

The Righteous, As Tamar

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Vayeshev

We read in this week's Parshah the story of Judah, his sons Er and Onan, and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Judah had married Shua, a Canaanite woman, and their union produced three sons – Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er came of age, he wed a woman named Tamar, but, the text tells us, Er behaved badly in G*d eyes, so badly that G*d took him from this life. In keeping with the custom of that time – and in keeping with *Halachah* (Jewish religious Law) as it has come down to us – Er's oldest surviving brother, Onan, was instructed by his father Judah to take Tamar as a wife in Er's name, to father children in Er's name, for Er had died childless.¹ While Onan was quite willing to take Tamar to bed – she must have been a most beautiful woman – he was unwilling to father children in his brother's name, and he **spilled [his seed] on the ground**. The text then tells us (Genesis 38:10), **That which he did was wrong in the eyes of the Eternal, and G*d slew him also**. Judah's remaining son, Shelah, was not yet of age, and Judah instructed Tamar to wait until he was grown. But the text (38:11) acknowledges Judah's fear that Shelah, like his brothers before him, might die.

Judah's son Shelah grew up, and Judah's wife Shua died. Tamar, having heard that Judah had gone to Timnah to tend his flocks, disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced him. He did not know it was Tamar, for she kept her face covered, and he left her his staff and his ring as a pledge for payment. Later, when he heard that Tamar (still legally his daughter-in-law) was pregnant, he ordered her to be killed, for she seemed to be, according to the law at the time, guilty of adultery, a capital crime. She then quietly sent his staff and ring back to him, and, the text (38:26) tells us, **Judah acknowledged them and declared, "She is more righteous than I."** And Tamar gave birth to twin boys, one of whom, Peretz, was to become the ancestor of King David.

¹ The *Halachah* actually provides a means by which the brother can decline – he removes his shoe and goes through a ritual of rejection (it is called *yibum*). In ancient times, he had the choice. In the days of the Talmud, the sages decreed that there was no longer a choice; the brother is required to go through *yibum* and is forbidden to take his brother's widow. But the Torah here speaks of a time when *yibum* was virtually never exercised, when the only real option was for the brother to father a child in his deceased childless brother's name.

There was another Tamar, the daughter of King David, and we find her story in II Samuel 13. Amnon, Tamar's half-brother, desired her and, through a ruse, got her alone and raped her. Afterwards, he had only contempt for her – how often have we heard the same tale in our own day! – and cast her away, and she felt shame and blame. Her full brother, Absalom, King David's favorite, bided his time, but eventually he had the opportunity to have Amnon killed, and David's reaction (II Samuel 13:38-39) is most interesting. **Absalom fled to Geshur and remained there three years. King David's very soul was weak with longing for Absalom, but, as for the matter concerning Amnon, David was reconciled, for Amnon was dead.** Absalom had killed Amnon, but David, the father of both, was reconciled concerning the slain Amnon and pined for the slayer Absalom. Clearly, something extraordinary is going on here, and an interpretation out of the ordinary is called for.

To what was David reconciled? For what was he comforted? Perhaps he recognized that Amnon had reaped what he had sown in his rape of Tamar. Sadly, Tamar no longer appears in the text to tell us how she felt about Amnon's death; we are left only with Absalom's vengeance and David's being reconciled. But we can speculate, and, in fact, we have an excellent vehicle for our speculation.

Psalm 92 is a part of our prayers on Shabbat; it is traditionally recited three times each Shabbat – once in *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the prayers welcoming the Sabbath, when we recite it standing, once in *P'sukei d'Zimra*, the preliminary morning prayers, on Shabbat morning, and once as the Psalm of the day on Shabbat. Why is Psalm 92 so important? There is a connection with *Parshat Vayeshev*, this week's Torah portion, and with Tamar, the daughter of King David!

I suggest that Psalm 92 was written by David as a poem of comfort for his daughter Tamar. Each verse of the Psalm bears a reference to Tamar and Amnon, and each verse is phrased to comfort her and to reassure her. Each verse of the Psalm could be the subject of several pages of commentary; in the interest of brevity, I will risk oversimplification and confine myself to a sentence or two on each.

A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath Day. The Sabbath is likened to a queen and a bride. Tamar, David assures her, is like a queen (for she is the daughter of the king and nothing that Amnon has done can take that away from her), and she is also like a bride in her purity (for the fault was Amnon's and not hers).

It is good to give thanks to the Eternal, to sing praises to Thy Name, O Most High. David assures Tamar that her songs to G*d, her praises of G*d, are indeed good, and that G*d will, in the course of time, bring her comfort.

To tell of Thy kindness at daybreak and Thy faithfulness through the night. Although Amnon abused her through the night and cruelly cast her away at daybreak, G*d will not do so, for Tamar is indeed righteous.

Upon the ten-stringed lyre and upon the lute, with singing and the harp. David here refers to his own instruments and his own voice, for David was the great musician, the sweet singer of Israel. He assures his daughter that she remains first in his thoughts and first in his heart.

For Thou hast gladdened me, O Eternal, with Thy deeds; I rejoice in the work of Thine Hands. And now, with Absalom's act of vengeance (which, while we cannot condone it, we can understand), Tamar's sorrow and grief may be assuaged.

How great are Thy deeds, Eternal; Thy thoughts are very deep. G*d's memory is infinite; G*d will not forget what Amnon did to Tamar.

The thoughtless cannot comprehend; the foolish cannot understand. Amnon – thoughtless and foolish Amnon – did not understand the depravity to which he had sunk, but G*d knows, and we know.

The wicked multiply like weeds and the iniquitous blossom, only to wither forever. Amnon has withered, for Absalom has slain him. But, even before that, Amnon had withered, for his father, King David, had rejected him.

But Thou, O Eternal, art exalted forever. In comforting those who have been hurt and violated (Tamar), G*d is exalted forever.

For behold Thine enemies, Eternal; behold, Thine enemies shall perish; those who commit iniquity shall be scattered. This is a direct reference to Amnon.

Thou raisest my head in pride; I am anointed with fresh oil. And this is a reference to Tamar; G*d raises her head and anoints her with fresh oil. Again, David speaks of Tamar's innocence.

I have seen the downfall of my foes; I have heard the doom of my attackers.
The reference here is clear.

The righteous, as Tamar, shall flourish and grow tall as a cedar in Lebanon.
And here is the key to the Psalm. Judah had spoken of the first Tamar as **more righteous than I**. Now David speaks of one who is righteous as Tamar. The traditional vocalization – *tzaddik katamar yifrah*; the righteous will flower like a palm tree – seems a bit strange; after all, the palm tree does not bear flowers. By a slight change in one vowel, however, we can read *tzaddik k'Tamar yifrah*; one who is righteous as Tamar will flourish. Just as Judah called her namesake righteous, even though she posed as a prostitute, so David is calling his daughter Tamar righteous, even though she felt shamed by her half-brother Amnon.

Rooted in the House of the Eternal, they will flourish in the courts of our G*d.
Tamar's roots are in holiness, in the House of G*d, in the courts of the Temple.

Even in old age, they will be fruitful, vigorous, and fresh. So long as she lives, Tamar will remain fruitful, vigorous, and fresh.

To declare that the Eternal is upright, my Rock in Whom there is no wrong.
In G*d there is no wrong, and there is no wrong in Tamar.

Many parts of King David's life were less than worthy. Many things that King David did were not right. We think in particular of David's seduction of Bathsheba, which some have called rape, although there is no direct evidence – other than the inherent inequality of power – of his having forced her. Indeed, the prophet Nathan declared David's guilt to David's face. David did not hesitate to use his power as king to get whatever he wanted, and for this we rightfully chastise him, as Nathan chastised him. **Thou art the man!**

But, if David had done nothing else, his writing of Psalm 92, the Psalm of comfort for his beloved daughter Tamar, would warrant raising him to the highest levels of honor. For David teaches us here that, however he may have acted previously (and his seduction of Bathsheba and its consequence are found in the two chapters immediately preceding Tamar's story), the use of power to satisfy one's lust is never acceptable, and the woman forced against her will is never – NEVER! – guilty or to blame.

Only one righteous as Tamar will flourish, only one righteous as Tamar.

Shabbat Shalom.