

# Family Honour

## **Dinah and her brothers.**

### **Text: Genesis 34.**

The Israelite Patriarch Jacob, his wives and children and his livestock arrived in Shechem in Canaan. Shechem was a large city with fertile land and a network of roads. Jacob and his family camped by the city. It was a territory with which he was familiar (33:18-20).

Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, together with their maids occupied tents which were designated for women. Leah had six sons until she gave birth to a daughter, who was named Dinah. The narrative reads that Dinah used to visit 'women of the region' (34:1). During one such visit Shechem, prince of the region, saw her, seized her and lay with her by force (34:2). He raped Dinah.

**Who was Dinah?** The segregation of women was accepted in ancient societies. Dinah would have been nurtured and protected by her mother, her aunt Rachel and the women who were included in women's households. The narrative informs the reader that Dinah had freedom to visit women in the region. It is possible to assume that such freedom would have had boundaries attached. Dinah would have been schooled in the importance of family honour. She would have learned the significance of protecting herself from shameful behaviour and protecting her sexuality as a virgin.

**Re-telling Dinah's story:** What follows is a re-telling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

*Dinah reflects: I feel as if I am invisible in my family of brothers. I was incidental to the rape I was subjected to by Shechem. I was not questioned or consulted by my brothers when they decided to defend the honour of my family. My father Jacob stayed silent.*

*I will now find the words to share my story. I loved the countryside and would go into the city of Shechem to visit with my women friends. I had always felt safe during such visits. I was not prepared for the moment when Prince Shechem saw me. I refused to go with him when he tried to talk me into going with him. In his anger he seized me and took me forcibly into his quarters (34:2). To this day I cannot shut out what happened. He raped me. I felt unclean and ashamed. As the days passed I was surprised to hear*

*Shechem talk gently to me and say that his soul was drawn to me (34:3). He then informed me that he had spoken to his father, Hamor, and requested that a marriage be arranged between us (34: 3-4).*

*I heard later that when my father and Hamor were talking, my brothers who had been working in the fields had returned. They had been furious when they heard of the rape and the proposal that was being discussed. My brothers had insisted that an outrage had been committed against Israel. (34:5-7). Neither my brothers nor my father talked to me about the rape nor what my wishes were regarding marrying Shechem. My rape was an excuse for defending the family honour and the honour of Israel.*

### PAUSE. Reflect:

The perpetrator of the violence, Shechem, falls in love with the victim, Dinah, and wishes to marry her. Would people in such situations receive support today?

*Word reached me that my brothers continued to be angry. Hamor, Shechem's father, had spoken of the benefits of an intercultural marriage should I be permitted to marry his son. Shechem had promised that he would be prepared to pay whatever my brothers desired so that I could be his wife (34: 8-12). The bargaining had gone on. I was an invisible bargaining chip for my brothers. They desired vengeance and power. They claimed that Shechem was not circumcised and therefore he could not marry me. However if every male in the city of Shechem were to be circumcised, they would consent to our marriage (34:13-17).*

*My brothers' crafty plan worked. Hamor and Shechem returned and persuaded the males in the city to be circumcised. They claimed that the Israelites were friendly people and that there would be benefits from the transaction for an intercultural marriage. The males were circumcised.*

### PAUSE. Reflect.

In multicultural Australia how much is known about arranged marriages?

What support is given to marriages between migrant and Anglo-Australians (the outsider and the insider) or between persons of different faiths?

*Two days passed after the men were circumcised. I hoped my family would honour their promises. I was wrong. My brothers Simeon and Levi had taken swords and crept silently into the Shechem . They had then killed all the males. They had crept into the*

*homes of Hamor and Shechem and killed them too. Then I heard them outside my door. They grabbed me and took me back to my mother's house (34: 25-26). I felt that I was an object to be carried off like a trophy, rather than a sister who had been violated.*

*My other brothers had then gone into the city, plundered it and taken away women, children and whatever wealth they could find (34:27-29). I sometimes wonder what happened to those women and children. Were they now like refugees, with no security or sanctuary in a foreign land? My father, Jacob, had been angry with Simeon and Levi when they returned after their violent actions. Jacob had reminded them that they had brought disgrace on our family and community; that should the Canaanites come to avenge the deaths and destruction, there would be little he could do to protect our family or our household. We would be destroyed. Instead of asking for forgiveness, Simeon and Levi had replied, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (34:30-31).*

*They justified their violent actions by naming me a whore. A label that was used to identify a prostitute. I was no longer a victim of violence. I was named a prostitute. I ask myself as to what honour there was in the actions of my brothers or in their treatment of me. And through it all I had no voice – until this moment.*

## REFLECTION

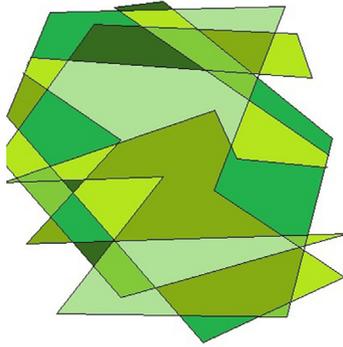
The rape of Dinah reads like a minor detour in the life of the patriarch Jacob. Obligation to community, family honour, shame and dishonour, violent actions are used to legitimise the use of Dinah as the reason for seeking vengeance and power. Justifying the righting of a wrong through the use of violence is a theme that runs through the story. The silence of Jacob when he learns of the predicament of his daughter, his willingness to meet Hamor half way and bring the two communities together in an act of understanding, demonstrates his faithfulness to God. His confrontation with his sons and the consequences of their brutality towards the neighbouring Canaanites closes this disturbing episode.

God's presence is not visible in this story. It is not a story that is read in church or used as the focus of a sermon. Yet it is a story that reminds the reader of the culture of violence that is evident at global, communal and personal levels today.

Are victims of rape and family violence assured of justice through our courts and law? The question is heard sometimes, "Why doesn't God do something?"

What answers are offered by communities of faith, organisations for peace or leaders of nation states?

Is it possible that God continues to work through the lives of those whose voices are drowned by the culture of violence and power?



God of hope and healing  
walk with me when my days get fagmented