

Parshat Vayishlach
Seeing the Divine in Dinah
Sofia Freudenstein - Class of 2025

*Trigger warning: The following Torah discusses rape.

Dinah, the daughter of Leah, like many female biblical characters, is somehow both under-developed in the Torah text and over-developed, rather negatively, by rabbinic commentators. In the eyes of Chazal, her singular act of “going out” escalates to become an extended lesson in what women should *not* do.

The Torah text says the following:

וַתֵּצֵא דִּינָה בַת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאֶרֶץ: (בראשית ל"ד:א')

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land (Genesis 34:1).

Dinah’s seemingly innocuous action is immediately followed by horrible tragedy:

וַיֵּרָא אֹתָהּ שִׁכֶם בֶּן־חַמּוֹר הַחִיטִי נָשִׂיא הָאֶרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה: (בראשית ל"ד:ב')

Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and raped her (Genesis 34:2).

What does it mean that Dinah “went out” to visit the land? ? Many rabbinic commentators see the second verse following the first one as a correlation that helps us better understand the context. Since Dinah “went out” in such a manner, she was raped. Midrash Tanchuma provides an analogy: To what is Dinah’s seeing of other women compared to? To someone who walks about the marketplace with a slice of meat in his hand, and a dog sees the meat - of course the dog walks after the person and clutches the meat out of his hand! So too, Dinah went out to see amongst the women of the land, and Schechem clutched her for himself (Midrash Tanchuma Vayishlach 19). The midrash reads Dinah’s desire for seeing the woman of the land to be one that is also about a desire to *be seen*, in a provocative or sexual manner.

This is a very painful read of what happens in this episode; one that blames the victim for what happens to her, and literally compares her to a piece of meat. This understanding of the story has been used to silence Dinah herself and women throughout Jewish history – creating a culture in which leaving the domain of the house is one that is not only licentious, but dangerous. Dinah’s desire to see and be seen, understood in an objectifying sense, represents a kind of Pandora’s box – the moment a woman claims independence, her intentions are deemed impure. The moment she claims her life for herself, she is perceived as “asking for it.”

However, I wonder if the issue here is not Dinah’s claim of independence, but how the rabbinic commentators *choose* to perceive this act. Midrash Tanchuma seems to rest on the

odd linguistic construct of “לראות בבנות הארץ.” The grammar of “לראות בבנות הארץ” is unusual. לראות, the verb “to see,” is usually followed by the word “את” (or “the”) with an accompanying noun, together meaning “to look at.” Yet Dinah’s action is described differently. She hopes to “look in” the daughters of the land. Midrash Tanchuma starts off with teasing out a desire to see and be seen (termed “לראות לראות”) from the peculiarity of the phrase’s structure, and sees that as the backbone for such a midrash. This ambiguity in the direction and context of seeing is what grounds the midrash’s problematic read of Dinah’s actions, and blames the victim by saying she was seeking to be seen. However, is wanting to see and be seen always about objectification, or even about “seeing” in a physical sense altogether?

In a very different context, Masechet Chagigah begins with discussions of who is to arrive before God on the pilgrimage festivals at the Temple. In this back and forth, the following *drash* is made regarding the two times the verses describe what is supposed to be happening at the Temple, and it might seem a bit familiar to us:

שְׁנַאֲמַר: “יִרְאֶה”, “יִרְאֶה” – כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁבָּא לְרִאוֹת כֹּה בָּא לְיִרְאוֹת. (חגיגה ב' א:ו')

As it says: “Three occasions in the year all your males will appear [yera’e] before the Lord God” (Exodus 23:17). Since there are no vowels in the text, this can be read as: All your males will see [yireh] the Lord God. This teaches that in the same manner that one comes to see, so he comes to be seen (Chagigah 2a:6).

God desires for us to appear at the Temple, for God to “see” us. Yet, God also desires for us to see God. What does it mean to see God? After all, isn’t God incorporeal? Perhaps this is a ‘seeing’ that is existential and relational in nature. Being in an authentic relationship requires us to bring our full selves and to be ready to fully accept the Other we are in relationship with in the truest sense. This has nothing to do with seeing on a physical level, but instead becomes a metaphor for talking about what it means to be truly accepted and respected by another being. 20th-century philosopher Martin Buber describes this as an “I-Thou” relationship as opposed to an “I-It” relationship. Do we encounter another being as an “It,” a thing purely for my benefit, or as a “Thou,” as a being unto itself that I seek to fully understand on its own terms? God, even in God’s almightiness, desires to relate to us in a way that is intimate and connected, as illustrated in this read of “יִרְאֶה” and “יִרְאֶה”.

This language of Chagigah is strikingly similar to the Midrash Tanchuma’s “לראות לראות” understanding of what Dinah desired, suggesting a potential for a mutual and relational desire to existentially and metaphorically see and be seen. What if, instead of the midrash’s read of Dinah’s desire to be seen and sexually objectified, it actually means she desired to be seen existentially, to be in deep relationship with others? What if, instead of being comparable to a piece of meat in the marketplace, Dinah’s actions are comparable to God’s own desires? What if Dinah actually is and should be an example for Jewish women, to model for us what relationship with others should be like? Of course, Shechem’s actions take advantage and violate Dinah in her pursuit for connection. But what if instead of gleaning lessons about how women should act from what Shechem does, we instead appreciate what Dinah originally was looking for when meeting the women of the land? Dinah then not only becomes redeemed, her actions mimic the Divine.

May we merit to learn from Dinah and her Godly desire for closeness, instead of learning

from the tragedy that befalls her.



Sofia Freudenstein graduated with an Honors Bachelor degree from the University of Toronto in May 2021, double-majoring in Jewish Studies and Philosophy. Her undergraduate thesis was on assessing Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought, and she also completed her first basic unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Baycrest Geriatric Hospital at that time. Before university, Sofia competed in the International Chidon HaTanach, and participated in the Drisha High School Program, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, and the Tikvah High School Program. She spent a gap year at Midreshet Lindenbaum, interned for the organization Ayeka, has been Co-Rosh Beit Midrash at Camp Stone for two summers, and was the Director of Experiential Education at the Drisha High School Program this past summer. Sofia has been involved in her local Hillel as a Student Leader and Multifaith Chaplaincy Intern, and was a member of the Hillel International Student Cabinet. While in the Core Semikha program, Sofia is also pursuing a masters degree in Jewish Philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva

University., and is the Maharat Intern for ASBI in Chicago for the 5783 year. Sofia fondly remembers hearing Torah from scholar-in-residence Rabba Sara Hurwitz at her parents' minyan when she was 13, and has been looking forward to this opportunity for learning and growth in leadership ever since.