

**Parshat Vayeshev: A Necessary Detour**  
**Rabbi Marianne Novak, Class of 2019**

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We return this week to the dramatic saga of Yaakov's family. After surviving a battle with an angel, a fraught reunion with his twin brother Esav, the rape of his daughter, and her brothers' violent retaliation, Yaakov settles down. He is now Vayeshev Yaakov. The lens of the narrative now turns to his children—specifically his most favorite child, Yosef, his ben z'kunim, the child of his old age, and Yehuda, the unlikely father of kings.

Any wish for a peaceful narrative is shattered when Yosef's brothers first try to kill him and then sell him into slavery. While certainly Yosef is the main victim of his brothers' actions, the damage extends further. Yaakov, when shown his favorite son's coat dipped in goat blood by the brothers, deduces that Yosef has been torn to pieces by wild animals. The pain of this loss devastates Yaakov to the point of despair. It is a loss from which he never truly recovers, even when he is told that his son is actually alive.

The trauma extends also to the brothers involved in the plot against Yosef, especially Yehudah. Yehudah saves Yosef from death by convincing his brothers that they should at least get something out of their betrayal. "Ma betza ki naharog et achinu v'chisinu et damo? L'chu v'nimk'renu laYishmaelim!" What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:26-27). Even if this scheme ultimately saves Yosef's life, it seems Yehudah's concern is not that Yosef will die, but that he and his own brothers should not kill him. "After all, he is our brother, our own flesh" (Gen. 37:27). At this point, Reuven, Yaakov's actual first born, has essentially relinquished his role as leader of his brothers and it is Yehudah who assumes that role.

The narrative, instead of directly following Yosef's story, takes a detour following Yehudah, who has not stayed with his brothers to lead but rather leaves town. He immerses himself in a different culture, marries a Canaanite woman, and has three sons. The first born Er marries a local woman named Tamar, does something displeasing, and God kills him. In keeping with the custom of ancient times, the next son/brother Onan then marries Tamar but refuses to impregnate her, knowing that any resulting offspring would not count as his. Yehudah, recognizing that Tamar is some sort of black widow, tells Tamar to go home and wait until the next son, Shelah, is of marriageable age, "pen yamut gam hu k'echav"—lest he too might die like his brothers (Gen. 38:11). Tamar is in limbo, left to wait for Shelah to grow up to marry her, and still under the control of her father-in-law Yehudah. She is told to go back home where she has no status and no guarantee of support or safety.

Soon after his sons' deaths, Yehudah's wife dies and he decides to run away again, this time to the sheepshearing festival in Timnah, a raucous affair with plenty of drinking, carousing, and all manner of debauchery. But here is where Yehudah's modus operandi of leaving when things get difficult is upended. Disguised as a prostitute, Tamar secures her future by orchestrating a liaison with Yehudah. Tamar cleverly demands that Yehudah leave all manner of identification—his cord, his ring, and his

staff—as collateral. Yehudah promises to send a goat to her as payment. After the tryst, Tamar returns to her widow's garb and her father's home. Yehudah makes one attempt to pay her, but no prostitute can be found. And then he is told that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant. Since she is promised to Shelah, her pregnancy is evidence of adultery. Yehudah, as pater familias, has the power to mete out her punishment, and exclaims, "Take her out to be burned" (Gen. 38:24). Tamar counters by producing Yehudah's personal items, saying: "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" (Gen. 38:25).

At this point, given Yehudah's power, and his propensity for avoiding sticky situations, one might expect him to either deny, double down on his pronouncement, or simply kill Tamar on the spot. But instead, he says: "Tzadkah mimeni," She is more right than I (Gen. 38:26). A better translation would be: She is right—tzadkah—and it is from me—mimeni. That is, "the baby is mine." Yehudah's confession here is nothing short of extraordinary. He could have revealed this information privately to Tamar, or not revealed it at all, but instead he publicly declares his responsibility. Tamar gives birth to twins—not unlike Rivka—and becomes a matriarchal figure, as her children begin the genealogy that will produce King David.

This step away from the Yosef story comes to illustrate the development of Yehudah's character. As Yosef has been sold to Egypt, and Reuven, the first-born son, has relinquished his role, Yehudah mistakenly believes that the covenantal line is essentially over. He is therefore free to do what he wants, shedding all familial or religious responsibilities. This unwillingness to assume a leadership role also extends to his new family as well. When both his sons Er and Onan die, Yehudah does not act as one who is the head of household. He simply sends Tamar away with hopes of avoiding the problem. Tamar, however, is not resigned to her fate. Without whining or agonizing, she forces Yehudah to see and realize what is right and assume responsibility. It is not an accident that the place where Tamar surreptitiously meets Yehudah is called "Petach Anayim," the opening of the eyes (as noted by the late Professor Tikva Frymer-Kensky). Tamar opens Yehudah's eyes and thereby changes him from a slacker to a doer. With Tamar's assistance, Yehudah, once again, becomes the leader of his brothers. As the story continues in the following parshiyot, he will use his re-acquired leadership skills to confront Pharaoh's right-hand man, the yet-to-be-revealed Yosef. Without this incident with Tamar, Yehudah would not have had the fortitude to step up to the plate and be the leader from which kings could emerge.

We all respond to trauma differently. Some with anger, some with despondency, and everything in between. Shimon and Levi respond to Dina's rape with violence. Yaakov reacts to Yosef's supposed death with despair. Yehudah, as a participant in the drama, actually saves Yosef from death, but carries the trauma with him as well. He engages in a pattern of avoiding responsibility, as do his children, the inheritors of the familial trauma. Until Tamar opens his eyes. Then, Yehuda takes responsibility for his part in the ongoing trauma. He is rewarded by becoming the progenitor of King David and the Davidic

dynasty. But just as significantly, this shift in Yehudah's behavior allows the entire family of Yaakov to begin to heal, to finally be on the path of repair, a path that continues in coming weeks as the family reunites.

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