



Tuning into Tamar's Motivation for Seducing Her Father-In-Law

The Veiled Woman Wrapped in Mystery

The story of Yehuda and Tamar intrigues me. Why did Tamar decide to sit at the crossroad, dressed up as a harlot in order to seduce her father-in-law? Why would this action be considered a mitzvah? Furthermore, how could Mashiach be born from such a shady relationship? I often intersperse my teachings with creative writing and biblio-drama exercises as a way to tune into the deeper motivation of the various personalities in the Torah. What were the thoughts and feelings behind the Torah personalities' actions? Which tone of voice and body language did they employ? These are examples of questions we need to address when we engage in writing exercises or play out the various biblical characters. However, Tamar is not easy to portray. She is a woman wrapped in mystery, shrouded in a veil as it states:

ספר בראשית פרק לח פסוק יד וַתָּסֶר בְּגָדֶי אֱלִמְנוּתָהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וַתֵּכֶס בַּצִּיצִיף וַתִּתְעַלֵּף וַתֵּשֶׁב בַּפֶּתַח עֵינָיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל דֶּרֶךְ תִּמְנַתָּה כִּי רָאתָה כִּי גִדֹּל שָׁלָה וְהוּא לֹא נִתְּנָה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

“So she took off her widow’s garb, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself. She then sat down at the crossroads that were on the way to Timnah, for she saw that Shelah had grown up, but she was not given to him for a wife” (*Bereishit* 38:14).

Rashi's commentary, "She covered her face so Yehuda wouldn't recognize her," only accentuates our bewilderment. Why would a righteous woman, the progenitor of the Mashiach, disguise herself in order to mislead her father-in-law and seduce him to have intimate relations with a woman he believed was a prostitute? These are questions I attempt to answer in my poem below based on the Torah commentaries, Midrash and Zohar.

For the Sake of the Soul of Mashiach

Tamar went to sit at the crossroads, in Hebrew, בְּפֶתַח עֵינַיִם/b'petach eynayim – “at the opening of the eyes.” Our Sages explained it to mean, at the entrance פֶּתַח/petach – “opening” of our father Avraham, which all עֵינַיִם/eynayim – “eyes” looked forward to see. (Sotah 10a; Rashi Bereishit 38:14). The last letters of the place that Tamar sat, אֶשֶׁר עֵינַיִם בְּפֶתַח/b'Petach Einayim asher – “In the opening of the eyes that” spell out רמח/ramach – ‘248’ backwards – the numerical value of the name אַבְרָהָם/Avraham. For she prayed, “may it be Your will that I will merit to bring forth the offspring of Avraham (Ba'al Haturim). Chassidic commentaries explain that in the same way that Avraham was willing to risk his life to save Lot by pursuing the four mighty kings, Tamar intended to bring down the soul of Mashiach. Just as Avraham saw with ruach hakodesh (divine inspiration) that from Lot sparked the soul of David and Mashiach, Tamar risked her life by playing harlot to seduce Yehuda because she prophetically understood that from him she could bring down the soul of Mashiach. This explains the Midrash, “she sat at the entrance of Avraham Avinu,” meaning, she followed in the footsteps of our father Avraham, who sacrificed his life to bring the soul of Mashiach into the world. For all the eyes are looking forward to see Him. The initials of, “So she took off her widow’s garb, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself,” add up to 63, alluding to the world of teshuva that corresponds to Hashem’s four lettered name when each letter is spelled out in the following way to add up to 63: yud-vav-dalet hei-hei vav-yud-vav hei-hei יה ויו הוה. Thus, Tamar’s holy intention when seducing Yehuda was to bring down the soul of Mashiach from the world of Teshuva (Maor V'Shemesh, Parshat Vayeshev).

An Opening for Unexpected Holiness

According to the rules of Levirate marriage, Tamar was supposed to marry her late husbands' younger brother, Shelah, in order to perpetuate the name of her deceased husbands (*Devarim* 25:5-6). Yet, she understood through divine inspiration that he was not meant for her. Her intentions were for the sake of Heaven; she wanted her seed to be from Yehuda who was more perfect and preferable to Shelah. From Yehuda, Mashiach would be descend (Sforno). There was only one opening in order to bring down the soul of Mashiach, and this was by seducing Yehuda, who was blessed by Ya'acov to become the father of kings (*Bereishit* 49:10). We reviewed the whole Torah without finding a place called Petach Einayim (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 85:7). This is to teach that Tamar set her eyes on an opening upon which all eyes are dependent, and said, "May it be your will Hashem my G-d that I will not leave this house empty-handed." Tamar in her wisdom set her eyes on a tiny opening through which kedusha (holiness) could sprout forth through seemingly unholy actions. In the straight way there was no opening for the Mashiach to be born, since Shelah was not fit to father him, and Yehuda would never have agreed to marry Tamar because she was his daughter-in-law.

Women Build the House of David through Rectified Sexuality

Deeds that are intended for the sake of Heaven, even if they seem distasteful in public light, are praiseworthy, and Hashem rewards them greatly. Therefore, Tamar's deed and Ruth's as well, are praised because of their good intentions (Abarbanel).

Two women, Tamar and Ruth, gave over their soul for the sake of the tribe of Yehuda. Tamar would cry out, "Let me not go out empty-handed from this house..." (*Midrash Zuta Ruth, parasha 1*).

Tamar prayed to G-d that she wouldn't leave this house empty-handed. Which house? We were not told about any house in Petach Einayim. Perhaps it is referring to the house of David – Beit David from where Mashiach will come. Tamar prayed to have a part in this house, and her prayer was answered. She became the mother of the Davidic dynasty. The building of the house of David happens through the arousal of the woman, such as the daughters of Lot, Tamar, and Ruth since they arose to repair themselves and the world (Rav Tzaddok, *Kometz Hamincha* 2:45).

Tamar's Monologue

I am Tamar and I have a mission.
I venture out on a risky expedition.
Since a young girl I could never agree
to all the evil in the world that I see.

Long enough have I wasted my beauty,
in order to fulfill my wifely duty.
No longer will I remain a fruitless palm.
My descendant will praise G-d in psalm.

Two husbands I have long ago buried.
About my future no one has worried.
Seeing that their brother has already grown.
How long am I supposed to remain alone?

I am Tamar and I come from a holy stem.
My father is no other than the Kohen, Shem.
Deep inside I have this awesome feeling
that it is my role to bring world healing.

I don't care what people might say.
I have to find my own special way
to bring forth prophets and kings,
especially King David who sings.

I lift my face in prayer to the Eternal,
that He will sprout forth my majestic kernel.
I'm willing to sacrifice my life in His Hand,
for my children to inherit the Promised Land.

I am Tamar – Woman at the Crossroad.
To Yehuda my face I have never showed.
I came into this world to engender repair,
so Yehuda's offspring can hold the royal chair.

My countless tears waters his forthcoming seed.
Such supplications no adversary can impede.
I've found the only opening to do what I must
With trembling faith in Hashem's salvation I trust.