

# Tamar / תָּמָר

## Biblical Text

About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to Adonai, and Adonai took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother." 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 Adonai, and God took his life also. Then Judah 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.

A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheep-shearing." So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, 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. When Judah saw her, he took her for a woman astray (זֹנֵהָ / *zonah*); for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you"—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." 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 slept with her, and she conceived by him. Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

Judah 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 temple prostitute (קַדְשָׁה / *kadeisha*) the one at Enaim, by the road?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute (קַדְשָׁה / *kadeisha*) here." So

he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no temple prostitute here.” Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.” About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has surely ‘played the harlot’ (זָנְתָה / *zan'tah*) ; in fact, she is pregnant by ‘harlotry’ (*liz'nunim* / לִזְנוּנִים)” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?” Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! 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.

-Gen. 38:1-30

And may your house be like the house of Peretz whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which Adonai will give you by this young woman.”

-Ruth 4:12

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir’s duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.

-Deuteronomy 25:5-6

## Classical Midrash

The verse states with regard to Tamar: “And she put off from her the garments of her widowhood, and covered herself with her veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the entrance of Enaim [*befetah einayim*], which is by the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she was not given unto him to wife” (Genesis 38:14).

The Amora'im dispute the meaning of the word *einayim*. Rabbi Alexandri says: This teaches that she went and she sat at the entrance of the home of Abraham

our forefather, a place that all eyes hope to see it, as she was certain that Judah would pass there. Rabbi Ḥanin says that Rav says: It is a place called Enaim, and similarly the verse states in the list of cities in Eretz Yisrael in the portion of Judah: “Tappuah and Enam” (Joshua 15:34).

Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani says: She provided eyes [*einayim*] for her statements, i.e., with her words she provided an opening [*petah*] for Judah to solicit her. When Judah solicited her to engage in sexual intercourse with him, he first attempted to verify her status and said to her: Are you perhaps are a gentile? She said to him: I am a convert. He asked: Perhaps you are a married woman? She said to him: I am an unmarried woman. He asked: Perhaps your father accepted betrothal for you and you are unaware of it? She said to him: I am an orphan. He asked: Maybe you are impure? She said to him: I am pure.

– Talmud Sotah 10a

Judah said: “She is more righteous than I [*mi’meni*].” The word “*mi’meni*” can also be understood as “from me,” with Judah thereby admitting that he is the father. The Gemara asks: From where did he know that it was in fact from him that Tamar was pregnant? The Gemara answers: A Divine Voice went forth and said: From Me these hidden matters emerged, and this woman will be the mother of royalty, which requires that Judah be the father.

– Talmud Sotah 10a

The Gemara wonders about Tamar’s claim of virginity: weren’t there Er and Onan, her previous husbands, who presumably engaged in sexual intercourse with her?

The Gemara responds: Er and Onan engaged in sexual intercourse in an atypical manner, i.e., anal intercourse, and therefore she was still a virgin.

The Gemara raises an objection from a *baraita*: After a woman gives birth, her husband penetrates inside and spills his semen outside for the entire twenty-four months during which the baby is breastfeeding, so that his wife not become pregnant, as that would terminate her milk production and the child might die. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. They said to him: These acts are nothing other than acts similar to those of Er and Onan, which are prohibited. Regardless, it can be deduced from here that Er and Onan engaged in normative sexual intercourse with Tamar, only they did not fully complete the sexual act.

-Talmud, Yevamot 34b

“Both Peretz and Zerach were righteous.” (*B’reisheet Rabbah* 85:13). The Talmud says that a baby learns all of Torah in the womb, and when they are born, an angel taps them on the lips, and they forget it all. – Talmud Niddah 30b

At birth, God removes our knowledge so that we can begin in a state of purity, in complete connection to God. As we learn things, it becomes more difficult to maintain that connection to God. (Universities are notorious dens of secularism.) The names *Peretz* and *Zerach* mean that we can connect to God by breaking through (*paratz*) the barrier that our knowledge creates, and then God will shine (*zarach*) a holy light upon us. -Kedushat Levi (18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland)

## Contemporary Midrash



Her name matters, for like names in so many biblical stories, it reveals the issue of the story. *Tamar* is the date palm tree, a tree that can bear copious and precious fruit. But the fertility of the date palm is not assured; it must be pollinated by direct human action. The name Tamar hints that this new daughter-in-law has the *potential* to bear, but her fertility will be endangered. The plot will determine whether she disappears (as did Tamar, the daughter of David), or becomes the ancestress of a precious hero.

- Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (266)

On two occasions in the story...the word קדישה (*kadeisha*) replaces זונה (*zonah*) “prostitute.” In the New Jerusalem Bible of 1985, the two words are both translated as “prostitute” but a note on the former states, “Strictly, sacred prostitute,’ priestess of a pagan cult....it is to be noted that the term *kadeisha* is only mentioned in conversations with the local inhabitants. Let us therefore assume that the term *kadeisha* was known to the inhabitants of Canaan. ***The prohibition against their existence in the scriptures is usually a good sign of their existence***....to the Hebrew author, the pagan priestess must be a harlot and vice versa, the harlot must have been a pagan priestess.

- Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Tamar, Qedesa, Qadistu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia*. Harvard Theological Review 82 (1989)

The *kadeisha* – priestess – in Mesopotamia was involved in childbirth and probably other matters relating to female biology. The great similarity between the *kadiesha* and the *zonah* (at least in male eyes) is that the *kadeisha* is outside the family system and thereby approachable for sexual encounter or arrangement. The great difference is that, while both have the right to say yes, only the *kadeisha*, who has other functions, may have the economic freedom to say no. - Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* p. 275

We propose...a fresh look at Genesis 38, one which explores the sociological ramifications of the story. We suggest that an important thematic thread of the narrative deals with the question of the stability and health of Israelite social structure. This theme tells us something about the categories or classifications by which order is maintained and the fabric of society strengthened....Simply stated, the young woman is allowed only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's home or she is a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home.

We have already discussed the sociologically uncomfortable position of the married woman who cannot bear children. The unmarried girl who engages in sexual relations and the married woman who sleeps with anyone other than her husband are much more severe anomalies and must be destroyed....The woman who has never had children before her husband's death finds herself in a particularly anomalous and uncomfortable situation: Where is she to go? In this light, Judah's attempt to send Tamar back to her father's home appears highly irregular. She no longer belongs there. The social fabric as a whole is weakened by her problem, and extremely unusual means are allowed to rectify the situation.

Tamar's harlot disguise gives further insight into the role of women in their biblical portrayal of Israelite social structure.... prostitutes seem to have an accepted, outcast place in society....she is a liminal character, outside the social order. By the same token, however, she belongs to a special class of women who can "play the harlot" without being condemned. In effect, one could fall between the proper categories and survive.... the union between Judah and Tamar does not mar the social fabric, but repairs it. The Rabbis wish to set the tale of Tamar apart from [other instances of harlotry] and thereby acknowledge its sociologically constructive message.

--Susan Niditch, *The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38*, *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979)

Tamar has much in common with Judah's foremothers: Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Sarah, like Tamar, was given away (to Pharoah and Avimelech); like Tamar, she took action to bear a child by arranging the surrogacy of Hagar; Tamar turned herself into a second Rivka when she veiled herself as Rivka once veiled herself at the sight of Sarah's son, Isaac, and she became the mother of twins. Leah disguised herself, pretending to be Rachel in order to marry Jacob....Thus...the great-great grandmother, the grandmother, and the mother of Judah overcame vulnerability and powerlessness to give birth and to determine the success of the grandfather and father of Judah and of Judah himself. Tamar continues this pattern to the next generation, They all were prepared to risk scandal, humiliation, ostracism or death to have children with their families. They all were assertive and proactive, and each of them engaged in unconventional sexual activity to accomplish their purpose....

Taken by themselves, incest, adultery and licentious behavior are subversive acts that could destroy the social order. In most contexts, such behavior is an indication of the loss of male control over female sexuality, and it can destroy the patriarchal system. However, in the context of the faithfulness of these women to their family and to its men, the loss of male control was actually a good thing; it enabled women to act in ways that served the family structure and enabled it to survive.

-Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* p. 276-277



*Tamar* - [Dikla Laor](#), Israeli Photographer (1976- )