

Remember Dinah: Listen to Women

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One of the most horrifying phenomena in the aftermath of October 7 is the attempt to erase and deny the brutal sexual violence that Hamas perpetrated that day against Israeli women and girls. This has even been true of international women's rights groups whose mission is to document sexual violence as a weapon of war. To ignore the violence perpetrated against Israeli women is to erase their experience.

Dinah's story is often overlooked in a parashah rich with other narratives that are easier and more pleasant to explore. But this is not a time to shy away from difficult stories or avoid stories of sexual violence. Shabbat Vayishlah can be an opportunity for our communities to center the stories of women and girls in their fullness and explore the ways our communities can become communities of support.

Dinah is a singular character in Genesis. The only named daughter born to Jacob, her existence is something of a paradox in the Torah. Her whole story is contained in two verses. Far more attention is given to the story of her brothers' avenging of her rape than the story of the rape itself. We know nothing of Dinah's story before or after. Dinah herself never speaks.

וַתֵּצֵא דִּינָה בִּתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאֶרֶץ:

Now Dinah, the **daughter of Leah, who she bore to Jacob**, went out to visit the daughters of the land. (Gen. 34:1)

Why is she named in this way? Rashi, citing several midrashim in Bereishit Rabbah, comments that this is to emphasize that she has inherited an undesirable characteristic of Leah's. Like her, Dinah is called a "*yatzanit*—one who likes to go out," since Leah went out to

meet Jacob to seduce him with the mandrakes (Gen. 30:16). This is in contrast to the women in Jacob's family of origin, Sarah and Rebecca, who traditionally stayed in their tents. Ramban explains the reference to Jacob is to draw the connection to Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, who will avenge her. In these explanations, Dinah is blamed for her rape, as women often are. The focus is then diverted to her brothers' vengeance; their interpretation of what happened to her, and their decision of how to react. We never hear from Dinah again.

In her introduction to *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*, Tamar Kadari elucidates the limitations of midrashim written by men in a time when women's lives and women's agency were understood through a very narrow lens. She writes that these perspectives express "mistaken understandings of God's will and intentions . . . This is not what God truly wants." In these cases, we may need to depart from classical rabbinic literature and create new interpretations.

How do we discern God in Dinah's story? We can start by not blaming her. As Noya Sagiv notes in her commentary in *Dabri Torah: Israeli Women Interpret the Torah*, Abravanel is one of the only classical voices who comes to Dinah's defense, claiming that the comparison to Leah is actually meant as praise. In her midrash in *Dirshuni*, Rivkah Lubitch offers a few alternative readings. If it is Dinah's "going out" which likens her to Leah, Lubitch suggests it is referring to going out for an act of mitzvah (proactively seeking procreation with Jacob). Going out also makes her like her father (Gen. 28:10) who went out on account of his brother, Esau; likewise, she went out "on account of her brothers, to find a place for herself. Dinah, Lubitch writes, knew her place wasn't with her brothers, "and went out to see the

daughters of the land. As it says, ‘Either friendship or death.’” Dinah was isolated, the only sister among brothers, and went out seeking friendship among the women of the land.

Lubitch also expounds on Dinah’s silence:

Dinah was a quiet person and had no voice. Why to such an extent? Because the members of her household did not listen to her and didn’t engage her in conversation, as the sages said, “Do not engage in excessive conversation with a woman.” And that is why she went out to see the daughters of the land.

Dinah was like a mute, as it says, *And Dinah went out . . . to see*. She went out to see and not to hear. What’s more, it says, *he bedded her and abused her* and it does not say “and Dinah cried out.” Is it conceivable that she did not? But it’s as if she was mute, out of the pain and the shame she hushed up and fell silent.

Perhaps this is one more way that Dinah took after her father. As Sagiv asks, “How is it possible that Dinah’s father, Jacob, was silent [after she was raped]?”

Many of the women and girls who were subjected to terrible sexual violence on October 7 have no voices—they were murdered or kidnapped or are suffering from unimaginable trauma. Those in the international community who would deny the sexual violence inflicted with such brutality on that day are willfully averting their eyes to further their own agenda at the expense of Israeli women.

There is another group of Israeli women who, like Dinah, saw and were not listened to: the *tatzpaniyot*, the spotters. For months before October 7 these young women soldiers, whose job it was to constantly survey the border with Gaza, repeatedly reported deeply concerning observations that they asserted were Hamas training for incursions against Israel. They were ignored and overlooked. And they paid some of the highest prices on October 7. Listening to their brave and insistent voices will necessitate an important

reckoning on the climate for women in the Israeli Army, and on the Army’s state of preparedness before that terrible day.

All too often, women are blamed, silenced, and forgotten. Earlier in the parashah, after their dramatic reunion, Jacob says to Esau that seeing his face “is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10). Blaming Dinah for her rape, or obscuring her story, conceals the face of God. As painful and uncomfortable as the story of Dinah is, we must not ignore it or shy away from it. We must grapple with that text, and what it teaches us about the rabbinic understanding (or misunderstanding) of women’s experience and learn how we must repair what is damaged and missing. We must recognize that we see more of the story and indeed more of the face of God when we see every member of our community. In the name of Dinah, as Israeli women give testimony, we must listen, we must recount their stories, and we must amplify their voices.