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**AND JACOB SAID, "I AM ESAU, YOUR FIRSTBORN."**

**TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY  
MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATIONS OF  
GENESIS 25 - 33**

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Rabbi Chananya ben Teradion:  
When two people sit and words of Torah pass between them,  
the Shekhinah rests upon them.  
(Pirke Avot 3:3)

To all of those  
who invite the Shekhinah into their lives  
through the study of Torah.

Most importantly, I would like to thank Barbara for  
being my partner in every sense of the word. We share  
dreams & aspirations, two computers & one printer,

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Most importantly, I would like to thank Barbara for being my partner in every sense of the word. We share dreams & aspirations, two computers & one printer,

interpretations & loving critiques, favorite past times & love. The midrash teaches that every person needs another to help nurture, shape, and form his personality. You are that person for me.

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## Introduction

The picture on the box of a natural soap is to be  
the end product. These skills are the skills of studying  
midrash.

The art of studying midrash is the art of finding

## Studying Midrash

The student of midrash is the student of the details of a jigsaw puzzle. The first step in solving the puzzle is to find a good table on which to lay all of the pieces so that they won't be disturbed. That table, from the first encounter with the puzzle until its solution, is solely dedicated to the art of solving the puzzle. Solving the puzzle is often easier with the help of others sitting around the table. So, the student might begin on her own, but through the course of solving the puzzle she would invite others to share in the process. Perplexed, they begin by finding all of the pieces that have straight edges in order to first form the border. Satisfied with the framework, they then begin to fill in the picture. They haphazardly hold one piece against another in hopes of a match. They then create a system: all of the blue pieces in one pile, the green in another... Pieces begin to join together and parts of a picture emerge. Parts join with other parts as the larger picture is formed through their careful observation to detail. Every action is directed towards the goal of creating a picture that resembles either the picture on the box or a mental image of what is to be the end product. These skills are the skills of studying midrash.

The art of studying midrash is the art of finding

nuances in the biblical text as understood through the eyes of students of that text. Often, such nuances are the result of a hiatus in the text. For example, a biblical passage that portrays Jacob as crying in the arms of Rachel upon their first meeting makes no mention of the reason for his tears. An artful midrash would place appropriate words in the mouth of Jacob that explain his tears. Or, should a biblical text use an uncommon phrase, like in the case of Jacob and Esau's struggles in the womb, a well crafted midrash would find meaning in the obscure, thus giving purpose to those struggles.

The midrash, of course, is a personal product of the student; the student is a product of her environment. One who interacts with the biblical text at one study table will have a very different experience than one who interacts with the same text at a different table. Such differences are influenced by those who sit at the two tables, the historical setting of the encounter, the socio-political factors of the day, and the psycho-spiritual state of the student. This study of midrash takes place at such a table. The guests of honor at the table are Esau and Jacob; Rebekah and Isaac; Leah and Rachel; and, Leah and a host of their contemporaries. The events recorded in chapters 25 through 35 of the book of Genesis claim to be the events of their lives. More than characters in a novel, they actually interpret. Is one right and the other wrong?

The process is on-going. A student of the biblical text sits with another such student. The first might offer an interpretation only to hear his colleague offer 'another interpretation.' Is one right and the other wrong? The narratives and the dialogues every time the pages

Doubtful. Do both interpretations have significant impact on the way that each student understands the text.

Definitely. Can the one live with the knowledge of the other's divergent opinion? Absolutely.

While discussions of this nature originally exist in an historical setting, bound by the limits of time, they ultimately transcend such temporal limits. The interpretations and discussions of one generation are used by later generations in their basic understanding of the biblical text. Students who lived hundreds of years earlier find themselves sitting at tables of learning as their descendants struggle with the same text with which they first struggled so many years before. They 'hear' their own opinions quoted and, perhaps, misquoted. They hear the opinions of their descendants that differ from their own. Can they live with the divergence? One can only hope.

And Jacob said, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

This study of midrash takes place at such a table. The guests of honor at the table are Esau and Jacob; Rebekah and Isaac; Leah and Rachel; and, Laban and a host of their contemporaries. The events recorded in chapters 25 through 33 of the book of Genesis claim to be the events of their lives. More than characters in a novel, they actually relive the narratives and the dialogues every time the pages

are opened by a student of the text. We don't know if the events actually happened to them the way that they are recorded; but that doesn't make a difference to our study. These students, like no other students, bring their own life experiences to the table as the topic of discussion. Everyone sitting at the table strives to empathize with them.

Also seated at the table are Rabbi Judah the Prince and Rabbi Berechiah; Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Yose ben Halafta; and, Rav Yochanan and all of their rabbinic contemporaries. They have sat at this table, and at others similar to it, for the past two millennia. They come to the table oppressed by the rule of the Roman Empire which at times forbid the study of Torah. They sit along side Rashi, Sforno, and other medievals who witnessed the decline of that Empire and the rise of others. Each of the 'Rabbis' speaks his own interpretation, yet somehow they all merge into one tonal voice, despite their differences. They bring to the table a love and familiarity of the text, and a creative spark that is unsurpassed by anyone else seated with them.

We, too, sit at the table. We study the text in two distinct ways that ultimately merge into one. We begin with the basic text: its words and their meanings. One word might be repeated several times, or omitted in a key. Another interpretation, *davar acher*, is a phrase its inclusion does not signal the negation of a might be repeated several times, or omitted in a key. teach another way of understanding a biblical passage.

location where it would be expected. We turn to the scholars of our day to understand the plain sense meaning of the text. Are their parallels with other ancient civilizations? What did that word originally mean in the ears of the biblical author? What is the narrative sequence? Are themes developed or left undeveloped? This endeavor is called "The Biblical Text" in this thesis.

And then we turn to the Rabbis. They read the biblical text as a commentary on their own lives. It is our task to decipher the puzzle; to better understand the impact of the text on their everyday well-being. How does the interpretation of one rabbi differ from that of another? Why does it differ? How does the interpretation of a particular verse correspond with the larger scheme of the entire Torah? While they represent divergent voices, they speak as one voice. This endeavor is called 'Rabbinic Voices' in this thesis.

The two distinct methods merge into one in the endeavor called, "Another Interpretation."<sup>1</sup> It is 'another interpretation,' no truer or falser than any other. It is formed after careful analysis of the biblical text and the

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<sup>1</sup> "Another Interpretation," *davar acher*, is a phrase that is often used in midrashic works to introduce a divergent opinion. Its inclusion does not signal the negation of a previous comment. Rather, its inclusion comes to teach another way of understanding a biblical passage.

rabbinic material according to the most advanced and traditional methods known to us. This interpretation is clearly the result of the time we live in as well as the times that came before us.

"Another Interpretation" is brought to the table not in hopes of receiving blanket approval from all of those in attendance. "Another Interpretation" is brought to the table in hopes of hearing a response of "Could be," from those seated with us. "Another Interpretation" is brought to the table in hopes that others, too, will offer another interpretation. When that happens, all seated at the table bask in the presence of the Shekhinah. They share in the generative process of intellectual, spiritual, and emotional growth. They walk away from the table more enlightened and better able to understand the many paths they will wander during life's journey.

## Esau and Jacob

This is a study of the material concerning the relationship between Esau and Jacob found in chapters 25 through 33 of Genesis. The six chapters of this study are arranged according to the biblical narrative sequence. Each chapter contains three parts: "The Biblical Text," "Rabbinic Voices," and "Another Interpretation."

The biblical texts along with the rabbinic texts cited in this thesis are all original translations. They were derived from the original versions through consultation with various translations. The rabbinic material was found primarily through reading Bereshit Rabbah. Various points of interest were noted throughout the reading. Those notes led to the investigation of various verse indexes, which ultimately led to other texts.

Chapter 1 discusses the events surrounding the events of the birth of the twins and their early and divergent development. Chapter 2 deals with Jacob's acquisition of the blessing of the firstborn and his flight to Paddan-aram. Chapter 3 records Jacob's dream at Bethel. Chapter 4 chronicles the two decades that Jacob spent in the house of Laban. Chapter 5 serves as a summary of those two decades through the establishment of a pact between Jacob and Laban. Chapter 6 considers the reunion between Esau and Jacob.

### Another Interpretation

Jacob and Esau were twins who struggled both inside and outside of the womb. When Isaac was about to die, he deemed it appropriate to bless his older son with the blessing of the firstborn. Through a chain of events involving Rebekah, Jacob, the younger son, anxiously received the blessing of the firstborn behind Esau's back.

It was during that episode that Isaac asked Jacob, "Who are you my son?" and Jacob responded, "I am Esau, your firstborn." What a powerful sentence to utter. Jacob said, "I am Esau, your firstborn," at the moment that his father offered him his deathbed blessing. Jacob said, "I am Esau, your firstborn," and meant it in the most profound way possible. When Jacob uttered those words he actually became Esau, experiencing the reality of baring the blessing of the firstborn; struggling with its meaning. From that moment on, until he would finally meet Esau again twenty years later, Jacob was both 'Jacob, the younger' and 'Esau, the firstborn.' The two struggled within him.

This study is an attempt to explore the dynamics of Jacob's life as he bore the blessing of the firstborn. Its implications reach far beyond the printed word. I invite you to share in deciphering the puzzle. I invite you to offer "Another Interpretation."

## CHAPTER 1

THEY STRUGGLED WITHIN HER...WHEN THE BOYS GREW...

GENESIS 25:19-34

...coming from 1745. The text continues to  
...after twenty years of barren marriage (25:26). In  
...of 25:26, Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his  
...wife (25:27) and Adonai responded positively by  
...Rebekah to conceive. There is an intricate  
...relationship between the plea and the conception. 'Isaac  
...eye/star, which sounds like 'Rebekah conceived'.

## The Biblical Text

They Struggled Within Her Genesis 25:19-26

<sup>19</sup> This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. <sup>20</sup> Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. <sup>21</sup> Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and Adonai responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. <sup>22</sup> But the children struggled within her, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of Adonai, <sup>23</sup> and Adonai answered her,

"Two nations are in your womb,  
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;  
One people shall be mightier than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger."

<sup>24</sup> When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. <sup>25</sup> The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. <sup>26</sup> Then his brother emerged, holding onto the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

Genesis 25:19-26 recalls the prenatal beginnings of two brothers in one womb. Verses 19 & 20 explain Isaac's identity and how he came to marry Rebekah when he was forty years old. Rebekah is described as coming from Paddan-aram and as the sister of Laban, one who will play a decisive role in the upcoming narratives. The text continues to explain how, after twenty years of barren marriage (25:26 in light of 25:20), Isaac pleaded with Adonai on behalf of his barren wife (25:21) and Adonai responded positively by enabling Rebekah to conceive. There is an intricate relationship between the plea and the conception. 'Isaac pleaded,' *vye'atar*, which sounds like 'Rebekah conceived',

vatahar. Thus, we explicitly and subtly learn that the brothers' lives began with a plea to Adonai.

As Rebekah experienced the nine months of pregnancy, the children 'struggled' in her womb. The biblical author used the verb *vayitrotzetzu*, an unusual form that literally means 'they crushed, thrust, one another.'<sup>1</sup> The experience was so troubling for Rebekah that she could only ask, "If so, why do I exist?" (25:21). Just as the brothers were conceived through a plea to Adonai, so were they nurtured in the womb with an existential question addressed to Adonai.

Adonai's response completely ignored the physical and emotional pain of the mother and informs us exactly why it is that this story is recorded here:

Two nations are in your womb,  
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;  
One people shall be mightier than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger. (25:23)

The children struggled in the womb of the mother just as the people to emerge from their respective genealogies would struggle throughout their entire lives. Verses 22 & 23 are the biblical author's attempt to link the histories of two enemies in one common beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary Genesis (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 179.

The idea that Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom were siblings finds expression in several biblical texts. Deuteronomy 23:8 says: "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman." Numbers 20:14 reports that in the course of the wilderness wanderings Moses sent a message to the king of Edom that opened with the phrase, "Thus says your brother Israel." The prophet Obadiah, in his indictment of Edom, also refers to "your brother Jacob" (v. 10), and Malachi (1:2) assumes it to be common knowledge that "Esau is Jacob's brother." This tradition is so extraordinary, given the long and bitter history between Israel and Edom, that it must reflect authentic historical experience. The two peoples must have shared memories of an early common ancestry, blood kinship, or treaty associations.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the text informs us that the two who emerged from one womb were actually very different in appearance and initial action:

The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob.... (25:25f.)

The names, themselves, reveal a great deal about who these children were to be. Esau emerged red, 'admoni, philologically rooted in the people of Edom. His brother emerged holding on to the heel of Esau, so they named him ya'aqov, philologically rooted in the heel, 'eqev, of Esau.

The descriptions of the two boys is clearly antithetical. The last parts of the comparison are self-evident: Esau is a man of the outdoors (field, stamp), whereas Jacob prefers the quieter life indoors (literally in the "tents,"...) ...The first parts of the comparison, however, are less transparent. Esau is given to hunting..., as opposed to Jacob who is (ish) tam, something like "of simple tastes, quiet, retiring." The over-all contrast, then, is between the aggressive hunter

<sup>2</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 177.

## When The Boys Grew Genesis 25:27-34

<sup>27</sup> When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man who sat in tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac loved Esau because the hunt was in his mouth; but Rebekah loved Jacob. <sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, famished. <sup>30</sup> Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red red stuff to gulp down, because I am famished" - which is why he was named Edom. <sup>31</sup> Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." <sup>32</sup> And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, why do I need a birthright!" <sup>33</sup> But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. <sup>34</sup> Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.

The above verses of text describe the different natures of the boys (25:27), their parents' interaction with them (25:28), and the events surrounding Esau's sale of the birthright (25:29-34).

The two who grew together in one womb ultimately became very different people: "Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man who sat in tents" (25:27). More than describing the idiosyncracies of two brothers, this verse speaks of the divergent natures of two different ways of life: the hunter and the semi-nomad.

The description of the two boys is clearly antithetical. The last parts of the comparison are self-evident: Esau is a man of the outdoors (field, steppe), whereas Jacob prefers the quieter life indoors (literally in the "tents,"...) ...The first parts of the comparison, however, are less transparent. Esau is given to hunting... as opposed to Jacob who is (ish) tam, something like "of simple tastes, quiet, retiring." The over-all contrast, then, is between the aggressive hunter

and the reflective semi-nomad.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, the apparent purpose of such divergent descriptions of the boys was to create a motif of dual life tracks throughout the remainder of the narrative.

The statement of parental preferences seems to be irrelevant to the current context, but is essential for a complete understanding of the events in chapter 27.<sup>4</sup> It is unclear why Isaac actually preferred Esau over Jacob. Was it that Isaac himself had a taste for game and enjoyed the food brought by Esau or was there something intrinsic in Esau's nature that drew Isaac to him? Whatever the reason, the parallel between the rivalry of Esau and Jacob and Isaac and Ishmael (21:9f.) is important to keep in mind. Isaac raised his sons in the only way he knew how, in the midst of sibling rivalry.

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~~always subject to dispute, were~~  
~~been looked upon to some extent as a game. One is~~  
 The legitimacy of the transaction regarding the  
~~another.... Popular lore takes delight in such~~  
 birthright for a bowl of lentils is often questioned. In  
~~ethical and moral side in such dealings....~~  
 many cultures, one who held the birthright received  
~~misapplied....~~  
 preferred inheritance and status, succeeding his father as  
 head of the family. In Canaan and other Near Easternay's  
 reader could still ask several questions about this episode.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Speiser, Genesis A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1986), 195-98, 1981), 175.

<sup>4</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 181-82.

countries such status provided one with a double portion and special honor among his brothers.

While it was clearly a right of birth, the birthright was not always given to the firstborn. This instance is only one of many when the birthright was transferred to the younger sibling:

First-born status came through natural birth, although in early biblical days the right could be lost because of misdeed, as in Reuben's case (Gen. 49:3-4; I Chron. 5:1), canceled through blessings, as in Manasseh's case (Gen. 48:13-20), or sold as in Esau's case....<sup>5</sup>

Yet still, the modern Western reader might question the legitimacy of such an important transaction at the cost of a bowl of lentils. Such a reader needs to be aware of another set of values:

Business transactions in the Near East, while always subject to strict legal norms, have also been looked upon to some extent as a game, one in which the contestants match wits with one another.... Popular lore takes delight in such "gamesmanship," much as official law stresses the ethical and moral side in such dealings.... the lentils Abstract judgements could thus be easily misapplied....<sup>6</sup> his thoughts regarding the transaction.

Despite such awareness of ancient day norms, today's reader could still ask several questions about this episode.

Jacob but goes indifferently about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution

<sup>5</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, The Torah: A Modern Commentary (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Speiser, Genesis, 196.

Why did Esau, the hunter who provided food, need to ask for food from Jacob who just sat in tents? Why was Jacob making a stew; was he waiting for Esau? Was this a premeditated action on the part of Jacob? Was Esau really on the brink of death? Why would Esau have to buy food in his own home? Why didn't Esau just make his own food when faced with the proposition of Jacob?

The biblical author's use and repetition of the root 'dm (red) to describe the yet unnamed stew in verse 30 is reminiscent of Esau's own complexion (25:25). Esau's own statement, "I am at the point of death, **why** do I need a birthright!" (25:32) contains the same language as Rebekah's earlier existential question, "If so, **why** do I exist?" (25:22)

The passage ends with incredible swiftness of action on the part of Esau: he ate, drank, got up, went, and spurned (25:34), which informs us as to his attitude toward the implications of the entire transaction. Just as the lentils were gone, so were his thoughts regarding the transaction.

Our sympathy with Esau is somewhat dissipated when the narrator describes his inner feelings. Having finished the broth, Esau does not quarrel with Jacob but goes indifferently about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution of the first-born.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>7</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 182.

Despite this apparent favoritism of Jacob on the part of the author, the text is not totally one sided. The conclusion of the passage informs us of Esau's sale without informing us of Jacob's acquisition.

...it is highly significant that the text only mentions Esau's sale of the birthright but does not state that Jacob bought it. This is contrary to the usual biblical legal style as, for instance, in the case of Abraham's purchase of the cave at Machpelah, Jacob's acquisition of a field, and David's buying the threshing floor from Aruanah. The omission in the present story is another way of dissociating Jacob's eventual ascendancy from the means he adopted.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the general nature of the passage does not seem to be legal. Rather, the transaction between Esau and Jacob appears to be more spiritual. The implications are to effect the spiritual well-being of the brothers more than any other aspect of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

### Rabbinic Voices

The Rabbis were very astute when it came to the brotherly divergence of Esau and Jacob. Interpreting 'vayitrotzetsu, the children struggled within her,' Rabbi Yochanan says, "This one ran to kill the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. <sup>9</sup> Ibid. <sup>10</sup> Ibid. <sup>11</sup> Ibid. <sup>12</sup> Ibid. <sup>13</sup> Ibid. <sup>14</sup> Ibid. <sup>15</sup> Ibid. <sup>16</sup> Ibid. <sup>17</sup> Ibid. <sup>18</sup> Ibid. <sup>19</sup> Ibid. <sup>20</sup> Ibid. <sup>21</sup> Ibid. <sup>22</sup> Ibid. <sup>23</sup> Ibid. <sup>24</sup> Ibid. <sup>25</sup> Ibid. <sup>26</sup> Ibid. <sup>27</sup> Ibid. <sup>28</sup> Ibid. <sup>29</sup> Ibid. <sup>30</sup> Ibid. <sup>31</sup> Ibid. <sup>32</sup> Ibid. <sup>33</sup> Ibid. <sup>34</sup> Ibid. <sup>35</sup> Ibid. <sup>36</sup> Ibid. <sup>37</sup> Ibid. <sup>38</sup> Ibid. <sup>39</sup> Ibid. <sup>40</sup> Ibid. <sup>41</sup> Ibid. <sup>42</sup> Ibid. <sup>43</sup> Ibid. <sup>44</sup> Ibid. <sup>45</sup> Ibid. <sup>46</sup> Ibid. <sup>47</sup> Ibid. <sup>48</sup> Ibid. <sup>49</sup> Ibid. <sup>50</sup> Ibid. <sup>51</sup> Ibid. <sup>52</sup> Ibid. <sup>53</sup> Ibid. <sup>54</sup> Ibid. <sup>55</sup> Ibid. <sup>56</sup> Ibid. <sup>57</sup> Ibid. <sup>58</sup> Ibid. <sup>59</sup> Ibid. <sup>60</sup> Ibid. <sup>61</sup> Ibid. <sup>62</sup> Ibid. <sup>63</sup> Ibid. <sup>64</sup> Ibid. <sup>65</sup> Ibid. <sup>66</sup> Ibid. <sup>67</sup> Ibid. <sup>68</sup> Ibid. <sup>69</sup> Ibid. <sup>70</sup> Ibid. <sup>71</sup> Ibid. <sup>72</sup> Ibid. <sup>73</sup> Ibid. <sup>74</sup> Ibid. <sup>75</sup> Ibid. <sup>76</sup> Ibid. <sup>77</sup> Ibid. <sup>78</sup> Ibid. <sup>79</sup> Ibid. <sup>80</sup> Ibid. <sup>81</sup> Ibid. <sup>82</sup> Ibid. <sup>83</sup> Ibid. <sup>84</sup> Ibid. <sup>85</sup> Ibid. <sup>86</sup> Ibid. <sup>87</sup> Ibid. <sup>88</sup> Ibid. <sup>89</sup> Ibid. <sup>90</sup> Ibid. <sup>91</sup> Ibid. <sup>92</sup> Ibid. <sup>93</sup> Ibid. <sup>94</sup> Ibid. <sup>95</sup> Ibid. <sup>96</sup> Ibid. <sup>97</sup> Ibid. <sup>98</sup> Ibid. <sup>99</sup> Ibid. <sup>100</sup> Ibid. <sup>101</sup> Ibid. <sup>102</sup> Ibid. <sup>103</sup> Ibid. <sup>104</sup> Ibid. <sup>105</sup> Ibid. <sup>106</sup> Ibid. <sup>107</sup> Ibid. <sup>108</sup> Ibid. <sup>109</sup> Ibid. <sup>110</sup> Ibid. <sup>111</sup> Ibid. <sup>112</sup> Ibid. <sup>113</sup> Ibid. <sup>114</sup> Ibid. <sup>115</sup> Ibid. <sup>116</sup> Ibid. <sup>117</sup> Ibid. <sup>118</sup> Ibid. <sup>119</sup> Ibid. <sup>120</sup> Ibid. <sup>121</sup> Ibid. <sup>122</sup> Ibid. <sup>123</sup> Ibid. <sup>124</sup> Ibid. <sup>125</sup> Ibid. <sup>126</sup> Ibid. <sup>127</sup> Ibid. <sup>128</sup> Ibid. <sup>129</sup> Ibid. <sup>130</sup> Ibid. <sup>131</sup> Ibid. <sup>132</sup> Ibid. <sup>133</sup> Ibid. <sup>134</sup> Ibid. <sup>135</sup> Ibid. <sup>136</sup> Ibid. <sup>137</sup> Ibid. <sup>138</sup> Ibid. <sup>139</sup> Ibid. <sup>140</sup> Ibid. <sup>141</sup> Ibid. <sup>142</sup> Ibid. <sup>143</sup> Ibid. <sup>144</sup> Ibid. <sup>145</sup> Ibid. <sup>146</sup> Ibid. <sup>147</sup> Ibid. <sup>148</sup> Ibid. <sup>149</sup> Ibid. <sup>150</sup> Ibid. <sup>151</sup> Ibid. <sup>152</sup> Ibid. <sup>153</sup> Ibid. 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<sup>812</sup> Ibid. <sup>813</sup> Ibid. <sup>814</sup> Ibid. <sup>815</sup> Ibid. <sup>816</sup> Ibid. <sup>817</sup> Ibid. <sup>818</sup> Ibid. <sup>819</sup> Ibid. <sup>820</sup> Ibid. <sup>821</sup> Ibid. <sup>822</sup> Ibid. <sup>823</sup> Ibid. <sup>824</sup> Ibid. <sup>825</sup> Ibid. <sup>826</sup> Ibid. <sup>827</sup> Ibid. <sup>828</sup> Ibid. <sup>829</sup> Ibid. <sup>830</sup> Ibid. <sup>831</sup> Ibid. <sup>832</sup> Ibid. <sup>833</sup> Ibid. <sup>834</sup> Ibid. <sup>835</sup> Ibid. <sup>836</sup> Ibid. <sup>837</sup> Ibid. <sup>838</sup> Ibid. <sup>839</sup> Ibid. <sup>840</sup> Ibid. <sup>841</sup> Ibid. <sup>842</sup> Ibid. <sup>843</sup> Ibid. <sup>844</sup> Ibid. <sup>845</sup> Ibid. <sup>846</sup> Ibid. <sup>847</sup> Ibid. <sup>848</sup> Ibid. <sup>849</sup> Ibid. <sup>850</sup> Ibid. <sup>851</sup> Ibid. <sup>852</sup> Ibid. <sup>853</sup> Ibid. <sup>854</sup> Ibid. <sup>855</sup> Ibid. <sup>856</sup> Ibid. <sup>857</sup> Ibid. <sup>858</sup> Ibid. 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<sup>906</sup> Ibid. <sup>907</sup> Ibid. <sup>908</sup> Ibid. <sup>909</sup> Ibid. <sup>910</sup> Ibid. <sup>911</sup> Ibid. <sup>912</sup> Ibid. <sup>913</sup> Ibid. <sup>914</sup> Ibid. <sup>915</sup> Ibid. <sup>916</sup> Ibid. <sup>917</sup> Ibid. <sup>918</sup> Ibid. <sup>919</sup> Ibid. <sup>920</sup> Ibid. <sup>921</sup> Ibid. <sup>922</sup> Ibid. <sup>923</sup> Ibid. <sup>924</sup> Ibid. <sup>925</sup> Ibid. <sup>926</sup> Ibid. <sup>927</sup> Ibid. <sup>928</sup> Ibid. <sup>929</sup> Ibid. <sup>930</sup> Ibid. <sup>931</sup> Ibid. <sup>932</sup> Ibid. <sup>933</sup> Ibid. <sup>934</sup> Ibid. <sup>935</sup> Ibid. <sup>936</sup> Ibid. <sup>937</sup> Ibid. <sup>938</sup> Ibid. <sup>939</sup> Ibid. <sup>940</sup> Ibid. <sup>941</sup> Ibid. <sup>942</sup> Ibid. <sup>943</sup> Ibid. <sup>944</sup> Ibid. <sup>945</sup> Ibid. <sup>946</sup> Ibid. <sup>947</sup> Ibid. <sup>948</sup> Ibid. <sup>949</sup> Ibid. <sup>950</sup> Ibid. <sup>951</sup> Ibid. <sup>952</sup> Ibid. <sup>953</sup> Ibid. <sup>954</sup> Ibid. <sup>955</sup> Ibid. <sup>956</sup> Ibid. <sup>957</sup> Ibid. <sup>958</sup> Ibid. <sup>959</sup> Ibid. <sup>960</sup> Ibid. <sup>961</sup> Ibid. <sup>962</sup> Ibid. <sup>963</sup> Ibid. <sup>964</sup> Ibid. <sup>965</sup> Ibid. <sup>966</sup> Ibid. <sup>967</sup> Ibid. <sup>968</sup> Ibid. <sup>969</sup> Ibid. <sup>970</sup> Ibid. <sup>971</sup> Ibid. <sup>972</sup> Ibid. <sup>973</sup> Ibid. <sup>974</sup> Ibid. <sup>975</sup> Ibid. <sup>976</sup> Ibid. <sup>977</sup> Ibid. <sup>978</sup> Ibid. <sup>979</sup> Ibid. <sup>980</sup> Ibid. <sup>981</sup> Ibid. <sup>982</sup> Ibid. <sup>983</sup> Ibid. <sup>984</sup> Ibid. <sup>985</sup> Ibid. <sup>986</sup> Ibid. <sup>987</sup> Ibid. <sup>988</sup> Ibid. <sup>989</sup> Ibid. <sup>990</sup> Ibid. <sup>991</sup> Ibid. <sup>992</sup> Ibid. <sup>993</sup> Ibid. <sup>994</sup> Ibid. <sup>995</sup> Ibid. <sup>996</sup> Ibid. <sup>997</sup> Ibid. <sup>998</sup> Ibid. <sup>999</sup> Ibid. <sup>1000</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Plaut, Genesis, 175.

other, while the other ran to kill that one."<sup>10</sup>

According to Rabbi Yochanan, the struggling was the result of a mutual animosity, the source of which is unknown. All that we know is that they hated each other so much, even in the womb, that both 'ran,' 'ratz,' to kill the other; thus rendering the unusual verb 'vayitrotzetzu,' an apparent duplication of 'ratz.' Such an interpretation gives equal weight to the aggressive nature of both children.

The Rabbis were not even sure of the meaning of the apparently clear phrase, 'the elder shall serve the younger' (25:23).

Rabbi Huna said, 'If he [Jacob] is meritorious, he [Esau] will serve, if not [if Jacob is not meritorious], he [Jacob] will serve [Esau].'<sup>11</sup>

The service of the older brother was not unconditional. Both children would have to merit their own status. The same verse is later questioned by the author of Midrash Hagadol when he compared it to Isaac's blessing of Esau, "I do not know if the elder or the younger serves. Based on the later verse, 'you shall live by your sword and serve your brother' (27:40), the text placed in first came out last? This is how the

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<sup>10</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 63:6. Bereshit Rabbah is a fifth century Palestinian compilation of midrash.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 63:7. Ibid. 63:8.

teaches that the older serves the younger.<sup>12</sup>

Both comments add to the ambiguity of the Rabbis' interpretation of the beginnings of two distinct nations. Both comments place Esau and Jacob on equal ground at the beginning of their lives, as if the reader need await the unfolding of the events of their lives to see who would serve whom.

Yet, Esau's appearance 'first' (25:25) troubled the Rabbis. How could Esau, the ancestor of Rome, emerge from the womb before Jacob, the ancestor of Israel, given all of the qualitative differences between first and second? The answer is easy: Esau emerged first with all of the impurities of the womb, while Jacob emerged second, perfectly pure.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, the question of preferential birth order was so important that it was portrayed not only as the question of the Rabbis, but as the question of a non-Jewish woman as well.

A matron once asked Rabbi Yose ben Halafta - she said to him, "Why did Esau emerge first?" He said to her, "The first drop [of semen] was Jacob." He continued, "It is similar to your placing two pearls in one tube. Doesn't the one that you placed in first come out last? This is how the one led by Hadrian among idol worshippers and the other led

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<sup>12</sup> Midrash Hagadol on Genesis 25:23. Midrash Hagadol is a thirteenth century Yemenite text.

<sup>13</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 63:8.

first drop was Jacob."<sup>14</sup>

Despite the Rabbis' apparent conviction regarding the equality of the two boys, Rabbi Yose ben Halafta and his contemporaries managed to transform 'second' (Jacob) into 'first' (Esau) thus making 'second' (Jacob) qualitatively better than 'first' (Esau).

Such subtle interpretations are not the Rabbis' norm. They had no qualms placing Jacob before Esau in the boldest way that they knew. For example, they argued that Rebekah's pain during pregnancy was the result of Jacob 'struggling' for Torah and Esau 'struggling' for idolatry:

At the time when Rebekah would stand near houses of assembly and houses of study, Jacob struggled to come out, as it is written, "Before I created you in the womb, I selected you" (Jeremiah 1:5); but, at the time when Rebekah would pass by houses of idolatry, Esau struggled to come out, as it is written, "The wicked are defiant from the womb" (Psalm 58:4).<sup>15</sup>

The Rabbis read their own reality into this dual approach of the two children. They perceived themselves as the children of Jacob, Israel; and the Romans, their oppressors, as the children of Esau, Edom. 'Two nations are in your womb' - one led by Hadrian among idol worshipers and the other led

<sup>14</sup> Midrash Tehillim 7:81-84. Midrash Tehillim is a medieval compilation of midrash on the Psalms.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 63:8. the full spelling is Genesis 28:27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 63:6. Ibid. 63:8.

by Solomon among Israel.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, the Rabbis read into the story of the birth of the two children the birth of two nations, prototypically different. Their midrash was an attempt to justify their own reality of life in Torah; their own 'struggle' for Torah, in a world dominated by pagans.

Two nations they are, each owning a world of its own, the one the Torah, the other sin. From the one will spring Solomon, the builder of the Temple, from the other Vespasian, the destroyer thereof.<sup>17</sup>

It is almost as if Rebekah's pain and subsequent question, "If so, why do I exist?" was in fact their own existential pain and question: If we live Torah, why are we subjugated?

The Rabbis' midrash extended beyond a polemic against Rome and a justification of a life in Torah to the individual attributes of Esau and Jacob. Playing on an apparently missing aleph in the word 't'omim, twins,' of verse 24,<sup>18</sup> the Rabbis noted that 'Jacob was righteous and Esau was evil.'<sup>19</sup> They reasoned that the aleph as it

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 63:7.

<sup>17</sup> Midrash Tehilim 9:83-84. Midrash Tehilim is a medieval compilation of midrash on the Psalms.

<sup>18</sup> Compare to the full spelling in Genesis 38:27.

<sup>19</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 63:8. (23)27) - Rabbi Levi said:

appeared in the word *t'omim* in reference to Perez and Zerah (38:29f.) indicated that both were to be righteous men. The missing aleph of 25:24 indicated that only one of the two boys was to be righteous. When faced with the decision of stereotyping either Jacob or Esau as righteous, the Rabbis unequivocally determined that Jacob was righteous and Esau was evil.

It is this dichotomy of personal attributes that structured the Rabbis' approach to the entire Esau/Jacob narrative. The story of the origins of two divergent yet sibling nations was predominately understood by the Rabbis as their story of difference with Rome. That which made two fathers (of nations) so different, made them so similar in family relations and daily events. They came from the same family, yet diverged; day after day one asked for food that the other provided. That which made the Rabbis so different from the Romans also made them so similar, as if the two nations, living side by side, came from one womb.

The Rabbis were well aware of the similarities and differences between the two brothers. They were as similar as similar could be, intertwined in each other's life for thirteen years, but then, they began to sprout in different directions:

"When the boys grew..." (25:27) - Rabbi Levi said:

It is like a myrtle tree and a thorn bush that were growing one on top of the other. Once they grow and separate, one gives its aroma and the other its thorn. So it was all thirteen years that the two of them went to school and came from school. After thirteen years, this one would go to houses of study, and this one would go to houses of idolatry.<sup>20</sup>

Their divergent ways were evidenced in their very natures. According to the Rabbis, Esau became a skillful hunter, able to entrap his prey with his guile tongue:

"Esau became a skillful hunter..." (25:27) - He hunted all creatures through his mouth saying, 'You didn't steal, who stole with you? You didn't kill, who killed with you?'<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, "Jacob would sit in tents," (25:27) "two tents, the house of study of Shem, and the house of study of Ever,"<sup>22</sup> the pre-Sinai houses of Torah study.

The day of the transaction was a busy one for these two very different brothers. On the one hand, Jacob, the tent dweller, slowly simmered a lentil stew for his father Jacob, on the passing of Abraham.<sup>23</sup> That stew, as described by Esau, was doubly rich in redness. The stew, in fact, was made especially for Esau:

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 63:10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Sanhedrin Toldot 7. Midrash Tanhuma

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 63:11.

Lentils are a traditional part of the meal of condolence. Aramaic translation of the Bible.

"From that red red stuff" (25:30) - ...Resh Lakish said, 'From it and from that which is like it. He is red, and his food is red; his land is red; his soldiers are red; his clothes are red; his redness bursts through his red clothes; he is red....'<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, Esau committed five major sins on that very day, thus shortening Abraham's life by five years.<sup>25</sup>

That day saw more than five sins committed by Esau. It was the day that Esau dropped the mask he had been wearing. Up until that day, Esau masqueraded before his father as a pious God-fearer. The Rabbis portrayed such interactions between Esau and Isaac in the following way:

'Father,' he would ask Isaac, 'what is the tithe on straw and salt?' The question made him appear God-fearing in the eyes of his father, because these two products are the very ones exempt from tithing. Isaac failed to notice, too, that his older son gave him forbidden food to eat.<sup>26</sup>

What he took for the flesh of young goats was dog meat.<sup>27</sup>

But on that day, when Esau came in from the field (25:29), he dropped the masquerade and publicly sinned. In response,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 63:12.

<sup>25</sup> Babylonia Talmud, Baba Batra 16b. This is an attempt to explain why Abraham only lived to 175 years, while Isaac lived to 180 years.

<sup>26</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Hanidpas Toldot 7. Midrash Tanhuma is a ninth century compilation.

<sup>27</sup> Targum Yerushalmi on Genesis 27:31. Targum Yerushalmi is a first century Aramaic translation of the Bible.

Adonai said,

I promised Abraham that he should go to his fathers in peace. Can I now permit him to be witness to his grandson's rebellion against God, his violations of the laws of chastity, and his shedding of blood? It is better for him to die now in peace.<sup>28</sup>

So it was that those who emerged from the same womb grew in very different directions.

### Another Interpretation

In Genesis 25:19-26, Jacob and Esau, brothers who eventually could not live together outside of the womb, found themselves struggling with each other within the warmth and security of their mother's womb. The image of one was hard to discern from the other as the two children-to-be caused their mother Rebekah to question her own existence (25:22). When she questioned God concerning her existential crisis, God responded,

Two nations are in your womb,  
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;  
One people shall be mightier than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger. (25:23)

And so it appeared that the struggle within the womb was for might and service. It would appear that such a struggle would not have been initiated by the older, for he

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<sup>28</sup> Nidrash Tehilim 9:83. Heel of Esau; so they

would have been content to be mightier and to be served as the natural order would dictate. Rather, it seems likely that such a struggle would have been initiated by the younger. The younger would have attempted to usurp the powers of the older from within the womb and beyond. Were this the case, it would appear that Jacob would have initiated the struggles in order to usurp Esau's position throughout their lives.

However, were Jacob to succeed in the womb, e.g., become firstborn, by necessity he would spend the rest of his life thwarting off the attacks of the younger Esau. But we know that this is not the case. In fact, Esau, the firstborn, is later replaced by the younger Jacob through birthright and blessing.

What then was the struggle about, if not for birth order? The struggle in the womb serves as a paradigm of the struggle outside of the womb. The struggle within the womb blurred the lines of definition between the individual identities of twin brothers. This prenatal lack of clarity continued as a thread throughout the lives of the brothers, by their father, while the other by their mother. One was especially Jacob. In fact, Jacob was first described only in relation to his brother, and patiently stirred the kettle. The one loved by his father. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding onto the heel of Esau; so they named it

named him Jacob. (25:25f.)

Esau had his own identity, he was red all over and his name reflected it. Jacob, on the other hand, was first called 'his brother.' He grasped the heel of Esau and his name reflected it. Jacob would spend the rest of his life trying to identify himself as someone other than Esau's brother.

Despite their strikingly apparent differences, the two emerged from one womb where they spent the better part of nine months entangled leg in arm, arm in leg. The questions, 'Is that my arm or is that your leg? Is that my hand or is that your voice?', seem to amply describe the nature of the relationship. This confused identity motif is prevalent throughout the childhood and first two decades of Jacob's adult life. Both his actions and his words serve as a question, 'Am I Jacob or am I Esau?'

Those who emerged from the same womb with different physical appearances, grew into those physical difference as their individual personalities developed. The elder was a hunter, the younger sat at home. One was particularly loved by their father, while the other by their mother. One was impatient and in dire need of food, while the other slowly and patiently stirred the kettle. The one loved by his father cried out in existential pain, "I am at the point of death, why do I need a birthright!" (25:32). How ironic it

is that these words are so reminiscent of his mother's own existential crisis during pregnancy (25:22).<sup>29</sup> Perhaps their incompatibility was due to their similarity.

Yet, each of the two boys possessed the key to the other's future: Jacob possessed Esau's nourishment, while Esau possessed Jacob's inheritance. Jacob gave Esau the red red stuff, thus giving him his name; while Esau gave Jacob his heel, thus giving him his name.

'Jacob possessed Esau's nourishment.' That stew was more than a way of satiating the momentary hunger of a hunter. That kettle, filled with red stuff, slowly stirred and seasoned by Jacob, possessed the true nature of Esau. It was red like his own complexion; it was red like the bloody by-product of the kill. Yet, it was Jacob, not Esau, who lit the fire, combined the ingredients, and slowly stirred divergent flavors into one robust 'personality.' On this occasion, the hunter could not feed himself and was dependent upon his sedentary brother.

'Esau possessed Jacob's inheritance.' He possessed it in the same manner that Jacob would ultimately claim it: through the apparent deception of Isaac. Esau entertained

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<sup>29</sup> The Hebrew, *lamah zeh*, 'why is this', is found in both cases.

his father with apparently pious questions and served him apparently succulent game. But it was all a masquerade, no different than the sheep skins and garments Jacob would soon wear (27:15f.).

'And the boys grew' - in very different, yet strikingly similar ways. The myrtle seemed to have thorns and the thorn seemed to smell like the myrtle. Yet the two were very different. The ultimate identity of each was yet to be discovered.

## CHAPTER 2

"I AM ESAU, YOUR FIRSTBORN."

GENESIS 27:1-28:9

18:1-9      Esau's reaction to Jacob's return is a study in spite.

If there is any scene in the Bible that might have been written for dramatic presentation, it is this passage. It is filled with dramatic irony, center stage scenes, asides

## The Biblical Text

This portion of text, which is filled with a great deal of dialogue and action, can be outlined in the following way:

- 27:1-4      Isaac instructs Esau concerning the preparation of the meal in return for the blessing of Isaac's soul.
- 27:5-13     Rebekah instructs Jacob to take Esau's place and Jacob expresses concern about her plan. Rebekah explains that she would take full responsibility.
- 27:14-17    Jacob brings the food to Rebekah who prepares both the food and Jacob for presentation.
- 27:18-29    Isaac determines the identity of the son standing before him and blesses that son who then left.
- 27:30-40    Esau arrives after Isaac blesses Jacob. He vehemently protests about missing the blessing. Isaac offers Esau another blessing.
- 27:41-45    Esau vows to kill Jacob after the death of Isaac. Rebekah, after hearing Esau's vow, instructs Jacob to flee to Haran.
- 27:46-  
28:5      Rebekah explains to Isaac her disgust regarding Esau's marriage to Hittite women in order to convince Isaac to send Jacob to Haran. Isaac blesses and sends Jacob to Paddan-aram to get a wife from the daughters of Laban.
- 28:6-9      Esau marries Ishmael's daughter out of spite.

If there is any scene in the Bible that might have been written for dramatic presentation, it is this passage. It is filled with dramatic irony, center stage scenes, asides

played on the wings, crafted dialogue, and intense emotions.

#### Isaac's Instructions for Blessing Genesis 27:1-4

27 When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called Esau, **his older son**, and said to him, "**My son**." He answered him, "I am here." <sup>2</sup> And he said, "I am old and I do not know the day of my death. <sup>3</sup> Please, take now your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out into the field and hunt me some game. <sup>4</sup> Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die."

We are first exposed to the interior of blinding Isaac's tent. He lay in bed, apparently preparing for his death. Yet, he will ultimately die no less than twenty years into the future (35:28f.). He called to Esau, who was hovering near the tent entrance, in order to instruct him concerning the meal of blessing. Esau responded in full presence, "Here I am" (*hineni*) (27:1). He responded with the same word that Isaac would later use in response to Jacob (27:18). *Hineni* implies an awareness of and a readiness to perform a task that is the result of a relationship with another. Isaac and Esau used that word, but Jacob could only say, "'ani - I am" (27:24), in a similar context of dialogue. Esau then went out to the field, to his favorite venue, to do his father's will (27:5).

Isaac only to be assured by Rebecca that she would bare the twins (27:13). Jacob ran to do the will of his mother just as Esau agreed to do the will his father.

## Rebekah's Instructions for Blessing Genesis 27:5-13

<sup>5</sup> Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the field to hunt game to bring, <sup>6</sup> Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, <sup>7</sup> 'Bring me some game and prepare a dish that I will eat, so that I may bless you before Adonai before I die.' <sup>8</sup> Now, my son, listen to my voice, to that which I am instructing you. <sup>9</sup> Please go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make them into a dish just as your father likes. <sup>10</sup> You will then bring it to your father, he will eat so that he will bless you before his death. <sup>11</sup> But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Alas, my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. <sup>12</sup> Perhaps my father will touch me and I shall be in his eyes like a trickster, thus bringing a curse and not a blessing upon myself." <sup>13</sup> His mother said to him, "Your curse shall be upon me my son! Just listen to my voice. Go and fetch for me."

While all of the events were taking place inside the tent, Rebekah had her ear to the tent flap. After hearing Isaac's instructions, Rebekah motioned to Jacob to come near. She explained to him exactly what Isaac told Esau and instructed him to do the same, so that Isaac may bless Jacob before he dies (27:10). Despite her careful attention to detail, Rebekah misinformed Jacob as to one detail. She insisted that the entire blessing was to take place before God (27:8), whereas Isaac never mentioned God in the instructions to Esau. Jacob protested out of fear of being cursed only to be assured by Rebekah that she would bare the curse (27:13). Jacob ran to do the will of his mother just as Esau agreed to do the will his father.

## Rebekah and Jacob Prepare for Blessing Genesis 27:14-17

<sup>14</sup> He went, he took, and he brought to **his mother**. **His mother** made a dish as **his father** liked. <sup>15</sup> Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau, **her older son**, which were with her in the house, and dressed Jacob **her younger son**. <sup>16</sup> She covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. <sup>17</sup> She placed the dish and the bread that she made in the hand of **her son** Jacob.

Jacob returned with two kids and handed them to Rebekah who quickly and silently prepared them as Isaac liked. Isaac originally sent Esau for wild game, but Rebekah and Jacob were satisfied to serve him domesticated sheep. She silently dressed Jacob in Esau's best clothes and covered his hands and the skinless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. She then ceremoniously placed the dish and the bread in Jacob's hands as she sent him to the entrance of the tent.

## The Blessing Scene Genesis 27:18-29

<sup>18</sup> He came to **his father** and said, "**My father**." He said, "Here I am. Who are you **my son**?" <sup>19</sup> Jacob said to **his father**, "I am Esau, **your firstborn**. I have done as you have spoken to me. Please rise, sit up, and eat from my hunt so that you soul shall bless me." <sup>20</sup> Isaac said to **his son**, "How did you find so quickly, **my son**?" He said, "Because Adonai your God was before me." <sup>21</sup> Isaac said to Jacob, "Please approach so that I may feel you **my son** - whether or not you are **my son** Esau." <sup>22</sup> Jacob approached **his father** Isaac who felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau." <sup>23</sup> He did not recognize him because his hands were hairy like **his brother** Esau's hands; so he blessed him. <sup>24</sup> He said, "Are you really **my son** Esau?" And when he said "I am," <sup>25</sup> he said, "Serve me and I will eat from your hunt, **my son**, so that my soul may bless you. He served him and he ate;

he brought him wine and he drank. <sup>26</sup> His father Isaac said to him, "Please approach me and kiss me **my son**." <sup>27</sup> He approached and kissed him. He smelled the odor of his clothes and blessed him, saying, "Behold, the smell of **my son** is like the smell of the field that Adonai has blessed.

<sup>28</sup> "May God give you  
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth,  
Abundance of new grain and wine.

<sup>29</sup> Let peoples serve you,  
And nations bow to you;  
Be master over **your brothers**,  
And let **your mother's sons** bow to you.  
Cursed be they who curse you,  
Blessed they who bless you."

Rebekah again placed her ear to the tent flap while Jacob, clad in Esau's clothing and sheep skins holding fresh bread and a dish of meat, approached his ailing father (27:18). The blind Isaac perceived more than his eyes had ever seen:

Tension mounts constantly as Isaac, sightless and never altogether convinced by the evidence of his other senses, resorts to one test after another: his visitor sounds like Jacob, but says he is Esau, yet the hunt took much less time than expected; the skin feels like Esau's and the food tastes right; the lips betray nothing, but the clothes smell of the chase; so it has to be Esau after all!<sup>1</sup>

The most telling verse of the entire episode was spoken by Isaac, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22). On the surface, this is a description of a make-shift costume and a poorly disguised

<sup>1</sup> Speiser, Genesis, 213.

voice. Beneath the surface, Isaac's words inform us of the depth of his perception. He might have been blind, but he was not easily fooled.

With this perception fully in mind, Isaac asked one final question, "Are you really my son Esau?" (27:24) Satisfied with Jacob's answer, "I am" (27:24), Isaac blessed the one whom he thought was Esau. That son quickly left the tent knowing that the other brother may show up any minute (27:30). Meanwhile, Rebekah removed her ear from the tent flap in order to bask in her own glory.

#### Jacob Left; Esau Returned Genesis 27:30-40

<sup>30</sup> It was when Isaac finished blessing Jacob, once Jacob had left the presence of **his father** Isaac, that **his brother** Esau had come in from the hunt. <sup>31</sup> He also made a dish and brought it to **his father**. He said to **his father**, "May **my father** rise and eat from the hunt of **his son** so that your soul may bless me." <sup>32</sup> **His father** Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am **your son, your firstborn**, Esau." <sup>33</sup> Isaac was seized with a very violent trembling. He said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it all before you came. I blessed him and he will now be blessed." <sup>34</sup> When Esau heard the words of **his father**, he burst out into a wild and bitter sobbing. He said to **his father**, "Bless me too, **father!**" <sup>35</sup> He said, "**Your brother** came with guile and took your blessing." <sup>36</sup> He said, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? He took my birthright and now he took my blessing!" He said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" <sup>37</sup> Isaac answered, saying to Esau, "But I have made him master over you: I have given him all of **his brothers** for servants, and sustained him with grain and wine. What, then, can I do, **my son?**" <sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, "Do you only have one blessing **my father?** Bless me too **my father!**" Esau raised his voice and cried. <sup>39</sup> **His father** Isaac answered, saying to him,

"See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth  
And the dew of heaven above.  
40 Yet by your sword shall you live,  
And you shall serve **your brother**;  
But when you grow restive,  
You shall break his yoke from your neck."

As soon as Jacob left the tent, Esau arrived confidently with dish in hand. He offered the food to his father (27:31) only to receive the surprise of his life. Isaac asked Esau, "Who are you?" (27:32), and deciphered that it was Jacob who received the blessing. The two entered into an emotional dialogue in order to figure out a way to bless Esau.

The reader is all but won over by the drama of Jacob's ordeal, when Esau's return restores the proper perspective. The scene between Isaac and Esau, both so shaken and helpless, could scarcely be surpassed for pathos. Most poignant of all is the stark fact that the deed cannot be undone. For all the actors in this piece are but tools of fate which - purposeful though it must be - can itself be neither deciphered nor side-stepped by man.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Jacob left the blessing in haste, so did Esau end the blessing scene in haste by saying, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob" (27:41). These few words were muttered under his breath as he left the tent, just loud enough for Isaac to hear. Isaac reported the awful news to Rebekah.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 213. ...said to Isaac, 'I am disgusted with my life ... If Jacob marries a Hittite woman

## Rebekah's Second Plan Genesis 27:41-45

<sup>41</sup> Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which **his father** had given him, and Esau said in his heart, "Let but the mourning period of **my father** come and I will kill **my brother** Jacob." <sup>42</sup> The words of Esau, **her older son**, were told to Rebekah. She sent and called for Jacob, **her younger son**. She said to him, "**Your brother** Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you." <sup>43</sup> Now, **my son**, listen to my voice: Get up and flee to **my brother** Laban in Haran. <sup>44</sup> Stay with him a few days until the fury of **your brother** has subsided; <sup>45</sup> until **your brother's** anger against you has subsided and he forgets that which you did to him. I will then send for you and take you from there. Why should I lose the two of you in one day?"

The awful news of Esau's plan was reported to Rebekah. In panic, she again summoned Jacob, this time to instruct him of Esau's plan. She informed Jacob of her plan to send him to Haran in order to save his life (27:42ff.). And once again, as she did when the boys were in her womb, she asked an existential question, "Why should I lose both of you in one day?" (27:45). Which two? Perhaps Esau and Jacob: Jacob killed by Esau and Esau killed as punishment. Perhaps Isaac and Jacob: Isaac of natural causes and Jacob at the hands of Esau. The reader is left guessing. The entire dialogue occurred as Rebekah escorted her favorite son to the tent entrance.

## Rebekah Convinced Isaac Genesis 27:46-28:5

<sup>46</sup> When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him on his way, Esau said to Isaac, "Bless me also." <sup>47</sup> Isaac said to him, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman

like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?" 28 Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying to him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. <sup>2</sup> Get up and go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, **your mother's father**, and take a wife there from among the **daughter's of Laban, your mother's brother**. <sup>3</sup> May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. <sup>4</sup> May He grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham."

<sup>5</sup> Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the **son** of Bethuel the Aramean, the **brother** of Rebekah, **mother** of Jacob and Esau.

Jacob waited outside the tent, where Esau stood at the beginning of the drama, as Rebekah entered to talk with Isaac. The dialogue was one sided, heated, and quick (27:46). Isaac sent for Jacob who quickly entered the tent just as Esau had done earlier. He instructed Jacob concerning the issue of marriage and offered him yet another blessing (28:1). Different than the blessing of the soul, this blessing was the blessing of covenant with God as expressed through Isaac's reference to Abraham (28:3f.). Isaac then sent Jacob to Paddan-aram. Rebekah is noted, for the first time, as being the mother of both Jacob and Esau (28:5). No word is mentioned of her preference for Jacob.

#### Esau's Revenge Genesis 28:5-9

<sup>6</sup> When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the

Canaanite women,"<sup>7</sup> and Jacob had obeyed **his father** and **mother** and gone to Paddan-aram,<sup>8</sup> Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased **his father** Isaac.<sup>9</sup> So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath, the **daughter** of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth.

Meanwhile, Esau was poised with his ear against tent flap just as Rebekah had done at least two times before. His face turned redder than ever as he sought out Uncle Ishmael (a Canaanite), from the 'other side' of the family, in order to marry Mahalath, his daughter, out of spite (28:6-9).

\* \* \*

This narrative is clearly a story of family dynamics including favored children and the hopes and dreams of parents for those children. In fact, there are over sixty various repetitions of the phrases 'my father,' 'his father', 'his mother,' 'his brother,' 'your brother,' 'his son,' 'her son'...<sup>3</sup> Most are repetitive of the personal name of the referent; and thus, unnecessary. The biblical author is clearly bringing our attention to the family dynamics through the many repetitions. This passage is the portion of Isaac's degree of knowledge regarding the various roles played all around him. Essentially, the

<sup>3</sup> These repetitions are too numerous to note here. See the bold face type within the biblical text for the exact locations.

Every member of the family interacts with others in unique ways:

All four members of the family participate, but only in pairs. Neither Jacob and Esau nor Rebekah and Esau appear together; they dare not confront each other. Each pair moves to the center of the stage twice, save mother and father who meet but once, and that briefly. The strong-willed, artful Rebekah prefers to hover inconspicuously in the background, manipulating the situation. She approaches her husband only when matters get out of hand.<sup>4</sup>

'Neither Jacob and Esau nor Rebekah and Esau appear together' because each pair is made up of two people who are so similar that they cannot interact with one another. In the case of the latter pair, Rebekah favored Jacob (25:28) over Esau, but both Esau and Rebekah cried out in existential pain (25:22,32): they were so similar in personality type that they could not get along. In the former case, the similarities and differences between the two brothers who emerged from one womb are apparent. Perhaps they never appear together on stage because they, like an actor who plays two roles in one performance, were in fact one person portraying two distinct characters. question, 'Did Isaac's lack of physical vision effect his

greater perception?' The answer to that question will be One of the biggest questions about this passage is the question of Isaac's degree of knowledge regarding the actions taking place all around him. Essentially, the

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<sup>4</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 'Excursus 21,' 397f.

<sup>4</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 189.1.

question can be asked, 'Did Isaac's lack of physical vision effect his greater perception?' Many commentators would answer this question affirmatively and have entitled this section, "Jacob Purloins the Blessing"<sup>5</sup> and "Isaac Deceived."<sup>6</sup> The comments go on in many case to either question the moral integrity of Jacob<sup>7</sup> or dismiss the question in order to deal with the text.<sup>8</sup>

Such questions are not the invention of the modern commentator. Rather, they are the questions of those who lived centuries ago. Jeremiah warned, "Beware, every man of his friend! Trust not even a brother!" (Jeremiah 9:3), apparently referring to these very events through the use of the word 'brother.' Similarly, Hosea referred to these episodes in a negative manner when he explained God's judgement's on Israel as a result of the fact that, "in the womb he [Jacob] tried to supplant his brother" (12:4).<sup>9</sup> It is not my intention to prove or disprove the morality of Jacob's actions. Such an investigation would be the topic of its own thesis. I do, however, intend to answer the question, 'Did Isaac's lack of physical vision effect his greater perception?' The answer to that question will be

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<sup>5</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Speiser, Genesis, 205.

<sup>7</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 'Excursus 21,' 397f.

<sup>8</sup> Speiser, Genesis, 211.

formulated based on a careful analysis of the text and presented in the section 'Another Interpretation' of this chapter.

Throughout this biblical section, Jacob's own statements exude a concern with his own identity in relation to those closest to him. Note the repetition of the first person:

27:11-13 "Alas, my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. Perhaps my father will touch me and I shall be in his eyes like a trickster thus bringing a curse and not a blessing upon myself."

27:18 He [Jacob] came to his father and said, "My father."...

27:19 Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn, I have done as you have spoken to me."

27:20 [Jacob said,] "Because Adonai your God was before me."

27:24 He [Isaac] said, "Are you my son Esau?" And when he said, "I am."...

These twelve citations inform us as to the importance of the deciphering of Jacob's identity in this passage and in those to follow. *ed be those who curse who, blessed they who bless you.*

*The* Both sons received related and similar blessing in Genesis 27. Those blessings, when compared to each other, share certain similarities and also diverge in many ways.

**FIRST BLESSING**  
(27:28ff.)

"May God give you

Of the dew of heaven  
and the fat of the  
earth,

Abundance of new  
grain and wine.

Let peoples serve  
you and nations bow  
to you.

Be master over your  
brothers,

And let your  
mother's sons bow to  
you.

Cursed be those who  
curse who,  
Blessed they who  
bless you."

**SECOND BLESSING**  
(27:39f.)

"See, your abode shall enjoy  
the fat of the earth  
And the dew of heaven above.

Yet by your sword you shall  
live,

And you shall serve your  
brother

But when you grow restive,  
You shall break his yoke from  
your neck."

The first blessing contains three elements which the  
second does not:  
May God give you  
Abundance of new grain and wine.  
Cursed be those who curse who,  
Blessed they who bless you.

The first and third elements are significant, while the  
second is merely a poetic enlargement of the theme of  
abundance found in both blessings.

Both the first blessing and the second blessing promise abundance. However, the first blessing attributes that abundance to God, while the second blessing fails to attribute the abundance to any source. Both recipients of these blessings will enjoy the best that life has to offer. On first glance, both recipients appear very similar. But, were one to ask questions of these recipients, the first would unequivocally affirm that his abundance comes from God, while the second would have difficulty defining its source.

Only the first blessing attributes to its recipient the power to serve as a vessel of blessing and curse for others. The recipient of this blessing would encounter others knowing that the interaction could have holy, redemptive, and universal impact. The recipient of the second blessing had no such sense of holy quality in interaction. He would only 'live by his sword.'

He who received the first blessing, while superficially similar to the one who received the second blessing, was invested with a Divine awareness in both his own material success and in his interactions with those around him.

## Rabbinic Voices

While Jacob might have thought that he was tricking his blind father, in actuality he was not. In fact, as the Rabbis interpreted it, it was Isaac who tricked Jacob into believing that Jacob tricked Isaac. This midrash expresses the power of that encounter:

At the moment when he [Jacob] said, "Because Adonai your God granted me good fortune" (27:20), Isaac said, "I know that Esau does not mention the name of the Holy One of Blessing; this one [Jacob] does - this is not Esau but Jacob." Once Jacob answered in this way, [Isaac] said, "Come closer that I may feel you my son" (27:21). Jacob could not control his bladder and his heart melted like wax. The Holy One of Blessing ordered for him two angels, one for his right and one for his left, to hold him by his elbows so that he would not fall...<sup>9</sup>

If Isaac did not intend to give the blessing to Jacob, Isaac, at that moment, would have ended the scene with words such as, 'Come on Jacob, I can't believe that you thought I would fall for this.' But Isaac didn't say that. In fact, he continued the masquerade knowing that he was not being deceived, but perhaps deceiving Jacob.

The biblical text continues with Isaac's observation:

Jacob approached his father Isaac and he felt him and said, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau.' (27:22)

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<sup>9</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65:19.

Isaac may have meant this statement to be a description of a one time costume, but the Rabbis understood it to mean so much more. As originally structured by those who composed Bereshit Rabbah (65:20f.) and later repeated and expanded by others, Genesis 27:22 can be read in the following six ways:

1. As a general statement of description, much in the same way that Isaac intended it, but much more biased according to the Rabbis;
2. As an indication of how the descendants of Jacob and Esau would characteristically act: the first ruling through voice, the second through hands;
3. As the nature of an inverse relationship: when the voice is loud, the hands are weak - when the voice is soft, the hands are strong - a play on the similarity between *hakol*, the voice, and *hikyil*, to soften;
4. As a voice of curse (playing on the similarity between *hakol*, voice, and *k'lalah*, curse);
5. As impacting on the celestial beings; and,
6. As a reciprocal relationship: when the hands are the hands of Esau, the voice is the voice of Jacob.

Each of these six interpretations is worthy of separate analysis. In fact, each interpretation identifies the voice and the hands as a different attribute of Jacob and Esau and their descendants. The various interpretations of this one verse became the defining texts of the Rabbis' relationship with the Roman Empire along with their own theological and sociological outlooks.

<sup>18</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65:20.

<sup>19</sup> Devarim Rabbah 1:15. Devarim Rabbah is a eighth century compilation of midrash on the book of Deuteronomy.

## 1. GENERAL STATEMENT

Hark, the voice is the voice of wise men, while the hands are the hands of those who strip the dead.<sup>10</sup>

If the Rabbis' bias for Jacob and against Esau ever needed a clear expression, this passage could serve that purpose. 'The voice of Jacob/Israel is the voice of wise men, while the hands are those of Esau/Rome who strip the dead.' The voice is the voice of one who mentions God, no matter how the tone might be disguised, while the hands are hairy like the hands of Esau and smell as bad as the hands of those who strip the dead (that waft the smell of flesh.)

Perhaps the tone of the voice itself was not disguised appropriately. As the scene plays itself out, Esau entered the tent, with dish in hand, saying, "May my father rise and eat from the hunt of his son so that your soul may bless me." (27:31). According to the biblical text, Isaac responded, "Who are you?" (27:32). According to a rabbinic elaboration, Isaac responded, "Who are you to speak with me in such a loud voice?"<sup>11</sup> It wasn't just Jacob's language that gave away his identity, but it was his tone as well.

The man of the tents was not accustomed to speaking as loudly as was the man of the fields. Jacob could not manage

<sup>10</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65:20.

<sup>11</sup> Devarim Rabbah 1:15. Devarim Rabbah is a eighth century compilation of midrash on the book of Deuteronomy.

to duplicate that voice, even for a few minutes of blessing.

In this case, the relationship between the voice and the hands can be best described as the following equation: The voice is the equivalent of wisdom, while the hands are the equivalent of that which performs menial labor.

## 2. RULE THROUGH VOICE - RULE THROUGH HANDS

Another interpretation: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob' - Jacob does not rule except through his voice; '...while the hands are the hands of Esau' - Esau does not rule except through his hands.<sup>12</sup>

"The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22) becomes an inheritance for all future generations of the descendants of Jacob and Esau.

For example, when the Israelites stood between the Sea of Reeds and the approaching Egyptians, "they were greatly frightened and cried out unto Adonai" (Exodus 14:10). In a later biblical retelling of these events, when Moses wanted to pass through the Land of Edom with the Children of Israel, he sent word to the King of Edom (Esau's descendent):

You know all of the hardships that have befallen us; that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. We are now on the edge of the land of Edom.

<sup>12</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65:20.

cried to Adonai, and He heard our voices....  
(Numbers 20:14-16)

While the biblical dialogue itself might be sparse, the Rabbis filled it in with the following:

The Edomites said to them, "You pride yourselves on that which your father bequeathed unto you, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob...' (Genesis 27:22), [it is no wonder that] 'Adonai heard our voices' (Numbers 20:16). And we pride ourselves on what our father bequeathed to us, "...the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22) and "By your sword shall you live" (Genesis 27:40). It is as the text says, "And Edom said unto him, 'You shall not pass through me lest I come out to meet you with a sword'" (Numbers 20:18). And so also here you can interpret, "The Children of Israel were greatly frightened and cried out unto Adonai" (Exodus 14:10), they grabbed onto the occupation of their fathers, the occupation of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>13</sup>

While the concept of inheritance given by Isaac to his two sons is subtly referred to above, it is explicitly referred to in the following passage. The scene, again, places the Children of Israel between the Sea of Reeds and the approaching Egyptian army. The Children of Israel have already cried out to God and now turn their attention to Moses. They accuse him of bringing the people into the desert in order to die, as if there were not enough graves

The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the

<sup>13</sup> Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d'Beshalach, Parashah 3. Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael is a third century exegetical midrash on the book of Exodus. Another example of this type of midrash can be found in Yalkut Shimoni 1:764. This particular case deals with the prayers of the Israelites at the time of the death of Aaron. Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael is a twelfth century rabbinic compilation on the book of Exodus.

for them in Egypt (Exodus 14:11). Moses countered their complaints with an instruction of faith, "Adonai will battle for you; you hold your peace" (Exodus 14:14). The very next verse records God's question to Moses, "Why do you cry out to Me?" (Exodus 14:15) But, according to the biblical text, Moses never cried out to God. Enter the Rabbis:

"Adonai said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to Me?' (Exodus 14:15). Behold, it is like Scripture, 'Cry out and Adonai will listen' (Psalms 34:18). What does it mean? Isaac bequeathed two inheritances to his two sons. He bequeathed to Jacob the voice, as it is written, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob...' (Genesis 27:22), and to Esau the hands, as it is written, '...the hands are the hands of Esau' (Genesis 27:22). Esau was proud of his inheritance, as it is written, 'And Edom said unto him, 'You shall not pass through me lest I come out to meet you with a sword'' (Numbers 20:18). Jacob was proud of his inheritance, 'We cried out to Adonai the God of our fathers' (Deuteronomy 26:7). In the future to come both of them will receive their reward. Esau will receive his reward, as it is written, 'For My sword shall be seen in the sky; Lo, it shall come down upon Edom' (Isaiah 34:5). Jacob will receive his reward, as it is written, 'The voice of joy and the voice of gladness' (Jeremiah 33:11). That is why it is written, 'Cry out and Adonai will listen' because the Children of Israel cried at the sea, as it is written, 'The Children of Israel cried out to Adonai' (Exodus 14:10): the Holy One of Blessing heard their prayer and said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to Me?', I already heard their cry...."<sup>14</sup>

So, when Jacob's voice is weak, the

"The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau," in the minds of the Rabbis became a guarantee of answered prayers. The guarantee is so iron

Exodus 20:16.

<sup>14</sup> Shemot Rabbah 21:1. Shemot Rabbah is a twelfth century midrashic compilation on the book of Exodus.

clad that when Rashi (12th Century) received it, it became nothing less than a 'blessing,'<sup>15</sup> bringing us full circle back to the original blessing of Genesis 27.

This interpretation is best diagramed as the voice of Jacob parallel to the prayer of Israel, and the hands of Esau parallel to the sword of his descendants. Both peoples are proud of their inheritance and make ample use of it throughout the ages.

### 3. INVERSE RELATIONSHIP OF VOICE AND HANDS

Another interpretation: 'The voice is [a softening of] the voice of Jacob' - Rabbi Pinchas said, 'When the voice of Jacob withdraws into itself, 'The hands are the hands of Esau' - one asks [God] and he [Esau] comes.'<sup>16</sup>

This interpretation of the verse, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau," (27:22) plays on the duplication of the word 'voice.'

Instead of reading the written text as it is most often read, this interpretation reads the second 'voice' as 'softens,' playing on a similar root of 'kuf lamed,' meaning, 'to soften.' So, when Jacob's voice is weak, the hands of Esau are strong. When Israel withdraws into himself, bickering with one another, not directing their

<sup>15</sup> Rashi on Numbers 20:16.

<sup>16</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 65:20.

voices to God, the hands are the hands of Esau. They might ask God for help, but Esau comes.

A clear example of this interpretation is offered in the continuation of the rabbinic passage as it relates to chapters 15-17 of Exodus. Exodus 15:24 begins a record of complaints lodged by the Children of Israel against Moses. The episode occurred immediately after they passed through the Sea of Reeds. As irony would have it, after being surrounded by water on both sides, they had the nerve to complain about a lack of water. Their complaints began with a lack of water and continued with a lack of bread (16:3). The complaints took the form of 'grumbling against Moses and Aaron' (16:2), not prayers to God. As a result of this misdirection of energies, "Amalek came and fought with Israel..." (17:8). Noting the juxtaposition of the complaints of Israel with the arrival of Amalek, the Rabbis interpreted,

Another interpretation: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob' - Rabbi Berechiah said, 'At the time when Jacob softens his voice, the hands of Esau rule, as it is written, "The people complained to Moses" (Ex 15:24) - "And Amalek came" (Ex 17:8) But at the time when his voice rings out, the hands are not the hands of Esau - the hands of Esau do not rule.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the above negative portrayal is true, so is the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

positive, as described in the last verse of the above passage and its continuation in the following passage. This next segment contains a comparison between Balaam (13th century BCE) and Avnemos, the Gardi (a contemporary of Rabbi Meir, 2nd century CE). Both were brought to the fore because of the fact that they were incomparable philosophers. Both were non-Jews.

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said, "No philosopher has risen in the world like Balaam, the son of Be'or, and like Avnemos, the Gardi. Avnemos, the Gardi, brought together all of the idol worshipers and said to them, 'Do you say that we can subjugate this people?' He said, 'Go and look at their synagogues and study halls. If you find children ringing out clearly in their voices, you will not be able to subjugate them, for this is what their father promised them when he said to them, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob' - At the time when the voice of Jacob is found in the synagogues, the hands are not the hands of Esau; but if not - 'The hands are the hands of Esau' - you can prevail over them.<sup>18</sup>

The Rabbis' message, spoken through the words of Avnemos, is, 'The pagans have no chance of defeating Israel when their children offer prayers. Subjugate them, for this is what their father promised them...'

As fanciful as such an interpretation might first sound, it rings true to the life situation of the Rabbis. Surrounded by the pagan world on all sides, on the brink of

didn't. Instead, he placed the words describing the nature

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Parallels are also found in Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 15:42; Yalkut Shimoni 1:115, 2:282; and, Aichah Rabbah, Petichta 2.

Ibid.

defeat through mere demography and political rule, the Rabbis read Isaac's original words, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau," as a description not of a poorly disguised son standing before his father, but as a description of their own quest for meaning. This interpretation is a rationalization of their lives' work: 'If our voices ring out in prayer and Torah, then their hands will not dominate.'

Who is the 'they?' None other than the Roman Empire, the spiritual descendent of Esau, renown for the works of their hands as found in cities, roads, coliseums... Yet, the interpretation does not end with such a simple sentence. It is most important that the sentence be read in the context of the midrash, as it was quoted above,

Avnemos, the Gardi, brought together all of the idol worshipers and said to them, "Do you say that we can subjugate this people?" He said, "Go and look at their synagogues and study halls. If you find children ringing out clearly in their voices, you will not be able to subjugate them, for this is what their father promised them..."<sup>19</sup>

Of course, it was a rabbi who recorded the words supposedly spoken by Avnemos. That rabbi could have placed the words of praise of Israel in the mouth of another rabbi. But he didn't. Instead, he placed the words describing the nature of the voice of Israel in the mouth of a descendent of Esau,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

a Roman. This clearly makes the interpretation all the more powerful. The power increases as one thinks of the occupation of Avnemos: a philosopher. The descendent of Esau, the one attributed with the use of hands, is a philosopher, one skilled in thought and language. It appears that the clear distinction that an initial look at this interpretation would make becomes blurred as one considers the dual nature of Avnemos: both descendent of Esau and skilled thinker and speaker. Avnemos possessed the best of both characteristics: he was a 'builder of ideas' ultimately expressed through the 'voice.' In this case, the 'voice of Jacob' was 'handed' over to a descendant of Esau.

This interpretation teaches that the 'voice of Jacob' can be directed towards negative ends, i.e., bickering, in which case the 'hand of Esau' is successful in oppressing Jacob. Yet, the 'voice of Jacob' can be directed towards positive ends, too, i.e., prayer, in which case the 'hand of Esau' will be unsuccessful in its attempts to oppress all of Israel. Such a model is true throughout all of the generations of the descendants of Jacob and Esau. (out of disgust) not to give a daughter in marriage to a surviving Benjaminite (20:49-21:4). VOICE OF CURSE later recounted in the This next interpretation is perhaps the most surprising of them all because it illuminates a very negative episode from the history of the Children of Israel. In this case, ar

*hakol*, the voice, is understood as it resembles (i.e., share similar letters with) the word *k'lalah*, curse:

'The voice is the voice [curse] of Jacob...' (Genesis 27:22) - in the incident regarding the concubine at Gibeah: "Cursed be he that gives a woman to Benjamin" (Judges 21:18).<sup>20</sup>

This midrash refers to the incidents described in Judges, chapters 19 through 21. It is a gruesome tale of civil war among Israel. The war pitted the tribe of Benjamin against the other eleven tribes of Israel. The cause of the war was the inhospitable, immoral behavior of the residents of the town of Gibeah in the area of the tribe of Benjamin. The incident revolves around a concubine:

They [the residents of Gibeah] raped her and abused her all night long until morning; and they let her go when dawn broke. Toward morning the woman came back, and as it was growing light, she collapsed at the entrance of the man's house where her husband was. (Judges 19:25f.)

After her death, several battles, the death of tens of thousands of soldiers, and the savage destruction of all of the towns, people, and cattle of the tribe of Benjamin at the sword of Israel, the men of Israel took an oath (out of disgust) not to give a daughter in marriage to a surviving Benjaminite (20:48-21:1). The oath was later recounted in the following way, "Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. This passage also cites verses regarding King Jeroboam that appear to be material brought in from another source.

Benjamin!" (21:18).

Why would such an episode be related to the verse, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22)? It is all based on one word: **sword**. "The men of Israel, meanwhile, turned back to the rest of the Benjaminites and put them to the **sword**..." (20:48). This is the same sword that is mentioned in the blessing that Esau received from Isaac, "Yet by your **sword** you shall live" (Genesis 27:40). The sword was bequeathed to Esau, he who is known for his hands. For Esau, the hand holding a sword is a blessing. But when the sword is in the hands of Israel, it is a curse.

The 'voice of Jacob' becomes a curse when the 'hand of Jacob' holds a sword. As similar as the two brothers might have been in the womb and early childhood, they are now very different. While Esau's blessing is achieved through the sword, should Jacob attempt such a feat, his voice, the potential vessel of blessing, would become a curse.

more than the apparent reality. The voice is the voice of Jacob that all 5. CELESTIAL IMPACT OF THE VOICE

This next interpretation is a mystical interpretation of the impact of Israel's voice below on the celestial beings above. The midrash begins with the following

statement:  
Ibid. 65:21.

Ibid.

Another interpretation: "The voice is the voice of Jacob." This is the voice that quiets both upper and lower beings.<sup>21</sup>

It then continues to discuss whether or not divine beings can sit or must constantly stand, at which point it makes reference to Ezekiel's sound oriented vision. The word used for 'sound,' *kol*, is the same used for 'voice' in Genesis 27:22:

When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai, a tumult like the din of an army. In their standing they would let their wings droop. (Ezekiel 1:24)

The midrash points to the awkwardness of the phrase, 'in their standing, *be'amdah*,' as yet another way to understand the 'voice of Jacob:'

Yet the text actually says, 'In their standing' (*be'amdah*)! Then what is the meaning of *be'amdah*? Ba' 'im dam [three separate words, meaning] 'Come with silence.' At the time when Israel says 'Shema Yisrael,' the angels are quiet, and afterwards they drop their wings....<sup>22</sup>

Isaac's descriptive statement of Genesis 27 described more than the apparent reality. The voice is the voice of Jacob that silences divine beings through the recitation of the 'Shema Yisrael.' Such an interpretation was a comfort to the Rabbis who might not have seen the results of their

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 65:21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

piety in the earthly world.

#### 6. RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai would interpret: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob...' cries out from what 'the hands are the hands of Esau...' did to him. Rabbi Yochanan said, "The voice of the Caesar Hadrian, who killed in Betar eighty thousand myriads of people."<sup>23</sup>

Living in a world where the study of Torah was prohibited by the government, the Rabbis further interpreted this verse as a cry of desperation. When Esau's/Rome's hands attack Jacob/Israel, 'the voice is the voice of Jacob' that cries out in desperation.

#### Another Interpretation

This narrative sequence is the record of Jacob's struggle to realize 'who he will be' for the next twenty years of his life. In actuality, this episode is less about a mother and son deceiving a blind father and more about a perceptive father inquiring as to his son's readiness to assume a different identity than his own. When read carefully, the text reveals that Isaac knew that it was Jacob, the younger, not Esau, the firstborn, standing before him in order to receive the blessing of the firstborn. The text says that Isaac gave the blessing to Esau, but Jacob was saying more, 'I have

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identity of the firstborn, and you,

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

text portrays Isaac as a concerned father asking critical questions of his son who was about to take on a false identity.

Jacob, with tasty morsels in hand, greeted his father, "My father" (27:18). The blind Isaac responded in full inquisitive presence, "I am here (*hineni*). Who are you my son?" (27:18). Who else could it have been? After all, Isaac only sent one son to prepare a meal of blessing; that son was Esau. Isaac was not asking his son to identify himself through the question, 'What is your name?' Instead, the blind Isaac saw more than the eye beheld. What a probing question for a father to ask his son at the time of final blessing: 'Who are you my son?...As I am about to bestow my blessing upon you, as you prepare to be a recipient of God's blessings, you must know who you are. What is your essence, my son? What is most important to you? How will you know yourself, Jacob, the youngest, as you masquerade as Esau, the firstborn?'

Jacob was fully aware of the true intent of the question. So he responded accordingly, "I am Esau your firstborn, I have done as you have spoken to me" (27:19). The apparent meaning is that Jacob had completed the task that Isaac gave to Esau, but Jacob was saying more, 'I have already assumed the identity of the firstborn, and you,

father, taught me through the example of your own life. I remember the stories you told me about Grandpa Abraham favoring you over Uncle Ishmael. How Uncle Ishmael and his mother were sent into the desert. Father, I have also done as you have commanded me.'

The reflective Isaac was astonished at his son's speed, "How did you succeed so quickly?" (27:20) Isaac was asking a very practical question, 'How were you able to hunt, catch, and prepare the meal so quickly?' Were Esau to prepare such a meal, it would be expected that he could do so in a relatively short amount of time. After all, he was "a man who knows how to hunt, a man of the field" (25:27). His skill and his nature would surely expedite the process on their own, but Esau would have been quick at his task for another reason: 'Isaac loved Esau because the taste of the hunt is in his mouth' (25:28). Esau's motivation (to please his father), his nature and skill would have all expedited the process to the extent that Isaac would have had no reason to question Esau's speed. few decades of his life,

submitting in direct dialogue with Esau in chapter 33.

But Isaac did question his son's speed because he knew that the son standing before him was not the skilled hunter Esau, but was the mild tent dweller Jacob. Isaac had every right to ask this question of the unskilled, non-course 'the instinctive, unmotivated Jacob. I know that it is you,

Jacob. How in the world did you beat your brother to the kill?'

But Isaac once again asked a question beneath the surface. Isaac previously asked Jacob, "Who are you my son?" (assuming all of the implied questions) and Jacob readily responded, "I am Esau your firstborn" without missing a beat. So now Isaac asked the deeper question, "How did you find [yourself] (mtz') so quickly?" That is to say, 'Was it that easy to lose your own identity and take on your brother's?' So Jacob responded, "God granted me good fortune." Jacob was really saying, 'Don't worry dad, God will be with me as I take Esau's blessing.'

Then Isaac made the most perceptive statement of the entire sequence: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22). It is this statement that structures our total understanding of the struggle in which Jacob was conceived and nurtured; it ultimately intensified throughout the first few decades of his life, culminating in direct dialogue with Esau in chapter 33. This seemingly descriptive statement can be read just as that: a descriptive statement. The blinding Isaac turned to his sense of sound and sense of touch in order to determine the identity of the son standing before him. Of course, 'the voice is the voice of Jacob' in both quality and content,

just as 'the hands are the hands of Esau,' for the skins made them as hairy as Esau's.

"The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22) is a statement that informs us of more than the results of a bad costume put together by a frantic Rebekah. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22) informs us that two distinct qualities attributed to very different brothers are both embodied in the person of the brother that stands before his father about to accept the identity of his hairy armed brother. Just as they struggled in the womb, uncertain of the owner of each limb, so, too, they struggle outside of the womb. Isaac's descriptive statement (27:22), along with Jacob's self identification as Esau (27:19), inform us that the characteristics of both Jacob and Esau are struggling within the person of Jacob.

Finally, the concerned Isaac asked Jacob (27:24), "Are you really my son Esau?" (27:24), as if to say, "Jacob, are you sure that you want to take on your brother's identity?" And Jacob responded with a simple one word (Hebrew) would response, "I am" (27:24). Jacob was concentrating so much on himself that he could respond only through his own narrow experience: I am. How ironic it is that both Isaac and, especially, Esau, were able to focus on more than themselves

by saying '*hineni*,' meaning, 'I am ready to perform your will.' Jacob would encounter God over the next twenty years in many different ways. But he would not understand the intense meaning of standing before God, prepared to do the will of God, in the same way that Esau and Isaac understood it until the twenty years were over.

As the blessing scene climaxes, so does the symphony of senses. Since Isaac's eyes were too dim to see, he needed to rely on his other senses. He first used the sense of touch (27:21f.), then sound (27:22), taste (27:25), and finally, smell (27:27) to determine the identity of the one standing before him. More than any other sense, the sense of smell was most powerful, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that Adonai has blessed" (27:27). These words seal the identity switch. The nameless son was identified by his odor, the odor of the field, the odor of Esau. No longer was the one born as Jacob, the 'Jacob of the tents;' the one born as Jacob was now 'Esau of the field' as identified by his smell. Father Isaac would never again address that son by name, for it was as if the son with two identities now had no name. In fact, Isaac would never again be with 'Jacob of the tents' during his and Esau's lifetime.

Meanwhile, mother Rebekah was concerned about the 'Esau'

favorite son she just lost to a false identity: she, too, would never be with the one born as Jacob, the one she particularly loved (25:28). She feared losing 'both' in one day (27:45). She already lost her favorite 'Jacob of the tents,' should the firstborn slay the younger (as promised in 27:41) she would not only have lost 'Jacob of the tents,' but 'Esau with the smell of the field' as well. The death of Jacob would be the death of both Jacob and Esau, for Jacob embodied both identities; and she, for the first time, was the mother of both (28:5).

The confused identity of the younger son continued through Rebekah's disdain for the Hittite women (27:46). Why would she be concerned about the marital possibilities of her younger son, the one born Jacob? He had not displayed any inkling of fraternization with the Hittite women. But the firstborn Esau had already married a Hittite woman and this had troubled both father and mother (26:34). Surely, the son who just received the premier blessing would not dare hurt his parents. Instead, the identity confusion had taken root. Rebekah was not concerned about the one born Jacob marrying a Hittite woman. She was concerned about Esau marrying more Hittite women. But Jacob and Esau were embodied in the younger son. So, the younger son, baring the identity of the older, was instructed to flee to another land to find a wife. The identities of both 'Esau'

and 'Jacob' had joined as one just as they were practically one in the womb.

Jacob would spend the next twenty years of his life in the body of Jacob with the blessing of Esau. The overriding identity crisis during these years would be a crisis between the personalities of Esau and Jacob. Everything that Jacob did from the time he left Esau, to the time he would meet him twenty years later, was rooted in this crisis. While they might have gone their separate ways, Jacob to Paddan-aram and Esau to Canaan, they never really parted because they were both in the person of Jacob. "And Jacob said, "I am Esau, your firstborn."... And he meant it!

### CHAPTER 3

"...AND I, I DID NOT KNOW."

GENESIS 28:10-22

<sup>1</sup> See Sarna, *Genesis*, 'Excurses 22,' 198ff. for a description of the history of that place for other peoples.

## The Biblical Text

## The Experience at Bethel Genesis 28:10-12

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-Sheba and set out for Haran. <sup>11</sup> He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking from the stones of that place, he put them under his head and lay down in that place. <sup>12</sup> He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. <sup>13</sup> And Adonai was standing beside it and He said, "I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. <sup>15</sup> Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

<sup>16</sup> Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely, Adonai is present in this place and I, I did not know it!" <sup>17</sup> Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." <sup>18</sup> Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. <sup>19</sup> He named that site Bethel; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, <sup>21</sup> and if I return safe to my father's house - Adonai shall be my God. <sup>22</sup> And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You."

On the way to Paddan-aram, Jacob decided to spend the night in a place that looked like any other place along the journey. The place had no history for Jacob or for his fathers.<sup>1</sup> Its appeal for the tired traveler was more

<sup>1</sup> See Sarna, *Genesis*, 'Excursus 22,' 398ff. for a description of the history of that place for other peoples.

happenstance than anything else: the sun had set and there was a rock that would make an adequate pillow. No sooner than he lay down, placed his hands behind his head for added comfort, did he begin reviewing the events of the day. In his rush to escape the wrath of Esau, he hadn't the time to think about the past. Up until that moment he had only thought about his destination. His ultimate destination was to be a fatal meeting with his brother, "Let but the mourning period of my father come and I will kill my brother Jacob" (27:41).

Thoughts of the events of the day riffled through his mind. Yes, father and mother had prepared him to take the blessing of the firstborn, even God had promised it to him, but he never imagined what it would be like to actually have that blessing. He looked around only to realize that to have the blessing apparently meant to be alone, for that was his current status.

The biography of Jacob as an independent personality, a patriarch in his own right, now begins. The home-loving favorite of an overprotective mother is now an exile, utterly alone and friendless, embarking on a long perilous journey that is to take him from Beer-Sheba in southern Canaan to Haran in northern Mesopotamia. His character is to be tested and refined, his personality molded and transformed by the experience.<sup>2</sup>

blessing bestowed by Isaac. In fact, this blessing was predicted by Isaac (28:3ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 197.

Would that he had known that the blessing brought exile and loneliness, perhaps he would not have agreed to take it. After all, he was 'Jacob who sat in the tents,' who probably sat for hours in tents with others, sharing stories, gossip, and dreams. He was a people-person, now all alone in a certain place.

The burden of the physical journey had taken its toll. He fell asleep only to dream of angels ascending and descending a stairway rooted in the earth reaching towards the sky. All the time, God was standing along side the stairway, saying,

"I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."  
(28:13-15)

This blessing consists of elements of land ownership and numerous offspring; Jacob and his offspring serving as a vessel of blessing and Divine providence. It shares only the element of 'vessel of blessing' with the original blessing bestowed by Isaac. In fact, this blessing was predicted by Isaac (28:3ff.).

God's words deeply affected Jacob. When he lay down for the night, he hardly expected such a dream. When he awoke he exclaimed, "Surely Adonai is in this place and I, I did not know it!" (28:16) His reaction was unique among

The element of land ownership is an expansion of the original blessing of 'abundance of grain and wine' (27:28). A blessing related to grain and wine can only be realized by one who is grounded. Jacob was in the beginning stages of journey. He may not have understood how it is that he would come to be the recipient of grain and wine. God's promise of land reassured him of the feasibility of the previous blessing.

The promise of numerous offspring is a reflection of a promise made to grandfather Abraham (13:16). For two generations his family had only been able to produce two children per generation. This Divine promise would enable Jacob to break the mold by having thirteen children.

Divine providence is nothing other than an awareness of the Divine reality in one's life. Just as Jacob would come to appreciate the Divine source of his material wealth (33:11) and the Divine nature of his interactions with others (30:27), so, too, would he always be aware of God's providence at all times.

God's words deeply effected Jacob. When he lay down for the night, he hardly expected such a dream. When he awoke he exclaimed, "Surely Adonai is in this place and I, I did not know it!" (28:16) His reaction was unique among

all of the patriarchs:

This reaction of amazement is unprecedented in the patriarchal stories. Neither Abraham nor Isaac exhibit any surprise at their initial experience of God's sudden self-revelation.<sup>3</sup>

The syntax of the verse, "Surely Adonai is in this place and I, I did not know it!" (28:16) is often translated as, "Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!"<sup>4</sup> The difference between such a translation and the one offered above, is the duplication of the 'I' found in the first and excluded from the second. The last part of the verse reads in Hebrew, "v'anochi lo' yadati." This literally translates as, "v'anochi - and I; lo' - no; yadati - I knew," rendering a duplication of the 'I.' In other words, the verse could have been written, "lo' yadati, I didn't know," and rendered as the same basic meaning. The inclusion of "anochi, (I)" serves as an opportunity to interpret the duplication.<sup>5</sup>

Jacob's response to the encounter did not end with awe and amazement. He took definitive action in response to the dream by establishing a pillar with the stone on which he slept, anointing it, and naming the place Bethel, the house

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 199. *What is the meaning of 'he came upon' (vayabon) 'a certain place?' He*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Lawrence Kushner, God was in this Place & I, i did not know (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991.)

of God (28:18f.). Jacob then made a conditional vow. Should God remain with him and protect him on this journey, provide him with bread and clothing, and return him safely to his father's house, then Adonai would be his God, the place would serve as God's abode, and Jacob would set aside a tenth for God (28:20ff.). Interestingly enough, all of the conditions of the vow have already been promised to Jacob by God (28:15).

### Rabbinic Voices

When 'Jacob came upon a certain place,' he stumbled into more than he bargained for. The 'place, *makom*,' was more than a random place to spend the night. That 'place' was a synonym God, for God is also known as 'the Place.'<sup>6</sup> When Jacob came upon a certain place, he came upon God, who is in every place of the world. As Jacob left his father's house with God's blessing, he soon learned that God would be with him in every place.

When 'Jacob came upon a certain place' he did more than find a geographic location. Jacob, through his own actions, found God.

Another interpretation - What is the meaning of 'he came upon?' Prayer. 'A certain place?' He

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<sup>6</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 68:9.

prayed in the Holy Temple.<sup>7</sup>

The encounter that Jacob experienced was not in a random place involving a random dream. When Jacob came to that place he came upon God in the Holy Temple and he responded by praying.

When 'Jacob came upon a certain place' "he tried to pass it, but the entire world made a type of wall before him."<sup>8</sup> He tried to avoid the entire experience but was forced to confront it. Just as it was fate that determined his relationship to the birthright and the blessing, so it was fate that determined this experience.

While the stones he placed under his head might have been random stones, Jacob's intent, according to the Rabbis, was to create a spiritual bridge between those who came before him and those who would come after him. Playing on the plural reference to the stones in verse 11, the Rabbis created three unique yet similar interpretations.

In the first interpretation, the Rabbis have Jacob playing a fertility game similar to pick up sticks. The goal was to place twelve different stones in such a way that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 68:10.

each touched another, thus forming one stone. If he was successful in this task, he would then be successful in establishing twelve tribes.

"Taking from the stones of that place" - Rav Yehudah and Rav Nehemiah and the Rabbis - Rabbi Yehudah said: He took twelve stones, saying, "So has the Holy One of Blessing decreed that I will create twelve tribes. Abraham did not create them, Isaac did not create them, but I, if I place all twelve together so that each is touching another, I know that I will create twelve tribes." As soon as he placed all twelve stones touching one another, he knew that he would create twelve tribes.<sup>9</sup>

In a second interpretation, Jacob only took three stones, each representative of one of the three patriarchs. The objective was the same: place all three stones in a configuration such that each touched another. If Jacob was to be successful in this task, he, like his fathers, would be associated with God's name.

Rav Nehemiah said: He took three stones, saying, "Abraham declared the unity of the Holy One of Blessing and God's name is associated with him; Isaac declared the unity of the Holy One of Blessing and God's name is associated with him; and I - if I can bring together these three stones so that each touches another - I know that the Holy One of Blessing will unite His name with me." Once he brought all of the stones together [in the prescribed manner] he knew that the Holy One of Blessing would unite His name with Jacob.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 68:11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The third interpretation is again voiced as a challenge. In this case, Jacob only took two stones as representative of the offspring of his fathers, each having two children.

The Rabbis say: What is the minimum number of stones [possible when 'stones' is written in the plural]? Two. Jacob said, "Unworthy offspring [lit. stone chips, garbage] came from Abraham: Ishmael and all of the children of Keturah. [Unworthy offspring came from] Isaac: Esau and all of his generals. But I, if I am able to place together these two stones so that they touch one another, I know that unworthy offspring will not issue from me."<sup>11</sup>

In each of the three cases, the Rabbis interpreted Jacob's simple action of selecting stones on which to sleep, as a determinant of his fertility, spirituality, or legacy through worthy children. Each of these three concerns was appropriate for one who just received the blessing of his father but now found himself alone.

Jacob's actions were an attempt to guide fate. Already blessed with Divine abundance (27:28), mastery over others, blessing potential (27:29), fertility (28:3), and land (28:4), Jacob tried to seal the blessing through his own actions. By interpreting Jacob's actions in this way, the Rabbis portrayed Jacob as one who was looking for more Divine assurances.

<sup>11</sup> Moshe Aryeh Minkin, *Genesis Rabbah: A New Scientific Commentary* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1986), 3185.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., *Genesis Rabbah* 68:12.

The dream itself was interpreted in many different ways by the Rabbis. They approached the dream with a great deal of reverence, explaining that it was a combination of dream and prophecy unlike any other dream recorded in the Bible. While its component parts cannot be totally allegorized, they attempted several different configurations.<sup>12</sup>

One of those configurations envisioned the angels as escorts for Jacob. Those who escorted him in the Land of Israel ascended as they completed their task, while those who would escort him outside of the Land of Israel descended to begin their task.<sup>13</sup> This midrash explains why it is that the angels first went up and then down. One would think that angels would begin in heaven and need to descend before ascending. In this case, those who were with Jacob in the Land of Israel first ascended before their colleagues descended. The basic assumption of the midrash is that Jacob was in need of escort. Related to the promise, "Remember, I am with you..." (28:15), this midrash provided Jacob with Divine accompaniment.

A second midrash on the dream transforms the dream from its original time and place into a historical survey of the

<sup>12</sup> Mosheh Aryeh Mirkin, Bereshit Rabbah. A New Scientific Commentary (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1986), 3:85.

<sup>13</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 68:12.

rise and fall of the kingdoms of the world. Again, the odd order of ascent of the heavenly beings before their descent is handily addressed in this midrash.

Rabbi Shmu'el bar Nachman said: These are the ministers of the nations of the world.... It teaches that the Holy One of Blessing showed Jacob our father that the minister of Babylonia went up seventy rungs and then came down; of Persia, fifty two and then came down; of Greece, one hundred and then came down; and of Rome, he went up but [God] didn't know how many. At that time Jacob our father feared and said, "What if this one doesn't have a fall?" The Holy One of Blessing said, "Do not fear My servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed Israel" (Jeremiah 30:10). As if it were possible for you to see this one go up with Me, from there I will force him down, as it is written, "Should you soar like an eagle and place your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down, the word of Adonai" (Obadiah 1:4).<sup>14</sup>

According to this interpretation, the angels represent the nations of the world, particularly Rome (the descendent of Esau.) The ascent of the angels is representative of the ascent of the nations. Likewise, the descent is representative of the fall of the nations.

This is an exquisite midrash for many reasons. First and foremost, it reflects the fears of the Rabbis concerning the heights that the Roman Empire will soar to in their day. Their question was, 'Is there no end to their success?!' and God's answer was, 'Don't worry. That which goes up must come down. I will force them down.' It is exquisite also

<sup>14</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Vayerze 2. placed his bag

because of the image of the eagle taken from the book of Obadiah; that eagle is none other than the eagle of the Roman seal. It is almost as if the verse in Obadiah, written long before the Roman Empire was a reality, was written explicitly for the Roman Empire.

The midrash is poignant for one more reason. Of all of the nations of the world that could serve as the climax of such an interpretation, that could climb a countless number of rungs, it had to be Rome: Edom, the descendants of Esau. Jacob placed his head on a rock pillow to rest as he fled the wrath of Esau, only to dream about Esau's descendants overtaking his own descendants. No matter where he dreamt, Jacob would always dream of Esau.

### Another Interpretation

As Jacob attempted to flee the wrath of Esau, he knew that he could never truly escape Esau, because Esau was a part of him. How difficult it was for the 'one who sits in tents' to be on the road, blessed and alone. Ultimately, he knew that there would be trials and tribulations he must endure. Saddled with the blessing of the firstborn, this younger son was unsure of the road ahead of him.

He was tired, so he decided to spend the night on the side of the road, in a certain place. He placed his bag

down and surveyed the situation. There were some rocks that might make for a good pillow. This seemed like as good a place as any to spend the night. But wait! As he unpacked his bag and determined which rocks to collect, he just didn't feel right about that certain place. He quickly gathered his things and attempted to move on to the next place. But he couldn't! Something was blocking his journey. He tried to move straight ahead but was quickly turned back. He charged ahead only to be met by an invisible wall keeping him in that certain place. He turned to the right thinking to move around it, with no success. He met the same end on the left. No matter how he tried to leave that certain place, fate kept him there. There was something in that place that this traveller needed to encounter.

Hesitantly, he again unpacked his bag. He nervously gathered rocks to make a pillow. He first collected twelve, thinking of the blessing of fertility. He placed the twelve in such a way that they all touched another, as if they were one. He tried it out, but was uncomfortable. He got rid of nine and gathered the remaining three: one for grandpa, one for dad, and one for me - 'May I be as spiritual as are they.' Again he tried the pillow and was uncomfortable. Removing one of the three, he dedicated the remaining two to himself and Esau as he thought of his own children yet to

be. Esau might have been back in Beer-Sheba, marrying a Canaanite woman, but he was also in that certain place with Jacob. Just as they emerged from the womb, Jacob dependent on Esau, so was he dependent upon Esau in that place. Jacob sought the comfort of a good night's sleep with his head resting on a stone dedicated to Esau.

Ah, to dream - that he was not alone, that God was with him even on his journey. A stairway grounded in the earth and heading to the sky appeared to be filled with those who have already escorted him and those who would escort him as he continued his journey. How peaceful and comforting to lie back and be escorted.

He continued to dream, anticipating more of the same. But the passive peace and comfort quickly transformed. One ascended seventy rungs and then came down. Jacob recognized him as the minister of Babylonia and was satisfied with his descent. The same rang true for Persia and Greece, and Jacob was again satisfied at their descent.

And then came Rome. He ascended and ascended and ascended in a blaze of red, apparently never to descend. Jacob awoke in his sleep and cried out to God, "It's Esau! God, don't let him take control!" God was comforting and assured Jacob that Esau, too, would fall.

Jacob awoke from the dream and exclaimed, "Surely Adonai is present in this place, and I, I did not know it!" How could he have known that God was there when he didn't even know who his own 'I' was? The statement was less a description of the past than it was a foreshadowing of the future. Jacob would spend the next twenty years in places where he never expected to find God. He would only find God in those places when he knew who his 'I' was, when he figured out how the Jacob and Esau inside of him could interact and diverge.

This task would take him twenty years of 'journeying' with God by his side and Esau in his dreams. They would be difficult years of deciphering how his role as a vessel of blessing was different than his role as a younger son. Throughout them all, Jacob would always "Remember, I [God] am with you: I will protect you..." (28:15) and would be unsure of his own 'I.' He would struggle looking for God, yet unsure of his own identity.

#### CHAPTER 4

"...SINCE ADONAI HAS BLESSED YOU WHEREVER I TURNED."

GENESIS 29:1-30:40

...as it is said in the text, 'and he said to him, 'achot, brother, is also used in the text. Further, is the strictest sense of the word and as it

Genesis 29:9, 12.

Genesis 29:13; 30:8. While the actual word 'achot, brother, was not used before with regard to Jacob, it is etymologically and audibly related to 'ach, brother, a key phrase in the Jacob narrative.

## The Biblical Text

These two chapters may be outlined in the following way:

- 29:1-14a Jacob arrives at the well, encounters the shepherds and meets Rachel and Laban.
- 29:15b-30 Jacob marries Leah and Rachel.
- 29:31-30:24 Jacob's first twelve children are born.
- 30:25-43 Jacob prepares to take leave of Laban by acquiring his wages.

As Jacob continued along his journey, his life, as described through the narrative, was filled with resonances of previous experiences. These two chapters constantly remind Jacob that although he was alone, away from his family, he could never truly leave them. The biblical author accomplished this task through the repetition of key phrases that describe family relationships. The word 'father' is used with reference to Laban three times.<sup>1</sup> 'Sister,' as it refers to the relationship between Rachel and Leah and Laban and Rebekah, is also used three times.<sup>2</sup> 'Brother,' in the strictest sense of the word and as it

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 29:9,12.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 29:13; 30:8. While the actual word 'achot,' sister, was not used before with regard to Jacob, it is linguistically and audibly related to 'ach,' brother, a key phrase in the Jacob narrative.

generally means 'kinsman,' is repeated six times.<sup>3</sup> Rachel, Leah, and Dinah are referred to as 'daughters' nine times.<sup>4</sup> (The general female population is referred to as 'daughters' once.<sup>5</sup>) Rebekah is twice referred to as Jacob's 'mother.'<sup>6</sup> Finally, the word 'son' is repeated an incredible twenty three times.<sup>7</sup> If Jacob were ever to forget his place of origin, those who brought him into the world and entered it with him, all that he had to do was to interact with those around him as they reflected his own family (forty seven times.)

As if those reminders were not enough, Jacob was also reminded of the stop he made between Canaan and Mesopotamia. Jacob arrived at a well covered with a 'stone,' just like the stone he placed under his head for a good night's sleep in Bethel (28:11). That stone appears five times in the opening dialogue of chapter 29.<sup>8</sup> Jacob became a part of a 'place' of a family that had its own customs with regard to

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 29:4,10,11,15.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 29:9,16,18,23,24,28,29; 30:21.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 30:9.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 29:10.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 29:22,26.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 29:4,12,13,31,33,34,35;  
30:5,6,10,12,14,15,16,17,19,20,23,24,25.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 29:2,3,8,10, 25,27,30; 30:26,29.

rejoicing and with regard to marriage ceremonies.<sup>9</sup> That 'place' is reminiscent of the place that Jacob found along the way (28:10). Ultimately, he requested to go back to his own 'place.'<sup>10</sup>

Most important, Jacob, who was promised that his 'brothers would serve him,' (25:23) ironically found himself 'serving' Laban. And did he serve! Over twenty years of faithful service mentioned ten times.<sup>11</sup>

#### Jacob Met Rachel and Laban Genesis 29:1-14a

29 Jacob lifted his feet [to continue his journey] and came to the land of the Easterners.<sup>2</sup> He saw and beheld a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The **stone** on the mouth of the well was large.<sup>3</sup> When all the flocks were gathered there, they would roll the **stone** from the mouth of the well and water the flocks; then they would return the **stone** to the mouth of the well.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob said to them, "My **brothers**, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Haran."<sup>5</sup> He said to them, "Do you know Laban the **son** of Nahor?" And they said, "We know."<sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Is he well?" And they said, "Yes; and there is his **daughter** Rachel, coming with the flock."<sup>7</sup> He said, "It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture."<sup>8</sup> But they said, "We cannot, until the flocks are rounded up; then they roll the **stone** from the mouth of the well and we water the flocks."

<sup>9</sup> While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's flock; for she was a shepherdess.<sup>10</sup> And when Jacob saw Rachel, the **daughter** of Laban (the **brother** of his

their local custom. When Rachel was close enough to see the

details of the action, Jacob himself rolled the stone off of

the well. This stone needed many shepherds to move it, but

Jacob was able to do it on his own. Jacob watered Laban's

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 29:15,18,20,25,27,30; 30:26,29.

mother), and the flocks of Laban (the **brother** of his **mother**), Jacob went up and rolled the **stone** from the mouth of the well, and watered the flocks of Laban (the **brother** of his **mother**.)

<sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel, raised his voice, and cried.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob told Rachel that he is her **father's brother** and that he is Rebekah's **son**; and she ran to tell her **father**.

<sup>13</sup> On hearing the news of his **sister's son** Jacob, Laban ran to greet him. He hugged him, kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban everything that happened (lit. all these words). <sup>14</sup> Laban said to him, "You are truly my bone and my flesh."

The narrative begins with Jacob 'lifting his feet' as he began his journey from Bethel (29:1). This phrase appears only this one time in the entire Bible. When Jacob arrived at the well, he only saw sheep, despite the fact that the sheep were tended by shepherds (29:2). In fact, the shepherds are first referred to as 'them' (29:3) without ever being identified before hand.

As soon as Jacob identified their relationship to Laban, Rachel appeared in the horizon. In a beautiful linguistic play, Jacob still only saw sheep, for 'Rachel' means 'little ewe.' As if Rachel's appearance was the cause of Jacob's next action, he instructed the nameless shepherds to remove the stone from the well. They refused based on their local custom. When Rachel was close enough to see the details of the action, Jacob himself rolled the stone off of the well. This stone needed many shepherds to move it, but Jacob was able to do it on his own. Jacob watered Laban's

sheep, kissed Rachel, raised his voice, and cried (29:6-11).

Rachel ran to her father in order to report Jacob's arrival. Laban greeted Jacob warmly with hugs and kisses. Jacob informed Laban of all of the events that occurred to him using the word *devarim*, which can mean, 'events, things or words.' Laban then identified Jacob as a kinsman (29:12-14).

The entire episode is strikingly similar to the events surrounding the acquisition of a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24). In both cases, the events center around activities at a well. Kindness is shown in both through the act of watering another's flock. The stranger is then escorted back to the tent of the family. The scenes differ in two important ways. The events recorded in chapter 24 portray an attempt by Abraham to procure a wife for his son Isaac through a messenger servant. In this case, however, Jacob himself is an active participant in the events. In the former case, the servant took with him all of the 'bounty of his master' (25:10). In the latter case, Jacob, the one blessed to be served, arrived apparently penniless.

The same language found in chapter 27

After a month's time, Laban offered Jacob

## Jacob Married Genesis 29:14b-30

When Jacob stayed with Laban a month's time, <sup>15</sup> Laban said to Jacob, "Just because you are my **brother**, should you **serve** me for nothing? Tell me, what are your wages?" <sup>16</sup> Now Laban had two **daughters**; the name of the older one was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup> Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful. <sup>18</sup> Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will **serve** you seven years for Rachel your younger **daughter**." <sup>19</sup> Laban said, "Better I should give her to you than I should give her to a stranger. Stay with me." <sup>20</sup> So Jacob **served** seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

<sup>21</sup> Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her." <sup>22</sup> And Laban gathered all of the people of the **place** and made a feast. <sup>23</sup> When evening came, he took his **daughter** Leah and brought her to him; and he cohabited with her. - <sup>24</sup> Laban had given his maidservant Zilpah to his **daughter** Leah as her maid. - <sup>25</sup> When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not **serve** you for Rachel?! Why did you deceive me?" <sup>26</sup> Laban said, "It is not the practice in our **place** to marry off the younger before the older. <sup>27</sup> Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you **serve** me another seven years." <sup>28</sup> Jacob did so; he fulfilled this vow and gave him his **daughter** Rachel as wife. - <sup>29</sup> Laban had given his maidservant Bilhah to his **daughter** Rachel as her maid. - <sup>30</sup> And Jacob cohabited with Rachel also and also loved Rachel more than Leah. And he **served** him another seven years.

"Laban had two daughters, the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel" (29:16). What a wonderful parallel to Jacob's own family. Not only was there a younger and an older, but they are described using the same language found in chapter 27 (*gedolah/ketannah*). The *ketannah* before the *gedolah*. This terminology would have been After a month's time, Laban offered Jacob a contracting

for his service. Laban asked Jacob to name his price and Jacob very clearly announced his intentions to marry the younger daughter, Rachel. Is it surprising that Jacob loved Rachel over Leah? Yes, "Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful" (29:17), but we could have guessed from that very first meeting (29:6,10,11) that Jacob and Rachel would wind up in love. They shared an incredible experience at the well. They were similar: both were the younger sibling. Laban and Jacob agreed on seven years of service for the hand of Rachel. Those seven years passed quickly for Jacob because of his love for Rachel (29:14-20).

Jacob requested payment after seven years. A great party was held for all of the people of that place in honor of the wedding. But, in the shadows of evening, Laban gave Jacob Leah, not Rachel. The two cohabited only for Jacob to discover the trickery in the morning. Jacob then confronted Laban with his misdeed.

Laban responded, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older" (29:26). 'Our place,' as opposed to 'your place:' Jacob might have thought that it was standard practice to ignore primogeniture, but Laban did not. Laban could have said, '...to marry off the *ketanah* before the *gedolah*.' This terminology would have been consistent with previous descriptive passages regarding

the older and the younger. When Jacob and Esau are described in relative age terms, they are always described with these two words (*ktn/gdl*) just as Rachel and Leah have been in this chapter (29:16). But Laban carefully selected his language: "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger (*tz'irah*) before the older (*b'chirah*)" (29:26). Laban's word selection triggered a precious memory in Jacob's mind. Jacob was described as the *tza'ir* only once in his life: when God explained to Rebekah that there were two nations in her womb, "and the older shall serve the younger (*tza'ir*)" (25:23). Laban's words triggered yet another memory for the troubled Jacob. "I am Esau your firstborn (*b'chorcha*)" (27:19), Jacob responded to his father's question.

They agreed on another seven year contract for Rachel. Jacob served the seven years, married Rachel, and then served yet another seven years. In sum, twenty one years have passed since Jacob first arrived at the well (29:21-30).

#### The Children are Born - The Sisters Fight Genesis 29:31-30:24

<sup>31</sup> Adonai saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, "It means: 'Adonai has seen my affliction; it also means: 'Now my husband will love me.'" <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This

is because Adonai heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also"; so she named him Simeon. <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a **son** and declared, "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have born him three **sons**." Therefore he was named Levi. <sup>35</sup> She conceived again and bore a **son**, and declared, "This time I will praise Adonai." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

30 When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her **sister**; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." <sup>2</sup> Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" <sup>3</sup> She said, "Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children." <sup>4</sup> So she gave him her maid Bilhah as concubine, and Jacob cohabited with her. <sup>5</sup> Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a **son**. <sup>6</sup> And Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; indeed, He has heeded my plea and given me a **son**." Therefore she named him Dan. <sup>7</sup> Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second **son**. <sup>8</sup> And Rachel said, "A contest for God I waged with my **sister**; yes, and I have prevailed." So she named him Naphtali.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as concubine. <sup>10</sup> And when Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a **son**, <sup>11</sup> Leah said, "What luck!" So she named him Gad. <sup>12</sup> When Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second **son**, <sup>13</sup> Leah declared, "What fortune!" meaning, "Women [lit. **daughters**] will deem me fortunate." So she named him Asher.

<sup>14</sup> Once, at the time of wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your **son's** mandrakes." <sup>15</sup> But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my **son's** mandrakes." Rachel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your **son's** mandrakes." <sup>16</sup> When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah came out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my **son's** mandrakes." And he lay with her that night. <sup>17</sup> God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth **son**.

<sup>18</sup> And Leah said, "God has given me my reward for having given my maid to my husband." So she named him Issachar. <sup>19</sup> When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth **son**, <sup>20</sup> Leah said, "God has given me a choice gift; this time my husband will exalt

me, for I have borne him six **sons**." So she named him Zebulun.

<sup>21</sup> Last, she bore him a **daughter**, and named her Dinah.

<sup>22</sup> Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a **son**, and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." <sup>24</sup> So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May Adonai add another **son** for me."

The narrative now turns to the sibling rivalry between Leah and Rachel. This rivalry is based on their own individual worth as women as expressed through their ability to have children. Ironically, Jacob left his father's tent with God's blessing, was reassured along the way of God's providence, but up until this point has not mentioned nor been reminded of God in any way at all in his new place. "Adonai saw that Leah was unloved..." (29:31) is the first mention of God since the experience at Bethel. God is first found in Jacob's life in connection with the older, unloved, Leah.

In the period of four verses Leah had as many children. The names of the children were derived from two major themes: praise of God and the hopefully mended relationship between Leah and Jacob. The name Reuben was attributed to both themes: "Adonai has seen my affliction...Now my husband will love me" (29:32). Simeon was similarly named with both themes in mind: "This is because Adonai heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also" (29:33). Levi was named only with Jacob in mind: "This time my husband will

become attached to me, for I have born him three sons" (29:34). Finally, when Judah was born, Leah declared, "This time I will praise Adonai" (29:35). In sum, the first two of the four children were named with both God and Jacob in mind, the third with only Jacob in mind, and the fourth with only God in mind. Leah, by naming her first two children as she did, was searching for God through her relationship with Jacob. With no success in building the marital relationship based on God, Leah devoted her third child to her husband. This attempt failed like the previous ones. Her fourth child was devoted solely to God, as if to say, 'I have given up on finding ultimate meaning in my marital relationship. This time, I will only praise Adonai, not my husband!'

Rachel was greatly distressed because of her own infertility. She was envious of her sister and stormed into the presence of Jacob and said, "Give me children, or I shall die!" (30:1). Rachel's tone was reminiscent of the tones of Rebekah and Esau (25:22,32). All three asked existential questions at critical moments in their lives. Jacob, aware of his own abilities in this matter, angrily responded, "Can I take the place of God?" (30:2). The solution was surrogate motherhood through Bilhah. Upon seeing the child that was to become her's, Rachel exclaimed, "God has vindicated me; indeed, He has heeded my plea and bore me a son" (30:6). Again, Bilhah gave birth and Rachel

declared, "A contest for God I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed" (30:8). Where Leah saw her children as vindications of God's love and hopes for improved relations with Jacob, Rachel saw her children as the spoils of contest between herself and her older sister. Once again, we are in the midst of a heated sibling rivalry where the younger strives to overcome the older.

Leah, in turn, was frustrated with her recent infertility and her sister's fertility. So, like her sister, Leah gave Jacob her handmaid as a concubine. In time, Zilpah bore Jacob two children. Both were named by Leah as a response to the contest waged by Rachel. At the sight of the first child, Leah exclaimed, "What luck!" (30:11). Then, after the birth of the second, Leah similarly proclaimed, "What fortune!...Women will deem me fortunate" (30:13). Leah began her berthing years in quest of holy relationship with God and Jacob. She continued those years in bitter rivalry with Rachel.

Then, one day, Reuben, Leah's first born, came home with some mandrakes, assumed to serve as an aphrodisiac.<sup>12</sup> Rachel requested the mandrakes from Leah only to be thwarted by a bitter response, "Was it not enough for you to take my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?"

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<sup>12</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 209.

(30:15). Rachel made the following arrangement: in return for the mandrakes, Leah may sleep with Jacob that night. The nature of the deal assumed that Jacob regularly slept with Rachel out of preference.

Jacob returned in the evening to be met by Leah, who informed him of the arrangements. Leah conceived and bore a child, saying, "God has given me my reward for having given my maid to my husband" (30:18). She again conceived and bore a child. This time she said, "God has given me a choice gift; this time my husband will exalt me, for I have borne him six sons" (30:20). The general thrust of her statements brings God into her life only for the purpose of self aggrandizement. Finally, she bore a daughter, with no comment (30:21).

After long years of suffering and questioning of her own worth, Rachel was remembered by God, who opened her womb. A son was born and she said, "God has taken away my disgrace" (30:23). "She named him Joseph, which is to say, "May Adonai add another son for me" (30:24). 'Yosef,' lit., 'will add,' was born in hopes of yet another child. His very name is dependent upon a sibling just as Jacob's name, the 'one who grasps at the heels (of his brother),' is dependent upon Esau.

## Preparing to Leave Genesis 30:25-43

<sup>25</sup> After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my **place** to my homeland. <sup>26</sup> Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have **served** you, that I may go; for well you know what **services** I have **served** you."

<sup>27</sup> But Laban said to him, "If you will indulge me, I have learned through divination that Adonai has blessed me on your account."

<sup>28</sup> And he continued, "Name the wages due from me, and I will pay you." <sup>29</sup> But he said, "You know well how I have **served** you and how your livestock has fared with me. <sup>30</sup> For the little you had before I came has grown to much, since Adonai has blessed you wherever I turned. And now, when shall I make provision for my own household?" <sup>31</sup> He said, "What shall I give you?" And Jacob said, "Don't give me anything! If you will do this thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flocks: <sup>32</sup> let me pass through your whole flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted animal - every dark-colored sheep and every spotted and speckled goat. Such shall be my wages. <sup>33</sup> In the future, when you go over my wages, let my honesty toward you testify for me: if there are among my goats any that are not speckled or spotted are any sheep that are not dark-colored, they got there by theft." <sup>34</sup> And Laban said, "Very well, let it be as you say."

<sup>35</sup> But that same day he removed the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats - every one that had white on it - and all the dark-colored sheep, and left them in the charge of his **sons**. <sup>36</sup> And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob then got fresh shoots of poplar, and of almond and plane, and peeled white strips in them, laying bare the white of the shoots. <sup>38</sup> The rods that he had peeled he set up in front of the goats in the troughs, the water receptacles that the goats came to drink from. Their mating occurred when they came to drink, <sup>39</sup> and since the goats mated by the rods, the goats brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted young. <sup>40</sup> But Jacob dealt separately with the sheep; he made these animals face the streaked or wholly dark-colored animals in Laban's flock. And so he produced special flocks for himself, which he did not put with Laban's flocks. <sup>41</sup> Moreover, when the sturdier animals were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the troughs, in full view of the animals, so that they mated by the rods; <sup>42</sup> but with the feebler animals he would not place them there. Thus the

feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob. <sup>43</sup> So the man grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses.

It was only after Joseph's birth, that Jacob requested of Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my place to my homeland..." (30:25). Jacob's departure from Laban's place to his own place was dependent upon the birth of Joseph.

Jacob then entered into another contract with Laban for the purpose of paying his wages for twenty one years of service. In his initial speech, Jacob mentioned three times his 'service' to Laban (30:26). Laban then acknowledged God's blessings that flowed through Jacob, as did Jacob acknowledge the same (30:27-30). The language of service and blessing was a clear recollection of the original blessing offered by Isaac, "Blessed be those who bless you" (27:29), and by God, "And the older shall serve the younger" (25:23).

The two agreed to a contract that would give Jacob "every speckled and spotted animal - every dark-colored sheep and every spotted and speckled goat" (30:32). Laban immediately removed all such animals and put them in the charge of his sons. He put a three days journey between them and Jacob in an attempt to lower Jacob's wages (30:35f.). Meanwhile, Jacob had perfected a mating ritual

for the animals that would produce a maximum number of speckled and spotted animals. He put the ritual to work and achieved great success to the extent that, ... "the man [Jacob] grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks..." (30:43).

### Rabbinic Voices

"Jacob lifted his feet and went to the land of the children of Kedem" (29:1). 'Jacob lifted his feet' at no other time than at the beginning of his journey. The possibilities of interpreting the one time phrase are numerous. 'Jacob lifted his feet' - as a result of the blessing, the going was now easier.<sup>13</sup> 'Jacob lifted his feet' - he directed his journey with resolve and confidence.<sup>14</sup> 'Jacob lifted his feet' - he had to force himself to leave that place of encouragement he found along the road as he began the journey of his life.<sup>15</sup>

When he finally arrived at the well, he scarcely acknowledged the presence of the shepherds, saw Rachel, instructed the shepherds, was rebuked, and then moved the

<sup>13</sup> Rashi, Bekhor Shor, and Radak on Genesis 29:1. All three are medieval biblical commentators.

<sup>14</sup> Sforno on Genesis 29:1. Sforno is also a medieval biblical commentator.

<sup>15</sup> Akedat Yitzhak on Genesis 29:1. Akedat Yitzhak is a medieval rabbinic work. 70:12.

rock from the mouth of the well. After all of this, he approached Rachel, kissed her, raised his voice, and cried.

"He raised his voice and cried out" (29:11) - Why did he cry? He said: What is written about Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, at the time when he went to bring Rebekah? "The servant took ten camels... and all of the bounty of his master in his hand" (Genesis 24:10). But I have come without a single ring or bracelet.<sup>16</sup>

The above rabbinic interpretation compares the events of this chapter with those of chapter 24. The contrast is stark between the 'well-loaded' servant and the empty handed Jacob. How ironic it is that the servant came with all of the bounty of his master's house, while the one blessed with the service of his brothers arrived empty handed. In the absence of the biblical details of Jacob's cry, the Rabbis interpreted it to be a cry of desperation and anxiety about the beginning of a life journey that had little prospect of material wealth.

While that very well may be an acceptable interpretation, there are still other ways of interpreting the cry. The next passage, from the same midrashic compilation, portrays the cry as one of love that will not find ultimate fulfillment in death. The scene is a beautiful one. Jacob arrived at a well in the middle of the desert only to find out that the nameless shepherds were

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<sup>16</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 70:12.

associates of his kinsman. They directed his attention to a blurry vision on the distant horizon: 'That is Laban's daughter Rachel.' Inspired by her approach, Jacob instructed the shepherds as to what he thought they should do concerning the watering of the sheep. They rejected his instructions. As Rachel approached, Jacob was able to discern her beauty. He himself rolled away the stone covering the well. He watered her sheep, approached her in loving awe, kissed her, raised his voice and cried.

Why did he cry? He saw that she would not enter the grave with him. It was this that Rachel said to Leah, "He shall lie with you tonight." (Genesis 30:15), meaning, with you he will sleep his last sleep; he will not with me.<sup>17</sup>

This interpretation assumes love at first sight. Jacob might not have known that he would marry Rachel when she was only a blurry vision on the distant horizon. However, once she approached, he knew that this was the woman he would marry; but ironically he would not be buried with her!

The exuberance was quickly thwarted when he realized that they would spend the rest of their lives on earth together only to be separated in death. Yes, when Jacob first met Rachel, he envisioned her burial place as Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19) and his own as the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 50:13). The Rabbis derived this.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

interpretation from Rachel's own words when she negotiated for the mandrakes with Leah, "He shall lie with you tonight" (Genesis 30:15). That sentence originally meant that Jacob would cohabit with Leah during that night. In the hands of the Rabbis, the sentence became a foreshadowing of Leah's eternal resting place (Genesis 49:31) along side Jacob in the cave of Machpelah during the eternal night of death.

Rachel was so moved by Jacob's actions, that she quickly ran to inform her father, Laban. More than just an excited relative welcoming a distant family member, Laban had keen memories of the last time someone visited from that side of the family. It happened one day when his sister Rebekah was by the spring:

The maiden ran and told all of this to her mother's household. Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out to the man at the spring - when he saw the nose ring and the band on his sister's arms... (Genesis 24:28ff.)

When Rachel told Laban that a visitor had come from Abraham's side of the family, Laban's thoughts were on the riches that Jacob might carry with him, like the riches that the servant carried many years earlier.

On hearing the news of his sister's son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him. He hugged him, kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all of the things (words) that happened. (29:13)

"When Laban heard" - He said: Eliezer<sup>18</sup> was the lesser of the house, but it is written about him, "The servant took ten camels..." (24:10). This one is the beloved of the house; he is going to have so much more than Eliezer! But when Laban didn't even see Jacob's wallet, "...he hugged him..." thinking, 'Perhaps he has money in his girdle.' After he found nothing, "...he kissed him..." thinking, 'Perhaps he has precious stones which he is hiding in his mouth. After Laban didn't find anything, Jacob said to him, 'What do you think, that I come laden with wealth? I have come laden with nothing but words.' - "And he told Laban all of these words."<sup>19</sup>

According to the Rabbis, Eliezer arrived with the riches of the house, while Jacob arrived with the riches of words. The relationship between the servant and the one to be served is an inverse relationship between material wealth and spiritual wealth. Jacob, blessed with a voice, only brought 'words of wealth.'

Jacob spent a month's time in Laban's home observing the dynamics of the family. This family was not so different than his own family. Both had two children who had different appearances and personalities. Esau was hairy and red and a lover of the fields, while Jacob was simple, a dweller of tents. Leah had weak eyes, while Rachel was shapely and beautiful. While the two brothers were very different, they were also very similar. So it was with the

<sup>18</sup> While the biblical text of Genesis 24 never gives the exact identity of the servant, the Rabbis assumed that the servant was Abraham's most trusted servant, Eliezer.

<sup>19</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 70:13. 2:647 n. 5. *Midrash Rabbah Genesis*

sisters. They might have appeared different, but according to the Rabbis, they actually were quite similar.

"Laban had two daughters" (Genesis 29:16) - Like two beams running from end to end of the world. Each produced generals, each produced kings, from each arose slayers of lions, from each arose conquerors of countries, from each arose dividers of countries. The sacrifice by the son of each overrode the Sabbath. The wars waged by the descendants of both overrode the Sabbath. To each was given two nights: the night of Pharaoh and the night of Sennacherib to Leah, and the night of Gideon and the night of Mordecai to Rachel, as it says, "On that night the king could not sleep" (Esther 6:1).<sup>20</sup>

This midrash is based on an unspoken word play between 'banot,' daughters, and 'bonot,' builders.<sup>21</sup> Leah and Rachel are seen as the builders of the people of Israel because their children ultimately became the progenitors of the tribes of Israel. Such a play is supported by a statement from the Book of Ruth. When Boaz intended to marry Ruth through levirate marriage, the people sitting in the gate blessed the marriage with the following words,

"May Adonai make the woman who is coming into your house be like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel" (Ruth 4:11).

Each daughter, qua builder, produced similar offspring. That is to say, to the descendants of both of their many

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 70:15. Leah had noble offspring, but Jacob loved

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah Genesis (London: Soncino Press, 1951), 2:647 n. 5. Rabbah, 3:111f.

children have been attributed similar experiences. Both produced captains - Leah through Judah: "They shall become like a captain in Judah" (Zechariah 9:7); and Rachel through Manasseh (Joseph's son): "[The following Manassites went over to David's side, they were]...the captains of the clans of Manasseh" (II Chronicles 12:21). Both produced kings - Leah, through Judah, produced King David; and Rachel, through Benjamin, produced King Saul. Both produced killers of lions - Leah produced David who killed a lion (I Samuel 17:36); and Rachel produced Samson who also killed a lion (Judges 14:5f.). Each produced conquerors of countries - from Leah, Moses and David; and from Rachel, Joshua and Saul. Each produced dividers of land - from Leah, Moses who divided the East Bank of the Jordan River; and from Rachel, Joshua who divided the West Bank of the Jordan River. Both produced those whose sacrifices and wars overrode the Sabbath in the sense that all the descendants observed Jewish law.<sup>22</sup> Both produced offspring who would be associated with nights of Divine intervention - from Leah, Moses (Exodus 12:19) against Egypt, and Hezekiah (II Kings 19:35) against Assyria; and from Rachel, Gideon (Judges 5:7:19) against the Midianites, and Mordecai (Esther 6:1) against Persia.

This was the Joseph who would eventually come to be loved. The two daughters had noble offspring, but 'Jacob loved

<sup>22</sup> See Mirkin's explanation in Midrash Rabbah, 3:111f.

Rachel.' So in his negotiations with Laban, Jacob was very clear as to his intent. "I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter" (29:18). But the text already stated, "Jacob loved Rachel" (29:18). Why then did Jacob need to be so specific regarding the daughter he wanted to marry?

"Jacob loved Rachel" - He [Jacob] said to him [Laban], "Knowing that the people of your town are deceivers, I will make my business with you perfectly clear: 'He said, 'I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter' - 'for Rachel', not Leah; 'your daughter,' that you shouldn't bring me another Rachel from the market; 'the younger one,' that you should not switch their names...."<sup>23</sup>

While the two daughters were very different, Jacob knew that they were similar enough to be switched in the shadows of the evening.

The years passed and the family grew until finally Jacob realized that he must take leave of Laban and return to his own place. What spurred his decision to move?

"After Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go back to my place, to my homeland" (30:25). Jacob realized that he had to leave once Joseph was born.

This was the Joseph who would eventually come to be loved by Jacob more than all of his children, as it is

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<sup>23</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 70:17.

written, "Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all of his sons, for he was the child of his old age" (37:3). The Rabbis questioned Jacob's reasoning. After all, Benjamin was actually the true child of Jacob's old age. But Joseph, the Rabbis reasoned, was loved more than any of his brothers for one special reason: Jacob and Joseph had the same facial features. They looked alike!<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps Joseph's birth served as a rebirth for Jacob who dwelled in someone else's place for over two decades. With Joseph's birth, Jacob saw new opportunity for himself. So he had to leave.

The Rabbis believed that there is one other reason why Joseph's birth sparked Jacob's return journey.

"When Rachel bore Joseph..." - Once Joseph was born, Esau's adversary was born, as it is written, "Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me leave to go back to my place, to my homeland.'" Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman: It is an oral tradition that Esau will fall at the hands of none other than Rachel's descendants, as it is written, "Surely the youngest of the flock will drag them [Edom] away." (Jeremiah 39:20) And why does he call them 'the youngest of the flock'? Because they [the tribe of Joseph] were of the youngest of the tribes.<sup>25</sup>

Joseph's birth reminded Jacob that he was yet to have an

the lot of the earth and the dew of heaven from God.

acknowledging the source, while the older was in the lot of the earth and the dew of heaven from God. The lot of the earth and the dew of heaven from God.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 84:8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 73:7.

encounter with Esau. Jacob had no choice but to return to his place.

### Another Interpretation

Jacob could not seem to get away from the reality he knew in Canaan. His climb up the stairway and back down placed him in the midst of a family similar to his own. No matter where he turned, he was confronted with fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters all acting out the emotions his own family experienced.

When he arrived at the well, Jacob was confronted with his first opportunity to actualize the blessing of his father: "Cursed be those who curse you, blessed they who bless you" (27:29). How ironic it is that the one who was blessed to be a vessel of blessing for other peoples saw only a well and sheep with no shepherds (29:2ff.). The distinction between the blessings of the two sons was most apparent at the moment when Jacob first interacted with the reality of the world around him. The presence of the Divine reality in the blessing of the older accentuates its absence in the blessing of the younger. The younger was to enjoy 'the fat of the earth and the dew of heaven' without acknowledging its source, while the older was to receive the fat of earth and the dew of heaven from God. The older was

to serve as a vessel of blessing/curse for those around him, while the younger had no such role. When Jacob only saw a well and sheep with no shepherds, he acted as if he received the blessing of the younger, unaware of the Divine Reality, unaware of the people around him. Jacob's silence with regard to the people around him was cry of desperation, 'I want to be the younger, not responsible for other people!'

And so the identity crisis continued; Jacob was torn between his identity as the younger and his identity as the bearer of the blessing of the firstborn. When Jacob failed to acknowledge the people around him, he internally asked the question that his father formerly asked of him, "Which of my sons are you?" (27:18); and this time, Jacob didn't have a ready answer.

As Jacob interacted with those nameless shepherds, he began to actualize his blessing potential. His questions were in fact centered around blessings as seen in his concern for the well being of his family member Laban (29:4ff.). And then in a surprising act of assertiveness, Jacob instructed the shepherds, "It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture" (29:7). Whether this was an act of assertiveness or arrogance, the fact is that Jacob instructed them. He began to live his blessing potential by

interacting with others. All would have been wonderful if they had only listened to his directions. But they didn't.

That first experience of blessing potential was meaningful and transformational for Jacob. He thought that he could actualize his blessing by ordering others to take positive actions, while he, as it were, sat back and did nothing. He practiced his blessing potential with the anonymous shepherds, and failed because of his own passive nature.

But once Rachel had approached him, Jacob realized that his blessing potential was not going to be actualized by instructing others. He realized that if he wanted to be a blessing for others, he needed to act on his own. So "Jacob walked up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban, his mother's brother" (29:10). What an inspiring moment for one struggling with his own identity! He courageously tried to actualize his blessing only to learn that he needed to be even more courageous by 'putting his entire body' into the blessing. It was such an inspiring moment for Jacob that he kissed his cousin Rachel, raised his voice, and cried out (29:11): 'I ~~did it!~~' would wake to see a reflection of himself in the face of Rachel. Instead he woke to see a reflection of what Jacob and Rachel shared a once-in-a-lifetime love-at-

first-sight moment. Even when they first met, Jacob knew their destiny despite his humble beginnings. Rachel ran to tell her father the news, only to find him even more excited than she over Jacob's arrival. Yes, Laban remembered well his sister's experience at the well and was eager to see how Jacob would out do the servant who swept away his sister Rebekah. After contact and dialogue, Laban came to realize that the riches Jacob carried were in his words: the words spoken by the 'voice of Jacob.'

Because he yearned to be the younger, free of the responsibility of others' blessings, Jacob loved Rachel, the younger daughter. He loved her as a result of the experience at the well. He loved her because of her physical beauty. He loved her because she was the younger child, a mirror image of himself if he hadn't said to his father, "I am Esau, your firstborn" (27:19). Jacob might have carried the blessing of the firstborn, but Rachel served as his vicarious experience of the younger child that he used to be.

Seven years later, Jacob awoke to find himself tricked. "When morning came, there was Leah!" (29:25). Jacob thought that he would wake to see a reflection of younger innocence in the face of Rachel. Instead he woke to see a reflection of what is, older responsibility in the eyes of Leah. Jacob

<sup>10</sup> *Baron, Genesis, note to 27:16.*

confronted Laban, "What did you do to me? Didn't I serve with you for Rachel? Why did you deceive me?" (29:25). Laban's use of the roots *bchr* and *tz'r* brought Jacob back to the pivotal moment when he lost his own identity and took on his brother's (27:19). Laban's word selection served as a commentary on Jacob's life path: 'Jacob, you might be seven years older than when you first came here parading as the older, but you are still, and will always be the younger!' Hence, even in love, Jacob struggled with his identity.<sup>26</sup>

When Jacob first married Leah, Laban held a party for all of the people of the 'place' (29:22). He then instructed Jacob of the customs of that 'place' (29:26). That place, where Jacob found himself, was as important as the 'place' he arrived at on his way from Canaan (28:11). The two 'places' were very similar. In both places, Jacob had to move stones in order to accomplish his task. He arrived in both places expecting to perform normal tasks: at Bethel he thought that he would sleep and at the well he thought that he would ask for directions. Yet, in both places he found more than he expected.

At Bethel he found a stairway leading to heaven and God's blessing. That place became a holy place for him, for it was truly the gateway to heaven. Jacob left Bethel with

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<sup>26</sup> Sarna, Genesis, note to 27:26.

a Divine promise, "Remember I am with you..." (28:15). And so, we could have expected that God would have been with him throughout his future endeavors.

Jacob arrived at the well, figured out what it meant to be a blessing, fell in love, served out of love for a total of fourteen years, and married two women. Each of these separate experiences calls out for an interaction with *Hamakom*, the Place, the Omnipresent One. Combined, they demand such an experience! But no such experience is discernable! In fact, for the first thirty verses of chapter 29, the equivalent of fourteen years of Jacob's journey, God is never mentioned as being with Jacob, nor did Jacob search for the God whose blessings he had received so many times in the past.

The Divine silence is broken in a way that informs us as to the dialectic between the younger and older sibling. "Adonai saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb" (29:31). God first appeared in response to the pain of Leah, the firstborn. If Jacob thought that he could live two identities in one life, Leah's interaction with God came to teach him that such was not the case. If Jacob wanted God in his life, he had to do more than roll a stone off of a well. No longer could he vicariously live his life as a younger sibling through his beloved Rachel. If Jacob wanted

to find God, he had to find God in the eyes of Leah that reflected older responsibility.

Leah's subsequent fertility, four birth's in as many verses (29:31ff.), and Rachel's infertility and existential frustration (30:1), serve as a reminder of Jacob's identity crisis. He might have loved the younger Rachel more than the older Leah (29:30), but God insisted on repeatedly opening Leah's womb instead of Rachel's. Jacob lived out his own sibling rivalry with Esau through the rivalry of Leah and Rachel. He might have wanted God to be with Rachel, but was confronted with the reality of God's presence in Leah. She began to name her children in hopes of finding God through the relationship with Jacob. But, once she realized that Jacob was not capable of bringing God into their lives, because he insisted on identifying with the younger sibling (qua Rachel and himself), she turned her energies solely to God. "This time I will praise Adonai." (29:35) because I cannot rely on Jacob to act as the older!

Finally, when Rachel did conceive and give birth, she named her child Joseph, meaning, 'Adonai will give me another son' (30:24). It seems appropriate that the name of Jacob's favorite son, born to his favorite wife, resembled his own name. When Jacob emerged from the womb, he was identified through his relationship with his brother

(25:26); when Joseph emerged from the womb, he was identified through the future birth of another child. Jacob's existence was dependent upon his older brother, just as Joseph's existence was dependent upon his younger brother.

That birth, more than any other of his older eleven children, provoked Jacob to return to his 'place' (30:25). Yes, Joseph looked like Jacob and was destined to be the adversary of Esau, but there was one other piece to the puzzle of this decision. When Jacob looked into the face of Joseph, he saw a mirror reflection of his own face and the one other person who most resembled the two of them: Esau. Jacob and Esau were twins. Perhaps they were not identical, but one would have been hard pressed to find another person on earth who as closely resembled the one brother as the other. That is, until Joseph was born. For Jacob, Joseph's face was a stark reminder of Esau. After Joseph's birth, Jacob realized that he had unfinished business with Esau. He realized that if he were ever going to invite God into his life, he would have to confront the one from whom he physically fled, but never spiritually separated. He knew all of this after looking into the face of the infant Joseph. As Jacob prepared to take leave of Laban, twenty one

years after he first told Laban his story, Jacob was reminded of the power of those two decades. Laban said, "If you would indulge me, I have learned through divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you" (30:26). How true it is, and we knew it all along:

Cursed be those who curse who, blessed they who bless you. (27:29)

May all of the families of the earth be blessed through you and your offspring. (28:14)

Finally, after twenty one years of struggling with the identity, it appeared that Jacob was fully cognizant of his blessing potential. "... For the little you had before I came has grown to much, since Adonai has blessed you wherever I turned" (30:30).

Jacob had learned even more. Twenty one years ago, at the well, Jacob first tried his blessing potential on the anonymous shepherds by telling them what to do. Two decades later, Jacob knew that the blessing could not be realized through orders. "Pay me nothing!," was Jacob's response to Laban's question, "What shall I pay you?" (30:31). 'You can't do anything for me, Laban. I have to acquire the blessing for myself.' And so Jacob passed through the sheep in order to find his own blessing. As a result of which, "The man grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses"

(30:43), thus fulfilling the blessing of Isaac, "May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and of wine" (27:28).

Such might have been Jacob's financial situation, but he was practically bankrupt in so many other ways. He was in a place surrounded by family, but exiled from his own. He was promised Divine providence, only to find God in the wife he loved least. He was blessed with the 'service' of his brother, but spent the past twenty years serving Laban. That bankruptcy, like so many difficult life experiences, taught him to take an aggressive step towards creating his own future. So, after the birth of Joseph, Jacob left two decades of servitude and physical and spiritual exile in order to encounter Esau. He was twenty years the wiser and destined to struggle with Esau.

CHAPTER 5

"I HAVE SERVED YOUR FATHER WITH ALL OF MY MIGHT."

GENESIS 31:1-32:3



## Surveying and Planning Genesis 31:1-16

31 Now he heard the things that Laban's sons were saying: "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all his wealth." <sup>2</sup> Jacob also saw that Laban's **face** toward him was not as it had been in the past. <sup>3</sup> Then Adonai said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers, your birthplace, and I will be with you." <sup>4</sup> Jacob sent forth and called for Rachel and Leah in the field where his flock was, <sup>5</sup> and said to them, "I see that your father's **face** toward me is not as it had been in the past. But the God of my father has been with me. <sup>6</sup> As you know, I have **served** your father with all of my might; <sup>7</sup> but your father has cheated me ten times but God has not allowed him to do me harm. <sup>8</sup> If he said thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flocks would drop speckled young; and if he said thus, 'The streaked shall be your wages,' then all the flocks would drop streaked young. <sup>9</sup> God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me.

<sup>10</sup> "Once, at the mating time of the flocks, I had a **dream** in which I saw that the he-goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled, and mottled. <sup>11</sup> And in the **dream** an **angel of God** said to me, 'Jacob!' 'Here I am,' I answered. <sup>12</sup> And he said, 'Note well that the he-goats that are mating with the flock are streaked, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. <sup>13</sup> I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a **pillar** and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to the land of your birthplace.'

<sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah answered him, saying, "Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father's house? <sup>15</sup> Are we not thought of as outsiders to him now that he has sold us and used up our money? <sup>16</sup> Truly, all of the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you."

Until this chapter, Jacob is portrayed as living for two decades without Divine communication. The last time Jacob heard God's voice was in Bethel when God blessed Jacob with the following words,

negotiations between Laban and Jacob, apparently happened

Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this

land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (28:15)

Despite such reassuring and comforting words of providence, God did not speak with Jacob for twenty years until he had already decided to return to the land. He decided to return to the land apparently without Divine help (30:25f.). It was only after the preliminary decision on Jacob's part, neither before nor during, that God instructed Jacob to return to the land as promised at Bethel.

God's apparent absence in Jacob's life, as portrayed through the biblical author's omission of God in Jacob's decision to return to the land of Canaan and throughout Jacob's life in Paddan-aram, (God never spoke directly to Jacob in Paddan-aram), did not alter Jacob's faith. He readily admitted to Rachel and Leah that "the God of my father has been with me" (31:5) and that "God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me" (31:9). Jacob knew all along, despite God's apparent absence, that God was with him.

This is also known through Jacob's recollection of a dream that he once had (31:10-13) but was not recorded in the narrative. This dream, as it related to the final negotiations between Laban and Jacob, apparently happened towards the end of Jacob's stay in Paddan-aram. Finally, having to confront Laban or his kinsmen who might not have

Divine providence, as it played out in the final negotiations between Laban and Jacob, was also acknowledged by Rachel and Leah (31:14-16).

Jacob made a vow at Bethel. It was a vow to give a tenth of everything that God gave to Jacob back to God. In fact, Jacob believed that God was with him, as we learn from his comment, "The God of my fathers was with me" (31:5), and that he acknowledged that the source of his abundant sheep was in fact God, "God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me" (31:9). Jacob could have easily said, 'I have to go back to Bethel in order to complete the agreement with God,' but didn't. When will Jacob give God ten percent? This we don't know.

#### Taking Flight Genesis 31:17-21

<sup>17</sup> Jacob arose and placed his children and wives on camels; <sup>18</sup> and he drove off all of his livestock and all the wealth he had amassed, the live-stock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household idols. <sup>20</sup> Jacob stole the heart of Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the [Euphrates] river and placed his face in the direction of the hill country of Gilead.

Jacob and his family left while Laban was sheering the sheep. It was an opportunity for them to leave without having to confront Laban or his kinsmen who might not have

taken well to Jacob's sudden departure after his new found wealth. Jacob's exit from Paddan-aram was surprisingly similar to his earlier exit from Beer Sheba. Note how N. Sarna describes theses similarities:

Events have come full cycle. As Jacob fled from his father's home to the safety of Laban's, so he now flees from Laban back to his native land. The entire episode is brought to a conclusion by employing the same two verbs used at the outset. It began with Rebekah's directive of 27:43, "flee at once to Haran," which in the Hebrew really reads "arise, flee!" It closes here with, "He fled...and arose...." [31:21] The reversal of the word order symbolize the reversal of direction.<sup>2</sup>

Such a repetition of words and a reversal of word order clearly portray this chapter as a 'closing chapter' in Jacob's life in Paddan-aram.

The motivation for Rachel's theft is unclear. No matter what it might have been, the severity of her crime is accentuated by the biblical author through the use of the Hebrew root *gnv*, which connotes illegal action.<sup>3</sup> Rachel stands in distinction to Jacob who only "stole the heart of Laban..." (31:20)...

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 216.

## The Pursuit Genesis 31:22-34

<sup>22</sup> It was told to Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled.  
<sup>23</sup> He took his **brothers** with him and chased after him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>24</sup> God came to Laban the Aramean in a night **dream**, and said to him, "Guard yourself lest you speak with Jacob either good or bad."

As Laban pursued Jacob, he was greeted by God in a dream who warned him concerning his actions with regard to Jacob. God's presence in the narrative is unquestionable. It was such a moving experience for Laban that he later repeated it verbatim to Jacob (31:29).

## The Confrontation and the Search Genesis 31:25-35

<sup>25</sup> Laban overtook Jacob. Jacob pitched his tent on the mountain and Laban pitched his **brothers'** [tents] in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>26</sup> Laban said to Jacob, "What did you do by stealing my heart and carrying off my daughters like captives of the **sword**? <sup>27</sup> Why did you flee in secrecy and steal me [fig. deceive me] by not telling me? I would have sent you off in joy and music with timbrel and lyre. <sup>28</sup> You did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters good-bye! It was a foolish thing for you to do. <sup>29</sup> I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Guard yourself from speaking with Jacob either good or bad.' <sup>30</sup> So you wanted to leave - leave already! You longed for your father's house, all right! But why did you steal my gods?"

<sup>31</sup> Jacob answered Laban, saying, "I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force. <sup>32</sup> But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! In the presence of our **brothers**, point out what I have of yours and take it." Jacob, of course, had not known that Rachel had stolen them.

<sup>33</sup> So Laban went into Jacob's tent and Leah's tent and the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find them. Leaving Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. <sup>34</sup> Rachel, meanwhile, had

taken the idols and placed them in the camel cushion and sat on them; and Laban rummaged through the tent without finding them. <sup>35</sup> She said to her father, "May it not be taken angrily in the eyes of my lord that I cannot get up before you, for the period of women is upon me." Thus he searched, but could not find the household idols.

Laban complained to Jacob and informed him of his ability to take punitive measures against him if it were not for God's intervention. Jacob rightfully pleaded his innocence and vowed the death of the thief. The tension heightens as Laban searched for the idols, beginning in Jacob's tent, then Leah's, the maidservants, and finally Rachel's. Perhaps Laban began in Jacob's tent because he truly thought that Jacob was the thief; but the reader knows that Rachel was the thief, so her tent was last to be searched, thus further mounting the tension.

Laban's words to Jacob, "What did you do?" (31:26) are duplicates of Jacob's words to Laban after he awoke to find Leah, not Rachel, lying beside him (29:25). Laban now felt the pain he earlier inflicted upon Jacob.

Lest one think that Jacob's compensation was wrongfully acquired, the narrator informs us that the only thing that he stole was "...Laban's heart by not telling him that he was leaving" (31:20). While Jacob might have been justified in fleeing Paddan-aram for fear of his life, this subtle

Plan, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 31-30.

vindication of Jacob informs us that the threat was not justified. Even Laban was not interested in this kind of vengeance. He believed that Jacob stole two other things: his heart (31:26) and his gods (31:30), not his fortune.

Laban, in fact, had no suspicions of Jacob's thievery of fortune as the motivation for his departure. He coupled Jacob's desire to leave with his equally powerful desire to return to the house of his father. In both cases, the appropriate infinitive is added to the verb to express the power of the emotions,

So you wanted to leave - leave already! You longed for your father's house, all right! But why did you have to steal my gods?..." (31:30)<sup>4</sup>

Laban's words portray the theft of his gods as an afterthought on Jacob's way out. It is almost as if Laban said, 'Jacob, what possible use do you have for my gods?'

#### Jacob's Rebuke Genesis 31:36-42

<sup>36</sup> Now Jacob became incensed and took up his grievance with Laban. Jacob spoke up and said to Laban, "What is my crime, what is my guilt that you should pursue me? <sup>37</sup> You rummaged through all of my things; what have you found of your household items? Set it here, before my brothers and your brothers, and let them decide between us two.

<sup>38</sup> "These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. <sup>39</sup> That which was torn by beasts I never brought

me past this mound and this pillar, for evil. <sup>40</sup> May the God of

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<sup>4</sup> Plaut, Torah, note on Genesis 31:30.

to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. <sup>40</sup> Often, scorching heat ravaged [lit. 'sworded'] me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. <sup>41</sup> Of the twenty years I spent in your household, I **served** you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages ten times. <sup>42</sup> Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God took notice of my plight and the toil of my hands, and He gave me judgement last night."

Jacob began his rebuke with the latest offense and worked backwards. Laban had some nerve accusing him of thievery after all of the years of faithful service guided by God.

#### The Pact Genesis 31:43-54

<sup>43</sup> Then Laban spoke and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine. Yet what can I do now about my daughters or the children they have borne? <sup>44</sup> Come, then, let us make a pact, you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me." <sup>45</sup> Jacob took a **stone** and set it up as a **pillar**. <sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his **brothers**, "Gather **stones**," so they took **stones** and made a **mound**; and they partook of the meal there by the **mound**. <sup>47</sup> Laban named it Yegar-sahadutha, but Jacob named it Gal-ed. <sup>48</sup> And Laban declared, "This **mound** is a witness between you and me today." That is why it was named Gal-ed; <sup>49</sup> and [it was called] Mitzpah, because he said, "May Adonai watch between you and me, when one is out of sight of the other. <sup>50</sup> If you oppress my daughters or take other wives besides my daughters - though no one else be about, behold, God is a witness between you and me," <sup>angels</sup>

<sup>51</sup> And Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this **mound** and here the **pillar** which I have set up between you and me: <sup>52</sup> this **mound** shall be witness and this **pillar** shall be witness that I am not to cross to you past this **mound**, and that you are not to cross to me past this **mound** and this **pillar**, for evil. <sup>53</sup> May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor" - their ancestral deities - "judge

between us." <sup>54</sup> Jacob then offered up a sacrifice on the mountain and called to his **brothers** to eat bread. They ate bread and then spent the night on the mountain.

The pact was one of civility between the two parties as well as a pact of protection for Laban's children. Even though they were to go their separate ways, Jacob was to be reminded of his responsibility to the women and children by the mound and the pillar that were to serve as witnesses. The etymology of the place, Gal-ed is derived from the 'mound,' gal, that serves as 'witness,' 'ed.

#### Parting Ways Genesis 32:1-3

32 Laban arose early in the morning, kissed his sons and daughters and **blessed** them; then Laban went and returned to his **place**. <sup>2</sup> Jacob went on his way, and **angels of God came upon** him. <sup>3</sup> When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim.

Laban affectionately left his family and headed back to Paddan-aram, while Jacob continued on his journey. Just as Jacob left the land of Canaan with a Divine experience, so did he enter.

Just as Jacob's outward journey was marked by the appearance of angels (28:12), so is his return to his native land. In neither case are the angels assigned any role in the narrative, and in this instance there is not even a divine revelation. Perhaps their mere presence is intended to insinuate the notion of divine protection such as is formulated in Psalm 91:9-11: "Because you took the Lord - my refuge,/ the Most High - as your haven,/ no harm will befall you,/ no disease touch

<sup>54</sup> Genesis 31:21, 25, 32, 37, 46, 54.

your tent./ For He will order His angels/ to guard you wherever you go."<sup>5</sup>

While Jacob's twenty years in Paddan-aram might have been devoid of Divine contact, the last few included many such experiences. He had a dream before he negotiated with Laban (31:10ff.), a direct communication after he acquired his wages (31:3), and now an incident with angels (32:2). He named that place 'Mahanaim, God's Camp.' Yet, the word only connotes a dual nature through the suffix 'ayim,' with no direct reference to God.

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These chapters, like the previous two are filled with literary reminiscences of past events and suggestions of events yet to happen. To begin with, 'brothers,' as it means 'kinsmen,' appears six times.<sup>6</sup> Its insistent repetition here, and throughout the entire narrative reminds us of that first moment when Jacob saw the light of day, "Then his brother emerged, holding onto the heel of Esau" (25:26).

Jacob and Laban established a pillar and a mound as witness of their agreement. The word for 'pillar' is the

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 31:13, 45, 51, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 223.51, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 31:23, 25, 32, 37, 46, 54.

same found at Bethel (28:18) as it is also referred to in 31:13. That word, as a central element of the pact, appears in these chapters five times.<sup>7</sup> The pillar is not the only witness of agreement; a 'mound' is also established for the same purpose. The 'mound,' *gal* in Hebrew, is reminiscent of the actions of the shepherds and Jacob at the well, "When all of the flocks were gathered there, they would roll the stone from the mouth of the well...." (30:3). The Hebrew word for 'they roll' is '*galelu*,' related to '*gal*,' mound. Mound appears in these chapters seven times.<sup>8</sup> Of course, both pillar and mound were created from 'stone.' 'Stone' appears three times<sup>9</sup> and is reminiscent of the stone Jacob placed under his head in Bethel (28:11) and the stone that covered the well in Paddan-aram (29:2).

As Jacob journeyed back to his homeland, destined to meet Esau on the way, he was also reminded of the very blessing that served as the point of contention between the two. To begin with, Laban simply 'blessed' his children in a way that Isaac was unable to duplicate in its simplicity (32:1; chapter 27). Jacob, himself, reminded his wives (31:6) and his father-in-law (31:41) of his 'service;' this was the service due to him from the original blessing

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 31:13, 45, 51, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 31:46, 48, 51, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 31:45f.

(27:29) and God's prenatal forecast (25:23).

Twenty years before, Esau received the blessing intended for the second son that included the line, "Yet by your sword you shall live" (27:40). That same 'sword,' *cherev*, appears for the first time since that blessing in Laban's accusation of Jacob, "What did you do by... carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword?" (31:26) The same root appears later in Jacob's description of the scorching heat that 'ravished' [lit. 'sworded'] him as he tended Laban's flocks (31:40).

Jacob was also poignantly reminded of his experiences at Bethel. There he 'came upon' a 'place' (28:11) where he dreamt of 'angels of God' (28:12); here he first dreamt of goats, then angels (31:10f.), and then 'angels of God came upon him' (32:2). The promise of Divine providence offered at Bethel (28:15) is repeatedly referred to in these events. Adonai first said to Jacob, "...I will be with you" (31:3) and then reminded him of the Divine experience at Bethel (31:13). It was Jacob, in his anger, who expressed this Divine providence in the clearest language, "Had not the God of my father... been with me..." (31:42).

The experience at Bethel was considered to be so pervasive and important that Jacob was not the only person

who reminisced about its impact on the current situation. Laban, who was not at Bethel, here dreamt of the Divine providence offered to Jacob (31:24). It was Laban, this time, who offered the blessing (32:1) and it was Laban who returned to his place, reminiscent of the place where Jacob stopped along the way (32:1). How did Laban know about all of these things? "Jacob told Laban all of these things" (29:13) when he first arrived in Paddan-aram; and Laban remembered every detail.

It seems that Jacob's motivation for leaving Paddan-aram was the preservation of his life. Apparently, Laban and his boys didn't take well to Jacob's compensation agreement with Laban:

So the man grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses. Now he heard the things that Laban's sons were saying: "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all his wealth."  
(30:43ff.)

Not only did Jacob hear these things being said about him, but he also, "saw that Laban's manner towards him was not as it was in the past" (31:2). And so, Jacob informed his family of these new developments (31:5), citing them as the only reason why they should pick up and leave their homeland for another. The narrator, too, tells us why Jacob and family left Paddan-aram, but cites yet another reason,

Jacob arose and placed his children and wives on camels; and he drove off all of his livestock and all the wealth he had amassed, the live-stock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. (31:17f.)

The narrator informs us that Jacob left not out of fear, nor out of reverence for the agreement he made with God, but in order to return to his father in the Land of Canaan. Laban, too, identified this as the reason for Jacob's flight. (31:30)

### Rabbinic Voices

The Rabbis were keenly aware of the high tension emotions running throughout this passage and the previous two decades of service that Jacob gave to Laban. Jacob arrived in Paddan-aram with less than what the servant arrived with in the previous generation, yet grew to be exceedingly wealthy. Laban was not pleased with his son-in-law's new financial status and Jacob could see the displeasure in Laban's face (31:2). For the Rabbis, the face is the window to the emotions:

Ben Sira said: The heart of a person changes the face both for good and for evil. The Holy One of Blessing said to him, "Your father-in-law does not show you a friendly face, and you are staying here? - 'Go back to the land of your fathers and

your birthplace and I will be with you.'<sup>10</sup>

The heart is the seat of the emotions. Not only did Jacob acquire a great deal of wealth from Laban in a way that some perceived as thievery, but Jacob also 'stole Laban's heart' (31:20,26).

Jacob's return to the land of his birth was more than a journey to a land where he used to live. It was a journey to a family awaiting him with open arms. Among those waiting was God:

..."Return to the land of your fathers, your birthplace and I will be with you." (31:3) - Your father waits for you, your mother waits for you, I Myself wait for you.<sup>11</sup>

There was a sense that Jacob was missing something by staying outside of the land of Canaan. Yes, he enjoyed great wealth as originally promised by his father (27:39), but that wealth was a fleeting adventure outside of the land of Canaan:

Rav Ammi said in the name of Resh Lakish: There is no lasting blessing in the wealth from abroad, but, once you return to the land of your fathers I will be with you...<sup>12</sup>

emerged by humans. Building on the experience in the beginning chapter 32 and the experience of the angels

<sup>10</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 73:12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 74:1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Tanhuma Parshas, Vayishlach 4.

While the blessing might have been fleeting in Paddan-aram, Jacob was not totally bereft of goodness during his stay there. The Rabbis were aware of God's presence throughout Jacob's stay in Paddan-aram. He said to his wives, "But the God of my father has been with me" (31:5), using the common word 'imadi to express 'with me.' As common as the word is, the Rabbis read more into it. Change the vocalization and one can read 'amdi, my pillar.' 'God has been my pillar and my support throughout all of the past two decades.'<sup>13</sup>

The events at Gilead were not removed from the previous events in Jacob's life. The Rabbis played on what appears to be Jacob's ever-present stone:

After the quarrel the two men made a treaty, and with his gigantic strength Jacob set up a huge rock as a memorial, and a mound of stones as a sign of their covenant.<sup>14</sup>

While Jacob journeyed to Paddan-aram alone, the text informs us that he did not travel to the land of Canaan alone. He traveled with at least four women, twelve children, animals, and others. But Jacob was not merely escorted by humans. Building on the experience in the beginning chapter 32 and the experience of the angels

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 74:2.

<sup>14</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Hanidpas, Vayishlach 4.

ascending and descending the stairway at Bethel (chapter 28), the Rabbis envisioned Jacob with an entourage of angels preceding and dancing before him.<sup>15</sup> More than joyous accompaniment, those angels played a key role in Jacob's protection:

Jacob had no need to fear either Laban or Esau because on his journey he was accompanied by two angel hosts, one going with him to Haran from the borders of the Holy Land, where he was received by the other host, the angels of Canaan.<sup>16</sup>

And suddenly Esau returned in the Rabbis' minds. It was the same Esau who would eventually be defeated by Joseph; the reason why Jacob returned to Canaan. The comparison between Jacob and Esau continues, this time, in a midrash based on a simple reversal of two words. Accordingly, Jacob is deemed wise and Esau a fool, based on a tenuous detail in the text:

"Jacob arose and placed his children and wives on camels" (31:17); Rav Yochanan said, "It is written, 'A wise person's understanding is in his right hand; but a fool's understanding is at his left' (Ecclesiastes 10:2); 'A wise person's understanding is in his right hand...' - This is Jacob, as it is written, 'Jacob arose and placed his children' and afterward 'his wives on camels.' 'A fool's understanding is at his left.' - This is Esau: 'Esau took his wives' and afterwards 'his sons' and afterwards 'his daughters' (Genesis 36:6).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 74:17.

<sup>16</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Buber 1:163.

<sup>17</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 74:5.

Jacob was deemed wise because he placed his children on the camel before his wives, whereas Esau was deemed a fool because he did it in the reverse order. If ever there was a cheap shot at Esau, this would be it. But for some reason the Rabbis needed to place such a midrash in the context of chapter 31 in which Jacob nervously traveled to meet Esau, yet to struggle with his own adversary.

Esau was clearly in the forefront of the minds of both the Rabbis and Jacob. "And Jacob said to his brothers [fig. kinsmen], "Gather stones"" (31:46) in order to make the mound at Gilead. Shocked by Jacob's use of the word 'brothers,' as if it were a Freudian slip, the Rabbis asked,

How many brothers did he have? One - and would that he had buried him! Rather, these are his sons who he calls in the holy language, 'his brothers.'<sup>18</sup>

The word 'brothers' coming from Jacob's mouth caused the Rabbis to pause, just as it must have caused Jacob to pause, and think about Esau.

The mound of stones was to serve as more than a one time witness between Jacob and Laban. That same mound was to be the battlefield between King David's armies and the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 74:13.

Edomites, the descendants of Esau, in the distant future.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from the worries, thoughts and concerns about Esau expressed in the above selections, the Rabbis read Esau into the script of the narrative. The following passage portrays Laban's alliance with Esau thus foreshadowing the confrontation between Jacob and Esau to happen in chapter 33:

Laban's true feelings were revealed in the message he sent to Esau at once upon his return to Haran, with his son Beor and his ten companions. The message read: "You have heard what your brother Jacob has done to me, who first came to me naked and bare, and I went to meet him, and took him into my house with honor, and brought him up, and gave him my two daughters for wives, and also two of my maids? And God blessed him on my account, and he increased abundantly, and had sons and daughters and maidservants, and also an uncommon stock of flocks and herds, camels and asses, also silver and gold in abundance. But when he saw that his wealth increased, he left me while I went to shear my sheep, and he rose up and fled in secrecy. And he put his wives and children upon camels, and he led away all of his cattle and substance which he acquired in my land, and he resolved to go to his father Isaac, to the land of Canaan. And he did not allow me to kiss my sons and daughters, and he carried away my daughters as captives of the sword, and he also stole my gods, and he fled. And now I have left him in the mountain of the brook of the Jabbok, he and all belonging to him, not a jot of his substance is lacking. If it is your wish to go to him, go, and there will you find him, and you can do unto him as your soul desires."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 74:15.

<sup>20</sup> Sefer Hayashar, Vayetze 59a-b. Sefer Hayashar is a thirteenth century ethical work.

## Another Interpretation

The story of Jacob's flight from Paddan-aram is intended to infuse the past twenty years with God's presence. Jacob was promised providence at Bethel (28:15) but never directly found God in the narratives of chapters 29 and 30. His personal relationship with God during those years, in fact, is described in terms of resentment and anger. The infertile Rachel demanded children from Jacob, but

Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" (30:2)

Twenty years of Jacob's relationship with God are represented by one sentence during a heated argument with his jealous wife. The sentence seems to imply Jacob's reverence for God but lack of ability to intercede. Why didn't he plead on behalf of his wife in the presence of Adonai, just as his father did for his mother (25:21) and his grandfather did for his grandmother (17:17)? Jacob was apparently lacking that intimacy with God, for according to the narrative, God was never with Jacob during those twenty years.

But then we read chapter 31 and learn differently:

Then Adonai said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers, your birthplace, and I will be with

you." Jacob sent forth and called for Rachel and Leah in the field where his flock was, and said to them, "I see that your father's face toward me is not as it had been in the past. But the God of my father has been with me." (31:3-5)

[Jacob said,] "...God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me. (31:9)

[Jacob said,] "Once, at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream.... And in the dream an angel of God said to me, 'Jacob!' 'Here I am,' I answered. And he said, '...I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to the land of your birthplace.'" (31:10-13)

Then Rachel and Leah answered him [Jacob], "...Truly, all of the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you." (31:14-16)

God came to Laban the Aramean in a night dream, and said to him, "Guard yourself lest you speak with Jacob either good or bad." (31:24)

[Laban said,] "...I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Guard yourself from speaking with Jacob either good or bad.'" (31:29)

[Jacob said,] "...Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God took notice of my plight and the toil of my hands, and He gave me judgement last night." (31:42)

These seven accounts of God's intervention throughout the past twenty years of Jacob's life inform us that God was always with Jacob: from Bethel to Gilead and every place in between. While God's presence was not found in the daily activities of Jacob's life, God was found by Jacob in

retrospect.

That retrospective vision enabled Jacob to find God through the people he loved, especially his father. When reprimanding Laban, Jacob commented, "Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me..." (31:42), mentioning both the 'God of Abraham' and the 'Fear of Isaac.' But, later in verse 53, Jacob swore only by the 'Fear of his father Isaac' adding the word 'father' and excluding mention of 'the God of Abraham.' If we weren't sure of Jacob's primary motivation for leaving, we now have no reason to question it. Jacob obeyed the command to return to the 'land of Canaan,' to 'his birthplace,' to 'his father's house,' to 'the Fear of his father Isaac' in order to make sense out of that which had happened over the past twenty years, to go back to the God of his father.

The journey was not made in isolation from the previous twenty years. Once again, after dedicating a stone to God at Bethel (28:22) and finding the blessing in the motion of a stone at the well of Paddan-aram (29:10), Jacob found holiness in a stone of testimony. As ephemeral as his thoughts might have been, Jacob needed the physical stone to remind him of his mission.

Jacob left Paddan-aram proud of his spiritual growth. When he first arrived, Jacob sought blessings through ordering others (29:7). He quickly learned that the blessing he sought must be earned through the work of his own hands (29:10). That lesson stayed with him for two decades. When he finally prepared to leave, Jacob informed Laban that he could do nothing for Jacob; that Jacob would have to struggle for his own blessing (30:31).

Jacob had grown a great deal, but not enough:

Laban said to Jacob, "What did you do by stealing my heart and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword?" (31:26)

Jacob left Paddan-aram with 'sword in hand;' the sword of the blessing given to Esau. Jacob might have grown a great deal during the past two decades, but he still held on to vestiges of Esau within him. Perhaps he was spurred to this action by the treatment he received from Laban, "Often, scorching heat ravaged [lit. 'swarded'] me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes" (31:40). No matter what the reason was, when Jacob left Paddan-aram with 'sword in hand,' he left with Esau's qualities dominant within him. Jacob's hand that held the sword was 'Esau's hand.'

As Jacob journeyed home, he was escorted by those messengers of God who escorted him on his previous journey.

Instead of Jacob coming upon a place and encountering them (28:11), they now encountered him (32:2). Jacob might have been journeying home towards God, but now, more than ever before, Jacob needed the 'angels to come upon him' in order to steer him in the right direction. This time he could not avoid them.

Jacob left Paddan-aram on a holy pilgrimage in order to return to his father who twenty years before had given him his death bed blessing, but who was still alive. He journeyed to return to his father who twenty years before started the odyssey of identity which brought Jacob to his new found family and wealth. But most importantly, Jacob journeyed on a holy pilgrimage in order to re-answer the question asked of him twenty years before, "Who are you my son?" (27:18.)

CHAPTER 6

AND A MAN WRESTLED WITH HIM.

GENESIS 32:4-33:17

## The Biblical Text

This section of text portrays two 'brothers'<sup>1</sup> looking into the 'eyes'<sup>2</sup> of each others' 'face'<sup>3</sup> in search of 'offerings'<sup>4</sup> and 'blessings'<sup>5</sup> to 'graciously'<sup>6</sup> 'pass'<sup>7</sup> from the 'hand'<sup>8</sup> of the 'servant'<sup>9</sup> to that of the 'lord.'<sup>10</sup> More than subtle references to other sections of texts, these key words serve as a median through which the text need be understood. The text is replete with images from the time of the birth of the two children to the very day of encounter described in these chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> Seven repetitions found in Genesis 32:4,7,12,14,18; 33:3,9.

<sup>2</sup> Four repetitions found in Genesis 33:1,5,10,15.

<sup>3</sup> Nine repetitions (in various forms) found in Genesis 32:21,22,31; 33:10,18.

<sup>4</sup> Six repetitions found in Genesis 32:14,19,21,22; 33:10.

<sup>5</sup> Three repetitions found in Genesis 32:27,30; 33:11.

<sup>6</sup> Four repetitions found in Genesis 33:5,10,11,15.

<sup>7</sup> Seven repetitions found in Genesis 32:11,23,24,32; 33:3,14.

<sup>8</sup> Five repetitions found in Genesis 32:12,14,17; 33:10.

<sup>9</sup> Eight repetitions found in Genesis 32:5,11,17,19,21; 33:5,14.

<sup>10</sup> Eight repetitions found in Genesis 32:5,6,19; 33:8,13,14,16.

The text can be easily outlined in the following manner:

- 32:4-22    Jacob spiritually and physically prepares himself, his family, and Esau (through gifts) for the eventual meeting.
- 32:23-33   Jacob encounters a mysterious assailant as he spent the night apart from his family.
- 33:1-11    Jacob and Esau meet after twenty years of separate lives.
- 33:12-17   The two travel on their own way.
- 33:18-20   Jacob arrives in the Land of Canaan.

#### Jacob's Preparations    Genesis 32:4-22

<sup>4</sup> Jacob sent messengers ahead to his **brother** Esau in the Land of Seir, the country (lit. field) of Edom, <sup>5</sup> and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my **lord** Esau, thus says your **servant** Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; <sup>6</sup> I have cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my **lord** in the hope of gaining your favor.'" <sup>7</sup> The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your **brother**, to Esau, he is also coming to meet you and 400 men are with him." <sup>8</sup> Jacob was greatly frightened and anxious; he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, <sup>9</sup> thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape."

<sup>10</sup> Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, Adonai who said to me, 'Return to your land and to your birthplace and I will deal bountifully with you!' <sup>11</sup> I am unworthy of all of the kindness and all of the truth that you did for your **servant**: with my staff I **passed over** this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. <sup>12</sup> Deliver me I pray from the **hand** of my **brother**, from the **hand** of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. <sup>13</sup> Yet You have said, 'I will deal bountiful with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.'"

<sup>14</sup> After spending the night there, he selected from what

was at his **hand** an **offering** for Esau his **brother**: <sup>15</sup> 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; <sup>16</sup> 30 milch camels with their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; 20 she-asses and 10 he-asses. <sup>17</sup> These he put in the **hand** of his **servants**, drove by drove, and he told his **servants**, "Go on ahead, and keep a distance between droves." <sup>18</sup> He instructed the one in front as follows, "When my **brother** Esau meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? Whose [animals] are these ahead of you?' <sup>19</sup> you shall answer, 'They belong to your **servant**, they belong to Jacob; they are a **offering** sent to my **lord**, to Esau; and he is behind us.'" <sup>20</sup> He gave similar instructions to the second one, and the third, and all the others who followed the droves, namely, "Thus and so shall you say to Esau when you reach him. <sup>21</sup> And you shall add, 'And your **servant** Jacob is behind us.'" For he reasoned, "If I atone before his **face** with this present that goes before me [lit. in front of my **face**] then afterwards when I see his **face** perhaps he will raise his **face**." <sup>22</sup> And so the **offering** went before his **face** while he lodged that night in the camp.

Jacob's actions in this section can be divided into four separate strategies:

Jacob, ever a man of action, takes precautionary measures. First he gathers intelligence, then he prepares a stratagem of escape in the event of battle. This is followed by a prayer and, finally, by the dispatch of a handsome gift.<sup>11</sup>

The opening verses of the narrative are reminiscent of the very beginnings of the two boys' lives. 'Jacob sent messengers ahead to his **brother** Esau in the Land of Seir, the country (lit. field) of Edom...' (32:4). The Hebrew *se'ir* (Seir), *sadeh* (field), and *'Edom* (Edom), are all reminiscent of the original conflict. '*se'ir*' reminds us of

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<sup>11</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 223f.

the 'sa'ar' (hair) that covered Esau (25:25); 'sadeh' is the very field to which Esau was accustomed (25:27); and, 'Edom' is reminiscent of Esau's ruddy complexion, 'adom' (25:25). All three terms were instrumental in forcing Jacob to flee from Esau to Paddan-aram. They are now embedded in the background as Jacob returns to the land of Canaan and encounters Esau.

From the start Jacob's language informs us as to the irony and tension about to be felt. He repeatedly referred to himself, the younger, as 'servant' and to his brother Esau, the older, as 'lord,' when the fact is that God promised that "the older shall serve the younger" (25:23). The tension mounts when we learn that Esau traveled with four hundred men (32:7), an apparent army in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup>

Fully cognizant of Esau's earlier vow, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob" (27:41), Jacob immediately resorted to a defensive measure. Perhaps Esau's approach was intended as a premature attack on Jacob. After all, Jacob was on his way to visit Isaac who was supposedly still alive and the motivation for his departure from Paddan-aram (31:18). Or, perhaps Isaac had died and Esau was correctly fulfilling his

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<sup>12</sup> See Sarna, Genesis, 224 note on verse 7.

vow. In either case, Jacob had good cause to fear and be anxious. In the first case, he feared for his life; in the second, he feared for his life and was anxious over his father's unannounced death.

Jacob then resorted to prayer (32:10-13). The prayer appears to be a reminder to God that it was God's doing that placed Jacob in this situation in the first place. The image of 'passing over' is first mentioned in the context of the prayer,

"I am unworthy of all of the kindness and all of the truth that you did for your servant: with my staff I passed over this Jordan, and now I have become two camps." (32:11)

The stark contrast between one who passed over with a staff twenty years ago and now is broken into two camps is telling. It is as if the earlier transition from one land to another is paralleled by the transition from one camp into two. That camp, Mahanaim, is filled with God's messengers.

Jacob then arranged for an offering to be given to Esau. The offering, '*minchah*,' can either be an expression of friendship and respect, or a tribute in recognition of the donor's subordinate status.<sup>13</sup> That same Hebrew term is

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<sup>13</sup> Sarna, Genesis, 225 note on verse 14.

used the next four times the presents are mentioned. It is only replaced in 33:11 with 'berachah,' blessing, near the climax of the story.<sup>14</sup> Jacob concluded his instructions to his servants by offering a rational for sending the offering: Jacob wanted to find grace in the Esau's face. Verses 21 and 22 have an incredible five repetitions of the word 'face.'

#### The Mysterious Assailant Genesis 32:23-33

<sup>23</sup> That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he **passed over** the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>24</sup> After taking them and **passing them over** the stream, he **passed** over all of his possessions. <sup>25</sup> Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. <sup>26</sup> When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched his hip at the socket, so that the socket of Jacob's hip was strained as he wrestled with him. <sup>27</sup> Then he said, "Send me forth, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not send you forth until you **bless** me." <sup>28</sup> He said, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." <sup>29</sup> Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." <sup>30</sup> Jacob asked, "Tell me your name?" But he said, "Why would you ask my name?" And he **blessed** him there. <sup>31</sup> So Jacob named that place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God **face to face** and my life has been preserved." <sup>32</sup> The sun rose upon him as he **passed** Peniel, limping on his hip. <sup>33</sup> That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle.

Jacob was left all alone after passing all of his beloved possessions to safety. The verses describing his encounter with the man are written in such a way as to

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<sup>14</sup> The reason for this will be explained on page 166.

create a great deal of intentional ambiguity. In verse 26, for example, we are not sure which person saw the other as he did not prevail. Did the man see that Jacob had not prevailed? Did the man see that he himself had not prevailed? Or, did Jacob see that he had not prevailed? Or was it the man who Jacob saw not prevailing? Did Jacob wrench his own hip in frustration or was it the man who wrenched Jacob's hip. In verse 27 we are not sure who demanded to be sent forth and who asked for the blessing. The ambiguity is as confusing as the two must have appeared wrestling in a cloud of dust.

Ultimately, the ambiguity can be clarified in the following way, "When the man saw that he had not prevailed against Jacob, he wrenched Jacob's hip at the socket. The man then demanded to be sent forth, but Jacob would not allow him to leave until Jacob himself was blessed by the man." It was Jacob who asked for the blessing like Esau did so many decades before, "Have you but one blessing father? Bless me too father!" (27:38).

The man responded to Jacob by asking him his name, to which Jacob responded, "Jacob." The dialogue is incredibly similar to the blessing scene of chapter 27 at which time Isaac asked Jacob, "Who are you my son?" (27:18).

Jacob was then given a new name by the man: 'Israel,' because he prevailed (*yachol*) against beings Divine and human. The explanation of his new name is similar to words spoken by Rachel at the birth of Naphtali, "A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed (*yachol*)" (30:8). Jacob then asked the man's name, but did not receive a reply. "And he blessed him there" (32:30), and we don't know who blessed whom. Jacob then acknowledged that his experience, as confusing and as painful as it was, was in fact a Divine experience. And he limped off to meet Esau.

#### Reconciliation Genesis 33:1-11

33 Jacob raised his **eyes** and saw Esau coming with four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, <sup>2</sup> putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. <sup>3</sup> He **passed** before them and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near him, until his **brother**. <sup>4</sup> Esau ran to greet him, embraced him, fell on his neck and kissed him; they cried. <sup>5</sup> He raised his **eyes** and saw the women and the children. He asked, "What are these people's relation to you?" He answered, "These are the children with whom God **graced** your **servant**." <sup>6</sup> Then the maids, with their children, came forward and bowed low; <sup>7</sup> next Leah, with her children, came forward and bowed low; and last, Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low. <sup>8</sup> And he asked, "What is your relationship to this entire camp which I met?" He answered, "To gain **grace** in the **eyes** of my **lord**." <sup>9</sup> Esau said, "I have a great deal, my **brother**; let what you have remain yours." <sup>10</sup> But Jacob said, "With all due respect, no. If I have found **grace** in your **eyes**, then please take my **offering** from my **hand**, for my seeing your **face** is like seeing God's **face** and you have received me favorably. <sup>11</sup> Please take my **blessing** which has been brought to you because God has been **gracious** to me

and I have everything." And when he urged him, he accepted.

Once again Jacob took defensive measures in order to protect his family by separating them according to their maternal relations. He approached Esau and 'bowed low to the ground seven times' and one cannot help but think of the original blessing, "Be master over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow down to you." (27:29) Esau was to bow to Jacob; but, instead, Jacob found himself bowing to Esau.

How sweet was the end of the grudge when Esau, capable and apparently motivated to kill Jacob, ran to greet him, embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and the two of them, brothers born from the same womb, cried. Esau was duly impressed by Jacob's family and wealth. He questioned Jacob's generosity only to inform Jacob that he had everything he could possibly want. 'Everything', 'rov', is fitting for the one who was older, 'rav' (25:23). The offering, *minchah*, became *berachah*, a blessing, and Esau accepted it.<sup>15</sup> The entire experience was as holy as was the experience of the night before at Peniel, and Jacob told Esau that seeing his face was like seeing God's face.

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<sup>15</sup> The implications of change in wording are to be explained on page 166.

Traveling Separate Ways Genesis 33:12-17

<sup>12</sup> And [Esau] said, "Let us start on our journey and I will proceed at your pace." <sup>13</sup> But he said to him, "My **lord** knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; if they are driven hard a single day, all the flocks will die. <sup>14</sup> Let my **lord pass** before his **servant** while I travel slowly at the pace of the work that is before me and at the pace of the children until I come to my **lord** in Seir.

<sup>15</sup> Esau said, "Let me assign to you from the people that are with me." But he said, "Why should I find **grace** in the **eyes** of my **lord**?" <sup>16</sup> So Esau started back that day on his way to Seir. <sup>17</sup> But Jacob journeyed on to Sukkot, and built a house for himself and made stalls for his cattle; that is why the place was called Sukkot.

Touched by the entire event, Esau insisted that the two now travel together. Jacob explained that his speed would be too slow for Esau. Esau offered the assistance of his men so that they could meet in Esau's home and Jacob once again refused. So the two, reconciled, parted ways with Esau under the impression that Jacob would eventually come to Seir. After Esau's departure, Jacob travelled in the exact opposite direction, with no apparent intention to see Esau again.

Jacob's Return to Canaan Genesis 33:18-20

<sup>18</sup> Jacob arrived whole in the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan - having come from Paddan-aram - and he encamped in the **face** of the city. <sup>19</sup> The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred kesitahs. <sup>20</sup> He set up an altar there and called it El-elohe-yisrael.

Jacob and his family continued their journey to the

land of Canaan. He came to the city a Shechem in a state of wholeness/wellness. It is the same term that he used concerning Laban when he first arrived at the well over twenty years ago (29:6). He bought land and set up an altar dedicated to 'El, the God of Israel.'

### Rabbinic Voices

The Rabbis were very aware of the many nuances with which this passage could be read and the repetition of key phrases within it. Their interpretations are based on these factors.

They first questioned the messengers which Jacob sent out. Those messengers were described as '*mal'achim*,' the same word used for the ascending and descending angels of Bethel and the angels who encountered Jacob at Mahanaim. Framed by the angels of 32:2 that met Jacob along the way and the man that strove with him in 32:35 who had the power to bless him and whose own status was questionable (32:29), the status of the messengers that Jacob sent was scrutinized. The author of Bereshit Rabbah commented,

"Messengers" - These are messengers of flesh and blood; but the Rabbis say they were really angels.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 75:4.

If they were just flesh and blood, then the implication of their mission was as important as could be understood through human action. However, if they were actually angels, then Jacob's power reached beyond the realm of human action into the realm of the divine, thus raising the ultimate importance of his future encounter with Esau.

Even if the encounter was just in the human realm, the Rabbis were cognizant of its importance. These chapters, more than the previous ones, were interpreted by the Rabbis with an eye to the relationship between the Romans and themselves. For example, when Jacob sent out messengers before him, he sent them to Esau,

...To the one whose time had come to take the kingship from before him. Rabbi Yehoshua says, "He disrobed himself of the purple robe and threw it down before him, intimating, two wrestlers cannot sleep on one board."<sup>17</sup>

According to this midrash, the meeting between the two brothers in ancient days was actually the meeting of two ancestors: one prepared to relinquish the kingship, as symbolized by the robe, and the other prepared to take it on. More succinctly, when Jacob sent messengers to and ultimately met Esau, he was involved in a changing of the guard that was to effect the lives of the Rabbis who lived two millennia after the event. It was no less than a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

political summit. The midrash itself has weak textual support as there is no apparent connection between the encounter and the purple robe. Nonetheless, despite their creativity, the Rabbis read the biblical encounter as an expression of their own servitude to Rome.

More than a national story of origins, the Jacob/Esau encounter instructed the Rabbis as to their own daily behavior visa vis Rome. Rabbi Judah the Prince was particularly fond of applying this text to his own conduct. He once applied it to his letter writing habits:

Rabbi Judah the Prince instructed Rabbi Afes, "Write a letter in my name to our lord, the Emperor Antoninus." Thereupon he arose and wrote, 'From Judah the Prince to our Sovereign the Emperor Antoninus.' Rabbi Judah took it and read it and tore it up and wrote, 'From your servant Judah to the Sovereign Emperor Antoninus.' He said, 'My master, why do you treat your honor so lightly?' He responded, 'Am I then better than my ancestor? Did he not say, 'Thus says your servant Jacob' (32:5).<sup>18</sup>

This letter was not the only time Rabbi Judah the Prince applied this text to his own actions. He, in fact, was accustomed to reading the text before every trip to the Roman officials. It is in this way that he metaphorically became Jacob, preparing to encounter Esau. This particular passage is based on the end of the biblical encounter in chapter 33:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 75:5.

"And Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of my people'" (33:15) - He offered to accompany him, but Jacob declined it. When Rabbi Judah the Prince had to travel to the government, he would look at this text and not take Romans with him. On one occasion he did not look at it, and took Romans with him, and before he reached Acco, he had already sold his horse.<sup>19</sup>

The one time Rabbi Judah the Prince did not read the text, he was punished by having to sell his horse, presumably as a result of the theft of his other property by the Roman escorts. He could have avoided such problems if only he had reminded himself of Jacob's wisdom *visa vis* Esau so many years before, by rereading Genesis 33.

The issue at hand for Jacob was the blessing received over two decades before from his father. It was a blessing that was to give its recipient 'the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth' (27:28), all of the prosperity imaginable on this earth. This blessing was the bone of contention between Jacob and Esau. Esau vowed to kill Jacob because of it (27:41). Yet Jacob flaunted his wealth before Esau by sending him so many gifts. If anything, one would think that Jacob would have hidden his wealth in order not to aggravate Esau. Such a move could have been expressed in Jacob's words as, 'Esau, the blessing didn't work. There is no reason for you to hold a grudge against me. I have as little now as I did when I passed over the Jordan.'

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 78:15.

The Rabbis were aware of the dichotomy between Jacob's actions and his intentions to find grace in Esau's eyes. They addressed it head on. Firmly rooted in the biblical text, they interpreted Jacob's generosity in an unusual manner:

Jacob sent messengers to Esau to placate him, and they said to him, "Thus said your servant Jacob, 'My lord, do not think that the blessing my father gave me profited me. Twenty years I served Laban, and he deceived me, and changed my wages ten times, as you well know. Yet, I labored hard in his house, and God saw my affliction, my labor, and the work of my hands, and afterward He caused me to find grace and favor in the sight of Laban. And through God's great mercy and kindness I acquired oxen and asses and cattle and menservants and maidservants. And now I am coming to my country and to my home, to my father and mother, who are in the land of Canaan. And I have sent to let my lord know all of this in order to find favor in the eyes of my lord, so that he may not imagine that I have become a man of substance, or that the blessing with which my father blessed me has benefitted me.'<sup>20</sup>

Jacob's abundant wealth and gift to Esau were read by the Rabbis as an expression of Jacob's humility and God's grace. According to this interpretation, Jacob's wealth had nothing to do with Isaac's blessing.

Jacob was greatly afraid and anxious throughout the entire experience (32:8). Yet he had no reason to be afraid. He was traveling to his father, thus intimating that Isaac was still alive and Esau could not kill him

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<sup>20</sup> Sefer HaYashar, Vayetze/Vayishlach 59b-60b.

because his vow was to take effect after the mourning period for Isaac had passed (27:41). Jacob had God's blessing and was instructed by God to return to the land of Canaan (31:3). Nonetheless, Jacob was afraid. Why?

Rav Yehudah, the son of Ilai, said, "Why would he have to fear or be anxious? Rather, he feared that he would not kill and he was anxious that he would not be killed."<sup>21</sup>

Jacob feared and was anxious because his role in relation to Esau was unsure. Would he kill or be killed?

Such tension was heightened when Jacob sent messengers bearing gifts to his brother in a civil manner only to find out that Esau had four hundred men with him. Playing on the redundant usage of both 'Esau' and 'your brother' in one verse (32:7), the Rabbis emphasized Jacob's brotherly intentions as opposed to Esau's hostile intentions.

"The messengers returned to Jacob saying, "We came to your brother, to Esau..." (32:7) You are treating him like a brother and he is treating you like Esau."<sup>22</sup>

In response to the report of the messengers, Jacob divided the camp into two and sent gifts to Esau in an attempt to appease him. Those gifts, according to the

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<sup>21</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 76:2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 75:7.

midrash, were a tenth of all of his cattle.<sup>23</sup> So he thought that he would be able to sleep comfortably that night, but was unable. He further protected his dearest family by placing them on the other side of the river and was left all alone, and a man wrestled with him (32:25).

Rav Huna said, "He appeared to him in the guise of a shepherd. Thus each had flocks, each had camels. He said to him, 'Take your's across and then I will take mine across.' So Jacob took his across. Then he went back to see if he had left anything behind, when immediately, there wrestled a man with him."<sup>24</sup>

According to Rav Huna, the man was a mirror reflection of Jacob. They both were shepherds with similar animals. They helped each other cross the stream in an attempt to achieve a mutual goal, only to wind up wrestling with each other.

Or, perhaps the man, as explicit as the biblical text might be, was no man after all.

Rav Hama the son of Rav Hanina said: It was the guardian angel of Esau; the very one which Jacob addressed when he said, "For seeing your face is like seeing the face of God." (33:10)<sup>25</sup>

The guardian angel of Esau must have looked like Esau, thus enabling Jacob to make his later statement, "...for my

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<sup>23</sup> Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 37.

<sup>24</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 77:2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 77:3.

seeing your face is like seeing God's face..." (33:10) to Esau.

Whether a man or an angel, a shepherd or a guardian, the image is unclear. Perhaps the wrestler was a representative of both the human and the divine realm. There are those who suggest the wrestler was both Esau and his angel in one figure.<sup>26</sup>

Whoever the adversary was, the intent of the match was clear. Jacob needed the physical encounter in order to figure out the meaning of the blessing before he met Esau. The Rabbis saw this in Jacob's own words:

Then Jacob spoke to the angel, "My father conferred the blessing upon me that was intended for Esau, and now I want to know whether you will acknowledge the blessing as mine, or will bring charges against me on account of it." And the angel said, "I acknowledge the blessing to be your right. You did not gain it by craft or by cunning, and I and all the heavenly powers recognize it to be valid, for you have shown yourself as master over the mighty powers of the heavens as over Esau and his legions."<sup>27</sup>

The ambiguity of the biblical passage led the Rabbis to question who actually won the competition. Playing on the root 'avak,' meaning dust, found in the word to wrestle,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 78:3.

<sup>27</sup> Zohar III, 45a. See also Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of The Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 5:307 n. 252.

'hit'avek,' Rav Berechiah asked and answered his own question,

"We do not know who was victorious. The angel or Jacob?" But, since it is written, 'A man wrestled with him' we know who was covered with dust. The man....<sup>28</sup>

Thus he assumed Jacob's victory and the man's defeat in the dust.

When Jacob and Esau finally did meet, it was an emotional encounter. According to the Rabbis, the emotions ran deeper than the words of the biblical text can express. Playing on the unusual manner in which the word 'he kissed him' is pointed in the traditional text, the Rabbis read more into the kiss:

"And Esau ran to greet him and kissed him" (33:4) - The word is dotted. Rav Shimon the son of Eleazar said: Wherever you find the plain writing exceeding the dotted letters, you must interpret the plain writing; if the dotted letters exceed the plain writing, you must interpret the dotted letters. Here, the plain writing does not exceed the dots; hence, it teaches that he kissed him with all of his heart. Said Rav Yannai to him: If so, why is the word dotted? It teaches however that he wished to bite him, but the patriarch Jacob's neck was turned to marble and the teeth of the evil one were loosened. Hence, they wept, one wept because of his neck and the other because of his teeth. Rav Abbahu adduced it in Rav Yochanan's name from the following verse, "Your neck is like a tower of ivory" (Song

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<sup>28</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 77:3.

7:5).<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, the weeping of the two brothers was the opposite side of the same coin. Each had his own reason to weep, but both were rooted in the same experience.

While the biblical text clearly portrays Jacob as fearful for his life at the hands of the aggressive Esau, the Rabbis reversed their roles. In their minds, Esau's life was threatened, not by Jacob but by angels.

And he said, "What do you mean by all of this camp I met" (33:8) - That whole night the ministering angels formed into bands and companies and kept confronting Esau's troops. When they asked them to whom they belonged and were told, 'To Esau,' they exclaimed, 'Give it to them!' 'We belong to Isaac's son!' They still exclaimed, 'Lay it on!' 'We belong to Abraham's grandson!' They still said, 'Lay it on!' But when they pleaded, 'We belong to Jacob's brother,' they said, 'Let them go, they are of ours.'<sup>30</sup>

In this instance, Esau's life was not at all threatened by Jacob. Rather, it was because of Esau's relationship with Jacob that the former's life was saved. In a surprising turn of events, Esau, whose heel was the defining nature of Jacob's name, was now dependent upon Jacob for the preservation of his life,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 78:9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 78:11.

While Jacob never made direct mention of the blessing scene of chapter 27 to Esau, his use of the word 'berachah' for gift is enough to tell us of his ultimate intent.

"Please take my blessing which was brought to you" (33:11), is an odd way to phrase the sentence. Its oddness is the source of another interpretation:

He said to him, "I worked hard for this to come to my hand; but you, from itself it comes to you" - 'that which I brought' is not written here, rather 'which was brought to you' - it comes to you in and of itself.<sup>31</sup>

Based on the passive nature of Jacob's words, the Rabbis interpreted the blessing as being naturally Esau's. Jacob had to work for the blessing, but it naturally belonged to Esau.

The encounter between Jacob and Esau was a one time event. The two hadn't seen each other in twenty years and were not to see each again until the death of Isaac. Despite this, the impact of the meeting did not end with the parting of ways. According to the Rabbis, Jacob was deeply moved by the encounter and continued to give of himself to Esau for many years to come. For example:

Rav Achin said in the name of Rav Abba, "He honored Esau with gifts for nine years"...<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 78:12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 78:16.

Finally, the trying episode ended and Jacob arrived whole in Shechem:

Whole in his body, as it is written "He was limping on his hip" (Genesis 32:32): it tells us here that he in truth was bodily whole. Whole in respect to his children as it is written, "He said, 'Should Esau come to the camp and smite it'" (32:9): it tells us here that he in truth was whole with regard to his children. Whole in respect to his money even though Rav Avin said in the name of Rav Acha, 'Nine years he honored Esau with a gift:' it comes to tell us in truth that he was whole with regard to his money. Rav Yochanan said whole in his studies...<sup>33</sup>

Somehow, despite the wrestling match, the division of camps, the gifts given to Esau... Jacob arrived whole, more whole than ever before. He was whole in his studies because he learned more in one day through wrestling and crying than he had in twenty years of fleeing.

### Another Interpretation

As Jacob continued his journey home, before the text makes any mention of the ensuing encounter with Esau, 'messengers of God' encountered Jacob (32:2f.). We are not informed if the messengers actually had a message or if they even said anything. Perhaps their silent encounter with Jacob was in fact the message they came to bring. Whatever did happen during that encounter, the messengers

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 79:5.

foreshadowed Jacob's two next actions. Just as Jacob encountered 'messengers,' so would he send out 'messengers' ahead of him towards Esau (32:4). The result of the encounter with God's messengers was for Jacob to name the place Mahanaim, meaning 'this is God's camp' (32:3). Therefore, when Jacob was to split his camp into two (32:8), it would be 'God's camp.' Jacob's encounter with the messengers of God placed him in a defensive mode. Defensive against whom?

If Jacob was in fact en route to 'come to his father Isaac, to the land of Canaan' (31:18) because he was 'yearning to return to his father's house' (31:30), for what reason would Jacob fear? Isaac was apparently still alive and Esau's pledge was to kill Jacob only after Isaac's death (27:41). Despite these facts, Jacob took a defensive mode.

Jacob naively instructed his messengers to inform Esau that he was returning from living with Laban, a direct outcome of the original strife of chapter 27, and that he had 'cattle, asses, sheep, male and female slaves' (32:6), the apparent fulfillment of the blessing of chapter 27. He informed Esau of all of this 'in the hope of gaining Esau's favor' (32:6). Jacob tried to buy his way out of the twenty year old conflict by placing the very core of the conflict in Esau's face. He did all of this when his father was

still alive, when there was no need for him to fear Esau.

Jacob did not fear for his own life, but rather for the lives of those who were dearest to him, "...for I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, mothers and children alike" (32:12). Should this have happened, the future of his seed would have been in question (32:13). While it appears to be a concern for the physical well-being of those with him, this fear was more than just fear of the physical danger. It was a fear of the superiority of the Esau qualities within Jacob. For twenty years he struggled to overcome the qualities of Esau within him. Yet, when he left Paddan-aram, 'the sword was in his hand,' as if his hand was 'the hand of Esau.' Jacob feared who he would be after the encounter with Esau.

The core of Jacob's prayer, "Save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau..." (32:12) must be understood in light of Isaac's observations twenty years prior, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22). When Jacob stood before Isaac to receive the blessing of the firstborn, he took on the identity of both Jacob, through voice, and Esau, through hands. These identities were to be confused and mixed throughout the next two decades of his life. Finally, as he prepared to stand before the full length mirror called Esau,

he prayed that he would be saved from the those qualities within him that were the qualities of Esau, more specifically, 'the hands of Esau.' For the past twenty years, he repeatedly came face to face with the Esau within, now he had to come face to face with the real Esau. The source of the conflict was not Esau's threat on Jacob's life. The true source of the conflict was Jacob's final encounter with the brother with whom he struggled in the womb of his mother and in his own soul for the past twenty years.

"Save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau..." (32:12). The duplication implies, 'Save me from the hands that I used when I took on the identity (chapter 27) and save me from the hands that I have used throughout the past two decades. Let the voice of Jacob ring out where the hands of Esau were dominant.'

Jacob's showering Esau with offerings was less an attempt to appease Esau than it was an attempt to be true to the vow he made to God to give God a tenth of all that was his (28:22).

The prayer was offered and the tithe given, and Jacob tried to rest before looking into the full length mirror. But he couldn't sleep. He awoke during the night, took his

most beloved and his possessions, both signs of the fulfillment of the blessing of chapter 27, with him to the other side of the river Jabbok (32:23f.).

Jacob remained alone in his last moments of his own identity struggle when a man struggled with him. Jacob hadn't fought like that since he struggled with Esau in the womb. In fact, wrestling in the dust was the purest form of expression that 'the hands of Esau' knows. They struggled until the birth of a new day when the man realized that he could not overcome Jacob, so he delivered an intentional wound to Jacob's thigh, a wound that Jacob would carry with him as he humbly approached Esau and every other later experience. Despite the wound, Jacob, like Rachel so many years earlier, prevailed. The man said, "Let me go because the sun has risen" (32:27). Jacob responded, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (32:27).

The two ends of the circle that have waited for twenty years to be drawn together were now about to meet. As he struggled with the man, Jacob demanded a blessing. But who was it that demanded a blessing over twenty years ago, saying, "Do you only have one blessing my father? Bless me too my father!" (27:38). Just as it was Esau then, so it was 'Esau' now, the 'Esau' within Jacob who demanded the blessing.

The blessing itself was reminiscent of chapter 27. Now the man asked, "What is your name?" (32:28). Then, Isaac asked, "Who are you my son?" (27:18). Then Jacob responded, "I am Esau, your firstborn" (27:19). Now, twenty years later, Jacob was able to respond with one simple heartfelt word, "Jacob" (32:28), as if to say, 'My name is Jacob, not Esau, and I can say it to anyone that asks!' What a glorious victory for a man who has been struggling since the womb with the name Esau.

And then the man continued,

Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel,  
for you have striven with beings divine and human,  
and have prevailed. (32:29)

Just when Jacob thought that he could finally speak his own name, he learned that he was about to enter into yet another identity crisis based on his name. The difference between 'Jacob' and 'Israel' is the difference between one who grasps for the heel of others and one who strives to prevail, who reaches for the Divine. The former is defined by others actions, while the latter makes a name for himself.

The struggle between these two names began immediately in the next verse: "And Jacob asked..." should have been written, 'And Israel asked...' The Hebrew is most deceptive in this matter, 'vayish'al ya'akov' is only missing the

letter *reish* to make it into 'vayisra'el ya'akov', 'Israel Jacob'.

The struggle that led to the name change was not the struggle of one night along the banks of the Jabbok. It was the struggle of more than two decades. Despite his original intentions to live life as the firstborn, receiving his blessing, acting as a light to those around him, and attempting to marry the younger sister before the older, Jacob prevailed and was able to exclaim, 'My name is Jacob.' Girded with this new self awareness, Jacob was now ready to meet his brother Esau.

Jacob named the place of the struggle Peniel, explaining, 'I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved' (32:31). Who exactly did Jacob see face to face? We know whom he anticipated seeing face to face, "...I will see his [Esau's] face and perhaps he will be gracious to me [lit. lift up his face]" (32:21). Jacob saw God, Esau, and himself at Peniel, and his life was preserved.

Jacob knew two things about his brother Esau: he lived in 'the land of Se'ir, the fields of Edom' (32:4) and "he too is coming to meet you [Jacob] and he has 400 men with him" (32:7). We know nothing of Esau's knowledge of Jacob.

The scene is painted in such a way as to place us as onlookers as the two brothers look into opposite sides of a two way mirror. It is yet unclear who is being observed and who is observing.

The four hundred men, apparently a sign of war, had no effect on Esau. If his intention was to go to war, he did not let it control his actions. As Jacob bowed seven times on his approach to Esau, Esau had ample opportunity to strike the fatal blow, but didn't (33:4). That bowing was the exact fulfillment of the blessing of the firstborn son (27:29), but now the younger was bowing to the older. It was the blessing that Jacob received which he gave back to Esau through his bowing. If the bowing was not a clear enough message, then Jacob's words serve as an indisputable proof of his intentions. Previously, Jacob referred to the gift he was giving to Esau as '*minchah*' (32:21f.) but here, Jacob referred to the gift as a '*berachah*' (33:11). Jacob's intention was not just to give Esau some gifts as the fulfillment of his vow of a tenth to God. Jacob's intention was to give Esau the blessing that was his. 'Take my blessing' are words that Jacob could not have uttered twenty years ago, ten years ago, or the day before last night. 'Take my blessing' are the words that Jacob spoke to the one that pleaded with their father, "Do you only have one blessing my father? Bless me too my father!" (27:38).

'Take my blessing' are words spoken by an empathetic Jacob who asked for a blessing just last night. 'Take my blessing' serve as words of closure for the twenty year struggle through which Jacob prevailed.

Touched by the non-material gift, Esau offered to join with Jacob on his journey (33:12). His intentions were well meaning but naive. Jacob could never have lived with Esau after having Esau living within him for the past two decades. The two went their own ways, Esau with Jacob's blessing which was his to begin with, and Jacob with a new name and a new struggle.

Yet, throughout it all, Jacob arrived whole in Shechem. He might not have had the blessing given two decades ago, but he certainly had so much more as a result of the struggle in the womb, in the dust, and in himself. Ultimately, he learned that to be a blessing one must 'serve' as if the blessing was never given. He learned this through twenty years of service to Laban and through his self-subjugation before Esau. No matter what was to happen to him, he was *shalem*.

## Conclusion

The preceding chapters are filled with biblical and rabbinic material that serves as a foundation for the interpretation offered in the sections 'Another Interpretation.' That interpretation suggests that the sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob occurred in two venues. The first, and most obvious, was the external world concerned with birth order, parental preference, birth rights, blessings, and material wealth. The second, and more subtle, was the venue found within Jacob's own psyche as he lived the life of the younger son confronted with the challenges of the blessing of the firstborn son.

Of all of the material presented to this end, some pieces stand out from the others as 'defining factors.' Without these pieces, the interpretation would not have firm footing upon which to rest. With them securely in place, the interpretation is feasible, and even an accurate portrayal of the events recorded in the book of Genesis.

From the biblical material itself, the following serve as 'defining factors:'

The struggle between the twins in the womb and God's instruction that the older shall serve the younger as a foreshadowing of events yet to come.  
(25:19-26)

The early growth of the two brothers in apparently divergent paths, despite their dependance upon one another for a sense of self-identity: Jacob defined by Esau's heel and Esau defined by Jacob's

red stew. (25:27-34)

The acquisition of the blessing of the firstborn by Jacob, disguised as Esau through clothing, physical characteristics ('the hands are the hands of Esau'), and self proclamation ('I am Esau, your firstborn'). Throughout the entire episode, Jacob bore the identity of both Esau and Jacob as expressed through Isaac's observation, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau." (Genesis 27)

The irony of Jacob's 'service' to Laban in light of his own blessing to be served and the constant repetition of the root 'avad, to serve. (Genesis 29-31)

The parallel sibling rivalry between Leah and Rachel as a vicarious expression of Jacob's rivalry with the distant Esau. (Genesis 30)

The birth of Joseph as the catalyst of Jacob's return to Canaan. (Genesis 30)

The parenthetical encounters with God as Jacob both left the land of Canaan and later returned to it. (Genesis 28,32)

Jacob's retrospective awareness of God's role in his life during the twenty years of service to Laban. (Genesis 31)

Jacob's return of the *berachah*, the blessing, to Esau after twenty years of separation through physical gifts, his own bowing to Esau and self description as Esau's servant. (Genesis 33)

The often redundant repetitions of the words of family relations throughout the entire eight biblical chapters.

These ten 'defining factors,' along with all of the other biblical material cited throughout this work, serve as a firm foundation on which the interpretation rests.

The foundation is even strengthened when one considers

the many midrashic interpretations associated with Jacob and Esau. From among all of those interpretations previously cited, the following serve as additional 'defining factors:'

The divergent personalities of the brothers both within the womb and outside of the womb. Their portrayal as thorn and myrtle, intertwined at first, ultimately to grow in their own natural ways. (Bereshit Rabbah 63:6,10)

The six interpretations of the dichotomy of Isaac's statement, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, while the hands are the hands of Esau." (Bereshit Rabbah 65:20f.)

The stones that Jacob dedicated to Esau at Bethel. (Bereshit Rabbah 68:11)

The interpretation of the dream at Bethel as the apparently endless rise of the Roman Empire. (Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Vayetze 2)

The birth of Joseph as the time of the birth of the adversary of Esau; Joseph's physical resemblance to Jacob; and, Jacob's return to the land of Canaan. (Bereshit Rabbah 84:8; 73:7)

Laban's contacting Esau after Jacob's flight. (Sefer Hayashar, Vayetze 59a-b)

Jacob's wrestling with a man that was either a shepherd like Jacob, Esau, or Esau's guardian angel. Jacob's request for a blessing from that man that was related to Isaac's blessing. (Bereshit Rabbah 77:2; 77:3; 78:3; and, Zohar III:45a)

Jacob's gift to Esau of the blessing that was naturally his. (Bereshit Rabbah 78:12)

These eight midrashic 'defining factors' also serve as foundation stones upon which the interpretation rests. If they were not present, the interpretation could not exist.

The Rabbis who lived during the height of the Roman Empire, as seen as the success of the descendants of Esau, viewed the struggle between Jacob and Esau as a national struggle between Rome and themselves. Their interpretations of the biblical text defined their relationship with Rome as a nation. Their interaction with the text and the Romans around them ultimately defined their relationship with one another as descendants of Jacob. Each individual, then, was able to define his own self worth as he related to the God of Jacob.

The process of studying Torah is the process of defining one's own identity as it relates to the text and to those seated at the study table:

Rav Chama, the son of Chaninah, began his dissertation in the following way: "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the wit [lit. face] of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17). Rav Chama, the son of Chaninah, said, "A knife can be sharpened only on the side [lit. thigh] of another knife, so can a scholar sharpen himself only through contact with his colleague, as it is written, 'As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the wit [lit. face] of his friend' (Proverbs 27:17). 'A man sharpens the wit [lit. face] of his friend' - the 'man' is Jacob - as soon as our father Jacob arose 'a man sharpens the wit of his friend,' for the Shekhinah attached itself to him, as it is written, 'And God was standing next to him' (Genesis 28:13).<sup>1</sup>

Jacob's struggle to define his own identity serves as a

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<sup>1</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 69:2.

paradigm for each of us to do the same. The process is easiest to accomplish while sitting with a colleague as you share bits of wisdom. The sharing is synonymous with the sharpening of a knife. A knife is sharpened only on one of similar or greater quality. So is a person sharpened on another of similar or greater quality.

When Jacob lay down to sleep at Bethel, he engaged in the process of sharpening his own wit, identifying his own personality. But, unlike the colleagues sitting at a table, Jacob was all alone. He was blessed with the potential to serve as a vessel of blessing for other people, yet lay in an open field with no company. On what 'knife' was he to sharpen his own? Was there even the potential for him to do so in isolation?

Yes, even in isolation, Jacob was able to further identify his own person. His 'knife' was none other than the Shekhinah, 'for God was standing next to him.' When confronted with no one to scrape against, Jacob scraped against God, and thus learned something about himself.

Solitude was not to be Jacob's lot in life. He entered Laban's family, married his two daughters and fathered twelve children by the time Joseph was born. Jacob basked in the beauty of his family as represented in the tender

face of the infant Joseph. That face was the face of 'the friend' who would ultimately 'sharpen' his personality. Jacob saw his own face reflected in Joseph's face. The son looked like the father and the father like the son. Joseph's face was like a mirror placed before Jacob's life; and Jacob saw more than his physical qualities. He looked into his own face and saw Esau's face. Yes, it was redder and hairier than his, but it was unmistakably Jacob's face. The reflection gave Jacob the opportunity to pause and reflect on the events of his life. He interacted with his brother and ultimately fled, never to truly flee. Jacob looked into Joseph's face and saw the same thing he saw at Bethel: God.

Explaining the events at Mount Sinai, Rabbi Levi discusses the unique quality of the relationship between God and each individual. "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2), is written in the second person singular, as if God spoke individually with every person standing at Sinai. How is this possible?

God appeared to them like a mirror in which many faces can be reflected. A thousand may look at it and it reflects each of them. Thus... the text is addressed to the individual.<sup>2</sup>

God appears to people as a mirror. The person who looks at

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<sup>2</sup> Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 12:185.

God, sees him/herself.

Jacob sought God by looking into a mirror only to see himself: when he looked into the face of Joseph, he saw himself; when he looked into that face, he saw Esau; when he wrestled with a shepherd identical to him and named the place Peniel, he saw God's Face; when he wrestled with Esau and Esau's guardian angel and named the place Peniel, he saw God's Face; when the assailant wrenched his 'thigh' he wrenched the 'side' of Jacob's knife that was most vulnerable; when he stood before Esau and said, 'Take my blessing for seeing your face is like seeing God's Face' - in each case, Jacob saw God's face reflected in his own and those who shaped his personality.

The reflection was a conglomeration of so many of the 'knives' upon which Jacob sharpened himself and the 'faces' in which he saw his own reflection. When he saw Esau he saw the entire history of his family beginning with Abraham and Sarah and the rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael. It continued with his early developed rivalry with Esau and their exchange of promises over a bowl of lentils. He saw Isaac and Rebekah playing favorites with their children. He saw himself dressed in Esau's clothing, saying, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

When he saw Joseph reflected in God's mirror, he saw his past and his future. He came to Paddan-aram with nothing and was ultimately taken into a family as he created his own. He saw in Joseph's reflection the rivalry of Leah and Rachel, who both knew the pain of being unloved. In Joseph's face he saw the repetition of everything that happened to him: parental preference leading to sibling rivalry and finding God in distant lands.

When Jacob first arrived at Paddan-aram, he only saw sheep. When Jacob arrived at Peniel and looked into God's Face, he only saw people. It took Jacob twenty years of 'service' to others in order to discover the meaning of the blessing, "Blessed they who bless you." Jacob would only understand the potential of being a blessing when he sought God and found people.

Jacob's experiences teach us that we, too, must find God reflected in the people around us. Whether our internal struggles are intended to clarify our personal or communal identity, we, like Jacob 'who sat in tents,' are social beings whose God is found in interactions with others. Jacob found himself while masquerading as Esau. Jacob found himself through the reality of Esau. God is found in the struggle, in the wrestling, and in the empathy. The search is climaxed when we, like Jacob, stand in a full length

mirror and say,

If I have found grace in your eyes, then please  
take my offering from my hand, for my seeing your  
face is like seeing God's face and you have  
received me favorably. Please take my blessing  
which has been brought to you because God has been  
gracious to me and I have everything. (33:20f.)

Only after such a humbling encounter, will we discover who  
we really are and realize the potential of our own blessing.

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