

THE DECEIVER DECEIVED: REREADING GENESIS 27

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Though much of the biblical narrative focuses on men, women often are powerful figures behind the scenes. Each of the four matriarchs, for example, influences the direction of the Abrahamic family and their descendants. The second matriarch, Rebekah plays a pivotal role in guaranteeing that Jacob will inherit his father's blessing. Readers of Genesis 27 often credit – or condemn – Rebekah with maneuvering events in such a way that Isaac is disadvantaged, an innocent victim duped by his wife and son Jacob.

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."¹ 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."² In *Etz Hayim*, the American Conservative movement's commentary on the Torah, one reads "Rebekah resorts to duplicity"³ 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"⁴ 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

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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.

In Genesis 27, and in the chapters leading up to it, there are clues, both clear and coded messages that indicate Jacob is to be the designated heir, and further, that both Rebekah and Isaac understand this. While this thesis is hypothetical, and perhaps is a form of modern midrash, there is nothing in the biblical text to suggest that there ever is tension between Isaac and Rebekah. It is significant that when "the ruse is *discovered*, neither Jacob nor Rebekah is cursed" (emphasis added).⁵ Further, when Rebekah suggests to Isaac that he needs to send Jacob to Uncle Laban, he does so with alacrity, and blesses Jacob in the bargain. These are not the actions of a man who feels duped and dishonored by his wife and son.

ISAAC AND REBEKAH'S DILEMMA

Isaac, no less than Rebekah, is aware that in their society primogeniture is the norm. In the preceding generation, in principle Ishmael should have received the patriarchal blessing for he was Abraham's first-born son. It was to protect *her* son Isaac (Abraham's second born son, though the first born through Sarah), that Sarah acted as she did. She was intent that Isaac, and not Ishmael would be the primary inheritor. Sarah says as much to Abraham: Exile Ishmael! '*Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac*' (Gen. 21:10).

Rebekah and Isaac are in a more delicate position. They have no desire to exile Esau, nor do they plan to do so. All they require is that he be gone for a while so that they can put their plan into effect. Consequently, when they decide the time is ripe, Isaac puts the ruse into play by sending Esau away on an errand, to hunt game off in the wilderness. Isaac says to Esau: '*My son . . . Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat*' (Gen. 27:1, 3, 4).

Even though they know they are correct in their decision, Isaac and Rebekah cannot bring themselves to tell Esau that he is not the right one to pass on the family traditions. It is too painful a task for them to deal with directly. They feel unable to say to him face-to-face, "Look here, Esau, Jacob is much

more suited in this matter than you are." Since they cannot act on the issue in a straightforward manner, they resort to their deception. Isaac could not just bypass Esau. There had to be some other reason for the "mistake" to have happened. There had to be an external excuse why Isaac gave the blessing away. *Further, an integral part of this plan is to cast Jacob as the villain.*

Esau has mixed feelings about his role as the first-born and its attendant responsibilities as bearer of the patriarchal traditions. He willingly sold the "birthright" to Jacob when they were still young men (Gen. 25:29-34). He married local girls, much to the consternation of his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). On the other hand, Esau's ambivalence notwithstanding, and despite the fact that he is a rough-and-tumble sort, it is also clear that he was not without some feelings in the matter. He will be genuinely upset when he learns that Jacob has sneaked past him (Gen. 27:34 ff.).

Then there was a problem with Jacob. As the Bible indicates, Jacob is a homebody (Gen. 25:27). With the exception of the time he negotiated the transfer of the birthright blessing, there is no indication that he has ever had to know the strength of his own mettle. Life is easy for Jacob, too easy. His parents have confidence in him but Jacob is untested. He has had no way to measure if he is up to the tasks before him. Is he really strong enough and resourceful enough to be the next in line to pass on the patriarchal tradition? In truth, Jacob himself could not know the answer to this question. Jacob has to learn through some difficult tasks that, to use a modern idiom, he has "the right stuff." Consequently, an additional purpose of the ruse is to have Jacob think he is "stealing" the blessing, that he is capable of worldly behavior and its consequences. He has to learn that he is made of resilient fiber.

Jacob is forty years old. The Bible describes him as *a mild man who stayed in camp* (Gen. 25:27). He is a homebody, lacking a clear future direction for life. He is not married, nor is there indication that he intends to wed. What will motivate this apparently mild, simple, quiet, retiring man to leave his parents' home, to find a proper wife, and to continue the challenge of the Abrahamic covenant? The answer is that he will leave *only if he feels he has no choice: if to remain, would put his life in immediate danger*. When Isaac and Rebekah come to this analysis, they plot to create conditions which will force Jacob to leave, to seek a path that they have planned for him.

Isaac and Rebekah know that the time has come for Jacob to leave the safety of his home. For his own personal development, Jacob needs to break with his established life; he needs to face serious challenges in order to mature.

ISAAC AND REBEKAH: GREAT AFFECTION

The Torah text describes Isaac and Rebekah's relationship as being one of affection (Gen. 24:67). A number of classical Jewish sources confirm this view of fondness and support.⁶ Rebekah becomes pregnant after her husband implores God on her behalf (Gen. 25:21). While still *in utero*, God labels Rebekah's second-born child the designated heir. God said to Rebekah, '*Two nations are in your womb . . . and the older shall serve the younger*' (Gen. 25:23). It is inconceivable (pun intended) that Rebekah did not share this divine revelation with Isaac.⁷ Some years later, in Gerar, Isaac describes Rebekah as a beautiful woman, and fears for his life, lest someone kills him and takes her as a wife. Despite the danger to his wellbeing, he cannot resist seeing her. He is even intimate with her (Gen. 26:8).⁸

Isaac and Rebekah share similar values: *both* are upset with Esau when he takes Hittite wives (Gen. 26:35). Later Rebekah voices her complaint to Isaac about these wives and worries that Jacob will marry outside of the clan. Isaac knows immediately what to do. He sends for Jacob, blesses him (again!), and then dispatches Jacob to the old country, to stay with Rebekah's brother, Jacob's uncle Laban (Gen. 28:1 ff.) The goal is clear: Jacob should marry one of his cousins, the nieces of Rebekah. Rebekah and Isaac evidently think alike. Rebekah does not offer detailed suggestions to her husband. She merely voices her complaint about the situation. He understands her unspoken words and acts on them.

Given the similarity of their thinking, it is certain they concur that Jacob is the right choice to receive the patriarchal blessing. In light of their demonstrated affection, it is just as unlikely that Rebekah would act in a disloyal manner to deceive, discredit, and dishonor her beloved husband.

JACOB IS THE DIVINELY DESIGNATED HEIR: REPETITION OF KEY WORDS, *AKEV YA-AKOV*.

God's statement to Rebekah noted earlier, *and the older shall serve the younger*, is the first recorded divine communication to that generation. She receives that word when she goes *to inquire of the Lord* (Gen. 25:22). Many

years will pass before God speaks to Isaac. In the meantime, the boys have grown up. When a famine forces Isaac to decide where to find pastureland, God finally addresses the patriarch directly. God says, follow in my ways, and prosper. *'Stay in this land . . . and I will be with you and bless you . . . and your descendants . . . fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham . . . I will make your descendants . . . numerous . . . because Abraham hearkened to my voice'* (Gen. 26:2-5).

These are not just random words of encouragement. References to Abraham and Isaac precede specific mention of Isaac's descendants. Isaac has only two children, Esau and Jacob. In principle, the blessing would go to the first-born son, Esau. There is, however, a coded message in God's statement, a message that points to Jacob. The Hebrew for the word "because," *akev* is made up of the Hebrew letters *ayin-kuf-vet* (*a-q-v*). They are the exact same root letters, in the same order, as the word Jacob – in Hebrew *Ya-akov* (*yod-ayin-kuf-vet*). God's communication to Isaac contains a hidden message: *'I will be with you and bless you . . . and your descendants . . . fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham . . . I will make your descendants . . . numerous . . . because [akev] Abraham hearkened to my voice.'* The message was heard in this manner: *'I will be with you and bless you . . . and your descendants . . . because [akev – that is to say, or hint, by your seed – akev . . . i.e. Ya-akov].'*

God's promise to Isaac, the selection of those particular words, was not merely coincidental. This selfsame promise had been spoken once before. At that time, it was addressed to Abraham, but very much in the presence of Isaac. The earlier promise came toward the end of Genesis 22, the narrative known as the *Akedah*, the Binding (of Isaac).

On that occasion, Isaac lies trussed up ready to be the sacrifice to God. With but seconds to spare, God stops Abraham's hand from plunging the knife into his son. Moments later these words are spoken: *'By myself I swear, the Lord declares, because you have done this and not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants numerous . . . because you have hearkened to my voice'* (Gen. 22:16-18). The very same word – "because/*akev*" – is used in both chapters 22 and 26. In fact, nearly the exact word pattern is used in both chapters. In the first

instance, the subject is Abraham and the object is his designated descendent: Isaac; in the second instance, the object is Abraham and the subject is Isaac.⁹

Genesis 22:18 *akev asher shamata [Avraham] be-koli.
Because you [Abraham] hearkened to my voice*

Genesis 26:5 *akev asher shama Avraham be-kekoli.
Because Abraham hearkened to my voice*

Earlier on, in Genesis 22 Abraham understood God's message. Life is cause and effect. You Abraham were prepared to honor My request (to slay your son) and so you will prosper. Isaac now also understands God's message. Life is cause and effect. Honor My request (to remain in the land) and you too will prosper. Yet in addition, there was God's revelation to Rebekah, mentioned earlier, *Two nations are in your womb . . . and the older shall serve the younger*. The elder, Esau, shall serve the younger, Jacob/*Ya-akov* – *akev* – because people who honor God's request/promise shall prosper.

Isaac does honor God's request, and Isaac does prosper. He goes to Gerar and becomes a wealthy man.

The near exact duplication of the wording in these two passages suggests an intentional connection. One way to understand this "intentional connection" is that it is a coded message for Isaac, one that he both hears in the present of Genesis 26 and remembers from the past in Genesis 22. He also connects it to the promise of Genesis 25, that the elder shall serve the younger.

Another way to understand the near duplication of the wording is that the biblical editor intended that those listeners who heard the words of this narrative spoken (or those who read this narrative) would be able to make the connection between Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham followed God's word and prospered. Isaac followed God's word, by staying in the land, and he prospered. Now Isaac needs to further follow God's word and secure the promise that the elder will serve the younger, so that the younger (Jacob), in his turn, will prosper.

THE PLAN

Rebekah and Isaac's plan is not complex. First, they will insure that Esau leaves the encampment. Isaac will send him on a mission to find game. Then

Rebekah, by herself, will approach Jacob and suggest how, now that Esau is gone, he, Jacob can "steal" the patriarchal blessing. Jacob will find this advice more credible because he believes Rachel holds him in particular affection (Gen. 25:28). The fact that Rebekah takes Jacob aside to suggest this plan adds to the credibility of the scheme. She has to get him to think that Isaac is unaware of what is taking place. Then, once she has convinced Jacob, she needs to drop out of sight for a while. She could not be seen speaking to Isaac lest this arouse Jacob's suspicions. Husband and wife have to maintain a discrete distance from each other. Consequently, Isaac and Rebekah set up a code word that Jacob will unwittingly use when he speaks to Isaac. This code word will indicate that he has been taken in unaware. The code word, as shown below, is the word "Lord."

THE DECEPTION

Once Esau is gone from the ancestral encampment, Isaac and Rebekah continue with their scheme. The text explains, *Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau* (Gen. 27:5). Patently, Rebekah is not far away; she is living in the same tent as Isaac. Rebekah *hears* their conversation.¹⁰ Consequently, as soon as Esau is out of sight Rebekah continues with the next part of their mutual "plan." She tells Jacob to go into the flock and to take two fine goat kids, which she will then prepare in such a way that Isaac particularly likes. Bring them to your father, she says, and then he will give you the blessing before he dies (Gen. 27:6-10).

Jacob, however, is skeptical. Initially he is reluctant to participate (Gen. 27:11-12). It is not that he has serious reservations about tricking his father. Rather, he is fearful of being caught and cursed. His reservation notwithstanding, Jacob is convinced by his mother's instruction. Soon he is dressed up and presenting Isaac the dish and the bread which Rebekah had prepared. Jacob is an unwitting accomplice to his parents' plan; he has no idea that Isaac is aware of what is going on.

The next ten lines (Gen. 27:18-27) are crucial to the narrative. They indicate that Isaac is the co-author of the ruse, both a willing and a witting participant in the deception.¹¹

Six times in the next set of verses,¹² Isaac will challenge who is *really* standing before him (vs. 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26). Once or twice may be un-

derstandable, but why six times? Why does Isaac keep pressing the issue? Isaac wants to raise the stakes for Jacob. He wants this younger son truly enmeshed in what Jacob is doing.

In verse 18, Jacob utters only one word, *'Father'* before Isaac says, *'Yes, which of my sons are you?'* That Isaac even raises the question is suspicious. From v. 22 below (*The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau*) it is clear that Isaac can distinguish between the voices of his sons. As we follow their conversation, it is evident that Isaac is putting Jacob through an ordeal.

In vs. 19-20 Jacob identifies himself as Esau, asks Isaac to eat of the game, and to give him his innermost blessing. Playing along, Isaac asks the seemingly innocent question, how was it that the hunter was so successful so quickly. Jacob may be wily, but he is also quick-witted. He understands that the gift of the innermost blessing is directly associated with the patriarchal tradition, and that this tradition is intimately connected with his father's, and grandfather's relationship with God.

Consequently, to show that he is sympathetic to this relationship, Jacob incorporates reference to the deity in his reply. Jacob says to Isaac, I have the food *'because the Lord your God granted me good fortune'* (v. 20). There is a further reason why Jacob invokes the specific name of the Lord in this response to Isaac. Jacob believes that in so doing he is reflecting back to Isaac what his father actually said to Esau before Esau was sent out to hunt game. Jacob's answer makes perfect sense *within the context of the information that he heard* (in v. 7), information that he was given by his mother Rebekah. There is, however, a *major* problem. The words of verse 7 are *not Isaac's actual words*; they are Rebekah's paraphrased "report" of what Isaac said to Esau in verses 1-4. In those verses, Isaac asked Esau to hunt game and prepare a meal for him. Yet, Isaac does NOT mention the name of the Lord! Isaac's words are *'Prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die'* (Gen. 27:4).

LORD AS CODE WORD

Why does Rebekah say that Isaac had said *'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord's approval before I die'*? The addition of the term "the Lord" is the code word, which tells Isaac that Rebekah has been successful in her mission to hoodwink Jacob.

There was no way that Rebekah can inform Isaac that she successfully convinced Jacob to play-act the part of Esau. She is busy preparing the dish, getting Esau's clothes, and then dressing Jacob. As mentioned above, had she gone to see Isaac in their tent, Jacob might be suspicious. Rebekah's reference to the deity in the context of securing the blessing for the younger son also is a way to affirm God's earlier statement to this matriarch; *the older shall serve the younger*.

As the drama continues, Isaac increases pressure on his son. He asks Jacob to come forward so that the old man may feel him. Jacob is horrified. Surely, he will be undone. Goatskins do not feel – or smell – like human hair. Young goats do not taste like venison. His voice has already given him away. All he had said was '*Father*' and Isaac was suspicious. Isaac senses Jacob's terrible sense of discomfort, and realizes that he dare not push too hard.

By verse 22, Isaac wants to reassure Jacob that the ruse is working. At the same time, he wants to maintain his own integrity. Consequently, Isaac utters the most famous line of his life: '*The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.*' Despite this ambivalence, a verse later we learn that Jacob receives Isaac's blessing.

Jacob serves his aged father food and wine. Then once again, fear grips Jacob's heart when Isaac asks his son to kiss him (vs. 26-27). The play-actor has no choice but to acquiesce, and he comes forward to embrace his father.

This eventuality is part of Isaac and Rebekah's plan. She had gone as far as to prepare goatskins to simulate the hair on Esau's arms and neck. She also had Jacob wear some of Esau's actual garments. Isaac then ends the test, blesses Jacob, and says, '*Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed*' (Gen. 27:27). It is noteworthy that Isaac does not say, this is the smell of my son *Esau*, rather he says merely '*the smell of my son.*' Isaac cannot resist the urge to parade the code word, and so he deliberately refers to '*the fields that the Lord has blessed.*' Isaac's use of the code word underscores how he was part of this careful stratagem.¹³ One can hear Isaac thinking to himself, "You, Jacob, think that you have taken advantage of my poor vision, that you have blinded me to the truth, but the truth is stranger still! Your mother and I have tricked you Jacob, and you ended up earning this innermost blessing whether you understand this now or not!"

The very names of the chief characters in this deception add another layer of meaning to this event. Isaac (*Yitzhak*) connects to the word laughter. Inwardly, Isaac was laughing at how well he and Rebekah accomplished the stratagem. Rebekah (*Rivkah*) in Hebrew and later Aramaic has associations with the word "tie" or "connect" and she certainly is strongly tied or connected to Isaac, and she ties up the inheritance for Jacob. Jacob (*Ya'akov*) can mean "trickster," "supplanter," or "deceiver" as Esau specifically mentions to Isaac (Gen. 27:36) in his in painful plaint.

AFTER THE DECEPTION

The next part of the drama finds Esau returning and asking Isaac for the promised blessing. It too is a strangely poignant moment. The Torah text no sooner has Jacob blessed and quit from his father's presence when Esau comes back from the hunt. Having succeeded in his questioning with Jacob, Isaac continues in this vein with Esau. *'Who are you?'* he asks. When Esau replies, *'I am your son, Esau, your first-born'* we read, *'Isaac was seized with very violent trembling'* (Gen. 27:32-33).

Why would Isaac tremble? The answer is that this episode with Jacob was a difficult burden to carry. Isaac has to play-act a part, that of the doddering old man. This is an affront to his dignity, though he knows that the ends justify the means. Isaac feels badly that through this process he is deceiving his son Esau. Isaac has succeeded, but the inner turmoil and tension take its toll. It is with sadness and in sorrow that Isaac trembles as he does. He cannot reveal to Esau the purpose of the deception. All he can do is to offer his son a secondary blessing.

For all that, Isaac is secretly pleased with the salient blessing going to Jacob.¹⁴ As noted earlier, Rebekah merely hints that she is unhappy that Jacob might marry a local woman, and Isaac immediately calls for Jacob and sends him on his way to Uncle Laban. There is no sense of estrangement between Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac then gives Jacob a second blessing (Gen. 28:1 ff.). He mentions that Jacob should know God's blessings. Isaac twice mentions Father Abraham. Indeed his very words are "May God grant the *blessing of Abraham* to you and your offspring"! These are hardly the words of a man who feels he has been deceived, duped, and misdirected. This is a spiritual

blessing, that links Abraham-to-Isaac-to-Jacob and to the future! It is the blessing for the true inheritor of the Abrahamic tradition.

CONCLUSION

The moral problems posed by the blessing of Jacob in Genesis 27, just as the sale of the birthright in Genesis 25, trouble commentators Jewish and non-Jewish alike.¹⁵ In the rabbinic era, many a midrash was devoted to placing Jacob's dark acts in a brighter light.¹⁶ The Torah text, the received tradition, is less troubled by these incidents. There is a clear line to follow, and the Ancestors (Patriarchs and Matriarchs alike) follow it. For them it is the correct choice. Nothing is without its purpose, and they do what they need to do. They understand that children have different strengths, and different (directed) destinies. Jacob's destiny was to become the third patriarch, the person who would develop into Israel, father of the twelve tribes. Had he remained a sedentary man, living among the tents, this would never have come about. Jacob had to grow within and as a leader. He needed an extra push; he had to go through a painful rite of passage in order to make his way in the world. Jacob's growth necessitated a betrayal of faith, and the pain both of deception and exile. In Genesis 27, Isaac and Rebekah make difficult decisions, but their choices guarantee the continuation of the covenant.

NOTES

1. G. Matalon, "Rebekah's Hoax" *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXXVI:4 (144), October-December 2008, p. 246. This contemporary criticism of Rebekah's actions, and those that follow, are in contrast to the sense of approval expressed by the classical rabbis. Cf. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 65.14; *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Genesis and Exodus*, Trans., S. Berman, (Hoboken: NJ: Ktav, 1996), Genesis 6:10 (on Gen. 27:33), p. 175.
2. T. C. Eskenazi and H.E. Person, in T. C. Eskenazi, A. L. Weiss, (Eds.), *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), p. 142. Other contemporary scholars describe the theft in similar terms. Speiser writes of "Isaac Deceived," E. A. Speiser, *Genesis - Anchor Bible Series* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), p. 205. Sama suggests with Rebekah's help, "Jacob . . . purloins the patriarchal blessing by means of crafty deception," N. M. Sama, *The JPS Torah Commentary Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 397.
3. D. L. Lieber (Ed.) *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, New York: 2001), p. 154. In the American Reform movement's explanation, the editor explains that Jacob "practices outrageous deceit on a helpless father and a guileless brother" and describes Rebekah's acts as "moral turpitude." W. G. Plaut (Ed.), D. E. S. Stein (Ed. Revised edition) *The Torah: A Modern Commentary: Revised Edition*

(New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2006), p. 185. A major Orthodox commentary strikes a similar note when the editor notes that Rebekah chose "to deceive Isaac into blessing Jacob," N. Scherman (Ed.) *The Stone Edition: Tanach* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1996), p. 62.

4. S. Niditch, "Genesis", *The Women's Bible Commentary*, C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe, (Eds.) (London: SPCK, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), pp. 19-20, 19.

5. S. P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 67.

6. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 60:16, 63:5, and Nahmanides (Spain 13th century) and Seforno (Italy 16th century) on Genesis 24:67. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Translated by G. Friedlander (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981), Chapter 32.

7. This analysis disagrees with an observation of Naftali Tsvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), the 19th century (d. 1893) head of the Volozhin Yeshiva and early Zionist thinker. In his work *Ha'amek Davar* he comments on Genesis 24:65, that Isaac and Rebekah suffered from a lack of communication; and she did not inform Isaac of the revelation in Genesis 25:23 that she would bear twins. Contra the Netziv, it is their very ability to communicate which leads them to the recognition that each child has his own good qualities. Esau is at the very least an accomplished outdoorsman, and Jacob more spiritual. This open communication allows both parents to decide to bypass Esau and to give the primogeniture blessing to Jacob.

8. This key verb "intimate" – in Hebrew *metzahēk* – can have different translations. The use of this particular verb is a conscious pun, a play on the name of Isaac (Yitzhāk) for both words contain as their roots, the Hebrew letters tzadeh-ḥet-kuf (tz-ḥ-k). Those who aurally heard this tale could well appreciate the pun. What was Isaac/Yitzhāk doing? NJPS, as Speiser, RSV, and NRSV offer the word "fondling." NIV reads "caressing." NEB reads a more demure "laughing together." Fox finds a middle path: "laughing-and-loving." E. Fox, *The Schocken Bible, Vol. 1, The Five Books of Moses*. (New York: Schocken, 1995.)

9. These two examples are the only instances of the use of the word *akev* in the book of Genesis.

10. That Rebekah is in Isaac's tent to hear Isaac's directions to Esau underscores the favorable relationship between husband and wife. Rebekah's "hearing" a significant matter echoes a similar act by Sarah (Gen. 18:10 ff.) There are many parallels in the lives of Sarah and Rebekah. Both are from Mesopotamia, both have trouble conceiving, and both have a strong influence on their husbands.

11. As noted earlier, the more conventional explanation is that Rebekah is the sole author of the plan. "Rebekah will take the initiative at a crucial moment in the story in order to obtain the paternal blessing for her favored son, Jacob." R. Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), p. 54. Likewise, Sarna in the *JPS Torah Commentary* understands Rebekah to be the author of the plan. "The strong-willed, artful Rebekah . . . manipulating the situation . . ." Sarna, p. 189. See also S. P. Jeansonne, op. cit., pp. 65 ff.; S. J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens: Swallow/Ohio University, 1984), pp. 41 ff.

12. For a verse-by-verse analysis, see D. J. Zucker, "A Still Stranger Stratagem: Revisiting Genesis 27" in *Conservative Judaism*, Winter, (2004), 56:2, pp. 21-31

13. Already in the Midrashic period, the rabbis highlight Jacob's use of the word "Lord." "Isaac said, 'I know that Esau does not mention the name of the Holy One, blessed be God, since he does not mention God, this is not Esau but Jacob.'" *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 65:19. Classical Medieval commentators have also noted that Isaac *was* aware that this was Jacob in disguise or

at the very least that this was not Esau. See Rashi (France 11th Century) and Nahmanides (Spain 13th Century) on Gen. 27:21.

14. "When the ruse is discovered, neither Jacob nor Rebekah is cursed." Jeansonne, op. cit., p. 67.

15. G. von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 273-281 and others cited in endnote 3.

16. See D. J. Zucker. "Jacob in Darkness (and Light): A Study in Contrasts" *Judaism*, Fall, (1986), 35:4, pp. 402-413.



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