

PARASHAS VAYEISHEV

The Telltale Sign

(or: A Portrait of Two Women)

Appearances can be deceiving. It is possible for two people to behave in exactly the same fashion, yet one is a hero and the other a scoundrel. What sets the two apart is motivation. The same act can be performed for selfish reasons or for the highest altruistic ideals, and it is the intent behind the act which determines its nature.

But how can we tell which is which? Very rarely will the selfish person admit he is motivated exclusively by greed and gratification. More often than not, he will pretend to be acting in the interest of others, for greatest good. How then is it possible to determine who is a true friend and who is a foe in disguise?

Furthermore, how do we evaluate our own impulses when motivated to do acts of kindness? Are our intentions really as altruistic as we would like to believe? Or is our supposed altruism a product of self-deception, a subconscious rationalization camouflaging ulterior motives?

Perhaps we can find the answers in this week's Torah reading. As the saga of Jacob's sons unfolds, we encounter two women, one portrayed as righteous, the other as an adulteress. And yet, on closer examination, there is a striking resemblance between them.

Tamar, the childless widow of Judah's son Er, marries her husband's brother Onan. But Onan also meets an untimely death, leaving his brother Shailah as Judah's sole surviving son. Twice widowed and still childless, Tamar wants to marry Shailah, but Judah refuses. Determined to give birth to a child from the bloodlines of Judah, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and ingratiates herself to Judah himself.

Presently, Tamar's pregnancy is discovered, and she is accused of fornication. Judah sentences her to death, unaware that the child she is carrying is his own. When she is about to be executed, Tamar sends Judah some personal articles he had left in her possession, indicating that these articles belonged to the man by whom she was pregnant. Judah acknowledges her righteousness, Tamar's life is spared, and her child becomes the forefather of the Davidic dynasty.

Why was Tamar so determined to conceive a child by Judah? Our Sages tell us that Tamar knew prophetically that the Davidic dynasty

was to descend from her. Therefore, when her father-in-law refused to let her marry his last son, she resorted to desperate measures.

Meanwhile down in Egypt, the minister Potiphar's wife tries to seduce young Joseph, but he flees from her. She turns on Joseph and accuses him of trying to seduce her. Joseph is sent to prison, where he languishes for years until he is summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

Why did Potiphar's wife try to seduce Joseph? Once again, our Sages discern a desire to share in the ancestorhood of the Jewish people. Potiphar's wife knew great leaders of the Jewish people would be descended from her and Joseph, and she wanted to fulfill that destiny. In actuality, however, Joseph's union was to be with her daughter, not her.

Apparently, then, both Tamar and Potiphar's wife were striving to fulfill their destinies as ancestresses of the Jewish people. Both also chose rather unconventional methods to reach that destiny. Why then is Tamar admired as a heroine and Potiphar's wife remembered with contempt?

The commentators explain that the test of a person's motivation is his response to failure. A person of altruistic motives pursues his goal vigorously and tenaciously, and if, despite all his efforts, he fails, he is disappointed. A person motivated by greed and desire, however, reacts to failure with violence and vindictiveness.

Tamar wanted to bear the future seed of the Davidic dynasty in order to draw close to Hashem and reach exalted spiritual levels. This noble dream inspired her. And when all her attempts failed and she faced death, she bowed to the will of Hashem with humility and acceptance. She did not hurl public accusations at Judah. Instead, she responded with tact and subtlety, sending him his articles and relying on his own sense of decency and justice to vindicate her. This was indeed a righteous woman.

Potiphar's wife, on the other hand, responded to failure and rejection like a true woman scorned. Seething with vengeance, she flew into a rage, making false accusations. This woman was clearly not motivated by a desire to cleave to the Creator. All she cared about was the glory of being an ancestress of the Jewish people. Failure revealed her authentic colors.

In our own lives, when we examine our innermost thoughts and motivations, we should ask ourselves how we would react to failure. If we sense we would feel frustrated and angry, our motives are indeed suspect. But if we are convinced we would feel only sadness and disappointment, we can rest assured that our altruism is genuine.