we must know about the influences that have shaped us, so that we can move forward and shape our own futures." We did that, creating support for such issues as ordaining women as Conservative rabbis and ensuring reproductive freedoms, battling the "J.A.P." stereotyping on campus and elsewhere, challenging abortion-rights foes and gaining recognition for the new political power Jewish women can wield with their philanthropy. We were guided and encouraged by remarkable writers, among them some of the women who talk to us in this anniversary issue.

The fidelity of our authors to their subject matter has been astounding, and sometimes overlooked. Blu Greenberg

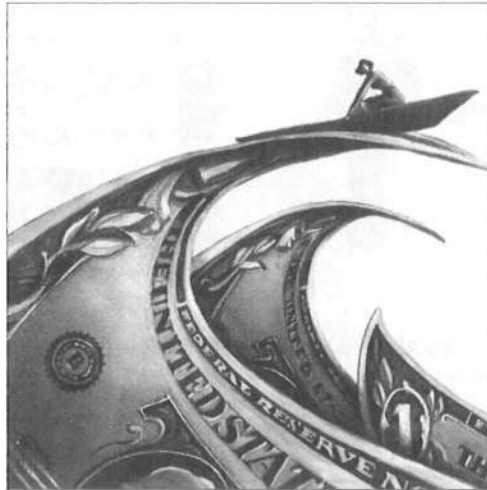
is one stellar example. An Orthodox Jewish feminist, Blu wrote on women and Jewish law in LILITH's premier issue, saying, "My belief in the perfect God does not allow me to think that the Lord would favor one sex over the other in any area of life." She made the case for repairing the gross inequities in Jewish divorce law in the second issue, and in the 1990's is still teaching us how to value both tradition and change.

The hortatory tone of some articles in the first few years reflected, I think, the desire of LILITH's editors for justice, and justice NOW. We hoped that change would come by fiat, as soon as consciousness was raised high enough (like those Hasidim who believe that if only enough people would observe Shabbat the Messiah would come). We earnestly went about our work of raising consciousness, without much thought for how people feel when they're told what's wrong with their lives (and with the Jewish community). As the world has turned, and as the staff has turned too, we've come to respect the process by which change is made.

Two sorts of changes have been apparent to longtime readers of LILITH. Groundbreaking articles such as Aviva Cantor's "Vanguard or Rear Guard" articles of the 1980's, a scathing and accurate description of how Jewish women were "warehoused" in women-only organizations, paved the way for articles different both in tone and in substance. LILITH has become less doctrinaire, less convinced that there is only one right answer to every question. Eighteen years ago we asked, "How can a Jewish woman respect herself in tradition and culture which has often treated her like a second-class citizen?" Now we ask less about getting to be like men and more about how to value women's own experiences and methods.

Another difference is that we now recognize and applaud the trust we have in women's own voices. This is not so much a sea-change from the first issues of the magazine, but rather reflects the editors' growing confidence. The experiential part of almost every story is one of LILITH's unique attributes, particularly as other Jewish periodicals have begun to publish analytical articles on "women's issues in Jewish life." LILITH has always placed women as the subjects (not the objects) in the stories of our own lives.

LILITH was the first to publish women's Holocaust memoirs, women's accounts of abuse and incest in their Jewish families, college women talking about the conflicts they experience as Jews in a multicultural environment that doesn't value *their* specificity, and even the responses



of a 12 year old to the ceremony her mother's friends created when she got her first period. We learn from each other's lives as well as from more formal texts.

What accounts for LILITH's durability in an era when such stalwart feminist periodicals as *Women: A Journal of Liberation* and Jewish magazines like *Present Tense* have folded? First, there's the "farbrene meshugener theory": that it takes at least one extremely tenacious person to launch and sustain an enterprise driven by ideology and not dollars.

I suppose I'd audition for that role in the movie version of the magazine. Second, LILITH has grown to be more than a magazine. Other projects include the new Jewish Women's Talent Bank and Information Service, outreach to women on campus, and the dissemination of new curriculum ideas to correct sexist bias in Jewish education. The polarity between Judaism and feminism that seemed irreconcilable 18 years ago no longer pulls women apart with the same ferocious intensity as it once did, and perhaps LILITH can take some measure of pride in—and responsibility for—this integration. Third, true to LILITH's original mission to explore women's issues in Jewish life and to be a Jewish presence in the general women's movement, the editors have ensured that the topics LILITH covers get wide exposure; in the past 18 years LILITH has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Glamour*, *Seventeen* and the *Une Reader*, and been talked about on "Donahue," "Oprah!" and "Good Morning America" (to drop only a few names...).

Yet there have been fragile moments, too. In our first decade there was never enough time, and never enough money, to come out as frequently as we wanted. But the hard times weren't all financial or temporal. There were a few angry times among the editors—not many, but enough to be lodged in memory—when some left and others stayed. Our staff now is made up of many different voices—usually all talking at once. Even the student interns, who have been with us in one body or another since the magazine's inception, have a voice at editorial meetings. The inclusiveness in the office, and in the pages of the magazine, doesn't happen out of ideology alone, but because it's much more fun this way.

So what's important to do now that LILITH is 18? Now that she can vote, what's she gonna vote for? Stay tuned for what we hope will be at least another 18 years making liturgies and celebrations more inclusive, launching women leaders into the highest positions in the Jewish community, encouraging our daughters and our sons to be feminist Jews. □