

## Torah Thoughts Vayishlakh

### 5780:

Sometimes our actions show who we are and make us who we become; at other times, including in this week's parshah, inaction does the same. In parshat Vayishlakh, the patriarch Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, is assaulted by Shechem the Hivite. After that act of violence, Shechem wishes to marry Dinah, and her brothers Shimon and Levi engage Shechem's family in talks to settle the details. Among their requirements is the insistence that the men of Shechem's town be circumcised so that marriage between the two clans can take place. All agree, but when the newly circumcised men are recovering from their surgery, Shimon and Levi kill them all, while the other sons of Jacob take their wives, children and property as booty.

Jacob, father to Dinah, Shimon, Levi and the other future fathers of the tribes, is largely absent from this story. It is only at its conclusion, when he confronts his two sons about their deception and violence, that he acts. But by then it is too late to shape events. Jacob's hesitancy to act in defense of Dinah or in restraining his sons from their violence mark him as a man whose time of leadership has passed. The literary scholar Robert Alter points out the same pattern in the story of King David: "...the father who fails to take action after the rape of his daughter and then becomes victim of the fratricidal and rebellious impulses of his son." For the rest of his life, Jacob will be more passive in his actions, less the subject of his story than an object in it. Was his passivity caused by the shock of what happened to Dinah, or was it characteristic of who he now was, as subsequent events would show? Was his silence the cause of the change in him or its effect?

We all know people who seem to be living out their lives as shadows of their former selves. Perhaps we even see ourselves that way. It is probably impossible to know when we cross the boundary that separates the time in life when we are making things happen and when we simply float along on the surface of our lives. Once that transition occurs, it can be sad, as in Jacob's case; he will no longer steer the course of his family and the nation whose name, Israel, he shares. On the other hand, the transition from actor to acted-on can also be pleasant and even rewarding. After all, what is retirement if not a time to relax our pace and escape from the heavy responsibilities of work and raising a family? Passivity gets a bad rap, in part because we see its toll when engaged in too early in life. But at a certain point, it may be a blessing. We can retire too early, like Jacob, too late, as some do, or in just enough time to give others the chance to push things forward, hopefully in ways more positive than in this week's parshah.