

Parashah Vayishlach, like all of the parashiot in Sefer Bereshit, is so full of stories that some are often overlooked – like the story of Dinah, Jakob’s only daughter. Unfortunately, its messages ring true even today, and in the spirit of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25, we would do well to revisit it: After parting with Esau, Jakob settles with his family on the outskirts of Shechem. Dinah goes out to see the girls of the city; she is accosted by the king’s son Schechem, and raped. The wording is exact: He saw her, he took her, he lay with her, and he violated her. The verb *aiyn–nun–heh* means to afflict, to humble, to mishandle. After the fact, Shechem is madly in love with Dinah and asks his father to take her for him as a wife. Jakob hears what happened but remains silent until his sons return from the field. The sons are furious and hatch a nefarious plot, proposing a merger with the people of Shechem on the condition that the men are circumcised. On the third day after their circumcision, when they are in pain, Shimeon and Levi kill all the males, plunder the city, capture the women and children, and leave with Dinah. Now it is Jakob’s turn to be furious, an anger that he carries to his deathbed. What is at play here? Certainly not the welfare of Dinah. She, like so many other women, is a silent partner in a power struggle amongst ego-driven men.

The Torah gives us little information about Dinah. She is the daughter of Leah, born following the birth of her 5th and 6th sons in the aftermath of the argument with Rachel over the *dudaim*. The name Dinah is the feminine form of the word for justice. But what justice has she known? One midrash tells us that the name has to do with Leah’s consideration for her sister, who is still childless. Knowing the prophesy that Jakob is to father 12 sons, Leah “judges” herself, and prays for a girl, so that Rachel can bear more than one son. Dinah herself is silent from the beginning and remains silent throughout her short appearance in the Torah. She is not even mentioned among Jakob’s children in the encounter with Esau. Midrash Genesis Rabbah 76:9 cites this very fact as the reason for the events that follow. Afraid that Esau would see Dinah and take her from him, Jakob locks her in a box. HaShem says, “You prevented kindness from your brother and as a result you suffered. Because had she married Esau, she would not have been raped.” In other midrashim, Leah, as the elder daughter of Laban, was to have married Esau, but her prayers and tears saved her from that fate. Whereas Leah chooses, Dinah is given no choice. The midrashim argue that both women had the moral strength to be a positive influence on Esau, but the opportunity was twice lost. Although this Midrash sees Jakob as culpable, Dinah is still the one who bears the brunt of his actions. Like many women – think of Lot’s daughters in Sodom – Dinah never acts, she is acted upon. It is understandable that Abraham’s descendants, strangers in the land, want to do everything possible to stay on the good side of their more powerful neighbors. Jakob spends 20 years under the yoke of his exploitative uncle Laban, he is silent when hearing of Dinah’s rape, and when Shimeon and Levi wreak their havoc in Shechem he is only worried about how the neighboring people will react, again understandably, since war with them would likely destroy them all. Shimeon and Levi, who have the last word in this story, seem to be more concerned with their reputation than with Dinah herself, but on a more positive note, perhaps their rhetorical question is actually intended as a rebuke to their father. However we choose to read it, “Should our sister be treated like a prostitute?” is an open question.

Underlying all of this is the oppression of women and girls, which back then was simply part of the culture, but today, despite herculean efforts to counter it, still remains a blight on our society. Since time immemorial women have been treated as pawns to be bartered, sequestered, abused, raped, – and silenced. Passing from the house of her father to the house of her husband, the woman has been expected to be compliant, and when she is not, she is blamed no matter what the circumstance. Today this usually prevails only in fundamentalist cultures, but other forms of oppression and violence still exist right here behind the closed doors of our own privileged societies. The Me Too Movement has done much to call attention to and right the wrongs of a myriad of injustices, but there is still a long road ahead. Reputations and careers are at stake, and – let’s face it – old patterns are exceedingly difficult to change. In addition, excesses and false claims within this movement have been detrimental to the cause. As we see from the reactions of Shimeon and Levi, violence breeds violence in a spiral of escalation that if allowed to continue, eventually destroys that which it wishes to protect. Two wrongs do not make a right, as the saying goes. It is upon us all to help find constructive ways to put an end to the violence against women and girls. We can start by giving them a voice. *Din* in our world means hearing all sides with a mind that not only open but is also able to balance *gevurah* with *chesed*. The laws set forth in our Torah lead the way; it is up to us to interpret them wisely so that justice can be served.