REBEKAH'S HOAX

GUY MATALON

The role of women as initiators in the Books of Genesis and Exodus is fairly obvious. According to Pardes, certain essential aspects of the story of Israel would not have taken place were it not for the initiative and action of women. The story of the Israelites could not have taken place without the single act of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Her eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil brings about culture (sewing), civilization (sexuality), and morality – three necessary components of society. The Exodus from Egypt, for example, would not have taken place in the manner that it did were it not for the midwives, Shifra and Puah (Ex. 1:15), Moses' mother and sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh who all played key roles in his survival. Let us not forget the somewhat bizarre decision of God to kill Moses, only for him to be saved by his wife Zipporah (Ex. 4:24-26). The purpose of this study is to contextualize the role of women as initiators through the story of Rebekah's deception of her husband Isaac.

Before addressing the deception itself and its ramifications, it is important to have a clear picture of the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah and the relationship between the parents and their twin boys. Isaac met Rebekah after the death of his mother. It is not clear how much time passed between Sarah's death and Isaac taking Rebekah as his wife and bringing her into his mother's tent. This detail is important, but simply not available. In their first encounter, Rebekah falls off the camel when she sees Isaac. Certainly this gives a whole different meaning to the concept "falling in love." She immediately covers herself. The text does not supply us any more information.

Thereafter, the text tells us vayeaveha [he loved her] (Gen. 24:67). The semantic field of the verb ahav encompasses various other possibilities, such as falling in love, making love, and loving. This is the second occurrence of the verb in the Book of Genesis; the first time it appears, God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice his son, the one you love, Isaac (v. 22:2). Feldman raises the following question: Does the semantic field based on the first usage suggest that Isaac's love of Rebekah was more as a son to a mother?
than a husband to a wife?\textsuperscript{5} This question becomes more acute especially in light of the fact that the text tells the reader the following: \textit{Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death} (v. 24:67). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the possible problematic foundation of the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac's love of Rebekah is really a form of dependence.

After they are married, the couple face a very difficult challenge – infertility. Isaac does not follow in the footsteps of his father to address the problem. Abraham, upon the suggestion of Sarah, takes Hagar as a concubine (v. 16:2-4). It is important to note that Jacob also follows Abraham's lead and when Rachel or Leah cannot conceive, he takes their servants as concubines (30:3; 30:9). Is it possible that the reason Isaac does not take a concubine is the trauma that he went through at the binding? This is possible, but in light of the Genesis 24:67 it is not probable. The reason for Isaac not taking a concubine has to do more with his relationship with Rebekah than any psychological trauma he may have suffered earlier in his life. Since the text tells the reader that Isaac loved Rebekah and establishes Rebekah's role as a comfort for Isaac, the reason Isaac did not seek a concubine appears to have been because of his dependant relationship on Rebekah. That is, Rebekah's comforting role in Isaac's life explains why he does not take another woman in order to produce a child.

Rebekah conceives twin boys and one finds what Feldman calls "a neat distribution of loyalties."\textsuperscript{6} Isaac loves Esau, while Rebekah loves Jacob (v. 25:28). The JPS translation interprets the verb \textit{ahav} as "favoring." While the choice is not incorrect, it fails consistently to translate other instances of the same verb in the Book of Genesis as discussed above. But before analyzing the nature of the parent-child relationships, I should like to note one more aspect of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage.

Isaac, like his father, is required to migrate due to famine in the Promised Land. He enters the territory of King Abimelech and introduces Rebekah as his sister in order to safeguard his own life. This particular story appears three times in the Book of Genesis, twice with Abraham and once with Isaac (vv. 12:11-20, 26). Although there are several differences among the stories, a paradigm exists. The patriarch introduces his wife as a sister fearing he
would be killed on account of her beauty. A ruler takes the sister/wife as a wife and rewards the patriarch for a fine match. Divine intervention ensures that the ruler and the matriarch do not consummate their relationship. The woman is returned untouched to the patriarch once the ruler learns that she is married.

In this particular version of the story, the ruler has not taken the sister/wife yet. As the text tells us, Abimelech, King of Gerar, looking out of the window saw Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah (v. 26:8). The Hebrew verb used in this verb is *metzahek*, an apparent pun on the name Yitzhak. As Feldman writes, "Isaac is now in the subject position, the agent of another kind of laughter, that of sexual playfulness and *domestic bliss*." However, the term can be interpreted in different ways. From the context, it is clear that the king interpreted what he saw as something that occurs between husband and wife. The couple, already with two children, appears to have a close and intimate relationship; as Feldman calls it, "marital bliss." On the surface, as the text tells us, things are quite well between the husband and wife. The birth of the children and the parents' respective relationships with each child did not strain their relationship in such a way that they could not be intimate with each other in public!

Isaac loves Esau for a specific reason; namely, *game was in his mouth* (v. 26:28) Isaac's love of Esau was conditional. He loved his son because his son brought food to him. Esau provides sustenance to his father. It has been pointed out by Feldman that the relationship between father and son is reversed. Instead of the child depending on the parent for nourishment, one finds the father – the patriarch – depending on the child for food. Moreover, the love Isaac has for his son is also one based upon a dependence.

The portrayal of Isaac in this passage becomes even more problematic when one notes that a similar phraseology with regard to game or food in the mouth appears in two other places in the Hebrew Bible. The first instance is the following: *The dove came back to him [Noah] and there was in its mouth a plucked off olive leaf* (v. 8:11). The second is in the Woman of Valor poem: *And [she] supplies game to her household* (Prov. 31:15). The first example symbolizes nourishment, comfort, and hope. The second example speaks to the nurturing nature of the mother. In light of these two passages, Esau, the
hairy male, is portrayed as a mother figure to his father, providing sustenance and nourishment.

The relationship between Rebekah and Jacob is just as complicated or knotty. The text does not give us any reason why Rebekah loves Jacob as opposed to Esau. The reader is quite aware of the dependence of Isaac on Esau's cooking. One can argue that Rebekah's love of Jacob is an example of unconditional love. The text supplies a few clues that allow the reader to gain a better understanding of this relationship. Jacob is clearly portrayed as being in opposition to his twin brother Esau. As Ibn Ezra points out, they are opposites. Esau the (masculine) hunter, Jacob the (feminine) who dwells in the tent, the domain of the matriarch (tent of Sarah, Yael); he cooks lentils, not meat, which is another example of feminine characteristics. Moreover, Jacob is described as smooth, again in opposition to his brother, the hairy one (Gen. 27:11). Although the text supplies a reason for Isaac's preference for Esau, it does not supply any reason for Rebekah's favoring of Jacob. Vidal Tzarfati (1545-1619), in his Imrei Yosher, a commentary on Midrash Rabba, writes, "The reason for Isaac's love of Esau was utilitarian, whereas the Rebekah's love [of Jacob] was love of the good." It is possible to argue that the reason Rebekah loves Jacob is the prophetic message she receives from God while pregnant. It is true that the prophecy tells the final outcome of the struggle between the two brothers, but it does not suggest a course of action. God does not dictate to Rebekah whom to love or favor. It is quite difficult to accept that God's decree can negatively influence a parent's love for her child.

Now we reach the heart of the matter. Rebekah, knowing everything that goes on in the tent, overhears Isaac speaking to Esau. She devises a plan to deceive her blind husband so that her favorite son will receive a blessing from his father. Rebekah initiates an action that has some very serious consequences. Yes, Jacob receives the blessing from his father, but he is forced to flee from his home. As far as the text tells us, Rebekah does not have any further contact with the son she loves. The relationship between the brothers is such that Esau wants to kill his brother.

The obvious question to ask is: Why did Rebekah not approach Isaac with the prophecy? That is, Rebekah could have spoken to her husband about making sure that Jacob will receive the appropriate blessing. Instead of fol-
lowing what would appear to be the easy way out, she conceived a plan to trick her husband into giving the blessing to its rightful owner. The morality of such an action is certainly problematic; encouraging a child to lie to his blind father is not something that is moral (see Ex. 20:17). At least one midrash considers why Rebekah did not discuss her view with Isaac but offers no solution to this question.\textsuperscript{13} It appears simply to imply that time was of the essence and she could not take the time to speak to Isaac because Esau could return any minute. Rebekah, so it appears, assumed that if her conversation with her husband failed, she would not have enough time to prepare the meal and send Jacob in. It should be pointed out that the Malbim (1809-1845) explains that the reason Rebekah could not take the time to talk to Isaac was that Esau hurried to bring the meal to his father. However, hunting, skinning, and preparing the meal cannot take less time than having a conversation. Jonah Girondi writes that Rebekah told Jacob that if his father should recognize him, she would step in and talk to him as Sarah spoke to Abraham and identified Ishmael as evil.\textsuperscript{14}

The morality of the story is one aspect that should concern readers. However, the manner in which prophecy is fulfilled should disturb the reader even more. The method selected by Rebekah to carry out God's message to her when she was pregnant teaches that the ends justify the means. God's will must be carried out by human beings at all cost. If this means that one must lie and use trickery to make sure that God's will is fulfilled, so be it. Divine sanction of the principle of the end justifies the means is morally problematic and dangerous. Nahmanides (1194-1270) is somewhat perplexed as to why Rebekah did not tell Isaac of the prophecy prior to the birth of the twins. Although he offers some possible answers as to why this conversation did not take place, he ends with the following: \textit{By Him actions are measured} (I Sam. 2:3). That is, God is all knowing, and He alone understands human actions.\textsuperscript{15}

In attempting to understand Rebekah's behavior, David Kimhi (1160-1235) writes:

\begin{quote}
And she [Rebekah] saw that Esau went to perform his father's command and she addressed Jacob because she was jealous of this [\textit{qin'ah bazeh}] and she did not know that Jacob would be blessed even if his father would not bless him . . . . But Rebe-
kah's heart saddened for Jacob and because of her great love of him she advised him to do something by deception.

Kimhi's view is even more problematic than presented here. Above, the contention was made that the motive for Rebekah's action was to fulfill God's word, but as Kimhi explains, the motivation for Rebekah's action was jealousy rather than obedience to God. He excuses her behavior because she loved her child and was willing to go to great lengths to make sure her child would succeed.

From the biblical perspective, Rebekah is considered a heroine since she was willing to do whatever it took to fulfill the prophecy revealed to her by God. The fact remains that the consequences of her actions led to Jacob's flight from her home; she was never to see her son again. Moreover, according to one midrash, "God repays human beings measure for measure . . . . Jacob our father cheated his father by use of goat skins, and his children cheated him by use of goat cloths." The consequences of the actions taken by Rebekah and Jacob had terrible consequences. Jacob tricked his father and later was tricked by his children, who told their father that an animal devoured his favorite son, Joseph.

This is the key to understanding the moral complexity of the story. Clearly not being able to see her son is a punishment of sorts and hence could be interpreted as God's disapproval of her method of fulfilling His will. Jacob's lie to his father was repaid twice: Once by his uncle Laban, who forces him to work 14 years for his beloved (Ch. 29), and once by his own children, when they bring Joseph's coat of many colors soaked in blood (Ch. 37). These details are essential and integral pieces of the story. One must avoid the *prima facie* conclusion that the text sanctions the doctrine of the end justifying the means. Rebekah and Jacob both face the consequences of their actions regardless of their intent. The consequences in both cases must have been emotionally draining and traumatic.

It should be noted that the majority of the traditional commentators on this story attempt to solve the problems raised in the paper by arguing that Rebekah and Jacob did not trick Isaac, or that the trick was necessary in order to achieve a greater good. Rashi, for example, comments that Jacob did not lie to his father; rather, when Isaac asks Jacob who is he, Jacob says, 'I am bringing you [the food] while Esau is your first-born.' Ibn Ezra dismisses this
interpretation completely. According to his reading of the story, Jacob did lie and it is permissible for him to lie since there is a greater good involved.\textsuperscript{18} It is interesting that both classical rabbinic interpretations of the text and medieval Jewish commentators do not fault Rebekah at all for this. Rebekah, so it seems, was justified in carrying out the hoax because of God's message to her. In a midrash on Numbers 23:8, the rabbis are quite critical of Jacob's actions:

When Jacob entered to obtain the blessings, he entered by deception as it is written, \textit{and the skins of goat kids} (Gen. 27:16). His father said, "Who are you?" He said, "I am Esau your firstborn." Whoever utters a lie from his mouth should he not be cursed?\textsuperscript{19}

The story puzzled the rabbis because it was difficult for them to conceive Jacob benefiting from his inappropriate behavior. Moreover, at least the authors of this particular midrash found it difficult to believe that Jacob behaved appropriately under these circumstances.

The ends justifying the means do lead to the possibility of redemption through sin. That is, by utilizing unethical and immoral acts one is able to resolve a problematic situation. One finds this sort of behavior occurring throughout the Book of Genesis. For example, as mentioned above, when the patriarch presents his wife as a sister and relinquishes her to a ruler (Chaps. 12, 20, 26). Another good example is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah (Chap. 38) conceives a male heir to her dead husband only after playing the harlot and sleeping with her father-in-law. Clearly, the means by which she chose to accomplish the end is highly difficult to legitimize. Yet she conceived twins and merited to be an ancestor of King David.

To conclude, Rebekah's actions were intended to fulfill God's message which she heard. As the story unfolds, one is aware that although God has established an end, there is no course of action that God recommends. Rebekah, as the initiator, decides to create an elaborate hoax, thereby setting a chain of events of \textit{had-gad-ya-ish} proportions. Isaac must live knowing that both his wife and his son tricked him. Rebekah is never again to see her beloved son. Jacob succeeds in stealing the blessing from his brother Esau but then is forced to flee to the house of his uncle who tricks him by switching an older sister for the woman Jacob wants. Later in the story, Jacob is deceived
by his children who sold their brother into slavery. Yet the act of selling Joseph to a passing caravan secured a future for Jacob and his children, as the end of the Book of Genesis shows.

Although I argued that the actions of Rebekah and Jacob were not sanctioned by the Torah, if one follows the Jacob saga to its conclusion the narrative shows, without the critical incident – the hoax – the Exodus from Egypt would not have taken place. The end toward which God guides the patriarchs was foretold to Abraham (15:13-14). The means by which this is achieved is fraught with inappropriate ethical decisions by the patriarchs as discussed above. Is the text sanctioning the notion of ends justifying the means? On one level this appears to be the case. However, the text shows clearly that despite immoral behavior on the part of human beings, God's ends are accomplished. The text does not portray the behavior of the patriarchs in the instances discussed above as meritorious (contrary to the rabbinic reading of Genesis). Rather it presents them fully human and God's end is established in spite of the behavior of Rebekah and Jacob.

NOTES
2. Pardes, pp. 79-97.
5. Feldman, p. 10.