THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP OF SIMEON AND DINAH

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In the story of the "defilement" of Dinah, Jewish tradition has it that Prince Shechem and all his people were guilty. I think other interpretations are possible. Particularly, I am fascinated by the possible change of Jewish history had the Shechemite community been included in the wider household of Jacob-Israel. Blame can be placed for the massacre of the Shechemites on the disturbed family relationship between Jacob and Leah, with emphasis on the violence of Simeon and Levi.

Jacob rebuked Simeon and Levi, saying *'You have sullied me making me odious among the inhabitants of the land'* (Gen. 34:30). It seems his complaint was directed at their misguided tactics. Decades later, Jacob on his deathbed instructed his other sons not to take heed of the counsel of Simeon and Levi. He defined them as cruel (a term he used twice), cursed their anger, and wanted to separate them from their brothers (49:5-7). Levi apparently understood the need for repentance, Simeon did not. When Moses, grandson of Levi, blessed the tribes shortly before his death, Simeon did not even appear among them (Deut. 33:6-25). One may deduce that indiscriminate killing was rejected by both Jacob and Moses

Perhaps reading the text may illuminate. *Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob, went out see the daughters of the land* (Gen. 34:1). Why the stress on Jacob as the father? It is obvious that since Dinah was the daughter of Leah then Jacob was her father. She is under her father's protection, and it seems unlikely that she went out without his permission. The text tells us that the prince took Dinah and lay with her, and dishonored or defiled her. He did not rape her as sometimes suggested (Gen. 34:2).[1] "Defiled" presumably indicates that since she was a virgin and her father had not given

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consent to a marriage, the prince had violated the custom. Whether Dinah experienced shame or dishonor is not stated.[2]

The only other incidence of rape in the Bible is the assault on Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, who then took a hatred to her and banished her from his house (II Sam. 13:14,18).

How does Prince Shechem act? *His soul cleaved to her and he loved and spoke kindly to her* (Gen. 34:3). In the entire Bible, the only other man portrayed as so loving to a woman is Jacob in his tender feelings for his wife Rachel (29:18). Jacob kissed her the first time he saw her (29:11), and one could argue that this could be construed or misconstrued as close to a defilement in that society.

What is crucially different is that the mother of Dinah is not the beloved Rachel but the despised Leah (29:31). Imagine a young girl whose father married two sisters, her mother and her aunt. He never loves or speaks tenderly to her mother, but only to her aunt. Leah's situation and feelings are reflected in the names she gave to Simeon and Levi; Simeon *because I was hated* (29:33), and Levi *this time my husband will love me* (29:34). Of course, he does not.

Her daughter Dinah does find a man who loves her and speaks tenderly to her. It seems likely that Dinah would be drawn to a man who shows affection that her father never showed to her mother. Shechem asks his father to arrange a marriage and was prepared to offer any price to marry Dinah (34:12).

The sons, led by Simeon and Levi, aggressively announce to their father that they cannot give their sister to an uncircumcised man. Her brothers could take Canaanite wives, but other than the offspring of Uncle Esau and Great-Uncle Ishmael, where could Dinah find a suitable circumcised husband? Prince Shechem *did not hesitate to do it* (34:19). The "it" is to be circumcised, that he was instantly willing to do *Because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter* (34:19). He and his father persuade all the males of the city to be circumcised. When they are still incapacitated, Simeon and Levi attack and slaughter all the males, enslave the women and children and plunder the city. Dinah is, of course, never consulted about her preferences.

Simeon and Levi say to their father *'Should our sister be treated like a whore*?' (34:31). They acted according to a concept of honor that justified

them in taking revenge on the perpetrator and all his tribe. They must have known, especially from their own names, that there was no love between their parents. Was it irrelevant to them that their sister was loved? Or, were they envious of what their mother did not have?

Jacob clearly saw things differently. He was primarily concerned about the welfare of his family, now seriously threatened by *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* (34:30).

One learns more about Simeon later. He was the brother that Joseph chose to hold hostage in Egypt, that perhaps hints that he had been the leader of the assault on Joseph. The tribe of Simeon is missing from blessing of Moses (Deut. 33:6-29). Did Moses mean to exclude the Simeonites from the people of Israel? Zimri, a Simeonite, had sexual relations with a foreign woman in front of the *mishkan* – the Tabernacle, and Phineas, a Levite slew him with a spear (Num. 25:6-12). The tribe of Levi – Moses' tribe – had changed; the tribe of Simeon had not.

This theme of vengeance in the story of Dinah contrasts with the event that precedes it; the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob (27:41). After 20 years of separation, it is Esau who repaired the relationship between the brothers. Esau decided reconciliation was better than the vengeance he had originally sought.

Hamor the Hivite had sought a merger with Jacob and his clan, after an intermarriage seemingly acceptable to Jacob. One might speculate on how such a merger, had it come to pass, might have changed the future history of Israel and the Jewish people.

NOTES

1. See: L.M. Bechtel, "What if Dinah is not raped? (Genesis 34)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 62:19-36 (1994); M.I. Gruber, "A re-examination of the charge against Shechem son of Hamor" [in Hebrew] *Beth Mikra,*157:119-127 (1999).

2. There is a tradition that Asenath, the wife of Joseph, was the daughter of Dinah and Prince Shechem. See James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) p. 435.