

"The Conversation We Must All Now Have With Our Children"

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

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Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

I had to have a talk with my kids this week; A very important conversation that I probably should have had with them a few years ago, seeing as I have two teenage daughters and an eleven year old son. Now, I know what conversation you think I'm referring to, but it's not that one! Sari talked to them about that a long time ago! One evening this week at the dinner table...was it Wednesday, after Garrison Keillor was fired, or was it Thursday after Matt Lauer was fired? Or maybe it was after Al Franken's bizarre interview in which he neither apologized for nor denied what he was accused of. Who can remember? It seems that every day another celebrity or politician falls from grace because of sexual harassment. So sometime this week, I had to tell my children about repelling unwanted advances, about if God-forbid someone touched them in a way that was inappropriate never to remain silent about it; about not putting themselves in a situation that could give cover to someone who could threaten them in such a way. As my grandmother, of blessed memory would say: *Kleine kinder trogt men oif di hent, groisse kinder trogt men oifn kop.* Little children are carried in your arms, while bigger ones are a weight on your head!

But worrying about sexual harassment is hardly a modern concern. In the parasha this morning there is a very strange detail, more like an omission. Danielle [this morning's bat mitzvah] spoke earlier about how Jacob sent his family across the river Yabok, where they would be safe from an attack by his brother Esau. Listen to what the Torah says, Genesis 32:23: "That night Jacob took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children and he crossed the river Yabok." Now what's wrong with that headcount? He has two wives: Rachel and Leah; he has two maidservants: Bilhah and Zilpah. But Jacob doesn't have eleven children...he has twelve children! Two chapters earlier we learned of the birth of that 12th child: V'achar, yaldah bat...Lastly, Leah bore him a daughter, vatkira et sh'ma Dinah. And she named her Dinah. Sadly, there is no explanation of why she was named Dinah. Her 11 brothers' births and namings are all accompanied by an explanation of what their names meant, and why they were named as they were. Not so for Dinah. We don't know anything about how either Jacob or Leah felt about the birth of their daughter. Just that she was born—matter of fact. So we wonder, was she just not counted among Jacob's "real" children, i.e. his sons? Was she left out because she was not the ancestor of one of the tribes of Israel? Was her safety less of a concern to him that he didn't need to include her in the family census? Rashi quotes a startling midrash: *Ve'Dinah, heichan haytah?* Rashi says, What about Dinah? Where was she that night? *Natnah be'teivah v'na'al be'faneih shelo yitein bah Eisav einav.* Jacob hid his daughter Dinah in a trunk, locking her inside, so that his brother Esau would not lay his eyes on her. Jacob was afraid that his brother was a predator. The same brother who spurned birthrights and blessings; the same brother who seems to care more about his next meal than his family heritage; the very brother who caused anguish to his parents for marrying Canaanite women...maybe he would see how beautiful his niece was and want to add her to his harem as well. And with Esau marching toward him with 400 men would Jacob really be in a position to stop him?

Now most parents have had moments when they wish they could shield, protect, even hide their precious children from a dangerous world, or a boy picking up their child for a first date! My eldest daughter got her driver's license yesterday and I stared at the screen of my i-Phone until the minute she texted me that she arrived safely at school! But most of us know that you can't actually put your children in a box or lock them in a tower like in some fairy tale to protect them from every danger, every risk, every incompetent, insensitive, inconsiderate person out there. As much of a dangerous scoundrel that Jacob imagined his brother to be, the right parenting move here was not to try to hide Dinah from him. In fact, Dinah's story takes a tragic turn in the very next chapter. Dinah, while mingling with the girls from a nearby town is taken against her will by the local prince, and forced to lie with him. To most readers, this story is undoubtedly about rape. If the midrash that Rashi quoted meant to suggest that locking up children was a way to prevent their abuse, this story seems to repudiate it, unless of course children are to remain locked up all the time. (Grateful to my colleague Rabbi Hayim Ovadia of Magen David Congregation in Rockville for his inspiration).

It seems that a much better strategy is to begin talking about this early and openly to our children about this danger and giving them the tools to protect themselves. In this day and age, perhaps unlike that of the Torah, both boys and girls are at risk of being both victims and perpetrators. And harassment can happen in places that we have taken for granted as being safe: like schools, youth group events, and other places where kids tend to hang out. The data suggests that many assaults are perpetrated by people who are known and thought to be trusted.

So I want to provide a few suggestions to help you think about this critical conversation that I think we all need to have with our kids:

The first is that sexual harassment includes ANY unwanted behavior that is sexual in nature. The Department of Education lists jokes, name-calling, picture-drawing, clothing with innuendo or explicit messages, graffiti, gestures, spreading rumors of a sexual nature about others, and, of course, unwanted or inappropriate touch.

The second is that our kids need to understand that there is no shame in reporting sexual harassment. Kids should know that keeping such things to themselves will not help the situation or make it go away. And boys in particular need to know that if they are harassed it is not a threat to their manliness or sexuality. It is just wrong. If it happens, speak up about it. Statistics have shown that nearly a quarter of boys and men will be sexually harassed over the course of their lifetime. This is not just a girl's problem or a women's problem.

We also need to communicate that sexual harassment has nothing to do with love, rather it is about power. In our parasha, Shechem wakes up the next day after assaulting Dinah and decides that he loves her. Not surprisingly, exactly no one believes that! Of course true love never involves force or any act that is non-consensual. Crossing that line is not only wrong, it is often times illegal, which is why reporting it is so important.

And just as we expect members of Congress to investigate their own colleagues who are accused of harassment, and we expect Hollywood to punish actors and producers who harass, we also must not be bystanders when someone is being harassed. Kids can be taught to look out for their friends, to intervene when someone needs help, and even not to laugh at jokes or tolerate

listening to stories about harassment. This is a problem we need to address together, regardless of age, gender, or sexual orientation.

Perhaps the Midrash about Jacob locking Dinah in a box to protect her from Esau is a metaphor for any parent who thinks they can shirk these conversations or avoid giving their kids real strategies to prevent abuse and harassment. If there is a silver lining in the constant string of revelations of sexual misconduct of famous people, perhaps it is the wake-up call that it is providing all of us, and the necessary jolt to talk about these issues with the people we love.

It's shocking, you know. Although the story of Dinah spans 31 detailed verses in the Torah, Dinah does not actually speak a single word in any of them. Her silence is deafening. We know nothing of what she thinks, how she feels, what her perspective is. Please God let there be no more silences like Dinah's. May the shame and isolation of silence be replaced by the courage and comfort of speaking-out. May there be no more silences like Dinah's....

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