YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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LITERARY STUDY OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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**Lecture #25:**

**The Story of Yehuda and Tamar —**

**The Contribution to the Narrative Cycle of Yosef and His Brothers**

In the previous lecture, we discussed the three different ways of looking at the structure of the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar. At this time, I wish to discuss the relationship of the narrative to the broader story of Yosef, in which it plays a part, and to explore its contribution to the general progression of the narrative.

COMPLEMENTING THE NARRATIVE

Since the days of Spinoza, modern critics have challenged the appropriateness of placing the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar in the middle of the narrative flow of the story of Yosef sale as a slave. Chapter 37 describes the sale of Yosef to Potifar (“And the Medanites sold him to Egypt, to Potifar, Pharaoh’s official, the captain of the guard”), and chapter 39 continues directly from this point (“And Yosef was brought down to Egypt, and Potifar, Pharaoh’s official, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian man, bought him from the hand of Ishmaelites who brought him down there”). Lo and behold, in between, Scripture abandons Yosef and what happens to him, turning instead to a description of Yehuda’s adventures in the land of Canaan.

In a simple reading of the narrative, it is indeed difficult to understand how the relationship of Yehuda and Tamar relates to the story of Yosef and his brothers, and in modern critical literature, some therefore claim that the narrative was woven in “by mistake.” For example, Speiser defines the unit as a “completely independent unit.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Von Rad writes: "Every attentive reader can see that the story of Judah and Tamar has no connection at all with the strictly organized Joseph story."[[2]](#footnote-2) Emerton finds the passage inconsistent with the Yosef cycle.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On the other hand, modern critics who support the literary reading of Tanakh point to the interesting and persuasive connections between the story of Yehuda and Tamar and the stories that precede it (the sale of Yosef) and follow if (Yosef and Potifar’s wife) it.[[4]](#footnote-4) In fact, the Sages already point out the similarity between the brothers’ words to their father and Tamar’s words to her father-in-law:

And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.” (37:32)

She was being taken, and she sent to father-in-law saying, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.” And she said, “Please identify whose these are, the signet ring and the wrap and the staff.” (38:25)

As R. Yochanan puts it in the Midrash: “God said to Yehuda: You said, ‘Please identify’ – by your life, Tamar will say to you, ‘Please identify’” (Bereishit Rabba 84:19).[[5]](#footnote-5)

These linguistic and literary links create a reading experience of continuity, but the question remains: what does the incident of Yehuda and Tamar contribute to the narrative cycle of Yosef? How would the story of Yosef be deficient if the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar were not implanted in its midst? Naturally, this question is tied directly to the question of the theme of the story of Yehuda and Tamar, and in particular the question of its point. We have found that we may see three different themes through the three different proposed structures, and we must ask this question according to each thesis. What is the contribution of this small story to the greater narrative into which it is integrated?

The Plot Structure — Establishing a Family in the Face of Disaster

As the reader will recall, we can present the structure of the story of Yehuda and Tamar as having five acts. According to this structure, it turns out that the point of difficulty in the narrative is the widowhood and barrenness of Tamar, which apparently signify the end of Yehuda’s family. The turning point is when Yehuda sleeps with Tamar and she becomes pregnant by him. After Yehuda reverses his decision to burn Tamar and chooses to save her fetuses (and her own life), the dénouement occurs, and her sons, who are in fact Yehuda’s sons as well, are born. According to this structure, the question of family continuity stands at the center of the narrative; Tamar takes her future in her own hands and does not remain like a widow in her father’s house, and her gumption allows her and Yehuda to continue the family line.

According to this reading, the contribution of this small passage to the greater narrative cycle of Yosef and his brothers is clear. The continuity of Yaakov’s family is dealt a blow with the sale of Yosef as a slave to Egypt. Will Rachel’s firstborn fail to be a branch of Yaakov’s dynasty? Note that the heading of the unit is “These are the generations of Yaakov…” (37:1) — in other words, the narrative wishes to explore the generations of Yaakov, how his sons established their families.[[6]](#footnote-6) From this point of view, the narrative follows in parallel the two sons who represent the two mothers in this very aspect — Yehuda’s difficulty in establishing his family and Yosef’s difficulty in establishing his family.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Yehuda in the land of Canaan “went down from among his brothers” –he detaches himself from his family and his father’s house and begins assimilating into the Canaanite environment, taking Bat Shua as a wife and Chira as a friend, and he ends up burying two sons. Similarly, Yosef is detached (albeit against his will) from his family and from his father’s house, is brought down to Egypt as a slave, and begins to strike roots in a foreign Egyptian environment. It is clear that, at this point of the story, Yosef is not destined to establish his own family. The irony of his situation is sharpened when we pay attention to the lone couple that he is witness to; his master’s wife attempts to seduce him! However, just as Yehuda merits in the end to have seed and continuity, and by the conclusion of the narrative has two sons (Peretz and Zerach) with Tamar, so too, in a twisted and abstruse way, Yosef merits to have two sons (Menasheh and Ephrayim) “before the year of famine arrived” as a result of Potifar’s wife.

If so, the story of Yehuda and Tamar parallels the story of Yosef, and the two of them together complete the continuity of “The generations of Yaakov” –establishing a family despite the obstacles in the way, obstacles generated by the disconnect between a son and his family and father’s house.

The Deep Structure — Concealment and Revelation

As one reads the narrative according to its deep structure, the theme that dominates is the idea of concealment and masquerade that occurs throughout the length of the narrative. Onan hides his actions because he does not want to establish the name of his brother; Yehuda conceals his motives from Tamar; Tamar hides her face so that Yehuda will not identify her; and at the end, Peretz outmaneuvers his brother and emerges from the womb before him. According to this reading, it becomes clear that the narrative judges the various concealments and tricks according to their aim. When this is done in order to create a life and save the family (Tamar and Peretz), it is justified and praiseworthy; however when the act of concealment is done to prevent life (Onan and Yehuda), there is sharp criticism of the act.

The connection between Tamar’s narrative and Yosef’s narrative in this context is apparent. There is no other narrative in the Torah that focuses on acts of trickery and concealment like the narrative of Yosef and his brothers.

At first (ch. 37), the brothers show appalling alienation from their brother Yosef and sell him as a slave (or they simply throw him into a pit, according to the view of the Rashbam). They hide the awful truth from their father when they send him Yosef’s blood-soaked robe, and he refuses to be comforted. Yosef arrives in Egypt and reaches Potifar’s house, and there as well, his master’s wife tries to take advantage of him, misleading the people of her household and her husband when she waves Yosef’s clothing and slanders him with the accusation that he tried to force himself on her. Yosef’s plan to act as a stranger towards his brothers relies in its entirety on acts of trickery and concealment; many have noted the commonality between Yosef’s assumed distance from his brothers in Egypt and his brothers’ plotting in Shekhem.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In fact, the guile and trickery in the story of Yehuda and Tamar and in the story of Yosef are similar in their concrete realization as well. In both stories, we encounter brothers who are not willing to let their brother survive (Onan is not ready to establish his brother’s name, and Yosef’s brothers throw their brother into a pit and sell him to Egypt), and who later hide this from their fathers. This trickery comes to a resolution at the end of the two stories; the birth of Peretz and Zerach constitutes yibbum of the dead sons, and the process that Yosef puts his brothers through when he acts towards them like a stranger ends with revelations and reconciliation. Between the act of fraternal trickery and the act of restitution, we have in the two narratives scenes of conjugal guile: Tamar versus Yehuda and the wife of Potifar versus Yosef (and her own husband).

We can express it in the following way: in the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar, as in the story of Yosef’s alienation from his brothers, the characters in the story go through a process of standing before a family member with an assumed identity. Tamar acts by beguiling Yehuda, and Yehuda ends up continuing the existence of his family by virtue of her masquerade; Yosef becomes a ruler in Egypt because of his brothers’ scheming against him, and they undergo a process of reparation as he hides his true identity from them. Concealing the identity of one of the heroes serves to motivate the internal development of the characters’ true identities, and in the two stories, the concealment turns into a tool for a deeper and truer inner revelation.

It thus turns out that from the viewpoint of the deep structure, which clarifies the issue of guile, concealment, and trickery, the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar integrates well into the wider story of Yosef and his brothers. It may be that it even contributes to it in terms of understanding the need for an act of deception in order to unite the family and guarantee its ultimate survival.

Artistic (Concentric) Structure — Yehuda’s Collateral

As we have said, according to the concentric structure laid out in the narrative, the central axis is the collateral that Yehuda gives to Tamar, which symbolizes his identity. The exchange of Yehuda’s identifying tokens from one hand to another is connected, evidently, to Tamar’s receiving the seed of Yehuda, thereby allowing the family line to continue against Yehuda’s will and without his knowledge.

However, as we have already said, the issue of Yehuda’s identity does not appear at first in the handing over of his private objects to Tamar. From the moment that Yehuda descends from among his brothers and settles down in Canaanite society, the reader notices a certain abandonment of Yehuda’s family identity — his Hebrew identity. At the time that Yehuda gives up his personal objects, from his point of view, he goes through another stage in losing his identity. Nevertheless, despite his intent, his identity passes over to Tamar, his daughter-in-law. The place in which Yehuda loses his identity absolutely is the place in which the story reverses itself and a surprising continuation for his family begins to sprout.

The issue of the Hebrew identity of Yehuda becomes prominent if we adopt the view of Lambe, who discusses the shifting terminology used to describe the disguised Tamar in the passage. When Yehuda sees her at first, it says, “And Yehuda saw her, and he reckoned her a harlot (zona), for she covered her face” (15. Later, however, when Chira searches for Tamar on the way and does not find her (21-22), the terminology changes to “prostitute” (kedesha):

And he asked the people of her place, saying, “Where is the prostitute who was in Enayim, on the road?”

And they said: “There was no prostitute here.”

And he returned to Yehuda and he said, “I have not found her, and the people of the place said, ‘There was no prostitute here.’”

In Lambe’s view, this switch stresses Yehuda’s tension between Hebraism and non-Hebraism. The term kedesha, cognate to kedusha, holiness, invites the reader to view Tamar as dressing up as a sacred prostitute, part of the pagan Canaanite ritual, while the term zona is not connected to one religious culture or another. At the time that the verse describes Tamar as dressed as a zona, it uses the Hebrew term, but when turning to the term kedesha, there are pagan Canaanite associations, something which expresses even further Yehuda’s settling in to Canaanite culture — even religiously![[9]](#footnote-9)

Whether Lambe is correct or not, according to the concentric structure of the narrative, it arises that the story orbits around Yehuda and around the question of his identity and leadership (his staff, given as collateral). At first, Yehuda decrees that Tamar must reside as a widow in her father’s house, and in the end, he concedes that “She is more righteous than I.”

This motif of the collateral emerges once again in the story of Yosef, and also there it is tied to Yehuda. I am referring to the surety that Yehuda issues in exchange for Binyamin’s welfare: “I will be his guarantor; seek him from my hand; should I not bring him to you and present him before you, I will have sinned to you for all days” (43:9). Indeed, when Yehuda stands opposite Yosef and seeks to exchange Binyamin’s service for his own service, he mentions this surety: “For your servant has guaranteed the youth to my father, saying ‘Should I not bring him to you, I will have sinned to my father all the days’” (44:32). Yehuda’s position as guarantor expresses above all his fitness to be a leader in Israel, and many have noted that through the course of the Yosef narrative, the reader senses how the leadership of the family passes from Reuven’s hand to Yehuda’s hand. Naturally, the design of the story of Yehuda and Tamar constitutes a basis for his resolute stance before Yosef and for his taking responsibility for the future of family and its survival (personified by Binyamin).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Indeed, the connection between the story of Yehuda and Tamar and the stance of Yehuda before Yosef is prominent also in other ways. In Yehuda’s speech, he says to Yosef, in his father’s name:

Your servant, my father, said to us: “You know that my wife bore me two. One went out from me, and I said, ‘Surely he has been torn apart!’ and I have not seen him until now. Should you take this one also from my presence and a tragedy befall him, you will bring my old age down to the netherworld in misery.” (44:27-29)

This statement, attributed to Yaakov, is more appropriate for the one who actually says it — Yehuda. He too can say that his wife bore him two sons (Er and Onan), and they have died, and he feels an internal identification with the pain of his father Yaakov.

Furthermore, there is a deep analogy between the two situations described. Tamar hides her true identity from Yehuda, and from this lack of knowledge, Yehuda acts (at the time that he gives the pledge). In his action, he succeeds — without any intention and without any understanding — to bring his family to completion anew with the birth of his two sons. Similarly, Yosef hides his true identity from Yehuda and his brothers; from this lack of knowledge, Yehuda acts (as required by his assumed role as guarantor), and in this action he succeeds — without intention and without understanding — to restore the family to completion, with Yosef returning to the bosom of his family. One may almost say that Yosef undergoes a yibbum process — at first, he “dies” (as a slave in Egypt and in his father’s consciousness), but he merits once again to live in the midst of his family and to establish anew his Hebrew name. In light of this connection, it appears that one may say that the narrative of Yehuda and Tamar is presented as one of the causes to contribute to the construction of Yehuda’s personality as one who takes responsibility because of a guarantee, as one who is fit to be a leader. In fact, it turns out that Tamar is the one who teaches him to do so, and naturally, Tamar is the one who brings about (if indirectly) the solution of the entanglement between Yosef and his brothers…

In summary, we have before us three possible structures of one narrative, which bring along with them three readings of the narrative, which in turn bring along with them three different interpretations of the narrative and, naturally, three different contexts. All that is left is to wonder whether the Torah indeed intends for the reader to embrace these three readings and the meanings which accompany them; alternatively, perhaps we must choose the one reading which appears the most convincing and determine that this is what Scripture intends for us to do.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

1. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; New York, 1964), p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; Philadelphia, 1972), p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. A. Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII," *VT* 25 (1975), p. 347 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, J. P. Fokkelman, "Genesis 37 and 38 at the Interface of Structural Analysis and Hermeneutics," in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible* (Assen, 1996), pp. 152-187. Compare this to the lectures disseminated in this forum in previous years on *Parashat Vayeshev*: my “*Mekhirat Yosef U-Mitat Benei Yehuda*” and Elchanan Samet’s “*Sippur Yehuda Ve-Tamar.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is worth noting that this comparison is extremely surprising, as the characters seem to be diametrically opposed to one another. According to the linguistic connection, Tamar, who misleads Yehuda, parallels the brothers of Yosef, who dupe Yaakov, while Yaakov’s identification of the robe of many colors parallels Yehuda’s identification of his personal objects. Does the assessment of Tamar in chapter 38 parallel the assessment of the brothers in chapter 37?! (Indeed, the Midrashic sources focus on Yehuda and not on Tamar.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See in particular the commentary of the Rashbam to *Bereishit* 37:2: “And now it writes, ‘And these are the generations of Yaakov’ — his descendants, seventy in number, and how they were born; how Yosef was seventeen and his brothers were jealous of him, and due to this, Yehuda descended from among his brothers and he had children in Keziv and Adullam — Shela, Peretz and Zerach. As matters progressed, Yosef was brought down to Egypt and he had in Egypt Menasheh and Efrayim, and Yosef sent for his father and his house, until there were seventy of them. All of this Moshe Rabbeinu records in order to reprove them (*Devarim* 10:22): ‘With seventy souls, your ancestors…’” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Compare this to the view of R. E. Samet, *Iyunim Be-Farashat Ha-Shavua*, *Parashat Miketz*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, R. Y. Medan’s *“Bi-Mkom She-Ba’alei Teshuva Omedim,” Megadim* 2 (5747), pp. 54-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. J. Lambe, "Judah's Development: The Pattern of Departure-Transition-Return," *JSOT* 83 (1999), pp. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lambe (ibid.) follows the same direction (see in particular pp. 57-58). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)