

Drash for VaYeishev, Todd Silverstein
Sat. 12/21/24, Congr. Netivot Shalom
Leyned: Gen. 39:1 – 40:23

Start by noting that many of the ideas for my drash today came from Rabbi David Kasher's wonderful book *Parshanut*, or in English, *Parshah Nut*.

Triennial cycle, we read the last third of *Parshat VeYeishev*, Gen. Chap. 39-40. The full *parshah* includes as well chap. 37 and 38.

Chap. 37: Joseph in Canaan – 17 yrs old and conceited, self-absorbed brat.

His 11 brothers fed up, throw him in pit, sell him into slavery (and you thought your siblings were mean!);

dip fancy coat in goat's blood, tell father Jacob devoured by wild animal

Jacob mourns, but meanwhile, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, courtier, chief steward

End of chap. 37: How will the story of Joseph continue? Can he rise from slavery? Will he ever see his family again? Before we get the answers to these questions, we have

Chap. 38, the story of Judah and Tamar in Canaan: “**At that time** Judah **went down** (*vayeired*) and pitched a tent near [his friend] Chirah the Adulamite...”.

Judah then married off his eldest son, Er, to Tamar; but Er “displeased God”, who killed him. Judah then married Tamar to his middle son, Onan, who angered God by refusing to impregnate Tamar (so as not to subdivide his inheritance); so God killed Onan too.

Judah saw the writing on the wall, and told Tamar, welllll... “My youngest son Sheilah is still too young, so go back to your father’s house and wait til Sheilah is old enough to marry.”

Time passed, Judah’s wife died, and when Tamar heard that Judah had returned to visit his friend Chirah, she put on a veil and stood by the side of the road.

Judah solicited her services as a prostitute, but he lacked the goat she requested as payment, so Judah left as a pledge his seal, cord, and staff. .

Three months later, when Judah heard that Tamar, who was still promised to his son Sheilah, was pregnant, he ordered her to be burned at the stake. She then sent him, privately, the items of his pledge, thus leaving the matter in Judah’s hands.

When he saw his own personal items, he halted the execution, saying “she is more righteous than I, (*tzadkah mimeni*) because I did not give her to my son Sheilah.”

Tamar later bore Judah’s children, the twins Peretz and Zerach. --End of Chap. 38--

With **Chap. 39**, return to regularly scheduled program, story of Joseph:

v. 1: “Joseph **was taken down** (*hurad*) to Egypt, and was purchased by Pharoah’s courtier Potiphar, chief steward...”. This continues directly from the last verse of chap. 37, so why put Chap. 38, the story of Judah and Tamar, in the middle?

Rashi recounts two reasons taken from a midrash in *Gen. Rabah*:

First, comparing the two male protagonists, “**Joseph** was **taken down** (*hurad*)” which echoes “At that **[same] time**, Judah **went down** (*vayeired*)”: So Judah will **be taken down** from greatness bec. He helped sell his bro. Joseph into slavery.

Judah falls fr. hi status among the bros to the depravity of prostitution.

So Judah and Joseph are linked: 1 goes down, other follows. Perhaps they'll rise together too?

Judah and Joseph are linked in leadership and lineage:

Two kingdoms of Ancient Isr.: 2 main tribes in N. kgdm = Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph's sons),

main tribe of the S. Kingdom was Judah.

In prophetic writings, 2 kingdoms referred to as *Beit Yosef* and *Beit Yehudah*.

The second reason that Rashi gives for interrupting Joseph's story w/ the Judah/Tamar story is to **compare the women** in the two stories:

Potiphar's wife & Tamar, both acted for the sake of Heaven (*lesheim shamayim*).

Shocking: Tamar posed by the side of the road as a prostitute to ensnare Judah, and Potiphar's wife threw herself at Joseph, ordering him to sleep w/ her (she said, literally: "Lie w/ me". Remember the 1970s French song "Voulez vous couches avec moi"? Well Potiphar's wife just left out the "voulez vous";) when Joseph refused, she lied to her husband and had Joseph thrown in prison.

So how are these two actions *lesheim shamayim*?

Tamar was denied her rightful husband, Sheilah (chg 1st vowel → shelah, hers). She knew she was destined to mother the offspring of Judah, so if not through *Sheilah*, then through Judah himself. And their son Peretz was the ancestor of none other than King David. So this was indeed *lesheim shamayim*.

Potiphar's wife, thru astrology ascertained that she was to bear Joseph's child, but she was off by one generation: Joseph eventually married Potiphar's daughter Osnat (Gen. 41:45), who bore his two sons, Ephraim and Menasheh (46:20).

So we have the two warring brothers, Judah and Joseph who descend together, and two women, Tamar and Potiphar's wife, who eventually bear their offspring, allowing their ascent as leaders of Israel. Devious sexual schemes *lesheim shamayim* ultimately result in covenantal offspring.

More connectns: Judah/Joseph sibling rivalry recalls their father's Jacob/Esau rivalry. Jacob suffered devious sexual schemes of his father-in-law Laban: subst. elder daughter

Leah for Jacob's love, Rachel, so Jacob had to work 7 more yrs. to marry Rachel.

But Kasher asks: "Are the heroes and heroines of this generation destined to replay the same traumas that their ancestors set in motion, or can they somehow resolve them?"

Brings us to 3rd reason that *Gen. Rabah* gives for the interruption of the Joseph story by the Judah and Tamar story: Rabbi Yochanan gave the 3rd reason as "to compare one 'recognition' to another 'recognition'."

In chap. 37, when Joseph's brothers brought the Joseph's blood-dipped fancy coat to Jacob, they said

"Please recognize (*hakeir na*) whether this coat is your son's or not." {Gen. 37:32}.

And Jacob did recognize it (*vayakirahh*).

In chap. 38, Tamar sent Judah's personal pledged items to him and asked: "Please recognize (*hakeir na*) who's seal and cord and staff are these." {38:35}. And Judah did recognize them (*vayikar Yehudah*).

These are the only 2 times that this phrase, *hakeir na*, is used in the Torah.

Kasher argues that in fact “recognition is exactly what’s missing from all of these stories, from Jacob on down”

Jacob v. Esau, **who should be recognized** for the firstborn’s birthright? Isaac/Esau, but Rebekah chose Jacob.

On wedding nt., **Jacob did not recognize** the woman in his bed, mistook Leah 4 Rachel.

Between Joseph and Judah, **who should be recognized** as Jacob’s heir apparent?

Judah did not recognize Tamar at the side of the road; he also did not recognize that she was destined to bear children in his lineage.

Potiphar’s wife recognized that Joseph was destined to father her descendants, but did **not recognize** that the mother was supposed to be (her daughter Osnat, not her.

Back to the two “*hakeir na*” moments in Gen. 37 and 38. Jacob recognized his son’s coat, but did NOT recognize the true situation. He was fooled by his sons.

On the other hand, Judah “truly saw things as they were. He recognized the personal items that he pledged, & also recognized that he was in the wrong.” Judah admitted publically, *hi tzadkiah mimeni*, she is more righteous than I.

Kasher wrote that “Judah’s **recognition** is a profound one, causing him to see himself differently... and to discover humility.... Allowing him to take responsibility for his role in the sale of Joseph, and to finally reconcile with his brother. Judah’s moment of **recognition**, then, is the beginning of a process that will rescue his whole family from a tragic fate, unify the embittered siblings, and welcome *all* of their descendants into the covenant.”