

Parsha Story

Stories and Parables from
the famed Maggid of Dubno
by Rabbi Chanan Morrison

The Ugly Present

Vayeishev

The peculiar - and uncomplimentary - story of Yehuda and Tamar was meant to set the stage for King David and the future Mashiach, the messianic king. The Midrash poignantly describes the scene:

"The tribes [Yaakov's sons] were occupied with selling Yosef. Yosef was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting. Reuven was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting. Yaakov was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting. Yehuda was occupied finding a wife.

And God? He was occupied creating the light of the Mashiach."

But the entire story is strange. If God had already decided to bestow this wonderful honor to Yehuda - the Mashiach would come from his descendants! - then why couldn't Yehuda have found a wife in a more respectable manner?

The Matching Gift

The Maggid told the story of a

wealthy man who married off his son. The local rabbi sent a congratulatory letter. The letter included a beautiful poem, written in exquisite calligraphy, extolling the virtues of the bride and groom and their respective families.

The letter and the poem were truly wonderful - but it was inscribed on an worn-out piece of scrap paper with uneven edges. The father of the groom was upset when he saw this peculiar gift. However, he decided not to ruin the joy of the moment; he would respond to the slight on a later date.

After the wedding, the wealthy man sent the rabbi a basket of fresh fruits and delicious cakes. But he placed the fruits and cakes inside a grimy bowl, and covered it with a soiled napkin. He found a bedraggled street urchin to deliver the gift.

The rabbi was amazed by this strange gift. When he met the wealthy man a few days later, he asked him, "Why did you do this? Why did you send me such an expensive gift wrapped in rags?"

The wealthy man replied, "I was only repaying you in kind. You also sent me a beautiful gift in an ugly, unattractive vessel."

Yehuda's 'Reward'

The Midrash teaches that Yosef was destined to go down to Egypt in order to fulfill the "profound counsel" of God's covenant with Avraham, the Brit Bein HaBetarim. "They will enslave and persecute them." This was all part of the Divine plan to create the Jewish people.

There were many ways that God could have brought Yosef down to Egypt. Since the brothers hated Yosef and sought to disprove his dreams of grandeur, God let them be the cause for Yosef's descent. The final result of the sale of Yosef - which was Yehuda's idea - was desirable; but the way it was done, with betrayal and lies to their father, was obviously improper and unseemly.

The Midrash teaches that the affair of Tamar was a case of poetic justice, mida k'neged mida. With this incident, God was telling Yehuda:

"You tricked your father with a goat; so too, Tamar will trick you with a goat.

You asked your father, "Do you recognize this?" Tamar will also ask you, "Do you recognize this?"

The ultimate result of Yosef's sale was good; but on the outside it

looked ugly and repulsive. God therefore repaid Yehuda in the same coin. He gave Yehuda a wonderful gift, but in a soiled and tattered wrapping. The final result was priceless - preparing the way for King David and the Mashiach - but it came in a disreputable vessel, in a way that suggested prostitution and moral turpitude.

Adapted from Mishlei Yaakov, p. 73-74