



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vayishlach: The Morality of Violence

Our parsha describes the episode in which Dinah is raped by the crown prince of the City of Sh'khem. The language used depicts the crime in violent terms:

Sh'khem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force, and raped her. (34:2)

Sh'khem is described as entitled, the "chief of the country." Maybe he saw it as his right to have his way with any girl he saw!

This depraved act is viewed by Jacob and his sons as a moral travesty:

"Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter...he had committed an outrage in Israel." (34:5-7)

Jacob's sons then trick the men of Sh'khem and:

On the third day, when they were hurting, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. (43:26)

The question we shall address this week relates to the moral justification of Shimon and Levi's bloodbath in Sh'khem. Does the Torah condemn or condone their actions? On the one hand, it depicts Sh'khem's ruthless rape. On the other hand, were all the men of Sh'khem guilty?

Later, the Torah reports the brothers looting the city. The passage is so wordy, so filled with emphasis that we feel it is making a statement. But is it a vindication or a vilification of their actions?

The other sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled. They seized their flocks **and** herds **and** asses, **all** that was inside the town and outside; **all** their wealth, **all** their

children, and their wives, **all** that was in the houses, they took as captives and booty. (34:27-29)

The Torah seems to throw our moral sense in opposing directions.

And we will not then be surprised that the legitimacy of these actions on the part of Jacob's sons is hotly debated by the medieval commentators.

Maimonides:

Sh'khem abducted (and raped Dinah); the people of Sh'khem saw, and they knew and... they did not bring them to justice... it is for this reason that all the householders of Sh'khem were guilty of death. (Mishneh Torah. Laws of Kings 9:14.)

For Maimonides, the entire townsfolk are culpable. After all, they were complicit in their silence, and demonstrate unwillingness to condemn, judge and punish the rapist. Can a man of power be allowed to rape and get away with it?

Nachmanides disagrees and condemns the brothers' excessive murder:

They killed the men of the city, who had not sinned towards him. It would have been legitimate had they killed Sh'khem [the prince of the city] alone. This is what the verse says, "The sons of Jacob answered Sh'khem and his father Chamor with guile, because he had defiled their sister Dina." For they agreed to speak with guile, because of the outrage committed against them.

On his deathbed, Jacob curses his sons. This would seem to support Nachmanides' opinion:

Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel. (49:5-7)

One of the most interesting exchanges in the biblical passage is the final conversation between Jacob and his sons. Jacob said to Simeon and Levi:

You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed. But they answered: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (34:30-31)

Please discuss this debate:

- What is Yaakov's criticism to his sons? Is it an ethical critique? What is his argument?
- How do Shimon and Levi respond? Is theirs an ethical argument?
- Who has the final word?

- Who makes a better point?
- Are Shimon and Levi answering Jacob's concern or are they making a different point?

Analysis:

We might say that Yaakov is expressing a visceral fear. He is saying that as a small family, Shimon and Levi have made the entire camp vulnerable. After escaping the clutches of Esau, Jacob feels that these hotheads have imperiled the entire family. He is scared.

But Shimon and Levi answer back. They say: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

What is their point? We might offer two possibilities:

1. They are saying to their father, "Dad! You are always so frightened for the family's future. But there are some things more important than safety and pragmatism. Our sister has been defiled; our honor is offended. Does that not matter? Now is the time to uphold our family pride, even if we imperil the family! Shall we have no honor?"

2. But we could read the verses a different way:

"Dad! You think we will be vulnerable if we just move away and suck this up? No! Moving on will invite further attacks! Now we have made people think three times before they touch our daughters! People will fear us! Only then will we ensure our safety!"

In other words, only violence will protect us; it is only an empowered Jewish people who will ensure the safety of the nation.

- Who has the better argument?
- Why does Jacob resort to a practical critique now, and a moral one on his deathbed?
- Do you think that Shimon and Levi's argument is valid? Valid enough to warrant indiscriminate killing and looting?
- And if they had done nothing... then what?

In Conclusion

Let me say that this topic is impossibly conflicted. The biblical text makes us realize that both sides are flawed; both sides are in the wrong. The debate between Maimonides and Nachmanides pits the degradation of a lawless and violent society (Sh'khem) that whitewashes its criminal leadership, against an action of retribution that seems to be unlawful genocide. Jacob expresses pragmatic fear for the safety of his family, but his sons remind him that the family also needs to uphold its dignity and self-worth; sometimes a family must defend itself.

Power and violence always entangle us in difficult moral dilemmas. I am glad that in today's Israel, we can take up arms to ensure the defense of our nation. After millennia of persecution, the Jewish People can rightfully say: "Shall you treat our sister as a whore?"

At the same time, I am glad that our army enforces an ethical code. I am proud that our courts examine and at times bring soldiers to a law-court to determine whether an act is moral or unlawful; a moment of self-defense or wanton violence.

The arena of force, bloodshed and brutality is rarely morally unambiguous. The Torah brings this story so that we may debate its complexity. We rise to a proper moral standard when we take these questions, and examine our actions with utmost seriousness, and honesty.

Shabbat shalom!