

## Parshat Veyeshev: Shabbat Mevarchim: December 23-24

*“Tamar – a Heroine So Difficult for Us to Understand”*

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Tamar appears suddenly in the Bible, interrupting the long Joseph saga – a massive tale with national implications -- with a seemingly small domestic drama. Judah has chosen her as the bride of Er, his son. Er dies of his own sins and Tamar is then given to Onan, in levirate marriage (*yibum*), to provide an heir for Er and to perpetuate his name. Onan refuses to fulfill this act of brotherly obligation and quickly dies in turn. Judah then withholds his youngest son, Shelah, from the levirate duties.

We can hardly sympathize with Tamar because the story is set in a culture that is deeply alien to ours. The purpose of levirate marriage – which here exists even before the Torah is given – is to ensure that the man who dies childless will nevertheless live on, through his son. The widow benefits, too. It is only when she has a child that her own social standing and economic security are assured. Unless the widow is released from (or fulfills) the levirate obligation, she cannot marry anyone else; she has no economic rights and no chance at a fruitful life.

Tamar waits “many days” for the chance of a levirate marriage with Shelah. Eventually, she realizes that Judah has condemned her to lifelong, solitary widowhood.

Twice a widow, desperate to be a mother, Tamar deceives Judah into conceiving a child with her. Through the deception, Tamar takes Judah’s staff, his wrap and his signet ring as a pledge. Three months later, Tamar is visibly pregnant with twins. Judah is told that Tamar has shamed his family. Imperiously, and without hearing her defense, Judah orders her to be taken out and burned.

Tamar sends the three pledges, so personal, so unmistakably his, to Judah with the words, “I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong. *Haker na*, Recognize please, the signet ring, the wrap and the staff.” (The words, *Haker na*, recognize please, are fraught. Judah and his brothers had just used these same words – *haker na*, recognize please -- when they showed Joseph’s coat, dipped in blood to Jacob, fooling him into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.)

We would expect Tamar to say, “Judah, you’re the father. You were the one who wronged me!” She might have taken special pleasure in showing him up before the entire village. Yet she is prepared to die rather than confront Judah publicly. The midrash exclaims: she would rather feel the fire under her feet than to put the fire of shame, the reddening blush, on Judah’s cheeks.

This is a concept foreign to our times, seemingly so un-modern, so anachronistic. Social media and a rapacious press thrive on shaming and “outing.” When we are feeling self-righteous, we call it “transparency.” Perhaps that is why we don’t read Tamar’s words with the awe that they deserve.

The French philosopher Emanuel Levinas would see Tamar’s act as an expression of the ultimate ethical imperative. It is the willingness to substitute one’s self for the other, to put one’s self into another’s place, even to give one’s very life for the other.

To his credit, Judah rises to Tamar’s level. “She is more righteous than I,” he says in acknowledging both his paternity and the justice of her actions. Judah’s admission is the first step in his repentance, his return to the Jacob family and his ascendance to leadership. It sets the stage for his confrontation with Joseph – and that, in turn, prepares us for a thousand years of history and the struggle for supremacy between their tribes.

Yet Tamar’s courage also prepares us for King David and the Mashiach. While she disappears from our story, Tamar is mentioned once more in Tanakh. As Ruth and Boaz are married, the townspeople bless them: “May your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Judah. (Ruth 4:12.)” The Book of Ruth ends with the verses: “Now these are the generations of Peretz...and Jesse begat David (Ruth 4:18 -22.)”