

Parshat Yayashev – Yehudah and Tamar
Melton at Shearith Israel, December 12, 2011
JSI at Akiba Academy, December 13, 2011

- A) Prelude - Breishit chapter 37
 - 1) Note the role of Yehudah
 - a) Counsels moderation
 - b) His leadership is accepted by the brothers
 - c) Yet he is ultimately responsible for the fate that befell Yosef
 - d) Plausibly, he is the one that is behind the ruse to deceive their father
- B) Afterward
 - 1) Yosef the Tzadik
 - a) Chapter 39, verses 7 - 12
 - 2) The role of Yehudah in saving the family
 - a) Chapter 43, verses 8 – 10
 - b) Chapter 44, verses 14 – 18, 30 – 34
- C) The story of Yehudah and Tamar itself
 - 1. Verse 1
 - a. 'About that time' – ויהי בעת ההוא; at what time? Why might it be important?
 - b. 'Left' – וירד; is there a deeper meaning in the use of this verb?
 - c. The contrast between 'his brothers' and 'a certain Adullamite'
 - 2. Verse 2
 - a. 'Daughter of a Canaanite ... and he married her'; compare 24:2-3; 26:34-35, and 27:46-28:1
 - b. 'Whose name was Shua' – ושמו שוע; her name is not given; does that mean anything?
 - 3. Verses 3-4
 - a. 'He named him Er'; 'and named him Onan' – ותקרא את שמו און; each parent named one of the children
 - 4. Verses 5-6
 - a. They have moved to a new area
 - b. Much time has passed
 - c. Presumably Tamar is a Canaanite woman
 - 5. Verses 8-9
 - a. See Devarim 25:5 -10; Devarim provides an out
 - b. Why did Onan not want to do what he was asked to do?
 - 6. Verse 10
 - a. This is another entry in a long list of sexual misdeeds of the Canaanite inhabitants of the Land
 - i. Chapter 9, verses 18 – 25
 - ii. Chapter 19, verses 4 – 9; 30 – 36
 - iii. Chapter 20, verses 1 – 3
 - iv. Chapter 34, verses 1 - 2
 - 7. Verse 11
 - a. Yehudah could not simply refuse straight out to give Shelah to Tamar
 - b. Yehudah seems to *deceive* Tamar
 - c. What does the reader know that Yehudah does not?
 - 8. Verse 12
 - a. What is the significance of the death of the wife of Yehudah?
 - i. Yehudah is left quite alone: He has distanced himself from his father and mother and brothers; two of his three sons are dead; no grandchildren; his wife is deceased
 - b. Yehudah's friendship with Hirah is a constant; he is still immersed in Canaanite culture
 - 9. Verse 14

- a. Widows apparently wore special clothes that identified them as such
 - b. Why is she doing what she is doing?
 - c. What qualities is she exhibiting?
10. Verses 16-18
- a. 'So he turned aside' – ויט; same word as in verse 1 – 'and camped'; does it mean anything?
 - b. Note the contrast to the behavior of Yosef haTzadik
 - c. What additional intention does she apparently have?
 - d. 'she conceived' – at this moment even she does not know that this is the case. Rather the reader is being informed of the success of her mission, probably as a way of indicating her righteousness
11. Verse 21
- a. 'cult prostitute' – קדשה; questionable translation
12. Verse 23
- a. 'Let her keep them' – תקח לה; questionable translation
13. Verse 24
- a. Her pregnancy begins to show
 - b. 'played the harlot' – זנתה; possibly refers to sexual relationships while bound to a different relationship
14. Verses 25-26
- a. 'Father-in-law'; emphasizes the relationship
 - b. 'Examine these', 'Judah recognized them' – הכר נא, ויכר יהודה; same verb. Compare 37:32 - 33 'please examine it', – הכר נא; what does the comparison teach?
 - i. He who deceived his father and deceived his daughter in law has himself been deceived, but he deceived to cover his own crime and out of ill will, whereas the deception perpetrated upon him has been to right a wrong and for his own good.
 - c. Yehudah becomes a penitent, and plausibly turns around the trajectory of his whole life. This might be the beginning of the 'new Yehudah'
 - d. 'And he was not intimate with her again'; why is this written?
15. Verse 29-30
- a. 'Peretz'; who is he and what significance does he have?
 - b. Lecha Dodi: ומין ושמהאל תפרוצי. ואת ה' תעריצי. על יד איש בן פרצי. ונשמתה ונגילה
 - i. Kingship and the messiah are born of the deed of Tamar
 - ii. King David's adulterous lust is also born of this line

16. Rabbi Benno Jacob, Genesis, Chapter 38

[(1862-1945) German rabbi and Biblical scholar, immigrated to England, wrote major commentaries on Bereshit and Shemot]

... Tamar stands even higher as she was originally a stranger. Her descent is not mentioned, only her name. This is intentional in contrast to Judah's wife. Undoubtedly Tamar too was the daughter of a Canaanite, because Judah lived among Canaanites and had taken a wife for himself from them. Calling her Tamar, and not "the daughter of a Canaanite man", points to her as an individual of special worth. Her merit consists in her responsiveness to the exalted mission of ancestress of the Messiah. Nobility of mind is more than nobility of family. Tamar represents the triumph of the spirit over "blood", and the attraction of Israel's national-religious ideas and of its faith. Another example is Jethro (Ex. 18).

We now understand that Judah's wife (verse 2) is called the daughter of a Canaanite. Her father Shua was a genuine Canaanite with a Canaanite bent of mind, and his daughter and her sons were similar. They have no understanding for Israel's mission. Er does not want to beget children, and

Onan will beget none for someone else. That is part of the Canaanite-Egyptian perversity (Lev 18, 3). A genuine son of Abraham begets children for his people and for eternity. Those men are killed by God who desires life and ordains events in such a way that Judah himself begets the ancestor of the kings. The woman is of foreign blood, but she is not only his equal, but even superior to him in moral purity and consistency. Ruth is the worthy successor of Tamar. She too is of foreign origin, from Moab; and Moab himself had been born in incest (19, 37). Yet again a noble mind triumphs over "blood". Ruth speaks that which Tamar thought, "Where you go I will go; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1, 16). After joining a house in Israel, Ruth will remain loyal unto death, and even offer herself covertly to a remote relative of her deceased husband.

This chapter is vital for the book of Genesis which tells the origins of Israel. However, Israel's story culminates in kingship. The tribe from which the king would come had to be indicated, even more so his ancestors. Chapters 34, 36, and 38 refer to each other. Each one of them is concerned with mixed marriage. A daughter of Jacob marries a Canaanite-she is lost; Jacob's brother marries Canaanite women-he is absorbed into the foreign people to such a degree that Esau and Edom become identical; a noble stranger marries into Israel and becomes the ancestress of Israel's most glorious family.

[Jacob, B. Genesis. New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1974, pp. 262-263.]

17. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, The Birth of the Bold

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Judah applauds Tamar's action and God rewards it. Her boldness, initiative, and willingness to defy society's expectations have enabled God to provide Judah with two new sons after the death of his first two sons. By continuing to consider herself a member of Judah's family and insisting on securing her own future within its parameters, she has made it possible for that family to thrive and develop into a major tribe and eventually the Judean state. The story marks the significance of this birth of twins with the language that heralded the birth of Jacob and Esau, Look! Twins in her womb! But as she is birthing, Tamar's role in Israel's history ends. She will act no more.

Midwives mark and witness the children's arrival, and "he," almost certainly Judah, names them. The attention of the story and its readers passes from Tamar to her sons and to the father who names them, claiming his role in their lives.

Tamar passes from the scene, but her impact continues. One of the twins is even bolder than Jacob. Jacob, the second born, came out holding on to his brother's heels, and spent the first part of his life trying to supplant him.

Peretz supplants his brother even before he leaves the womb. He shows the key characteristic of his mother, breaking through constraints and creating the breach (**peres**) through which he is born. But the birth of Peretz is not Tamar's only effect and achievement. Despite the story's keen interest in the lineage of Judah, it does not relate the life of Peretz or follow his descendants, and we realize his unique significance only when another bold, unconventional, and loyal woman, Ruth, intervenes to make his lineage lead eventually to the Davidic dynasty. In the more immediate context, Genesis continues with the story of Joseph and Judah. And in this story we realize

that the woman who transformed the history of the kingdom of Judah also transformed Judah himself. Judah, whom his mother named in thanksgiving (from wdh, "give thanks"), becomes the one who has acknowledged (from 30 wdh, "confess, acknowledge") that Tamar was the righteous one. This acknowledgment changes him, and he begins to act more like Tamar. He had left his brothers before he married Batshua, but the rest of Genesis shows him back in Jacob's family. He had betrayed Joseph out of jealousy, but he henceforth acts out of loyalty to his brother Benjamin and his father, 35 and is willing to stand up to the Egyptians in order to ensure their safety. The very words echo the story of Tamar, for he who had given his staff as pledge to Tamar turns himself into a pledge for the safety of Benjamin (Gen. 43: 9; 44: 32-34).

[Frymer-Kensky, T. Reading the Women of the Bible. New York: Schocken books, 2002, pp 274-275

Tamar deceives to do what is right, just like her grandfather in law, Yaacov did. In both cases it might be that the deception was necessitated by the lack of male female communication – there between husband and wife, and here between daughter in law and father in law

Yehudah engaged in sexual relations without identifying his partner, just as his father Yaacov engaged in relations with Leah without identifying his partner. In both cases the male is tricked in having sex with a woman he believes is someone else.

The birth of the twin boys reminds us of the birth of Yaacov and Esav

This class is based upon my earlier class given in the framework of:
Shivim Panim Breishit II
Unit VII – Chapter 38
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