

Rape, Violence, Pregnancy, and Power: From Dinah to Dobbs

Shabbat Vayishlach 5783

December 9, 2022

Rabbi Barry H. Block

“A powerful man, sweet talking and lustful, rapes a woman. Other men become involved and ignore the feelings and reaction of the woman. Ultimately, deadly revenge is enacted upon the rapist. The woman is never heard from again, and we do not know if she feels justice has been achieved.”ⁱ That’s Student Rabbi Evan Traylor’s intentionally terse description of the rape of Dinah and its aftermath in this week’s Torah portion, *Vayishlach*.

The details aren’t better. A man named Shechem sees Dinah, Jacobs’s only known daughter, and he rapes her on first sight. The Torah says, “He was then captivated by...Dinah, falling in love with the young woman,” and he “spoke tenderly” to her.ⁱⁱ “Spoke tenderly” to **his rape victim**? Give me a break. The rapist’s father comes to Jacob, asking for his daughter in marriage. If Jacob responds, or if Dinah is consulted, Torah doesn’t tell us. Jacob’s sons, though, agree to the marriage proposal, under the condition that Shechem and all the men of his tribe circumcise themselves. Then, while these men are in their post-circumcision infirmity, two of Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, massacre them, killing them all. Rabbi Traylor synthesizes the episode compellingly: “Although they do not perpetrate Shechem-like sexual violence, Jacob and his sons [choose] domination over healing justice as they silence their own daughter and sister, bargain with the father of Dinah’s attacker, and lead a murderous rampage in revenge.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Who do Dinah’s brothers think they are? The answer is clear. They are men, large and in charge.

What makes these men imagine that they are entitled to this power? Rabbi Traylor finds an answer earlier in this week’s portion: “In the beginning of the *parashah*, Jacob is fearful when he learns that Esau is coming to meet him for the first time since Jacob stole his birthright and left home. However, according to Rashi, Jacob ‘was afraid lest he be killed, and he was distressed that he might have to kill someone,’ namely Esau. Patriarchal ideas tell men that they must ‘kill or be killed,’ that to survive and thrive in life requires being aggressive toward others in order to dominate them.”^{iv}

The FBI reports that, men commit nearly three-quarters of all crimes, including nearly 88% of murders and nonnegligent homicides and over 96% of rapes.^v The #metoo movement has brought awareness of sexual misconduct by

men in power in a wide variety of fields—from the entertainment industry to elite athletic associations, from medicine to religion. Obviously, every Catholic priest found to have committed sexual abuse is male, but the Catholic Church is not alone. Twenty-two individuals are named on the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ website listing of rabbis who have been expelled or suspended from our rabbinical organization for violations of the Code of Ethics, nineteen of them for sexual misconduct. All are male.^{vi}

In our Torah portion, Jacob’s sons take their sister’s rape seriously. In our own world, that’s not always the case. Rabbi Mary Zamore writes compellingly about “the productive perpetrator.” As professional leader of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, Rabbi Zamore has heard it all. In four vignettes, she compiles remarks “reflecting...real cases in the Jewish community:

“Yes, it is awful that he said those things. They are totally inappropriate, but he is a beloved member of our clergy team, a founder of our congregation. We must recognize that he only yells at our professional staff and lay leaders when he is stressed.

“She just has trouble with boundaries, but she’s harmless. If we hold her accountable, she may leave the temple, which would be devastating. After all, she donates hours and hours to the synagogue. She is irreplaceable. The staff just needs to avoid her. We will remind her not to go to the staff members’ homes without permission.

“We all know his behavior is not right, so we will make sure he does not meet with women alone. He’s going to retire soon. There is no reason to ruin his otherwise stellar reputation. Retirement is just a few years away. Maybe we can encourage him to leave sooner.

“He has suffered enough by his sexual harassment coming to light. However, his contributions to the Jewish community are far too numerous not to quote him. Whom else could we cite? And why mention this dark spot on an otherwise sterling career?”^{vii}

In the new movie *She Said*, which I highly recommend, we see men and women rushing to Harvey Weinstein’s defense, minimizing his crimes and highlighting his achievements. We also see brave and industrious women exposing his wrongdoing at great risk to themselves. Some imagine that we can continue enjoying Weinstein’s films—or, in our Jewish world, the music of Shlomo Carlebach or Bonia Shur, now known to have committed grotesque sexual misconduct. But how can we sanctify God’s great and holy Name to a melody composed by a man who defiled God’s image by abusing women over whom he

held power? We cannot. To do so defiles the Divine Name and risks retraumatizing victims of sexual misconduct, and not only victims of the artist or scholar in question.

Sexual violence comes in a variety of forms. Any time that people are denied equal rights, not to mention autonomy over their own bodies, on the basis of their gender, they have been violently assaulted.

This June, five men and one woman on the United States Supreme Court took it upon themselves to overturn a half century of expanded human rights. With a ruling known as *Dobbs*, they permitted the men and their female accomplices who control state legislatures across the country to enact laws that deprive people who can bear children, most of them women, of their reproductive liberty.

We do not know if Dinah became pregnant after being raped. We do know that, if Dinah did become pregnant, and she lived in Arkansas, she would no longer be able to decide for herself if she wanted to continue the pregnancy that resulted from a despicable act of sexual violence.

The CDC reports that nearly three million Americans have experienced pregnancy as a result of rape in their lifetimes. Moreover, “[o]f women who were raped by an intimate partner, 30% experienced a form of reproductive coercion by the same partner. Specifically, about 20% reported that their partner had tried to get them pregnant when they did not want to or tried to stop them from using birth control. About 23% reported their partner refused to use a condom.”^{viii} Reproductive coercion, too, is violence. And these victims, too, ought to have the right to terminate a resulting pregnancy, just as a victim of a non-sexual assault is entitled to the healthcare required for their physical and emotional healing.

From Dinah to *Dobbs*, women have been subjected to sexual and reproductive violence and then been rendered powerless to respond. Rabbi Traylor insists that it does not have to be that way: “Knowing [our] destructive power...and witnessing its brutality in our Torah and throughout society, men must work forcefully to destroy the current structures of toxic masculinity. We must imagine a world in which we do not seek to dominate others physically, sexually, or emotionally—a world in which we...no longer...feel as if we must fight, or imagine that we must know all the answers. That world is possible.”^{ix}

At the Red Sea, liberated from Egyptian bondage, Moses and the men of Israel sing joyfully, in gratitude to God. Miriam knows that the praise is incomplete—perhaps the liberation is incomplete, too—as the women have not been invited to raise their own voices. Miriam takes initiative. She picks up the

hand-drum and leads the women in joyful song. The millennia of gender-based violence and oppression, and of men silencing everyone else, have been long and painful. One day, we will all sing the song of liberation, together.

Amen.

ⁱ Evan Traylor, “Dismantling the Patriarchy from All Sides,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 47.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 34:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Traylor, p. 50.

^{iv} Traylor, p. 49.

^v “2019 Crime in the United States, Ten-Year Arrest Trends, by Sex, 2010-2019.” [FBI — Table 33](#). I used 2019 figures. I did the math to determine percentages.

^{vi} “Rabbis Expelled, Suspended, or Censured with Publication,” [Rabbis Expelled, Suspended or Censured with Publication \(ccarnet.org\)](#). I did not mention censured rabbis, because none are so listed on this website on December 9, 2022. Any error in counting is mine.

^{vii} Rabbi Mary L. Zamore, “Harassment-Free Jewish Spaces: Our Leaders Must Answer to a Higher Standard,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*,” p. 141.

^{viii} Understanding Pregnancy Resulting from Rape in the United States,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Understanding Pregnancy Resulting from Rape in the United States | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC](#).

^{ix} Traylor, p. 51.