

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Vayishlach*

Genesis 32: 4-36:43

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### *Parashat Vayishlach* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Facing the Inevitable—Jacob's Struggles with God and Men

Theme 2: The Rape of Dinah—the Personal Becomes Political

## Introduction



In *Parashat Vayishlach*, God's promise to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as "the grains of sand along the seashore" (Genesis 32:13) meets the messy realities of intra-familial conflict and extra-tribal politics. The struggles of Abraham's descendants to establish their identities—in relationship to God, to each other, and to the Canaanites among whom they live—feature prominently in this parashah. Jacob, who the biblical text portrays as one who struggles even prior to his birth, continues to do so in this parashah. The parashah begins with Jacob's terror over an imminent and potentially dangerous encounter with his estranged brother Esau. After preparing for this encounter, Jacob struggles physically with a mysterious figure who may or may not be divine, and his name changes as a result. The physical conflict with Esau does not materialize, and Jacob ultimately reconciles with his brother. Later in the parashah, Dinah, Jacob's daughter, has a sexual encounter with Shechem, the son of a Canaanite tribal leader. The difficulties triggered by this incident highlight the challenges for the descendants of Abraham as they struggle with what it means to live according to God's covenant in the midst of the other inhabitants of Canaan.

## Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on page 183 and/or survey the outline on page 184. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger

portion. Also, remember to take the time to examine the comments in the Central Commentary associated with the biblical text we are reading. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

## Theme 1: Facing the Inevitable—Jacob’s Struggles with God and Men



Struggle is a constant in the life of Jacob, the third and final patriarch. His struggles in the womb, with his brother Esau, and with Laban set the stage for Jacob’s corporeal encounter in this parashah with the Divine. This final struggle transforms Jacob’s life, a transformation represented by a change of name—Jacob is now “Israel.” Jacob is the last of the patriarchs to receive a personal covenant with God. His new name foreshadows that future renewal of the covenant will transpire between God and *B’nei Yisrael*—the children of [the patriarch] Israel. Jacob’s lifelong struggles prepare him, and *B’nei Yisrael*, for the challenges that lie ahead.

1. Read Genesis 32:8–13, which describes Jacob’s feelings and actions as he prepares to meet his brother, Esau.
  - a. In verse 8 we read that Jacob is “terrified” and “anxious” upon learning that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob. What accounts for Jacob’s feelings? (See Genesis 27:41–28:5.)
  - b. In 32:10–13 Jacob prays to God, asking God to protect him from Esau. According to Jacob, why does he deserve God’s protection? In your view, why does Jacob allude to God’s covenant with Abraham (vv. 10 and 13) in this prayer?
2. Read Genesis 32:17–22, which details the offerings Jacob plans to give Esau.
  - a. What instructions does Jacob give to his servants regarding what they are to say to Esau?
  - b. What does Jacob hope will be the impact of these offerings on Esau?
  - c. These verses contain seven different forms of the word “face” (*panim*), translated variously as “in front of,” “ahead of,” “before me,” “his face” (vv. 17, 18, 21, 22). What is the impact of the repetition of this word? How does the repetition convey what is going on in Jacob’s life and what he must confront?
3. Read Genesis 32:25–33, which describes Jacob’s physical struggle with a mysterious being.
  - a. The figure who wrestles with Jacob (v. 25) is called an *ish* (translated here as “man”). According to Hosea 12:5–6 (see note to Genesis 32:25), who was this “man”? How is this understanding of the man consistent with the way the word *ish* is used in biblical Hebrew?
  - b. In your view, why does Jacob insist that the man bless him?
  - c. In Genesis 32:29, the man gives Jacob a new name, “Israel.” According to the Central Commentary by Shawna Dolansky and Risa Levitt Kohn, what are the various ways we can understand the meaning of Jacob’s new name? “Israel” is translated here as “for you have struggled with God.” How does substituting the other possible translations for Israel (“God struggles,” “God rules,” or “his struggle is mighty”) alter your understanding of this verse and Jacob’s role in life?

- d. In the second half of verse 29 we read that Jacob has “struggled with God.” According to the Central Commentary, how else might “God” be translated here? How does the second half of verse 29 inform your understanding of Jacob’s new name?
  - e. According to the Central Commentary, a change of name often represents an alteration in someone’s character. In your view, what are the changes in Jacob’s character that his name change represents?
  - f. What is the meaning of Peni’el, the name Jacob gives to the place where he wrestled with the man (v. 31)? What does this name tell us about Jacob’s understanding of the man’s identity?
  - g. How might the injury Jacob sustains in wrestling with the man help prepare him for his encounter with Esau?
4. Read the Another View section by Tammi J. Schneider on p. 202.
- a. In what ways does this parashah highlight Esau? In particular, what impression of Esau do you get from 33:4, when Esau first greets Jacob, and from 33:12–17, when Esau urges Jacob to move on together, but Jacob demurs and goes his own way?
  - b. According to Schneider, how is Esau a touching figure? How does Schneider’s view of Esau compare with your own perspective on him?
  - c. How can we account for the prominence the biblical text gives to Jacob over Esau?
  - d. According to Schneider, what message about marriage does the story of Esau and Jacob convey?
5. Read “The Struggle” by Amy K. Blank in *Voices* on p. 206.
- a. How does God describe God’s self in the poem’s first line? To what aspects of God does this description refer?
  - b. What is the relationship between Jacob’s “universe of thought” and God’s “shadow”?
  - c. What is the result of Jacob’s efforts to grasp God?
  - d. How does the poet’s view of the struggle between God and Jacob compare with that in this parashah (Genesis 32:17–33)?
  - e. In what ways does this poem and Jacob’s wrestling with God in the biblical text reflect your own struggles with God?

## Theme 2: The Rape of Dinah—the Personal Becomes Political



The story of what happens to Jacob’s daughter Dinah when she goes out “to see the women of the locality” (Genesis 34:1)—and its aftermath—is one of the most troubling in the Torah. Although contemporary readers focus on the consequences of this violent incident for Dinah and, later, for the men of Shechem, this is not the primary concern of the biblical author. The prince’s sexual encounter with Dinah places her in a tenuous legal and social position. If Shechem were an Israelite, these difficulties could be resolved by Shechem taking Dinah as his wife. The major concern of this story is less the personal fate of an individual woman than it is the political relationship between Israel and the other inhabitants of Canaan. Dinah’s story illustrates the challenges the Israelites face in developing and maintaining their identity while living among their non-Israelite neighbors.

1. Read Genesis 34:1–4, which describes what happens to Dinah when she goes out “to see the women of the locality” (v. 1).
  - a. How does the text introduce Dinah in verse 1? What does this introduction tell us about Dinah’s status?
  - b. Although she is free to leave her father’s house and go to a public place, the events that follow suggest that Dinah assumes a risk in doing so. What is your impression of how the text portrays Dinah’s action?
  - c. According to the comment on verse 2, what is the significance of the name “Shechem,” and how might it account for the hostility with which the text portrays this city?
  - d. The verb “to see” appears in both verse 1 and verse 2. What connection do you make between the two appearances of this verb?
  - e. The word *innah* (from the root ‘-n-h) in verse 2 is translated here as “rape”; however, this verb can also be translated as “oppress,” “violate,” “overpower,” “humiliate,” or “subdue.” What are the ramifications of these different translations? How does the perspective of the translator of this verb compare with the interpretation of the commentators?
  - f. How does the use of *innah* in this verse compare with its use in Deuteronomy 22:24 (where it is translated as “violated”)? How does this language compare with that used in Deuteronomy 22:25, where the man lies with a woman “by force”? How do these other passages inform our understanding of what transpires in this parashah?
  - g. According to the Central Commentary, what are the primary concerns of the Bible in dealing with a woman who is forced to have sex against her will?
  - h. How does the root ‘-n-h in Genesis 16:6 (translated as “afflicted her”) help us to understand the degraded social status of a woman who was disgraced in the way that Dinah was?
  - i. How does what happens to Dinah compare with our contemporary understanding of rape?
  - j. The commentators raise the question of whether what transpires between Dinah and Shechem constitutes rape. What is their opinion? How do you understand what transpires between Dinah and Shechem in verse 2?
  - k. The words *yaldah* (female child), *bat* (daughter) and *naara* (girl or young woman) are all used in these verses to describe Dinah. What does this suggest about her age and how her age might be relevant to what follows?
  - l. According to the Central Commentary, what does the change from *yaldah* to *ishah* (translated here as “wife,” but it can also mean “woman”) in verse 4 indicate about Dinah’s change of status?
2. Read Genesis 34:5–17, which describes the reactions of Dinah’s father and her brothers to what has occurred.
  - a. In verse 5, the word *timei* (translated here as “defiled”) describes the consequence of what happens to Dinah. How does the use of the word in this verse compare with the use

- of other forms of the word in Leviticus 11:44 (“impure”), 15:31 (“impurity”), and 18:20 (“defile”)? According to the Central Commentary, how can something defiled be made pure? How can Dinah’s status change from “defiled” to “pure”?
- b. What is Jacob’s reaction (v. 5) when he hears what happened to Dinah? How does that compare with the reaction of Dinah’s brothers when they learn what happened? What is your view of the brothers’ reaction that Shechem has committed “an outrage against Israel” (v. 7)?
  - c. Beginning in verse 8, Hamor—Shechem’s father—enters into negotiations on behalf of his son. Who is involved in these negotiations? What is Dinah’s role, if any, in this discussion? What conclusions can we draw from this about Dinah’s place in this narrative?
  - d. We read in verse 13 that Jacob’s sons answer Shechem and his father deceptively (b’*mirmah*). Read Genesis 27:35, in which the same word is used. What is the irony in the use of the word *b’*mirmah** in 34:13?
3. Read Genesis 34:25–31, which describes the actions of Dinah’s brothers after the men of Shechem are circumcised.
- a. According to the Central Commentary, what is Dinah’s status in Shechem’s house? How does her removal from Shechem’s house by her brothers change her situation? What is Dinah’s place in society?
  - b. Whom do the brothers punish (vv. 25–29) for what happened to Dinah? What questions does their actions raise for you?
  - c. What is Jacob’s reaction (v. 30) to the actions of Dinah’s brothers? How does this compare with Jacob’s words to his sons in his deathbed blessing (Genesis 49:5–6)?
  - d. How do Simeon and Levi respond to Jacob’s admonition (v. 31)? What does their reaction show about how they view Hamor’s offer of compensation for Dinah’s virginity? How does their response contrast with attitudes in both the ancient and modern worlds toward women in Dinah’s situation?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Gail Labovitz, pages 202–3.
- a. How does Midrash B’reishit Rabbah address the discrepancy between the number of Jacob’s children mentioned in Genesis 32:23 (eleven) and his actual number of children (twelve)? What is Rashi’s view of this discrepancy?
  - b. How do rabbinic sources view Dinah and Leah based on 34:1 (“Dinah, Leah’s daughter . . . went out”)? How does this compare with the biblical depiction of this event?
  - c. How does Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 38 view “the women of the locality” (Genesis 34:1)?
  - d. After this parashah, Dinah is mentioned only once more in the Torah (in 46:15). What does Labovitz indicate are the various traditions in rabbinic literature about what happens to Dinah? What are your reactions to these interpretations of Dinah’s fate?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Laura Geller, pages 204–5.
- a. According to Geller, what image does the midrash that Jacob locked Dinah in a box

- suggest? What is the significance of this image?
- b. How do the commentaries understand Dinah's rape? How do these commentaries address Dinah's reactions to what happens to her?
  - c. In Geller's view, how can the story of Dinah help us to understand and compel us to act on the problem of violence against women?
6. Read "Dinah" by Ruth Fainlight in *Voices* on page 206.
- a. How do you relate to the poet's impulse in the first stanza to prevent the events in this story from going forward?
  - b. How does the poet use the image of "swollen tender flesh" in the second stanza to apply to Shechem, Dinah, and Hamor's men?
  - c. How does the poet view the motive for the actions of Dinah's brothers toward the people of Shechem (stanza 3)? How does this compare with your view of their actions?
  - d. What is your understanding of the poet's exclamation in the first line of the final stanza?
  - e. What is the relationship, according to Fainlight, between what happens in the story of Dinah and the story that "has only started"?
7. Read from "Dina's Own Story" by Vanessa Ochs in *Voices* on page 206.
- a. How does Ochs view Dinah's desire to "see the women of the locality" (Genesis 34:1)?
  - b. In Ochs's view, how would Jacob's encounter with angels of God ascending and descending a ladder and with God (Genesis 28:12-13) be different if Dinah had been the one encountering the heavenly beings? Do you agree with Ochs's unstated premise that there are fundamental differences between the way men and women respond to the world around them?
  - c. In your view, how might the biblical narrative have turned out if Dinah had been able to act on her desires, as Ochs expresses them, in the last sentence?

### *Overarching Questions*

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. In your view, what is the impact of Jacob's previous struggles on his encounters with man and God in this parashah? What are the strengths and shortcomings in how Jacob handles these encounters? What struggles have you experienced in your own life? What did you learn from these struggles, and what impact did this knowledge have on how you faced other difficulties?
2. In this parashah, Dinah is an actor in a social world of men: her father, her brothers, Shechem, Hamor, and the men of Shechem. The story defines her identity according to her relationship with these men. In what ways has your own identity been shaped by your relationship with family members and friends of the opposite gender?

### **Closing Questions**

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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