

**Parshat Vayeitzei:  
The Violation of Dinah; The Violation of our Society**  
**Maharat Rori Picker Neiss**  
*Class of 2014*

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*The following is adapted from the drasha (sermon) delivered by Rori Picker Neiss at Bais Abraham Congregation, St Louis, MO on November 17, 2013, Shabbat Parshat .*

I used to think that the Torah was a story of God, and, as such, was a story of heroes, of bravery, and of goodness. Perhaps that is how my teachers had wanted me to see it. I learned of the heroism of Noah, who saved humanity from total extinction. I learned of the bravery of Abraham, who argued with God in defense of the wicked people of Sodom and Gemorrah. I learned of the never-ending compassion that God displays towards the Jewish people.

The Torah is not a story of God, though; it is a story of humans. While humans can be heroic, brave, and good, they can also be corrupt, oppressive, and depraved.

There is one story in the Torah in particular that we often slide right past. It is a story we do not like to teach in schools, and one we often do not want to discuss openly. It is a story that is not easy to tell, but one that we need to tell. It is a story of corruption, of oppression, and of depravity.

In this week's parsha, Parshat Vayishlach, Jacob's daughter, Dinah, is forcibly taken, and raped.

She is raped by Shechem, a man of power, the son of the head of the city, the namesake of the town.

As if the story itself would not be shocking and disturbing enough already with those details, the story unfolds in a surprising way. It begins:

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

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַת-לֵאָה, אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב, לְרֵאוֹת, בְּבָנוֹת הָאֶרֶץ. (בראשית לד:א)

Rashi says something astounding about this verse. He says:

Dinah was called bat Leah – the daughter of Leah, and not the daughter of Jacob, because of her act of going out. She was a yatz'anit, a "going-outer" just like her mother, as it is written, "Leah went out to meet him" (Bereishit 30:16). (Rashi on Bereishit 30:1)

בת לאה – ולא בת יעקב, אלא על שם יציאתה נקראת בת לאה, שאף היא יצאנית היתה, שנאמר (ל טז) ותצא לאה לקראתו (רשי בראשית ל:א)

When did Leah go out? In the previous parsha there is an odd story that is recounted. Reuben, the eldest son of Leah, was picking plants in the field and he brought back mandrakes for his mother. Rachel asked her sister for some of these plants and Leah, referencing the sibling rivalry that pervades their relationship, responded, "Was it not enough that you took away my husband? You also want my son's mandrakes?!" And so Rachel, in order to acquire these plants, offers her sister her own night to be with their shared husband in exchange for the mandrakes.

So why did Leah go out? She went out to greet Jacob to tell him that he was going to be spending the night in her tent and not Rachel's. She said to him:

Come to me for I have hired you with my son's  
mandrakes (Bereishit 30:16).

אֵלַי תָּבוֹא כִּי שָׂכַר שְׂכָנְתִּיךָ בְּדוּדָאֵי בְּנֵי (בראשית ל:טז)

The Rabbis connect these stories. Why did Leah go out? She went out to bring Jacob back to her tent. Why did Dinah go out? As her mother's daughter, she, too, must have gone out to entice a man back to her tent.

This Rashi is incredibly troubling and deeply painful. In no uncertain terms, Rashi is saying that Dinah bears, at the very least, some of the blame for her attack.

I cannot help but notice that this story is a quintessential story of abuse. We have a woman who is attacked. She is taken by force— whether that force is physical or whether that force is perceived because her abuser is one in a position of power. She is attacked and is blamed for her own attack. We also have a father, Jacob, who feels paralyzed by the situation and, throughout the entire ordeal, says absolutely nothing. And we have brothers, Simeon and Levi, who are so overwhelmed by the assault on their sister and by their father's failure to act that they turn to violence, and ultimately murder every man in the town.

I wish we could look at this story as one of ancient history, but the Torah is not a story of the past. It is a story of humans, and tragically, this story is one that is still very current.

There is abuse in our community. There is physical abuse, there is mental abuse, there is emotional abuse, and there is sexual abuse. To color over it doesn't make it go away. To ignore it doesn't make it go away. Even to turn to violence does not make it go away. To blame the victim certainly does not make it go away.

In fact, it condones it.

There is one particular tale of abuse that has pervaded the headlines lately, one that is unique to the Orthodox Jewish community. It is most embarrassing because of our inability to respond, and so it is a tale we would all much rather ignore: the abuse of *agunot*.

When a husband refuses to grant his wife a get, a religious divorce, she is bound to him in a state of endless limbo, unable to sever ties and forbidden to remarry and move on with her life.

Some people may think that I just took quite a leap. We began with a story of kidnapping and rape and now we have come to women whose only problem is that they cannot get remarried. I might have thought that too at one point.

In 2008, I started working for an organization called JOFA, The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. JOFA has been at the forefront of the fight to free agunot for over a decade. If you would look online to learn more about iggun, you would find JOFA. In fact, that is what people did. My job was Program Coordinator. I planned conferences; I coordinated speakers. Countless times, though, the phone would ring in the office and there would be a woman at the other end of the line who was pleading for help. I would listen to their stories, and I learned something very important: no one wakes up one morning and decides to withhold a get. The women that I spoke to had been physically abused. They had been emotionally abused. They had been mentally abused. They had even been sexually abused. When they finally found the courage to leave—to take their families, to pack their bags, to walk away often into an uncertain future—the get was one last way their abuser was able keep control over them.

The plight of agunot has been especially in the news lately because of two stories that have gained national attention. In October, the FBI arrested ten people as part of a conspiracy to kidnap and torture husbands

who refused to give their wives a get. Police seized masks, ropes, and scalpels together with feather quills and ink bottles. Feather quills and ink bottles: tools for writing a get, together with tools of torment.

About a week and a half ago, Gital Dodelson went public with her story. Four-and-a-half years ago, she married Avrohom Meir Weiss, the great-grandson of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and a member of an incredibly public and incredibly illustrious family. Ten months later she left with allegations that her husband was controlling and manipulative. In August 2012 they received a civil divorce. Now, over a year later, she is still married to him under Jewish law.

In response to the publicity, the family of Avraham Meir Weiss issued a statement that says that Weiss is prepared to give the get, as soon as the Dodelsons agree to their demands. They said, “The Dodelsons, not we, are preventing the get from being given.”

Thus we find ourselves in the midst of the same story we just read in this week’s parsha. We have a woman who is being abused and is being blamed for her abuse. We have people who are so overwhelmed by the situation and by the power of those involved that they feel paralyzed to respond. We have people who want to turn to violence.

The story in the Torah ends in a rather jarring way. There is no resolution to the story. There are no winners in this tale, only losers.

We cannot stand idly by. Nor can we turn to violence.

JOFA has been working on resolutions for the agunah problem since its inception. Come hear Blu Greenberg talk about her vision for this issue at the December 8 JOFA conference. Register today!  
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I do not know the whole story of Gital Dodelson and Avraham Meir Weiss. There are many allegations that are going back and forth. We may never really know the full story. Here is what I do know: the get should never be used as a method for extortion. In a situation where a couple has decided to separate and not seek reconciliation, a get must always be given unconditionally. It cannot be a tool for demanding more money. It cannot be a tool for renegotiating child custody agreements. It most certainly cannot be a tool to manipulate and harm someone just because one feels wronged.

The Orthodox community is the only community that still has agunim and agunot— people trapped in these religious marriages. Many solutions have been proposed but, until recently, none have really taken hold. There is one solution, though, that may be the answer: a prenuptial agreement.

The Rabbinical Council of America’s prenuptial agreement provides that in the unfortunate event of divorce, the beit din (religious court) will have the proper authority to ensure that the get is not used as a bargaining chip. The document requires that (1) each spouse agrees to appear before a panel of Jewish law judges (dayanim) arranged by the Beth Din of America, if the other spouse demands it, and to abide by the decision of the Beth Din with respect to the get; and (2) if the couple separates, the husband is obligated to pay the wife a certain sum each day from the date he receives notice until the date a Jewish divorce is obtained.

Many of us who are married got married before the prenuptial agreement was created, or did not know about the document or, as in my case, had a rabbi who did not want to give us the document. This document is currently the best defense and the best offense that we have against iggun, but it can only work if we all sign on— figuratively and literally.

That is why Bais Abraham Congregation is inviting all married couples in our community without a prenuptial agreement to join us on January 26th to sign the RCA postnuptial agreement. Rabbi Yona Reiss, the former Director of the Beit Din of America and the current head of the Beit Din of the Chicago Rabbinical Council, will join us that day as a Keynote Speaker to discuss iggun and the work that he has done to end this horrible problem in our community. We will then join together, as a community, in signing the postnuptial document– not because we think it is necessary for our own marriages, but because we believe it is necessary for all marriages. Then, like at a wedding, the signing of the legal documents will be followed by a party. We, too, will celebrate our relationships, but we will celebrate relationships based on mutual respect and equanimity. We will celebrate our community’s commitment to solving this problem. We will celebrate taking a stand. We will celebrate that we will no longer stand idly by to the abuse within our community.

Ramban (Nachmanides) differs from Rashi in his read of the opening to the story of the rape of Dinah. He does not assert that Dinah is called the daughter of Leah to emphasize that she is to blame for her rape, but rather:

<p>The reason that the Torah calls Dinah the daughter of Leah who was born to Jacob is to emphasize to us that she is the full-sister of Simeon and Levi, who protect her zealously and avenge her. (Ramban on Bereishit 34:1)</p>	<p>וטעם בת לאה אשר ילדה ליעקב – לומר שהיא אחות שמעון ולוי המקנאים ונוקמים נקמתה. (רמב"ן בראשית לד:א)</p>
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We, too, feel the pain of our brothers and sisters who are suffering. We, too, want to protect them zealously. We will not avenge them with violence, though. Instead, we will avenge them with the best revenge possible: working to ensure that no one else will be able to use a get as a tool for abuse, extortion, or retribution ever again.



*Maharat Rori Picker Neiss serves as the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St Louis. Prior to that she was the Director of Programming, Education and Community Engagement at Bais Abraham Congregation, a Modern Orthodox Jewish synagogue in University City, MO. She previously served as Acting Executive Director for Religions for Peace-USA, Program Coordinator for the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Assistant Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Secretariat for the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, the formal Jewish representative in international, interreligious dialogue. Rori is the co-chair of the North American Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders fellow, and co-editor of "InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook." She is married to Russel Neiss, a Software Engineer for Sefaria, and they have three children.*