

The Rape of Dinah

It is hard to think of a more disturbing passage in the Torah than the rape of Dinah and the bloodbath that follows as described in Gen. 34. It seems that there are no ‘winners’ in this story. All the characters are either violated or guilty of violation and murder. While various commentators shine a light on this or that part of the text, a satisfying explanation that brings holistic ‘meaning’ to the story eludes us. Humble and helpless before the mystery of God’s sacred word, let us bravely enter the story of Gen. 34.

Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter, never speaks in the Bible. Yet her brief and tragic appearance in the story of Jacob’s family cannot be ignored. If nothing else, perhaps the story calls for honest acknowledgement of the human dysfunction and contradictions to be found even amidst good and blessed families, societies and religions. We will make no attempt to solve the ethical dilemmas raised here. Rather, we will familiarise ourselves with the story itself (many Catholics are unaware that Jacob even had a daughter) and some of the observations of the sages. For instance:

- Dinah “went out” (v.1). Traditional opinions have judged Dinah unfavourably for setting out as an unmarried girl on an unchaperoned journey!
- Shechem’s crime is described (v.7) using the powerful Hebrew term *‘nevalah,’* i.e., an offence of such magnitude that it threatens to destroy Israelite society.
- The revenge planned by Jacob’s sons is marked by deceit. Jacob—whose own life has been marked by deceit—is silent (v.5) and passive in the face of this plan.
- The story ends abruptly (30-31) with no clear positive result. E.g., no one is blessed, no gain is recorded.

Share your own observations of the text.

Nehama Leibowitz, one of the great Torah teachers of the 20th century in Israel, draws our attention to the subtle contradictions between

the way Shechem and Hamor address Jacob and how they address their own townspeople. E.g.:

“Get me this girl as a wife” (v.4) versus “My son longs for your daughter” (v.8).

“Give your daughters to us...” (v.9) versus “we will take their daughters to ourselves as wives...” (v.21).

Continue to compare vv.9-10 with vv.21-23. Note especially what is said to the people of Shechem but not said to Jacob: *“Their cattle and substance and all their beasts shall be ours...” (v.23).* It seems that deception is being played out by both parties to the negotiation.

But where is Dinah in this story? And where is God? Continue to prayerfully, sensitively explore this Torah text, sharing your insights and questions with your *havrutah* partner (Torah discussion partner). •

Reflection

Who are the ‘Dinahs’ of our twenty-first century? What ‘Shechem events’ are part of our world today? What further thoughts, questions, insights arose as you reflected on this Torah passage?

In the midrash

Although the Torah does not tell us what happened to Dinah ultimately, Jewish storytelling traditions that accompany the Torah do. One tradition [Bereshit Rabbah] suggests that Dinah was reluctant to leave Shechem’s house (“Where shall I carry my shame?”) and did so only after her brother Simeon agreed to marry her. Accordingly, the unnamed Canaanite woman who bears Simeon a son (Gen. 46:10), is thought to be Dinah, described as a ‘Canaanite’ because of her sexual intimacy with Shechem.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Freedman (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989). Scripture: NJPS.

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