

With the birth of Jacob and Esau, we greet the last of the three patriarchs and his brother. The number of *parshiot* that feature Jacob are greater than the number that feature Isaac or Abraham. Jacob is clearly an extremely important character in the Book of Genesis. You may recall that our name, Israel, comes from Jacob who gained the name after wrestling with an angel before reentering the land of Canaan.

Throughout the millennia, our rabbis have commented on the Jacob narratives and sought to justify or explain Jacob's behavior. While we are certainly welcome to embrace those commentaries, we cannot help but formulate our own ideas about who Jacob is and whether his behavior is righteous or not.

The key moment, of course, that raises the problem of Jacob's character is when Jacob appears before his father Isaac in disguise in order to receive his father's blessing. This is undeniably an act of deception, and in fact, Jacob openly lies at one point. "Which of my sons are you?" Isaac asks, and Jacob replies, "I am Esau, your first-born" (27:19). Lies and deception – are these teachings of Judaism? How could they be? Rather our tradition affirms the importance of honesty and truth. How then can we make sense of this passage? I'd like to present a few aids for responding to this passage and its difficulties. My hope is that what I share won't rise to the level of apologetics. We are beyond that as a people. Perhaps during the Exile, especially when Esau was a stand-in for Christianity, we had to elevate Jacob and denigrate Esau through Midrash, but now that we have restored ourselves to a collective sovereign existence in the Land of Israel, we should be able to deal forthrightly with what is right before our eyes.

The first factor that has to be taken into account is the role of Rebecca. Jacob's act of deception is commanded by his mother, Rebecca. Honoring mother and father holds significant weight in our tradition. If we see Jacob's behavior as a way of honoring his mother, then what he does makes more sense. But perhaps then we have only shifted the burden. By exempting Jacob, we have placed the guilt upon Rebecca and compromised her character by pointing out that she instructs her son to deceive.

How can we get out of this conundrum? Some might not want to. Families are messy. Deception, or the withholding of truth, within a family is not that uncommon. Parents and children are not equals, and parents sometimes have to use innovative means for setting their children on the right path. I want to bring forward one important element in the narrative, however, that helps make Rebecca's demand of Jacob more understandable. Rebecca received a communication from God that Jacob would carry forward the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. "Two nations are in your womb," God told her. "One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (25:23). When she instructs her son to deceive his father, she is fulfilling a divine promise that Jacob will inherit his father's legacy. Like the previous solution, however, this one just shifts the difficulty one step back to God.

Note, however, that God does not tell Rebecca how to achieve the outcome He has promised. Would God have approved of Rebecca lying in order to fulfill a divine promise? One would think not.

Here is where I would engage in a little midrash, my own midrash that is. Imagine that Rebecca tried to communicate what God told her to Isaac, but Isaac did not believe her. Isaac lived within a patriarchal framework and may not have seen his wife as his equal. The fault then would lie with Isaac for not listening to his wife, who had received a divine promise. Does that justify lying?

We cannot escape this plain reading of the text. That Jacob deceived his father or his mother told him to, or she told him to because she had received a divine promise, which her husband ignored, we are thrown back on the same problem. None of this can justify lying.

Does the Torah appear to justify Jacob's behavior? On the contrary, the Torah is clear that Jacob lives a very hard life. He is exiled from his home for twenty years; he is deceived into marrying a woman he did not want to, he is exploited by his uncle; he is threatened by his brother with death; his daughter is raped; three of his sons disappear; he lives through a famine, and finally he himself is forced to go into exile in Egypt. Might all this misfortune suggest that the Torah does not approve of what he did to his father and brother?

The point can be made even more strongly. Consider chapter 36, in which every one of the forty three verses is dedicated to a genealogy of Esau. As it turns out, Esau has an enormous family and many, many descendants. From this, it appears that Esau is actually blessed. All this leaves one to wonder whether what Isaac bestowed upon Jacob in his blessing was actually for good.

The same question arises when we consider, as the Haftorah does, that Jacob and Esau are stand-ins for Judaism and Christianity in the medieval mind and among charedim today. Judaism prides itself on being the religion of the people that is covenanted with God. Yet, in the world today there are more than a billion Christians and about fifteen million Jews.

Jewish life has always been a puzzle. One would think that a people covenanted with the one God of the universe would enjoy seamless good fortune, but as we all know, Jewish life across the millennia has often been accompanied by tremendous pain. How could what we have lived through be what chosenness means?

To repudiate our chosenness for this reason or to repudiate Jacob for that matter is, however, no solution. We cannot abandon Jacob without abandoning ourselves. What we can do as modern people, however, is look squarely at the problems the text presents us with and not pretend that they are not there. The sorrow of Esau and the deception of Jacob are real. They cannot be commented away.

Ultimately, what this narrative teaches, I believe, is the difficulty of translating divine promises into lived realities, or in other words aligning Heaven with Earth. The two realms are inherently at odds. The uneasy relationship between the two is most clearly shown through the coordinated deception of Jacob and Rebecca of Isaac and Esau.

Yet, Jacob must remain our forefather, which is why I love Jacob. Although he made an error in judgment, he certainly lived through enough difficulties to have made penance for his mistake. Perhaps that is what Jacob teaches us more than anything. We should never be paralyzed by our

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mistakes. We must keep living our lives and trust that God will correct us for our misdeeds in due time.