

**June 25, 2017 - Gen. 38:1-30 - Judah and Tamar**  
**Torah Readings: Gen. 38:1-30 - Judah and Tamar**  
**Psalm 31**  
**Haftorah - (1) Isaiah 37:31-35 + 38:1-6**  
**(2) Hosea 12:1-9 + 14:9-10**

### **Another dysfunctional family incident!**

When reading these uncomfortable stories from Israel's past, we see clearly that the patriarchs and matriarchs were human and real.

A classic midrash narrates that the angel of transcendental truth advised God not to create man. God threw the angel down to earth, where it shattered and must now grow out of the earth in splintered, contingent shards - "Truth springs from the earth" (**Psalm 85:12**).

From the fallen and broken lives of God's people, the splintered letters of God's Name come to light, if we have eyes to see. Ultimately, that Truth was grown, whole and complete, in Jesus.

### **The Canaanite Danger**

Remember that Isaac had expressly told Jacob: "'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan" (**Genesis 28:6**). Judah ignores this advice.

This incident shows, first, the danger the family of Jacob was in from mixture and intermarriage with Canaanites. It also shows that the pre-eminence of Judah in the patriarchal family was due exclusively to grace, not the merit of his own (less-than) upstanding character. This also sets the stage as a reason for the famine causing the whole family to depart to Egypt (**Genesis 46:5**), to remove them from the danger of corruption of the lineage of the Redeemer, and fulfill the prophecy to Abraham of bondage for a time before inheriting the Land.

**Genesis 38:1** - "And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her. And she conceived, and bare a son; and he called his name Er. And she conceived again, and bare a son; and she called his name Onan."

Adullamite.—The town of Adullam, in the lowlands by the sea, near David's famous cave (**1 Samuel 22:1**).

Shua was actually the name of her father, not her. She is not named. Shua means "wealth, riches." (Thus perhaps it's a hint of what drew Judah away. The Talmud says he was drawn away from his brothers by Canaanite ways).

**Genesis 38:6-7** - “And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar. And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him.”

It doesn't say what his crime was. “Er” means “watchman.” But Targum Jonathan says it means "because he should die without children," as if Er was related to the word “Ariri,” which means "childless.” - *Gill's Exposition*

Er also means “evil” when reversed.

Onan means “strong.” But the Targum relates it to “benoni - son of sorrow,” “because his father would mourn for him,” because his sin and premature death caused sorrow.

**Genesis 38:5** - “And she yet again conceived, and bare a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bare him.”

Shelah is from the same root as shiloh and means “peace.” It expressed the hope that Shiloh/Messiah would spring from him, (see the blessing in **Genesis 49:10**). But it was not to be.

**Genesis 38:6** - “And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar.”

## **Tamar**

Tamar means “date palm.”

Tamar was most likely a Canaanite. One tradition asserts that she was an orphan and was converted in order to marry (BT Sotah 10a), while another claims that she was the daughter of Melchizedek, king of Salem, who was “a priest of God Most High” (**Gen. 14:18**). That would explain why Judah judged her according to the laws pertaining to the daughter of a priest (which are set forth in **Lev. 21:9**) and ordered that she be burnt when he thought that she had become pregnant as a result of an illicit tryst (Gen. Rabbah 85:10).

**Genesis 38:8-10** - “And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also.”

Onan died because he did not want to do his duty as a brother-in-law (**Deut. 25:5–10**) because he knew “that the seed would not count as his” (v. 9).

Yet another tradition views their death as punishment for Judah's starting something but not finishing it. Judah persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, and instead sell him to the Ishmaelites (**Gen. 37:26–27**), but he did not bring this to a conclusion, since he

could have completely saved Joseph: he should have carried Joseph on his shoulders to his father. He therefore was punished by having to bury his wife and his two sons, and also by coming down in the world, as it is said (Gen. 38:1): “Judah left [va-yered, literally, went down (from)] his brothers” (BT Sotah 13b; Gen. Rabbah 85:3).

While Judah was busily engaged in seeking success and taking a wife, God was engaged in creating the light of the Messiah who would eventually issue from the union of Judah and Tamar (Gen. Rabbah 85:1). This midrash teaches that people are involved in their own affairs and troubles and do not see the sweeping divine plan that takes form before their very eyes, one that is for their own good and that gives them a future and hope.

**Genesis 38:11** - “Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter in law, Remain a widow at thy father's house, till Shelah my son be grown: for he said, Lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.”

Judah's concern was that Tamar might be cursed and Shelah might die if married to her. But he eventually reneged on his promise completely. So Tamar takes events into her own hands. And as with Sarah and Abram, God's plan was furthered, despite their leaning on their “own arm of understanding.”

### **Another scheme - Tamar and Judah**

Tamar realized that she would not be given to Shelah, so she planned how she would become pregnant by Judah and “sat down at the entrance [be- petah] to Enaim [einayim, literally, “eyes”]” (v. 14). The midrash tells that Tamar cast her eyes to the portal [petah] to which all eyes are cast (i.e., she cried out for help), that is, God, and said: “May it be Your will that I not leave this house empty” (Gen. Rabbah 85:7). Tamar's prayer to God reveals her true aim, which, according to the Rabbis, was to cleave to the house of Judah and provide a successor for his line.

The midrashim see Tamar in a positive light.

She supposedly gave convincing replies to Judah's questions to show she was “permitted” to him.

When Judah asked to consort with her, he inquired: “Perhaps you are a Gentile?” She replied: “I am a convert.” When he asked her: “Perhaps you are a married woman?” she answered: “I am unmarried.” He asked: “Perhaps your father received the money of betrothal for you [and you are already a married woman, without your knowledge]?” She rejoined: “I am an orphan.” He further probed: “Perhaps you are [menstrually] impure?” She answered: “I am pure” (BT Sotah 10a). This midrash presents Judah as meticulous in his observance of the laws regarding married women and niddah, even with a prostitute by the roadside. Tamar is portrayed as a woman who meets all the requirements of halakhah: she is a convert, both unmarried and not betrothed, and also pure. In a similar interpretive direction, the midrash relates that, at first, Judah did not pay any attention to Tamar, thinking her to be a harlot. When he passed by her,

however, and saw that she covered her face, he realized that she was not a strumpet, because such women do not veil their faces, and then he turned aside to her (Gen. Rabbah 85:8).

[Alternately, another Midrash states that Tamar had always covered her face in her father-in-law's home. Thus, when she disguised herself as a harlot and revealed her face, Judah did not recognize her (BT Sotah 10b).]

**Gen. 38:13** states that Tamar was told: "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheep shearing," thus implying that Timnah was a high place. The Samson narrative, in contrast, states that "Samson went down to Timnah," thus indicating that it was a low place. The Rabbis reply that this is a moral description. Samson disgraced himself in Timnah, (since he went there in order to marry a Philistine woman), and therefore the Bible uses the language of descent, while Judah was exalted there (for being the forebear of kings; see below), and therefore the language of ascent is applied to him (BT Sotah 10a; Gen. Rabbah 85:6).

Other Midrash go to extraordinary lengths to show God's hand in this affair because it resulted in the line of David and of Messiah. (Little is said here about the sins of lust, or the evils of prostitution):

The Rabbis add that we learn from this incident that every daughter-in-law who conducts herself modestly in her father-in-law's home will be privileged to bring forth kings and prophets, as did the actions of Tamar, from whom came forth kings—King David—and prophets—Isaiah the son of Amoz (there is a Rabbinic tradition that Amoz, the father of the prophet Isaiah, and Amaziah, king of Judah and a descendant of the Davidic line, were brothers) (BT Sotah 10b).

The Rabbis emphasize the hand of Divine Providence in Judah's turning aside to the tent of Tamar. Judah wanted to pass by her, without entering the tent. What did God do? He summoned for him the angel responsible for desire. He [the angel] asked him: "Where are you going, Judah [i.e., why are you passing by the tent]? From where kings stand? From where redeemers stand? [i.e., you should enter the tent, from where kings and redeemers will come forth]." Only then did he "turn aside to her" (v. 16), against his will (Gen. Rabbah 85:8).

## **The Pledge**

The Bible has Tamar asking Judah for a pledge, and, after his asking what to give her, "she replied, 'Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry'" (v. 18). The Rabbis say that she spoke with the spirit of divine inspiration (*ruah ha-kodesh*), for she would in fact receive these three items from Judah: "Your seal [*hotamkha*]"—this is kingship, for their descendants would include King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim, of whom it is said: "a signet [*hotam*] on my right hand" (Jer. 22:24); "and cord"—this is the Sanhedrin, whose members are distinct, like the cord of *tekhelet* in the *zizit* [one of the eight cords of the fringe (*zizit*) at the corners of one's garment must be of *tekhelet*, a special blue color—Num. 15:38]; "and the staff [*u-matekha*]"—this is the anointed king, the Messiah, who

will issue from this union, and of whom it is said: “The Lord will stretch forth from Zion your mighty scepter [mateh]” (Ps. 110:2) (Gen. Rabbah 85:9).

## Deceptions

Some midrashim argue that the embarrassing situation in which Judah found himself was punishment for selling Joseph. Tamar vanished, together with the pledge that Judah left with her, and he could not find her when he sent her the kid from his flock. God said to him: “You deceived your father with a kid [when you dipped Joseph’s coat of many colors in the kid’s blood, so that Jacob would think that his son was dead]—by your life, Tamar deceives you with a kid!” (Gen. Rabbah 85:9).

As Judah deceived his father by means of clothes, so, too, did Tamar similarly lead Judah astray with clothing. God said to Judah: “You told your father: ‘Please examine it [, is it your son’s tunic]’ [**Gen. 37:32**]—by your life, you shall hear ‘Examine these [: whose seal and cord and staff are these?’] [**Gen. 38:25**]” (Gen. Rabbah 84:19).

Another deception like this: Jacob tricked his father Isaac with skins of the goat.

## Proofs of the Pledge

Samael (the Adversary) concealed the proofs [hoping to destroy the mother along with what was in her womb], and God sent the angel Gabriel to find them. According to the Rabbis, this moment is depicted by David (Tamar’s descendant) in the superscription of **Ps. 56:1**: “For the leader; on yonat elem rehokim [or: the silent dove of those who are far off]. Of David. A mikhtam.” Scholars think the word “mikhtam” may be a technical term used only in the psalms, its meaning uncertain. The Rabbis thought otherwise. When Tamar’s proof vanished she was like “a silent dove.” God, however, intervened, on account of “Of David. A mikhtam,” for she was destined to be the forebear of David, who would be meek (makh) and perfect (tam) to all (BT Sotah 10b).

These traditions stress the real dangers facing Tamar and her fetuses, and the fact that God miraculously intervened to ensure the existence of the future king.

**Genesis 38: 25** - “When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff.”

The Rabbis observe that she did not say outright: “I am pregnant by you,” from which they conclude that if Judah had not acknowledged his responsibility, Tamar was prepared to be burnt rather than publicly shame him. The Rabbis learn from this act by Tamar that it is better for a person to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to publicly shame his fellow (BT Sotah 10b).

## Confession and repentance

**Genesis 38:26** - “And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more

righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more.”

“And he knew her again no more.” - One tradition translates this to mean the opposite, that he did not “disengage” from her again. Since Judah knew that Tamar acted for Heaven’s sake (le-da’atah, literally, according to her mind), he did not disengage from her, that is, from that day Tamar became his wife in all respects (BT Sotah 10b).

The Rabbis praise his courage for admitting to his acts and not fearing for his honor. The midrash says that by this act Judah publicly sanctified the Name of God and therefore merited having the Tetragrammaton included within his name (BT Sotah 10b). (‘Yehudah’ includes the four letters of the Tetragrammaton)

Another tradition relates that Judah was awarded the throne for having made this admission. He was not given the scepter because he was more heroic than his brothers, for others were just as valorous, but because he rendered true judgment and stated the truth; in consequence, God elevated him over his brothers (Ex. Rabbah 30:19; Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta Va-Yehi Be-Shalah 5). In yet another tradition a heavenly voice goes forth and proclaims: “You saved Tamar and her two children from the fire—by your life, by your merit I will save three of your children from the fire,” namely, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (BT Sotah 10b). An additional midrashic exposition states that because Judah was not too ashamed to confess, he merited the life of the World to Come (BT Sotah 7b).

The Rabbis learned from Judah’s actions that if a person is shamed in this world by public confession, he will not be shamed before God in the World to Come (Ex. Rabbah 30:19).

In his blessings to his sons, Jacob blesses Judah (**Gen. 49:8**): “You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise,” which the rabbis view as an allusion to the episode with Tamar. Jacob is saying: Since you confessed, your brothers shall praise you in this and the next worlds. Jacob’s blessing was fulfilled, and thirty kings came forth from him: from David and Solomon to Jehoiachin and Zedekiah (the entire line of Judean kings). And so it will be in the World to Come, of which it is said (**Ezek. 37:25**): “with my servant David as their prince for all time” (Gen. Rabbah 97:8).

### **Transcendence through Repentance**

Again, in Jacob’s blessing of his sons, he says to Judah: “Judah is a lion’s whelp, from prey, my son, have you risen up.” In other words, from his “tearing” of Joseph (represented in the bloodied coat) Judah has “risen up” through repentance.

The midrash puns on the his name: “You acknowledged your responsibility (hodeita) in the affair of Tamar - so your brothers will acknowledge you (yodukha) as king.

Judah had asked Jacob to “recognize” (haker na) Joseph’s torn and bloodied coat. Judah now “recognizes” the pledges from Tamar. “With the word *haker*, he brought

news to his father. With the word *haker*, he had news brought to him.” (Bereshit Rabbah 84:19)

By recognizing his own pledges and seals, he is “recognizing himself as he truly is, displayed in his actions both with Joseph and with Tamar. His repentance and acknowledgment allows him to transcend himself.

In fact, in the midrash, Tamar pleads with him: “Please recognize your Creator and do not hide your eyes from me.”

By seeing all the way through to his Creator, Judah truly finds himself.

Later in the story of Joseph, Judah promises to “stand surety” or become a pledge himself for Benjamin’s life to his father Jacob/Israel.

**Genesis 43:9** - “I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him: if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever”

(See *The Beginning of Desire*, p. 277)

What ever happened to Shelah, the son that Tamar was never offered to as wife? He and his descendants are absorbed as a fairly insignificant clan into the tribe of Judah.

"These were the potters, and those that dwelt among plants and hedges: there they dwelt with the king for his work." (1 Chronicles 4:21-23)

## Pharez and Zerah

**Genesis 38:27** - “And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins were in her womb.”

The Rabbis take note of the spelling of the word *te’omim* (twins) in the verse (27) referring to Tamar: “there were twins in her womb,” while this word appears with defective spelling in the verse that speaks of Rebekah’s twins. (“there were twins in her womb”—**Gen. 25:24**). The spellings differ because of the moral character of the twins. Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau, one of whom was righteous and the other wicked, with the consequent deficient spelling. On the other hand, both of Tamar’s children, Perez and Zerah, were righteous, and therefore no letter is missing from the word “*te’omim*” in their verse (Gen. Rabbah 85:13).

(See “Tamar: Midrash and Aggadah,”  
<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/tamar-midrash-and-aggadah> )

Pharez = “breaking forth” and Zerah = “this breach be upon thee,”

Christ is descended from Pharez.

Zerah is listed as the ancestor of Achan, who was stoned to death as recounted in the Book of Joshua (Joshua 7:18 and 7:24, where Achan is called the son of Zerah, skipping the father and grandfather).

This is the same situation as with Jacob and Esau. Zerah, the “firstborn,” does not inherit the blessing.

Some see the twins as signifying Jew and Gentile, as well as the natural and the spiritual.

“Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual.” (1 Corinthians 15:46)

“to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16-17)

The Jews, as Zerah, bid fair for the birthright, and were marked, as it were, with a scarlet thread, as those that came first; but the Gentiles, like Pharez, or a son of violence, got the start of them, by that violence which the kingdom of heaven suffers, and attained to the righteousness which the Jews came short of: yet when the fulness of time is come, all Israel shall be saved. Both these sons are named in the genealogy of Jesus, **Matthew 1:3**, to perpetuate the story, as an instance of the humility of our Lord Jesus. (He made himself of no reputation - **Philippians 2:7**) - *Benson Commentary*

## Conclusion

On first glance this story is simple. Tamar arrays herself as a harlot and sleeps with her father-in-law, who thought she was a prostitute.

But why? What was Tamar up to?

Extinction of name and family was one of the greatest calamities that could befall someone.

Normally, sex is forbidden with the wife of a brother: “Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness.” (**Leviticus 18:16**)

The Levirate law instructing a brother marry his dead brother's wife to carry on the lineage is thought by some to be for the express purpose of keeping alive the hope of resurrection in the minds of the chosen people. Boaz puts it (**Ruth 4:5**), “to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance.” and “that his name be not put out of Israel.” (**Deuteronomy 25:6**)

This would be an unmarried brother, by virtue of his still living with his father. The

Targum of Jonathan interprets it brothers united by virtue of having a claim to their father's inheritance.

(Jesus had a question about this and its relation to resurrection put to him by the Sadducees in **Matthew 22:23-32**).

In the case of Tamar, it was not the claim of her dead husbands' "name" but it was about her place in the family of Israel. In the balance hung the future progeny of the offspring of Judah (and the lineage of his forefathers all the way back to Adam and the promise of Genesis 3:15). Tradition says that, like all the noble matriarchs of Israel, Tamar possessed the gift of prophecy, and she foresaw the Messiah would descend from her.

Additionally, the danger of Canaanite corruption of the bloodline because of their idolatry is transformed into good - another faithful Gentile matriarch is included in Messiah's lineage, foretelling the inclusion of Gentiles into Israel through the Gospel.

The scriptures sometimes "see through" events as reported to reveal God's hand. For instance, Moses is reported to have *fled* from Egypt out of fear. But that story is reinterpreted in the New Testament:

**Hebrews 11:24** - "By *faith* Moses, when he was grown, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

Judah's sins recoiled back on him, but his confession and repentance preserved the line of Messiah, despite human failure and fallibility.

This tells us if we walk in repentance, God's plan will be completed in us, despite our many failures. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (**Philippians 1:6**).