

DEFENDING THE FAMILY

A commentary of *Parashat Vayishlach*
By Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum

What would you not do for your loved ones? Chapter 34 describes one of the most shocking stories in the book of Genesis. Jacob's daughter Dinah is abducted and violated by a local Chivite prince who then desperately wants to wed her. His father offers a lucrative deal to Jacob and his sons: their clans can intermarry, live together, and trade profitably. Jacob's sons are indignant but they answer calmly, and with some deception. They agree to the deal on condition that all the Chivite men are circumcised. The Chivite Prince and his father take the offer back to their clan who all agree and are circumcised. While they are recovering, two of Jacob's sons, Shimon and Levi, storm the Chivite city, kill all the weakened men, take back their sister, and plunder the entire place. Jacob is appalled and worried about retaliations. The story ends with Shimon and Levi's defiant cry, "*Should our sister be treated like a harlot?*" (Genesis 34:31). At the end of the book, when Jacob is blessing his sons, he curses Shimon and Levi for their murderous violence (Genesis 49:5-7).

At first glance their actions seem inexcusable, but let us reflect on them in light of two clauses of Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): "Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."

Dinah's 'full consent' was clearly doubtful, and it could be argued that Shimon and Levi were simply exercising the right of 'protection', to which their family was entitled. After all, there was no nation state to which they could appeal, and they were part of their society's leadership.

Nevertheless, the circumcision ruse and subsequent killing spree is wildly excessive and cannot be condoned. Interestingly though, I found a rabbinic

Midrash (*Sechel Tov*) that suggests that the circumcision deal offered by Jacob's sons was, in fact, genuine and that they really were open to becoming "a unified people" (Genesis 34:16). However, the Chivite Prince and his father revealed their lack of real commitment to this unification when they presented the offer to their own clan. They emphasised the potential trade opportunities, played down the circumcision condition, and then said, "*Their livestock, their possessions, and all their animals – will they not be ours?*" (Genesis 34:23). In their eyes this was not unification, it was a takeover. Shimon and Levi realised this and took matters into their own hands, but without the support of Jacob or his other sons.

Thus, as often happens in fraught political negotiations, there were numerous underlying interests and deceptions being played out in this not-so-straightforward biblical story. Marriage requires consent and the family unit must be protected, but at what cost? Our Torah does not idealise or idolise our ancestors. What it does do is teach us the complexities of human interactions through multi-layered narratives. Opposing views, values and interests lie beneath its surface,

and studying them again and again sharpens our ability to think more deeply and honestly about our own dealings and relationships. Learning Torah is an act of moral refinement. Rights are not simply declared. They must be analysed, weighed and compared. I pray that the defence of human rights is pursued with integrity and fairness and is never used to promote the hidden self-interests of particular nations or ideologies. Only then will they become truly universal.

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