

And Dinah – the daughter of Leah... went out... to look over the daughters of the land. (34:1)

The *Midrash Tanchuma* makes a startling statement concerning Dinah's journey to observe the girls of the land. *Poretz geder yishchenu nachash*, "One who breaches the fence will/should be bitten by a snake." (This term is used in the *Talmud Avodah Zarah* 27b and is based upon a *pasuk* in *Koheles* 10:8, "He who breaks down a wall will be bitten by a snake.") This is strong terminology to be applied to Dinah. *Chazal* continue: "Her father and brothers were sitting in the *bais hamedrash* studying Torah, and she went out to observe the girls of the land. As a result, she was violated by a snake, Shechem *ben* Chamor." *Chazal's* statement begs elucidation. When you think about it, Dinah was a young girl, eight years of age. Is she to be held in such contempt as to be called a *poretz geder*?

The *Baalei Mussar*, Ethicists, explain that *Chazal* criticize Dinah because, having been raised in a home steeped in such sanctity, with a father such as Yaakov *Avinu* and brothers such as the *Shivtei Kah*, she had received an exemplary education in Torah values. She should have felt that life within the Torah camp was unparalleled; it was filled with such happiness that there would be no need to seek substitutes or supplements from the pagan environment external to her home. Why would a girl who had it all feel the need to have more? As a result, she is called a *poretz geder*, for intimating that the Torah world was an insufficient *weltanschauung* for her.

One of the most important principles of Torah Judaism is that a life of Torah observance is the greatest opportunity one can have. The sheer joy of being able to serve Hashem – to study His Torah, to live a life of sanctity and purity away from the blandishments of today's materialistic, hedonistic, aimless and purposeless, self-centered society – should in and of itself be satisfying. One should not feel that he is missing out on anything. If he is still not fulfilled, if he feels left out of the fun, then his problem is much more severe. Something is inherently wrong with his Jewish observance. If he is missing the *geshmak*, satisfaction in life, then his observance is deficient, his *davening* is not *davening*, his learning is substandard.

I know that these are strong words, but it is what we see all of the time. The man or woman who feels unfulfilled by a Torah observant lifestyle is really not experiencing one! He or she might be going through the motions, but without experiencing true observance. **Horav Zaidel Epstein, zl**, explains that this was the underlying intention of the Greeks, *l'hashkicham Torasecha*, "To make them (the Jews) forget Your Torah." They would allow the Jews to learn Torah, but they did not want them to equate Torah with Hashem. They were concerned with *Torasecha*, Your Torah. They were willing to let the Jew learn, but not in such a manner that he views the Torah as *Toras Hashem*, and that studying Torah is his *tachlis*, purpose in life, such that only through Torah could he achieve *sheleimus*, perfection. Unless one learns and lives Torah like that, it is considered *nisht gelerent*, not having learned.

Horav Zevullun Graz, zl, was a *talmid muvhak*, primary student, of the *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka*. He was well-known for his incredible *simchas ha'chaim*, joy of life, reflecting it in his very countenance and every endeavor. His love of Torah and everything related to it was consummate. He related that this attitude was the result of a remark which his revered *Rebbe* made to him, a remark that penetrated his heart and mind, a remark that impacted his entire life. *Rav Zevullun* was leaving the *bais hamedrash* one day following a very successful and fulfilling *seder*, learning session, during which he was able to delve deeply into a difficult *sugya*, problem in the *Talmud*, and successfully resolve the issue. He truly felt good, satisfied with the day's learning. The *Alter*, seeing him leave, said, "You are a *tzaddik*, righteous person, but you look like a *rasha*, evil person!" *Rav Zevullun* immediately asked, "*Rebbe*, in what area am I a *tzaddik*, and, if I am righteous, how is it that I give the appearance of a *rasha*?" The *Alter* replied, "You are a *tzaddik*, because after hours of intense study and dialectic, you have merited to grow in Torah and to spiritually elevate yourself. You give the appearance of a *rasha*, however, since the tremendous, unparalleled joy that you should have experienced studying Torah is not apparent in your countenance."

We now understand the critique of eight year old Dinah. Growing up in what may be considered the perfect home, should have been more than enough for her to be able to achieve spiritual success. Sadly for *her* it apparently was insufficient. She wanted something other than the spiritual utopia in which she was living. She looked elsewhere, a move which ultimately led to her violation by Shechem..

I am using this *dvar Torah* as a segue to touch briefly upon the plight of those children who, for some reason, do not pick up the beauty of *Yiddishkeit* from their homes or schools and, as a result, seek other media of self-expression, joy, identity – whatever one wants to call it – the children who are called "at risk," when, in fact, we are the ones who are at risk. We are failing them.

I am here neither to solve the problem, nor even to address the multifold issues involved. I just want to remind everyone that the problem many of us tend to ignore is still present. It has not gone away. Many gifted and dedicated individuals have presented solutions, but, sadly, the problem is still alive. Rather than focus on why it happens, what we do, I would like to address how we should react to the boy or girl, who, after seeing that it is not all fun and games on the outside, has decided to return. They should be embraced, with love and respect, because this is what they need (and, for all intents and purposes, the lack of which might have played a role in their originally eschewing the Torah way of life).

Years ago (November 1999), the Jewish Observer presented two editions devoted to the subject of, "Kids on the Fringe and Beyond." The articles were unprecedented, and the public ate them up. One short anonymous vignette was written by a young girl who had drifted from observance to non-observance – and had come back. Her observations are eye-opening and give us much over which to ruminate as parents, grandparents, and friends. I take the liberty of presenting it verbatim:

I wish I could speak and be listened to.

I cannot speak, because I am too young.

I cannot speak, for it's too late for me.

I cannot speak, because I've lost the desire to keep fighting. It's too hard... too painful...

I don't want to try, have no more tears to cry. My emotions have bled out; I am left an empty shell. I am in your school, your *shul*, on your block. You don't want your kids hanging out with me. You won't let me play with your son. You won't let your daughter sleep over at my house. I try not to dream.

But I'll speak anyways, because I've made it. I am not better or more intelligent than my friends. I am not more personable or lovable. I am no warmer or deeper than my friends, and my insides hide no secrets of beauty or potential.

There were just some people, a handful or less, who gave me a penny, a tiny lift. Sometimes they lied to me, saying how well I did. But the little love that came with it was perfect and genuine.

You can help us. You don't have to think. There's no magic system. Don't change or fight the system. Don't change the formula. Don't change at all, except for one thing: your heart.