

The Strange Tale of Judah and Tamar

Gen. 37:2 commences one of the weekly Torah portions read in the Synagogue each Sabbath. with the words: "These are the generations of Jacob." The narrative then launches straight into the story of Joseph. Strangely, however, and rather abruptly the story of Joseph is interrupted in *Gen. 38* by the account of Judah and Tamar.

We might wonder *why* Joseph's story should be broken off in this way. Why the detour? It becomes understandable once we realise that the entire section deals with the continuation of the family line, and more specifically, with the theme of the chosen son. The family line of paramount concern is that of the promised Messiah. Jacob has twelve sons. Which of the twelve will it be? Who will the Messiah descend from?

The Biblical revelation of who the coming Messiah would be is somewhat like the details of an address that at first is supplied in rather general terms but over time becomes increasingly more specific. In *Gen. 6* we are told that Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Like the Joseph story, the narrative is disrupted by the account of the flood. Afterwards we learn that the Messianic line will descend from Noah's son Shem, not from Ham or Japheth. Later we learn that he will come from Isaac, not Ishmael, from Jacob not Esau. By the middle of *Genesis*, the selection process has narrowed down to the twelve sons of Jacob. God begins to weed out the non-contenders and limits the choice to a single tribe.

As can be seen, the preference is not necessarily the *firstborn* but the son of God's choosing. Often God's choice seems strange to us. He appears to choose people not for what they are but for what they will become. He therefore allows his chosen ones to go through difficult times in order to shape and mould them into what he wants them to be.

Joseph is Jacob's favourite son, the son of his beloved Rachel, but from God's perspective Judah is the chosen son. In a sense both have been chosen. Joseph has been chosen to preserve people from many nations, including his own the Jewish people, from starving during a severe famine, but most important of all, his mission is to preserve the Messianic line.

A Selection Process

At first glance, however, it seems that neither Joseph nor Judah is up to the task. Up till now God has been sifting out the wrong candidates. Reuben was Jacob's firstborn but he was disqualified from inheriting right of the firstborn, and consequently from being the one through whom the Messiah would come. The reason was that he had slept with his father's concubine. The misdemeanour involved more than mere sexual attraction. Reuben was in fact challenging Jacob's authority just as Absalom would later do by sleeping with the concubines of his father David. That single act of dishonouring his father eliminated Reuben from being a potential ancestor of the Messiah.

Next in line were Shimon and Levi but they displayed such lack of control in avenging the rape of their sister Dinah when they slaughtered the men of Shechem, that they showed they didn't have the necessary strength of character. Next in line was Judah, Jacob's fourth son by Leah. According to *Gen. 29:31* Leah was hated by her husband. As someone has well pointed out, Jacob could not have hated her too much since he had seven children by her

Joseph was much further down the line. He was Jacob's eleventh son by Rachel. Nevertheless he was Jacob's favourite, a fact Jacob took no pains to hide. Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age, the one who reminded him of his beloved Rachel. The Torah has far more to say about Joseph than about Judah. He appears to have been a man of far more godly character than his older sibling. According to an ancient Jewish sage, Rabbi Phinehas, the Holy Spirit dwelt in Joseph from his childhood until his death. Yet God chose Judah, not Joseph. Why?

After Joseph's first dream of his brother's sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf and the later dream of the sun, moon and stars bowing down to *him*, he certainly must have thought he was the chosen one (*Gen. 37:5-9*). It was the mediaeval rabbi Maimonides who observed, "The deeds of the fathers shall be a sign to the children." In other words, many of the life events of important characters in the Bible recur in the lives of their descendants. This is interpreted as a sign that God has his hand on them. Certainly the chief incidents in the lives of Jacob and Joseph demonstrate striking parallels. Both were born after their mothers had been barren for a long time, and both were hated by their brothers. Both were met by angels at various times and both had two dreams. Joseph might therefore have had good reason to believe that he was going to inherit the right of the first born, especially after his father presented him with that famous technicolour coat. Perhaps that gift, more than anything else, earned him the envy and hatred of his brothers.

Judah's Descent

Suddenly right in the middle of Joseph's life story - leaving us at a veritable cliffhanger - the story of Judah and Tamar is introduced in *Gen. 38*. It is not a very savoury story. Midrashic literature has much to say about the significance of *Gen. 38:1*, "**And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.**" Judah not only went down, he turned aside.

Have you ever wondered *why* Judah separated himself from his brothers? The most likely explanation is that it was due to his guilty conscience over Joseph. In the previous chapter, Judah had been the one who suggested selling Joseph into slavery. To cover up their evil deed the brothers removed Joseph's garment, the special coat his father had given him, and dipped it in goat's blood. They presented it to Jacob who identified it as Joseph's. The old man immediately assumed his favourite son had been killed by a wild beast. Every day since then, Judah had to live with his father's anguish and it just got too much for him. Unable to confess to the truth, he chose the line of least resistance, packed up and left. Judah was a man who couldn't face up to things.

Even as Joseph's life had paralleled his father's, so striking similarities began to occur in his life and that of his brother Judah. Judah "**went down from his brothers.**" *Gen. 39:1* notes that "**Joseph was brought down to Egypt.**" Judah married a Canaanite woman and assimilated into Canaanite society. Joseph, likewise, was given an Egyptian wife and was assimilated into Egyptian society. Joseph's brothers used his garment in order to disguise the truth and deceive Jacob. In *Gen. 38* Judah himself fell victim to a ploy involving a garment, when Tamar disguised herself in order to deceive him. There is much truth in the old saying, "What goes around comes around."

As noted earlier Judah, like his uncle Esau before him, married a Canaanite woman. Her name was Shua. What heartache it must have caused Jacob. Here was his own son polluting the family line. Judah's marriage to Shua produced three half-Canaanite sons, Er, Onan and

Shelah. According to ancient custom, when Er was grown, Judah chose a wife for him, a woman named Tamar. Unfortunately for Tamar, Er proved to be a man of low character. He was so evil that it earned him a unique place in Bible history. He is the first individual of whom it is written that God killed him. The only other lives God had destroyed up till then had been the inhabitants of Noah's world. It says of them that their hearts were totally evil and depraved (*Gen. 13:13*). God also destroyed the people of Sodom and Gomorrah whose sins are notorious. This demonstrates just how bad Er was to make it necessary for God to kill him.

Gen. 38:7 - **“Er, Judah's first-born, was evil (Heb. *ra*) in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord took his life.”** The ancient rabbis find it significant that in Hebrew Er is spelled *ayin reish*, whereas *ra* is spelled *reish, ayin*. Er is evil spelled backwards! Anyway you spell it, God hates sin and he deals with it.

Er died before he and Tamar had any children. In ancient times a custom existed called *yibbum* which was later written into the Torah. It is also known as the Levirate marriage. The custom dictates that if a widow is childless, the brother (or other male relative) of the late husband is required to marry or father a child with the deceased's wife. Any son born of such a union is considered son and heir of the deceased. In this manner the family name does not die out and the widow is provided for. Otherwise, the widow would have to return to her father's family where she would be regarded as a liability. The custom of *yibbum* is found only three times in Scripture: *Gen. 38*, the book of *Ruth*, and *Deut. 25:5-10*.

Though the custom might sound bizarre or even repugnant to modern Western ears, *Deut. 25:6* explains “that the name of the dead may not be blotted out of Israel.” The death of a husband also carried serious economic implications for his widow. In ancient times women were at a huge disadvantage. A widow could not inherit her husband's property. Only her sons could do so, which meant that she was reliant on her children. If she had a son by the levirate custom, the property of the deceased would then pass to that son.

The Plight of Women

Women in ancient Middle Eastern culture only had status if they were attached to a male. A woman who wasn't a daughter, a wife, or a mother was without protection. She was a misfit in the social structure. The greatest sociological misfit of all was the young childless widow. The levirate duty served to reaffirm her place in the home of her husband's people.

Due to tribal inheritance laws a woman was valued by her ability to produce children. As a logical corollary, a childless woman was regarded as someone cursed by God. This explains the barren Rachel's dramatic outburst to Jacob. **“Give me children or else I die”** (*Gen. 30:1*). In keeping with the ancient custom Judah instructed his middle son, Onan, to father a child with Tamar. But Onan turned out to be a naughty boy. *Vs. 9* - **“But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his.”** He proceeded to practice the oldest and crudest form of contraception. **“He spilled his seed on the ground.”** God was furious with Onan and killed him also. It wasn't merely that he had failed to continue his dead brother's name and inheritance. It was because he had used Tamar for sexual gratification despite the fact that he had no intention of giving her offspring. He treated Tamar like a prostitute. If truth be told, he treated her as less than a prostitute since a prostitute would at least have been paid for her services.

Tamar's father-in-law, Judah, was responsible for the continuation of the family line. He instructed her to go wait in her father's home promising to send his youngest son, Shelah, to perform the levirate duty with her when the lad was old enough. Therefore at this point Tamar was very much at Judah's mercy. Her life was on hold until he sent Shelah to her. Little did she know what Judah was thinking. **"This woman has killed two of my sons already. She's the original black widow. I'm not giving her my last one."** Judah was in denial.

This was the man who had a history of not facing up to things. He refused to acknowledge that the fault lay with his two rotten sons. He chose to believe that there was something wrong with Tamar. Blame the woman! There is nothing new under the sun. From that point on, Tamar waited and waited, and her biological clock began ticking louder and louder.

As a childless widow, Tamar was in terrible peril. She could not inherit her husband's property; she had no children to look after her in her old age; and it is safe to assume that life was not comfortable for her back in her father's house. In all likelihood she would have been shut away and ignored. She was a misfit who simply did not belong anywhere. This state of affairs was quite unacceptable to her. Judah *must* fulfil his obligation to her. Nevertheless, it became clear that even though Shelah was now a grown man, Judah had no intention of sending him to her. When she learned that Judah was on his way to the sheep-shearing in the company of his Canaanite friend, Hirah, she devised a bold and desperate plan. She disguised herself as a prostitute and lay in wait for Judah.

Sheep-Shearing Shenanigans

Sheep-shearing was clearly the time for all sorts of shenanigans. It is shameful that one of our morally upright South African politicians demanded that prostitution should be legalised in time for the 2010 soccer cup to entertain the visitors to our shores. It is quite amazing what our politicians think of women. However, things were little different at the sheep-shearing festivities in Tamar's day. Therefore when Judah, whose wife had died, saw a prostitute positioned at the roadside he did not think it at all unusual. The writer of Genesis uses the same word in *vs 16* as in *vs. 1*, "He turned aside to her." He did not have money to pay her for her services so he offered to send her a young goat. Not unnaturally, she demanded a pledge and asked for his signet, his staff and his cord. The signet ring was used to sign contracts. The staff was carved with markings distinctive to its owner. The seal was carried on a cord around the neck. Therefore these insignia were extremely valuable to their owner. To give someone your insignia was the equivalent of handing over your ID document and credit card.

Some time later, Judah sent his friend Hirah with the goat to find "the woman" (*Gen. 38:20*). He never bothered to learn her name, real or pretend. Hirah was unable to find her and returned to Judah with the goat. Judah shrugged his shoulders. "Let's just forget about it." He wanted to keep the incident quiet for fear of ridicule, and wrote off the loss of his insignia to experience.

Three months later, Tamar's neighbours noticed that she was putting on a considerable amount of weight. Legally, she was supposed to be waiting for Shelah which meant that she had committed adultery. The people wasted no time reporting her pregnancy to Judah. At last he saw the opening he had been looking for. In one fell swoop he could get rid of this bad-luck woman, free his youngest son to marry someone else, and be done with his obligations. He self-righteously thundered, "Burn her with fire." The good old double standard. The nature of the sentence has led some rabbis to believe that Tamar was the daughter of a priest

since *Lev 21:9* states - **“And when a daughter of any priest pollutes herself by going whoring, she is polluting her father; she shall be burned with fire.”**

The community hauled Tamar in front of Judah. Taking a huge risk, she waited until the last moment to make *her* accusation. *Vs. 25*: **“When she was brought forth, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, ‘By the man, whose these are, am I with child’: and she said, ‘Discern, I pray thee [Heb. *haker na*], whose are these, the signet, and corner, and staff’.”**

When Tamar showed Judah his signet and staff, her words “*haker na*” (in Heb. literally, “see please”) were the selfsame words the brothers had said to Jacob when they presented him with Joseph’s bloodied coat: “See please [*haker na*] whether it is your son’s coat or not” (*Gen. 37:32*). Remember? What happened to Joseph happened to Judah. The hairs must have stood up on Judah’s arms when he heard the echo of his own words. He was now faced with a choice: He could either continue to flee reality and hide in a forest of lies or else he could save himself and return to the world of truth. Tamar would either be burned at the stake, together with Judah’s child in her womb - and Judah would sink even lower in terms of his morality - or he could face reality and suffer great embarrassment, but with the prospect of once more becoming a human being who could live with himself.

Judah took the moral high ground. He not only confessed that Tamar was pregnant by him, but that she had been more righteous than he. The word he used was “*tsedek*.” That word is usually reserved in the Bible for truly righteous people.

It was Judah’s decision to take responsibility for his actions that established him as a leader. From that point on, he began to act like a leader. Later he would assume a leader’s responsibility for his brother Benjamin, offering a guarantee for the latter’s safety. In a subsequent confrontation with Joseph, it would be Judah who would fight to bring Benjamin home to Jacob. And it was all thanks to Tamar. She showed him up for what he was and it turned his life around. The royal sceptre would henceforth belong to his tribe.

Chapter 38 begins with the details of Judah’s first family, and it concludes with the birth of Tamar’s twins. The conclusion of the story is a reversal of its beginning. The beginning describes Judah’s failed attempts at establishing a polluted family line, but at the end his true family was formed, the godly line.

The purpose of this story is not to sanction deceptiveness or trickery. Instead it shows that Tamar demanded respect and to be treated right. As a result she bore two children: Perez and Zerah. The birth of Tamar’s twins is an example of “*tikkun olam*,” the rabbinic concept of fixing the world. The segment began with “the generations – or history - of Jacob.” The birth of these twins set right the history of Jacob. It corrected the birth of Jacob and Esau. Perez succeeded in emerging first, whereas Jacob, even though he was God’s choice, did not. Esau was eventually excluded from the people of Israel, but Zerah, Perez’s twin brother, remained included and he became one of the forefathers of the tribe of Judah.

Perez is the ancestor of King David, who in turn became the ancestor of the Messiah himself. Without this strange little story stuck in the middle of the history of Joseph, there would be no Davidic monarchy or messianic line.

Lessons to be Learned

What does this episode teach us? Essentially, it is about character change. The history of Jacob is also the history of Judah and Joseph. God had to work on Jacob's character to transform him into an Israel. God then changed the brattish young Joseph who boasted to his brothers and tattle-taled on them, into a mature man who would preserve the Messianic line. Meanwhile God had to transform Judah from a self-centred individual into one who had to face himself and take responsibility. It should encourage us that God chooses us not for who or what we are, but for who and what we can become if we allow him to work on us. It is not about self-improvement of the kind espoused by Oprah Winfrey. It is about facing up to our weakness and sin and submitting to God's dealings. It is also about being freed of the burden that somehow we have to be spiritual giants before God can use us.