

Relationship advice with Judah and Tamar

Vayeshev cycle 2 5784

Genesis 38:1

נָטָה (v) heb

1. to stretch out, extend, spread out, pitch, turn, pervert, incline, bend, bow

1. (Qal)

1. to stretch out, extend, stretch, offer

2. to spread out, pitch (tent)

3. to bend, turn, incline

יָרַד (v) heb

to go down, descend, decline, march down, sink down

1) Why, though, has Yehudah arrived at this place of depression and isolation? While the text does not explicitly give us a reason, Rashi notes that this incident directly follows Yosef's sale, in which Yehudah played a leading role:

רש"י בראשית לח:א

למה נסמכה פרשה זו לכאן, והפסיק בפירשתו של יוסף? ללמד שהורידוהו אהיו מגדלתו כשראו בצרת אביהם, אמרו: אתה אמרת למכרו, אלו אמרת להשיבו היינו שומעים לך

Rashi on Bereishit 38:1

Why is this chapter placed here, interrupting the story of Yosef? To teach that his brothers brought him down from his greatness when they saw the distress of their father. They said [to Yehudah], "You said to sell him; if you had said to return him, we would have listened to you."

38:2

38:3-8

2) Yibbum and chalitzah are two related Jewish practices that deal with the marriage of a widow to the brother of her deceased husband:

Yibbum

Also known as levirate marriage, this is the Torah-mandated practice of a widow marrying the brother of her deceased husband. This practice is intended to perpetuate the name of the deceased husband.

Chalitzah

This is an alternative ceremony that can be performed if the widow and her deceased husband's brother do not want to go through with yibbum. The ceremony involves the widow removing the brother's shoe, spitting on the floor, and reciting a phrase. This ceremony frees the widow to marry anyone she chooses, except for a Kohen

38:8

3) Rashi 7

וְרַע בְּעֵינֵי ה' WAS WICKED IN THE EYES OF THE LORD — like the wickedness of Onan, and committing the same sin. This must have been the case because of Onan it is said, (v. 10) “And the Lord slew him also — Onan’s death was for a similar reason as Er’s death. Why did Er commit this sin? So that she should not bear children and her beauty thereby become impaired (Yevamot 34b).

4) The sin of Er and Onan

Jewish Virtual Library: ONANISM, term derived from the biblical narrative of Onan, son of Judah (Gen. 38, 7–10), who "spilled" his seed "on the ground." Onanism refers to the thwarting of the sexual process in one of several ways. In Hebrew, it is called more fully ma'aseh Er ve-Onan ("the act of Er and Onan") and is taken by the Midrash (Gen. R. 85:5; and by Rashi to the Pentateuch) to mean coitus interruptus and by the Talmud (Yev. 34b) to refer either to unnatural intercourse or (cf. Nid. 13a) to masturbation. The Zohar (Va-Yeshev, p. 188a; Va-Yehi, p. 219b) expatiates on the evil of onanism in the last sense, which condemnation then entered the Shulhan Arukh (EH, 23:2) to underscore the gravity of the sin of hashḥatat zera ("improper emission of seed").

- What was the real sin?

38:11-12

- Judah is hanging with his friend! Keep this in mind, we will come back to it

38:13-23

5) **Hirah**¹: Hirah a minor character, who appears only in this one place, presents a totally different 3 picture of loyalty. His loyalty is expressed through duration, companionship, devotion, and togetherness. As mentioned, he appears at the beginning of the chapter as the person to whom Yehudah inclines, but he also appears twice more. Again when Yehudah's wife passes away and a third time when he is chosen to be the messenger to deliver Yehudah's payment to and receive his collateral from the supposed prostitute on the way to Timnah, the woman who the biblical readers know is Tamar but Yehudah does not. As the verses describe: "After many days, Bat Shua the wife of Yehudah died. He was comforted and he went to shear his sheep in Timnah, he and Hirah his friend from Adulam... Yehudah sent the goat in the hand of his friend, to get the collateral from the hand of the woman" (vv. 12, 20). The three times at which Hirah is mentioned are momentous junctures of Yehudah's life: moving away from his brothers, losing his wife, and the challenge of delivering payment to a prostitute who has all of his identifying objects in her hand. Hirah accompanies Yehudah through many years, from the day he arrived to Adulam as a single man through the marriages of his children. He sticks by Yehudah during the tough times and volunteers to help in solving Yehudah's problems. For example, when Hirah sees that the prostitute that he was looking for isn't there, he tries to find her and to strategize with Yehudah to find a solution for the confusing situation that he is caught up in, "he returned to Yehudah and said, I didn't find her. And also the local people there said that there was no prostitute here. Yehudah said, Take it for her, lest we be shamed. Behold, I send this goat and you didn't find her" (vv. 22-3). What is so moving about this conversation is what isn't told in the

¹ Tamar's Choice: Different Models of Loyalty Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@mechonhadar.org
Parashat VaYeishev 5777

verses. Yehudah, as is evident from the verses, includes the man from Adulam in his encounter with the prostitute, and they deliberate together about his situation in an open way, about the potential embarrassment latent in this predicament. Yehudah is very concerned that other people will find out, he's concerned about shame and ridicule from everyone- with the exception of Hirah, whom he trusts completely. This is emphasized by Rashi's comments there, "Lest we be shamed—If you ask after her further the matter will become public and there will be a disgrace!" The connection between Yehudah and Hirah, as opposed to the connection between Yehudah and others, is free of drama, free of suspicion or extreme decisions that require ultimate sacrifice. Between Yehudah and his friend Hirah there is a sense of openness, ease, devotion, and time. In Midrash Bereishit Rabbah, Hirah is called an "ohev" a lover, in the sense of an extremely close friend: "'He inclined to the man from Adulam and his name was Hirah.' The Rabbis say... this person was known to be the lover of this tribe [i.e. Yehudah]" (Bereishit Rabbah 4 [Theodor-Albeck] 85:1). Maybe the midrash is arguing that these are the characteristics that define a loving devoted bond: openness, duration, and tolerance. Not dramatic demonstrations and tests of loyalty in which one is required to choose between me and you.

Back to the story - why did Tamar do what she did?

38:24

Note the irony of this moment. And the hypocrisy.

38:25-27

6) Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 59a It is better for a person to cast himself into a fiery furnace and not publicly shame [lit. whiten the face] of his friend. How do we know this? From Tamar. As it says, "she was found and sent to her father-in-law"

38:28-30

