

A Complicated Family

The relationship between Jacob and Esau is a colourful saga within the family story that fills the book of Genesis. By this stage of the narrative, Abraham and Sarah have both died and the attention turns to the next generation: Isaac and his wife Rebekah. After a difficult pregnancy Rebekah, gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob, with Esau emerging from the womb ahead of his brother. When we meet them in adulthood, the tensions between the brothers are exacerbated by their strong-minded (manipulative?) mother and their relatively passive (weak?) father. From chapter 27 tensions build as Jacob and his mother conspire in a plan of deceit. By posing as Esau, Jacob tricks his elderly blind father into blessing him with the paternal blessing which would ordinarily go to the firstborn (Esau). When the trickery is revealed, all hell breaks loose. The episode closes with Jacob fleeing for his life before Esau's wrath.

If at first glance the family dynamic appears complex (dysfunctional!) the interpretative traditions of Judaism mine it for even deeper intricacies. For example, when we read the text carefully with the help of the Jewish sages we note that Jacob is blessed by his father not once but twice; the first time under the pretext of being Esau, and the second with his true identity in full view just before he flees his homeland.

1. Blessing intended for Esau: *"May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine..."* (See Gen.27:27-29).

2. Blessing for Jacob: *"May God Almighty bless you and make your fruitful... May he give to you the blessing of Abraham... so that you may take possession of the land..."* (See Gen.28:3-4).

The contrast between the blessings is striking. The first (meant for Esau) promises material prosperity. But it does not mention the divine promises made to Abraham, including election of a chosen people and the gift of a special land. These

are part of the second blessing, clearly meant for Jacob. It would appear that even if Esau *hadn't* been denied his blessing, he still would not have received the Abrahamic mission. The Torah seems to suggest that the promise given to Abraham is to pass through Jacob, not Esau; raising the question: is this what their parents understood all along?

Of course, the intentions of Rebekah are explicit. In her engineering of the sequence of events she boldly expresses her view that Jacob *must* be the one to carry the Abrahamic promise. But what about Isaac? Is he really as blind as he makes out? (Note the drawn-out sequence in 27:19-26 where he repeatedly questions his son's identity.) Does he, like Rebekah, understand Jacob to be the chosen one, but can't bring himself to admit it? Is it a case of going along with the charade, reluctantly giving a muted blessing, followed by the fuller blessing only when denial is no longer tenable?

Over centuries of Jewish biblical reflection we find the sages discussing Isaac's 'dim eyes.' One opinion is that his vision is impaired in a spiritual sense. Favouring his firstborn, and wanting to comply with the conventions of natural birthright, Isaac 'turns a blind eye' to the unexpected choices of God. According to Abravanel: *"His affection for Esau blinded him to his faults... His powers of judgment grew dim and he was not able to see reality."*¹ Do you agree?

Of course, you may be wondering why Esau is deemed so unsuitable. (A whole topic of discussion in itself.) And it is certainly relevant to the question of parental insight and divine intentions. What do you make of the family and spiritual dynamics in this Torah portion? Open your Bible and join the discussion! •

1. Abravanel: 15th c. Spanish-Jewish scholar. Quoted in Leibowitz, 275.

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (New York: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.

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