

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

GENESIS 38-39

CHAPTER 38 - Judah & Joseph go down

Chapter 38 almost seems like an unnecessary diversion—in the last scene Joseph was taken down to Egypt – turn over to Genesis 39:1 and the story of Joseph is picked up again as if Genesis 38 didn't exist. But, of course, following the maxim that there is nothing random or unnecessary in Torah, we are going to dive into this story of Judah to see what it is trying to tell us.

What's in a name? Read 38:1-11

The first six short verses contain eight names or designations. Unnecessary detail —or is Torah laying a vital foundation for understanding this story? Let's look more closely:

Adullam – justice of the people; **Hirah** – noble family, splendour; **Shua** – wealth ,(but strangely, it comes from a root word meaning “to cry out (for help)”.

Now the son's names: **Er** – awake, raise; **Onan** – strong; **Shelah** – petition, request. Shelah was born at **Chezib**, which means false, lie; **Tamar** – Palm tree. The one name we are not given is that of Judah's wife—we are simply told that she is the daughter of Shua.

Q: What might the Torah be trying to tell us/Judah through these names?

It is Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, who takes centre stage in our story. Tamar means “palm” and Midrash says that “she was descended from Noah's son Shem and she was as beautiful as a palm.”¹ Throughout the story we witness the ruling (that would come to be known as levirate marriage), that, should a man die childless, a member of his family would marry his widow to perpetuate the dead brother's name (Deut. 25:6). Tamar marries Er, but he dies because he ‘was wicked in the sight of the Lord’; she is then given to Onan, who also dies at the hand of the Lord because he ‘spilt his seed upon the ground’. (we might notice here that they are not living up to their names). At this juncture, Judah felt that Tamar who was causing the deaths of his sons so he withheld his youngest son, fearing that he too would die. Measure for measure—with the loss of his own sons, Judah is now experiencing the cruel suffering he inflicted upon his father.

Meanwhile, Tamar is trapped—unable to marry Shelah because of Judah's fears, and unable to marry anyone else because she is legally bound to him. Who, then, will carry on the family name? Tamar takes a bold course of action—posing as a prostitute in order to secure a son for Judah.

Q: What are some of the moral lapses that characterise Judah's life to date?

v.14 So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife.

Looking behind the Hebrew words, we see interesting allusions in this verse:

¹ Midrash Hagadol.

The literal translation of the word “open” here (Hebrew word, עין *ayin*) is “eyes” or “sight” (1st use Gen 3:5 “...your eyes will be opened...” It is also figuratively used of mental and spiritual faculties; *Timnah* means “assigned portion”. So we could say that Tamar—the upright, fruitful ‘Palm’—has positioned herself to bring about the ‘opening of the spiritual eyes’ of Jacob to his assigned portion in regards to his family line. Despite the part Judah played in the sale of Joseph, God has destined him to be the patriarch of the line of Judah that will lead to Messiah King.² He needs to raise himself up (Er), be strong (Onan), and face up to his falsehood—and the LORD will see that he does just that.

Before Tamar agrees to Judah’s advances, she secures a pledge: 17-19 *And he said, “I will send a young goat from the flock.” So she said, “Will you give me a pledge till you send it?” Then he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” So she said, “Your signet and cord, and your staff that is in your hand.” Then he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.*

As if inspired by prophecy, she asked for the three objects which became the insignia of her descendants:

- **The signet** ring of royalty;
- **The cord** on which it hung. This was a twisted blue cord and is the same Hebrew word used for the blue cord used in the high-priest’s garments (Ex. 39:30,31), and later designates the blue cord in the tassel of Israelites prayer shawls (Num 15:38).
- **The Staff** was a branch – “sceptre of the Messiah”— a symbol of leadership and authority. Each tribal ruler led his tribe with a staff.

It is telling that Judah was willing to part with them at all, simply for sexual favours, and later on to treat the matter of their return so lightly when the ‘harlot’ was not found. (v.23) Tamar knew exactly what she was doing and what she held in her possession. With great ingenuity and boldness, she broke through the bind in which Judah has placed her, taking upon herself the risk of being put to death for adultery (because she was still pledged to Shelah). When Tamar’s pregnancy became evident, thus indicating the crime of adultery, Judah orders, “bring her out so that she may be burnt” (38:24). Only then does the full subtlety of Tamar’s strategy become apparent, *“By the man to whom these belong, I am with child.” And she said, “Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff.”*

Remember, it was Judah who decided to sell Joseph and to cover-up their sin, presenting Jacob with Joseph’s blood-stained garment saying, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.” Now it is Judah who is confronted with evidence of his wrongdoing in the exact same manner—“please identify, whose are this signet, this cord, and this staff.” Imagine Judah’s shock when these were produced by Tamar, who was being taken out to be burned for her immorality, on Judah’s order. Once again, we are getting a glimpse of measure for measure Divine punishment. v.26 *Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.”* Tamar’s place in the family and Judah’s posterity are now secured.

The Birth of Twins - read v. 27-30

We now come to a most intriguing aspect of this story— the birth of Perez and Zerah. The name *Zerah* means *shining, dawning of light*, and is said to refer to the brilliant light of the sun. (see Isaiah 60:1-3). The name *Perez* means ‘breach’³ or ‘breaker’, it is related to ‘bursting out’.

The hand of Zerah, the second born (the one designated as firstborn heir according to 38:28), ‘shone through’ before Perez is born, but he only comes in his fullness later. Thus we see a breach or gap between the sun’s dawning and its full expression. Perez forms a breach or break.

² Timnah formed one of the landmarks on the north boundary of the allotment of Judah. (Josh 15:10)

³ *Breach* means the act or a result of breaking; break or rupture.

Q. What does the scarlet cord represent? Do you know where else we see this sign?⁴

Q. Why do you think Zerah, came out both first and last?

Q. Where have we seen birth of twins before?

Q. Could the two births bear a related message? (There is a 'hand' mentioned in both.)

So what might Perez represent? Since we understand that the scarlet thread represents Christ's atoning blood, (see also Joshua 2:18,21) we seem to be shown a remarkable prophetic picture here. The Midrash Rabbah says that Tamar names him Perez to indicate that King Messiah, "The Breaker", would one day come from Him, saying:

"Tamar meant, 'This one is greater than all those who make breaches, for from you will arise The King Messiah of whom it is written in Micah 2:13: *'The breaker goes up before them; They break out, pass through the gate and go out by it. So their King goes on before them, and the LORD at their head.'*"

Perez is listed in Luke's genealogy of Jesus. (Lk. 3:33). Perez, Zerah and Tamar have the honour of being named in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew (1:3), the line continuing through Perez as it traces the genealogy through Judah and the kingly line of David.⁵

"Judah is a man of flawed character. Like others, he sometimes does things that are both unwise and plainly wrong. But he is Jacob/Israel's true son, and like Jacob, he is a man who is able to own his guilt, thereby chartering a new repentant course for his future. Judah's destiny will soon become clear. It is his family that will lead Israel, and give rise to the quintessential Israelite King—David."⁶

Once again providential action is seen manifesting itself among and above the comings and goings of men's lives. Jewish Midrash expresses this truth when it strikingly portrays the scene which unfolds in this story: "The tribes were involved with the sale of Joseph, Jacob was in deep mourning, and Judah was absorbed in looking for a wife, while God was kindling the spark of the messianic king."⁷

CHAPTER 39

Scripture now returns to Joseph and his journey to Egypt where he is sold to Potiphar, a minister of Pharaoh. The first verse tells us that he was taken down (unlike Judah, who went down away from his brothers) Jewish commentary suggests that this descent was the work of a higher will. Accordingly, the Midrash begins its treatment of this chapter with a verse from Psalms, "Come, let us contemplate the works of God! Wonderful is His way with mankind." (66:5)

Gen.39:2-6 *The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.*

Q. What are the striking features of this passage? What spiritual principles we can learn from this?

⁴ Josh. 2:18; Lev. 14:4-6; According to Jewish tradition, during Yom Kippur, a scarlet cord was tied around the neck of the 2 goats, as well as around the doors to the entrance of the Holy Place. Once the scapegoat died in the wilderness, a miracle took place. The scarlet cord on the doors of the Temple turned white!

⁵ Another gentile woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy is Ruth, the Moabite. The parallels between Tamar and Ruth are quite striking, and worth a study in itself, especially considering their prophetic significance.

⁶ Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Joseph Story*.

⁷ Munk, 36:1

Although Joseph was no longer with his father, but had been brought to a foreign land, the LORD had not ceased to be with him. On the contrary, it is repeated that the LORD was with Joseph, and his master saw that blessing flowed, not only to him, but through him to the house of the Egyptian also for Joseph's sake.

If God was with Joseph, it could only have been so because Joseph was with God. If man's purpose is identical with God's, his circumstances develop in such a way that these purposes will bear good fruit. Surely it is true that *"All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose."*

It was due to Joseph that the first rays of the divine light penetrated into Egypt. The Shechina had "accompanied" Joseph to this 'land' and it hovered so plainly over him that Potiphar, as it were, "saw It" with his own eyes. It alone can explain the mystery of the superiority of this slave, so radiant with religious piety and *moral* purity, with a brilliant mind, with physical perfection and personal magnetism. His triumphant success in all that he did could only have been the result of a blessing from a supernatural source."⁸

This quote is included to underline just how highly Jewish sages have viewed Joseph. In fact some go so far as to say, "Scripture puts Joseph on equal terms with the Holy Ark", comparing the above verses with 2 Samuel 6:11, where it is written that Obed-Edom and all his house was blessed when the Ark of God remained there."

Joseph's testing & imprisonment – 39:7-20

Servants of God always face temptations and tests and we know that Yeshua Himself was not exempt from this. What draws our attention in this story is that again we see that Joseph's garment is used to identify him. Noting these two accounts of identification through his garment, our minds might again be drawn back to the Judah and Tamar incident where three items are used for identification.

Q. Examine these three incidents of identification and relate them to Yeshua.

Can you see the three truths which emerge?⁹

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.

Joseph accepts this new setback just as passively as he had accepted his previous ordeals. Not one word of protest or rebellion does he utter. (Isaiah 53:7ff) Again we see the presence of the LORD with him and he is given great favour and authority, even in prison.

One who stays close to God will know that only "trials of love" are sent by Him to give him the opportunity to raise himself to a higher degree of spirituality. What counts most of all is the personal reaction. If a man emerges stronger in his faith in God, these ordeals will have fulfilled their purpose, whatever may have been their cause. As for Joseph, the years which he spent in servitude to Potiphar and imprisonment gave him the opportunity to raise himself to the utmost degree of his spiritual strength.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, 39:3.

⁹ Shed blood, Messiah/kingship, falsely accused.

¹⁰ Munk, 39:21