

In the Beginning, God Created Adam . . . and La Petenera

*I am destined to wander, by the book of God, and to roam over every land.
For all who are fated to exile move about like Cain and flee as Jonah.*

In the beginning, God created Adam and Lilith, Adam's first wife.

Everything was fine until Lilith decided she wanted to be on top, after which Adam sent her away and received a more submissive wife in exchange: Eve.

Wounded, enraged beyond belief, and out for revenge, Lilith is blamed for a lot of ills and quite literally was demonized, becoming an actual demon and the bane of all men and of their wives. She entered their homes, had sex and procreated with the husbands, had demon babies, and sometime ate the babies. Not only that, she caused the wives to have miscarriages when they conceived. And she caused the men to spill their seed, a big no-no in Judaism.

After her demotion, did Lilith stay put in the Holy Land and sit around baking bread and keeping house? No, she moved to Spain with the other Jews who went there in ancient times, and when she was in Spain, she transformed herself into La Petenera, *femme fatale* and the bane of Spanish men. She rampantly seduced and abandoned, shapeshifting from a beautiful prostitute to a virgin and yes, to an angry Jewess out to avenge the fate of her people in the Holy Land. In spite of her rage and exile, Lilith/La Petenera remained loyal to her people.

If La Petenera just seduced and abandoned, this doesn't seem sufficient to build a whole mythology around, since love is about seduction and often about abandonment. Most people in their pursuit of love or marriage get jilted at one time or another. *La Petenera* perhaps epitomizes or embodies this feature of love. She is an archetype. The trope of the spurned woman is not the invention of any one culture, and the desire for revenge seems a basic human instinct.

La Petenera became the subject of a whole category of songs—specifically, flamenco songs—called *peteneras*. *Peteneras* all pretty much have the same chord progressions and melodies, and the lyrics, though not all the same, sometimes are "Jewish" and repeat with different performers. The flamenco Carmen Linares sings one of these Jewish *peteneras* about a crying woman who has lost her home. Curiously, she sings her *petenera* to a different melody, that of the famous Ladino—Judeo-Spanish—song "Los Bilbilicos," "The Nightingales." Although Carmen is not afraid to sing *peteneras*, some male flamenco singers are afraid to perform them, because one singer died during a performance, and so these singers fear bad luck for themselves. Here are some of the lyrics of that *petenera* translated into English:

*Ay, what lament in all of Spain
For all the Jewish neighborhoods . . . //
Through the streets of Judea
A crying woman passes by
They say she is from Sefarad (Jewish Spain). . . .*

Was Lilith an only child? No, she had a sister, Shekhina, whom we shall refer to as the *shekhina*. The

shekhina—usually thought of or referred to as the feminine presence of God, His daughter, or His bride—was banished from the Holy Land or from one of the heavens or from God's side—wherever she was abiding, because of the sins of her people. Her name is derived from the Hebrew word for *dwelling*, an English word with two meanings—"abode" and "thinking a lot about." Although she, unlike Lilith, was a "good girl," she too was been demonized.

When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, when Jews in ancient times sinned, the *shekhina* often was blamed—by God. Her punishment was exile. Exile from Earth to one of the heavens, or from one of the heavens to earth. On the other hand, when the Jews were exiled from the Holy Land to Babylonia, the *shekhina* also is described as going into exile *with them*. In one story about her, after she goes into exile, God marries Lilith, whom we just met. A painting of the *shekhina* going into exile shows her crying: the crying woman. The famous Spanish painter Pablo Picasso also did a famous painting called "The Crying Woman," which you might say, if you have an active imagination like mine, was his rendition of the *shekhina* going into exile. The *shekhina* is the light, Lilith the dark—the two sides of humanity, of life and existence. Think *yin* and *yang*, from Chinese philosophy. Light and dark are inseparable, intertwined, aspects of everything that is.

Although at first one might doubt that authors of *peteneras* knew or know anything about Lilith or the *shekhina*, and some scholars argue forcefully that the *petenera* is not Jewish in origin, I propose the opposite. Spain once had a lot of Jews, and Spanish Jews were persecuted and then forced to convert or killed or forced to leave Spain. Possibly some of the authors of *peteneras* were openly practicing Jews or crypto-Jews—hidden Jews. Since apparently about twenty percent of Spanish men today have some Jewish DNA, this theory is not totally impossible.

Making La Petenera Jewish, as is done in some of the *petenera* lyrics, is a good way to deal with the tragic history of Spanish Jews, as is discussed by the authors who otherwise dismiss a Jewish origin. However, whether she is simply a vehicle for the expression of certain ideas and emotions, or the inspiration for a whole genre of flamenco, I don't think anyone really knows. Finally—and I am going way out on a very fragile limb here—the words *petenera* and *peteneras*—whatever their idiomatic usage—seem to be used almost interchangeably, suggesting that La Petenera has dual identity, comprising both Lilith and the *shekhina*. Who else but a knowledgeable Jew could have created such a human being or folk figure!

Note

There also is a Mexican *petenera* that some people think is related to the Spanish one but probably isn't.

Sources of Quotations

- p. 1. "The Wanderer," in *Jewish Prince in Moslem Spain: Selected Poems of Samuel Ibn Nagrela*. Introduction Translation, and Notes by Leon J. Weinberger. University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1973, p. 21. Ibn Nagrela is the Jewish poet Shmuel Hanagid, aka Samuel the Prince.
- p. 1. The Spanish lyrics for "A Crying Woman Passes" ("Pasa una mujer llorando") can be found at <http://www.tomaflamenco.com/es/tracks/236>.

For Further Reading

These are just a handful of the many sources of information on *peteneras*.

Davidi, Einat. "The Jewish Petenera: Profile of a Spanish Myth," in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*. Vol. 61, No. 1, 2018.

Hammer, Rabbi Jill. "Lady Flying in Darkness." <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lilith-lady-flying-in-darkness/>.

Lorca, Federico García. *Grafico de la Petenera (Sketch of the Petenera)*, in Federico García Lorca, *Poem of the Deep Song/Poem del Cante Jondo*, translated by Carlos Bauer. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987, pp. 56–71.

Schwartz, Howard. *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 47–63 (*shekhina*) and 216–225 (Lilith).

Recordings

These are just a few of the many recordings and performers of *peteneras*.

Linares, Carmen. *La luna en el rio*. France: Auvidis, 1991. Track 4 is a *petenera*. Spanish lyrics at <http://www.tomaflamenco.com/es/tracks/236>

Other singers, or musicians, or dancers who have recorded *peteneras* (often available on YouTube on the Internet) include:

Camarón de la Isla (vocals) and Paco de Lucía (guitar), Esperanza Fernández (dance), Fosforito (vocals), José Menese (vocals) and María Pagés (dancer), La Niña de Los Peines (vocals), Luis de Córdoba (vocals), Paco Peña (guitar), Rafael Romero (vocals), and Victoriano de Málaga (vocals).

Festivals

Concurso Internacional de Cante por Peteneras. Held in Paterna de la Rivera, in Cádiz, Spain.

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