

## Tamar, Our Mother

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Parashat Vayeshev begins the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. But just after this narrative kicks off, the text veers for the length of a chapter into the story of another of Jacob's sons, Judah, as well as Judah's three sons and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Just as the Joseph story is foundational for the broader narrative of B'nei Yisrael—the children of Jacob who become the Israelites—the story of Judah and Tamar is foundational as well.

Judah has three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah arranges the marriage of his eldest to a woman named Tamar, about whom no other details are provided. Is she Israelite or Canaanite? What is she like? The text does not tell us. What we do learn is that Er displeases God, and so God causes him to die. Judah then instructs Onan to marry Tamar and bear offspring that will be attributed to his deceased brother, apparently a case of *yibum* (levirate marriage). But Onan does not like this idea, and so he deliberately prevents Tamar from becoming pregnant. Of course, this displeases God, and so Onan dies as well.

At this point, Judah tells his daughter-in-law to remain in her father's house until Shelah is old enough to get married. But the Torah also gives us a glimpse into his thoughts, and we learn that Judah thinks Tamar is the cause of his sons' deaths and does not truly intend to wed the two. Tamar is left in limbo until one day, she takes matters into her own hands. Judah's wife has died, and Tamar learns where Judah will be at a particular time. She disguises her face with a veil and poses as a prostitute at the entrance to a place called Enaim, and Judah takes the bait. Tamar cleverly requests a few of Judah's possessions as collateral, until he will send a goat to pay her. But instead of collecting payment, she holds on to these possessions. Three months later, when it becomes clear that Tamar is pregnant and Judah hears this news, he assumes the worst about her and demands that she

be burned to death. This is when Tamar produces the items he had given her, at which point Judah realizes exactly what has happened, and also perceives her pure motivations. Judah then famously pronounces, *צדקה ממני*—she is more in the right than I.

At the end of this story, Tamar gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerah. We can connect this notice with a genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth, which draws a direct line from Tamar and Judah's son Peretz to the future king David.

What are we to make of Tamar, a woman of ambiguous origins, who poses as a prostitute and tricks her father-in-law into sleeping with her in order to preserve his lineage?

I suggest that we consider Tamar in the broader context of the *imahot*—the matriarchs, who are classically understood as including Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, though we can also note the invisible mothers who stand alongside them—Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah. As a mother in Genesis, and direct ancestor of the future king of Israel, to what extent might Tamar belong to this club?

At first glance, there are some important differences between Tamar and the classic canon of matriarchs. For one thing, unlike Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, Tamar does not seem to be related to the ancestral family; instead, her lineage is not clear. There are no patriarchal negotiations over her marriage, like we see with Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and no fairy tale meeting at a well. She does not speak to or invoke the name of God (at least, not in the biblical text itself, although the midrash adds prayer to her story). Tamar gets pregnant immediately, without needing to pray to God and without a reference to God opening her womb.

And yet, Tamar may not suffer from infertility, but she is prevented from becoming pregnant through divine

intervention, in the form of God killing her husbands and through the intervention of men. Like the matriarchs who engage surrogates to try and have children unconventionally, Tamar takes initiative and creatively devises a plan to bear children in an unconventional way.

While Tamar does not meet her husband or a matchmaker at a well, she does encounter Judah at a place called Enaim, which may be translated as “two springs,” i.e., sources of water.

We can also note that Judah encounters Tamar immediately after he finishes mourning his wife, in Genesis 38:12, where the verse uses the term **נִנְחַם**—“he was consoled”—the same verb used of Isaac’s consolation after the death of his mother upon marrying Rebecca.

The midrash in Genesis Rabbah 85 identifies commonalities between the stories of Tamar and Rebecca: “There were two who covered themselves with a veil, Tamar and Rebecca, and the two also gave birth to twins.” Just as Rebecca covers herself with a veil in the story where she meets her husband Isaac, Tamar covers herself with a veil for her encounter with Judah. And just as Rebecca gives birth to twins—Jacob and Esau—Tamar gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerah. The midrash explicitly connects Tamar to the matriarch Rebecca.

In the early Jewish text *Biblical Antiquities*, Tamar appears in the context of a different foundational story, the prelude to the Exodus. When Pharaoh demands that all Israelite male babies be killed, Amram (Moses’s father) is portrayed as the protagonist who encourages the Israelites to disobey him. Amram gives a speech in which he urges the Israelites to be like Tamar:

“For when our wives conceive, they will not be recognized as pregnant until three months have passed, as also **our mother Tamar** did. For her intent was not fornication but being unwilling to separate from the sons of Israel she reflected and said, ‘It is better for me to die for having intercourse with my father-in-law, than to have intercourse with Gentiles.’ And she hid the fruit of

her womb until the third month ... And her intent saved her of all danger. Now therefore let us also do the same.”

Because Tamar acted with courage and with honorable intentions, God saved her. Amram urges the people not to despair, but to be like Tamar. Amram calls her “our mother Tamar”—in Hebrew, we would say **תַּמָּר אִמֵּנוּ**—and emphasizes her maternal role and her devotion to perpetuating the Israelites, despite the danger involved.

While this text certainly embellishes on the Torah itself, I propose that we consider the way that Genesis Rabbah and *Biblical Antiquities* frame Tamar: as Rebecca-like, as “our mother,” as a model of bravery and commitment to B’nei Yisrael. Tamar is in many respects unlike the matriarchs of Genesis, yet we can grant her a place among them. In doing so, we may also expand our idea of who is central to our story, and who our role models ought to be.