

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Va-Yishlakh

WHO'S TO BLAME?

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאֲרָץ:
וַיְרָא אֹתָהּ שֵׁכֶם בֶּן־חַמּוֹר הַחִוִּי נְשִׂיא הָאֲרָץ וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה:

Now Dina, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her and took her and forced her to lie with him.
(Genesis 34:1-2)

BACKGROUND: The narrative of the rape of Dina takes place immediately after Jacob and his family have returned to Jacob's ancestral home in Canaan. We learn from the text that Dina goes out to "see the daughters of the land" and is raped by Shechem the Hivite, who then requests that she become his wife. Dina's brothers are outraged to hear that their sister had been raped. The brothers trick the Hivites, promising that if the Hivites agree to be circumcised, then Dina and the daughters of Israel will be available to them. One the third day, when the Hivites were in pain from having been circumcised, Simeon and Levi snuck up on the Hivites and killed all the men of the city. When Jacob complained that Simeon and Levi's actions would bring trouble to the house of Jacob, the sons answered, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

The text raises many questions, most poignantly perhaps, why Dina is victimized by Shechem. One such answer to the question appears in the following midrash:

A man must master his wife, that she go not out into the market place, for every woman who goes out into the market place will eventually come to grief. From where do we know it? From Dinah, as it is written, *And Dinah went out...* (*Bereshit Rabbah* 8:12)

Another explanation for why Dina is raped is that the story is meant to indict the Canaanites, whose sexual practices are immoral, according to later books of the Torah. Shechem's rape of Dina is the paradigmatic example of Cananite depravity, an early historical episode that vividly illustrates why the Israelites must always remain separate from their Canaanite neighbors. To permit the sexual mixing of Canaanites and Israelites, the text seems to suggest, leads to immorality and the threatening of the Israelite people's future in the land. The idea that the Canaanites are sexually depraved then, leads eventually to a justification for the Israelites' later conquest of the land where the Canaanites dwell.

Questions: When people are the victims of crimes, it is natural to try to explain "why," in order to restore our own sense of order. Two of the means by which society does this are suggested by the Dina narrative. We can, on one hand, "blame the victim," as in the case of the midrash. Dina was raped, the midrash explains, because she went out into the public sphere. We also can indict the culture that the perpetrator comes from, as in the Canaanites. Dina was raped, according to this reading, because Canaanites are inherently immoral and depraved, and therefore collective punishment and displacement is justified.

How can we respond adequately to victimization without, on one hand, blaming the victim or, perhaps just as ominously, resorting to cultural stereotypes and collective punishment?