

We try to name our children something meaningful; sometimes for a deceased relative, sometimes a meaning in the name, sometimes a connection to someone in history. My Reuben is named after my grandmother, Rita, whose yahrzeit is today. I needed an R. But I also liked the symbolism of naming my son Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob, born from his wife Lea—because my Hebrew name is Chanah Lea. So like in the Torah, he's Reuben, the son of Lea, and my first born.

I knew that Reuben wasn't a perfect character. There aren't any biblical characters who are flawless! But this week's Torah portion illustrates just how problematic Reuben was; even though he did some very kind and caring things for his mother, and even for his bratty little brother Joseph.

In this week's reading, we heard, "While Israel stayed in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, the concubine of his father: and Israel found out." (Gen 35:22)

The fact is that we don't know why Reuben did what he did. There's a big gap in what the torah tells us—and indeed there's a big gap in the writing itself. In the scroll, you see a new line begins mid-verse! Maybe some details got edited out over time?

The Talmud suggests that after Rachel died (his favourite, and loved wife), Jacob moved Bilhah's bed to his tent. Bilhah was Rachel's maid, so maybe this was a way for Jacob to feel close to his deceased wife in his grief. But this angered Reuben, "Is it not enough that my mother was so disrespected while her sister was alive? Now my mother is going to be diminished by a concubine?" And that's why he bedded Bilhah—in order to avenge his mother.

Bilhah's voice is conspicuously absent from the Torah. Was she a willing participant in this power grab? How did she feel about being treated as a possession?

Did she have feelings for Jacob? And therefore, what was it like to sleep with his son? We don't know. And, I'm sorry to say, the Rabbis don't ask these questions either.

None of the classical commentators deal with Bilhah. Their focus is on Reuben—to condemn him for his actions for using his father's property. Because Reuben was not written off from Jacob's will, the commentators explain that he actually repented of what he did and was the first one to do teshuvah.

In fact, the men of the Talmud take a very familiar tack. They blame the victim.

There is a work of pseudopigrapha – specifically the text “the Testament of Reuben” (this was a falsely attributed work, but it's not important that Reuben didn't actually write it. What's important is that later apologists felt the need to put these words in his mouth.). We find there the need to besmirch and defame Bilhah is given free rein.

The character of Reuben says:

*Pay no heed to the face of a woman, nor associate with another man's wife, nor meddle with affairs of womankind. For if I had not seen Bilhah bathing in a covered place, I would not have fallen into this great iniquity. For my mind taking in the thought of the woman's nakedness, suffered me not to sleep until I had wrought the abominable thing...*

In other words—it was her fault! She was drunk! She was naked! What could I do? I couldn't help myself. It wasn't my fault.

Rabbinic literature does not only **not** help Bilhah, but it seems more concerned with protecting the reputation of Reuben, even while explaining why the status that

should have been his went to Judah. The Mishnah (Megillah 4:10) suggests that the verse should not be translated when read out in the synagogue, so that the people who did not know Hebrew would not learn about it. Talmud (BT Shabbat 55b) says that Reuben only moved his father's bed without permission and scripture ascribes blame AS IF he had slept with her. The Rabbis fall over themselves to find Reuben innocent of the terrible act that Torah records quite bluntly.

Rabbi Lia Bass points out that the clue comes from the preposition *et*, in verse 22, which is used to mean “with” in the phrase “he lay with her.” וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת-בִּלְהָהּ

*Et* is a grammatical tool in Hebrew to show that the word that follows it is an object—the object of the verb that preceded it. The verb form “he lay,” *vayishkav*, used of a man with a woman implies a sexual encounter. It's usually followed by the word *im*, meaning “with.” We see this verb form in David's encounter with Batsheba, or Jacob with Leah—both times seen as either consensual or initiated by the woman—the preposition used after *vayishkav* is *im*. With Bilhah, however, the preposition *et* is used, and indicates that Bilhah is an object of this act—and not a consenting partner. We call that rape.

There are only two other instances in the Hebrew bible where the expression “*vayishkav et*” is found, and both are initiated by a man, done to a woman. Both are well known to be rape—the rape of Dinah that we find in Genesis 34, and the Rape of Tamar, found in 2 Samuel 13. Through an interpretive tool we call “*gezerah shavah*” meaning “the same claim” it looks like in Bilhah's case, too, she did not consent. It was rape.

What else do these stories have in common? In these three instances, the motivation for the rape is not desire—it is power. And we have learned in modern times too, that rape is not about lust or desire; it is about power and control.

In the case of Tamar, raping her would establish Amnon's power over his half-siblings, especially over Absalom, who was next in line to succeed King David. In the case of Dinah, she was a pawn in the fight between the possessors of the Land (Shechem and his father Hamor) and the newcomers (Jacob and his sons). In taking her by force, Shechem tried to establish his power over the Land and his right to do whatever he deemed right in that Land. So too, in the case of Bilhah, as we said, we have Reuben trying to establish power over his father's estate.

But here is the saving grace: if we continue these stories to their conclusions, we see that making women suffer—and using women—is not the road to attain power. Amnon is killed by his half-brother, Absalom, in revenge for his sister. Shimon and Levi kill Shechem and his people in revenge for their sister. And Reuben loses all his privileges, including the rights of the firstborn.

Rape is about power, but it will never secure the power that the rapist seeks. The Torah tells us this very clearly and supports women in telling their stories too.

Ironically, December 10 was International Human Rights Day commemorating the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. The hypocrisy could not be clearer as we see the UN's denial of what we know to have happened on October 7 to Israeli women. The UN not only refused to acknowledge that rape was used by the terrorists but denied that these acts happened at all, despite documented evidence. Today, sixteen young women remain in Gaza, no doubt reliving the horror daily.

The Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism has declared this week "Dina Week" (but they could have easily named it Bilhah Week) to raise awareness about emotional and sexual protection, and I have to think, highlight the inequity at the UN

when it comes to standing up for the human rights of Jews, and especially Jewish women.

But we in our lives, can follow the lead of the Torah rather than the Rabbis who made excuses and obfuscations—being honest about what happened to Bilhah then and to women today, not making apologies for those who transgress and violate the rights of others, and confronting the ugliness of our tradition and our society. The Torah records this episode for a reason—to learn from it, to confront it, to learn what not to do, and to see that there is even holiness in learning from the wrongs of our ancestors.

I am grateful that a close reading of our holy book allows us to see the truth and hear the otherwise silenced voices of the women. May the leaders and law makers in society today likewise see the truth and listen to the voices of the women.

Kein y’hi ratzon.