WOMEN AT THE TABLE
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Growing up I used to play an imagination game called, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner". To play this game you made of a list of people living or dead that you would like to have over for a dinner party at your house, you then extrapolated from the guest list what the dinner conversation might be. My guest list was often made up of sports heroes and movie stars, how great I imagined it would be to have Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Babe Ruth and Joe Dimagio over for dinner. I would raise the subject of the greatest baseball game they ever played and sit back and listen to their stories.

Imagine a dinner table filled with the world's greatest explores, Louis and Clark, Columbus, Magellan, and Neil Armstrong, sharing tales about their great adventures. Sometimes I imagined a mixed company of scientists, scholars, inventors, and captains of industry as we tried to tackle the worlds ills, fixing problems and creating a better society.

What makes this game fun is when you imagine the cross talk that would take place, not only the relating of stories, but what might Hertzl say to Netanyahu, imagine Jesus, Moses and Mohamed sitting down for a meal together – it could change the whole world.

If you can stomach it imagine Hitler and Ellie Weisel coming face to face. The guests need not be famous or even specific individuals, how about a dinner party made up of 10 generations of women from the same family, could you imagine sitting across the table from your great-great-great-great-great grandmother as she told the story of life under the Cossaks in Eastern Europe, or I guess in my case what the original Kuggle recipe really was?

Now imagine for a moment a dinner party made up of great Jewish women from the past, who would be on your guest list? From the Torah we might take the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, certainly Eve and Miriam, perhaps Tamar, Debroah, Bat Sheva, Esther, Naomi and Ruth. If we are well versed in Biblical women, we may include a little known prophetess named Huldah whom we have to thank for the inclusion of the book of Deuteronomy in the biblical canon. We may also include the biblical Helen of Troy, Leah's daughter Dinah, who we read about in this week's Torah Portion, and over whose virtue the entire city of Shechem was destroyed, all of its men killed by Dinah's vengeful brothers.

The list while not exhaustive, or lengthy compared to the male characters of the Bible is still sizable and significant. Each of these women played crucial roles in the Jewish narrative, each of these women represent a unique and important biblical model of ethics, character, determination and reliance for the modem era.

Searching beyond the Bible we may want a representative from the Rabbinic period. That period after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE that came to shape the Judaism we practice and observe today. Here our list of potential guests is much shorter, there is Beruriah, the only woman in the Talmud mentioned to participate in debates of Jewish law, and the foster-mother of Rav Abaye, of which he frequently spoke with great reverence. Beyond these few women our representatives from this formative period of Jewish history are all men, and thus disqualified from our dinner party.

From the end of Rabbinic period in S00ce, through all of the middle ages up until the start of the modem period only a handful of Jewish woman are widely known or written about in Jewish History. We would do well to include all of them on our guest list, certainly we would make room for, Gluckel of Hameln a 17th century German woman whose detailed diary comprises much of what we know about the life of a Jewish woman in that era. We would include the Spanish poets Kasmuna bint Ismalia, and Huldah bat Judah Halevi, whose command of verse helped shape the Golden Age of Spain.

And we would include a Jewish scribe named Miriam bat Benayah from medieval Yemen who wrote the following inscription on the sefer Torah she penned in her own hand, "Please do not fault me if you find a mistake, as I am a nursing mother as I write this."

In the modem period our list is limited only by the number place settings of china we have, though for such an impressive list of guests we might use paper plates just to accommodate more people. How could we pick between the witnesses to holocaust Anne Frank and Hannah Szenesh, and the women who brought a Jewish state, Zionists like Henritta Szold and Golda Meir. Writers and Scholars such as Hannah Ardent, Lea Goldberg, Nahama Liebowitz, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg would make the list, as would activists' Anat Hoffman and Gloria Steinem, psychologist Melanie Klein, astronaut Judith Resnick, entertainers Barbara Streisand and Bette Midler, the first female Rabbi Sally Preisand, Wonder Woman Gal Gadot. We'd have to include Canadian born Lila Kagedan, who became the first female Modern Orthodox rabbi in the United States.

And these are only the names of people we know, to get a complete representation of the woman who have shaped Jewish life we would want to include an immigrant Jewish woman from Eastern Europe who led her family through the doors of Ellis Island to a new life in America. We would of course need the voices of modem Jewish women, those who marched for civil rights and equality, worked assembly lines during WWII and those who are courageously standing up to harassment and assault in the work place.

We would need the millennial Jewish single woman, as well as the single mother, the newly wed, the college student. We would need the grandmother who struggles to pass on tradition to her children, and we would need the teenage Jewish girls who has never known a world without women Rabbis, gender sensitive prayer, and Feminist Jewish theology.

We would invite all these women to our dinner table, maybe we would make it a shabbat dinner, as together all assembled mystically waved their hands three times over the sabbath candles, covered their eyes and sang the blessing in unison. And when the sweet wine is passed from woman to woman, and the challah, baked by a generation of hands is torn and tasted, when the soup is finally on the table, and all assembled sit down to eat, what would Sarah say to Golda, what would Eve whose eating of the apple led us out of Eden, say to Miriam who danced with timbrels leading us across the Red Sea, back into the land.

What would Bueriah, whose Talmud study was never fully accepted by some many, say to Sally Priesand whose Rabbinate is still today a subject of heated debate and controversy?

I would hope they would hold each other's gaze in their eyes and exclaim in full voice *Dorsheini! Dorsheini!* Interpret me, interpret my life, my story. Find yourself in me, find yourself in the gaps and lapses of my story, that were never recorded by the men who wrote our collective history and only viewed the world through their gender specific lens.

How different our world would be, our collective discourse would be if more women's voices were not only at the table, but in this time of awareness about long festering and pervasive sexual harassment in the work place, if those voice were at the head of the table, in the corner office and Chairwoman of the Board of Directors.

On this Shabbat when we read the story of the Rape of Dinah in a Torah portion that treats such a horrific event as an afterthought as compared to the sibling rivalry of the two brothers Jacob and Esau I have to raise this up.

So many women in the Bible and throughout Jewish history have been forgotten, ignored or relegated as the story of Dinah is, to footnotes in a male dominated narrative.

Sure, we can point to numerous women who are remembered, whose deeds are recorded to varying degrees. But most would conclude that women who represent at least half of biblical society, who were created as Eve was, to be man's partner's in the world are, under represented, their stories either not recorded, or not told fully. Even women about whom we know a great deal in the Torah, Rebecca, Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and Miriam, they seem to be easily forgotten.

Rebecca's death is never reported, Miriam's story is full of references to Moses and Aaron, and never fully her own.

Women become secondary character's in the bible, when the text uses the metaphor of God remembered them for Sarah, Rachel and later Hannah it is for fertility, not covenant as it is so frequently employed for men. Even the Hebrew root word for memory, *zayin, chaf, raish* is also the root for male *Zachar*.

In contrast when Israel forgets God, Israel is commonly represented as an adulterous wife or Harlot. (Ezekiel 16:15, Hosea 3:1). As Debra Orenstein writes in her second volume to her Lifecycles anthology on Jewish Feminist Thought, "In a culture that values memory as a path to living rightly, connecting with God and finding salvation, it is painful to embody the dominant symbol of forgetting and at the same time, to be so frequently forgotten. (Orenstein p.24)"

She continues, "It is not malicious, but it is also not accidental, that women have been 'written out of history, as philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard has noted, along with the history and theology of remembering, there is also a politics of forgetting." (Orenstein p. 24). And I would add the harsher politics of intentionally overlooking.

On the story of the Rape of Dinah, the Ramban explains that all forced sexual connection is called “affliction”, “*inui*”. Scripture emphasizes that Dinah was forced and did not consent to the prince of the country.

As the story unfolds, we do not hear from Dinah at all, not after the rape and not when she is taken captive. From what we see from the text, she is completely silent when Shechem tries to convince her brothers to let him marry her. We also don’t hear from her after she is rescued.

Yaakov is silent as well.

In this week’s parasha we read: “Yaakov heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter, Dinah, while his sons were with the livestock in the fields. Yaakov remained silent until they returned.”

But what about Leah, Dinah’s mother, what did she say? We will never know the text was not interested in what women had to say about assault only how men responded to it.

We don’t have answers to any of those questions and unfortunately some things still have not changed.

Through the recent #MeToo campaign, many women who were afraid to speak out about the abuse that they went through are finally opening up about what happened.

Unfortunately, Dinah was never able to express herself and tell her own story about what really went on and the anguish that she suffered.

Had Leah been in a position of authority and power, had there been women in leadership and men of empathic understanding sitting around the table talking about what for too long was not talked about, is still not talked about enough in our study of our sacred text perhaps it would have been different. Perhaps had those values been present back then, our values today or lack thereof would have created a different reality for women and all of the vulnerable in our society.

May the statements of the women who have courageously spoken up so far help promote awareness of abuse and help deter all forms of misconduct in the future. May we listen to their voices past and present – so that they can give birth, as only women can to different and I pray better future.