

Mashiach’s Dubious Ancestry

As I am sure you’ve heard before, “The Lord works in mysterious ways”. Case in point: This week’s Torah portion, Vayeshev.

The portion is about Joseph. Joseph and his multicolored coat, Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph rising to prominence in his master’s house, Joseph nearly seduced by his master’s wife, Joseph thrown into prison, Joseph interpreting dreams for his fellow inmates. But in the middle of this narrative is a big non-sequitur, inserted there for no obvious reason: The incredible story of Judah and Tamar. (Gen. 38)

Judah was one of Joseph's brothers. Our name, Jews, comes from his name. He commits the impardonable sin of leaving his family to marry the daughter of a Canaanite idolater. “He turned away” is how the Torah puts it. They have three sons: ‘Er, Onan and Shelah. ‘Er marries a Canaanite woman named Tamar. But he dies young, because, the Torah tells us, “he was evil in the eyes of the Lord”. So Judah says to Onan, his second son: Marry your brother's wife, according to the law of the levirate, and raise up progeny for your brother. The Torah continues: “Now Onan knew that the child would not be his, [so] when he came to his brother's wife, he wasted [his semen] on the ground, in order not to give seed to his brother. Now what he did was evil in the eyes of the Lord.” [What was evil was refusing to give his dead brother an heir, NOT spilling his seed on the ground, but that’s the subject of another discussion]. So Onan also dies for his sins.

The third son, Shelah, is too young to marry, so Judah sends Tamar away to live in her father’s house until the boy grows up. But when the boy grows up, Judah is reluctant to give him to Tamar, because he thinks she brings bad luck. His Canaanite wife dies and he feels lonely. So Tamar, determined to have a child in that family, “took off her widow's garb, covered [her head] with a veil and covered her face, and she sat down at the crossroads... When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute... so he turned aside toward her ... and he said, "Get ready now, I will come

to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law... So ... he came to her, and she conceived his likeness... behold, there were twins in her womb. [One was named] Peretz [and the other] ...Zerach."

Peretz becomes the great great great great grandfather of Boaz, who is the great grandfather of King David, the father of King Solomon, and the progenitor of the future Messiah – Melech HaMashiach.

So the Messiah will be the result of intermarriage with idolaters, prostitution and deception. But that's not all, oh no. Boaz was married to Ruth, a Moabite woman. And who is her ancestor Moab? He is the son of Lot by Lot's own daughter. His father was also his grandfather.

Let's examine all this from the beginning. The Torah tells us that Lot, Abraham's nephew, flees the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with his wife and two daughters. The wife looks back, against God's instructions, and is turned into a pillar of salt. The daughters believe that the whole world was just destroyed and they and their father are the last people on earth. They fear that humanity will die unless they have children. But the only male available is their father, so their father will have to do. They get him drunk in a cave and sleep with him and each has a son. One of these sons is Moab, meaning "from the father". He is the ancestor of Ruth.

Now let's turn to Ruth. There is a famine in Israel. A man named Elimelech and his wife Na'omi, two Jews, flee the famine and go live in Moab across the Jordan river. Their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. But all three men die, so Na'omi decides to return to Israel. Orpah decides to stay in Moab, but Ruth wants to convert to Judaism and follow her mother-in-law to Israel. She tells her, "Wherever you go I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Wherever you die, I will die and there be buried; may the Lord do so and so to me, and more besides, if even death separates me from you." [Ruth 1:16-17] So Ruth, a forty-year-old widow, is now in Israel with her mother-in-law. She is beautiful and can have her pick among eligible bachelors in the land. But she sets her eyes on Boaz, the next-of-kin of her father-in-law Elimelech. She marries him by levirate marriage, and has 'Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of King David.

Now let's turn to King David, David Ha-Melech. From his high palace, he sees Bathsheba bathing naked on the rooftop of her house. He seduces her. But Bathsheba is married to Uriah, a soldier in King David's army. So

King David promptly disposes of him by sending him on a suicide mission in the frontline of battle. He then marries Bathsheba. Bathsheba gives birth to his successor, King Solomon the Wise, the progenitor of the future Messiah.

Now let's summarize. Our Messiah will be the necessary product of a process that REQUIRED breaking away from one's Jewish family and intermarrying with idolaters [that's Judah], prostitution and deception [that's Tamar], incest [that's Lot's daughter], self-exile and marrying idolaters [that's the family of Ruth's first husband], adultery and abuse of power bordering on murder [that's King David]. Why? Why can't the Messiah be a nice Jewish boy from a good family, as you might expect? Couldn't God have chosen better, to teach us the rewards of virtue?

Maybe the lesson here is that we are not responsible for what our ancestors did, that every generation is a new deal, that humanity perpetually renews itself, and that it *is* possible for a righteous person to be born in a less-than-righteous family.

Before we get too wrapped up in conspiracy theories, consider this, We each have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and the numbers keep growing exponentially in powers of two. So each one of us has A LOT of ancestors – thousands upon thousands. The chances are overwhelming that *some* of these people did not rank high on the scale of virtue. In fact, the Talmud tells us: Why was humanity derived from a single couple, Adam and Eve? So that no one should be able to tell his neighbor, "My ancestors were better than your ancestors". [Sanhedrin 37a] So, before you ask, "Why is God making the Messiah come from such dubious ancestry?", ask yourself, "Does God really have a choice?"

Nevertheless, there *is* something puzzling about Messiah's ancestry, which may not be present in your ancestry or mine, and that is the role of the women. Here we have four women – Lot's daughter, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba – who were absolutely determined that certain lines must continue at all costs, and went way out of their way to make it happen, as if they *knew* that the divine plan rested in their hands. For them, the end justified the means.

Take Tamar. After two aborted attempts to have children in Judah's line, she sees her third chance denied her, so she goes after Judah himself, disguised as a prostitute. Now, she is no prostitute. The Zohar says, "she was by nature chaste and modest" (Bereshit 1:188a) and adds later, "from the

chutzpah of the righteous woman Tamar, many blessings came into the world” (3.71b-72a). She could have married any nice Canaanite boy, but no, she HAD to have a child in Judah’s line. The Midrash says, “While Judah was busy taking a [Canaanite] wife, the Holy One, blessed be He, was creating the light of Messiah” (Gen. Rabbah 85:1). Translation: *You* may want out of the Jewish fold, but it’s not that easy, and your descendants may have other plans. In the Torah, when Judah finds out that it was Tamar he slept with, he says, “Tzad’kah mimmeni -- She is more righteous than I am” (Gen. 38:25).

And Ruth. She was married to a Jew for 20 years – why did she wait for his death to convert? Forty and beautiful, she could have found many men her age. What did she see in Boaz, that she pursued him so relentlessly, up to showing up in his bedroom at night, a highly improper action, especially at the time? The Midrash tells us that Boaz was an 80-year-old widower without children (Ruth Rabbah 6:2), and that he died immediately after impregnating Ruth (Ruth Zutta, ed. Buber, 55). He did not survive his wedding night. Ruth must have been something else. But maybe she also KNEW something else?

And Bathsheba. Did she not know her rooftop was in full view of King David’s palace? Did they not have folding screens in those days?

The notion that the Messiah must arise from sin and turpitude has always been present in Judaism. The 19th century Hasidic master Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin writes, in his book *Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik*:

“The redemption will emerge precisely from a place of lust and sin, by means of repentance (teshuvah). The Talmud says, in Sanhedrin 98a, “The son of David [i.e., the Messiah] will come only in a generation that is entirely wicked.” David is the archetype for the messianic soul because he showed how to make repentance into a life principle... And just that is the realization of ultimate fulfillment – that the root of evil will be transformed to good... At that time, the lowest will become the highest.”

When I read that, I thought: That’s good teaching, as long as it does not encourage people to lapse into bad behavior for the express purpose of hastening the coming of the Messiah! It *has* happened, in the days of pseudo-Messiah Jacob Frank and at other times. But then I asked myself: Did the Talmud in Sanhedrin 98a really say: “The son of David [i.e., the Messiah] will come only in a generation that is entirely wicked”? I checked the Talmud directly, and it says: “Rabbi Johanan also said: The son of

David will come only in a generation that is entirely wicked or entirely righteous.” AH! Big difference. Always check original sources. And try to bring the Messiah by good behavior, not bad. Shabbat shalom.