

Tamar's Tenacity

Today's portion begins the saga of Joseph, the favoured son of Jacob and a victim of his brothers' hatred. The saga will continue for the rest of the book of Genesis, however it is interrupted in chapter 38 by a story concerning Jacob's fourth son, Judah. It is a colourful story indeed, containing all the themes of tabloid journalism! Death, deception, prostitution, incest, accusation and counter-accusation... what on earth were our faith-ancestors thinking when they included this tale in the sacred scriptures?! Read the whole of Gen. 38 for yourself, then let's join in conversation with the sages.

After reading the story of Judah and Tamar share your initial reactions to the text. What observations and questions arose for you about the narrative, the characters? Why do you think this story was preserved in the tradition? Would it help if you knew that the bible tells us that King David is the descendant of Perez, one of the twin sons of Tamar and Judah's union? And the lineage of David, of course, is that of the messiah. You can follow the family tree in the Book of Ruth (see 4:12,18-22) and also in the genealogy that opens the Gospel of Matthew.

Yet again we see in the Bible how the divine plan emerges amidst surprising, complex (some would say dysfunctional!) human relationships. Judah is guilty of breaking his promise to Tamar to provide her with a husband. While she is legally part of his household, he effectively disposes of her by telling her to "Remain a widow in your father's house" (38:11). Judah deceives, and is himself deceived. If we know the family story we might say: Just like his father, Jacob! Yet the sages note that, when confronted, Judah displays integrity in unhesitatingly owning up to his actions ("She is more in the right than I" - v.26), vindicating Tamar and saving her from the death penalty.

The Jewish sages rally in support of Tamar too, noting that as a victim of Judah's broken promise Tamar displays a holy tenacity in cementing her relationship to the family of Abraham. Indeed, some commentators compare her character to that of Rebekah, Judah's grandmother and a matriarch of the chosen people. Both women endured sadness in their personal lives (Rebekah was barren and Tamar lost two husbands in death), yet neither resigned themselves to fate, even boldly taking matters into their own hands in order to forge a new chapter in the life of the divinely blessed family of the patriarchs.

Thus, while both Judah and Tamar are guilty of deception, in the eyes of the sages they also exhibit admirable qualities and play a decisive role in the divine plan. Because of Tamar's risk-taking and Judah's repentance, the roots of the messianic line take hold in salvation history. What an extraordinary story!

How would you enter into the above Torah discussion? Do you agree with the views expressed? Support your opinion with reference to the text. What thoughts, insights, questions, dilemmas emerge from your own pondering of the Judah/Tamar story? •

Table topic: What stories of determination and tenacious undertaking are part of your own family tree? Share them over a meal.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.

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