

WRJ CENTENNIAL



# D'var Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

## Tamar: Conscious Choices and Choosing One's Own Destiny Parashat Vayeishev (Genesis 38: 1 – 30)

Do you make conscious choices? One of our Torah heroines surely did. Tamar made a conscious choice following the deaths of her husband, Judah's son Er, Judah's next son Onan, and Judah's wife Hirah. Tamar became a childless widow and it seemed as though Judah had no plan to allow his youngest son Shelah to marry Tamar, as biblical law mandated. Judah claimed that Shelah was too young and he could not risk losing another son.

However, our heroine Tamar needed a child in order to claim a true stake in the household of Judah. So, she tricked her father-in-law Judah into sleeping with her during his bereavement. Posing as a harlot, Judah solicited Tamar's services, willingly giving Tamar his signet seal, his cord and his staff, all of which clearly identified him when she would later proclaim Judah's paternity for her twin sons Perez and Zerah. Not for love or for lust, but rather for a legacy into the future, Tamar made a conscious choice. She took initiative. She changed destiny. And, ironically, Judah admitted, "She is more in the right than I!" (Genesis 38:26) Judah had refused the rights of levirate marriage to Tamar.

It all returns to making choices. Each woman on our sisterhood roster has made a conscious choice to join sisterhood. We are grateful to the women who choose to join sisterhood and our congregation, for choosing the path of leadership, and for sharing *mitzvah* time.

Each woman who participates in sisterhood is making a conscious decision about how she commits her volunteer time. There are many worthy causes to endorse as one enters the world of adult responsibility. A woman considers her commitment to her faith, how she wants her faith to impact her future and the futures of those who come after her. Initially, she might not be aware of how her sisterhood membership and participation affect all children of the community, and that her actions bear influence and make a difference. But somewhere along the way, she may come to realize, that the choices she has made affect her own family, her local Jewish community and the future of Reform Judaism. Obviously, conscious choices make a difference.

WRJ Past President Judith Silverman (1997-2001) shares, "The story of Tamar and Judah in Parashat Vayeishev is often overlooked because this parashah contains the more well-known story of Joseph. Yet Tamar is a very intriguing woman to learn from and her story is one that we can

relate to in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As Jews, we are all charged both to develop our individuality and to play a larger role in the world. Tamar, in her own way, pursued her unique personal identity and made a positive impact way beyond her time.”

How many of us, when we face personal tragedies, are not prepared to protect ourselves and our loved ones by taking control of the situation? In her Contemporary Reflection in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Carol Selkin Wise references Victor Frankl (*Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959) noting that “while we may have no control over circumstances in which we find ourselves, we have the utter freedom in how we respond to those circumstances, even if only in the attitude we choose to assume in response. Tamar teaches us not to become immobilized by loss.” (p. 229)

Judy continues, “Tamar teaches us not to become immobilized by loss or other sorrows, but to come to terms with them and then move on to find an ongoing purpose. As women of sisterhood, we have an ongoing purpose. We have the tools in our resolutions to make this world a better place for every woman no matter where they live or what their faith is. May we all be like Tamar, women who embrace destiny both for ourselves and for other human beings. May we provide a community that honors all families and may women wherever they live, be stronger together in ‘Sisterhood’ advocating for the rights of all women.”

Tamar, a childless widow, realized that her destiny was in her own hands. She managed, via charade, to have Judah father her children and, by planning ahead, she was able to legitimize herself. Tamar took proof (the ring, the cord, the staff) so that Judah might eventually know his own children and guarantee that they might own property within the house of Judah. What a story! A bit steamy, you might say, for a WRJ Centennial d'var Torah. But the real lesson for us today is in how we continue to find meaning in Tamar's story.

As Judy said, may we all be like Tamar, women who embrace destiny both for ourselves and for others. May we provide a community that honors all families. May women everywhere be *Stronger Together* in advocating for their rights... for human rights. Amen!

*This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.*