HEBREW SEMINARY
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Her Voice and Her Silence: Vayyishlach 5787

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Note: This week's Torah commentary contains references to sexual violence.

Dinah goes out.

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָהׇ בַּת־לֵאָה

"Dinah, Leah's daughter, went out" (Genesis 34:1.)

She goes to see the daughters of the land. This is her only initiative recorded in the chapter. From the following verse and on, men take possession of her body, then of her story.

Our next verse tells us of Shechem the son of Chamor: "וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ וַיְעַנֶּהָ" ("He took her, lied with her, and violated her"). The root of the word וַיְעַנֶּהָ (*vay'anneha*, translated as "violated her") does not exclusively denote rape; the entire scene warrants that reading. In her 2007 article in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* regarding our passage, Dr. Yael Shemesh challenges interpretations that recast rape as seduction or marriage by abduction. Shechem's subsequent love changes nothing; his desire cannot establish Dinah's consent.

Responding to our opening verse, the French commentator Rashi (1028–1105) calls Leah a יְצָאנִית (*yatz'anit*, a "woman who goes out [frequently]"), associating her conduct with Dinah's. "כְּאִמָּהּ כְּבִתָּהּ"

("like mother, like daughter"), he remarks. In the ancient rabbinic anthology Bereshit Rabbah 80:1, Yosei Me'ona'a describes Leah as emerging adorned like a prostitute. Presumably his words come from a belief that going women's being out and about at all led to sexual sins. It is in this spirit that Rashi (1:28) states, "שֶׁהַזָּכָר כּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת הַנְּקֵבָה, שֶׁלֹּא תְּהֵא יַצָּאנִית" ("the male subdues the female so that she does not become a woman who goes out"). Bereshit Rabbah 8:12 invokes Dinah to justify restricting women's movements—"שֶׁכָּל אִשָּׁה שֶׁיּוֹצְאָה לַשּׁוּק סוֹפָהּ לְהִכָּשֵׁל" ("for every woman who goes out to the marketplace will ultimately stumble"). Rape is thus recast as a woman's failure. The violence men inflict becomes the justification for the restrictions they impose. Modern readers should reject interpretations of our passage though that turn the man's crime into a lesson in proper conduct for women.

Commenting on Genesis 32:23, Rashi narrates that Jacob concealed Dinah in a chest to keep her from Esau—yet she evidently escaped. "וּלְכָךְ נֶעֱנַשׁ יַעֲקֹב" ("Jacob was therefore punished"), Rashi explains. From such an angle, her rape is viewed as a punishment for depriving Esau of a wife who might reform him. Yet, from any reality that views women as independent beings, it is inconceivable that divine justice would punish a father with the violation of his daughter's body; moreover, Dinah has no obligation to improve Esau's repentance.

After Dinah's rape, the Chamor negotiates a marriage between Dinah and Shechem. Shechem offers payment, and the brothers discuss circumcision. The narrative records no consultation with Dinah. Her silence acquires political significance precisely because the men negotiating her future claim the authority to decide what will become of her. When the brothers in Genesis 34:31 ask "הַכְזוֹנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־אֲחוֹתֵנוּ"

("Should our sister be treated like a prostitute?"), the brothers angst over their family honor. When the brothers in Genesis 34:26 had rescued Dinah from her aggressor, they did not necessarily delegate any agency to her.

One tradition in Bereshit Rabbah 80:11 attributes to Dinah words spoken by Tamar several centuries later in II Samuel 13:13: "וַאֲנִי אָנָה אוֹלִיךְ אֶת־חֶרְפָּתִי" ("And I, where shall I carry my shame?"). Simeon, according to this rabbinic myth, promises to marry Dinah, his sister—allowing the family to doctor any external image of disgrace.

In our communities, support for women who have suffered assault must never be subordinate to the reputation of a leader, teacher, or institution. We must guarantee their safety without demanding testimony, forgiveness, or reconciliation. Their voices belong to them, and so does their silence. Dinah's silence is not an invitation to speak for her. We do not know what she would have said. It is not ours to decide.

Let us reread the opening verse without following it with a warning addressed to girls. May our daughters go out, study, love and meet others, without their freedom ever being held against them. Dinah goes out. May she be free to go out again.

All commentaries on the Book of Genesis in this Jewish year have been dedicated by Barbara and Art Hoffman to the memory of Carolyn J. Hoffman.