



Yehuda and Tamar By Rabbi David Silverberg

In Parashat Vayeshev, the Torah digresses from the narrative of Yosef's tribulations to discuss the travails of his older brother, Yehuda. The story of Yehuda includes his solicitation of the services of a prostitute, who was, in truth, Tamar, the widow of Yehuda's two older sons. The law of *yibum* (levirate marriage) mandated that Tamar should marry Yehuda's third son, but Yehuda did not allow the marriage out of fear of what might happen to his son. Tamar therefore took the initiative of appearing as a prostitute so she could cohabit with Yehuda and thereby bear a child.

Maimonides addresses this narrative in the third section of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 49), where he notes that Yehuda did not commit any offense by hiring a prostitute. He writes, "For before the Lawgiving, the intercourse with a harlot was as lawful as cohabitation of husband and wife since the Lawgiving; it was perfectly permitted, nobody considered it wrong." In fact, according to Maimonides, not only does this story contain no indictment of Yehuda, it actually presents "an example of a noble conduct, and uprightness in judgment." When Yehuda first confronted Tamar and sought to solicit her services, he promised to later send her a young goat as payment, and he gave her a number of personal items as collateral. Later, Yehuda sent his comrade, Chira, to deliver the payment and retrieve his collateral, but Tamar, of course, was nowhere to be found. Chira returned to Yehuda, who instructed him to keep the goat, saying, "Behold, I sent this kid, but you did not find her." Maimonides comments:

This is the uprightness which he had inherited from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: that man must not depart from his given word, nor deviate from what he agreed upon; but he must give to others all that is due to them. It makes no difference whether he holds a portion of his neighbor's property as a loan or a trust, or whether he is in any other way his neighbor's debtor, owing him wages or the like.

In other words, Yehuda's prompt attempt to deliver the payment owed to Tamar serves as a demonstration of integrity and fulfilling verbal commitments.

Maimonides also notes in this context that Yehuda, in his comments to Chira, emphasized that he had sent "*this* kid," as though pointing to a particular goat. It appears, Maimonides speculates, that Yehuda selected specifically a high-quality animal as payment for Tamar. This, too, is a reflection of Yehuda's "uprightness." In fulfilling his promise, he did not look for compromises or choose the most inexpensive option. If he promised to deliver a goat, he made a point of sending an animal of the highest standard.

This final point becomes especially significant when we consider that we deal here with payment for the services of a prostitute, who, presumably, belonged to the lower end of the social ladder. The woman's personal stature did not affect Yehuda's attitude toward his obligations. After making a commitment to deliver a goat, he fulfilled

his commitment – and at the highest standard that he could. Yehuda’s conduct establishes an example of showing respect and regard to all people, regardless of their stature. We all come in contact with many different types of people, representing many different backgrounds, professions, personalities and social strata. We must ensure to afford them all the respect, dignity and consideration they deserve as human beings, and never deny anybody these basic rights due to their personal stature.