

And Dinah went out: restoring the Voice of the Silenced

A Christian Perspective by Ursula Rudnick

"And Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne unto Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land." (Genesis 34:1). This is how a tragedy begins. From this verse, a genocide was conceived, and from this saying, a tribe's identity was erased, Dinah's tribe; from this opening, a long- time rivalry descended. What is it in this seemingly simple verse that involved so much pain and suffering?

Let us look at the opening of the verse:

"And Dinah... went out" – why did she go out? Why didn't she stay in Jacob's camp? Why did she give up the security of her life at home? The secret of the disaster is in the autonomous going out of the daughter. In another place in the Bible there is a detailed description of the superior qualities of a "woman of valor" (Proverbs 31:10-30), she has many qualities but they are mostly regarding the woman's traditional duties at home and in her nearby surroundings. Dinah crosses the boundaries; she is a woman who chooses to go out. The one who went out to "see" ended up "being seen", and this being seen ended in disaster; why did Dinah go out? Here is an unexpected midrashic interpretation:

"And afterwards she bore a daughter, and called her name Dinah" (Genesis 30:21). What is meant by 'afterwards'? Rav said: After Leah had passed judgment on herself, saying, 'Twelve tribes are destined to issue from Jacob. Six have issued from me and four from the handmaids, making ten. If this child will be a male, my sister Rachel will not be equal to one of the handmaids'. Forthwith the child was turned to a girl, as it says, And she called her name Dinah" (Talmud Bavli, Berakhot, 60a)

Here we see that Dinah was supposed to be a son, and may be this is the reason she had a boy's character and a tendency to go out. A woman is not supposed to ask for wide open space. It seems that she was free to go out but her going out had a crucial result.

"Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne unto Jacob". Dinah is not called Dinah the daughter of Leah and Jacob or the daughter of Jacob, as the sons are. Rashi, followed in the footsteps of Hazal, the Rabbis, and explained that she

was called the daughter of Leah because, like her mother, she went out, as it is written "and Leah went out" (to meet Jacob, Genesis 30:16) and about her it was said "like mother like daughter".

"To see the daughters of the land". Dinah did not go out to help the tribe with its work, nor to herd her father's sheep (as did her aunt when she met Jacob ;) she did not even go out to pick flowers with the daughters of the family. She went out to see the daughters of the land, the strange local girls, the daughters of Shechem. Is this going out of Dinah an act of self-determination? Is it an act of rebellion? Or maybe it is an innocent act with no ulterior motive or intention. Any way, this intercultural meeting is curious, dangerous and worrying.

According to the Midrash, Dinah was supposed to be a male, but in fact she was apparently a good- looking young woman (or girl). Now the story develops fast: "And Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her; and he took her, and lay with her, and humbled her" (Genesis 34:2). This is what happens to a girl who leaves the security of her tribal tents and goes out, to a strange and unknown public place. This is the realization of the threat (in fact just the beginning of it). Generations of preachers used this event in order to threaten girls not to go out of their homes and to teach them the proper place for a woman. This event is interpreted as Dinah's punishment for going out, and as a punishment to every woman who behaves like her.

After this, Shechem falls in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. A delegation of honored people from Shechem headed by Hamor, the president and Shechem's father, comes to ask Dinah's father for her hand in marriage. They offer a high bride price. Jacob is silent and does not reply, but his sons reply that it is a disgrace for them to marry an uncircumcised person and add deceptively: "Only on this condition will we consent unto you: if ye will be as we are, that every male of you be circumcised;" (*Ibid* 15). Did they even consider the possibility that the inhabitants of Shechem might agree to this demand? The people of Shechem were determined to circumcise all the males, which they did. Then the conspiracy of Dinah's brothers, her mother's sons, is revealed: "And it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brethren, took each man his sword, and came upon the city unawares, and slew all the males." (*Ibid* 25). They take Dinah back to Jacob's camp. Jacob

criticized the brothers' behavior for it could endanger all the tribe but they replied: "Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?" (*Ibid* 31). This is the end of Dinah's story.

The meeting between Dinah and Shechem created a great disaster, but what actually happened between them? Was it really a rape? This is one possibility, but, in my opinion, there was no rape here but, rather, consensual sex. Let's go back to the meeting of Shechem and Dinah and read the three verbs that describe what happened: "**took**", this is the usual description of the one who initiates a marital relationship. For example, it was said about Isaac: "and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife;" (Genesis 24:67). This expression in the Bible does not describe an equal relationship, but it is not a description of rape. Secondly, "**lay**": this is the usual description of a sexual act. The only verb that can be seen as a description of rape is the third verb, which may mean that he humiliated or afflicted pain on her. But the meaning of this verb is not entirely clear: *Vaye'aneha* in Hebrew also means caused her pain, maybe because it was Dinah's virginal bed. The word *ona* (period) in Hebrew also comes from this verb; in fact, *this is the usual rabbinic expression* describing the woman's [!] legal right for having satisfying sexual relations. Another understanding of this verb can be derived from *ma'ane* (= reply), maybe suggesting that the two youngsters were engaged in a conversation, and Shechem replied to Dinah. This is a less probable interpretation, but I find it interesting, since it stands in opposition to her family, which granted her with silence.

Unfortunately, we do not have in this verse Dinah's version of what happened between her and Shechem, but the Biblical story itself does not indicate rape. Let's compare it to another biblical story, which clearly describes a rape: Amnon, David's son, deceived his half sister into entering his chambers and, when he was alone with her, it is written that: "being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her." (II Shmuel, 13:14). It is obvious here that Amnon forced Tamar to have sex with him. In our portion, the description of the sexual act is completely different and the next verse clarifies Shechem's feelings: "And his soul did cleave unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the damsel, and spoke comfortingly unto the damsel." (Genesis 34:3). The brief Biblical story gives three

accounts of Shechem's love for the daughter of Israel, which correspond with his three actions, described above.

Can this story be read as an ancient version of Romeo and Juliet, a tragic and impossible love story? This is the interpretation of many people nowadays, (especially women), while previous generations of interpreters avoided it. It seems that it was easier for the classical interpreters to see Dinah as a passive girl who was punished for her mistake than for them to see her as an assertive young woman who chose to love a man from another nation.

Throughout the generations, the virginity of the daughters of Israel was an important asset. Many men in the Bible, including Moshe and even Jacob's sons (Dinah's own brothers) married foreign women and the Bible does not condemn it. However, when it is a daughter of Israel who couples with a foreigner, it is considered not only as undermining the laws of the society but also as an act against society's most basic foundations. Dinah's brothers immediately punish the foreigner, his family and all his people by brutally murdering them. Jacob does not agree with Shimon and Levi deceiving and attacking the people of Shechem, and the Bible and the Midrashim also denigrate their action. In conclusion, Jewish culture has always emphasized the importance of safeguarding the sexual assets of their daughters while understanding the sons' sexual adventures.

The Midrash says, in reference to Dinah, that if a woman is engaged in sexual intercourse with an *Arel* (an uncircumcised man) it is hard for her to stop; does this come from an ancient male Jewish complex regarding their sexuality, when they compared themselves with their uncircumcised neighbors? This is a well-known cultural phenomenon ascribing to "the Other" an exaggerated and threatening sexuality.

We will never know what Dinah wanted, what was going on in her mind, while she was taken from the corpse-ridden town during the massacre committed by her brothers. We will never know how her life continued, what happened afterwards; she disappeared from the Bible and is mentioned again only in a genealogical list (*Genesis* 46:15). The Biblical story does not grant her a voice. She is referred to as "the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne unto Jacob", "child", "girl" "sister"... but she is never described as a subject. The Biblical tradition has silenced her. There is no tribe named after her and no part in Israel was promised to her

offspring. Generations of interpreters have used the story to threaten and shape the identity of the daughters of Israel, leaving them with the horror of a young girl, desecrated and forgotten. In a way, she is mentioned in the tradition only to be forgotten. May be we can see in this a never ceasing rape of the unfortunate Dinah.

In this difficult story, there are two points of light: one in a classical Midrash. Despite the Biblical account of Dinah having no tribe, there is a Midrashic tradition redeeming Dinah's legacy:

And she conceived and bore Osenat. The children of Israel wanted to kill her, lest people may say that there is obscenity in the tents of Jacob. What did Jacob do? He brought a plate and wrote the Holy name [of God] on it and he sent her away. Now everything is revealed to the Holy One Blessed Be He, and Michael the angel descended and took her down to Egypt to the household of Potiphera, for Osenat was worthy to marry Joseph. The wife of Potiphera was barren and raised her like a daughter. And when Joseph descended to Egypt, he took her for himself. As it is said: "and he gave him to wife Osenat the daughter of Potiphera priest of On" (*Genesis* 41:45) (Pirkey d'Rabbi Eliezer, 38).

We know that from Joseph's seed came two tribes; maybe we can understand that one of them represents Dinah, his wife's mother.

The second positive aspect is the way many women and men nowadays refuse to accept the silencing of women and give Dinah a voice in songs, stories, and modern interpretations of the story. Take for example Anita Diamant's book *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador 1997). The author dedicates the book to Dinah and tells the story from her perspective. The book, already a classic, begins with the words:

We have been lost for each other for so long. My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust... On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped (p. 1)

Diamant's Dinah unfolds the story of her father, mothers and brothers and tells about her encounter with Shechem, an encounter of love, tenderness and passion. When relating to their first night of love, she says:

When Shalem¹ lay still at last and discovered that my cheeks were wet, he said: “Oh, little wife. Do not let me hurt you again”. But I told him that my tears had nothing of pain in them. They were the first tears of happiness in my life... I told him of my father and my mothers and described my brothers one by one. He was delighted by their names and learned each one in the order of his birth, and knew which one came of the womb of each mother. I’m not sure my own father could have listed them so well (pp.190-191)

Diamant’s book is one of the contemporary efforts to redeem Dinah’s lost voice. She, like other writers, is enriching the chorus of our tradition and challenging the hegemonic conception of the Book of Books.

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In the wider context of relations among religions and cultures people, Judaism is an ethnic religion. People can choose to be Jews by conversion but, the great majority are Jewish by birth. Maybe for this reason intercultural relations that could lead to intermarriage are always problematic. Many Jews today are concerned about the growth of intermarriage that leads to the setting up of non-Jewish families. Even though I share this opinion, I don't think that one can take away a person's right to marry whom they like. In intercultural relations there is a danger that the culture and religion will be weakened, but there are also advantages. To tell the truth, if I had to choose between the danger of cultural isolation and the danger that comes from friendship and brotherhood between peoples, I would choose the latter.

¹ Diamant changes Shechem’s name to Shalem. The name means in Hebrew “whole” or “complete” and is derived from the same root as “Shalom” (peace).