

Don't Blame Dinah! A Jewish Response to Domestic Abuse
Parashat Vayishlach 5770 – December 4, 2009
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Vayishlach might be my favorite Torah portion, because of the wealth of important stories that are found here. Right here in one portion you have Jacob wrestling with the angel. It tells about the Patriarch's name being changed to Yisrael – the one who wrestles with God. It tells of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, of Jacob's return to the land of Israel, God's reestablishment of the covenant with him and his 12 sons. Some of the most important, powerful stories in our tradition are right here.

But tucked away between them is an incident that's not very pleasant at all:

Genesis 34:

Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force.

In other words, he raped her. And the rest of the chapter details the aftermath of the rape. Shechem decides that he is in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. Then two of Dinah's brothers – Simon and Levi – get revenge by killing Shechem and his entire clan.

This is not the kind of Bible story we want to teach in Sunday school, or that we really want to talk about. But we need to talk about it, because if you look closely, something very important and very disturbing is going on here.

In verse 2, it says that Shechem saw Dinah and took her by force and raped her. In verse 3 – He was in love with her, and spoke to her tenderly. Declared that he wanted to marry her.

So this isn't just a rape. Dinah was violated in the context of what seems to be an intimate relationship with the man she intends to marry. We have a word for that: it's called Domestic Abuse. And it's not only in the Torah – it's right here with us.

Every nine seconds, a woman in this country is battered by her partner.¹ Most victims of Domestic Violence are women, but certainly not all. However, Domestic Violence is the single greatest cause of injury to women, more than muggings and car accidents combined.²

¹ Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1994.

² First Comprehensive National Health Study of American Women, The Commonwealth Fund, 1993.

Unfortunately, it seems from this Torah portion that this is nothing new. And even more unfortunately, this Torah portion is dead wrong in the way the way it deals with this incident. In fact, *Vayishlach* is basically a study in what *not* to do in cases of Domestic Abuse.

An example: the midrash asks the question, What was Dinah doing that caused her to come into contact with Shechem, her rapist? And it seizes on the opening words of the portion: “*Vatezte Dinah* – Dinah went out” into the town. It was highly unusual for women to be wandering outside the camp, and the commentators understand this to mean that she was out behaving in provocative ways. In other words, that she brought the rape upon herself. And while that attitude may seem far-fetched when we’re reading the story, it is not uncommon in real life.

Rabbi David Rose of Jewish Women International writes:

Very often, society blames the victim. And sadly, the victims of abuse often blame themselves.... We need to say clearly this perspective is wrong, dangerous, and hurtful. An abused woman is hurt not because of anything that she did. Abuse is about power and control.³

The midrash is wrong to imply that Dinah brought her rape and her pain upon herself.

Reading further, we encounter the reaction of Dinah’s father Jacob. Verse 5: Jacob heard that his daughter had been defiled, but... Jacob kept silent.

Why did Jacob keep silent? Was he not sure what to do? Was he hoping that his sons would respond for him? Or did he simply not want to acknowledge what had happened?

We in the Jewish community also have a tendency to believe that Domestic Violence is a problem in other segments of the population, but not ours. But it occurs at all socioeconomic levels and in all religious communities. In fact, according to a National Crime Statistics Report, Domestic Violence may occur in up to 60% of marriages,⁴ even though only a fraction of those cases are ever reported.

There are Dinahs all around us – in our workplaces, in our clubs and gyms, right here in this sanctuary: women, children, and men who are being abused physically or

³ Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse , Spring 2006 newsletter. <http://jcada.org/downloads/springnewsletter2006.pdf>.

⁴ National Crime Statistics Report, 1993.

emotionally in their own homes by their own loved ones.

Again, Rabbi David Rose:

Domestic violence happens precisely because people are silent. Only when we break through the silence, can we end the abuse and violence that continues to occur in our community.⁵

Jacob is wrong to assume that doing nothing can't make things any worse.

At the other end of that spectrum are Dinah's brothers, Simon and Levi, whose murderous reaction to the rape is so out of proportion that we flinch whenever we read it. Verse 25: They took their swords, came upon the city, and killed all the men.

What's really going on here? They saw this as an affront to their family honor, and they were seeking justice against their sister's attacker. In fact, the name Dinah actually means justice. But justice is not what Dinah needed in that moment. What she needed was support; she needed the presence of loved ones; she needed a safe place to go; she needed assurance that she would be protected.

Dinah's brothers are wrong to make this about their anger toward the attacker rather than about the needs of the victim.

So there's a great deal we can learn from this Torah portion about what not to do when we become aware of Domestic Abuse in our community. We ought not to assume that the victim is at fault or wants to be in an abusive relationship. We ought not to keep silent or assume that it can't be real. We ought not to become angry and vindictive toward the attacker at the expense of the victim's real needs.

But there is a great deal that we *can* do.

We can take time to educate ourselves about the warning signs of this hidden epidemic – both the signs of an abuser and the signs of a victim. There are resources available online or through Shalom Bayit – a local organization that provides support for victims.

We can learn what to say and what not to say to a victim of abuse. And by the way, the most important thing we can say is, "It's not your fault."

We can talk to our children about what it means to be in a healthy relationship – about self-esteem, about partnership, about the ways that boyfriends and girlfriends should

⁵ Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse , Spring 2006 newsletter. <http://jcada.org/downloads/springnewsletter2006.pdf>.

talk to and about each other. (Did you know, by the way, that between 25% to 30% of adolescent relationships are abusive.⁶ We have a lot of work to do.)

Above all, we can establish ourselves and our congregation as safe places for those women and men are not safe in their own homes. We have already begun to do this work. 2 years ago, the Temple Beth El board passed a resolution on Domestic abuse. We have created a partnership with Shalom Bayit. We brought in a speaker last month. And our clergy – along with those of Temple Israel, Ohr Hatorah, and Lake Norman, attended a training session on supporting victims.

Just like the unpleasant story of Dinah and Shechem, Domestic Abuse is something that we would rather not think about. But by acknowledging that it happens in our community, we can begin to bring this hidden epidemic into the light. Removing that stigma is the best thing that we can do for its victims.

We cannot solve Domestic Abuse. There will unfortunately, be another Dinah. But we pray that next time, she will have a supportive, loving community surrounding her so that she can begin to pick up the pieces and move on with her life.

Amen.

⁶ L.A. Commission on Assaults Against Women.