

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement B

Midrash on Jacob's Blessing Episode

Chapters 27 and 28 of Genesis narrate in great detail the central story of how Jacob obtains Isaac's blessing that had been intended for Esau. By means of a clever deception orchestrated by his mother, Rebekah, Jacob pretends to be his older brother. This is a crucial transitional event in Jacob's life, marking the close of his life at home in Canaan with his parents and brother, and the beginning of his married life, which will start on his wedding night with Leah in Haran. Based upon the simplest plain reading of the text, the Blessing episode is often referred to as the "stealing" of the blessing, but that term ignores the many factual and moral nuances exhaustively examined in midrash.

Isaac's Blindness

And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his eldest son, and said to him, My son; and he said to him, Behold, here am I. (Gen. 27:1)

The opening line immediately introduces several of the basic issues of the Blessing story: Isaac's eyes were dim and he could not see; he called Esau, his eldest son. Since the Rabbis believe that there is no room for redundant repetitions in a perfect Bible, the commentators felt compelled to wrestle with even as such an apparently innocuous a phrase as, "his eyes were dim, so that he could not see".

Midrash plays with this verse by reading it as saying that Isaac's eyes were dim "from seeing," either in the sense of a consequence of what he had seen, or else that his eyes had been dimmed to save him *from seeing* what he shouldn't see. A standard midrashic explanation of Isaac's blindness is that when the young Isaac had been bound on the altar to be sacrificed by his father, Abraham (Gen. 22:9-10), the angels wept at the lad's distress, and their tears fell into his eyes, causing eventual blindness.¹ Perhaps this was more than an unintended consequence of heavenly compassion. Perhaps the angels' tears were intended to have the immediate effect of obscuring young Isaac's view of the descending knife. One commentary suggests that the story of the angel's tears isn't necessary. The boy's terrifying sight of the descending knife would have been traumatic enough to cause later blindness.²

Another interpretation of this issue in the Binding episode is that God imposed Isaac's blindness as an act of loving kindness for Abraham. Isaac's blindness (and not just the ram caught in the bushes) was the substitute sacrifice provided by God to spare Abraham the grief of sacrificing his son's life. Some sort of substitute sacrifice may have been necessary if Isaac opened his eyes on the altar and gazed up at God at the moment for the sacrifice. Despite the general law that no man can see the face of God and live (Ex. 33:20), God acted out of concern

for Abraham's feelings, and softened Isaac's punishment for this extreme violation, from death to blindness (a condition that appropriately ensured that Isaac could never repeat his offence of looking at God).³

Some commentaries link Isaac's blindness to the evil acts of his son Esau (marrying Hittite wives, mentioned just prior to the verses revealing his blindness). Perhaps it was the shock and disappointment of observing Esau and his heathen wives that caused Isaac's loss of vision. The righteous Isaac, son and spiritual heir to the first Jew/monotheist, would have been particularly sensitive to his daughters-in-law worshipping profane idols. One graphic commentary makes this point in physical, rather than ethical, terms. Because Esau's pagan wives worshipped idols in the house, the smoke from their incense burned Isaac's eyes, which is why the later text (Gen. 28:8) says that these Hittite women were evil "in" Isaac's eyes.⁴

It is also suggested that Isaac shares some responsibility for the loss of his vision if that resulted from seeing the sins of Esau and his wives. Isaac was at fault for not expelling Esau when his son's depraved lifestyle first became evident. Or perhaps Isaac was at fault because he imposed the same early childhood education and training upon both Esau and Jacob without paying attention to Esau's individual tendencies, which were so different from the scholarly Jacob. To prove this point, the Rabbis contrast Isaac's blindness in old age with Abraham's excellent health in his old age—Abraham drove his evil son Ishmael out of the home, and so was spared seeing his older son's actions. So if Isaac's blindness was an affliction imposed by God as a punishment, it was not for having an evil son (God doesn't punish the parents for the sins of their children, Ezek. 18:1-32; Jer. 31:28-29), but rather for Isaac's own parental failure to individually respond to his son's character and actions⁵.

Even when dealing with such serious matters of morality, the Rabbis still apply the midrashic techniques of playful word-puns to find measure-for-measure justice in the biblical text. So if Isaac had willfully "closed his eyes" to Esau's youthful sins, perhaps God responded by closing his eyes permanently.⁶ Of course, even if Isaac were not being punished for failing to see Esau's true character, Isaac's physical blindness could be a figurative reference to his moral blindness in being unable to distinguish good from evil in his own family.

Similarly, some commentators who are eager to find a scriptural justification for such harsh punishment conclude that Isaac's blindness was a penalty for accepting a bribe (the tasty venison) from Esau. The Bible twice states that bribery blinds the recipient. (Ex. 23:8; Deut 16:19).⁷

Other commentators explain Isaac's blindness as a story not of divine punishment, but rather of divine compassion. God dimmed Isaac's eyes to spare him the distress of seeing Esau's evil. Since Esau, the cunning trapper, fooled Isaac with exemplary behavior at home (dressing in fine clothes to attend his father and pretending interest in questions of Jewish law), Esau only acted wrongly outside of the home. Blindness was God's gift to Isaac because blind men do not go into town, and Isaac was thereby spared from seeing or hearing about Esau's sins from the townspeople.⁸

Finally, Isaac's blindness might simply have been necessary to God's plan that Isaac's blessing eventually go to Jacob, rather than to Esau.⁹ So while Rebekah later seems to orchestrate the deception of Isaac by passing off Jacob in place of Esau, God could be considered the true architect of the plan by having initially imposed the enabling condition of Isaac's blindness.

To our modern sensibilities it seems that making Isaac blind was an unnecessarily harsh method for God to intervene in history. We must remember, however, that under the classical

view of the Bible held by the early commentators, the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were endowed with great powers that could require extreme force by anyone—even God—to overcome.

One midrash concludes that Isaac was not fooled by Esau's cunning words and was not morally blind to Esau's character faults. On the contrary, Isaac was painfully aware of his older son's shortcomings. But this awareness made Isaac even more determined to give the blessing to Esau, in the hopes of reforming him.¹⁰ Isaac's blindness may have been God's way of overcoming the Patriarch's determination to bless Esau.

Isaac Sends Esau for Venison

Now therefore take, I beg you, your weapons, your quiver and your bow and go out to the field, and catch me some venison; And make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless you before I die. (Gen. 27:3-4)

Since the Rabbis treat Isaac's craving for Esau's tasty venison as the moral equivalent of a judge taking a bribe, which rendered him blind (both morally and physically), we might expect the commentaries to be highly critical of Isaac for beginning the solemn ceremony of blessing the firstborn with a request that Esau first bring him venison to eat. On the surface, this makes Isaac appear little better than the famished Esau was when he sold his brother the birthright for a pot of lentils. Indeed, some commentaries do infer that the story is simply stating that Isaac craved Esau's tasty food because he was old or blind—old, blind people may have a diminished sense of taste and therefore enjoy highly seasoned food.¹¹ However, the majority of the midrashic commentaries on this point find a more elevated reason for Isaac's request: The food was necessary for an effective blessing, based upon a variety of theories.

Some commentaries assert that Isaac knew of Esau's sinful character and wanted him to perform a *mitzvah* (in this case, honoring a parent's request) in order to become at least minimally worthy of receiving the firstborn's blessing. Other opinions state that it was Isaac who had to be changed by the venison. To effectively bless another, one must be in a good, joyous frame of mind. Isaac needed the help of the venison because he knew the truth about Esau's character, and this interfered with Isaac being appropriately joyful.¹²

The core dispute here, as in midrashic controversies over some other aspects of the blessing episode, centers on what Isaac knew about Esau's character. It is impossible to harmonize all of the midrashic views on this. Most of the commentaries are based upon the premise that Isaac was unaware of—blind to—his older son's faults. As noted above, perhaps God had imposed Isaac's physical blindness specifically in order to spare him the pain of seeing Esau's sins. Others agree that Esau fooled Isaac, but they place some blame for this upon Isaac for being taken in by Esau's tricks of hypocritical words and gifts of tasty food.

Some of the Rabbis suggest that Isaac was well aware of Esau's evil nature, and had always intended to give the appropriate blessing (the primary blessing for the firstborn) to the appropriate son (Jacob) who deserved it.¹³ Isaac may have even been relying upon Rebekah to act as she did to intervene so that Jacob would receive the blessing of the firstborn. There are also a few commentators who are willing to contemplate that Esau was not as evil as the vast majority of the midrashic stories paint him to be, or at a minimum that Esau could, and perhaps did, eventually reform.¹⁴

These irreconcilable views illustrate the nature of midrash. In the wonderful intellectual tradition of Jewish philosophical inquiry, midrash is not like delivering a speech. It's more like engaging in a conversation where the views of others are respectfully considered and one's own views are proposed for purposes of discussion. We don't read midrash for answers; we read midrash for questions.

Rebekah Arranges the Deception

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 to Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, Bring me venison, and make me savory food, that I may eat, and bless you before the Lord before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command you. (Gen. 27:5-8)

If it is true that when you marry your husband you also marry his entire family, then Leah will make an interesting match when she marries into Jacob's family. Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob all have us guessing as to the true nature of their characters. Midrash has an especially challenging time dealing with the morality of their actions because many of the Rabbis begin with the presumption that the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Bible were uniquely righteous individuals, prophets with special knowledge of God's will.

So what to think about Rebekah? When she apparently overhears Isaac preparing to bless his favorite son, Esau, Rebekah immediately commands her favorite son, Jacob, to carry out a plan she devises in order to deceive Isaac into giving the firstborn's blessing instead to Jacob. When Jacob objects that even his blind father will discern his true identity, Rebekah overpowers Jacob's compunctions by taking full responsibility for the deception and commanding him to obey her. This leads to her complicated scheme of dressing Jacob in Esau's clothes, wrapping his neck with animal fur, and having him serve meat from the flock after Rebekah cooks and seasons it to Isaac's taste. It certainly seems that Rebekah should be severely criticized for having Jacob take advantage of Isaac's blindness to trick the old man into giving Esau's blessing to Jacob. The conspiracy between Rebekah and Jacob leaves us very uncomfortable.

The question of who is going to receive Isaac's blessing is an extremely important one in the story. Blessings and curses in the Bible carry formidable power. When the person giving a blessing or a curse is a righteous or high-status individual such as Isaac, the blessing or curse, once uttered, cannot be revoked, even by the person who issued it. We know this principle from the familiar Purim story in the Book of Esther, where the King's decree directing the people of his kingdom to attack the Jews, once issued, could not be recalled, even after the King realized Haman's treachery. The royal decree for attacking the Jews was averted only by a second decree authorizing the Jews to take arms and defend themselves. (Est. 8:8-12)

As we have seen, biblical justice is often delivered in an ironic, measure-for-measure fashion. Jacob profits from the irrevocability of a Patriarch's blessings or curses in order to retain his father's blessing even after Isaac learns about the deception. But later this same rule will shatter Jacob's happiness when he himself (also a Patriarch) curses whoever stole Laban's *teraphim* (household gods), and that curse inadvertently causes (according to some interpreters) the premature death of Jacob's beloved Rachel.

For the Blessing story, midrash further elaborates on the power of Isaac's blessing by concluding that the event took place on the first night of Passover, when the prayers of the righteous are especially effective.¹⁵ Logically, however, ascribing such special power to the blessing merely highlights the moral issue of Rebekah manipulating Isaac to give the valuable firstborn's blessing to Jacob.

But midrash manages to justify Rebekah's orchestration of this distasteful plan by offering several inventive explanations. Harkening back to the story of the prophecy Rebekah received from God when the twins were struggling in her womb, Rebekah knew that God had promised that her younger son would rule over the elder (Gen. 25:22-23). So Rebekah's plan simply carried out God's will. In fact the Bible never states that Isaac was aware of this prophesy to his wife, which could explain why he was still intending to give the blessing to Esau. (Contemporary readers might wonder whether the whole story of the pre-natal prophesy was inserted by some author/editor to justify Rebekah's problematic actions in shifting the firstborn's blessing to her second son.¹⁶)

Other commentaries confirm the correctness of Rebekah's actions by describing God's active cooperation with her plan. Rebekah is absolved of the initial eavesdropping—she learned what Isaac said to Esau through her Matriarchal powers of prophecy. God makes Rebekah's plan feasible by sending an angel (Satan) to delay Esau by interfering with his hunting. And when the reluctant Jacob is so paralyzed with guilt that his legs won't carry him to approach Isaac in the tent of blessing, God sends two more angels to physically support the faltering Jacob and propel him towards his father.¹⁷

Midrash further exonerates Rebekah by examining her motives. She was not acting from preferential love for Jacob. Rather, she could see (as blind Isaac could not) that Esau's evil character did not merit the blessing. So Rebekah acted only to save Isaac from being fooled by Esau into blessing him. A later commentary suggests she intended that when Isaac eventually learned of the deception, the revelation would teach him that if he could have been tricked by Jacob's impersonation, he similarly could have been tricked all along by Esau's posturing.¹⁸

But if midrash refuses to make Rebekah the total villain of the blessing episode, neither is she portrayed entirely as a heroine. Even if her deception was effective, and even if justified, the Rabbis question whether it was necessary. Jacob was righteous and so would have been blessed by God without Isaac acting. One commentary concludes that, indeed, Rebekah unnecessarily convinced Jacob to obtain Isaac's blessing by deception because she was excessively consumed by love for her favorite Jacob, and by jealousy on his behalf.¹⁹

Moreover, Rebekah's unwillingness to talk directly with Isaac about God's revealed plan for Jacob's dominance over his older brother, and her failure to tell her husband the truth about the twins' opposite characters, had some unforeseen consequences. The Rabbis point out that because Rebekah chose to trick her husband rather than confide in him, Isaac's intentions for the blessings were distorted, and Esau was injured. Under this analysis, Isaac was in fact aware of Jacob's righteousness and Esau's evil. Isaac had therefore planned two blessings: The first would have blessed Esau with the material benefits that he valued (material possessions, strength, and dominance in this world), but a second would have blessed Jacob with the spiritual benefits appropriate for his character (rewards in the world to come). Rebekah may have objected to this arrangement, wanting her favorite, Jacob, to also enjoy material blessings and power in this life. As a result of Rebekah's deception, Jacob did receive the blessings for this world, while the spiritual blessing that Isaac had reserved could not be given to a sinner like Esau.²⁰

Jacob Participates in Rebekah's Plan

And he came to his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I; who are you, my son? And Jacob said to his father, I am Esau your firstborn; I have done according to what you told me; arise, I beg you, sit and eat of my venison, that your soul may bless me. And Isaac said to his son, How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son? And he said, Because the Lord your God brought it to me. And Isaac said to Jacob, Come near, I beg you, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not. And Jacob went near to Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. / And he said, Are you really my son Esau? And he said, I am. (Gen. 27:18-24)

The biblical text painfully details the steps Jacob took to deceive Isaac and obtain the blessing. Indeed, this level of direct quotations and detailed descriptions is fairly unusual for the typically concise biblical text. It is as if the text is trying to signal us to pay close attention. And if the Rabbis worked so hard to justify Rebekah's role in organizing the Blessing episode, you can be sure they won't shrink from devoting the even greater effort and inventiveness necessary to shield the righteous Jacob from being criticized for being the active member of the conspiracy when he impersonates his brother and lies to his father.

The first way to justify Jacob is to throw the responsibility for the deception back onto Rebekah. She commands obedience from Jacob (Gen. 27:8), a command that requires observance due to her dual capacities of mother and prophetess. So the Rabbis can say that Jacob was not naturally a deceiver, but acted only out of dutiful obedience. Midrash even pictures him obeying his mother, but bowed down and weeping with remorse.²¹

Even the wording of Jacob's response to his mother shows that his true nature was not to be a deceiver. Jacob expresses concern that if his blind father feels him and discovers that he is smooth and not hairy, he will appear to Isaac as a deceiver (*Ki-Mitateiah*). Midrash points out that the prefix (*Ki*) does not imply an actual quality ("is"), but only "as", or "as if." Thus, grammatically, Jacob's statement shows that he was not a deceiver by nature, but was concerned that Rebekah's plan would make him appear to his father in a false light.²²

When the reluctant Jacob protests that his father might discover the deception and the blessing will turn into a curse, Rebekah responds, "Upon me shall be your curse!" (Gen. 27:13) Midrash interprets this enigmatic response in various ways: that because of the prophesy Rebekah had received before the twins were born, she knew that Jacob would not be cursed; that she would remove Isaac's anger by showing him that Esau was evil and Jacob righteous; that if Isaac did utter a curse against Jacob she would remove it; that any curse from Isaac would be issued against her rather than Jacob; or even that if Jacob disobeyed her she would be the one who certainly would curse him (while Isaac's curse was only a possibility).²³

And as it did for Rebekah, midrash likewise exonerates Jacob's actions from criticism because of God's active participation in the plan. Jacob possessed such personal righteousness and felt such awe of his father that he would have been physically unable to approach his father

as an imposter except that God sent angels who had to support him from collapsing by dragging him forward by the elbows.²⁴

And perhaps Rebekah told Jacob about her prophesy from God (or Jacob may even have had independent prophetic knowledge of it). So when Jacob explains to his father that he was able to find the venison so quickly “Because the Lord your God brought it to me” (Gen. 27:20), Jacob might not be lying. In a sense, God did indeed bring the food swiftly to Jacob by acting through Rebekah’s preparation of the substitute meat. Midrash goes on to note that Jacob’s response in the blessing episode echoes Isaac’s own childhood experience in the binding episode, when God furnished a ram as a substitute for Isaac.²⁵

Did Jacob Fool Isaac by Impersonating Esau’s Voice?

The Bible records in detail Jacob’s conversation with Isaac leading up to receiving the blessing. This raises an initial question of whether Jacob tricked Isaac by speaking in Esau’s voice. After all, Isaac was blind, not deaf. Blind people often develop compensating enhancement of their other senses (especially hearing). And the Rabbis noted that blindness would have kept Isaac at home, where he would have become familiar with the voices of his sons. So Isaac’s blindness should have made him even more aware of whose voice he was hearing.

The underlying position of Midrash is that each human voice is distinctive. But the Rabbis nevertheless acquit Jacob of attempting vocal impersonation of his brother. If Jacob’s voice sounded like Esau, it was simply because they were twins, who naturally can have identical-sounding voices.²⁶ Of course, the Rabbis may have felt that this was an important conclusion to reach because they knew what would soon follow—the story of Jacob’s wedding night, which likewise raises the question of how Leah could speak but be misidentified as her younger sister.

Midrash actually uses the occasion of the Blessing story to note that it is the inherent distinctiveness of voices that makes it permissible for a blind man to have sexual relations with his wife, since it is presumed that his ability to identify her by voice will avoid the risk of sinning with a third party.²⁷

A later Chasidic commentary explores several more layers in this issue of vocal deception. The Bible uses different Hebrew words to describe how Isaac initially spoke to Esau when he asked him to bring food for the blessing (*midaber*, speaking forcefully), and how Rebekah spoke to Jacob when she instructed him how to obtain the blessing (*amarah*, speaking softly). From this, the commentary imagines a highly convoluted plot: Isaac not only intended that Esau would receive the blessing, but Isaac was concerned from the outset that Jacob might attempt to steal the blessing by impersonating Esau’s loud, forceful voice. To protect against this, Isaac instructed Esau to use Jacob’s soft voice when he returned for the blessing. But Isaac was no match for Rebekah in plotting. To counteract her husband’s stratagem, Rebekah told Jacob that he must use his own voice and not try to imitate Esau.²⁸ Under this commentary, a suspicious Isaac was no more able to frustrate the deception planned for him in the tent of blessing than a similarly suspicious Jacob could avoid the parallel deception that awaited him in the tent of wedding.

But why is midrash so uncertain whether Jacob was speaking in Esau’s voice? The biblical text seems to state clearly that, even presuming Isaac was truly fooled by Jacob in the tent of blessing, it wasn’t the voice that fooled Isaac. Isaac explicitly says, “The voice is Jacob’s

voice...” (Gen. 27:22) Some of the Rabbis read this text in its plain meaning—Isaac recognized Jacob’s voice.²⁹ Others argue, however, that Isaac’s statement means something else. The twins’ voices may have sounded the same, but it was Jacob’s wording that raised Isaac’s suspicions. When Jacob brings the food, he speaks respectfully to his father: “Arise, I beg you, sit and eat of my venison, that your soul may bless me.” (Gen. 27:19) This is contrasted with Esau’s curt command later, “Let my father arise and eat.” (Gen. 27:31) An even stronger clue was Jacob’s response to Isaac’s question of how he had been able to hunt and bring the food so swiftly: “Because the Lord your God brought it to me.” (Gen. 27:20) Midrash here concludes that Isaac knew the true characters of his sons and recognized that Esau would not talk about God in this pious manner.³⁰

Did Jacob Lie to Isaac?

Even the combined forces of obedience to maternal command and evidence of divine approval fail to make us feel entirely comfortable reading the Bible’s transcript of Jacob’s conversation with his father: “[W]ho are you, my son?” “...I am Esau your firstborn.” (Gen. 27:18-19) “Are you really my son Esau?” And he said, “I am.” (Gen. 27:24) Can anything justify these statements of Jacob if they are, as they appear to be, outright lies? Midrash requires considerable effort and agility to read this conversation without censuring Jacob.

Some of the rabbinic attempts to salvage Jacob’s reputation take advantage of the limitations of biblical Hebrew, which lacks a word for the basic linking verb “is/am.” This linguistic shortcoming can create sufficient uncertainty in meaning (and especially in translation) that the commentators can find ambiguity in what might appear to us to be clear text. In the Hebrew text, Jacob answers Isaac’s first question of who he is with three words: *Anochi Esau b’chorachah* (I – Esau – your firstborn). So rather than read this as “I am Esau, your firstborn,” midrash can have Jacob saying “It is I; Esau is your firstborn.”³¹

Similarly, in most translations Jacob answers his father’s second question “Are you really my son Esau?” with the response “I am.” (Gen. 27:24) But again the Hebrew text has only a single word, *ani* (I). It’s not clear whether this is “I am” or “It is I” or just “I...” (Jacob’s broken attempt to respond while overwhelmed by emotion).³²

Other commentators acknowledge that Jacob said, “I am Esau, your firstborn,” but they find several pious justifications for this apparent lie: Jacob was acting to further a divine plan, and a righteous person in the service of God’s plan is entitled to use words that would ordinarily be a lie. Or in a sort of circular justification, Jacob’s statement was not a lie because he was a prophet who was revealing the future ordained by God (that Jacob would receive the firstborn’s blessing). Or by claiming to be the firstborn, Jacob was merely giving voice to a valid legal fiction—his earlier purchase of the birthright from Esau meant that Jacob now had the status of being, or being in place of, Esau the firstborn.³³ (This could suggest that the Birthright episode was made a part of the text in order to justify Jacob’s statements in the later blessing episode—a position similar to Stephen Mitchell’s conclusion that the prophesy to Rebekah about the struggling twins in her womb was inserted to justify her orchestration of the blessing episode.)³⁴

The insightful contemporary commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg suggests that when Jacob presents himself as his older brother Esau for the blessing, he is doing more than just claiming the birthright he had previously purchased. Jacob becomes Esau, participating in a series of identity exchanges that began when Esau pretended with Isaac to be the pious son, and culminating with Leah and her sister Rachel similarly becoming each other, or trying to become

each other, throughout their marriages to Jacob.³⁵ This concept could provide a sort of psychological defense against culpability: If Jacob and, later, Leah felt that they were their sibling for the moment of “deception,” then perhaps they were not guilty of deceiving when they presented themselves as the other.

The Book of Jubilees neatly sidesteps the whole problem of deciding whether Jacob deserves blame for lying in the blessing story. It recasts the words of Jacob’s response to totally delete the apparent claim to be Esau: “And Jacob went in to his father and said: ‘I am thy son: I have done according as thou badest me.’”³⁶ And the version reported in the Book of Jubilees goes even further, essentially absolving Jacob of any blame, since God intervenes to stop Isaac from recognizing his son: “...[Isaac] discerned him not, because it was a dispensation from heaven to remove his power of perception.”³⁷

By way of ultimate justification, a contemporary commentator has pointed out that even if Jacob had intentionally lied to his father when he claimed to be Esau, the text shows that Jacob later reformed. The next time he is asked his name, it is at the conclusion of his night of wrestling with the man/angel, who asks, “What is your name?” This time, perhaps having learned his lesson, he answers, “Jacob.”³⁸ (Gen. 32:28) When Jacob thus finally accepts responsibility for his true name (perhaps thereby accepting responsibility for the parts of his prior life when he was grasping for what his older brother had), he learns that he will be given a new name—Israel (one who has wrestled with God and man and has prevailed). (Gen. 32:29)

Was Isaac Deceived?

The conversation between father and son is ambiguous not only regarding Jacob’s statements. We also must decide, based upon the biblical text describing and quoting Isaac in this conversation, whether Isaac was truly deceived. While the text shows that Isaac is initially suspicious—he notices that his son speaks in Jacob’s “voice”, and he therefore uses his other senses of feel and smell to confirm who stands before him—he finally appears convinced that he is blessing Esau.³⁹

Most of the commentators taking the view that Isaac was deceived into giving his blessing seem to rely upon two features of the story—the aroma of Esau’s garments worn by Jacob, and the particular wording of the initial blessing pronounced by Isaac.

The Garments

And Rebekah took the best garments of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son (Gen. 27:15)

And he came near, and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed; (Gen. 27:27)

As part of Rebekah's plan, she dressed Jacob in Esau's garments. A plain reading of the text would be simply that Isaac smelled the odor of the field on the hunter's garments, and that this convinced him that he was about to bless his older son. However midrash digs deeper and creates an inventive story: These garments were not ordinary clothes, but no less than the garments God made to clothe Adam in the Garden of Eden after Adam became aware that he was naked. We would certainly expect that a garment made by God would have some very special qualities; this one had magical powers to render the wearer unable to be killed. In addition, it would emit the aroma of Paradise (the Garden, where it was created) when worn by a righteous person. Midrash tells how the garment had been passed down to Nimrod, the hunter, and that on the very day of the earlier sale of the birthright, Esau tricked Nimrod into removing the clothes so that the two hunters could fight, whereupon Esau killed Nimrod and took the garment. These acts of killing and stealing were two of the three sins Esau committed in the fields on the day of the birthright sale. So it was the aroma of the Garden of Eden (which Isaac took to be the aroma of the fields) that convinced Isaac to give his blessing.⁴⁰

One commentary extends yet another miracle to the garment: Esau was a large man, and Jacob was smaller, but God made the clothes fit Jacob (similar to the later biblical story when young David—descendent of Leah and Jacob—dons King Saul's armor, 1 Sam. 17:38).⁴¹ But the Rabbis were not unanimous in attributing such history and magic to Esau's clothes. For some commentators, this was simply a ceremonial vestment garment, special only because Esau used it, rather than his field clothes, for special occasions (officiating at family sacrifices or attending to his father).⁴² These commentators don't even concede that the aroma was special—the clothes were kept wrapped with flowers from the field to keep them fresh, and that is what gave them the fragrance that convinced Isaac.⁴³

The Wording of the Blessings

Therefore God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine; let people serve you, and nations bow down to you; be lord over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow down to you; cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be he who blesses you. (Isaac's first blessing, to Jacob – Gen. 27:28-29)

... Behold, your dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above; / and by your sword shall you live, and shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass when you shall have the dominion, that you shall break his yoke from off your neck. (Isaac's second blessing, to Esau – Gen. 27:39-40)

The second major evidence that Isaac was indeed deceived is found in the wording of the two blessings. Midrash notes that Isaac's first blessing, which he gave to Jacob, is one of material wealth (the dew, the fatness of the earth, grain and wine) and mastery over others, including other family members. (Gen. 27:27-29) This seems to the Rabbis to be a blessing

more appropriate for Esau's character, showing that Isaac thought this blessing was going to Esau.⁴⁴

Midrash contrasts the first blessing with the parallel one Isaac gives to the grieving Esau when Esau learns that the firstborn's blessing has been given to Jacob and demands a second blessing for himself. Again the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth are promised, but the Rabbis note that these benefits are plentiful on earth, and so could be promised to both sons (and could be enjoyed simultaneously by Jacob's descendants in the Promised Land and by Esau's descendants in their homeland at Mt. Seir, outside the Land). But sovereignty must be exclusive at any point in time, and Jacob had already been promised sovereignty over Esau, so Esau can't receive that promise too. The best that Isaac can do for Esau is to indicate that if the descendants of Jacob stray from God's ways, the descendants of Esau (which the Rabbis of the time identify with Rome) would be able to gain temporary dominion in this world. However, the realm of eternal and spiritual dominion belongs to Jacob (and his descendants, the Children of Israel). One clue pointing to this conclusion is that the first blessing, given to Jacob, includes God's name, while the second blessing, for Esau, does not.⁴⁵

But even if the first blessing did not go to the son whom Isaac intended, he nevertheless could not revoke it. Isaac had been in the proper frame of mind (joyous, having eaten the savory food prepared by Rebekah), and he had intended to bless the son who stood before him. As with a legally binding contract, since the formalities had been met, the blessing was effective and permanent. This was especially true for this blessing, which ended by cursing anyone who cursed Jacob. So even if Isaac had the power to do so, he couldn't reverse the blessing with a curse without being cursed himself.⁴⁶

One provocative interpretation of that final portion of Isaac's blessing—"cursed be those who curse you"—suggests that Isaac was deceived by Jacob, that Isaac intended this portion of the blessing for Esau, and that his words had their intended effect. Just as Jacob "cursed" Esau through deceptive impersonation that deprived him of the blessing, so was Jacob later punished in kind by Leah's deceptive impersonation at their wedding, depriving him of a first marriage to his beloved Rachel.⁴⁷

But not all of the midrashic commentators are convinced that Isaac was truly deceived. Or perhaps we should say that not all the midrashic commentators are willing to be convinced. It obviously would make the Rabbis more comfortable if they could conclude that Isaac was never fooled. This would keep the Second Patriarch from appearing foolish or impotent, while at the same time shield the Third Patriarch from moral criticism for being a deceiver.

Some commentaries do declare that Isaac was not fooled by Rebekah's plan. One midrash explains that Isaac proceeded with the blessing in part because he knew that Rebekah had engineered it, and he respected her prophetic insight as to who deserved the blessing. A variation on this idea suggests that Isaac wasn't fooled but went along with Rebekah's plan, not out of respect for her prophetic wisdom, but simply as an old blind husband deferring to his wife in an attempt to keep some measure of peace in his home for his final years. Still another view is that Isaac originally intended to give the principal blessing to Esau because Isaac thought that Jacob was too simple and scholarly to be superior to his brother in worldly power. However, when he recognized Jacob's attempted deception in the Blessing tent, Isaac concluded that Jacob possessed the necessary resourcefulness to merit receiving the primary blessing.⁴⁸

Esau Returns for His Blessing

And Isaac trembled very much, and said, Who then is he who hunted venison, and brought it to me, and I have eaten of all before you came, and have blessed him? moreover, he shall be blessed. And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and very bitter cry, and said to his father, Bless me, me also, O my father. And he said, Your brother came with cunning, and has taken away your blessing. And he said, Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he has supplanted me these two times; he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he has taken away my blessing. And he said, Have you not reserved a blessing for me? / And Isaac answered and said to Esau, Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers have I given to him for servants; and with grain and wine have I sustained him; and what shall I do now to you, my son? And Esau said to his father, Have you but one blessing, my father? bless me, me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept. (Gen. 27:33-38)

Jacob leaves Isaac's tent immediately after receiving the blessing, whereupon Esau finally appears with the food from his hunt in order to begin what he expects to be the firstborn's blessing ceremony. When Isaac learns that his first blessing has not gone to Esau, Isaac trembles greatly. Here is another ambiguous description in the text that is subjected to various midrashic interpretations. Some commentators accept the biblical story at its plain meaning: Isaac trembled with the shock of discovering that he had been deceived. Others conclude that this trembling was an act put on by Isaac to spare Esau's feelings and avoid his anger.⁴⁹

But regardless of their views on whether Jacob deceived Isaac into blessing him, the Rabbis uniformly respond to the description of Esau's bitter cries and tears as most readers of this moving passage have for thousands of years. These are not stage tears. Esau's grief is patently genuine, and in the view of midrash, Jacob must therefore suffer consequences for inflicting such bitterness upon his brother. Once again, the Rabbis see the consequences imposed measure for measure: Because of Esau's tears, his descendants (Rome) will come to dominate the Children of Israel until Israel sheds sufficient tears of its own to atone for the anguish Jacob caused Esau.⁵⁰

And however moved Isaac was by Esau's tears, there was little he could do. He acknowledges the effectiveness of the blessing to Jacob: "...moreover he shall be blessed." Although Isaac has not yet blessed Jacob with spiritual benefits as the inheritor of God's blessing to Abraham, he knows that Esau's blemished character does not merit such a blessing. So Isaac saves that spiritual blessing for Jacob and soon will voluntarily give it to him in another blessing upon his leave-taking. (Gen. 28:1-4) Thus, all that Isaac has left for responding to Esau's cries is a limited blessing promising material bounty, but subject to Jacob's already-promised sovereignty.⁵¹

Midrash carefully explores the words exchanged between Isaac and Esau in the tent of blessing. Esau complains that this is the second time Jacob has taken his place, first with the birthright and now with the blessing. Midrash recognizes that this could be the first time that Isaac was aware that Esau had transferred the birthright to Jacob. This new knowledge might have been what moved Isaac to later give the spiritual blessing to Jacob before he leaves home, thereby impliedly confirming the effectiveness of the first blessing regardless of what Isaac initially had in mind.⁵²

Although Isaac states, “Your brother came with cunning, and has taken away your blessing,” midrash does not read this as a clear pronouncement of Jacob’s culpability. Perhaps, like Isaac’s trembling, his words are aimed at deflecting Esau’s emotions (although this may have had the opposite effect). The Rabbis save Jacob from condemnation by arguing the meaning of Isaac’s words. In the Targum (Aramaic translation) of Onkelos, the phrase is rendered “Your brother came cleverly and accepted your blessing”, changing the tool Jacob used from deception to the exercise of superior intelligence, and changing the characterization of his act from stealing to accepting.⁵³ And even if Isaac did state that Jacob came with deceit, this was not necessarily meant as condemnation. Since Esau had been deceitful in fooling Isaac, midrash sees Jacob as morally justified in taking necessary counter-measures.⁵⁴

Notes to Supplement B:

- ¹ The angels’ tears at the Binding caused Isaac’s blindness: Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 44; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 488; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.10.
- ² Isaac’s stress at the Binding may have caused his blindness: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 488
- ³ Isaac’s blindness was a lesser punishment due to Abraham’s merit: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 488; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.10.
- ⁴ Isaac’s blindness was due to Esau’s wives: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 486 [Isaac’s distress]; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 255 [smoke from their incense].
- ⁵ Isaac’s blindness was a consequence of his parental failings: A. Z. Friedman, *Wellsprings of Torah*, 52-3 [Isaac should have expelled Esau, as Abraham did with Ishmael]; Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 121-2 [Isaac should have trained his sons according to their individual tendencies].
- ⁶ Isaac’s blindness was divine punishment for closing his eyes to Esau’s evil: *Hachut Hameshulash* 532 [citing Sforno].
- ⁷ Isaac’s blindness was punishment for accepting a bribe: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 172; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 486; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.7; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 153; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 256.
- ⁸ Isaac’s blindness was a divine gift to save him from seeing Esau’s evil: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 173; Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 43; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 487; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.10.
- ⁹ God imposed Isaac’s blindness to enable Jacob to obtain the blessing: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 173; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 487; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.8, Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 255.
- ¹⁰ Isaac was aware of Esau’s character but wanted to reform him: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 222.
- ¹¹ The elderly and blind often enjoy highly spiced food: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 490.
- ¹² Why Isaac wanted the venison: *Hachut Hameshulash* 532 [to put Isaac in a joyful mood needed for giving a blessing, citing Kimchi]; Nachshoni, *Weekly Parashah*, 159 [to make Esau more worthy by performing a mitzvah].
- ¹³ Isaac always intended to give the primary blessing to Jacob: Armstrong, *Beginning*, 79; *Hachut Hameshulash* 545 [citing Sforno].
- ¹⁴ Esau was not wholly evil and could reform: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 222.
- ¹⁵ The blessing was on Passover: Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 44.

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- ¹⁶ The prophesy was a later insertion to justify Rebecca's actions: See: Mitchell, *Genesis*, Introduction, xxxvii – xxxviii.
- ¹⁷ God actively participates in Rebecca's plan: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 222 [gift of prophesy]; Bialik, *Book of Legends*, 44-5 [sending Satan to delay Esau; sending angels to physically support a reluctant Jacob]; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.19 [sending angels to physically support a reluctant Jacob]; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 154 [sending Satan to delay Esau].
- ¹⁸ Rebecca acted to save Isaac from being fooled: Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 127; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.6.
- ¹⁹ Rebecca's deception was unnecessary: *Hachut Hameshulash* 534 [citing Kimchi].
- ²⁰ Rebecca's deception distorted the allocation of the blessings: Alshech, *Torat Moshe*, 125; Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 105; Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 127.
- ²¹ Jacob did not intentionally deceive; he acted from obedience to his mother: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 223; Bialik, *Book of Legends* 44; Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, 121-2; Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 126; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.15; Talmud *Makkoth* 24a
- ²² Jacob was not a deceiver by nature: Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 129.
- ²³ Rebecca's statement about the curse: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 494; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, 261-2; *Targum Onqelos*, 100.
- ²⁴ Angels had to physically support Jacob in the tent of blessing: Bialik, *Book of Legends* 44; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.19.
- ²⁵ God provided the food Jacob brought as God provided the ram at the Binding: Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 155.
- ²⁶ Twins' voices are naturally similar: Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 339; Rashbam, *Commentary*, 154-5; *Hachut Hameshulash* 536 [citing Rashbam].
- ²⁷ The distinctiveness of voices permits a blind person to have marital relations with a spouse: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 499; Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 339.
- ²⁸ Rebecca warned Jacob to use his own voice: Rymanover, *Torah Discourses*, 141-2.
- ²⁹ Isaac recognized Jacob's voice: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 499.
- ³⁰ Isaac recognized Jacob's pious manner of speaking: Bialik, *Book of Legends* 44-5; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 498; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.19; Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 339-40; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 159.
- ³¹ Jacob did not claim to be Esau in his first response: Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 142; *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.18; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 154.
- ³² Jacob did not claim to be Esau in his second response: Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 192.
- ³³ Jacob's claim to be Esau was justified: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 224-5; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 497; *Hachut Hameshulash* 537 [citing Kimchi]; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, 262.
- ³⁴ The purpose of the Birthright episode as justifying Jacob's actions in the Blessing episode: See: Mitchell, *Genesis*, Introduction, xxxvii – xxxviii.
- ³⁵ Jacob became Esau in the Blessing tent: Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 172, 211-2.
- ³⁶ Jacob never claimed to be Esau: Jub. 26:13.
- ³⁷ God stopped Isaac from recognizing Jacob: Jub. 26:18
- ³⁸ Jacob learns not to deceive: Moyers, *Genesis*, 287 [Roberta Hestenes].
- ³⁹ It appears that Isaac was deceived: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 225, 228; Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 177-8; Jub. 26:18; Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 342-3.

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- ⁴⁰ Isaac was fooled by the aroma of Esau's clothing: Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, 265 [the aroma of the fields]; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 155, 157 [the aroma of Eden]; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 259-60 [the aroma of Eden].
- ⁴¹ Esau's clothing miraculously adjusted to Jacob's size: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 496.
- ⁴² This was an ordinary garment that Esau customarily wore when with Isaac or when performing family rituals: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 494-5; Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, 122; *Talmud of the Land of Israel*, Megillah 1:11 (vol. 19, p. 72).
- ⁴³ The garment's fragrance came from being stored with flowers: *Hachut Hameshulash* 535 [citing Kimchi]; Rashbam, *Commentary*, 155.
- ⁴⁴ The first blessing was appropriate for Esau, so Isaac was deceived: Armstrong, *Beginning*, 79; *Hachut Hameshulash* 545 [citing Sforno].
- ⁴⁵ Similarities and differences between the two blessings: *Hachut Hameshulash* 548 [citing Kimchi]; Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 334; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 172; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 267.
- ⁴⁶ The blessing was permanent, and Isaac couldn't change it: Armstrong, *Beginning*, 78; Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 225, 228; Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 177-8; *Hachut Hameshulash* 544 [citing Kimchi]; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, 269.
- ⁴⁷ Isaac's curse was effective and caused Jacob's later punishment: Armstrong, *Beginning*, 80.
- ⁴⁸ Isaac was not fooled; he intended to bless Jacob: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 510; *Hachut Hameshulash* 542 [citing Rashbam]; Nachshoni, *Weekly Parashah*, 163; Rashbam, *Commentary*, 157; Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics*, 152.
- ⁴⁹ Isaac's trembling: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 228; Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 510; *Hachut Hameshulash* 543 [citing Kimchi].
- ⁵⁰ Sympathy for Esau's tears: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 2, 512.
- ⁵¹ Isaac could give only a limited blessing to Esau: *Hachut Hameshulash* 545, 549 [citing Sforno]; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 172.
- ⁵² Why Isaac gave Jacob a second blessing: Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 265-6, 270.
- ⁵³ Jacob did not come with deceit: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 67.4; *Targum Onqelos*, 101, n. 12; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 172.
- ⁵⁴ If Jacob came with deceit, it was justified: Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 172.