JUDAH AND TAMAR: SELF-ESTEEM LOST
AND (PARTIALLY) REDEEMED

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The story of Judah and Tamar is nested in the saga of Joseph. Although it can be appreciated as an independent narrative to a certain extent, its full import can be comprehended only within its framework. The introductory verse reads: *It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adulamite, whose name was Hirah* (Gen. 38:1).

Although technically opening up a new chapter, this verse immediately follows the Bible’s recounting of Jacob’s relentless mourning for Joseph: *Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard* (Gen. 37:34–36).

Rashi (Gen. 38:1) perceives the *semihut haparshiot*—the sequencing of these apparently unrelated events—as indicative of a connection between them. The text assists the reader in his quest for the connection through its choice of the word used to describe Judah’s departure—*va-yered*, literally meaning to go down, to “descend.” In addition to reporting Judah’s geographical descent to Adulam from the hills of Hebron where Jacob and family resided, Rashi, based upon *Midrash Tanhuma* (Gen. 46:9), perceives the verse as referring to Judah’s interpersonal descent, the deterioration of his relationship with his brothers.

Upon witnessing Jacob’s heart-wrenching grief and the unbearably dismal atmosphere in the family home, the brothers demote Judah from his prior position of leadership, for initiating the sale of Joseph. Unlike Rashi, Sforno (Gen. 38:1) understands *va-yered* as indicative of Judah’s *intrapersonal* descent—his own guilt and loss of self-worth. *Tzror Hamor* (Gen. 38:1) perceives Judah’s action as a self-imposed exile through which he intended to do penance for selling Joseph.1 Whether the “descent” was interpersonal or in-

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trapersonal (or perhaps a combination of both), Judah, at the ebb of his self-esteem, turns to Adulam. He heads down a dubious path of least resistance until Tamar empowers Judah to regain control and (partially) redeem his self-esteem. He heads down a dubious path of least resistance until Tamar empowers Judah to regain control and (partially) redeem his self-esteem.

PUTTING DOWN NEW ROOTS

The story opens as Judah turned aside (vayet ad), Gen. 38:1) to a friend and protégé from Adulam whose name was Hirah. The combination of the two words vayet ad is unique to this verse, indicating the extreme nature of Judah’s turn “off the track”—settling in the Canaanite Adulam and marrying a Canaanite woman as is reported in the very next verse. It is to be recalled that Abraham prohibited his servant from bringing a wife for Isaac from the Canaanite nations (Gen. 24:3), and Rebecca and Isaac were pained when Esau took Canaanite women as wives and sent Jacob off to Haran to prevent such a recurrence. The text at this point provides a series of subtle messages, which, when grouped together, reflect the nature of the new relationship into which Judah enters. No name is given for Judah’s wife; rather she is referred to as the daughter of a Canaanite ish (man) whose name is given—Shua, which means a generous man of social stature. Such is the individual who Judah found for a father-in-law.

The word ish in the Bible, when it is superfluous to the meaning of the text—as it is in this case (it would have been sufficient to say a Canaanite)—often denotes a prominent person. Ish Canaani further defines Shua’s essence by his being a Canaanite. Another example of this usage of ish, in this sense, is found in the characterization of Esau and Jacob. Esau is defined as an ish zaid ish sadeh, a hunter and a man of the outdoors, whereas Jacob is characterized as an ish tam yoshev oholim, a quiet individual dwelling indoors. Hirah, Judah’s friend and protégé, is referred to both as an ish (in the previous verse, Gen. 38:1) and as the Adulamite—the definite article in Hebrew signifying prominence (in Adulam). These two individuals provided Judah with the ability to integrate into the Canaanite culture and gain some status. In contrast to the use of the word ish with respect to Shua and Hirah, Judah’s wife is not referred to as an isha, a term used throughout the Bible to (honorably) refer to a woman who engages in marriage, including a concu-
bine, such as Abraham’s Ketora (Gen. 25:1). Even Esau’s Canaanite wives are individually referred to as *isha* (Gen. 26:34, 28:9, 36:1). This nameless woman, not referred to as an *isha*, is taken by Judah after merely “seeing her,” as the text stipulates (Gen. 38:2). The narrative is devoid of words indicating love or affection as a basis for the relationship. In contrast, with respect to Judah’s father and grandfather, the text recounts that Isaac loved Rivka and Jacob loved Rachel and Leah, although the latter with less intensity.  

There is also no mention of Judah sharing his past with his wife, or indeed any interaction between them. The marriage appears to be one of convenience—a vehicle for integrating into Adulam—but not one that could compensate for the family Judah left behind. This was an unfortunate choice for a new start.

‘ALONE’ IN THE ‘NEW’ FAMILY

The narrative continues to progress rapidly—three parsimonious sequential verses report the birth of Judah’s three sons, as if nothing additional of import transpires during this timespan: And she conceived, and bore a son; and he called his name Er. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she called his name Onan. And she yet again conceived, and bore a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bore him (Gen. 28:3).

It is worthy of note that Judah names only the first of his three sons. The third son, moreover, was born in Judah’s absence as, according to one interpretation, Judah is reported to be in Kziv at the time of the birth, or as other commentaries maintain, it was the birth that took place in Kziv in Judah’s absence. There is no mention of how the children were raised or how they developed, nor the extent to which Judah was involved. Lurking in the background is what Judah told (or did not tell) his children about his past and what impact this may have had. On the one hand, how does a father tell his children that he sold his brother into slavery? On the other hand, keeping such things secret would have to have placed a strain on the paternal-filial relationship. All of these things, in context of the text’s silence, should invite skepticism with respect to how close a relationship Judah could have had with his sons.

The unfolding of the narrative henceforth, as will become apparent, lends supports to this skepticism. With respect to the sons, the text relates only to...
their rites of passage—birth as has already been noted, followed by marriage and death.

Judah takes a wife for his oldest son Er. She is referred to as an isha and has a name, a beautiful one, Tamar, perhaps named after the palm tree. But alas, without giving the reader an opportunity to rejoice as Judah’s first child marries, the text immediately and abruptly informs: And Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him (Gen. 38:7). No mention is made of how Judah experiences the emotional trauma of his son’s death, especially in these circumstances—isolated from his nuclear family and devoid of an adequate support system. The text dispassionately reports only Judah’s technical response as he commands Onen, his second son: Go into your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother (Gen. 38:8). The text reports, however, in detail, Onan’s response: But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So, whenever he went to be with his brother’s wife, he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother (Gen. 38:9). Onen’s behavior was evil in the eyes of God and he too was slain (Gen. 38:10).

Unlike in the case of Er, the nature of Onen’s misconduct, as well as his motive, is revealed to the reader. Onen purposely refrains from cohabiting with Tamar so as to prevent the perpetuation of his brother’s identity, even at the expense of not having, in the future, a child to carry on his own memory—at least not from Tamar. The severity of Onen’s actions is reflected in the severity of the retribution. It is remarkable that whereas with respect to Er the text states that he was evil, regarding Onen, his behavior was wicked. In TB Yevamot 34b, R. Nachman b. Yitzchak states that Er’s sin is identical to that of his brother. This is extrapolated from the word gam (“too”) used in reporting the punishment meted out to Onen, the same retribution for the same misconduct. Clearly, however, the motives for the misconduct differed. Er had no brother to consider and any children that Tamar bore would have been his own. He nevertheless chose not to bring a new generation into the world, rejecting the opportunity to contribute to the continuity of life.8 For the sin of negating future life, his own life was negated, measure for measure. The text reads Er was evil— not did evil, because, on principle, he rejected the value of posterity absolutely. His brother, although valuing his own continuity, selfishly refused to contribute to that of his brother.
This is conjecture, but perhaps the sons knew of their father’s past-dissolution of the family of Jacob over sibling rivalry and Joseph’s “disappearance.” Family brings pain of which they wanted no part or less of a part. If so, Judah bore indirect blame for the children's death. Perhaps there is here also direct retribution for Judah: Whereas Er refused to bring a new generation into the world and Onen refused to bring into the world an inheritor for his brother, Judah wiped out an already existing brother and pulled apart an existing family. This is intimated in the text at least with respect to Er: And Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him (Gen. 38:7), the words Judah’s firstborn are otherwise superfluous, unless they are used to teach that Judah bore some of the blame and father and son, both accountable, are being punished.

The loss of two young adult children one after another should have brought Judah to do some soul-searching with respect to himself and Er and Onen, perhaps even to initiating an interaction with Tamar with respect to the tragedy. No mention of this is made in the narrative. Judah, in a self-preservation mode, may have needed to repress these thoughts as his situation could not withstand the burden of additional guilt. The path of least resistance was to assume that Tamar was somehow to blame.

There is, as alluded to before, no word regarding Judah’s mourning for his sons. This is in sharp contrast to what is recounted with respect to Jacob, who states, I will go down to the grave mourning my son (Gen. 37:35). The text’s silence in this regard may be reflective of Judah’s tragic situation—he had no family to comfort him, aside from his wife with whom he probably did not had a close relationship. In a similar vein, the book of Ruth makes no mention of Naomi mourning the death of her husband and two children in the land of Moab. Both Judah and Naomi were disconnected geographically and estranged from their family of origin, so before whom could they mourn? The text is similarly silent with respect to Joseph after he was thrown into the pit. He surely cried out, but no mention is made of this in the text as his cries fell on the deaf ears of his brothers. Judah is alone, with no mention even of Hirah, his friend and protégé, coming to console him.

With only one remaining son, Judah decides to withhold him from Tamar: Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your
father’s house, until Shelah my son grows up for he feared that he would die like his brothers” (Gen. 38:11).

Rashi (commentary on Gen. 38:11) suggests that Judah in fact had no intention of ever allowing Shelah to marry Tamar. Many of the commentators attribute this to Judah’s belief that Tamar was a katlanit, a woman who has become a widow twice, is herself the cause of the death of his sons. The manner in which the narrative depicts how Judah relates to Tamar is abrasive. He banishes her from his home and command her to live as widow, no words of consolation for a twice-bereaved spouse are reported, notwithstanding that the book of Genesis is the most "human" of the Torah, approximately one third of its verses are direct quotes in which individuals give expression, among other things, to their feelings (with respect to themselves and others).

Judah was sentencing Tamar to life imprisonment behind her back, with no chance of offering a defense. Judah was also holding his surviving son Shelah captive. The fragile Judah could not see beyond Shelah, the only posterity he had left at this point. Yet there were other options. The death of one child after another was a unique situation; Perhaps both Tamar and Shelah could have been freed from their shackles had Judah been willing to raise the option of their parting ways in the court of Adulam. Judah could have attempted to find a solution for Tamar, either with Shelah or without. The narrative portrays an insecure and pessimistic Judah, trying to hold on to respectability in Adulam and, unjustifiably, fearing for Shelah’s life.

Tragedy strikes once more as Judah is himself widowed: And in process of time, the daughter of Shuah, Judah’s wife died: and Judah was comforted, and went up to his sheep-shearers to Timnath, he and his friend Hirah the Adulamite (Gen. 38:12).

Again, nothing is mentioned about Judah’s mourning for his wife. In the same verse, moreover, the text relates three events: her death, Judah’s solace and his joining the sheep grazing festivities, as if they occurred one after another as a natural matter of course with little difficulty. Consistent with the text up to this point, no emotions are portrayed. Indeed, Judah does not emote from the time he left his home.

FROM DESCENT TO ASCENT

In contrast to Judah, Tamar was not going to ignore her widowed state and the future childless state of the family but rather be proactive in seizing the...
opportunity available to at least attempt a resolution. She knew that if Shelah was not an option, Judah could be; the father of the deceased son was next in line, according to the ancient levirate custom. Tamar had no guarantees, but she was willing to take risks to secure the future, so unlike Judah who feared risks even if it meant forsaking the future. In slow motion, indicative of Tamar’s deliberation, the text informs: And she put off from her the widow’s garment, and covered her[self] with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place, which is by the way to Timnah (Gen. 38:14).

Judah sees the disguised Tamar, and strays “off the path.” The word vayet (Gen. 38:16), the same word used at the beginning of the narrative to report Judah’s turning aside to the Adulamite, denotes this off-the-track course of action; Judah takes Tamar to be a prostitute and solicits her services. The reader can’t help but see the double standard: What about Tamar and Shelah? Judah, who robbed them of an opportunity for a future relationship, is exercising his own freedom to engage in a non-committal “pleasurable” encounter. This is not meant to deride Judah but rather to bring out what seems to be indicative throughout this narrative of a broken individual in need of mending. The encounter was to be seen as a temporary escape from a harsh reality.

The narrative continues with an unidentified informer bringing Judah word of Tamar’s pregnancy. The text gives no indication of any deliberation on Judah’s part, he immediately sentences her to burning at the stake. The decision is hasty and harsh, Judah makes no attempt to verify the accuracy of the information. Even if the information was accurate, burning at the stake is an excruciating death, and more so, perhaps a reason could be found to save her (such as the fact that she had not been given Shelah as promised). This is actually the second time that Judah mistakenly sentences his daughter-in-law. The first time, as will be recalled, Judah “sentenced” Tamar as a katlanit and banished her from his home into permanent widowhood while in fact the sons themselves were to blame for their deaths.

At this point, Tamar elegantly informs Judah of his mistake and brings him to admission and submission. As she is being brought out to be executed, she sends a message to her father-in-law: “I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said, adding, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.” Judah recognizes them and says, “She is more righteous than
I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not cohabit with her again (Gen. 38:25–26).

All the hidden secrets of the narrative, Judah’s true plan for the widowed Tamar, Tamar’s masquerade and Judah’s encounter with the disguised Tamar, are all uncovered simultaneously. Tamar, twice wronged by Judah, ironically becomes the catalyst for Judah’s epiphany and change of direction in his life course, from descent to ascent. While the admission of guilt was certainly an ordeal for Judah, it was paradoxically his redemption.

Tamar embodies everything that Judah was (temporarily) not, but aspired to be. She deliberates and takes calculated risks (disguising herself as a prostitute) when the stakes are high. She considers others before herself, even at the expense of risking her life. She spared Judah the truth about Onen’s misconduct, even though she suspected it might result in life-long widowhood. In this last and most dramatic part of the story, by orchestrating Judah’s self-admission, she enables him to trade shame for respect and self-respect.

Tamar asks Judah, haker na (Gen. 38:26), identify the objects he left behind. The recognition she elicits, however, goes much deeper. Judah becomes aware of his responsibility for her pregnancy, not only in the direct physical sense, but also indirectly, by denying Tamar his son Shelah. Judah also acknowledges that he gave priority to his own needs at the price of others, further eating away at his self-esteem. The recognition reflects the change that has taken place within him. Judah declares: tzadka mimeni (Gen. 38:26), she is more righteous than I: The items belong to me, I am accountable for approaching her as a prostitute, for the pregnancy, for harshly and hastily sentencing Tamar to death, for not giving her Shelah, and for selling my brother and deceiving my father.13

The sin of the sale, beyond its awful ramifications for Jacob, Joseph and the family, ate into the core of Judah’s soul. Wrongdoing always damages first and foremost the perpetrator.14 The story of Judah and Tamar bears unmistakable witness to this, morale and morality are connected. Tamar redeems Judah by empowering him through her own actions to publicly admit his transgressions and, paradoxically, regain his self-respect through this admission.

The birth of the two sons, Peretz and Zerah, are a new beginning for Judah—hope for the future, a replacement so to speak, for Er and Onen. There is,
however, no full closure and “happily ever after” ending to the story. Judah does not marry Tamar, whom he comes to admire and who is truly a noble isha, perhaps because he considers it an incestuous relationship. This is tragic for the two of them and also for the children. Judah will also still have to return home and confront the situation he left behind. He is still estranged from his family and the sale of Joseph hangs over him. He has, however, been purified in the crucible of his travail, demonstrated responsibility and accountability, and (partially) redeemed his self-esteem.

NOTES
1. There are commentators, among them Ibn Ezra, who claim that the story of Judah and Tamar takes place before Joseph was sold by his brothers. The twenty-two years that transpired between the sale of Joseph and the descent of Jacob’s family to Egypt does not allow enough time for Judah to marry, have children and also grandchildren. And yet, the latter—Hetzron and Hamul, the children of Judah’s children from Tamar—are listed as part of the family in Egypt (Gen. 56:12). To this, Cassuto replies that just as Er and Onen are mentioned in the list, despite the fact that they died in Adulam, so too the two grandchildren are mentioned as descendants, although they themselves did not descend but rather were born in Egypt. This author adds that it is difficult to accept that the story of Judah and Tamar occurs before the sale of Joseph. The story reflects a broken Judah who manages to make a comeback. It is hard to imagine that through this process or after it, Judah would regress to engage in an action such as selling his brother into slavery. Furthermore, the Sages praise Judah for his repentance with respect to Tamar and see it as inclusive of the transgressions toward his father and brother.
2. Although Rivka’s main intention was to save Jacob from Esau’s wrath, see Genesis 27:42–45.
4. See the article by Dr. Nissim Eliakim, “Kol Ha’anashim Shebamikra Lashon Chashivut”, https://orot.ac.il/sites/default/files/shmaatin/177-6.pdf
5. Radak, commentary to Genesis 29:30.
6. Sforno, commentary to Genesis 28:3.
7. Ralbag and Abarbanel commentaries, Genesis 28:3.
8. R. Nachman b. Yitzchak explains that Er preferred the perpetuation of Tamar’s beauty to having a family.
9. See the article by R. Shimon Klein, “From Joseph to Judah”, on the Virtual Beit Midrash. https://www.etzion.org.il/he/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%A7%D7%A5-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A3-%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%93-%D7%99%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93%D7%94
10. I later came across this idea in: Dr, Aviva Gottlieb Zorenberg, The Murmuring Deep (2008), pp. 300-301. The text reports Joseph's desperate plea, only much later, when the brothers stand before Joseph and recollect their cruelty vis-a-vis Joseph: They say to one another, Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us (Gen. 42:21).
11. See TB Yevamot 54b.

13. See TB *Sotah* 10b, where it is explained that the words *haker na* draw a parallel to another event in which these words were used: Joseph’s multicolored coat was torn and bloodied by his brothers, under Judah’s leadership, and subsequently sent to Jacob with the following message: *haker na* recognize the coat (Gen. 37:32) and draw the only possible but factually wrong conclusion that Joseph was devoured by a wild animal.