

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement C

Midrash on Jacob Leaving Home

And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him; and Esau said in his heart, When the days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob. And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebekah; and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee to Laban my brother to Haran; And remain with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away; Until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and fetch you from there; why should I be deprived of both of you in one day? (Gen. 27:41-45)

The family picture of Isaac, Rebekah, and their twin sons in the Blessing episode could stand alone, stripped of its theological aspects, as a provocative literary case study of familial dysfunction, one that clearly resonates with modern readers. In particular, this story seems all about communication—the communication that we read in the text and the communication that is noticeably absent from the text. Even the literary format of this portion of the Bible underscores this. In a reversal of the literary form often used in other parts of the Bible, we don't learn about this family primarily from descriptions given by the narrator. This family, for better or worse, is displayed to us primarily through their dialogs.

But we are not presented with a series of multi-party family conversations and interactions of the sort that a modern writer (or psychologist) might record. This is not your typical family talking around the dinner table on Friday night. Instead, the blessing story reports a series of intense two-party conversations, often marked by secrecy, manipulation, and deception. The twins don't talk at all with each other during this episode. Their only recorded conversation while growing up at home is their previous negotiation for sale of the birthright; the next time they speak with each other will be decades later when Jacob returns from Haran.

Throughout the blessing episode, each twin speaks only with one parent at a time. Indeed, we never hear Rebekah speaking with Esau in the Bible—all of her parental words are reserved for her favorite, Jacob. The closest she comes to conversation with her older son is when she overhears (or learns through prophetic vision) what Isaac and Esau are saying.¹

Perhaps more extreme, Rebekah doesn't speak with her husband during the episode itself, but instead schools Jacob on how to manipulate Isaac. Rebekah only talks with Isaac after he has blessed Jacob. Even then she talks about wanting to send Jacob away to avoid his marrying Canaanite women. She doesn't mention the blessing or her fears concerning Esau's plans for revenge against Jacob.

The story of what happens immediately after Isaac is tricked into granting the firstborn's blessing to Jacob demonstrates how the Bible uses the subtleties of dialog to portray the deep

fissures of tension separating this family. And like so much of this family's story, it is left to the reader to examine the limited text and determine what is really happening.

Esau's Silent Pledge of Revenge

Upon learning of Esau's intention to seek mortal revenge against Jacob ("Esau said in his heart, 'When the days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.'"), Rebekah instructs Jacob to flee to her brother, Laban. She tells Jacob to stay with Laban "a few days" until Esau gets over his anger, "and he forgets what you have done to him." Midrash has some fun unpacking this language.

First the commentators must determine who told Rebekah about Esau's words of revenge if he spoke them "in his heart." While it's possible that Esau told his thoughts to some confidant who then warned Rebekah, the majority of the commentators are comfortable with the explanation that Esau never spoke his thoughts aloud. Rebekah learned of them from God through her matriarchal gift of prophecy. This interpretation elevates Rebekah's character by confirming God's continuing grant of prophetic vision to her. At the same time, this interpretation reminds us how God plays a key role of support for all of this plotting and seemingly unfair activity by Rebekah and Jacob.²

In contrast with God continuing to favor Rebekah with prophecy, midrash concludes that God withdraws the powers of prophecy at some points from both Isaac and, later, Jacob. Isaac loses the power of prophecy when his prophetic blindness (perhaps due to his distress over Esau's idolatrous wives) causes him initially to favor the evil Esau and eventually to bless the wrong son. Jacob later loses the power of prophecy when he mourns for his son Joseph, thinking he has been killed (Gen. 37:33). Jacob loses the gift of prophecy again when he tries but is unable to make a deathbed revelation to his sons disclosing the End of Days (Gen. 49:1).³

It is interesting to speculate how Rebekah may have learned about Esau's silent promise of vengeance. Even more interesting, however, is what we can learn about Esau's character from what he said in his heart. Unlike many things said to one another by these four family members, at least we don't have to be concerned whether Esau's vow of revenge is sincere. Surely the Bible intends that what's said in one's heart is true, or at least is truly believed. Our conclusion must be that Esau, the hunter of the fields, was determined to kill Jacob because his brother had taken the blessing that Isaac intended to confer on Esau.

However, Esau's vow to kill Jacob is not an immediate threat, but rather expressly conditional—Esau will not act until the days of mourning for Isaac arrive. Then why did Rebekah send Jacob away immediately? One answer to this in midrash is simply that Rebekah knew that Isaac was an old man, and he could die at any time. In fact, perhaps everyone expected this. Isaac himself stated that his desire to bless Esau was because he was old and did not know the time of his death (Gen. 27:2). The blessing was thus intended by Isaac as a deathbed blessing.⁴ The Rabbis speculate that Isaac may have thought that it was time for giving his final blessing because he presumed that becoming blind (which hadn't happened to his father,

Abraham) indicated that he would die soon. Of course, we readers see the irony in Isaac's "deathbed" blessing taking place 57 years before his death.*

Alternatively, perhaps Rebekah wasn't certain that Isaac would die soon. Perhaps she simply recognized that bottled-up resentment and thirst for postponed revenge can seethe and grow over time. Rebekah might not have trusted Esau to wait until Isaac's eventual death.

But midrash goes further and questions why Esau said he would kill Jacob only when the days of mourning for their father came. Perhaps Esau acted out of respect for Isaac—midrash is not unanimous in painting Esau as monochromatic evil. Esau may have intended to wait until Isaac's death because he feared that killing Jacob before then might cause Isaac's premature death from grief.⁵

However most of the Rabbis read everything done or said by Esau—including (or perhaps, especially) what he says in his heart—in a manner consistent with casting him as the bad character in this family drama. The classical interpretation is that Esau was coldly calculating when he postponed taking revenge against Jacob. He was influenced by the story of Cain and Abel, the Bible's first fratricide. After Cain slew his brother Abel, Adam had another son, Seth, who shared the inheritance from Adam. So the Rabbis reasoned that Esau didn't want to kill Jacob during Isaac's lifetime because he feared that Isaac could have additional children who would diminish Esau's inheritance. (Midrash later attributes a similar calculating motivation to Leah's son, Reuben.) Indeed, some of the Rabbis hear in the statement of Esau's heart a determination not just to wait for Isaac's death, but also to actively bring it on.⁶

Rebekah's Response to the Threat Against Jacob

Rebekah's response to her prophetic knowledge of Esau's murderous intent shows that her plotting and manipulation hasn't yet concluded. She once more commands her obedient Jacob to play the role she's written for him—this time to flee to her brother, Laban, in Haran, in order to get beyond Esau's ability to enact his mortal revenge.

Rebekah tells Jacob to remain in exile with her brother Laban "for a few days (*yamim achadim*), until your brother's fury turns away; until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him..." (Gen. 27:44-45). We have to wonder what Rebekah was really thinking. Do children ever forget? Would Esau's hunger for revenge dissipate over time, or would it rather intensify for being postponed? In any event, it's certainly difficult to imagine that Rebekah could have expected that "a few days" would change anything. Her use of that unrealistic term seems to suggest a conscious attempt to further manipulate Jacob to do as she commands.

It is ironic, of course, that the brief sojourn urged by Rebekah in fact will last for twenty-two years. The "few days" become so long that Rebekah and her favorite Jacob never see each other again after he leaves. The text will later draw our attention to this when it uses the same

* The commentators do not always agree on the timeline for biblical events because the text itself often is not explicit. The preeminent medieval commentator, Rashi, calculates that Isaac survived for 57 years after the blessing until his death at 180. This is based upon some convoluted computations interpreting various verses from the Bible fixing relative times for the births of Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and the death of Ishmael. (Rashi, Commentaries, v. 1, 305-6, n. 9)

phrase to describe how Jacob feels when he is forced to defer marrying his beloved Rachel until the conclusion of his seven years of bride-price service to Laban: “And they seemed to him as a few days (*c’yamim ahadim*) because of his love for her.” (Gen. 29:20) In contrast to Rebekah’s manipulative use of the phrase in order to persuade her son to flee, Jacob’s “few days” of working and waiting for Rachel signify a deep, sincere romantic love.

And what should we make of Rebekah’s telling Jacob that he should stay away until Esau “forgets what you have done to him”? The Rabbis portray Jacob as a highly reluctant participant in Rebekah’s scheme, agreeing to obtain the blessing intended for his brother only out of obedience to his mother and in reliance upon divine support. Yet Rebekah now makes it sound as if Jacob were the principal, if not sole, actor. In light of her role in plotting the blessing episode, it is difficult to believe that Rebekah is really blaming Jacob for the actions he reluctantly undertook at her command. Perhaps her words implying his guilt are just another attempt by her to persuade Jacob to follow her command to flee. She might have felt that these words were justified at this stage when Jacob’s compliance with her previous commands seems to have elicited his father’s shocked anger and his brother’s murderous hatred.

Rebekah’s Story to Isaac

And Rebekah said to Isaac, I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these who are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life be to me? (Gen. 27:46)

Rebekah’s final act in the blessing story finally has her speaking directly to her husband, rather than working through Jacob. However, this “direct” conversation merely seems to show how deceptive and manipulative Rebekah can be in her dealings with Isaac. To Jacob, she expressed the need for his fleeing solely on the basis of evading Esau’s vow of revenge. But to Isaac, she states as her sole reason her distress at the possibility that Jacob will take a wife from among the local Canaanite women.

On the surface, at least, it seems as if Rebekah is telling her husband and her son what each needs to hear in order to persuade them to do what she wants. But as we’ve seen before, one common theme of the Rabbis is striving to rehabilitate the character of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs through interpretation of any apparently condemnatory biblical text. Here classical midrash works to justify Rebekah’s misleading statement to Isaac about her purported concerns over a Canaanite marriage. The Rabbis infer that she was hiding her true concerns (fear of Esau’s revenge against Jacob) from her husband for righteous motives—it is forbidden to tell slanderous tales. However, Rebekah had earlier been able to tell the truth to Jacob because revealing to him Esau’s evil intention was necessary to save Jacob’s life, a higher virtue.⁷

One contemporary commentator, Burton L. Visotzky, proposes an interesting alternative explanation of this scene by turning the story upside down: Rebekah was finally telling the truth to Isaac. In contrast, her dissembling occurred in her prior statements and actions about the firstborn blessing. Even before the twins were born, Rebekah received the prophecy from God that Jacob would be blessed with preeminence over Esau. Thus, she wouldn’t have been concerned over who would receive Isaac’s blessing. Isaac couldn’t change Jacob’s divine destiny. Visotzky therefore reasons that Rebekah’s true concern all along was the threat of

Canaanite marriage, as she finally reveals to Isaac. If this was Rebekah's real motivation, however, then it is difficult for readers to feel better about her character. Under this theory, she must have concocted the entire destructive blessing plot simply to bring about the predictable circumstance (Esau's rage) that would force Jacob to flee to Haran, where he would find an appropriate wife from among her own family—a very heavy-handed and hurtful strategy.⁸

Jacob's Second Blessing

And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said to him, You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and take a wife from there of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. And God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, that you may be a multitude of people; And give the blessing of Abraham to you, and to your seed with you; that you may inherit the land where you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham. (Gen. 28:1-4)

Although perhaps not very appealing to us, it is not entirely far-fetched that Rebekah was indeed motivated throughout this episode by her concern over Jacob marrying Canaanite women as Esau had done. Her goal here might not be to secure for Jacob his father's initial material blessings of prosperity or even temporal superiority over his brother. She may have simply wanted to ensure that Jacob would become the inheritor of Abraham's special covenantal relationship with God. In his time, Abraham secured that unique status for his younger son, Isaac, by sending for a non-Canaanite wife among his kin (Rebekah herself). Now Rebekah may have felt that she must bring about a similar situation for Jacob so that he would in turn inherit the special Abrahamic tradition from Isaac.⁹

If this was Rebekah's true goal, she succeeds. Isaac sends Jacob off to marry from among the family in Haran, endowing him with a second, voluntary blessing that expressly designates Jacob as the successor to the Abrahamic covenant: "And God Almighty bless you ... and give the blessing of Abraham to you, and to your seed." (Gen. 28:3-4)

But as not unexpected in the Bible, God has the last laugh. Because Jacob's road to his eventual marriages in Laban's household started with all this trickery by him in obedience to his mother, Jacob's first marriage (to Leah) becomes perhaps the most colossal instance of trickery in the lives of any of the Patriarchs.

Esau Marries Again

And Esau seeing that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father; Then went Esau to Ishmael, and took, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife. (Gen. 28:7-9)

The blessing story closes with a subtle and understated postscript after Jacob is sent off to Haran to marry within the family of Rebekah's brother rather than marry Canaanite wives as Esau had done. The Bible next reports that Esau immediately sought out an additional wife from

the family of Isaac's brother, Ishmael. From a superficial literary analysis, this terse statement could be seen as merely continuing the story's efforts to maintain a telling parallelism between the twins—Jacob and Esau, the good son and the bad son, portrayed not merely as opposites, but as indissolubly linked together like opposite sides of the same coin. However, midrash won't let even these few seemingly innocuous lines of family history pass without excavating some of the intriguing possibilities hidden within.

Esau adds one more wife in addition to his first two, and this time she is not a Canaanite, but Ishmael's daughter. This immediate emulation of his brother's marriage quest suggests that Esau is competitively striving for sibling equivalence. But the commentators underscore some subtle distinctions between Jacob and Esau in this matter. Jacob is sent to marry non-Canaanite brides because both his parents want him to succeed to the covenant of Abraham (Rebekah by implication and Isaac explicitly). But Esau arranged his new marital match by himself, without consulting them. Perhaps this third marriage was Esau's grasping attempt to level the brothers' qualifications in the hopes that he could regain the Abrahamic inheritance in the Land.¹⁰

If this was his intent, of course, Esau appears to have widely missed the mark. His parents were already bitter because he had married Canaanite women in defiance of Abraham's tradition (Gen. 26:35). Esau now takes on another wife without sending away his Canaanite wives (in contrast to Abraham's exile of Hagar and Ishmael). This is not a step that would remedy his parents' misgivings or bring Esau closer to being the proper successor to Abraham.

And the text states that Esau acted when he saw that his Canaanite wives "pleased not Isaac his father." Both of his parents were bitter over Esau's Canaanite wives (Gen. 26:35), but all that Esau cared about was his father's displeasure (Gen. 28:8), not his mother's. This further reinforces the analysis that Esau was not acting from personal righteousness, but only attempting to ingratiate himself with the source of the family inheritance.

Another commentary accepts the possibility that Esau's eyes had been opened when Isaac sent Jacob away to marry within the family. Esau's reaction shows that he could be changed and morally elevated once he understood his parents' displeasure. Based upon this, Isaac and Rebekah are criticized for previously having failed to exert more forceful parental interference in Esau's initial choice of wives.¹¹ This conclusion will resonate when midrash later faults Jacob for missing another chance to reform Esau (when Jacob hides his daughter, Dinah, in fear that Esau would demand to marry her.)¹²

Just why the parents failed to intervene to avoid Esau's earlier marriages to Canaanite women is left for us to imagine. Consistent with what we've seen of the family dynamics of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau—the Bible's second Jewish family—we can speculate that a calculating Rebekah might have avoided any attempt to dissuade Esau from an action that would displease Isaac because she wouldn't want to do anything to diminish the fortunes of her favorite son, Jacob. Or perhaps she didn't bother with Esau because she had already received God's prophecy that Jacob would be the true family heir. Indeed, the Bible never reports her speaking anything to her son Esau, so it's not surprising that she had no apparent influence on his life and character.

And as for Isaac, his failure to try to influence Esau's marital choices could be an expression of Isaac's blind favoritism of Esau, or even a result of Isaac's dependence upon his hunter son for tasty venison. Another convenient interpretation is to remember that Isaac was likewise a prophet, and some of the commentaries presume that he therefore knew that Esau was morally unfit and not destined to be Abraham's heir. Under this approach, it would already be

too late to change anything by attempting to dissuade Esau from marrying Canaanite women. Therefore, Isaac never advised Esau about choosing a wife as he did with Jacob.¹³

Esau's marrying Ishmael's daughter in order to please his father Isaac suggests some other themes. In the Abraham and Sarah story, Ishmael is portrayed as having an evil nature sufficient for God to side with Sarah in her demand that Ishmael be exiled for Isaac's benefit. From this text, we would not expect that Esau's marriage to a daughter of his father's brother and rival would necessarily please Isaac. But a modern commentary speculates about the complex, conflicted feelings that Isaac may have held for his separated older brother, Ishmael. Isaac had triumphed over Ishmael, but that very success led to Isaac's traumatic near-sacrifice by Abraham (which may have resulted in Isaac's subsequent blindness). Perhaps Isaac now longed for his separated brother, admiring his vigor and strength—if so, Esau's marriage to a daughter of Ishmael may have been well-calculated to please Isaac. Or the same factors could lead to an opposite conclusion: Perhaps Esau married Ishmael's daughter in anger over losing the blessing, and Esau was attempting to defy or hurt Isaac by allying with his rival.¹⁴ As always, we look to midrash on this point for its theories and questions, rather than necessarily expect to be convinced by its conclusions and answers.

Notes to Supplement C:

- ¹ Conversation within the family: Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 189-90.
- ² How Rebekah learned of Esau's intent to murder Jacob: Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 175; Ibn Ezra, *Commentary*, 272; Jub. 27:1.
- ³ Loss of prophetic powers: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 65.4; Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 423, n. 31; 535, n. 1.
- ⁴ Everyone believed Isaac was on his deathbed: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 229; *Hachut Hameshulash* 550-1 [citing Kimchi].
- ⁵ Esau may have had a good reason to wait until Isaac died: *Hachut Hameshulash* 551 [citing Kimchi].
- ⁶ Esau may have been threatening to hasten Isaac's death: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 75.9
- ⁷ Rebekah's statements to Isaac: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 230.
- ⁸ Rebekah's real goal was to get Jacob to marry in Haran: Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics*, 157.
- ⁹ Rebekah's real goal was to have Jacob inherit the Abrahamic covenant: Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women*, 22.
- ¹⁰ Esau took a third wife to compete with Jacob: *Etz Hayim Torah/JPS* 161, p'shat n. 6; *Hachut Hameshulash* 550 [citing Rashbam].
- ¹¹ Isaac and Rebekah should have guided Esau's choice of wives: *Hachut Hameshulash* 554 [citing Sforno].
- ¹² Jacob was wrong to hide Dinah from Esau: Page 186: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 76.9.
- ¹³ Isaac knew that Esau would be unfit to inherit the covenant regardless of his choice in wives: Nachmanides (Ramban), *Commentary on the Torah*, 348.
- ¹⁴ The significance of Ishmael in the story: Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics*, 136, 150.