

The Irrevokability of a Blessing

A D'var Torah on Parashat Toldot (Gen. 25:19 – 28:9)

By Alan I. Friedman

*“V'eileh tol'dot Yitzhak ben-Avraham.”
“These are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham.”*

As Parashat Toldot opens, Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, conceives, and two children struggle in her womb. In great distress, Rebekah calls upon God to explain her frightening symptoms and is told, “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.”¹

When Rebekah gives birth, the first twin to emerge is red and hairy; his parents name him Esau. When Esau's brother emerges, he is holding on to Esau's heel, so Isaac and Rebekah name him Jacob.²

As the boys grow up, their differing personalities and interests emerge. Esau becomes a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors, with few spiritual interests. Jacob, on the other hand, ventures out very little, preferring to stay in the tents, close to his mother, and study. Because Isaac has a taste for game (and perhaps because Esau is the firstborn), Isaac favors Esau over Jacob. Rebekah, continually aware of God's pronouncement that the younger twin will have dominion over the older, favors Jacob.

One day, Esau returns tired and famished from a day of hunting in the field and, in an amazing disregard for his rights of inheritance and privilege, trades his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew.

Years later, Isaac — weak of eye and fearing he does not have long to live — summons Esau and says, “Go out into the field and hunt game for me. Then prepare delicacies for me such as I love and bring them to me and I will eat, so that³ I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.”⁴

When Rebekah overhears Isaac's conversation with Esau, she schemes with Jacob to deceive Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob. While Esau is out hunting, Rebekah prepares one of Isaac's favorite meals and disguises Jacob as Esau. Jacob brings the meal to his father and receives the blessing that was intended for Esau.

¹ Genesis 25:23.

² A play on words: יַעֲקֹב (Yaakov) = Jacob; אַכְיִיב (akeiv) = heel.

³ “...so that I may be strong enough to bless you.” With his hunger satisfied, Isaac would not be distracted from conveying a spiritual blessing.

⁴ Tradition says that a blessing is more efficacious when the bestower is near death.

Scarcely has Jacob left his father's presence when Esau returns from the hunt, prepares the game, and takes it to his father. When Isaac realizes what has happened, he trembles and tells Esau that Jacob, now blessed, must remain blessed.

Esau is enraged, sobs bitterly, and exclaims, "First he took away my birthright,⁵ and now he has taken away my blessing. Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!"⁶ And Isaac does cobble together a blessing for Esau.

Having now been tricked out of his birthright and his blessing, Esau vows to kill Jacob. Rebekah hears of the plot and arranges for Jacob to flee to Haran, to the home of her brother Laban. Before Jacob leaves, however, Isaac gives him one more blessing.

Let's now take a look at the dynamics of blessings and explore the views of some noted Torah commentators.

- One midrash asserts that Jacob was actually conceived first and, therefore, as the spiritual firstborn, entitled to his father's blessing. In the strictly legal sense, however, the privileges of the firstborn are determined by birth, not conception.⁷
- On hearing of Jacob's perfidy, Esau does what we all would do: he breaks into tears. "Bless me too, Father," he pleads; and then again, "Do you have no blessing left for me?" And one more time, "Do you have but one blessing? Bless me too, Father."

Reaching deep inside himself, Isaac finds a second blessing he did not know was there. He blesses Esau, at which point we wonder what plea of Esau's prompted the surprising discovery of the second blessing. The rabbis imagine Esau arguing, "Surely an important man like you must have more than one blessing." But arguments fail because, the truth is, Isaac believes sincerely that he has no blessing left. He discovers otherwise, not because Esau argues, cajoles or threatens, but because Esau cries.⁸

⁵ Esau had the audacity to tell his father that Jacob had stolen his birthright when, in reality, Esau had so little regard for his birthright that he traded (or sold) it for a pittance.

⁶ In other words, "Give me the blessing you had intended to give to Jacob."

⁷ *Pachad Yitzchak* (= *The Terror of Isaac*) by Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner

⁸ Commentary by Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, NY

- What force did Isaac's blessing have for Jacob, if he was thinking of Esau? It seems on the face of it that Rebekah and her sons indeed thought that the power to convey blessing lay with Isaac, according to the rabbinic maxim, “the righteous decree and the Holy One, blessed be God, brings it to pass.” All he had to do was to lay his hands upon the recipient of the blessing, and that son would become blessed almost automatically, even if Isaac had meant to bless the other, and even if he had not intended the actual outcome. This explains Isaac's fearful trembling after discovering that he had been deceived: “Now he must remain blessed” – for I cannot take back the blessing.⁹
- One of the questions often asked about the story of Jacob and Esau is why, once Isaac has given Jacob a blessing, he cannot give the same blessing to Esau. Esau asks, “Do you have but one blessing?” Isaac's first blessing, to Jacob, is that he will gain material wealth and rule over his brethren. The second blessing, to Esau, is a much weaker one: That even though he will be oppressed, at some point he will throw off that yoke. The rules of blessing, though, are clear. A blessing, whether given properly or improperly, cannot be undone, only mitigated.

In the book of Esther, the same theme of irrevokability is presented as the simple law of the land: “what is signed with the seal of the King cannot be overturned.”¹⁰ However, the situation has flip-flopped. It is Esau's descendant who holds the primary “blessing,” and Jacob's descendants who get second best. The King's first boon goes to Haman, in that he will have total control over the Jews and their wealth. The Jews, just like Esau, can only hope for the secondary blessing, that they will be able to fight back and overthrow that control.¹¹

- Choosing the correct blessing is quite an art. We may not have an Esau and a Jacob but we do have it in our power to confer twin blessings, one material and the other spiritual. Both blessings are perfectly in order but we bestow too readily the material blessings of life. In the main, spiritual blessings are neglected.¹²
- Isaac's first blessing to Jacob is certainly a beautiful one. It speaks of wealth and power. What it neglects to mention is a spiritual mission or message. When Esau stands before his father and understands that his brother Jacob has taken the blessing intended for him, it would seem that Isaac has “run out” of blessings.

⁹ Commentary by Dr. David Henshke, Dept. of Talmud, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

¹⁰ Esther 8:8

¹¹ Commentary by Rabbi Joshua Heller, Director of Distance Learning, Jewish Theological Seminary

¹² Commentary by Cantor Michael Plaskow, Woodside Park Synagogue, London, UK

However, when Jacob is about to leave for Haran, Isaac summons Jacob and blesses him: “May God bless you, may you multiply and become a great nation. May God grant you the blessing of Abraham for you and your descendants to inherit the land which God had given to Abraham.”

Evidently, Isaac did have another blessing to give. This “blessing of Abraham” and the Land of Israel was always intended for Jacob. Isaac had always intended to give the blessing of power to Esau and the blessing of spirit to Jacob. However, because of Rebekah's intervention, Jacob received both blessings. Isaac apparently felt that his spiritual son needed only spiritual blessings, while his physical son needed the physical blessing. Rebekah's understanding was quite different; she felt that the spiritual could not subsist without the physical. Divine providence sided with Rebekah.¹³

- Now the questions any detective would ask are: “Why are there *three* blessings in the story?” “How do they differ?” “Which one of the three blessings is the real blessing?”

To determine which blessing is the real one, stop and compare these other blessings now: God's blessing to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and God's blessing to Isaac (Gen. 26:1-5).

Note that central to both of these blessings is the promise of the Land of Israel and many offspring. So which one of the blessings given to Jacob and Esau is the real one? Which one promises land and seed? Only the third blessing is real!

The answer to the mystery is that Isaac always intended to give Jacob the real blessing. He did not know which son stood before him when Jacob dressed up like Esau; Isaac was confused. Afterward, when Isaac called Jacob to him — when he was sure it was Jacob to whom he was speaking — he gave Jacob the real blessing.¹⁴

¹³ Commentary by Rabbi Ari Kahn, Director of Foreign Student Programs, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

¹⁴ Commentary by Rabbi David Katz, Temple Israel, Staten Island, New York