

Lessons from the Bible's Rape Narratives

By Sandra E. Rapoport

The Torah teaches us through the dual media of its halakhic, or legal, passages and its narratives, or stories. However, the two approaches are not entirely separate. Rather, some of the events described in the Tanakh's difficult stories propel the development of remedial *halakhot*.

Storytelling is a powerful tool; through the telling and retelling of its stories, the Bible insures that we remember both the story and its lessons. Our most enduring rituals—Pesach and Purim—are marked by storytelling, via the *Haggadah* on Pesach and *Megillat Esther* on Purim.

The most difficult Bible stories—those that tell of hatred between brothers, of enslavement of one people by another, of the rape of a virgin princess by her brother—force us to confront our fears. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Biblical ethics is based on repeated acts of role-reversal, using memory as a moral force ... recalling what it feels like to be [the] victim. ... We are commanded to remember ... to prevent a repetition of the past.”¹

The Torah's stories about rape or sexual abuse, though they are not “pretty,” can teach us not only how our tradition views and handles these disturbing incidents, but also, by injecting ourselves into the biblical narrative, how to behave as moral, ethical beings in God's world.

Not incidentally, as we read these difficult stories, we are introduced to memorable characters: victim-survivor heroines, complex villains, and indifferent, enabling, or vengeful families—not that different, after all, from

people today. To paraphrase Shakespeare, “the story's the thing” that will keep us by turns terrified, shamed, saddened, and angry, and can thereby instruct and galvanize us.

The Rape of Tamar

One such story appears in 2 Samuel 13, the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. It takes place at the very highest levels of the Israelite royal court, around the year 1000 BCE. It is a riveting story of rape, incest, and revenge among King David's grown children, and it subtly references other biblical rape narratives, building on them with compelling results.

The essential cautionary message from this story is that what can happen to an exalted and protected princess can—and surely does—happen to ordinary girls and women,² and what happened to Tamar will happen to Israel.

Let us enter the world of King David's court.

Sometime after the story of David's taking of the beautiful Batsheva, wife of his prized officer, the Tanakh tells us that Avshalom, King David's third-born son, has a beautiful sister named Tamar. Amnon, the crown prince and half-brother to Avshalom and Tamar (all of whom are in their twenties), is infatuated with Tamar to the point that he pines for her, desiring her sexually, because she is a virgin.

Tamar is unaware that she is the object of her half-brother's sexual obsession.

From the story's first words, the reader faces a fraught

¹ Jonathan Sacks, “Letting Go of Hate,” published at Covenant and Conversation.org, September 1, 2012.

² Talmud *Sanhedrin* 21a.

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Halakhic Issues

There are real halakhic issues to be explored here. Is a victim of abuse entitled to damages for the pain, medical bills, embarrassment, and employment losses caused by the abuse? When a rabbi, claiming mystical powers, seduces a married woman while asserting that these acts are appropriate, is she considered to have been coerced? What are the halakhic responsibilities of those who knew and didn't report, and even covered up, the abuser's behavior?

The true desecration of God's name is the misuse of *halakhah* to protect the perpetrators and not the victims.

ignores the cries of children in pain and questions their credibility is terribly lacking.

Rabbis have a moral responsibility to speak out forcefully, but this does not free the rest of the community from acting. It is difficult to believe that an individual we know and who seems perfectly normal can be an abuser, but the stereotype of the dangerous stranger applies to a small percentage of cases of abuse.

When we change the environment, progress will be made in reducing instances of abuse and enabling victims to become survivors.

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situation: Not only is the crown prince nursing a forbidden obsession for his half-sister, but there is a suggestion of a potentially dangerous political situation, too. Avshalom, Amnon's chief rival for the throne,³ has a beautiful sister. It is precisely *she* whom Amnon is targeting. If one assumes that the kingdom and royal court are replete with beautiful, virginal girls,⁴ one can deduce that it is not just Tamar's beauty and virginity that are motivating Amnon. We must consider that Amnon is targeting Tamar for the additional reason that subduing and humiliating *her* not only will slake his own lust, but also will send a message that he is asserting political dominance over his rival brother, Avshalom.⁵

Enter Yonadav, Prince Amnon's friend. The text tells us via word play what it thinks of Yonadav: he is called "friend," in Hebrew *re'a*, which in the unvoiced Hebrew text is spelled the same as *ra*, the word for "evil." Yonadav and Amnon are not simply first cousins and buddies, but, as the text is signaling us, they are up to no good. Yonadav is Amnon's enabler and panderer; he does not hesitate when Amnon tells him of his unholy "love" for his virgin half-sister. In fact, it is clever Yonadav who conceives the plot to draw Tamar from the house of the women and bring her, unsuspecting and alone, into Amnon's bedchamber.

Amnon feigns illness, drawing a concerned David to his bedside. Amnon tells his father that he will feel better if his sister Tamar, known for her healing skills, could cook special food by his bedside. David agrees, and orders Tamar to go to Amnon's house. Tamar obeys.

We must appreciate that it is unusual for a virgin princess, beautiful and desirable in the bargain, to venture alone out of the house of the women. As the only daughter of the king, Tamar is a prize, and was likely being kept by her father for an advantageous



Eustache LeSueur, *The Rape of Tamar*. Probably ca. 1640. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

political marriage. Yet there is subtle evidence in the text that Tamar responds to royal orders to exit the cloister to ply her healing skills. We are told later that she was wearing the *kutonnet passim*,⁶ the striped cloak signifying royalty, virginity, and preference. The cloak was a badge and a protection, telegraphing to all: "Here walks the royal princess! Let no harm come to her on her healing mission!"⁷ It is significant and deliberately ironic that the only two biblical characters to wear the *kutonnet passim*, Joseph and Tamar, are abused vilely by their brothers. We are fearful for Tamar, with good reason.

Amnon peremptorily dismisses everyone from his chamber, and from his bed calls out to Tamar, who is cooking her healing pancakes on a brazier outside the room: "Bring the food inside and feed it to me!" Amnon is alone—his chamber is a room within a room and essentially soundproof—and we watch, terrified, as Tamar unsuspectingly enters at his summons.⁸

⁶ 2 Sam. 13:19.

⁷ Ramban on Ex. 28:2.

⁸ 2 Sam. 13:10.

Amnon surges from his bedclothes and grabs Tamar, saying “Come lie with me, my sister!” The text leaves no room for doubt that Amnon is bent on rape. Likewise, there is no doubt that Tamar is taken utterly by surprise. We know this because Tamar speaks in this story, telling us what she is thinking and feeling. This is a significant difference from the Bible’s earlier rape narrative of Dinah by Prince Shechem.⁹ In that earlier story the young Dinah (Abarbanel calculates her age as twelve), also a privileged only daughter, is silent before, during, and after the rape. But here, both the biblical narrator and Tamar refer to Amnon as “her brother.” Tamar is caught unaware because she has only ever thought of Amnon as her brother. Why should she *not* enter her brother’s sickroom?

Amnon Forces Tamar

Overpowered, and terribly aware of what she is facing, Tamar pleads with Amnon: “Don’t, my brother! Don’t force me! Such things are not done in Israel! Do not do such a vile thing!”

It is painful to read Tamar’s words. “*Al te’aneni!*” she cries. “Don’t force me!” So eloquent is she that it is as if Tamar is speaking right now, and we have a window into the horrific and violent scene. We hear her cries, but are as helpless to stop Amnon as she is.

Tamar uses the precise word to describe her impending rape as is used in the Torah text describing Shechem’s rape of Dinah: *inuy*, meaning abuse, force, and torture. In the Dinah story, Rashi says *inuy* means that Shechem forced himself on Dinah not only in the way of a man with a woman, but that he also repeatedly sodomized her.¹⁰ In both rape narratives the text unambiguously tells us that the attacker subjected the girl to sexual cruelty.

The outcome is inevitable. Amnon violently rapes Tamar. Tamar tries twice more to deflect his attack, her words growing more jumbled each time, indicating her battered state. Tamar also fights back, doing some damage to her attacker.¹¹ After the rape, Amnon has Tamar thrown bodily from his house, and we are told that he loathes her with a loathing that is even greater than the love he had felt for her before.

Tamar stands outside Amnon’s door on the public street, bloody and bruised, and she cries out, ripping her *kotonet passim* in two, expressing her desolation and mourning. She makes a public spectacle of her battered and damaged self, when all instincts are to keep it private. Tamar is centuries ahead of her time; modern-day sex-crime counselors and trained police officers know that the best evidence against a rapist is the girl herself, immediately after the event. But in that ancient time and place Tamar’s brother, Avshalom, sees her, divines in an instant what has occurred, and covers, comforts, and shelters her, counseling silence.

Echoing Jacob’s silence in the Dinah story, King David neither comforts his only daughter nor chastises or disciplines his eldest son. We are shocked! Will no one

champion Tamar? Is there no consequence for a rapist of virgins, a violator of the incest taboo? For two years, Avshalom waits in vain for his father to act. When no justice is forthcoming, Avshalom acts: He murders Amnon and flees the kingdom. Again, as in Dinah’s story, the victim’s brother avenges his sister.

The Message of the Tanakh is Clear

In the rape narratives of Dinah and of Tamar, a rough, vigilante justice is all that is forthcoming. Post-rape, both girls essentially disappear from the text, to be referenced lavishly in the midrash. But because Tamar speaks the truth in her words and actions, the message of the Tanakh is clear: Rape of a virgin girl or any girl is an abomination in Israel; all the more so the intrafamilial, transgressive rape of a half-sister. A swift and class-blind administration of justice for the victim is a *sine qua non* of a just society.

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And, in fact, after Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, the sages put in place a strengthened law aimed at clarifying the prohibition against intrafamilial rape. They broadened the legal prohibition, building a legal “fence” around unmarried Jewish girls and women. The biblical *halakhah* forbidding seclusion with one’s close kin, which even specified “your sister, your father’s daughter” (Leviticus 18:6, 9), was changed to unambiguously forbid seclusion with any unmarried Jewish woman, even if it were possible to marry her.¹²

The Talmud explains that this halakhic change came about as a direct response to the Bible’s story of Amnon’s vile rape of Tamar. And such a halakhic response is laudable. For if a society’s highest authority fails to protect and bring justice to the weakest and unprotected among them, the fabric of that society will be rent or unraveled, or end in violence. This is precisely what happened in the wake of Tamar’s rape. Tamar’s torn *kotonet passim* prefigured the fate of ancient Israelite society. Soon thereafter the kingdom itself was riven, and David’s family and monarchy self-destructed.

The Tanakh’s message is clear: Such is the fate of a society that fails to learn the lessons of Tamar’s story.

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⁹ Gen. 34.

¹⁰ Rashi on Gen. 34:2; also *Bereishit Rabbah* 80:5.

¹¹ *Sanhedrin* 27a and Rashi on 2 Sam. 13:15.

¹² *Avodah Zara* 36b and *Sanhedrin* 21 a-b.