



## **D'var Torah – Parshat Vayashev**

**By Jonathan Forman, Dec. 9, 2023**

Shabbat Shalom and Hanukkah sameach. My name is Jonathan Forman.

Let me begin by giving attribution to a Podcast – Aleph Beta – a biblical commentary I like and recommend from which I got many of my thoughts today – it is led by Rabbi David Fohrman – no relation to me, but does have the same name as my brother. – though spelled a bit differently. The parsha begins a long narrative about Joseph that dominates the last 14 chapters of Breishit.

But in the middle of the Joseph narrative, the story is interrupted with the story of Judah and his relationship with his daughter-in-law Tamar. An X rated tale, it almost seems like an aside, and on first read, one wonders why it is even in the Bible. But today I'd like to look at that story more closely, and try to convince you that it is in fact, an extremely important story in our tradition and one that portrays several of our most basic principles as Jews. It is a story that in fact is related to the Jacob and Joseph narrative, and is also very much related to the future of the Jewish people.

To understand the story, we need to first understand the biblical principle of Yibum, translated as a Leverite marriage. In biblical law, if a man is married and dies childless, his brother has the religious obligation to marry the widow, even if the living brother is already married.

Then, any child from that marriage inherits the property from the deceased man and continues that family lineage and legacy. It is considered an obligation on the part of the living brother and the widow to do this, but it is also considered a selfless and extremely righteous act. He is doing something for his brother that has passed, and there is no possibility that he can be compensated in return. Now this law is described later in the Bible, but it is assumed that it already applies to our story in today's Pasha.

Allow me to suggest that in order to fully appreciate these biblical stories, we need to suspend some of our modern sensibilities. Marrying one's brother in law is a practice usually prohibited in the Torah, and to us seems incestual. And Yibum as a Jewish practice is 99 % extinct. I say not entirely eliminated, as in Israel and in Orthodoxy generally today they still sometimes practice the act that is described in Deuteronomy and is used to religiously release the couple from the obligation of marrying each other. The widow publicly pulls the sandal off her brother-in-law's foot, spits in his face, and makes a declaration saying : "This shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house. "

But in biblical times, Yibum was clearly very important to the structure of the family, and was considered an act of great chesed.

OK, so let's begin by reviewing the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah is the brother who had come up with the plan of selling Joseph into slavery. He is described as "going down" to Canaan and marrying a local Canaanite woman. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, the phrase "going down" was rightly taken by the Sages as full of meaning. Judah was on the decline both morally and spiritually; first by leading in the plan to sell his brother into slavery, and now by doing what the patriarchs had insisted on not doing: Marrying into the local population.

Judah then has 3 sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er, the first born, marries Tamar. In an obscure verse, we are told Er was evil and dies. A reason is not given, but we should note that ER-ayan-rash-is-rah - Evil-rash-ayan-spelled backwards.

Judah tells Onan, his second son, to marry Tamar and to perform his duty as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for his deceased brother. But Onan, knowing that the child would not count as his, let his seed go to waste when he joined with his brother's wife. This was also displeasing to the Lord and he took Onan's life

Judah sees the pattern and gets worried that his third son might also die if he allows him to marry Tamar. Judah procrastinates and rather than telling Tamar the truth, tells her to wait until Shelah gets older. However, it eventually becomes quite clear to Tamar that she was never going to get another husband. Shelah, the third son, was grown up yet still did not marry her.

So to have a child, and to continue her deceased husband's legacy, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. The only family member left to possibly continue the legacy is Judah himself.

In the next scene, Judah himself becomes widowed. He goes traveling to another city for sheepshearing of his flock. Tamar disguises herself and dresses as a prostitute. Judah does not recognize his daughter-in-law and hires her services

For payment, he promised her a goat from his flock, but does not have a goat to give her right away. She requests a pledge to be sure he will return and asks for his signet ring, his coat and his staff.

When Judah's aide goes to pay the pledge of the goat, they cannot find her. She is gone without a trace. Three months later, it becomes obvious that Tamar is pregnant. She's assumed to have committed adultery and Judah - apparently acting as the judge of the area - commands that she be brought out and burned.

But Tamar then brings out Judah's personal objects and sends a message to her father-in-law. "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." Judah recognizes them and says "she is more right than I" - he apologizes, she is forgiven, and the Torah notes that they were not intimate again. Tamar delivers twins and one of them is named Peretz, who then becomes the forefather of King David.

So why this story? Why now? How does it fit into the thread of the Joseph stories? We don't hear stories

about the other brothers. Why do we hear so much about Judah?

So, if we look closely at the two stories, there are in fact some connections- and we will focus on two of these.

First: the recurrent themes of Goats and coats: Joseph's coat of many colors plays a prominent role in his story. It is the coat that Jacob gives him and demonstrates his favoritism for Joseph and is one of the factors that provokes the brothers' jealousy. After the brothers sell Joseph, they dip his coat in the blood of a goat to try to prove that he is in fact dead when they show it to Jacob. And now in the Tamar story: Tamar keeps Judah's coat as a security. And the goat is what was promised to Tamar as a payment for her act of prostitution by Judah. Goats and Coats are in both stories.

And these objects bring us all the way back to Jacob's deception of his father- Yitzhak. Rivka dressed him in Esau's coat in order to fool his father. And she cooked a goat for him to give to his father, pretending that it was something he himself had hunted and prepared... as Esau was wont to do. Another example of a connection between the Joseph and the Tamar episodes is the use of the term Haker Na -please recognize - in both stories. When the brothers bring the bloody coat to Jacob they ask him: please recognize it .. is it your son's coat? .. then when Tamar shows the security objects to Judah, she also asks if he recognizes them. In fact these are the only 2 places in the entire Tanach that this expression is used.

Jacob's sons are repeating the behaviors and sins of their father. They all participate in the sale of Joseph and hide it from their father. Judah creates a deception to cover his sin and shirks his familial responsibility to his daughter in law. The family legacy continues to decline.

But in this story, Judah begins to correct the chain of deception that had been plaguing the whole family. It started with his father and continued with himself and his brothers.

But here things begin to change. Tamar, in a manner that is highly praised by our commentators, grants Judah the opportunity to repent for his actions without publicly shaming him. He takes the opportunity - "she is more righteous than I" --- he admits he acted in lust, Tamar acted nobly. It is the first time in the Bible that someone admits they were wrong and repents their sins. And later in the story, he repents and acts nobly again .. this time in his deeply moving appeal to Joseph to offer be his slave to save the life of Benjamin.

Tamar returns the signet ring, the coat and the staff to Judah. And who has these objects ? .. but a king.

And as we see later in the Bible, Judah and Tamar do become the ancestors of kings. .. their son is Peretz, who is then a direct ancestor of the Davidic dynasty.

Everyone makes mistakes, but leadership comes from the ability to admit wrongdoing and to correct our mistakes.

OK so to complete the story we now need to look at the book of Ruth. We obviously cannot give this book justice in this drash today, but I'd like to focus on a few important aspects of the book of Ruth that relate to our theme.

As in the Tamar story, Ruth is a widow without any children who also needs to find a husband to continue her deceased husband's legacy. And.. there is also a seduction scene where a woman does what is necessary to achieve her aims.

As we know, Ruth is a Moabite who decides to convert to follow her mother-in-law Naomi. They are poor and have no resources, but they are able to locate a relative Boaz who could potentially marry her, and thus perform the obligation of Yibum. At Naomi's instruction, Ruth dresses up, places oil on her body and lies at his feet to seduce him to perform his obligation. In an incredibly righteous act, Boaz, a much older man chooses to do the right thing. He first makes sure that the marriage is arranged correctly, and then has relations with her. Though I admit, some may read the sequence a bit differently. Their child becomes the ancestor of King David, who then becomes the ancestor of the Messiah.

Now Ruth is a Moabite. And Boaz is a seventh generation descendent of Peretz the son of Tamar.

Let's look a little bit more closely at the lineage.

Moab was the son of Lot. The story occurs after the destruction of Sodom and Gamora. Lot's daughters worry that there are no men left on earth and seduce their father after making him drunk. The older daughter produces a son and named him Moab. He is then the father of the Moabite nation.

The name Moab "from father" is a reminder of the incestuous relationship that created him. In a way, it is a mistaken act of Yibum --- yes, the family line is continued, but in a morally reprehensible way.

And the people of Moab are infamous for refusing to offer the Israelites bread and water when they pass through. And after the Bilaam story, the Moabites are described as mingling with the children of Israel and seducing them to worship foreign gods. We are told to never allow a Moabite to convert to Judaism

And so, it really is an incredible progression. Lot is seduced by his daughters and produces a son who becomes Ruth's ancestor. Judah sleeps with his daughter -in - law and produces a son who becomes the ancestor of Boaz. Incestuous inappropriate relationships. But Ruth and Boaz are able to transform their heritage to join in a proper beautiful and appropriate relationship. One that follows all the rules of Judaism of morality, and of God. They both model exemplary behaviors. Their descendants become kings, and then their lineage is said to be destined to produce the Messiah.

The Torah is not naïve. Another teaching tells us that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the fourth generation. The Torah understands that a lot of who we become is driven by how we were brought up.

Mistakes were made by our ancestors. But the focus of the Torah seems to be telling us that behaviors can change. Judah is the first person in the Torah to admit that he has wronged someone and to repent. We can also admit that we have done wrong. Beginnings do not have to be permanent. The many errors we make do not have to burden us and our children permanently. We can improve. We can do better. And by constantly working to better ourselves, the world can improve, and perhaps one day, the Messiah will indeed arrive.

Shabbat Shalom