

## **Parshat Vayishlach**

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by Andrew Ramer

Poet Adrienne Rich wrote,

*Re-vision – the act of look back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.*

For those of us here, women, LGBT people, and others, the work of re-visioning brings us back week after week to the Torah, our oldest and most sacred text. This week's portion of the Torah is called *Vayishlach*, And He Sent Out. It begins with the patriarch Jacob's reunion with his twin brother Esau. Twenty years earlier Jacob had tricked Esau out of his birthright and blessing, then fled to the land of their ancestors, where he married two sisters, took two concubines, and fathered eleven sons and a daughter. This reunion of twin brothers could have been a healing for their fractured family. Instead they embraced, reconciled, but went their separate ways.

The next story in this parasha begins with these innocent words:

*Dinah, Leah's daughter whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land.*

But in the following line we read that Dinah was raped by the son of Hamor, a local chieftain. Then two of Dinah's brothers slaughtered the rapist, his father, and all the men of their community. In this horrifying story, with fathers and brothers aplenty, we never hear the voice of Dinah herself, just the voices of the men who spoke for and about her.

One traditional interpretation of:

*Dinah... went out to see the daughters of the land*

has been – Dinah went out to worship foreign gods with the women of the land, and therefore everything that happened to her was punishment she brought upon herself and her family. Blaming the victim is an old familiar way to look at life and texts.

Recently I read a book called *The Bible Unearthed*, by two Israeli archaeologists. During the period in which the Torah was written only three male images from ancient Israel have been unearthed that may represent God or other gods. But the archaeologists' spades have uncovered more than three thousand female images, the representations of goddesses that seem to

have been worshipped by our ancestors in a parallel and probably complementary religion to that recorded in the Torah, a religion whose stories have not survived, just its artifacts. Thinking of the daily lives of our foremothers, who must have turned to these goddesses for strength, wisdom, comfort, healing, and mulling over the line about Dinah visiting the daughters of the land, I found myself re-visioning this story.

*Dinah was crossing the stream that separated her father's grazing land from that of the local chieftain Hamor.*

*As she made her way across the stream, Dinah was thinking about a song Hamor's daughter Katirat taught her on her last visit, about the goddess Asherah. "Oh, she is a mighty tree," the song began. "She is a tree that reaches from earth to heaven."*

*The closer Dinah got to the town, the more her heart swelled with thoughts of Katirat. The two of them began their friendship by singing and dancing together with all the village girls. Now that she was older, Dinah wanted to be alone with her new friend. Her heart beat faster as she approached the town, its stone walls glowing in the sunlight. And there was Katirat, waiting for her by the open gate. "Come with me," she said to Dinah.*

*Katirat led Dinah around the town walls. At first they walked and then they ran, toward a cave that Katirat wanted to show her. It was dark inside, but Dinah wasn't afraid. She was with her friend now. Out of breath, the two stood in the darkness. Neither of them spoke. And then Dinah began to sing a song that she learned from Leah her mother. "Asherah, the Lady of the Sea, she opened her body to Tallai, the Lady of Rain. And oh, how Tallai came to her, wet and beautiful."*

*And then Dinah reached out a trembling hand, and placed it on Katirat's warm shoulder. And the two were wrapped fast in each other's arms.*

*"And Tallai the Lady of the Rain, she poured herself into the body of Asherah, the Lady of the Sea. And the two waters met, dark and shining."*

From a long and painful story I have re-visioned a single verse to make a new story. The goddesses I placed in it are not made up. They were worshipped for centuries in ancient Israel by our ancestors and their neighbors.

Poet Anne Sexton wrote:

*The whole life of us writing, the whole product I guess I mean, is one long poem – a community effort if you will. It's all the same poem. It doesn't belong to any one writer – it's God's poem perhaps. Or God's people's poem.*

For me the Torah is God's poem, perhaps. God's people's poem. Our poem. It's curious to me that our ancestors worshipped the goddess Asherah, one of whose sacred images was a tree, and that we call the Torah a tree of life to all who study it and take it to heart. And we call the wooden staves around which the Torah's parchment scrolls are rolled trees of life as well. Perhaps in subtle ways the unrecorded faith of our foremothers has survived in these images, like two saplings grown up together whose trunks merge and whose branches offer now a great shelter of peace. And perhaps hints of our foremothers' stories have survived too, tucked into these scrolls, waiting for us to find them again, all a part of God's poem, perhaps. God's people's poem. Ours the work of reading, remembering, re-visioning, from generation to generation. We, a people who are surviving.