

## **Vayishlach: The Rape of Dinah**

**(D'var given by Susan Jacobson, 12 Dec. 2008)**

The Torah portion this week is Vayishlach, "And He Sent out" (Genesis 32:4-36:43). The parsha recounts a number of significant events: Jacob's reconciliation with his brother Esau – the first meeting of the brothers since Jacob cheated Esau out of their father Isaac's blessing; Jacob's wrestling with God; the birth of Benjamin and death of Rachel; and the death of Isaac at the age of 180. The story I would like to focus on, however, is that which Judith has just read for us this evening, the one known as the Rape of Dinah.

The text tells us that Dinah, daughter of Jacob and Leah, went out to visit the girls of the land of Hamor, where Jacob had set up camp. Shechem, prince of Hamor, "saw her and took her and lay with her by force." Immediately afterwards -- in fact in the very next verse -- Shechem proclaims his love for Dinah and asks his father to speak to Jacob to arrange a marriage between him and Dinah and thus to establish an alliance between the people of Hamor and the people of Israel. Jacob's sons demand that before the marriage can occur, every adult male in the city be circumcised. So much does Shechem desire Dinah, that he and his father agree to this condition. When the men of Shechem are in pain and unable to defend themselves, Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi, go to the city and kill all the adult males. They bring Dinah home from the house of Shechem and the other brothers then follow and plunder the city. The brothers rationalize their action as just revenge, "should our sister be treated like a whore?" they ask.

One response to this story might be that justice has been served. Dinah – a mere girl at the time -- was raped, kidnapped, and held hostage in the house of her rapist. Her brothers boldly came to her rescue and avenged the defilement of their sister.

But recent interpretations have questioned whether "rape" is the correct word to describe what happens in this story.

The Hebrew text reads *v'ykach otah, va'yeshkav otah, vaya'neha.* " The JPS Tanach translates this as "he took her and lay with her by force." The URJ Women's Torah renders the verse as "he took her and lay her down and raped her." In the ArtScroll Tikkun, the translation is "he took her, lay with her and violated her." In my opinion, it is the ArtScroll translation that most accurately reflects the meaning of the original Hebrew. And other passages in the Bible would seem to support this reading.

The key word in this debate is *vaya neha* from the root word *innah*. In Deuteronomy 22 which outlines laws about sexual offenses, the expression used for rape is “he took hold of her” an expression that is also found in other passages describing forced sexual relations. On the other hand, the use of *innah* in Deuteronomy 22 clearly means “violate” and not rape.

This view is echoed by Jonathan Kirsch In his book [The Harlot by the Side of the Road](#) . Kirsch writes that the word “innah” indicates a “degrading and debasing experience by which a girl loses the expectancy of a fully valid marriage, mostly because she is no longer a virgin.”

According to the mores of the tribe of Israel the interaction between Shechem and Dinah was a defilement or dishonoring -- she did after all have sexual relations with a man who was not circumcised. This is even acknowledged in the parsha itself. Verse 34:7 states that what really angered Jacob’s sons was that Shechem had “committed an outrage in Israel by lying with a daughter of Jacob”. Nowhere is there any indication that force was involved. And the very next line goes on to say that Shechem is madly in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. So there is more to this story than initially meets the eye.

What really occurred here was not the rape of a woman but a violation of the rights of property. What we are witnessing is a juridical and social status negotiation. Dinah is no longer virgin, and there must be compensation; whether she was forced to have sex with Shechem or whether this was consensual, is really immaterial from the viewpoint of Dinah’s father and brothers. Dinah becomes a pawn in Israel’s negotiations with their Canaanite neighbors.

In our post feminist world we tend not to question an accusation of rape. “If a woman says she was raped, then she *was* raped.” But Dinah never says she was raped – in fact the voice of Dinah is totally absent from this story.

It is only now that Dinah’s voice is being heard --- in interpretations such Anita Diamant’s [The Red Tent](#) and other revisionings of the Bible that view the event from Dinah’s point of view, and attempt to give voice to her feelings. Was she ashamed of what had happened? Did she want revenge? Or was this a secret love affair, frowned upon by her family? Had she been able to speak, could she have averted the slaughter of the men of Shechem and the plunder of the city? The silence of Dinah is deafening.

But there is another silence in this story and that is the silence of Jacob. When he learns of what happened to Dinah, he says nothing – no words of comfort to his daughter, no effort to

support her through this ordeal – whether this be an ordeal of rape or one of thwarted love. Jacob also does not reach out to his sons – he waits until they return home from the fields. And following the slaughter of the male inhabitants of Shechem and the plunder of the city, Jacob again is silent, concerned only that his sons may have created enemies among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and other people. Where is Jacob's concern for justice? Does he not feel outrage at the wanton acts of his sons against Shechem? He says nothing about the deception of his sons in falsely entering into marriage negotiations with Hamor, father of Shechem. Perhaps this is too reminiscent of his own deceptive actions against Esau. That the parsha opens with the meeting of Jacob and Esau is not a coincidence, but a reminder of the patterns of deception, and their consequences.

Earlier in our service, we were reminded that this is Human Rights Shabbat. It was 60 years ago that the UN passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a landmark document proclaiming the international values of human equality and freedom. The Declaration was proclaimed in part as a response to the horror and human rights abuses of the Holocaust and the World War II, and was part of the international response of "Never Again." The Declaration contains key passages on civil liberties, equality, and the rule of law. It also enshrines in international discourse the concept of *k'vod habriot*, the inherent dignity of all human beings.

One of the gravest offenses we can commit is to remain silent in the face of the abuse of human rights. In 1987, gay activists in New York formed the Silence = Death Project and began plastering posters around the city featuring a pink triangle on a black background stating simply 'SILENCE = DEATH.' In its manifesto, the Silence = Death Project drew parallels between the Nazi period and the AIDS crisis, declaring that 'silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.' The slogan protested both the taboo around discussion of safer sex and the unwillingness of some to resist societal injustice and governmental indifference.

SILENCE=DEATH. The silence of Dinah. The silence of Jacob. As gay Jews in particular, we must not keep silent in the face of oppression – whether it be genocide in Darfur, government sanctioned torture of inmates at Guantanamo, or Taliban persecution of women. It is incumbent upon us to give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, to learn the truth, and work to end violence and oppression.