Vol. III. Issue 13
22 Kislev 5780 /
December 21, 2019

LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

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VAYESHEV

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
SHARON AND MICHAEL FELDSTEIN,
IN APPRECIATION OF
TZVI SINENSKY AND **THE ENTIRE LEHRHAUS EDITORIAL TEAM**
FOR PROVIDING THOUGHTFUL AND INTERESTING TORAH CONTENT.

OF DECEPTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS: REREADING TAMAR IN LIGHT OF RIVKAH

SARAH GOLUBTCHIK is an educator specializing in curriculum development for Jewish day schools.

The The story of Tamar and Yehudah interrupts the lengthy Yosef narrative that dominates the end of the book of Genesis. Tamar is first introduced as the wife of Yehudah's eldest son, Er. Upon Er's death, Yehudah gave Tamar to his second son, Onan. Onan was not interested in fathering what would effectively be his brother's children, and spilled his seed. He, like his older brother, died as a result of his misdeeds. Tamar, who was sent to her father's house to await the youngest son's maturity, reemerged at a critical junction. Yehudah, unaware of her identity, slept with her and she conceived. When Yehudah found out that his daughter-in-law was pregnant, he initially sentenced her to death. Having realized the facts of their encounter, however, Yehudah accepted his role in the situation and Tamar gave birth to twins. While the placement of the story itself begs understanding, there are also a number of puzzling elements within the story that require explanation. What was the purpose of Tamar's deception, and what was her role in the development of Yehudah's family? What ultimately happened to Tamar, and what legacy did she leave?

R. Moshe Alshikh, in his commentary on *parshat* Hayyei Sarah (Genesis 24:67), cites a midrash that highlights two similarities between Tamar and Rivkah: both covered themselves with a scarf, and both gave birth to twins. On the basis of this midrash, Alshikh posits that the Torah highlights these two similarities in order to learn about Tamar from Rivkah. After all, Tamar's action of donning a scarf before meeting Yehudah seems strange. The parallels between the stories suggest that just as Rivkah covered herself with a scarf out of modesty, Tamar too donned her scarf out of modesty before meeting Yehudah. In fact, there are a number of striking parallels between the narratives of Rivkah and Tamar. These similarities create a structure that functions as a form of exegesis: each parallel serves as a point of departure from which the experiences of Rivkah can shed light on those of Tamar. This method unveils layers of understanding and meaning in the narrative of Tamar and Yehudah, and sheds light on its significance in the broader context of the Book of Genesis.

Dressing for the Opportunity

As the midrash notes, both Rivkah and Tamar donned scarves before meeting significant men in their lives. Furthermore, each of these meetings took place after the death of a family matriarch.

When Rivkah approached Yitzhak for the first time, her initial gesture was to cover herself with her scarf:

> And [Rivkah] said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself וַתִּקַּח הַצָּעִיף וַתִּתְכָּס. (Genesis 24:65)

Shortly after this initial encounter, Rivkah was brought into the tent of Sarah, where Yitzhak loved her and was comforted by her in the wake of the loss of his mother:

> Yitzhak then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rivkah as his wife. Yitzhak loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death. (Genesis 24:67)

Tamar's encounter with Yehudah also includes a scarf. Tamar, the widowed wife of Yehudah's sons, had been sent back to her family in mourning to await her marriage to Yehudah's remaining son, Shelah. When Tamar heard that Shelah was grown, she went out to confront Yehudah. Tamar shed her mourning garments and, like Rivkah, wrapped her scarf around her:

> So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil וַתִּתְכַּס בַּצָּעִיף, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Einayim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. (Genesis 38:14)

Tamar's meeting with Yehudah occurs shortly after the death of Bat Shua, Yehudah's wife:

> A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Yehudah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Yehudah went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. (Genesis 38:12)

The purpose of Tamar's meeting with Yehudah is vague. Rivkah's parallel encounter provides a basis from which to understand this event. Rivkah modestly covered herself in front of Yitzhak, the man whom she was about to marry. It is possible to extrapolate that Tamar, too, donned herself in an act of modesty befitting a bride on her wedding day. Tamar, having been sent by her father-in-law back to her parents' house to await Shelah's maturity, realized that the time for her to marry Shelah had arrived. Since Yehudah had not yet followed through on his word, Tamar moved to facilitate the arrangement on her own. She took off her mourning clothes and wrapped herself in a scarf, in the manner of a bride. As Ramban describes:

> The meaning of "live as a widow in your father's house" is to behave as a widow until Shelah is grown, hinting to her, "mourn and dress in your mourning clothes and don't anoint yourself with oils as befits a woman wearing sackcloth for the husband of her youth, until Shelah has grown and will marry you." This was the custom among those waiting for marriage, she who wanted to go out and marry a stranger wears mourning clothes for a short time according to the custom, and feigning comfort dresses in scarlet, **and she wrapped herself with a veil until she would be married to a man.** (Ramban to Genesis 38:11)[1]

As was the custom, a woman who was prepared to marry after her period of mourning changed out of her mourning clothing in anticipation of remarriage. Thus, Tamar removed her mourning clothes as a sign that she was ready to move on. Her scarf, specifically, was an indication of marriageability.[2] However, Yehudah was not the focus of this encounter, but rather his son, Shelah:

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

The significance of the timing of Tamar's approach also supports the conclusion that her intention was to be taken to Shelah. Just as Rivkah's marriage to Yitzhak provided comfort in the wake of his mother's death, Shelah too had recently suffered the loss of his own mother. Notably, the Torah records that Yehudah had found comfort after the death of his wife. This serves as a further indication that he was not the subject of Tamar's confrontation.

In this light, Tamar approached her father-in-law with the intention of being welcomed back into the family as Shelah's bride. Not only was Shelah physically grown, and thus eligible for marriage, but it was an opportune time for him to take comfort in a wife following the loss of his mother, just as Yitzhak was comforted by Rivkah after Sarah's death.

Goats of Deception

Both Rivkah and Tamar engage in acts of deception. In both stories, goats are the central prop in the deceptive act. This connection serves as the basis from which Rivkah's deception can illuminate the nature and intent of Tamar's deception. In Rivkah's famously engineered deception of Yitzhak, she ordered Yaakov to fetch two goats, from which she prepared both a meal for Yitzhak and a disguise for Yaakov:

> Go **to the flock** אֶל־הַצֹּאן and fetch me **two choice goats** שְׁנֵי גְּדְיֵי עִזִּים , and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. (Genesis 27:9)

Similarly, two goats play a crucial role in Tamar's deception of Yehudah:

> So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me come to you"—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you give me for coming to me?" He replied, "I will send **a kid from my flock** גְּדִי־עִזִּים מִן־הַצֹּאן ." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it."And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and came to her, and she conceived by him. (Genesis 38:16-18)

The significance of the parallel use of the goats as central props in both deception stories is bolstered by the fact that these are the only two instances in Tanakh where it is specified that the goats are taken "from the *tzon."* In order to understand the significance of this parallel, it is necessary to delve into the nature of Rivkah's deception of Yitzhak. In doing so, we will demonstrate Rivkah's intentions shed light onto the nature of Tamar's deception of Yehudah.

The narratives that describe Yitzhak's life are filled with references to his past. In the realm of family, his marriage to Rivkah is initially defined by the comfort she brings him after his mother's death. Similarly, when famine hits, the Torah describes the scene by referring to the famine in the days of Avraham:

> There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Avraham—and Yitzhak went to Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, in Gerar. (Genesis 26:1)

Politically as well, his dealings with Avimelekh resemble those of his father. In the economic realm, Yitzhak digs the same wells that his father had dug and calls them by the same names (Genesis 26:18). Furthermore, twice Hashem explicitly notes that the blessings Yitzhak will receive are a result of Avraham's loyalty:

> I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs, inasmuch as Avraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings. (Genesis 26:4-5)

> That night the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Avraham. Fear not, for I am with you,

[1] Translation based on Chavel edition, Shilo Publishing House, Inc. 1999.

[2] In the context of the description of the curtains of the Mishkan, Rashi (Exodus 26:9 s.v. "el") defines *tza'if* as a garment worn in the context of marriage.

> and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Avraham." (Genesis 26:24)

Yitzhak's persona is characterized by strong ties to the previous generation, coupled by limited indication of personal development. This lack of development also characterizes Yitzhak's relationship with his children,[3] and it is on this point that Rivkah ultimately takes action.

The Torah tells us little about the relationship between Yitzhak and his children. When they were young, Yitzhak loved Esav because he put food in his mouth, while Rivkah loved Yaakov (Genesis 25:28). The Torah shares only two indications of the relationship between Yitzhak and Esav: Yitzhak's love for Esav because of his hunted food, and his distress over Esav's wives. Yitzhak is conspicuously absent from the Torah's description of other aspects of his son's life, particularly Rivkah's prophecy describing the tenuous relationship that would characterize her sons and the sale of Esav's birthright in exchange for a pot of soup. These events each shed light on key aspects of Esav's persona, of which Yitzhak seems to be ignorant.

In preparation for Yitzhak's impending passing, he called for Esav to bring him food in order to receive a blessing. Despite the passage of time, the essence of the relationship between Yitzhak and Esav remained simplistically centered around the provision of hunted food:

> When Yitzhak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esav and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am." And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game צֵידָה (כתיב- צידה) וְצוּדָה לִּי. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die." (Genesis 27:1-4)

Rivkah realized that Yitzhak's naivete toward the true nature of Esav could have detrimental ramifications regarding the blessing of her sons. In this context, she took action in order to demonstrate to him just how easily he could be fooled. She instructed Yaakov to fetch two goats, which she prepared as a meal for Yitzhak, and used the skins to disguise Yaakov as his brother. The simple reading of the text indicates that the blessing itself was not the intended result of her deception. When Yaakov protested that he may end up being cursed instead of blessed, Rivkah responded:

"Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me" (Genesis 27:13). She dismissed Yaakov's concern, as the immediate object of her deceit was Yitzhak himself, not her son nor the blessing he would receive. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains:

> And now what was she to do? What could she have wanted with this plan? Nothing but to bring home to him, to convince him, ad hominem, that, and how easily, he could be deceived. If a Yaakov, an *ish tam,* can so easily masquerade as a *gibbor tzayid*, how much more easily can an Esav masquerade as an *ish tam* to him! And in this -- Yitzhak's undeception through Yaakov's deception -- Rivkah succeeded perfectly. As soon as Yitzhak realized the trick that had been played upon him… he received a terrific shock; he saw, as our Sages put it, Geihinom yawning at his feet, saw how all his life he had allowed himself to be deceived. Immediately the scales fell from his eyes, and he immediately added deliberately his confirmatory and now fully consciously expressed blessing *gam barukh yihiyeh*. (Hirsch to Genesis 27:1)[4]

Rav Hirsch concludes that Rivkah's deception cannot be understood as a serious attempt to fool Yitzhak into blessing a different child. Her plan to dress Yaakov in Esav's clothes and to affix goat skin to his arms and neck was not intended to be foolproof, but rather, the opposite. She intended for Yitzhak to discover the prank, and, in doing so, recognize how deeply and thoroughly he had been fooled by Esav throughout his life. The success of Rivkah's plan is underscored by Yitzhak's reaction of both shock and acceptance:

> Yitzhak was seized with very **violent trembling**. "Who... where is he," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; **now he must remain blessed!**" (Genesis 27:33)

His emotional trembling and verbal stumbling demonstrate his shock as he registered what had just transpired. This immediate reaction is followed by acceptance: Yaakov will surely be blessed. As a result of forcing Yitzhak into the realization that he had allowed himself to be fooled, Rivkah effectively caused him to take control of what remained in his life. Accordingly, he sent Yaakov to Haran with instructions to marry a woman from his own family, in contradistinction to the wives Esav had taken. Furthermore, he bestowed upon Yaakov *birkat Avraham*, actively ensuring that only Yaakov would be the progenitor of the nascent Abrahamic line.

This analysis of Rivkah's motivation provides a framework that allows for deeper insight and understanding of Tamar's intentions in deceiving Yehudah. Following the sale of Yosef, Yehudah immersed himself in his economic pursuits and integrated into the community around him as demonstrated by his choice of wife, known only as the daughter of a Canaanite called Shua. They had three children: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Yehudah selected Tamar as a wife for Er; upon his death, she was given to Onan, who soon died as well. Having only one son left from which he could establish a legacy, Yehudah was clearly troubled by the possibility that Tamar was the cause of his sons' deaths, as the Torah gives a rare glimpse into his thoughts:

> Then Yehudah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he thought, "**He too might die like his brothers**." So Tamar went to live in her father's house. (Genesis 38:11)

Until this point, each of the patriarchs had been required to marry a woman from outside of Canaan. The Canaanites were known for their immorality (Leviticus 18:3), and it seems logical that Er and Onan were influenced negatively by their surroundings. Against this background, Yehudah sent Tamar away on the premise that she herself caused the death of his older sons. However, the Torah explicitly states that the brothers died as a result of their own misdeeds:

[3] The only realm in which Yitzhak does take initiative is the birth of his children. When Rivkah proves to be barren, Yitzhak prays on her behalf, and, it seems, his prayers are immediately answered. However, from this point on, the Torah does not share any active parental involvement on the part of Yitzhak.

[4] Translation based on Isaac Levy's translation, Judaica Press.

> But Er, Yehudah's firstborn, **was displeasing to the Lord**, and the Lord took his life. (Genesis 38:7)
>
> But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. **What he did was displeasing to the Lord**, and He took his life also. (Genesis 38:9-10)

By simply sending Tamar away, he ignored the reality that his sons' own behavior caused their deaths. Like Yitzhak before him, Yehudah was pained by the foreign wife of his sons, and yet ignored the reality that his sons themselves were the root of the problem. From his perspective, Tamar posed a threat to Shelah as well as to Yehudah's legacy. Thus, Yehudah sent Tamar home to her family, on the stipulation that she would be given to the third son upon his maturity.

Tamar, passive until this point, returned to her father's house, but did not forget the temporal nature of her exile: "until Shelah is grown." When she heard that Yehudah was travelling to Timnah to shear his sheep, she decided to meet him on the way, as she knew that Shelah was now of marriageable age. By taking off her mourning clothes and donning her scarf, she prepared herself to be taken to Shelah, as described above.

Yehudah approached her and requested that she have relations with him, misjudging her scarf to be the guise of a harlot:

> When Yehudah saw her, he **considered her to be a harlot**; for she had covered her face. (Genesis 38:15)

This misperception is bolstered by the fact that Yehudah's messenger was subsequently unable to find Tamar at all, being informed that there had never been a harlot in the area:

> Yehudah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. He inquired of the people of that town, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Einayim, by the road?" But they said, **"There has been no prostitute here."** (Genesis 38:20-21)

Tamar confirmed what was likely her suspicion: she could not trust him to allow her to marry Shelah. The notion that simply removing Tamar from the scene would prevent his son's death is indicative of his misperception of the reality of his family. However, by delaying or perhaps denying Tamar and Shelah the opportunity to marry, this misperception led Yehudah to deny his responsibility towards both Tamar and his sons, all of whom were entitled to the benefits of *yibbum.*[5]

Like Rivkah, Tamar took action when she saw that Yehudah's blindness toward the reality of his children was about to develop into irresponsibility. As Tamar approached the junction, Yehudah propositioned her to sleep with him. Tamar accepted his offer to pay her with a goat, having negotiated the collection of three unique objects of identification as collateral until the goat arrived. They had relations, she conceived, and returned to her father's home and her mourning garments. Yehudah sent the goat with a messenger, but he was not able to find her; the goat remained undelivered and the collateral unreturned. When Yehudahh was ultimately informed that Tamar was pregnant, he ordered her to be burned as punishment for her prostitution.

Tamar, in possession of Yehudah's unique objects of identification, could simply have exposed Yehudah and claimed what was rightfully hers. However, Tamar discreetly sent the collateral without directly exposing her father-in-law. In doing so, she set up an opportunity for Yehudah to realize how he had allowed himself to be fooled by impregnating his own daughter-in-law on the misperception that she was a harlot. If he accepted this, perhaps he would also realize how he had been fooled by his sons and their misguided ways. Tamar put Yehudah in a position where he could take responsibility for his actions and his family by saving her and his unborn children from death. The shocking dose of reality awakened Yehudah, as he cried out:

> *Tzadkah mimeni*, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah. And he was not intimate with her again. (Genesis 38:26)

Yehudah's cry of "*tzadkah mimeni*" can be interpreted as "She is more right/righteous than I," or, "She is right, they (the children) are mine." The first interpretation, while true to the text, is ambiguous regarding the nature of the comparison that Yehudahh made between himself and Tamar. Perhaps his intention was to clear her of his implied accusations that she was somehow responsible for the death of his sons.

The second interpretation (following Rashi s.v. "tzadkah"), which requires an implicit understanding that *mimeni* refers to the unborn children, fits neatly into the context and details of the story. In light of the dynamics of the story, the word *mimeni* takes on significant weight. Yehudahh acknowledged that not only are the unborn children his, but that he desired them. His simple yet powerful response proved that Tamar did indeed facilitate a change in the way that he perceived his reality and, consequently, in the way he related to his familial responsibilities.

The word *tzadkah* also implies merit, as in Rashi's explanation of the puzzling statement in *parshat Lekh Lekha*:

> And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לּוֹ צְדָקָה**.** (Genesis 15:6)
>
> And He accounted it unto him for righteousness — The Holy One, blessed be He, accounted it unto Avraham as a **merit**, because of the faith with which he had trusted in Him. Another explanation is: he did not, by these words, ask for a sign regarding this promise that he would possess the land, but he said to Him, "Tell me by what merit they [my descendants] will remain in it (the land)." God answered him, through the merit of the sacrifices (*Ta'anit* 27b). (Rashi, Genesis 15:6)

Thus, on a deeper level, Yehudah acknowledged that it was in Tamar's merit that he would have more children, and effectively a second chance at creating a family.

Yehudah's realization that this specific incident of deception was only one of many that he allowed himself to experience is reflective of

[5] Tamar was entitled to a son who would support her, the older sons were entitled to inheritors, and Shelah was entitled to Tamar as a wife.

Yitzhak's reaction upon realizing that he had been deceived. Yitchak's initial panic indicated a shocked admission of acceptance of the reality that he was, in fact, tricked. Yet, his declaration "*gam barukh yihiyeh*" denotes an acceptance of responsibility for the resultant act such that Yaakov, too, will be blessed. Similarly, withholding Shelah from Tamar was the culmination of Yehudah's warped sense of reality characterized by his misperception of the nature of his children and the responsibility that he had toward his family. His admission of *tzadkah mimeni* expressed his acceptance of his own foolhardiness and acceptance of responsibility, and his later dealings with his father, his brothers, and Yosef demonstrate personal change in a fundamental way.

Abrupt Endings

Yet another parallel between Rivkah and Tamar is the birth of their twins. The birth of Tamar's twins is an unusual one, and it echoes the dynamic entrance of Rivkah's twins. Esav exited the womb first, followed by Yaakov, with his hand on Esav's heel. Similarly, the birth of Tamar's twins included an extended hand:

> While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife **tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first**. But just then **he drew back his hand, and out came his brother**; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Peretz. Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah. (Genesis 38:18-20)

Zerah's extended hand is followed by its withdrawal and the subsequent birth of Peretz as the firstborn. The seeming struggle of Zerah and Peretz to come out first reflects the lifelong struggle of Yaakov and Esav for the birthright. The birth of Tamar's twins concludes the narrative of Tamar and Yehudah, and the Torah returns to the Yosef story writ large. As with the analysis of other parallels between the two stories, the role of Rivkah's twins in the broader context of the story sheds light on this unusual ending to the Tamar and Yehudah narrative.

Yitzhak's blindness and passivity towards his twins compelled Rivkah to demonstrate to her husband how he had been deceived. Rivkah's plan effectively changed both the attitude and actions of Yitzhak toward his children. Before the deception, Yitzhak was bothered by Esav's choice of wives, yet did not react. After the deception, however, Yitzhak took control by actively choosing to bless Yaakov with *birkat Avraham*, and by instructing him to find a wife from his own family. These actions on the part of Yitzhak effectively gave him a second chance, and guaranteed the continuation of his family line through the building of Yaakov's family.

Tamar, too, was compelled to deceive Yehudah as a means to awaken him to the nature of his sons' behavior and his obligation to them and to herself. In his blindness, he lost both Er and Onan, and by not allowing Shelah to marry Tamar, he effectively cut off the continuation of his family. As a result of Tamar's actions, Yehudah, like Yitzhak, claimed responsibility for his family and its future. Though this change came too late to rectify the situation of Er, Onan, and Shelah, Yehudah was given a second chance with the birth of his twins. Both Yitzhak and Yehudah were granted second chances, and the birth of Tamar's twins is thus a fitting conclusion to this narrative.

A final parallel that bonds the stories of Rivkah and Tamar is the vague endings of these two women. Although both Rivkah and Tamar were major characters in their stories, each had a somewhat ambiguous end.

After Rivkah expressed to Yitzhak her fear lest Yaakov take a wife from the daughters of Het, she is not heard from again. Even her death remains unclear. The Torah strangely recounts the death of Rivkah's handmaid, Devorah:

> Devorah, Rivkah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-bakhuth. (Genesis 35:8)

Ramban (to Genesis 35:8), on the basis of *Genesis Rabbah* (81:5), explains the unusual mention of Devorah as an allusion to the death of Rivkah, whose own death is not mentioned. Likewise, Tamar's active presence in the Torah ends abruptly. In fact, the ambiguity in the text indicates that Tamar's active involvement ended when she sent the collateral to Yehudah; she is not an active figure in the birth of her twins, as the midwife was the one who named them.[6] The Torah hints to Tamar's ending in the same pasuk that contains Yehudah's pivotal declaration:

> Yehudah recognized them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah, וְלֹא־יָסַף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ." (Genesis 38:26)

Rashi (to Genesis 38:26) discusses two opposite meanings of this phrase: either he did not cease to know her and thus they lived as a married couple, or he did not continue to know her intimately, and they never had relations again. Her future is left intentionally vague, but what is clear is that Tamar disappears as an active figure in the text.

Rivkah's role in her own deception imposes meaning on Tamar's vague ending. Rivkah's role was behind the scenes: she set the stage, prepared the props, and directed Yaakov. Once Yitzhak claimed responsibility for his family, Rivkah all but disappeared. Rivkah's deception was never about her in any way; her goal was to engineer an awareness in Yitzhak and, in doing so, precipitate change. In contrast to Rivkah, Tamar was both the engineer and principal player in the deception of Yehudah. However, their parallel endings provide the perspective that Tamar's deception was also never about her personal gain. Though she was entitled to her levirate marriage and the benefits thereof, these gains were byproducts of the larger goal of demonstrating Yehudah's ability to be deceived, and the resulting change in his character.

The Big Picture

The many points of similarity between the experiences of Rivkah and Tamar underscore the unique relationship between these two narratives, adding layers of understanding and purpose to the story of Tamar and Yehudah. At its essence, the story of Tamar begins with a deeply flawed Yehudah, who would not see the true nature of his sons. Noting his ability to be deceived by his family, and feeling the effects of Yehudah's misperceptions in a very personal way, Tamar deceives Yehudah in a way that compels him to acknowledge and deal with his warped vision of his family. Tamar's act proves successful, as Yehudah takes responsibility for her pregnancy, and is granted a second chance to develop his family upon the birth of his twins.

[6] See Radak to Genesis 38:29.

Yehudah's renewed sense of obligation is also relevant in the broader context of the leadership narratives that characterize the second half of the book of Genesis. The selection of leaders in Genesis seemed to operate in contrast to the culture of the time, which emphasized the role of the firstborn as the leader of the family. Both Avraham and Yitzhak had two children; the youngest of each family was chosen to be the heir and sole progenitor of the Abrahamic line. However, among the twelve sons of Yaakov there was no clear indication as to how the leader or leaders of the next generation would be chosen. Of the sons of Yaakov, five stood out as potential leaders: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yosef, and Yehudah. Each of these brothers experienced a turning point that involved sexual impropriety with a woman.

Reuven, as the oldest, was a possible contender for leader. However, his attempts at leadership were misguided at best. The incident that stands out as the disqualifier is when Reuven[7] laid with his father's concubine Bilhah:

> While Yisrael stayed in that land, **Reuven went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine;** and Yisrael found out… Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve in number. (Genesis 35:22)

Yaakov's reaction is unrecorded; however, immediately after Yaakov hears of this action, there is a rare *parshiyah* break in the middle of a *pasuk*, after which the sons of Yaakov are listed, a seeming non-sequitur. Later, Yaakov's final words to Reuven center on his inappropriate act:

> Reuven, you are my first-born, My might and first fruit of my vigor, Exceeding in rank And exceeding in honor. Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer; **For when you mounted your father's bed, You brought disgrace**—my couch he mounted. (Genesis 49:3-4)

Despite what were likely good intentions throughout his life, Reuven's legacy was stained by his inappropriate involvement with Bilhah.

Shimon and Levi also stood out as natural leaders. When Dinah was taken by Shekhem, they took action and ultimately killed the male inhabitants of the entire city. When Yaakov reacted negatively, they justified their behavior as being driven by responsibility for their sister, who was treated like a harlot:

> But they answered, "Should our sister be treated like a harlot?" (Genesis 34:31)

There was no response to this declaration; as with Reuven, the *parshiyah* abruptly ends. This act defines them, as Yaakov expressed in his final words:

> Shimon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Yaakov, Scatter them in Yisrael (Genesis 49:5-7).

In contrast to these three brothers, Yosef and Yehudah both engage in pivotal acts with women that prove to be transitional in a positive way. Yosef, having been sold by his brothers, became a servant in the house of Potiphar. He found favor in the eyes of his master's wife, yet he refused her advances. Dismayed by rejection, Potiphar's wife deceived her household and accused Yosef of rape. As a result, Yosef was thrown in jail. However, despite the many years he spent there, this proved to be his ticket to freedom:

> So Yosef's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined. But even while he was there in prison, G-d was with Yosef: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. (Genesis 39:20-21)

By refusing Potiphar's wife's advances, Yosef demonstrated the loyalty and responsibility that were needed for the next stage of his development. Yaakov recognized this in his last words to Yosef:

> Archers bitterly assailed him; They shot at him and harried him. Yet his bow stayed taut, And his arms were made firm By the hands of the Mighty One of Yaakov— There, the Shepherd, the Rock of Yisrael. (Genesis 49:23-24)

Rashi (to 49:23) explains that Yaakov referred to Yosef's brothers, and Potiphar and his wife, as those who embittered Yosef's life. Despite these forces, Yaakov described Yosef as remaining steadfast, and accorded him what is effectively a leadership role:

> The blessings of your father surpass the blessings of my ancestors, To the utmost bounds of the eternal hills. May they rest on the head of Yosef, on the brow of the elect of his brothers. (Genesis 49:26)

As demonstrated above, Yehudah's transitional moment also took place in the context of inappropriate sexual conduct with a woman. Whereas Shimon and Levi were zealously concerned that their sister was treated like a harlot, Yehudah had no qualms in propositioning Tamar. Like Yosef, however, this incident ultimately had a positive outcome. As demonstrated, Tamar awakened Yehudah to his ability to be manipulated, not just by Tamar, but by his children as well. Yehudah reacted favorably to this realization, taking responsibility for Tamar and for his twins. His changed sense of obligation towards his family also became apparent in the way he related to his brothers and his father. The leadership role he took upon himself is recognized by Yaakov in his final speech:

> The scepter shall not depart from Yehudah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet; So that tribute shall come to him, And the homage of peoples be his. (Genesis 49:10)

Tamar's legacy is the birth of her twins and the leadership of her descendants. The Alshikh (to Genesis 24:26) concludes that the modesty of Rivkah and Tamar merited the birth of twins. The modest act of donning a scarf was a manifestation of an inner trait that characterized both women. Both deception stories highlight the need to facilitate change in another person, and the unceremonious endings of both women highlight the selflessness of their acts. Rivkah's deception of Yitzhak led to the chosenness of Yaakov as the sole recipient of *birkat Avraham*. Tamar's deception of Yehudahh led to the birth of her twins and the eventual Davidic dynasty. Both deceptions caused a ripple effect that is seen clearly throughout the book of Genesis and continues through Jewish history at large.

[7] Earlier, Reuven gave his mother *dudaim*, which she in turn used as currency to buy an extra night with Yaakov, which serves as an additional example of his lack of appropriate boundaries regarding marital relations.

The Autism Question and Beyond: Rereading the Joseph Saga

YITZCHAK BLAU is a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Orayta and also teaches at Midreshet Lindenbaum.

Most readers of Samuel J. Levine's *Was Yosef on the Spectrum? Understanding Joseph Through Torah, Midrash, and Classical Jewish Sources* will likely focus their energies on the question in the book's title. Is it appropriate to attribute autism to one of our biblical heroes? Are the author's arguments for such a thesis persuasive? Yet it would be a shame if that issue exhausted discussion about a volume which deals with many significant interpretative questions regarding the Joseph narrative. Levine, a professor of Law and Director of the Jewish Law Institute at the Touro Law Center, has done an impressive amount of research, combing the traditional commentaries and *midrashim* for relevant material, and reading the verses quite carefully. Following up on his footnotes provides ample reward, particularly since Levine addresses the later chapters in Genesis which many *Humash* students do not get to. After evaluating the central thesis, this review will then explore some important ideas in Levine's work.

In support of his essential thesis, Levine identifies many potential traits of Joseph that cohere with a person on the autism spectrum. Among other traits, Joseph feels a special connection with animals, engages in self-stimulating physical gestures, has trouble reading the emotions of others, does not foresee the consequences of his actions, and combines impressive cognitive abilities with immaturity. Furthermore, Potiphar's wife identifies him as an easy mark. These commonalities notwithstanding, while the list does describe people on the autism spectrum, it also describes many people to whom we would not attribute a particular condition. Many human beings struggle to anticipate consequences, and combine deep intelligence with lack of understanding. Thus, it is hard to say that we have a strong case for locating Joseph on the spectrum.

Moreover, a number of the items listed above depend upon a particular interpretation of the relevant verses. To be fair, Levine always honestly outlines various possibilities even when only one supports his thesis. For example, some commentators on 37:2 (Seforno, Abravanel) explain that Joseph instructed his brothers in how to care for the sheep, but that is not the only reading of "*hayah ro'eh et ehav ba-tzon*". Joseph may simply have been an equal partner with his brothers in the realm of shepherding. According to the latter interpretation, there is no evidence that Joseph had a particular affinity for animals. Similarly, while Levine interprets the midrash about Joseph's *ma'aseh na'arut* as his engaging in self-stimulating physical gestures, Rashi understands that Joseph is arrogantly playing with his hair and admiring his own good looks. Thus, the list of traits identifying Joseph on the autism spectrum is itself debatable.

I imagine that Levine is partially motivated by a desire to generate greater respect for autistic people and their potential accomplishments, a worthy goal. However, his approach may come at a cost. We often grant significant leeway to autistic individuals and alleviate them of full moral responsibility for their behavior. Doing so for Joseph destroys crucial elements of the story. Joseph makes youthful errors born of pride, yet he heroically resists the wife of Potiphar, and eventually forgives his brothers for their heinous crime despite his temptation and ability to extract revenge. Does this account work if we excuse Joseph from full moral responsibility? Perhaps it does if we view Joseph as on the extremely high functioning end of the autism spectrum; but I have my doubts.

Still, even those who do not accept the main thesis will benefit from a careful reading of Levine's work. The following four issues appear in the book in the context of the possibility that Joseph was somewhere on the spectrum. I am purposely divorcing them from that context to illustrate the value of Levine's analysis beyond his central theme. His wide reading and effective citation of textually sensitive commentaries on the Joseph saga enhanced this reader's understanding of the story. Levine locates interpretive gems in the traditional commentators which illuminate aspects of the Joseph narrative.

Many note the intensive mourning Jacob does for Joseph with six different verbs conveying his grief:

> And Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said: 'Nay, but I will go down to the grave to my son mourning.' And his father wept for him. (*Genesis* 37:34-35)

Why does Jacob express the most profound mourning of any biblical character? Obviously, losing a child, especially one's favorite son, causes immense pain. Yet Levine notes that Radak adds that Jacob blamed himself for the tragedy; after all, Jacob had sent his son to check on the brothers in Shekhem. Perhaps the only thing more horrible than a parent losing a child is the parent feeling responsible for that child's early demise.

We now jump ahead several chapters to Joseph appearing before Pharaoh. Some erroneously think that tyrants and dictators can rely on their intimidating power to do whatever they please, but history indicates otherwise: even absolute monarchs worry about open or hidden resistance as they employ various methods of propaganda and persuasion to convince the populace to support their decisions. The process of Pharaoh's appointment of Joseph follows this trend. Pharaoh wants to appoint Joseph second-in-command in Egypt, but he foresees opposition, either due to jealousy against a newcomer or ethnic hatred of an outsider. Thus, it is not an accident that Pharaoh turns to his servants to proclaim Joseph's greatness (41:38). He intends to persuade them to go along with his decision. Furthermore, as Abravanel explains, Pharaoh gives Joseph both an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife in order to facilitate his integration into Egyptian nobility (Abravanel, Jerusalem 5744, Genesis p. 396).

After the familial reconciliation, Joseph instructs his brothers to inform Pharaoh that they tend cattle so that he will grant them dwelling in the land of Goshen, but he does not tell his brothers to mention Goshen (46:33). Apparently, the plan is for Pharaoh to arrive at that conclusion without feeling that the brothers decided independently where they will live; the king might otherwise resent the brothers for selecting real estate for themselves. Yet when carrying out the plan, they do explicitly state their desire to live in Goshen (47:4). Abravanel begins his explanation by noting that the verb "*Va-yomru*" appears twice consecutively (47:3-4) despite the fact that the brothers speak to Pharoah each time. One explanation for this biblical phenomenon is that a character waits for a response that does not come, and then chooses to speak again. After the brothers declared that they are shepherds, they waited for Pharaoh to articulate the Goshen idea. Only after the monarch responded

with silence did they begin anew and ask for Goshen (Abravanel, Genesis p. 422).

Our final example comes from one of the concluding chapters of Genesis. Afraid that his days are numbered, Jacob asks Joseph to swear that he will bury him in Canaan, the burial place of his ancestors, not in Egypt. When Joseph assures his father that he intends to carry out this directive, Jacob asks again for an oath, and only then does Joseph swear (47:29-31). Ramban explains that Jacob certainly trusted his cherished son and Joseph's word alone sufficed without a formal oath. However, Jacob was concerned that the Egyptians would resist the idea and anticipated that an oath would make them appreciate Joseph's need to carry out Jacob's wishes. Indeed, Pharaoh makes reference to the oath when granting Joseph permission to bury his father in Canaan (50:6).

Levine uses these four scenes to advance his essential argument. Joseph's struggle to understand his father's request indicates the communication difficulties that plague the autistic. Pharaoh has to work extremely hard to convince his followers to accept Joseph given the latter's unusual condition. Jacob feels extra responsible for Joseph's fate since he failed to appreciate how his son's autism might render him unsuitable for the mission of checking on his brothers. In contrast to the above, Joseph shows greater wisdom than his brothers regarding the request to settle in Goshen. Despite their limitations, autistic individuals often have areas of life in which they succeed admirably. For Joseph, negotiating with the Egyptian monarch was one such area.

At the same time, as noted, we can explain these scenes quite well without the autism theme. Jacob's excessive grief, Pharaoh's need to convince his underlings, strategizing to enable settlement in Goshen, and the debate about the need for an oath regarding location of burial all make sense and generate insight even if Joseph is not on the spectrum. Appreciating the wisdom of Radak, Abravanel, Ramban, and others allows those resistant to the main argument to benefit significantly from a careful reading of this volume. We are indebted to Levine both for his painstaking reading of the last fourteen chapters of Genesis and for his prodding us to rethink our attitude to the autistic.