

THE PEOPLE & THE BOOK

The Torah portion of
Vayeshuv, Genesis 37:1-
40:23, is read on
Shabbat, December 12

Breaking Out

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IN AMSTERDAM, I'VE MET WITH MEMBERS OF AN ecumenical Christian-Jewish feminist organization called Tamar. The name, taken from the Biblical figure in Genesis 38, is just one reflection of the effort by today's religious feminists to find scriptural role models. But is Tamar an appropriate example for today's woman?

Tamar's story is told in 30 verses. Judah, son of Jacob, marries a Canaanite woman and fathers three sons — Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er takes Tamar for his wife. "But Er... was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord took his life," says Genesis 38:7, without elaborating on what Er's sin actually was. However, in the ensuing story of Onan, whose sin is specified, the text says, "... and He took his life also." From the seemingly extraneous word "also," medieval commentators such as Rashi, Rashbam and Radak induce that both Er and Onan were guilty of the same sin — the wasteful spilling of their seed.

Onan had married his childless, widowed sister-in-law Tamar, in accordance with the law of levirate marriage later laid out in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. In that text, we're told that the purpose of this institution was to produce progeny who would bear the name of the deceased brother, so "that his name may not be blotted out in Israel." An additional function, no doubt, was to protect the widow's economic and social status.

We can understand why Onan might not have wanted to father children who would legally not be considered his. But why would Er engage in the spilling of seed (which has become known, both in English and in Hebrew, as "onanism")? The Talmud in Tractate Yevamot, contrary to many views today, offers the explanation that pregnancy mars women's beauty. Commenting on Genesis 4:19, where we read of Lemekh's two wives, the midrash in Breshit Rabbah explains that in the generation of the Flood, a man would have one wife for procreation and one for beauty and sexual pleasure. Woman as mother, and woman as lover don't go together, the rabbinic texts are saying — though it's not clear whether they agree with that view or are criticizing it.

After losing two sons, Judah isn't about to give his third one, Shelah, to Tamar, who is becoming suspect in his eyes as a "black widow" (what the halakhah would later call "a lethal woman," one twice widowed and possibly barred from marrying again). He forces her to remain an *agunah*, legally bound to Shelah and unable to marry anyone else, but in reality waiting for years in enforced singleness.

Tamar's motives for her next move aren't clear in the text, but it appears that she wants desperately to have a child — and within Judah's family. She finally develops a plan to entrap Judah into impregnating her himself — disguising herself as a prostitute and waiting for him on the road.

After their tryst, the unknowing Judah leaves his signet, cord, and staff with her as a pledge in lieu of payment. When Tamar's pregnancy becomes obvious, Judah, assuming she has had illicit relations, orders that she be burned. But Tamar shows the symbols Judah left with her, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." At last, Judah acknowledges both not only paternity but responsibility — and so emerges as the leader of his brothers in their encounter with Joseph.

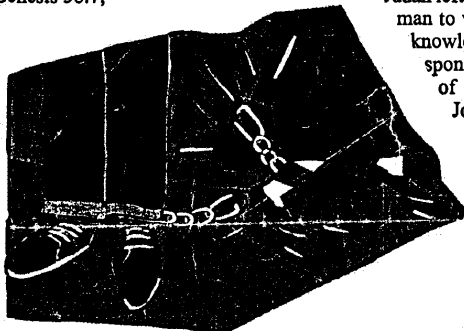
Is Tamar's behavior — deceit, seduction, the use of feminine wiles — worthy of emulation? Given the constraints her time and society placed on her, these may have been the only means she had, but they hardly seem "feminist."

But the Talmud, in Tractate Nazir, suggests another direction. It connects Tamar's story with those of other Biblical women of questionable behavior — Ruth the Moabite and the daughters of Lot. All are women who broke social and legal conventions to achieve their goals. Ruth, to be alone with Boaz, took the bold step of going to his threshing-floor in the middle of the night. Lot's daughters intoxicated their father and seduced him into incest. Another example of a woman taking bold action, not

mentioned in this Talmudic text, is Queen Esther, who courageously goes to the king when not called, saying, "And if I perish, I perish." For each of these women, the goal was to promote human, Jewish, or family survival.

In the Talmud's discussion, one rabbi comments that a transgression committed for the right reason may be greater than a mitzvah done for the wrong one. Today, that's a hard statement to accept without question. Too many people believe in taking the law into their own hands, with disastrous results. And yet, the Talmud's treatment of these women does have a clear message for feminists: They will have to take bold action, challenging the conventions of religious society, to correct injustices, particularly in the area of *agunot*, bound wives. In that respect, Tamar may indeed be a fitting model.

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