

From the Promised Land, to Shechem, to Dothan

¹Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan... ¹³Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.' And he said to him, 'I will go (Hineni).' ¹⁴Then he said to him, 'Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, 'What are you looking for?' ¹⁶He said, 'I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock.' ¹⁷Then the man said, 'They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. (Gen. 37:1, 13-17)

Should we ever leave the Promised Land? Joseph's brothers were now tending sheep in *Shechem*. What! They are back to the place where they committed a grievous sin by murdering an entire city. Memories of Dinah had to be fresh in their minds. Do you recall in the Bible the phrase '*a dog returns to his vomit*' (Prov. 26:11; 2 Pet. 2:22). Wow! Wasn't *Shechem* a place of trouble already? How often do we return to places where we have had difficulties? I think the answer is yes a lot of the times. Maybe we are wiser, or maybe we are stubborn, or maybe we easily forget. Wait a minute, you say, they went to *Dothan*! *Dothan* means law, edict, royal decree, custom, religion, faith, belief, and orthodoxy. The children of Israel went from the Promised Land to *Shechem*, and then to *Dothan*, that is from bad to bad.

²⁶*Y'hudah* said to his brothers, 'what advantage is it to us if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?' ²⁷Come, let's sell him to the *Yishma'elim*, instead of putting him to death with our own hands. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.' His brothers paid attention to him." (Gen 37:26-27)

Hey, if one is going to do evil, why not make a profit? Of course, maybe *Yehudah* was truly trying to spare his own brother from death, or maybe he understood that "...*The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!*" (Like it is said of Abel in Gen. 4:10.) *Yehudah* comes up with the alternate plan (Scripture tells us that *Reuben* intended to rescue *Yosef*) to spare *Yosef*'s life. Whatever the reason, it is particularly *Yehudah*'s plan that prevails. The text does not state that the brothers actually sold *Yosef*, but rather, that while they were eating, the Ishmaelites (or was it the Midianites?) take him and trade him like one trades goods. So much for the dreams of a 17-year old! (Although I am inclined to preach *Yosef*'s path and life and draw from it rich insights, I will try and stay focused on *Yehudah*, but it is hard!) And so the brothers, including *Yehudah*, come to their father, things now out of control, and say unto their father "*Haker-Na*" – see for yourself, examine for yourself, know now, discern please, check this out dad! "*All of us agree dad, look at the evidence!*"

Let me focus on *Yehudah*. It was his big idea to sell *Yosef*. Never mind that he saved *Yosef* from a death plan, but now *Yehudah* is left alone, with his own conscience and the pain of the deception, the agony of his dad, the guilt, his imagination running wild, his brothers (in private, of course) now perhaps blame him (for the idea), his head begins screaming constantly "if only."

"It was at this time that *Y'hudah* went off from his brothers and settled near a man named *Hirah* who was an '*Adulami*'". (Gen 38:1)

I looked for a translation for *Adulami* but none was available. However, the first two letters, **אד** (AD), in Hebrew means "*a witness.*" *Hirah* means '*splendor from waxing pale.*' What is it you will find when you leave the Promised Land? What will you find when you leave home – to run away from facing the truth, from facing up to your failures and shortcomings? You'll find the witnesses of the splendor of waxing pale – the waning discoloration of a life of sin – the best the world has to offer. And you know what, the world wants you to integrate into the system. "*Come on, become one of us,*" they say. Don't do it! But *Yehudah* did! And guess what? If you do you will bring forth fruit that perishes.

“²There Y’hudah saw one of the daughters of a certain Kena’ani whose name was Shua, and he took her and slept with her.³She conceived and had a son, whom he named ‘Er. ⁴She conceived again and had a son, and she called him Onan. ⁵Then she conceived yet again and had a son whom she called Shelah; he was in K’ziv when she gave birth to him. ⁶Y’hudah took a wife for ‘Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷But ‘Er, Y’hudah’s firstborn, was evil from ADONAI’s perspective, so ADONAI killed him.” (Gen 38:2-7)

The wages of sin are death (Ro. 3:23) and we’ll see that principle play out in the next few verses. But *Yehudah* is stiff-necked (hardheaded) and it takes several strikes to see that something is not kosher in this situation. One son is dead, now Scripture continues: *“⁸Y’hudah said to Onan, “Go and sleep with your brother’s wife - perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and preserve your brother’s line of descent.” ⁹However, Onan knew that the child would not count as his; so whenever he had intercourse with his brother’s wife, he spilled the semen on the ground, so as not to give his brother offspring. ¹⁰What he did was evil from ADONAI’s perspective, so he killed him too.” (Gen. 38:8-10) *Tamar* means date palm, and the righteous, we are told, are to flourish like a date palm tree (*Tzadik KaTamar*, in Ps. 92:12). *Tamar* deserved better, but now *Yehudah*, fearing for his third son, victimizes her. (I want to comment on the sexual/moral implications of *Er* and *Onan* actions with respect to *Tamar*, who was beautiful. No children! *Tamar*, they thought, was just for sexual pleasure, no future, no blessing, and ultimately, no David and no Messiah through her children). This was contrary to הוה’s instructions to: ‘*be fruitful and multiply.*’ So *Yehudah* sends *Tamar* home, with an empty promise: “*wait until my son grows up*”. *Tamar* waited a long time; the text tells us that she devised a plan (not an evil plan given her culture) in order to obtain justice.*

What a mess! When we leave the Promised Land (which should be our home), for improper reasons (guilt and wanting space), we get into big messes and problems. These are problems that only *Adonai* can ultimately repair. Since we know the usual cultural procedure of the levirate marriage (brothers or finally the father), we are now able to understand why *Tamar* would have been so upset when *Yehudah* apparently broke the cultural tradition by withholding his youngest son from marrying her. It was, more or less, an insult to her. Consequently, she waited for an opportunity in which she could teach *Yehudah* a lesson. That opportunity came when *Yehudah*, her father-in-law, took a trip to see his friend. Disguised as a prostitute, *Tamar* waited along the road at a strategic point where *Yehudah* would notice her. After she allured him into having relations with her, she tricked *Yehudah* into leaving some sort of personal identification with her.

Tamar's Revenge

Tamar had her day! She figured that if *Yehudah* would not give her his last son to marry, she would do what was socially permissible for her to do (to have children through the father). Her method of getting what was culturally hers was a bit unorthodox, but evidently, she did it that way in order to teach *Yehudah* a bitter lesson.

Guess what *Tamar*’s words were to *Yehudah* when she confronted him in Gen. 38:25? Are you ready? *Haker-Na Yehudah* – see for yourself, examine for yourself, know now, discern please, and check this out *Yehudah*! “*All of us agree, Yehudah, look at the evidence!*” The same words *Yehudah* and his brothers used when they deceived *Ya’akov* because of their sin against *Yosef*! If this doesn’t move you, you can’t be moved!

“When she was brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law: ‘I am pregnant by the man to whom these things belong. Determine (Haker-Na), I beg you, whose these are—the signet, the cords and the staff.’” (Vv. 38:25)

In the end, when the truth came out, *Yehudah* was finally forced into giving her his last son, as custom dictated. But it was not until after *Tamar* gave birth to *Yehudah*’s first set of twins! Thus, by denying her his last son, not only did it cause *Yehudah* to commit a grievous sin, but it also complicated his life by having children through a Canaanite woman. Not to mention the fact that, when all was said and done, his son married her anyway, causing further domestic complications. One of *Tamar*’s twins is in the lineage of *Yeshua*. Stay in the Promised Land and it will be well with you!