

Brief reflection on parshat VaYishlakh

Heard this rather blunt one-liner? I hadn't until a few days ago: Washington is like Hollywood for ugly people. A radio talk show guest used it to remind listeners that power can be as attractive, even as seductive, as movie-star looks. Or maybe even more so. In this week's Torah portion, perhaps it is a sense of privilege that comes with political power, or the lure of physical beauty, or lusting after forbidden fruit, or a combination of factors that causes Shechem, the son of one Hamor the Hivite – "chief of the country" – to violate Jacob's only daughter, Dinah. The Torah's sparseness leaves unspoken so many details of this disturbing story, including Dinah's motives for leaving her father Jacob's compound "to visit the daughters of the land" in the first place – and her reaction afterwards to the assault by Shechem. But at least here in Torah, the earliest layer of our textual tradition, Dinah is not blamed as the instigator of what we today would clearly call rape; Shechem, the chieftain's son, is. In later layers, especially in several commentaries such as B'reishit Rabbah [midrash] and the Gemara [Talmud], silent Dinah is blamed for initiating the contact that will lead to "her" shame. But you and I can help give Dinah back her voice: every time we speak up, like Gail Collins quoted below, in defense of silent/silenced women, we do so. Every time we pause the TV at one of its many moments of trashy viewing to talk to our teens about healthy relationships, we do so. When we support local women's shelters, and national organizations dedicated to preventing intimate partner violence, and international movements to eradicate human sexual trafficking, we do so.

David Brooks: Now we turn to ethical issues. My first question, and this is a genuine question, concerns the victims. Let's detach ourselves from the specifics of the Cain case and consider a general question: If you are the victim of sexual harassment, and you agree to remain silent in exchange for a five-figure payoff, should any moral taint attach to you?

Gail Collins: Sexual harassment is a matter so serious that I'm not prepared to prejudge anybody, including the woman who accepted money in return for leaving the organization, until I have a pretty fair factual understanding of what actually happened. If you feel you have no power, that everybody with clout is aligned against you, and the situation makes keeping your job untenable, you might feel compelled to just get out of there with whatever compensation is available to tide you over. (excerpted from the NYTimes Opinionator, Nov 2, 2011)

Shabbat shalom u'mnukha – may those feeling like weary travelers this week find their way to Shabbat, an island of peace and rest,

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