



---

## Toledot

Vol. 8, Issue 9 • 4 Kislev 5784 / November 17, 2023

---

CONTENTS: Goldberg (Page 1); Becker (Page 3)

*Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing articles that were previously scheduled. In this way, we hope to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.*

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at <https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

### **WITH PAIN AND WITH MIGHT: RESERVE DUTY ON THE NORTHERN FRONT**

*Gilad Goldberg is a writer for Makor Rishon.*

The following was translated by Mordechai Blau, republished with permission from [Makor Rishon](#)

In the morning at the synagogue, they had already given instructions on where to go in case of a siren. But we still didn't understand. Even when the kids went outside to look for shrapnel from Iron Dome interceptions, the rumors told of one casualty. We still didn't understand. When it came time to make *kiddush*, between the kugel and the herring, out of the corner of your eye, you could already see children in the synagogue holding onto their fathers' legs to prevent them from leaving, and bags of kool-aid and potato

chips took on a different flavor. But we still didn't understand. Later on, when we sat down for the festive meal, and there was no longer any alternative, the phone was turned on. I was called up.

I write to Pini from reserve duty, a friend from my company who lives in the neighboring community, a ten-minute drive. "Have you gone yet?" I ask him. Pini isn't one to hesitate—"Come, let's go." Uniforms are thrown into a backpack with hysteric panic as well as laundry detergent and boxers so I won't run out. A hug, a kiss. The first tear begins to well up, but there's no time. We're on our way.

After a long drive which felt like eternity, I get to Pini's house. Again children holding onto pant-

legs, again bags of kool-aid and potato chips, again a different flavor. “We’re picking Shoko up on the way,” he says, “They’ve already been at her parents’ house for a month. Tomorrow is his wife’s due date.” We drive. Pini, with a pistol on his knee, lifts it every time we pass by an unidentified vehicle. At the security checkpoint, throngs of Arab cars are stalled. He turns on his car’s siren and drives around them. From the left, from the right, in between, above. All the options are open; this is no time for rules. In Jerusalem, Shoko parts from his nine-month pregnant wife and the three of us keep going toward our destination: the brigade’s emergency storerooms in Havat Ha-Shomer Base.

A quiet ride with a churning stomach. The sunset of a Shabbat and Yom Tov that closes out the holiday period. The streets are empty; we’re zooming. All the cars around us on Highway 6 are also full of soldiers. Hard glances are exchanged among the passengers. Maybe also a little comfort. The automatic dialer of the system calling up reservists disturbs the silence. In order: first Shoko, then Pini, and I am last. Even before it finishes the sentence, we press 1. Of course, we’ve already reported for duty.

The entrance to the base is packed with cars with a line trailing back to somewhere off under the heavenly throne. We enter. We receive the equipment that has been waiting in the storerooms since the days when *makim* [squad commanders] were called *mem-kafim*. We think of the devoted soldier who organized all of our new equipment in the backpacks; she has probably already been discharged. New bandages, ammunition, and vests that have never

been worn go on soldiers who never imagined this day would come. I offer a “hey there” to the guys. Rumors and names start to trickle in. The channels already have videos of good-looking people who came to some party for a small getaway from the humdrum of daily life and are fleeing, running for their lives. Literally their lives. Unimaginable. Everything gets mixed up in some jumble of emotions without much order: frustration, anger, horror, confusion, preparedness. There’s also worry there, and who knows what else.

We’re going, we’re not going, to here or to there—in the end we spend the night next to the storerooms. In the morning they wake us and tell us that we’ve been assigned to be a provisional force up north in case other countries decide to join the party. After some running around and a couple of changes, we find ourselves in the new outpost: the shoreside playground in the heart of Nahariyah. Pure surrealism, young people walking on the beach at sunset, bearing guns, and they haven’t exactly come for a dip. Children come to play on the swings, and next to them there are rockets and ammunition. By now the IDF has brought us a lot of equipment but has barely taken care of food. Despite this, we have filled our bellies thanks to special civilians who come to us with full hands and big smiles, with cries of “good job, IDF.” Chabadniks with *tefillin* and canned drinks locate us prior to our arrival. If only the army had had the intelligence that they have.

There’s some time, so the thoughts begin to creep in. I’m actually in uniform. Again. “Reserve duty is like a shower,” one of the guys said during the last reserve stint, only a few months ago. “We don’t want to start, but once we’ve started we don’t

want to finish.” This time is more like toweling off after the shower. As-fast-as-possible-put-on-what-we-need-so-we-can-finish-this-thing. And, truthfully, everyone reported for duty. Two officers from the company who were [separately] supposed to get married during the coming week are now sweating with us here at the firing range, leaving behind waiting fiancés, waiting for what comes next. In the meantime, we do anything to make the time pass—some chatter about this and that, checking the equipment again and again. We look in every direction, going through briefing after briefing, but the tension remains. We get updates primarily from the channels and websites; the commanders don’t have much to say. The emotional rollercoaster doesn’t pause, and the transitions are sudden. Too sudden.

During one of the guard duty sessions in the middle of the night, I look up when those who were called down south were last seen [on WhatsApp]. Good friends, a neighbor from the community. My heart is torn in two. We’re just waiting, and they’re deep in the fighting there. Between the fragments of words and the little information they can share, I hear stories of great valor: fighting over who will be in front in the tank, preparing everything so that they can be there for all of us. God bless them, their dear hearts. “Watch over us and over yourself. Green heart,” I write to my younger brother who was last seen two hours ago, a message I never thought I’d write.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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

I didn’t believe I would ever be able to say this: Rabbi Sabato’s books were right. True, we haven’t yet reached the same scale, but on the whole not much has changed since then—the uniform is still olive green; the element of surprise still wreaked havoc on us. What has changed is that every conversation brings up the number for the psychological first-aid hotline, and the dashed expectation that this wouldn’t happen again, because we’ve already learned.

---

### **NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY: REVISITING BLESSINGS AND DECEIT IN PARASHAT TOLEDOT**

*Maier Becker is Medical Director of Endocrine Services, Maccabi Health Fund, Tel Aviv Region, Israel.*

**B**iblical commentators have grappled with trying to understand the motivations behind Isaac and Rebecca's actions regarding the blessings of their sons.<sup>1</sup> 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

are owed to my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Berger, whose generous input and unwavering assistance were integral to the development of this piece.

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 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).<sup>2</sup> 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

---

<sup>2</sup> All references to chapter and verse are from the Book of Genesis unless noted otherwise.

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.'

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 Isaac'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.”<sup>3</sup> This was exactly what Isaac had sought to discover through the test, a Jacob 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).

---

<sup>3</sup> 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 that this 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.

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: Behold, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

Managing Editor:  
**David Kollmar**

Editors:  
**David Fried**  
**Chesky Kopel**  
**Yosef Lindell**  
**Chaya Sara Oppenheim**  
**Tzvi Sinensky**  
**Miriam Zami**

Consulting Editors:  
**Miriam Krupka Berger**  
**Elli Fischer**  
**Miriam Gedwiser**  
**Chaim Saiman**  
**Jeffrey Saks**  
**Jacob J. Schacter**  
**Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld**  
**Shlomo Zuckier**

Please contact us at [editors@thelehrhaus.com](mailto:editors@thelehrhaus.com)

---

<sup>4</sup> *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."

<sup>5</sup> 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.