

TAMAR
A Contemporary Midrash on
Bereishis, Parashas Vayeishev (Genesis 38)

By
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Tamar stood shivering beside the road. She clutched her robe tightly about her and nervously adjusted her lacy black veil, making sure it hid her face. It wasn't the cloudy spring morning that chilled her – Judah was coming. From where she stood she had a good vantage point to see at least a mile down the dusty path toward Timnah. If it wasn't him leading the flock of sheep, she could slip into in the little temple nearby. Because if it wasn't him, if it was another man, a stranger perhaps; or, even worse, someone she knew . . . She started shaking.

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It had only been a week since the dream. Tamar awoke that morning in a sweat, her head filled with pictures and thoughts and ideas she could clearly see but only barely understand. Her heart pounding, she threw on her robes and ran to find her mother.

“Ima!” she called. “Mother, where are you?”

“Where I always am at this hour, my daughter. And why aren't you here helping with the bread?”

Tamar found her mother kneading dough for their breakfast. The morning sun had just come up over the hill, and the rays of the new day shone on Ima and her small oven. The smells of wood smoke and yeast mingled and curled through the air and drifted into their tent. Tamar took a lump of dough and knelt beside her mother at the kneading trough. “I am sorry, Ima, I am late, but I had a dream.” Tamar slapped down the dough and started to vigorously knead, as if that would help her grasp what she saw.

“You had a dream?” Her mother put her dough down and looked closely at her daughter. “Not another one! Is it bad again?” The family had learned to their dismay

that Tamar had the Sight, and it frightened them all. She had seen she would have two husbands in succession and that both would die and leave her childless. Then it all came true. No dream of Tamar's could be good.

“But Ima, it is wonderful!” Tamar stopped kneading and looked at her mother with eyes shining with hope. “I am to be the mother of generations of great warriors, great leaders of our people, even a king!”

“What? Impossible.” Ima looked at her daughter first with shock, then pity. “My poor child, surely you know that the God of Abraham must have cursed you because your two husbands were evil, and so they died. And now it seems that Judah, after losing Er and Onan, will never do what he promised and give you his remaining son to marry. He fears that Shela will die too because you are cursed! So who will be a husband for you?”

Tamar took a deep breath, then whispered, “Judah!”

“Judah?” Ima stared, her mouth agape. “It's Judah? How can that be? He would never . . .”

“I don't know how. But you know Bath-Shua has died, and he has finished mourning.” Tamar stiffened her back and gazed steadily at her mother. She knew this must happen. She had seen it.

Ima stared at Tamar a long time, frowning, then went back to kneading her dough.

“Ima?” asked Tamar tentatively, her heart pounding hard. “What do I do?”

Ima grimaced but didn't look up. “Finish your work,” she snapped. “I'm thinking.”

For several minutes, the only sound in the tent was mother and daughter slapping and pounding the dough.

“You are right. Something must be done.” Ima gestured outside at the dusty road and a scraggly flock of sheep wandering by in search of water. “Hard times are coming, my daughter. Abraham's God is not sending enough rain. Our sheep become thin and they call out for food. We know from our ancestors that if we please God, He brings the rain in its time, and if we do wrong we go hungry. Something is amiss, and Judah is part of it.”

“What? I thought Judah was a righteous man! What are you saying?”

Ima pursed her lips as if she had eaten an unripe pomegranate. “Do you remember?” Her voice trailed off as she looked down the road, lost in the past. “No, you were little.” She turned to look at Tamar and frowned. “Do not repeat what I am about to say,” she whispered. “I have no proof . . .”

“Proof? Of what?”

“Years ago, Judah’s brother Joseph disappeared. His brothers claimed that a wild beast had eaten him, and they even showed Jacob the blood on Joseph’s fancy cloak. Poor Jacob! He wailed for his son and rent his clothes and would not be comforted. But his brothers . . . They were silent. I caught Reuben and Judah looking at each other with shame clouding their faces. They never mentioned Joseph’s name again, even though he was dead, and to forget the names of the dead is to curse them.”

Tamar stared, horrified. “Ima, what are you saying? Did Joseph’s brothers kill him? Why?”

“Joseph was a little tattletale, and he boasted. Like you, Joseph had dreams. What is worse, they also came true. Jacob loved him more than his other sons, and they all knew it. Joseph’s death was very convenient.”

“But do you think they killed him?”

“I don’t know. But I have heard whispers that Joseph didn’t die, he was sold into slavery, and it was Judah’s idea. And Judah is to be the father of your child?”

Tamar looked down at her hands, dusty with flour. “Sons,” she whispered. “I am to have twins.”

“Twins? Aiee!” Ima threw up her hands in dismay and began to weep. “Twins!” She wiped her tears away with her dress. “Are you sure?” She stared at Tamar hopefully, but her daughter only gazed steadily back at her. “Yes, of course you are sure. But twins could kill you.”

“Rebecca had twins and she survived. Besides, I did not see my death.”

Mother and daughter fell silent, both looking at the little statue of Ashera on the altar. The goddess herself seemed to be contemplating this drama. Then, like the dough rising before them, hope began to lift their hearts.

“I have an idea,” said Ima, her black eyes glittering. “Yes, Judah’s wife is gone and he has finished mourning. He is a strong, lusty man, and Bath-Shua was from Canaan like us. He likes Canaanite women. You could disguise yourself . . .”

“Like a temple prostitute?”

Both women fell into a fit of giggling at the outrageous idea. “Do you think the goddess would mind?” asked Tamar, now breathless with both shock and hilarity.

“Ashera? Mind?” Ima looked thoughtful. “No. As I was saying, we are facing hard times. Maybe even famine. Perhaps a child—or even two, especially from Judah! Would bring fertility once again to our land.”

“But wouldn’t he recognize me?”

“Hmm.” Ima examined her daughter closely. “How long has it been since you have seen him? Months? I doubt that the righteous Judah even remembers what you look like. A fine father-in-law, avoiding you, not giving you Shela even though he promised. And Shela is old enough now to be your husband! Why, I even saw a trace of a beard on him. Naturally Judah is too ashamed to face you.” She smiled wickedly. “You could wear a veil. I have one, and some pretty clothes and even scent for your hair.”

Finally, the bread was ready for the oven.

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So here she waited at the side of the road leading to Timnah, looking for Judah leading his flock to be sheared. Behind her stood a little temple to the goddess, always available for occasions like this. It was spring, a time for shearing the sheep and celebrating and certainly drinking too much wine. However, the Tribe of Israel looked with disdain on the orgies of the Canaanites, who would soon mourn the death of the divine Tammuz, consort of the goddess, then celebrate his return. After the weeping for Tammuz would come the mating of their tribal chief with their most beautiful temple prostitute, thus ensuring the fertility of the land. This ritual would be reenacted throughout Canaan, and the little temple behind Tamar would soon be very busy.

Tamar was perfectly disguised, and Ima declared her the most beautiful woman in Canaan. Her hair was anointed with sweet-smelling balm, and Ima had painted her hands and feet in intricate designs with henna. Every finger and several of her toes sported rings, and intricate earrings dangled from her ears. Around her neck hung a necklace of lapis beads just like the one the Great Goddess wore in her descent to the Underworld. A black lace veil concealed her large dark eyes shaded in kohl, and her robe covered a sheer dress that would inflame the most jaded man.

But her garments could not hide her from herself. *How can I do this? I'm so ashamed!* She bit her lip trying not to cry. The memory of her dead second husband Onan rose before her like the dust clouds on the horizon. He had first defiled her by casting his seed on the ground next to their marriage bed, and then declared that he would not bring up a child for his hated brother. Why should he? He would have less of an inheritance from Judah if he did. Tamar was humiliated. She ran weeping to her parent's tent and refused to see her husband for a week. Then, mysteriously, Onan died, just like his brother Er, and the whispers started. Two husbands dead . . . Would anyone dare to be the third? *How can I go through this again? How can I live with even more disgrace? Will Judah hurt me? Or will he be gentle? His wife never complained. But when they learn I am pregnant, I will be burned for fornication! Oh, dear God of Abraham, I hope Ima is right!*

"Seducing him will be easy," Ima had said. "The hard part will be when your pregnancy is revealed. He must be absolutely certain that the child is his! Before you lie with him, demand his seal with the cord and his staff for payment. That way, he cannot deny it. And be careful how and when you tell him so that he is not shamed publicly."

Him shamed publicly? And what about me? It would be better to die giving birth to these sons, just like Rachel! The thought of grandmother Rachel, barren so long, begging for a child, then dying in childbirth, made tears sting her eyes. *What will become of me? Oh Ashera, Anath, goddesses, give me strength, help me bear these sons, please don't let them burn me for this sin! But . . . what if I am praying to the wrong gods?* She remembered a conversation with her mother when she was little.

"Ima, does Abraham's God have a wife?"

“What?” Her mother stopped spinning. “Does God have a wife? What a big question from such a little girl.”

“El has a wife!” Tamar announced brightly. She was seven and knew a lot. “El has Ashera as his wife. And they have children, too, they have Anath and Baal. Does Abraham’s God have children?”

Ima put down her spindle and folded her hands in thought. “I never thought about it before. No, I don’t think he has a wife or children. But—” She took Tamar firmly by the shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. “The God of Abraham our father is much more powerful than the other gods. And he is the God of Sarah our mother too. Remember, Sarah was very old, almost a hundred—and barren—when an angel told her she would bear a son. And she did, she had Isaac. The God of Abraham and Sarah has worked great miracles for our people. If you are ever in terrible trouble, little one, you must pray to Him. Remember, He gave our ancestor Noah a promise, and He will not forget!”

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Pray to Him! But I don’t know how or even if it will work. Why should He listen to a woman about to act like a whore? A drop of rain fell at her feet, splattering the dust. Then more drops. Tamar looked up at the darkening sky in dismay. “No!” she cried at the black clouds gathering above the road to Timnah. “Don’t rain now! It will ruin everything, no, please! Oh, please, God of Abraham our father and Sarah our mother, help me, please, I am doing this because I saw in my dream two sons, the ancestors of many generations, a king for our people!” She began to sob, her tears falling from her veil to the ground, mingling with the raindrops in the dust. What does this God want? He told Abraham that he didn’t want Isaac sacrificed, so what does he want?

Finally she knew. “God of Abraham!” she called into the rushing wind. “God of Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca! My life is yours! Just tell me if I’m right, tell me what to do! That’s all I want, that’s all I want . . .”

The storm calmed, the rain slowly turned to mist. And there, above the road to Timnah, piercing the clouds with splendor, arched the biggest rainbow Tamar had ever seen. “Dear God!” she cried. “The rainbow, your promise! You promised Noah that it would not rain forever! You have heard my prayer. Thank you, thank you!” She wiped

away her tears with her veil, and stood watching the rainbow slowly dissolve into the mist. Her courage gradually returned until she stood as straight as an iron-tipped spear.

“Shalom aleichem!”

Startled, she turned to greet the man behind her. “Shalom,” she whispered. It was Judah, and he was smiling.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adelman, Penina. *Conversations with Biblical Women*. (2005.) Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

Adelman's book translates a section of the *Midrash HaGadol* containing a commentary on Proverbs 31, "A Woman of Valor." Adelman and her fellow writers present a chapter on each notable Biblical woman who was given a portion in the midrash. They give each woman a voice and imagine what message they might have for us. Tamar isn't mentioned in the midrash itself, but the writers did discuss her. Giving each woman a personal voice inspired my own midrash.

Bieler, R. Yaakov. "What Might They Have Been Thinking?" (www.kmsynagogue.org) Rabbi Bieler split many hairs in this article that draws on Rashi, RaMBaM, and the *Midrash HaGadol*. He (and his sources) attempted to justify the immoral conduct of Judah and Tamar, and compared Tamar to other Jewish heroines such as Yael and Esther who tempted the enemy in order to save their people. He finally agreed with *RaMBaM*, *Mishna Tora, Hilchot Ishut*, 1:4, that states that before Torah was given it was permissible for a man to pay a woman for sexual services. After Sinai, sex out of marriage was fornication. He also quotes *Talmud (Sota 10a R. Shmuel bar Nachmani)* that created an entire conversation between Tamar and Judah at the side of the road in which he tries to find out if she is ritually pure. She explains that even though she is a non-Jew, she is a convert and pure. She is therefore eligible to enter into the kind of financial arrangement that was later prohibited by Torah.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary. (1st Edition, 2001.) Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

This translation of Torah is by far my favorite. It is clear and the footnotes are very helpful. I am using their interpretation of Onan's sin as being the refusal to raise up the brother's son in order to increase his own inheritance.

Jewish Agency for Israel, The. "Judah and Tamar: A Duet of Destiny." (www.jewishagency.org.)

This article explores the motivations for all the characters in this story, including Er and Onan. It agrees with the commentators of *Etz Hayim* that in refusing to bring up his brother's potential child, Onan is guilty primarily of poor family values and not of an abominable act. Further, they offer the intriguing idea that Judah's sons were plagued with the same sibling rivalry and brotherly hatred that Judah had faced with his own brother Joseph. Citing *Bereshit Rabba* 85.6-9, the authors find significance in the objects Tamar demanded of Judah as a pledge for future payment: the signet, cord, and staff, signifying respectively kingship, royalty, and messiahship. Tamar had seen in a prophetic vision she would become the ancestor of the Messiah, and that was her motivation for coupling with Judah. "Judah and Tamar are a paradigm for the component of biblical relationships that are governed by Divine will." However, the authors deny that Tamar is a Canaanite on the grounds that midrash says so. (Not all midrash says so:

Bereishis Rabbah 85:10 said she was a daughter of Shem and lived in Canaan.) Besides, the authors insist that there is in the Bible “no tolerance for patriarchs marrying Canaanite women” because “if King David were to have Canaanite ancestry, that could open the door for a Canaanite claim to the land.” The authors ignore the fact that Judah’s late wife Bath-Shua, the mother of his sons, was a Canaanite. Perhaps we can blame Tamar and Bath-Shua for the entire Middle East situation!

Patai, Raphael. *The Hebrew Goddess*. (3rd Edition, 1990.) Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press.

This is one of my most treasured books. It describes the development of the Divine Feminine in Judaism and compares the Hebrew religion with the beliefs of their neighbors, the Canaanites. This is where I learned about the divine family of the god El, his wife Ashera, and their children Baal and Anath. Brother and sister were also lovers, and the stories of this pair under different names are found throughout the Fertile Crescent. In Babylon, they were Ishtar and Tammuz, and once a year, in the spring, the people would commemorate his death and resurrection. The mother goddess Ashera was worshipped in her sacred groves in Israel for centuries, and Isaiah complained that even in his time women were on the steps of the Second Temple itself weeping for Tammuz. With the destruction of the Second Temple the archetype of the Shekinah took hold, replacing Ashera as the Divine Feminine aspect of God.

Qualls-Corbett, Nancy. *The Sacred Prostitute: Eternal Aspect of the Feminine*. (1988.) Toronto: Inner City Books.

Another favorite book, a classic of feminist literature: this is a Jungian exploration of the archetype of the Sacred Marriage. It discusses the role of the temple prostitute, and also the relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

Schaberg, Jane. “Before Mary: The Ancestresses of Jesus.” (Dec. 2004.) In *Bible Review*, pp. 13-23.

This article was my first inspiration for my own midrash, and its mention of the *Midrash HaGadol* led me to Adelman’s book. It discusses the women listed in Jesus’ genealogy in the New Testament Book of Matthew. All the women had interesting pasts: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. These four courageously pushed the envelope of respectability in order to be accepted by the Tribe of Israel and to become the ancestors of the Messiah. Unfortunately, the article is a condensation of Schaberg’s works that fails to cite most of her rabbinic sources. Her article, “Feminist Interpretations of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew,” was published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13 (1997). Because it was not available online, I did not have the opportunity to read it.

Tanach: The Stone Edition. (2nd Edition, 2005.) Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications.

This edition of the Tanach has a very useful appendix with genealogies of the 12 Tribes. And I needed it, because it claimed that Tamar was “a daughter of Noah’s son Shem who resided in Canaan (*Bereishis Rabbah* 85:10). I hope it meant descendant, because 10 generations separated her from Shem. It also said that she, along with Judah’s late wife, were from Canaan, which made sense. (Torah does not specify where she was from.)

However, it quoted Rashi's (no cite given) claim that both Onan and Er were guilty of not wanting the beautiful Tamar to lose her girlish figure by becoming pregnant. That doesn't sound quite plausible.