

Tamar - Fruitful Righteousness

Background

A spicy chapter about the marital relations in the family of Judah, one of Yakov's ten jealous children, interrupts the popular narrative about Joseph and his siblings. Immediately after selling their brother into slavery, Judah "descends." Without introduction or lineage, Tamar enters the drama as a daughter-in-law, *taken* by Judah to wed with his first son. She remains on stage during the course of one chapter, an act with many scenes and character transformations.

Biblical Sources

א וְיְהִי בְעֵת הַהוּא וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחָיו; וַיֵּט עַד-אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וְשָׁמוּ חִירָה. ב וַיֵּרָא-שָׁם יְהוּדָה בֶּת-אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וְשָׁמוּ שׁוּעַ; וַיִּקְחֶהּ וַיְבֵא אֵלָיָהּ. ג וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן; וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ עֵר. ד וַתְּהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן; וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ אוֹנָן. ה וַתִּסֹּף עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שְׁלֵה; וְהָיָה בְכָזִיב בְּלִדְתָהּ אֹתוֹ. ו וַיִּקַּח יְהוּדָה אִשָּׁה לַעַר בְּכוֹרָו; וְשָׁמָּה תָמַר. ז וְיְהִי עַר בְּכוֹר יְהוּדָה--רַע בְּעֵינָי הָהוּא; וַיִּמְתְּהוּ יְהוָה. ח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְאוֹנָן בֶּא-אֶל-אִשְׁתִּי אָחִיךָ וַיְבֵם אֹתָהּ; וְהָקָם זָרַע לְאָחִיךָ. ט וַיַּדַּע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יְהִי הַזָּרַע; וְהָיָה אִם-בָּא אֶל-אִשְׁתִּי אָחִיו וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָהּ לְבִלְתִּי נָתֹן-זָרַע לְאָחִיו. י וַיַּרַע בְּעֵינָי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה; וַיָּמָת גַּם-אֹתוֹ. יא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתָמָר פְּלֹתוֹ שָׁבִי אֲלַמְנָה בֵּית-אָבִיךָ עַד-יִגְדַּל שְׁלֵה בְנִי--כִּי אָמַר פֶּן-יָמוּת גַּם-הוּא כְּאָחִיו; וַתֵּלֶךְ תָּמַר וַתִּשָּׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ. יב וַיִּרְבוּ הַיָּמִים וַתִּמָּת בֶּת-שׁוּעַ אִשְׁת־יְהוּדָה; וַיִּנָּחַם יְהוּדָה וַיַּעַל עַל-גִּזְזֵי צֹאנוֹ הוּא וְחִירָה רַעֲהוּ הַעַדְלָמִי--תִּמְנַנְתָּה. יג וַיִּגַּד לְתָמָר לֵאמֹר: הִנֵּה חָמִיךָ עָלָה תִּמְנַנְתָּה לְגַז צֹאנוֹ. יד וַתִּסֵּר בְּגָדֵי אֲלַמְנוּתָהּ מֵעַלֶּיהָ וַתִּכְסֵּ בְּצִעֲרֶיהָ וַתִּתְעַלֵּף וַתִּשָּׁב בְּפֶתַח עֵינָיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל-דֶּרֶךְ תִּמְנַנְתָּה: כִּי רָאֹתָהּ כִּי-גִדַּל שְׁלֵה וְהוּא לֹא-נִתְּנָה לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה. טו וַיֵּרָאָה יְהוּדָה וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ לְזוֹנָה: כִּי כִסְתָהּ פְּנֵיהָ. טז וַיֵּט אֵלֶיהָ אֶל-הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵנָה אָבּוֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַע כִּי כֹלְתוֹ הוּא; וַתֹּאמֶר מֶה-תִּתֶּן-לִי כִּי תָבּוֹא אֵלַי. יז וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח גִּדֵי-עִזִּים מִן-הַצֹּאן; וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-תִּתֶּן עֲרַבּוֹן עַד שְׁלֹכֶךָ. יח וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה הָעֲרַבּוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן-לָךְ וַתֹּאמֶר חֹתֶמְךָ וּפְתִילְךָ וּמִטְּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ; וַיִּתֶּן-לָהּ וַיְבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַתְּהַר לוֹ. יט וַתִּקַּם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּסֵּר צִעֲפִיָּה מֵעַלֶּיהָ; וַתִּלְבַּשׁ בְּגָדֵי אֲלַמְנוּתָהּ. כ וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוּדָה אֶת-גִּדֵי הָעִזִּים בְּיַד רַעֲהוּ הַעַדְלָמִי לְקַחַת הָעֲרַבּוֹן מִיַּד הָאִשָּׁה; וְלֹא מָצָאָהּ. כא וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת-אֲנָשֵׁי מְקוֹמָהּ לֵאמֹר אֵיךְ הִקְדַּשְׁתָּהּ הוּא בְּעֵינָיִם עַל-הַדֶּרֶךְ; וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא-הֵיטֵהָ בְּזֶה קִדְּשָׁהּ. כב וַיִּשָּׁב אֶל-יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא מָצָאתִיהָ; וְגַם אֲנָשֵׁי הַמְּקוֹם אָמְרוּ לֹא-הֵיטֵהָ בְּזֶה קִדְּשָׁהּ. כג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה תִּקַּח-לָהּ פֶּן נִהְיֶה לְבוֹז; הִנֵּה שְׁלַחְתִּי הַגִּדֵי הַזֶּה וְאָמַרְתָּ לֹא מָצָאתָהּ. כד וְיְהִי כְּמִשְׁלַשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיִּגַּד לִיְהוּדָה לֵאמֹר זָנַתָּ תָמַר פְּלֹתְךָ וְגַם הִנֵּה הִרָה לְזִנוּנָיִם; וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאוּהָ וְתִשְׂרָף. כה הוּא מוֹצֵאתָ וְהִיא שְׁלַחָה אֶל-חָמִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אָלָהּ לוֹ אֲנֹכִי הִרָה; וַתֹּאמֶר הֲרָה-נָא--לְמִי הַחֲתָמְתָּ וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמִּטָּה הָאֵלֶּה. כו וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי-עַל-פֶּן לֹא-נִתְּתִיךָ לְשְׁלֵה בְנִי; וְלֹא-יִסֹּף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ. כז וְיְהִי בְעֵת לְדַתָּהּ; וְהִנֵּה תְּאוּמִים בְּבֶטְנָהּ. כח וְיְהִי בְלִדְתָהּ יִתְּן-יָד; וַתִּקַּח הַמִּילָדָת וַתִּקְשֹׁר עַל-יָדוֹ שְׁנֵי לֵאמֹר זֶה יָצָא רִאשׁוֹנָה. כט וְיְהִי כְּמֹשִׁיב יָדוֹ וְהִנֵּה יָצָא אָחִיו וַתֹּאמֶר מֶה-פָּרַצְתָּ עָלַיךָ פָּרֹץ; וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ פָּרֹץ. ל וְאַחַר יָצָא אָחִיו אֲשֶׁר עַל-יָדוֹ הַשֵּׁנִי; וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ זָרַח. (בראשית לח)

1 At that time Judah descended from his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. 3 She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. 5 Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

6 Judah took a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. 7 But Er,

Judah's first-born, was evil to God, and God took his life. 8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother." 9 But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. 10 What he did was evil in God's eyes, and S/He took his life also. 11 Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"--for he thought, "He too might die like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

12 A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing." 14 So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as a spouse. 15 When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. 16 So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you"--for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" 17 He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." 18 And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

20 Judah sent the kid with his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. 21 He inquired of the people of that town, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim [Eyes], by the road?" But they said, "There has been no prostitute here." 22 So he returned to Judah and said,, "I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: 'There has been no prostitute here.'" 23 Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her."

24 About three months later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry." "Bring her out," said Judah, "and let her be burned." 25 As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." And she added, "Recognize these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" 26 Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more right[eous] than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again. 27 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. 28 While she was in labor, one of them put out, his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. 29 But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. 30 Afterward, his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah. (Genesis 38)

What motives and desires drive Tamar and her high-risk behavior?

Questions for Discussion

Tamar's character is first glimpsed through the juxtaposed lenses of Judah's perspective and the information provided by the narrator. While the text explains that the cause of the death of his first two sons is their own evil behavior, Judah attributes their demise to Tamar and fears for the life of his last remaining son. How do these dual perspectives affect your view of Tamar? Do you accept the coincidence that both sons die when they cohabit with Tamar?; do you share Judah's suspicion and fear? Is Tamar dangerous?

Masquerading as a prostituted woman by the road, from behind her veil, Tamar speaks directly and assertively with Judah. In each of her many roles, spouse, daughter-in-law, prostituted woman - business dealer, prisoner-condemned-to-death, vindicated righteous person, birthing mother, what aspects does the text about Tamar hide and what does it reveal? Note the character identities signified often by "costume" changes. How does her complex identity affect and transform Judah?

At her final moment of mortal judgment, Tamar reveals Judah's staff, cord and seal discreetly to him, appealing to him in private to recognize the tokens of his own identity. Her language corresponds with the expression he and his brothers had addressed to their father only a few verses ago. When they brought Joseph's special garment drenched in the blood of a kid after they had sold him into slavery, they say, "Recognize this, is it your child's garment or is it not?"(Genesis 37:32). Why does Tamar endanger her own life when she might have exposed the proof of Judah's responsibility for the pregnancy publicly?

According to the lineage recorded at the end of the Book of Ruth, Tamar is the ancestor of King David, mother of the Jewish messianic lineage. Her recourse to proscribed sexuality is affiliated with the bloodline of the messiah. In what ways does or does not Tamar's character and activism fuel hope for and confidence in redemption?

Links for Inquiry

Tamar's seduction scenes are the subject of many artistic renderings. View the Dutch Aert de Gelder (1645 - 1727) oil painting of the moment that Tamar demands a pledge from Judah, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=1593>

See Emile-Jean-Horace Vernet's version (1789-1863), <http://www.artrenewal.org/asp/database/image.asp?id=10619>

For a discussion of Tamar's willingness to sacrifice her life for the sake of Judah's honor, http://www.geocities.com/m_yericho/ravkook/VAYESHEV_65.htm

Summary of Issues

In this chapter, Tamar demonstrates that power is not solely a function of social status, nor is it necessarily wielded over and against another person. Whereas Judah (ab)uses his status as patriarch, precipitously ordering his daughter-in-law to be burned, Tamar enacts a different model. At high risk, she alters her personal and family destiny through the extremely discreet and humble exercise of power. Tamar accomplishes her goals while nurturing the transformation of her detractor.

Tamar's complex character traverses conventional and marginal social roles. Her sexuality is one of the main variables in the transformations that she finesses. She masterfully seams together licit and illicit acts, ultimately vindicating the worthiness of her purpose and methods. Outmaneuvered by her righteous conviction, Judah willingly capitulates, acknowledging his own folly and Tamar's greatness.

The Psalm for Shabbat alludes to Tamar,

The righteous, like Tamar, shall flourish and grow tall as a cedar in Lebanon. (Ps. 92: 13)

Methodology Matters

The thirty-eighth chapter of Genesis can be viewed as a theater piece comprised of a number of dramatic scenes. It is an excellent prototype for introducing the pedagogic method of one of the master teachers of the Tanakh, Nechama Leibowitz. According to the system she developed, the first step is to divide the chapter into major units and title each according to its content. These major units or scenes can again be sub-divided according to what you find to be themes or subjects; the units can be as discreet as half of a single verse. The next stage is to pose questions about each of the units. These are the first steps that will prepare for close reading of the text and, subsequently, studying the biblical *parshanim*, interpreters.

Contact

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