

In a Beginning, God Created Adam, Lilith, *La Petenera*, and . . .

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 a 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, whose story will not be told here.

Wounded, enraged beyond belief, and out for revenge, Lilith was 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 any pregnant wives to have miscarriages. And she often caused 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 still in the Holy Land. In spite of her rage, 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 her, since love is often about seduction and often about abandonment. Most people in their pursuit of love or marriage get jilted or at least disappointed or hurt at one time or another. Still, *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, the desire for revenge a basic human instinct.

La Petenera became the subject of a whole category of songs—specifically, flamenco songs—called *peteneras*. Most *peteneras* have pretty much the same chord progressions and melodies, and the lyrics, though not all the same, are "Jewish" in only two versions I have heard. The flamenca Carmen Linares sings one of these Jewish *peteneras* about a crying woman who has lost her home ("Pasa una mujer llorando"—"A Crying Woman Passes"). Curiously, she sings her *petenera* to a different melody from that of most of the other versions, that of the famous Ladino—Judeo-Spanish—song "Los Bilbilicos," "The Nightingales." Here is an English translation of some of the lyrics of her *petenera*:

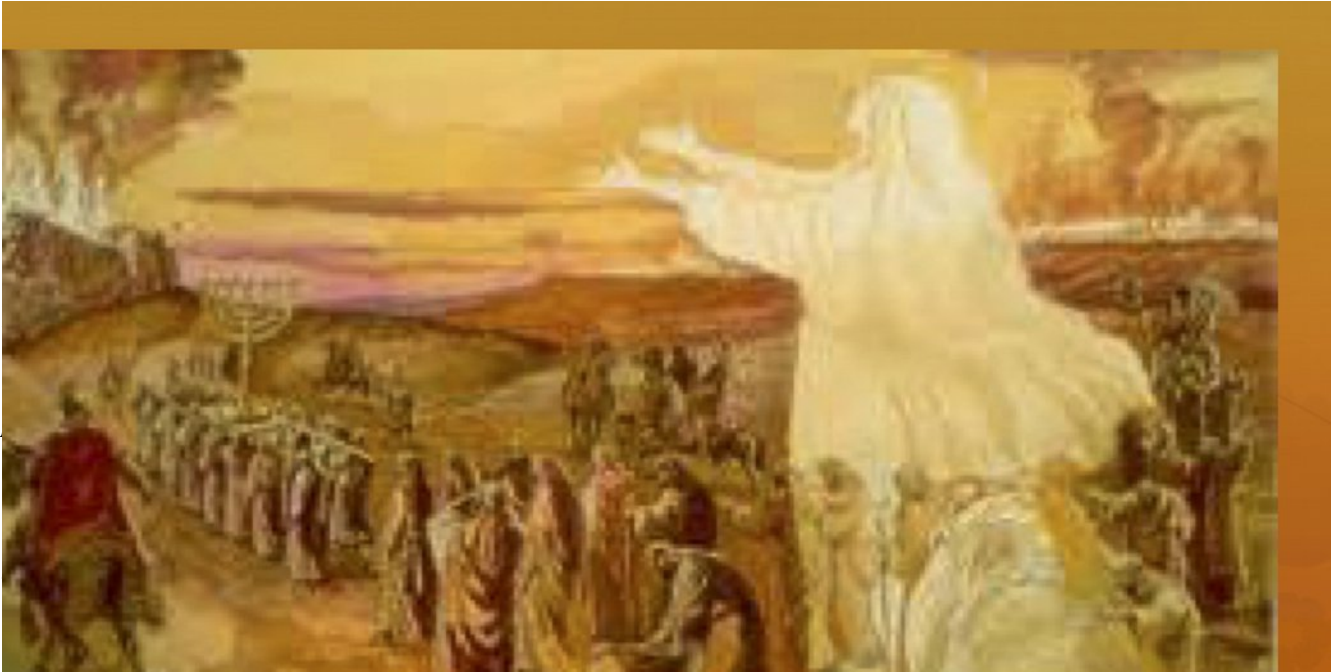
*Ay, what lament in all of Spain
For all the Jewish neighborhoods . . . //
Through the streets of Judea
A crying woman passes by
They say she is from Sefarad (Jewish Spain). . . .*

Was Lilith an only child? No, she had a "sister" called the *shekhinah*, a name derived from the Hebrew word for *dwelling*, an English word meaning both "abode" and "thinking a lot about." The *shekhinah* usually is thought of as the feminine presence of God, or His daughter, or His bride.

When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, when Jews in

ancient times sinned, the *shekhinah* 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, or from God's side. On the other hand, when the Jews were exiled from the Holy Land to Babylonia, the *shekhinah* also is described as going into exile *with them*, but not as punishment. If the *shekhinah* followed her people into exile in Babylonia in ancient times, why not also to Spain over the centuries?

The *shekhinah* going into exile is described as crying. Is she the crying woman Carmen Linares sings of in her *petenera*? The famous Spanish painter Pablo Picasso did a painting called "The Weeping Woman," which you might say, if you have an active imagination like mine, was his rendition of the *shekhinah* going into exile, although probably he never had heard of her.



The shekhinah going into exile from the Holy Land to Babylonia with the Jewish people.

The focus of *peteneras* and *La Petenera* in Spanish culture seems to be on the dark side, on the wounded woman acting out and seeking revenge, just as the focus with Lilith seems to be on *her* dark side, even though some artistic reproductions show her with owls, symbols of wisdom. Perhaps, then, Lilith is not all bad but encompasses both the good and the bad, the light and the dark. I will argue the same about *La Petenera*, that she is not all bad but instead encompasses both the good and the bad: When she is scorned or feared, she becomes dark, and when she is loved, she becomes light. She perhaps symbolizes all human beings, who want and need to love and be loved and who get caught up, at one time or another, in the emotional tangle that usually accompanies those wants and needs. And, of course, most human beings encompass a dark side, what some psychologists call a shadow. The *peteneras* celebrate, in song and dance, those emotions, drives, and complexities.

Curiously, the words *petenera* and *peteneras*—whatever their idiomatic usage—seem to be used almost interchangeably, suggesting that *La Petenera* indeed has a dual identity, comprising both Lilith *and* the *shekhinah*, the dark and the light, 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. Who else but a knowledgeable Jew could have created such a human being or folk figure!

Many writers on flamenco claim Jewish origins of flamenco in general, which would lead one to conclude that *peteneras* too had Jewish roots. Although at first one might doubt that authors of *peteneras* knew or know anything about Lilith or the *shekhinah*, and the scholar Einat Davidi (see Further Reading below) argues forcefully that the *petenera* in particular 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 *petenera* authors were openly practicing Jews or *conversos* (converted Jews), or *crypto-Jews*—secret, or hidden, Jews. Since apparently about twenty percent of Spanish men today have some Jewish DNA, this theory is not totally implausible.

Making *peteneras* "Jewish," as is done in the lyrics of *peteneras* like Carmen's, is a good way to deal with the tragic history of Spanish Jews, as is discussed in the article by Einat Davidi just referred to. In the other "Jewish" *petenera*, the singer asks, "Where are you going, beautiful Jewess?," he then refers to her as a healer, and she responds, "to the synagogue." This could just be man-talk, or it could be a subtle allusion to the *shekhinah*. And, whether *peteneras* are simply a vehicle for the expression of certain ideas and emotions, and *La Petenera* the inspiration for a whole genre of flamenco, I don't think anyone really knows.

Interestingly, *La Petenera* somehow might have made her way to the New World, specifically South America, Mexico, and later on New Mexico. What is the evidence? A host of stories swirl around a New World folk figure, *La Llorona*—"the weeping woman." Could this be the weeping woman that Carmen Linares sings about in her *petenera* or that Picasso painted? Not the same flesh-and-blood one, of course, but an incarnation. *La Llorona's* husband abandoned her, she drowned their children, and as a ghost wreaked and continues to wreak havoc wherever she goes, wandering around searching for her dead children. This is not the same story as the story of Lilith, or the *shekhinah*, or *La Petenera*, but there are some similarities.

When did the legend of *La Llorona* first surface in the New World? Possibly in the mid-sixteenth century, indicating that if she did come from Spain, it might have been then. And if so, why did she leave Spain and go to the New World? Given the time frame, perhaps she was fleeing the Inquisition in Spain and went to the New World along with other refugees, including many *conversos*, Jews who voluntarily or forcibly were converted to Christianity. Another reason, I would argue, is the *shekhinah's* devotion to her people: If she followed them to Babylonia and then Spain, why not the New World?

This suggests that *La Llorona* herself—and *La Petenera*—originally might have been—yes—Jewish, or a *converso* or *crypto-Jew*. After all, if her pre-Spanish heritage is Jewish, why not? And, since *La Llorona* is an active figure in today's Latino community but people don't think of her as Jewish, perhaps she too could be described as a *crypto-Jew*. If this is so, I find it remarkable that Lilith and the *shekhinah* have made their way so far while traveling through alien cultures that often didn't or don't recognize her true nature, and that her manifestations in those cultures have been so pervasive, influential, and powerful. The crying woman made her way from ancient times to the present, changing forms along the way in adapting to the cultures she found herself in.

At the same time, it could be argued from a different perspective that the weeping woman, in all her forms and stories—Lilith, the *shekhinah*, *La Petenera*, and *La Llorona*—is a creation of our own

psyches or of our collective human unconscious. Whatever her origins, however, let us recognize, appreciate, and empathize with the weeping woman wherever we find her, including in ourselves.

Notes

I don't want to complicate matters—at least not too much—but if you read more about *peteneras*, *La Petenera*, and *La Llorona*, especially on the Internet and in many of the books about *La Llorona*, you will find all kinds of contradictory and speculative information, plus parallels made with ancient Greek myths and with other New World myths and legends. Additionally, the dates you will find are all over the place. At first I thought that maybe *La Llorona* was older than *La Petenera*, killing my idea that *La Petenera* became *La Llorona* in the New World, but since I am not convinced, I decided to exercise poetic license and stick to my guns in what I wrote.

In some ways perhaps the timeline doesn't matter, since sometimes widely disparate cultures create similar ideas, even at the same time in history, and the basic truths of these stories are what's important. Additionally, the spirit of Lilith and her "spawn" just might have been and continue to be immune to the temporal rules that bind ordinary human beings. In the world of literary criticism, some critics argue that our current reading of a long-dead author actually influences that author and what s/he wrote, so that perhaps historically *La Llorona* might have preceded *La Petenera* but our understanding of the former was influenced by the latter. As I said, however, the dates are not agreed upon, so this line of reasoning, like the others, seems dubious. Finally, I am cynical about what I read about Jews in Spain, including what I have read about *peteneras* and *La Petenera*; a lot of it seems made up: For example, a marker in Seville, Spain, tells the story of a Jewish woman from at least five hundred years ago that calls the story a "true legend." Legends may contain a kernel of truth, but that's about it.

I used the word *spirit* in describing Lilith and her "progeny," not thinking of the way the famous Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) uses the Spanish word "duende," which translates as "spirit" but which he interprets in a much deeper way. His *duende* is almost a *hypostasis*, a philosophical term meaning something like underlying reality or essence. However you want to define the word *spirit*, there is an essence, a basic reality, underlying all of the manifestations of Lilith and the *shekhinah*. Tragically, Lorca was assassinated by the Spanish government. Was this the work of a jealous or frustrated *La Petenera* (about whom he wrote the poem "Gráfico de la Petenera") because he was very handsome but gay?

These stories and variations contain the same basic themes, however, as was pointed out, and at least to me, these are what are important, and recognizing them might be the only way to navigate the morass of attempts to place the stories in a historical context. Still if you want to try, be my guest!

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Victoria Lauren Smith for helping me identify and translate *peteneras* and information about them, and to Gideon Weisz for assistance with the epigraph.

Photo credit

Shekhinah. <https://www.valleybeitmidrash.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Shechinah-PP-converted.pdf>. The artist is unknown. You will find many other artistic depictions of the *shekhinah* on the Internet, but they seem to have nothing to do with anything.

Note on the URL Web Site Links Below

Clicking on these should take you to the Web sites, but if not, you'll need to cut and paste them into your Web browser.

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 medieval Spanish–Jewish poet Shmuel Hanagid (993–1056), aka Samuel the Prince.
- p. 1. The English lyrics for "Pasa una mujer llorando" are at <https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.tomaflamenco.com/en/tracks/236&prev=search>. The Spanish lyrics are at <http://www.tomaflamenco.com/es/tracks/236>. The performance by Carmen Linares is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3Tm7fb_CiE. *Llorando* is just a different part of speech from *llorona*.
- p. 3. "Where are you going, beautiful Jewess?" See <https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://tomaflamenco.com/en/lyrics/9819&prev=search> for a weak English translation, <http://tomaflamenco.com/en/tracks/3642> for the Spanish lyrics, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-Ay-Yg_sz for an intense performance of the song by Rafael Romero (vocals) and Perico del Lunar (guitar).

Further Reading

- 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/>. Article about Lilith.
- Hayes, Joe. *La Llorona: The Weeping Woman: An Hispanic Legend Told in Spanish and English*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2004. An illustrated children's book that focuses on the basics. *La Llorona*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Llorona.
- Lorca, Federico García. "Gráfico 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. Written by the famous Spanish poet.
- Lorca, Federico García. *In Search of Duende*. New York: New Directions, 1998.
- Schwartz, Howard. *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 47–63 (*shekhinah*) and 216–225 (Lilith). Excellent, scholarly, and eminently readable.

Recordings

Many singers, guitarists, and dancers have recorded *peteneras*, and many are available on YouTube on the Internet, including 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), and Victoriano de Málaga (vocals).

The Mexican *Petenera*

There also is a Mexican *petenera*, which some writers say originated in Mexico and went to Spain after 1492. See for yourself if the two *peteneras* are related with these examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF3otLcmkkQ>. Mexican

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao9_AW3rXI0. Spanish

Is "Eli, Eli" a *Petenera*?

Finally, "Eli Eli" ("My God, My God"), a poem by the Hungarian Jewish resistance fighter Hannah Senesh (or Szenes), was set to music in 1945 by David Zahavi. The melody and chord progression sounds awfully like those of most of the *peteneras*. Whether there is a connection is something I will let you, the discerning listener, decide for yourself:

*Here's Ofir ben Shitrit singing "Eli Eli": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgEHWyQsi_k.

*And Luis de Córdoba with a *petenera* using the most common chord progression and melody: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao9_AW3rXI0.

Petenera Festival

Concurso Internacional de Cante por *Peteneras*. Held in Paterna de la Rivera, in Cádiz, Spain. Thanks to Isidoro Cascajo and José García Quiñones for granting permission to reproduce the flyer shown below, which also can be found on the Internet at <https://www.paternaderivera.es/es/1001-editado-el-libreto-de-mano-del-xxiv-concurso-internacional-de-cante-por-peteneras-2019>.

XLIV CONCURSO INTERNACIONAL
DE CANTE POR
Peteneras SÁBADO 27 JULIO 2019
PATERNA DE RIVERA (CÁDIZ)
"CUNA DE LA PETENERA"

¡Ay, Paterna de Rivera!
Cómo te voy a "olviá"
si llevo a tu *Petenera*
en mi corazón "grabá"

LETRA: JUANITO VALDERRAMA
INTERPRETE: PERRO DE PATERNA

**ARCÁNGEL
MAYTE MARTÍN**

LUGAR: IES PATERNA HORA: 22:00
PRESENTA JESÚS VIGORRA

MEDALLA DE ORO DE LA PETENERA A ROCÍO MÁRQUEZ
IMPOSICIÓN Y RECITAL 25 DE JULIO 22:00 h
PLAZA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN

INSTITUTO ANDALUZ DE FOLCLORE
Agencia Andaluza de Industrias Culturales
COMISIÓN DE CULTURA Y PATRIMONIO HISTÓRICO

EL FLAMENCO

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