



YOSEF & YEHUDA – PARSHAS VAYEISHEV – WARREN GREENWOOD

From this week's parsha until the end of Sefer Bereshit, Yosef is the central character. However, one episode in the parsha ignores Yosef completely. Between Yosef's sale and his descent to Egypt, the Torah recounts the Yehuda/Tamar episode.

What is the purpose of this episode and why does it interrupt the Yosef narrative? The obvious answer is that it is in chronological order. "Around that time (i.e. when Yosef was sold) Yehuda went down from his brothers..."

However, if we consider the time span, we will see that this cannot be correct. Yosef was 17 years old when he was sold to Egypt (Bereshit 37:12). He "was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh" (ibid 41:46). There were then 7 years of plenty and two years of famine before his family went down to Egypt – a total of 22 years.

Yet the following things occur in the Yehuda/Tamar episode:

- He leaves the family, goes to Timna and marries Batshua.
- He has three children: Er, Onan and Shela.
- Er marries Tamar.
- Er dies. Tamar marries Onan.
- Yehuda tells Tamar to wait for Shela to grow up.
- "Many days passed and Batshua died" (ibid 38:10).
- Tamar entraps Yehuda and she becomes pregnant.
- Tamar gives birth to Peretz and Zerach.
- Peretz has two sons when they go down to Egypt (ibid 46:12).

It is unlikely that all this could have occurred in only 22 years.

So why does the Yehuda/Tamar episode interrupt the Yosef narrative?

It is true that many themes in this episode parallel the Yosef narrative:

As it's pointed out by the Baal Haturim and other commentators, that in chapter 37 verse 32, the words "Identify if you please" **הִכָּר נָא**:

- Appears twice in Tanach (1) as above, and (2) later in this parsha (chapter 38 verse 25).
- Certain words appear in both, e.g. יָרַד (go down), הִכָּר (recognize), נָחַם (comfort), עָרַב (pledge)
- Deception - the brothers to Yaakov, Tamar to Yehuda
- Temptation – Yehuda/Tamar, Yosef/Potiphar's wife
- A kid goat - Yosef's coat was dipped in its blood, payment for Tamar's services

These parallelisms clearly show that there is a thematic link between these episodes. Indeed, both show the rise of leaders and the eclipse of Reuven. The route to Yosef's leadership was through his position in Egypt. Yehuda's, however, was far more natural. At first Yehuda strays away from his brothers, perhaps signifying the tribe of Yehuda's secession from the rest of Israel in the pre-monarchical era, i.e. the Judges. However, circumstance brings Yehuda to leadership. His older brothers Reuven, Shimon and Levi have fallen out of favour with Yaakov. Yosef, Yaakov's favourite son was missing, presumed dead. Yehuda, therefore, found himself taking on the mantle of leadership when the brothers run into trouble in Egypt, he placates Yaakov into releasing Benyamin, he negotiates with Yosef over Benyamin and he is sent by Yaakov to prepare for their descent to Egypt.

These two represent two distinct realms of leadership within Israel, and show fulfillment of G-d's promise to Yaakov that "kings shall come forth from your loins" (ibid 35:11).