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Towards an Understanding of Deception in the Bible:  
Gersonides and Abravanel  
on the  
Interplay of Vice and Virtue.

by Joseph W. Prass

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
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## Digest

It is one of the tasks of any culture to express and articulate certain ideals. Truthfulness is one such ideal in modern Western culture, while deception is its negative counterpart. However, one of the most important documents in that same culture is the Hebrew Bible, which both commends truthfulness and shows many of its heroes and potential role-models actually lying to and deceiving others in their circle.

My rabbinic thesis will address the question of how two important biblical commentators understand this seeming paradox. Specifically, the thesis will focus on two philosophically sophisticated and philosophically literate commentators : Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides) (1288-1344) and Isaac ben Judah Abravanel (1437-1508). These two individuals commented on the majority of the Bible yet their works have never been systematically translated into English.

The introductory chapter summarizes some of the main conclusions from rabbinic literature concerning the key biblical prohibitions against lying. Here, the discussion examines the Talmud and other sources of rabbinic literature to find those exceptions to the absolute rule against lying. While lying in judicial matters is strictly prohibited, in general, if a lie is for the sake of preserving peace or supporting the stability of society, it is acceptable in rabbinic literature. The specific conditions governing the permissibility of a lie are discussed in this chapter. In addition, this first chapter presents a brief history of the two commentators as

well as highlights some of the main features of their unique styles of commentary.

Chapters two through five are devoted to translation, analysis and discussion of the commentaries of Gersonides and Abravanel on four stories from the Bible. The stories that are examined tell of Jacob's deception of Isaac, Laban's deception of Jacob, Yael's deception of Sisera, and Delilah's deception of Samson. Each commentary will be discussed with a focus on those issues which pertain to the character and circumstances of the type of deception involved.

Chapter six will focus on contemporary views of deception and specifically on one of the most up to date and comprehensive works on the subject, by Sissela Bok, entitled Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. In addition to Ms. Bok's work, other contemporary studies of truthfulness and deception will be considered. Ms. Bok's basic premise is that most lying is unacceptable except in those cases of self defense and where a lie will not only do no harm but may actually support the fabric of society.

The final chapter of my thesis will reflect some personal observations and conclusions.



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I would like to thank Dr. Barry Kogan for all of his insights into this topic. I have learned a great deal about the difficulty of translating philosophers' works and am deeply grateful for all the support and encouragement, as well as countless hours of corrections, he has provided in this endeavor.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

As the core document of Judaism, the Bible influences all aspects of the religion. As such, the ethical standards exemplified in the Bible become the basic values on which moral guidelines of the religion depend. Yet, how will a contemptible act committed by a patriarch or matriarch serve as a model for future legislation and ethical archetype? For example, how is a parent supposed to turn to their child and explain why Abraham lied to his son Isaac concerning why they were truly going to Mount Moriah? Jews have been taught to look to the narrative sections of the Bible for moral and ethical insights on how to conduct their lives. However, the illustration is not always one to be followed. In a liberal context, a Jew may feel free to say that the Bible is depicting a path not to follow. But in the literal reading, in some cases, our ancestors were very moral lax individuals.

The case can be made that our role models in the Bible are, at times, all too human. While it would make the text appear unrealistic if the people described had no faults, it presents a unique problem when the exact situations are examined closely. For example, the Jews are descended from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet Jacob acquires the blessing not because of his birth status, merit or will of his father. Rather, he achieved his status as a patriarch by deceiving his nearly blind, aged father while he was disguised. Is this the type of role model Jews want to look to as a hero?

There are other examples in the Bible where deception is employed to achieve a goal such as when Abraham goes to Egypt and

allows Sarah to be taken to Pharaoh claiming she was merely his wife. Later, Isaac does the same thing, calling Rebecca his sister, yet this time the ruler refuses. The sons of Jacob lie shamelessly to their father about Joseph's fate, and Joseph in turn deceives them when they come to Egypt. Even King David, because of his desire for Bathsheba, concocts a ruse to have her husband eliminated. The stories in the Bible are not without their moral lapses.

If the heroes and heroines of Scripture do commit such ethically troubling acts, are there justifications for these actions? Judaism has had to contend with this dilemma for centuries and in some cases has found justification for less than perfectly honest behavior if the cause was justified.

This thesis will attempt to find insights from ancient, medieval, and contemporary sources on how to reconcile seemingly unethical behavior by our ancestors with the high status that tradition affords these individuals. Further, this thesis will examine the question whether deception is ever justified and try to respond to it, and in the end propose a resolution to this inquiry.

## **Overview of Rabbinic Literature**

The rabbis were confronted with certain basic statements in the Torah which clearly prohibited lying. Foremost among the Torah's prohibitions against lying are the following:

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

(Exodus 20:13)

"Keep far from a false matter." (Exodus 23:7)

"You shall not deal falsely nor lie to one another." (Leviticus 19:11)

The relationship between truth and deception is not clearly defined in these passages. Sissela Bok notes in her book that the subject of deception has received very little academic analysis.<sup>1</sup> Bok further notes that it is commonly perceived that, "The whole truth is out of reach ... but this has little to do with our choice about whether to lie or to speak honestly."<sup>2</sup> While Bok and her understanding of deception will be examined at length in the concluding chapter, this notion of the whole truth being out of reach is something which even the rabbis recognized. While the rabbinic sages may not have explicitly agreed that the truth is out of reach, more accurately, they said that the truth is not always appropriate. The biblical verses on lying are very general statements and leave wide room for interpretation based on application to various situation. It is not clear what exceptions, if any, there might be to these statements or whether observing them might conflict with other commandments. How these rules are to be observed in relation to actual life and important biblical narratives will be examined.

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<sup>1</sup> "Once again, the paucity of what I found was astonishing. The striking fact is that, though no moral choices are more common or more troubling than those which have to do with deception in its many guises, they have received extraordinarily little contemporary analysis. The major works of moral philosophy of this century, so illuminating in other respects, are silent on this subject. The index to the eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contains not one reference to lying or to deception, much less an entire article devoted to such questions ["trust", "truthfulness", and "veracity" are also absent]. Even if one looks back over the last few centuries, the little discussion which is to be found is brief and preemptory. And works in other disciplines - in psychology, for example, or in political science- most often approach problems of deception in a merely descriptive or strategic manner." Bok, Sissela Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> Bok, p. 4.

Louis Jacobs offers a starting point for the discussion of the rabbinic understand of truth and falsehood by defining the areas in which truth should be examined. He says, "In the vast Jewish literature in which the praises of truth are sung there are references to three kinds of truthfulness... : truthfulness to God, truthfulness to one's fellow, and truthfulness to oneself."<sup>3</sup> Having marked out these borders, we must then look for both specifications of how these norms should be followed and exceptions to the rule of truth. Within Jacobs' framework, most traditional Jewish teaching, including liturgy, halachic and aggadic material, allows for no conscious lapses in truthfulness to God. In terms of truthfulness to oneself, while this is certainly emphasized, it is not codified in legal material and thus is mainly allegorical.

While hesitant to make a complete break with the unequivocal statements of the Torah, the sages did find situations in which certain lies were permissible in interpersonal situations. Ari Zivotofsky<sup>4</sup> summarizes the mitigating factors that allowing for telling less than the absolute truth as follows:

1. Circumstance - Since it will be shown that it is sometimes permissible to lie, are there times when it is necessary to lie?
2. Context - he distinguishes between legal and non-legal matters. Lying may be an option in non-legal matter, yet it is totally prohibited in a judicial setting.
3. Result - the result of a lie may be either harmful, neutral or even beneficial.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, Louis, The Book of Jewish Values, Chappaqua, NY: Rossel Books, 1960, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Zivotofsky, Ari, "Perspectives on Truthfulness in the Jewish Tradition," Judaism, 42:3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 267-288.

4. Method - Lies may be told through the omission of facts, statements with double meanings, mental reservations, and exaggerations.
5. Motive - there are many reasons for telling a lie, including: protecting life, maintaining peace, gaining an advantage over an adversary.

All of the above factors need to be weighed in deciding whether to resort to a lie. Zivotofsky finds that traditional sources, such as the Talmud and later medieval law codes, actually endorse an approach of varying degrees of dishonesty based on the situation. First, in the case of saving a life it is well established that this necessity outweighs almost all other mitzvot including the command to tell the truth. A biblical precedent for this case can be seen in the example of Abraham lying about Sarah's status as his sister to save his own life, not for material reward.<sup>5</sup> It follows that since the Talmud allows killing in the name of self defense<sup>6</sup> that lying would be acceptable.

A second situation in which lying is permissible is one in which lying is done for the sake of preserving peace. The Talmud states, "One may modify a statement in the interests of peace."<sup>7</sup> "Peace" here is generally understood to mean for the sake of sholom bayit, peace within the household. The Talmud goes on to say that even God modified statements for the sake of peace when Sarah said, "My husband is old." God rephrases this to Abraham as the question, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Shall I bear a child at this age?'" (Genesis 18:12-13) Since it is impossible to say God "forgot" what

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<sup>5</sup> Zivotofsky, p. 269-70.

<sup>6</sup> B. Sanhedin 72a "If someone comes to murder you, precede to kill him first."

<sup>7</sup> B. Yevamot 65b, as quoted in Zivotofsky.

Sarah said, here is a model of how to restate something, not completely truthfully, for the sake of peace.

A third category in which deception is deemed permissible is to prevent financial loss at the hands of the unscrupulous. Here, Zivotofsky brings the aggadic example found in the Babylonian Talmud, Meggilah 13a, which permits a person to resort to deception to avoid being defrauded.<sup>8</sup> Certain conditions apply to this situation. First, one must see that the other party is intent on evil before resorting to deception. Second, one must allow them to actually attempt to do evil, because it is possible that they have changed their ways and thus should be given an opportunity to be honest. Third, the value of the item in question must be significant or deception is not warranted.

Another group of cases when it is permissible to lie is for the sake of humility, modesty and hospitality.<sup>9</sup> In these three cases

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<sup>8</sup> B. Megilah 13:a - R. Eleazar said: what is the meaning of the verse "He withdraws not his eyes from the righteous?" (Job 36:7) In reward for the modesty displayed by Rachel, she was granted to number among her descendants Saul. In reward for the modesty displayed by Saul, he was granted among his descendants Esther. What was the modesty displayed by Rachel? As it is written, "And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother." (29:12) Now was he her father's brother? Was he not the son of her father's sister? What it means is this: He said to her, will you marry me? She replied yes, but my father is a trickster, and he will outwit you. He replied, I am his brother in trickery. She said to him, Is it permitted to the righteous to indulge in trickery? He replied, Yes 'with the pure you show yourself pure, and with the crooked you show yourself to be subtle.' (II Samuel 22:27) He said to her, What is his trickery? She replied, I have a sister older than I am, and he will not let me marry before her. So he gave her certain tokens. When night came, she said to herself, Now my sister will be put to shame. So she handed over the tokens to her. So it is written, "In the morning in came to pass that, behold it was Leah." (29:25) Are we to infer that up to now she was not Leah? What it means is that on account of the token which Rachel gave to Leah, he did not know till then. Therefore she is rewarded by having Saul among her descendants.

<sup>9</sup> Zivotofsky, p. 278.



rabbi is allowed to lie without damaging their credibility. Specifically, to show humility, a scholar may respond that they are unfamiliar with a specific tractate even if this is not true. As for modesty, the Gemara teaches that if a scholar is asked if he engaged in marital relations, he may lie for the sake of modesty. Again, if a rabbi was the guest of another person and felt that the treatment was exceptional, he may actually lie and say that it was inferior to the actual case, if the lie was for the sake of saving the host from an onslaught of visitors.

Dignity is of major importance in the cases where strict honesty is not required. The classic example in this case is cited in Ketubot of the Babylonian Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: How does one dance before the bride? Beit Shammai says: The bride as she is. Beit Hillel says: Beautiful and graceful bride! Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: If she was lame or blind, does one say to her: Beautiful and graceful bride? Whereas the Torah said, "Keep far from a false matter." (Ex. 23:7) Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: According to your words, if one has made a bad purchase in the market, should one praise it in his [the purchaser's] eyes or deprecate it? Surely, one should praise it in his eyes. Therefore, the Sages said: Always should the disposition of man be pleasant with people."<sup>10</sup>

The above citation clearly endorses a lie for the sake of the dignity of the bride. Other examples from Talmud include lying to a hostess that the food served was tasty<sup>11</sup> and saving a fellow pupil from embarrassment.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> B. Ketubot 16b - 17a, as quoted in Zivotofsky, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> See B. Eruvim 53b.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Sanhedrin 11a. "It once happened that Rabban Gamliel said: "Send me up seven scholars early in the morning to the upper chamber." When he came in the morning and found eight, he asked: "Who is he who has come up without permission? Let him go down." Thereupon, Shmuel Hakatan

Another kind of lying that the Talmud considers permissible is making statements which have dual meanings. Zivotofsky states "It is preferable to (lie) in such a way that the statement can be interpreted in two ways, one true and one false..... This is how Rashi understands most of the seeming lies in the Bible."<sup>13</sup> One example of this which will be studied later is Jacob's statement to his father, "I am Esau, your first born." Rashi rephrases this with the implied words and emphasis, "It is I; Esau [is] your first born." The entire category of speech must be examined as well as the absence of speech (i.e. what is the meaning of silence). Jack Cohen, citing the Rashash,<sup>14</sup> takes an absolutist view that truth is paramount, and must be revealed to rectify a situation. He goes on to say, "Therefore it is logical that silence is immoral when it may create a wrong act or decision."<sup>15</sup> Here silence is added to the other verbalized lies which must then be judged for their acceptability. Mark Dratch agrees that nonverbal statements are included in these guidelines, for he mentions that the legislation encompasses, "any communication or impression of false ideas - articulated or unarticulated."<sup>16</sup> For example, there is a competent doctor in a group of people who is collectively asked, "can anyone render help to this individual in need of medical attention?" If the doctor remains silent, his or her very

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rose and said: It was I who came up without permission...." Rabban Gamliel then answered: "... you are worthy...." But in reality it was not Shmuel Hakatan [who was the uninvited member] but another; he only wished to save the intruder from humiliation." - Translation provided by Zivotofsky, p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Zivotofsky, p. 281.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Joseph Strashun. Vilna, Poland. 1794-1872.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, Jack S., "Halakhic Parameters of Truth," Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought, 16:3 (Spring, 1977), p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Dratch, Mark, "Nothing but the Truth?" Judaism, 37:2 (Spring, 1988), p. 228.

lack of response has been a lie since the accurate response to the question would have been, "Yes, I am a doctor. I can help."

Other minor categories of acceptable lies include those in which all parties understand that something is a lie. This may be an exaggeration. "The Gemara (B. Hullin 90b) relates a number of such exaggerations about various aspects of the Temple and its operations, citing Deuteronomy 1:28 and I Kings 1:40 as examples of exaggerations in the Bible."<sup>17</sup> For example, phrases such as "wall sky-high" (Deuteronomy 1:28) and "making merry until the earth split open" (I Kings 1:40) can not be expected to be read literally, but rather are examples of the hyperbole in the Bible.

While the previous examples make it clear that lying is permissible in certain situations, it is equally established that under other circumstances lying is forbidden. In all cases of judicial proceedings only absolute honesty is acceptable. While some lying is permitted to children, habitual lying is discouraged. The Talmud warns, "One should not promise a child to give him something and then not give it to him, because he will thereby teach him lying, as it is said, 'They have taught their tongues to speak lies.' (Jeremiah 9:4)"<sup>18</sup>

Zivotofsky and the other authors cited present a sound case that the Bible and Talmud, in spite of the biblical verses prohibiting lying, do not advocate an absolutist approach to the truth. How is this discrepancy to be reconciled? One author suggests, "The Bible does not proscribe telling a lie; rather, it suggests the desirability of

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<sup>17</sup> Zivotofsky, p. 282.

<sup>18</sup> B. Sukkah 46b. Translation by Zivotofsky, p. 282

maintaining a social distance from falsehood."<sup>19</sup> This idea of maintaining of social distance from falsehood is integrally linked to the very idea of society. Louis Jacobs writes:

Truth is a value which exists for the benefit of society and may, on occasion, be set aside if the well-being of society demands it. This idea appears to be behind the Midrashic teaching that when God was about to create man the angels formed themselves into two factions. Love said: 'Let him be created, for he will do works of love.' Truth said: 'Let him not be created, for he will practice deception.' Justice said: 'Let him be created for he will do justice.' Peace said: 'Let him not be created, for he will be all controversy.' What did God do? He seized truth and hurled it to the earth!<sup>20</sup> If absolute truth were always to prevail, man could not endure, but the world cannot endure without truth. Consequently man must try to live by the truth but there are times when truth imperils man's existence and then truth must be cast to the earth.<sup>21</sup>

Jacobs eloquently summarizes the tension between truth and deception in a real society. While it may be an ideal to strive for, that ideal is never achieved, yet it is indispensable in an organized civilization. "Further the midrash indicates that absolute honesty could actually harm society. Would there not be hurt feelings if everyone was completely and brutally honest with one another? At the same time, a society without any assumption of truth would be impossible. No one would ever know if anything or anyone could be trusted. It would be impossible to for relationships (personal, communal or political) if there was no basis of honesty or trust.

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<sup>19</sup> Cohen, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis Rabbah 8:5.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, pp. 152-153.

Mark Dratch concurs with Jacobs in his analysis of absolute truth saying:

The obligation of truth-telling has two purposes, one social and one moral. The former is to ensure the smooth functioning of society... the latter is to safeguard one's own moral integrity.<sup>22</sup>

While many might theorize that absolute truth is either unattainable or undesirable a modern dissenting opinion comes from Immanuel Kant. Kant advocated an absolutist approach to truth. Kant, "maintained that veracity is an 'unconditional duty which holds in all circumstance,' and that it is limited 'by no expediency.'"<sup>23</sup> Kant goes so far as to argue that if a person, seeking to kill your friend, requested information from you which would lead him to that friend, you would have to be completely honest with the potential killer.<sup>24</sup> Clearly this modern opinion is counterintuitive vis-a-vis the principles of acceptable deception laid out in the analysis of rabbinic views on the subject. Judaism places a premium on life and society, if absolute honesty does not serve those goals, then honesty, generally, must be modified.

In summary, while classical Jewish sources place great emphasis on honesty, this is always directed towards the goal of maintaining the fabric of society. The sages recognized that in some cases honest actually hurt elements of society and thus provided situations in which deception must be acceptable and is even recommended. The final chapter of this thesis will compare this

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<sup>22</sup> Dratch, p. 223.

2 <sup>23</sup> Dratch, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> Example found in Bok, p 39.

relative value of truth for society as an underlying principle to modern thinkers in order to see if contemporary ethical situations have modified the acceptability of deception with our society.

### **Medieval Perspective**

While the sages of the Talmud find certain situations in which deception was acceptable, it must be assumed that they were, nevertheless, duly cautious about attempting to circumvent the commands of the Torah. Yet these scholars found an affirmative answer to the question, "does this act coincide with the spirit of the Torah as a whole?"

In order to extend our analysis of this issue beyond classical rabbinic sources it will be helpful to consider later points of view as well, especially those that tend to incorporate a philosophical approach to the moral status of deception. Such an approach typically searches for underlying principles and hierarchies of value to help clarify ambiguities and resolve conflicts of value. Thus, I will turn to the commentaries of two philosophically insightful commentators: Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344) and Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508). These two commentators present very distinctive perspectives based on their different backgrounds, philosophies and understanding of Scripture. Both commented extensively on the Bible and other classic works, although the bulk of their commentaries have never been translated into English.

Levi ben Gershom, an unusually talented individual, was a philosopher, astronomer, physician and exegete. Also known as Gersonides or the RaLBaG, he was born in Bagnols, France in 1288.

He was greatly influenced by philosophy and especially the ideas of Aristotle and Averroes. Gersonides published a wide array of works, of which the best known is Milhamot Adonai where he addresses six central issues with which he believed Maimonides and other philosophers had not dealt satisfactorily.<sup>25</sup> Gersonides drew on the conclusions of Milhamot Adonai in his biblical commentaries. He held that "a philosophic or a moral teaching underlies every Biblical narrative... [he gave] the literal meaning and then summed up the philosophical ideas and moral maxims in each section."<sup>26</sup> These ethical lessons are called *to'alot* or *to'aliyot* and contain practical guidance on ethical, religious, and philosophical concerns which will be especially helpful in identifying his main conclusions and comparing them with those of Abravanel. Gersonides composed his commentary on the Pentateuch between 1329 and 1338, and his commentary to the earlier Prophets was also completed in 1338. Gersonides continued to write works on various subjects until his death in 1344. According to his philosophy, Gersonides believed that God was the supreme thought thinking Itself. Through development of one's mind to achieve conjunction with the active intellect, one could begin to glimpse the divine will.<sup>27</sup> For Gersonides this was a key prerequisite in obtaining prophecy. Only uniquely qualified individuals could achieve this level of communication with the

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<sup>25</sup> The issues he addressed were: "the immortality of the soul; prophecy; God's omniscience; divine providence; the nature of the celestial spheres; and the eternity of matter." - The Jewish Encyclopedia, p 29.

<sup>26</sup> Seligsohn, Max, and Isaac Broyde. "Levi ben Gershon." The Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1901.

<sup>27</sup> Guttman, Julius. Philosophies of Judaism. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, pp. 210 ff.

divine. For him, this communication was ultimately an intellectual perception of the divine will and not a case of God speaking directly to individuals. This is of central importance when Gersonides will make reference in his commentary to individuals perceiving God's will. Yet "God does not know the individual qua individual, but only as a link in the general order of being."<sup>28</sup> Gersonides unique philosophical perspective on the divine will being perceived by humanity will figure prominently in what actions are viewed as explicitly, or implicitly, acceptable in ethically troubling situations.<sup>29</sup>

Isaac Abravanel was also a multi-faceted figure who will have much to contribute in clarifying questions about the moral justification of deception in the Bible. In addition to being well versed in rabbinic literature, he was also a biblical exegete and statesman. Born in 1437 in Lisbon, he spent much of his life trying to support his fellow Jews suffering oppression. Ironically, he himself, had to flee his home more than once. In 1483 he was forced to leave Castile, even abandoning his family fortune, and fled to Toledo. There he devoted himself to biblical studies and within six months produced his commentaries on Joshua, Judges and Samuel. He would later finish his commentary on Genesis and Exodus in 1505. In his biblical commentaries, Abravanel was not hesitant to pass judgments, whether positive or negative. His commentaries contained three unique characteristics. First, he sought to illuminate not only the words of the Bible but the society about which Scripture speaks. He often compared this society with his contemporary

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<sup>28</sup> Guttman, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> Feldman, Seymour, "Gersonides" Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward Craig, New York: Routledge Press, 1998, pp. 47-51.



culture for guidance. Second, he was very concerned with the Christian environment and as such often wrote in an apologetic manner, emphasizing the Jewish perspective on the messiah and attempting to refute Christian readings of biblical ideas. His last innovation was a particularly critical approach to the prophets. In his introduction he presents issues related to authorship, style, composition and dates of compilation.

In contrast to Gersonides, however, he was basically a critic of philosophy, for he believed that it was largely misleading. In his own commentaries Abravanel often took direct exception to the views of other exegetes and philosophers, one of whom was Gersonides. Abravanel, like Gersonides, found the traditional divisions of the Bible into chapters not to be useful. Both authors commented on the text using their own individual systems of breaks, divisions and chapters. A particularly helpful feature, Abravanel introduced each of these chapters with questions that he thought were important and then proceeded to answer each of these questions.

Isaac Abravanel died in 1508 in Venice, having completed a remarkably full life, not only as a statesman, but as exegete and philosopher.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Information on Isaac Abravanel drawn from the following sources: Dobbs-Weinstein, Idit, "Abravanel, Judah ben Isaac" Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward Craig, New York: Routledge Press, 1998, pp. 23-27.

Ginzberg, Louis. "Abravanel, Isaac." The Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1901.

Netanyahu, B. Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953.

The different perspectives of Levi Ben Gershom and Isaac Abravanel will help inform our discussion of deception, as it was viewed in the medieval era. Their use of preparatory questions will indicate where the events depicted in the Bible were problematic in the context of medieval society. Further, when they identify key moral issues for discussion, it is possible that clear moral and ethical norms will emerge from the discussion to indicate what lessons these stories have to teach us.

### **Approach to the topic.**

Having outlined the biblical and rabbinic perspectives on this topic, the next four chapters will present distinct narrative situations from the Bible in which act of deception apparently occur. The episodes will be analyzed by reference to the commentaries of Gersonides and Abravanel. Following a translation of each philosopher's commentary, there will be a discussion of their insights into the acts of deception described in that chapter. The final chapter of this thesis will introduce the modern perspective through the most recent comprehensive philosophic study of the subject. Sissela Bok, the author of Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life has offered profound insights into the modern manipulation of the truth. She presents her own account of deception, indicating when it is acceptable when it is not. Her conclusions will be compared to biblical, Talmudic, and medieval sources to disclose both similarities and differences. At that juncture I will close with some concluding reflections of my own.

**Chapter II**  
**Jacob's Deception of Isaac**  
**Genesis 27:1 - 28:9**

**Preface to the Translation**

The twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca present an example of polar opposites. Esau was the rough, manly hunter who was favored by his father, while Jacob displayed more domestic traits which endeared him to his mother. In a prior incident, relevant to the following episode, Esau returned from hunting and was famished. In exchange for a bowl of stew, Jacob requested that Esau trade his birthright. Esau did this in what Scripture disapprovingly says, "thus did Esau spurn the birthright."<sup>1</sup> In the present discussion Isaac feels that his own death is imminent and calls Esau in to confer his blessing. Isaac requests that first Esau hunt and prepare a tasty dish of meat in the manner that he likes. Rebecca overhears the conversation and summons Jacob. She relates the events and instructs him to bring her two goats to prepare and to disguise himself in his brother's clothes. Jacob goes into his father with the meal and proceeds to feed him. Isaac questions Jacob's identity several times, but in the end he gives his blessing. Jacob departs just as Esau returns. Isaac, first confused, then trembles with rage as he discovers the ruse, but says that he can not rescind the blessing. Esau leaves swearing vengeance on Jacob. Rebecca, fearing a confrontation between her sons, convinces Isaac to send Jacob to her brother Laban. The passage closes as Jacob receives a second

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 25:34. Hebrew וַיְבִז עֵשָׂא אֶת הַבְּכֹרָה. Others render this as "thus Esau despised his birthright."

blessing and departs, at the same time Esau goes to take another Canaanite wife, which displeases his parents.

### Issues to be discussed:

This passage presents not only a troubling example of a dysfunctional family but is problematic in a deeply religious sense. To begin with, the Jews are descended from Jacob; yet we cannot help but ask: did he lie and cheat to achieve this position of honor? Is there perhaps a great travesty in the countless adulatory references to the patriarch in liturgy and literature? Further, what of the designation "people of Israel (Jacob)?" One could say that the Israelites are descendants of a liar and cheat. But is there some rationale that justifies, in a human or divine way, the substitution of Jacob for Esau?

Another set of issues to be raised deal with the roles of Rebecca, Isaac and Jacob. The text never seems to speak poorly of the matriarch in spite of the fact that it seems as if it was she who initiated this scheme. Further, Jacob seems to actually protest this potential deception of his father.<sup>2</sup> Is the source of his protest a disapproval for deceiving his father or fear that he might be caught? The role of Isaac is also unclear in the story. He repeatedly questions Jacob in such a way that it appears he does not believe he is Esau. He even feels his arms and is convinced that goat skins are the same as the arms of Esau. Is it plausible that Isaac was really fooled, or did

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 27:11-12. "Jacob answered his mother Rebecca, 'But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing.'"

he actually know that the son standing before him was Jacob, and thus intentionally bless him?

The commentary and translation for this chapter will focus on Genesis 27:1 to 28:9 in an attempt to examine the above questions and provide additional insights into this morally troubling scenario.

## Commentary

### Gersonides<sup>3</sup>

#### Chapter 27

Scripture tells that when Isaac was old, his eyes grew dim, so that he could not see. Then he called Esau, and asked him that he hunt some game<sup>4</sup> and make him a savory dish such as he loved, so that he might bring it and he would eat, so that he would bless him before his death.

Behold, Rebecca was listening to these words, and because of her love of Jacob she attempted [to arrange] that Jacob would be blessed by his father, because she knew that the blessing of a prophet does not return empty.<sup>5</sup> Behold Jacob was more deserving of the blessing than Esau because of what was well known to her from their affairs. Because of this, Rebecca loved Jacob like before.<sup>6</sup> Rebecca said to Jacob that he should bring her two kids from the good herd of goats, from which to make savory foods for Isaac, which he likes, and he will bring it to him and he will eat so that he will bless him before his death. Because his eyes had grown dim he would not distinguish between Jacob and Esau. Jacob said to Rebecca that he feared, lest Isaac touch him and he would know by his feel that he was Jacob. For, without a doubt, he could distinguish by his touch between the smoothness of Jacob and the hairiness of Esau. Moreover, this would be a reason for

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew text for this section of Gersonides may be found in Gershom, Levi ben. Peirush al ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Levi ben Gershom, vol. 1: Genesis. ed. Jacob Levi. Jerusalem: Mosad ha Rav Kook, 1992, pp. 171 (קעא) to 177 (קעז).

<sup>4</sup> Others- savory meat, game.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew - תשוב ריקם. See Isaiah 55:10-11 for parallel.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrew - כמו שקדם - or "as if he was first born"

Isaac to get angry with him and curse him.<sup>7</sup> But his mother said to him that he should not fear this because she would receive the curse on herself. Perhaps she knew through prophecy that his father would not curse him or she trusted in God, may He be exalted, that He would help Jacob because he was more deserving the blessing than Esau.

Here Jacob heeded her voice, and she wisely brought it about that Isaac could not recognize him when he touched him. This was because she clothed Jacob's arms in goat skins [and put them] as well on his smooth neck. In addition, she dressed him in Esau's best clothes, which were with her in the house. This was what added to the concealment from Isaac. Further, Scripture relates that Isaac attempted to investigate in every way he could whether the one bringing the dish was Esau or not. Then, when the examination, in keeping with all he had thought about was complete, he ate the dish which was brought to him. After he ate and drank, he called out to Jacob to draw near to him. [Jacob] drew near and kissed him. He smelled the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, I felt you by means of the sense of smell<sup>8</sup> because the smell of my son is the smell of the field, which the God of heaven blessed, and of flowers or fruit which have a good odor.<sup>9</sup>

**"May God give you"** [with] a land that will be blessed with **"the dew of heaven."** For not every place on which the dew of heaven falls is fertile ground<sup>10</sup> [therefore he adds the following] **"and may God give you of the fatness of the earth."** **"And plenty of grain and wine"** (Genesis 27:28) because not all the earth is fertile and appropriate for vines; now this is evident from the sensations, and inasmuch as not all the earth is fertile [and] suitable for a multiplicity of grains, but it is possible that on much of the fertile [land] the grain would not grow. This is evident to one who has observed nature. Behold, **"he blessed him"** (Genesis 27:30) also [could mean] that he

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<sup>7</sup> This reaction from Isaac would be the result of blatantly trying to deceive him and failing to do so.

<sup>8</sup> RaLBaG is responding to the problem in verse 27. Following his examination, Isaac responds "See, (this is my son)". Problem is, he can't see.

<sup>9</sup> Literally - "and flowers or fruit which are masters of good smell."

<sup>10</sup> Lit. "a place of sowing."

would have **"plenty of grain and wine"** every year because of the divine Providence that was attached to him, for without this, the blessing would not have been fulfilled in a continuous way.

**"Let people serve you. Nations bow down to you. Be master over your brothers, let your mother's sons<sup>1 1</sup> bow to you."** (Genesis 27:29) Behold this is in the plural but he has only one brother, as Scripture says about the one son **"and the sons of Dan: Hushim."**<sup>1 2</sup> There are many other cases like this in Scripture. Perhaps this is said about the children of Esau that were born at that time, for they would be called 'children of Isaac and Rebecca', according to a linguistic custom. In this respect, it is possible that they were called "brothers" to Jacob. If this is the case, he (Jacob) becomes culpable, if it is verified for Isaac that the one being blessed [by him] was Jacob, or it is possible he thought that Jacob had sons at that time. [Since the blessing refers, according to the above analysis, to Jacob and his sons, Isaac said,] **"Cursed be those who curse you and blessed be those who bless you."** (Genesis 27:29)

Further, the text says that when Jacob left the presence of Isaac his father, Esau came in from his hunting and made the dish and brought it to his father. When Isaac confirmed that the second one was really Esau, he trembled violently and said **"who was it that hunted game and brought it to me so that I ate it all before you came and I blessed him, and blessed he shall be [i.e. remain]."** (Genesis 27:33) [This means that it was] already confirmed for Isaac that his blessing would be fulfilled without a doubt, because Jacob's perfection would cause the blessing to come to him, just as it was said concerning Abraham, **"For I have singled him out, so that he will command his children..."**<sup>1 3</sup> Behold, it becomes clear to you that Abraham's perfection brings

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<sup>1 1</sup> Key is that "brothers = mother's sons"; grandchildren = are sons of the mother- Hebrew are B'nai emah.

<sup>1 2</sup> Genesis 46:23. The problem here is the agreement between plural 'sons' and the singular son listed.

<sup>1 3</sup> Genesis 18:19. Full verse reads, "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by

about that the blessing of God, blessed be He, would be fulfilled for him. Then Esau asked his father that he bless him also, and Isaac informed him that he could not rescind<sup>1 4</sup> Jacob's blessing which [indirectly] cursed Esau. This is because he (Isaac) made him lord over Esau, and he promised him that he would have the more choice land to grow plenty of grain and wine.<sup>1 5</sup> Because of this, in his blessing he could not give to Esau the chosen land and could not set him free from servitude to Jacob. Because of this, Isaac refused to bless Esau. Then Esau asked his father that he bless him with some kind of blessing if he could not give the choicest land with his blessing and could not release him from servitude to Jacob. Then Isaac blessed him and said to him, "**behold, (among) the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling**"<sup>1 6</sup> and you shall be blessed "**with**"<sup>1 7</sup> **the dew of heaven above.**" (Genesis 27:39) Your sword will be the instrument to supply your food, and this will be when you overcome all who want to rise against you, "**and you will serve your brother.**" "**But it shall be when you break loose**" and you rule, it will be possible that you will break "**his yoke from your neck,**" (Genesis 27:40) but this will be when the descendants of Jacob are no longer worthy of this blessing because of his rebellion and evil deeds then this servitude will depart from you. [This means] that just as it is with 'perpetual blessings' it is not possible for them to be [fulfilled], except for those who are worthy of them. However, it is possible for those blessings meant for a specific time and a specific place to be fulfilled both for those who are worthy and those who are not worthy. This is part of what we will clarify completely about God's decree in the

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doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." - JPS Translation, .

<sup>1 4</sup> Literally - "turn backwards."

<sup>1 5</sup> There are two different interpretations of the "blessing" of Esau. The unclear use of the "mem" before the word "land" makes it possible that it means "from the land" or "away from the land" in the context of the sentence.

<sup>1 6</sup> See prior note on the interpretation of this verse. It appears here that the interpretation is that he is to dwell "with" the fatness and not away from it.

<sup>1 7</sup> Gersonides changes the preposition from **בְּמִטָּה** to **בְּמִטָּה**; not away from the dew but rather with the dew.



portion "**V'yislach Yaakov.**"<sup>18</sup> Here, Esau thought in his heart to kill his brother after his father's death and then this curse would be broken.<sup>19</sup> It appears that Esau said this to some of his friends; They told Rebecca or [perhaps] by means of prophecy it became known to her, and because of this she brought it about that Jacob [would] go to her brother Laban. She also made Isaac agree with this [when] she said to Isaac that she was weary of her life because of Esau's wives that were Hittite women, and because of this, she asked that he command Jacob not to take a wife from among the Canaanite women.

## Chapter 28

Then "**Isaac called Jacob and blessed him**" (Genesis 28:1) to make it known to him, that from him would come the chosen seed who would inherit the land. [This was] because Esau was worthy of this, neither on his own account nor on account of his wives. [Isaac] said to him, "**Do not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Up go to Paddan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban**" (Genesis 28:2)

Now, El Shaddai, through His own existence, whether for Himself or to bring the other existents into existence [will favor him] which is not the case with any of the other existents because every one of them needs another [existent], prior to it in its own existence, and it [i.e. the other existents] causes it to exist. But it [that other prior existent] does not possess sufficient [power] to bring all existing things into existence. Also those existents that it brings into existence do not emanate from it, unless it is by means of the power that emanates to it from its cause. As we explained in the book The Wars of the Lord.<sup>20</sup> Behold, may God "**bless you, make you fruitful and numerous**" in such a way that you will become "**an assembly of peoples.**" (Genesis 28:3) "**May He**

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<sup>18</sup> Portion "Jacob sent", Genesis 32:4-36:43. Specifically 33:8 and following, the "reconciliation" of Jacob and Esau. According to the note in the Rav Kook text.

<sup>19</sup> Literally - "Depart from him."

<sup>20</sup> Milchamot Adonai- **מלחמת ה'** - Book 5, Part 3.

**grant you the blessing of Abraham"** (Genesis 28:4) because from you will come the chosen seed which God, blessed be He, promised to Abraham that would inherit the land. When Esau saw that Isaac already commanded Jacob not to take a wife from among the Canaanite women, and Jacob obeyed him<sup>2 1</sup> and he also wanted to do something pleasing for his father, to let it become known in relation to himself that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac.

He took a woman from his family as a wife, in addition to his other wives. Behold this is the explanation of the words of this story.

It is appropriate that we examine how to resolve a great [source of] doubt which occurs in some of what comes to pass in this story before we mention the valuable lessons that come from it. This is because there was doubt concerning the meaning of this blessing as to whether it is an announcement of what will be in the future , or whether it is like a prayer and a petition from God, may He be exalted, that might bless the one who is to be blessed. For apart from these two facets there would be not benefit in the blessing of the prophet. Already it appears that this blessing does not announce what will be in the future for one who is [to be] blessed, if this were the case, it would not have been possible for someone to say what Isaac said to Esau, **"your brother came with guile and he has taken away your blessing."** (Genesis 27:35) and this was evident in itself. Likewise, one would think that it is not possible that this blessing was a prayer and a petition from God, may He be exalted, because what is actually His way [is such that] it is possible that contained in it would be a blessing for everyone of those that were blessed. For it is not impossible in regard to someone who prays to request something on one occasion and to request its very opposite on another occasion according to what he needs at the moment. If this was the case, what was it that prevented Isaac from blessing Esau with the very same blessing as the one with which he blessed Jacob. If only I could know! Further, Isaac

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<sup>2 1</sup> Literally - "Heeded his voice."

intended that the blessing be for Esau only. In sum, this story raises a very strong doubt concerning this matter. In addition, the prophet's [Isaac's] request for a savory dish for [the sake of] this blessing was also strange because it is not characteristic of the way of a prophet to be drawn after these bodily pleasures, all the more so that he would make them a prerequisite to the divine emanation [i.e. prophecy] becoming attached to him. For this was indeed possible in connection with the pleasures of the soul as Elisha states, **"But now bring me a minstrel....(and the hand of the Lord came upon him.)"**<sup>2 2</sup> (II Samuel 3:15) It has been said that it will already have been seen from the meaning of the prophet's blessing that it [blessing] was not ascribed to his will, but he blesses the ones who are to be blessed, each person according to his blessing. In a similar manner, it was made known from the blessing of Jacob to his sons, **"everyone according to his blessing he blessed them."**<sup>2 3</sup> (Genesis 49:28) This already was explained more fully in the case of the blessing of Menasseh and Ephraim. Joseph said, in his request of him, that [Isaac] should lay his right hand on the first born.<sup>2 4</sup> **"(And his father refused, and said,) I know it, my son, I know it; he too shall be great; but his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations."** (Genesis 48:19) Because this is part of what was made clear with respect to him, without a doubt the basic idea of the prophet's blessing is not to be ascribed to the prophet's desire, but rather is a way of making known what will take place in the future in some manner. This is already apparent in the story with which we are

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<sup>2 2</sup> "The effect of music would make him more receptive of Divine inspiration." - Soncino commentary on Kings p. 179.

<sup>2 3</sup> "According to his future destiny (Rashi, Rashbam). Each according to his particular requirements (Sforno)." - Soncino commentary on Chumash, by Cohen, p. 309.

<sup>2 4</sup> In Genesis 48:18 he lays his hand the head of Manasseh. Rashbam comments that Joseph was not trying to be presumptuous, but thought his father was confused. "Joseph assumed that his father must have thought that Joseph would naturally have Manasseh at his (Joseph's) right hand, which would have been Jacob's left, and that he therefore crossed his hands. Hence he told him that he had placed the firstborn at his (Jacob's) right hand (Rashbam)." - Soncino Chumash, p. 301.

dealing, since this blessing does not make known what will be in the future, for if that were so, it would not have been appropriate for Isaac to have said to Esau, "**Your brother came with guile**" as we have mentioned.

This being the case, perhaps this doubt is even greater when the prophet's blessing is [to be] said in a certain way in accordance with what will be in the future and in a certain way of prayer and petition.<sup>25</sup> This truly will be according to what I will say, and this is because when some person is ready to receive and is deserving of some good befalling him, the prophet will pray for this good thing to happen to him more powerfully than that same good which was established [i.e. bound to come his way] except that the good for which the prophet prays has a certain relationship with the [original] good that he deserved, and this is the manner that Scripture said that he blessed him with his blessing. For example, [consider the case of] one who is in his household,<sup>26</sup> a servant who is pleasing to his master. Now, if the prophet blesses him, he blesses him in a manner that is related to this success, namely, that he might become an important servant/official in the king's palace or that he might become a successful merchant. But he does not bless him to the effect that he might become king because this is very far from the good that he deserved. However, the prophet might bless him such that he will be king and rule many nations if it was in his horoscope<sup>27</sup> that he would be a ruler and lord for one nation. Because the Providence of God, may He be exalted, was attached to the prophet, it was extended to him that his prayer would be heard and his blessing be responded to in stages of the things destined to occur in the future. But in this case, the prophet's blessing will be gauged according to the preparation of the recipient. But he will not just bless anyone who

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<sup>25</sup> Mosad Ha Rav Kook commentary notes - "Our rabbi's line of thought is clear, since the blessing blends seeing the future with prayer and petition. When the spirit of prophecy rests upon the one who blesses, he sees both the character traits and the future affairs of the one blessed and here the same is true when he blesses [his son] with his blessing - that the appropriate good will increase to come to him."

<sup>26</sup> Hebrew unclear- **מערכת** - array, arrangement; army; row; battle, fight, campaign; order, sub-kingdom, system; disposition of stars.

<sup>27</sup> See prior note.

happens to come along with just any blessing that happens to occur to him. Rather the blessing will be in accordance with the one blessed. And this is very clear, given what we have clearly said.

When this was settled for us, it became possible for us to easily resolve the doubts which can easily arise regarding these blessings. It was said in the beginning that Isaac's request for a tasty dish was not for the love of pleasures.<sup>28</sup> Heaven forbid the prophet would have such a defect! Rather it was in order for him to attain complete solitude for thinking about the person who brought him the tasty dish, by emptying his thoughts while eating it so that it would be made known to him through prophecy which blessing was appropriate for him, for this is one of the conditions of prophecy, as we explained in the second book of Milchamot Adonai.<sup>29</sup> This is why you find that Saul said to his servant when he advised that they go to the man of God to tell them where the asses were **"But, behold, if we go, what shall we bring the man? for the bread is spent in our vessel, and there is not a present to bring to the man of God; what have we?"** (I Samuel 9:7) At the end of the incident his servant says he had with him a fourth part of a shekel of silver, and it is clear that a fourth part of a shekel of silver is not an appropriate gift for the prophet that was ruling all of Israel. Concerning this it is clear that they used to give the prophet gifts these which they were giving to the prophet for the reason we mentioned, because in the time of Samuel the word of the Lord was rare<sup>30</sup> and visions were not common [i.e. widespread] among the people and because of this he needed things like these, which have the capacity to provide entree into achieving solitude in one's imagination, in one's thought process, in whatever way he wishes. Perhaps this was necessary for Isaac due to his great age because it was on account of this [great old age] that attaining greater solitude in his thinking and imagination with regard to this matter.

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<sup>28</sup> Also "tastiness."

<sup>29</sup> In Perek vav - on prophecy.

<sup>30</sup> Reference to I Samuel 3:1 "... in those days the word of the Lord was rare; prophecy was not widespread." (New JPS Translation)

This you find concerning many of the prophets where the prophecy ceased [coming to] them in their old age.

Behold, it was made clear to Isaac that the one who brings the tasty dish, he belongs to the "sect" [i.e. group] of those who are appropriate for divine Providence to rest upon, and he blesses him in accordance with that fact. Now through philosophic speculation he likened, Jacob's smell of perfection<sup>3 1</sup> to the smell of the field which God blessed with the fruit of the vine, in a figurative sense, just as the Song of Songs puts forward an analogy between the science and perfumed things.<sup>3 2</sup> That is why in Jacob's blessing he made the dew of heaven come before the fat of the earth, which he does not do in the blessing of Esau. To call attention to the fat of heaven, God, may He be exalted, looked down to exercise Providence over it, for it is better known that dew is a result of Providence than the inheritance of the land. In general, it is because the dew comes from above that he mentions it first, to teach that from above came Jacob's good fortune<sup>3 3</sup> on account of individual providence.

Behold he blessed Jacob continuously with **"an abundance of grain and wine,"** which he did not do for Esau. This was because it was impossible [for there to be] **"an abundance of grain and wine"** continuously on the land except for the individual providence through the Lord for that land. In terms of Providence, he also blessed him, so that many peoples and the descendants of Esau would serve him; thus it necessarily follows from divine Providence that those who curse him will be cursed and those who bless him will be blessed.

After Jacob was blessed in this manner, which contained a kind of curse for Esau, it was necessary that it be realized through the prophet's blessing. Behold, of necessity, Esau was not blessed with what it was possible for him to be blessed with before Jacob

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<sup>3 1</sup> Hebrew שלמות- also: completeness, wholeness, perfection, totality.

<sup>3 2</sup> Specifically Song of Songs 8:2 and 7:3 mention mixing spices to make wine more potent.

<sup>3 3</sup> Literally - "things."

was blessed. This is what Isaac said to him, "**your brother came with cunning and took your blessing**" and Isaac was confused about which blessing to bless him with, and he blessed him with what would not undermine Jacob's blessing, [choosing] from what was still available for Esau to be blessed with, in accordance with what was prepared for him from among the [various] benefits. He informed him that his servitude to Jacob would not be forever, but he would be released from servitude at the time when Israel would not be fit for something like this Providence being attached to them. Thus, Scripture says, "**And you will break his yoke from you neck.**" (Genesis 27:40) Scripture means to say that when dominion come to Esau through the configuration [of the stars] then it is possible that at some time this servitude will be removed from him, that is when Israel will not be fit for divine Providence being attached to them in a way that may cause this people,<sup>3 4</sup> who are fit to rule, to serve them. But he made a condition that dominion would come to Esau through the configuration of the stars<sup>3 5</sup> for if this were not the case, nothing would prevent the subjugation of the descendants of Esau to the descendants of Jacob despite their [Israel's] being unfit to receive divine Providence. This is why you see one nation ruling another, even if the nation that rules does not [do so] in a manner deriving from the [kind of] perfection to which divine Providence is attached.

Herewith the resolution of the doubts that can be raised concerning these blessing is complete. Nevertheless, [before moving on, we should note that] the lessons that come from this story are seven in number:

The first lesson concerns moral qualities, namely that it is fitting that a man attempt to bequeath to his sons from the best that is possible for him [to give]; all the more so to the one he loves most. Surely you see that Isaac attempted to bless Esau before his death, and

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<sup>3 4</sup> This people is the Edomites, the descendants of Esau.

<sup>3 5</sup> i.e. astrological determination..

he commanded that he make him a dish in order to choose [the best] of what was possible for him to bless him with.

The second lesson concerns moral qualities as well, namely that he [the recipient] should be the beloved son, the best one of the sons; but if he isn't, let his parents [at least] derive benefit from him as they do from the others. Surely you see that Rebecca used to love Jacob to make known because he displayed his perfection to her. Because of this, she attempted to have Jacob [become] the one to be blessed, even though she deserved to derive even greater benefit from Esau because of the game that he would bring regularly. But Isaac, because of all his isolation in contemplation<sup>3 6</sup> [was such that] the traits of Jacob and Esau were not well known to him in a manner that he was able to know which one of them was better. Because of this, he loved Esau more, for the reason of the advantage that came to him [Isaac] from him [Esau] he was being deceived continually by emotional things.

Likewise the third lesson is also ethical, namely that every person who attempts to perform some act for some purpose, should attempt to remove all the things that prevent him from realizing that purpose, and to bring about those things that enable him to realize it. Do you not see that Jacob feared that he would be prevented from [reaching] the goal he intended until he saw that Rebecca supplied him [with] the tricks [by means of] which what he feared could be removed. This [assistance] was that she dressed him in the clothes of Esau and this was what caused Isaac to think that the person dressed in these clothes was Esau. She put the skins of kids on his hands and upon the smooth part of his neck so that Isaac would feel from it that he was a hairy man when he touched him.

The fourth lesson concerns moral qualities, namely, that one should not deny a person what he is entitled to. Surely you see that Isaac's love of Esau was because of the benefit

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<sup>3 6</sup> Also "study, consideration, reflection"



that [Esau] brought him; he did not want to bless Jacob when he brought him the tasty dish because he thought that it was Jacob, just as it says at the end of the matter, "**the voice is the voice of Jacob.**" (Genesis 27:22) Rather, he wanted Esau to be the one blessed so that he would have a reward from [his father] in exchange for the advantage of helping him. [This was the case] until Jacob caused him to think that he was Esau, and then he blessed him.

The fifth lesson concerns matters of knowledge, namely, this teaches that it was already possible for the constant well being that the prophet promised to cease at some [future] time. Surely you see that Isaac already promised that Jacob would be lord over his brothers. Afterwards, he told Esau that it would happen that he would break his yoke from his neck at some [future] time. Behold, the reason for this is made known in the command of God in the portion "**Jacob sent messengers.**"<sup>3 7</sup>

The sixth lesson concerns moral qualities, namely, that it is not appropriate for a man to despise anyone who hates him, whoever he may be. But it is appropriate for him to be frightened of him and to attempt [either] to flee from that land or to make peace with him. Surely you see that Rebecca commanded Jacob to flee because of the wrath of his brother Esau.

The seventh lesson concerns moral qualities, namely, that it is appropriate for parents to show compassion to [their] children, whether they are good or bad. Surely you see this when Rebecca feared lest she lose both of them if Jacob did not flee from Esau, because it is clear from Jacob's case that he was strong. This is made clear from the stone that he alone rolled off of the mouth of the well, where many [people] were gathering before they

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<sup>3 7</sup> Parashat V'Yishlach- At the meeting of the two brothers, Esau has his own rulership at that time. Jacob refers to him as "lord." Esau is clearly more powerful at this time, and no longer under the rulership of Jacob. (Ch. 32-33)

were able to roll it.<sup>38</sup> Without a doubt when she feared that Esau would rise up against him to kill him, [Jacob] would kill him first, or perhaps the two of them would die.

The eighth lesson concerns moral qualities, namely, that it is appropriate for a man to take a wife from his family or a select [i.e. elite] family in order for his descendants to be chosen. Concerning this, you find that Isaac commanded Jacob to take a wife from his [own extended] family so that chosen descendants would emerge from his line who would take possession of the land that God promised to Abraham. We have already learned from this passage that the blessing comes only in accordance with the [degree of] preparation of the one blessed. This means that if it was possible for the prophet to bless the one blessed just as he wished, why was Isaac confused about Esau's blessing and with what [specific things] would he bless him? Behold, it was possible for him to bless him [by saying] that he would have the blessing of Abraham just as he blessed Jacob. In fact, he could not bless him with this blessing because this blessing could only be realized for those who cleave to God, may He be blessed, as was explained from what we said in connection with making the covenant of the parts.<sup>39</sup> Because Esau was not worthy of this Providence, Isaac could not bless him with it. From this passage we also learn that Isaac only loved Esau more than Jacob before [Jacob's] perfection became known to him. In fact, after this he loved Jacob more on account of his perfection and merit. He was precise in [Jacob's] case and commanded him that he not take a wife from among the Canaanite women, then he blessed him with this second blessing which was very wonderful.

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<sup>38</sup> Genesis 29:9-10. While waiting to have *enough* people to roll the stone, Jacob *single handedly* moves it.

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 15:8-18

### Abra vanel<sup>40</sup>

"When Isaac was old" (Genesis 27:1) until the end of the portion. Now, concerning this story and its meanings I asked<sup>41</sup> these questions:

The first question: What did Jacob see in Esau so that [he wanted] to bless him? Is it not so that Abraham, his father, did not bless [Isaac] at the time of his death, and Adam did not bless Seth at the time of his death, and Noah did not bless Shem? Who introduced Isaac [to this feeling] that it was urgent<sup>42</sup> to bless this one, and all the more so when he was evil?

The second question: If it was the intention and will of Isaac to leave behind a blessing before his death, why would he bless Esau alone and leave Jacob with no blessing? Surely the both of them were his sons, and he had to bless both of them, because in fact Jacob had the twelve tribes, and he blessed all of them. Then, too, when he wanted to bless the children of Joseph, he blessed the two of them. Moses also blessed all the tribes. Why didn't Isaac do this, but [rather] threw jealousy and hostility [into the relationship] between his two sons during the meal [for conferring] his blessing?

This third question: Scripture says, "**Behold now, I am old, I don't know the day of my death.**" (Genesis 27:2) Why did he leave the matter of the blessing until his death, as if it were forbidden and an improper thing for him to bless before that time? Surely, it was appropriate for him to bless his sons at any time, when everyday the High Priest used to bless Israel. Indeed, it is true that Jacob blessed his sons at the time of his death, and Moses also blessed Israel before his death, but it is appropriate to give a reason and a sufficient cause for this.

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2 <sup>40</sup> Text may be found in Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition beginning on page 304 (ש"ד) and continues until page 313 (ש"ג).

<sup>41</sup> Literally - thought, imagined, surmised, assumed.

<sup>42</sup> Literally - an emergency.

The fourth question: Why does he link his blessing with eating the savory foods, when he is explicit in his command to Esau? [He says,] **"Take your weapons, your bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such, and bring it to me and I will eat it, so that I may give you my blessing before I die."** (Genesis 27:3-4) Behold, Jacob blessed the children of Joseph, and he also blessed all his children, but his blessing did not depend on the food he ate, and this is also the case with our teacher, Moses, when he blessed Israel.

The fifth question: What did Rebecca perceive that led her to deny the blessing to Esau, since he was her older son and the right of the blessing belonged to him? Why did she make all these efforts to take away from Esau the blessing which his father desired to confer to him? [She was a source of] sending strife, not for the sake of providing help, and not for the sake of [doing] something beneficial between brothers but rather [as a source of] lies, deceit, cheating, and in vain.

The sixth question: Why did Rebecca think that the blessing that Isaac would give to Jacob, when he thought that he was Esau, would benefit Jacob when his [Isaac's] intention was to bless Esau and not Jacob? Now, all this follows after the intention. Our Sages, of blessed memory, said concerning the matter, "His wife vowed, and one thought that his daughter vowed; and his daughter vowed, and one thought that his wife vowed; Behold, this [man] would cause it [the vow] to return [i.e. reconsider it] and nullify it because the things that are said to one man on the presumption of [his being] a man are of no benefit whatever. And if so, why did the righteous woman, and Jacob as well, think the blessings intended for Esau would be beneficial to Jacob, since it never occurred to Isaac to give them to him.

The seventh question: Why did God, blessed be He, desire that Isaac give Jacob the blessing through an error and a mistake when he thought that he [Jacob] was Esau? It [would have been] better for him to have commanded Isaac to drive Esau out and to have

offspring ascribed to him through Jacob, just as He promised to Abraham, so that Isaac would bless Jacob by His command and with his complete intention.

The eighth question: This is the doubt about which Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra and Gersonides first commented; Rabbenu Nissim mentions it as well. The issue [deals] with blessings in general, as to whether they are simply prophecy and predict the future, or whether [they are] a prayer and petition for the one blessed, [for God] to confer on him success and the good that the prophet mentioned. Each view has [many] facets. [There are] great doubts about whether they were simply prophecy and tell what will happen. Why did Rebecca get agitated and set that whole ruse in motion? When, in fact, whatever God had decreed will come about,<sup>43</sup> who would [be able] nullify it? Why did Esau shout and Isaac tremble violently unless it was because it was proclaiming the future? What is it to us whether that he speaks [the blessing] to them, to Jacob or to Esau? And what of the matter of **"your brother came with guile and took your blessing?"** (Genesis 27:35) He said, **"Behold, I have made him lord over you."** (Genesis 27:37) Then he said, **"he has taken my birthright."** (Genesis 27:36) Behold, Isaac did not do anything himself, but he told what the future would be, and Jacob did not do anything to bring about this matter.

If we say, [on the other hand,] that this blessing was a request for compassion for the one blessed, this [position] becomes very problematic to take, for who prevented Isaac from praying on behalf of Esau, and blessing him with blessings which he blessed Jacob? All the more so, when Esau knew [by this point that] he [Isaac] gave them [to Jacob].

In sum, the meaning of these blessing is in doubt.

The ninth question: [Jacob says,] **"Perhaps my father will feel me."** (Genesis 27:12) Why did he not fear recognition of the voice, for it is impossible to escape from it, in addition to the fear of touch, for perhaps he would not feel like him? What is the answer of

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<sup>43</sup> Literally - "rise up."

Rebecca? **"Upon me will be your curse."** (Genesis 27:13) Is it that a person takes over the curse of his companion, just as she desired?

The tenth question concerns the confusion of Isaac's words, and if he was satisfied at first whether he (Jacob) was Esau or not. Conjecturing about his doubts, he said, **"The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau"** (Genesis 27:22) and he blessed him, as it is written, **"and he blessed him."** (Genesis 27:23) After this he comes back to say to him **"Are you really my son Esau?"** (Genesis 27:24) Already he had said to him **"I am Esau, your first born."** (Genesis 27:19) After he smelled his smell, Scripture says a second time **"and he blessed him."**<sup>44</sup>

The eleventh question: Why are all these blessing [in the category of] material benefits and he did not mentioned among them anything spiritual, and nothing in terms of the inheritance of the land, and nothing in terms of what was sworn [to] Abraham, his father? In general, [there is] this question: why did he begin the blessings with the *vav* of covering **"and may God give you."** Now, the sages, of blessed memory, said, "He will give and he will return and he will give [to another] since they gave a meaning to the *vav*. But note that the plain meaning of the verse does not sustain [the reading]."

The twelfth question concerns the trembling that Isaac trembled, as if he was angry about his blessing of Jacob, [but] immediately he said **"and blessed shall he be."** (Genesis 27:33) This teaches that it was his desire to bless him. What of the matter that [commentators say about] **"who was it then that...."** (Genesis 27:33) Who? It teaches that he asked 'who is this', 'who is this', and the word **"then"**<sup>45</sup> teaches that he was asking 'at what place is he?'

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<sup>44</sup> In verse 23, after feeling his hands he blesses him. Again, after smelling him, he blesses him. Each time uses the verb. **וַיְבָרֶכְהוּ**.

<sup>45</sup> Uncommon Hebrew word **אָפְנָה** - According to the modern dictionary by Alcala it can mean: "however, consequently, then." The Brown, Driggs and Driver Lexicon of the Bible defines it as: "enclitic participle."

The thirteenth question concerns Esau's words and his requests, when he asked at first **"bless me too, my father."** (Genesis 27:34) Afterwards he said, **"have you not reserved for me a blessing?"** (Genesis 27:36) Later he said, **"Do you have one blessing, my father?"** (Genesis 27:38) If [Isaac] blessed Jacob in his thoughts [believing that] he was Esau, how would it bequeath a [real] blessing to him?

The fourteenth question: Why did Isaac not say to him at first when he said **"bless me too, my father"** what he replied the second time, **"Behold, I have made him lord over you."** (Genesis 27:37) [Was it] because he was truly the hindrance that he did not bless him as well?

They said concerning the second [statement], and what is the meaning of this statement, **"And all his brothers I have given him as servants."** (Genesis 27:37) [This is] after **"Behold, I have made him lord over you."** Behold, he did not have other brothers.

The fifteenth question: The text says, **"Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him,"** (Genesis 27:41) because he (Esau) said to him that he took his blessing with guile, not that his father blessed him [with a blessing]. What of the matter, **"but the words (of Esau) her older son were told to Rebecca, so she sent and called Jacob her younger son?"** (Genesis 27:42) Behold, we knew that Esau was her older son and Jacob her younger son. Why was it mentioned here?

The sixteenth question concerns Rebecca's words **"until your brother's anger turns away."** (Genesis 27:45) It continues to say further **"until your brother's anger turns away from you,"** which is a clear duplication. What is the meaning of, **"and he forgets what you have done to him?"** (Genesis 27:45) Behold, was this not the cause reason of the action. How does he attribute the guilt to him? [Also] problematic in conjunction with this is [Rebecca's] statement, **"Why should I loose you both in one**

**day?"** (Genesis 27:45) Except [this can only mean] Esau would kill Jacob. Who would kill Jacob? How would she loose them both?

The seventeenth question: If the whole was entirely of Esau, lest he kill Jacob, how did Rebecca not truthfully relate the matter to Isaac? Rather, she persuades him [to do] something else by her words, "**if Jacob takes a wife from among the Hittite women.... what good will life be to me?"** (Genesis 27:46) Because of this matter Isaac sent him away, not because of the matter of the brothers' hatred. But here is Jacob, fearful about death, not about marriage.

The eighteenth question: If Rebecca commanded "**Get up, flee to Laban my brother in Haran.**" (Genesis 27:43) why did Isaac change [the command and say] "**get up, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel the brother of your mother?"**

(Genesis 28:2) And concerning the act it is said "**and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca**" (Genesis 28:5) according to the words of his mother. What is with this matter of stating "**the brother of Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau?"** (Genesis 28:5) Didn't we already know this?

The nineteenth question: Concerning the redundancy of verses and the fact that they are without a pattern since Scripture says "**When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob.**" (Genesis 28:6a) The text says again, "**he blessed him.**" (Genesis 28:6b) Once again, Scripture says, "**Jacob heeded his mother and father, and went to Paddan-aram.**" (Genesis 28:7) Scripture has already said all this [why is there the repetition?]

The twentieth question, concerns the statement, "**Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac.**" (Genesis 28:8) This was implicit in what was written earlier, "**When Esau saw that Isaac blessed etc.**" (Genesis 28:6)



Further why does it not say 'in his mother's eyes' (because) she was the more annoyed with this? Why is it written **"in his father's eyes?"**

Behold, I will explain the verses concerning other matters and all these questions.

**"And Isaac was old"** (Genesis 27:1) until **"Jacob said to his mother Rebecca."**

(Genesis 27:11) Blessing is a common word that one would say like 'the one who blesses' and 'the one blessed'. For notice there is a blessing from the Creator, may He be blessed, to His creatures, and there is a blessing from the creatures to Him, may He be blessed. There is a blessing from His creatures [given by] some to other. The blessing that is from the Creator to His creatures without a doubt is the overflow and abundance of goodness in them, and concerning their matter, they are not prayer, and not thanksgiving. It says, **"and God blessed Abraham with all things,"** (Genesis 24:1) that many good things were bestowed on him. **"And God bless you from amongst Zion."**<sup>46</sup> The blessing of God, causes people to be made rich and things similar to that.

The blessing that is [extended] by people to God, is not an overflow nor [an act] of doing good except which they receive from Him. They do not grant abundance and give to Him except thanksgiving and praise in the manner of Shabbat. **"And David blessed God."**<sup>47</sup> **"And you shall love the Lord your God."**<sup>48</sup> **"His praises eternally in your mouth."**<sup>49</sup> **"We will bless God now and forever, Halleluyah."**<sup>50</sup> All are the language of praise, thanksgiving and glorifying. The blessing that is given by some creatures to others, it is not overflow, and it does not cause good things [to happen] nor is it praise or glorifying, but truly it designates the one blessed in prayer and requests benevolence on by God, may He be blessed, and he answered him and may He bestow on

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<sup>46</sup> Part of Shir Ha'Malot. Psalms 128:5, 134:3 This is a liturgical connection.

<sup>47</sup> I Chronicles 29:1. In Psukei D'Zimrah.

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5. Part of Shema and its blessings.

<sup>49</sup> Psalm 34:2.

<sup>50</sup> Psalm 115:18. Conclusion of the Ashrei in Psukei D'Zimrah

him his blessing. Thus it is said, concerning the priestly blessing, **"Thus shall you bless the Israelites saying to them..."** (Numbers 6:23)

**"May God bless you."** (Numbers 6:24) That is to say that the priestly blessing to Israel is speech and prayer to God that He bless them and guard them.

**"May He cause His face to shine on them and be gracious to them; may God lift up His face to you and grant you peace."** (Numbers 6:25-26) At the conclusion it says **"and they will place my name upon the Israelites and I will bless them."** (Numbers 6:27) That is to say that they bless them when they merit it and [then] God will place [the blessing] on them. But it is God, blessed be He, that is the one that blesses them with His abundance [not the blessing].

After we know this it is said again that when the Holy One, blessed be He, assigned the chosen land to Abraham individually and then to his offspring. It was appropriate that each one of the fathers, at his death, appointed in his place the son [who would be] heir to these promises, destiny and who would sit in his place concerning them. Because in this way the nation would develop in the divinely [prescribed] order that is known and divinely defined, but among the nations it is not considered as such.

Therefore, Isaac blessed his sons, and Jacob [blessed] his sons to tell [us and others] that the one blessed or the ones blessing each other receive the divine promises and carry [them on] from others to them [i.e. those who will come after them. And if Abraham had not blessed Isaac, this would have been because the Holy One, blessed be He, already revealed and chose that Isaac would be the heir to his mission and his blessing as it is written, **"For in Isaac will be your offspring continue."** (Genesis 21:12) **"And my covenant I will establish with Isaac."** (Genesis 17:19) and He commanded Abraham that he expel his son Ishmael, thus Abraham was not required to bless Isaac, and to leave him in his place, his blessing and his mission because this was already made clear by God's word [that] He was blessed. But Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob, and God does not specify which one of them would sit on Abraham's seat and he saw them as being

different in the extreme: that Esau had a natural advantage being older, first born of the womb<sup>51</sup>, his [Isaac's] first born son.<sup>52</sup> Jacob had a rational advantage, concerning both his moral qualities and his opinions. Behold, when the righteous one [Isaac] saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not specify who would inherit his promises and his blessing, the old man was obliged to specify with his [own] blessing. Thus, this necessity caused him to utter the blessing<sup>53</sup> and he attached it to his statement, "**Behold, I am old, and I don't know when I will die.**" (Genesis 27:2) For it was appropriate that before his death he would specify and tell who would sit in his chair after him. During his life there was not this necessity, except [there would be this necessity] after his death. Therefore, he feared lest he suddenly die today or the next day, and leave a quarrel between his sons.

Esau said that he was the oldest son, [thus] to him [went] the divine right of inheritance. But Jacob said that just as Isaac was younger than Ishmael, and he inherited the 'house,' so too he would inherit it and not Esau. Behold, in order to remove this doubt his conscience told him to select this one with his blessing.

The midrash gives us another reason. It discusses an example of the orchard and the land tenant, and that Abraham feared to bless Isaac because of Ishmael, *and also God's way*<sup>54</sup>, and He blessed Isaac after his death.<sup>55</sup>

I explain the matter according to its simple meaning. Here I arrive at the conclusion to the first question.

Behold, Isaac did not see [fit to] bless his two sons together, Esau and Jacob, so that the two of them would inherit the promises of Abraham and his blessings with regard to divine Providence adhering [to him] and the inheritance of the land, since he saw them as being utterly different in their nature in terms of both moral qualities and belief. Therefore,

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<sup>51</sup> See Ex 13:2 for a parallel wording.

<sup>52</sup> Literally- first of his strength (potency).

<sup>53</sup> Literally- "this necessity stirred up/awakened the blessing."

<sup>54</sup> Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.

<sup>55</sup> Perhaps a reference to Genesis Rabbah 61:6.

he was obliged that there would be one son among them [who would inherit] and the other would be attached to the first and included in his inheritance, for, behold, Jacob blessed the two sons of Joseph because he made them both tribes and they were both righteous and good. But concerning the rest of the sons [Jacob said to Joseph], **"But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance."** (Genesis 48:6) Behold, he did not bless and did not explain except the main [points] and not the things joined to them and thus he blessed his twelve sons because they were all the heads of a nation. All feared God and [were] truthful people, and he did not bless their sons that were before him [if they were] important men because it was not extremely appropriate, and they were adding and they were included with their brothers. Thus, Moses, may he rest in peace, before his death only blessed the tribes by their names, there were leaders but they were did not mention with the names of their sons. Thus, Isaac wanted to do with his sons just as Abraham did with his sons, that Esau would be the head[of the family], [because he was] his older son, because the law of the eldest child gave him an advantage<sup>56</sup>, and it was his intention to bless him so that he would merit Abraham's blessing to inherit the land and that he would be the 'possessor of God's covenant', and that in general Esau and his blessing would be the root of the household, Jacob, his younger brother would be added [to his household and would enjoy whatever blessing he had through Esau]. And for this reason, he [Isaac] did not bless him in his own right [i.e. independently]

With this the second question is resolved.

How, truly, did Isaac [not] see Esau as the who never following the ways of God? He wanted to help him in engaging to receive the blessing though his prayer, and this is when he attempted [to reward him] by means of [asking him to fulfill] the mitzvah of honoring the father by bringing him some game and feeding him a tasty dish such as he

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<sup>56</sup> Literally- "his nature advanced him in the first born law."

loved, and he specified these things for him. He mentioned these in order that by the same merit and the important mitzvah he would be fitting for the blessing.

The RaN<sup>57</sup> wrote that he commanded this in order to gladden his heart and his soul, and to be alone with him and to bestow abundance on him. This is the matter and the necessity - the gifts they were giving to the prophets, that they took as a wage for their prophecies. This is also correct.

There would be no doubt that this prayer of the righteous one helped [as well as] his petition from that time forward. For the prayers of the righteous are received more readily at the time death, they are more joined to their Creator, as it is written "**your father commanded before his death.**"<sup>58</sup>

Our sages said, a command establishes the words of the dead. Thus the forefathers were all blessing [their children] at the time of their death in order that their blessing would be better bound [to their children].

With this the third and fourth questions are resolved.

There is no doubt that Isaac took into account Esau's and his wives' acts of wickedness and that of his children who would be born; they were compared to them in wickedness. He has to pray to God to tell him which one he should bless; whether the older because of his [position in] birth order or the younger because of his perfection. But the love confused the matter and his love for Esau and the his heart's desire did not see any liability in his actions. Perhaps what is meant when Scripture says, "**And it came to pass that when Isaac was old and his eyes grew dim**" (Genesis 27:1) that the sight [literally eyes] of his intellect and devotion [kavanah] dimmed in the matter of Esau and he did not see and did not observe his actions as was appropriate [for the patriarch to do].

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<sup>57</sup> Rabbi Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi. Spain. Died 1380.

<sup>58</sup> Genesis 50:16. Joseph's brothers sent word that Jacob had died and that supposedly his last wish was that Joseph forgive the brothers and make peace.

In the midrash<sup>59</sup> it says: R. Hanina bar Papa expounded "**Many things have You done, O Lord my God, even Your wondrous works and thoughts are toward us, etc.**" (Psalm 60:6) All the wondrous works and the thoughts you only did for our good. [Therefore,] why did our father Isaac's eyes grow dim? In order that Jacob would come and receive the blessing.

The commentary [says] that physical eyes grew dim and I say that his analytical sense<sup>60</sup> grew dim as well. Here, Rebecca heard the message from Isaac to Esau despite that Isaac was hiding [this matter] from her and not telling her. Because she knew God's command that "**the older shall serve the younger,**" (Genesis 25:23) and she believed that Jacob would be the source of the people<sup>61</sup> rather than Esau be the leader. Further, she feared lest Esau be blessed by Isaac and the power of his blessing would add strength against Jacob and increase the dispute between them. Thus, she did not fear Isaac's will except in order to agree with the truth and the promise that was spoken to her.

She also saw that Esau's wives were evil and sinned, and he did not protest against their doing so, and how would their children inherit [genuine] adherence to God and [inherit] the Holy Land. Thus, she attempted in regard to this matter by [virtue of] her hope that when the spirit of God would rest upon Isaac to bless the one standing between his hands [i.e. right before him], and He would put the [right] word in his mouth, and He would tell him that which he should do according to the decree before him.

There is no doubt that Rebecca never told Isaac about the prophecy which was spoken to her, "**the older shall serve the younger.**" If this were not the case, how would Isaac transgress the word of the Lord when she could not succeed? Perhaps because of her modesty she went to inquire of God without his permission and hid it from him [because he would be angry with her] or because [she thought] it is not necessary to tell a prophecy to a prophet because he is greater than I. And even now, she did not want

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<sup>59</sup> Genesis Rabbah 65:8.

<sup>60</sup> Literally- "eyes of examination/testing."

<sup>61</sup> Literally- "the root/foundation of the house."

to say to him [that] such and such was related to me by God before she gave birth because of her fear that perhaps for Isaac's love of Esau he would not bless Jacob, but she left it all up to God.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless she wanted Jacob to be blessed from his father's mouth with all his heart and soul; or these are reason from God and by Him are our actions judged. This is similar to what Ramban wrote.

Her mind was occupied with this, that there is not an act of prophecy for a prophet, but rather he is only an instrument of God like the appearance of the glass that shines by the light that comes to it from heaven,<sup>63</sup> [and this is] like the speech of the prophet **"the spirit of God spoke by me, and his word was on my tongue."**<sup>64</sup> That is to say, the words also rested on his tongue in prophecy and he says only what God wants.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, in his blessings, the words are not from Isaac, but rather from God, may He be blessed. He arranges them and places them in his mouth to bless Jacob, the circumstances involved in this [phenomenon] are similar to [those are work in] natural phenomena, for if the intention of the person who sows was not to sow wheat and by mistake he took barley seed and sowed that, there is no doubt that the soil will bring forth barley and not wheat. Thus, the outcome does not depend on his intention, but rather on the [kind of] seed that was sown, and man is the instrument of the sowing. But the circumstances are not like this in connection with annulling vows, which I mentioned in [connection with] the question [of a] man who performs his action, [but] is not an instrument [involved] in that activity, and so in connection with those [aforementioned] blessings, Isaac was an instrument for realizing [i.e. attaining] God's will and His decree. Therefore, the righteous woman [i.e. Rebecca] was wise [in using] this trick which she performed to fulfill the word of God and His decree which he made known to her.

With this the fifth and sixth questions are solved.

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<sup>62</sup> Literally- "she rested it in the hand of heaven."

<sup>63</sup> On this simile see Halevi, Kuzari 4:15.

<sup>64</sup> II Samuel 23:2 - In context this is a psalm of thanksgiving by David for victory over his enemies.

<sup>65</sup> Literally- "he has no choice at all concerning them."

The Holy One, blessed be He, did not want Isaac to bless Jacob against his will and to exile Esau whom he loved because of his blessing, lest the old man grieve for many days and not be able to be consoled, and the prophecy would not be in effect at the time of the blessing [because of his distress]. Then Jacob would become confused, because prophecy is not seen amidst grief, therefore He allowed him to think that he was blessing Esau in order that he would bless Jacob with a joyous and happy heart.

Secondly, this bearer of advice from afar [i.e. heaven] caused animosity between these two brothers, so that Esau would become the rod of God's anger and the staff of His fury, by which to afflict Israel when they would sin [later on].

The RaN has already mentioned this in his sermons. With this the seventh question is resolved.

Truly, concerning the rest of the eighth question, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra thought that blessings were a [kind of] prayer, and the doubts associated with the question attach to it. Now the best of what has been said about it is what they [the sages] said, to the effect that the blessings are composites, [made] from prayer and [fore]telling future events, for the prophet sees [what] the future will be and prays to God to bestow what is good in abundance and take away harm from the one who is being blessed; in fact, this [explanation] is inadequate because it is necessary to distinguish between the blessings of the righteous, who do not know future events and blessings by the prophets, who do know them in advance.

Behold the Priestly blessing was [given] without the knowledge of the future. For Isaac it also would be difficult. Why did he not pray that Esau would be more successful than Jacob? Why did he not tell Esau that his words told the future and that he did not do a thing to Jacob by his blessing? Therefore he had no hatred of him, and he did not complain against him because the word of the King [God] is law.



But the truth of this matter is as I explained earlier, [i.e.] that the blessings of men, whether these are either prophets or pious men and men of action, are nothing other than [a kind of] giving preparation to the one who is being blessed and a prayer to God to cause some of His goodness to overflow to him. This is because the overflow from on high is bestowed on the one who receives [it] in stages and intermediaries and on the condition that the one who receives it on himself will be ready. [Or if] the one who will receive [it] is not already prepared as far as he, himself, is concerned. The one who blesses prepares him by his prayer, and the one who blesses he is the medium by which the abundance is conveyed. The ones doing the blessing were empowering the ones blessed in order to prepare them to receive the abundance and the goodness, as if the prophet or this righteous one truly extends the abundance by his power. As Scripture states, **"You shall take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, and lay your hands on him."**

(Numbers 27:18) Here Isaac recognizes and knows that Esau was completely unprepared to receive the divine Overflow. In accordance with his behavior, he commanded Esau to attempt by means of his work and his food that he [Isaac] derive benefit from it, and that his soul will be reconciled with him, and before he dies he will bless him. That is to say that he would pray to God on his behalf and that he [Esau] would be prepared concerning the matter that he would receive the goodness from God which was promised to Abraham. When Jacob came and stood on his own legs and the righteous one placed his hand on him and prepared him, and prayed on his behalf for a powerful attachment [to God] he knew that the divine overflow had already descended on him, and that no strength remained within him to remove from him the overflow that had already been bestowed. For the one who blesses is nothing other than an instrument, and with withdrawal of the instrument, the act that was already done withdraws [too]. This is like he who makes a window to let the light enter the house, [them] the darkness flees<sup>66</sup> [meaning] that it would withdraw from there. The Craftsman [God] can not turn aside the sun which has already entered [the sky].

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<sup>66</sup> literally - tramples, crushed

This was what Isaac feared greatly [when] he said "**and who was it then that...**" (Genesis 27:33) in saying [this he meant] it is not in my power to stop [the blessing] and turn aside the abundance that was already done by my hand. This is what he said "**for you then, what can I do my son?**" (Genesis 27:37) This means to say it had already happened to him by his hand and according to his preparedness [comes] all this abundance. I have no power to stop it and to turn it away from him.

Because the righteous woman knew all about this matter concerning the blessings, she attempted to have Jacob blessed, and she also commanded him to perform an act of labor for his father, and that he prepare two young goats and give them to him to eat so that he would pray for him on account of that [same specific] act. He would designate him by his prayer. Behold, in addition she said, "**may he bless you before God.**"<sup>67</sup> Isaac did not inform him that this blessing would be unimportant in his opinion, because it was connected to his death it would be before God and because of [Isaac's] close connection to God. And, therefore, her power would have been great, like the power of the king.

If he would be blessed then by God, it would be fulfilled in him and his descendants forever and Esau would have no standing before him. Because he was prepared in his own right; his preparation became increasingly frequent by virtue of his father's blessing, and the abundance would come to him and who would give it back and already the RaN agrees with this in a certain respect and those who follow after him even if they do not reconcile with him in this matter. And the eighth question is resolved.

"**And Jacob said to Rebecca etc.**" (Genesis 27:11) until "**as soon as Isaac finished [blessing him].**" (Genesis 27:30) Behold, Jacob, in his righteousness, feared greatly to cross the boundary of appropriateness concerning the honor of his father, and therefore he said to his mother, 'surely you know that Esau my brother is a hairy man while I am a smooth man, and despite [the fact] that my father cannot see, perhaps he will

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<sup>67</sup> Genesis 27:10 actually reads ".....in order that he may bless you before he dies."

feel me.<sup>68</sup> The text says, "**draw near to me**" (Genesis 27:21) [Isaac meant] to he himself, to kiss me or to put his hands on my face in an affectionate manner as the father does to his sons and he will discover that I am smooth then he will know me. He said if I am lying about this to him and I insult him by mocking his command, then this would be a reason that he would curse me and he would not bless me. That is to say, even now, despite the fact that he will bless Esau I still think that he will give me some blessing, but if I do this he will curse me and not bless me at all. Therefore behold, Jacob did not fear the matter of [being discovered by the sound of his] voice but [he did fear] if he [Isaac] felt hairiness or baldness. This is one of three reasons.

Perhaps, he thought that he would not need to speak to his father at all because his mother had not commanded him that he would say [certain] things to his father except that he would put [food] before him to eat. [On the other hand,] perhaps he thought that he could change his voice to resemble Esau's voice, because there are people who do this with as [their] occupation. Or perhaps Esau and Jacob were similar in their voices, and what Jacob's voice articulated would only be spoken in soft words, just as Rashi thought.<sup>69</sup> Or as the philosopher [Aristotle] wrote in the Book of the Soul, that the senses have primary sensibles [i.e. objects of sensation], like black and white and what[ever other colors there are] between them, to see, and sound with one [sound being] light and one [being] heavy, to hear, and heat and cold, or roughness and smoothness, to touch and so on with respect to other [senses and sensible objects] and in sensing these primary sensibles, no mistake whatsoever takes place. [But] there are also secondary sensibles closely related to them [i.e. to the primary sensibles], as [for example] if you say 'that thing that is visible' or 'the person speaking, he is so-and-so',<sup>70</sup> and [both] the number and [kinds of] motion associated with these sensible objects are such and such]. With regard to these [latter

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<sup>68</sup> This is a paraphrase of verses 11 and 12, but not a quote. He leaves out the word "trickster."

<sup>69</sup> See Rashi's comment on Genesis 27:22.

<sup>70</sup> Hebrew = פלני

examples] error surely does take place, as, for example, one who travels by ship would see the land moving. Therefore, the voice itself was only a sign to feel [Jacob] because [the touch is a] primary perception, and the recognition of the man by his voice (is) perceptible second.

Rebecca answered him **"your curse be on me."** (Genesis 27:13) To me there are two explanations of this. The first [explanation] is that she said if your father does curse [someone] behold it will be a curse only for the one who does this, based on what he overheard Isaac saying<sup>71</sup>. You have not done a thing and you did not hear a word. I heard and did all of this. Therefore your curse will be on me. So that you will be saved from his curse now **"heed my voice, and go get for me"** (Genesis 27:13) this means [to say] do this for me my son, not for your father, and you will not be subject to his curse. This is the meaning of **"go get for me."**

The second reason is that Rebecca knew that Isaac's nature and character was not to curse anything through a prayer [which would] bring on him calamity and great evil. Rather what he would do at the time of this anger is that he would reproach and revile with words the one who angered him. The insults could be called curses as Scripture says **"who cursed me with a great curse."** (I Kings 2:8) Scripture also says **"(come out) you bloody man, you base man."**<sup>72</sup> Thus Rebecca said when you father curses you, you will not be [the object of] his curse but [it will be] on me, when he says leave you son of a wanton mother, surely I know that your crazy mother advised you about this. If this is the case, the curse he would give you will be on me, and his revilement will be at me, and therefore do not worry about me, **"but heed my voice."**

With this, the ninth question is resolved.

Scripture mentions that Jacob did as his mother instructed and his mother dressed him in Esau's clothes which were with her in the house. Behold, Scripture says, **"Esau**

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<sup>71</sup> Literally - "from that which he heard of his words to do."

<sup>72</sup> II Samuel 16:7A member of the house of Saul is cursing David.

**her older son .... and Jacob her younger son"** (Genesis 27:15) to tell that Esau was her older son and the majority of parents enjoy the honor of their older sons, she did not do this because in her mind [Jacob enjoyed] God's will and His decree. She did it in order that her younger son would be blessed and not the older.

Then he brought the food to his father, and because [Isaac] asked him **"which son are you?"** (Genesis 27:18) Jacob was required to speak. He answered him, **"I am Esau your first born, I did as you commanded me, etc."** (Genesis 27:19) Rashi was in a difficult position to explain these words so that he [Rashi] would not say that Jacob lied and deceived his father in what he said to him. I would think that after Jacob acquired the birthright from Esau, and he traded it by his own [free] will, it was in his power to say to his father **"I am Esau your first born"** because [Jacob] was already the firstborn [by virtue of acquiring the birthright in the incident with the red stew] and was called by his name. If Isaac [did indeed] command what he commanded Esau in order to bless him because he was the first born and it was appropriate to establish the entire [covenant] with Jacob. Concerning this, he did not hesitate saying, **"I am Esau your first born"** because the laws of the first born were in his favor. I have no doubt that Isaac was confused if he was Esau or Jacob. Therefore, he first asked him **"how is it that you have found [the game] so quickly my son?"** (Genesis 27:20) As if he thought that he did not go out to hunt in the field. He answered him, **"Because the Lord your God granted me success."** (Genesis 27:20) It was his intention that He grant him [the blessing so] that his mother would be successful in this. Isaac accepted these things according to their plain meaning. Further this explained the doubt about him which was revealed [because next] he said **"draw near my son that I may touch you and know that you are my son Esau or not."** (Genesis 27:21) Then, with the sense of touch, he felt that his arms were hairy like Esau. He said, **"the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."** (Genesis 27:22) Because he was confused if he would believe the sign of the voice or the sign of the feel, Scripture says,

**"He could not recognize him because his hands were hairy."** (Genesis 27:23)  
[Despite the fact that] he felt that the voice was the voice of Jacob, behold he did not confirm that it was Jacob and he did not observe the truthfulness [or lack thereof].

Scripture further says, **"and he blessed him."** (Genesis 27:23) He did not mean to bless him because of the act, but rather he had decided [to bless him for another reason]. In order to further strengthen his examination [of Jacob], he asked another time, **"are you my son Esau?"** (Genesis 27:24) in order that he would be increased by the words of his repentance. He also recognized him by his voice. But Jacob was wise and responded to him with only one word and did not elaborate except to say, **"I (am)."** (Genesis 27:24) Thus, the old man believed more in the tangible sense of touch that he felt first from the perceived voice that was a secondary sense, as I explained. Therefore, he asked for the food **"and he ate... and he drank."** (Genesis 27:25)

In addition, after he ate, due to the doubt he had, he said to him, **"Draw near now and kiss me, my son."** (Genesis 27:26) This was in order to smell his clothes and to judge by the sense of smell as Scripture states, **"see, the smell of my son is like the smell of the field which God has blessed."** (Genesis 27:27) As if he was saying, if this truly not Esau he is similar to him in this manner. See, because the smell of my son is like the smell of the field and this teaches that God blessed him.

This means that concerning his sons, that God truly blessed him because of the act, and all of this was explained [because] Isaac was in doubt if the one blessed was Esau or Jacob, and because of the doubt [yet no conclusive evidence, he gave him the benefit of the doubt and] he blessed him. The one who refutes that these blessing were given by mistake and that it was not known that Isaac already doubted if it was Jacob, but it was God that caused him to speak and directed his will to bless him. Because of this same doubt there are many commentaries [on this portion].

With this the tenth question is resolved.

What were these blessing really? It was fitting that Scripture only mentioned them as "**and may God give you, etc.**" (Genesis 27:28) Rather, the blessing designated that the one who was blessed would be the master of the house, for God especially in regard to the supervision of His Providence and that he would inherit the land as God's inheritance. This is all included in what Scripture says, "**and he blessed him.**" [This means] the blessing was vague, [but] this was Abraham's blessing. As Scripture states, "**After Abraham died, God blessed his son Isaac.**" (Genesis 25:11) The text does not elaborate on what He blessed him with because it is all connected to [the fact that] it teaches that the blessing was said for the benefit of the descendants of Abraham.

Thus Isaac said to Jacob, "**may He grant you the blessing of Abraham.**" (Genesis 28:4) Thus it says there, "**may He bless you (with)**" all the noble spiritual blessings that God gave to Abraham, as if [he were] saying, "**may He bless you,**" and by this blessing may it be known that God blessed Abraham, and that God blessed Isaac after the death of his father, [and may He bless Jacob as well].

But because material benefits require the acquisition of true happiness whether for the purpose of being aides in approaching [it] or for the purpose of removing the impediments [to it] and the things that disturb it, as the great Rav [Moses Maimonides] wrote in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Perek Helek.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, after Isaac blessed his son with temporary good things he mentions, "**and may God grant you, etc.**" That means to say, and further may God give you these good things which He mentioned. It is possible to further say about this that Isaac began his blessing with the dew of heaven to allude to God's Providence and adherence to the Most High and He Who called the dew of heaven from the very first. Our sages, of blessed memory, said "the dew" means that in the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will resurrect the dead.

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<sup>73</sup> Sanhedrin, chapter 10, which gives his presentation and analysis of the 13 articles of faith.

In saying "**from the fat of the earth**" (Genesis 27:28) he is alluding to the land of Israel because it is flowing with milk and honey and this is also called "from the fat of the earth."

"**He blessed him.**" Also through Abraham's blessing so that he would be singled out for his close attachment [to God] and His Providence and his inheritance of the chosen land and his blessing was with the letter *vav* "**and may God grant you**" because it is returning to what Scripture said "**See the smell of my son is as the smell of the field, which God has blessed.**" (Genesis 27:27) That is to say, 'my son whom God has blessed.' This is as I explained. Therefore, God grant you these divine gifts which God gave to Abraham. These [gifts] are "**from the dew of heaven and from the fat of the earth,**" (Genesis 27:28) because this is God's Providence. The abundance of the Most High One descends from God from heaven and it is called "the dew of heaven." Truly concerning Esau [when] he said "**from the dew of heaven and from the fat of the earth**" there was a different intention as will be explained. By each one of these ways this matter is settled and the eleventh question is resolved.

If we interpret "the heavens" and likewise "the earth" in keeping with their plain contextual meaning, behold, He blessed it with these blessing which He said "**the dew of heaven and from the fat of the earth... abundance of new grain and wine,**" (Genesis 27: 28) and the rest of the things which Scripture mentions. The old man wished to bless him with this measure for measure, concerning that which he did for him there concerning the food. This was because he thought that [Esau] brought [the meal] to him. He saw that there was water and he extended his hand for the food. There was the tasty dish [made of] fat meat, oil, young goat, and he placed them in front of him, along with wine. [Isaac wanted to reward him] for the service which he did for him.

Regarding the blessing. In order that the water said, '**may God grant you the dew of heaven.**' This means so long as your land will require rain, God will give it to



you. Scripture mentions **"the dew"** because this is the water of blessing according to the words of the sages, of blessed memory.

In respect to the meat, Scripture says, **"and from the fat of the earth."** This means that God will grant him a rich and fertile land flowing with milk and honey.

Concerning the bread which he brings to him, Scripture says, **"an abundance of grain."** When Scripture says **"and wine,"** it means wine.<sup>74</sup>

Truly, because of the labor he did for him he said, **"Let people serve you and nations bow down to you."** (Genesis 27:29) Not only to the stranger, but also to your family will you always be lord and master. This statement teaches that Isaac feared that it was Jacob [in front of him]. Thus, he said, **"be lord over your brothers."** (Genesis 27:29) This meant, if you are Jacob, with you being the younger, you will be the patriarch to your real older brother. **"May your mother's sons bow down to you."** (Genesis 27:29) [This refers to] Laban and all of Bithuel's house. Or [perhaps] he said **"your mother's sons"** referring to all the children of God, [meaning] that the sons of son are like actual sons. If Esau was the one blessed, why would [Isaac] need to say to him **"be lord over your brothers"** because by the knowledge that he was older he would be their leader? [Isaac said this because] in his heart and mind he said I don't know if you are Esau or Jacob but you will be who you will be.

**"Be lord over your brothers"** means the relatives on the father's side. **"And let (your mother's sons) bow down to your"** refers to relatives on the mother's side.

In addition, one who undermines my blessing he will be cursed forever. One who fulfills [my blessing] he shall be blessed. This is the meaning of these blessings.

Here Isaac gave his blessing in the name of Elohim, as Scripture says, **"May Elohim grant you,"** but not [using] the special name. Thus he says another time to

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<sup>74</sup> Torah uses the less common word **תִּירָשׁ** which he clarifies with the common **יָרָשׁ**.

Jacob, **"May El Shaddai bless you... may He grant you the blessing of Abraham."** (Genesis 28:3-4) Elohim gave to Abraham means to tell that his blessings were given according to the readiness of the one blessed. According to how they were good and honest in their hearts [the blessing] will be accounted to them, but if it is not so, [the blessing] will not apply to them. In addition to this aspect, it was possible that the blessing of Abraham and Isaac would fall on [apply to] Esau because it was given in the name of Elohim, the One who teaches about the measure of justice,<sup>75</sup> and if he was innocent, it would be from the justice that he would receive [the blessing]. But if this is not the case, [the blessing] would not apply to him, because the scales and balances of God's justice for this matter. The sinner would not be able to come before him.

[With this the twelfth question is solved]

**"When Isaac had finished [blessing Jacob, etc.]"** (Genesis 27:30) until **"Esau hated Jacob."** (Genesis 27:41) Scripture tells of Jacob's good fortune that Esau did not come while Isaac was eating his meal, and [while] he was blessing him. If he had come in while [Isaac] was blessing him, it would have undermined and confused the entire matter, but in a great [feat of] condensing [the sequence of events]<sup>76</sup> [just as] Isaac had finished, Jacob left his father and Esau came with his dish as [Isaac] commanded him.

Our sages, of blessed memory, said that Jacob was concealed and hiding behind the door. When Esau opened the door to enter there, [Esau] entered and [Isaac] left.

The question is: how did he leave? Here Isaac asked, **"Who are you?"** (Genesis 27:32) Perhaps he feared that Esau was the first one blessed and Jacob came after him in order that he too would be blessed. When he said to him, **"I am your older son Esau"** (Genesis 27:32) it confirmed for Isaac that the one he truly blessed was Jacob, just as he had doubts about him, but because of his fear that his son Esau was evil, wicked and malicious he appeared as if he had never suspected him. Thus he trembled violently and

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<sup>75</sup> Hebrew מרת הדן.

<sup>76</sup> Hebrew - בצמצום גדול

did not tell Esau anything about the inquiry which he made. He said as if surprised, "**Who was it then that hunted game?**" (Genesis 27:33) Scripture means to say - who of those belonging to us [our family] here? Is there a man who knows how [to bring] game that he hunted and brought it to me? We don't have children who know how to do this except you.

Perhaps he said, "**Who was it then that hunted game?**" as if to say: who was he and where is he that was then with me in this room? If you say that was a strange<sup>77</sup> hunter, how did he bring me his game to eat when this [blessing] is not attached to anyone except my sons.

Further, I see a third secret. He said, "**I ate it all.**" (Genesis 27:33) Scripture means to say that: I am an old man, whose appetite has been corrupted and they make me tasty dishes, so that if I don't eat from this, I eat from that but now I have eaten from all the dishes [that they have cooked up] more than one is accustomed to eat.

Further, I inquired about a fourth secret. All of this was done in a very big hurry: [hunting] the game, preparing the dish and eating it. He said "**He came with guile.**" (Genesis 27:35) This means from the hunting. Since all these things happened, then I will bless him because of his [good] intentions. I know, my son, I know that he will fulfill my blessings by necessity, because it was not without cause that all these things are associated. Rather [it shows] that this matter is decreed in heaven.

Thus he said "**and blessed he shall be.**" (Genesis 27:33) This was not a prayer, except in as much as he was praying that Jacob would be blessed. Esau was complaining about him, but [Isaac] said this like a judge concerning the things [Jacob] merited. Here was Esau who saw the trembling of his father and believed that he felt regret about the blessing which he had given, but he did not understand his words. He feared that it was his intention by saying "**blessed he shall be**" that when he blessed the first one [it was only because] he brought game and made a tasty dish like his. In addition it

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<sup>77</sup> Literally - from outside.

was his judgment that he also be blessed. The trembling was because it was Isaac's original intention to only bless Esau, but now, by necessity, he blessed both of them. Thus, he said to his father, "**bless me too father.**" (Genesis 27:34) As if to say, since the two of us did this task let the two of us be blessed, despite the fact that because I am the first born it is appropriate that I alone am blessed. Isaac responded, "**your brother came with guile and took your blessing.**" (Genesis 27:35) This means, my son, you do not understand my words, for it was not my intention to be compelled that the two of you are blessed [by eating the game]. Rather, [I only] truly [instructed you to] hunt some game [because I wished to eat it, not because the food itself was a condition of blessing]. You brother Jacob came with guile to me and took the blessing that I wanted to give to you. He will inherit the earth, the connection to divine Providence and the blessing which God gave to Abraham.

If he already took it, how do they both merit it? Twice Esau asked about his [receiving a blessing]. One [time] he was grumbling about Jacob, "**Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times?**" (Genesis 27:36) That is to say that his name teaches about him, that this denotes<sup>78</sup> deceit and fraud<sup>79</sup> in the word "**he has supplanted me.**"<sup>80</sup> He has deceived me two times. These are the two times: my younger brother took my birthright and now he has returned again to subjugate me, he only took the birthright by merit of the blessing.

Scripture said "**he has supplanted me these two times.**" That is to say, two times in this matter.

This statement "**these two times**" he says in front of his father, as well as "**and then he said, 'Have you not reserved a blessing for me?'**" (Genesis 27:36) He responded to his father that he knew that it was impossible to have recognized Jacob by his

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<sup>78</sup> Literally - in the language of...

<sup>79</sup> Deceit - drash on root עקב - also. cunning, deceit, artfulness, wile, guile.

<sup>80</sup> Hebrew עקבני - note similarity to Jacob and above word.

voice or feel, [but] since [Isaac] wanted to bless him with the blessing of the first born it [seemed] impossible that he had not reserved for him some blessing to give him, when he came. Therefore, Isaac said to him, "**Behold, I have made him lord over you.**" (Genesis 27:37) He means to say that I have elevated him in the hearts of man; in addition, it is my will that he will be blessed, as I have decreed, that he will be your lord and master. If I had known it was him, this [situation] would have been impossible but I thought it was you there. Therefore, [I thought that] I gave you lordship, but this also teaches that this [whole sequence of events] was from God because you gave your blessing to him. This was not known to Isaac until that exact moment, as if he said: "If you gave him the birthright on heaven's authority, based on God's mandate," he has rebuked him in that he [Jacob] will be master to you and all of [your] relatives. [This refers to] the descendants of Esau who will be his servants.

In addition, this same vague blessing of Abraham, which I gave [Abraham] is connected to him. That is to say, I gave him supporters and helpers for the blessing so that he will possession "**an abundance of grain and wine.**"

"**For you then what can I do, my son?**" (Genesis 27:37) That is to say, you are wise. Please know and see that. What can I do? He made it [this way] and [what] can I do for you? Truly, Esau's answer to this was "**Have you but one blessing, father?**" (Genesis 27:38)

The commentators thought that this was surprising. When the blessing is for you, you are only able to bless one person with one blessing?

"**Bless me also**" [means] with another blessing different than the one with which you blessed him.

In my opinion, this was a gentle statement [i.e. a soft way of saying it], I confess to you that the main blessing is Abraham's blessing. What is it to you, my father? But it is impossible to take it [away] from Jacob, because it was all yours [and now it must all be his]. But because of the confusion I gave it to Jacob and it shall be his. But when the

words that are connected to it **"Bless me also father."** Then [these words] are received, more or less, and you are able to give me something in respect to what you gave him.

Thus the old man said to him, **"from the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling."** (Genesis 27:39) According to the commentators, he blessed that his land would be fertile and rich, and that he would be a valiant warrior by means of his sword, but not in respect to his brother because he will serve him and when the descendants of Jacob will sin [then] he will break his yoke from his neck.

And this is [what is meant] **"but is shall be when you break loose"**<sup>81</sup> (Genesis 27: 40) according to the commentary of Onkelos.

I think that the old man indicated four great future developments in one [blessing]. This is, **"Behold, from the fatness of the earth shall be you dwelling place."** It has been observed that he did not say 'you land will be;' rather, he said **"your dwelling place will be."** He promised that since his land would be Mt. Seir, a desolate mountain, as the prophet said, "Behold he will merit that his offspring will settle in a land that is good and fat, on which dew and rain always falls [in order] to satisfy and fulfill this observation about your descendants in the days to come. Further, I have already discussed this in my extensive commentary of the book of Isaiah, in the section of **"Approach, O nations and listen..."** (Isaiah 34:1) and I proved its meaning [based on] the words of our sages in many places and from the words of story tellers<sup>82</sup> who wrote Chronicles for the [various] peoples.

The second statement is **"By you sword shall you live."** (Genesis 27:40) It indicates that he would merit to dwell in the land by his strength and the might of his friends. It is understood that after the Edomites ruled there, they would rule the whole world because by their swords. They rule the same land on which they dwell. This was also fulfilled as is known from Scripture.

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<sup>81</sup> In the Hebrew of Genesis 27:40 there is a repetition of 'break loose' and 'break'. He is simply defining the word תריד.

<sup>82</sup> He appears to be referring to non-Jewish historians.

The third statement he says is, **"you shall serve your brother."** (Genesis 27:40) This means to say, that the descendants of Esau will be oppressed and submissive to the descendants of Jacob because when they will be in their natural land, they will serve the descendants of Jacob; and this will be fulfilled all the days of David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah and Asa; Judean kings, since there was no king in Edom [then], but rather military governors subject to the authority of the Judean kings. [This was the situation] until Jehoram, when because of his sin the Edomites rebelled from under his rule and established their own king.<sup>83</sup> Also in the days of the Second Temple, Edomites were enslaved to Israel, as I mentioned earlier.

The fourth statement he says is **"but it shall come to pass that you shall break loose and remove his yoke from your neck."** (Genesis 27:40) **"Break loose"** is similar to 'you shall rule.' [Thus he was saying] **"you will break loose"** and rule in the same abundant land when "you remove Jacob's yoke from your neck." For you will not be subjugated to him there as you will be at Mt. Seir, that is, Edomite land and this will also be fulfilled.

Truly, at the end of days the Edomites will return to their subjugation and deliverers will go up on Mt. Zion to judge the mountain of Esau and thus you find our exile attached to the destruction of Sammael.<sup>84</sup>

Thus questions thirteen and fourteen are resolved.

**"And Esau hated Jacob"** (Genesis 27:41) until the end of the portion. Scripture relates that toward Jacob great enmity and hatred remained in Esau's heart. They said concerning the blessing with which his father blessed him [i.e. Jacob], I think that [it is] returning to Esau; and he [Jacob] will want the blessing with which his father blessed Esau because [he said] **"by your sword shall you live... but it shall be when you break loose,**

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<sup>83</sup> Jehoram was the fifth king of Judah after the monarchy split. He worshipped foreign gods. The territory of Edom broke away under his rule.

<sup>84</sup> Hebrew - שָׂטָן - Satan, venom of God, Angel of Death, Devil, Adversary, etc.

**when you break his yoke from your neck."** (Genesis 27:40) Esau thought that by his sword he would take revenge on him [Jacob], and he will break his yoke from his neck. Therefore, because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, he took counsel [i.e. the blessing], and thought about killing Jacob. [Esau] said, **"the days of mourning for my father are approaching then I will kill Jacob, my brother."** (Genesis 27:41) But its meaning is that Esau did not want to cause grief to his father by the death of Jacob, his brother, but also not until after his death.

For perhaps when Isaac died, Jacob would flee and he would not be able to kill him. Therefore, he thought that the days of mourning for his father were approaching and his death. And at the hour of [his] death, when he [Isaac] was moribund [but not actually dead], so that Jacob would not separate [himself] from there, and they would all be in a state of confusion because of [Isaac's] death, then he would have time to kill him. Thus he says, **"the days of mourning for my father are approaching,"** and he did not say "they are coming" for Esau's idea to do this [to kill Jacob] at the very hour when no one would be thinking of such a thing.

There are those that say that, **"the days of mourning for my father approaching"** does not refer to the death of his father but rather, despite the fact that it was appropriate that the days of his mourning were approaching, that he would mourn his son Jacob when [Esau] would kill him. Thus, his father would mourn for him.

By him being so [intent on] taking revenge and bearing a grudge in his heart, there is no doubt that his heart was revealed to one of his family. This is according to the words of Abraham ibn Ezra [who commented] concerning **"(Esau's words) were told to Rebecca."** (Genesis 27:42) Scripture says about this **"her older son"** and calls Jacob **"her younger son"** to shame Esau's plan. While he was her older son, he was happy that the days of mourning for his father were approaching, in order that he would kill Jacob, his younger brother and [thus] be comforted and [receive] pity [at the time] of the death of his father [by being rid of his nemesis].



With this, the fifteenth question is resolved.

Rebecca said this to Jacob, "**behold Esau your brother comforts himself against you [by planning] to kill you.**" (Genesis 27:42) This means to say "Esau your brother is planning to seek revenge [at the] meal of comfort after the death of you father, and [he will try] to kill you." This is what "**comfort himself against you**" means.

Or its explanation is that, "behold Esau your brother is behaving friendly toward you as if he is already comforted concerning the blessing [which he received], but this is not true. Rather this is in order to kill you; that you will not be on guard to him and will trust him." Thus, he fled from there and went to the house of Laban her brother who was a strong and powerful person and thus he [Laban] would be protection, a refuge and Laban would save him from Esau [until] his anger was subsided. Because Esau would know how this whole thing was done, he would have great anger with his mother and with Jacob, his brother. Thus the righteous woman said "**until your brother's anger turns away.**" (Genesis 27:44) [Thereby] hinting at the anger he had, anger at her plan. Wait for this sign alone, "**until your brother's anger turns away from you.**" (Genesis 27:45)

Or [perhaps] she said, "**until your brother's anger turns away from you**" to the blessings. "**Until your brother's anger turns away from you and forgets what you did to him**" in the matter of the birthright.<sup>85</sup> Because Jacob was courageous in deeds, as was seen by the rolling of the stone that the shepherds had gathered to roll, he said, "if Esau were to come [now] I would kill him." [Therefore,] his mother was obliged to say to him, "**why should I loose you both in one day?**" (Genesis 27:45) This means, 'that if you kill him, his son will kill you.'

Thus the sixteenth question is solved.

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<sup>85</sup> Abravenel points out an interesting twist here - It is now what Jacob did alone, not her plan. She was willing to take Isaac's anger, but not Esau's.

Here Rebecca does not wish to reveal to Isaac Esau's true hatred, [namely] that he wanted to kill Jacob. She feared that Isaac [would be] against her and accuse her that she had caused all this evil. So that there would not be this great distress, and since she sent strife between brothers, she separated them for the sake of peace.

She spoke to [Isaac] about the matter of the marriage, that [Jacob] would not marry a Canaanite woman and Isaac agreed with her. He called Jacob and commanded him that he not take [a wife] from the Canaanite women, but that he go to the house of Bethuel because he was old and [seek] his advice. There, he would take an appropriate wife according to his honor.

Truly, Rebecca, whose intention was that Jacob's departure was to flee from Esau's hatred, commanded him that he would go to Laban, who was strong and mighty, not to Bethuel, her father, who was old. Thus, he did the deed [and left] because [Jacob] did not have property, wealth or a company of men to protect him.

Thus his father blessed him with blessings connected to this issue. He said, "**May God bless you.**" (Genesis 28:3) [This means, may God bless you] with property.

"**[May God] make you fruitful and multiply you.**" (Genesis 28:3) This refers to children and he mentions [this] to establish him then, at that moment [through future offspring by] the blessing which he gave him.

He said, "**May God grant you the blessing of Abraham (to you and your descendants with you) that you may take possession of the land of your sojourning which God gave to Abraham.**" (Genesis 28:4)

In order that one not think that because of Esau, Jacob had fled to the fields of Edom, Scripture mentions that he went to Paddan-Aram, to Laban, the son to Bethuel the Aramean, because he was powerful. He went to him because of his mother's command and also because he would create peace between them [because] he was his mother's brother, the mother [of both] Jacob and Esau. For Laban was equally close to both [i.e. he

was uncle to both and had no history with either] of them, but if Jacob was fleeing he would have gone to another location where Esau wasn't at with strength [to overcome him].

This resolves the seventeenth and eighteenth questions.

Scripture mentions that Esau did not think that Jacob's departure was to flee from him, but rather that he went to take a wife. This [is clear in the verse] "**and Esau saw [that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac].**" (Genesis 28:8)

Consider the meaning of the verse and why Scripture mentions the blessing two times?<sup>86</sup>

This is [because] Esau saw that Isaac blessed Jacob. That is to say, when [Esau] brought him the tasty dish as was mentioned earlier, it was at the moment when [Jacob] was before him being blessed and then he sent him to Paddan-Aram to acquire a wife for himself there. But now this blessing is at the time of his departure, another time. [Thus] he commands him "**you will not take a wife from the women of Canaan.**" (Genesis 28:1) He also saw that Jacob listened to his father and mother and went there to fulfill their command, but this is different than all the rest [of the verses], "**Esau saw**" but nothing else was told of the event except what "**Esau saw.**"

Further, Esau saw that he was judged [negatively] because he had evil Canaanite sons according to his father Isaac, but Scripture does not mention his mother because of what she had done to him, [in causing] Isaac to bless Jacob.

It was Esau's opinion, in his heart, that because of his wives he had lost his blessing. [In addition] his mother was a source of trouble, as was his father. Therefore, he went to Ishmael because he was Abraham's son and took Mahalath his daughter as a wife. He also was being defiant<sup>87</sup> because if he had bad Canaanite children, and on account of them he lost his blessing, then he needed to abandon them, but he did not do

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<sup>86</sup> Specifically in 28:1 and 28:6.

<sup>87</sup> Literally - crossed his arms.

this. Rather, he took Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, as a wife with his [other] wives and added to them. [Thus] he did not reduce his wickedness.

With this the nineteenth and twentieth questions which I expounded earlier are resolved.

With that the portion is complete and (let us give) praise to the True God.

### Discussion

Gersonides' commentary presents several contradictory views; some indict the behavior of Jacob, while other statements seem to approve of his actions.

In general, Gersonides is rather quiet about the acts of apparent deception. Perhaps he is hesitant to note a flaw in one of the patriarchs or perhaps, because in the larger picture there is little approval for Esau, he is hesitant to support his case.

Regarding the participation of Rebecca, he does make a comment that indicates her complicity in the act. Near the beginning of the commentary he says "she knew that the blessing of a prophet would not return empty."<sup>88</sup> This would seem to subtly indicate that she, and Gersonides, knew that the blessing was being obtained under questionable circumstances, yet they believed nevertheless that it would be efficacious, even if obtained through deception. Further, we see the justification for this action was that Rebecca thought Jacob was the more deserving son. This theme is alluded to

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<sup>88</sup> See a parallel verse in Isaiah 55:9-11. "But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways, and My plans above your plans... So is the word that issues from My mouth: it does not come back to Me unfulfilled, but performs what I purpose, Achieves what I sent it to do." - New JPS Translation, p. 737.

by other commentators such as Rashi and Ramban. Gersonides seems to approve of Rebecca's actions when he says that she "wisely brought it about ."

Gersonides devotes great attention to the detailed analysis of the blessing, but he does not comment further on the circumstances that led to its acquisition. Overall, there is very little said in the commentary concerning the deception. Still, the ethical lessons at the end of the exegesis provide some additional insight, which is informative.

In his discussion of the first lesson, Gersonides states that it is appropriate to bequeath to the more loved son the better portion. While Jacob is Rebecca's more beloved son, and perhaps God's favored one, Isaac favors Esau as the more loved son. Thus, Jacob upsets this rule concerning inheritance which Gersonides states. Thus, in this case, we must infer disapproval from Gersonides.

On the other hand, in the third lesson, Gersonides seems to favor a "win at all costs" approach. "Every person should attempt to remove all the things that prevent him from realizing that purpose... Do you not see that Jacob feared that he would be prevented from reaching his goal until Rebecca supplied him with the tricks..." From this we see that the objective seems to outweigh the morality of the situation, or the ends justifies the means in this case. Further, Gersonides specifically mentions "tricks" as the means to achieve the objective. All this yields, at the very least, a tacit approval of deception to achieve this specific goal.

In what is again a reversal of opinion, Gersonides seems to contradict his last lesson by saying, "it is not appropriate for a person

to deny another person what he is entitled to...." Here he pointedly says that Isaac wanted to bless Esau, thus the blessing was Esau's to possess, not Jacob's. Here we infer that the ruse was not acceptable.

In the eighth lesson Gersonides presents his last and longest ethical lesson. Here he speaks definitively in favor of Jacob. While he does not justify the deception, he makes it clear that the blessing is meant to rest on Jacob. He says, "Because Esau was not worthy of this Providence, Isaac could not bless him with it. From this passage we also learn that Isaac only loved Esau more than Jacob before (Jacob's) perfection became known to him. In fact, after this he loved Jacob more on account of his perfection and his merit." In this lesson, it is clear that Isaac harbored no ill-feeling toward Jacob, and it was also the divine will that the scenario should unfold in this manner. Thus, in the end, we are invited to conclude that Jacob was always the better choice to receive the blessing.

Abravanel's commentary is much more lengthy than that of Gersonides and also spends significant time discussing the details of the blessing. Abravanel also provides insight as to how one should judge the actions of our patriarchs and matriarch. He asks several questions which reveals the fact that he is troubled by the actions in this episode. For example, in the first question he is troubled by Isaac's haste in doing this act, especially since he was to bless Esau, who is here characterized as "evil." He poses further queries concerning the nature of the act in the second, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth questions. In the ninth question he also basically states Rebecca was an accomplice in using "tricks." Furthermore,

Abravanel points out, in question 17, that Rebecca compounds her lies by deceiving Isaac into sending Jacob away to Laban.

In his explanation of the passage, Abravanel makes some very insightful comments. For example, as he discusses the relative birth order of the two boys, he points out that Jacob would have been justified in assuming that he could supplant the elder brother, just as his father had replaced Ishmael, his older brother, when Abraham bequeathed his wealth to him.

In his answer to the fourth question, Abravanel squarely addresses the issue of the validity of the acts committed to obtain the blessing. He says that Isaac surely saw the wicked acts Esau committed. He prayed to God for guidance, and thus it was God's will that Jacob be blessed. All of the acts involved with the blessing were part of God's will. In the same section he even says that Isaac's eyes had grown dim for the specific purpose that Jacob could come and receive this blessing. To add credibility to the choice, Abravanel notes, as do others, that Rebecca received a prophecy foretelling that the older would serve the younger. Thus, all these acts, moral or not, were preordained. In keeping with his comment on divine intervention, he agrees with other commentators on the origin of prophecy. He states, "... there is not an act of prophecy for a prophet, but rather he is only an instrument of God, like the appearance of the glass that shines by the light that comes to it from heaven;<sup>89</sup> and this is like the speech of the prophet." Again, while Isaac spoke the words, they came from God and no error can be implied here. In concluding his comment on the fifth and sixth questions he

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<sup>89</sup> For further comments on this theme, see Kuzari 4:15

unequivocally absolves Rebecca of any wrongdoing, saying, "Thus the righteous woman was wise [in using] this trick, which she performed to fulfill the command of God and His decree which he assigned to her."

Abravanel goes on to agree with Gersonides that Isaac knew that Esau was not ready to receive the mantle of God's Providence. Here too is a justification for the outcome of the episode.

In a very telling comment, as he answers question ten, Abravanel clearly shows that he thinks Jacob was deceptive. He states, "Rashi was in a difficult position to explain these words so that he (Rashi) would not say that Jacob lied and deceived his father in what he said." Abravanel goes on to say, "I have no doubt that Isaac was confused about whether he was Esau or Jacob." Thus, it appears that Abravanel believes that Isaac's actions and speech, if not directly deceptive, were at least confusing enough to disorient Isaac.

Abravanel, in his tenth answer, also notes that Isaac noticed the different voice, and so when he was directly confronted with the question, "Are you really my son Esau?" Jacob responded only with, "I am." (Genesis 27:24) Abravanel comments "Jacob was wise and responded to him with only one word and did not elaborate except to say, "I am." The use of "wise" in this context would seem to indicate an appreciation for Jacob's method, if not tacit approval. Just a few lines later, he again introduces the divine will in order to quell any doubts that Jacob's action might have brought about an inappropriate conclusion. Here he says, "it was God that caused him (Isaac) to speak and directed his will to bless him."



In Abravanel's answer to question thirteen, he discusses the deception further. First, he adds details such as how Jacob hid behind the door as his brother entered and then slipped out behind him. An ambiguous comment here is the analysis of the verse, "Who was it then that hunted game?" (Genesis 27:33) Abravanel points out that the only person who knew how to do this was Esau. This now raises the question about whether Isaac noticed that the dish which Jacob brought was made of the more common baby goat. If this is the case, Isaac participated in his own form of deception, by pretending to be fooled.

While not an original insight, Abravanel connects Esau's lament in verse 36, with the meaning of the root of Jacob's name, which is "to supplant." He explain here that it means through "deception and fraud."

The answer to the seventeenth question explains how Rebecca persuaded Isaac to send Jacob away. Here, she fears Isaac's wrath and again deceives him by failing to present a full picture of how angry Esau was. Yet her motives are motherly, for she is only trying to separate her two sons for the sake of shalom-bayit.

To summarize, both commentators provide a detailed discussion of the actions of the four principal characters involved in this episode. Both provide an adequate defense to the question of the legitimacy of Jacob's acquisition of the birthright. The most basic assumption underlying all of the arguments is that Jacob, not Esau, was the one whom God wanted to receive the blessing. If receiving it was God's will, we humans can not begin to question it. If this logic is accepted by the reader then the conclusion that blessing is

legitimate and the means by which it was acquired are irrelevant since they were acceptable to God. Any attempt to apply human system morality to God is unworkable in the philosophers' view and thus since the act derives from God, legitimacy is a prerequisite.

**Chapter III**  
**Laban's Deception of Jacob**  
**Genesis 29:9-30**

**Preface to the Translation**

Jacob acquired the birthright under the questionable circumstances discussed in the prior chapter. He also left Beer Sheva to avoid the wrath of his brother Esau. Isaac, at the urging of Rebecca, sent Jacob to Haran where he was to find a wife from among the daughters of Laban. While on his journey, Jacob had a dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder stretching to heaven. In this vision he received God's promise that his descendants would inherit the land on which he slept and that he would have numerous offspring. Jacob continued to Haran where he encountered shepherds waiting at a well to water their sheep. When a beautiful woman arrived, he was moved to a great act of strength and rolled the stone cover off the mouth of the well. Following their recognition of kinship, the two returned to Laban's house, where Jacob was greeted and invited to stay. Laban gave Jacob the opportunity to work for him in return for a price he would name. Jacob chose Rachel. Following the agreed seven years of service Laban threw a huge feast in honor of the coming marriage. When the evening concluded, Laban brought Leah, not Rachel, to Jacob and he cohabited with her. The next morning Jacob discovered the deception and confronted Laban. Laban's defense was that the custom of the area was to marry off the older daughter first. Jacob then agreed to work for another seven years for Rachel. Following this period, Jacob worked a final six years for Laban in return for the wage of any

spotted or striped sheep born to the flocks. At the end of twenty years of service Jacob left with his two wives, two maidservants, eleven sons, one daughter and a great many sheep.

### **Issues to be discussed:**

This selection contains what may be seen as a clear deception of Jacob by Laban, when he switched Leah for Rachel at the final moment of consummating the marriage. While this may seem unambiguous, the extent of the deception is unclear.

One concern that should be addressed is the issue of what seems to be assent on Laban's part to agree to the marriage arrangement that Jacob proposed for Rachel. Specifically, Laban responded, "Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me." (Genesis 29:19) This is a vague statement; how is it to be understood? Was Laban planning his deception from the very beginning or not? If Laban was planning a deception, what were his objectives?

Exactly who was party to the deception? Their roles need to be explored. The text clearly states, "when evening came, [Laban] took his daughter Leah and brought her to [Jacob]; and he cohabited with her." (Genesis 29:23) How did Leah feel about her role? Why did Jacob not notice earlier that it was the wrong woman? Where was Rachel during this evening?

While Jacob plainly said that he was deceived, he remained with Leah and even fathered several children by her. If he originally wanted to marry Rachel, and then does, indeed, marry her,

how are we to understand the unusual polygamous family situation we see? Was polygamy an appropriate response to this deception?

Gersonides and Abravanel will touch on these and other issues as they expound on this portion.

It should be noted that the relationship between Jacob and Laban is continually marked by deception up to, and even following, their separation. For the purposes of this discussion only the initial interaction surrounding the betrothal of the two daughters will be examined as described in Genesis 29:9-30.

### Commentary

#### Gersonides<sup>1</sup>

While [Jacob] was speaking with [the shepherds], Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother, he got up to help her. He alone lifted and rolled the stone cover off the mouth of the well and watered Laban's sheep. He kissed Rachel on the hand or her clothes and he cried, according to the custom of family.<sup>2</sup> When he had already told her that he was family, she then ran and told her father.

Her father ran to meet him, embraced him and kissed him. Jacob told him the events which occurred, that he had been compelled [to do] on account of Rachel. Laban said to him, behold you are my bone and my flesh, behold I am obliged to bring you into my house.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition beginning on page 183 (גקפ).

<sup>2</sup> Bereshith Rabbah 50:12. "And Jacob kissed Rachel' (Genesis 29:11) All kissing is indecent, save in three cases: the kiss of high office, the kiss of reunion, and kiss of parting.... R. Tanhuma said: the kiss of kinship too, as it says, 'And Jacob kissed Rachel' because she was his kinswoman." -Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, Freedman & Simon, p. 645.

Jacob dwelled with him for a month and served him as a shepherd for his flocks, but his mother did not command him about this. Laban said to him, "Even though you are my kin, it is inappropriate that you serve me for free. Tell me, what shall be your wages?"

Behold, Laban had two daughters, and Jacob did not choose the elder, because she had weak and weepy eyes. This was due to some type of ailment. He chose the younger because of the [potential] offspring which would come from her and would be healthier and more complete. In addition, [Rachel] had a fine shape and pretty appearance. Jacob said that he would work for seven years, if he would give him Rachel, the younger daughter. Laban desired this, and Jacob fulfilled for him the seven years of service, and they were like but a few days. Notice that before Jacob began his work he said to Laban, bring me my wife because I am old and I will come to her, in order that I will have children from her. Truly Scripture said this because Jacob was already more than seventy seven years old<sup>3</sup> or [at least] eighty years old. Because of this, it was not possible for him to wait until he finished the work. But Laban did not fear that he would not finish the work, because it was within [Laban's] power to take away his daughter from [Jacob].

Here I am forced to explain that this matter was [discussed] before Jacob began his labor, for if this is not the case it would have been impossible that he did what was written in conjunction with Judah his son. This is because Jacob remained in Laban's house for twenty years, as Scripture says, **"Thus I have been twenty years in your house."**<sup>4</sup> When we take away seven years that leaves thirteen years from the time Jacob married Leah until his departure from Laban's house. This [issue] is explained by the lives of [his children], for each and every pregnancy was before his separation from Laban.<sup>5</sup> Joseph

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<sup>3</sup> Rashi calculates Jacob's age as 84 years old at the time he says "my days are fulfilled." (29:21). Thus Gersonides may be deducting the first seven years of service to yield an age of 77.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 31:41. Full verse reads, "Thus I have been 20 years in your house. I have served you 14 years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks, and you have changed my wages ten times."

<sup>5</sup> Meaning Judah was the fourth child born. Based on subsequent verses describing the size of his family, Gersonides is going to calculate when Jacob had been engaging in marital relations with the women.

was then six years old [when they left], this is if Rachel gave birth when the work that Jacob did for both Rachel and Leah was finished, as Scripture says, **"Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, (and let me go: for you know I have completed my service to you)."**<sup>6</sup> Thus Laban had to make [another] condition to pay him another wage.<sup>7</sup>

One should not say that he worked another fourteen years, until Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Concerning this, it is possible that there were six or more years [until he left] when Joseph was born. It was already apparent that Jacob did not serve him without a wage, for Laban himself rejected this when he said, **"Just because you are my brother, should you serve me for free?"** (Genesis 29:15) Further, Jacob mentioned that he would not serve without a wage, yet his service was fourteen years for [Laban's] daughters and six years for his flocks. This is the sign when the six years [were finished] altogether, Laban gave Jacob a wage from his flocks. One time he gave him striped sheep, another time spotted, another time speckled, and one another occasion patched sheep. He changed his wages ten times, as is mentioned after this.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, it becomes clear that if this [calculation] is accurate, Judah was more than forty three years old when Jacob went to Egypt, because Joseph was then thirty nine years old.<sup>9</sup> Behold, according to the common custom, Judah was [at least] thirteen years old when his wife conceived. Further, he was, by necessity, at least sixteen years old

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 30:26. This statement would seem to support that Jacob already had children by the women at the conclusion of the 14 years of service. RaLBaG may be hinting here that Jacob was no dupe. He knew that Laban was going to try to trick him and demanded his wages (the women) up front. By doing this genealogy he will prove that Jacob took them as wives at "the beginning" rather than wait till the work was completed. Nevertheless he completes the work as agreed.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to the promise to give him the spotted and speckled sheep which he then has moved away from the flock. Another later attempt at deception. See Genesis 30:25 through 30:43.

<sup>8</sup> See Genesis 31:41.

<sup>9</sup> This number is based on Genesis 41:36. "Joseph was 30 years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh." There was then seven years of plenty. When he reveals himself to his brothers, the text reads, "now two years of famine were in the land." (Genesis 45:6) Thus  $30+7+2=39$ .

when Shelah was born.<sup>10</sup> It was already seen that Onan was at least one year older than Shelah; it was because of this that Judah commanded Tamar, "**Remain a widow in your father's house until Shelah grows up,**" (Genesis 38:11) This was when Judah was at least twenty nine years old, when Shelah grew and he would be thirteen. After that, Tamar conceived by [Judah] and gave birth to Perez, and he was not less than thirty years old. Then when Perez[']s wife] conceived Hezron Judah was forty four years old, at least, and when Hamol was conceived he was forty five years old. We have already shown according to this computation that he was not more than forty three years old upon his arrival in Egypt, and Hamol had already been born then, as is mentioned in the following portion Vayigash.<sup>11</sup> It may be that it is unreasonable that everything we have calculated [in the timeline] about the connection [in the genealogy] should be drawn out within the [exact] time frame we have defined. Further, one can see from Scripture that there was a long time between the death of Onan and the maturing of Shelah.<sup>12</sup>

Because of this, we agree with the explanation that Jacob asked Laban [for the women first], and he gave as the reason for this that he had fulfilled his days. According to this calculation, it is possible that Judah was seventeen years old when Jacob left Laban's house.<sup>13</sup> Judah was fifty years old when he came to Egypt. Within this time, it is undoubtedly possible that it took thirty years for all that happened to him with respect to [his] children. This is clear from what we have mentioned.

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<sup>10</sup> Shelah was his third child. Genesis 46:12 gives the genealogy. "Judah's sons: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez and Zerah- but Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan; and Perez's sons were Hezron and Hamul."

<sup>11</sup> Again referring to the genealogy found in 46:12 of this portion.

<sup>12</sup> This statement would acknowledge that it is difficult to calculate the ages because there was not exactly one year between the ages of each boy.

<sup>13</sup> This supports the theory that he did not wait until each seven year tenure was complete before fathering children by the women. If he did, the oldest child could only be 13 years old at the time of his departure from Laban, and Judah could only be nine years old, at most.



Further, this interpretation is better suited for the language of Torah, for if it was the intention of Scripture that "**now my days are filled**,"<sup>14</sup> [means] that he completed the days of his service; it would have said the days of 'my service' are filled, not "**now my days are filled**" without a connection with the work. Thus, this refers by necessity to the days of his life. Further, this refutes the objection raised about how it is possible that he fathered eleven boys and one girl, one after another, in seven<sup>15</sup> years, for according to the calculation their births were completed in the fourteen years of service. There is nothing strange about this. However, we said "one after another" because from this story it appears to be this way without a doubt.

However, our sages, of blessed memory, tell us that this was all completed in seven years,<sup>16</sup> but this is their manner to greatly exaggerate with regard to the power of divine Providence and to publicize [its meaning] to the masses. Truly, that which is fitting, according to the plain meaning of the words, is what we wrote. You already knew their saying that the words of Torah have multiple meanings.

Behold, Scripture relates that Laban wished to give Leah [to Jacob] as a wife in place of Rachel. He gave him Zilpah, his maid, as her maid. Here it occurs that because of Jacob's modesty<sup>17</sup> he does not recognize her as Leah until the morning. Then Jacob complained to Laban and asked him, why did he serve him and what did he receive from him for his seven years of service? It was [Jacob's] intention that he give him only Rachel. This was stipulated between them. It is appropriate for you to know that it does not say, "**Did I not serve you for Rachel?**" in a sense that would necessitate the inference that

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 29:21. Hebrew- **כִּי מִלְאָן יָמֵי**.

<sup>15</sup> Gersonides use of seven years here is confusing. Six would seem to be the proper number. Twenty less fourteen years of service leaves him six years of procreation. But he would have been with Leah and her maid for seven years before that. Perhaps he derives this number from some other source.

<sup>16</sup> This according to *Seder Olam* (book believed to have been written by Tana Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta) "we find that all the tribes were born in these seven years except Benjamin."

<sup>17</sup> Here is an explanation of why Jacob was duped. Jacob was not stupid, he was modest, and was showing care towards his bride.

this took place after the days of his service; for [Abraham] said words like this, "**Let me give you the price of the field.**"<sup>18</sup> But [Ephron ben Zohar] still did not give it to him and there are many more examples in Scripture.

Laban answered him that it was not the custom of that place to give away the younger before the older. Because of this, he was forced to give him the younger daughter [in addition to the elder]. [Laban] said to him, "Fulfill seven days of rejoicing with Leah,<sup>19</sup> then in the next week I will also give you Rachel for the work which you will do for me, [meaning] for another seven years on top of the seven years you have worked." Thus, Jacob did [as Laban proposed], and Laban gave him his daughter Rachel, and he gave her his maid, Bilhah, as her maid. Scripture also says that [Jacob] came to Rachel and loved her more than Leah. This teaches that Leah was also loved, but that she was not loved as Rachel, and this is the reason for the statement in Scripture "**Leah was hated**"<sup>20</sup> for she was not loved like Rachel.

[End of Exegesis - Only relevant lessons listed below<sup>21</sup>]

The fourteenth lesson concerns character traits. This [teaches] that it is appropriate for a man at first to behave with utmost modesty with his bride at the time of sexual intercourse. Behold, you see that Jacob did not recognize at the time of intercourse that his wife was actually Leah until the morning. About this they say<sup>22</sup> concerning one of the great sages of

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<sup>18</sup>Genesis 23:13. An example of honorable negotiations, where Abraham buys the burial site for Sarah. "and [Abraham] spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, 'If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.'"

<sup>19</sup> Also noted in Rashi who quotes Talmud Yerushalmi, Moed Katan 1:6. See also Bereshith Rabbah 70:19.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 29:31. Hebrew reads **בִּי שְׂנֹאתָ לָהּ**. Others say, "Disliked, unloved."

<sup>21</sup> Many of the lessons concern how it is appropriate to rejoice with the bride, the prescribed amount of time to rejoice, and how Leah is actually loved. The Hebrew text of the translation continues here, in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition on page 195 (**קצת**).

<sup>22</sup> B. Nedarim 20b.

the Talmud that he would sanctify himself for more than an hour before the act of intercourse, and then he would uncover a handbreadth and cover a handbreadth, and for him it was as though he were compelled by a demon. In this way, the impudence<sup>23</sup> is removed and his offspring will be more chosen.<sup>24</sup>

The eighteenth lesson concerns moral qualities. This [teaches] that it is appropriate for a man to establish, without qualification, what he will receive, give, and do with a whole heart. Then it is impossible for a person [to say] that his wife does not treat him properly. Here, you see that even though Laban behaved deceptively with Jacob concerning Rachel, [Jacob] worked seven years for him when he received [his payment], and he did not grow tired of the long labor. Rather in his eyes they were as though there were a few days, as though Laban had not deceived him at all. Likewise, he worked for Leah seven more years faithfully and willingly as if he had [received] from Laban a good wage. It has already been explained to you that this labor performed with the utmost perfection [on Jacob's part] with respect to what has been mentioned in this portion.

The nineteenth lesson concerns character traits. This [teaches] that a person should rejoice in the portion that God gives him. For it already happens that what a person thinks is not to be preferred [literally chosen] is in reality, [often] more preferable. Behold, Jacob chooses Rachel over Leah, but God, may He be exalted, shows him that Leah is more preferable, in keeping with the goal for the sake of which one intentionally takes a wife, namely, bearing children.

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<sup>23</sup> Impudence here has the sense of being overly forward or inclined to follow one's impulses without restraint.

<sup>24</sup> Chosen in the sense of refined or of higher quality.

### Abravanel<sup>25</sup>

The 8th Question.<sup>26</sup> Why did Laban say in response to Jacob alone, after he told him all the events that happened to him alone [on the road], "**Surely you are my bone and my flesh.**" (Genesis 29:14) It was a short reply and apparently given without much interest. Now Jacob already knew that he was of his bone and his flesh [because he was] the son of his sister Rebecca. What new thing does he announce to him by this statement?

The ninth question. Why does Jacob choose the younger sister Rachel and not the older sister Leah? There is no doubt that it was improper to give [away] the younger daughter before the older daughter. Was it because Rachel had a pretty shape and fine appearance [but] beauty is only skin deep<sup>27</sup> and was it because Leah's eyes were weak that the man saw these things? But the Lord looks into the heart and it was not appropriate for Jacob to be concerned about these things.

The tenth question concerns the response of Laban to Jacob [when he says], "**It is better that I give her to you, than I should give her to another man.**"<sup>28</sup> But, behold, in this response he doesn't say that he will give her to him, and he doesn't say that he will not give her to him. Why does it not say, "It is only appropriate to take Leah for she is better for you?"

Behold I will explain these passages in a way that will resolve these questions.

[Answers to question eight<sup>29</sup> and nine do not provide any discussion of deception which would be pertinent.]

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<sup>25</sup> The Hebrew text for this translation may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition, beginning on page 314 (דף 314).

<sup>26</sup> Prior questions do not bear on the passage and topic under discussion.

<sup>27</sup> Literally - the falsehood of grace and vanity of beauty. For a parallel see Proverbs 31:30 "Grace is deceptive and beauty is illusory, it is for her fear of the Lord that a woman is to be praised." - New JPS Translation, p. 1338.

<sup>28</sup> Genesis 29:19. In context Jacob has just said, "I will serve you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter." (v. 18)

<sup>29</sup> While Abravanel did not see any deception here, Ramban saw cunning in the initial interchange between the two men.

[Answer 10]<sup>3 0</sup>

But Laban thought in his heart that if he implored him to take Leah that it would not be sufficient for him to [work for the seven years]. But perhaps because of this Jacob would flee from there and not take this one [Rachel] or that one [Leah]. Therefore he deceived him with words in his statement, **"It is better that I give her to you, than I should give her to another man."** (Genesis 29:19) That is to say, "This wage that you requested for your work, namely, that I should give you Rachel as a wife, [is a difficult request.] For it is well known that in the future she is to marry a man without [the condition] of work." [Jacob responded] "Who is this person such that it will be better for you that she should be given to him?" [Laban responded,] "I will not choose him yet. Rather, I might give her to you. Accordingly, these are not wages, but rather free labor. **"Stay with me,"** and I will give you your reward."

Behold, by these words he made known to him, by explanation, that he would give him Rachel and also that he would conceal from him that he intended to give him both of them, with this he posed his question to him, and Laban was silent.

With this the 10th question is solved.

[Text continues with a new set of questions]<sup>3 1</sup>

The first question: The text states, **"And [Jacob] went in also to Rachel, and in addition he loved Rachel more than Leah."** (Genesis 29:30) [The question is:] What did Jacob see to take two sisters [when both were still living<sup>3 2</sup>], in addition to taking two servants? This is a total of four women. One should not say that from the Torah of

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<sup>3 0</sup> The Hebrew text may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition on page 320 (שכ) in column b.

<sup>3 1</sup> The Hebrew text may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition on pages 320 -321 (שכ - שכא).

<sup>3 2</sup> This is prohibited in Leviticus 18:18, "Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister and uncover her nakedness in the other's lifetime." It would have been permitted to marry a surviving sister after the other had died. This was not the case here.

that the descendants of Noah it was not forbidden to take them [both]. Nor [should one say] this is outside the land [and the laws don't apply]. Behold, this matter itself will show that it is base and something that one should keep away from. Behold, you will see that Adam, our first father, took for himself only one wife, as did all of his descendants. Further, Noah took for himself only one wife, as did Shem and Ever. Abraham took only Sarah as his wife; and if he took Hagar, it was only by her command and permission of the mistress<sup>33</sup> [of the family] because she [Sarah] did not have children. Isaac our father took only Rebecca as a wife. Why, then, did Jacob take these two sisters and the two maids?

The second question concerns the statement, "**And he loved Rachel more than Leah.**" This teaches that he also loved Leah. This inverts the idea of the Torah in the statement, "**for Leah was hated,**" (Genesis 29:30) as well as the verse "**for I am hated.**" (Genesis 29:32) There are those who say that Leah was loved, but it was because of Rachel that she was hated. But this is not the case, for a person does not hate a beloved companion. In addition, with children the person might love this one more than that one, but would not hate one of them.

Also our rabbis, of blessed memory, said:<sup>34</sup> When she behaved in a deceitful manner, he thought about divorcing her. But when she gave birth, he said, "Shall I divorce their mother?" Because of this he rebuked [her] and said that he had hated her, and actually sought to divorce her. If this is so, why does Scripture say, "**Moreover, he loved Rachel more than Leah,**" (Genesis 30:30) for we do not find that he loved Leah [at all], but rather [the text says] that she was hated?

The Ramban resolved the difficulty of the meaning of "**Moreover, he loved also Rachel more than Leah.**" This is to say that he went to Rachel, and he loved her. If this is so, it includes an act and not a woman. But this is not correct because inclusion

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<sup>33</sup> Literally - female master. A reference to Sarah.

<sup>34</sup> Bereshith Rabbah 71:2.

always comes under the preceding class [in this case, associating] love [for Rachel] with [love for Leah] and not [associating] love with cohabitation.

Further, there is still the difficulty of what need there was for this use of the inclusive *gam*.<sup>3 5</sup> For [we find] here only an addition to the act of loving; but the act of "coming to her" [sexual intercourse] and the *vav* of "**and he loved**" has brought this into the text.<sup>3 6</sup> Ramban thought the meaning was also to teach that since Leah was the first [wife], it was customary for a man direct his love to his first wife. Here, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah; there is no place for this at all because customarily a man loves his first wife who is his intended [love]. But Leah was not his intended [love], for he thought that he came to Rachel but on the contrary the first love is the more enduring and it was Rachel whom he loved first. And all the more so [did he love Rachel more] after Leah behaved deceptively so something of this doubt remained in place.

[Answers:]<sup>3 7</sup>

**"Jacob worked (seven years) for Rachel" (Genesis 29:20) until "God saw that she [Leah] was hated." (Genesis 29:31)**

Scripture says that Jacob served Laban as a shepherd for seven years which he swore to serve for Rachel. It was not his intention to work fourteen years, for this is a long time; but it seemed "**as if it was [merely] days**" (Genesis 29:20) because of his love.

[His love was also] so great and mighty that he didn't notice the work, and all the days passed as if they were two days, and the seven [years] were [like] one. Or [it felt like] two days because of his desire for her, and it appeared to him that he took her as a

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<sup>3 5</sup> Hebrew - "גם."

<sup>3 6</sup> Meaning of prior sentence uncertain.

<sup>3 7</sup> The Hebrew text may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition on pages 322 (שכב) in column a until page 323 (שכב) column a.

bargain,<sup>38</sup> [considering her value,] and acquired her inexpensively. Moreover, he was rewarded with her beautiful appearance.

In payment for the seven years he said to Laban, **"Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, and I will go to her."** (Genesis 29:21) This means, that the days of my work are fulfilled, these are the seven years for which I was obligated to work because of her.

The RaLBaG wrote that before the [end of the] seven years Jacob asked **"Give me my wife."** He was forced to [calculate this] by the ages of Judah and Joseph. [Thus, the meaning of] **"and when the days were fulfilled"** means the age appropriate to conceive them. [Gersonides] said, **"Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife.'"** [meant that] the whole story of Leah's chuppah (marriage) as well as Rachel's took place beforehand, **"and Jacob worked for Rachel for seven years."** Behold, this distorts the verses and confuses them.

They said, **"and I will come to her."** It is not the explanation of this passage that he will ravish her because this is most despised. Rather, it intends to say that he would be with her in her lodgings; that he would come to her whenever he returned from the fields, and he would not be like a [mere] visitor, who turns aside to lodge in his companion's house.

Rashi wrote that he said, "Let me come to her in order to beget offspring. Behold, today I am eighty-four years old, and when shall I establish the twelve tribes?" Similarly, the Ramban, **"I will come to her,"** [means] "I will dwell here with her so that you will not give her [to others] and I will go to her."

Laban gathered together all the men of the city and made a feast to honor the marriage, and in the evening, [meaning,] the middle of the night, he brought his daughter Leah; and he made her enter into the bed chamber with him. Laban watched in deceit [presumably to see] that the marriage was consummated.

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<sup>38</sup> Literally - a cheap price.



For he [Laban] gathered together all the men of that place at Leah's wedding chupah and made a feast for them; but he did not do this for the marriage of Rachel. For if Jacob would have wanted to divorce Leah, because he was furious with her, he would shame her in front of all the people who had gathered for her wedding and eaten with him. Perhaps because of this, he refused to divorce her. But with Rachel, because of his love for her, there was no doubt in this regard. He did not try to be clever by making a feast, nor would he gather all the people of the city to her wedding chamber.

It appears that when he entered the house with Leah he put a lamp before them in a modest manner. When he performed the obligatory act of sexual intercourse following the marriage, he separated from her and left her tent, and Zilpah, her maid, whom Laban had given to her, remained with her. This also is a way of being deceptive as in the words of [our sages], of blessed memory. Behold, Bilhah was older than Zilpah, and it was appropriate that Laban gave the older maid to Leah because she was his older daughter. [But] he did the opposite and gave Zilpah, the younger maid, to Leah so that Jacob would think he came to Rachel, who was the younger daughter, just as she was [the younger maid]. This is according to what Rashi wrote.<sup>39</sup>

Because of his great modesty Jacob did not recognize [her] until the morning, and then he protested to Laban saying, **"What is this that you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why have you deceived me?"** (Genesis 29:25) Laban responded, "One does not do it that way in our place." This means, behold I, myself, am not obligated to give Rachel to you, but I said, **"[It is] better that I give her to you than I should give her to another man."** (Genesis 29:19) If I give her to you it will only be according to the custom that the older daughter is given first and

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<sup>39</sup> Rashi comments on this in his note to Genesis 30:10. "For she (Zilpah) was the youngest of them all and a child in years, and pregnancy was not recognized in her. In order to deceive Jacob, Laban gave her (Zilpah) to Leah, so that he should not understand that they are bringing him to Leah. For such was the custom, to give the older maidservant to the older (daughter), and the younger (maidservant) to the younger (daughter)." - Translation by Isaiah & Sharfman (S.S. & R. Publishing Co, 1949) pp. 293-4.

afterward the younger [is given in marriage], for according to their birth are they married off. But if, despite this, you still desire Rachel, I will give her to you in exchange for seven more years of work to follow. You have already acted well, so I will act well with you and give her to you before the work which you will do, this is what is said [in the verse], **"Fulfill this one week."**<sup>40</sup> This means, fulfill with Leah seven days of rejoicing following the marriage, and immediately I and my wife or I and the people of this place will also give you Rachel; and you will work with me for her, just as you worked on account of Leah. Behold, Jacob was satisfied with this, for this [option] was from God, that he might take [as wives] these two righteous women. Behold, Scripture says, **"And he came also to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah..."**

(Genesis 30:30) This is to make known that, according to the natural course of events, he who loves a woman and then goes to another one [is such that] his love will become weak for the one whom he loved first. This is because the woman's desire, insofar as she is a woman, is only a desire for sexual intercourse, and behold the man's sexual desire is canceled to a certain extent by the act of sexual intercourse. Thus, his lust will weaken for that which he desires. Because of this, doctors prescribe that someone who suffers from lovesickness<sup>41</sup> lie with other women so that his heart forgets those who are desirable to him.

But Scripture tells here that it was not the case with Jacob. When he came to Leah, he did not forget Rachel, and his love for her did not weaken on account of his [actions] with Leah. Rather, the opposite happened. On account of his coming to Leah, his love for Rachel was strengthened, because that which is good is loved on its own account, and it will be loved even more when it is linked to something that is lacking, for when it is linked with something [which is lacking], that thing will be more prized.

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<sup>40</sup> Genesis 29:27. Full verse reads - "Fulfill this one week and I will give this other one to you for the service which you will do for me, for another seven years."

<sup>41</sup> Literally - "a sickness of desire."

This happened to Jacob when he went to Leah first, and then afterwards went to Rachel. Here was the association with Leah [with whom he had already been], and thus, Rachel seemed to him even more perfect in terms of being the alternate goal [of his affection]. Afterwards, he then had two [types of] love [in connection] with Rachel. One [love] on account of her own perfection, without being connected to any other source; this was the love with which he first loved her. The second [love], on account of being linked with Leah, and this is the love which comes on the scene now, when he came to her [Rachel] after [having been with] Leah.

In accordance with this [reading] the *mem* of *mi-leah* is not the comparative *mem* [signifying] advantage or superiority as in "more than a thousand pieces of gold and silver," but rather it is the *mem* of causation, signifying the reason or cause, as it "the matter has come forth from [i.e. because of] sins of her prophets." It [the text] said that he came to Rachel after Leah and that he also loved Rachel on account of Leah, just as he also loved her for herself, and [the use of] the inclusive word *gam* [Genesis 29:30] comes under the category of "is connected to [it]," namely, that if he were in love with her [Rachel] the verb which is inclusive is [to] love, not a woman, because it does not come under the same category as it [the woman]. Behold, owing to the strengthening of love, you say that he [has] worked, after this [incident] for an additional seven years, for payment of compensation after receiving the benefit and the labor will always be difficulty. But, Jacob did not act thus, because [he acted] out of love and [because] he had already [presumably cohabited with] Rachel. He was filled with anger during the first seven years of his labor. Now, behold, [in order to marry] Rachel he worked happily and with a glad heart for another seven years.

With this the first and second questions are solved.

## Discussion

The two commentators approach the potential deception in this episode from very different vantage points. Gersonides analyzes the motivations and emotions of the characters, while Abravanel is more concerned with the actions involved.

A major portion of the commentary is taken up by Gersonides' lengthy analysis of the ages of Jacob's children. Having carefully presented his case, however, he does not state the exact purpose behind the calculations. For my part, I believe that the analysis is presented to show, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jacob did not wait until the conclusion of the periods of labor to cohabit with his wives. Rather, he did so at the beginning of the work periods mentioned. This would refute the reading that Jacob labored for seven years, and never anticipated Laban's deception. Rather, Jacob was aggressive, not meek, and demanded his wages at the beginning. While this does not negate the fact that he was tricked, one could read the passage as indicating that he was prepared for an act of deception and was responding pro-actively. We also learn a response to deception from Jacob's behavior. Even though he was tricked, he was honorable and fulfills his obligations in the bargain. It should be pointed out that Abravanel pointedly disagrees with this specific reading of Gersonides' concerning when the marriages took place and the ages of the offspring.

To the question of how Jacob could be so negligent as not to notice the difference between the two women on the wedding night, Gersonides offers an answer. This deception succeeded because Jacob was being "modest" with his bride. While wedding night

rituals may have changed over time, this argument is unconvincing assuming any realistic understanding of the wedding night and its activities. An issue related to the substitution of Leah for Rachel is how Leah was viewed by her husband. Scripture says she was despised. This may be because she was less attractive, the cause of his continued servitude to Laban, or because she had a role in the deception. Gersonides comes to the defense of our matriarch and says that she was not hated or unwanted, simply less loved than Rebecca. It should be noted that there is very little negative commentary on the character of Leah in rabbinic literature. Abravanel is one such dissenting opinion. He finds that some reproach for the deed carried over to her. Quoting the Ramban he says, "Leah behaved in a deceptive manner. From this act he retained many doubts." Thus Leah was not untainted by this act. We can see that trust must be reestablished in the marriage and may be the source of the Bible's statement "she was despised."

Gersonides offers three lessons which bears on our understanding of deception in this passage. First, in lesson fourteen, he reiterates that it was not Jacob's carelessness that led to the confusion but the care he, and we should, show towards a bride; specifically, a groom should proceed so slowly and with such care and modesty for his bride that it is possible that he might not see her face or any other distinguishing marks. The second lesson teaches the honor one must nonetheless show others, even in the face of deception. This echoes the childhood adage, "two wrongs don't make a right." Even though he was cheated and deceived, Jacob shows himself the bigger man and fulfills his task. Third, Gersonides says

that this act, the deception of Jacob, is part of the divine will. Perhaps divine will was connected to why he was justified in taking the blessing from his father. Perhaps Jacob's deception is a veiled reference to the events that happened on the road from Beer Sheva, and multiple wives were a necessary part of becoming a populous nation. This last lesson is troubling because, while it displays a certain logic, it says in essence that God was behind this deception for a greater good. Does this then make the deception acceptable?

Gersonides does an adequate job of addressing the major elements in the story, yet Abravanel will go deeper, adding detailed analysis to events not fully explained in Scripture.

Abravanel sees the entire story as a plot, and from the beginning he is filling in details in order to lay out the subterfuge. At the outset, in answer ten, Abravanel saw Laban as trying to deceive him with words. In addition, in his answer he adds some of his own dialogue in order to show that Jacob did not go blindly into the bargain. Other commentators make a similar remark, such as when Rashi parses the statement, "Give me Rachel, your younger daughter."

Abravanel sees the plot continue when Laban summoned the men of the city. Leah would be put to shame if Jacob were to divorce her when he found out about the switch. The birth order of the maids was part of the plan, because Zilpah was the younger maid and would normally accompany the younger daughter. Thus, the switch of the maids, figured into the plan. To compound the deception further, Abravanel suggest that Laban watched to make sure the sexual act occurred! The depths to which Laban went in the

deception were indeed great. Thus, Jacob was certainly not a fool, nor did he passively accept this situation once the ruse became clear to him, but rather the situation was well-crafted and executed.

Concerning Leah and the issue of multiple wives, Abravanel again responds. Here he finds it to be a matter of divine will. He says, "Behold, Jacob wanted this, for this [option] was from God." He does not illustrate how Jacob recognized this, except to explain that Jacob maintained an unabated, almost unnatural desire for both women. Later he says, "(Jacob) also loved her."

To summarize, both commentators give thorough but different account of the events in this episode. Taken together, they illuminate the actions and reactions of the characters in this story of honor, dishonor and deception.

**Chapter IV**  
**Yael's Deception of Sisera**  
**Judges 4:1-24**

**Preface to the Translation**

The verses to be examined in this chapter will focus on a conflict that occurred during the judgeship of Deborah. At this time, Israel was oppressed by the Canaanite king, Jabin. Deborah conveys God's message to Barak that he should lead the people against Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army. When the battle goes poorly for Sisera, he flees to the home of a man named Heber, who is characterized by the statement "for there was peace between Jabin, the king of Hazor, and the house of Heber the Kenite." (Judges 4:17) Heber's wife, Yael, meets Sisera and encourages him to take refuge in her tent. She provides him with some milk to drink and then waits for him to fall asleep, at which time she pierces his head with a tent-pin and thus kills him.

Our investigation in this chapter will focus on the actions of Yael, described in the later verses. The action occurs in the area of the Wadi Kishon, Mt. Tabor, and Harosheth-goiim, which are all in the area between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea.

During this period the Israelites were still struggling to establish their hegemony in the land and had not yet founded the monarchy. Deborah's judgeship, described in only chapters four and five, is significant as a rare example of positive female leader.



### Issues to be discussed:

The main issue to be examined in Judges 4 is Yael's deception when she innocently and hospitably invites Sisera into her tent, only to kill him as soon as he falls asleep. Not only does she deceive him by her invitation, but there is an added element of treachery in light of the peace treaty between her husband and Jabin. While she may be viewed as a heroine for killing an enemy of Israel, this act seems totally unprovoked and bizarre in light of the existing peace treaty. As the ally of Sisera's king, she should render aid to him, not duplicity. While her actions do not cohere with her statements, Scripture speaks highly of her actions and does not deprecate her in view of her devious behavior. This chapter will attempt to uncover a moral and practical understanding of Yael's deceptive behavior.

### Commentary

#### Gersonides<sup>1</sup>

[Sisera] used to dwell in a large and well fortified city and this [place] was called Harosheth-goiim, that is to say it was built by the work of many nations that constructed it; they strove to make it strong because of Israel. They called the many nations, and on the advice of all of them the building was finished with the utmost vigor.

[Another possible] explanation of Harosheth-goiim [is that] owing to the great size of the city [they envisioned] every kind of craft among those that the various nations performed [would be found there]; As if you would say weaver, embroiderer, of different kinds of clothes were among them, as well as those who polish bronze and iron. So it is with all kinds of work, for one does not find this in a city if the city is not very large. It is

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in Mikraot Gidolot: Nivim Rishonim, Jerusalem: Mesorah Publishing, 1990, pages 46a (יב) to 47b (יג).

possible Harosheth-goiim had a wide border, within which there were many cities, and this border was in a strong place. It is possible that it was in the midst of a great forest, for the Targum of forest is *hursha*<sup>2</sup> ; and it appears that there were many kings there according to what is apparent in Deborah's song. It says, "**The kings came and fought.**" (Judges 5:19) We did not see in the story that Sisera brought an army, rather only that, "**[he was from] Harosheth-goiim.**"

Behold "**at that time Deborah was judging Israel,**" (Judges 4:4) and I think that at the time that Israel returned to God she was judging them. She caused that they return to God, for it is not farfetched [to assume] that Israel did evil in God's sight and Deborah did not rebuke them, in as much as she is a prophetess and behold this further teaches what we have said [namely that Scripture says], "**she judged Israel at that time.**"

Scripture calls her "**the wife of Lappidoth**" because her husband's name was Barak, and 'barak' (lightning) and 'lapid' (flame) are similar in their meaning. Or perhaps the explanation of 'woman of Lappidoth'<sup>3</sup> is by reason of the fact that she was a woman of valor, a woman of strife, there were flames. What is meant is that her rank in prophecy had already reached the point at which flames were seen in the place where the prophecy was in contact with her, just as the Torah related about Moses, may he rest in peace.

If Barak was her husband, it appears that she already separated from him because of her prophecy, and thus she was already obliged to send and call him at the place where he dwelt. This place was Kadesh- Naphtali; or she also dwelt in Kadesh-Naphtali, but the Israelites came up to her at this place for judgment where there was a palm tree. This is why they call [the place] "the Palm of Deborah" because it was her custom to sit in judgment in this place.

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrew forest = עֵר ; Aramaic = חורשא

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew אִשְׁתִּי לַפִּידוֹת - Possible understandings are: wife of Lappidoth or woman of Lappidoth.

Behold Deborah said to Barak, truly Adonai, God of Israel has commanded that you do this. That you gather on Mt. Tabor the heart of Israel in such a way that you will bring ten thousand men there from the people of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Now indeed this will be done by way of incitement and enticement, by the words he will say to them, to the effect that, God has already promised to them that Israel will defeat Sisera's army. They [will] have to trust in God concerning this, for there is no obstacle to God saving by many or by few. God will bring it about that Sisera, his chariots, and his host will be drawn in to [fighting] you at Wadi-Kishon and God will deliver him into your hand.

If someone says: why did God send out a command for Barak to gather ten thousand men at Mt. Tabor with words of incitement and enticement, and how did God not do this thing [himself] in advance when he drew Sisera, his army, and his host to Wadi-Kishon? One says to him that God only attempts to do things through the performance of miracles when there is a need to do so. Because it was possible for Israel to gather in this manner, there was no [need nor] wish on God's part to perform a miracle in order for them to come there.

Here [in this verse 8] Barak's response was that if Deborah were to go with him to the war, he would go, and if not, he would not go. This was because he thought that on account of her merit, divine Providence would be more [closely] attached to the army of Israel, who would fight against Sisera.

Deborah answered [in verse 9] that, surely, she would go with him, but that he would not attain glory on the journey on which he was to go, when he (or God) defeats Sisera, his hosts and his chariots: because God will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, into the hand of Deborah, because this miracle will be attributed to her as will be

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<sup>4</sup> In effect, she says, "If you depend on a woman's help at the beginning, you will depend on a woman's help in the end."

seen in the words of the song mentioned after this; she prophesied nevertheless that Sisera would fall by the hand of a woman, and this is Yael, as the story will make clear.

Here [in verse 11] it mentions that Heber had separated himself from Cain, from b'nai Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, which was related earlier [when the tribe of] Judah dwelt in the Wilderness of Judah, and his tents [were] pitched all the way down to Elon-bezaanannin, which is near Kadesh.

The act of Yael teaches that the custom of Heber the Kenite was like the custom of the rest of the children of Hobab, to behave according to the law of Israel. Yael attempted to kill Sisera for this reason.

In truth, there was peace between Heber the Kenite and Sisera; with the war being between Sisera and Israel, for perhaps Heber the Kenite subjected himself to<sup>5</sup> the rule of King Jabin of Canaan, or there was friendship<sup>6</sup> between them for other reasons.

Behold, [in verse 12] it was told to Sisera that Barak ben-Abinoam went up to Mt. Tabor and Sisera assembled all his chariots and all the people who were with him from Harosheth-goiim [and sent them] to the Wadi Kishon. Here they said because Barak went up [on Mt. Tabor] it is a sign,<sup>7</sup> for Deborah was the wife of Barak. If this was not the case here, it would have been appropriate for one to say that Deborah and her army went up, because she was leading Israel. This is because it is fitting that the "leader"<sup>8</sup> be mentioned in this way. But if fact because Barak was her husband, Scripture attributes the leadership to him.

Deborah commanded Barak that he rise up to make war with Sisera and his army because God had gone out before him to make war on their behalf; and behold they all fell at the hand of Barak and his soldiers except for Sisera, who thought he could save his life in the

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<sup>5</sup> Literally - "put his neck under the yoke of.."

<sup>6</sup> Literally - "love."

<sup>7</sup> The sign was the song of Deborah.

<sup>8</sup> Literally - "head."

tent of Yael because there was already peace between them. Yael showed herself as desirous of saving him and she covered him with a blanket in the middle of her tent such that they would not see him there. This *samichah* (covering) is "cote"<sup>9</sup> in old French.<sup>10</sup> He asked her [for] water, but she gave him milk to put him to sleep. What also helped to put him to sleep [was that] he was tired and exhausted, so that she could kill him while he was fast asleep. Behold, Yael took the tent peg that was of iron. That is what I think.

**"And she took the hammer in her hand."** (Judges 4:21) It was a tool [made] of iron that they struck it on rocks and they chiseled with them. She put the tent peg against his temple, she struck the hammer on the peg until the peg was driven in to his temple and it (the hammer) fell on the ground and the peg was driven into it (earth).

Here Sisera was fast asleep and he was already tired before this. For this reason [Sisera] did not feel anything in this act.<sup>11</sup>

**"And behold Barak pursued Sisera,"** (Judges 4:22) when he could not find him on his path which he pursued toward Harosheth-goiim. [But it occurred to him that] he was already hidden in one of the [other] places [he had not checked]; and Yael informed him that [Sisera] was dead in her house. It became clear to Barak that Yael was the one who killed him, for he saw the tent peg in his temple.

At the end of the matter: in the days of Deborah **"The children of Israel destroyed Jabin, king of Canaan"** (Judges 4:24) and this is the miracle which God, blessed be He, performed for Israel by the hand of Deborah, the chieftain, and Barak. This is the song that [Scripture] mentioned, and there is no desire in this regard [to say] that Barak was her helper in composing the song; rather she alone composed it, although behold

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrew - קו"טה

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew abbreviation. - בלע"ז - similar to Rashi's use of Laazim;

<sup>11</sup> Meaning that he did not sense that the act was being committed.

Barak is mentioned with her, just as when Scripture mentions, "**Then sang Moses (and the Israelites).**" (Exodus 15:1)

### **Abravanel<sup>1 2</sup>**

Here the text says, "**Again the Israelites did what was offensive to God; and Ehud was now dead.**" (Judge 4:1) It was proper that Scripture said that Shamgar was dead (<sup>1 3</sup>because he was the last judge), to relate that the Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of the Lord from the day that Ehud died, and also that in the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, they used to worship the Ba'alim, and therefore [the Lord's] salvation was not as great as that which Deborah spoke in the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Yael- as will be explained. And this connects the verse; it says the Israelites did evil in the sight of God *from* the day that Ehud died.

"**For God sold them into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor,**" (Judges 4:2) that is to say in the days of Joshua he was king of Hazor, after Joshua captured it they settled in Harosheth-goiim for it was a city named in this way because within it there were all [types of] craftsman's works of art and all [kinds of] manufacturing;<sup>1 4</sup> or it was a great border town where there were many nations, for Sisera only brought his people from there.

"**The Israelites called out to God.**" (Judges 4:3) Because he oppressed them mightily for 20 years and he had an iron chariot. This is the manner (that they cried out to him) "**and the Israelites sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out and their cry rose up to God because of their bondage.**" (Exodus 2:23)

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<sup>1 2</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in the Mosah Ha Rav Kook edition from pages 105 (ק"ה) to 108 (ק"ח).

<sup>1 3</sup> In this particular Hebrew text there are parentheses in some comments. Those comments will be noted by the same parentheses ().

<sup>1 4</sup> Hebrew - חרושת המלאכות

The third section<sup>1 5</sup> concerns Deborah's prophecy and Barak's war with Sisera, the salvation of God, the song that Deborah and Barak composed concerning the deliverance. The [portion] begins "**Deborah was a prophetess**" [and continues] until [the verse] "**and the Israelites did...**"<sup>1 6</sup> Here I have asked six questions about this chapter:

The first question: If Deborah was a prophetess, how is it that Barak did not believe in her words when she says to him, "Has not the God of Israel commanded saying, Go and march up.....?" (Judges 4:6) Then why does he say to her, "**If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go?**" (Judges 4:8) If this is so, did he transgress the command of God and the word of the prophetess? The Torah states "**And it shall come to pass that whoever will not heed the words of the prophet which he says in My name.... that man shall die...**"<sup>1 7</sup>

The second question. The text states "**Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites.**" (Judges 4:11) Despite this statement being true, he is in another place, how can the text distinguish [between two accounts] and establish [the connection] between what it is saying, "**Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali**" (Judges 4:10) and between the verse that says "**They told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam (had gone up to Mt. Tabor).**" (Judges 4:12) It distinguishes between them and says "**Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites**" and therefore, he was in another place.<sup>1 8</sup> Also what about the meaning of the part where it says, "**he was separated from the other Kenites?**" It should have said that he was separated from

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<sup>1 5</sup> Using alternate chapter division, see next note for his division here.

<sup>1 6</sup> Judges 4:4 to Judges 6:1.

<sup>1 7</sup> Deuteronomy 18:19-20. Abravanel takes some liberty with the text. The two verses are combined to yield a meaning different than the original. "and if anybody fails to heed the words he (the prophet) speaks in My name, I myself will call him to account. But any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle that I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods - that prophet shall die."

<sup>1 8</sup> Another place meaning a place other than his usual location.

[the tribe of] Judah, because Heber the Kenite was himself a Kenite and he dwelt with the people of Judah.<sup>19</sup>

The third question. How did Yael do what she did to Sisera, in spite of the fact that (as Scripture attests) there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite? How did Yael do this great evil thing? To call for peace with Sisera his [Heber's] friend, and when he entered her house at her invitation and call (in the house of a friend [characterized by] a pure heart on the basis of the peace which existed between them) but she killed him with cunning and this is a very strange thing as well as improper.<sup>20</sup>

The fourth question. In her poem [it says], "**In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Yael.**" (Judges 5:6) Why does it mention from among the judges [only] Shamgar son of Anath and not mention [any] other judge? If it mentions Shamgar because he was the preceding judge, why does it mention him with Yael? She was not judging Israel. Also the salvation at that time was Yael's doing. The days of Yael, they were also the days of Deborah, how is it that it says "**in the days of Yael caravans ceased?**" (Judges 5:6)

The fifth question. If Deborah commanded Barak, "**and you shall take with you ten thousand men of the people of Naphtali and Zebulun,**" (Judges 4:6) why was she [not] angry at the rest of the tribes that did not come to help with the war, and did she not insult them with this [failure to ask them]? And why did she say, "**Curse Meroz..... for they did not come to the aid of God,**" (Judges 5:23) after all it was by the command of God she limited the people who went to the war alone?

The sixth question. Why does the text not mention as a source of authority those verses which she stated in her complaint about the tribes that did not come to the war? For she

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<sup>19</sup> Judah lived in the south.

<sup>20</sup> Translation also - disgraceful.



brought up the case of Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher;<sup>2 1</sup> and she praises Zebulun and Naphtali, but she distinguished between them with the statement, "**Then the kings came, they fought .....They fought from heaven**"<sup>2 2</sup> and it returns to curse Meroz when "**(they) did not come to the aid of God against the warriors.**"<sup>2 3</sup>

And here I explain the passages so that all of these questions will be resolved.

**"And Deborah was a prophetess."** (Judges 4:4) In this passage I saw tremendous lesson [that are] in accordance with statesmanship, and RaLBaG was not stirred by [even] one of them, and therefore I choose to mention them in their place after commenting on written verses. When they spoke of "**the wife of Lappidoth**" our sages, of blessed memory, said, "She used to make wicks for the Sanctuary."<sup>2 4</sup> And the commentators extended it so that she was Barak's wife, and they thought that Barak and Lappidoth were the same<sup>2 5</sup>.

RaLBaG explained "**Lappidoth**" as "Lappidim"(flames), meaning that her level of prophecy was so high that flames were visible around her. I think that they are her attributes, it says that Deborah was a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth. And insofar as scripture said "**a prophetic woman**"<sup>2 6</sup> it teaches about the perfection of her intellect and her good preparation which were so great that the prophetic spirit accompanied her. And why does Scripture say "**the wife of Lappidoth**"? It teaches that she was a woman of valor and her acts were so vital and quick that she was like a flaming torch. Because of these attribute she was a prophetess in her wisdom, and a burning woman in her actions, and with great heartedness she used to judge Israel at that time. Undoubtedly she would

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<sup>2 1</sup> See Judges 5:16-17.

<sup>2 2</sup> Judges 5:19-20. Verses 19-22 contain a description of the battle before continuing to discuss Sisera's flight and events at his mother's house.

<sup>2 3</sup> Judges 5:23. The Hebrew phrase is unclear. New JPS translates it as, "among the warriors."

<sup>2 4</sup> Megillah 14:a. Play on lappidoth. Wicks = lappid(im).

<sup>2 5</sup> Literally - "the two were from one matter."

<sup>2 6</sup> Literally it says "A woman, a prophetess" not in construct form.

rebuke them in such a way that they would turn in repentance even if it is not mentioned; for if there were not repentant people they would not have been saved, as has been explained previously in the second chapter.<sup>27</sup>

From this we learn the first lesson. The judge and the leader of the people needs [to behave with] intellectual perfection, preparation, stout-heartedness and speed, in order to reprove and chastise the people in a fitting way.

**"And she dwelt under the palm tree....."** (Judges 4:5)<sup>28</sup> Our sages, of blessed memory said the palm tree was called the Palm of Deborah because buried there is Rebecca's nurse Deborah. It is written here **"between Ramah and Beth-El"** and it is written there **"and she was buried there beneath Beth-El."** (Genesis 35:8) Targum Jonathan says, "And she was dwelling in her city at the crowns of Deborah, supporting herself from what was hers. She had palm trees in Jericho, gardens in Ramah..."<sup>29</sup> According to the plain meaning, Scripture says that Deborah did not want to remain at home so that she would not be alone with a man, therefore **"she was sitting under palm tree;"** and that which the text further says **"Deborah, between Ramah"** it is as if it says 'Deborah was continually between Ramah and Beth-El, on Mt. Ephrayim.' As if to say she was firmly set up, sitting on the roads and paths, and the text gives the reason for this and says **"and the Israelites came up to her for judgment."** That is to say, that the Israelites were coming up to her for judgment every day, and therefore, in order not to be alone with the men, she was sitting under the palm tree.

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<sup>27</sup> Note - he is using alternate chapter divisions. His second chapter corresponds to Judges 2:7- 3:30. Possible acts of saving: Judges 2:18, 3:9, 3:28.

<sup>28</sup> This section will deal with what is the meaning of יושבת. As well as why she was under the tree.

<sup>29</sup> Targum Jonathan Judges 4:5. Translation from Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets by D. Harrington & A. Saldarini. They suggest "The Targum makes Deborah reside in a city because that is where courts were located in talmudic times. The account of her wealth suggests she had no motive to be dishonest." (p. 65)

We learn from this the second lesson. It is fitting that every worthy person, in addition to being on good terms with God, should attempt to remove suspicion from himself and that he fear a bad report [about himself], so that he will also be on good terms with men, just as Deborah the prophetess used to do in this manner [and was above reproach].

**"And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam."** (Judges 4:6) The commentators were inclined to say that he was the spouse of Deborah and [specifically] her husband, and truthfully the matter is not settled, for Scripture did not mention [explicitly] that he was her husband. But it does say "Barak ben-Abinoam from Kadesh Naphtali."<sup>30</sup> And what it says [there] is **"Barak ben-Abinoam had gone up..."** (Judges 4:12) and it does not mention Deborah, this is because Sisera feared the warrior and did not know of Deborah's prophecy. Therefore, I think that Deborah was not married or was separated from her husband because her prophecy was as RaLBaG wrote, and behold the blessed God commanded that she bring about this deliverance by means of Barak by his being courageous before the soldiers.

His name teaches about him, for Barak<sup>31</sup> implies that he is a courageous and energetic man. Ben-Abinoam teaches that his father was also this way, he was a master of charm<sup>32</sup> and good deeds.

The text mentioned that she said to him, **"Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded?"** (Judges 4:6) Scripture wants to say that this matter was already decreed in heaven, and this [is the proof] **"Has not God commanded"** for He already commanded this, being the God of Israel, He supervises Israel always. Thus he should take with him ten thousand men of the people of Naphtali and Zebulun, because the God of Israel chose them in particular to perform this act. Since Barak was from Kadesh-

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<sup>30</sup> Alternate- Kadesh in Naphtali.

<sup>31</sup> Literally - "lightning or splendor."

<sup>32</sup> Literally - "my father, the charmer" - אבי הנועם

Naphtali, he commanded him to take from the people of his land and his clan, because they would go more easily. And the text says "**and march (toward Mt. Tabor)**," the commentators wrote that its meaning is that he should persuade and draw Israel out by means [or words] to come to battle for they were afraid of Sisera's army.

I think that [when] she said to him that the Lord, the God of Israel, decreed that he go, and draw out Sisera. He accomplished this [act of] drawing out when he went up on Mt. Tabor and he took with him ten thousand men, just as it says after this, "**They told Sisera that Barak ben-Abinoam had gone up to Mt. Tabor. Then<sup>33</sup> Sisera ordered...**" (Judges 4:12-13) Now, if that is the case, the [act of] going up on Mt. Tabor and gathering the people would cause Sisera to march there, but this would not have been sufficient without the help of God who truly caused him [to march up there]. As it is written, "**And I will draw out to you... and I will deliver him into your hand.**" (Judges 4:7)

From this we learn the third lesson, namely, who is fitting to be the captain of the armies- the [kind of man] who is strong, [with] many achievements of his own, and from a family of courageous men, from whom the people will accept reproach [when rebuked] and fear, as with Barak ben-Abinoam.

"**And Barak said to her...**" (Judges 4:8) It mentions that Barak said to Deborah, "**If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go.**" He did not say this like someone who doubts the prophecy which she told him, or like one who transgresses the words of a prophet, but (he said this) because at that time Israel dreaded and feared Sisera's army, his chariots, and his multitude. Barak saw that even though he called the people of Zebulun and Naphtali to battle, they would not go with him and would not trust his words, since they thought of him as one who endangers himself [and others]. Therefore he told Deborah that she should go with him, in order to encourage Israel when they see with him

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<sup>33</sup> Reading the <sup>1</sup> not as "and", but as "then."

the prophetess who commanded this, then they will believe him for this is the word of God and He is doing this thing through him, and it is not Barak's [idea] alone. Because of this,<sup>34</sup> Deborah did not go down with him from the mountain to the battle; even though she did not go with him; she went only to she strengthen the courage of Israel;<sup>35</sup> or according to the words of RaLBaG, [Barak wanted her with them] so that Deborah could link God's Providence to them by means of her presence.

With this the first question is resolved.

Deborah replied to him **"I will surely go with you, however you will scarcely attain honor..."** (Judges 4:9) The text means to say 'I will go with you because you command me to go (for you are the captain of God's army and every man and woman who disobeys you will die) but despite this I will tell you what will be proclaimed in latter days, and this is that **"however you will scarcely attain honor"** if I go with you, and this is not for those who will see your deeds in the war, for truly all those who see your mighty acts there, testify and report what a courageous [soldier] you are, and that God will save Israel by your hand. But course that you are pursuing [is one in which there are] those who will see a woman going with you on your way. When they hear afterwards [that] **"God will yield Sisera into the hand of a woman"** (Judges 4:9) (namely is Yael about whom I prophesied) they will believe that a female leader is with you, because the deliverance is through her power and not through yours. They will think that I am the woman into whose hands **"God will yield Sisera."** Thus my going with you, will not honor and glorify a warrior like you. But despite her having said all this, she did followed his order<sup>36</sup> **"and she rose and she went with Barak to Kadesh."**

From this we learn a fourth lesson. This is that it is fitting that a king's advisors and his captain do what he commands even though it conflicts with their opinion.

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<sup>34</sup> This ploy is to use Deborah to establish his own military authority. Yet Deborah will see through the argument and not go with him.

<sup>35</sup> Literally - "drew on the heart of Israel."

<sup>36</sup> Literally - "did his word/utterance."

Nevertheless, they told him their opinion, because they said and advised was appropriate for them to communicate insofar as they were advisors to their lord and fulfilling his command [was appropriate] insofar as they were his advisors. This is just what Deborah did, she spoke her mind, and she fulfilled his command. The commentators said, **"for God will yield Sisera into the hand a woman,"** [here] Deborah spoke of herself, the victory depended on her, as she said in her song.

**"Barak summoned Zebulun...."** (Judges 4:10) This occurred after their coming to Kadesh. There Barak gathered ten thousand men from Zebulun and Naphtali as she commanded him, and he went up with them and Deborah with him, to Mt. Tabor. This was [done] so that it would be well known, that he was up on the mountain and there was a [large] fighting force<sup>3 7</sup> with him in order to provoke [a rebellion against] King Jabin of Canaan and in order to prosecute war from there with Sisera, the captain of his army, in the valley.

**"Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites<sup>38</sup>"** (Judges 4:11) It is written earlier **"The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judahites from the City of Palms to the wilderness of Judah..... and settled among the people [in the Negev (south) of Arad]."** (Judges 1:16) According to this [verse], it would have been proper to say that Heber the Kenite, from the people of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, departed from the wilderness of Judah. I agree with the explanation of the passage that Heber the Kenite was in the wilderness of Judah with the same masses that were called "descendants of Cain and descendants of Hobab" They were all there with Israel. When he heard that Barak went up on to Mt. Tabor and saw that Sisera was preparing to wage war with him, he thought about helping Israel. Therefore he cunningly pretended to have a quarrel with the people of his

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<sup>3 7</sup> Literally - "a people of war."

<sup>3 8</sup> Kenites - literally - "from Cain"- מִכַּיִן

tribe so that he separated himself from them, that is to say, from their affection. It also mentions that he separated himself from their settlement, which was with the Judahites. Thus Scripture says **"He pitched his tent at Elon- bezaananim, which is near Kadesh."** (Judges 4:11) This place was between Harosheth-goiim, which was Sisera's location and Mt. Tabor where Barak was. He did this so that his household would be ready to help Israel strike at their enemies in keeping with whatever would happen. It was also [done] so that the Canaanites would trust him seeing that he himself was an enemy to his tribe, he had separated from them, and had left the place of their encampment with Israel. It says, **"Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the other Kenites,"** [meaning] that they were **"descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses."** They were the same Kenites who were from the tribe from which he had separated. Also, he separated himself from their place of encampment, which was there with the Judahites, and pitched his tent well away from there, because he did not dwell in a house but rather in tents, as I mentioned in the verse **"and the descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up [with the Judahites] from the City of Palms."** (Judges 1:16)

From this we learn a fourth lesson. One who wants to help his ally will first make himself appear as if he was his enemy, just as Heber the Kenite did by separating himself from his tribe and the camp of Israel to help them later. This story comes at this place to indicate that he did this when he heard that Barak went up to Mt. Tabor and Sisera was making preparations to fight him.

With this the second question is resolved.

**"And they told Sisera that [Barak] had gone up..."** (Judges 4:12) It mentions that when Sisera heard that Barak ben-Abinoam, a warrior and soldier of whom much was recorded, had gone up to Mt. Tabor, which was a high and mighty place, he saw that this was not customary for foreigners or the oppressed, which Israel was at that time. For it was appropriate that the oppressed person did not dwell in a fortified place or in a king's

sanctuary, lest he would boast saying, "I will rule" and remove his enemy's yoke from him. This is similar to when the Torah commands regarding the stranger, "[A slave who takes refuge...] He will dwell with you [in any place he may choose] among the settlements in your midst where ever he pleases; [you must not treat him wrong]." (Deuteronomy 23:17) As I explained in [my] commentary on the Torah, [this was commanded] so that strangers would not dwell in places with especially strong forces [ruling] over them, but rather in Israel's midst and in submission to them.<sup>39</sup> Thus in that time Israel was under King Jabin of Canaan, when Sisera, captain of his armies, saw that under the command of the heroic soldier Barak that Israel went up to a fortified place to gain strength and make war from there. Immediately he gathered his chariot and his people to come to wage war against [Barak]. They were going from Harosheth-goiim, the place where he lived, to the Wadi Kishon, the battlefield.

From this we learn the fifth lesson and idea. It is not appropriate for the dominant and prevailing people that their enemies dwell in their midst as strangers, [lest] they go up to a fortified place [in rebellion], [such as] a high and steep mountain. [The ruler should be careful] lest they gain strength and wage war with [he reigning] people.

"Then Deborah said to Barak..."<sup>40</sup> [Scripture] said that when Sisera came with all his chariots and all his people to the Wadi Kishon (it appears that it was also his idea to go up the mountain and from there to wage war with Barak), Deborah immediately said to Barak "Get up!" That is to say, get up and go down from the mountain to fight there. Do not hope that he will come up to the mountain. She stated the reason why Barak went

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<sup>39</sup> Perhaps indicating that Israel would be more benevolent in their rulership, as compared to the harsh rule of other neighbors.

<sup>40</sup> Judges 4:14-16. Full verse reads, "Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! This is the day on which the Lord will deliver Sisera into your hands: the Lord is Marching before you." Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men, and the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariot and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot as Barak pursued the chariots and the soldiers as far as Harosheth-goiim. All of Sisera's soldiers fell by the sword; not a man was left."



down to him rather than wait for Sisera's arrival [atop the mountain] in order to wage war against him.

**"For this is the day on which God has delivered Sisera into your hand."** (Judges 4:14) That is to say, today is the day on which there will be success, and if you hope for [it to come on] another day, your path will not be successful on that day. Therefore she said, **"God has delivered Sisera [into your hand]; God has gone out before you."** (Judges 4:14) This [verse] is in the perfect tense<sup>41</sup>, as if the war was already done. The text mentions that it was already this way. For **"God threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic with the edge of the sword before Barak."** (Judges 4:15) Know that [the reference to] **"before Barak"** that is stated here is a temporal reference like **"Before the coming to the great and terrible day of God."**<sup>42</sup> Scripture tells that before Barak came, God threw Sisera into a panic (despite his being captain of the mighty army) and all the chariots and all the army, for perhaps they heard in their ears the sound of a great force, and saw chariots of fire and horses of fire or something like this, in such a way that fear and trembling befell them. (All this was before the arrival of Barak, just as Deborah said to him, **"Behold God has gone out before you,"** as if to say, God has already waged war and you sit here) until Sisera stepped down from his chariot and fled on foot. When Barak came to the camp he found this [i.e. that Sisera had fled] and the only thing he could do was pursue them. Thus the text says, **"Barak pursued the chariots and the army"** (Judges 4:16) for God was waging and winning the war, and the only thing Barak did was to pursue those fleeing<sup>43</sup> from the battle, and thus **"all the army perished by the sword."** (Judges 4:16)

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<sup>41</sup> 4:14 verbs נָתַן & נָסַח are qal past 3 m.s. no vav or degesh- have to be past (perfect) tense.

<sup>42</sup> Malachai 3:23. This proof-text is employed to show the temporal use of נָסַח as compared to the spatial/physical dimension of the word.

<sup>43</sup> Literally - "those who fled." Principally Sisera.

From this we learn the seventh lesson and a main [piece] of information, namely that when people are successful in war, they acquire great strength and overwhelming might because of the success. This was until Barak was alone with a few men in pursuit of the chariot and the army, just as when he was overcome and pursued, he was worried and had neither the strength nor might, to the point that he said to Deborah, **"If you will go with me, I will go."** For success acquires strength and courage, and disgrace acquires fear and cowardice.

**"And Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Yael..."** (Judges 4:17) [The text] mentions that Sisera fled to the tent of Yael and that she came out and called to him saying **"Turn aside, my lord."** (Judges 4:18) She called him **"lord"** [because] Heber the Kenite, her husband, was subject to him; and she assured him [i.e. lulled him].

**"Turn to me, fear not"** (Judges 4:18) the text wants to say that his heart was right to trust her; **"and she covered him with a blanket,"** and he asked for water. **"And she gave him a drink of milk"** to cause him to fall fast asleep.

He said to her that **"if anyone comes while you are standing at the door of the tent, and asks you whether there is any man here? You should say 'no.'"** (Judges 4:20) [He himself] prophesied in this way, that Sisera was no longer a man but it was as if he was dead and ceased to exist in<sup>4 4</sup> the world, therefore he said, **"Is there any man here? and you will say 'no.'"** For really there was none.

When Yael took the tent peg and drove it into his temple **"he was tired and died."** (Judges 4:21) The text wants to say that things came together in such a way that he would not feel the blow. One factor was that he was fast asleep from the drink of milk, and the second was [expressed in the verse] **"and he was tired,"** meaning that he was exhausted,<sup>4 5</sup> inasmuch as he fled on foot, and **"he died"** because he was unable to move

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<sup>4 4</sup> Alternate translation - "was abolished from."

<sup>4 5</sup> The repetition here is to explain the slightly unusual biblical form of **"וַיִּעַף"** with the more common form of **"הָיָה עֵיף"**.

anymore because of the blow. When Barak came after him **"She went out to meet him"** and she said, **"Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking,"** (Judges 4:22) and she showed him Sisera, dead and lying on the ground and this is the [whole] story of the episode.

It is appropriate for us to know why in all this does Scripture not mention Heber the Kenite, but rather Yael, his wife? Heber was alive, as it is written, **"for there was peace between Jabin, king of Hazor, and between the house of Heber the Kenite."** (Judges 4:17) Also how [was it that] Yael did such an evil deed as this if there was peace between her and Jabin, king of Hazor, and [since] Sisera was the captain of Jabin's army?

What appears [reasonable] to me is that Scripture has indicated that there are two associated reasons [about why] Yael found an opportunity to commit this act.

The first [reason] is that in the affairs of kings, this [kind of] act was not forbidden or permitted, suitable or improper, except in keeping with the common conventions which they had made and established between themselves; and when Heber the Kenite made his peace treaty, he was exceedingly wise and said, **"for there was peace between Jabin, the king of Hazor, and the house of Heber the Kenite."** Here Scripture does not say "between the *house* of Jabin" but it says **"between Jabin."** The peace was his (Jabin's) alone, and therefore Sisera was not included in that peace arrangement. Therefore Scripture specifies **"... and between the house of Heber the Kenite"** for on the part of Heber, the peace [arrangement] included all the people in his house, but this was not so in the case of Jabin, for [the peace] was with him alone.

The second reason is that Sisera did not go to the tent of Heber the Kenite but to the tent of his wife. Yael's tent was separated and set off from her husband's tent. This is what the text [means] **"to the tent of Yael... [and she came out] to meet Sisera,"** and her husband Heber was not there. It is known from the prevailing customs of kings that a woman is not obligated [to do] the things her husband does with respect to

maintaining peace and guarding the fortification. Because of this, she could do what her husband could not do.<sup>46</sup> And it appears that Heber the Kenite was inside his tent and would not do anything [either] to help Israel or [to act] against them.

With this, the third question is resolved.

We learn from this an eighth lesson that there is no political peace unless it is in accordance with the things which they say and write down in a document,<sup>47</sup> and that the women are not obligated by this, because they are exempt from all obligations, except [of course] from preserving and performing their husband's work.<sup>48</sup>

**"So God subdued on that day..."** (Judges 4:23) Because the kings' authority<sup>49</sup> was dependent upon the authority of the captain of their armies, and the captains' success was their success. The same day that Sisera died, all his army and his hosts fell by sword. Therefore, on this day God not only subdued Sisera alone, but also Jabin, the king of Canaan, in such a way that from that day forward, **"the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan until"** (Judges 4:24) they destroyed him.

Moreover, we learn a ninth lesson and item of knowledge from this, namely, that the success of kings is dependent upon the success of their captains.

### Discussion

In this chapter Gersonides provides a detailed description of the background of all the major characters. Some of these details help to inform the discussion of deception. For example, he notes that Sisera did not bring an army with him to Harosheth-goiim. This

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<sup>46</sup> Meaning that she was not bound by his treaty.

<sup>47</sup> Document here has the connotation of a treaty.

<sup>48</sup> There seems to be a tension between Yael's alleged exemption from the treaty and her duty as a wife to preserve her husband's work.

<sup>49</sup> Hebrew - קבֹּוד - also honor; respect; glory; splendor; importance.

may indicate that Sisera was a mercenary, someone simply hired to lead Jabin's army, rather than a native born soldier in his employ. Based on this assumption, Sisera might be less invested in the cause because he was someone who simply fought for pay. Nevertheless, this is merely an inference based on Gersonides' statement, "We do not see in the story that Sisera brought an army."

Gersonides placed great emphasis on the importance of prophecy in his commentary. He makes a point of noting that it is foretold that Sisera will be defeated by a woman. Commenting on verse nine, he restates the Biblical verse to indicate clearly that if Deborah accompanies Barak, "she prophesied that Sisera would fall by the hand of a woman, and this is Yael, as the story will make clear." This statement makes Yael an agent of the divine plan.

A further justification of Yael's actions is contained in the statement, "The act of Yael teaches that the custom of Heber the Kenite was like the custom of the rest of the children of Hobab, to behave according to the law of Israel. Yael attempted to kill Sisera for this reason." He does not specifically clarify why the law of Israel caused her to attempt the assassination, yet one could infer that as an enemy of Israel, likewise, Sisera became her enemy. Even without a precisely defined rationale, Yael was clearly conspiring against Sisera, as demonstrated by the fact that she virtually drugged him to sleep. Gersonides notes, as do many other commentators,<sup>50</sup> that while he asked for water, she brought him milk to drink, and this caused him to fall asleep more easily. Once she had lulled Sisera

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<sup>50</sup> Rashi notes, "She gave him milk because it slackens the body and causes drowsiness."

to sleep, Yael drove the tent-peg through his temple in such a way that "he did not feel anything in this act." This last statement can be interpreted in a variety of ways: either it was a painless and merciful killing, or her approach was with such stealth that he never knew he was in danger.

Overall, Gersonides does not provide a clear, decisive explanation and rationale for her behavior beyond the brief statement about following the laws of Israel, which justifies Yael's sudden violation of her husband's treaty and new allegiance to Israel.

While Gersonides does not provide an unambiguous reason for this change of heart, Abravanel goes into greater depth. In response to the third question he asks, Abravanel directly takes up the issue of Yael's deception and the propriety of her behavior. He goes into great detail in his discussion in order to provide a unique and credible justification for the act.

Following his discussion of the mustering of the troops and Deborah's prophecies, he directly analyzes the issue of allegiance and deception. A crucial statement for Abravanel is **"Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the other Kenites."** (Judges 4:11) Abravanel sees this as a clever ploy, whereby Heber forced a fight, real or otherwise, as a pretense to leave the Judahite encampment. Thus, as the renegade, Heber became the enemy of Sisera's enemy. Yet all of this was a deception. Abravanel so much as endorses this behavior in the context of war. His fifth lesson states, "one who wants to help his ally will first make himself appear

as if he was his enemy, just as Heber the Kenite did..." This lesson endorses deception as a means to an end, in the context of war.

In relation to the acts of Yael, Abravanel continues with his insightful justification. Again, he agrees with Gersonides and others that the offering of milk was part of the greater plan to overcome Sisera. Following his comments on verse 21, he asks the question "how was it that Yael did such an evil deed as this if there was peace between her and Jabin... and [seeing that] Sisera was the captain of Jabin's army?" He finds two justifications for this act.

First, the peace treaty was with Jabin, not all of his servants. Thus, on a technicality, Sisera was not protected. Here Yael behaved in a manner consistent with a higher principle of loyalty to family and tribe, which is not fully explained in the commentary or Scripture, but is nonetheless a consistent argument. The only remaining difficulty with the commentary of Abravanel is that he endorses these acts on the basis of their greater good. He does not weigh the moral implications of using deceptive practices. Yael broke no treaty, and she never actually mentioned the treaty as a means to lure him into the tent. Here Abravanel, acting as a good lawyer, finds a clause in the contract which makes the act not one of treachery, even if it is still deceptive.

His second explanation relies on Yael's status as a woman, and as such, she was not bound by the treaty to the same extent her husband was. Abravanel claims that, consistent with his relocation, Heber wanted to help Israel, but because he was bound by the peace treaty he was powerless to act. Yael, knowing her husband's intentions, was free to complete the act, and indeed did just that.

In summary, Gersonides either does not see deception in this passage or he sees it but excuses it. On the other hand, Abravanel definitely sees problematic issues with Yael's behavior. Abravanel basically allows it to be acceptable within the technical context of the political relationship between Heber and Jabin.



**Chapter V**  
**Delilah's Deception of Samson**  
**Judges 16: 1-31**

**Preface to the Translation**

Chapter 16 of Judges describes the last events of Samson's life. Samson, in addition to being a judge of Israel, was also a Nazirite. As such, Samson was forbidden to cut his hair, because this was the source of his strength. The basic events of Samson's life, as described in Judges 13-16, revolve around his involvement with three women. The first set of adventures revolve around his attempts to marry a Philistine woman named Timnah. The second major description centers on Samson's brief involvement with a prostitute from Gaza, where the men of the city lie in wait for him at the locked city gate, but Samson uproots the gate and carries it away. The third exploit involves another Philistine woman, Delilah. In return for a reward, the Philistine rulers convinced her to persuade Samson to divulge the secret of his strength. Three times he gave a false answer to her questions, and each time she or her accomplices tried to subdue him yet his strength remained. On the fourth attempt, Samson was forthright with her and she had his head shaved while he slept. Once captured, Samson was brought to entertain the Philistine rulers at their temple. At that time, Samson's hair, and thus his strength, had begun to return. He asked his guard to allow him to rest a moment against the pillar of the temple. Pronouncing a final prayer to God, Samson pulled down the pillars and the temple with them. In this final act Samson not only killed 3,000 Philistines but he perished with them as well.

### Issues to be discussed:

In this selection Delilah was clearly acting as an agent for a hostile power who was trying to overcome Samson. As a spy for this enemy, Delilah was trying to obtain information that would be lethal to Samson. It is noteworthy that she never gave the reason for her request, she simply queried "how can you be tied up?" It was stated, and implied, that Delilah cajoled, pleaded and pressed him hard in many ways to reveal his secret. One could also question Samson's honesty in this situation, for having been described as in love with this woman, he was not forthcoming with answers to her questions. In the final analysis while Delilah never stated that she was in the employ of the Philistines, was her actions not a form of silent deception? Samson, likewise, participated in his own ruse at the last moments of his life. As he feigned to rest against the temple column, he was actually preparing to topple the structure. Was his deception toward his captors an act which the commentators will find shrewd and acceptable or dishonest and double-dealing?

This chapter will focus on the events from his arrival in Gaza, to his liaison with Delilah, his betrayal, and his death.

### Commentary

#### Gersonides<sup>1</sup>

After this [prior chapter] Scripture tells that Samson came to Gaza, and there saw a woman  
2 who was an innkeeper.<sup>2</sup> He went to lodge in her house.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in Mikraot Gidolot: Nivim Rishonim, Jerusalem: Mesorah Publishing, 1990, beginning on page 67a (יד).

<sup>2</sup> RaLBaG gets this from the Targum, which differs from usual "harlot". He uses same word פונדקיתא.

Behold, [in verse 2] it was told to the people of Gaza that Samson came there, and they lay in wait for him all night at the gate [of the city]. This means to say that they closed the gates and waited for him all night and in this way [they were prepared] to kill him in the morning. [Thus,] they thought they had him in their power.

But, behold, Samson lay [only] until midnight and arose. He took hold of the [locked] doors of the city gates and pulled them up with the bar and put [them] on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is before Hebron. This act taught about the enormity of his strength.

After this Scripture relates that [Samson] loved a woman in the Sorek Valley, [who was] a Philistine woman. Her name was Delilah. It appears that she converted first, as our sages of blessed memory said.

**"The lords of the Philistines came to her"** (Judges 16:5) and persuaded her to entice Samson to inform her about the source of his great strength and by what means they might overpower him in order to bind him and to subdue him and he deceived her three times. After this she pressed him on the matter until she wore him down, despite the fact that she was holding back from him [the real reason behind her question] at that time when his inclination overcame him, as our sages, of blessed memory, have said. These [questions] **"vexed his soul to death"** (Judge 16:16). When his soul was vexed to death then he told her everything on his mind, and this is the reason why he fell into the hand of the Philistines. They gouged out his eyes and **"bound him with bronze fetters"** (Judges 16:21) and he was made a mill slave<sup>3</sup> in the prison, according to the custom of prisoners that used to grind types of grain there [when they were] enslaved to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Literally - "he ground (grain)."

Behold, [in verse 23] the Philistine lords thought to give thanks to their gods because Samson, their enemy and the ravager of their country, was in their grasp. This is the reason they summoned Samson and he made sport<sup>4</sup> before them in order that all would see him and it would be clear to them what good [fortune] had come to them through his falling into their power.

Behold, [in verse 26] Samson caused the lad who held him to bring him to touch the pillars on which the house rested. [He said he wanted] to touch them in order to rest against them.

Samson cried to God, may He be blessed, so that He might strengthen him at this time to take revenge on his enemies who had gouged out his eyes. God heard his plea, but Samson chose to die with the Philistines in order that he be avenged on them.

Behold, Samson bent the two middle pillars on which the house rested; and he leaned on them, [with] his right hand on one and his left hand on the other. Then he bent them with his great strength and the house fell on the lords and on all the people until [those he killed] **"were greater [in number] than those he had slain during his life."** (Judges 16:29)

Behold, [in verse 31] Scripture mentions a second time after this that he had judged Israel for twenty years. This is to teach that the time he [Samson] dwelled in the land of the Philistines was included in the twenty years.

These are the lessons that come [to us] from this story:

[He lists 22 lessons, which cover chapters 11-16 of the Book of Judges. Only those lessons which are relevant to chapter 16 are included here.]<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hebrew צחק 'unclear- others say 'danced'. Other possible definitions: to laugh at; jest; mock, jeer, deride.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew text found in Mikraot Gidolot: Nivim Rishonim, Jerusalem: Mesorah Publishing, 1990, beginning on page 69a (כט).

[Lesson] twenty one teaches that there is reward and judgment for every act, measure for measure. Concerning this, Scripture mentions that Samson was stricken<sup>6</sup> in his eyes when he followed after his eyes and because of this he was made to stumble.

[Lesson] twenty two teaches what God did in order to jealously protect His honor in so fast as the Philistines were attributing Samson's falling into their hands to their gods, of which the cause was his being duped by the enticements of women [i.e. Delilah]. But this [act of judgment] came after Samson's strength had returned to him in order to avenge himself on them. But his soul did not live because he was fit for this in view of the fact that he was enticed by these base things. For this reason, he asked for his soul to die with the Philistines because it was not appropriate at that time for Him to perform a miracle greater than this [act of knocking down the house] and they [i.e. the Philistines] also deserved this because they were ascribing this success to their gods.

### Abravanel<sup>7</sup>

#### Questions

The fourth question.<sup>8</sup> Was there a limit to Samson's foolishness and his folly, [namely,] that he used to tell harlots how he might be bound and how his strength could be taken away from him? How could he not perceive his death in this question [asked] of him that the Philistines asked this of her? [And how could he not have realized,] when she explicitly said to him, "**How might you be bound so that one could subdue you?**" (Judges 16:6) that she was seeking his death? Why did he not protect himself against her?

And why did he reveal to her what was in his heart, which [then] caused all the evil which befell him?

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<sup>6</sup> Literally - lashed or beaten.

<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in the Mosad Ha Rav Kook edition from pages 135 (תל"ה) and 136 (תל"ו).

<sup>8</sup> Abravanel lists six questions at the beginning of the chapter. Only the last three questions are relevant to the passage under examination.

The fifth question. If this woman, Delilah, saw that Samson deceived her three times, why on the fourth time, when he revealed to her [the secret involved in] shaving his hair, did Scripture say, **"When Delilah saw that he had confided everything to her, she sent and called for the Philistines lords. She said, 'Come up this once, for he has told me all his mind.'"** (Judges 16:18) Who told her this was the truth? Perhaps he was deceiving her like the other times? Why did they then bring her the money, which they had not done the previous times? This being the case, [i.e. that they brought the money only the last time], how did they know that this was the truth?

The sixth question. Why is it said of Samson two times **"He judges Israel for twenty years?"** (Judges 15:20 and 16:31) If after God opened for him the spring of water that is called Eyn Ha-Kore, **the Spring of the Caller** (Judges 15:19), the text says there, **"He judged Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines."** (Judges 15:20) But if after his death Scripture says another time, **"He judged Israel twenty years."** This is redundant in the story.

#### Exegesis<sup>9</sup>

**"Samson went to Gaza, etc."** (Judges 16:1) Scripture mentions that Samson went to Gaza and saw a prostitute there. He went to her because he was attracted [to her] by his desire, as I have mentioned.

It is said of the people of Gaza that they were called **"Gazites."** (Judges 16:2) [They said to each other,] **"Samson has come here,"** and they were quiet. This means that they waited all night. They lay in wait, and they surrounded the city-gate through which Samson would [need to] leave in order to kill him as he departed, just as Scripture says, **"...then we will kill him."**

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<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew text for the following translation may be found in the Mosah Ha Rav Kook edition from pages 139 (מספ) and 140 (מספ).

They went there towards dawn, but Samson had lay only till midnight. He rose to leave from the city, but because he found the gates locked **"he took hold"** of them **"and by the two doorposts he pulled them up with the bar"** (Judges 16:3) which was still in them.<sup>10</sup> He carried them on his shoulders to the top of the hill, and this was typical of [his] great strength.

**"After this [he loved a woman]..."** (Judges 16:4) Scripture mentions that after this he loved a different woman, who was from among the Philistine women and her name was Delilah.

Our Sages of blessed memory said, "Why was her name Delilah?" Because she weakened<sup>11</sup> his heart, she weakened his spirit, and weakened his strength.<sup>12</sup> Those who compared her to matter and Samson to the rational faculty made a good point, but it does not belong to the context [of the story], except that we know that he took her.

The Philistine lords set her to assess [whether he was] a fool to show her [the source] of his great strength, [and in return] they established for her eleven hundred pieces of silver; this is to say that they said to her that every one of them had obligated himself to give her, on behalf of all of them, eleven hundred coins of silver. It appears that at that time, the sum of eleven hundred was customary for them. Thus you find concerning [a man named] Micah **"eleven hundred shekels of silver."**<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that this enticement lasted many days. She asked him, **"What [is the source] of your great strength and with what might you be bound so that one could subdue you?"** (Judges 16:6) What is evident from the contextual meaning of Scripture is that she asked this of him in the manner of women who nestle against their lovers. With a show of love, she asked him to tell her [the source of] his great

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<sup>10</sup> The bar constituted the hinge on which the gates swing open or shut.

<sup>11</sup> This is a play on the name **חֲלַחֲלִי** and the verb "to weaken" **חֲלַחֲלִי**.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Sotah 9b

<sup>13</sup> Judges 17:2. A man named Micah from Mt. Ephraim stole eleven hundred shekels of silver from his mother. She uttered a curse on the (unknown) thief. When he heard this he returned the silver. She then commissioned a graven image with some of the money.

strength in order to show her [his] great love, for it was the manner of lovers to reveal their secrets to the one they loved. You should not say that she was asking him for the purpose that he be bound by the Philistines.

And he, like a man joking with his wife, said to her **"if they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings... then I shall become weak and be like any other man."**

(Judges 16:7)

Scripture mentions that she did not bring with her Philistine men to bind him because she suspected that perhaps [what he said] was not true. [If] he were to see that the Philistines bound him, Samson would think that this was the intention of her question. Therefore, Scripture says, **"...and she bound him with [the bowstrings]"** (Judges 16:8) because she alone bound him.

She had someone lying in wait in her room to see if after the test he would pretend that the act (of binding) was effective. She said, **"Samson, the Philistines are upon you' and he broke the bowstrings"** with which he was bound so that **"his strength was not known."** (Judges 16:9) This means that the breaking of the bowstrings did not show [the source] of his strength, because he did not attempt to untie them and [the extent of] his strength was not known. He did not even make an effort in removing them, but he made it seem as if it was **"a string of tow when it touches fire."** (Judges 16:9) When Delilah saw this, she said to Samson (11), 'Behold I did this only to test you, to know if you love me. Behold, I knew that you told me lies.' He responded to her, **"If they bind me with new ropes [I will be weak]."** (Judges 16:11) This means I told you the truth at first by what I said **"with seven fresh bowstrings."** But in [my] forgetfulness there remains one condition which I forgot to tell you, namely, that those extra ones [i.e. bowstrings] be new. If this were so, it would have simply be a complete expression of the first statement [with no ellipses]. Therefore, he did not say in the second statement the number of new ropes for it was similar to the seven bowstrings that he



already mentioned first. If this were not case, he now explains that they should be new ropes.

Scripture mentions that Delilah herself also did this test and Samson snapped them off his arms like a thread. Then she cried to him, **"until now you have mocked me and told me lies."** (Judges 16:13) This is to say, I feared this and I begged you about this matter, but you have mocked me and spoken lies to me. Therefore, I will attempt, against your will [to compel you] to tell me the truth. This [was] all typically the manner of harlots to their men [when after] much grumbling she tells him that [the grumbling] is from hidden love.<sup>14</sup> She said, **"How might you be bound?"** Meaning, how might you be bound by my hand, but she did not reveal that the hands of the Philistines were with her in this. Samson mentioned after the first two times he spoke the lies, that he wanted to tell the truth in the two latter [times, but between] the first two times and the two later (times) he was confused between what was true and what he did not remember.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, for the first two times he mentioned that his strength was due to the [weakness] of the bowstrings. These things were [based on] a dependence [on the strings], but the two later times he mentioned that his strength was in the hair on his head. If it were not for the first of these [which he did not clarify appropriately, she] would not have seen what was appropriate and at last he revealed all his mind to her. Thus he began to reveal to her that the things depended on the changing of his head in regards to his hair, but he did not reveal the matter of shaving except that [he told her] she should weave his hair with the tools of weavers and [the result] is called a web.<sup>16</sup> But Delilah decided<sup>17</sup> to add to his instructions. Scripture says, **"she made it tight with a pin."** (Judges 16:14) Not only did she weave [his hair], but also after the weaving, she tightened it with the peg in the ground and called to

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<sup>14</sup> Note the parallel in Proverbs 27:5, "Better an open rebuke than hidden love."

<sup>15</sup> Literally - he mixed neglected things with the truth.

<sup>16</sup> Note - he is explaining the strange conclusion of 16:13 with "the web."

<sup>17</sup> Literally - "saw."

him [saying], **"Samson, the Philistines are on you!"** Then he awoke and pulled the pin from the web. Then Delilah cried to him, **"How can you say I love you when your heart is not with me?"** (Judges 16:15) This means to say that behold my question was only to test if you loved me. Samson thought that this was the truth that Delilah had only done this to test his love for her and because of this he told her all that was on his mind.<sup>18</sup> That is to say that the third time he had already told her some of his mind when he told her that his strength was in the hair on his head, but now he completed the explanation by saying that the strength was essentially the hair of his head and that [his strength] would depart by the shaving [of his hair]. Scripture says because of what he said to her she pressed him with her words and her weeping; or as our sages of blessed memory said, "she would detach from him a the time of sexual intercourse."<sup>19</sup> [Because of this] Scripture said, **"His soul was vexed to death."** (Judges 16:16) I think that Scripture says this to tell that Samson did not agree to reveal this to her except that she vexed his days to death. Thus it was God who caused him to tell all his mind to her so that this would be the reason for his death. This is the meaning of **"his soul was vexed to death."**

**"He told her all that was in his heart."** (Judges 16:17) Behold, Delilah saw that this was undoubtedly the truth, because she noticed that he mentioned God's name and it was not his custom to mention God's name in vain, so our sages explained.<sup>20</sup> Because he told her this thing in terms of its [genuine] causes, that he had been a Nazirite to God since birth, she saw that the appearance of his hair and conduct agreed with this [statement]. Perhaps Delilah also heard the matter of his mother and what happened to her with the angel during her pregnancy.<sup>21</sup> In all this she recognized the truth. Perhaps he also swore

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<sup>18</sup> Literally - "all that was in his heart."

<sup>19</sup> B. Sotah 9b.

<sup>20</sup> B. Sotah 9b.

<sup>21</sup> See Judges chapter 13. Samson's mother, the wife of Manoah, was visited by an angel who said Samson would be a Nazirite and should never let a razor touch his head.

an oath. Therefore she sent [a message] to call the Philistine lords and she informed them that she already knew. Therefore they came with money.

This resolves the fourth and fifth questions.

Behold Scripture mentions that when Delilah saw Samson was asleep on her knees she shaved the seven locks of his head. This time the test was not done by her hand but rather she commanded a man that he shave him, this is [what Scripture means when it says] **"and she called a man and she shaved [his head]."** (Judges 16:19)<sup>22</sup> When she called the male barber<sup>23</sup> [she told him] to shave him, and if Scripture says **"and she shaved him"** the explanation is that Delilah shaved Samson by means of the man mentioned.

Truly Scripture says **"then she began to torture him and his strength left him."** The commentators have written that he immediately felt himself tormented and weak. It is possible that Delilah began to torment him by afflictions and bindings and that his strength left him and he could not feel them appropriately. Therefore when she said to him, **"Samson, the Philistines are on you,"** (Judges 16:20) he thought that he would shake off [the bonds] and do mighty act. But behold, divine Providence had left him as well. **"Then the Philistine lords seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza."** (Judges 16:21) [This was] because there [in Gaza] his corruption began.<sup>24</sup> **"They bound him in bronze fetters"** (Judges 16:21) in order to regard him with contempt and it was already his task that he ground [grain] in prison. Scripture mentions that when the hair on his head grew, then the text describes that it happened that Samson manifested there the [kind of] strength which he manifested at [the time of] his death. It is not appropriate that we should think that Samson's strength was in the hair of his head in some natural manner, and that therefore it [his strength] left when

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<sup>22</sup> He is explaining the problem with the verb **והגלה** - a piel imperfect verb 3 f.s. - which implies a female subject.

<sup>23</sup> Literally - "a shaver."

<sup>24</sup> See Judges 16:1-3 concerning his behavior with the harlot.

[his hair] left, and his strength returned when [his hair] grew back; but [in fact] his strength was something miraculous, so long as he would preserve his Nazirite(ship). But when he followed after [the desire of] his eyes and he revealed his secret to the [woman] who lay in his lap, and he did not remember that she was from the family of his enemies, he was punished by God's withdrawing from him, and his glory was turned to ruin. When the hair of his head grew back Scripture does not say that his strength returned to him, because truly the strength did not return with the hair, but this happened after its growth when they brought him to make sport of him in the house of their gods. He made repentance for his sin(s) and returned to God with all his heart and all his soul. He called to God from amidst his affliction. Because of this [repentance] God answered him and God strengthened his hands. God did this act of strength and [it was] not because of his hair.

Scripture mentions that the Philistine lords gathered to praise and to sacrifice to Dagon their god because he had delivered Samson into their hand. The text says they brought Samson there to make sport [i.e. mock him] before them. Then [Samson] called to God, prayed to Him, and [God] strengthened him.

**"Samson grasped the two middle pillars [of the house]."** (Judges 16:29) This means that he stretched out [his arms] against them and grabbed them.

Then Samson said, let him die with the Philistines, then he bent [the pillars] with his strength and the house fell on the Philistine lords and all the people. In his death he slew more than he had slain during his life. Here the Philistines deserve praise, since they did not mistreat him after his death, but they gave [him] a place so that they might pay him honor in his death.

Thus his brothers and all his father's house came and took him and buried him in the tomb of Manoah, his father. Because Scripture mentioned his brothers here, it appears that since the wife of Manoah was barren at first, behold, after God opened her womb, she bore

Samson and she also gave birth to other sons. This is similar to what Scripture will say concerning Hannah.<sup>25</sup>

Behold, Scripture relates after this **"he had judged Israel for twenty years."** [This is] to attest to the fact that at the time of the deliverance that was performed for him at Eyn-Kore, the "Spring of the Caller," Samson died. [By this] it means to indicate the "death" of his mighty acts and his victories, because up to that time, God was with him; but from then on his downfall began [to unfold].

After that, it mentions only that he followed after his desires<sup>26</sup> and was enticed by every harlot he found. Thus our sages said<sup>27</sup> that Samson followed his eyes and thus the Philistines gouged out his eyes.<sup>28</sup>

Salvation was not granted to him again except at the time of his death. For this reason, Scripture records in this place the same verse it recorded earlier (Judges 15:20). [This was done] to indicate that this deliverance was of the same kind as the victory that was given to him there, and just as though at the very time he died in terms of honor after Eyn-Kore (Judges 15:19) here the text tells [us] that he "died" in terms of the [actual] length of his life.

Rabbi Levi Ben Gershom, wrote that it was related, **"Behold that [Samson] judged Israel for twenty years,"** to make it known that the time that Samson dwelt in the Philistine land was included in these 20 years. I believe that this understanding is a true statement.

In the explanation<sup>29</sup> the sages said why it is said of Samson two times **"and he judged Israel twenty years?"** Rabbi Levi said, "It teaches that the Philistines feared him twenty years after his death, just as they had feared him twenty years of his life.

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<sup>25</sup> See I Samuel 2:21.

<sup>26</sup> Literally - "eyes."

<sup>27</sup> B. Sotah 9b

<sup>28</sup> The Talmud actually says that Samson rebelled (against God) through his eyes.

<sup>29</sup> Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 17:b.

This resolves the sixth question.

### Discussion

In this episode Gersonides singles out virtually none of the potentially deceptive acts for discussion. The one point where he does note deception is in the running commentary following his clarification of verse five. He simply states that the lords of the Philistines persuaded her to entice Samson into revealing the source of his strength, "... and she deceived him three times."<sup>30</sup> With the exception of this one comment, Gersonides does not make note of deception either in a positive or negative manner.

Abravanel, on the other hand, has much to say about the duplicitous actions of Delilah. From the very beginning of the chapter he questions the absurdity which Samson displays by taking harlots into his confidence. One would be justified to question his skill as a leader if he revealed such crucial and personal secrets about himself to such women. Abravanel clearly states in the fourth question,<sup>31</sup> "Was there a limit to Samson's foolishness and his insanity? [Namely] that he used to tell harlots how he might be bound and how his strength could be taken away from him." Abravanel's chagrin is apparent here. Perhaps to mitigate the seeming ease with which Samson fell, Abravanel says that the persuasion lasted several days. However, Scripture does not state how long Delilah's persuasions lasted. In making this temporal statement, Abravanel attempts to answer his own question by

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<sup>30</sup> Hebrew verb - **התל** - meaning to deceive or to mock.

<sup>31</sup> This would be the first question in the translation; the one Abravanel calls "fourth question."

showing that Samson was not easily fooled, but rather it took several tries over a length of time. Abravanel portrays a vivid picture of the wiles Delilah displayed in trying to extract her information. He suggests that "she nestled against him, in the manner of a lover or friend." When this did not work, she acted like the pouting child, calling him a liar. This accusation is particularly ironic since it was she who engaged in the lies to entrap Samson in the first place. When she again tries to force him into revealing the source of his strength, she adds the nuance of claiming to test his love. While she is engaging in a lie, the implication here is to force Samson into a truthful statement on the basis of his love for her. Thus, his love becomes his potential downfall. Nevertheless Samson again deceived her in return. Abravanel, drawing on Tractate Sotah, finally theorizes that she denied him sexual climax as one more way to induce his truthful response. All of these above acts constitute an elaborate plan of deception and subterfuge on the part of Delilah to obtain the information for the Philistine lords. As an agent she is often tricked and the only way that Abravanel feels she knew the final answer was truthful was that Samson invoked the name of God<sup>32</sup> in his response. From this isolated instance we can connect this statement with others throughout Scripture which prohibit making an oath in the name of the Lord in vain. Overall, Delilah's deception is well documented by Abravanel and in this case he makes no mitigating statement or justifications for her actions.

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<sup>32</sup> He uses the name - Elohim in reference to his status as "נזיר אלהים" - a Nazirite unto God.

The inaccuracies in Samson's statements are not overlooked by Abravanel. He portrays Samson as a man who jokes with his "wife". Further, he says that Samson actually meant to speak the truth but "he confused the truth with [other] things." This vague statement seems to indicate that Samson did not intend to deceive, but rather in his confused attempt to make truthful statements they inadvertently were deceptive.

Another one of Samson's actions which must be judged for its veracity is his final act. As Samson feigns exhaustion against the Philistine temple, he prepares to topple the structure. But what of his inaccurate request to rest. Here Abravanel is silent. His only comment addresses the absence of Samson's strength as soon as his hair begins to grow. Perhaps drawing on Sotah (9b) he refers to this as punishment for his sins. The strength only returns once Samson utters a cry of repentance, which is seen as a sign of contrition for his sins. The sins are not identified, but can be assumed to be his inclination to frequent harlots. As Samson's strength returns he kills all who were in the temple. This is described in the text and commentary as a triumphant moment. Perhaps Abravanel's hesitancy to take Solomon to task on this act is the clear victory over his tormentors and enemies which would be diminished by impugning the sly nature in which it was accomplished. In the end, Abravanel makes a strong argument for Samson's moral weaknesses overcoming his vast physical strength. It is only when he appeals to God and regains a measure of the moral fiber does he again emerge triumphant.



In summary, while Gersonides makes virtually no comments or judgments on the actions of either Samson or Delilah, Abravanel provides a detailed discussion of their acts. He elaborates on the ongoing coercion that Delilah applied to Samson as well as justifies Samson's statements not as lies but as Samson jesting with one with whom he was intimate.

## Chapter VI

### Contemporary Considerations of Deception

The Bible presents a plethora of vexing dilemmas concerning the acceptability of deception in the ancient context, yet the modern era has introduced many new problems to consider. These modern issues may be grouped into similar categories and considerations with their ancient counterparts, such as family conflicts, political deceptions and lies for the sake of economics. However, these same issues occur in an environment in which morality and ethics are much more fluid concepts. Today, there is a broad range and diversity of opinions about the morality of deception in a large, multi-cultural society. In addition, there is still not a universally accepted definition of what constitutes a lie in all situations.

Sissela Bok seeks to shed light on this infrequently analyzed subject in her book Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. In this work she begins by defining what a lie is and what are the characteristics, principles and tests of deception. She next provides keen insight into the various perspectives involved in a lie, showing that a lie has many dimensions to be considered. In addition, she provides several chapters on categories of lies which help to clarify whether this type of lie should be accepted or rejected.

Bok presents her initial reason for writing the book as an attempt to answer the question: "what actual choices should we make when we are wondering whether to lie or to tell the truth?"<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Bok, Sissela Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p. xx.

main elements of her response can be summed up by the following statements she writes in Lying:

The whole truth *is* out of reach. But this fact has very little to do with our choices about whether to lie or to speak honestly, about what to say and what to hold back. These choices can be set forth, compared, and evaluated. And when they are, even rudimentary distinctions can give guidance...<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the "whole truth" can never be reached in its entirety should not, therefore, be a stumbling block in the much more limited inquiry into truth-telling and falsehood...<sup>3</sup>

There are at least *some* circumstances which warrant a lie.<sup>4</sup>

Having stated that some lying is acceptable, she presents several basic principles by which to evaluate deception in general before proceeding to evaluate specific forms of deception.

In attempting to establish criteria for the definition and evaluation of lies, Bok acknowledges that these two tasks are extremely difficult given the infinite permutations of lies. In addition, she notes that deception can occur in many forms including spoken statements, written words, actions, and even silence. Nevertheless, lies can be examined on the basis of certain common features.

One of her first major requirements for evaluating lies is that we examine the act or statement in question from all perspectives. While this step is fundamental in nature, it is often disregarded by liars. Often a liar will deceive another person for a variety of

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<sup>2</sup> Bok, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bok, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bok, p. 45.

reasons, some of which may be self-regarding while others may be altruistic. Yet, she points out that liars usually fail to consider the perspective of the deceived. How the deception will negatively affect the person is rarely considered. Also, she points out that the person who is the object of deception may also be participating in the lie by allowing themselves to be deceived. An example of this would be of the patriarch Isaac, who, in the view of some exegetes, was aware of the lie Jacob was telling, yet allowed the deception to proceed anyway.

A second major requirement for evaluating a potentially deceptive statement is that we follow the principle of veracity. This principle holds that, given the "initial imbalance in our weighing of truthfulness and lying... in a situation where a lie is a possible choice, one must first seek truthful alternatives... only when a lie is a *last resort* can one even begin to consider whether or not it is morally justified."<sup>5</sup>

Another factor in the evaluation of lies is the role of consequences. She disagrees with utilitarian philosophers who argue that an act is more or less justifiable according to the goodness or badness of its consequence. While this approach simply judges a statement and says nothing about how to define what is a lie, it is not without its limitations. Bok's main objection to this approach is that utilitarian calculations appear "to imply that lies, apart from their resultant harm and benefits, are in themselves neutral."<sup>6</sup> This contradicts the principle of veracity discussed above. Bok prefers to

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<sup>5</sup> Bok, pp. 30 - 31.

<sup>6</sup> Bok, p. 50.

approach this issue from the vantage of asking "questions of benefit and harm, questions asking why lying *matters* and what it *does* to individuals and to institutions."<sup>7</sup>

One final requirement that needs to be considered for the analysis of a lie is the principle of justification. If a lie is to be judged acceptable, it must first pass the tests of justification and publicity. Justification, is to simply defend the act or statement as just, right and proper, by providing adequate reasoning. The second aspect of this process requires that we take into account who is intended to be the recipient of this justification. While some might suggest that our conscience or God are acceptable sources to consult, Bok disagrees. She suggests that for a potential deception to pass the test of publicity it must be deemed justifiable by a group of individuals who have a perspective that is wider than our conscience. They must be critical thinkers, as well as disinterested parties. This group must be capable of weighing the moral reasons for and against a lie and be able to appreciate the perspectives of all parties involved. Based on this test, most lies would fail to satisfy the questions of justification.

Having laid the groundwork for her inquiry, Bok examines several different categories of lies. Some of the broad topics she discusses include: lies in a crisis, lying to liars, lying to enemies, lies which protect peers and clients, lies for the public good, deception in social science research, paternalistic lies, and lies to the sick and dying. In most cases she rejects the validity of lying, yet there are

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<sup>7</sup> Bok, p. 55.

some cases in which she believes lying is acceptable. Lying is acceptable in the following instances:

- Legitimate self-defense from serious harm.<sup>8</sup>
- If it is a last resort.<sup>9</sup>
- If force is deemed justifiable, (in all cases of wrongful threat to life) then a lie is equally justifiable.<sup>10</sup>
- When innocent lives are at stake.<sup>11</sup>
- White lies.<sup>12</sup>
- In situations where informed and voluntary consent occurs or mutual deceptions. For example, bargaining in a bazaar, playing poker, etc.<sup>13</sup>
- In an acute crisis. Deception here would not lead to the spread of deceptive practices.<sup>14</sup>
- When a lie will counter harm.<sup>15</sup>
- Lies for the public good.<sup>16</sup>

Bok's basic premise is that these lies help maintain the well-being of society. While lies should not be resorted to easily, her main concern is with their effect upon social stability. "A society, then, whose

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<sup>8</sup> Bok, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Bok, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Bok, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Bok, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> "White lies" is a technical term for Bok. She specifically says that truth is preferred to white lies, yet such things as "marginally deceptive social excuses" should not be ruled out in situations where no major harm will result, and feelings will be spared by the minor deception. Bok, pp. 71-72.

<sup>13</sup> Bok, pp. 103-104, 129-132.

<sup>14</sup> Bok, pp. 108-110.

<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that all lies to enemies are acceptable. Bok notes that it is impossible to aim a lie so as to achieve specific result. Lies to enemies must be weighed against the dangers of: "bias, self-harm, proliferation and severe injuries to trust." - Bok, pp. 140-143.

<sup>16</sup> Bok discusses this in an entire chapter (pp. 165-181) and is careful to say that there are great limitations and potential long term consequences. Not all lies for the public good are acceptable. The acceptable lies may involve withholding the release of information at a time when it would cause public harm. For example financial information which would cause harmful spending or hoarding of goods. Also lies which protect the public in time of war often referred to as "disinformation." She states, "Some lies ... may be more *excusable* than others, but only those deceptive practices which can be openly debated and consented to in advance are *justifiable* in a democracy." (p. 181).

members were unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones, would collapse."<sup>17</sup> If a lie prevents this "collapse," or at least maintains the spirit of stability without actual harm, then its utilization may be considered.

Bok devotes great care in providing clear examples for each of the above mentioned categories which provide the reader with a clear understanding of how she views these lies as acceptable. For example, in the cases covered under self-defense and where innocent lives are at stake, she cites numerous examples including Jews in the Holocaust, parents protecting their children from violent criminals and a child confronted by a bully on the playground. Another category where she is most explicit is concerning white lies. These are such exchanges as "How nice to see you" and "Cordially Yours." However, she says it is not acceptable to engage in many common social practices. For example, to say one "can't" do something often means one does not want to do that thing. Likewise, unnecessary social compliments, and inflated letters of recommendation are lies that are not necessary and convey a message that is in no way helpful. Under the category of situations where informed and voluntary consent occurs, she notes examples such as those participating in clinical studies and know they may receive false information of placebos. She specifically denounces the use of placebos to those who see a doctor for a stated ailment and believe the pills to be real medication. This later only leads to false conclusions by the patient. Also acceptable in the area of mutual deceptions are games of chance where deception is an expected element of the game, such as poker.

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<sup>17</sup> Bok, p. 19.

One of the categories concerns rare situations where either the rule of law has broken down, or we are faced with a criminal element. She says in cases of acute crisis such as a war-torn country in a state of chaos, a lie for self-preservation would be acceptable. Likewise, faced with a violent criminal, one is justified in deception. In both of the prior two cases, the deception would in no way lead to a more acceptable or common use of subterfuge, or the contrary, these situations are rare and considering the circumstances, all public tests of the acceptability of the lies would deem them justifiable. The last two categories must be used most judiciously: lies that counter harm and lies for the public good. These are lies to which governments most often erroneously resort. These lies are often not justifiable because the truth, though politically difficult, would prove to be equally effective. Yet, Bok does acknowledge that there are certain situations where the absolute truth is not in the best interests of the public. For example, if either keeping information secret, through deception, or providing inaccurate information (also known as "disinformation") will protect civilian and military lives then it is clearly acceptable. Cases in this category which require serious debate would include deceptions which support the economy as a whole or prevent harm of a minor degree.

Lying discusses many contemporary instances of deception, and thus, provides an excellent and thorough examination of the subject. In addition, this work exemplifies the kind of practical approach that helps to apply a modern perspective to this ambiguous and problematic subject. While the material from which she draws



her conclusions is mainly Christian in origin, it does not take away from the applicability of her theories to Judaism.

The perspective and usefulness of this work is clearly appropriate for the biblical stories examined by the Medieval commentators. For example, in the case of Yael's deception of Sisera, various factors were at play. First, since Yael was truly a secret ally of Israel, Sisera was the enemy; yet as Bok notes, not all deceptions of the enemy are warranted. However, lies are acceptable in a crisis, when self-defense is clearly in order. A modern interpretation of Judges 4 might therefore conclude that Yael, seeing her enemy Sisera charging toward her door, thought she had been discovered and was in immediate peril. Consequently, she acted quickly to save her life, even at the cost of Sisera's. As Bok notes, in the comparison of violence to deception, if one is warranted then so is the other.<sup>18</sup> When she came face to face with her enemy, she should have been prepared to engage in either violence, deception, or both. However, the reader must still reserve judgment, because one does not know if she resorted to violence/deception as a first or last resort.

Another episode that can be fruitfully examined in the light of Bok's analysis is Jacob's deception of his father in acquiring the blessing. First, Bok would note that Jacob would perhaps appeal to the excuse of "fairness" by claiming that it was only fair that he do everything possible to claim the birthright which Esau had sold to him. Yet, "fairness involves deeply personal views about what one deserves or what is one's right, [thus] they are extraordinarily prone

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<sup>18</sup> "Deceit and violence, these are the two forms of deliberate assault on human beings. Both can coerce people into acting against their will." Bok, p. 18.

to misinterpretation and bias."<sup>19</sup> If this excuse is unpersuasive, perhaps the legitimate use of deception in the name of public good might be appropriate. Again, the case could be made that Esau would have been either a warlike chieftain or simply a poor leader and not the appropriate forefather of the Jews. In the same story, Rebecca's lies to Isaac may be for the reason of avoiding harm between Jacob and Esau, as well as saving herself from Isaac anger for her role in the deception. While this may be an excuse for lying, it is one that Bok nevertheless rejects if the truth, despite some temporary difficult repercussion, ultimately achieves the same effect.

The story of Jacob being deceived by a deceiver is an excellent example of Bok's contention that unrestricted lying, even to liars, is unacceptable. Specifically, Jacob has been cast as a deceiver as he leaves his parents, yet the biblical author nonetheless speaks sympathetically of him. As the deception is perpetrated on him, we feel sorry for him. According to the plain meaning to the text, Jacob acted honestly and maturely to fulfill his part of the bargain, and attempted no deception despite his actions with his father. If someone lies once, it does not mean that they will always lie. The Bible and Bok agree that everyone is capable of change.

Certainly Bok's conclusions can be used to evaluate the actions of prominent figures in the Bible as much as they can be used to examine modern situations. Her analysis of lying is clear, thorough, and practical. Her conclusions help not only to inform the general public, but also offer an opportunity for change for those who read her work. Bok states:

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<sup>19</sup> Bok, p. 83.

Individuals... have the power to influence the amount of duplicity in their lives and to shape their speech and action. ...They can rule out deception.<sup>20</sup>

Bok elaborates further that institutionally we must eliminate incentives for achievement at all costs (including deception) and put pressure on the government to work to abolish lies in all areas of its services.

The one limitation I found in Bok's work is that she provides no basis from which to discuss one last category of deception: that which is in fulfillment of the divine will. This last area will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

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<sup>20</sup> Bok, p. 243.

## Chapter VII

### Conclusions

This thesis was originally an attempt to define deception. As my research progressed two facts became apparent. First, it would not be possible to define deception because what one party claimed as deceptive could simply and honestly be called a mistake. How is one person to decide if the statement was truly meant to be vague or deceptive? The fact is that deception is not simply in the spoken word, but also in actions, written words, and silence and it must be evaluated in terms of these circumstances. My second major realization was that whether something was deceptive or not was not the critical consideration. The real question becomes, "is the seemingly deceptive act justifiable?"

The Judaic sources clearly say that in judicial matters absolute truth must be the rule. Outside of the legal realm there is a general principle of honesty which must be balanced with many other factors. As we discussed earlier, Judaism explicitly sanctions lies in certain very specific situations, such as peace in the household, modesty, and saving a life, to mention just a few. The underlying principle in these situations is an appreciation of life coupled with a concern for the welfare of others and of the society as a whole. If a lie, used prudently and infrequently, helps to achieve this goal, then it may be considered as an option. Sissela Bok in Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life also bases her conclusions on a concern for society and its members. In very limited situations, with clearly defined parameters, she concedes that lying is an acceptable

choice of last resort. However, she warns that a lie may seem to harm no one yet in fact does harm others. Even a seemingly innocent lie may at one point be discovered, and its damaging effect on society is cumulative. The more lying becomes normative and not the exception, the more people will begin to distrust society and its institutions; the inevitable result, Bok postulates, is a breakdown of society. When this line of reasoning is taken to the extreme, this outcome may seem unlikely; but, in fact, the path of her logic is quite sound.

Having defined situations and parameters for the utilization of deception, we have found that ancient, medieval, and contemporary sources alike have provided helpful guidelines in all but one area: that which relate to the divine will. This remains an overriding exception to all of the rules laid out to this point. For normative Judaism, God is not only omnipotent and omniscient, but is also omnibenevolent. As such, God's acts and commandments are for the ultimate good of humanity. In this manner, Biblical commentators are free to attempt to explain human actions only to a certain point and then can simply say that a deception was in order to "fulfill God's will." If there is an act which seems to confirm this hypothesis, it is even more difficult to refute the claim that God wished for or provided for it. For example, since a widely held medieval view of prophecy states that the prophecy occurs only by the will of God; then if prophecy occurs, it must be with the approval of God that prophecy was judged appropriate in this situation. To be specific, Isaac bestows a blessing on Jacob through the God-given vehicle of prophecy; the fact that he did so demonstrates God's approval of

Jacob and full knowledge of the situation in which the blessing is being bestowed. Here it seems that God's intervention, whether explicit or implied, is a variable that can override any systematic answer to the question of what deception is as well as whether deception is acceptable.

The actions described in the Bible present a spectrum of issues and behaviors. It is too simplistic to judge the actions there, or in contemporary society, simply as honest or deceptive. All of the research leads to the conclusions that, if possible, honesty is always preferred over deception if it results in no harm. If there is a question of harm, deception becomes a legitimate option, which must be carefully considered but not hastily employed. Even then, we must always remember that ultimately deception must be employed in line with and for only one set of goals; deception is only justifiable if it supports the fabric of society and not for personal gain.

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