

PARASHAT VAYESHEV
Yehuda and Tamar

By Rav Amnon Bazak

I. "Anyone who Blesses Yehuda Angers God"

When Yosef approaches his brothers, they are almost unanimous in their view that he must be put to death:

They saw him from afar and before he got close to them they conspired against him to kill him. And they said to one another, "Behold, this dreamer is coming. Now, let us go and kill him and cast him into one of the pits, and we shall say, 'A wild animal has devoured him' – and we shall see what will become of his dreams." (37:18-20)

Only two of the brothers are opposed to the plan: Reuven and Yehuda. There is a fundamental difference between the respective responses of these two brothers, the leaders among the sons of Yaakov – especially now, in the wake of the slaughter in Shekhem by Shimon and Levi. Reuven seeks to prevent his brothers from spilling Yosef's blood, and proposes an alternative:

Reuven heard, and delivered him out of their hand. He said, "Let us not take his life." And Reuven said to them, "Do not spill blood; cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him..." (37:21-22).

The Torah itself testifies that his intention here was "... in order to save him from their hand, to restore him to his father" (37:22).

Yehuda is likewise presented as seeking to prevent his brothers from bloodshed, but he offers a different idea:

Yehuda said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let us sell him to the Yishma'elim, and let our hand not be upon him, for he is our brother, our flesh." And his brothers

listened to him. (37:26-27)

There is no doubt that Yehuda's suggestion, while sparing Yosef's life, is completely different from Reuven's proposal. Yehuda, too, is reluctant to kill Yosef, "for he is our brother, our flesh," but the idea of selling him to the Yishma'elim arises not from concern for Yosef's welfare, but rather from a feeling that this would be an act less grave than killing him. It is this view which makes Yehuda's act so fundamentally problematic. From an objective point of view, killing is indeed more grave than selling a person. Nevertheless, the severity of the latter cannot be ignored, and it is no coincidence that the Torah metes out the same punishment to someone who sells a person into slavery as it does to a murderer:

If a man be found stealing one of his brethren of *Bnei Yisrael*, and he treats him as a slave and sells him, then that thief will die, and you shall be rid of that evil in your midst (*Devarim 24:7*).^{1[1]}

Despite the severity of the act, Yehuda feels that he can ease his conscience with the knowledge that he prevented the killing of Yosef. To his mind, then, the sale is the simplest and most convenient way to be "rid" of Yosef without paying the moral price for his removal.

But there is more to it than that. Harm to Yosef also means direct harm to Yaakov, his loving father. Therefore, the sale of Yosef to the Yishma'elim will necessarily require that the matter be concealed from Yaakov. To this end, the brothers stage Yosef's death by slaughtering a goat and dipping Yosef's coat into its blood. From the point of view of the anguish caused to Yaakov, there is no difference between Yehuda's suggestion and the brothers' original intention to kill Yosef: either way, as Yaakov understands it, Yosef is dead. Just as the brothers had originally planned that after killing him they would tell Yaakov that "a wild animal has devoured him" (37:20), after selling him, they act to create exactly the same impression:

They sent the coat of many colors and brought it to their father, and they said, "This we have found; know now whether it is your son's coat or not." And he knew it, and he said, "[It is] my son's coat – a wild animal has devoured him; Yosef is surely torn in pieces." (37:32-33)

Here again the brothers – led by Yehuda – are shown to be trying to ease their conscience. They do not tell Yaakov an outright lie, but rather ask him to make the pronouncement himself: "Know now whether it is your son's coat or not." In this way, they can satisfy themselves that they did not tell a lie

^{1 [1]}It appears to be no coincidence that the Torah uses the expression "of his brethren of *Bnei Yisrael*," which hints to the sale of Yosef by his brothers, the "sons of Yisrael," their father.

and that it was Yaakov who arrived at the mistaken conclusion that “a wild animal has devoured him; Yosef is surely torn in pieces.”

In other words, in comparison with Reuven's line of thought, Yehuda's suggestion looks like an attempt to evade responsibility. He acts to remove Yosef in such a way that he will not have Yosef's death on his conscience, and he delivers a terrible blow to Yaakov in such a way that he need not deal with having lied to him.

This may be what R. Meir means in his statement in *Sanhedrin* 6b:

R. Meir says: The word “*botze'a*” is mentioned only in relation to Yehuda, as it is written: “Yehuda said to his brothers, ‘What profit (*betza*) is there if we kill our brother.’” Anyone who praises Yehuda angers [God], and concerning this it is written, “He who praises the *botze'a*, angers God” (Tehillim 10:3).

Yehuda should not be praised for preventing his brothers from killing Yosef; on the contrary, he deserves reproach – for instead of acting as Reuven did and trying to restore Yosef to his father,^{2[2]} he chose to condemn Yosef to a life of harsh slavery in Egypt, at the same time causing untold anguish to his father.

II. The Punishment

The text goes on to relate:

And it was at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers and wandered to a man from Adulam, whose name was Chira. And Yehuda saw there the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shu'a, and he took her and came to her. And she conceived and bore a son, and he called him Er. And she conceived again and bore a son, and she called him Onan. And she conceived once again, and bore a son, and called him Shela, and he was at Keziv when she bore him. And Yehuda took a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, the firstborn

^{2 [2]} As Rashi comments there: "He should have said, 'Let us return him to our father,' once his brothers were already receptive to his words.

of Yehuda, was wicked^{3[3]} in the eyes of God, and God slew him. And Yehuda said to Onan, "Go to your brother's wife and perform your duty as brother-in-law, and raise up progeny for your brother." But Onan knew that that the progeny would not be [considered] his own, so when he came to his brother's wife he spilled it on the ground so as not to give [his] seed to his brother. And that which he did was evil in God's eyes, and He slew him too." (38:1-10)

It is reasonable to assume that the expression which introduces this episode, "And it was at that time," is not meant to indicate chronological sequence – that Yehuda went down from his brothers after selling Yosef – since a calculation of the years shows that this must have happened several years prior to the sale of Yosef.^{4[4]} It is quite possible that the words "at that time" are meant to refer to what we read later on – the deaths of Er and Onan, Yehuda's sons. In any event, the Torah clearly seeks to indicate that there is a connection between the two narratives, and they are therefore juxtaposed.^{5[5]} It would seem, then, that Yehuda's sons died not only because they did evil in God's eyes in their own right, but also because God visited their father's sin upon them, since they maintained his evasive ways.

This is of special significance in the case of Onan. We do not know in what way Er was "evil in the eyes of God," but concerning Onan, we are told explicitly that he did not want to raise up progeny for his brother. The significance of this sin, and the motivation for it, may be deduced from the parasha of *yibum* (levirate marriage).^{6[6]} This unit addresses the tragic

3 [3] This is a play on words: The name "Er" is spelled *ayin resh*; the word for wicked, "*ra*," is the reverse, *resh ayin*. The same device is found in other places in *Tanakh*; of particular interest is the verse which describes Noach in a positive light: "Noach (*nun chet*) found favor ("*chen*," *chet nun*) in the eyes of God" (*Bereishit* 6:8).

4 [4] Yosef was sold at the age of 17 (see 37:2), was brought before Pharaoh at the age of 30 (41:46), and revealed his identity to his brothers after seven years of plenty and two years of famine (45:6). In other words, a total of twenty-two years passed from the sale of Yosef until Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt. The story of Yehuda and Tamar tells us that Yehuda married a wife, had three sons, and married off two of them; after their deaths he had his own twin sons, Peretz and Zerach, from Tamar – his widowed daughter-in-law, and then Peretz himself had two sons, Chetzron and Chamul, who are included in the list of Yaakov's descendants who go down to Egypt (46:12). This could not all have happened within 22 years. Ibn Ezra notes this chronological problem and asserts, "'The words, 'And it was at that time' do not mean 'at the time when Yosef was sold,' but rather prior to the sale.'" See further in n. 5.

5 [5] Rashi, too, questions: "Why is this narrative [about Yehuda and Tamar] brought here, interrupting the story of Yosef?" His explanation, in contrast to the view of Ibn Ezra cited in n. 4, is that "it teaches that his brothers 'brought him down' from his greatness when they witnessed their father's sorrow. They said, 'You suggested selling him; had you said we should restore him [to Yaakov], we would have followed your suggestion.'" According to Rashi, the events are recounted in accordance with their chronological order. There is much debate surrounding this assertion; we shall not elaborate here.

6 [6] Concerning the source of the commandment of *yibum*, Ramban writes here: "The earliest sages, prior to [the giving of] the Torah, knew that there is great benefit in raising up progeny for a brother who died childless, and therefore a brother should be the first preference [to marry the widow], followed by other close relatives, since any close relative from his family who inherits a portion, can bring benefit to him [the deceased brother]."

situation of a person who dies childless, and points to a unique way of perpetuating his memory: "The firstborn whom she [the widow] bears shall stand in the name of his deceased brother" (*Devarim* 25:6). According to the literal meaning of the text, the son born to the wife of the deceased man and his brother is considered the son of the deceased man, and not of that man's brother – the child's living, biological father. Naturally, a person is hesitant to marry his widowed sister-in-law in order to bear a child who will not be considered his son. Therefore, the Torah emphasizes the responsibility that a person must feel towards the memory of his brother, and sets forth sanctions against a person who refuses to fulfill his duty:

She shall remove his shoe from his foot and spit in his face and answer and say, "So shall be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." And he will be known in Israel as "the house of him who had his shoe removed." (*Devarim* 25:9-10)

Onan, then, falls into the same model of sin set down by his father. Just as Yehuda sought to remove Yosef and cause him to be forgotten, exempting himself from the responsibility for killing Yosef by selling him instead, and just as the brothers covered up this act with their white lie – "recognize now" – so Onan fulfills his formal responsibility by marrying Tamar, but evades the real obligation of *yibum*, spilling his seed "so as not to give [his] seed to his brother."

As a result of his actions, Onan too meets his death. However, attention must be paid to the fact that unlike Er, who was "evil in the eyes of God," concerning Onan we read that "that which he did was evil in God's eyes, and He slew him too." This is difficult to understand. Is it possible that owing to this single act, severe as it may be, Onan was deserving of death? Even a person who avoids marrying his widowed sister-in-law altogether is not given such a serious punishment by the Torah! It seems reasonable to assume, then, that Onan died not only for his own sin, but also for the sin of his father – which arose, as noted, from the same root.

Further support for the thesis that the death of Yehuda's two sons was a punishment for his part in the sale of Yosef is to be found in Reuven's words to Yaakov when the brothers return from their first encounter with Yosef, whom they recognize only as the Egyptian viceroy. Yehuda relays the demand that they bring Binyamin down to Egypt. Yaakov refuses at first, and Reuven steps in as guarantor: "You shall slay my two sons if I do not bring him to you" (42:37). Where on earth did Reuven get such an idea from? It seems reasonable to suggest that he sought to hint that someone who fails to take responsibility for a brother is deserving of having his own two sons die – as happened to Yehuda. (It must be remembered that by this time, Reuven

already had four sons [see 46:9], and hence the fact that he says specifically "two sons" is not coincidental.)

Later on in the *parasha*, a further sin is added to the sins of Yehuda's two sons – this time committed by Yehuda himself:

Yehuda said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house until Shela, my son, is grown," for he said, "Lest he, too, die like his brothers." So Tamar went and stayed at her father's house. (38:11)

Apparently, Yehuda had no idea what had caused the death of his sons. Instead of concluding that they had done evil in the eyes of God and considering that perhaps the matter might be related to the sale of Yosef, Yehuda casts the blame for his troubles on Tamar. As he sees it, death came solely as a result of marriage to her: "She has a record of her husband's dying!" (Rashi). Therefore, if he keeps Shela away from her, he will be saving his life. In doing so, Yehuda sins not only against reality, but also against Tamar; he had promised that she would remain a widow only "until Shela my son is grown," but in truth, "he was putting her off with mere words, for he had no intention of allowing her to marry [Shela]" (Rashi).^{7[7]} Once again, Yehuda does not accept responsibility for his actions, nor does he dare tell Tamar that he has no intention of delivering her from the limbo of waiting for *yibum*; he misleads her into thinking that in the future he will give her to Shela.

Years pass, and Yehuda fails to fulfill his promise – and again he is punished:

Much time went by, and the daughter of Shu'a, Yehuda's wife, died... (38:12).

Will Yehuda now learn the lesson?

III. The "*Tikkun*"

^{7 [7]} Perhaps this is what the Torah was referring to in stating, at the beginning of the chapter, "And she conceived once again, and bore a son, and called him Shela, and he was at Keziv when she bore him." The mention of Shela's birthplace, Keziv, may hint at the *kazav* (falsehood) of which Yehuda was later guilty concerning this son.

Not yet. Yehuda gets over the death of his wife and is not yet prompted to change his attitude. On the contrary, he decides to visit a harlot, not knowing that the woman in front of him is the daughter-in-law who he has wronged:

And Yehuda was comforted, and he went up to his sheep-shearers – he and Chira, his Adullamite neighbor – at Timna. And it was told to Tamar saying, “Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timna to shear his sheep.” So she rid herself of her garments of widowhood and covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat at the entrance of Enayim, which is on the road to Timna, for she saw that Shela had grown up and she had not been given to him as a wife. And Yehuda saw her and thought her to be a harlot, for she had covered her face. And he turned to her by the way and said, “I pray you, let me come to you” – for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, “What will you give me, that you may come to me?” And he said, “I will send [you] a kid goat from the flock.” And she said, “Will you give [me] a pledge, until you send it?” And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” And she said, “Your signet and your cord and the staff that is in your hand.” So he gave them to her, and came to her, and she conceived from him. Then she arose and went away, and rid herself of her veil, and put on her garments of widowhood. (38:12-19)

Between the lines, we are exposed to Tamar's miserable situation; she has been wearing her widow's garments for years, with no hope of raising a family. Tamar acts on her own initiative to rehabilitate herself, but at the same time, there are growing hints to the story that is the background to this sorry situation – the sale of Yosef. Just as Yosef's brothers deceived their father using a garment – Yosef's striped coat – so Tamar deceives Yehuda using a garment – a veil. In the previous chapter, Yehuda had appealed to his brothers, “What profit is there if we kill our brother and cover his blood,” preferring to adopt a different course of action which would eliminate the need for him to “cover the blood;” Tamar now does her own “covering”: “She covered herself with a veil... and he thought her to be a harlot, for she had covered her face.” Finally, of course, the kid goat which Yehuda proposes to send her recalls the kid goat whose blood was used to soil Yosef's coat.

Still, Yehuda remains oblivious:

So Yehuda sent the kid goat by the hand of his Adullamite neighbor, to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, but he could not find her. He asked the men of her place, saying, “Where is the harlot who was at Enayim, on the road?” But they said, “There was no harlot here.” And he returned to Yehuda and said, “I have not found her; also the

men of the place said, 'There was no harlot here.'" Then Yehuda said, "Let her take it [i.e.; I shall make no further efforts], lest we be put to shame: behold, I sent this kid but you have not found her." (ibid. 20-23)

Yehuda is embarrassed to show up personally to claim his pledge from the harlot, so he sends his Adullamite neighbor to take care of the matter for him. When the harlot turns out to have disappeared, Yehuda shrugs off his commitment to her, and lets her retain his signet and cord in order not to be ridiculed. Once again, his excuse is ready at hand: "Behold, I sent this kid but you have not found her."

It is precisely when Yehuda reaches this low point that the turning point comes. Upon hearing that his daughter-in-law has been playing the harlot, he passes verdict on her without hesitation:

And it was, after some three months, that it was told to Yehuda saying, "Tamar, your daughter-in-law, has played the harlot, and behold – she is also pregnant from her harlotry," that Yehuda said, "Bring her out and let her be burned." (38:24)

But when Tamar produces his signet and his cord, Yehuda changes his character completely:

When she was brought forth, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "The man to whom these belong – I am pregnant by him," and she said, "Know now to whom this signet and these cords and this staff belong." And Yehuda recognized them and he said, "She has been more righteous than I, for it was because I did not give her to Shela, my son," and he knew her no more. (ibid. 25-26)

What brought about this sudden change? *Chazal* note (*Sota* 10b) that the expression Tamar uses in revealing the situation to Yehuda – "Know now" (*hakker na*) – is the same expression that the brothers used in the previous chapter:

R. Hama said in the name of R. Chanina: With the word "*hakker*," Yehuda notified his father, and with the same word "*hakker*," he himself was notified. He notified with the word "*hakker*" – [as it is written,] "Know now whether this is your son's coat"; he himself was notified with the word "*hakker*" – [as it is written,] "Know now to whom [these objects belong]."

However, it would seem that at issue here is more than just a semantic connection. As we have already seen, the main problem with Yehuda's behavior has been his tactic of indirect action and blurring in order to evade having to deal with his sin. Now, Tamar has adopted exactly the same technique, but in the opposite direction. Instead of simply telling Yehuda, "I am pregnant from you," she adopts a non-compelling style, "Know now to whom this signet and cords and staff belong" – echoing the opaque wording of Yehuda and his brothers, "Know now whether this is your son's coat or not."

Apparently, Yehuda is simply dumbstruck in the face of Tamar. By placing the entire burden of responsibility on Yehuda while refusing to accuse him directly, Tamar leaves him no choice – he is forced to confront himself. For the first time since the beginning of the *parasha*, he assumes responsibility for his actions. Not only does he acknowledge that Tamar has not played the harlot, he goes so far as to acknowledge his own responsibility for neglecting her for so many years.

This episode brings about a complete turnabout in Yehuda's personality. As we shall see in the coming *parashiot*, from this point onwards, he demonstrates responsibility in all that happens to the brothers in Egypt.

Translated by Kaeren Fish
