

The Rape of Dinah – and Other Stories in the News

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Parashat Vayishlah*

Today's Torah reading, is unfortunately, all too familiar, and perhaps even a bit too close for comfort. Each week when I review the weekly Torah reading I look to see if there is a correlation between the Biblical narrative and what is happening in our world. I search to see if an insight from our tradition's teachings can help place in context current events so we can better know how to respond and react to what is going on in our lives. To do so requires reading the text with a keen eye and perusing the comments of our sages. To be honest, sometimes, it is a stretch to make the connection. But rarely has the weekly scriptural selection corresponded so closely to what is in the headlines and on the minds of so many.

Genesis 34 tells a terrifying story of a young woman who goes out and leaves her parents' home to find in the words of our text and commentators, "others like herself," whatever that may mean. She is seized and brutally violated by the son of a prestigious, wealthy family. The young woman and the family are forced to come to grips with the tragedy that has befallen them.

This story about the only Jewish daughter mentioned in the patriarchal narratives is one we often skip and usually do not discuss extensively for it raises so many difficult and uncomfortable issues and behaviors which, in the most favorable light, are complex, and which are actually rather disturbing and even despicable.

The incident which occurred 3400 years ago to Jacob's daughter Dinah in Schechem, is in so many ways contemporary and relevant it sounds as if it could have taken place today.

It does not take too much imagination to read the narrative, and hear echoes of what is going on college campuses today. Incidents of women being violated, taken advantage of, abused and attacked appears to be almost epidemic. Research indicates that one in five women is sexually assaulted in college today, although only about 12 percent report it to police. According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism "more than 97,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are victims of alcohol related sexual assault."

Does today's reading about what Shechem did to Dinah against her will not evoke thoughts of women who are coming forward to reveal what they claim was done to them by a much younger, more handsome and virile and powerful respected comedian named Bill Cosby.

Does today's reading not remind us of what unfortunately we already have forgotten about and how appalled we were to learn that several hundred young Christian women in Africa were captured in their school and taken captive by the Islamist group Boko Haram. They have been raped, converted against their will, and married to older men, an act that so outraged our President, he showed his outrage by tweeting about it. (Actually it was the First Lady who tweeted).

The Biblical story is literally, to use an all too appropriate descriptive saying, "ripped out of today's headlines". It is the story of Linor Abargil. Abargil was Miss Israel in 1998 and went on to win the Miss World competition in Europe. As documented in a movie about what happened to her, just weeks

before the Miss World contest she was raped and stabbed by the Israeli travel agent hired to drive her in Milan.

As we hear of the plight of Dinah, we may think of what tragically happened just this past week in Paris, when intruders burst into an apartment and robbed and raped a young woman, saying they attacked her because she was Jewish.

Or, closer to home, as we consider the issues raised in this week's Torah reading, how can we help but think about a local rabbi who abused his position of power to violate the sacred trust placed in him and who has desecrated the mikvah, a place of sanctity for his own perverted purposes?

Sadly, the story of abuse of power and mistreatment of women is all too familiar and commonplace.

In our biblical text, knowing that the king is unlikely to order his son to release their sister, Shimon and Levi devise a plot to free their sister who is still being held captive against her will and to take revenge against the perpetrators. They lie and deceive the Shehemites and tell them that if the whole town will become circumcised, they will enter into a pact with them to allow intermarriage to take place and that Dina will be able to marry the prince, her captor. Shehem agrees to the terms and convinces the men of his town to accept the conditions. On the third day after the men are circumcised, while they are weak and recovering from the surgery, and when the pain is most acute, Shimon and Levi take advantage of their vulnerability, entering the town and killing the entire male population. They rescue Dina and bring her home while the other brothers then plunder the town. Their violent betrayal seems to displease their father Jacob.

Classic and modern commentaries have struggled with the actions of all of the actors in the story. In truth, no one comes out looking good. Shechem is clearly guilty of taking Dina against her will, of raping her and of keeping her in captivity. Yet he also falls in love with her and wants to marry her. The narrative does not tell us what Dina is thinking. It is left to our imagination to imagine her anguish and pain and to hear her voice and what she is feeling. While we reject the notion of blaming the victim, some commentators note that it is she who went out and believe she was wrong to tempt her fate. Jacob's silence is troubling as well, especially since he seems more concerned with his relations with the other tribe than with what has happened to his own daughter. Shimon and Levi are portrayed negatively for their deception and violence, and the townspeople who appear to be innocent, but who are killed are condemned by later commentators for their seeming complicity by not turning in Shechem. The townsmen can be likened to the fraternity brothers who allow one of their own to commit rape and do nothing to stop it.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch does not excuse what the brothers did. Rabbi Hirsch believes that punishing the criminals was warranted but the brothers went too far in killing the townsfolk. "Had they killed Shechem and Hamor there would be scarcely anything to say against it. But they did not spare the unarmed men who were at their mercy, and went further and looted, altogether made the inhabitants pay for the crime of the landowner. For that there is no justification."

Rambam and Ramban however, both support the brothers' actions. While Ramban suggests that the town was an evil place, worthy of being destroyed, Rambam justifies the actions by accusing the town of a major moral failure. In the Laws of Kings and their Wars he states, "all the inhabitants of Shechem were obligated to die. Shechem kidnapped. They observed and were aware of his deeds, but did not

judge him.” Rambam argues not only must kidnapping and rape be punished, but woe to the society that allows this to go on unchecked.

The fifteenth century commentator Rabbi Isaac Arama in his monumental work, *Akedat Yitzchak*, declares any crime known about and allowed to continue ceases to be an offense of individuals only and becomes a sin of the entire community as a whole. “A grave sin, done in private, without public knowledge... is [merely] a personal sin and [the criminal] will be punished... yet [the nation] is pure... however, a minor sin allowed by the community...is a sin of the entire community.” He sees it as a problem of attitude, of tolerance of unacceptable behavior.

The disturbing Biblical account, which closely parallels some of the horrible things happening in our society today, calls out for guidance, wisdom and an appropriate response. When Jacob first sees Esau, the brother he has not seen for twenty years, and who he fears will seek revenge, he makes the surprising comment, “*im Lavan garti*, with Lavan I lived.” Our sages postulate that he says this to let Esau know that although he lived with a conniving and manipulative individual, he remained true to the practices of Judaism. They derive this from an analysis called *gematria*, where every letter is assigned a numeric value. The word *garti* is the equivalent of the word 613, representing the 613 commandments Jews observe.

With this statement, Jacob is proclaiming the importance of Judaism and of keeping the mitzvot as a means of coping with the environment around us, a message relevant to today. Keeping the mitzvot, the commandments offer us a path and a way of life of holiness, but it also is a means of resisting the temptations we face each and every day because the underlying foundational principle of the system of mitzvot is that not all is permitted. This means you cannot just seize and violate or aggressively take advantage of another person and do whatever you want to them.

Prior to his encounter with Esau, Jacob is described as afraid and distressed. Rashi explains he is afraid that he will be killed by Esau, but distressed lest he will become like him and kill another person. Our commentaries are reinforcing the admonition not to be like those around us. We are repeatedly reminded how easy it is to succumb to the ways of the society we inhabit. Judaism offers the tools and means to rise above this.

At the foundation of it all is the concept that each and every person is created “*betzelem elohim*, in the image of God.” This essential teaching demands that we treat each and every human being with the dignity and integrity they deserve, and relate to each as children of God. When we do that we begin to realize that we are forbidden to force ourselves upon another human being against their will.

So let us take the messages to heart and recognize how we should act towards others, for rape, sexual assault and forcing someone to do something against their will is as wrong today as it was in Biblical times.

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