



Bringing Dinah Home

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

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By the time Yosef reaches Egypt, he is one of a long list of lost children in the Abrahamic family.

It's a family that has always been made up of insiders and outsiders, those who stay and those who are exiled. While Yosef started life as his father's favorite, seemingly destined to be the carrier of the covenant, by the time he rises to second in command in Egypt in Mikeitz, it seems as if he has accepted his new place as one of Avraham's banished children: he is an Egyptian noble, with an appropriate marriage, and two children with the daughter of an Egyptian priest:

בראשית מא:נ

וַיֹּסֶף יֵלֶד שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטֶרֶם תָּבוֹא שְׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יֵלְדָה לוֹ אִסְנַת בֵּת פּוֹטִי פֶרֶע כְּהֵן אוֹן:

Bereishit 41:50

To Yosef were born two sons—before the year of the famine would come—that Asnat, daughter of Poti Fera priest of On, bore him.



Like Esav marrying Canaanite women,¹ Yosef's marriage seems like a signal that Yosef will never return to his family and the covenantal path.

A midrashic tradition, however, asserts that Asnat, Yosef's wife, is not actually an Egyptian, but is the daughter Dinah conceived after she was raped by Shekhem:

פרקי דר' אליעזר לח

מה עשה שכם בן חמור?... ושללה ושכב עמה והרתה וילדה את אסנת ואמרו בני ישראל להורגה שאמרה עכשו יאמרו בכל הארץ שיש בית זנות באהלי יעקב. מה עשה יעקב, הביא שרץ של זהב שם הקדש כתוב בו ותלה על צוארה, ושלחה והלכה... וירד מיכאל המלאך והורידה למצרים לבית פוטיפרע, שהיתה אסנת ראויה ליוסף לאשה.

Pirkei de-R. Eliezer 38

What did Shekhem, the son of Hamor, do?... He seized her, and he slept with her, and she conceived Asnat.

The sons of Yisrael said that she should be killed, for they said that now people would say in all the land that there was an immoral daughter in the tents of Ya'akov. What did Ya'akov do? He wrote the Holy Name upon a golden plate, and suspended it about her neck and sent her away. She went her way... Mikha'el the angel descended and took her, and brought her down to Egypt to the house of Poti Fera, because Asnat was destined to become the wife of Yosef.

Asnat begins her life already rejected: she is the child of rape, and, according to Dinah's brothers, a living stain on their family. In order to spare her life, Ya'akov sends Asnat away and she is eventually adopted by Poti Fera and raised as an Egyptian.

¹ See the discussion of this theme in my essay for Parashat VaYeishev, "Despair Meets Hope: Yehudah and Tamar," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/despair-meets-hope-yehudah-and-tamar>.



In this midrashic reading, Asnat is, like Yosef, a lost member of Ya'akov's family who finds her way to Egypt. Unlike Yosef, however, Asnat was not a wanted child. While Yosef is a son who was hoped for and prayed for, Asnat is the result of an unwanted pregnancy. While Ya'akov desperately loves Yosef, singling him out from all of his brothers, Ya'akov sends Asnat away.

The difference between Yosef and Asnat, in many ways, mirrors the difference between Yosef and Dinah, Asnat's mother. While Yosef is born to Raḥel, Ya'akov's most beloved wife, Dinah is identified as Leah's daughter, her identity marked by her relationship to the wife Ya'akov never wanted to marry:

בראשית לד:א

וַיֵּצֵא דִּינָה בֵּת לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוּת בְּכֹנוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

Bereishit 34:1

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Ya'akov, went out to visit the daughters of the land.

Similarly, while Ya'akov cries for Yosef for years, Ya'akov is silent when his daughter's rapist asks to marry her. When it comes to Dinah, not only does Ya'akov not have tears, he does not even have words.²

Dinah and Yosef are opposite poles in a family that has always had insiders and outsiders, children who will carry the covenant and children who will be cast off. In sending Asnat away, Ya'akov carries on the ancestral pattern in which unchosen children are sent away from the family just like Avraham sent away Yishmael. Being sent away, in this pattern, is a mark of unchosenness, a sign that this child will not be a carrier of the covenantal blessing.

² Compare Bereishit 34:5 to 37:35.



In any other generation, this is where we might expect Dinah's story to end. And indeed, in the text of the Torah itself Dinah's story ends as her brothers remove her from Shekhem.

But in telling us that Yosef and Asnat meet and marry in Egypt, the *midrash* keeps Dinah's story alive—and what's more, it changes the way the story of the unchosen child is told. In this telling, unlike her family, God never abandoned Dinah and her child. Instead, God made sure that both of them would be able to find a way back into the covenant, even miles away from the covenantal family and the covenantal land. Dinah, instead of being written out of the family like the unchosen children before her, is brought back in through her grandchildren: Yosef's sons Efrayim and Menasheh.

When we remember that Efrayim and Menasheh are not just Yosef's sons but also Dinah's grandchildren, the blessing we give our sons on Friday night, that they should be like Efrayim and Menasheh, takes on new meaning. It is not a wish that our children should be like Yosef, the most beloved son, and his chosen children. Instead, in blessing every Jewish boy with these words on Friday night, perhaps what we are really saying is a sort of prayer: May you be part of a world in which there are no chosen and unchosen children, a world in which every child is loved. May you know a world in which no human is expendable. May you understand that you come from those the world saw as nothing and those it saw as great.

And may you know—truly know—that to God, all of them mattered.

