LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Toldot

Vol. 11, Issue 9 • 3 Kislev 5786 / November 13, 2026

CONTENTS: Greenfield (Page 1); Letters To The Editors (Page 9); Becker (Page 10)

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Hesed, Gevurah, and Emet: Do These Attributes Actually Describe our Forefathers?

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Editor's Note: This piece was originally published in December 2022.

In kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, each of the forefathers is associated with a defining characteristic. Avraham is associated with the attribute of kindness (*hesed*), Yitzhak with that of strength (*gevurah*), and Yaakov with truth (*emet*). For example, *Zohar Hadash* 33b states:

> Each and every one of our *Avot* knew the Holy Blessed One through his own *aspaklariah* (looking glass). Avraham knew Him through *hesed* … Yitzhak knew Him by the level of *gevurah* … Yaakov knew Him through the level of *tiferet* … which is called e*met*, and which unites [the previous two *middot*], as it is written: "You will give *emet* to Yaakov" (*Micah* 7:20).[1]

[1] The verse continues, "[and You will give] *hesed* to Avraham," which would itself be a fitting proof text for the first association.

This threefold association has entered the pantheon of popular English-language Torah knowledge. A simple search finds it referenced at length on websites such as Chabad, Torah In Motion, Aish HaTorah, Torah.org, Mishpacha Magazine, as well as throughout the Artscroll Humash—all without a citation to any specific source.

But these associations seem false! In the actual biblical narratives, Yaakov is deceptive, Yitzhak is weak, and even Avraham's kindness begins to collapse after light analysis. How then should we understand this kabbalistic association? This essay argues that the *Zohar Hadash* understood these three attributes not as virtues which our forefathers mastered but as qualities with which they each wrestled. In fact, the very use of the term *hesed*—a rather loaded phrase in Avraham's life—may indicate that the *Zohar Hadash* intends to highlight not strengths but struggles of our ancestors.

The Discrepancy

Let us begin with Yaakov, whose attribute of "truth" is the most difficult to understand. His very name means trickery (*Bereshit* 27:36); he seemingly swindles Esav into selling his primogeniture (25:29-34); he deceives his blind father, by thieving Esav's identity, in an act that Yitzhak himself describes as *mirmah*,◌ guile (27:35); he offers to work with Lavan for only the rare speckled, spotted, and black sheep, before intentionally manipulating the flock's procreation to profit himself (30:31-43); he absconds from the Haran clan in the middle of the night, which the Torah describes as "stealing Lavan's heart … by not telling him that he was fleeing" (31:20). Back in Canaan, he tells Esav to travel ahead, because he will follow close behind and the two brothers will soon meet up again in Seir. Instead, Yaakov takes his family to Sukkot (33:14-17).

Further, Yaakov is himself the victim of immense lies. He wakes up beside not his promised wife, Rachel, but her sister, Leah (29:25). His own children sell his favored son, Yosef, down to Egypt and then invent an elaborate and bloody cover story (37:32-34). Finally, he remains silent as his two children, Shimon and Levi, deceive the city of Shechem into a defenseless massacre, themselves acting with *mirmah* (34:13). In sum: Yaakov's blessing and initial wealth are the product of two deceits; his frustration and grief, the product of two more; his silence, the background to the killing of a deceived town.

Yitzhak's supposed "strength" offers a similarly weak match to the actual Yitzhak we know. The reader witnesses a tragic impotence in Yitzhak's latter years, when he sits blind and befuddled (27:1): when he is unable to distinguish between hunted game (supposedly his favorite food, 27:4) and a goat meat substitute (27:25); between hairy skin and wooly coats (27:22); between his sons Esav and Yaakov (27:23); when he is powerless to decide the direction of his own legacy and blessing (27:33, 27:37); when the only wife he has ever loved connives against him (27:8-10). These verses paint the Torah's single most vivid portrait of, well,

weakness.

Yitzhak's earlier life only adds to the portrait. When Avraham passes away and Yitzhak is left in control of the family water wells, competing clans move in and obstruct them. Two new streams that Yitzhak bores are immediately contested. It is a triumph when a single well obtains (*Bereshit* 26:18-22). Similarly, Yitzhak's attempts to pass Rivkah off as a sister rather than his wife fail dramatically, as Avimelekh catches the couple sporting; he righteously scolds a silent Yitzhak, and he later sends Yitzhak out of town (26:7-11, 26:16). But we are bound to mention one more moment of debility: *Akedat Yitzhak*. Constrained on the altar, Yitzhak lays with his neck bare, awaiting the fatal stroke (22:9, 22:10). His most iconic biblical moment is one of perfect passivity.

Even Avraham's claim to *hesed* falls apart after some inspection. True, his generous reception of the three angelic strangers offers the reader a showcase moment of clear *hesed*. But, Avraham's full story is not at all defined by "kindness" and often runs directly counter to it. How is Avraham the epitome of *hesed* in raising the blade over his bound son? Where is the *hesed* in allowing Sarah to torment the lowly maidservant Hagar (*Bereshit* 16:6) or in exiling Hagar and her young child Yishmael into the blazing desert (*Bereshit* 21:14)? When Avraham argues on behalf of Sodom, his claims are explicitly rooted in *mishpat* (justice) and not in empathy, mercy, or kindness (*Bereshit* 18:23-25). If anything, Avraham's exploits unite around the theme of *gevurah*! With courage he leaves his homeland and journeys to a land that God will eventually show him; with brute force and clear valor he raises an army that successfully rescues Lot from captivity; with exceptional willpower he circumcises himself at the age of 99 (*Bereshit* 17:24). The Avraham we know from the actual Torah exemplifies any number of virtues, but *hesed* is not particularly high on that list.

Yaakov's story is one of guile and deception, not *emet;* Yitzhak's persona is one of frailty and relative impotence, not *gevurah*; Avraham's character shows moments of profound *hesed,* amongst ample narratives that are simply unrelated to kindness if not directly counter to it. How then to make sense of these kabbalistic attributions?

Two Unsatisfying Strategies

The first strategy is the "selective" one, in which one waves away the various discrepancies and elevates only those few moments when each patriarch's story actually matches their attribution. This strategy is most commonly applied to Avraham, whose treatment of the three angelic guests is quite easy to "select" as representative of his *hesed.* The selective strategy can be used with Yaakov as well: Yaakov displays *emet* in his remarkably frank dialogue with Pharoah (47:9); makes oath-commitments that he presumably fulfills in full (28:20-22); and recounts to Lavan his years of workplace integrity (31:38-41). Even with Yitzhak, a brief spotlight on *gevurah* can be made. Yitzhak faces open hostility over his wells, yet he manages to outmaneuver the competition and establish "ample space to increase in the land" (26:22). Highlight a few

choice narratives, and the trifecta is complete. However, the selective strategy is ultimately weak and unpersuasive. It is difficult to accept that a patriarch epitomizes a particular attribute, when in so many narrative moments, those attributes are betrayed. What honor does it give a biblical character, to declare them the embodiment of a particular trait on the basis of one narrative and then watch as they fail to live up to that trait in other narratives?

(A cousin to the "selective" strategy is the "revisionist" reading, in which challenging verses are reread as innocent. For example, when Yaakov falsely tells his father, "It is I, Esav, your firstborn" [27:19], Rashi plays with the commas, producing the more accurate phrase, "It is I. Also, Esav is your firstborn." As one might imagine, extending this to every detail of Jacobian dishonesty quickly becomes a rather forced and difficult project.)

The second interpretative strategy is the "counterintuitive" approach, which works best in recasting Yitzhak's attribute of *gevurah.* This strategy acknowledges that Yitzhak seems weak but asks us to reconsider our notion of strength. Is there not a strength in self-sacrifice and self-restraint? Is it not the supposedly weak ones who, in their very survival and gritty self-regard, reveal true power? When the *Zohar* attributes *gevurah* to Yitzhak, we are meant to pause for a moment, in surprise, before realizing the counterintuitive force of this kabbalistic claim. *True strength* is an internal capacity, not an external display. Recall Ben Zoma's well-known code in *Pirkei Avot 4:1*: "Who is strong? He who conquers his own desires." The "counterintuitive" read of the *Zohar* affords a similar moral message.

But the counterintuitive read fails when applied to Yaakov and Avraham. "Who is truthful? He who has a questionable relationship to the truth" is a mantra thankfully omitted from *Pirkei Avot*; we would be remiss to impose this "moral" teaching upon our forefather Yaakov. Is there justification for Yaakov's cunning decisions? Is there a certain hardball realism that even the righteous must engage in? Quite possibly. But let's call that "wisdom" or "politik" or *netzah*—the kabbalistic attribute associated with survival, victory, and endurance. Calling deception truth does not broaden our understanding of truth; rather, it violates it. Further, applying the counterintuitive read to Avraham adds little bite. What kind of newfound understanding of *hesed* would the *Zohar* point us toward? The mind struggles to capture a meaningful "*true hesed*"—meant to deepen our commitment and understanding of kindness—when reviewing stories of attempted child sacrifice and successful child banishment. The counterintuitive strategy comes up blank before Avraham and reads as forced, if not downright amoral, before Yaakov.

The straightforward read—Yaakov is in fact truthful—fails the evidence test. The counterintuitive read—truth ought to be redefined in light of Yaakov's untruth—is equally problematic. What then is the *Zohar* thinking

when it connects Yaakov to truth, Yitzhak to strength, and Avraham to *hesed*?

Theory #1: Attributes They Confront

The *Zohar* is not offering us the trait that each forefather masters; rather, it offers us the trait that they each confront. In effect, the *Zohar* offers a theme word that ties together their respective biblical careers. Understood this way, the *Zohar* is brilliant. Looking for one single thread that knits together almost all of Yaakov's diverse stories? *Emet*: its challenges, its lack, its necessity. Many of his narratives revolve around one character knowing a certain truth, another left in the dark, and the ramifications that emerge. Will Yaakov choose truth? What was gained and lost in each of those choices? Will his uncle, his wives, and his sons be truthful to him? What will emerge when the truth is eventually uncovered? Yaakov is not the epitome of truth, but his stories do consistently revolve around that theme.

Likewise, Yitzhak is by no means the embodiment of strength. But his narratives turn on the realities of strength: its absence, its varieties, and its challenges. We meet Yitzhak as a defenseless infant, the first-ever subject to the cut of circumcision; the Torah then alludes that Yitzhak is bullied by an older brother who toys with him (*Bereshit* 21:9, cf. Rashi); next, his arms and legs are bound, as he lays under Avraham's sharp blade and God's powerful command; he prefers his strong and aggressive son Esav, who is able to brandish weapons and bring home game; he maneuvers (not always gracefully) to maintain his family's safety amongst dangerous and strong clans; he navigates his own growing power, making strategic treaties and ultimately choosing to distance himself from rivals; he sits impotent at the end of his life, endowed with the titular power to decide his successor yet lacking the de facto ability.

Avraham's stories likewise orient around *hesed*: with moments of granting kindness, withholding kindness, overcoming kindness. We know Avraham is capable of immense *hesed* to strangers (*Bereshit* 18:1) and of modeling *hesed shel emet* in his burying of Sarah (23:2, 23:19). But it is this same Avraham who must "conquer his compassion" (cf. Rosh Hashanah Mussaf, *Yalkut Shimoni Bereshit* 101:7) in order to sacrifice his blameless son, and the same Avraham who, in the face of apparent need, gives up Sarah into the hands of two powerful men (*Bereshit* 12:11-13; 20:2). Likewise, Avraham clearly holds such overwhelming devotion to family that he drops everything, puts his own life at risk, and rescues Lot (*Bereshit* 14:14); but it is the same Avraham who is earlier tasked with leaving his father and brothers behind (12:1, 12:4), and later, with exiling his own son (21:14). In each episode, Avraham confronts the call to *hesed*, sometimes manifesting that trait and at other times withholding himself from it.

Indeed, a simple rereading of the initial *Zohar Hadash* passage affirms this approach: "Our Avot knew the Holy Blessed One through their own *aspaklariah* … Avraham knew Him through *hesed* … Yitzhak knew Him by the level of *gevurah* …

Yaakov knew Him through … e*met*." It never states that each forefather mastered, epitomized, or championed these attributes. Rather, it asserts that these virtues were the *aspaklariah*—the looking glass, or windowpane—through which each forefather came to know God. To say that *emet* was the lens through which Yaakov experienced the Creator is not to claim that he mastered the attribute of "truth," but that his sacred life story keeps returning to that theme.

Theory #2: Attributes of Struggle

But a more radical read of the *Zohar*'s claim is also available: these attributes are those with which each forefather struggled and even failed. By pairing Yaakov with *emet*, the *Zohar* calls attention to the fact that Yaakov is rarely truthful; by connecting Yitzhak with *gevurah*, the *Zohar* highlights how he almost never displays power. After all, saying that Yaakov experienced God through the lens of *emet* is to identify God—and not necessarily Yaakov—as a beacon of Truth; it is Yaakov who finds himself in need of that beacon. Perhaps Yaakov understood God through *emet* precisely because that was the realm in which he was constantly struggling.

In fact, this more critical reading best fits the *Zohar*'s choice of biblical proof text: "As it says, *''titen emet le-Yaakov,* You [God] will give truth to Jacob' (*Micah* 7:20)." Give truth to him, because he is in need of it! The verse makes no claim that Yaakov possesses *emet* but instead implies a present lacking. Indeed, the fuller context of that *Micah* passage makes clear that the prophet speaks of sin and failure, and the wish for eventual change:

> Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression … He [God] will turn again and have compassion on us, He will subdue our iniquities; You will hurl into the depths of the sea all our sins. You will give *emet* to Yaakov and *hesed* to Avraham…. (*Mikhah* 7:18-20)

The prophet hopes that our present-day iniquities will be subdued and that with it, *emet* and *hesed* will one day be manifested in Yaakov and Avraham. Only a forced and out of context read of "*titen emet le-Yaakov*" would hear in it a call to attribute the virtue of truth to Yaakov. Rather, in the *Zohar*'s choice to employ this verse, it offers a subtle critique of our ancestors. Turn to Yaakov not to see a victor in the battle for Truth, but one who struggled mightily with that challenge. Indeed, associations rooted in opposites are a running theme in kabbalistic symbolism, where the *sefirah* of *gevurah* is commonly associated with the left/weaker hand, and the *sefirah* of *malkhut* (monarchy) is commonly associated with women, not men. That the *Zohar* might go out of its way to connect our patriarchs with an attribute they each lack ought not surprise.

Further, the very use of the Hebrew word "*hesed*" for Avraham may be part of the *Zohar*'s critique. It is easy to forget that the biblical term *hesed* is a homonym, with two egregiously different

denotations. We tend to be more familiar with *hesed* as related to kindness, love, grace, favor, and goodness. Yet that is clearly not the meaning

in *Vayikra* 20:17:

> If a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness: it is a *HESED*; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people: he has uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity.

Unsurprisingly, *hesed* here is rarely translated as kindness or favor. Rather, it appears to mean something like disgrace or shame, with support provided from how *hesed* is used in Mishlei 14:34 ("righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a *hesed* to any people"), Mishlei 25:10 ("lest a listener *yehasdekha*—shame you—and your disgrace never be undone"), and in Aramaic (cf. Rashi ibid. and Onkelos to *Bereshit* 34:14).[2]

With that in mind, let us now turn to the only time in which Avraham himself employs the term *hesed*: *Bereshit* 20:12-13. Avraham had previously told Avimelekh that Sarah was his sister, and now he is forced to explain their relationship:

> And Avraham said [to Avimelekh]: "Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her: 'This is your *HESED* which you shall do unto me; at every place where we shall come, say of me: He is my brother.'"

Which *hesed* does Avraham here employ? The straight read is that Avraham speaks of the favor, or the kindness, that Sarah shall do for him. Yet it is possible to read this as Sarah's disgrace that she shall do for him, in forfeiting her body into the hands of a powerful stranger. Either way, the appearance of this particular word, in this specific context, is remarkable. *Hesed* appears both times in instances of sibling/mate confusion. *Vayikra* 20 is about treating a sister as a spouse; *Bereshit* 20 is about treating a spouse as a sister.

When the *Zohar* pins Avraham with "*hesed*," it is aware of this moment in Avraham's career—the only time in which Avraham himself uses the term.

[2] Cf. Ramban for the position that *hesed* means kindness even in this verse.

The *Zohar*'s word choice highlights this episode for us and effectively asks us to consider which "*hesed"* the *Zohar* has in mind: Avraham of loving-kindness, whom we see at various points in his narrative, or Avraham of a few disgraceful episodes, including the very difficult *hesed* choice to treat his spouse as a sister. In effect, it is possible to read this phrase in the *Zohar Hadash* as speaking "tongue in cheek": sure, Avraham's story is marked by acts of "*hesed*," but not necessarily in the virtuous sense. The very choice of this term by the *Zohar Hadash* alludes to the possibility that each attribute was not an area of perfect mastery but of substantial struggle, for each of our patriarchs.

Conclusion

The attributes which kabbalistic sources associate with our forefathers (truth, strength, and kindness) are at odds with how the patriarchs are actually portrayed in Torah narrative (often dishonest, almost always in a position of weakness, occasionally quite kind but also marked by an essential callousness). If we assume that this kabbalistic thread celebrates the forefathers as champions of each respective trait, the above discrepancy is a substantial problem. We are left with two somewhat forced and unconvincing strategies for resolving that discrepancy. The "selective" strategy asks the reader to ignore those parts of our patriarchs' lives which do not match the kabbalistic attribution. The "counterintuitive" strategy asks the reader to put aside their own baseline understandings of truth, strength, and even kindness.

However, we need not assume that this kabbalistic thread sees the forefathers as championing these traits. Nothing in the *Zohar Hadash* indicates that the forefathers own, master, or are themselves the source of these virtues. Rather, it asserts that each patriarch "knew God through the looking glass" of these virtues. The virtue is located outside them and is central to their experience, but it is not necessarily something that they themselves embody. As such, it is reasonable to understand this kabbalistic thread as stating that the forefathers repeatedly *confront* their respective attribute: sometimes exhibiting it, sometimes challenged by it, constantly weighing if and how to bring that virtue into the world.

But a fourth, more critical understanding is also possible. Perhaps to "know God through the looking glass" of a virtue means to *struggle* with that virtue. It is possible that *Zohar Hadash*'s intention in this passage is to highlight Yaakov's tendency toward *mirmah*, guile (*Bereshit* 27:35; 34:13) and Yitzhak's frequent positions of impotence. This "struggle" read is bolstered by the *Zohar Hadash*'s biblical proof text (*Micah* 7:20), a verse that speaks of Yaakov and Avraham lacking their respective attributes and which appears in a passage about Jewish spiritual failure. A more critical reading is also aided by awareness of how the term *hesed* actually occurs in Avraham's narratives. It is never used to describe his grand acts of kindness; it instead occurs when he asks Sarah to give herself to Avimelekh, a context which eerily echoes the much more negative meaning of the term *hesed* ("disgrace") in *Vayikra* 20:17.

Ultimately, the discrepancy between these attributes and the patriarch's biblical portrayal is best resolved by recognizing that the original kabbalistic sources did not claim that these virtues actually describe our forefathers.

Indeed, virtues like Kindness, Strength, and Truth cannot possibly be embodied completely by any mortal being. It is fairly bold of later sources to construe Avraham as the model of kindness, Yitzhak as the champion of strength, or Yaakov as the embodiment of truth, when only God is capable of such uncorrupted virtue. As the Psalmist (117:2) tells us—weaving together all three attributes into testament of praise: "For God's *kindness* has over*power*ed us, and *true* is the Lord forever—Hallelujah!"

Response to Ben Greenfield on the Forefathers' Attributes

Letters To The Editors

Editor's Note: This piece was originally published in December 2022.

Last week, the Lehrhaus published "*Hesed, Gevurah*, and *Emet*: Do These Attributes Actually Describe our Forefathers?" by Ben Greenfield. This essay "argues that the *Zohar Hadash* understood these three attributes not as virtues which our forefathers mastered but as qualities with which they each wrestled" and concludes that "it is reasonable to understand this kabbalistic thread as stating that the forefathers repeatedly confront their respective attribute." Review of other medieval material, including the parallel passage in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, critically undermines this interpretation. I present three thirteenth-century sources to the editor for comparison:

- Shlomo ibn Adret (*Responsa* 5:115) writes that "[Of] these three blessings, the first corresponds to Abraham, who was a man of *hesed* … the second corresponds to Isaac, a man of *pahad*, but he was a man of *gevurah* … and the third corresponds to Jacob, who was a man of *emet*."
- *Sefer ha-Bahir* 135: "According to the virtue which each practiced, its corresponding [force] was given to him. Abraham did acts of kindness … and the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him the attribute of kindness…"
- Asher ben David of Posquieres (*Perush 13 Middot*): "And in the first blessing we recall 'the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob'; these correspond to the three virtues which the patriarchs practiced, and from which they never departed in all their days, and each of the patriarchs wielded one of these virtues in its entirety: 'Abraham' corresponds to the virtue of *hesed* … this is as it says, '*titen emet l'yaakov, hesed l'avraham*' … and 'Isaac' corresponds to *gevurah*…"

It would likely be impossible to establish these sources' exact diachronic sequence, but it suffices to say that they are at least contemporary with the Zoharic texts. The slightly vaguer formulation

found in the *Zohar Hadash* (which still, behind Greenfield's ellipsis: "[Abraham] grasped [*hesed*], never released it, and dealt well with others; these acts brought him to [the lens of *hesed*]") is simply not representative of "this kabbalistic thread" at its earliest stage. Greenfield may feel that "Kindness, Strength, and Truth cannot possibly be embodied completely by any mortal being" but Asher ben David disagreed, and it can hardly be "fairly bold of later sources to construe Avraham as the model of kindness, Yitzhak as the champion of strength, or Yaakov as the embodiment of truth" when those sources follow exactly in the footsteps of tradition.

Gershon Klapper

Navigating Uncertainty: Revisiting Blessings and Deceit in Parashat Toledot

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Editor's Note: This piece was originally published in November 2023.

Biblical commentators have grappled with trying to understand the motivations behind Isaac and Rebecca's actions regarding the blessings of their sons.[1] There are numerous questions to consider: Did Isaac genuinely intend to bestow the patriarchal blessings upon the wayward Esau? Was he deceived into believing that his older son was worthy of carrying on the blessings of Abraham? Alternatively, did Isaac fully recognize Esau's true character but nevertheless chose to bless him in the hope that such blessings might bring him back to the ways of his ancestors? Did Rebecca believe that Isaac was unaware of Esau's character? Did she have prophetic knowledge about the future disposition of her sons that she kept from her husband for some undisclosed reason? Alternatively, did Rebecca misunderstand Isaac's intention, unaware that her husband was fully aware of Esau's true nature?

The questions mentioned above, as well as many others, have prompted traditional exegetes to propose a range of different interpretations of the story of Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau. In this essay, we will suggest a fresh perspective on the deceit present in *Parashat Toledot*, based on an analysis of perhaps lesser-known traditional sources.

Before presenting our proposed reading, we will first examine three diverse exegetical approaches to the story. While these approaches do not exhaust the entirety of exegesis on the story of the blessings in *Parashat Toledot*, most traditional sources are based on variations of the three summarized prototypes. Then, we will address a number of assumptions typically made about the

[1] I am grateful to Judi Becker for reviewing multiple earlier iterations of this essay, to Rabbi Nati Helfgot for offering significant critiques of its central thesis, and to the editorial staff of Lehrhaus for their helpful guidance. Special thanks are owed to my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Berger, whose generous input and unwavering assistance were integral to the development of this piece.

story. Lastly, we will propose a new way of reading the story to answer some of the questions above.

I. Traditional Approaches

Approach 1: Isaac Entirely Misreads His Sons

According to Ramban's interpretation, Isaac, the blind, has been duped into believing that Esau is righteous. When Isaac sends Esau to "go out in the field to trap me some game, and bring it to me to eat; my soul will then bless you," Ramban writes, 'It was Isaac's intent to bless Esau that he merit the blessing of Abraham to inherit the land and to become the one with whom God would make the covenant' (27:4).[2] Ramban further suggests that 'Esau was not wicked in his father's eyes' and, although Esau refrained from using the name of Heaven upon entering his father's tent, this was 'considered (in Isaac's eyes) a manifestation of (Esau's) fear of Heaven' (27:21). Rebecca, on the other hand, 'knew of the righteousness of the younger (Jacob) and the wickedness of the elder (Esau) and went to all this trouble to transfer the blessing and the honor from the elder to the younger' (27:15). Furthermore, Ramban posits that Rebecca received the prophecy of 'the older one will serve the younger' (27:4), unbeknownst to Isaac, which justified, if not outright obligated, the subterfuge she orchestrated to undermine Isaac's misinformed intention to bless Esau.

Approach 2: Rebecca Misreads Isaac

According to Radak (27:4-5), Isaac recognized that Esau was not an honest and good person and therefore believed that he needed a blessing. In contrast, Jacob needed no blessing from Isaac, as the blessings of Abraham (progeny and land) were to be bestowed upon him by God Himself, without the need for human intervention. It was Rebecca who misread Isaac's intention and misunderstood how divine blessings were transmitted. She was unaware that Jacob would be blessed even if Isaac did not confer a blessing upon him, and believed that Isaac's blessing Esau would leave Jacob without a blessing. However, as Radak notes, Isaac had no intention of denying Jacob the blessings he deserved by transferring them to Esau. It was based on this misunderstanding that Rebecca advised Jacob to undertake his ruse in order to receive Isaac's blessing.

Approach 3: Isaac and Rebecca Agree about Jacob but Disagree about Esau

According to Netziv (25:28), both Isaac and Rebecca were aware of a long-standing tradition, initially revealed to Abraham and later recorded in the Talmud (*Nedarim* 31a), that only a portion of Isaac's progeny would carry the blessings of Abraham. "From Isaac will emerge your progeny" (21:12) was understood to mean 'from a portion, but not from all, of Isaac's children.'

[2] All references to chapter and verse are from the Book of Genesis unless noted otherwise.

Netziv further posits that both Isaac and Rebecca knew that it was Jacob who would be the forefather of the nascent Jewish nation and that they were aware of Esau's problematic behavior. Isaac even refused to eat from meals prepared by Esau's wives, suspecting that they would feed him prohibited foods (27:7). However, despite their shared assessment of their two sons, they disagreed on Esau's appropriate role.

Isaac believed it was necessary and appropriate to confer upon Esau "the dew of the heaven and the fat of the earth" (27:28), which Netziv understands to represent blessings of the physical world. Jacob, however, would receive the spiritual blessing of Abraham (27:35). On the other hand, Rebecca understood that Esau was unfit for any blessing, and that therefore both the physical and spiritual blessings should be given to Jacob under all circumstances.

According to Netziv (24:65), Rebecca was unable to openly communicate with her husband due to a longstanding lack of communication between the couple. This lack of communication led Rebecca to devise a plan, in the form of a ruse, to ensure that Jacob alone would receive Isaac's blessing. The absence of effective communication between Rebecca and her husband left her with no other choice but to resort to this ploy in order to achieve her desired outcome.

Some Difficulties

All of the above commentaries must grapple, to varying degrees, with a number of substantive textual and contextual difficulties.

First, it is difficult to reconcile the idea that Isaac, who clearly strongly opposed Esau's marriage to Hittite women, ("*Va-tihyena morat ru'ah le-Yitzhak u-leRivkah*, 26:35), would have found it acceptable to bless Esau in any way. Given Abraham's efforts to find a suitable wife for Isaac, it seems unlikely that Isaac would have seen his Hittite daughters-in-law as potential leaders of a Godly nation. Therefore, it seems improbable that Isaac would have even considered blessing Esau under these circumstances. Furthermore, if Esau's choice of wives did not disqualify him from receiving his father's blessings, why is there mention, immediately preceding the blessings, of Isaac's extreme dislike for them? Even if, as Radak suggests, Isaac believed that Esau needed to be blessed to counter his rebellious behavior, the mention of Isaac's discontent with Esau's chosen partners just before the blessings is problematic. Is the text implying that as a corrective to Esau's behavior, Isaac intended on blessing his wayward sons' progeny, thereby conferring matriarchal status on Basmat and Yehudit? It is difficult to believe that Isaac saw these Hittite daughters-in-law, who brought him such grief, as the potential mother figures to the descendants of Abraham.

Moreover, the traditional interpretation that Isaac completely misread Esau for more than forty years suggests that he was disconnected from worldly affairs and unable to discern the deserving from the undeserving. However, this reading seems problematic, given Isaac's exceptional involvement in this-worldly endeavors.Isaac's active engagement in various activities, as described in nearly an entire chapter (26:12-33),

such as digging wells, planting crops, and forming treaties with kings, challenges the notion of him being disconnected from the world. These actions indicate that Isaac was not unaware of his surroundings. Furthermore, the Bible explicitly notes Isaac's awareness of Esau's inappropriate marriages, which casts doubt on the idea that Isaac was unaware of Esau's true nature.

The second issue concerns the legal and spiritual significance of the blessing. Is a blessing binding if bequeathed in error, assuming that it was conferred upon the unintended party? If human intention is a necessary component for a blessing to have effect, then it stands to reason that the intended recipient should be clearly known. So, we must consider how Jacob's deception could have resulted in a valid blessing being given to him, given Isaac's belief that he was bestowing it upon Esau.

The nature of the blessing is also worth considering. According to those who suggest that Isaac intended to bestow the physical blessings on Esau, the formulation of the blessing is such that nothing of the physical world would be left for Jacob. Indeed, as Isaac himself states, the one who received the first blessing “is a Lord over his brother” and to him “his other brothers are slaves, and he will control the produce of the land” (27:37). According to this approach, the Bible (or at least Isaac) bifurcates between the physical and the spiritual, implying that the blessings of this world are not a part and parcel of the covenant between Abraham and God. However, this interpretation seems inconsistent with the way both Abraham and Isaac were themselves blessed.

Both were blessed with an abundance of cattle, gold, silver, and servants, as shown in various biblical passages (13:2, 24:35, 26:14). These material blessings were attributed to God and seem to be interwoven with the promises of land and progeny. Therefore, the idea that the physical blessings are entirely separated from the covenant between Abraham and God does not appear to align with the blessings bestowed upon Abraham and Isaac themselves.

Third, Isaac's request for Esau to use a quiver and bow to "trap some game" suggests a hunt for wild animals. However, it seems that the taste of the intended wild game was indistinguishable from Jacob's lamb. If not, Isaac would have detected the deception immediately. So, why send Esau on a seemingly unnecessary, time-consuming hunting expedition when he could have taken lambs, as Jacob did (Genesis 27:3, 9)?

It is noteworthy that there seems to be no animosity between Isaac and Jacob following the deception. One might expect Isaac to feel betrayed or at least uncomfortable with the fact that his son exploited his blindness to manipulate the blessings. This question is compounded for the exegetes who understand that Isaac viewed the blessing as a necessary means of saving Esau from his wayward ways. The theft of the blessings undermined Isaac's attempt to save his son and condemned Esau to a life bereft of blessing.

Indeed, there appears to be no reason to presume that the ruse perpetrated by Jacob changed Isaac's perception of Esau's nature or his concern for Esau's future well-being. Isaac's apparent equanimity towards Jacob regarding the ruse is distinctly unusual, as is the fact that he makes no mention of the trickery and high drama when he shortly afterwards meets with Rebecca and then Jacob.

Finally, the fact that Isaac sent Jacob to Padan Aram to find a wife raises some questions. If we assume that Isaac was unaware of Esau's true nature and of his intention to kill Jacob, it seems strange that he would send Jacob away. He could have found a wife for him in the same way that Abraham had done for Isaac himself. Why was it necessary for Jacob to go to a distant land when he could have simply stayed in the tent and waited for a suitable wife to be brought to him? And if, for some reason, he must travel himself, should he not, according to Isaac's perception, be accompanied by servants with camels laden with dowry jewels in order to woo his prospective wife? Why does Jacob in fact travel alone, sleeping under the stars with a stone for a pillow and arriving in Haran penniless, with only his walking stick for company? Jacob's solitary sojourn appears in keeping with the prophet's description: “And Jacob fled to the country of Aram" (Hosea 12:13).

This biblical story, then, as explicated by traditional exegetes, leaves us pondering its assumptions and message.

II. The Assumptions

The noted textual, contextual, and conceptual challenges invite an alternative interpretation to the traditional exegesis and prompt an exploration of a different perspective that might illuminate fresh insights into its underlying messages and themes. First, however, we will explore a number of widely held assumptions about this story, followed by presentations of alternate interpretations offered by traditional exegetes.

Assumption 1: Rebecca Receives Divine Communication that Jacob is the Chosen Son

When pregnant, Rebecca turns to God for understanding after perceiving a struggle within her womb. In response, God tells her, "Two nations are in your womb - *ve-rav ya’avod tza’ir.*" However, the preposition "*et*," which is necessary to introduce the direct object in the verse, is absent. As noted by Radak and Netziv (25:23), this leaves the verse open to two possible, opposite, interpretations. The preposition "*et*" could be correctly placed in the middle of the verse, resulting in "*ve-rav ya’avod **et** hatza’ir*," meaning "the elder will serve the younger." Alternatively, "*et*" could be correctly inserted at the beginning of the verse, resulting in "*ve-**et** ha-rav ya’avod ha-tza’ir*," meaning "the older shall be served by the younger." Hence, instead of an unequivocal message about her sons' ascendancy, Rebecca receives a deliberately ambiguous prophecy, informing her of the potential dominance of either

Jacob or Esau.

Assumption 2: Hairiness and Smooth Skin Refer Exclusively to Physical Attributes

The twins, Esau and Jacob, are not identical. Esau has a ruddy complexion and is hairy, whereas Jacob is smooth-skinned. Hizkuni (25:25) views Esau's ruddy, hairy features as more than just physical attributes; they symbolize masculinity, reflecting power and ambition. It appears that these qualities were not readily discernible in the smooth-skinned Jacob.

Assumption 3: The One Who Sits in the Tent is the Preferred Patriarchal Archetype

Esau and Jacob have very different personalities. Esau is a skilled hunter and a man of action who is comfortable in the outdoors, while Jacob is a quiet man who spends most of his time in the tents. Jacob's introspective qualities are those necessary to cultivate a religiously sensitive persona, whereas Esau's traits are those needed to confront a hostile outside world. Unlike his grandsons, Abraham was a multifaceted individual, with qualities of both a tent dweller, who practiced acts of kindness and hospitality (18:1-3), as well as a warrior who used cunning tactics to defeat the armies of powerful kings (14:15). If only one of the brothers must be chosen to carry on the Abrahamic heritage, it is not clear which one would be the most appropriate. Both the characteristics of a tent dweller and a warrior are necessary to lead the nation of Abraham's children, yet it seems that each of the brothers holds only a part of the attributes needed for the task.

Assumption 4: Isaac is Misled in His Preference for Esau

Isaac and Rebecca each have their favored son. Isaac is attracted to Esau *"ki tzayid be-fiv,"* "because he had a taste for game" (25:28). Rashi, citing Midrash Rabbah, understands this phrase to mean that Esau, a slick talker, ensnared and misled his father into believing he was righteous, thereby gaining his favor. Abravanel (25:24), however, views Isaac's preference for Esau in a positive light; Isaac was impressed with the daring exploits of the hunt that Esau would regularly share with him. Esau's cunning and bravery, qualities Isaac did not find in Jacob, led to his seeing his older son as his likely heir.

Assumption 5: The Sale of the Birthright was a Private Affair between the Brothers

Ibn Ezra (25:31-32) understands that the birthright entails preference in the future financial inheritance. Esau, returning from the field, questions whether the dangers of the hunt will shorten his life, *"hine anokhi holekh lamut"*(25:32), and prevent him from benefiting from the assets his father will eventually leave him. Esau decides to sell the *bekhorah* in order to secure his current financial situation. Radak and Seforno (25:33) understand that the actual purchase price is an undisclosed sum of money and that the brothers seal the deal by sharing a meal of bread and lentil soup.

Hizkuni (25:34) suggests that Esau openly boasts of securing the agreement, and interprets *"va-yivez"* in the phrase "*va-yivez Eisav et ha-bekhorah*," "thus did Esau spurn the birthright"

(25:34) as a verb, signifying active disdain through public derision. This led to Esau being called Edom, stemming from the widely known lentil soup deal. Hizkuni (27:2) contends that Isaac himself had knowledge of this public action.

Ramban (25:34) emphasizes that Esau's decision to prioritize immediate benefits over his future inheritance displayed a foolish shortsightedness. Those who heard him boast of his sale may well have questioned his judgment and foresight.

Assumption 6: Isaac's Diminished Vision is Due to Old Age

Isaac is blind in his old age. Yet, his loss of vision is not ascribed to his advanced age, as the verse simply states that he was both old and blind: "*Va-yehi ki zakein Yitzhak va-tikhhena einav mei-re'ot*" — when Isaac was old, he was also blind (27:1). Rashi, apparently sensitive to the scriptural ambiguity as to the cause of Isaacs's loss of sight, ascribes it to the immediately preceding verse, "And the wives of Esau were a cause of great bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca" (26:35). Isaac's eyes are harmed as he painfully gazes upon the type of home Esau has established. The Midrash (Tanhuma 8), amplifying this bitter reality, states, "The eyes of Isaac were injured from the acrid smoke arising from the idolatrous sacrifices of his daughters-in-law."

Assumption 7: Rebecca Hears Isaac Intending to Bless Esau Serendipitously

In describing Rebecca's overhearing Isaac informing Esau of the blessing, the verse reads, "*Ve-Rivkah shoma'at, be-dabeir Yithak el Eisav beno,"* "Rebecca had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau" (27:5). The term "*shoma'at*" might suggest a chance occurrence in which Rebecca coincidentally learned of Isaac's intentions. We find, however, a similar phrasing concerning Sarah overhearing the angelic announcement of her conceiving a son:*"ve-Sarah shoma'at petah ha-ohel*," "And Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent" (18:10). In this case, Sarah intentionally listens to the conversation. Moreover, the speakers aim for her to hear, evident in their question *"ayei Sarah isthekha*," "where is Sarah your wife," and Abraham's response, *"hinei ba-ohel*," "she is in the tent." This then indicates that '*shoma'at*' is consistent with a deliberate hearing, including the possibility that the speaker intended for the words to be heard.

Assumption 8: Isaac is Astonished when Esau Arrives

Radak (27:23-24) explains that when Jacob arrives disguised as Esau, Isaac becomes uncertain as to which of his sons stands before him. Radak (27:33) interprets that, despite Isaac's initial intention to bless Esau, he accepts the possibility that he may be blessing his younger son. Isaac is satisfied knowing that the blessing is being conferred upon one of his sons. When Esau returns from the hunt, Isaac confirms that he has, indeed, blessed Jacob. However, Isaac does not want to give Esau the misimpression that he had planned, from the start, to bless Jacob. Thus, he violently trembles and asks, "Who, then, is the one who trapped game and just served [it] to me?" While Esau perceives Isaac's response as representing overwhelming astonishment, Radak (27:33)

asserts that Isaac's trembling is contrived and that his surprise is feigned.

Assumption 9: Esau Plans on Waiting Until His Father Dies to Exact His Revenge

Upon learning that his blessing has been taken by his brother Jacob, Esau plots to kill him. R. Joseph Bekhor Shor (27:41) understands that the danger to Jacob is imminent, as Esau intends on exacting his revenge immediately. When Esau says, "*yikrevu yemei eivel avi, ve-ahargah et Ya'akov ahi*," it is to be understood, "my father will soon be in mourning for my brother Jacob whom I will murder shortly."

Assumption 10: The Two Blessings Conferred upon Jacob are Distinct

Before Jacob sets off for Aram, Isaac bestows a blessing upon him. According to Netziv (25:28), this blessing differs from the one Jacob received while disguised as Esau. Netziv believes that the blessings intended for Esau were of a physical nature, while the spiritual blessing of Abraham was always intended for Jacob.

On the other hand, Ramban (27:39), who understands that Isaac had initially intended to confer upon Esau the blessings of Abraham, maintains that the physical blessing of "the fat of the earth, plentiful grain, and wine" (27:28) contains within it the spiritual element as well. He views the latter blessing of "inheriting the land which God gave to Abraham" (Genesis 28:4) as referring to a land blessed with bountiful yield. According to Ramban, the physical and spiritual aspects of the blessings of Abraham are intertwined and inseparable.

Assumption 11: Rebecca Must Deceptively Convince Isaac to Send Jacob to Haran

Rashbam (27:46) proposes that Isaac remains unaware of Esau's murderous intentions towards Jacob. Meanwhile, Rebecca, fully aware of the danger posed to their younger son, finds herself unable or unwilling to disclose Esau's sinister plot to Isaac. Consequently, she resorts to a ruse, manipulating Isaac into sending Jacob away under the pretense of finding a suitable wife from outside the Hittite community. The primary motivation behind this scheme is to ensure Jacob's safety, protecting him from Esau's malevolent designs.

Netziv (24:65) expands upon Rashbam's notion of Isaac and Rebecca's inability to communicate, arguing that this deficiency dates back to their initial encounter and pervades their entire lives. In this narrative framework, Rebecca is unable to rectify Isaac's flawed perception of Esau's character, leading her to resort to subterfuge in order to trick Isaac into blessing Jacob and sending him to Haran.

However, Rashbam and Netziv's perspective on the lack of communication between Isaac and Rebecca is not universally accepted among commentators. Hizkuni (27:46), for example, interprets Rebecca's conversation with Isaac differently. When Rebecca tells Isaac that she would have no reason to continue living should

Jacob marry a Hittite woman like Esau's wives, she first says, "should he marry Hittite women such as these," and then adds the phrase "from the women of the land." This latter phrase appears superfluous since it is already known that the Hittites are local women. As such, Hizkuni believes that Rebecca is sharing a twofold concern with Isaac. First, like Isaac, she is greatly grieved by Esau's wives and does not want Jacob to similarly marry a Hittite woman. Isaac is already well aware of this shared sentiment, as both he and Rebecca are described as being greatly grieved by Esau's wives: *"Va-tihyena morat ru'ah, le-Yitzhak u-leRivkah* (26:35). Second, even if there are eligible local ("women of the land") brides, Jacob may seek protection from his brother by marrying the daughter of a local strongman, who, in Rebecca's estimation, would be unable to shield Jacob effectively from Esau's deadly fury.

Similarly, Radak (27:46) agrees with Hizkuni's interpretation and believes that Rebecca is conveying a double message to Isaac: "You must command Jacob to flee to my brother Laban's house so that he will be saved from his brother's sword *and* from marrying Hittite women."

According to Hizkuni and Radak, Rebecca does inform Isaac of Esau's malevolent plans. Isaac concurs with her assessment, agreeing that Jacob must flee to Haran, where he can find an appropriate wife and be at a safe distance from the dangers of his wrathful brother.

In the sole recorded conversation between Rebecca and Isaac in the Bible, as interpreted by Hizkuni and Radak, there are no indications of communication difficulties between the couple. Rebecca openly voices her concerns about Esau and the threat he poses to Jacob, implying a lack of hesitation in conversing with her husband. Consequently, challenges in communication don't seem to characterize their relationship, and thus need not serve as an explanation for the dynamics that influenced their actions and decisions in earlier life events.

III. A New Reading

Thus far, this essay delved into the questions and quandaries that occupied traditional exegetes, who offered varied perspectives and solutions, many of which may be seen as responses to many popular beliefs about the narrative. The text's inherent ambiguity is evident in the multitude of interpretations it has sparked. Nevertheless, as demonstrated, these approaches do not escape substantial challenges, prompting a call for a fresh perspective.

By drawing on aspects of the exegetical alternatives previously outlined, we propose a novel reading of the blessings narrative in *Parashat Toledot*. This suggested reading departs from conventional views on the discussed chapters, possibly challenging long-held assumptions about the biblical tale. However, it is important to recognize that our proposal builds upon traditional exegetes, particularly Rakak and Hizkuni, who assume an unobstructed communication between Rebecca and Isaac. According to their interpretations, the sole recorded conversation between the couple is

marked by candid and open dialogue. This perspective invites a reevaluation of their life events without resorting to an interpretation that presupposes a lack of communication between them.

In our proposed reading, the textual and contextual difficulties mentioned earlier find resolution, and the significant role of human initiative in fulfilling the divine plans is highlighted. By exploring the potential thinking of Isaac and Rebecca, we gain a clearer picture of the meaning and message of this story.

Isaac and Rebecca pray for a child together and their prayers are answered when Rebecca conceives. Rebecca receives a divine message that she is expecting twins and that these twin brothers will be in perpetual conflict. The relationship of these sons will be defined by a zero-sum game in which the success of one will be at the expense of the other. Rather than being partners in the world they will inhabit, they will be in an indefinite struggle, with one brother subservient to the other. However, as noted by both Radak and Netziv, the divine message was ambiguous as to which brother would be the patriarch of the nation of Abraham — Would the elder serve the younger (*ve-rav ya'avod et ha-tza'ir*), or the younger serve the elder (*ve-et ha-rav ya'avod ha-tza'ir*)? As such, neither Rebecca nor Isaac is certain as to which of the twins is-to be the chosen son. The options for interpretation of this divine message were meant to convey that either option was conceivably possible and that human intervention would determine which of these options would be realized. Rather than divulging the future, God left Isaac and Rebecca with the challenge of navigating through the uncertainty of who would be the future progenitor of the chosen people.

As the boys grew, Isaac admired the vigor, daring, and cunning of his older son, and thought he was the likely candidate for leadership, while Rebecca believed the qualities of leadership were more appropriately found in the mild-mannered and spiritually sensitive younger son, Jacob.

Isaac may have begun to question Esau's suitability for leadership when, as per Hizkuni, he learned of Esau's public renunciation of his birthright for short-term gain. Prudence and sound judgment are prerequisites for effective leadership, and Esau's shortsighted behavior lacked both. Yet, it was upon Esau's choice of the women he married that Isaac became certain of Esau's disqualification. Isaac remembered the efforts his own father had put into finding him an appropriate spouse and the importance of marrying the right partner, and he saw that Esau had chosen wholly inappropriate wives who brought great grief to him and Rebecca (26:35). It was self-evident that Esau could not be the chosen son to lead the children of Abraham, especially with Yehudit and Basmat, the Canaanite Hittites, as potential matriarchs. Isaac understood all too well that Esau could never be the recipient of a blessing which would subordinate his brother Jacob.

Despite this, Isaac had doubts about Jacob's ability to lead the Jewish people. The children of Abraham were destined to live in a hostile, foreign land where they would be enslaved and oppressed (14:13), and their leaders would need to possess a fighting and indefatigable spirit, as well as cunning and guile, to survive the vicissitudes of a long exile. While Isaac knew of Jacob's cleverness in purchasing the birthright, he remained doubtful as to whether the gentle tent dweller possessed the daring and guile necessary for leadership. Rebecca may have shared these concerns.

Isaac and Rebecca, therefore, decide to put Jacob to the test by preparing a ruse that requires him to be manipulative, dishonest, and deceitful. It involves Jacob overcoming his fear of being exposed to the wrath of his father and having to face the inevitable deadly fury of his brother. The test entails Jacob (thinking he is) tricking his blind father into believing he is Esau. To execute this, Esau is sent on a prolonged hunting expedition. When the moment arrives, as Isaac sends Esau off to hunt, Rebecca would pressure and embolden Jacob to take the initiative and steal what he believes to be Esau's blessing. Isaac would grill Jacob with questions such as “who are you?”; “how did you find prey so quickly?”; “let me touch you; are you really Esau?”; “but are you really my son Esau?”; “the voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau”; “come closer and kiss me” — to all of which Jacob must lie and say, “I am Esau your first born” and “I am [truly Esau, your son],” all the while outstretching his camouflaged arms to his father and dreadfully fearful that Esau will suddenly appear with his own prepared meal.

Isaac had always known the gentle side of his younger son, and he had therefore suspected until now that Jacob lacked the worldly skills that he so admired in Esau. The ruse, designed by Isaac and Rebecca to prove Isaac wrong, did just that. Jacob, exhibiting cunning, courage, and deceit during his test, exposes Isaac to a side of Jacob that he had not previously witnessed. He learns that the *yosheiv ohalim*, the tent dweller, possesses the resourcefulness and wiles of the *tzad tzayid*, the hunter. According to this reading, the verse“*Ve-lo hikiro, ki hayu yadav kiydei Eisav ahiv se’irot*” (27:23) is to be understood as “The one who stood before him was not the Jacob he had previously recognized, in that this son exhibited the hairy masculinity, cunning, and resourcefulness of his hunter brother, Esau.”[3] This was exactly what Isaac had sought to discover through the test, a Jacob

[3] Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, *Chapters of The Fathers* (Heb., Tevunot Press, 2002), 152, suggests a similar reading of the words *ve-lo hikoro*. According to R. Bin-Nun, Isaac, believing that the older son stands before him, is greatly pleased to discover that this person possesses both the hands of Esau and the voice of Jacob. The phrase “*ve-lo hikiro*” is to be understood as this not being the son (Esau) he had previously known. The Esau he knew before was a man of cunning resourcefulness but who lacked the gentle refinement of Jacob.

In our suggested reading, akin to R. Bin-Nun's interpretation, we understand the verse “*ve-lo hikiro*" to mean thatthis was not the son (Jacob) he had previously known. Until this point, Isaac had been unaware that Jacob, the gentle tent dweller, also possessed the qualities of his brother, the manly hunter of the field.

possessing the attributes of both the soft-spoken tent dweller and the cunning wiles of the powerful, rugged hunter of the fields (the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau, 27:22). Isaac was now prepared to bless Jacob: *va-yevarekheihu* (27:23).

Isaac's blessing takes hold and is legally binding, as he knows exactly whom he is blessing. Isaac learns that his blessings have received divine approval when he senses the fragrance of godliness on Jacob: BBehold, my son's fragrance is like the scent of a field blessed by God" (27:27).

Isaac, now convinced beyond doubt that his younger son has the qualities of a patriarch, must find a way to deny that he intentionally deceived Esau. As noted by Radak, he feigns trembling, pretends to be surprised, and claims that he himself was misled, saying "Who, then, is the one who trapped game and just served [it] to me? I blessed him before you arrived with a blessing that will, per force, remain his" (27:33).

When explaining to Esau how the blessing was 'inadvertently' given to Jacob, Isaac uses a clever play on words: "*Ba ahikha be-mirmah, vayikah birkhatekha*" (27:35). To Esau, the meaning is a straightforward alibi; your brother took, through trickery, your blessing. To Isaac, it means something entirely different: your brother demonstrated guile and cunning and therefore received the blessing which I had thought, long ago, would be yours.

While Isaac's blindness may have provided him with a plausible excuse for unintentionally blessing his younger son, Jacob has no defense for what appears to Esau as premeditated theft. Esau's feared and expected violent desire for revenge becomes immediately apparent, and Jacob goes into hiding.

Isaac and Rebecca know that they have no choice but to instruct Jacob to leave the land of his birth and seek safety in the home of his uncle Laban. The circumstances do not allow for a replay of Abraham's sending a servant to obtain a wife for Jacob, nor do they allow for Jacob to be laden with jewels for his prospective wife. In accordance with the readings of Radak and Hizkuni, they jointly implore Jacob to run for his life.

Prior to Jacob's departure, Isaac reiterates the blessings he had already conferred upon him. In this reiteration, he specifically emphasizes the blessings connection to the land promised to Abraham, thereby reassuring Jacob that, despite his exile, he will eventually return to inherit the land of his forefathers.

In this final meeting of father and son, Isaac makes no mention of having been exploited by Jacob, as, on the contrary, it is Isaac, together with Rebecca, who has capitalized on his own disability in order to devise and execute his test of Jacob.

When sending Jacob off to a foreign land, Isaac and Rebecca were undoubtedly filled with

concern for his well-being. Divine justice would inevitably exact a toll for Jacob's participation in a deception that had inflicted bitter anguish upon his brother Esau. They could not have known, at the time, about Laban's switching of the daughters or about Jacob's own children tricking him into believing that Joseph had been killed. Nonetheless, they understood that, in accordance with the heavenly principle of 'measure for measure,' Jacob would have to pay a price for his involvement in the ruse they had prepared. Moreover, while they could not have foreseen the emergence of a grandson named Amalek from Esau's lineage, they undoubtedly recognized that the lasting impact of Esau's fury would leave a scar, generating implacable enmity between the descendants of these brothers for generations to come.[4]

Yet, Isaac and Rebecca had confidence that the qualities which Jacob had demonstrated in the ruse they had prepared for him would serve him and his progeny well. They now knew that he possessed the strength, resourcefulness, and determination that would allow him to thrive in his new surroundings, and the courage to overcome the challenges that awaited him. They were assured that they had properly navigated the uncertain waters of raising their sons, and believed that Jacob would eventually be able to return to the land of Abraham in order to fulfill the role he was now destined to play.

While Isaac and Rebecca assuredly wrestled with their intended scheme, being aware of the resultant painful consequences for their son Jacob, they nevertheless understood that the essence of authentic leadership frequently necessitates making sacrifices and enduring the ramifications of challenging circumstances and choices.[5]

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[4] *Midrash Lekah Tov* (*Pesikta Zutrata*, Exodus 17:8) links the perpetual animosity between the progeny of the brothers to Jacob's involvement in denying Esau his blessings: "What caused Amalek (Esau's grandson) to battle the Jewish people? It was to avenge the theft of his grandfather's blessing."

[5] After completing this essay, I discovered a previous work that shares a similar central thesis (see DJ Zucker "A Still Stranger Strategem: Revisiting Genesis 27," *Conservative Judaism* 56:2, (2004), 21-31. This essay differentiates itself from that earlier work in that it is grounded in and draws upon traditional exegesis, as well as in the fact that it addresses verses that may initially seem incompatible with the main argument, a task that the earlier work does not comprehensively undertake.