



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Vayishlach 5774

By Mollie Andron

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*Parashat Vayishlach* contains the harrowing story of the rape of Dina and its equally violent aftermath. Dina “goes out” to see the daughters of the town of Shchem. Instantly Shchem, the son of Chamor, sees her, takes her and defiles her. He then falls in love with her and asks for her hand in marriage. Dina’s father, Yaakov, is unable to offer a response, remaining silent and waiting for his sons to return home from the field. As a form of retaliation, two of Yaakov’s sons, Shimon and Levi, slay all of the men of Shchem and take the women and children as captives.

After this incident, the Torah never speaks of Dina again. All we are left with is her name and her tragically violent story. By trying to reconstruct the character of Dina and fill in the missing gaps in her narrative, we can not only try to make sense of her story but also apply its lessons to the contemporary issue of violence against women and girls.

While the Torah tells us very little about Dina prior to the story in this week’s *parashah*, a troubling *midrash* offers some insight into her character. Earlier in *Parashat Vayishlach* Yaakov prepares himself and his family for his reunion with his brother Esav. He takes his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven children, and crosses the fork of the Jabbock River. But where is Dina? She seems to be missing from the narrative. According to the *midrash*, Yaakov, fearful of his brother Esav, locks her in a chest so that Esav won’t see her and want to marry her.<sup>1</sup> Dina was thus literally constrained by her sexuality and gender, boxed in and invisible.

Shortly after this episode, Dina “goes out” to see the women of Shchem. This movement of hers from being invisible to “going out” suggests that Dina was likely frustrated by the limits placed on her and may have been trying to separate herself from her family and become more visible and more liberated. The verb “*vatetze*—and she went out,” which describes Dina’s movement, is the same verb that is used for her father, Yaakov, when he escapes the wrath of his brother and, at the start of his journey, encounters God in a dream.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps similar to her father, Dina was trying to escape her invisibility and was searching for liberating and inspiring encounters. Sadly, however, unlike her father, her experience of “going out” resulted in violence and trauma, driving her into complete and total silence.

Unfortunately, in today’s world, many women and girls, who, like Dina, are already constrained and oppressed because of their gender, become victims of similar gender-based violence. One in three women world-wide will be abused, beaten or raped during her lifetime, most often at the hands of a boyfriend or husband.<sup>3</sup>

And for many of these women, the violence against them goes unpunished. This past February in South Africa, seventeen-year-old Anene Booysen was assaulted, raped and killed by Jonathan Davids and his friend. In her dying

<sup>1</sup> Genesis Rabbah 76:9.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:10-15.

<sup>3</sup> *The Promise of Equality, Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals*, UNPFA, 2005. Pages 65, 69. Available at [http://www.unpfa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2005/swp05\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unpfa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2005/swp05_eng.pdf).

words she uttered the names of the perpetrators who were arrested and quickly released. The police asserted that they didn't have enough evidence to prosecute them.<sup>4</sup>

On September 13, 2013, the world witnessed a step in the right direction in responding to violence against women. After Delhi-born Jyoti Singh Pandey died after she was beaten and raped by six men, the men were tried, convicted and sentenced to death. This time, justice was sought and served through the court. And yet, despite the convictions, the larger systemic problems that allowed gender-based violence to occur weren't addressed.

In the aftermath of the Indian court sentence, Ruth Messinger suggested that one way to create this systemic change is by empowering vulnerable members of society to advocate for their rights in all facets of their lives. She asserted that, "In order to realize a full vision of justice, people on the margins and legislative decision-makers must work together to implement enduring, informed solutions to social and economic problems."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this path to systemic change is the final lesson that we can learn from Dina. Unlike her brothers, whose names are explained and connected to particular traits, Dina is simply named, with no interpretation. Despite the lack of explicit explanation, Dina's name is simple to interpret, as it derives from the Hebrew word "*din*—judgment." In Dina's case, her brothers execute judgment on her behalf by killing the men of Shchem, addressing violence by causing more violence. But this judgment plunges Dina into further silence and invisibility.

In response to the problematic judgment exercised in Dina's case and the incomplete judgment exercised in contemporary instances of violence against women and girls, we have a moral and political obligation to reclaim Dina and bring about full justice by stepping up and acting with judgment. We need to not only raise our voices against sexual violence but support women and girls around the world who are—with courageous legislators and decision-makers—working to enshrine their rights in law so that violence is not only punished but prevented. Only once we eliminate violence and restore Dina's *din* will we have truly internalized the lessons of her story.



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<sup>4</sup> Lydia Polgreen, "Dropped Charges in Deadly Rape Provoke Fury in South Africa, and Pessimism," *The New York Times*, 8 June 2013. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/world/africa/rape-and-murder-stirs-fury-in-south-africa.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/world/africa/rape-and-murder-stirs-fury-in-south-africa.html?_r=0).

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Messinger, "Seeking Transformative Justice in the Aftermath of the Rape Case," *Feministing.com*, 9 October, 2013. Available at <http://feministing.com/2013/10/09/seeking-transformative-justice-in-the-aftermath-of-the-new-delhi-rape-case/>.

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