

Parashah Thirty–Two

Genesis 33:18–35:8; Nahum 1:12-2:5; Matthew 5:38–48

Notes by Tim Hegg

Doing Right the Wrong Way

Our text today contains the story of Shechem’s demise at the hands of Jacob’s sons. At the outset the *parashah* specifically states that Jacob came “safely” to the city of Shechem. The word translated “safely” is שָׁלֵם, *shaleim*, from the same root as shalom, “peace.” The word itself means “whole” or “complete,” and thus the Sages emphasize that Jacob had come to Shechem lacking nothing—God had supplied his every need, including protection from his enemies. Jacob purchased land from the local authorities, an indication that he planned to stay long term. Once again, the narrative of Genesis emphasizes that the promise of God in terms of giving Abraham and his seed the Land was coming true. Moreover, Jacob built an altar there, and called it אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *El Elohei Israel*, “El is the God of Israel.” However, this opening notice of Jacob’s “peace” contains a portend of a turnabout in the story: he would soon be leaving Shechem because the action of his sons would create hostility and war. The shalom with which he had arrived would be short-lived.

The whole matter involved Dinah. 34:2 sets the scene: Dinah is the daughter of Leah, and she went out to “visit” the “daughters of the land. The word translated “visit” is רָאָה, *ra’ah*, “to see,” but we have already noted how the word “to see” can also mean “to select,” or “to choose.” In the *Akedah* of Genesis 22, the same word plays a significant role in the story. When Isaac inquires of Abraham about the lamb for the sacrifice, his father answers that “God will *provide* for Himself a lamb.” The word translated “provide” is our same word, *ra’ah*— God will *see* for Himself a lamb. So it is very possible that the use of the word here indicates far more than mere physical “seeing.” Dinah went out from her home because she had become attracted to the daughters of the land. Here is the first important lesson we learn from our *parashah*: attraction to the world, to the life of those who neither know nor obey God, is a fatal attraction. Our Master taught:

John 15:19 “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

And John himself wrote:

1John 2:15–16 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

The “lust of the flesh” is the desire of the fallen nature. This is followed by the “lust of the eyes,” the desire to participate in the life of the world. This may well inform the use of *ra’ah* in our text: when Dinah went out to “see” the daughters of the land, the text may be telling us that she had been drawn to their pagan ways.

Out from under the protection of her home and the safe-guards of her family, Dinah is vulnerable. And in her vulnerability, she falls prey to the base lusts of the men of the place. Shechem is the son of Hamor and when our text introduces this man, Moses makes it clear that he was a “prince” of the land, and that he was a Hittite. In other words, he had plenty of power, and he was

an idolater. In his viewpoint, taking any woman was within his power and rights. And so he violated Dinah—he took her by force. The text is very clear: he afflicted Dinah (עָנָה, *'anah*, “to afflict, humiliate”) against her will.

We might be tempted to place the blame upon Dinah. After all, she had gone out from her family and willingly had placed herself in the company of idolaters. But even though she had acted foolishly, the sin of rape lay fully upon the shoulders of Shechem. Dinah had acted foolishly by despising the protection of her authorities. But Dinah’s foolish choices in no way diminish the guilt of Shechem. So we discover that God’s laws of morality are universal. Even though the Hittite gave no credence to the morality demanded by the Creator, His laws still apply: Shechem had committed a sin first and foremost against the God of the universe, a sin for which he is guilty and worthy of punishment.

But Dinah’s actions should be a clear warning to us all: if we put ourselves in the company of those who have no regard for God’s righteous ways, we should not be surprised when we are treated unjustly. If we accept the ways of the world, we will fall prey to the ways of the world.

In 34:3 we discover another important lesson. The verse states that Shechem was deeply attracted to Dinah (literally, “his soul was attached to Dinah,” וַתִּדְבַק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה). The word translated “attracted” is דָּבַק, *davak*, the same word used in Genesis 2:24—“a man shall leave his father and mother and be *joined* to his wife.” What Shechem desired is something God allows only in the context of marriage. Shechem was attracted to Dinah on physical grounds only—he wanted a physical relationship with her apart from the life commitment of marriage. So when the next phrase states “and he loved the girl,” we recognize that this “love” was really very selfish—it was a base kind of “love,” a desire characterized by personal fulfillment alone. The verse goes on to say “and he spoke tenderly to her,” literally, “and he spoke upon the heart of the young lady.” The Hebrew idiom, “to speak upon the heart,” often indicates passionate speech. Hannah, in pouring out her heart to the Lord (1Sam 1:13) speaks “upon the heart.” And often the phrase indicates “kind words” or words of “compassion.” What we learn from the story of our *parashah*, however, is that *kind words may mask true motives*. Shechem has already demonstrated his true character—he is motivated by selfish desires. His tender words are a thin veneer to cover up his wayward heart. But how vulnerable we are to “tender words.” Many a woman’s heart has been swayed by “kind words” only to discover later that the true heart of the man is entirely opposite of his words!

The violation of Dinah soon is made known to her father and brothers, and they react appropriately: “the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he (Shechem) had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.” The actions of Shechem could never be condoned. He had violated one of the most sacred institutions given to mankind by the Creator, the sacred bond of marriage. In so doing, Shechem had belittled one of the primary building blocks of a righteous society. Even before the giving of the Torah, in which the specifics of God’s laws would be revealed, marriage was held as sacred.

The sons of Jacob were therefore justified in seeking revenge on behalf of their sister, Dinah. Remember that in the time of the patriarchs, justice was administered within the clan. There were no recognized civil courts. This was the time of the blood avenger, in which a family member was given the right to enact justice upon one who violated the life of a relative. Yet the method employed by Dinah’s brothers in seeking justice against Shechem was wrong: they used deception wrapped in the cloak of religion to achieve their desire for justice.

The story is well known: the brothers appear to agree with Hamor’s request that Dinah be given

to Shechem as a legitimate wife. But they explain that in their covenant tradition, only circumcised males could marry within their clan. Hamor and his people decide that undergoing circumcision was the means of eventually controlling and owning the wealth of Jacob, and so they submit to the ritual. Then, when all the men are recovering from their circumcision, and in no condition to fight, the sons of Jacob swoop down upon them and slaughter them with the sword. They must have reasoned that though Shechem alone was guilty of the crime, to bring him to justice would surely incur the wrath of the Shechemites, and initiate war. So they pre-empt that possibility by wiping out the whole lot of them. It was a brilliant military strategy, but it was surely unjust. Their desire for justice was well-founded, but their method was both unwise and unjust. It was unwise because they rendered the whole company of Jacob vulnerable to inevitable reprisals, and it was unjust because they killed every male in the city as though every male was guilty of Shechem's crime.

When Jacob heard of the matter, he realized that he could not stay—military reprisals would soon come, and his small band of men could never stand against the armies of the Hittites. Apparently Jacob inquires of God as to what he should do, and God tells him to return to Bethel and to build an altar there, at the place where the covenant had been renewed to him previously. The God of his fathers Abraham and Isaac was with him, and was fulfilling the promises He had made. God's faithfulness was Jacob's protection.

In preparation for the journey back to Bethel, Jacob commands his family to "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments" (35:2). Here we come to the crux of the matter: Jacob's family had intermingled pagan idolatry into the worship of their own God. We now understand why circumcision could be viewed as a matter of clan identity rather than the sign of the covenant for which it was originally given. The hearts of Jacob's sons had been divided through syncretism, mixing the ways of the world into the covenant life of Israel. Their only hope was to return to the covenant, symbolized by a return to Bethel, the place where the covenant had been renewed to Jacob.

It is interesting that not only were the idols put away (buried under the oak near Shechem), but that also they changed their clothes and took off the rings that were in their ears (35:2–4). We may surmise that both their clothing as well as their jewelry were somehow connected to idolatry. The clothing may have contained particularly weaving patterns connected with the worship of pagan gods, and the jewelry may also have borne the symbols or insignias of the pagan gods. Often what we wear bespeaks what is in our hearts.

So Jacob and his clan journey to Bethel, and all along the way God protects them from local armies who, having heard of the slaughter at Shechem, would have seen Jacob's advances as possible military strategy. God's faithfulness to Jacob is thus once again demonstrated.

The lessons we learn from this *parashah* are many and very relevant for our own times. We need to consider them carefully and take them to heart. The first lesson relates to being in the world but not of the world. Dinah's desire to be with the "daughters of the land" was the first step to her demise. Deep in our hearts we know that the world offers no lasting shalom for our souls but only fleeting pleasure. We know that friendship with the world is enmity with God. Yet we must also admit that we are vulnerable to the influences of the world. We long to be accepted and "fitting in" is far easier than being "different." It is not that God calls us to be "different" in the sense of being "abnormal" or "weird" (even though living righteously may be judged in such a manner). Our "difference" is in the way we accept God's standards as our own. We prove our sanctification (being "set apart") by honoring Him because we have come to love Him as our King and Savior. Our love

for God governs the way we live and that sets us apart from the world that is at enmity with God.

Secondly, we are reminded that words are cheap—actions are what demonstrate one’s true heart. Shechem’s “tender words” to Dinah were an attempt to allure her heart, and to cover his true motives. Wisdom dictates that we give far more credence to one’s actions than to one’s words. “By their fruits you will know them.”

Thirdly, the desire for justice, while essential, must be matched by a similar desire to accomplish justice through just means. Justice is never served through unjust means. We can never establish God’s justice in our communities by resorting to deceit and unrighteousness. The end does not necessarily justify the means.

Fourthly, we should remember that religion and the true worship of God are not always the same. For the sons of Jacob, circumcision, which should have functioned as a deeply spiritual sign of their covenant relationship with God, had apparently degenerated into a mere marker of clan identity. Their relationship with God had, in some measure, become a religion, easily mixed with other religions. When we can go through the motions of obedience without a genuine heart of sincere worship to God, then we have slipped into “religion” and away from the covenant relationship God desires for us to have with Him.

Finally, once again we are warned in our passage about the subtle yet devastating power of syncretism. Jacob’s sons had taken idols into their homes and families. They apparently thought that they could mix the religion and worship of their pagan neighbors with their own worship of the God of Abraham and Isaac. Obviously, the two do not mix. We must constantly do an inventory of our own thinking processes: have we accepted the ways of the world as normative for our own decisions? Have we fallen prey to thinking that when “everyone else is doing it,” it must be okay? Rather, we must constantly renew our minds by aligning our thoughts with what God has given us in His word. For it is His word that is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path (Ps 119:105). What we experience time and time again is that when we do submit ourselves to God and His ways, the joy and happiness for which we long is supplied to us beyond even what we could have imagined. The longing in our souls for true significance in this world is satisfied; our desire for genuine relationship with others can become a reality; and the joy that God intends us to experience in this world is given to us in full measure. The question, of course, is whether we will trust God for this. Are we willing to submit to Him—to put our longings into His hands and trust are happiness to Him? The words of the Psalmist are true: “Delight yourself in Adonai and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4).

The *haftarah* was chosen by the ancient Sages to accompany our Torah *parashah* because it speaks of the victory God will give to Israel over her enemies, paralleling the victory that Jacob’s sons had over the Shechemites. Here, in Nahum’s prophecy against Nineveh, the capital of Assyria in the final years of her prominence, God promises to bring vengeance upon Israel’s enemies. Even though Assyria was the strongest power of the Ancient Near East during the prophet’s lifetime, her strength would be no match for God’s power. Ninevah would run like a frightened soldier—his heart melting and his knees shaking (2:10). Assyria’s treachery would become her own demise and she would be plundered even as she plundered others. History has proven the validity of the prophet’s words. Ninevah fell to the Babylonian armies in 612 BCE.

Nahum’s prophecy is yet another example in a long list of historically verifiable events that God will keep His promises to Israel, and that He is able to overcome even the greatest armies of the nations. His words remind us that the safest place to be is within the loving care of God.

The Apostolic portion chosen for this Shabbat emphasizes this same theme, of trusting God and living in submission to Him. It is our natural inclination to take matters into our hands, particularly when we have been mistreated by others. The sons of Jacob did just that—aroused by anger against the injustice done to their sister, they find their own way to take revenge against the Shechemites. But while their anger was justified, their methods for achieving justice were not. In the same way, when we are mistreated by others, our fleshly response is to inflict an equal pain upon those who have hurt us. In so doing, we short-circuit what God intends to do, both in our own lives and in the lives of those who are our enemies. “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says Adonai” (Deut 32:35, cf. Rom 12:19–21). Surely God loves justice and He expects that we should seek to have justice administered in our own experiences. But we must seek justice as God intends, not as we design it.

Moreover, the words of Yeshua in our Matthew text are directed specifically to inter-community conflicts. The situations He uses for examples (personal insults [idiomatically viewed as a “slap in the face”]; borrowing a coat; suing in economic disputes; asking for assistance on a journey) are all things that normally occur between people who know each other and put expectations upon one another. Sometimes within an extended community relationships break down and rather than being friends, people treat each other like enemies. Yeshua calls us to forgiveness and expressions of love: “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (vv. 44–45). Here, once again, the primary theme of trusting God is emphasized: we entrust ourselves to God and wait for Him to bring about success. In loving those who hurt us, we openly display the fact that we are trusting God to bring about justice in His time and in His way.