

Reflections on the Weekly Torah/Bible Portion Vayeishev: A Message for our Time

By HarlenWall

This week's Torah portion is riddled with all manner of dysfunction and human error; like a pebble tossed into the middle of a pond, the ripples cause more ripples and more ripples until they finally reach the banks and disappear. The imbalances are restored, temporarily at least, until the next pebble is tossed into the pond. And so, goes the story of humanity. Every person affects the other, and another the next one. The world is filled with people and stories but all of them are ONE.

There are two troubling narratives that occupy this installment of the Bible. Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, is hated by his brothers and sold into slavery. The brothers present their father with Joseph's coat, stained in goat's blood, to imply that he was killed by a wild animal. But amid this gross injustice, it's hard not to be penetrated by Judah's words as he presents his father with his kid brother's bloody coat. "Ha-ker-na," he says, which translated from Hebrew means "recognize please." It seems that Judah is not only saying "Dad, recognize that this is your favored son's coat," but rather, on a deeper level, "Dad, recognize who this coat should've been given to."

In other words, Judah seems to be crying out "Dad, recognize who the real first-born son is." In truth, it was not baseless hatred that was to blame for Joseph's sudden departure. It was favoritism. This sentiment is dripping with irony since Esau's claim against Jacob, earlier, was that he did not recognize HIS (Esau's) status as first-born. But the most difficult question to answer is what the connection is between the narrative of the Brothers selling Joseph and the story of "Judah and Tamar." If the story of Joseph and his Brothers is not enough to boggle the mind, we are told that after this horrific event, the great Judah has relations with a prostitute! It seems like a rather strange way to celebrate your kid brother's brush with death and arrival on the slave-trade.

The first and obvious lesson is that what happens away from the play (to use sports terminology) is always more important than the spotlight itself. Let's pull back the zoom lens for a minute and get a wide shot. In Genesis 1:2 we are told that the earth was *tohu* (without form) and *vohu* (empty) with darkness of the face of the depth, but God's spirit moved on the surface of the water. Ok - now God's "spirit" is a reference to the Messiah, which is always connected to (living) water from the very beginning! The spirit of Messiah moved or hovered over the surface of the water.

We learn from this that, in a sense, it was the sheer darkness that caused the Messianic Spirit to "move." And this is why the Messianic Light is not far away! It has already started to shine, although it's only visible to the wise of heart (King Solomon said that wisdom is rooted in the heart, not the mind). It's very obvious how depraved our society has become, and sadly, the world is on the cusp of a Nuclear War. In some strange twist of irony, it's the darkness, that will

bring the Messiah and the light of salvation. This is just the way it works. This principle can be clearly witnessed when a child is born. The point at which the Mother experiences the most intense and painful contractions and feels that she can't take one more second, is the point when the child is born.

OK - now, let's put our zoom lens back on Judah and Tamar and the culmination of that story, which is the birth of Peretz (the very seed of Messiah). At the time Peretz was born, the Patriarch Jacob was involved in the mourning period of his father, Isaac. The tribes were involved in the sale of Joseph. Judah himself was overseeing his sheepshearers, and Joseph was captive in Egypt. Everything was a mess! The family of Israel---charged with the task of bringing salvation to the world---was in a CRISIS of cosmic proportions.

While all this was happening, however, the HOLY ONE, BLESSED BE HE was involved with the Light of Messiah. This is the way God works. Was it not after the destruction of Sodom that Lot's daughter gave birth to Moav (the ancestor of Ruth) who married Boaz and produced Obed who produced Jesse who produced David and eventually Messiah? Once again, God draws the attention to a certain place but usually inserts the central character/theme away from the action! So, the diversion in the text of this week's Torah Portion, is not really a diversion at all. This is what people don't seem to understand. It was the very chaos and darkness of the Brothers selling Joseph (and everything else going on at the time) that gave rise and birth to Messiah (Peretz).

Let us now take out our strongest zoom lens and focus it on the great Judah, the root of David and Messiah. The verse says that "Judah went down from his brothers." The sub-text here is that he not only went down physically/geographically, but also spiritually. In simple everyday parlance, he lost his status. You see, Judah was a natural leader. He had a strong will. When he spoke, people listened. His brothers respected him for his leadership ability.

However, when he spoke up to save Joseph from being killed, he couldn't bring himself to do what was right. Instead of returning Joseph to his Father, he suggested that they sell Joseph as a slave. When he presented his Father, Jacob, with his kid brother's coat stained in the blood of a goat---implying that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal---it became clear to his brothers that he had failed as the leader. When he spoke up and demanded their attention (when Joseph was in the pit) they would've listened to anything he said! He had their full attention. But he used his charisma and powers of persuasion to convince his brothers to sell Joseph as a slave. The result was that their father, Jacob, would now go down to his grave mourning for his favorite son, Joseph.

So, after losing his status and the respect of others, Judah had relations with a prostitute, who turned out to be his daughter-in-law, Tamar, in disguise. As payment, he promised her a goat at a future date and deposited his coat/staff/ring with her as collateral. Tamar eventually relinquished these belongings, using a variation of the Hebrew verb "to recognize" (ha-ker-na) asking the owner of the belongings to recognize them.

In other words, Judah now had to make a life-altering decision. Should he kill the prostitute, who was really his widowed daughter-in-law (in disguise). Or should he admit that the

belongings were his and that he had relations with a prostitute?! Although his first reaction was to have Tamar killed to save his reputation, he ultimately confessed that the coat/staff/ring were his, and that the woman who appeared guilty was the innocent one. Her only motivation in having relations with him (Judah) was to perpetuate the Messianic line, which she accomplished through the birth of Peretz.

There is a striking irony here. In the previous narrative, Judah had presented his father, Jacob, with his brother's bloody coat, saying "ha-ker-na" (recognize please). In a classic case of "measure-for-measure," (midah k'neged midah) Tamar was now presenting Judah with a coat and saying "ha-ker-na" (recognize please). But she was saying much more than "please recognize that this coat is yours." Just as Judah had reminded his father of the pain he had caused---by favoring Joseph---now Tamar was reminding Judah of the pain he caused his father by SELLING Joseph!

In both cases, the instruments or symbols of revelation, were goats and coats. By admitting that the coat was his, Judah fully recognized his initial sin of selling Joseph; which culminated in the bloody coat that he had given his Father (a symbol of his brother's death). When he recognized his sin and also admitted to having relations with Tamar, he claimed back his Kingship. The hallmark of Kingship is not perfection or absence of sin. It's the ability to admit the truth and recognize mistakes. The tribe of Judah, the root of David, which had been withering from failed leadership and sin, was now back on course. And the obvious seal of this great recovery was the birth of Peretz and the continuation of the Messianic line, leading to the salvation of the entire world!

And so it goes. Just as a pebble kisses the surface of the water and causes ripples and more ripples until they melt into each other and disappear, this is the way of life. Everything we do or say in this world will, at some point, come back to us. Existence viewed through the Torah, is a multi-dimensional super-conscious process of repentance. In truth, everything and everyone is part of one living organism. The world is filled with people and stories. And each one affects the other and another the next one. But all the stories are really ONE.

Shabbat Shalom!
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