

NEW SHOES FOR OLD SOULS

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"Then Yehudah said to Onan, 'Consort with your brother's wife and enter into levirate marriage with her, and establish offspring for your brother' (38:8)"

The Torah relates that Yehudah takes Tamar as a wife for his eldest son Er. Er is "evil in the eyes of Hashem", and Hashem causes him to die.¹ Yehudah then asks his second son Onan to enter into a levirate marriage - "yibum" with Tamar to establish offspring for his deceased brother. Onan too is evil in the eyes of Hashem and is punished with death.² Since Yehudah refuses to allow his youngest son Shelah the opportunity to marry Tamar, Tamar takes the initiative, creating a subterfuge that induces Yehudah himself into performing his levirate obligation to her.³ As a result of this union, Tamar gives birth to Peretz and Zerach.⁴ The Torah lists all seventy souls who descended to Mitzrayim. When recording Yehudah's children, the Torah lists Er, Onan, Shelah, Peretz, and Zerach, stating that Er and Onan are deceased.⁵ Why does the Torah record the deceased brothers if they are not included in the seventy souls? Compounding this difficulty, we find Er and Onan mentioned again in the census of Bnei Yisroel taken in the desert. This census is taken in order to account for those who would receive a portion of land upon entering Eretz Yisroel.⁶ What possible benefit could there be in listing Er and Onan in this situation? When Yehudah tells Onan to marry Tamar, he explains to his son that by performing this levirate marriage he will be "establishing an offspring for his brother". Rashi comments that the child born from this type of union is named after the deceased.⁷ The Ramban explains that there is no source which requires that the child born from a levirate marriage be named after the deceased brother. Rather, even prior to the Torah being given, the mystical understanding of the levirate marriage was already known; the child born from a levirate union receives the transmigrating soul of the deceased.⁸ Yehudah is instructing Onan to have a child with Tamar. In this manner the continuity of Onan is assured. Both Er and Onan die childless. Consequently, Yehudah's act of yibum is performed for both of his deceased children. This results in Tamar giving birth to twins, for each child represents the transmigrated soul of one of the deceased brothers. Zerach and Peretz are, in reality, Er and Onan. Therefore, whenever listing Zerach and Peretz, the Torah juxtaposes the deaths of Er and Onan to teach us that whatever potentials and capacities were contained within Er and Onan, were resurrected in Yehudah's latter children, Zerach and Peretz.

1.38:7 2.38:8 3.38:14-18 4.38:29,30 5.46:12 6.Bamidbar 26:19 7.38:8 8.Ibid

The Boy Who Would Be King

"and he was a youth with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives..." (37:2)

Rashi interprets the verse "vehu na'ar es bnei Bilhah ve'es bnei Zilpah n'shei aviv" in the following manner: "vehu na'ar" refers to Yoseif acting in an immature manner, i.e. constantly fixing his hair and eyebrows, and "es bnei Bilhah ve'es bnei Zilpah" refers to Yoseif associating with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah because Leah's children slighted them¹. What is the connection between these two ideas? Furthermore, there appears to be a verb missing from the verse "es bnei Bilhah" - "with the children of Bilhah"; there is no verb indicating the activity in which Yoseif engaged himself with them. After hearing Yoseif recount his dreams which foretold his superiority to his brothers, they began to hate him.² Their hatred of him culminated with their plot to kill "the dreamer".³ The Talmud teaches that a dream is a minor prophecy.⁴ If Hashem had indicated to Yoseif that he would be the monarch, how could his brothers harbor resentment for something that was Hashem's will?

There is a major distinction between a dream and a prophecy. A prophecy is Hashem's way of revealing to the recipient a reality which will unconditionally occur. A dream portends that which can potentially occur if the recipient both interprets the message and develops his propensities in the appropriate manner. Yoseif interprets his dreams as a message that he is fit to be the king. Therefore, he immediately begins acting upon this perception. His apparent preoccupation with his looks is not an expression of vanity, rather a manifestation of his sovereign duties, for the Talmud teaches that there is a scriptural requirement that the king be groomed daily, as it is written "the King in his beauty shall be viewed".⁵ Rashi records that Yoseif attempted to correct what he perceived to be the mistreatment of the children of Bilhah and Zilpah at the hands of the children of Leah.⁶ Consequently, Yoseif attempted to elevate the children of the concubines to equal status among the brothers. He exercised what he perceived was his monarchical right to confer caste. In his brothers' eyes these very actions in which Yoseif engaged, and which served as a declaration of his position, i.e. fixing his hair and eyebrows, were viewed as "childish", the actions of a "na'ar". The Torah testifies however, that to a certain degree he was successful. Immediately following Yoseif's actions, the Torah identifies the children of the concubines as the children of the wives of Yaakov for the very first time. Prior to this time Bilhah and Zilpah were identified as either "maidservants" or "concubines", but never "wives".¹

The brothers did not necessarily deny the message of Yoseif's dreams as portend to the future conditional to Yoseif developing his potential. What they took issue with was Yoseif's attempts to define the present based upon his dreams. They viewed these pretensions as dangerous and divisive. Yoseif's dreams were his own private messages encouraging him to develop these qualities.

His acting upon them prematurely is what raised the ire of his brothers. Tangentially, we have an insight as to why a teenager is referred to as a "na'ar" which is also often used as a term of derision. A teenager is only potentially an adult, yet he demands to be treated as one in his present state. A na'ar is a person who expects to be treated based upon his pretensions, not upon the reality of his present condition. Often we encounter individuals who may possess great potential, but expect to be dealt with in a manner commensurate with what they will become. Until a person actualizes his potential he has no right to expect others to treat him based upon his potential alone.

1.37:2 2.37:5 3.37:18-20 4.Berachos 65b 5.Taanis 17a 6.37:2 7.33:1, 35:22
