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Who Is the Victim in the Dinah Story?

We can not imagine anyone but Dinah as the victim, but does the Torah? Do the Rabbis? Understanding the story of Dinah and its reception in historical context can help us reflect on the role of women in ancient Israel and the meaning of sexual violence in a patriarchal society.

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*The Seduction of Dinah, Daughter of Leah(detail),*James Tissot, 19th century. Jewish Museum

The Story of Dinah and Shechem

The account of Jacob and his growing family is interrupted by the story of Dinah in Genesis 34, in which Dinah goes out to see the women of the land and is noticed by a local man:

בראשית לד:ב וַיַּרְא אֹתָהּ שְׁכֶם בֶּן חֲמוֹר הַחִוִּי נְשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ וַיְעַנֶּהָ.

*After* the sexual encounter, Shechem is smitten by Dinah:

בראשית לד:ג וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַּת יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַב אֶת הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ.

He tells his father, Hamor, that he wants to marry Dinah, and they set off to enter into marriage negotiations with Jacob. Shechem and Hamor offer a generous bride price and suggest that as tribal groups they should intermarry their children, living as one people.

Jacob’s sons, Dinah’s brothers, answer בְּמִרְמָה, “with deception” (v. 13), pretending to agree to the marriage and the tribal alliance only if Shechem, Hamor, and all of their men are circumcised. Three days later, while the Shechemites are weakened, recovering from the circumcision, two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, massacre the town, loot it, and take their sister back, ostensibly because they could not countenance “their sister being treated as a harlot” (הַכְזוֹנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת אֲחוֹתֵנוּ; 34:31).

Dinah’s Lack of Personhood in the Story

The narrative, at first glance, appears to tell the story of Dinah, but in reality, she is barely present in this chapter. She does not speak; she acts only once (34:1), after which she is referred to only as an object and never as a subject. After the brothers arrive, she is only mentioned by name once between verses 6 and 25, and appears again in Genesis only in the genealogy in 46:15.[2]

We take for granted that the wrong in the story is Dinah being raped But this focus on consent is a modern perspective. Within the historical context of ancient Israel, however, the focus would not have been on the heinous act of sexual violence perpetrated against a young woman—if that is even what the story assumes (see below)—but on the practical and social consequences of such an act to the girl’s father and household, including to the girl herself.[4]

The rape or seduction of an unmarried woman would make it difficult for the father to marry her off later on, would make it impossible for him to collect a full bride price,[5] and, if it became known publicly, would be an insult to his honor, and, by extension, to the honor of the men in her family.[6]

The Practical and Social Concern

of Biblical Rape Laws

Biblical Hebrew does not have a word for “rape” but the Bible is aware of the fact that women can be forced into sex. This is clearest from the law in Deuteronomy about adultery with a betrothed virgin, which distinguishes between a sexual encounter in the city, which is presumed to be consensual (since no one heard her screaming),[8] and one in the field, which is assumed to have been forced, since she probably screamed, but no one heard (she is given the benefit of the doubt).[9] The term used in these cases for coercion is “to grab hold of and lie with” (וְהֶחֱזִיק בָּהּ… וְשָׁכַב עִמָּהּ). The man’s crime is the same in both instances (adultery), consent is only relevant to determine whether the woman is liable for punishment or not.

The point comes up in the next law as well, which offers a clear parallel for the case in the Dinah story:

דברים כב:כח כִּי יִמְצָא אִישׁ (נער) [נַעֲרָה] בְתוּלָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא אֹרָשָׂה וּתְפָשָׂהּ וְשָׁכַב עִמָּהּ וְנִמְצָאוּ. כב:כט וְנָתַן הָאִישׁ הַשֹּׁכֵב עִמָּהּ לַאֲבִי (הנער) [הַנַּעֲרָה] חֲמִשִּׁים כָּסֶף וְלוֹ תִהְיֶה לְאִשָּׁה תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר עִנָּהּ לֹא יוּכַל שַׁלְּחָהּ כָּל יָמָיו.

In the previous law, the woman was already betrothed so the father was not going to lose his bride-price and the woman was not going to lose her husband. But an unbetrothed virgin is a different matter, and the primary concern of the law is her decreased value upon the loss of virginity and the difficulty the father will have marrying her off. The law solves these problems by forcing the man to marry the woman, with no option for divorce, and to pay the full bride price.

A similar law appears in Exodus about a seducer, which can also be seen as a parallel to the Dinah story (the Dinah story never says she was forced):

שמות כב:טו וְכִי יְפַתֶּה אִישׁ בְּתוּלָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא אֹרָשָׂה וְשָׁכַב עִמָּהּ מָהֹר יִמְהָרֶנָּה לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה. כב:טז אִם מָאֵן יְמָאֵן אָבִיהָ לְתִתָּהּ לוֹ כֶּסֶף יִשְׁקֹל כְּמֹהַר הַבְּתוּלֹת.

In this case, which is described as seduction, the man must still marry the maiden and pay the bride price, though the father is given the right to refuse the marriage. In both cases the primary concern is for the father’s finances and the girl’s future on a practical and social level. Similar practices appear in the Middle Assyrian Laws 55-56 (11th century BCE) with regard to both coerced and consensual sex with an unbetrothed woman.[11]

Neither Deuteronomy nor Exodus expresses concern with the woman’s emotions or any potential trauma.[12] The intention of these laws is to restore the social order: to ensure that an “undesirable” woman would get married, to reimburse the father for the loss of her virginity and the full bride price she would have brought him, and to preserve the honor of the family for not being able to protect her virginity. The desires and feelings of the woman are not considered in this equation.

A Polemic against Intermarriage

Considering this context, why do the brothers refuse Shechem’s offer to marry Dinah? Is his offer not exactly what the Bible thinks he ought to do and what an injured family should want and accept? This is not to say that Jacob and family were beholden to the laws in Deuteronomy and Exodus, but rather that these laws reflect the social convention of the time. If a man were to have sex with a single woman, under any circumstance, because she is available (i.e., not married or engaged), they would be married.

Thus, the story is about how the brothers handled the debasing of their sister when the perpetrator was a non-Israelite.[14] In such a case, the possibility of marriage to the rapist or seducer would need to be forfeited and revenge exacted. According to Gen 34, Israelites simply do not marry Hivites, circumcised or not. The story would then reflect a strong polemic against intermarriage, similar to that found in Deuteronomy 7, which specifies the prohibition of marrying Canaanites, and which finds its full expression in the broader polemic against any intermarriage at all, in the Second Temple period Ezra-Nehemiah.[15]

The story tells how the brothers overcame the desire for Dinah’s social recovery in order to take an unambiguous and violent stand against intermarriage—at least with Canaanites—by exacting revenge against Shechem by slaughtering him and his people. If anything, this demonstrates even *less* concern for Dinah’s welfare than the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Blaming the Victim: Problematic Behavior on Dinah’s Part?

It may be difficult for the modern reader to process the fact that Jacob and, by extension, the brothers were considered the primary injured party in the biblical narrative, and not Dinah! Even more troublesome is the *possibility* that Dinah is being partially blamed for what happened to her in the opening line of the story:

בראשית לד:א וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַּת לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לִרְאוֹת בִּבְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ.

The phrase “to see the daughters of the land” implies that she went to see how the Hivite women dressed or acted, perhaps even to consort with them. This negative activity has been interpreted with an ethnic bias. You can imagine accusers asking, “What would a nice Israelite girl be doing going out there?” The verse may be understood as equivalent to the contemporary accusations against victims of sexual assault: she shouldn’t have been there; she shouldn’t have worn that; she shouldn’t have been drinking….

**Like Mother Like Daughter?**‍

Whether this is the meaning of the verse or not, the Rabbis indeed understood the verse as a criticism of Dinah, and even take this criticism much further, by noting two key phrases in this same opening verse:

בראשית לד:א **וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה** בַּת לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לִרְאוֹת בִּבְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ.

The Rabbis note that Dinah is described as “daughter of Leah” and not “daughter of Jacob” and that Leah also “goes out,” and that she does so for sexual purposes:

בראשית ל:טז וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב מִן הַשָּׂדֶה בָּעֶרֶב **וַתֵּצֵא לֵאָה** לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלַי תָּבוֹא כִּי שָׂכֹר שְׂכַרְתִּיךָ בְּדוּדָאֵי בְּנִי וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא.

In *Genesis Rabbah* 80:1 (mid-1st millennium C.E.), ReshLakish argues that a lewd mother will have a lewd daughter, and offers the following proof:

לפי שכת’ ותצא לאה לקראתו יצאת מקושטת לקראתו כזונה לפיכך כת’ ותצא דינה בת לאה.

Jacob Neusner (1932-2016), in his comment on the midrash, says, “The verb ‘go out’ when associated with a woman carries the sense of ‘awhoring’.”[16]

Similarly, *Midrash Yelamdenu* (ca. 5th cent. C.E.), commenting on the Mishnah (*Shabbat*6:1) that lists what jewelry women may not wear when going out on the Sabbath (to avoid violating the prohibition of carrying), makes a connection to the Dinah story:

ותצא דינה בת לאה וגו’. לא תצא אשה בעיר של זהב ולא בקטלה ולא בנזמים וכו’, ואף בחול אסור לצאת בהם לרשות הרבים שלא תגרום תקלה לעצמה, שהרי דינה בת יעקב בשביל שהיתה רגלה פרדנית גרמה תקלה לעצמה, הה”ד ותצא דינה בת לאה, וירא אותה שכם וגו’.

בת לאה, ולא בת יעקב, אלא תלאה הכתוב באמה, יצאנית בת יצאנית.

לראות, בקשה לראות ונראית.

These midrashim, which are cited by no less an authority than Rashi, are particularly cruel, blaming Dinah for what happens to her. They underline how ancient readers understood the text as being about the violation of the honor of Jacob’s family; the possibility that Dinah may have been partially complicit in this dishonor only heightens the tension in the story in such a reading.

Ambiguity of the Sex Act: From Debasement to Rape

Dinah’s experience is not an important factor in the story. The text never tells us how she felt about Shechem or about her brothers’ revenge, or even what happened to her after she was rescued. In fact, the text never actually tells us if she consented to the sex or not. Interpretations of this liaison run the gamut from rape, to statutory rape, to consensual encounter, to teenage love affair.

As noted above, although biblical Hebrew has no exact term for rape, it does have a term for forced sex, using a term meaning “grab hold of” (החזיק, maybe also תפש) coupled with verbs of sex (שכב). The story of Amnon and Tamar also exhibits this usage:

שמואל ב יג:יד וְלֹא אָבָה לִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹלָהּ וַיֶּחֱזַק מִמֶּנָּה וַיְעַנֶּהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ.

But Genesis 34 says nothing about Dinah refusing or Shechem using force. The verb used in Gen 34, “take” (לקח), is ambiguous, and often refers to taking a woman as a wife (Gen 11:29, 25:1, 28:9, etc.). The Dinah text does use the term *‘innâ*, a verb often translated as “rape,” but, as Shawna Dolansky argues in “[The Debasement of Dinah](http://thetorah.com/the-debasement-of-dinah/),” it is more properly rendered with “debase”;[19] this is accurately captured, e.g., in the LXX translation, “He humbled her” (καὶἐταπείνωσεναὐτήν), and in that of the Latin translation of *The* *Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo* (8:7), which reads, “And he debased her” (*humiliaviteam*).

The debasement in this case is a reference to the insult the sex act offers to the woman and her family and is not focused on consent or the violence done to her. Nevertheless, later interpreters of the story did understand the term *‘innâ* as something hurtful to the woman, and they attempted to discern what this hurt was.

Unusual Sex

Rashi (1040-1105), citing *Genesis Rabbah* (80:5), offers an interpretation based on the understanding that two verbs imply that Shechem did two separate things:

וישכב אתה – כדרכה,
ויענה – שלא כדרכה

In rabbinic texts, לא כדרכה, “an unnatural manner,” is a euphemism for anal sex. Rashi and *Genesis Rabbah* are not concerned about whether the sex is consensual or not, but that the contact between Shechem and Dinah was not limited to “normal” sex. Perhaps the concern is that it is painful because, according to the Rabbis, it is a “debased” form of sex.

Dinah the Canaanite‍

Rashi (Gen 24:16) criticizes Canaanite women for maintaining their virginity[22] by being promiscuous in “unnatural ways,” (i.e., anal sex). It seems possible, then, that Rashi’s suggestion that Shechem engaged in anal sex with Dinah may be connected to the imagery in Rabbinic literature of Dinah as a “Canaanite woman.”

The midrash takes as its starting point the reference to a son of Simeon called, “Saul the son of a Canaanite woman” (Gen 46:10). Who was this Canaanite woman who mothered a son for Simeon? *Genesis Rabbah* 80:11 identifies her as Dinah, and suggests a number of reasons why she would be called a Canaanite woman:

[ויקחו את דינה מבית שכם ויצאו] ר’ יודן אמר גוררים בה ויוצאים,

אמר ר’ חוניה הנבעלת מן ערל קשה לפרוש,

אמר ר’ הונא אמרה ואני אנה אוליך את חרפתי וגו’ (ש”ב =שמואל ב’= יג יג) עד שנשבע לה שמעון שנוטלה הה”ד ובני שמעון וגו’ ושאול בן הכנענית (בראשית מו י)

ר’ יהודה א’ שעשתה כמעשה כנענים, ר’ נחמיה א’ שנבעלה מחוי שהוא בכלל כנענים, רבנן אמ’ נטלה שמעון וקברה בארץ כנען.

Some of the interpretations in this midrash are harsh and others less so, but even in the more sympathetic portraits, the hero is Simeon who steps up and takes care of his sister. The polemic against intermarriage in this midrash is strong; instead of marrying Shechem to restore her social status, Dinah marries her full brother. The message is clear; incest is the lesser of two evils when it comes to marrying a foreigner.

The Pain of Deflowering‍

In contrast to Rashi and the midrash, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) reads *‘innâ* as a physical affliction:

ויענה – כדרכה, וטעם העינוי בעבור היותה בתולה.

For ibn Ezra, the two verbs represent the same act. He explains the use of the term *innui* as a reference to the physical pain that accompanies the breaking of a virgin’s hymen. As this pain would occur with any sexual encounter the maiden would have had, marital or extramarital, consensual or coerced, ibn Ezra’s explanation has the effect of making the word *‘innâ*disappear.

Nahmanides: Dinah Was Forced

Dinah finally takes her place as the focus of the story in the interpretation of Nahmanides (1194–1270), who pushes back against the interpretations of Rashi and ibn Ezra:

ואין צורך, כי כל ביאה באונס תקרא “ענוי”, וכן “לא תתעמר בה תחת אשר עניתה” (דברים כ״א:י״ד), וכן “ואת פלגשי ענו ותמת” (שופטים כ׳:ה׳). ויגיד הכתוב, כי היתה אנוסה ולא נתרצית לנשיא הארץ לספר בשבחה.

Nahmanides may not be the first to call this rape—the Vulgate translates ויענה in Gen 34:2 as *vi opprimensvirginem*, “ravishing the virgin by force”—but Nahmanides is unique in his concern not only with sexual violence, but also its victim, and in his making rape a main focus of the story.

Nahmanides calls attention to biblical precedents, such as the gang-rape of the concubine in Gibeah and the law allowing the capture of brides from enemies during wartime, in which forced sex (rape) is referred to as ע-נ-ה, debasement or affliction.[25]

The Rape of Dinah

As noted at the opening, Nahmanides’ understanding of the story is now the prevalent reading. But how did a story originally concerned with social status and intermarriage become a “rape story”? One way is through looking at the overall narrative context: the violent end may influence us to read a violent beginning. In addition, the rape focus may be a result of later readers looking for a crime that better fits the punishment.

To readers unfamiliar with biblical society and its social mores, the revenge taken against Shechem, massacring the entire town, capturing the women, and pillaging the spoils, may seem quite disproportionate with the social offense committed against the brothers. Fury over the rape of one’s sister is certainly easier for the modern reader to identify with, and this is likely true of certain pre-modern readers as well, depending on their social realities.

Calling out Patriarchy‍

The story of Dinah was set in a historical context in which women were regarded frequently as objects. When a horrible thing is done to Dinah, the authors of the text are concerned with the men around her. Nahmanides offers a powerful example of how we can highlight the pervasive patriarchy and difficulty in the text, as well as in the history of interpretation, and even of how we can read texts of sexual violence today.

Recognizing patriarchy in these texts, and saying, “That’s the way it was back then,” does not need to be apologetic, but instead can be empowering, by highlighting how our sexual mores have changed. Biblical society may have known about forced sex and even frowned upon it, but in biblical society there was no social structure or vocabulary to call “rape” what it was; Dinah may have been Shechem’s victim, but she was also a victim of her times.

Only very recently have we developed a real understanding of rape, and even now much work remains to be done. Genesis 34 and its reception offers important insights as we think about rape cross-culturally and throughout time, and especially on how patriarchal societies—including biblical society—were blind to rape and its effects.

1. This is one reason that scholars such as Yair Zakovich and David Frankel read Dinah’s name as a secondary addition to the narrative. See, Yair Zakovitch, “Assimilation in Biblical Narratives,” in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey H. Tigay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 175–96; David Frankel, [“The Rape of Dinah, Added as a Motive for the Sack of Shechem,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-rape-of-dinah-added-as-a-motive-for-the-sack-of-shechem) *TheTorah.com* (2015).
2. Lyn M. Bechtel, “What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 62 (1994): 19–36.
3. See discussion of bride prices in, Tracy M. Lemos, *Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine: 1200 BCE to 200 CE* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a brief overview, see Tracy M. Lemos, [“Weddings and Marriage Traditions in Ancient Israel,”](https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/weddings-and-marriage-traditions-in-ancient-israel) *Bible Odyssey*.
4. In ancient Israel, women were members of their fathers’ and, after marriage, husbands’ households. They did not regularly own property and had little ability to support to support themselves when not associated with a man. The daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27) seem to be the exception, but the status quo is still maintained as the property resorts to husbands when they marry and they are limited to marrying within their tribe to protect the tribal claims on the land (Num 36:1-3).

דברים כב:כג כִּי יִהְיֶה (נער) [נַעֲרָה] בְתוּלָה מְאֹרָשָׂה לְאִישׁ וּמְצָאָהּ אִישׁ בָּעִיר וְשָׁכַב עִמָּהּ. כב:כד וְהוֹצֵאתֶם אֶת שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶל שַׁעַר הָעִיר הַהִוא וּסְקַלְתֶּם אֹתָם בָּאֲבָנִים וָמֵתוּ אֶת (הנער) [הַנַּעֲרָה] עַל דְּבַר אֲשֶׁר לֹא צָעֲקָה בָעִיר וְאֶת הָאִישׁ עַל דְּבַר אֲשֶׁר עִנָּה אֶת אֵשֶׁת רֵעֵהוּ וּבִעַרְתָּ הָרָע מִקִּרְבֶּךָ.

דברים כב:כה וְאִם בַּשָּׂדֶה יִמְצָא הָאִישׁ אֶת (הנער) [הַנַּעֲרָה] הַמְאֹרָשָׂה וְהֶחֱזִיק בָּהּ הָאִישׁ וְשָׁכַב עִמָּהּ וּמֵת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר שָׁכַב עִמָּהּ לְבַדּוֹ. כב:כו(ולנער) [וְלַנַּעֲרָה] לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה דָבָר אֵין (לנער) [לַנַּעֲרָה] חֵטְא מָוֶת כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר יָקוּם אִישׁ עַל רֵעֵהוּ וּרְצָחוֹ נֶפֶשׁ כֵּן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה. כב:כז כִּי בַשָּׂדֶה מְצָאָהּ צָעֲקָה (הנער) [הַנַּעֲרָה] הַמְאֹרָשָׂה וְאֵין מוֹשִׁיעַ לָהּ.

1. This is not the same term as used previously, which leads TikvaFrymer-Kensky to argue that this may not be a case of force. See TikvaFrymer-Kensky, “Virginity in the Bible,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (eds., Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and TikvaFrymer-Kensky; The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79-96
2. Eve Levavi Feinstein, “[The Rape of the Unbetrothed Virgin in Torah and Assyrian Law: A Comparative Analysis](http://thetorah.com/rape-unbetrothed-virgin/),” *TheTorah* (2013).
3. Editor’s note: For a discussion of this problem from a modern religious perspective, see Zev Farber, [“Marrying Your Daughter to Her Rapist,”](http://thetorah.com/marrying-your-daughter-to-her-rapist/) *TheTorah* (2014).
4. See, Naomi Graetz, “[The Missed Opportunity for Intermarriage and Conversion in the Story of Dinah](http://thetorah.com/missed-opportunity-in-the-story-of-dinah/),” *TheTorah* (2014).
5. For more on this polemic, see, Jacob L. Wright and Tamara Eskenazi, [“Contrasting Pictures of Intermarriage in Ruth and Nehemiah,”](http://thetorah.com/contrasting-pictures-of-intermarriage-in-ruth-and-nehemiah/) *TheTorah* (2015).
6. Jacob Neusner, ed., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 104-106 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 146.
7. Shawna Dolansky, [“The Debasement of Dinah,”](http://thetorah.com/the-debasement-of-dinah/) *TheTorah* (2015).
8. Literally, Rashi says, “The place of their virginity,” i.e., the hymen.
9. The contemporary Bible scholar, Yair Zakovitch of Hebrew University, reads the Dinah story like Nahmanides does. He points to another biblical account that uses this verb, the story of Amnon and Tamar, which is explicitly about forced sex. Although this does not prove that the Dinah story is also about forced sex, Zakovitch suggests literary assimilation of the Tamar and Amnon story into the Dinah narrative, making a similar story intentionally look like the other. See, Zakovitch, “Assimilation in Biblical Narratives.”