**PARASHAT VA-YISHLACH**

(Year 2 of the triennial cycle)

Bereshit. 34:1 - 35:15

*Eitz Hayim*, 206-213; Hertz, 127-130; Plaut, 226-244

I do not usually start my divrai Torah with an apology, but today I must do so. I asked specifically for this parashah because it has always bothered me, but I focus on chapter 34, which appears in the second year of the triennial cycle of readings, and we are still in the first year. I suppose I could have given my d’var a year from now, but even Susan Kriger’s charts linking names to tasks do not extend that far into 2020.

So, to jump right into the text, what is it that bothers me? My concerns start from words found even in modern chumashim, such as Plaut and *Eitz Hayim*, that refer to the ***rape*** of Dinah, something for which I find little evidence. Parashat Va-Yishlach does begin with the statement that Dinah “went out to visit the daughters of the land.”[[1]](#footnote-1) (Hertz at 127 notes that a Samaritan text translates “to visit” as “to see and be seen.”) It does not take any imagination to think that this was an inadvisable step, and some chumashim blame Jacob for letting her out alone. I will come back to that point in a moment. However, we must accept that it happened, and that during the time among the girls in a Canaanite community led by a man named Hamor, she came to the attention of Hamor’s son Schechem, and they had sexual intercourse.

The text is pretty strong here, with use of the verb 'קח (yakach), but it is only the English text that adds the words, “by force,” which is a possible emphasis but not a necessary one. Hertz says that the verb only implies “by force” (127, note to v. 2). *Eitz Hayim* disagrees with me (206, end of note to verse 2), so let’s follow the text further. The text goes on to say that Schechem was “strongly drawn” to Dinah, and urges his father to make arrangements for him to marry her. Having conferred with my wife Toby, who has worked for years on problems related to male violence against women, I can assert that it is highly unlikely for sexual relationships to shift quickly from rape to a desired marriage. More likely is what is described much later in history when King David’s son Amnon was infatuated with his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-15), schemed to rape her, and then almost immediately afterwards hated her.

Let’s go back in the story to learn more about Dinah. She was Leah’s last child and Jacob’s only daughter. Her birth is notable mainly for its absence of commentary; not a word is said about the conception or about the choice of her name. With that start, it is but small inference to suggest that Dinah was a neglected child—not deprived of the necessities of life, but certainly not respected as were her brothers. However, in all probability, as with other young women of her time, and of ours, she was held under adult supervision within rulings set by men. No wonder then that, presumably as a teenager, she snuck away and went out to visit girls, who were her only contemporaries, living in a nearby Canaanite village. While there she meets—maybe is encouraged to meet this handsome young man, loses any caution she might have had, and ends up in bed with him. The text does say that they lay together.

Yes, these thoughts include a lot of conjecture, but they do not stray far from the text. If it were only the alleged rape that bothered me about this text, that would be bad enough, but the story gets worse. After learning about what happened, and about the proposal of marriage, two of Leah’s sons (hence, Dinah’s full brothers), Simeon and Levi, take it upon themselves to avenge what they see as an insult to their family honour. Briefly, when Hamor is talking with Jacob to suggest that the two groups could merge, they deceive him by indicating that merger is possible, but only if all men of the village—not just Shechem—are circumcised. (I am putting to one side that the text clearly shows that Hamor himself was engaged in deception.) Hamor agrees to this condition, and shortly thereafter the operations are carried out. While the men are still recovering, Simeon and Levi make a surprise attack and kill every one of them, an action that Hertz describes as “treacherous and godless” (128). Plaut (note to v. 25 on 228) says that they probably attacked with their personal forces, which makes sense given how many men they had to kill. The wording in Eitz Hayim is explicit (34:26): “They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, and took Dinah out of Schechem’s house and went away.” Note that nothing in the text blames Dinah for going for the visit or for its aftermath, nor does anything suggest that Dinah fled into the arms of her brothers and asked to be rescued. Moreover, Simeon and Levi must have boasted (more conjecture here) to the rest of Jacob’s sons, who then raided the village, which was defenseless, and captured all the “flocks and herds and asses . . . all their children and their wives, all that was in the houses, they took as captives and booty”(34:27-29). I don’t have to conjecture at all to know what happened to those women and children.

I must digress here to respond to a comment in a number of chumashim to the effect that earlier text says that marriage between Israelites and Canaanites was forbidden (Ber. 24:3 and 24:37). That is not quite true; the text does indicate that Israelite men should not to marry Canaanite women. It is silent about whether Israelite women can marry Canaanite men. It is a matter of interpretation whether those earlier texts should be taken broadly (applies to men and women equally) or narrowly. (only to men).

What happens next in the text? In a word, nothing! Jacob reproaches his sons because their precipitous acts have given him a bad name, and he worries that they now risk revenge attacks from other Canaanite groups. Jacob’s deathbed blessings to most of his sons show that he stays angry at Simeon and Levi by cursing rather than blessing them (Ber 49:5-7). Simeon and Levi end Chapter 34, still self-righteous, by responding to Jacob with the words, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

Chapter 35 opens with God talking to Jacob about moving to Bethel. Perhaps this was an evasive action to avoid a revenge attack, but nothing in the text so indicates. And surely wise old Jacob did not need God to know that it was time to move.

If anything, the absence of any aftermath raises a different question in my mind: Why does Chapter 34, which Hertz describes as, “a tale of dishonour, wild revenge, and indiscriminate slaughter,” appear in our Torah at all. The later history of the Israelites does nothing to shame the tribes of Simeon and Levi. If anything, life becomes better for them. True, Jacob’s deathbed curse that they shall end up without land does come true, but without serious consequence. Simeon eventually merges with Judah, which is the strongest and longest lived of all the tribes. And Levi of course became the source for the priesthood, which had no land of its own. Surely it would have been better for them to have gone into the future without a stain on their records, as reported in Chapter 34.

I have four answers to my own question as to why Chapter 34 was retained in the Torah. First, as with other parts of the text that are difficult to accept, they provide back-handed evidence that the words we read today reflect events that really occurred three or four millennia in the past. Why would a community as literate and as self-aware as the Jews retain such embarrassing material if it was false?

A second answer is given by Plaut (229). This chapter is part of the history of Jacob. When young, he used deceit to get ahead, and now his children are use deceit—Dinal, Simeon and Levi in this parashah; Judah, Reuben and Joseph in later parashiot.

A third answer comes from bits of later commentary. After Chapter 34, Dinah is never again mentioned in the Torah, and she joins many Biblical women in obscurity. One feels that she was lucky at least to have a name. However, maybe she was not completely forgotten. In a loose translation, Genesis 46:8-10 says:

When Jacob's family prepares to descend to Egypt, the Torah lists the 70 family members who went down together. Simeon's children include "Saul, the son of a Canaanite woman." Rashi suggested that this Saul was Dinah's son by Schechem.

The phrase “Canaanite woman” does not fit the text but perhaps it is a sarcastic.. reference to Dinah.

Finally, my favorite answer comes from a modern midrash. Dinah is the heroine of Anita Diamant’s 1997 novel, *The Red Tent* (Wyatt Books for St. Martin’s Press, 321 pp), which is her entirely fictional autobiography. (Before going on, I should note that, though *The Red Tent* is Diamant’s best known work, and, though she has written a nonfiction book entitled *Living a Jewish* Life, many scholars criticize her for historical or biblical inaccuracies.) Back to the novel as written, it seems that Dinah loved Shechem and was happy to marry him. She is horrified by her brothers’ murder of him and their destruction of the Canaanite community. She flees to Egypt where she becomes a highly respected midwife. Somewhat later, she gives birth to a daughter named Asenath. Most importantly, not in the novel but according to some commentaries, the story goes that Asenath, who is unequivocally Jewish, marries Joseph, who is now vizier of Egypt, and therefore preserves the heredity and the religion of Jacob. Lest you think that this is just tidying up the genealogy, note how many times the siddur refers to us as children of Jacob, or from the house of Jacob, notably in the 4th blessing of every Amidah, so perhaps it is Dinah and Asenath who preserved those Jewish genes that are found in all of us.

Shabbat shalom,

1. Quotations are all from *Eitz Hayim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)