Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Vayishlach: Dinah Teaches That Jewishness Follows the Mother

How Did Dinah Turn Hidden Holiness into a Legacy for Israel?

Why Is Dinah's Story So Painful for Some Women to Learn?

In my Women in Tanach series, a student will occasionally ask to be excused when we reach the Dinah classes. Over the years, I have been saddened to discover how many women carry memories of having been violated. In the CDC's 2023–2024 survey, about one in five women in the United States reported having experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime.

This happens in Jewish communities too. The belief that such things should never happen in our communities can make it especially hard for a woman to tell anyone when they do. She may fear being judged or blamed, and that fear can keep her from getting the support she needs. Hearing Dinah's story in a Torah class can trigger feelings she has carried for years – fear, shame, or the painful question of whether she could have done something to prevent it.

This is why, when I teach the Torah's definition of rape, I choose my words carefully and make sure to explain the context of the verses (*Devarim* 22:23–27). The Torah holds the young woman liable "because she did not cry out in the city" (*Devarim* 22:24). Had she cried out, someone might have come to her aid. Her silence could therefore indicate that she was acting willingly. Yet Rambam learns from the verse וְלַנַּעֲרָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה דָבָר/*vela'na'arah lo ta'aseh davar* – "You shall do nothing to the young woman" – that a woman who was forced bears no liability. He adds that this holds even if her response changes after the act began by force (*Hilchot Issurei Biah* 1:9). A woman facing an overwhelming threat may freeze and find herself unable to move or cry out, even with people nearby. When we teach these verses today, we need to be clear that silence alone cannot establish consent.

Over the years, my students have taught me to approach Dinah's story with greater sensitivity. I still want to learn the full range of commentaries, including those that ask why Dinah went out and seem to place some of the blame on her. Those readings can land painfully for a woman in the room who has spent years asking herself, *Why did I go there? Why didn't I cry out?*

The Torah tells us that Dinah "went out to see the daughters of the land" (*Bereishit* 34:1). What higher purpose might have drawn her to them?

What Was Dinah Seeking Among the Daughters of the Land?

ספר בראשית פרק לד פסוק א וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַּת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לִרְאוֹת בִּבְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ׃

"Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Ya'acov, went out to see the daughters of the land" (*Bereishit* 34:1).

Why does the Torah introduce Dinah as "the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Ya'acov"? The Midrash hears an echo of Leah's own going out to meet Ya'acov. Yet Leah went out to meet her husband, and the comparison leaves us wondering what her daughter's going out had in common with hers.

The words "whom she bore to Ya'acov" take us back to Leah's pregnancy. According to our Sages, Leah realized that if she bore another son, only one of the twelve tribes would be left for Rachel to bear. Rachel would then have fewer sons than either of the maidservants (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Berachot* 60a). Leah prayed, and the child she had conceived as a boy was born as a girl. Dinah's inclination to go beyond the tent reflected the original root of her soul, since in those days it was ordinarily men who went out. The Torah calls Dinah "the daughter of Leah" because Leah's prayer brought about the change in the womb. The words "whom she bore to Ya'acov" tell us that the child Ya'acov had conceived as a son was born to

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him as a daughter (Alshich, *Bereishit* 34:1).

A lesser-known account places Dinah's outing at the time of a local celebration. The women of Shechem had gone out to dance near Ya'acov's home. Rachel and Leah went out with their maidservants to see what was happening, and young Dinah went out too (*Seder HaDorot*, Yemot Olam, third millennium, year 2205).

Rabbi Chaim of Czernowitz draws our attention to the wording, "she went לִרְאוֹת בִּבְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ/*lir'ot bivnot ha'aretz* – 'to see **in** the daughters of the land.'" Why does the Torah use בְּ/*b* – 'in' – rather than the usual אֶת/*et*? Dinah wanted to see what was **within** the daughters of the land, to look into the depths of their hearts and discover who might draw close to her and listen to her words. She hoped to follow in the footsteps of Avraham and Sarah, who had brought others close to Hashem. Among the women of Shechem, she sought those who might respond to that invitation (*Be'er Mayim Chaim*, Vayishlach 34).

Dinah's purpose in going out echoes her mother's. Leah went out to meet Ya'acov for the sake of building their family. Dinah went out to do *kiruv*, much like a Chabad *shelicha* who leaves the tent to bring others closer to Hashem. In this sense, Dinah embodies what it means to be Leah's daughter. Leah's prayer began with noticing what her sister might lose. Dinah's going out began with a desire to see what the women around her carried within them. In both, I see a woman whose attention reaches beyond herself. The Torah expresses this through a single letter. That בְּ/*b* lets us glimpse how Dinah looked at the women she went out to meet. In the next verse, the gaze turns toward Dinah herself – וַיַּרְא אֹתָהּ שְׁכֶם/*vayar otah Shechem* – "Shechem saw her" (*Bereishit* 34:2).

How Far Did Dinah's Power to Transform Others Reach?

A man who violates a woman may come to despise her afterward, as we see in the case of Amnon and Tamar (II *Shemuel* 13:15). Shechem's feelings took a different turn. After he violated Dinah, his soul cleaved to her:

ספר בראשית פרק לד פסוקים ג, ח, יט וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַּת־יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַב אֶת־הַנַּעֲרָה וַיְדַבֵּר עַל־לֵב הַנַּעֲרָה...
חָשְׁקָה נַפְשׁוֹ בְּבִתְּכֶם... כִּי חָפֵץ בְּבַת־יַעֲקֹב:

"His soul cleaved to Dinah, the daughter of Ya'acov. He loved the young woman and spoke to her heart ... his soul longed for your daughter ... for he desired Ya'acov's daughter" (*Bereishit* 34:3, 8, 19).

The Torah describes the depth of feeling Dinah awakened in Shechem through five expressions of affection – וַתִּדְבַּק/*vatidbak* – 'cleaved,' וַיֶּאֱהַב/*vaye'ehav* – 'he loved,' וַיְדַבֵּר עַל־לֵב/*vayedaber al lev* – 'he spoke to her heart,' חָשְׁקָה נַפְשׁוֹ/*chashkah nafsho* – 'his soul longed,' and חָפֵץ/*chafetz* – 'he desired.' We find all five used to describe Hashem's affection for Israel – "You who cleave to Hashem" (*Devarim* 4:4), "Hashem set His affection upon you" (*Devarim* 7:7), "a land of delight" (*Malachi* 3:12), "I have loved you" (*Malachi* 1:2), and "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem" (*Yeshayahu* 40:2). This teaches you how dearly Hashem loves Israel (Midrash *Lekach Tov*, *Bereishit* 34:3). What did Dinah awaken in Shechem that the Torah uses the very language of Hashem's relationship with Israel?

Shechem carried within him a spark of אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן/*Adam HaRishon* – 'the first human being' – a spark that had fallen into the depths of the *kelipot* – 'shells.' In Dinah's presence, that spark stirred, and the longing it awakened led Shechem to circumcise himself, an act of rectification. Shechem's words of desire for Dinah contain a hint of the righteous man in whom that spark would later reappear. When Shechem and Chamor address the men of their city, they describe the land as רַחֲבַת יָדַיִם/*rachavat yadayim* – 'spacious.' The letters of רַחֲבַת/*rachavat* are the initials of רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶּן תְּרַדְיוֹן – Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion. Through Dinah, the spark of this holy Rabbi concealed within Shechem was released (*Bereishit* 34:21, Arizal, *Likutei Torah*, Vayishlach).

When Ya'acov prepared to meet Esav, he hid Dinah from him. Our Sages teach that, had she married Esav, she might have returned him to the righteous path (Rashi, *Bereishit* 32:23, *Bereishit Rabbah* 76:9). Dinah's

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power to awaken the good concealed within Esav could have changed the course of his descendants. Had she brought him back to the good, Amalek would never have emerged from him, and Hashem's Name and throne would have been complete (Rav Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin, *Poked Akarim*, ot 5, s.v. וְהִנֵּה). How far Dinah's gift might have reached! By transforming one person, she could have changed the course of generations and brought about the ultimate redemption.

How Did Dinah Transform Ya'acov's Family to Become a People?

Dinah's story marks a turning point in the life of Ya'acov's family. Her brothers return from the field as בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב/*bnei Ya'acov* – 'the sons of Ya'acov.' As the Torah recounts their grief over Dinah, it speaks of what took place בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל/*beYisrael* – 'in Israel.' In that shift from Ya'acov to Yisrael, the Torah speaks of Ya'acov's family for the first time as a people – transformed into the nation of Israel (*Bereishit* 34:7).

Later in the parasha, Hashem confirms Ya'acov's name as Yisrael and tells him what will grow from his household.

ספר בראשית פרק לה פסוקים י–יא יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה שְׁמֶךָ ... גּוֹי וּקְהַל גּוֹיִם יִהְיֶה מִמֶּךָּ׃

"Yisrael shall be your name ... a nation and an assembly of nations shall come from you" (*Bereishit* 35:10–11).

The Ramchal asks how the twelve tribes that emerged from Ya'acov were to expand into the seventy souls. When the Torah lists those who went down to Egypt, it names her וְאֵת דִּינָה בִתּוֹ/*ve'et Dinah bito* – 'and Dinah, his daughter.' The numerical value of דִּינָה/Dinah is sixty-nine, the number just before seventy. Her very name hints at the threshold she stands on. Dinah is the channel through whom the twelve become seventy. In her lies the secret of how the twelve tribes grew into the seventy souls who formed the people of Israel (Ramchal, *Derushei Vesamta Otam*, *Bereishit* 46:15, 27).

Dinah's power of transformation reaches back even further, to Chava in Gan Eden. The Arizal hears an echo of the serpent in the Torah's description of Shechem as a Chivite, a word that recalls the Aramaic חִוְיָא/*chivya* – 'serpent.' He also points out that דִּינָה/Dinah and נִדָּה/*niddah* contain the same four letters in a different order. The rearrangement hints at a reversal. In the kabbalistic reading, Chava absorbed the serpent's impurity, while Dinah embodies the power to expel it and bring forth holiness. Through אִתְהַפְּכָא/*ithapcha* – 'transformation' – Dinah rectifies Chava's encounter with the serpent (Arizal, *Likutei Torah*, *Vayishlach*).

How Do We Learn from Dinah That Jewishness Follows the Mother?

What happened to the child conceived through Shechem's violation of Dinah? Osnat, Dinah's daughter, was sent away with an amulet on her neck, upon which was written: "Whoever cleaves to you cleaves to the seed of Ya'acov" (Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bereishit* 41:45). The angel Michael brought her to Egypt to the house of Potiphera, where she was adopted, and later Yosef took her in marriage (*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 38). Through Osnat, Dinah's inner holiness was carried forward into the next generation. Osnat carried that holiness into the home she built with Yosef HaTzaddik, who embodies יְסוֹד/*Yesod* and is שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּרִית/*shomer habrit* – 'guardian of the covenant.' The very daughter conceived through Shechem's violation of Dinah became the mother of Efrayim and Menashe, whom Ya'acov counted as his own sons (*Bereishit* 48:5).

In this way, Dinah teaches us that whatever a Jewish woman has gone through, there is a place within her soul that remains completely intact and pure in its holiness. This is the גַּן נָעוּל/*gan na'ul* – 'a sealed garden' – that no impurity can reach (*Shir HaShirim* 4:12). This holy spark is passed on to her children. Through Osnat, Dinah's story embodies the principle that Jewish status is passed down through the mother. Dinah's name hints at this inheritance. The letters ד״י״נ evoke DNA, and the final ה points to Hashem – the DNA of Hashem. Every Shabbat, when we bless our sons to be like frayim and Menashe, we speak the names of

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Shechem and Dinah's grandsons. The holiness of the woman the Torah calls וְאֵת דִּינָה בִתּוֹ/*ve'et Dinah bito* – 'and Dinah, his daughter' – lives on in the blessing Jewish families pass from one generation to the next (*Bereishit* 46:15, 48:20).

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