



“The Five Books of Moses:  
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 9 Parshat VaYeshev  
The Theater of Seduction and Righteousness

Genesis 38-39

**בראשית לח:** יא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתַמָּר כְּלֹתוֹ שְׁבִי אִלְמָנָה בֵּית-אָבִיךָ עַד-יִגְדַּל שְׁלָה בְּנִי כִּי אָמַר פֶּן-יָמוּת גַּם-הוּא כְּאֶחָיו וְתִלְךְ תִּמְרָ וְיִשָּׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ. יב וַיִּרְבוּ הַיָּמִים וַתִּמָּת בֵּת-שׁוּעַ אִשְׁת־יְהוּדָה וַיִּנָּחַם יְהוּדָה וַיַּעַל עַל-גִּזְיָה צִיִּי צִיִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְחִירָה רַעֲיוֹ הַעֲדֹלְמִי תִמְנַנְתָּה. יג וַיִּגְדַּל לְתַמָּר לְאִמֵּר הֲנִיָּה חֲמִיךָ עַל־הַתְּמַנְתָּה לְגִזְיָה צִיִּי אֲנִי. יד וַתִּסֶּר בְּגָדֶי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ מֵעַלֶּיהָ וַתִּכְסַּב בְּצַעֲפֵי וַתַּתְּעֵלֶף וַתִּשָּׁבַב בְּפֶתַח עֵינָיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל-דֶּרֶךְ תִּמְנַנְתָּה כִּי רָאִתָּה כִּי-גִדַּל שְׁלָה וְהוּא לֹא-נִתְּנָה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה. טו וַיִּרְאֶה יְהוּדָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לְזֹנוּתָהּ כִּי כִסְתָהּ פְּנֵיהָ. טז וַיֵּט אֶלֶיהָ אֶל-הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵנָה אָבֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַע כִּי כְלֹתוֹ הוּא וְתֹאמַר מֵה-תִּתֶּן-לִי כִּי תִבֹּאוּ אֵלַי. יז וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח גְּדֵי-עֲזִים מִן-הַצֹּאן וְתֹאמַר אִם-תִּתֶּן עֲרֻבוֹן עַד שְׁלֹחֲךָ. יח וַיֹּאמֶר מֵה עֲרֻבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן-לְךָ וְתֹאמַר חֲתָמֶךָ וּפְתִילֶךָ וּמִטְרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּתֶּן-לָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֶלֶיהָ וַתְּהַר לוֹ. יט וַתִּקַּם וַתִּלְךְ וַתִּסֶּר צַעֲפִיפָה מֵעַלֶּיהָ וַתִּלְבַּשׁ בְּגָדֵי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ. כ וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוּדָה אֶת-גְּדֵי הָעֲזִים בְּיַד רַעֲיוֹ הַעֲדֹלְמִי לְקַחַת הָעֲרֻבוֹן מִיַּד הָאִשָּׁה וְלֹא מִצָּאָהּ. כא וַיִּשָּׂאֵל אֶת-אֲנָשֵׁי מִקְּמָה לְאִמֵּר אֵיךְ הִקְדַּשְׁתָּהּ הוּא בְּעֵינָיִם עַל-הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא-הִיְתָה בְּזָה קְדוּשָׁהּ. כב וַיִּשָּׁב אֶל-יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא מִצָּאִיתִי וְגַם אֲנָשֵׁי הַמְּקוֹם אָמְרוּ לֹא-הִיְתָה בְּזָה קְדוּשָׁהּ. כג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה תִּקַּח-לָהּ פֶּן נִהְיֶה לְבֹזֵז הֲנִיָּה שְׁלַחְתִּי הַגְּדִי הַזֶּה וְאַתָּה לֹא מִצָּאִיתָ. כד וַיְהִי כִּמְשָׁלֵשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיִּגְדַּל לְיְהוּדָה לְאִמֵּר זָנַתָּ תִמְרָ כְּלֹתְךָ וְגַם הֲנִיָּה הָרָה לְזִנוּנָיִם וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאֹהָ וְתִשְׂרָף. כה הוּא מוֹצִיאָתָה וְהִיא שְׁלַחָה אֶל-חֲמִיָּה לְאִמֵּר לֹאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אֵלָהּ לוֹ אָנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַר הֲכֹר-נָא לְמִי הִחַתְּתִי וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמְטָה הָאֵלָהּ. כו וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי-עַל-כֵּן לֹא-נִתְּתִיהָ לְשְׁלָה בְּנִי וְלֹא-יִסֹּף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ. כז וַיְהִי בַעַת לְדִתָּהּ וְהִנֵּה תְּאוֹמִים בְּבִטְנָהּ.

**בראשית לט:** וַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ בְּיַד-יֹסֵף וְלֹא-יָדַע אֹתוֹ מֵאוּמָה כִּי אִם-הִלָּחַם אֲשֶׁר-הוּא אוֹכַל וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יָפֵה-תָאֵר וַיְפַה מְרָאָה. ז וַיְהִי אַחֵר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אָדָּם נְיוֹ אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ אֶל-יֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי. ח וַיִּמָּאן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-אִשְׁת־אָדָּם נְיוֹ הֲנִי אָדָּם לֹא-יָדַע אֹתִי מֵה-בְּבִית וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-יָשָׁלוּ נִתַּן בְּיָדִי. ט אֵינְנִי גְדוֹל בְּבֵית הַזֶּה מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא-חֲשׂוֹךְ מִמֶּנִּי מֵאוּמָה כִּי אִם-אוֹתְךָ בְּאֲשֶׁר אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאִיךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה הֲרַעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחִסְתָּאֲתִי לֹאלֹהִים. י וַיְהִי כַדְבָרָה אֶל-יֹסֵף יוֹם יוֹם וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֶלֶיהָ לְשִׁכַּב אִצְלָהּ לְהִיוֹת עִמָּהּ. יא וַיְהִי כִּהְיוּם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֵא הַבִּיטָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּבֵית. יב וַתִּתְּפֹשֶׁהוּ בְּבִגְדוֹ לְאִמֵּר שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיִּנָּס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה. יג וַיְהִי כִּרְאוּתָהּ כִּי-עָזַב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיִּנָּס הַחוּצָה. יד וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לְאִמֵּר רְאוּ הֵבִיאוּ לָנוּ אִישׁ עֲבָרִי לְצַחֵק בְּנוֹ בָּא אֵלַי לְשִׁכַּב עִמִּי וְאֶקְרָא בְּקוֹל גְּדוֹל. טו וַיְהִי כִשְׁמָעוֹ כִּי-הִרִימֵתִי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיִּנָּס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה. טז וַתִּנָּח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד-בּוֹא אָדָּם נְיוֹ אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ. יז וַתִּדְבַּר אֵלָיו כַּדְבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאִמֵּר בָּא-אֵלַי הָעֶבֶד הָעֲבָרִי אֲשֶׁר-הִבֵּאתָ לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בִּי. יח וַיְהִי כִּהְרִימִי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיִּנָּס הַחוּצָה. יט וַיְהִי כִשְׁמָע אָדָּם נְיוֹ אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דְּבָרָה אֵלָיו לְאִמֵּר כַּדְבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֲבָדְךָ וַיַּחֲרֵ אָפוּ. כ וַיִּקַּח אָדָּם נְיוֹ יֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֶהוּ אֶל-בֵּית הַסֹּהַר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אִסּוּרִי (אֲסִירִי) הַמֶּלֶךְ אִסּוּרִים וַיְהִי-שָׁם בְּבֵית הַסֹּהַר.

Genesis 38

<sup>11</sup> Then Yehuda 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. <sup>12</sup> A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Yehuda, died. When his period of mourning was over, Yehuda went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing." <sup>14</sup> 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



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was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as a spouse.<sup>15</sup> When Yehuda saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face.<sup>16</sup> 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?"<sup>17</sup> He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.<sup>20</sup> Yehuda sent the kid with his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her.<sup>21</sup> He inquired of the people of that town, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?" But they said, "There has been no prostitute in this."<sup>22</sup> So he returned to Yehuda and said, "I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute in this."<sup>23</sup> Yehuda said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her."<sup>24</sup> About three months later, Yehuda was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry." "Bring her out," said Yehuda, "and let her be burned."<sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong." And she added, "Recognize these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?"<sup>26</sup> Yehuda recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.<sup>27</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb!

#### Genesis 39

<sup>6</sup> Now Joseph was well built and handsome.<sup>7</sup> After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me."<sup>8</sup> But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands.<sup>9</sup> He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his spouse. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?"<sup>10</sup> And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.<sup>11</sup> One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside,<sup>12</sup> she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside.<sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside,<sup>14</sup> she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud.<sup>15</sup> And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside."<sup>16</sup> She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home.<sup>17</sup> Then she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me;<sup>18</sup> but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside."<sup>19</sup> When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, "Thus and so your slave did to me," he was furious.<sup>20</sup> So Joseph's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined.



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#### Context

Yosef evokes his brothers' jealousy by reporting about their misbehaviors to their father, and by telling dreams that hint about his future leadership. Yakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers when they are grazing the flocks in Shechem. Seizing the opportunity to take revenge, the brothers plan to murder him, but relent, throw him into a pit, and then sell him to traders heading for Egypt. The brothers cover up Yosef's disappearance. Staining his special tunic with the blood of one of their flocks, they pretend to their father that an animal devoured him. Yakov is heart-broken.

Yehuda marries and has three sons with an unnamed Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua. He marries the firstborn, Er, to Tamar, but Er dies for the evil he does in God's eyes. Onan, the second, spills his seed when Yehuda asks him to marry Tamar and bring forth offspring in his brother's name, and dies for his transgression. Both custom and Yehuda's promise dictate that he should give his third son to Tamar to marry, but he delays. Tamar seduces Yehuda, and bears twins who will beget a messianic lineage [according to the Book of Ruth].

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Yosef rises to run the wealthy household of Potiphar. Potiphar's spouse finds Yosef irresistible. Failing to lure him, she has him jailed by her accusation that Yosef had tried to seduce her. God's kindness with Yosef wins him authority in the prison. There he interprets the dreams of two inmates, Pharaoh's courtiers. One, the baker, is put to death, while the other is restored to his post as Pharaoh's cupbearer, but forgets Yosef's request to remember him.

#### Explorations

This chapter about Yehuda and Tamar reads as a dramatic script, a near-tragedy. Our scene begins at Yehuda's home where Tamar resides after the death of the second son. Yehuda sends Tamar away to her father's home, instructing her to wait, though he has no intention of marrying her with Shela, as he ought to do. Yehuda's ignoble character is made plain here, his flaw. At the same time, through Yehuda's eyes, we witness fear of a mysterious Tamar. Two sons who had sex with her have died.

After time passes and Yehuda's spouse dies, the next scene is prompted by a “chorus”-like character in the text who tells Tamar that Yehuda has headed up to Timna. She changes her costume from *widow* to *prostituted veiled woman*. She contrives to intercept Yehuda when he arrives at the place of “Opening the Eyes”, for Yehuda has not kept his promise. Tamar negotiates to receive a goat in exchange for sex, taking as collateral Yehuda's tokens of identification. She conceives by his seed. After she changes back into her *widow* costume, Yehuda's friend is neither able to deliver the goat nor retrieve the deposit, for the character who posed at the roadside is nowhere to be found. The “chorus”, people of the place, report that “there has been no ritual prostitute in this.” Repeated twice, this statement alludes to more than the fact that the woman is nowhere. Perhaps what she has done is not prostitution. Yehuda responds with a certain discomfort about his reputation, admitting that the sexual encounter was something improper that is better off concealed.

Three months later when Tamar's pregnancy is visible, the “chorus” reports to Yehuda that she has conceived by prostitution. A more menial word, *zona* is used here, different from the sacred ritual



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word, *kedesha*. Yehuda's response is immediate and ferocious. In the very same verse, in the very same heartbeat as receiving the report, Yehuda condemns Tamar to be burned to death for harlotry. What prompts Yehuda's instant resoluteness? Perhaps Yehuda harbored a suspicion that the woman at the eye opening place had been Tamar. For three months, the details of his sexual encounter had been shrouded in the mystery of Tamar's veil. The appearing and disappearing woman, his missing identification, the unredeemed goat—all of these might have been prodding his memory and fear of the person he had exiled from his home. He repressed these events to keep alive his hope that he could escape from the promise he had betrayed and from Tamar's deadly power.

Earlier in the parasha, Yehuda had participated with his brothers in the conspiracy to rid themselves of Yosef. Slaughtering a goat, and dipping Yosef's coat in the blood, they reduced their brother to a commodity to be traded. Yehuda had undermined the dignity of a human being by means of a transaction with a goat. On the same theme, Yehuda intended to commodify and demean human intercourse, exchanging his seed and with it the tokens of his own identity by means of a transaction with a goat. Rashi comments, “As Yehuda had beguiled his father with a goat, dipping Yosef's coat in its blood, also he was beguiled with a goat” (on Ber. 38:23).

At this point, the tragic drama peaks into the crisis that portends death for Tamar. One element in Aristotle's definition of tragedy is an incident, “arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.” As she is being led to her pyre, Tamar sends him an offering-- the tokens of his betrayal--with an invitation to redeem his tragic flaw, to restore the integrity of his character. Tamar removes the veil that separates Yehuda from his own dignity and humanity. Tamar appeals to Yehuda using the very same words that he and his brothers had uttered in the previous passage to betray their father about his beloved child: “Please, recognize!” Respectful of Yehuda's honor, Tamar reveals her evidence to him in private, minimizing his embarrassment and, thereby, maximizing her risk. There is no person who knows or understands; she has no recourse should Yehuda choose to  destroy the evidence and deny her claim. In spite of his past moral transgressions, Tamar trusts that her method will elicit Yehuda's finest character, and delivers herself into his hands.

Perhaps it is her willingness to risk her own life to save Yehuda and her overarching commitment to give birth to a messianic lineage that overcomes his fear, self-righteousness, and cruel judgment. We quiver with her in anticipation of the edict on her fate. “She is more righteous than I,” he blurts out, obliterating the tragedy, and opening channels for life and blessing to pour forth. Compared with Tamar's successful seduction of Yehuda that proves her righteousness, the seduction by the spouse of Potiphar demonstrates Yosef's righteousness through its failure. Whereas Tamar builds the man she entices to his finest ethical standard and empowers him to develop, Potiphar's spouse humiliates and imprisons Yosef, abusing her power.

Both Tamar and Potiphar's spouse make claims about material evidence in the aftermath of the seductions. The honesty of Tamar's statement, ["I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong"](#) contrasts with the  deceptiveness of Potiphar's spouse, ["Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside."](#) Both the honest and the deceptive use of the material evidence achieve their goal; they determine serious life outcomes, one just, the other unjust.



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### Questions for Discussion

Among the many complex and risky maneuvers that Tamar finesses, she uses sex to rectify the injustice that Yehuda, her father-in-law, has wrought. Tamar's sexual seduction is instrumental to her goal. Could she have achieved her goals by other means? Explain whether or not you think her ends justify her means and why.

Another component of Tamar's successful activism is her faith that Yehuda, the one with power, will transform himself and publicly acknowledge the justice of her cause. How can we better cultivate the capability of powerful people to develop their moral character, dispose them to recognize their role in injustice, and transform their behavior toward more just action? Rather than as a relationship of honor and holiness, people often relate to sexuality as a medium for playing out power dynamics of gender and class. Parashat Vayeshev includes two scenes of women's sexual seductions that illustrate very different power structures.

1. In the seduction scene between Potiphar's spouse and Yosef the woman subdues a servant who resists *her* abuse of power. The man is under her control.
2. In Tamar's seduction, her life is subject to Yehuda's authority.

Compare these biblical seductions in terms of the roles of gender and power and their relevance to contemporary life. The relationships between US President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, the alleged relationship between Israeli President Katzav and female employees, between Israeli Justice Minister Haim Ramon and a female soldier, all of these created national public debate. How do similar issues of power and sex affect your life and community?

To what vision is Tamar committed that she is willing to risk her life to fulfill it? Is there any element of her vision with which you can identify? Under what, if any conditions are, or would you be willing to risk so much?

#### Study Links

[This book](#) tells a different story about women's seduction.

[Here](#) is a link to an outline of Aristotle's views about tragedy.

In the 1970's, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon proposed and framed laws that define sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination, illegal according to the code of human rights. Catharine published the main argument in [Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination](#).

These sites document the struggle toward more dignified working conditions:

- a [bibliography](#) of MacKinnon's publications documenting her activism
- a [landmark case in Canada](#)



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#### Summary of Issues

A theatrical drama dealing in sexuality and human integrity features a shrewd protagonist who overturns a possible tragedy by overwhelming the self-righteousness of her father-in-law with the force of pure passion and commitment to ongoing life with integrity.

#### Methods & Observations

One of the great Tanakh scholars, commentators, and teachers of the past generations, [Nechama Leibowitz](#), often used to make the analogy between the text and drama. She would ask us to break a chapter down into acts and scenes, title and ask questions of our own pertaining to each. This she would ask us to do before turning to the commentators.

#### Contact

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