

Rabbi's Column

[The Torah contains many difficult narratives. If sexual abuse or intentional violence is a trigger for you, please skip down to the place where it says IT IS NOW SAFE TO READ.]

There is a story within this week's Torah Portion which is often summarized by simply calling it Dinah's rape. It would perhaps be better summarized by calling it Simeon and Levi fool/murder the neighbors.

First, a slight grammatical detour. Sometimes in Biblical Hebrew, a three letter root word can itself have different meanings. In the verse in question, the three letter root can mean: sing, afflict, be busy with, reply.

The inflected word (he did something to her) appears two times in the TaNaKH. In the case of Amnon and Tamar, (children of King David by different mothers), the relevant phrase is "he was stronger than she was, so he ANH her and slept with her." Immediately afterwards Amnon kicked Tamar out of his room (which he had convinced her to enter by playing sick.) In this week's Torah text, the relevant verse is "Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite saw her, took her, slept with her and ANH her." The following verse "His body clung to the body of Dinah, daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and conversed with her concerning her thoughts and feelings." Then Shechem tries to get his father to arrange to become married to her.'

Most translators have given both times when ANH is used the same meaning - rape.

I am not so sure.

The tale of Amnon and Tamar is indeed one of inappropriate lust resulting in rape and then hatred. Amnon never pays any attention to what Tamar has to say - she asks him to go to their father and ask for permission to marry her before the rape, and afterwards she begs him to maintain the relationship. The case of Shechem is quite different.

In my opinion, (as of today) I think the verb in the Amnon story can be translated as "humiliated her" and in the Shechem story as either "busied himself with her" or "was engrossed with her".

Eventually Tamar's full brother, Absalom arranges to have Amnon killed. Simeon and Levi, upon hearing that Shechem wants to marry Dinah, tells them the entire village would need to be circumcised first. While the village is recovering from the surgery, Simeon and Levi kill them all. This event does keep Simeon and Levi, as tribes, from ever being able to retain ownership of any land in Israel.

IT IS NOW SAFE TO READ

Hanukkah, which is coming up soon, is a holiday which shows quite clearly that the people as a whole over time decide what expressing Judaism involves. Hanukkah is certainly not the case of the Rabbis deciding what people should do.

If the people had followed the Rabbi's thinking, there would be no Hanukkah celebrations at all.

The Rabbis did not look at the events leading up to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem as being the main part of the story. The Rabbis looked at what the current descendants of the Maccabees were doing, before deciding that a holiday celebrating a mini-victory by those people should be ignored.

Really.

There is no Talmudic Tractate on Hanukkah. The only lengthy discussion about Hanukkah occurs in the midst of a discussion about which oils might be able to be used for Shabbat candles. Somebody asks, "So what is Hanukkah?" and the Rabbis make up a story about a jar of oil, possibly hoping that everyone will realize how silly the story is and for that reason ignore the holiday. People don't, of course, and they also do something else strange. When the discussion turns to what is required to observe Hanukkah properly, the Talmud mentions that people who consider themselves "holier than thou" would light up to eight candles at some point during Hanukkah. If they follow Shammai's practice, they light eight candles on the first night; if they follow Hillel's practice they light eight candles on the eighth night.

The people as a whole, in this and in many other behaviors, have decided that being "holier than thou" should be the default normal. They also decided to make the Rabbinic throw away tale of the jar of oil one of the star attractions, at least until Jews started reading the Books of Maccabbees again.

May we all be safe and kind this week.