

Ethan and Jeremy have made a pretty convincing case for the inclusion of the Story of Tamar in this week's Torah portion. In addition to teaching us several important moral lessons, this story is important to our understanding of Judah's transformation.

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Judah totally disregards what it will mean for his father to lose his beloved young son Joseph and so is quite willing to sell him off as a slave. By the end of the portion, Judah will offer his own children and grandchildren as a guarantee of Benjamin's safety and will risk his own life for his half-brother. He becomes much more concerned and sympathetic to what the loss of another son will mean to his father. We wonder, how is it that Judah changed? Our tradition concludes that it was his experience with Tamar, Judah's loss of two sons and his recognition of his own failings as a man and as a father, that softened his heart towards his own father and his father's failings.

Still I think there is another connection, between the story of Tamar and the rest of the Joseph narrative, and it is around the incident of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. When Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce 17 year old Joseph, we are told, he refuses, *vayemaen*. That one word sounds very definite, but the rabbis wonder, in that she has been approaching him for some time, why would he set

things up so he was alone with her, unless there was some wavering, some vacillation, in his own mind. He was 17 years old. They introduce the wavering in the trophe, the cantillation mark they place on this word- vayemaen. They put a shalsholet, a long musical phrase, which goes up and down and up and down – three times. It allows you to imagine Joseph saying to himself, no and yes and no and yes and no. While” he refuses” vayemaen, is one word in Hebrew, Joseph uses 35 words to explain himself, allowing some visibility to his inner argument. Further the one word vayemaen, an unusual word, occurs one other time in our portion, and that is in relation to Jacob’s unwillingness to accept that Joseph is dead. Jacob is constantly thinking about and longing for his missing son, and that longing is considered to be pulling on Joseph as well. From this the rabbis conclude that Joseph had a vision of his father, or in looking at the mirror, could imagine his father looking back at him, and it was this in particular that fortified his resolve not to give in to Potiphar’s wife. It was as if his father’s soul reached out towards him, and he didn’t want his father to see him do this.

Caring about what other people think of us is pretty natural and commonplace. Judah is concerned about what others think of him. He sends his friend to pay the prostitute, and when the friend can’t find her, lets it go, as he doesn’t want to have this unseemly episode known.

Joseph offers rational arguments against giving in to Potiphar's wife, after all it would be wrong to repay all the good Potiphar had done for him with this betrayal, but, at least according to tradition, is able to resist only by thinking of what his father would say to such an act.

When I became a rabbi, I was advised, always act, so that if what you do or say makes the front page of the newspaper tomorrow, you will be ok with that. It may not be the most exalted moral reasoning, but if various well known political and artistic figures would have taken this advice to heart, it would have kept quite a number of people out of trouble.

The rabbis say it a little differently. Once a thief took a rabbi captive and made him act as a look-out while he plied his trade. As the thief was in the middle of a robbery, the rabbi called out, "Someone is watching". The thief immediately stopped. "Who's there?" he asked. "Who saw me?" The rabbi taught: "Would that we were as afraid of God seeing us, as we are of another person".

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, wrote about this as well. Being afraid that other's see us, is a way of finding moral strength. Caring about what others think of us, is a goad to better behavior. Otherwise we are too prone to rationalize our own bad behavior. He writes: "When a person comes to sin or to do something repulsive, God Forbid, a fear falls upon him and he says, "Hopefully no person will see me." This is the clothing of the Divine spark."

There are times we act against the view of peers, to do what is courageous and right, but sometimes, thinking about what other's would think about us, is the thing we can grab onto when we need support to withstand temptation.