

Judah and Tamar: Writing the Story

**Dr. Judith Hauptman E. Billi Ivry Professor Emerita
of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture**



One of the most gripping stories in the entire Bible appears in this week's parashah. Chapter 38, a self-contained unit, interrupts the ongoing Joseph saga to tell the story of Judah and Tamar.

The chapter opens with the somewhat strange statement that Judah leaves his brothers, meets up with Hirah the Adulamite, and there, in Adulam, finds himself a wife of Canaanite stock. He thereby violates God's warning to the patriarchs to avoid Canaanite women ([Gen. 24:3, 28:1](#)). Judah's wife bears him three sons. He marries off his first son, Er, to Tamar. No information is provided about her lineage. Er dies because he was "displeasing to the Lord" (v. 7).

Judah's second son, Onan, marries Er's widow Tamar, according to the rules of levirate marriage, which require a family member, usually a brother, to produce an heir for the deceased. But Onan spills his seed. Since he knew that a child with Tamar would not be his, he decided not to sire a child. God kills him off, too. The third son, Shelah, is now in line to marry Tamar. It is not clear how old he is, but Judah tells Tamar she will have to wait for Shelah to grow up (v. 11).

The next verse reports that, after a long period of time, Judah's wife died. It then continues with the words, *vayinahem Yehudah*. The translators understand these words as saying that Judah was "comforted" following his wife's death, which is the standard interpretation of the Hebrew root *N.H.M.* But the word *vayinahem* almost certainly has two meanings in this context. The same grammatical form of this verb appears in many other places in the Bible (e.g., [Gen. 6:6](#), [Exod. 14:14](#)) where it means "to regret." If so, the phrase *vayinahem Yehudah* in this chapter, very pertinently, also means that Judah regretted making a

promise to Tamar to marry her off to Shelah. He clearly does not want to risk the life of his third and only living son. It is his inaction on this matter that triggers the rest of the story.

Judah joins his old friend Hirah the Adulamite, at Timnah, for a sheep shearing. It sounds as if he is looking for a new wife because, as the opening verse of the chapter stated, he found his first wife when "hanging out" with Hirah.

At this point the text reverts to Tamar, who had returned to her father's home. Verse 13 says that "it was reported to her that her father-in-law had gone up to Timnah for a sheep-shearing." Both traditional and modern commentators skip over this seemingly simple verse. I find that it calls out for interpretation. My question is not who told Tamar that her father-in-law had gone to a sheep-shearing, but rather why people provided her with this information. The verse seems to suggest that there was general sympathy on the part of the local community for her plight. There she was, twice widowed, promised to the third son, but not permitted to perform levirate marriage with him even though he was now an adult. The townspeople, therefore, are likely to be suggesting to her that she take her fate into her own hands, that she clarify her ambiguous marital status. Note that they refer to Judah not by name but as her father-in-law, an ironic appellation since he clearly was not fulfilling his role of father-in-law for her.

The next verse (v. 14) relates that Tamar decided to play the prostitute. She predicted that her widowed father-in-law, when going to a sheep-shearing with his old friend, would likely choose to enhance his experience by visiting a prostitute. She also knew that once she bore a child with Judah as the father, her ties to his family would dissolve and

she could then marry whomever she pleased (or perhaps remain with Judah).

By veiling herself, even though prostitutes in the ancient world did not usually do so, she is able to offer her services to Judah without his discovering her identity. After having sex with her, he promises to send her a kid in payment. She wisely asks him for collateral, knowing this would allow her later to expose him. He gives her his seal, cord, and staff.

Again, townspeople play a role. Judah sends a kid with Hirah to pay the “prostitute,” but the people tell Hirah that there was no prostitute at that location. Judah becomes worried about his own reputation.

Three months pass, which is exactly the time it takes for a pregnancy to begin to “show.” Just as the narrator reported earlier that Rebecca’s fetuses “struggled within her” ([Gen. 25:22](#)), which is a way of saying that pronounced fetal movement is a sign of a twin pregnancy, here, too, the narrator’s “three months” indicates knowledge of the details of pregnancy. Also true is that twin pregnancies, like those of Rebecca and Tamar (as will be reported in v. 27), “show” more than singleton pregnancies.

The people play a role a third time, announcing Tamar’s pregnancy and casting aspersions on her for having played the harlot. As *The Oxford Study Bible* points out, her misdemeanor was not prostitution but adultery, since she had not yet dissolved her bond to Judah’s family. Judah decrees that she be burnt at the stake. Tamar, in a very dramatic move, as she is being taken out to be executed, sends Judah back his seal, cord and staff. She says aloud, apparently to those gathered to watch the awful scene, “Whose staff and seal and cord are these?” Judah admits to being the father of the unborn child(ren) and acknowledges that Tamar is “right,” meaning he should have married her off to his son Shelah. The verse (v. 26) goes on to say that Judah no longer slept with her. As also noted by *The Oxford Study Bible*, he may have eventually married her off to Shelah because Shelah names his first son Er (1 Chron. 4:21), thus implying that he had entered a levirate marriage with Tamar to produce an heir for his deceased, childless brother. Tamar gives birth to twins, a blessing in and of

itself. The younger twin, Perez, is a progenitor of King David ([Ruth 4:18–22](#)). In this way the narrator endorses Tamar’s shrewd strategy.

The role played by the townspeople in this episode, like that of a Greek chorus, is significant. They, and not the male characters, move the story along. They tell Tamar that Judah was on his way to a sheep-shearing, suggesting it is time for her to act; they inform Hirah that there was no prostitute at Ena'im, thus making Judah fearful of losing face; they report to Judah that Tamar is pregnant by harlotry, leading him mistakenly to decree to execute her. Moreover, Judah is characterized in this chapter as evasive and hot-headed, whereas Tamar is shown to be clever, levelheaded, and resolute. Given the role played by the “chorus,” the narrator’s knowledge of pregnancy details, the fact that Tamar is portrayed in more positive terms than Judah, that she uses a sex act to right the wrong done to her by him, and that he publicly acknowledges his error of judgment, it seems likely to me that this story’s narrator is female.

As we read the Torah, and as we observe the events of our own lives, it is worth our while to ask who is really creating the narrative. We may find that, aside from the famed protagonists and antagonists, the voices of less prominent people can be just as critical in driving the stories that shape our world.

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