

'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive'

**Candle Lighting Friday, November 25 4:08 pm**

**CSH Shabbat Service Schedule**

**December 3 – CSH @ Old Whalers**

December 10- Temple Adas Israel

December 17 - Temple Adas Israel

**December 24 - CSH @ Old Whalers (Chanukah)**

December 31 - Temple Adas Israel



**This week's parashat: Toldot**

Annual: Genesis 25:19-28:9 (Etz Hayim p. 146)

Triennial Cycle: Genesis 26:23-27:27 (Etz Hayim p. 152)

Haftarah: I Samuel 20:18-42 (Etz Hayim p. 1216)

**Toldot Musings:** *And Rebekah heard when Isaac spoke to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it. And Rebekah spoke unto Jacob her son, saying: 'Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying: Bring me venison, and make me savoury food, that I may eat, and bless thee before the Lord before my death. Now therefore, my son, hearken to my voice according to that which I command thee. Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats; and I will make them savoury food for thy father, such as he loveth; and thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, so that he may bless thee before his death.' And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother: 'Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a mocker; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.'* (27:5-12)

Taken at face value it appears as if Rebekah and Jacob collude to swindle, to take shameless advantage of the limited sight of the patriarch Isaac. Scholars have characterized the episode in disparaging terms. "Rebekah's Hoax" is the title of a recent article in Jewish Bible Quarterly. There the author writes that Rebekah "devises a plan to deceive her blind husband." This description of Rebekah's action is in line with other contemporary critics. In notes to the recently published The Torah: A Women's Commentary, Rebekah is portrayed as working without Isaac's "knowledge or consent," that she "creates a way to usurp his authority" by using "subterfuge." In Etz Hayim, the American Conservative movement's commentary on the Torah, one reads "Rebekah resorts to duplicity" against Isaac.

To accuse Rebekah of duplicity and deceit against Isaac misreads the text. To suggest, "Rebekah thoroughly controls the action in Genesis 27" is too narrow a focus. Likewise, to term Rebekah as the "trickster who formulates the plan and succeeds, moving the men around her like chess pieces" ignores Isaac's crucial role in this plot. Without Isaac's major contribution to the scheme, his playacting as the innocent barely-sighted giver of blessings, the deception of Jacob would not have succeeded.

A closer reading of the text suggests that while there was a hoax, a deception, it was Jacob, the deceiver, who was in fact deceived, not Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah together have planned this event. Isaac knows who is before him, as his dialogue with faux Esau makes quite clear. It is not Isaac who is "in the dark," it is Jacob. Both of Jacob's parents work in concert to mislead him so that he thinks he is "stealing" the blessing.

To read this essay in its entirety, go to:  
<http://www.jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/391/Deceiver.pdf>



Rebekah overhears Isaac's conversation. She convinces Jacob to deceive his father, her husband, the almost blind Patriarch, to steal the blessing from him. Jacob is fearful of engaging in deceit towards his father, but his mother allays his fears by assuming total responsibility for the theft and deception 'On me be the curse, my son. Just listen to me' (27:13). Does Jacob obeying his mother act similar to those who stated 'I was just following orders'? Perhaps he pondered whether stealing a promise from God is valid. Does Isaac in his 'spiritual blindness' give the blessing to the 'spiritual blind' son?

What are Jacob and Rebekah seeking? .... Ironically she wanted him to be what Isaac admired in his son Esau and what Abraham loved in his son Ishmael. She wanted him to replicate herself. And she wants him to attain the 'mastery' of [his brother] as her vision implied. Rebekah may have understood that blessing would give Jacob the power of Abraham, the power of God's chosen. But why if he is spiritual does he need a special blessing and how does one get spirituality by stealing? Further as we will see the blessing is not exclusively one of spirituality. Did she ever pause to consider whether receiving the spiritual blessing by stealth was appropriate or even valid?

Did she feel she had been deceived forty years earlier and manipulated into this marriage. Did she ever feel rage at Abraham and Eliezer for not having been informed of Isaac's infirmity? Did she feel she had the right to determine who would get the blessing, not her damaged husband? Did she believe that the end justifies the means? Did she indeed understand the blessing more deeply than her damaged husband? Can she therefore be seen as the spiritual protector of the family? Did she believe the firstborn blessing bestowed on Jacob would imbue him with the aggressiveness he so sorely lacked? Could she have wanted for Jacob what Isaac admired in Esau: an Adam One personality? She unquestionably manipulated her emotionally ill husband. Would Isaac realize that she misused his power? Did she realize that she risked a cut-off from her husband and from Esau? How would Isaac and Esau react to her deception? Undoubtedly a major conflict exists between her spiritual mission, her role as wife and her role as mother.

To read this commentary in its entirety, go to:

[http://moshereiss.org/messenger/03\\_rebekahandisaac/03\\_rebekahandisaac.html](http://moshereiss.org/messenger/03_rebekahandisaac/03_rebekahandisaac.html)

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Sefat Emet does not presume that husband and wife did not communicate, but rather that they differed philosophically. Yitshak, it would appear, felt that the spiritual legacy of Avraham is sufficient blessing for an *ish tam yoshev ohalim*, immersed in the contemplative life; whereas, Rivka opined that Yaakov was not beyond the temporal blessings which he wrests from his father, including the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth as well as *rov dagan ve-tirosh* (27:28)-an abundance of grain and wine. Howsoever they may have differed initially, it seems that once Yaakov receives the temporal blessings-deceivingly or otherwise-Yitshak affirms that he should have them, by averring to Esav ". . . and I ate from all [the delicacies] ere you came and I blessed him, and he is indeed blessed" (27:33). In the final analysis, Yitshak changed his assessment of Esav's potential, as well as any utopian plans for a Yisaskhar-Zevulun symbiosis between the two brothers.

What caused the change of heart in Yitshak? Surely, it was not Rivka's persuasive powers, which would then have made the ensuing charade unnecessary. According to R Hirsch and others, it was Yitshak who staged a deceptive ruse, hoping to lure Esav into a path of repentance by proffering a "blessing" of unknown nature, having already decided to secure the spiritual legacy of Avraham for Yaakov. The request for venison was an educational ploy to capitalize on Esav's desire to hold on to his father's approval and affection, despite his violating the "Avrahamic" norm by marrying idolatrous women. Rivka, who was not aware of her husband's secret plan, countered with a deception of her own, presuming that Yitshak had been too blind to see his first-born son's immorality. The resulting drama is reduced to a tragicomedy of errors, which unmarks for the first time the true secret of the birthright.

When Esav returns from the hunt and learns that Yaakov had maneuvered to take "his" blessing, he reveals unwittingly the hidden fact that he had already relinquished the duty and privilege of the bekhora:

First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing! 27:36

These words undo Yitshak's earlier judgment about Yaakov's underhanded manner of obtaining the blessing (27:35):

Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing.

Having revealed his own contempt for the spiritual legacy inherent in the bekhora, Esav stands unmasked before his father who hitherto had been "blinded." Rivka, in contrast, had known all along the nature of the divergent paths of her twin sons. She was privy to worldly knowledge -or to divine prophecy- that she would not, or could not share with her husband.

To read this commentary in its entirety, go to  
<http://www.traditiononline.org/news/article.cfm?id=104941>



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**Happy Anniversary**

Helen and Harvey Schrier celebrating 45 years

**Yom Huledet Sameach**

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**Mazel Tov**

Aaron Weininger on his senior sermon at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Aaron's teaching on this week's parashat is below

**A Thanksgiving Prayer**

O God, it is good to give thanks to You and to acknowledge your blessings. Only then can we savor them. In the hurried pace of our lives and in our preoccupation with the petty and the trivial, we are prone to take your gifts for granted. Oblivious to your bounties, we sinfully waste the opportunities they afford us for living a life of fullness and satisfaction. Therefore, do we set aside this day for Thanksgiving.

We thank You for the land and for its fruits by which we live. We thank You for the vigor of body and mind that enables us to utilize the fertility of our country's fields and forests and the buried treasures of its mineral wealth. We thank You for the varied beauty of its landscape, for the grandeur of its mountains, the hospitality of its plains and prairies, and the gleaming vistas of ocean from its coasts.

We thank you for the inspiration of our country's history -- fir the courage and strength that sustained its explorers and pioneers, for the heroism that inspires it fighter for freedom and equality, for the enterprise that builds its teeming citted, for the arts that express the beauty and meaning of its way of life, for the just laws and free institutions that enable its people to work together in peace and harmony.

Grant, O God, in Your grace, that we may perfect our national life to the measure of your bounty. Grateful for the gifts You have bestowed upon us, may we use them to extend the area of freedom, justice, and goodwill among all people. May our use of your gifts bear witness to humankind that life is good when lived according to Your will. *Mordecai M. Kaplan*

Shabbat Shalom.

Stacy

Aaron Weininger's Senior Sermon  
November 22, 2011 ~ 25 Cheshvan 5772 ~ Parashat Toledot  
The Jewish Theological Seminary

Esav's Cry

I received my first chumash, the Five Books of Moses, in third grade. Jumping in to read the stories of Genesis, I soon reached our parashah, Toledot. Disguised in the skins of his older brother Esav, Jacob deceives their dying father, Isaac, and receives the firstborn's blessing instead. We read in Genesis chapter 27, verse 34, "Ki shmoah Esav et divrei aviv, vayitz'ak tz'akah gedolah u'marah." "When Esav heard his father's words [regarding what Jacob had done], he burst into loud and bitter crying." Despite such an act of deception, our tradition is quick to praise Jacob and vilify Esav. Being an older brother, I secretly sided with Esav.

But it came to be much more than that.

As I grew older, the tradition's treatment of Esav drew me in with urgency. I spent my college years hoping a rainbow might emerge from color-coded terror alerts and illuminate a black and white world in which you were "with us or against us." My faith and identity, meanwhile, became grounded in blessing borne from struggle and nuance. Through the gray of fog I could discover what my teacher Rabbi Carie Carter calls "the many roads to the palace of Judaism." Out of a living faith that wrestled with centuries of precedent, a road could even take me to rabbinical school. So I began charting my way as a teacher and preacher of Torah. In learning how to become a lifelong learner, I came to draw from my story and create space for those most vulnerable to discover theirs. Serving as a hospital chaplain for a patient who jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge, I learned what it meant to give and receive blessing on the margins. I could not close my eyes like Isaac to the reality in front of me. Nor could I condemn as many commentators do those on the margins like Esav. Becoming a rabbi meant traveling down a road with another person and finding blessing.

How could I be a religious leader if I could not hear Esav's loud and bitter cry?

Many of the classical commentators leave Esav on the margins, perhaps out of desperation to justify Jacob's behavior as "good for the Jews." When Isaac explains to Esav that his brother Jacob received the firstborn's blessing "b'mirmah," only Ibn Ezra, the medieval Spanish commentator translates "b'mirmah" as "coming with deception"- "she'lo diber emet." "He did not speak the truth." Seeking to portray Jacob's deception in a positive light, the medieval French commentator Rashi translates "b'mirmah" as an act of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

Aware of blessing borne from struggle earlier in my life, I began my project—searching for a text that might root Esav's pain in the tradition. Now the stakes were higher. I could not leave Esav on the margins as I prepared to enter the world as a rabbi. The path of tearing him down would not help me pave the many roads to the palace of Judaism.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:35

In Genesis Rabbah, a fifth-century collection of biblical commentary, Rabbi Haninah admonishes those who claim the Holy Blessed One doesn't pay attention to human suffering. He teaches that God ultimately collects what is due. "Tz'akah achat hizik Ya'akov l'Esav, dicitiv: 'Vayitzak tz'akah gedolah u'marah.' V'heichan niphrah lo? B'Shushan habirah, she'ne'emar: 'Vayizak z'akah gedolah u'marah.'" "Jacob made Esav break into one cry, as it is written: 'And he burst into a loud and bitter cry.' Where was he punished for it? In Shushan the capital, as it is written: 'And he cried a loud and bitter cry.'"<sup>2</sup>

Esav's cry penetrates into the heart of the tradition and waits like a volcano to erupt again. His tears soak the conscience of Torah, and then breach the city walls of Shushan in the book of Esther. The loud and bitter cry of Esav—the one despised by many rabbis for being the symbol of Edom, the archetypal enemy of the Jewish people—is the cry echoed by Mordecai Hayehudi, the first biblical character identified as a Jew.<sup>3</sup>

When Mordecai finds out the Jewish people of Shushan are to be annihilated, he cries the same loud and bitter cry as Esav. "Vayizak z'akah gedolah u'marah." "He cried a loud and bitter cry."<sup>4</sup>

Edomite cries burst from Jewish lips. In a moment of dread, Mordecai is able to access his emotions from none other than Esav. Both of them encounter blindness from those in charge of shaping the future. King Achashverosh is blind to Mordecai's loyalty and

<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 67:4

<sup>3</sup> Esther 2:5

<sup>4</sup> Esther 4:1

accepts Haman's decree to wipe out the Jewish people. And Esav's father Isaac is blind as he prepares to die. According to Rashi, Isaac is blinded by the tears of the angels who cried from heaven as they watched his near-sacrifice by Abraham on Mt. Moriah.<sup>5</sup> In both narratives, people who have the power to bless become trapped by not being able to see. King Achashverosh and Isaac are spiritually absent to the reality in their midst. Why does Genesis Rabbah link Esav and Mordecai? Esav's tears give Mordecai a way to be real with his pain, and Mordecai's prominence gives visibility to Esav on the margins. Speaking of Esav's tears, Rabbi Sarra Lev writes, It is a response of inward pain, rather than of outward rage. Esav's is not the macho response of Biblical men who experience injustice and respond with rage and revenge... Never do we hear that Esav tries to carry out this internalized threat [of killing his brother Jacob], even when his chance does arrive...<sup>6</sup>

Esav's cry, sounded by none other than Mordecai, forces us to take a closer look, to listen, and to learn on the margins.

Each morning in the preliminary blessings known as Birkhot HaShahar, we praise the Holy Blessed One for giving sight to the blind. I thank God for opening my eyes at different points in my life-- the eyes of a third grader and now the eyes of a teacher and preacher of Torah. When I recite this blessing, I thank God for opening my eyes each day to see precisely those who are rendered invisible by narrow vision, to meet the challenge of Esav who asks, *Are you willing to see and bless those like me who might otherwise be left as scraps on the rabbinic cutting room floor?*

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 27:1

<sup>6</sup> Sarra Lev, "Esau's Gender Crossing, Parashat Toldot" in *Torah Queeries*, ed. Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Shneer (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 40.

As I prepare to graduate, I may not look much older than the third grader who received his first chumash. But my vision of a redeemed world includes Esav coming to transform us. Esav's cry catapults us into the deeper recesses of pain—the moments when we cry a loud and bitter cry. Like Esav we wonder if somebody will witness our despair. "Have you but one blessing, father?" Esav asks Isaac.<sup>7</sup> He repeats that question today when his story is in my hands to teach. I knew I had to continue searching for Esav's blessing when one was not obviously there.

Psalm 126 holds out our hope: "Restore us, Eternal One, as you return streams to the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap in joy." In my first summer as a chaplain at Bellevue Hospital, I shared this Psalm with the patient who tried to take her life by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. I journeyed with her for eight weeks-- from the emergency room, to the trauma unit, and eventually to a psychiatric floor. She shared with me a collection of poems she composed years before as she struggled on the margins with depression. In her desert of despair, tears flowed like the streams of the Negev. We imagined the possibility of healing through poetry and of reconciliation with her family. Previously estranged, her mother visited and heard her daughter's loud and bitter cry for help. We blessed one another with the words we knew and the silence we held. A young rabbinical student sitting with an older Christian woman of color, we prayed those who sow in tears would reap in joy.

What does it mean to hear Esav's cry, a cry that pierces through our tents and rattles us? What does it mean to make Esav's cry our cry, his pain our pain? To see Esav's tears

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 27:38

streaming down the seventy faces of Torah. To hear the words of Genesis Rabbah and my patient at Bellevue, reminding us of those who sow in tears. To say yes, there is a blessing for you—and your blessing will bring joy.

Esav eventually receives a blessing from his dying father Isaac, and Esav comes to bless his own brother, Jacob. Twenty years later, as recorded in Genesis chapter 32, Jacob wrestles with Esav's ministering angel in the middle of the night.<sup>8</sup> Jacob—like his older brother Esav before him—begs to receive a blessing. At the break of dawn the ministering angel of Esav blesses Jacob with the name Yisrael, and Jacob names the place Peniel. He declares, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."<sup>9</sup> In opening his eyes to his brother Esav, Jacob sees God and the possibility for reconciliation. Wrestling with the ministering angel of Esav, Jacob discovers his road to the palace of Judaism as a patriarch of Israel. Transformation is possible in giving blessing to and receiving blessing from Esav.

I know the power of blessing in holding me these last five years. For that I am so grateful to you—my family, friends, mentors, congregants, colleagues, and teachers. Thank you. You have sustained me with your blessings on this road and trusted in the blessings I might be able to offer as a rabbi.

I received my first chumash almost twenty years ago. Its stories still brim with wisdom. Not because the words mean the same to me now as they did then. They don't. The Torah, like me, has changed. Its seventy faces include many new shades of color. In those faces I catch a glimpse of the rainbow I struggled to see many years ago through the fog. The Torah expands to witness the tears of Esav, the Edomite enemy, streaming from the eyes of Mordecai, the Jewish hero. It shatters the binary in which Jacob is good and Esav is bad. The beauty of the Torah is found in its complexity. The same God who opens our eyes each morning can help us recognize blessing as we travel the many roads to the palace of Judaism

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis Rabbah 77:3

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 32:31