

Where is Dinah? Parenting, Protection, Predation

The Torah tells us about Yaakov's preparations for the encounter with his brother:

ויקח את שתי נשיו ואת שתי שפחותיו ואת אחד עשר ילדיו

Jacob took his two wives, two maid-servants, and eleven children.

As a matter of fact, Yaakov had twelve children: Reuven, Shimon, Levy, Yehudah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Yisakhar, Zevulun, Dinah, and Yosef. Though they are not listed, it is obvious who was not counted: Dinah. Women are usually not mentioned in the Torah's censuses or genealogical lists, and when they are, it is a source of endless speculations. The lesser significance of Dinah within the family circle is evident from the way she was named. In chapters 29 and 30 Leah makes a statement with each name she gives her sons, and even the sons of the maid-servant who was used as a surrogate mother. Her explanations revolve around the recognition she will get from her husband, from other women, or her own joy. Reuven: God saw my misery; Shimon: God heard that I am not loved; Levy: My husband will now choose me over Rachel; Yehudah: I truly have to thank God; Gad: Good luck befell me; Asher: I am joyous, women will praise me; Yisakhar: I was rewarded for giving my maid-servant to my husband; Zevulun: My husband will dwell with me in a palace because I have given him six sons (Gad and Asher were surrogate sons). Then, finally, a baby girl is born, but her name is not explained or celebrated. Leah doesn't say that her husband will be thrilled with having seven children, but simply calls her Dinah.

The Midrash, which also assumes that Dinah is the one omitted, comes up with a different explanation for the number eleven:

ואת אחד עשר ילדיו - ודינה היכן היתה? נתנה בתיבה ונעל בפניה שלא יתן בה עשו עיניו.

And his eleven children – and where was Dinah? He hid her in a trunk and locked her, so Esau will not lay his eyes on her.

Rashi quotes this Midrash, and I fear that some of our children learn it in school. There is no hint to that ludicrous idea in the Torah, and it portrays Yaakov in a negative light. Had he wanted to

hide Dinah from whom he thought would be a sexual predator, he could have done so without locking her up. Putting a woman in a trunk and locking her is not protection but imprisonment, and it reminds us of grim tales, from Rapunzel to Bluebeard¹. In defense of that segment of the Midrash we have to say that it is not meant to be taken literally. The phrase about eleven children is mentioned when Yaakov crosses the river, and he obviously did not leave Dinah on the other side. The reference to eleven children probably excludes Dinah, not because she was locked in a box, but rather because she is a woman.

I believe that the Midrash is using Jacob as a metaphor to parents who deny their children choices because they fear for them, leading to disastrous consequences. Yaakov is so protective that he limits his daughter's knowledge and worldview. Instead of teaching her of possible dangers and how to avoid them on her own, he locks her out of the world. Esau might represent here the lure of foreign culture, the Midrash suggests that parents should provide their children with the means to deal with that culture and appreciate their own, instead of locking them away. Overprotective parents want to shelter their kids forever. They lock them in a physical or conceptual trunk and take the keys with them, but sooner or later, they will be exposed to the real world, and they will have no immunization system.

Though I can search for a message in the first segment of the Midrash, the second, also quoted by Rashi, is unforgivable:

ולכך נענש יעקב שמנעה מאחיו שמא תחזירנו למוטב, ונפלה ביד שכם!

Because Jacob prevented his brother from meeting her, not seeing that she could have caused Esau to repent, he was punished, and she fell victim to Shechem!

Before we continue reading, we utter a silent prayer, especially in light of the horrible stories about sexual harassment exposed daily, that no one blamed Dinah for what happened. Please tell us that no one said that she was provocative or inviting or that she should not have been out in the streets. After all, many women kept quiet for years because of the same and because they knew that they can easily be painted as predator and not prey, perpetrators and not victims.

But we will have to admit, reluctantly, that this is exactly what the Midrash does:

דינה, כשהיו אביה ואחיה יושבין בבית המדרש יצאה לראות בבנות הארץ, גרמה לעצמה שיבא עליה שכם בן חמור

While Dinah's father and brothers were sitting in the Beit HaMidrash, she went out to meet the local girls, and caused herself to be violated.

They were not in Beit HaMidrash, they were in the field, and as the following chapters shows, there were many pagan items in their possession. But the Midrash chooses to describe a deviate

young woman who abandons the Torah-steeped environment of her home to wander the streets, and sort of blurts at her: “Don’t complain! you deserve it”.

Let us return now to the previous segment. The one about Yaakov’s punishment. Again, Dinah is perceived as a property of her father and not as an intelligent, independent woman. Her father’s punishment for hiding her is that she is raped? She is the one suffering, she is the one traumatized for life, she is blamed for being assaulted, and you tell me that that is his punishment?

To conclude, we can draw a message from the first part of the Midrash, a message which appeals to all parents who want to censor what their kids read, hear, or know. This is a practice which is common in orthodox families, and often enforced by schools or tightknit communities. The Midrash warns parents, educators, and religious leaders that locking people away, or locking the world away from them, could lead to disastrous results.

The second and third segments, however, represent a worldview which we must eschew. This is where we follow the rule coined by Rav Shemuel b. Hophni Gaon (~940-1010): Of that Midrashic material, we accept only that which makes sense, and we reject all the rest.

In cases such as that of Dinah, we should examine and solve the problem at its core, and never blame the victim.

Shabbat Shalom

¹ This and other motives in folktales and myths are discussed in depth in *Women Who Run with Wolves*, by Clarissa Pincola Estes.