

I'm going to talk about a deeply violent and troubling episode that occurs in this week's Torah portion, Vayishlach. If you've experienced abuse or violence firsthand and need this not to be a moment when you're thinking about it, do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

Specifically, I want us to look at the story of the rape of Dina and what follows there. At the beginning of Chapter 34 of Genesis, Jacob has just acquired land around Shechem, present day Nablus, and his only daughter, Dina, goes out walking in the land. I'll start by quoting the text as plainly as possible:

Genesis 34:2-4 states: "Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and violated her. Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, "Get me this girl as a wife."

I referred to this as "the rape of Dina," despite some beautiful present-day midrashim, most famously Anita Diamant's book, *The Red Tent*, that imagine Dina as consensually eloping with Shechem. While I appreciate the ways that those stories attempt to claim some agency for Dina, I actually object to that reading for two reasons. The first is simply based in the text: The text refers to her as a נערה, a teenage girl, and Shechem himself calls her a ילדה, a little girl.¹ She is a young daughter of immigrants, he a prince of the city. By our contemporary standards, we would say that true consent isn't possible in the most positive reading of the story, especially given the rapidity of the verbs ascribed to Shechem: he took her, he laid with her, he violated her.

But the second reason I object to reading Dina as enthusiastically consenting is what it does to the rest of the story, how it flattens the moral problematics of what happens next. Some of you may be familiar, but for those of you who aren't, I'll summarize:

¹ Thanks to Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein, whom I will quote extensively below, for pointing out this distinction in his 2020 dvar Torah, at <https://avodah.net/theres-a-riot-goin-on-talking-about-violence-and-power-devar-torah-for-parashat-vayishlah/>

Jacob hears of the deed and is troubled but silent. Hamor approaches Jacob and his sons and asks for Dina as a wife for Shechem, inviting Jacob's family to settle permanently in the region and intermarry with them. Jacob's sons pretend to agree but insist on universal male circumcision as a condition. Hamor persuades all of the townsmen to circumcise themselves, by promising them wealth from absorbing Jacob's herds. On the third day, when they are recovering, Shimon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, attack the town, killing every adult male, and then as verse 26 says, "They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away." All of the brothers then plunder the town, and Jacob scolds them for bringing trouble upon him from the neighboring cities. Shimon and Levi have the last word in the Torah portion, saying, "Shall our sister be treated like a whore?" And the chapter ends with that question, hanging. Yuck, yuck. Yuck all around.

The thing is, if we read the story Anita Diamant style, we have a tragic story in which Dina and Shechem are the sweet young lovers, and Dina's brothers are the evil, violent patriarchal barbarians who care not at all for their sister's heart but only for their own honor, and will kill to avenge that honor. Shechem, good guy. Jacob's sons – our ancestors – bad guys.

But what happens if we allow ourselves the horror of receiving the text as it is plainly written, as a tale of rape and abduction? Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein notes that even though Torah is often patriarchal and misogynistic, when female characters are named, they usually get to speak. Dinah doesn't speak throughout this narrative, and Rabbi Bernstein suggests, "Dinah's silence is thematic. In verse 26, at the end of the massacre, we read that Shim'on and Levi took Dinah out of Shechem's house, which tells us that throughout that long negotiation, for this whole time, since the assault, Dinah has been held captive in the house. How does that affect your assessment of the massacre?"

Of the negotiations between Hamor, Shechem, and Jacob's son's Rabbi Bernstein continues,

“The Governor’s civility masks the brutal violence he is committing at that very moment, talking of coming together in harmony, to the family of the captive currently trapped in his house. The negotiations are a farce; the Governor is making Ya’akov ‘an offer he can’t refuse’. People in power can hide, sanitize, or justify their violence, controlling the public narrative along the way. Make no mistake, though; it is violence.”

What we have here, if we read it according to the plain text, is an *impossible moral dilemma*. Couldn’t Shimon and Levi have successfully launched a raid, killed Hamor and Shechem, and gotten their sister out without first killing their followers? we might ask. . . Could they? Presumably, they didn’t think so.

I can understand why people prefer to read the simple tale of star-crossed lovers. Even though it is uncomfortable to imagine our ancestors as doing an unequivocally evil thing, we still have the relief of a tidy story, of knowing what they *should have* done. That might be more comfortable than imagining our ancestors in an impossible moral dilemma.

What violence are we willing to enact in order to restore our family members who have been abducted to safety? The Torah text itself is oddly morally ambivalent about Shimon and Levi’s behavior. Jacob curses them and their rage, not only in this parasha, but also at the end of his life. Yaakov, whose name is also Israel, who is us, condemns his sons for their violence – not only because of it being intrinsically wrong, but because of the damage it does to his reputation and relationships – the “bad optics” of it, if you will. But he has no answer for Shimon and Levi, who get the last word in the story.

And we squirm as we read about Shimon and Levi’s slaughter, on the very Shabbat that Israel has resumed strikes against Hamas for continuing to hold 140 captives. In the process, Israel is killing thousands of innocent Palestinians. I have heard various pundits claim that there are no innocent Palestinians, they elected Hamas.

There are commentators who claim that no one in Shechem was innocent, they allowed their leaders to rape and abduct a young girl. But I think those claims let us off the hook too easily.

It is tempting and compelling to read Dina as a metaphor for the Israeli captives in Gaza, and to justify any violence to free them. Should we expect Israelis to care about the cost in Palestinian blood to free their beloved family members?

But look at the story from a slightly different angle: If we justify violence because no other alternative works to liberate *our* captives, a step beyond that falls into the argument being made to justify Hamas actions as “liberation by any means necessary.”

Because one could also read Dina as a metaphor for the *Palestinian* plight. There are, according to Israeli sources, over 4,000 Palestinian prisoners currently imprisoned in Israeli jails without trials.² Should we expect a Palestinian mother who has a child in Israeli captivity to care about the cost in blood, if holding an Israeli hostage can free her child?

Once the cycle of violence begins, it becomes easy to justify continuing it, and vastly difficult to imagine alternatives to it.

The story ends not with any statement of moral certainty, but with a question. If not violence, what is to be done?

It cannot be a rhetorical question.

² See <https://www.972mag.com/palestinian-prisoners-israeli-hostages-exchange/>