



Despair Meets Hope: Yehudah and Tamar

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In order to understand why Yehudah does not want Tamar to marry Shelah, his youngest son, after his first two sons die, we need to understand who Yehudah has become since Yosef's sale.

That change in Yehudah is signaled from the very beginning of his story in this *parashah*:

בראשית לח:

וַיְהִי בָּעֵת הַהוּא יֵרֵד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחָיו וַיֵּט עַד אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וַשְּׁמוֹ חִירָה:

Bereishit 38:1

About that time, Yehudah went down (*va-yered*) from his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah.

While the word “*va-yered*” certainly denotes a physical action, the connotation of “descending” or “going down” may give us insight into Yehudah’s inner state in this moment: he is caught in a downward spiral, in a state of depression and isolation. Notably, the text does not only state that he “went down,” but that he “went down from his brothers.”



Whatever Yehudah is experiencing in this moment, its result is disconnection from his family. The family structure that began to fracture with Yosef's sale has continued to disintegrate, this time not by force, but because of Yehudah's despair.

Why, though, has Yehudah arrived at this place of depression and isolation? While the text does not explicitly give us a reason, Rashi notes that this incident directly follows Yosef's sale, in which Yehudah played a leading role:

רש"י בראשית לח:א

למה נסמכה פרשה זו לכאן, והפסיק בפרשתו של יוסף? ללמד שהורידוהו אחיו מגדלתו כשראו בצרת אביהם, אמרו: אתה אמרת למכרו, אלו אמרת להשיבו היינו שומעים לה:

Rashi on Bereishit 38:1

Why is this chapter placed here, interrupting the story of Yosef? To teach that his brothers brought him down from his greatness when they saw the distress of their father. They said [to Yehudah], “You said to sell him; if you had said to return him, we would have listened to you.”

While Rashi argues that Yehudah's “descent” is initiated by his brothers who cast him out due to their regret at the sale, it seems equally possible that it is Yehudah himself who initiates the separation for similar reasons. Yehudah is disgusted by what he did—to his brother, to his despairing father, to his family.

Yehudah's attempts to isolate himself from his family, however, do not end with his physical and emotional departure from their midst. Immediately after his “descent” from his brothers, we are told that Yehudah marries a Canaanite woman, a sort of marriage that, in previous generations of the family, has been viewed as fundamentally inappropriate for a child of



Avraham's family and incompatible with being a carrier of the covenantal blessing.¹

בראשית לח:ב

וַיֵּרָא שָׁם יְהוּדָה בֵּת אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וְשֵׁמוֹ שׁוּעַ וַיִּקְחָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ:

Bereishit 38:2

There Yehudah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite man whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her.

Unable to face himself after his crime, Yehudah reacts by rejecting everything of which he now deems himself unworthy: his brothers, his family, and his role in the covenant itself. Now that he understands himself as unworthy of being a member of the covenantal family, Yehudah begins to build a new family whose very composition indicates that, no longer worthy of its blessings, he is also no longer obligated to abide by its rules.

While the text does not tell us what Yehudah thought when his sons begin to die one after the other, each immediately after marriage, the context of the story might help us hazard an answer: perhaps Yehudah, filled with self-loathing, isolated from his brothers, cut off from the covenant, believes that God is punishing him for his role in Yosef's sale. Perhaps Yehudah thinks that he is being punished appropriately for what he did to his father: because he deprived his father of a son, he is being deprived of his own sons. Because Ya'akov will never have grandchildren from Yosef, his favorite child, God is killing each of Yehudah's sons in turn, as soon as they marry, so that Yehudah will never have grandchildren.²

The Yehudah we meet by the time his sons die is a man who is all too ready to believe that

¹ See, e.g., Bereishit 27:46-28:9.

² This is similar to what Reuven offers as an appropriate punishment for him if he fails to return Binyamin safely from Egypt (Bereishit 42:37).



their deaths are his fault, that having deprived his father of his favorite son, he deserves to be deprived of the chance of descendants.

And so, as each son marries Tamar and dies, Yehudah becomes more and more convinced that he is cursed, that marriage, for his sons, can never lead to progeny, but only to death. Desperate to protect Shelah, his youngest son, he decides that he will not allow him to marry:

בראשית לח:יא

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתָמָר כְּלֹתוֹ שְׁבִי אֵלַי מִנָּה בֵּית אָבִיךָ עַד יִגְדֹּל שְׁלָה בְנִי כִּי אֶמַר פֶּן יָמוּת גַּם הוּא כְּאֶחָיו וַתֵּלֶךְ
תָּמָר וַתֵּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ:

Bereishit 38:11

Then Yehudah 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.

In Yehudah’s mind, as long as Shelah remains single and not in a position where he is capable of having children, the grandchildren Yehudah believes God is deliberately denying him, he has a chance to live. While the reader knows that Yehudah’s first two sons have died because of their own sins,³ Yehudah believes that his last chance to save his son is to make sure that his line will end with him. Yehudah bargains for his son’s life, protecting him in the only way he knows how: by sacrificing the possibility of a future he believes he does not deserve.

This understanding of Yehudah’s motives—the belief that he is doomed to have no progeny, that any child of his who marries and is in a position to have children will be killed by God—also sheds light on Yehudah’s encounter with Tamar, whom he believes to be a

³ Bereishit 38:7-10.



prostitute. Unlike Avraham who remarries when his wife dies,⁴ Yehudah seeks sexual encounters that have no possibility of permanence or of children he will acknowledge as his own. Yehudah has no intention of remarrying and subjecting potential future children to a life of loneliness. If his line is destined to end with his children, he will make sure that no more children, or at least children he must recognize, will come into the world.

But in Tamar, Yehudah meets his mirror. While Yehudah is willing to abandon any possibility of a future, Tamar is willing to go to any lengths to ensure hers. Like her namesake, the date tree, whose roots spread wide and deep even in the most inhospitable of environments,⁵ Tamar clings to life and her desire to bring future life into the world. In Yehudah and Tamar's sexual encounter, these two opposing worldviews meet: Yehudah in his despair, seeking sexual satisfaction with no possibility of connection or generative possibility, and Tamar in her determination, believing against all odds in the possibility of life and a future.

When Tamar reveals her pregnancy to Yehudah, sending him tokens of his identity and daring him to acknowledge his paternity with the words "*haker na* - recognize please," she is not only gambling for her own life; she is challenging Yehudah's understanding of himself: cursed, sterile, unable of generating lasting life and unworthy of descendants.

בראשית לח:כח

הוא מוצאת והיא שלחה אל חמיה לאמר איש אשר אלה לו אנכי הרה ותאמר הכר נא למי החתמת
והפתילים והמטה האלה:

Bereishit 38:25

As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "It's by the man

⁴ Bereishit 25:1.

⁵ See Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Her Name Was Tamar—Invasive, Destructive, Redemptive," available at: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/her-name-was-tamar-invasive-destructive-redemptive>.



to whom these belong that I'm pregnant." And she added, "Recognize please: whose seal and cord and staff are these?"

"Look," Tamar is saying, "You may believe that you are only capable of begetting death, but here, within me, is life. Do you recognize the man whose staff and cord these are? Do you recognize the man you once were, a man who believed in the possibility of a future? Are you able, in this moment, to save me, your children, and yourself by abandoning your certainty that God has abandoned you? Are you willing to step back from the abyss, to let go of the narrative you have constructed about your life, and to search for the possibility of a better future?"

When Yehudah makes the choice to save Tamar and his unborn children, he is also choosing to believe in the possibility of a future for himself, and returning him to his family and the covenant. It is the moment that allows the Yehudah we encounter at the beginning of this chapter, defeated and isolated, to become the Yehudah we meet next: once again embedded within his family and acting as a leader.⁶ It is the choice that allows him to become the man who can fight for his brother Binyamin even when he thinks that Binyamin has done something unconscionable,⁷ because he himself has learned that sin does not have to mean a dead end; and through that defense, to become the man who takes a family fractured by sin and make it whole again.

The story of Yehudah's choice, though, does not end with his generation. Peretz, the first of the twins Tamar bears, is the progenitor of the Davidic line and ultimately the ancestor of the anticipated Messiah.⁸ Why does it matter that the Messiah is born from this moment? Perhaps because what the Messiah symbolizes is redemption where redemption feels

⁶ See how he is portrayed in Bereishit 43:3-5, 8-10.

⁷ Bereishit 44:18-34.

⁸ Bereishit 38:29; Rut 4:18-22.



impossible; the ultimate possibility of life in a world that so often feels too overcome by sin. In anticipating the Messiah every day, we remind ourselves of the lesson Yehudah learned: no matter what we do, no matter how alone we might feel, we are not abandoned by God.

