Drasha for Parasha VaYishlach – November 20,2021

Parashat Vayishlach carries on with the story of Jacob and secures his place as the inheritor of the covenant with G-d and as a patriarch of the Jewish people. He crosses the River Jabbok, on the way to meeting his brother Esau, after more than 20 years, and a history of betrayal between them. Jacob fights with the angel and receives a blessing and a new name. After an ambiguous reunion with his brother Esau, Jacob has a complicated return to the land of Canaan. Rachel dies in childbirth. God renews the covenant, and the parashah ends with the death of Isaac and a recital of the lineages of Esau and Jacob.

Reading this parashah reminded me of the observation of my daughter, then in kindergarten at Tehiyah. Why are all these stories about boys? Indeed, where are the girls/women in this parashah. But wait, you remind me. I left out the story of Dinah, the only named daughter of Leah. This parashah tells the story of her rape and the revenge taken by her brothers Shimon and Levi. But, really, is that story about Dinah? Her voice and reactions are never heard, are not important enough to be heard, in the context of the future of the covenant. The parashah tells of the reaction of her father, of her brothers, what they do to Shechem, and Jacob’s anger that they must leave an area where he had hoped to settle. Dinah is taken away, and disappears, except to name her in the list of Jacob’s children that went down to Egypt.

Dinah is silent about what happened to her, and in that silence, many stories have been told. The first is the pshat – Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had born to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her and took her, and lay with her vayaneha. And already we have ambiguity. Vayaneha. Translated in Etz Chaim as forced, in other sources as raped, and still others as abused or degraded. But let’s take each meaning of the word Vayaneha and see how it affects the story.

Let’s start with rape. According to Rachel Adelman, an associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Boston’s Hebrew College, in Biblical times, if a virgin had sexual intercourse outside of marriage or betrothal, it was handled in different ways depending on where it occurred though, in all cases, the woman’s value to her family was debased.

The story begins with Dinah going out from the protection of her home and family to visit with the daughters of the land, in other words, people who were different from those with whom she had been raised. In some eyes, this clearly means that Dinah was putting herself at risk, behaving promiscuously – like wearing a miniskirt, or walking alone at night – you know – asking for it. Nevertheless, because this event occurred in the countryside, it was presumed to be rape, because her protests could not be heard.

According to Richard Elliot Friedman, in his Torah commentary, the words used in this passage do not contain the usual signifier of rape. The words to take, to lay with and to degrade are all used in contexts in the Torah which exclude rape. It is the phrase– to take hold of- which is used in the unquestionable rape of King David’s daughter Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. So, this is not clearly rape.

Again, according to Rachel Adelman, in Biblical times if the intercourse occurred in a city, the woman was presumed to have given consent. To use modern understanding, this would apply even if she was at a party and everyone was drunk, even if she had entered into a room with a man and the door was closed, and the music was loud, even if she was given drugs at a bar, even if she changed her mind, the presumption is that her protests would have been heard, and accepted, and if she was too impaired, or too scared to protest, no matter.

In either case, consent or no, rape or no, the harm that the Torah considers is not the harm to Dinah. Think about that for a moment. Dinah is not the person whose harm needs to be redressed. The Torah suggests that harm in the case of unsanctioned deflowering is experienced by the male relatives due to the loss of a virgin who could command a high bride price and familial alliances. The Torah then provides a remedy -that is, marriage to her deflowerer, which would restore her status, as a married woman, with an accepted place in the community. Of course, whether she was forced to marry her rapist, or her consensual lover, the woman’s feelings in this regard do not matter.

In this context, the response of Shimon and Levi seems contradictory. Our story goes on to state that Shechem not only wants to marry Dinah, but is willing to give the full bride price, and make a formal alliance with her family – and, to seal this alliance with circumcision of the whole community. But this is not acceptable to Shimon and Levi who cannot bear to have their sister treated like a whore, that is, married to a depraved foreigner. They massacre all the males of Shechem, and the other brothers take their wives and property as spoils. In this interpretation, Dinah’s story was added later to the Torah, when marrying within the community was crucial. Dinah cannot be restored to a place in their community because the proposed intermarriage, and those likely to follow could threaten the values and ties of the nascent Israelite community. Certainly, this is suggested later in the Torah, when Pinchas, a descendent of Levi, violently kills an Israelite who is engaged in intercourse with a foreign woman. Also, to support this interpretation is a midrash which states that Dinah became pregnant from her encounter with Shechem, and her child, a daughter, was adopted by an Egyptian couple. This child was named Asenath and eventually married Joseph, her cousin. In this case, Joseph’s children, Ephraim and Mehashe would be Jacob’s descendants, through both their father and their mother.

Many modern feminist writers have used Dinah’s story to highlight the ways that women are still mistreated in the world, be it honor killings, problems with being heard by police, judges, and jury when rape charges are filed, and in the shame and feelings of lost status as victims, the Me-Too movement notwithstanding.

Other feminist writers have created midrash, assuming that the relationship with Shechem was consensual, and that the story reflects what can happen when a woman chooses a partner who does not meet the approval of her family. The consequences can be on a personal level, as in Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent, a midrash giving voice to a Biblical community of women. Here, when Dinah’s own account is ignored, she has a permanent estrangement from her family. In a political interpretation in Deena Metzger’s What Dinah Thought, a modern-day Dinah is imagined returning to Israel, to Nablus (formerly known as Shechem), and trying to reunite with her lover, envisioning a world where Israelis and Palestinians have accepted their shared roots in the land, and love between two people can become peace between two peoples.

In both retellings, the authors have imagined what Dinah was thinking and feeling. But we do not know. Dinah is silent. So, what is even the purpose of including this story in the Torah? Is it to explain why the tribes of Shimon and Levi are landless in the Promised land? Is it to explain why Jacob did not ultimately settle in Shechem? Or is it part of a long polemic against marrying with the natives of the land we were promised?

The stories we hear are created by those who have a certain point of view, a specific message that they want told, be it the story of the emergence of a people who made a covenant with G-d, the story of that same people’s glorious return, after 1900 years of exile, to the land that G-d had promised them, or the story of a nation created with the dream of liberty and equality for all. Dinah’s point of view was not considered important enough to our story to be passed down to us. We are left ignorant of what her legacy to us, as a people, might have been.

It is our job, as readers, to pay attention to whose voices are included and whose are left out and to leave space for other, possibly conflicting narratives. As Dinah did not get to tell her story, others have been able to make her whatever they want or need her to be. But her story, as perceived and told by her, is important. Each of our stories is important, as we are each important, in our own ways, in our own lives, because we are equally human, of equal value.

And what would it mean to our country, to our world, if everyone’s story was told. It would be complicated and messy and painful. But maybe, just maybe, it would help us heal our brokenness and bridge the divisions between us.

We are a people whose most important prayer instructs us to hear. We must not only speak the truth as we know it, but we must also listen to the truth as others understand it. We need to pay attention and that includes listening for what is unsaid or suppressed. We ask G-d, in the daily Amidah, to hear our **voices**/Shma Kolenu. May G-d hear our prayers and help us hear not only G-d but also each other.