Reading Tamar

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We are in our second year of studying women in Tanakh every Thursday afternoon for an hour. The class takes place in one of the participant's homes in memory of her late mother. The oldest woman in the class is in her 80s, the youngest in her 30s. There is a range of educational backgrounds around the table, from Day School graduates to women whose own observance is evolving. We study everything in Hebrew and English with a smattering of traditional commentaries and modern scholarship. Mostly, our focus is on a primary reading of Tanakh; we slowly dissect the words, paying careful attention to repetition, alliteration, and odd words or unexpected phrases. We spend a lot of time on biblical cross-referencing, moving to other passages or verses that present parallel stories or language. The class is no different, in certain ways, from any other in Bible through a thematic and literary lens. Yet, as the teacher, I find myself stepping back in observation at critical junctures to watch modern women judge ancient matriarchs. Do they see themselves refracted in the behind-the-scenes female manipulation of a narrative? How objective are they in removing themselves when doing a character analysis? Can they study a swath of text about women in compromising sexual situations and remain neutral? After all, gender is not an insignificant aspect of personal identity.

Yet I would not ask any of these questions during class. It is a safe space to express opinions, but such questions would be a digression we cannot afford given our limited time together. Then from a pedagogic standpoint, I wonder if I have made the right choice in ignoring the bridge from text to life. We certainly engage in what I call life/text dichotomies and entertain spiritual lessons so that the words can jump off the page and into our lives, but we do this more in the style of Aesop's fables than a direct confrontation with an underlying gender bias. It would not dawn on me to pause, look up and ask: "Does this offend you?"

This is not a group of people who revel in feminist readings, although some of them struggle with a woman's place in Judaism; they are mostly women steeped in tradition, and who have largely accepted gender limitations in their faith commitments or at least made some peace with ritual exclusion. They may not be content with every gender-based prohibition thrown their way, but they have accepted the total package of meaning and lifestyle that comes with Orthodoxy. Would this resignation manifest itself in their reading of the Tamar story, I wondered? Tamar was a risk-taker embroiled in a serious

and morally trying tale. Sexual taboos were broken for the sake of succession. One value was pitted against another in an ethical and emotional tug-of-war that almost cost Tamar her life. It is hard to retain objectivity and not personalize texts in some way when faced with such turmoil. Life seeps in between the lines as we read the words together.

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Tamar is the protagonist of Genesis 38. Judah picked her as a wife for his first-born son Er. God did not like Er; for some unstated reason, he was "displeasing to the Lord," and God, subsequently took his life, leaving Tamar bound by the levirate laws of remarriage. Judah then adjured his next son Onan to "do his duty by her" to "provide offspring for your brother." The obligation is presented with a paradox. The duty is described as a relief for her when, in actuality, it benefits a dead man by keeping his name and property intact in the family. The ambiguity of who this act of marriage is for may contribute to the puzzling way Judah proceeded. Onan was troubled that the seed would not technically count as his so instead of normal cohabitation, he spilled his seed outside of her. He was willing to undergo intercourse as an act of pleasure but not as an act of responsibility, "so as not to provide offspring for his brother" (Gen. 38:9). He did exactly the opposite of his father's wishes.

Tamar's own feelings, loss, and future desires were not vocalized by Judah. After Onan died—because the Lord also found him displeasing—Judah told his daughter-in-law to stay a widow in her father's house until his third son, Shelah, grew up and could fulfill his commitment: "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up…" (Gen. 38:11). Judah's suggestion that Tamar return to her father's house shows that he felt little responsibility for her welfare in the intervening years and yet expected her to stay faithful all the while. The continuation of Judah's line through Er depended on Tamar's commitment to a family that had little regard for her. This disregard is cemented by the side-thought communicated in the passage; even as he told Tamar to wait, Judah knew that he would never actualize the duty because he feared for his last son: "He might die like his brothers" (Gen. 38:11). God found Judah's sons displeasing, but Judah conveniently blamed Tamar.

Scholars who struggle to understand the odd placement of this chapter between Joseph being thrown into a pit and Joseph being seduced by his Egyptian master's wife, should note that this is another story about fatherhood and brotherhood that takes many wrong turns because filial and fraternal bonds were weak or severed. The displacement of seed is not unlike the displacement of an actual brother, another act that stops the family line from natural continuity. The private ruminations of a brother who is not willing to give provide children for a dead sibling is paralleled by a father who would dispose of a brother with nary a concern and force a daughter-in-law into prolonged widowhood with no escape.

Over time, Judah's wife died and after mourning for her, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers with his friend Hirah, a minor character who surprisingly appears many times in the chapter. Tamar was told that her father-in-law was coming to the area. She was not informed directly. We are unsure how much time had elapsed but enough for her to understand that Shelah was never to be hers and that her garments of widowhood would be worn as a life sentence. Taking destiny into her own hands instead of waiting any longer, she exchanged her widow's garb for the clothing of a prostitute to seduce Judah and make him give her the child that she deserved. Rather than seduce Shelah, the brother who should have been rightfully her husband, she tricked her father-in-law, perhaps literally coupling obligation with revenge. To add to the curiosity, the garments she donned as prostitute were not revealing, as we might expect, but concealing:

So he took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. (Gen. 38:14–15)

In three different ways we are told that Tamar was covered, ostensibly to conceal her identity from Judah but also a subtler signal to the reader that she was far from a prostitute in her manner. This identity was not one she wore comfortably. The ironic location of the encounter makes the reader

smirk. *Enaim* in Hebrew means eyes. Tamar saw the future ahead as a spouse-less widow and saw an opportunity precisely because her father-in-law did not see what was coming.

The use of a veil in conjunction with the name of the place, presents many opportunities for playful readings. One feminist commentary on the story speaks in the words of Tamar herself:
I exposed Judah's shallow grief by subtly playing upon the irony of veils. When I dressed as his son's widow, I was invisible to Judah. He sent me away; he ignored my legitimate claim on Shelah. But when I voluntarily hid myself behind a veil, then he noticed me and unwittingly fulfilled his duty as his son's redeemer.[1]

Veils reveal and conceal; it is no coincidence that the word for clothing in Hebrew "*beged*" is related to the word for traitor: "*boged*." Clothing creates identities but can also disguise identities.

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I spoke with several of my students between classes about studying the Tamar story together. Does it make them angry? It does not. One woman finds Tamar inspiring:
I perceive Tamar to be brave. She must have been in a lot of pain. As a woman, I could imagine her feeling unfulfilled and experiencing the loss. I imagine the loss was different. She must have been in a very emotional place, feeling blame on top of loss. I don't think I felt anger when we were studying this; it was more admiration for her than anger against the situation. There wasn't much time to get angry because the action took place very quickly in the text. It's very powerful that she figured out something to move her life along.

This class participant did not feel angry about what happened to Tamar because she saw her as a woman who fought back and was able to "achieve her purpose without hurting someone else." To her, Tamar was a symbol of empowerment since she admires those who struggle with a character deficit or adversity and find ways to overcome challenges. In this instance, Tamar, like other matriarchs and female characters in the Bible, plays a supporting role to the larger story, helping us forge a nation but not as an overt, public leader. "The woman is not the leader in a religious or tribal sense, but what she does or does not do becomes a defining moment that changes the course of history. It's important not only to pay attention to the headlines but the sub-text."

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The text confirms that Judah did not know that this woman was his daughter-in-law when he invited her to sleep with him. Tamar knew that to corner her father-in-law she needed to exact an identifying object. Judah did not pay in advance for this prostitute's services but suggested that he would send an anonymous kid from his flock later. Tamar, shrewder than Judah, told him that she needed to secure a pledge from him, another ironic statement since Judah was not one to keep his promises. The "*eravon*" or collateral she seeks has the same Hebrew root as the word for responsibility, a subtle way to suggest that Judah betrayed his responsibility to her.
Judah did not know what to give her but she knew exactly what she wanted: "Your seal and cord and the staff which you carry" (Gen. 38:18)—all signature items of the one who holds them. Rashi explains that the seal was the ring by which Judah signed documents and the cord was a garment that he covered himself with; she could not have asked for identifiers stronger than these. The Hizkuni mentions that these were items of regular use; the cord for him was an object used to weave wool. Taking away that which was basic and used often would remind Judah of the absence and perhaps bring Tamar's dilemma to a more expedited solution. Nahum Sarna believes that the seal and cord were a unit:
The reference is to the widely used cylinder seal, a small object made of hard material, engraved with distinctive ornamentation. The center was hollowed out and a cord passed through so that the seal

could be worn around the neck. When the cylinder was rolled over soft clay, the resultant impression served as a means of identifying personal possessions and of sealing and legitimating clay documents. [2]

This explanation helps us understand why Tamar suggested these items. In Sarna's words it was "a kind of extension of the personality" since it was had the function of a signature. It uniqueness was unmistakable.

The staff is regarded as a symbol of power and makes its first appearance in the Bible in this chapter, fitting in with the blessing that Jacob gave Judah on his deathbed, namely that Judah would assume the mantle of leadership and that the scepter would not depart from his legacy. In taking it, was Tamar also suggesting that his leadership might rise and fall depending on his capacity to act with both compassion and justice? Taking these objects together was symbolically divesting Judah of authority by which he presented himself to the outside world. In essence, although Tamar played the prostitute, it was Judah who stripped himself bare of that which is most essential as a leader, all for momentary gratification.

Tamar asked for three items, not one. Tamar wanted the paternity of the child to be certain, with no taint of ambiguity. Even though Tamar suffered years without pregnancy on the horizon, she was absolutely sure that this one sexual liaison would end with conception, and she was right. She then "took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb" (Gen. 38:19). She quickly left the identity she temporarily donned for the long-suffering identity of the widow. But this time, something was growing under her widow's robes: a child and a delicious secret.

The Adullamite appears again and is the one sent to pay the pledge. Clearly Judah's act was known to at least one person besides Tamar. When Hirah could not find her, he made inquiries about town, connecting himself and his cohorts with prostitutes publically. The text belabors this point. Hirah is seen asking about the prostitute. The townspeople replied in the negative, and then Hirah reported this all to Judah. Judah then made an ironic observation: "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her" (Gen. 38:23). The fear of being ridiculed did not occur to him beforehand. Judah was self-satisfied that he did his best by her since he tried to deliver on his pledge, without understanding that she had what was truly valuable: the damning evidence.

Next Judah was told that his daughter-in-law was pregnant with another dose of irony: "Your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry" (Gen. 38:24). All of the chatter that embodies the chapter tells the reader that this seemingly private encounter was the subject of gossip. Where news of Judah's visit allowed Tamar to seek justice, news of Tamar's pregnancy presaged an act of injustice. Judah was prepared to have Tamar brought out into the public square and burned. Burning is a very specific type of punishment. Its destructive powers are total. If Judah had paid Tamar little mind before, now he would have her literally obliterated without the residue of personal guilt that he should have carried. He could project his guilt onto her shame and feel blameless.

"As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, 'I am with child by the man to whom these belong.' And she was dragged out to her public execution she added, 'Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?'" (Gen. 38:25). The moment of drama is acute; her walk of public shame is the physical approximation of the secret that was about to become public knowledge. Instead of the badge of shame brought on by pregnancy, we imagine Tamar's head held high as she grabbed the objects that would save her and condemn Judah. Tamar immediately referenced the man who fathered the child so as not to bear the shame alone. It was as if she had said directly to the audience of voyeurs, "It takes two to have a child. Let me tell you who else should be punished with me." To his credit, Judah recognized the objects and took the blame: "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen. 38:26).

The chapter then turns from this scene of revelation to the birthing moment. The drama of the breech birth also involves the danger of twins, taking the reader from Tamar's perilous risk in masking her identity to a sudden, breath-holding birth of two children. Since nothing takes place in an ordinary way in the chapter, the birth is no exception. One child placed his hand outside Tamar, and the midwife

quickly encircled it with a crimson thread, a color associated elsewhere in the Bible with sin. The midwife assumed that this brother would come out first. Since the first-born is entitled to certain fiscal privileges and burdened with certain responsibilities, determining the first-born is not insignificant. The red bracelet would have been a sign of early victory. But, because nothing turned out as expected, the hand of this child went back into the womb, and his brother came out first instead. Just like the rest of the narrative, the one who is expected to triumph is vanquished to be eclipsed by another. Judah who thought he had the hand of power ended up bested by a powerless woman. The hand that grabbed life first went back into the womb to emerge second.

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"I consider myself a pretty spiritual person and I know that she wants to continue the line, but I had a problem with this," remarked another woman from the class. "Obviously she is a very holy woman willing to sleep with her father-in-law to continue the line, to produce a future king but personally, that couldn't have been me. Maybe it's because I'm thinking of my own father-in-law." She laughs.
I guess I admire her for it because it's not something I think I could have done. I am in awe of her. She had a mission. She did it. I can feel the text very personally. I think studying texts about women is different than studying other texts. I can identify with the women we study. I love hearing a woman's point of view. It's different than sitting in a room with men and talking about what Tamar was willing to do. I don't know how men would react to this story. I think studying this with women creates more openness with other women. I don't think women would have talked the same way if men were in the room.

For this student, studying with women creates a sensitive space for exploration. "The comfort level is different, and maybe even the thought level is different. Maybe the conversation is going to go in a slightly different direction with a group of women." Safety is one feature of gender-based learning as is topic selection and discussion, but this woman was making a more radical suggestion: "the thought level is different."

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The context of Genesis 38 is critical. Sandwiched between the throwing of a brother into a pit and the seduction of that brother by a woman in power, we have the story of a brother's abdication of responsibility and a seduction by a relatively powerless woman. Genesis 38 begins with Judah's lone descent. "About that time, Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah" (Gen. 38:1). Grouped together as a unit, Judah and his brothers made poor decisions with long-term consequences; their brutality fed off each other. Suddenly, the text singles out Judah, perhaps, as some commentaries believe, to understand the kind of brother who would allow his own flesh-and-blood to squander in a pit. He was not the first brother to be singled out from the group. Reuben took his own walk back to the pit and discovered that Joseph was missing, ripped his clothes and reported it to the others. When he painfully cried, "The boy is gone! Now what am I to do?" may indicate that Reuben thought this a mere prank driven by rivalry until it turned into something more sinister, and he, as eldest, would be held accountable. In an anxious huddle, the men contemplated their next move and took Joseph's coat to their father. Once the deed had been done and its consequences unraveled, the linear movement of the story pauses and turns to Judah alone and a drama that involves him to the exclusion of any brothers.
Judah's only close company in this chapter is his friend Hirah. Judah took a wife, had children, then lost a wife, had sons who died and a daughter-in-law who was banished to her father's house. Hirah is the only character who stays at his side throughout the entire narrative. If Genesis 37 warned us about evil in company and the rabble-rousing that complicity can create, Genesis 38 continues the lesson. It is Hirah who Judah camps near, Hirah who Judah goes sheep-shearing with and Hirah who went to pay

the prostitute. Judah's decisions and actions throughout are self-absorbed. Even his friend is only regarded in service of him, and an ignoble service at that. This is the kind of man, the chapter suggests, who might just throw his brother in a pit, who is groomed for leadership himself and blessed with it by his father but he failed to initiate moral leadership, both with his brother Joseph and with his daughter-in-law Tamar.

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Women studying about women with other women naturally precipitates conversations about women. One woman who prefers learning in a mixed-setting said that she does not necessarily view the texts from a woman's perspective, making a study of women in Genesis undifferentiated from, say, an exploration of major themes in Numbers. "I've always liked talking with males about things, and in some of the mixed groups I've been in—without stereotyping men or women—I've liked the rigor and the logic that I don't always find in learning with women." Even as she says this, she hesitates. She does not want to stereotype the way that women learn and struggles to find the language to explain her preferences. She was aware as a child that when men studied separately she felt left out and didn't want to feel left out. But then she pauses because there are times when the women-only learning setting and the cast of female characters does impact her more:

When we're learning about a woman who is in a difficult position, either she doesn't have the freedoms to do what she wants with her life or she doesn't have children, I think that there's an identification with what she might be experiencing which is more personal than with other characters. I think it's easier to imagine oneself in the inside of a female character. It's not seeing myself in her position currently as much as like when you're little and you play imagination games. You play another character, and I could envision myself that way. But sometimes I do identify more with a male than a female depending on the circumstance.

Infertility, rape, nursing, birth, marriage, and mothering have come up as themes in the class. Could these be explored in the same way with men? "I think there might be a level of discomfort with the topics if we were studying with men. It's not really about modesty but about privacy." It allows for a comfort level for sensitive topics that surface in discussion.

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The interpolation of this chapter in the Joseph narratives has led many scholars to view this story as an imposition or digression on what would otherwise have been a linear tale about the rise of Joseph's power. The scholars who arbitrarily dismiss the placement as a result of multiple authors miss many of the more profound linguistics and thematic connections in the chapters before and after the story of Judah and Tamar. Robert Alter draws attention to a Midrash that regards Judah as the deceiver deceived (*Bereshit Rabba* 84:11,12) and comments on the way that the assumption of interconnectedness makes us more careful readers:

The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have assumed. With their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of the Midrash were often exquisitely attuned to small verbal signs of continuity and to significant levels of nuance as any "close reader" of our own age.[3]

Specifically in reading this narrative, Alter places great weight on the repetition of the infinitive *le-hakir*—to recognize or to identify— in its various forms. Jacob was asked to identify Joseph's coat

dipped in blood in Genesis 37 and then Judah was asked to identify his seal, cord and staff in 38. Although Alter does not point this out, identifying objects surface again in Genesis 39 when Joseph runs away from the wife of Potiphar's nefarious clutches and leaves his garment as evidence.

One critical emphasis in each of these chapters is the way in which an object tells a story. Although Alter stresses the verb "to recognize" that runs throughout these narratives, he does not note an inherent difference which the juxtaposed texts force upon the reader. The brothers, when handing Jacob the bloody garment did not lie. They let the coat lie for them in the visual shock it presented to their father: "They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, 'We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not' He recognized it and said, 'My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!'" (Gen. 37:33).

In one chapter, an object lied. In the next, an object told the truth. There are many ways to tell a story and many props that lend themselves to non-verbal reporting. All Potiphar's wife had to do to incriminate Joseph was hold up what he once wore. In her case, the object both lied and told the truth. It was indeed Joseph's garment, but it was not left there as the remains of a sordid tryst. It was in this nameless woman's hands because she took it forcibly, exerting her considerable power over a vulnerable servant who rejected her.

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"In our class, when you learn with women there's a lot of discussion about the psychology of what's going on, and I doubt we'd get that in a mixed class." She was sure studying as a man would not be the same. "It might be on a different level; it might not look much to the interpersonal. The comments and questions people make inform our learning."

As an instructor, I struggled and still struggle with this question. Does learning in a uni-gender classroom change the learning and possibly even change the thinking? I am familiar with the psychological research presented in *Women's Ways of Knowing*:

Women pose questions more than men, they listen to others, and they refrain from speaking out—these have long been considered signs of powerlessness, subjugation, and inadequacy of women. When women's talk is assessed against standards established by men's behavior, it is seen as tentative, vacillating, and diminutive.[4]

Perhaps women in the company of men invalidate their own intellectual confidence, stunting their own exploration of an idea. I am aware that many women experience this, but generally I never have. Through high school, all of my own learning took place in a mixed-gender setting. My study partners were usually male by preference because, like the learner in the class who unwillingly made assumptions about the way men and women learn, I fell into the same trap. I felt comfortable with the confidence of boys and was anxious to be in their intellectual company. I shied away from what I regarded as "girly" topics and even studied and taught Talmud at the expense of my love of Bible, feeling it to be the intellectually superior discipline, not because it is but because I bought wholesale into that stereotype.

I appreciate the diversity of discussion that comes from different life-experience, different points of religious observance and non-observance, different ages, and, of course, different genders. I rarely teach women-only classes and have often turned down opportunities to privilege mixed-gender learning. But I did not turn down the invitation to teach this class in my neighborhood and soon found it growing into a highlight of my week. Try as I might to minimize the act of a woman teaching other women about women I could not resist its attractions. This is a community of learners in the best sense of the word. They care for each other and use the class as platform to honor a deceased parent on a *yartzheit* or to think about a member of the class who is ill. They know about each other's families and have been through bat mitzvah celebrations, the birth of grandchildren, and even the passing of class members. They remind each other to pray for others and discuss communal issues before and after our learning. They learn in the most powerful way that ideas have staying power, when they are studied among friends.

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“She is more in the right than I…” Tamar does not get the last word in her narrative. Judah does, speaking about Tamar and validating the risk she took, understanding that she did it with the most noble of intentions. Trapped in limitation, Tamar modeled responsibility, justice and compassion for Judah, a man blessed with future leadership. Those who wear the seal and cord and carry the staff must use power judiciously and righteously. And those who follow Tamar and study her story see in her the ultimate female empowerment, leadership not for the sake of authority alone but for the sake of continuity.

Notes

[1] Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1996): 77.
[2] Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001): 268.
[3] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981): 11.
[4] Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986): 188–189.