

We have before us one of the most exceptional *parshiot* in the entire Torah. The drama, the intrigue, and the passion are hardly exceeded by any other.

*Parsha Toldot* is for those reasons, however, extremely hard to navigate. *Parshiot*, like people, suffer from stereotypes. When you read a text year after year, a certain impression tends to concretize that is hard to dissolve. I'm going to do my best to help you take a fresh look at this *parsha*, and I'm going to make an argument. My argument is that Rebecca, not Isaac, was the one upon whom was bestowed the responsibility of deciding who would inherit the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. I will

explain why that is the case and why that recognition has not been easy to come by until now. I will argue, further, that without question Jacob was the correct choice to inherit that legacy, and I will demonstrate my case with several key points from the text. I will also seek to reveal some ambivalences that are present in the text, which make the narrative less straightforward than has been commonly thought.

The stereotypical way to view *Toldot* is through the lens of deception. Jacob deceived his father and stole the birthright from his brother Esau. Not only that, his mother convinced him to do this. I will problematize this view through several key verses.

This is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that this dynamic, in which Jacob is cast as a deceiver and a thief is part of a whole repertoire of Christian antisemitic thinking that transmogrified into modern antisemitic views of Jews. That Esau was considered the stand-in for Christianity by the Rabbis made this scenario apparently more fitting.

I would also add that the rabbis went out of their way to denigrate Esau over the centuries in ways that are not fair to Esau. While Esau should not have inherited his father and grandfather's legacy, that

does not make him the horror depictions of him present.

Much of the attention in *Toldot* is on the interaction between Jacob and his father Isaac. Jacob, of course, dons Esau's clothes and covers his bare skin with hair. He then approaches his father with the exact meal that he ordered Esau to prepare for him. Isaac expresses skepticism throughout the interaction between them.

“Yes, which of my sons are you?” he asks  
(27:18)

Further, “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?” (v. 21)

“Come closer that I may feel you, my son – whether you are really my son Esau or not” (v. 21).

At this point, Isaac says something quite revealing, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau” (v. 22). Yet he blesses him. Right after blessing him, Isaac is once again skeptical. “Are you really my son Esau?” (v. 24).

Four times Isaac expresses doubts about the identity of the son with whom he is speaking. How are we to understand this fixation?

No doubt, Jacob lied to his father. He explicitly says, “I am Esau” (v. 19). Later on, when asked if he is Esau, Jacob replies, “I am” (v. 24). That lie is

undeniable, and as Jacob's life demonstrates, he pays dearly for it. Nonetheless, we must remember the very beginning of the *parsha*. Somehow, those who obsess over Jacob's lying to Isaac forget that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob. Not only did he sell it to him, but he sold it to him for a bowl of soup! The Torah says plainly, "Thus did Esau spurn the birthright" (25:34). When we consider what Abraham and Isaac endured in order to establish their relationships with God, we can hardly imagine a person so impulsive as to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup.

The case is stronger still. The Torah teaches, “Rebekah conceived. But the children struggled in her womb...She went to inquire of the Lord, and the Lord answered her, “Two nations are in your womb...and the older shall serve the younger” (vv. 21-23).

God explicitly told Rebekah that Jacob would inherit the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. I would add that God communicated this to Rebekah before He communicated anything to Isaac at all. In short, by the time we arrive at Isaac’s deathbed scene, the issue is resolved. Rebekah has received word from God that Jacob will inherit the legacy of his father

and grandfather, and Jacob has purchased the birthright from Esau.

What then is the role of this scene? On the level of drama, it is basically unmatched. I think, however, that the scene reveals something about Isaac and his ambivalence. We don't know whether Rebekah communicated to Isaac that God had told her that Jacob would inherit his legacy. The repeated statements of skepticism are a curiosity. I'd like to hone in on one of Isaac's statements in the midst of his exchange with Jacob. He says, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22). At the beginning of that very passage, the

Torah states, “When Isaac was old, and his eyes were too dim to see...” (v. 1) informing the reader – or listener – that while Isaac’s eyesight was poor, his hearing was unimpaired. Isaac, I believe did not know whom to give the blessing to. He had received no instruction from God, as Abraham had regarding him and his brother Ishmael. All he had was the love that he held for Esau.

Aside from receiving no guidance from God, why else might Isaac have been ambivalent about to whom he should give the birthright? The last two verses before the deathbed scene state, “...Esau...took to wife Judith daughter of Beerli the

Hittite and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah” (vv.34-35). This is the first time in the *parsha* that Isaac and Rebekah are united in their sentiment.

I will conclude with two points. The first regards a word that Isaac uses in his conversation with Esau after he has given the blessing to Jacob.

Isaac says, “וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנֵי אֶחָיו בְּמֶרְמָה”

The word *מרמה* is familiar to us from the Aleinu prayer. There we state, *בְּגִבְהֵי מְרוֹמִים*

Which is translated as the “loftiest heights”

In the passage in the Torah, JPS translates מרמה as “guile,” which highlights the deception involved in the encounter between Isaac and Jacob. I think if we keep the meaning of מרומים in mind, we can understand how Jacob spoke differently. In short, he was speaking to the One on High even as he spoke directly to Isaac. Given that God had prophesized that he would receive the blessing, this seems appropriate.

The second point has to do with how Esau reacts to this event. The Torah states, “Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which

his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, ‘Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob’” (27:41). Given that Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob and knew he had sold it, this reaction seems to cement the justification for why Esau was not the proper inheritor of the legacy of Abraham and Isaac.

The last point I’d like to make is that a *parsha* like this is much easier to understand in an age of feminism. We can understand how a woman – in this case Rebekah – knew what must be done, but because of patriarchy, she was unable to bring the knowledge to bear on a situation. Isaac, though he

had no guidance from God, was not willing to relinquish the sentiment of favoritism that gripped him in his relationship with Esau. Simply because he was the man, and Rebekah was the woman, the decision was in his hands. Given those circumstances, Rebekah had no recourse save to arrange events so that they worked out according to how she understood God's will.

None of what I have shared is a justification for lying or deception, themes that will plague Jacob throughout his life, but they do bring some clarity and complexify, I hope, a narrative that is often viewed in a manner that is occasionally antisemitic

or vehemently anti-Esau to the point of hyperbole.

At the least, I hope I have provided a fresh look at a familiar narrative.