

Parshas Vayeishev

In this week's Parsha Vayeishev, we learn of Yosef's descent into Mitzraim at the hands of the brothers. Interspersed in the chapters is the story of Yehuda and Tamar. The first Rashi, after the story in chapter 39, asks why the story of Yehuda and Tamar took place and then returns to the 'original' subject of Yosef. Rashi says firstly that Yehuda's status was demoted after the incident of Yosef's sale, and further, that Potiphar's wife acted with pure motives just as Tamar did. In Potiphar's wife's case, she saw astrologically that she would have children from Yosef. Still, she didn't know if it would come from her or her daughter (hence, she tried to have children with Yosef, but later, when Yosef became viceroy, he married Potiphar's daughter).

The episode with Yehuda and Tamar and the Midrashic, Talmudic and Rashi's explanations lend to a more profound Hashkafik takeaway. It is clear from Midrash and the Gemara that interpersonal matters are at play, and lessons need to be learned on how to treat one another. For example, in Sotah 10b, one of the opinions teaches us that it is better to be killed than throw a friend under the bus or embarrass another person, just as Tamar was willing to die before embarrassing her father-in-law with whom she had a child. Tamar was also unrecognizable because she had been modest in her father-in-law's house, among other laudable traits.

Her positive actions were so powerful that Zohar explained she merited Mashiach as

her offspring because even righteous people can be born from dubious unions.

One of my key takeaways is that this is a lesson in training yourself to believe Hashem is in control and manifests outcomes. (For example, on the surface, Tamar's actions resulted in birthing Kings, whereas someone like Zimri caused the deaths of 1000s).

This links with the 19th Kislev holiday, which comes out around the time of Vayeishev. 19 Kislev celebrates the release of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe (the Alter Rebbe) from prison, where he was enlightened (by the Baal Shem Tov and the Mezricher Maggid) about publishing Tanya and spreading the words of Chassidus that had previously been taught in a limited capacity.

In a Sichra on the Parsha, the Rebbe highlights a story in the jail and the lesson to be learned. A scholarly soldier knew Torah and Midrash and was challenging the Alter Rebbe. The soldier asked the Alter Rebbe why Hashem would ask "Where are you?" (ayeka) to Adam when he was searching for him after the sin of the fruit; the soldier posited that if Hashem is all-knowing and all-powerful, then why would he need to ask where Adam is. The Alter Rebbe said to look at the Rashi there, where Rashi explained that it was done not to scare Adam. The soldier, unhappy with the answer, stated that he knew the Rashi but wanted an explanation from the Rebbe. The Rebbe thought about it and said that this is a question everyone should ask of themselves, i.e. "Where are you?" as in, where are you holding? Are you keeping up with the purpose of why you were put

on earth? Our Rebbe quoted the Freidieker Rebbe, who explained that this answer was the Alter Rebbe asking it of himself, and that question helped him stay sane, ultimately leading to the Alter Rebbe continuing his purpose as the leader and spreader of the profundity of Chabad Chassidus. Now, just the Alter Rebbe asked it of himself, so too must we ask it of ourselves. The answer is that he empowered us to fulfill a purpose by learning the Torah and serving Hashem, who sent us as his messengers. The sender imbues the power to succeed in the messenger.

This means that everyone has a purpose and a role, and this occurs by Hashem's hand. We don't know what is happening with other people and their trials, tribulations, challenges, etc., but we must engage with our world as Hashem meant us to.

Our missions are purposeful and divinely inspired when performed with Torah and Avoda on our minds and in our hearts because then even what looks dubious will have the outcomes they are meant to because Hashem wills it that way, just as Tamar's outcome was the offspring of Mashiach. This is further reflected in the recurring narrative of the Parsha with the sale of Yosef. Among all the other reasons given for the contentious relationship between the brother and Yosef, Zohar explains that Hashem willed for it to happen so that the outcome was the promise given to Avraham earlier. The actions are about how Hashem controls the world, and the Torah explicitly tells us this, along with the Midrashic explanations. The purpose of these stories, then, is to teach us how to live,

that is, submit to the fact that it is Hashem's world, and everything happens with divine providence, that we need to be vessels honed by Torah and Mitzvos to ensure that the outcomes of our actions are positive.

Good Shabbos