

THE SHAME OF IT ALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Yehudah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up, in case he dies like his brothers." Tamar returned and remained in her father's house. (Bereishis 38:11)

The building of the Moshiach dynasty has been a long, difficult, and often VERY confusing process. Had we been in charge we probably would have done things differently. Had WE done it G-d's way, it would have ended in disaster a long time ago. Thank G-d He is in charge, because only G-d can work in such mysterious ways and still make everything work out in the end the way it was meant to.

On such detail is the Yehudah-Tamar incident. In the beginning, we aren't given much of an opportunity to appreciate the greatest of this special woman because she is known only through her two husbands - Er and Onan - who were decidedly bad. And, one would assume that the wife of an evil man must not be too righteous herself. How wrong assumptions can be!

In any case, after Onan had gone the way of his former brother, their father Yehudah feared for the life of his third and last surviving son, Shelah (which, ironically, means "hers"). At that time, Shelah would have had to marry the wife of his dead brother, since she failed to have children from the deceased brother, just as Onan had done after Er had died childless. Therefore, Yehudah sent Tamar back home once again, lamely citing Shelah's youth as an excuse to avoid marriage at that time.

Well, the years went by and there had been no sign of Yehudah or Shelah, which inspired Tamar to take matters into her own hands. For some, that might have meant confronting the father-in-law to decide either to have the remaining son marry or to "file" for divorce. But for Tamar, it wasn't freedom to marry another that she wanted, but to produce children from this illustrious and royal family, the very source of Moshiach himself.

Therefore, Tamar - with tremendous help from Heaven - took advantage of a situation that she could never have planned: the death of Yehudah's own wife, and his being in Tamar's neck of the woods shortly after. Disguising herself as a woman-of-hire, she placed herself in Yehudah's path and let Divine Providence take care of the rest.

And it did with precision: Heaven brought Yehudah to Tamar, and the rest is in the parshah itself. The result was the conception and eventual birth of two sons, Zerach and Peretz, the latter becoming of

the next link in the chain of the Messianic dynasty. And, as if to prove just how much Divine Providence had played a role in the entire affair, Yehudah never approached his daughter-in-law again.

This part of Messianic history occurred just after we recovered, if we ever did, from the story of Moav's humble, or should we say, rather bizarre beginning. Moav was the son of Lot's eldest daughter and himself, conceived while Lot was intoxicated with wine. True, the daughters had acted in this strange way because, after witnessing the destruction of Sdom, they had thought that no other men were left to marry and from whom to have children. That itself was strange given that they probably knew, as their father did, that Avraham and his family was still alive, and more than likely, others as well.

Moav was also the nation from which another righteous woman, Rus, descended, in order to marry Boaz, through circumstances that were every much as strange as those to do with Yehudah and Tamar. She had married a Jew who had emigrated to Moav against the halachah, and who ended marrying a Moabite princess. Yet, because he did, Rus ended up converting and returning to Eretz Yisroel to marry Boaz, whose own wife had died just as Rus had returned with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Beit Lechem.

And Boaz himself lived only long enough to marry Rus - amidst great controversy - and have her conceive - one day altogether!

The creation of Moshiach, upon which so much rides, has been a very precarious development.

But all of this is just by the way, because one of the main lessons of this story comes out quite vicariously. And, when one thinks about how close Tamar came to death with her twins still inside of her, just to avoid embarrassing the very man who had been somewhat of a source of her own misfortune, one shudders. It leaves us with two very important lessons, one about the importance of not embarrassing another in public, and the second about what might be holding up the Final Redemption, as we watch with trepidation monsters of the past renew themselves before our very eyes.

SHABBOS DAY:

While she was being taken out, she sent for her father-in-law saying, "I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong. Please identify to whom this signet ring, cloak, and staff belong." (Bereishis 38:25)

The Talmud begins with a discussion about "ona'a," the technical name used when someone has been charged at least one-sixth more than the value of something. However, as the Talmud later teaches, "ona'a" applies to more than acquiring items - it also applies to how we speak to others (Bava Metzia 58b).

Classic examples of "Ona'as Devarim" include reminding a Ba'al Teshuvah about his pre-Ba'al Teshuvah days, or a convert about his non-Jewish origin. Even calling a person by a not-so-nice

nickname, even if others use it freely falls into this category, and amazingly, can cost a person his portion in the World-to-Come.

The Talmud, as if to emphasize this point, brings up the story of Dovid HaMelech (Bava Metzia 59a). As if descending from Rus wasn't bad enough (some still questioned in those days whether or not a Maobitess could convert to Judaism, as Rus haddone), Dovid married Bas Sheva under somewhat cloudy circumstances. It just gave the enemies of Dovid HaMelech, whose own birth was questionable in the eyes of some, more fodder to shoot at Dovid himself. Only during his son's lifetime, Shlomo HaMelech, after Dovid was long gone, did all the questions get answered in his favor.

All Dovid had to do was enter the Bais Medrash, a place that should have been one of peace for him, and he was humiliated.

"Dovid!" some would call out to him, "Someone who takes a married woman dies by what kind of punishment?"

An obvious reference to himself. However, he would answer them, "His death is by strangulation, but at least he gets a portion in the World-to-Come. But," he would continue, "someone who embarrasses another in public does NOT have a portion in the World-to-Come!" (Bava Metzia 59a).

Indeed, the Talmud makes the most remarkable comment that it is better for a person to be intimate with a woman who might already be married than to embarrass another person in public! Not that the Talmud is sanctioning doubtful adultery, G-d forbid! The Talmud just wants us to understand just how severe the sin of embarrassing a person in public really is. If we already appreciated that, then the statement from the Talmud would make sense to us without any further explanation. We would already know that embarrassing a person, especially in public, is like killing them on some level, since the blood drains from their face.

Tamar understood this. When it became known that she was pregnant, and obviously not from Shelah, she was accused of adultery by Yehudah. Being the daughter of a kohen, she was sentenced to burn to death, which she accepted without saying a peep for fear that she would embarrass Yehudah by spilling the beans about who was the true father. The most she would do was hint the truth to him, and then leave it up to Yehudah to either take responsibility for his actions, or to let her go up in flames. Amazingly, the future of Moshiach came down to one woman's willingness to burn to death rather than to embarrass the secret father of her children, and that man's willingness to reveal the truth about his dubious act.

Incidental, or a major factor in the construction of the Messianic Dynasty?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Yehudah recognized [them] and said, "She is right. It is from me. It happened because I didn't give her to my son Shelah." (Bereishis 38:26)

One can only begin to imagine the collective sigh of relief that Yehudah's admission must have brought, not just to Tamar and her family, but to all those who had been present, physically and spiritually speaking. Perhaps this is why Ya'akov made such a great deal about Yehudah's admission from his death bed, when Yehudah's connection to royalty was sealed:

"Yehudah, you brothers will admit to you . . ." (Bereishis 49:8)

Indeed, everything about Yehudah is about admission, as his name implies.

But, even still, the star of the story is Tamar, who never stopped thinking about producing children from the line of Yehudah, and then leaving it up to him to prove her innocence. As to why this trait plays such a major role in the creation of the Moshiach, we have only to return back to the beginning of history, where the concept of bushah - shame - was a major issue because it hadn't been prior to the sin.

Prior to eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Torah comments:

Both the man and the woman were naked, but were not embarrassed. (Bereishis 2:25)

Rashi explains:

They did not know the way of modesty to distinguish between good and evil. Even though he had knowledge to name the animals, he did not yet possess a yetzer hara. When he ate from the tree, the yetzer hara entered him, and he knew the difference between good and evil. (Rashi)

Rashi has introduced some interesting concepts. Embarrassment, according to Rashi, is a function of the yetzer hara, of being able to distinguish between good and evil. Bushah is the response to the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a measure of one's awareness of the difference between good and evil, or more accurately, man's potential to do either.

Thus, if Moshiach represents the tikun for history since the sin itself - hence the gematria of Moshiach and Nachash (snake) are the same - it makes sense that the concept of bushah, also a tikun for the first sin, should be intricately bound up with the concept of Moshiach, and to play a major role in its evolution to reality.

Thus, Tamar was doing more than simply protecting her father-in-law from public embarrassment. She was creating an opening through which Yehudah could pass in order to bring about the realization of Moshiach.

MELAVE MALKAH:

There is a fundamental difference between the idea of embarrassment and the idea of shame. In the case of the former, it usually comes from others whereas the shame comes from within us. People cause others to become embarrassed, but shame is something we feel about ourselves, when we do something that is below the standard that we expect from ourselves. To feel shame for one's

incorrect behavior is noble, but to embarrass another is despicable and, according to the Talmud, tantamount to murder.

Not only is shame for immoral behavior a noble thing, it is throwback to Adam HaRishon. It implies a strong sense of right and wrong, and understanding of G-d's rules for creation, and commitment to them. It indicates a greatness of spirit, a willingness to put Objective Truth ahead of personal gain and comfort. It represents a person's ability to sense his own G-dliness, and yearning to fulfill it. Ultimately, it means a person can still relate to man's greatness from before the sin, while living in a state after the sin. It is the conduit between both worlds.

The king of the Jewish people, and ultimately Melech HaMoshiach himself, has to be someone of this nature. He will not be a god, but he will be very special. His uniqueness will lie in his ability to put the needs of creation before his own, the requirements of his people ahead of his own interests. It is the only way for him to become the conduit he must be for the light of G-d in order to bring an end to thousands of years of evil.

This is what Yehudah did upon seeing his staff, ring, and cloak in his own hands, sent to him by the woman he had thought had only been his daughter-in-law, but now understand she was much more. As Yehudah stood there and beheld the evidence in his hand, he underwent a paradigm shift, from seeing himself as the judge and Tamar as the defendant; he as the proud one and Tamar as the shameful one - to Tamar as the brave and humble soul and himself as the guiltiest of parties on more than one charge.

However, only he and Tamar knew the truth, and she was committed to die with it rather to embarrass her father-in-law. Her future, the future of their children, and his own future was in his big and powerful hands, and only his attitude towards truth would decide the outcome. He chose to be modeh - to admit - and to suffer the shame of all of his inappropriate actions: from not giving Shelah to her in time as promised, to hiring a supposed woman of ill-repute, of suspecting his righteous daughter-in-law of adultery, of almost killing an innocent woman and her children.

And in the brief moment that he felt shame, he ascended to the highest heights, and merited to become the king of the Jewish people and ancestor of Moshiach. For, as the Talmud says, at the end of history, falsehood will be so rampant that sanity will be difficult to maintain (Sanhedrin 97a). It will take someone of just the opposite qualities to combat and destroy all the falsehood, and that day, as a result of Tamar's clever planning and great self-discipline, Yehudah was able to step into that role.

Have a great Shabbos,

PW

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org