

Can We Be Empowered by Patriarchal Texts?

Alison L Joseph, PhD (LC '01), Director of Digital Projects, The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization



I have long been bothered by the story of Dinah in Genesis 34.¹ This narrative, often referred to as the “Rape of Dinah,” is difficult to read, not only because sexual violence against a young woman is employed as a plot device, but also because I’m not sure why the story is included in the Torah in the first place. My concern with the story is more acute when I read it within our liturgical calendar as just another episode in the Jacob cycle (Gen. 25–35).² Don’t get me wrong, the Torah, and even the book of Genesis, is filled with stories that disturb our modern sensibilities—murder, destruction of the world, near child sacrifice, sibling rivalry. But, unlike those other troubling stories that advance the plot of the overall narrative, it is hard to explain why the story of Dinah is included. It appears to disrupt the narrative flow—at the end of Genesis 33, Jacob and family arrive in Shechem (Gen. 33:18–20). Genesis 35 picks right up where chapter 33 left off, with God telling Jacob to go to Bethel. The story of Dinah seems to have migrated into the Jacob story as an episode of something that happened in Shechem, before they moved on to Bethel.

¹ Alison L. Joseph, “Understanding Genesis 34:2: ‘Innâ,” *Vetus Testamentum* 66:4 (2016): 663–68; “Who is the Victim in the Dinah Story?,” *TheTorah.com*, November 30, 2017, <http://thetorah.com/who-is-the-victim-in-the-dinah-story/>; “‘Is Dinah Raped?’ Isn’t the Right Question: Genesis 34 and Feminist Historiography,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures, Gendered Historiography: Theoretical Considerations and Case Studies*, 19:4 (2019): 27–37; “Redaction as Reception: Genesis 34 as Case Study,” in *Reading Other Peoples’ Texts: Social Identity and the Reception of Authoritative Traditions*, ed. Ken S. Brown, Alison L. Joseph, and Brennan Breed (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 83–101.

² Michael Fishbane, “Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19–35:22),” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (July 1, 1975): 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.18647/734/JJS-1975>.

In this story, Dinah, the only mentioned daughter of Jacob, goes out among the women of the land. A local prince, Shechem, sees her and has sex with her. Following their sexual union, Shechem urges his father, Hamor, to enter into negotiations with Jacob so that he can marry Dinah. Deceitfully, Dinah’s brothers agree to Hamor’s proposal that Shechem and Dinah marry and that the family will continue to intermarry with the Shechemites. They claim, however, that they can only give their sister to a circumcised man. Hamor and Shechem agree and have all the male Shechemites circumcised, including themselves. While they recover, Simeon and Levi massacre the town. The chapter ends with Jacob complaining to his sons that they have jeopardized their clan’s safety, while the sons counter with the accusation that Jacob has not adequately responded to Shechem’s act.

And yet, Dinah is barely present in this narrative. She never speaks and acts only once when she goes out, in 34:1. Thereafter, she is referred to only as an object. After the brothers appear, she is only mentioned by name one time between verses 6 and 25. Beyond Genesis 34, she is something less than a character. She is reported as the last of the children born to Leah, but no other information is given beyond her name. In contrast, the naming of her brothers includes explanations of the meanings of their names. From the beginning, she seems to be an afterthought. After chapter 34, she is only mentioned again in the genealogy in Genesis 46:15.

At first glance, the story appears to be one in which the brothers avenge the honor of their sister, especially because their father’s response is tepid at best. The men in the story—Jacob, her brothers, Shechem, and Hamor—move around her, and act for and against Dinah, rendering her more of a prop than a character. But what is she propping

up? The brothers' actions, using the sign of the covenant as an excuse and a weapon (the command of circumcision given to Abraham not 20 chapters ago) to massacre the men of the entire town, are extreme. But they had an alternative. They could have conceded to Shechem's request and married their sister to him, supported by the ancient social convention that allowed for a restoration of a virgin's honor (see Deut. 22:28–29). The rejection of Shechem demonstrates that the brothers were not concerned with their sister and her honor, but rather with the implications of the marriage alliance. Hamor suggests (and his men agree) that they intermarry, become as one people, share their land, property, and livestock. In doing so, he offers to erase any differences between the two peoples, even physical ones (i.e., circumcision). In the brothers' minds, the offense is his suggestion of intermarriage, rather than Shechem's sex with Dinah. The brothers reject the alliance and see the threat to their uniqueness as a people as a declaration of war or worse, as trying to turn them toward idol worship.³ Dinah and what happens to her are a narrative excuse to make this point.

I'm not sure that I can answer the question of why this story is included among the Genesis narratives. Nevertheless, I offer the following proposal for how we might read it productively. We should not hold up the brothers as heroes, despite the readings offered by some Second Temple literature, which grant Simeon and Levi divine and eternal rewards (*Testament of Levi*, *Jubilees* 30), while indicting Jacob for not protecting his family and willingness to exchange his daughter for financial gain. This is the accusation of the text in the brothers' closing words, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (Gen. 34:31). We should not devalue the story by saying "that's the way it was back then" (by then I mean the context depicted in the narrative and the historical context of composition), accepting that the story of Dinah was set in a historical context in which women were regarded frequently as objects and did not have their own sexual autonomy. "That's the way it was back

then" does not need to be apologetic but instead can be empowering. We can highlight where we can identify patriarchy in the text—in a narrative that does not care about the feelings and trauma of its daughter, who is silenced by the men around her and the text itself. Reading this story publicly each year, even if it challenges us to wonder why it is included, reminds us that the worlds described in the Torah are not necessarily the worlds that we want to inhabit. Instead, we should strive to inhabit a world in which we listen to the voices of victims, in which we deal honestly, and in which we use our identity with pride and do not wield it as a weapon of destruction.

³ Deut 20:14–18; 21:10–14; cf. Num 31.