

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

Genesis 32:4–36:43

Vayishlach means “and he sent” and refers to Jacob sending messengers to his brother Esau before their meeting after twenty years of separation. We are told of Jacob’s fears, of his division of his community into two camps, and of his wrestling with a man-angel who changes Jacob’s name to Israel. Following that struggle, Jacob and Esau meet and part peacefully, each going his separate way. After Jacob and his community settle in Shechem, Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, is raped by Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite. Jacob’s sons take revenge by murdering all the males of Shechem and plundering the city. Jacob is critical of his sons for what they have done. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin and is buried near Bethlehem. Isaac dies and is buried in Hebron near Abraham and Sarah. The Torah portion concludes with the genealogy of Jacob and Esau.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Having journeyed from Haran, Jacob now approaches Seir, the country of Edom, located in the green forested area in the mountains east of the Dead Sea. Jacob fears meeting Esau. Though twenty years have passed, he remembers that Esau had sworn to kill him.

So Jacob sends messengers ahead to Esau, hoping they will return with a message of peace from

him. When the messengers return, they tell him that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men. Jacob is terrified and immediately divides his community into two camps. He reasons that, if Esau attacks one camp, the other will escape.

Jacob spends the night in prayer, and in the morning he selects gifts of goats, rams, camels, cows, and asses for his servants to take to Esau. He hopes that Esau will like the gifts and, therefore, be kind and peaceful in his dealings with him. That night Jacob takes his family to a safe

place across the river Jabbok, and then he wanders off alone.

Throughout that night a man-angel wrestles with Jacob. Near dawn, the man-angel says to him, "Let me go!" Jacob tells him that he will not let him go unless he gives him a blessing. The man-angel asks, "What is your name?" Jacob tells him his name, and the man-angel says: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with divine and human beings and have triumphed."

Jacob names the place "Peniel," which means "face of God," explaining, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." At dawn, Jacob limps away from the place, injured by the man-angel who had wrenched his hip at the socket.

• 2 •

That day Jacob sees Esau and his company of four hundred men approaching his camp. He lines up his wives and children and then goes out to greet Esau. Esau embraces and kisses him. "Who are these people?" he asks Jacob, pointing to Leah, Rachel, and the children. Jacob introduces his wives and children to his brother and offers Esau gifts. "To see your face," Jacob tells him, "is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably."

Esau offers to accompany Jacob and his family to Canaan, but Jacob informs him that it is not necessary. Esau then returns to Seir, and Jacob travels to Succoth in the Jordan Valley, where he builds a home for his family. We are also told that he purchases a plot of land outside the city of Shechem, which is near the site of Nablus, thirty-two miles north of Jerusalem.

• 3 •

While out visiting other young women, Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, is raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country. Shechem declares his love for Dinah and asks his father to arrange their marriage.

Jacob hears that his daughter has been raped, but he takes no immediate action against Shechem because his sons are out in the field tending to

the herds. When the brothers hear what has happened, they are enraged and return home.

Meanwhile, Shechem's father, Hamor, approaches Jacob and tells him that his son is in love with Dinah. "Please give her to him in marriage," he says. "Intermarry with us . . . and the land will be open before you." Shechem adds his own words to those of his father. "Ask of me a bride price ever so high, and I will pay what you tell me; only give me the maiden for a wife."

Angry over what has happened to Dinah, Jacob and his sons indicate that they cannot permit their women to marry uncircumcised men. "Circumcise yourselves," they tell them, "and we will give you our daughters, and we will become like one family."

Hamor and Shechem agree, and they go before all the people of their city and announce: "These people are our friends; let them settle in the land and move about in it, for the land is large enough for them; we will take their daughters to ourselves as wives and give our daughters to them. . . . Would not their cattle and substance and all their beasts be ours?" The people agree, and all the males circumcise themselves.

Three days afterwards, while all the males are in pain from their circumcision, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, enter the city and murder all the males, including Hamor and Shechem. Their other brothers join them, and they plunder the city, taking flocks and herds as booty and children and wives as captives. When Jacob hears what they have done, he says to them: "You have brought trouble on me. Other peoples will not trust me. We are few in numbers, and we will be destroyed."

Simeon and Levi answered their father with a question: "Are we to allow our sister to be treated as a whore?"

• 4 •

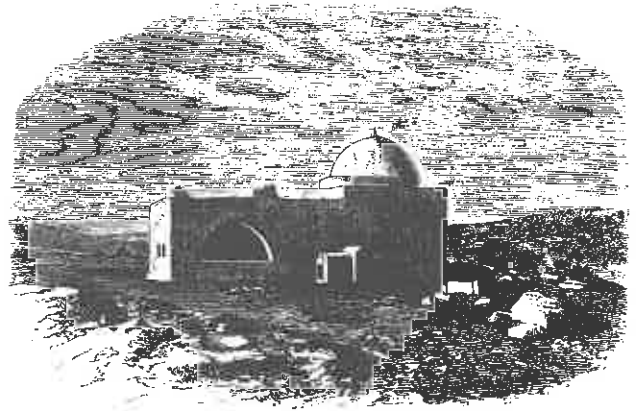
Afterwards God instructs Jacob to return to Bethel, where he had built an altar at the time he was fleeing from Esau. Jacob tells all in his household to give him their idols and earrings. He buries them near Shechem, and they set out for Bethel.

At Bethel, God says to Jacob: "I am El Shaddai [God Almighty]; be fertile and increase; a nation, many nations will descend from you. . . . The

land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you; and to your offspring to come will I give the land.”

After leaving Bethel, Jacob and the community with him travel toward Ephrath, now called Bethlehem. On the way Rachel, who is pregnant, becomes ill and dies in childbirth. Jacob names his new son Benjamin and buries Rachel near the road. Over her grave he builds a pillar of stones.

Jacob returns to the area of Hebron where Isaac, his father, dwells. At one hundred and eighty years of age, Isaac dies, and Esau and Jacob bury him in the cave of Machpelah with Abraham, Sarah, and Rebekah.



THEMES

Parashat Vayishlach contains three important themes:

1. Dealing with powerful people and nations.
2. Wrestling with angels and ourselves.
3. The appropriate response to the violence of rape.

PEREK ALEF: *Jacob's Reunion with Esau—Dealing with Power*

Rabbi Yochanan, who lived in the second century during the bitter persecutions of Jews by Roman authorities, taught that “whoever wishes to deal with a king or powerful authority . . . should study this Torah portion about the reunion of Jacob and Esau.” (*Genesis Rabbah* 78:6) Rabbi Yochanan was famous for his clearheaded thinking and good advice. Why did he believe our Torah portion contained such wisdom about the tactics of dealing with powerful people and governments?

Several details should be noted about the reunion of Jacob and Esau. Jacob sends messengers to his brother. He instructs them to demonstrate his humility by referring to Esau as “my lord Esau” and to himself as “your servant Jacob.” Tell him, Jacob says to the messengers, that “I send this message to my lord in hope of gaining your favor.”

When the messengers return and announce to Jacob that Esau is on his way to meet him and that he is bringing four hundred men with him, Jacob is frightened. But he does not panic. Instead, he divides his community into two camps, cal-

culating that, if Esau destroys one camp, the other will escape. Then he prays, asking God to save him from his brother. Afterwards, he selects choice animals from his herds of goats, rams, camels, cows, bulls, and asses and sends them as gifts to Esau. He reasons to himself, “If I appease his anger with presents in advance, and then face him, perhaps he will show me favor.”

Jacob’s strategy (sending a delegation to represent him, humility, practicality in dividing his community, prayer, and gifts to reduce the hostility of the enemy) was greatly praised by many biblical interpreters.

Compare the reed to the cedar

The rabbis of the Talmud commented that there is a lesson to be learned by comparing the reed to the cedar. “The reed, which is a humble plant, grows in the water, replenishing its roots which are many. No matter how hard the wind blows, or from which direction, the reed is not blown from its place. It simply bends away from the wind.” By comparison, “the cedar, which is a high and prideful tree, stands tall against all

the winds of the world except for the south wind. When that wind blows, it can uproot the cedar and turn it upside down." (Ta'anit 20a)

Zugot



Beware of those in power

Shemayah and Abtalyon, who lived in the Land of Israel during the first-century persecution of Jews by the Romans, taught: "Do not seek to be close with governmental authorities." (Avot 1:10)

Be careful in your relations with those in power, for they draw people near for their own interests. They appear as friends when it is to their advantage and will not defend a person in time of trouble. (Avot 2:3)

Rabbi Bechaye commented that, because Jacob remembered that Esau loved to hunt, he sent him a falcon, which noblemen carry when they go hunting in the woods. He hoped that his gift would make a friend instead of an enemy of Esau. Another interpreter writes that Jacob instructed the messengers to make sure that Esau understood that the animals Jacob was sending to him were a gift meant to ease any angry memories Esau might have of him. (*Tze'edah u-Re'edah, Vayishlach*, p. 165)

Sforno

Obadiah Sforno, who lived in Italy (1475–1550), pointed out that Jacob's tactic of humility with Esau was successful. Jacob saved his life and possessions because he was ready to appease Esau. Realizing that Esau had the power to destroy him, Jacob humbled himself like a "reed bending against the wind," rather than standing tall like a "cedar" and taking the chance of being overturned and destroyed.

By comparison Sforno recalls the reaction of Jews to Roman persecution during the first cen-

tury. At that time Roman authorities heavily taxed the community, cruelly oppressed men, women, and children, and threatened to destroy places of Jewish learning. Sforno heaps criticism upon those Jews who refused to appease the Roman authorities. He quotes Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, a leader during those troubled times, who argued that, had Jews cooperated and not followed the bad advice of those who organized protests and burned the marketplaces of Jerusalem, "our Temple would not have been destroyed." (*Gittin* 56b) They should have "bent like a reed," Sforno writes, instead of trying "to stand tall like a cedar."

Other interpreters disagree.

Rabbi Judah ben Simon, who lived in the Land of Israel during the fourth century, called the attention of his students to the lesson in the biblical Book of Proverbs that teaches: "A righteous person who humbles himself before a wicked person is like a muddied spring or a ruined fountain." (25:26) A righteous person like Jacob, Rabbi Judah argued, should not have humbled himself before Esau. It was the wrong thing to do.

In another comment, the rabbis point out that Jacob humbled himself eight times by calling himself Esau's "servant" or by referring to Esau as "my lord." God, the rabbis teach, was displeased with Jacob and told him that, because he had disgraced himself, God was appointing eight kings to rule over the Jewish people.

Clearly, the rabbis were critical of Jacob for his display of humility before the power of Esau. They also point out that his tactics were bad. Jacob should never have sent messengers to Esau. He should have moved his family through the land quietly, and Esau might not even have noticed them. It was like waking a robber or a bully who was sleeping, these commentators explain. Had Jacob moved quietly by, he would not have needed to confront Esau.

Rabbi Huna, who headed the great school of Jewish learning in Sura, Babylonia, during the third century, agrees with the criticism of Jacob. He should not have become involved with Esau or paid any attention to him, Huna explains, quoting the teaching from Proverbs 26:17: "A person who passes by and gets involved with other people's disagreements is like one who takes a dog by the ears."

Goats and wolves

The Talmud teaches: "A person who acts like a goat will be eaten up by the wolves."

"I'm just a servant"

Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi ("the Prince"), who edited the Mishnah and lived during the Roman persecutions, once said to his secretary, Rabbi Aphi: "Write a letter to Emperor Antoninus." So Aphi wrote the letter, addressing it, "From Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi to His Majesty the Emperor Antoninus." Rabbi Judah took the letter, read it, and tore it up. Afterwards he said to Aphi: "Address it as 'From your servant Judah to His Majesty the Emperor Antoninus.'" Aphi asked: "Why do you humiliate yourself?" Judah replied: "Am I better than my forefather Jacob? Did he not say to Esau, 'Your servant, Jacob'?" (Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach, 78:6)

Peli

**"Buttering up"**

The rabbis chastise Jacob, not only for "buttering up" Esau by introducing himself as "your servant" and offering him lavish gifts, but also for the very fact of Jacob's seeking Esau's approval for resettling the land that he was forced to flee earlier. . . . (Pinchas Peli, Torah Today, B'nai B'rith Books, Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 34)

Ramban (Nachmanides)



Unlike the commentator Sforno, Nachmanides disapproves of Jacob's "buttering up" of Esau. He should have acted with strength not weakness. He should not have bent in the wind or appeased him. Nachmanides argues that, had the Jews during the Roman persecutions not given in to the Romans and not fooled themselves into believing that they could make allies out of their enemies,

the Temple and Jewish life in the Land of Israel would not have been destroyed.

Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz agrees. In her commentary, she claims that the reason Jews have been persecuted and battered through the ages is that they acted with humility before power rather than meeting power with power and pride. "With our own hands we sealed our own fate by lowering ourselves, allowing others to lord it over us. As the prophet Jeremiah (13:21) words it: 'You have taught them to be captains and chief over you.'"

At least one interpreter suggests that Jacob did not humiliate himself before Esau but instead met him and said to him: "If you want peace, I am with you. If you want war, then I am ready for you. I have strong men for battle, and God answers my prayers." (Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach, 75:11)

In other words, Jacob retained his pride and dignity. He took matters into his own hands. First he divided his camp so that, if Esau came for battle, half of his community might escape. Then he went out to meet Esau face to face. He did not appear afraid, nor did he seek mercy from him. He refused to bend before Esau. He met power with power. He let Esau know that he was ready to make peace or to engage in battle. From a position of strength he offered to negotiate peace between them.

Rabbi Yochanan once said that, if "one wants to know how to deal with powerful kings or governors, he should study closely the Torah portion about the meeting between Jacob and Esau." (Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach, 78:6) The varieties of opinions about how to treat powerful people, groups, and nations, even their conflicting opinions, are still important considerations for us today.

PEREK BET: *Wrestling with Angels and Ourselves*

After being told that Esau is approaching with four hundred men, Jacob divides his community and his possessions into two camps on either side

of the Jabbok stream. By evening they are settled, and he is left alone. That night, the Torah (Genesis 32:25) informs us, "And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." The man wrenches his hip and says to Jacob, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." Jacob refuses, demanding that the man bless him. The man asks his name, and, when Jacob tells him what it is, the man says, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

When Jacob, now Israel, asks the man to identify himself, the man answers, "You must not ask my name," and then disappears. Jacob names the place where this strange wrestling match occurred *Peniel*, meaning "face of God." At dawn he limps away, saying, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

What is this strange "wrestling match" all about? Who is this "man"—or "divine being"—Jacob encounters? What is the meaning of Jacob's change of name to Israel? And why does he walk away from this strange night experience injured, limping?

The first interpreters of this strange story were the ancient rabbis. Some of them believed that the "man" was an angel who appeared in the form of a robber. His intention was to frighten Jacob, but Jacob was strong and unafraid. "You cannot scare me," he told the angel-robber. And, because he was brave and refused to run away from his attacker, Jacob was victorious and blessed with a new name—Israel.

Religious persecution

Nachmanides suggests that the "man" Jacob wrestled with was Esau and that their battle "refers to the generation of religious persecution" during the time of Emperor Hadrian (117–138 C.E.) when Rome ruled in the Middle East. "What did the Romans do in that generation?" They would bring iron balls, heat them in fire, and then place them under the arms of Jewish leaders, causing their death. And there have been other generations when they have done such things to us and even worse, but in the end we have survived," just as Jacob prevailed over Esau.

The hollow of Jacob's thigh

We are told that the man wrestling with Jacob injured him by touching the hollow of his thigh. By "hollow of his thigh" is meant the place of his circumcision. Here, too, we have an indication of how the enemies of the Jewish people persecuted them and sought to destroy them. They would forbid Jews from practicing the ritual of circumcision through which a Jewish boy enters the covenant of Abraham. (Lekach Tov)

As we have already noted in our discussion of this Torah portion, the rabbis often portrayed Jacob and Esau as much more than competing brothers. They also thought of them as two competing national forces—as Israel and other nations, or as Israel and Rome. For some interpreters, the wrestling match between Jacob and the angel was a match between Jacob and Esau. Esau was the angel, and the battle between them symbolized the bitter war for survival between the Jewish people and those nations that sought to destroy them. Jacob's night battle, they taught, was a preview of the future. Jacob-Israel would be attacked by Esau-Rome. They would fight throughout a long night of terror in which Israel would suffer. But, at the end of the night, Israel would emerge secure, strong, and victorious against all its enemies.

Rashi



The commentator Rashi suggests a very different approach. He argues that the "man" with whom Jacob wrestled was "Esau's angel." Rashi points out that Jacob was worried because Esau was coming with four hundred men to kill him and to destroy his community, still bearing a grudge against him for stealing his blessing from their father, Isaac. Rashi explains that, when Jacob discovered that he was wrestling with Esau's angel, he realized that he might be able to force Esau into forgiving him for taking the blessing. If he succeeded, Jacob thought, then his community would be saved. So Jacob fought on, refusing to give up until Esau's angel cried out, "Let me go."

Rabbi Abraham Chill, a modern interpreter, agrees with Rashi that the “man” was “Esau’s angel,” but his explanation is different. Chill believes that the night battle between Jacob and Esau’s angel was between two opposing views of how human beings ought to live. Jacob’s view represented compassion, kindness, and mercy; Esau represents self-centeredness, crudeness, and destruction. What we have here, Chill argues, is “a combat of values.” Because Jacob remained faithful to his high standards, the only thing Esau’s angel could do was to injure him physically. In the end, however, Jacob and his principles prevailed.

RASHBAM

Jacob wanted to run away

Actually, Jacob was frightened of meeting his brother. Fearing what Esau might do to him and his community, Jacob was about to flee. God saw this and sent the angel to prevent Jacob from running away. He injured the hollow of his thigh because he wanted Jacob to know that he should have shown greater faith and that no one can flee from God. (Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, Rashbam, 1085–1174)

Jacob’s real enemies

“ . . . the greatest enemy of Jacob is not Esau; the greatest enemy of Jacob resides within himself. It is the enemy that makes him an idol worshiper, a pagan, serving false values and going after false ideas; it is the pride of learning, of knowledge that destroys the capacity of the mind to learn the truth. And, lastly, the enemy is the hostility, the hatred, the resentment that have become deeply embedded either in our conscious or our subconscious.” (Rabbi Morris Adler, The Voice Still Speaks, p. 92)

Other commentators point out that the battle between Jacob and the angel took place inside Jacob’s

mind, and it represented a major turning point in his life. He could not meet his brother, Esau, without wrestling with the guilt that he felt about stealing both his birthright and blessing. All his successes were tarnished by his feelings of having taken what did not belong to him. He could not go on. He had to struggle with what he had done, and he had to repent. He needed to admit that Esau had been cheated. He had to become a different person, a person who cared about his brother. The battle was with himself. Jacob struggled to become a better, more honest, fair, and just human being. It was only after Jacob became Israel that he was ready to reconcile with his brother. (W. Gunther Plaut, editor, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, UAHC, New York, 1981, Genesis, p. 221)

The modern writer Elie Wiesel enlarges this view. Wiesel writes that “at Peniel . . . two Jacobs came together.”

There was the Jacob who had doubts about himself, fears about his future, and regrets about how he had stolen the blessing from his brother. This side of him said: “I deserve nothing, I am less than nothing, I am unworthy of celestial blessing, unworthy of my ancestors as much as of my descendants, unworthy to transmit God’s message. . . .”

And there was the other Jacob who was the “heroic dreamer,” the brave, experienced, and future-looking Jacob. That voice reminded him of how he had worked to create his family and his fortune and how he had stood up to Laban and his sons when they had plotted against him. That voice reminded him that he was the son of Isaac and that through him the Jewish people was to survive.

That night, the two sides of Jacob fought with each other. He wrestled with the most serious questions of his life. Who was he? What was really important to him? What were his responsibilities to himself and to those he loved? As dawn broke, he knew that he would never be the same. He was a changed person. He would limp away from his night battle with himself, but he would have a new name. He would no longer be *Ya’akov*, “the one who holds on to his brother’s heel” or “the one who steals his brother’s blessing.” Now he would be *Yisrael*, “the one who had wrestled with

himself and was now ready to wrestle with the world.”

Wiesel writes that “it was a turning point for Jacob. He had a choice: to die before dying or to take hold of himself and fight. And win. And win he did. . . . Such, then, is the prime meaning of this episode: Israel’s history teaches us that man’s true victory is the one he achieves over himself.” (*Messengers of God*, pp. 122–129)

So who was this “man-angel” with whom Jacob wrestled? Perhaps a figment of his imagination. Perhaps it was Esau or Esau’s angel in a dream. Perhaps it was meant to represent all the enemies who would arise to destroy the people of Jacob-Israel. Perhaps the man-angel was Jacob, and the battle was between two sides of Jacob’s character.

At times the intent of the Torah is unclear. Great literature and art allow for many differing opinions and interpretations. Each person, and often each generation, uncovers new meanings. That, now, is our challenge with Jacob’s mysterious night battle.

PEREK GIMEL: *The Rape of Dinah*

Hertz



In his commentary on the Torah, British rabbi and scholar Joseph H. Hertz (1872–1946) called the story of Dinah “a tale of dishonor, wild revenge, and indiscriminate slaughter.” It is also a story that raises important ethical questions.

Dinah, who is the daughter of Leah and Jacob, goes out to socialize with other young women and is raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor who is the chief of the country. Afterwards, Shechem tells his father that he is in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. He asks his father to arrange the marriage with Jacob.

Jacob hears that Dinah has been raped, but he remains silent until his sons return home from the fields. When they hear what has happened they are furious.

When Hamor asks that Shechem be allowed to marry Dinah, her brothers refuse. Already plotting

their revenge, they tell Shechem that only if all the males of his community are circumcised will they allow such a marriage. They also promise friendship. “We will marry one another,” they say. “We will dwell among you and become as one kindred.”

Shechem and Hamor convince their townsmen to circumcise themselves. “These people are our friends,” they tell them. Pointing out the material gain, they declare, “Will not their cattle and substance and all their beasts be ours?” Convinced, all the males are circumcised.

Three days later, Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, enter the town and murder all the males, including Hamor and Shechem. The other brothers follow and plunder the town. They seize all the wealth and take the women and children as captives.

When Jacob hears what they have done, he says to Simeon and Levi: “You have made trouble for me by giving me a bad reputation among the people of the land. I am few in number, and if attacked my house will be destroyed.” The brothers respond: “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

The question posed by Simeon and Levi takes us to the heart of the matter. What should they have done? Should they have allowed Shechem to rape Dinah, their sister, without taking some revenge? Given the fact that they were fewer and weaker than Hamor’s powerful fighting men, were Simeon and Levi justified in tricking them into circumcising themselves so that Dinah’s brothers could take advantage of their weakness, easily killing them and plundering their town? Finally, who was really responsible for this incident—Dinah, who went out socializing without a chaperon, or Shechem, who forced himself upon her?

Defining “rape”

Laws defining rape usually indicate that the crime must involve sexual intercourse by force and against the will of the woman.

The penalty for rape

Within the Torah the penalty for rape is compensation to the family for the disgrace and mar-

riage to the victim without the opportunity for divorce. (Deuteronomy 22:29) Later, the rabbis added the payment of compensation for "pain inflicted on the woman" during the rape.

Who was to blame?

A woman should not show herself in the street wearing conspicuous jewelry. Jewelry was given to the woman for the purpose of adorning herself in her own house for her husband. It would be wrong to set a stumbling block even before a righteous man and certainly before people who are on the lookout for an opportunity to sin. (Tanchuma, Vayishlach 5)

Rape is an act of violence whose cause has been debated over the centuries. Some interpreters of our Torah portion blame Dinah, not Shechem, for what happened to her. They point out that, had she stayed at home rather than putting on fancy jewelry, dressing in clothing that attracted attention, and running about to parties, she would not have fallen into trouble. Other commentators blame her mother, Leah. It was Leah's fault, they say, because she was constantly "running about and socializing." She set a bad example for her daughter, and that's why Dinah got into trouble. (*Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach, 80:1-5 and Tze'enah u-Re'enah, Vayishlach, 34:1*)

Blaming the victim of rape, or her family, for the violence she has suffered happens frequently. "She must have done something to deserve such treatment," is a common statement. Yet, it is as logical and misleading a judgment as blaming the victims of Nazi brutality for the agony and death they suffered. In our Torah portion, Dinah was not at fault; she was the victim of Shechem's violent passions.

The question faced by Jacob and his sons was how to deal with such violence? Were they to sit by idly and do nothing? Were they to take revenge, answer the violence of Shechem's act with a massacre of his community?

Some interpreters argue that Simeon and Levi were justified in their revenge. Their sister had been treated "as public property." Shechem used her with no regard for her feelings, her rights, or

her dignity. He forced himself upon her, and she would live with the terrible memories throughout her life. (*Genesis Rabbah 80:2*)

Rabbi Bechaye comments that the people of Shechem were among the world's greatest thieves and liars. No one could trust them. Although they promised to live at peace with Jacob and his sons, actually, as soon as they healed from their circumcisions, they planned to kill all of them. What Simeon and Levi did, Rabbi Bechaye says, was an act of self-defense, not of revenge. (*Tze'enah u-Re'enah, Vayishlach, p. 171*)

Rabbi Moshe Weissman, in his commentary *The Midrash Says*, writes that "Simeon and Levi acted in accordance with *halachah* (Jewish law) when they planned to kill the inhabitants of Shechem because the people of Shechem were all deserving of capital punishment according to the Seven Laws of Noah. Shechem himself was liable to capital punishment for having kidnapped Dinah (the transgression of robbery). His fellow townspeople were also guilty since they knew of his deed but did not bring him to justice. According to the Seven Laws of Noah, they were obligated to administer justice. Since they refused to do so, Weissman argues, they deserved death.

The Seven Laws of Noah

The Seven Laws of Noah were considered by rabbinic tradition as the essential "moral laws" for all human beings. The rabbis believed that anyone who practiced them was "a righteous person." The laws prohibited idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating from a live animal; and they called for the setting up of a legal system of justice. (Sanhedrin 56-60)

Rambam (Maimonides)



Weissman's opinion is close to the views of both Moses Maimonides and Joseph ben Abba Mari Caspi. They also call attention to the failure of

the inhabitants of the city of Shechem who knew that Shechem raped Dinah but refused to arrest and convict him for his evil deed. They believe that it was right for Simeon and Levi to take revenge since no one in Shechem had raised a protest on Dinah's behalf. Caspi writes, "They saw and knew and did not punish him." In other words, the people of Shechem were as guilty as Shechem because they stood by and did nothing to arrest and prosecute him. Consequently, they deserved the massacre inflicted by Simeon and Levi.

Hirsch



Samson Raphael Hirsch offers another point of view in support of Simeon and Levi. He points out that Jacob and his sons realized that they were a small, weak group by comparison with the strength of the people of Shechem. Any protest was futile. Any appeal to "human rights" or "justice" would not be heard. Shechem attacked an innocent, weak "Jewish woman" whose people were also weak. Now he was holding her captive in his city. It was an act of brute force, and the only response was brute force. Simeon and Levi are to be praised for seeking to rescue her and for seeking revenge against Shechem and Hamor.

Rabbi Hirsch, however, adds the following: "Had (Simeon and Levi) 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 (and) made the inhabitants pay for the crime of the landowner. For that there was no justification." Simeon and Levi, Hirsch explains, may have thought that they would teach all their enemies a lesson. They would show that, if others used force against their women, they would have to pay with their lives. "But they went too far," Hirsch concludes. "They took revenge on innocent people for the wrongs that their powerful leaders (Shechem and Hamor) had done." (*The Pentateuch*, Vol. I, L. Honig and Sons Ltd., London, England, 1959, pp. 517-524)

Like a troop of murdering bandits

The rabbis of the Midrash taught: "As bandits sit in the road, murder people, and seize their wealth, so did Simeon and Levi act in Shechem." (Genesis Rabbah 80:2)

In his commentary, Nachmanides also condemns Simeon and Levi for their massacre of the people of Shechem. He disagrees with Maimonides. He argues that the failure of the people of Shechem to prosecute Shechem for raping Dinah is no justification for the brutality of Simeon and Levi. Nachmanides declares: "It was not the responsibility of Jacob and his sons to bring them to justice."

Furthermore, Nachmanides speculates that, had Simeon and Levi not taken the law into their own hands, the people of Shechem, including Hamor and Shechem, might have lived alongside them as friends and as devoted followers of the one God. After all, they had willingly circumcised themselves. "They would have chosen to believe in God . . . thus Simeon and Levi killed them without cause for the people had done them no evil at all." (*Commentary to Genesis*, pp. 419-421)

Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz agrees. He comments that "the sons of Jacob certainly acted in a treacherous and godless manner, and Jacob "did not forgive [them] to his dying day." Hertz reminds us that, in the blessing that Jacob gave on his deathbed to Simeon and Levi, he said: "Simeon and Levi are a pair;/ Their weapons are tools of lawlessness./ Let not my person be included in their council,/ Let not my being be counted in their assembly./ For when angry they slay men,/ And when pleased they maim oxen./ Cursed be their anger so fierce,/ And their wrath so relentless." (Genesis 49:5-7)

Jacob's condemnation of Simeon and Levi for taking the law into their own hands, even to revenge the rape of their sister, seems clear enough. The answer to brute force, to violence, is not more violence, not the massacre of innocents. It is the pursuit of justice within the courts of society.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Apply the talmudic statement, "A person who acts like a goat will be eaten up by wolves," to Jacob and to Jewish history. Is that a fair assessment of what happened to Jews in Europe during Hitler's rise to power?
2. Does each individual need to "wrestle" with the meaning of life? What are the benefits of such a struggle?
3. Why was Jacob so upset with his sons when they took revenge against the people of Shechem for the rape of Dinah? Was it a matter, once again, of being a reed rather than a cedar or were there more significant issues involved in his decision?