

Parsha Plug: Parshat Vayeishev

Bereshit 38:1-11	בראשית לח:א-יא
<p>1 Now it came about at that time that Yehudah was demoted by his brothers, and he turned away until [he came] to an Adullamite man, named Hirah. 2 And there Yehudah saw the daughter of a merchant named Shua, and he took her and came to her. 3 And she conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. 4 And she conceived again and bore a son, and she named him Onan. 5 Once again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah, and he (Yehudah) was in Chezib when she gave birth to him. 6 And Yehudah took a wife for Er, his firstborn, named Tamar. 7 Now Er, Yehudah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. 8 So Yehudah said to Onan, "Come to your brother's wife and perform yibum, and raise up progeny for your brother." 9 Now Onan knew that the progeny would not be his, and it came about, when he came to his brother's wife, he wasted [his seed] on the ground, in order not to give seed to his brother. 10 Now what he did was evil in the eyes of the Lord, and He put him to death also. 11 Then Yehudah said to his daughter in law Tamar, "Remain as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up," for he said, "Lest he too die, like his brothers." So Tamar went, and she remained in her father's house.</p>	<p>א ויהי בעת ההוא ויָרַד יהודה מאת אָחיו ויט עַד־אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וישָׁמוּ חִירָה: ב ויִרְאֶשׂם יהודה בַּת־אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וישָׁמוּ שׁוּעַ ויקַחָהּ וַיְבֵא אֵלֶיהָ: ג ותָּהָר ותֵּלֵד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ עֵר: ד ותָּהָר עוֹד ותֵּלֵד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אוֹנָן: ה ותֵּסֵף עוֹד ותֵּלֵד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שְׁלֵה וְהָיָה בְּכֹזֵב בְּלִדְתָּהּ אֹתוֹ: ו ויִקַּח יהודה אִשָּׁה לְעֵר בְּכוֹרוֹ וישָׁמָה תָּמָר: ז ויהי י עֵר בְּכוֹר יהודה רַע בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיִּמָּתֶהוּ ה': ח וַיֹּאמֶר יהודה לְאוֹנָן בֶּא אֶל־אִשְׁתִּי אָחִיךָ וַיְבַם אִתָּהּ וְהָיָה זָרַע לְאָחִיךָ: ט וַיֵּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יִהְיֶה הַזָּרַע וְהָיָה אִם־בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתִּי אָחִיו וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָהּ לְבַלְתִּי נִתְּנָה־זָרַע לְאָחִיו: י וַיִּרַע בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּמָּת גַּם־אֹתוֹ: יא וַיֹּאמֶר יהודה לְתָמָר כִּלְתוֹ שְׁבִי אֶל־מְנָה בֵּית־אָבִיךָ עַד־יִגְדַּל שְׁלֵה בְנִי כִּי אָמַר פְּנִי־יָמוֹת גַּם־הוּא כְּאָחִיו וַתֵּלֶךְ תָּמָר וַתֵּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ:</p>

Rashi on Bereshit 38:7, 11	רש"י על בראשית לח:ז, יא
<p>7. Was evil in the eyes of the Lord: Like the evil of Onan, he wasted his seed, as it is written in connection with Onan: "and He put him to death also," meaning that Er's death was as Onan's death. Now, why should Er waste his semen? So that Tamar would not become pregnant and her beauty be impaired. 11. For he said: Meaning that he dismissed her with a straw, for he did not intend to marry her to him. For he said, "Lest he too die...": This is a woman whose husbands presumably die young.</p>	<p>ז: רַע בְּעֵינֵי ה': כרעתו של אוֹנָן משחית זרעו, שנאמר באוֹנָן (פסוק י) וימת גם אותו, כמיתתו של עֵר מיתתו של אוֹנָן, ולמה היה עֵר משחית זרעו, כדי שלא תתעבר ויכחיש יפיה: יא: כִּי אָמַר וגו': כלומר דוחה היה אותה בקש, שלא היה בדעתו להשיאה לו: כִּי אָמַר פֶּן יָמוֹת: מוחזקת היא זו שימותו אנשיה:</p>

Haamek Davar, Bereshit 38:10	העמק דבר בראשית לח:י
<p>Here the act that Onan did was deserving for God to kill him...But the act caused him to not have children-- just as he did not give children to his brother-- with the same act.</p>	<p>כאן היה המעשה ראוי להמיתו...אבל המעשה גרם שלא יזכה לבנים כמו שלא נתן זרע לאחיו באותו מעשה.</p>

Kallah Rabbati 2:7	כלה רבתי ב:ז
<p>We taught: The generation of the flood all spilled seed. There were astrologers among them who said: "The world will last no less than 6,000</p>	<p>תאנא דור המבול כלן מוציאין שכבת זרע לבטלה היו, הוו בהו אצטגניני, אמרי עלמא</p>

<p>years, let us not have children and then we will live for the entire time.” God said to them, “You have made yourselves the most important thing (“the root”). I will uproot your names so that you will never be considered in the accounting of the world. From where do we know this? It says regarding Onan, “And when he would come to his brother’s wife and he would waste (v’sheecheit) his seed to the ground (artza)”-- he pleased himself and emitted seed. Similarly it says by the generation of the flood, “For all flesh wasted (hishcheet) its way on the earth (haaretz)”.</p>	<p>לא פחות משיתא אלפי שנין, לא נוליד, ואנן נחיה לעלמא כוליה, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא, שמתם עצמכם עיקר, הריני עוקר שמיכם שלא תעלו בחשבון עולם. מנא הני מילי, דכתיב באונן והיה אם בא אל אשת אחיו ושחת ארצה, שהיה מחמם את עצמו ומוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה, וכתיב בדור המבול כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על הארץ.</p>
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<p>Masechet Niddah 13a-b</p>	<p>מסכת נדה יג.:-</p>
<p>Whoever spills seed in vain deserves death, as it is written, “And the thing Onan did was evil in the sight of the Lord, and He slew him also”. R. Yitzchak and R. Ammi said: It is as though he shed blood...R. Assi says: He is like one who worships idols...Rav said:...he incites his evil inclination against himself. R. Ammi said...Today the evil inclination incites him to do one thing, and tomorrow it incites him to worship idols and he worships them.</p>	<p>כל המוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה חייב מיתה שנאמר (בראשית לח, י) וירע בעיני ה' (את) אשר עשה וימת גם אותו רבי יצחק ורבי אמי אמרי כאילו שופך דמים...רב אסי אמר כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים...אמר רב...דקמגרי יצה"ר אנפשיה ורבי אמי אמר...שכך אומנתו של יצר הרע היום אומר לו עשה כך ולמחר אומר לו עשה כך ולמחר אומר לו לך עבוד עבודת כוכבים והולך ועובד.</p>

<p>Tosafot Rid Yevamot 12b</p>	<p>תוס' רי"ד יבמות יב: ד"ה תני</p>
<p>Were you to ask, ‘How did the Rabbis permit a person to spill his seed in vain (to allow certain women for whom pregnancy would be a danger to use a sponge), and to do an act of Er and Onan?’ The answer is-- what is the act of Er and Onan that the Torah forbade? Whenever a person’s intent is that his wife should not become pregnant so as not to diminish her beauty and he does not want to fulfill the mitzvah of procreating with her. But if his intent is to prevent her from becoming endangered, it is permitted. So too if his intent is to satisfy the desire of his yetzer, and he is not doing this act to prevent his wife from getting pregnant, it is permitted...They whose intent it was that Tamar should not become pregnant transgressed, but someone whose intent it is to satisfy the desire of his yetzer would not transgress. For whatever a man wants to do with his wife, he may do, and he is not called a spiller of seed. For were this not the case, a person would not be permitted to sleep with a minor, a pregnant woman, a barren woman, or an elderly woman.</p>	<p>ואי קשיא היאך התירו חכמים להוציא זרעו לעשות כמעשה ער ואונן. תשובה איזה הוא מעשה ער אונן שאסרה תורה כל שכוונתו כדי שלא תתעבר כדי שלא יכחיש יופייה ואינו רוצה לקיים פריה ורביה ממנה, אבל אם כוונתו שלא תבא לידי סכנה מותר, וכן נמי אם מתכוון לתאוות יצרו ואינו מתכוון שלא תתעבר מותר...אלא ודאי הם שהייתה כוונתם שלא תתעבר היו עוברים אבל מי שכוונתו להשלים תאוות יצרו אינו עובר שכל מה שאדם רוצה לעשות באשתו עושה ולא יקרא משחית זרעו שאלו כן אל ישכב אדם עם הקטנה ומעוברת ועקרה וזקנה.</p>

<p>Masechet Avodah Zarah 17a-b</p>	<p>מסכת עבודה זרה יז.:-</p>
<p>It was taught in a Baraita that they said of Rebbe Eleazar ben Durdia that he did not leave out one harlot in the world without coming to her. Once he heard that there was a harlot in a city by the beach who accepted a purse of denarri as payment. He took a purse of denarri and went and</p>	<p>והתניא אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כיס דינרין בשכרה נטל כיס דינרין</p>

crossed seven rivers to get to her. At the moment when he was intimate with her, she blew forth breath and said, 'Just as this breath will not return to its source, so too Eleazar ben Durdia will never be received in repentance'. He then went and sat between two hills and mountains and he said 'Hills and mountains plead mercy for me!' They said to him, 'How can we plead for you? We must plead for ourselves, as it says 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed''. He said, 'Heavens and earth, plead mercy for me!' They said, 'How can we plead for you? We must plead for ourselves, as it says 'For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke and the earth shall wax old like a garment''. He said, 'Sun and moon, plead mercy for me!' They said, 'How can we plead for you? We must plead for ourselves, as it says, 'Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed''. He said, 'Stars and constellations, plead mercy for me!' They said, 'How can we plead for you? We must plead for ourselves, as it says, 'And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away''. He said, 'The matter then depends on me alone'. He placed his head between his knees and wept aloud until his soul departed. A bat kol came out and said, 'Rebbe Eleazar ben Durdia is destined for the life of the world to come!' But here is a case of a person repenting from a sin [that was not minut] and yet he still died! There too since he was so much addicted to immorality it is as if he was guilty of minut. [Upon hearing of it] Rebbe cried and said, 'There are those who acquire eternal life after many years and those who acquire eternal life in a single hour. Rebbe also said, 'Those who repent are not only accepted but called 'Rebbe'!'.

והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה אמרה כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה כך אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר כי שמים כעשן נמלחו והארץ כבגד תבלה אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה אמר כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר ונמקן כל צבא השמים אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא [והא הכא בעבירה הוה ומית] התם נמי כיון דאביק בה טובא כמינות דמיא בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת ואמר רבי לא דיין לבעלי תשובה שמקבלין אותן אלא שקורין אותן רבי.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *What is the Theme of Stories in Genesis?* (5772)

What was different about the patriarchs? What new did they bring to the world? What difference did monotheism make in their day? There is an answer but it is an unexpected one. One theme appears no less than six (possibly even seven) times. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her own space and enters the wider world of their contemporaries, they encounter a world of sexual free-for-all. Three times, Abraham (Gen. 12 and 20) and Isaac (Gen. 26) are forced to leave home because of famine. Twice they go to Gerar. Once Abraham goes to Egypt. On all three occasions the husband fears he will be killed so that the local ruler can take his wife into his harem. All three times they put forward the story that their wife is actually their sister. At worst this is a lie, at best a half-truth. In all three cases the local ruler (Pharaoh, Avimelekh), protests at their behaviour when the truth becomes known. Clearly the fear of death was real or the patriarchs would not have been party to deception. In the fourth case, Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19), the people cluster round Lot's house demanding that he bring out his two visitors so that they can be raped. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead. Only swift action by the visitors – angels – who smite the people with blindness, saves Lot and his family from violence. In the fifth case (Gen. 34), Shechem, a local prince, rapes and abducts Dina when she "went out to visit some of the local girls." He holds her hostage, causing Shimon and Levi to practise deception and bloodshed in the course of rescuing her. Then comes a marginal case (Gen. 38), the story of Yehudah and Tamar, more complex than the others and not part of the overall pattern. Finally there is the sixth episode, in this week's parsha, when Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Failing, she accuses him of rape and has him imprisoned. In other words, there is a continuing theme in Genesis

12-50, a contrast between the people of the Abrahamic covenant and their neighbours, but it is not about idolatry, but rather about adultery, promiscuity, sexual license, seduction, rape and sexually motivated violence. The patriarchal narrative is surprisingly close to the view of Freud, that eros is one of the two primal drives (the other is thanatos, the death instinct) governing human behaviour, and the view of at least one evolutionary psychologist (David Buss, in his books *The Evolution of Desire* and *The Murderer Next Door*) that sex is the main cause of violence amongst humans. This gives us an entirely new way of thinking about Abrahamic faith. Emunah, the Hebrew word normally translated as faith, does not mean what it is taken to mean in English: a body of dogma, a set of principles, or a cluster of beliefs often held on non-rational grounds. Emunah means faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, honouring your commitments, doing what you said you would do and acting in such a way as to inspire trust. It has to do with relationships, first and foremost with marriage. Sex belongs, for the Torah, within the context of marriage, and it is marriage that comes closest to the deep resonances of the biblical idea of covenant. A covenant is a mutual act of commitment in which two persons, honouring their differences, each respecting the dignity of the other, come together in a bond of love to join their destinies and chart a future together. When the prophets want to speak of the covenantal relationship between God and His people, they constantly use the metaphor of marriage. The God of Abraham is the God of love and trust who does not impose His will by force or violence, but speaks gently to us, inviting an answering response of love and trust. Genesis' argument against idolatry – all the more impressive for being told obliquely, through a series of stories and vignettes – is that it leads to a world in which the combination of unchecked sexual desire, the absence of a code of moral self-restraint, and the worship of power, leads eventually to violence and abuse. That domestic violence and abuse still exist today, even among religious Jews, is a disgrace and source of shame. Against this stands the testimony of Genesis that faithfulness to God means and demands faithfulness to our marriage partners. Faith – whether between us and God or between us and our fellow humans – means love, loyalty and the circumcision of desire. What the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell us is that faith is not proto- or pseudo-science, an explanation of why the natural universe is at it is. It is the language of relationship and the choreography of love. It is about the importance of the moral bond, in particular as it affects our most intimate relations. Sexuality matters to Judaism, not because it is puritanical but because it represents the love that brings new life into the world. When a society loses faith, eventually it loses the very idea of a sexual ethic, and the result in the long term is violence and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Women suffer. Children suffer. There is a breakdown of trust where it matters most. So it was in the days of the patriarchs. Sadly, so it is today. Judaism, by contrast, is the sanctification of relationship, the love between husband and wife which is as close as we will ever get to understanding God's love for us.