

Parshat Vayeshev Deceptions and Higher Callings Tamar Green Eisenstat

In Genesis Chapter 38, the second chapter of our parsha this week, we learn about a particularly challenging episode in the lives of Judah and Tamar, including how Tamar tricked Judah into having children with her, and how the progeny of this sham encounter merited becoming Israel's royal and messianic dynasty.

Taking a closer look at the chain of events, we learn that Tamar had been told by her father-in-law Judah to wait to marry his youngest son, Shelah after her first two husbands (Judah's sons Er and Onan) had died. As time passed, Tamar realized that Judah had no intention of marrying her to Shelah and so she disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah. Sometime later, Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant via an act of prostitution and sent an order that she be burnt to death. Tamar subsequently sent Judah back his seal, cord and staff (items she had requested from Judah during their encounter) with a message that the man to whom those belonged was the father of her child. Understanding what had happened, Judah admitted that Tamar was in the right and Tamar subsequently gave birth to two sons, Perez (from whom King David is descended) and Zerach.

Turning to the question of Tamar's behavior, I'd like to focus on whether Tamar acted ethically in seducing Judah. Specifically, is it permissible to be deceptive for certain end goals? The words of Shimon Ben Gamliel in Avot 1:18 spring to mind: *עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם* "the world endures on three things: justice, truth, and peace." Is it a Torah value to lie, even when possibly warranted?

Rabbinic literature has many narratives exploring the permissibility of "white lies." Last year in Yeshivat Maharat we learned the very sad story in Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Proverbs 31 about the death of Rabbi Meir's and Beruria's two sons and how Beruria had at first lied to Rabbi Meir and claimed that their sons were alive and in the Beit Midrash. It was not until after Havdalah and after Rabbi Meir had something to eat that she very gently broke the tragic news of their sons' passing to him by reciting to him the verse in Job (1:21): "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken, May the name of the Lord be blessed."

But what about here in our parsha? Was Tamar in a similar situation to Beruria, where the kind thing to do was to tell a white lie? Was Tamar really obligated to seduce Judah? Are the means justified by the end? I think the answer lies in the objects which Tamar took from Judah as collateral during their encounter - his seal, his cord and his staff.

In Midrash Aggadah, Genesis 38:18:1 we see the following explanation of the turn of events:

חותמך ופיתילך ומטך. נצנצה [בה] רוח הקודש: חותמך. זו מלכות, שנאמר חי אני נאם ה' [כו'] אם יהיה בניהו בן יהויקים מלך יהודה וגו' (ירמ' כב כד): ופיתילך. אלו סנהדרין שמתעטפים בטליתותיהם: ומטך אשר בידך. זה משיח, שנאמר מטה עוזך ישלח ה' מציון וגו' (תהלים קי ב):

According to the above Midrash, Judah's seal represented the seal of royalty, a symbol of the house of David that would be descended from Judah. Judah's cord represented the

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Sanhedrin, which will later sit in the Temple that Judah's descendents will build, and Judah's staff represents the Messiah, also said to descend from Judah. In Genesis Rabbah 85:9 the Midrash writes that Tamar was infused with a spirit of prophecy, and in asking for those items, Tamar was enacting a vision. The symbolism and meaning of those three objects was so ripe for Judah that when Tamar later had those items returned to Judah, he was able to immediately identify them as his own and, more importantly, understand Tamar's deeper message to Judah about the illustrious destiny of their future progeny.

As such, Tamar was acting as the messenger of the divine will, and it felt almost as if she had no choice but to make the prophetic vision come true, even if it meant telling a white lie and deceiving Judah. I think we should use the actions of Tamar to help us understand and embrace others when they are caught distorting the truth. Before judging others and dismissing their dishonesty and lack of integrity, we should first look at why they are lying, try and understand their motivations and drives. We should give people the benefit of the doubt, as perhaps there could be some sort of higher calling here - like Tamar's prophetic vision - that may make the lie or deception necessary and understandable.

Shabbat shalom.

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