

© 2010



Class #5



Dinah



THE POWER TO TRANSFORM EVIL.

BY DINA COOPERSMITH



Several years ago, I was teaching a course called "Misunderstood Stories in the Bible." Among the stories I discussed was the rape of Dinah by Shechem, the son of Chamor, the Canaanite. The reason it became a misunderstood story, and not just a harsh, tragic episode in the life of a Jewish girl, was the recent (at the time) publication of *The Red Tent*, a novel by Anita Diamant. She is a good writer and I could have enjoyed the book had it been a work of pure fiction. Unfortunately, it was a gross misrepresentation of episodes relating to real characters in the Torah, and more specifically of Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov and Leah.

In this essay, as we wade through the Torah's commentaries and Midrashim about Dinah's life, we will try to recapture a true appreciation of this very complex woman.



Name and Essence

And then [Leah] had a daughter and she named her Dinah. (Genesis 30:21)

Rashi comments:

Leah judged (din) herself, saying: "If this is a male, Rachel will not even be equal to the maidservants." So she prayed and he turned into a female.

From our previous essays, we saw how Leah had great power to change reality through her prayers. Dinah, it seems, actually started out her existence as a male embryo and is named after the "justice-oriented" thinking which resulted in her switch to a female.

Leah, who knew that there were to be 12 male tribes born in this family, and who already had six sons at the time, calculated that if she now had another son (the eleventh tribe, Yosef), Rachel would not even have as many sons as the maidservants (who already had two each).

Therefore, Leah prayed that it be a girl. God listened to her prayers and switched the baby's gender! This portends the future circumstances in which Dinah will find herself. In her soul, perhaps, is a male element, an aspect of Yosef, or a similarity to him which might express itself in deeper ways.

Connection to Esav

Yaakov and his family finally make their way back to the Land of Israel (Canaan at that time), after having confronted Esav and his army on the way and reaching a reconciliation of sorts. Dinah was nowhere to be found during this confrontation. Her absence is commented upon by the Midrash as being connected to the tragic story to come:

"And he got up that night and took his two wives and two maidservants and his eleven sons" (Genesis 32:33). Where was Dinah? [Yaakov] placed her in a box and locked her in. He said, "This evil man (Esav) has a haughty eye -- lest he see her and take her from me."

God said: "You prevented kindness from your brother and as a result you suffered. Because if she had married Esav, she would not have been raped," as it says later (Genesis 34:1) "And Dinah went out." (Breishit Rabba - Vayishlach 77: 9)

The Midrash places blame on Yaakov for hiding Dinah in a box and preventing her from meeting Esav. Yet how can a caring father be faulted for protecting his daughter from someone he considers to be lecherous and violent, capable of murdering his own relatives?

Obviously, Yaakov could not be blamed for protecting his family as best he could. But on another level, the Midrash is pointing out something extraordinary about this girl, and sees Yaakov's locking her in a box as a subconscious act of "preventing kindness," rather than a caring, protective one. It seems to be saying: All of Esav's raw traits could have been tamed and channeled under Dinah's guidance and influence. She, more than anyone, would have been able to do it. Yet you locked her in. You wanted to prevent Dinah from being negatively influenced, but you did not fully appreciate that on the contrary, she could have actually saved Esav from the evil path upon which he was heading.

In Dinah's potential destiny to be married to Esav, it's interesting to note the similarity to her mother, Leah. Leah, we remember, was also fated to marry Esav as the elder daughter of Lavan, and with prayer and tears averted this reality at all costs. Dinah wasn't given the choice of connection to Esav; it was completely prevented by her father. However, it seems that she inherited from her mother the incredible capacity to overwhelm evil -- to the extent that she could have been a match for the powerful negative of Esav, transforming and directing him to positive channels.

The Rape

Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Yaakov, went out to see the girls of the land. Shechem, the son of Chamor, the Hivite, saw her, took her, lay with her and violated her. His soul became attached to Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov, and he loved the girl and he spoke to her heart. (Genesis 34:1-3)



The Torah mentions that Dinah went to check out the girls of the land, after coming to live in a new place, a bustling city, for the first time. Shechem, the prince of the land, saw her, kidnapped her and raped her (seemingly without much investigation as to her identity). Afterwards, something odd happened. His soul became attached to her and he wanted to have a conversation with her, to apologize for what he did.

"Going Out"

"Dinah, the daughter of Leah... went out" -- and not the daughter of Yaakov. The text connects [Dinah] to her mother to teach: Just as Leah was a "going out" person, so too [Dinah] was a "going out" person, as it says: "And Leah went out to greet him" (Genesis 30:16). Like mother, like daughter. (Midrash Tanchuma - Vayishlach 7)

The Midrash points out that just as Leah possessed a certain forwardness and assertiveness, Dinah also liked to "go out." Is there something wrong with going out? Is there an undercurrent of blame of the victim here? Did Dinah do anything to provoke these unwanted attentions from Shechem? Should women stay inside if they know what's good for them? What can we learn regarding our own lives today, in modern society?

It's important to note that in the above (apparently critical) Midrash, Leah's assertiveness is praised by our Sages in another context as being positive, resulting in the birth of a righteous child with outstanding descendants. So on the surface, it doesn't seem to be teaching women not to behave in an outgoing manner.

Abarbanel (a Spanish commentator in the 15th century) sees the textual connection between Dinah and Leah as showing the positive nature of her behavior and the innocent intentions it exhibited:

This [rape] did not happen to Dinah because she was a girl who liked to "hang out"; she was Leah's daughter and [Leah] was the one who stayed home all day whereas Rachel was the outgoing shepherdess... Also from Yaakov's side, he was the "dweller of tents," and if the father is an

internally focused person, how much more so, the daughter. This teaches that [Dinah] didn't go out for wrong reasons, G-d forbid. [She went out] only to see the girls in the land... since there were no other girls except her in Yaakov's house, and she wanted to learn from them... as young girls tend to do. (Abarbanel - Genesis 34:1)

Dinah was a curious young woman who wanted to see the girls of this new country and get a sense of their practices. There was no provocation or lack of modesty; the text clearly states it was "the girls" she was interested in -- not the boys.

"And he saw her" -- don't think she flirted with him, because the text specifies that he just saw her for the first time. "And he took her" forcefully and nobody could save her, since he was the prince of the land. His crime was threefold: (a) He kidnapped her -- this is stealing. (b) He lay with her -- this is violating her, especially since he is uncircumcised. (c) "And he tormented her" -- since it was rape and she didn't consent, and this is violating her personally. (Malbim - Genesis 34:2)

Lured Outside

The commentaries seem quite adamant not to place any blame on Dinah for the behavior of Shechem. Even the "going out" is attributed to Shechem's deviousness:

Yaakov's daughter sat in her tent and would not go outside. What did Shechem, the son of Chamor, do? He brought young ladies outside her tent to play and strum with musical instruments. Dinah went out to watch them play, and he grabbed her and raped her. (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 38)

From this account it seems that Shechem planned his crime, with premeditation. What caused him to become so infatuated as to grab her in the marketplace, rape her, and then become even more attached to her?

If he didn't know about her being the daughter of Yaakov, who was world famous and had a reputation regarding all his sons, he would never have done what he did. (Ohr HaChaim – Genesis 34:2)

It seems that Shechem, the son of Chamor, was a very spoiled prince, used to having anything his heart desired. He believed he deserved everything, that he was all-powerful, and that no gratification need be delayed. As soon as he craved something, his craving was immediately satisfied. When the new family came to town -- consisting of a father with a reputation for being powerful, and blessed with many possessions and grown sons -- this must have irked Shechem. He may have become infatuated with Dinah because of her beauty, but no less so because she was the "daughter of Yaakov." He wanted to overpower Yaakov and crush him so that there would be no question as to who was actually in charge in this town.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch says this was a classic case of the ruling dictator wanting to subdue the weak, friendless Jew-girl. This was what outraged the sons of Yaakov later on and caused them to retaliate with such force and vengeance.

Shechem devised a way for Dinah to be lured outside and she, giving in to the natural curiosity of a young girl in a new environment, fell into the trap. She was immediately kidnapped and raped.

Passive or Active Influence?

Throughout this entire story, Dinah is silent and we do not hear a word from her. She is a completely passive victim of assault.

What makes the story a bit odd is the effect that Dinah seems to have on Shechem after this purely physical experience:

And his soul clung to the soul of the daughter of Yaakov, and he loved her and spoke to her heart. (Genesis 34:3)

The experience changes from one of physical and external, to one with emotional and internal transformation. From this point on, Shechem is in a frenzy of passion, behaving in a rash, almost insane manner to try and win over Dinah's family in order to marry her. He even agrees to have all the men in his city circumcised!

In a bizarre juxtaposition, the Midrash correlates Shechem's feelings for Dinah, with God's feelings for the Jewish people:

Chamor spoke to them, saying: "Shechem, my son, his soul yearns for your daughter..." (Genesis 34:8). Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: With three words of endearment God expressed his love for Israel -- attachment, yearning and desire ... and we learn them all from the story of that evil man: Attachment – "And his soul attached to Dinah." Yearning -- "My son yearns for your daughter." Desire -- "because he desired the daughter of Yaakov." (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 80: 7)

Of all the things one can learn from this Midrash, we notice the positive light with which Shechem's passion (if not he himself) is viewed. It is spiritual in nature. In some ways his feelings represent a spiritual longing to connect to "the daughter of Yaakov" -- the Jewish nation.

We would normally expect that the lustful perpetrator of rape and violence would feel distaste and hatred toward his victim (see the story of Amnon and Tamar, 2-Shmuel 13:11-15). Yet Shechem's act has apparently caused some sort of transformation in this evil, power-hungry man.

It seems that Dinah, even in her utter passivity, had an overwhelming effect on Shechem. This expressed itself through the sexual bond that they shared, albeit without her consent.

The clinging of souls is only possible between people who are on a similar level, although physical attraction is possible between two people of very different [intellectual-psychological] levels and backgrounds... Here, Shechem felt a kinship of souls because she was "the daughter of Yaakov." (Malbim - Genesis 34: 3)

Perhaps Shechem was drawn to the enormous spiritual power latent in this young girl. He may have sensed a treasure-house of greatness, and it appealed to his tyrannical nature. But then, the attraction superseded even this level of relationship, causing him to turn around and channel his selfish energy toward

the spiritual goal of marrying a Jewish girl and essentially converting with his entire city.

Epilogue: Dinah and Yosef

After this experience, and that of the brothers' outrage and retribution upon the male population of the city, the Torah doesn't go into much detail about Dinah's life. However, the Midrash does tell us that she bore a child from this union, a daughter, Osnat, who was given up for adoption. Then, by a curious twist of fate, Osnat ended up in Potiphar's house in Egypt, and eventually married Yosef, her uncle! (Midrash - Yalkut Shimoni 134)

How ironic that the daughter of the extraordinary Dinah -- whose transformative powers could have overcome Esav's evil if given a chance, and who ultimately channeled Shechem's animalistic energies to heights of spirituality -- ended up marrying her uncle Yosef, who in essence should have been the baby born to Leah instead of Dinah!

We see here a strong connection between the souls of Dinah and Yosef. A masculine aspect of Dinah's soul may have stuck with her even after the physical switch of gender. Perhaps she had within her that special spark belonging only to Yosef, who had the power to consume the "straw" which is Esav:

And the house of Yaakov shall be a fire and the house of Yosef a flame and the house of Esav will be straw...

Yaakov said: Once Yosef, the flame, is born, I am ready to leave (Lavan) and face Esav my brother -- because fire can't rule from far without a flame, and only with Yosef can I overcome him. (Rashi – Genesis 30:25)

Yosef was given a unique strength to "rule from afar" over evil and conquer it. In his life we observe his ability to live in Egypt among evil people, resist temptation, maintain his righteousness, and even rise to power and rule over everyone. His particular character trait is called in the mystical writings "Foundation" (*Yesod*) or "righteousness." This unique ability may very well have been shared by Dinah.

The midrashic reference to Dinah's potential as a marriage candidate for Esav and her incredible affect on Shechem, the Canaanite prince, point to the wonderful suitability which must have existed between her daughter Osnat and Yosef, her half-brother.

The sefira (God's character trait manifested in this world) of righteousness -- a deep inner ruling over passions, along with the ability to influence externally "from afar" without becoming affected negatively in the process -- is what Dinah contributed to her daughter. So while Dinah never fully actualizes her potential to influence and overcome evil, the marriage of her progeny is continuity to Dinah's ability to effect change in an extremely powerful way. And with Yosef, this trait became distilled and potent, engendered into the genetic code of the Jewish people, part of our heritage for eternity.