

# Tamar - Fruitful Righteousness



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### 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 וַיְהִי בָּעֵת הַהִוא וַיַּךְ יְהוָה מִאֵת אֲחֵינוּ; וַיַּט עַד-אִישׁ אֶדְלָמִי וְשָׁמוֹ חִינָה. בְּ וַיַּרְא-שָׁם יְהוָה בַּת-אִישׁ גְּנָעִי וְשָׁמוֹ שֻׁעַ; וַיַּקְרַב יְבָא אֶלְיוֹן. גְּ וַיַּפְרֵר עוֹד וַיַּלְךְ בָּן וַיַּקְרַב אֶת-שָׁמוֹ שָׁרָה; וְהִיא בְּקִזְבָּב בְּלִקְבָּה אֶת-שָׁמוֹ אָזְנוֹן. הַ וַיַּטְף עַד וַיַּלְךְ בָּן וַיַּקְרַב אֶת-שָׁמוֹ שָׁלָה; וְהִיא בְּקִזְבָּב בְּלִקְבָּה אֶת-שָׁמוֹ שָׁלָה. זַ וַיְהִי עַד בְּכָרְרָה-יְהוָה-רְעֵבָעִי הַחֲוֹתָה. חַ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאָזְנוֹן בְּאֶל-אֶשְׁת אֲחֵינוּ וְשָׁתַת אֶרְצָה לְבָלָתִי נְטוּ-צְרוּ לְאֲחֵינוּ. טַ וַיַּדַּע אָזְנוֹן כִּי לֹא לוּ יְהִיא פְּצָרָעָה; וְכִי אָס-פָּא אֶל-אֶשְׁת אֲחֵינוּ וְשָׁתַת אֶרְצָה לְבָלָתִי נְטוּ-צְרוּ לְאֲחֵינוּ. יַ וַיַּרְא בְּעֵינֵי יְהִיה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה; וַיִּמְתֵּן גַּם-אָזְנוֹן. יָ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְתָמֵר כְּלֹתוֹ שְׁבִי אֶלְמָנָה בֵּית-אָבִיךְ עַד-גְּדֵל שָׁלָה בְּנֵי-כִּי אָמַר פָּרִימָאת גַּם-הַזָּא בְּאָחֵינוּ; וַיַּתְּלֵר תָּמֵר וַיַּשְׁבַּב בֵּית אָבִיךְ יְבָא וַיַּרְבֵּן הַיָּמִים וַיִּמְתַּמֵּת בַּת-שָׁעָר אֶשְׁת-יְהוָה; וַיַּקְרַב יְהוָה וַיַּעֲלֵל עַל-גְּזֵרָא צָאנוֹ הַזָּא וְחִינָה רְעוּהוֹ אֶדְלָמִי-תְּמַקְמָה. יְגַד לְתָמֵר לְאָמֵר: הַבָּה סְמִיר עַלְהָה תְּמַמָּתָה לְגַם צָאנוֹ. יְדַ וַיַּסְרֵר בְּגַדִּי אֶלְמָנָה מְעָלָה וַיַּכְסֵּס בְּצָעִיף וַיַּתְּעַלֵּף וַיַּשְׁבַּב בְּפִתְחָה עִינִים אֲשֶׁר עַל-צְרָרָה תְּמַמָּתָה: פִּי רַאֲתָה כִּי-גָדֵל שָׁלָה וְהַזָּא לְאָנָה. טַ וַיַּאֲמַת יְהוָה וַיַּחֲשַׁב לְזֹוֹנָה: פִּי כְּפָתָה פְּנִים. טַד וַיַּט אֶל-פְּצָרָעָה וַיֹּאמֶר בְּבָה-פָּא אֶבְּאוֹ אֶלְיוֹן כִּי לֹא יְדַעַּכְיִ פִּי כְּלֹתוֹ הַזָּא; וַיֹּאמֶר מִה-פְּטָפְנִילִי כִּי מִבְּאוֹ אֶלְיוֹן. יְזַ וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָכִי אֲשֶׁר חִתְמָךְ וַיַּתְּלֵג וַיַּמְטֵר אֲשֶׁר בְּצָרָה; וַיַּקְרַב לְהָהָר יְבָא אֶלְיוֹן וַיַּתְּלֵר וַיַּסְרֵר וַיַּכְסֵּס צָעִיפה מְעָלָה; וַיַּתְּבַשֵּׂש בְּגַדִּי אֶלְמָנָה. כִּי יְשַׁלֵּח יְהוָה אֶת-גַדִּי סְעִידִים בְּגַדִּי רְעוּהוֹ אֶדְלָמִי לְקַסְתָּה הַעֲרָבָן מִזֶּה הָאָשָׁה; וְלֹא מֵצָאָה. כִּי יַיְשַׁלֵּל אֶת-אֶנְשִׁי מְקֹמָה לְאָמֵר אֵיתָה הַקְּדָשָׁה הַזָּא בְּעֵינֵים עַל-פְּצָרָה; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא-קִיְתָה בְּזָה קְדָשָׁה. כִּי יַיְשַׁב אֶל-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא מֵצָאָה; וְגַם אֶנְשִׁי הַפְּקִים אָמְרוּ לֹא-קִיְתָה בְּזָה קְדָשָׁה. כִּי יַיְאֵר יְהוָה תְּמַקְתָּה לְהָהָר פְּנִים נְנוּהָה בְּזָה וְאֶתְּהָה לֹא מֵצָאָה. כִּי וַיְהִי בְּמִשְׁלָשׁ פְּדָשִׁים וַיַּגְדֵּל לְיְהוָה לְאָמֵר זְבָתָה תָּמֵר בְּלִטָּק וְגַם הַבָּה פְּרָה לְזֹנְנוּנִים; וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הַזָּא וְתָמָרָה כִּי הַזָּא מֵזָאָתָה וְהִיא שְׁלָחָה אֶל-חַמִּיה לְאָמֵר לְאָישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אָלָה לוּ אֲנֵנִי פְּרָה; וַיֹּאמֶר הַקְּרָב-אֶל-לְמִי הַחֲטָמָת וְסִפְתִּילִים וְסִפְתִּילָה. כִּי וַיַּרְא יְהוָה יַאֲמֵר אֶל-קְדָשָׁה מִפְּנֵי כִּי-עַל-פְּנֵן לְאַ-תְּמִתָּה לְשָׁלָה בְּנֵי; וְלֹא-יְסַפֵּר עוֹד לְדַעַתָּה; כִּי וַיְהִי בְּעֵת לְדַתָּה; וַיַּהַפֵּךְ תְּאָמִים בְּבִטְחָה. כִּי וַיְהִי בְּלִקְבָּה יְסֻפָּן-יְסֻפָּן; וַיַּחַק הַמִּלְעָדָת וַיַּקְרַב עַל-יְדוֹ שְׁבִי לְאָמֵר זָה יְאָה רַאֲשָׁהָה. כִּי וַיַּהַפֵּךְ יְסֻפָּן וְהַבָּה יְאָה אֲחֵינוּ וְתָמָר מִה-פְּנִצְמָת עַל-יְדוֹ פְּרָץ; וַיַּקְרַב שְׁמוֹ פְּרָץ. לְאַחֲרֵי יְאָה אֲחֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר עַל-יְדוֹ פְּשָׁנָה; וַיַּקְרַב שְׁמוֹ זָה. (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,

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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)

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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=l593>

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](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 finesse. 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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