

Dinah's Silence – it ends with us

by Senior Rabbi Nicole K. Roberts

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In last week's parasha, most of the 12 sons of Jacob were born. As Jacob was called Israel, his sons and their descendants became known as the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, was also born in last week's parasha. Yet while Dinah's birth is mentioned, tribal heritage isn't transmitted through women, so her name isn't included later in Torah, when Jacob and Moses bless the children of Israel. Nor is Dinah represented on Aaron's breastplate where there's a stone for each tribe, nor on the panels that appear in many synagogues today, depicting the symbols of the tribes. Even Dinah's naming doesn't get the attention the boys' do. For each boy, we're told what his mother exclaimed when he was born, and how his name is derived from that outburst: "And Leah said, 'B'oshri—Happy am I...' so she called him Asher."ⁱ "And Rachel said 'Danani—God has judged me...and given me a son' so she called him Dan."ⁱⁱ But when Jacob's daughter is born, the Torah says simply that Leah "bore a daughter and called her Dinah."ⁱⁱⁱ The omission is not lost on the Torah commentators. Rashi makes up the missing explanation, or derivation, of her name.^{iv} And Rashbam explains that it's just not customary to be as expressive—particularly of gratitude—when a daughter is born, as opposed to a son.^v

The lack of regard for Dinah in last week's parasha is a distressing premonition of what happens in *this week's* parasha, when Dinah herself plays a completely silent and passive role, in the face of what appears to be an act of violence against her by a man named Shechem.^{vi} The 12 tribes of Israel, Dinah's brothers, take revenge on Shechem, but this ends in horrible violence as well, and all the while, Dinah remains silent. If she did utter any words, the Torah didn't find them worth recording.

Perhaps Dinah's silence, and the silence surrounding her birth, is what called out to me in reading these two parshiot because last week was White Ribbon Day, when we as a society confront the problem of domestic violence. Or perhaps it called out to me because of the rash of recent news reports of misconduct by men in powerful roles in the entertainment industry or even the religious sphere—some of the acts they committed were violent to women's bodies, others abusive to the spirit. Perhaps the silence called out to me because of a recent article I read about what *all* the recent mass shootings in America had in common—not merely the shooter's absurdly easy access to a firearm, but a previous history of *violence against women*. Perhaps it stood out because of the recent phenomenon on Facebook, when thousands of women shared their own story of a time they'd felt threatened by inappropriate behaviour against them—each story followed by the hashtag "me too." Or perhaps it stood out to me because of the recent aggressive, physical obstruction at the Kotel, when women tried to hold a prayer service there on Rosh Chodesh.

The silences of Dinah called out to me for all these reasons, and with both the Torah and recent news reports resting uneasily on my mind, I found myself feeling worried. Worried about what our children—both girls and boys—think of their religion when they read these texts. When

they're told that the Torah is either the word of God or "divinely inspired," do they conclude that the will of the Divine is to keep women silent?

There are so many ways that Dinah's silence echoes throughout women's history. So many places in our world where women's voices, opinions, cries, and prayers are silenced, and all too often in the name of religion... even *our* religion. Thankfully, since its inception, Progressive Judaism has been uttering a counter-echo, starting with our call for egalitarianism—for gender equality in religious life, and our movement's persistent attempts to give women—both biblical and contemporary—a voice.

From the earliest stages, our movement allowed mixed seating in the synagogue, at least as early as 1866 when the Plum Street Temple opened in Cincinnati and permitted whole families to sit together and worship side by side.^{vii} Women sang in our choirs, and as early as 1907 served as office holders on Temple boards.^{viii} By the 1950s women were celebrating bat mitzvah in our movement and wearing the same ritual garb as men including tallit.^{ix} As early as 1846, women were counted in a minyan by our movement,^x and in 1972, the Reform seminary in America, Hebrew Union College (HUC), became the first to ordain a female rabbi.^{xi} 40 years later, that rabbi, Sally Priesand, was invited to speak at my ordination ceremony, addressing our rabbinical school class, more than half of whom were women. (Here's a photo of all of us standing with Rabbi Priesand in front of the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati.) In 2016, a 700 page volume of essays and history was published by our movement, in a book called *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*.^{xii} The book opens with a listing of "firsts": First woman rabbi to serve as a military chaplain; First to serve in Canada; First to serve on the HUC faculty. Had the book been published but a year later, I'm proud to say they could have added to the list of firsts: 2017—First congregation in Australia to appoint a woman as Senior Rabbi, the North Shore Temple Emanuel in Chatswood.



All of this is to say, that Progressive Judaism's commitment to gender equality has given Jewish women a voice in shaping our ritual life, our theological beliefs, our halakhah, our liturgy, and our understanding of Torah. Our movement has been publishing gender neutral siddurim for some 40 years.^{xiii} The first ever Women's Torah Commentary was written by the women of our movement and published in 2008.^{xiv} And the halakhic scholars involved in drafting our movement's Responsa literature have always taken gender equality as one of the four "underlying assumptions which govern our work and direct our conclusions," rejecting "ancient distinctions between the ritual roles of men and women."^{xv} We may or may not be able to redeem difficult ancient texts, but we can ensure that, at least in our movement, women's voices are heard around the table that discusses

those texts, interprets them, and derives teachings from them, so that the next generation might learn to regard and treat women differently than the previous... or the present.

10 years ago, Reform Jewish author Anita Diamant wrote a bestselling novel called *The Red Tent*. The book was her attempt to give voice to Dinah, a few millennia after Dinah’s humiliating encounter with Shechem. Some call it a modern-day midrash—a creative filling-in of gaps in the biblical narrative. The Prologue, written in Dinah’s voice, begins, “We have been lost to each other for so long. My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.... And now you come to me...hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them.”^{xvi} Yes, Dinah, we *are* hungry, for the counter-echo that society so needs to hear, which your descendants in our movement have started and which we vow to continue in your honour, and in honour of all the silenced women and girls in our world throughout history until today.

So, Lucy, my charge and prayer for you on this day of bat mitzvah is that you’ll become part of the counter-echo. That you’ll take part in the conversation our movement has invited you into—by participating in our services, by sharing your thoughts at the table whenever Torah is discussed, by continuing your Jewish learning and writing about it, by joining our choir, and by helping ensure that religion is used to give voice to the silent, not take it away. Make the most of this gift that our Progressive movement has worked over a century to give you, and me, and all women—past, present, and future. Take your place in the minyan that you now count in at NSTE and every other Progressive community around the world, and let your voice be heard. With it, you can change our history, and our destiny. Mazal tov, and Shabbat shalom.

ⁱ Gen. 30:13

ⁱⁱ Gen. 30:6

ⁱⁱⁱ Gen. 30:21

^{iv} Rashi to 30:21

^v Rashbam to 30:21

^{vi} Gen. 34:2

^{vii} <https://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/sarna/synagoguehistory/Archive/TheDebateoverMixedSeatingintheAmericanSynagogue.pdf>

^{viii} Jonathan D. Sarna. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale University, 2004.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x David Phillipson in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (Vol. 18, No. 4): The Breslau Rabbinical Conference.

^{xi} Michael A. Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut. *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*. New York: UAHC Press, 2001.

^{xii} Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alysa Mendelson Graf, ed. Renee Edelman, Consulting Ed. New York: CCAR, 2016.

^{xiii} *Gates of Prayer, the New Union Prayer Book*, 1975.

^{xiv} Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss. *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. New York: URJ and WRJ, 2008.

^{xv} Mark Washofsky. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*. New York: UAHC, 2001.

^{xvi} Anita Diamant. *The Red Tent*. New York: Wyatt, 1997.