



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Women Navigating a Man's World

The story of Yehuda and Tamar is often understood to be Yehuda's story, but it is also Tamar's story. It is the story not of a leader or a person in a position of power, but of someone without power and without a voice. It is the story of how a woman in a patriarchal society is able to influence those with power, to right the wrongs done to her, and to help others do what is right.

Tamar cannot directly challenge those above her, for the powerless cannot simply confront the powers that be. She is silent and raises no objection when Yehuda tells her that she must marry Sheila, his youngest son. Yehuda is not being straight with her: "for he said, lest he die just like his brothers" (38:11). We can assume that she was not fooled by this excuse. But what could she do? Yehuda was the man and the head of the family; she had no choice but to take him at his word. So she says nothing; she goes, she sits, and she waits: "And Tamar went, and she sat in her father's home" (38:11).

If she cannot succeed through a direct appeal, then an indirect approach is called for. And so, when many years have passed and there is no question that Yehuda is not going to live up to his word, she takes matters into her own hands. Taking advantage of his state of sexual neediness, she dresses as a prostitute and acts—through deception—to right the wrong.

At this point, we are familiar with the use of clothing to misrepresent and deceive. Rivka dressed Yaakov with Esav's garments so that he could present himself as his brother. But the outcomes of the two stories are radically different. Yaakov's and Rivka's deception led to great suffering: Yaakov flees in exile, labors for twenty years, and is himself deceived by Lavan. Tamar's deception, in contrast, leads to the acknowledgement of her righteousness and the birth of two children, one whom will be the forbearer of the Davidic line.

To appreciate the differences between these two stories we

must first appreciate the parallels, and the parallels are striking. The key woman in each story—Rivka in one, Tamar in the other—gives birth to twins. Both sets of twins—Yaakov and Esav, Peretz and Zarach—fight in utero for who will be the true firstborn son. In both stories, clothing is used to misrepresent a person's identity and a kid goat plays a key role in the deception. In both narratives the word *yaker*, to recognize, is central and represents the turning point of events. "Lo hi'kiro," Yitzchak did not recognize at the key moment that the person before him was not Esav, not the intended son, and blessed him. In parallel, at the critical moment of our story we read, "*va'yaker Yehuda*"; Yehuda recognized the cloak and staff and acknowledged that he was the true father.

The purpose of these parallels, however, is not to show us that the two stories are the same, but to highlight their differences. In the Rivka story, the presence of the goat skins deceived. Because of the goat skins on Yaakov's hands, Yitzchak believed him to be Esav: *vi'lo hi'kiro*. In the Tamar story the absence of a goat stripped away the deception. Because he had no goat, Yehuda gave his cloak, staff and signet ring, markers of a person's true identity and because he had given these items, *va'yaker Yehudah*, the truth came to light.

While both Rivka and Tamar use an indirect and perhaps less than fully honest approach, the critical question is how it is being used. Is it being used to deceive and lead someone astray, or to educate and encourage someone to live up to his commitments and responsibilities? Rivka did what she did despite Yitzchak and with disregard for his desires. Yitzchak was not doing anything unusual or wrong in trying to give his blessing to his firstborn son. If it was wrong, it was only so because God told Rivka that the older son would serve the younger one. But she seems to have never shared that communication with Yitzchak. Because she had not been forthright earlier, she now had to act in a way contrary to Yitzchak's wishes and desires.

The reverse is true for Tamar. There was no question where Yehuda's obligation lay; he had to marry his next son to Tamar. Tamar acted not only to do what she thought right, but also to help Yehuda do what he himself knew was the right thing to do. As Ramban points out, the concept of levirate marriage seems to have existed before it was commanded in the Torah, and at this earlier time the obligation would have extended to other family members beyond the brother of the deceased. If Sheila was not going to marry Tamar, it was Yehuda's responsibility to do so himself.

Tamar's goals were not the only difference from Rivka. Her method was different as well. While Tamar dressed as a prostitute, she did not trick Yehuda into doing something he did not want to do. Yehuda knowingly and willingly chose to hire a prostitute. Tamar's actions allowed him to do what he desired, to sleep with another woman, and in so doing, also enabled him to do the right thing by fulfilling his obligation to his daughter-in-law. The contrast goes even deeper. Rivka, although motivated by her belief in what was right, nevertheless took away what belonged to one brother to give it to another. Tamar, on the other hand, restored to a brother what was his due. The act of the levirate marriage is one of self-sacrifice of one brother for another. Knowing that "the seed would not be his," the living brother is called upon nevertheless to sire a child that will carry on his dead brother's name. Onan would have none of this—he betrayed his brotherly obligation and died as a result—and Yehuda continued to delay its fulfillment. It was left to Tamar to step in, remind Yehuda of his obligation, and ensure that this brotherly obligation would be fulfilled.

While Rivka's deception put a man who was already blind more in the dark, Tamar's actions led to the restoration of Yehuda's moral sight. It is thus no accident that, when dressed as a prostitute, Tamar sits "*b'petach einayim*," "in the open place," but also, more literally, "at the opening of the eyes." Her actions enabled Yehuda to see clearly: *va'yaker Yehuda*.

As a powerless woman in a male-dominated society, like Rivka before her, Tamar could not take the direct approach. She could try, as Rivka had, to use subterfuge to trick Yehuda and bend him to her will. Doing this is not only morally problematic. As the aftermath of Yaakov's subterfuge demonstrates, even if this deception is successful in the short

term, it is bound to lead to suffering and strife. Tamar chose to do what was right, and what was right was also what was most effective. Rather than tricking the person in power, she helped him to see the light.

We are taught that Tamar does not directly accuse Yehuda when she is about to be burned because she did not want him to suffer public embarrassment. This is a valuable moral lesson, but it is not the reason she avoided direct confrontation. Had she directly challenged Yehuda, she would have failed. Yehuda would have denied that he was involved, and she would have been executed. Instead, Tamar places the identifying items in front of him and then steps back. She gives Yehuda the space to accept responsibility and to do what is right. And Yehuda steps forward and owns that responsibility.

While the story of Rivka's deception begins with the struggle of the younger and older brother; the story of Tamar ends with one. Peretz also struggled with his twin brother, but he did not come out holding onto his older brother's heel. He won the fight and legitimately came out first. Peretz was the son of Tamar and Yehuda, of a mother who knew that one who lacks power must nevertheless always do what is right, and of a father who had learned that one who wields power must not allow it to blind him to the right course of action. Many generations later, Boaz, a descendant of Peretz, will come to recognize where his true obligations lay through the actions of Ruth, another woman honestly navigating a man's world. Their descendants will become the future leaders of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!

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