

The Messianic Life Force

Or: The Strange Genealogy of Messiah, Son of David¹

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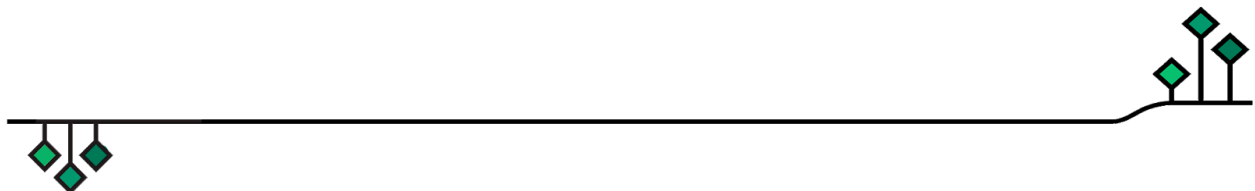
The story of Judah, told in our *parashah*, is full of tragedy and pain, with surprising twists and religiously dissonant behavior—perhaps even a bit shocking to the pious reader. This is one of the three surprising narratives that make up the ancestry of King David—and of the final Messiah, son of David. This strange genealogy demands an explanation.

Judah and his wife Bat Shua² raised three children. The first born, Er marries a woman named Tamar. Er is apparently a bad person. He dies young and without children. As was the custom in the pre-Sinaitic times, when a man dies childless, his brother marries his widow,³ and their first born child carries the name of the deceased and is designated to carry forth the

¹ I want to acknowledge the primary source of this *dvar Torah*. I heard the core concept in a talk on this very *parashah*, given by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in Boston in the late 1950s. I was so struck by the theme that I never forgot it. Over the years, I have worked variations on this theme but this is the first time that I put it in writing. To my knowledge, the shiur was not published, not even in the posthumous writing series. Let me also acknowledge with gratitude that this is but one drop from an ocean of Torah and insight which I gained from him.

² This may not be her actual name since she is the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. The Torah not infrequently leaves off the name of important women in its narratives. The name of Tamar, the heroine of this story, is given, probably because she is the main driver of the action.

³ This practice was taken into the Torah, Deuteronomy 25:5-10, and known as levirate marriage. The levir (husband's brother) redeems/preserves the chain of life of the dead brother "so his name not be erased from [the ranks of] Israel (v. 6). The levir could reject this role in which case there was a ceremony which released her and rebuked him (vv. 9-10); see next note.



chain of life of the brother whose line was “cut off.”⁴ Judah, the grieving father, honors this custom, and marries Tamar to his second son, Onan. Although Onan marries Tamar, he knows that his first child will be counted as his brother’s offspring, so he prevents conception by spilling his seed, that is, masturbation or coitus interruptus. He, too, is “struck down by God,” and dies young and childless (Genesis 38:10).

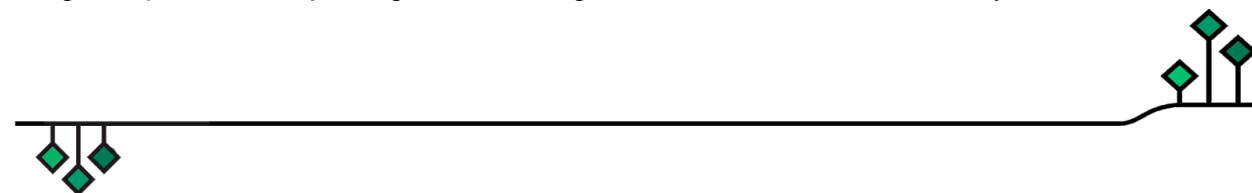
Now imagine the scene of death and devastation left behind. Two parents have lost two grown sons in their prime of their lives, both childless. Perhaps the tragedy is compounded by the suspicion—or knowledge?—that both sons were not good people. Consider Tamar’s pain and ruin. She suffered through extended periods of childlessness⁵ and the untimely death of her first husband. This was followed by the anguish of a second husband who—far from comforting her and carrying on the line of life—was self-centered, begrudging to his brother, and debilitated their sexual life to prevent conception. He, too, dies young, leaving her bereft, childless, and lonely.

Tamar is now a widow, bearing the stigma of being a “*katlanit*,”⁶ a woman who has buried more than one husband. By drawing conclusions—and often by cultural tradition—men shunned such women, rather than face the risk of being the next fatality. Judah feels the obligation to marry Tamar to his youngest son, Shelah, but he fears that this would spell death to Shelah as well. He tells Tamar to remain, instead, in her widowed state, and wait until Shelah grows up. In effect, he dooms her to an endless loneliness, anchored to a dead man or a future redeemer, and unable to seek any new relationship or marriage on pain of being deemed an adulterous wife.

⁴ This sentence assumes that the Torah’s practice and rationale was the same as the pre-biblical custom but this is far from certain. In later Jewish law, this practice was essentially replaced by the *halitzah* ceremony in which the living brother renounced this obligation and freed the widow to marry whomever she wanted.

⁵ Compare Rebecca’s similar experience (Genesis 25:21) and Rachel’s (Genesis 30:1) and my comments in my essay for Parashat Hayyei Sarah, “The Torah Came to Make a Mensch’: Reflections on the Discovery of Rebecca”, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/torah-came-make-mensch>

⁶ קטלנית = a killer woman (= a black widow?). In Yevamot 64b, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi rules that a woman whose first two husbands died may not get married to a third husband. Shulhan Arukh Even Ha-Ezer 9:1 codifies this ruling but reports that many men ignored this ruling and we (the authorities) “raise no objection.”



Years pass. Tamar sees that there is no move to bring Shelah to her as a husband. Her biological clock is ticking. Judah's wife dies. He recovers from his grief, yet is deeply lonely. Tamar learns that he is going to Timna to graze his sheep and decides to "draft" him to be her redeemer/levir. She dresses as a prostitute and waits for him on the road to Timna. Judah passes and sees her, but does not recognize her as his daughter-in-law. He feels a rush of desire and sexual need and asks to have sex with her. He was so far from planning to go to a prostitute that he actually has no money to pay her hire. He offers to send her a goat when he reaches Timna. She asks him to leave his signet, rope, and staff with her as security. He agrees.

Out of that encounter, Tamar conceives. She leaves the scene, removes her harlot's clothing and resumes wearing her widow's weeds. When Judah, a man of his word, sends her the goat, the "prostitute" on the road to Timna is nowhere to be found. In three months time, Tamar's pregnancy is visible. Judah is notified that his daughter-in-law has violated her widowhood and sentences her to death by fire.

As she is taken out to be burned, however, Tamar sends Judah the signet, staff, and rope he left with her. In a remarkably understated scene, she does not name him, only saying that these belong to the man with whom she slept. Judah is moved and shaken. He sees that Tamar acted for the sake of having a child, and that he had sinned against her by holding her captive while not giving Shelah to be her husband. He publicly acknowledges his personal responsibility. Tamar is saved. She is given the divine blessing of two healthy twins, who grow up to be community leaders and generational transmitters of the covenantal claim.⁷

In the book of Ruth, this genealogy of Judah's son, Peretz, is taken up and directly traced to King David (Ruth 4:18-23), ancestor of the ultimate messiah, Messiah son of David. In making this connection, the story informs us that Ruth, a daughter of Moab, is central to the messianic lineage. This in turn directs our attention to the original ancestor of Moab, the daughters of Lot. That story is even more surprising and shocking than Peretz's conception.

⁷ Unlike Rebecca's twins, where the first one out was a source of problems for a lifetime, Tamar's twin who fights his way out first, Peretz (= bursts out) is a good link in the covenantal chain, as is his brother, Zerah.



Lot and his daughters are the only survivors of the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. From a cave on a mountain, they look down on a scene of smoking ruins and total devastation as far as the eye can see. There is no sign of life anywhere (Genesis 19:25, 28). As the end of the world as they know it sinks in, the eldest daughter initiates a stunning response. She tells her younger sister “There is no man left [alive] in the land who can come to us [a euphemism for having intercourse in order to conceive]” (19:31). She believes that the whole earth is wiped out. With their ultimate death, humanity—maybe life itself—will come to an end.

Lot’s daughter is not willing to accept the end of humanity. In truth, there is one man left to seed the future: their father, Lot. Her proposal is: let us get him drunk, then lie with him. Thus we will get the seed for new life from our father (ibid, 34). Both daughters carry out this plan on successive nights. Lot is so drunk that he does not know or remember what happened. Both daughters conceive, and the elder gives birth to a boy, Moab, the eponymous ancestor of the Moabite nation, from which Ruth is descended. Hardly an illustrious ancestry for the ultimate redeemer of the world, who will bring God’s Kingdom, the world’s final political, economic, social, spiritual perfection.⁸

This pushback of life against death and evil is the core of an insight of Rabbi Soloveitchik. He pointed out that Ruth represented the same response as Lot’s daughters’ and Tamar’s—a refusal to give in to death or to accept it as final. Ruth discovered the truth that “love is stronger than death” (Song of Songs 8:6), love persists after death, be that love for her dead husband or love of her mother-in-law whom she would not abandon. Ruth defied both logic,

⁸ In my work with Jewish-Christian dialogue, I sought ways of stressing Jewish distinctive values and often focused on the contrast between the Torah’s flawed heroes (Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Moses, David, etc.) and the Christian vision of ideal heroes, modeled on Jesus, saintly and perfect in every way. I always got a big response when I delivered the punchline: how to birth the ultimate hero, the Messiah? In the Christian tradition, he is perfect and untainted by sin or sex. Jesus is the outcome of a Virgin Birth while his mother, Mary is born out of an Immaculate Conception (i.e. untainted by Original Sin). And how is the Jewish messiah birthed? Out of drunken incest and prostitution! Then I would argue my Jewish case. Take a redeemer who was born in Heaven and never tasted sin or experienced the blood, sweat, and tears of earthly oppression. Arriving on earth, that messiah would turn right around and return to Heaven at the first encounter with the unspeakable cruelty, suffering, and pain of life on Earth. However, a messiah born out of the unyielding pushback of the survivors of total devastation, who had grown in the reality of a cruel, wicked society, who was the outcome of a stained but life-affirming sexual congress, would encounter the worst that the planet could throw at him and would wade right in. She would roll up her sleeves and repair this broken world.

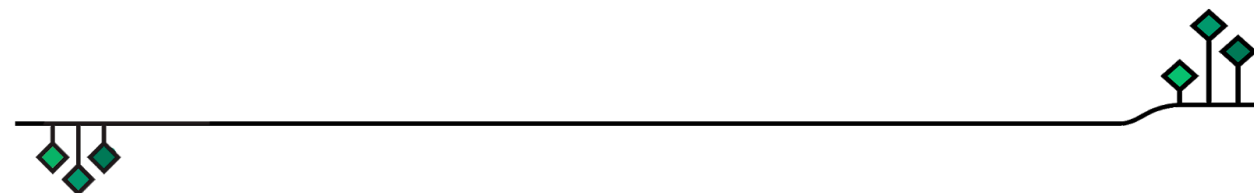


knowing that there would be no one to marry her, and convention, in going to Boaz on the threshing floor to ask him to redeem her (Ruth 3). So, too, Lot's daughters defied the implacable fate that had, they believed, demolished the world. They would let no obstacle, no norm, no inhibition stop them from assuring that life would go on. This, too, is the power of Tamar, who defied the pattern of passive widows letting their lives drain away. She risked her life to ensure that the covenantal chain would not end with her.

Ruth, Tamar, and Lot's daughters embody a fierce, unyielding rejection of death's final victory. This determination to have life go on reflects an unlimited embrace of life. Knowing full well the extra risks and likely pain of loss of loved ones, the person answers, against all logic: "I choose life"—then makes it happen.

Says Soloveitchik: Judaism preaches that life, driven by love, is strong enough to overcome all the enemies of life and the inescapable natural phenomenon, death itself. This is the unlikely, in a sense, unbelievable, message of messianism and Jewish religion. But one must embrace life intensely, take the worst blows and come back with more life in order to make this come true. The proof that the Torah is not spouting hollow affirmation or spreading pollyannaish illusions is the women who fought back and overcame the finality of death. This is the force in humans that has the ability to give the final victory to life.

For years, I carried Soloveitchik's insight in my mind as a deeply Jewish message. Then in the 1980s, I came across a newspaper story of a baby boom in Nicaragua, during and following the catastrophic Sandinista civil war. It reminded me of the Jewish DP camps after the Shoah, which had the second highest birth rate in the world. Apparently, people everywhere respond to death with affirmation of life. After being drowned in death, people either give up, or they intensely reaffirm hope and belief in the future by generating new life. In the Warsaw ghetto at the end, the death rate was forty times the birth rate. People understood that there was no hope and that no new child would survive. After the war, the Jewish people responded to the tsunami of death in the Holocaust with the greatest outburst of life, biological and cultural, in Jewish history. The United States of America also had a baby boom after World War II.



My wife and I chose to have a large family—in the 1960s, five children was considered a large family. In 2002, we suffered the ultimate parental devastation, the death of our son J.J., then 36. In the aftermath, I struggled with the unbearable pain of being cut off and wanting him back, and the urge, from somewhere deep inside of me, to strike back at death with more life. Over the next two years, out of love and longing, his two sisters, who had four children in their families, each had a fifth child, named after J.J.

Tamar's response—and those before and after to this day—is the reason why I firmly believe that the Torah and Talmud's messianic promise, the triumph of life, will come true.

