

Adult B'nai Mitzvah 5773 (Dec 8, 2012) Drashot

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***Parashat Vayeshev* (Genesis 38) - Our B'nai Mitzvah Group's Translation**

1. It happened at this time that Yehudah *went down*, away from his brothers. He headed for an Adullamite man named Hirah.
2. There Yehudah saw the daughter of a Cannanite man – his name was Shua. He took her and came in to her.
3. She conceived and gave birth to a son and he (Yehudah), called his name: Er.
4. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and she called his name: Onan.
5. She did it again and gave birth to a son and she called his name: Shelah. And he was in Cheziv in her birthing of him.
6. Yehudah took a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.
7. And Er, Yehudah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of Adonai, and Adonai caused him to die.
8. *Yehudah said to Onan: “Come in to your brother's wife, do a brother-in-law's duty by her, to raise up seed for your brother!”*
9. And Onan knew that the seed would not be his, so it was, whenever he came in to his brother's wife, he let it go to ruin on the ground, so as not to raise up seed for his brother.

10. What he did was evil in the eyes of Adonai, and he caused him to die as well.
11. *And Yehudah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law: Sit as a widow in your father's house until Shelah my son grows up.* For he said to himself: "Lest he too die like his brothers!" And Tamar went and stayed in her father's house.
12. And the days grew many. And Shua's daughter, Yehudah's wife, died. When Yehudah had been comforted, he *went up* to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hira the Adullamite, to Timnah.
13. And Tamar was told: "Here, your father-in-law is *going up* to Timnah to shear his sheep."
14. And she removed her widow's garments from upon her, covered herself with a scarf and wrapped herself and sat at Petach Eynayim (The opening of Wells or Eyes), which is on the way to Timnah, for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given to him as a wife.
15. And Yehudah saw her and thought her a prostitute, for she had covered her face.
16. *He headed toward her on the road and said, "Please, let me come in to you"* for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. (Tamar): "What will you give me if you come in to me?""
17. (Yehudah): "I will send a goat kid from the flock." (Tamar): "If you give me a pledge until you send it."
18. (Yehudah): "What is the pledge that I am to give you?" (Tamar): "Your seal, your cord, and your staff that is in your hand." He gave her, he came in to her and she conceived by him.
19. And she arose and went away. She removed her scarf and wore her widow's garments.
20. And Yehudah sent the goat kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to get the pledge from the woman's hand and he could not find her.
21. He asked the people of her place, saying: "Where is that temple prostitute, the one of Eynayim on the road? And they said: "There was no temple prostitute here!"
22. He returned to Yehudah and said: "I didn't find her and the people of the place said, "There was no temple prostitute here." _
23. *Yehudah said: "Let her take for herself, lest we become a mockery. Here, I sent this kid but you, you could not find her."*
24. And it was around three New-Moons (months) and it was told to Yehudah saying: "Tamar your daughter-in-law has prostituted herself and also here, she has conceived from prostituting herself." And Yehudah said: "Bring her out and she will be burned!"
25. *As she was being brought out, she sent to her father-in-law saying: (Tamar) "To the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said: (Tamar) "Please recognize – whose seal and cord and staff are these."*
26. *Yehudah recognized them and he said: "She is in-the-right more than I! For after all, I did not give her to Shelah my son!"* And he did not continue to know her again sexually.
27. Now it was, at the time of her birthing, that here: twins were in her body!
28. And it was, as she was giving birth, that (one of them) put out a hand; the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying: "This one came out first."
29. And it was, as he pulled back his hand, here, his brother came out! And she said: "What a breach you have breached for yourself!" So they called his name: Peretz (Breach).
30. Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the scarlet thread. They called his name: Zerach. (scarlet).

Our B'nai Mitzvah Group's Questions

LISA ELLENBERG:

The story of Tamar and Jehuda raises many questions—questions about how power is held, withheld and wielded; how identity can be lost and changed; and what causes points of shift and transformational moments in our lives. The parsha elicits thinking about rights and righteousness, vulnerability and risk taking, and how we choose or are assigned roles that define us.

ALANNA HEIN:

It raises questions about social order and social guarantees. It provides an opportunity to examine the ways women's lives are portrayed in the Torah. It reminds us to grapple with how women today, in the US and around the world, are placed in untenable situations, due to degrees of powerlessness in a patriarchal society. How do we challenge this? These are some of the questions we asked as we studied this parsha.

LISA ELLENBERG:

How do we make meaningful demands when we're in a powerless position?

ALANNA HEIN:

Tamar couldn't ask Yehuda directly to acknowledge his debt to her. How do we know when pushing a question is too much and when the time is right to demand justice?

LISA ELLENBERG:

Why is it, that in this story, exploitation, revenge, deception, and entrapment lead to righteousness?

ALANNA HEIN:

Is this a story about relative righteousness or maybe relative immorality?

LISA ELLENBERG:

How do we own up to mistakes and regrets?

ALANNA HEIN:

How do shame, fear, and embarrassment keep us from doing what's right?

LISA ELLENBERG:

Do women give themselves credit for all the thinking ahead and negotiating required to resolve our issues in the world?

ALANNA HEIN:

What is the significance of the parsha starting with the death of two of Judah's sons, and ending with the birth of his twin sons?

EVAN KING:

We invite you to see what questions arise for you as you listen to the story today. We're really asking for questions here, not answers. etc..... (call on congregants)

Our B'nai Mitzvah Group's Drashot

Layton Borkan

The story of Tamar and Judah brings us up close to the universality of loss and grief. Judah's two sons are young men, in the prime of their lives. Their deaths deprive Tamar of children and Judah of descendants.

Both Tamar and Judah are mourners, facing the challenge of living with their losses and finding their way to a more hopeful future. Their story tells us how differently they each face this challenge, constrained as they are by the rigidities of a patriarchal culture.

Judah is a man of limited self-understanding who turns his grief and fear into an abuse of his power over Tamar, isolating her and depriving her of the protection of her rightful status.

Later, Judah once again turns his misguided fear and anger against Tamar, condemning to death the one person who most closely shares his great loss, and the one person who has a compelling incentive to conceive the new life that can ease grief and restore hope.

Tamar sees clearly that she must deal with her own grief and fear quietly and skillfully if she is to survive. In her bold, but careful plan, she makes daring choices that are life affirming. Wisely, she avoids the potential for continuing a cycle of anger and retaliation by sparing Judah the humiliation of public confrontation, even when faced by the threat of death by fire.

Tamar's courageous commitment to life restores balance and hope. Judah recognizes Tamar's righteousness and his own unjust treatment of her. Tamar gives birth to two healthy baby boys. The future of the people is secured.

One of our greatest modern teachers, Abraham Joshua Heschel, has written, "The Hebrew bible calls for concern for the problem of living.....its central concern is not how to escape death, but, rather, how to sanctify life....."

For me, this is the wisdom of Tamar, and the wisdom of our tradition that teaches us to take risks and to take action in the pursuit of justice, to “choose life”.

Mimi Epstein

Is this a story about relative righteousness or maybe relative immorality?

As I see Judah in this story he is superstitious. He believes that Tamar must be a “deadly woman” because she married his two sons in succession and both of them died. Judah did not know why his sons had died and attributed their deaths to the “powers” of Tamar. We, the readers, know that their deaths were because of their own failings, which Judah did not see. So Judah protected Shelah out of fear that he would suffer the same fate. In so doing, he implied to Tamar that he would give her Shelah when he was old enough, even though he never intended to do that. Judah was unfair to Tamar. He cared more about his one remaining son than about this daughter-in-law, who had produced no grand-children for him and, as he saw it, caused the deaths of his two older sons. Was this unrighteous? Was it immoral? I think the story leaves us with those questions. In the end Judah admits that Tamar is “more righteous” than he. That is a relative statement. As I see it, they were both acting to protect what they believed to be their right. They both had to do something less than moral to accomplish those goals.

How do we make meaningful demands when we’re in a powerless position?

Tamar was in a powerless position because she was a woman in a patriarchal society. This means to me that she had less power than the men. It does not mean that she had no power. Tamar’s power was in her wits and her patience. She waited for many years, living as a non-entity in her father’s house. She was unable to get married because she was promised to Shelah, Judah’s 3rd son. She should have been part of Judah’s household because she was the widow of his two sons. But Judah had sent her back to her father’s house and she could not protest. There she waited, we do not know how long, until Judah’s wife died. Tamar then implemented a plan to encounter Judah on his way to the sheep shearing. She took off her widow’s garb and disguised herself with a veil. Judah assumed that she was a prostitute and immediately propositioned her. This was her opportunity to take control of her life and she accepted his offer, taking from him items that would later identify him as the father of the twins she was carrying as a result of their encounter. Her position in society did not allow her to make the one demand that she was entitled to: Shelah as a husband. She believed that it was her right to carry forward the seed of Judah’s household, if not through his sons, then through Judah himself, and she did that. She made a meaningful demand by subterfuge, using her wit and patience to achieve what was rightfully hers.

Eleyna Fugman

I have battled with the story of Tamar and lost, for the time being. At first this the story pleased me immensely. A woman in the old testament who is not only named but triumphant! Now it is depressing and makes me angry.

During the most recent round of grappling with the story the question that haunts me is “Are things that much different for me, for women now, than they were from Tamar?” Some of you might not agree but I say no they’re not.

Tamar did not have many choices. She didn’t get to decide who she married or had sex with the first or the second time. She didn’t get to decide where she lived or how she lived.

Women do have more choices now, externally, but the patriarchal system remains, it has not been undone. This means that while it looks like we have free will and can make our own decisions, as in Tamar’s time this is not true.

Externally, our right to control our fertility, to be in charge of our own reproductivity is constantly being challenged, now, today, openly, publicly, even by politicians.

Our rights for safety, to not be assaulted and raped are more intact than they were in Tamar’s time, but not that much, statistics say that 1 in 6 US women experience rape in their lifetime.

And what of a women’s value if she does not bear children? In Tamar’s time, she was doomed. Useless, cast off, trash. Today, outwardly we are told that of course we have free choice, to bear children or not, but I can tell you as a woman in my 30’s who is not a mother, barely a day goes by where I don’t wonder if I “should be having children.” In fact today, 80% of US women will still bear a child in their lifetime and I would argue that it is because what Tamar had to overtly battle, the messages that she was “not really a woman,” or “that she had no value” without children, are still imprinted in the minds of Jewish women today.

Needless to say, I am not happy about any of this.

What I am happy about however, on this day particularly, is that I am a Jew. What I know about Jews is that we fight tirelessly for tzedek, for justice. That we refuse to let injustice slip by. That we are freedom fighters, that we fight for others and ourselves. And this gives me hope, that Jews, Jewish women and men have and will continue to look this male dominated system straight in the eye and that we will refuse to accept it. That we have and we will continue to change it. That we can model for other communities the undoing of the patriarchal system by looking at our own laws, rules, customs, our hearts and our minds and challenge them externally and internally. And that in the memory of Tamar, we will do this work with passion and hope.

Rob Tanner

Preparing for this day has been a very enlightening experience for me in ways that I never expected or could have anticipated. If you look around up here, you can easily see that I’m one fellow in the midst of eleven very smart and thoughtful women. And here’s why that in itself has been such a powerful experience. Actually, some background first. I love mythology and anything associated with myth, fairy tales, folk tales, legends, etc. And, as such, I pay attention to the story as given. A folklorist might do a great deal of statistical research to trace similarities between various tales to see how they have evolved over time and place and if possible figure out

where a particular tale or a scene in that tale originated. Our story, the Jewish story has many strands that come from many different localities in and around ancient Mesopotamia. The common theme in all that research is that our sages, as far as the story goes, have paid attention mainly to the story itself in its various manifestations. While some Jewish modern scholars might apply some of the methods used in the study of myth and folklore, the early sages consider most tales as historical, as components of the historical Jewish story and both focused more broadly on how the individual tales move the bigger story along. And don't get me wrong, that's important and invaluable in helping us to define who we are as a people.

But, since our group began the study of this parsha, what has been foremost on the minds of my colleagues has been figuring out what's going on in Tamar's mind. What are her motivations? What are her fears? Why from her perspective did she do what she did? Was she acting within the expectations of proper woman in her society or was she in rebellion, and how did she feel about that? And what about Judah, the other significant player in what we've read. he was not above scrutiny either. These were serious discussions and not at all frivolous. And what I learned from those discussions is that to truly understand the tales themselves and how the various tales affect the larger Jewish story requires us to go beyond just the story as given, but to intimately understand the actors because that ultimately where the real story is.

Sarah Wetherson

Like Tamar, I have been powerless to change my life. I sometimes still feel that way. But I know I can choose how my life unfolds. Being called to the Torah today is a powerful demonstration of that. I am publicly choosing and committing to take responsibility for my Jewish adult life.

This does not come easily. Despite my modern-Orthodox upbringing and deep-seated love of Judaism, I often struggle when I look closely at prayer and Torah, which I find difficult to reconcile with the feminism and other modern notions I embrace. The Tamar story is no exception.

I grudgingly admire Tamar. She refused to be a perpetual child in her father's house. She acted and took what was rightfully hers. But, here's the rub: She acted deceitfully and perverted the power she had over Judah to get what she wanted. I can hear my mother's voice saying, "two wrongs don't make a right"

Traditional sources tell us that Tamar deceived Judah because she had a closer understanding of G!d's plan. This not only reinforces unhelpful thinking about women being more spiritual beings, but distances me theologically from the Tamar story.

I want another way for Tamar – one that does not predicate a G!d whose hidden plans cause Tamar to deceive Judah to correct his injustice. I want to find other meanings in the spaces between the words we've spoken today.

Marcia Klotz

To me, this passage offers guidance on the path of political resistance. Tamar has much to teach. She knew better than to confront Yehuda directly about his failed promise, and she was smart enough to disguise herself when she tried to seduce him. Yet when the right moment came, she was willing to put everything on the line for her demands. What we learn from her example is that the struggle for justice demands not only careful strategy and impeccable timing, but also psychological insight. We must study and understand the limitations of the powerful; it is unwise to push them too far, even when we are in the right. But we must be equally diligent in knowing their strengths, their virtues, in order to allow them an opportunity to be their best selves when the time comes. We can't afford to overestimate those in power, nor can we demonize them. And sometimes we must find the courage to risk everything when the right moment arises.

What I learn from Yehuda is that it is possible – though admittedly terribly difficult – to pull back in the moment of rage, to recognize our own fault when we want to punish another with violence. I aspire to Yehuda's example in my interactions with my children and my students, with all those who have less power than I, and with those who sometimes enrage me. And I find here the working of what Christians call grace – a gift from the divine that is undeserved. The midrash of the ancient rabbis found in Yehuda's reversal the reason why his name contains the Tetragram, the four sacred letters that name God. There is surely wisdom here. That moment when we want to strike but pull up short instead, the moment when we can say, through teeth still clenched in anger — no. It is I who am in the wrong, not you – that is surely a moment when we come closest to the divine.

Kate Haas

In most of this parsha we see Tamar through her actions. And through those actions, we come to know something about her: her desperation, her cleverness, her courage and determination. She becomes a person, a character, to us through what she does. But in the brief moment after her encounter with Yehuda, between the words *she removed her veil* and *she put on the clothes of her widowhood*, we see Tamar herself, defined neither by the garb of a widow nor by the veil of the kidesha. There she stands, poised between roles: free, alone for just a moment in time. As I try to picture her standing there, I'm reminded that we all take on roles, all our lives, we put on veils; the ones we choose in full awareness, or those we have no say in, or the ones that slip up on us. We make those roles our own. Or, like Tamar, we do what we must to discard them, to change them, to put on the clothes we really want to wear.

In a single hour, by discarding one role and taking up another, Tamar changes the course of her entire life. And as I wrap this tallit around myself for the first time as a bat mitzvah, I wonder: who am I now? And how will going through this process, putting on this tallit, month after month, slowly, subtly, perhaps without my full awareness, transform me, too, in the end?