

## Lilith and the Letter Shin: A Midrash about Perfection and Wholeness

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**I**t was on the Eighth Day that God created the Hebrew letters so that our history and prophecy and poetry and, most of all, our stories could be preserved.

Each letter was made of glass. Like a prism, each reflected all the colors of the universe. God could not decide who should keep these treasures that one day would preserve Jewish teachings for eternity. God thought and thought and thought; then, on the eighteenth day, God knew.

“Lilith,” said the Holy One addressing the first woman, “because you understand the importance of learning, not just for yourself but for all our people, I am placing the first set of Hebrew letters in your safekeeping.”

“I am honored,” she said. “I know of a good place to keep them.” And Lilith led God to a deeply wooded part of the Garden of Eden. “Here,” she said, pointing to a huge flat rock which rose from the ground but was protected by an overhanging ledge. Flowering vines cascaded down from the ledge; birds and butterflies flew about; a nearby waterfall flowed into a pool where fishes of every color swam.

“Yes,” said God, “this is a good place.” The Holy One handed Lilith the alef. Lilith stepped into the sunlight and held the letter high overhead, catching the light, admiring the smooth, cool, hard glass. She touched the alef to her cheek, smelled it, kissed it.

“The bet,” said God, and Lilith carefully placed the alef on the rock so that she could accept the bet. One by one, God named the letters; one by one, Lilith accepted them; one by one, Lilith admired them. When nearly all were laid down, the Holy One paused. “This one,” God said, “is called shin. See how perfectly round it is? I think it the most perfect of all the letters.”

As luck would have it, just as Lilith accepted the shin, a baby cried in the distance. It wasn’t a piercing cry. It wasn’t a cry of pain nor one of fear.

It was a cry that said, "I am lonely. Please hold me." Lilith's thoughts turned to the baby for only a fraction of a second, but that was long enough for her to drop the letter God had just pronounced perfect.

Neither God nor Lilith spoke as the shin glanced off the rock, its shattering sound louder than the birdsong, the waterfall, the humming of insects, the quiet melody of wind in the vines.

"Excuse me, God," Lilith said. God was about to forgive her for breaking the most perfect letter, but Lilith continued, "for I must tend to the baby."

God said nothing as Lilith stepped away. "When I come back," Lilith added, "I'll fix the shin."

This remark struck God as very odd. Though the world was but 18 days old, the Holy One had not expected people to fix things. God made things, and people would take care of them—or not, but no one would fix them, neither God nor people.

God was still pondering this odd notion when Lilith returned. She picked up the broken glass and deftly arranged the pieces into the shape we call a shin. "Your handiwork is within this new shape," Lilith said, "but it also reflects humanity—just as each person is a reflection of the Divine."

"How shall we use the shin?" God asked, pleased by what the first woman had just said.

"As the first letter of a word for greeting," she suggested. It will remind us that we can communicate with you." God nodded in agreement. "Also," Lilith continued, "let the same word stand for peace since all of us can be peacemakers—whether the peace is broken by a crying baby, a disagreement between friends, or even discord between nations. The word will remind us that what is in pieces can be repaired."

Again God agreed with Lilith, but added, "Let shin also be the first letter of the word for listen."

"Yes," Lilith said, "we must listen to You."

"And I shall listen to all who seek Me," God said. And it was so. And it is so. And it shall be so forevermore.

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