

Embedded in this week's parashah, Vayeshev, is a skip in the story of the patriarchal lineage, of Jacob and sons, Joseph and his brothers.

Chapter 38 of Genesis is devoted to the story of Tamar, a woman married to a grandson of Jacob, the son of Jacob's son Judah. Now, the job of a woman in patriarchal society is to bear sons to continue the lineage, but Tamar almost doesn't get the chance. Judah's first son, Er, dies before impregnating Tamar; we do not know why, but the text places the blame on him, rather than her, saying only, "he did what was displeasing before God."

Jewish law has a particular requirement for when a married man dies childless. The closest surviving male relative is obligated to marry the widow, and the first son from the union is considered the heir of the deceased, rather than of the genetic father. This practice is explicitly mandated in Deuteronomy 25, verses 5 and 6. We encounter this practice in the book of Ruth that we read on Shavuot, as well.

This practice is implied in Genesis 38, as well, for after Er dies, Judah marries Tamar off to his second son, Onan, who refuses to fulfill his familial duty, and when called upon to perform, so to speak, spills his seed, according to verse 9. Incidentally, his name is (appropriately) the etymology for "onanism." Now, this is a big no-no in the biblical tradition, and so according to the story, Onan dies as well.

Judah worries that the problem is Tamar, however, that she must have some kind of deadly influence over his family - so instead of marrying her to his third son, who is in any case not yet mature, he sends her back to her family of birth.

And the story could end here, with the risky problem woman sent away.

But Tamar knows something is not right. She somehow prophetically understands that her destiny is to be part of this emerging Israelite nation, so she takes matters into her own hands, by breaking all the rules.

She hears that her father-in-law, Judah is coming to town, she dresses up as prostitute at the crossroads, seduces him somehow without his recognizing her, demands his staff as payment - yet, I know, how symbolic can you get? And then when she is visibly pregnant, word gets back to Judah that his daughter-in-law has dallied with some other man. He suggests, according to the sensibility of the times that she should be dragged out and burned, but Tamar keeps her wits about her, produces Judah's staff, and says, "The owner of this staff fathered my child." Whereupon Judah acknowledges that she actually did the right thing in seducing him, since he had failed to provide her with any other source for a child. She gives birth to twins - and in Torah, this is the thing, if it's not barrenness, it's twins! One is named "Peretz" Breaking through - and the other is named "Zorach" - sunrise.

Okay, I know it's weird and somewhat uncomfortable story, but bear with me, because there is a lot going on here. That son, Peretz, whose name means, "Breakthrough," is actually the ancestor of King David. When we sing in the second-to-last verse of L'cha dodi, "al yad ish ben partzi - v'nis'mecha v'nagilah" - that means, "along with the one descended from Peretz, we will rejoice and be glad", referring to a hoped for time of redemption at the hands of a Messianic king.

The archetypal ruler of the Jewish people, the one who we still invoke when praying for redemption, was descended from this messy situation of levirate marriage gone awry and Tamar taking her own fate into her hands, seducing her own father-in-law and risking death.

As Rabbi Shefa Gold writes in her commentary: “Tamar, caught in the injustice of a cruel system, breaks all the rules, and acts from the knowledge of her own beauty, truth, and radiance. Tamar refuses to give up her dream. She risks her life to allow our dream to be birthed through her. The two children born to Tamar as a result of her dream-following and risk taking are named, “Breakthrough,” and “radiance.”

Tamar’s story is one of taking a dreary situation and working with the tools at hand. As a woman chained to obligation to deceased husband, but sent away from the people who could have fulfilled that obligation with her, in a society where a woman’s status was measured in sons, her options were limited and unappealing. I don’t want to over romanticize this. Tamar was certainly not liberated, and she didn’t liberate herself. The action she took was still firmly in keeping with the role of a woman in her society, her ultimate meaning tied to the sons she could produce. She didn’t have the option of getting a civil divorce and starting over, or of heading to college and moving far away.

She could, of course, have resigned herself to growing old in her parents’ home, waiting for the call to return to Judah’s household, even as it became increasingly clear that the call would never come. But Tamar didn’t resign herself to that fate. Instead, she risked her life and her reputation for her vision of her own role in history - what she could be and what she could produce.

The specifics of Tamar's ambition are probably not so easy for many of us to relate to. But the character - the rule breaking and the risk taking out of a fundamental sense of what must be done now - is perhaps something we can all admire, especially in these times.

And let us not forget that the story of Tamar is embedded within the larger Joseph narrative. Before Her story, we learn of how Joseph's brothers throw him in a pit, sell him into slavery in Egypt. After Tamar's story, the narrative returns to Joseph, rising to favor in his new master's household, falling and being imprisoned again, and then planting the seeds of his own liberation by interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's courtiers.

The parasha does not end on a happy note - it leaves Joseph forgotten in jail. But the story will continue - and just as Tamar carved out her own story in the midst of a dreary situation, so Joseph will rise to power in Egypt.

This parashah is the story of people doing what they can do - the most courageous and risky things they can do - when faced with no good options, and somehow these people prevail. It seems to me a fitting parashah for solstice, a fitting parashah for a time of year and time in civic life when all seems hopeless. Our job, like Tamar's, like Joseph's, is no more and no less than to do what it is immediately evident that we can do, trusting that redemption, hidden as it may be, will come.