

## Parshat Vayeshev: Tamar the Tenacious Rabbanit Leah Sarna Class of 2018

In the middle of the Joseph story drama, as we watch Yaakov's family falling apart at the seams, Bereishit 38 takes a short detour-- and shows us a different way. We encounter the character of Tamar, and she models sacrifice for family, legacy and continuity.

In this chapter, we find ourselves caught up in the intimate lives of Yehuda and his sons. Yehuda marries the daughter of Shua and they have three children: Er, Onan and Shelah. Yehuda marries Er off to Tamar. Hashem kills Er, and Judah marries Tamar to his second son, Onan. This short-lived relationship is all about זרע-- seed, continuity, succession. The word זרע, in context meaning offspring, appears three times in this short story.

### Bereishit 38

**8** Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring (זרע) for your brother."  
**9** But since Onan knew that the offspring (זרע) would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring (זרע) to his brother.

### בראשית פרק לח

ח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְאוֹנָן בֶּן אֶלְיָשָׁת׃  
אָחִיךָ יִבַּם אֶתְּךָ וְהָקִים זָרַע לְאָחִיךָ׃  
ט וַיֵּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יְהִי הַזָּרַע וְהָיָה  
אֶם-בָּא אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ אָחִיו וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָהּ  
לְבִלְתִּי נָתֵן זָרַע לְאָחִיו׃

This too displeased Hashem, and Hashem killed Onan as well.

This year the yeshiva is learning Hilchot Shabbat. Early on, we studied Massechet Shabbat 73b as part of our investigation of the complex relationship between avot melachot and toldot-- between the primary categories of forbidden activity and their subcategories. The gemara says:

A baraita is taught with regard to the prohibited labor of sowing: One who sows, and one who prunes the branches of vines to accelerate their growth, and one who plants, and one who bends the branch of a vine or a tree into the ground so that it takes root while still attached to the trunk, and one who grafts the branch of one tree onto another have all performed one type of labor, as they all stimulate plant growth ([The William Davidson Talmud, Shabbat 73b](#)).

תנא: הזורע והזומר  
והנוטע והמבריך  
והמרכיב כולן מלאכה  
אחת הן. (שבת עג:)

Which is all to say, there are multiple ways to plant.

Yehuda tried one form of planting, by having Tamar marry his second son. It failed, the planting (זריעה) subverted through his son's semen (זרע), and while he promised to marry her to his third, in truth he feared that it would continue to fail, and he didn't want to risk marrying off his last son to Tamar. But Tamar knew that there are multiple ways to plant.

A fascinating essay by Professor Jacqueline Vayntrub suggests that we take a closer look at the symbolism embedded in Tamar's name. The tamar is the date palm, and it has particular botanical features that might play a role in this story. She writes:

"...The connection can be found in a Tamar character who behaves like the date palm. The date palm, *Phoenix dactylifera*, would have littered the landscape of ancient Israel and Judah—as it still does

today....Beneath the ground, her roots spread out widely—some say as far out as the fronds above. While some trees will have roots that widen as the roots deepen, the date palm will always have wide roots, no matter how deep these roots may go. The roots therefore take up more space as young trees than other types, and can be invasive if not given sufficient space.” (Professor Jacqueline Vayntrub, [“Her Name was Tamar”: Invasive, Destructive, Redemptive](#)).

Vayntrub suggests that the roots of the date palm are thick, strong and invasive. From Hilchot Shabbat, we know that planting can happen in multiple ways. Sometimes, one can even just bend a piece of a tree down into the ground (מבריך) -- and that will shoot off new roots too.

And indeed, this is precisely Tamar’s unusual solution. Instead of looking to carry forward the family name through a standard planting of yet another brother, she looks back to the original tree, to Yehuda. She fools him into sleeping with her, conceives twins, and the family is continued through them to King David and beyond (Ruth, 4:18-22).

Tamar is creative and tenacious. The gemara in Sotah 10a describes her commitment to the family tradition when it interprets the phrase “וַתֵּשֶׁב בְּפֶתַח עֵינַיִם” “sat down at the entrance to Enaim”(Bereishit 38:14). The gemara says:

<p>“Sat down at the entrance to Enaim” Rabbi Alexandri says: This teaches that she went and she sat at the entrance of the home of Abraham our forefather, a place that all eyes hope to see it (<a href="#">The William Davidson Talmud, Sotah 10a</a>).</p>	<p>ותשב בפתח עינים א"ר אלכסנדרי מלמד שהלכה וישבה לה בפתחו של אברהם אבינו מקום שכל עינים צופות לראותו (סוטה י.)</p>
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In this verse, Tamar has come to realize that she will not be married to Yehuda’s third son. Rabbi Alexandri imagines that with that realization, she went to tent of Abraham. The root of it all. Where she could feel tied to the legacy of the family she had tried to plant and perpetuate. That is where Yehuda unknowingly came across her, and--through her cunning alone-- perpetuated the family line.

With all of the wonderful scientific innovations of our day, family continuity remains a complicated process for many. Perhaps we can look to Tamar as a model of creativity and perseverance in the face of challenge. She recognized, as we do, the necessity of carrying forward the family line and the legacy of our forefathers and foremothers in the face of difficulty. Her tenacious loyalty to family resulted in majesty. May we all be so fortunate.



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