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ASBI Congregation
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She is More Righteous Than I

Our parashah this morning tells of Yosef's rise as the favored son of the patriarch Jacob, the owner of his own coat of many colors and the teller of dreams that appear to be delusions of grandeur. Yosef then finds himself at the bottom of a pit, left to die by his own brothers. He then rises from the pit and is sold down into slavery in Egypt. In Potiphar's home he rises again to prominence and responsibility, only to find himself back in the pit, at a political prison in Egypt. From that dark confined place, Yosef begins to plot his next rise, using his power of dream interpretation to earn his way to freedom.

And then, Yosef's precipitous rise and fall and rise and fall and rise comes to a sudden stop. Our *parashah* ends with a simple statement and this roller coaster narrative comes to an abrupt halt:

וְלֹא־זָכַר שָׂרֵה־הַמִּשְׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּח־הוּ׃

Yet the butler did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

The next verse continues our story *two years later* when Pharaoh has dreams that cannot be explained. Rashi explains this gap of two years in this way:

וַיִּשְׁכַּח־הוּ לְאַחַר מִכָּאן מִפְּנֵי שֶׁתָּלָה בּוֹ יוֹסֵף לְזָכְרוֹ, הַזִּקֵּק לְהִיּוֹת אֲסוּר שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אֲשֶׁרִי הַגָּבֵר אֲשֶׁר שָׁם ה' מְבַטְחוּ וְלֹא פָּנָה אֶל רְהָבִים (תהילים מ') – וְלֹא בָטַח עַל מִצְרַיִם, הַקְּרוּיִים רְהָבִים

Because Joseph had placed his trust in the butler that he should remember him he was doomed to remain in prison for two years. So it is said (Psalms 40:5) “Happy is the man who makes the Lord his trust and turns not to (רְהָבִים) the arrogant” — i.e. do not trust in the Egyptians who are called arrogant (Genesis Rabbah 89:3 cf. Isaiah 30:7).

Joseph is criticized for placing his trust in an Egyptian butler. A wine pourer to Pharaoh does not deserve to be the recipient of Yosef's trust. Yosef should have placed his hope for salvation in God alone. He endured two more years in prison as the forgetful butler returned to his life and forgot about the man who had helped him in prison.

Is it true that trusting people is a sign of a lack of faith? Are we meant to rely upon God to the exclusion of placing our trust in other people?

There is another episode in the *parashah* that hinges on trust as well. Tamar was married to Yehudah's son Er. After Er dies, Tamar becomes a levirate wife to Er's younger brother Onan. Their children will be considered the children of the childless deceased brother. Onan refuses to participate in the mitzvah of creating offspring for his deceased brother and Onan too dies. At this point Yehudah sends Tamar away because his surviving son Shelah is too young for marriage. But Yehudah has no intention of letting Shelah marry a woman with such an ominous track record of two deceased husbands. Once Tamar senses that Shelah will never be her husband, she decides to find another method of bearing a child for the household of her deceased husband.

Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and solicits Yehudah as he travels to the countryside to shear his sheep. She succeeds in becoming pregnant and departs from Yehudah taking only his seal, cord, and staff as a pledge for future payment. Yehudah, of course cannot find the prostitute when he returns to pay her, but some time later, he hears that his daughter in law, Tamar, is pregnant.

Because this episode occurred before the Torah was given, we cannot know precisely how this worked legally. After the Torah was given, things no longer work this way, and they certainly don't work this way today. Tamar was sentenced to death for conceiving a child when she was bound by levirate marriages ties to Shelah, despite Shelah being withheld from her. Yehudah, as Shelah's father was also a legitimate marriage partner for Tamar, but he had no way to know that his daughter in law was none other than the prostitute he had been with three months earlier.

Tamar does not profess her innocence or beg for mercy. She doesn't expose Yehudah or say anything that indicates she knows he is the father of her unborn children. Moments before her death, Tamar pulls out the staff and signet that Yehudah had given to her months earlier and says the man who gave these to me is responsible for this pregnancy.

הוא מוצאת וְהִיא שְׁלָחָה אֶל־חַמְיֶיהָ לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אָלָה לּוֹ אֲנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַרְךָ הַכֹּרֶן־נָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמֹת וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה:

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, "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?"

"Examine these" she says, Do you recognize them? הַכֹּרֶן־נָא she pleads. Recognize, acknowledge what I am sharing with you and recognize your own role in this sad story. With that gesture and with those words, Tamar places her trust in Yehudah. Her very life is in his hands. Will he continue to cover up his responsibility for her pregnancy? Will Yehudah recognize Will Yehudah acknowledge her or continue to deny his responsibility. Yehudah acknowledges responsibilities

At that moment, Tamar is placing her trust in Yehudah. Her very life is in his hands. Will he continue to cover up his role in her pregnancy? Will Yehudah acknowledge how he has wronged Tamar by preventing her from assuming her rightful place in his family?

וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִי־עַל־כֵּן לֹא־נִתְּתִיהָ לְשָׁלָה בְּנִי וְלֹא־יָסַף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ:

Yehudah recognized them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah."

Tamar put her faith in Yehudah's integrity and honesty and her faith was confirmed. Yehudah acknowledged her righteousness and he acknowledged his own guilt.

What are we supposed to make of these two stories one following the next? Is it wrong to rely on the decency of others or does it pay off? Tamar discloses her truth to Yehudah, puts her life in his hands, and is rewarded with a place in the lineage of the Jewish people. Yosef places his trust in Pharaoh's butler and is condemned to an extra two years in prison.

The difference, of course, is not the trusting, but whether or not the one who receive that trust is worthy. The one being tested is not the one seeking assistance and seeking recognition, but the one who receives disclosures. Pharaoh's butler failed a test. He was unworthy of being the recipient of Yosef's request. Yehudah passed his test and allowed Tamar to become a participant in the redemption of Israel.

Over the past few weeks a string of high profile and powerful men have been accused of various forms of sexual assault, workplace harassment, or other forms of misconduct. The accusations have been diverse in their severity and the targets of these accusations have been associated with Hollywood, the media, journalism and the halls of congress.

Less than two months ago, I recommended Leon Wieseltier's book "Kaddish" to a young woman reciting mourners kaddish for the first time. The book is a mixture of detailed and scholarly historical analysis of the

ritual of reciting kaddish and quite beautiful reflections on Jewish life, the experience of mourning, and the nature of religious commitments. I read the book shortly after I had said kaddish for my father, and Sara read the book when she said Kaddish for her father. When we married we ended up with “his and hers” copies of the book, each one with marked pages indicating our favorite passages. Days after I made that recommendation, Wieseltier was exposed in the New York Times and elsewhere for a years-long pattern of sexually inappropriate interactions with subordinates and colleagues. I feel guilty that the young mourner may have read my email the same week that Weiseltier was in the news for his patterns of harassment. Did she read my email first or did she read the allegations first?

And it has continued since that day for weeks and months. Some people have begun to circulate a personal “Mr. Rogers’s List” - the list of the famous men, role models, educators, celebrities, people like the children’s television personality Mr. Rogers, about whom it would be devastating to one’s understanding in the world if allegations were to be made about them.

I am not going to share who is on my own Mr. Rogers list because it seems like bad luck. And because it misses the point. If we are lucky, we have parents and mentors and teachers and public figures who help us understand the world and whom we emulate as we try to grow and learn. Some of those people will disappoint us in profound ways. When we experience that disappointment we should realize that we are that admired individual in the eyes of someone else and we need to work harder to live up to their trust in us.

In Daf Yomi this week we have been studying *Massechet Shevuot*. The tractate concerns oaths and the consequences of violating oaths and making false oaths. One category of forbidden oath, however, isn’t a false oath, but a worthless and vain oath, *shevuat shav*. One violates this transgression if one takes an oath in God’s name that a pillar of wood is made of wood. Of course it is and making an oath to assert something that is obvious is a violation of the sanctity of oaths. I’ve thought of that category frequently in recent months as I’ve pondered what Torah message I could say about events transpiring in the world that would be anything other than a *shevuat shav*, the sermonic equivalent of declaring that a pillar of wood was made of wood.

In an effort to avoid the pitfalls of *shevuat shav*, I want to suggest that this moment in our country’s history must become about something more than punishing villains and supporting victims, important as that may be. This moment needs to include developing standards of conduct and creating systems of accountability. That is hard work and our institutions, large and small need to engage in that hard work. But this moment can also be about the even more challenging work of self-scrutiny and self-improvement, and establishing personal boundaries to ensure that those who admire us and love us and learn from our examples, are not disappointed.

Like Pharaoh’s butler, hidden victims of assault and misconduct are asking us to remember them. Like Yehudah, the disadvantaged and stigmatized, putting their very lives on the line, are asking us to recognize our own complicity in their suffering.

Let us answer them with honesty, courage, and integrity.