

וישב

VAYESHEV/AND HE SETTLED

Bereshith/Genesis 37:1-40:23

At this point in the Torah, it is always so interesting to begin the story of Yosef with all the parallels pointing to Messiah. It's easy to skip over **chapter 38** and the story of Yehuda and Tamar. Read how you can go from the end of **chapter 37** to the beginning of **chapter 39** without skipping a beat...

Bereshith/Genesis 37:36 Now the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh *and* captain of the guard.... **Bereshith 39:1** And Yosef had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there.

Why the break in the Yosef story to talk about Yehuda? First let's recognize that the dysfunctional family of Ya'acov seems to be at the point of melt-down. If we note the theme of the rest of **Bereshith**, we could express it as the reunification of the family of Ya'acov during a time of trials. And if we had to narrow down the two principle characters who facilitate the reconciliation? It would be Yosef and Yehuda. Thus, we begin with a parallel "**descent**" in the lives of the two brothers, albeit for different reasons:

Bereshith 38:1 At that time, Yehuda left his brothers and went down (yarad - יָרַד) to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah.

Bereshith 39:1 Now Yosef had been taken down (yarad - יָרַד) to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there.

The events that follow prophetically foreshadow that which will occur in the lives of their descendants. Eventually, the sons of Ya'acov will be split into two main houses – that of Yehuda, and that of Yosef/Ephraim/Israel. This split began with the lives of two matriarchs, Leah and Rachel, and will continue to play out until the reconciliation of all Israel and the return of Messiah Yeshua.

Our story is filled with obstacles the Almighty will have to maneuver in order to work out His Divine plan. Yehuda's marriage to a Canaanite woman contrasts boldly with his great-grandfather's concern that Yitzchak not marry a Canaanite (from the cursed line) and with Yitzchak's concern that Ya'acov avoid a Canaanite spouse:

Bereshith 24:3 "and I will make you swear by יהוה, the Elohim of heaven and the Elohim of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell

Bereshith 28:1 Then Yitzchak called Ya'acov and blessed him, and charged him, and said to him: "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan."

Even Esav, the non-covenant son, brought grief to his parents by marrying Canaanite wives:

Bereshith 26:35 and they are a bitterness of spirit to Yitzchak and to Rivkah.

And so, our story in **chapter 38** begins with Yehuda, only recently telling his father that Yosef had been killed, marrying a Canaanite woman and having three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Then, having perhaps learned from his error, Yehuda sought out a wife of noble character for his eldest son, Er:

Bereshith 38:6 Then Yehuda took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.

Who was **Tamar**? There are many opinions. Some say she was a Canaanite. According to the book of Jasher, Tamar was the daughter of Elam, who was the son of Shem, Noach's son. Since Shem was a priest and bore the title Melchizedek, the judgment rendered for her later by Ya'acov was in agreement with the Torah:

Vayikra/Leviticus 21:9 'The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, she profanes her father. She shall be burned with fire.

If Tamar was from the family of Shem, it seems likely that she would have heard of some of the deceptions using disguises, that had occurred in the family. Rivkah and Ya'acov used goat skins to deceive Yitzchak about Esav concerning the blessing. And then Lavan deceived Ya'acov by veiling Leah, causing him to be oblivious to who he was marrying. Soon Tamar would come up with a disguise of her own.

Continuing with the story in our parasha, Yehuda's first son, "**Er, was wicked**" and "**יהוה killed him,**" leaving Tamar childless. Yehuda's solution was to follow the standard procedure of "**levirate marriage**":

Bereshith 38:7 But Er, Yehuda's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of יהוה, and יהוה killed him.

⁸ And Yehuda said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother."

A "**levirate marriage**" (in Hebrew, **yibbum**) is literally a marriage with a brother-in-law. The word levirate, has nothing to do with the tribe of Levi, but comes from the Latin word levir, "**a husband's brother.**" Yibbum obliges a brother to raise up offspring on behalf of his childless deceased brother. The first son born to the union of the widow and her brother-in-law carried on the name of the son's "**legal**" father (the wife's deceased husband):

Devarim/Deuteronomy 25:5 " If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be *married* to a stranger outside *the family*; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty (יָבַם יָבָם) of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ "And it shall be *that* the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel...

If a man should die childless, then his memory would die out in the Land of Israel. Therefore, it was the duty of the brother of the deceased to provide an offspring for his brother who could not only care for the

widow, but also be the son of the deceased brother to receive his inheritance and keep his memory alive in the land of Israel. Being “**remembered**” was the same as keeping that person “**alive**.”

Tamar’s 2nd husband, also was killed by Elohim. It seemed that Onan did not want any part in continuing the family line of his brother, Er. He was no more dedicated to his family than his father, Yehuda had been when he sold Yosef. What makes Onan’s sin so offensive is that he appears to undertake his responsibility, but then he fakes it. He sleeps with Tamar, but wastes his seed. Consider the problems of hating your brother and selfishly thinking only of yourself as seen in Yehuda and then mirrored by his son, Onan:

Bereshith 37:26 So Yehuda said to his brothers, "What gain *is there* if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ "Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he *is* our brother *and* our flesh." And his brothers listened.

Bereshith 38:9 But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother's wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother. ¹⁰

And the thing which he did was wicked in ה'’s sight; therefore, He killed him also.

Two wicked sons and yet Yehuda wants to blame Tamar for their deaths. There is only one son left now and he is too young to marry. Thus, Yehuda sends Tamar away, deceptively telling her to “**live as a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.**” When Shelah grows up and it is obvious he will not be given to Tamar, she takes matters into her own hands and arranges to become pregnant by Yehuda without him knowing her identity.

Let’s consider for a moment the likelihood that her plan would work. First, how did Tamar know that her father-in-law would agree to engage in the services of a harlot? How did she know that he would not pay her with money? If she lacked the evidence of Yehuda’s paternity – the signet, the cord, and the staff, she would have had nothing to convince him that he was the father of her child. And how did she know that she would become pregnant in this single encounter? The hand of ה' is written all over this and we wonder what she knew ahead of time. Had ה' told her that she was destined to become one of the matriarchs of Israel?

It can be debated as to whether Tamar’s actions were righteous or not. She was clearly not motivated by lust or private ambition, but by a strong sense of duty that characterized a godly woman – namely to secure the family line and produce seed for the covenant. In fact, Tamar showed herself to be much like the matriarchs of Israel. We do know that from their encounter, Yehuda declared Tamar “**more righteous than he.**”

Bereshith 38:26 Yehuda recognized them and said, "**She is more righteous than I**, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again.

Tamar's intervention was without a doubt critical in changing Yehuda from a man with no moral compass, as evidenced by his treatment of Yosef and Tamar, into one who was self-sacrificing, and compassionate as evidenced in later roles with his brothers. When he gave Tamar his signet, cord, and staff, he casually gave her his entire identity. We can only surmise that perhaps he had given up on his destiny when he lost his dignity and his integrity. But Tamar gives those things back to him, restoring his identity and his focus. Despite all the dysfunction, יהודה saw to it that Messiah's lineage would continue.

Now for something new. Included in her commentary on **Vayeshev**, **Cathy Helms** wrote about the Messianic significance of levirate marriage. I've taken some liberty with her writing and added some emphasis, but you can read her entire commentary here - [Vayeshev](#).

The sages see yibbum (levirate marriage) as "the process in which the dead brother gains a new life" (Artscroll Chumash pg. 209), and therefore, is in their view, one of the most mysterious of all the commandments. Yibbum, in the eyes of the sages, provides resurrection, so to speak, of the dead brother.

Yibbum is highly significant to believers in Messiah Yeshua. The House of Israel is currently divided along the lines of Jew and gentile, the twelve tribes grouped now in Scripture as – the **House of Yehuda** and the **House of Israel/Ephraim**. These are the only recipients of the "New Covenant":

Jeremiah 31:31 "The time is coming," declares יהוה, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Yehuda.³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares Yehuda.³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares Yehuda. "I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their Elohim, and they will be my people.

We who were not raised in Jewish practice, by default, fall into the second category. The **House of Israel (Ephraim)** was taken into captivity by the king of Assyria and was considered "dead" by the prophets. In other words, keep in mind that **Ephraim** became a "dead brother" with no inheritors.

Hosea 13:1 When Ephraim ...became guilty in Baal, he died.

When **Ephraim** "died," he became "not a people," just as Moshe had foretold and **Isaiah** later prophesied:

Devarim 32:21 They have provoked Me to jealousy by *what* is not Elohim; They have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by *those who are* not a people; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation

Isaiah 7:8 For the head of Syria *is* Damascus, And the head of Damascus *is* Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken, so that it will not be a people.

It was also said through **Hosea**:

Hosea 1:4 Then יהוה said to him: "Call his name Jezreel, For in a little *while* I will avenge the bloodshed of Jezreel on the house of Jehu, And bring an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.

He further explained that though both Houses were wicked, **Yehuda** would be saved:

Hosea 1:6... For I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel, But I will utterly take them away. ⁷ Yet I will have mercy on the house of Yehuda, will save them by יהוה their Elohim...

יהוה's judgment on the House of Israel was pictured in the names of the children born to Hosea through the harlot, Gomer. The first child was called **Jezreel**, which means "scattered" or "sown." The House of Israel would be scattered to the four winds by the king of Assyria. The second was called **Lo Ruhamah** (no mercy), for Elohim's mercy to the House of Israel had come to an end. The third child was called **Lo Ami** (not my people), for Elohim said to the House of Israel, "You are not my people, and I am not your Elohim." (**Hosea 1:9**)

To summarize, the **House of Israel/Ephraim** has been described by the different prophets as:

- Scattered
- Not a people (without identity)
- Broken
- Without mercy
- Kingdom has ended
- Dead

However, as absolute and finite as יהוה's judgment seems, He then makes an incredible announcement about the **revival/resurrection** of the "**children of Israel**":

Hosea 1:10 " Yet the number of the children of Israel Shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And it shall come to pass **in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' There it shall be said to them, 'You are sons of the living Elohim.'**

The familiar, prophetic words of **Hosea 1** are scattered throughout the **Brit Chadasha! Peter**, writing to the "**elect**," the "**strangers scattered** throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (**1 Peter 12:1-2**) where their ancestors had been "**sown**" **in exile**, reminds them that as believers in Messiah they are part of the "**royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people**," echoing the vows Elohim spoke as He betrothed Himself to Israel and the mixed multitude that dwelled with them on Mount Sinai (see **Shemot 19:5-6**).

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ who once were not a people but are now the people of Elohim, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Peter does not stand alone in this theology. The writer of **Romans**, likewise, quotes **Hosea**:

Romans 9:22 *What if Elohim, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,* ²³ *and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,* ²⁴ *even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?* ²⁵ As He says also in **Hosea**: "I will call them My people, who were not My people, And her beloved, who was not beloved." ²⁶ "And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' There they shall be called sons of the living Elohim."

The apostle **John** wrote:

John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of Elohim, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of Elohim.

When Yeshua entered into His ministry He announced to His disciples and followers, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" (**Matthew 15:24**). He also said, "the **Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.**" (**Luke 19:10**). Was it not the **House of Israel** that was lost among the nations?

Israel/Ephraim was a "dead brother" in the nations. They no longer could be identified. But Yeshua, representing the **tribe of Yehuda**, willingly came to raise up offspring for His **brother Ephraim!** יהודה gave us the law of **levirate marriage** and then **Yeshua** came in the flesh to fulfill it, thereby **RESURRECTING the House of Israel/Ephraim!** So determined was He not to leave His brother Ephraim disgraced and dishonored, that Yehuda, in the person of Yeshua of Nazareth, humbled Himself even to the cross.

The concept of **brotherhood** is important to יהודה. **John**, the beloved disciple of Yeshua had this to say about "brothers":

1 John 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves Elohim must love his brother also.

Revelation 1:9 I, **John**, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Messiah Yeshua

Yeshua told us that everything points to Him. Sometimes we cannot make the connection, and who would have thought that the law of the levirate marriage would be such a Gospel concept. My thanks to Cathy Helms for making that so clear in her commentary. We truly serve an amazing El who continues to reveal His loving attributes and His Divine plan throughout His Word!

Shabbat Shalom!

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