

PURPOSE OF MISSION

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Often, it is hard to discern between acts of good intent, and of good intent mired with selfishness. This week we read two similar stories that are in reality very different and have very different endings. Tamar was the wife of Yehudah's son, Er. When he died, Yehudah gave her his next son, Onan. Tamar knew that she was destined to mother the seed of Yehudah, and that seed would eventually father King David. But Onan died too. And Yehudah refused to give her his last son Shailah. The custom in that day was that as long as the widow was not totally relinquished from the deceased's family, she would not be allowed to marry an outsider. Tamar was desperate for Yehudah's seed. She hid her face, dressed as a prostitute, and seduced Yehudah himself. Yehudah, unaware of who his courtesan was, reacted in horror when he was told that Tamar was with child. "Take her and have her put to death," he ruled. Tamar's plans were almost for naught. She would never bear the seed that she envisioned.

The wife of Potiphar also had a vision. She saw in the stars that she and Yoseph would breed greatness. She tried to seduce him. She too wanted to fulfill her vision. But Yoseph refused time and time again. He finally fled together with her visions.

Rav Yeruchom Levovitz asks a powerful question. Both of these women had visions, and though their methodology was unconventional, why is there so much disparity as to their status? Tamar is viewed as the righteous woman who desperately wanted a child from Yehudah. She is known as the Mother of The Kingdom of David. Yet the wife of Potiphar is treated as an adulterous two-timer who tries to seduce Yoseph and then throws him into jail. In what way is she so different than Tamar?

Rabbi Boruch Ber Lebowitz, Rosh Yeshiva in Kaminetz, Poland, had a difficult time getting his older daughter married off. When an outstanding student of his accepted a marriage proposal, Reb Boruch Ber was overjoyed. He knew this young man to be a both a scholar and gentleman. As engagements in those days would endure for a long time, he suggested to the young man to continue his studies, uninterrupted, in a distant city.

One could not imagine the shock Reb Boruch Ber had when two months later a package arrived. In it was the watch and other gifts that Reb Boruch Ber had given the young man on his engagement. An enclosed note tersely stated that for personal reasons the engagement was off. The bride and her parents were both devastated.

A few years later Rabbi Lebowitz called in three of his closest students to a private meeting. "I'd like

you to read this letter and tell me if I have infected it with my personal pain," he told them. The students read the letter and stood in awe. A community was seeking a recommendation concerning an applicant for a rabbinical position there. The scholar had learned in Kaminetz and asked Rabbi Lebowitz for a letter of recommendation. The candidate was none other than the formerly engaged student. Rav Lebowitz wrote a beautiful letter, flowing with praise, but was worried that perhaps his personal bitterness may have dulled the response. He called his best students to approve. They knew of the incident and were amazed by the praises Rabbi Lebowitz had written.

Rav Yeruchom explains: every action has a litmus test that reveals true intentions: Failure.

When one fails does one look to heaven and say, "G-d, I tried to do the job my way. I failed. Now it is up to you. "Or does one scream and curse and perhaps even maim and destroy to get his way? Many people begin noble missions, but when they fail, personal vendettas arise.

Tamar failed, and when Yehudah sentenced her for becoming pregnant from out of the family she did not embarrass him by pointing an accusatory finger. She just showed two items he left behind and said, "I am pregnant from the owner of this staff, seal and wrap." Fortunately, Yehudah admitted his folly, and she was spared. Her children were King David's grandparents.

Potiphar's wife's vision ended as Yoseph fled. She could have said, "G-d, I tried to fulfill the dream, now it's up to you." (It actually was, as Yoseph married her daughter!) She didn't. She reacted with a vengeance and accused him falsely. Yoseph was sent to prison. Potiphar's wife is forever branded as an evil temptress.

Sometimes the experience of failure destroys the nobility of mission. Only those acts that are bred with purity of purpose remain unscathed. They continue to flourish with honor in the face of adversity. Ultimately, they succeed, and we reap the fruits of that success for many years to come.

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The author is the Dean of the [Yeshiva of South Shore](#).