

Shabbat shalom

I want to speak about the most terrible economic times that we as a country, a global economy and in particular as a Jewish community are suffering...

But before I do it I want to explore together one of the most powerful narrative in the book of Bereishit, the story of Yehudah and Tamar.

This is an odd narrative. Immediately after the sale of Yosef, we are told

וַיְהִי בְעֵת הַהוּא וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחָיו וַיֵּט עַד אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וַשְּׂמוּ חִירָה

Yehuda leaves home. It is the story of a Yerida – a decline. Rashi shows that his brothers blame him, they all blame each other for the sale of Yosef. There is a moral decline, a decline in stature of the brothers of Yosef after what they did. They have effectively killed their brother, they have lied to their father, causing him anguish and pain for decades.

Now in those words vayered Yehuda met echav –we see the moral, the psychological consequences of such a terrible deed, a deceit, how could it be otherwise?

And through all of this Yehuda leaves home, he tries to escape. He goes from being leader to outcast.

And

וַיֵּרָא שָׁם יְהוּדָה בֵּת אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וַשְּׂמוּ שׁוּעַ וַיִּקְחָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ:

And there he marries. But he doesn't marry just anyone – he marries a Canaanite girl. And although most commentators say that she isn't literally Canaanite – nonetheless the fact that she is called a Canaanite hints that Yehuda has in fact not just left home, but he has cut himself off from his past.

And so Yehuda makes for himself a new life. He closes himself away from his past. He doesn't see his father, his brothers, he lives life amongst the adulteries.

And he raises a family. He has three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. And now he makes a Shiduch for his oldest son, Er, and he marries a woman called Tamar.

But the Torah tells us, Er is bad in the eyes of G-d – and he dies. And Yehudah turns to his next son, Onan, and says you must marry Tamar, yibum, levirate marriage, so that Er, your brother will live on in.

But Onan didn't want to have his brother's children, he knew that the kids would be regarded as his, so he spilled his seed – he prevented her from getting pregnant. And what he had done was evil in G-d's eyes, so he died too.

Yehuda's first two children died – but this experience of mourning did not awaken a sense of compassion in Yehuda – quite the opposite.

He said to Tamar, Shelah, my third son, is still too young to marry you –

שְׁבִי אֶלְמָנָה בֵּית אָבִיךָ עַד יִגְדַל שְׁלָה בְּנִי

Sit as a widow until Shelah becomes older

But the posuk goes on to tell his his real intentions -

כִּי אָמַר פֶּן יָמוּת גַּם הוּא כְּאֶחָיו

He is worried that Shelah will die too – it must be Tamar's fault that all these children are dying.

And so Tamar is assigned to widowhood, really an Agunah like status in her father house.

And many many years pass, and Tamar is left in this childless, husbandless in a state of imprisonment

And one day, Yehuda needs to go sheep sheering with is friends to Timnah. And Tamar gets to hear that he is coming, and she covers herself up completely, from head to toe, and she covers her face, and she stands bipetech eynayim, at the cross roads, and Yehuda sees her, and he thinks, as his her intention, that's he is a harlot.

And he asks to sleep with her, and he offers to pay her. He says I will give you goats, but I haven't got any, and she agrees, and she asks him to leave a pledge, a deposit, and he leaves his ring, staff and cloak.

When he attempts to recover his pledge, a very strange thing happens – she is nowhere to be found. And now Yehudah has lost his property...

Three months later, it is told to Yehudah that Tamar has committed adultery – she is pregnant. And Yehuda's judgment is swift

הוֹצִיאֶיהָ וְתַשְׂרֶף

Take her out and burn her...after all she has the status of a betrothed women, a shomeret yibum, she is supposed to be Shelahs wife...

And then, in private, Tamar sends a message -

הֲכָרָנָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמָת וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה:

The father of the baby is the one who owns these things.

And then

וַיָּבֶר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי עַל בֶּן לֹא נִתְתִּיחַ לְשַׁלֵּחַ בְּנִי וְלֹא יִסַּף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ:

But lets consider this strange story in its proper context, as understood by Chazal.

It is a story, as we have already identified, about a person with a terrible past, a secret, a skeleton in his closet. He has inflicted pain, he has lied, he has damaged other people terribly.

And he tries to run away – he doesn't make amends, he doesn't try and undo , he doesn't confess – instead he denies – he moves away, a new identity, a new family –
But in life you can't do that – how could such an action as the sale of Yosef not have moral consequences, how could a person carry on with life after doing such a thing
So the story begins vayered Yehudah – it's a coming down, a moral decline, he is living a lie.

And he builds a family, and first one son dies, and then another son dies. But Yehudah never says what have I done wrong, or even, now I understand the unbearable pain of losing a child, how could I have done such a thing to my father...

Instead he assumes that is all Tamar's fault – and he resolves not to let his last son Shelah marry her.

But he doesn't release her, or even tell he what he is doing – why should he – the person who has condemned his father to sit alone and weep, desolate and without hope every day for decades is quite capable of doing that to his daughter in law too.

Yehuda may think he has escaped his past, but he is every bit the same person who sold his brother and lied to his father.

And then finally, as Tamar is being led out to be killed, and she says to him, privately, haker na, please recognise

הֲכַר נָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמָת וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה:

And something in Yehuda stirs.

Because what should Yehuda do? He now has a dilemma, because he risks disgrace – he slept with a prostitute – hardly an honorable thing. His judgment on her was wrong. For Yehuda it would have been the easiest thing in the world to say, I don't know what you are talking about, where did you get these things you thief, you harlot – take her and burn her...

Not only is that the easiest thing, it's the Yehuda thing – because that is what he has always done – he has put himself first, completely indifferent to other peoples suffering. But this time something in Yehuda changes. Perhaps it is Tamar's use of the words haker na- don't you recongnize- the same words the brothers said to Yakov

זֹאת מִצְאָנוּ הֲכַר נָא הַכְּתָנִת בְּנֶךְ הוּא אִם לֹא

We have found this cloak – please recognize (haker na) – is this Joseph’s coat?

And at the moment, vayaker Yehuda, Yehuda recognized something – not just his ring and his staff – for the first time he recognized himself.

Indeed, remember the name of the place that Tamar had stood at to entice him is called what? Petach eynayim – the opening of the eyes. And for the first time in his life his eyes truly open.

And he realizes what he has done – he has probably killed his brother and he has good as killed his father, and now he sees that because of this G-d has punished him with the death of his own two sons. And now he is on the verge of killing an innocent women and an unborn child, so as once again to protect his position in life?

But this time he cannot.

I am now how you think you I am – I am not an honorable person, I am not a judge, I am not a wronged party –

צְדָקָה מִמְּנִי

She is righteous, I am guilty.

And so the story of Yehuda and Tamar can only be understood in the light of the sale of Yosef. Yehudah was the most active party – he is the most guilty, he is the most damaged, however he tries to cover up. And in this moment of recognition, of confession, of pulling himself back from hurting more and more people the unexpected happens:

Yehuda transforms himself. At this moment he earns the right to be the leader of the Jewish people – the name Yehuda really means to confess- and when he indeed confesses, he reaches his potential.

Until that moment the Jewish people had been adrift – following the sale of Yosef there had been drift and division and no leadership. Now, Yehuda is to be king – indeed Tamar’s baby is to be the ancestor of moshiach.

And from this story, the following is very clear

That the difference between utter wickedness, the senseless destruction of other people on the one hand, and salvation and redemption on the other lies in the three words that are the hardest words in any language

“I was wrong. “

Tzadka mimeynee

I am not who you think I am . I have done bad things. And in that moment Yehuda saved himself, he saved Tamar, and he saved the future of the Jewish people.

And this past week we have learned the devastation that can be caused by people who have not a fiber of moral courage.

The unspeakable evil, yes indeed, evil - rishus, of a person, or indeed people, who in order to protect their image, to perpetuate the way the world sees them, the inability to admit to mistakes, to losing money, has caused an unbelievable disaster.

That to carry on raising money, taking in investors, charities, innocent people, billions and billions of dollars, all to project the image of success, all to avoid ever having to admit a mistake – this is a rare and very pure form of evil indeed.

I can't quite put into words the scale of this disaster - the destruction of so many people, so much wealth, so many charitable institutions.

Worse, the unbelievable chilul Hashem - the biggest financial scandal in American history, by a Jew, an identifiable Jew, close to our own communities.

And however much we worried, and we do about the impact of the recession on the vital work of charities and Jewish schools and the community, this scam, this cheat, this bad bad person, has destroyed over a billion dollars of charitable money.

Lives have been ruined. Not that makes a difference, not everyone who lost money was a multi millionaire. Hospitals will not be built now, charities will close their doors, people will lose their jobs, thousands of people have lost their security for old age.

Jewish philanthropy may never recover. And the reputation of the Jewish community of America may never recover.

I have said before recessions and depressions are always time of increased anti-Semitism., the Jews are always to blame. But as far as the loss of 20, 30 or has he likes to boast 50 billion dollars – it really was a Jew's fault.

But there is something specific that we have to address in this abomination.

Because lets be honest: If this scandal had affected the Chasidic community, if it was a Charedi Jew what would we have said ? Look at those people, what are their values, look at how much better than them we are.

But it didn't. it wasn't a Chasidic Jew from Brooklyn, it was Yeshiva University trustee from Manhattan. It was one of us. At least as near as makes no difference. – and so we must ask the same question – What's wrong with us?

And here is a sobering fact – it is we, the modern orthodox Jewish community that has been the most affected by these events. Over a billion dollars of money held by modern orthodox institutions, or by modern orthodox philanthropists has disappeared! Has gone up in smoke.

This is the biggest financial disaster that any kehilla has ever faced in history. To put it bluntly, we are watching helplessly as our wealth is evaporating before our very eyes – the wealth of so many modern orthodox institutions - YU, Ramaz, SAR and countless others.

And we have a duty to ask the following question. Why? What have we done wrong? Why are we being punished in this way?

It is not enough to say we are not Bernie Madoff, we are not bad people. The fact is that we are all hurt by this. There are people in our community who have lost money, people who have already lost their jobs, and the fall out will last for years on our schools, our shuls our community our way of life

If Yehuda had a moment of petach eynayim, of the opening of his eyes, then this must be ours...

And so we have to say the following. If we are having our wealth taken away from us, if Hashem in his judgment has caused our modern orthodox community see a billion dollars just vanish then we have to ask: what have we been doing wrong with our money that it has been taken away from us....

And of course the answer is not that we haven't been charitable. Quite the opposite - hundreds of millions of dollars that we gave away to charity have been destroyed – a terrible thing...

No, the answer is that we have misused our wealth.

We have seen our wealth has everything. We have judged ourselves and others by how much we have, how wealthy we are.

There is absolutely nothing wrong in working hard and making a living, indeed in becoming rich. But we have forgotten that there is more to life than wealth. And that the true worth of a human being is not what they are. And that when we try and keep up with the wealthy rather than living our own lives is when disaster strikes. And I will have more to say about conspicuous consumption in the Jewish community next week.

Worse, we have said koche viotzem yadi asu et hachayil hazeh– our strength, our power has got us this. We have stopped believing that Hashem runs the world. We have thought that our wealth buys us security, immunity. The truth is it buys us nothing, because as Tanach and Chazal remind us over and over again it can be taken from us in an instant – and isn't that the truth.

Worse we have begun to construct a model of the successful Jew, started to build a type of orthodox Judaism that requires at the very least affluence but ideally serious wealth to fully be part of...

We have communicated to a generation of kids that to be a doctor a lawyer, a professional, to say nothing of a teacher, a social worker, is to be a loser.

We have constructed in our minds a value system that says wealth is the most important thing. Then comes being a Jew. First the American dream, the dream of affluence –only then the Jewish dream.

And I think we have lost a sense of proportion, of modesty, of values. We have become so materialistic. We have, and I talk about the wider Jewish community, worshipped the idea of wealth and the wealthy. Our financial success we think, gives us the right to be pushy, to get our way, to demand our own way of doing things, even our own form of Judaism – if you can afford it, why not?

And last of all, and worst of all we all, to one extent or another like Bernie Madoff, want to project an image of success, of having made it, of being smarter and better than everyone else. Of never admitting that we may, as a community, not always be right, that we have made mistakes. We have refused to allow the possibility that our values, our practices, our attitudes are never wrong.

And I will say it on behalf of myself and behalf of my profession, Rabbis are not completely innocent of the charge that they run after the wealthy and give them what they want.

In short, we find ourselves, humbled and made substantially poorer, on erev Chanukah with a sickening realization – we have made a life style, a Judaism, that owes more to material values than to spiritual ones.

That has more in common with the Greeks and the Hellenists ideals of beauty and riches and material possessions and status, than of the simple values of living according to torah, of walking humbly with Hashem, of committing ourselves to eternal spiritual values.

These are times of unbelievable difficulty. But we have to show ourselves, and show the world, that Judaism, that our modern orthodox community is a force for good in the world. People in the shul and beyond have lost their jobs. People have seen their savings decline, people are having a hard time making ends meet. And it will get worse before it gets better.

And we need to respond. We will respond by showing exactly who we are – we are not Madoffs, we are not crooks, and we are not greedy people. We will come together to support each other, to help each other, to build an infra structure of chesed, and more importantly rebuild our self image of what it means to be a Jew.

In the next week or so I will be writing to the whole community – we will be holding a town hall meeting,. An opportunity for the whole shul to come together to share ideas and generate initiatives on how together we can help each other get through these difficult times.

Chazal tell us that at the moment Yosef was busy in Potiphar's house, and Yakov was bust mourning, and Yehuda was busy with Tamar, Hashem was also busy –he was busy making the lights of moshiach.

In truth, in times of great darkness is when we indeed see the value of light. Let us like Yehuda open our eyes, admit tzadka mimeeynee, indeed we have made bad mistakes, and through that merit to see a future that is blessed, secure and triumphant

Shabbat Shalom