Parashat Vayeshev: Unmasking Deception

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Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12
…an essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology… Meaning…was conceived as a *process*, requiring continual revision…

1. *Haker-Na*

Bereishit 37:32	
וַיְשַׁלְּחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אֲבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מָצָאנוּ הַכֶּר־נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בִּנְךָ הִוא אִם־לֹא:	They [Joseph's brothers] had the ornamented tunic taken to their father [Jacob], and they said, "We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?"

Bereishit 38:25	
הִוא מוּצֵאת וְהִיא שָׁלְחָה אֶל־חָמִיהָ לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּה לּוֹ אָנֹכִי הָרָה וַתֹּאמֶר הַכֶּר־נָא לְמִי הַחֹתָמֶת וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמַּטֶּה הָאֵלֶּה:	As Tamar was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law [Judah]: "It's by the man to whom these belong that I'm pregnant." And she added, "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?"

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10
The first use of the formula was for an act of deception; the second use is for an act of unmasking.

2. Unspoken Revelations

Midrash Bereishit 84:19	
(בראשית לז, לא): וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים וַיְשַׁחֲטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים, וְלָמָּה שְׂעִיר עִזִּים, שֶׁדָּמוֹ דּוֹמֶה לְשֶׁל אָדָם. (בראשית לז, לב): וַיְשַׁלְּחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים וגו'. אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לִיהוּדָה אַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ (בראשית לז, לב): הַכֶּר נָא, חַייֶךָ שֶׁתָּמָר אוֹמֶרֶת לְךָ (בראשית לח, כה): הַכֶּר נָא. (בראשית לז, לג):	**"They sent the fine tunic, and they brought it to their father and said: We found this. Identify, please: Is it your son's tunic or not" (Genesis 37:32).** "They sent the fine tunic…" – Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The Holy One blessed be He said to Judah: 'You said: "Identify, please"; as you live, Tamar will say to you: "Identify, please"' (Genesis 38:25).

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Bavli Sotah 10b	
״וְהִיא שָׁלְחָה אֶל חָמִיהָ לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶּה לּוֹ אָנֹכִי הָרָה״. וְתֵימָא לֵיהּ מֵימָר! אָמַר רַב זוּטְרָא בַּר טוֹבִיָּה אָמַר רַב, וְאָמְרִי לַהּ אָמַר רַב חָנָא בַּר בִּיזְנָא אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן חֲסִידָא, וְאָמְרִי לָהּ אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחַי: נוֹחַ לוֹ לָאָדָם שֶׁיַּפִּיל עַצְמוֹ לְתוֹךְ כִּבְשַׁן הָאֵשׁ, וְאַל יַלְבִּין פְּנֵי חֲבֵירוֹ בָּרַבִּים. מְנָלַן — מִתָּמָר.	The verse concerning Tamar then states: **“She sent to her father-in-law, saying: By the man whose these are, am I with child”** (Genesis 38:25). The Gemara comments: **And let her say to him** explicitly that she was impregnated by him. **Rav Zutra bar Tuviyya says** that **Rav says, and some say Rav Ḥana bar Bizna says** that **Rabbi Shimon Ḥasida says, and some say** that **Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: It is more amenable for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace** if faced with the choice of publicly embarrassing another or remaining silent even if it leads to being burned, **and not humiliate another in public. From where do we** derive this? **From Tamar,** as she was prepared to be burned if Judah did not confess, rather than humiliate him in public.
״הַכֶּר נָא״. אָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא: בְּ״הַכֶּר״ בִּישֵּׁר לְאָבִיו — בְּ״הַכֶּר״ בִּישְׁרוּהוּ. בְּ״הַכֶּר״ בִּישֵּׁר: ״הַכֶּר נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בִּנְךָ הִיא״. בְּ״הַכֶּר״ בִּישְׁרוּהוּ: ״הַכֶּר נָא לְמִי״.	The verse continues: “And she said: **Discern, please,** whose are these, the signet, and the cords, and the staff” (Genesis 38:25). **Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, says: With** use of the word **discern** Judah **informed his father** that Joseph was lost, and also **with** use of the word **discern they informed** Judah about the signs. The Gemara explains: **With** the word **discern he informed** Jacob his father when he brought him the coat of Joseph and said to his father: “And they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father; and said: This have we found. **Discern now whether it is your son’s coat** or not” (Genesis 37:32). **With** the word **discern they informed him:** “And she said: **Discern, please, whose are** these.”
״נָא״. אֵין ״נָא״ אֶלָּא לְשׁוֹן בַּקָּשָׁה. אָמְרָה לֵיהּ: בְּבַקָּשָׁה מִמְּךָ, הַכֵּר פְּנֵי בּוֹרְאֶךָ וְאַל תַּעֲלִים עֵינֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי.	It states: “Discern, **please [*na*].”** The word ***na*** is **nothing other** than **a language of request.** The Gemara explains: **She said to him: I request of you: Discern the image of your Creator** in every person, **and do not avert your eyes from me.**

3. The Complexities of Language (and People)

Radak on Bereishit 38:25	
בב"ר (פ"ה) תורה משחקת על הבריות, אמרה ליהודה אתה אמרת לאביך הכר נא, חייך שתאמר תמר הכר נא:	In Bereishit Rabbah, it notes that “the Torah toys/plays with people,” as Tamar said to Judah, “You said to your father, ‘We found this.’” Now Tamar said those words “We found this.”

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 22
The biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us, again and again, to ponder the complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because they are essential aspects of its vision of humankind, created by God, enjoying or suffering all of the consequences of human freedom….Almost the whole range of biblical narrative, however, embodies the basic perception that humanity must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others…