BS”D

*Parshas Vayeshev*

Tamar was a woman who acted when she felt she was right and who was willing to pay the ultimate price if she was wrong.

Yehuda and Tamar

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

Yehuda took a wife, Tamar, for his son Er. But Er sinned in the eyes of G-d and died. As was the custom when a man died without children, his brother would marry her to “provide children for [his] brother.” (Later, when the Torah was given, this became the Mitzvah of *yibum*—levirate marriage.)

But the second son Onan, who married Tamar after his brother’s death, sinned too, and he died as well.

Yehuda hesitated to give his only remaining son Shaila to Tamar in marriage. He was afraid that Shaila too would die as his brothers before him. Yehuda told Tamar to wait until Shaila was older. Time passed. Shaila was older and still not given to Tamar as a husband. Perhaps Yehuda was just stalling for more time, or perhaps he never intended to let Tamar marry Shaila. In any event, Tamar was left in limbo; unable to perform a levirate marriage yet still bound to the family of Yehuda and forbidden to marry anyone else.

Meanwhile, Yehuda’s wife died. After the period of mourning was over, Yehuda went to shear his sheep which was usually a time of celebration.

Now Tamar covered her face and sat on the road that Yehuda was passing through. Yehuda, not recognizing Tamar, was attracted to her. He approached her and offered her a kid as payment. Since he did not have the goat with him, she took his signet, his cord, and his staff as a pledge.

Later, when Yehuda attempted to pay her, the strange woman was nowhere to be found.

Tamar conceived. When word came to Yehuda that Tamar was pregnant, he ordered her to be killed by burning. Apparently, by the law of that time, a woman awaiting levirate marriage had a status similar to a married woman, and her promiscuity was considered adultery, a capital offense.

As Tamar was being led to her execution, she presented the signet ring, the cord, and the staff and said that she was pregnant by the man to whom those objects belonged.

Yehuda acknowledged that it was indeed he who had been with Tamar. Tamar did what she did because Yehuda had not given her his son Shaila, and she wanted to perform the rite of levirate marriage with Yehuda. Thus she was exonerated.

Later, she bore twins, Peretz and Zerach. Peretz was the ancestor of King David and of the kings of the Davidic dynasty. Thus he is also the ancestor of Moshiach, the descendant of David who will lead the Jewish people to redemption.

Rashi, quoting the Talmud, says that Tamar did not directly accuse Yehuda because she did not want to embarrass him. As the sages put it, “Better to allow oneself to be thrown into a fiery furnace rather than embarrass one’s fellow.” Tamar left it up to Yehuda to own up to what he had done. It was in his hands to confess and save Tamar or deny and allow her to be killed.

The question that Rashi’s words raises is obvious. Should a person literally allow himself to die rather than embarrass someone? Yehuda had been with Tamar. He was responsible for his actions. Surely, Tamar, or any person in such a situation, has the right to defend himself and save his or her life, not through a lie or a false accusation, but by telling the truth. Surely, this would have been justified.

Although the Torah had not yet been given, this story shows us that levirate marriage was practiced at that time. By Torah law, the only person who may marry the widow of the childless man in the performance of levirate marriage is the brother of the deceased. The father would be strictly prohibited from marrying the widow. It would be considered incest. The Ramban suggests that in the time of the patriarchs other relatives besides the deceased brother could perform the Mitzvah of levirate marriage. This would include the father-in-law.

I suggest that the matter was unclear and unsettled at that time. Perhaps it was justified for the father-in-law to perform the *yibum*. Perhaps it was not.

Tamar had misgivings. Perhaps she should be patient. Maybe Yehuda would allow his son Shaila to marry her. Or perhaps not. Perhaps she could perform the Mitzvah of *yibum* with Yehuda, or perhaps that was strongly forbidden.

Tamar must have done much soul-searching before attempting to be with Yehuda. She decided that it was the right thing to do. But if she was wrong, she was willing to accept the consequences.

This may be part of the reason she would not reveal Yehuda’s name. If Yehuda did not acknowledge being with Tamar, it would an indication that she had done the wrong thing. How dare she take the initiative and decide to be with Yehuda! Perhaps the levirate marriage could not be done with the father-in-law. Perhaps Tamar was bringing sin and shame upon herself and upon Yehuda. If Yehuda failed to acknowledge Tamar’s proof, it meant she had tricked him into sin. It meant she had done an immoral, terrible thing. She was ready to die if that was the case.

But Yehuda did acknowledge responsibility. “She is more in the right than I,” he declared. Tamar’s act was validated as right, as pure, indeed as holy. She became the ancestress of King David and ultimately of Moshiach.

There are similarities between the story of Tamar and Yehuda and the story of Ruth and Boaz.

Ruth, who was a convert, also desired a levirate marriage.

 In her case, the controversy was Ruth’s Moabite origins. The Torah forbids marrying a Moabite despite the fact that the individual had converted to Judaism. Some felt, however, that the prohibition applied only to Moabite males and not to females. It was a controversy that lasted for many generations.

But Ruth and Boaz made the decision to get married. Boaz ruled that a Moabite female convert was permitted. Ruth bore a son Oved. Oved was King David’s grandfather.

The connection of Tamar to Ruth is clearly stated in the Book of Ruth. When Boaz and Ruth decided to get married, they were blessed by the elders and the people. They said, “And may your house be like the house of Peretz whom Tamar bore to Yehuda.”

Tamar was a woman who acted when she felt she was right. She was willing to pay the ultimate price if she was wrong. Her bravery and her commitment had tremendous consequences for the Jewish people. Her actions made possible the birth of David and indeed the final redemption of the Jewish people through Moshiach.