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### HOW YEHUDAH LEARNED TO RESPECT WOMEN

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Chapter 38 of Genesis tells the story of Yehudah's fall and rise, quite literally; Yehudah initially "goes down" (from among his brothers), and then "goes up" (to supervise his sheepshearers). The narrative arc of the chapter builds toward the moment when Tamar returns Yehudah's talismans using the exact words the brothers used when implying to Yaakov that Yosef was dead: "נא הכר" = Please recognize!" Yehudah acknowledges not only his signet, but his guilt, and this cleanses his soul and prepares him to assume the leadership of the family. Yehudah's descent was therefore an atonement for his role in selling Yosef, and his rise the product of repentance.

Or was it? Yehudah is described as 'rising' not because of improved self-understanding, but rather because he finds consolation after his wife's death. That consolation is apparently expressed by willingness to sleep with a random harlot he finds on the way, and astonishingly, he pays for her services by credit card! Finally, he sentences Tamar to death impetuously. In what sense does this behavior reflect maturation or repentance?!

These difficulties motivate a variety of commentators to radically reread the texts, and produce a very different set of narrative facts.

Let's start with Midrash Rabbah (Vayeshev 85)

– "ויראה יהודה וגו'"

לא השגיח.

כיון שכסתה פניה, אמר:

'אילו היתה זונה, היתה מכסה פניה?!' אתמהא?!

אמר ר' יוחנן:

ביקש לעבור,

וזימן לו הקדוש ברוך הוא מלאך שהוא ממונה על התאוה.

אמר לו:

'לאיכן אתה הולך, יהודה? ומאיכן מלכים עומדים? ומאיכן גואלים

עומדים?'

– "ויט אליה"

על כורחו, שלא בטובתו

"Yehudah saw her" –

and paid her no attention.

Once she covered her face, he said:

"Were she a harlot, would she cover her face!?" That would be astonishing!?

Said Rabbi Yochanan:

(Yehudah) sought to pass (Tamar) by,

so The Holy Blessed One prepared for him the angel appointed over desire.

(The angel) said to him:

To where are you going, Yehudah? From where will kings emerge? From where will redeemers emerge?

"Yehudah) turned toward her" –

against his will, without his consent.

According to this midrash, Yehudah ignores and fails to recognize Tamar at first sight. He consciously looks at her only once he understands that she is **not** a harlot, because harlots **don't** cover their faces. Even so, he would not have engaged with her without angelic prodding.

Alshikh takes the midrashic reading one step further. Tamar's exposed face initially made Yehudah dismiss her as a harlot. However, she covered her face as soon as she saw that he was accompanied by an Adulamite. This made Yehudah realize that her design was matrimony. The subsequent negotiations are about marriage-price, not harlot-hire.

These readings still leave Yehudah's precipitous judgment – "take her out and let her be burnt" – unjustified. Many commentators find ways to make her alleged crime halakhically punishable by execution, but Malbim chooses a different path. He cites Mahara Ashkenazi as suggesting that, in line with what he understood to be the custom of his Ishmaelite contemporaries, the "burning" punishment for harlotry was not execution-by-fire, but rather branding.

This perhaps mitigates Yehudah's rush to justice, but certainly does not excuse it.

The medieval commentator Rabbi Chaim Paltiel goes one step further – he denies that Yehudah ever considered Tamar a harlot, by translating **ויחשבה לזונה** as "he thought her a woman who sought a husband!!!" Rabbi Paltiel makes a noble but unconvincing effort to justify this translation etymologically. His translation of **אייה הקדשה** as "where is the woman whom I betrothed" is similarly unconvincing, especially in light of the Talmudic assertion that *kiddushin* refers to marriage only in Rabbinic Hebrew, not in Biblical.

Deborah Klapper points out that Tamar, after removing her widow's weeds, performs an action with her veil reminiscent of Rivkah's reaction upon seeing Yitzchak. It therefore seems unlikely that only harlots covered their faces, and this seems a basis for Rabbi Chaim Paltiel's reading of this as a marital courtship scene. Note also that Yehudah's seemingly crude address to Tamar

**הבה נא אבא אליך**

is almost identical to what Yaakov says to Lavan

**הבה נא את אשתי ואבואה אליה**

where the context is explicitly matrimonial. I see several other narrative elements as strongly supporting the contention that Yehudah did not see Tamar, even initially, as a harlot.

- 1) Tamar's willingness to extend credit rather than demand cash
- 2) Yehudah's willingness to give as surety things that are worth money only as blackmail tools
- 3) Yehudah fearing that he will be shamed if people think he reneged on a deal, but showing no concern that anyone will think less of him for paying for sex with a random roadside harlot. If not for the words **זונה** and **קדשה**, it would be clear that Yehudah was worried about being shamed for publicly breaching a promise to marry, as Alshikh and Rabbi Chaim Paltiel contend.
- 4) Tamar asks "What will you give me?" rather than setting a price. (Compare also Rachel apparently selling Yaakov's services for the night to her co-wife.)

For all these reasons, it seems to me that, to use a dangerous word, the "pshat" of this story is not that Yehudah sought a one-night no-commitment stand with a women-of-the-day. Rather, I suggest, Yehudah married his first wife on no basis other than having seen her; being now comforted after her death, he seeks another wife on the same basis.

Perhaps, as the midrash suggests, he was attracted by her combination of clear availability (she sat at a crossroads) and modesty (she concealed her face). But it is of the essence of the story that he did not consider simply sleeping with her.

All this explains why Yehudah's relationship with Tamar is not part of his descent. But is there any way that it can be part of a moral ascent?

I suggest that it can be. Perhaps Yehudah understood that a moral of the Deenah story - "shall our sister be treated as a *zonah*" - is that **no** woman should be treated as a *zonah*. Thus his attempt to marry the attractive woman at the crossroads, in a context where most men would have sought merely to hire her, represents genuine growth.

Yehudah has one more lesson to learn. His false accusation of Tamar teaches him that "not treating a woman as a *zonah*" is not just a rule for men's behavior toward women, but even for men's assumptions about women's behavior. Perhaps he even learns that men should seek wives who educate them morally.

When he learns that lesson, he is finally ready to "go up" among his brothers, and to become – with Tamar - the ancestor of kings.