

Parashah: Vayeshev
Read On: December 21, 2024 | 20 Kislev 5785
Torah: Genesis 37:1–40:23
Triennial: Genesis 39:1–40:23
Haftarah: Amos 2:6–3:8

Tamar and the Wife of Potiphar

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

Each time we go down to Egypt during Genesis, twice with Abraham and Sarah, once with Isaac and Rebecca, and once with Joseph and family, we have problems with unwanted sex. The story with Sarah and Rebecca is clear. Both of these wives are told by their husbands to pretend to be their sisters. They are taken by the king to be his consort. God intervenes, punishes the king, rewards the husband monetarily, and the husband and wife go back to Canaan to have children. Egypt plays the role of the wanton one, driven by lust, doing what is right in their eyes rather than responsive to a higher power. Meanwhile, Sarah and Rebecca become sacrosanct. We learn from these episodes that the promises God has made to Abraham must be realized through these specific women. Abraham may be the father of many, but the Jewish people will be the children of Sarah and Rebecca. The women ensure the line is continued, the divine promise is fulfilled.

Almost all of the other women of Genesis fit this model. Rachel and Leah are almost a parody of it in how devoted they are to producing children. Their competition to have the most children leads to the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, the final completion of the divine promise.

Dinah and Tamar are edge cases for this model, each existing in parallel to each other. Dinah is of our tribe, Tamar is potentially not. Dinah spurns the model and goes out on her own to interact with foreigners. She who actually should be sister instead almost becomes wife to the foreigner. Instead, her brothers reclaim her as their own, making her sister again. But she produces no children that the Tanakh reports. She is a genealogical dead end, not a matriarch. Meanwhile, Tamar, who is not a sister, not a relative, is forced out of wifeship by one of us, by Judah. But just like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, she claims motherhood. Tamar masks her identity just as Sarah and Rebecca had done, but this time, it is for the sake of producing children for us, for fulfilling the divine promise. Tamar replaces Dinah in the family tree, she becomes the woman of her generation ensuring that the correct seed is passed down.

Of all the sons of Jacob, of all of B'nei Yisrael, we only hear of Judah's marriage with Tamar as significant. She is the only one who is important for the passing down of seed. And indeed it is through her and Judah that King David will be born. The rest of the sons of Jacob's marriages are unimportant. We do not hear in detail about who they marry and we certainly do not hear about the process of childbearing with them. The central driving point of Genesis is lost, or, perhaps, already complete.

The story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar stands in curious counterpoint to their whole narrative. Joseph descends to Egypt, just as Abraham and Sarah had done. But instead of passing his (non-existent) beautiful wife off as his sister to save himself, Joseph is the one who is taken by the powerful Egyptian and praised for his good looks. But the gender roles are reversed. The wife of Potiphar seems to be playing a role similar to Tamar, to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. She seems too to be childless. Her husband has taken note (טִיָּוֶן) of Joseph in the same way that God "took note" of Sarah and Rebecca. Her husband is treating Joseph as heir rather than producing a child of their own. So she takes matters into her own hands to produce an heir for Egypt. But it does not work. Just as happened in the story of Dinah, when foreigners try to take us to fulfill their own storylines, their own bloodlines, they end up dying out. And we survive and thrive, thanks to the actions of our matriarchs and the women who join them.

Joseph and the Balm of Gilead

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah



**In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.*

Let Boys Be Boys

Ilana Kurshan

White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

Let boys be boys, I say, don't get involved
When kids are cruel, or mean, or horse around
They'll learn to treat each other with respect
When we, their folks, don't overstep our bounds.

So many boys. I've got a lot. Last time
I counted there were twelve. A dozen lads!
The oldest is impetuous and rash
The fourth, flirtatious. Somewhat of a cad.

All boys are boys. But one kid stole my heart
The second youngest. Joseph. Dreamy-eyed
He doesn't always follow with the flocks
He senses he is different, deep inside.

His mother was my favorite. She had eyes
More brilliant than the sun, and moon and stars
Her hair? Like sheaves of wheat in summer wind
She died. My heart was broken into shards.

She had a dress I loved. A colored gown
I gave it to her Joseph. Let him be
Enveloped in his mother's warm embrace
Like Harlequin. A stunning sight to see.

His brothers can get rough with him. But I
Will let them tough it out, like my own dad.
Eventually they'll hug, the boys, make up,
Shake hands. Even if now, the fights are bad.

Let boys be boys, but in my throat, a pit
I swallow hard. Yeah, they'll grow out of it.

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The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.