

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Toldot
November 6, 2021 *** 2 Kislev, 5782

[Toldot in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3178/jewish/Toldot-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years, until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives. She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the “children struggle inside her”; G-d tells her that “there are two nations in your womb,” and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau’s heel. Esau grows up to be “a cunning hunter, a man of the field”; Jacob is “a wholesome man,” a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister, out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells: over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the third well are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind, and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father’s favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father. Jacob receives his father’s blessings for “the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land” and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is to predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Charan to flee Esau’s wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother’s brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Malachi 1:1-2:7](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/587261/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell-Malachi-1:1-2:7)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/587261/jewish/Haftor

ah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah opens with a mention of the tremendous love G-d harbors for the children of Jacob, and the retribution He will visit upon the children of Esau who persecuted their cousins. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading, whose two protagonists are Jacob and Esau.

The prophet Malachi then rebukes the kohanim (priests) who offer blemished and emaciated animals on G-d's altar: "Were you to offer it to your governor, would he be pleased or would he favor you? . . . O that there were even one among you that would close the doors [of the Temple] and that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain!" The haftorah ends with a strong enjoinder to the kohanim to return to the original covenant that G-d had made with their ancestor, Aaron the High Priest. "True teaching was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. In peace and equity he went with Me, and he brought back many from iniquity."

Food For Thought

Was Jacob Right to Take the Blessings? (Toldot) by the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

<https://rabbisacks.org/toldot5782/>

Was Jacob right to take Esau's blessing in disguise? Was he right to deceive his father and to take from his brother the blessing Isaac sought to give him? Was Rebecca right in conceiving the plan in the first place and encouraging Jacob to carry it out? These are fundamental questions. What is at stake is not just biblical interpretation but the moral life itself. How we read a text shapes the kind of person we become.

Here is one way of interpreting the narrative. Rebecca was right to propose what she did and Jacob was right to do it. Rebecca knew that it would be Jacob, not Esau, who would continue the covenant and carry the mission of Abraham into the future. She knew this on two separate grounds. First, she had heard it from God Himself, in the oracle she received before the twins were born:

'Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the elder will serve the younger.' (Gen. 25:23)

Esau was the elder, Jacob the younger. Therefore it was Jacob who would emerge with greater strength, Jacob who was chosen by God. Second, she had watched the twins grow up. She knew that Esau was a hunter, a man of violence. She had seen that he was impetuous, mercurial, a man of impulse, not calm reflection. She had seen him sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. She had watched while he "ate, drank, rose and left. So Esau despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34). No one who despises his birthright can be the trusted guardian of a covenant intended for eternity.

Third, just before the episode of the blessing we read: "When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca." (Gen. 26:34) This, too, was evidence of Esau's failure to understand what the covenant requires. By marrying Hittite women he proved himself indifferent both to the feelings of his parents and to the self-restraint in the choice of marriage partner that was essential to being Abraham's heir.

The blessing had to go to Jacob. If you had two sons, one indifferent to art, the other an art-lover and aesthete, to whom would you leave the Rembrandt that has been part of the family heritage for generations? And if Isaac did not understand the true nature of his sons, if he was "blind" not only physically but also psychologically, might it not be necessary to deceive him? He was by now old, and if Rebecca had failed in the early years to get him to see the true nature of their children, was it likely that she could do so now?

This was, after all, not just a matter of relationships within the family. It was about God and destiny and spiritual vocation. It was about the future of an entire people since God had repeatedly told Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a great nation who would be a blessing to humanity as a whole. And if Rebecca was right, then Jacob was right to follow her instructions.

This was the woman whom Abraham's servant had chosen to be the wife of his master's son, because she was kind, because at the well she had given water to a stranger and to his camels also. Rebecca was not Lady Macbeth, acting out of favouritism or ambition. She was the embodiment of loving-kindness. And if she had no other way of ensuring that the blessing went to one who would cherish it and live it, then in this case the end justified the means. This is one way of reading the story and it is taken by many of the commentators.

However it is not the only way.[1] Consider, for example, the scene that transpired immediately after Jacob left his father. Esau returned from

hunting and brought Isaac the food he had requested. We then read this:

Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!' When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, 'Bless me – me too, my father!'

But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully [be-mirma] and took your blessing.'

Esau said, 'Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!' Then he asked, 'Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?' (Gen. 27:33-36)

It is impossible to read Genesis 27 – the text as it stands without commentary – and not to feel sympathy for Isaac and Esau rather than Rebecca and Jacob. The Torah is sparing in its use of emotion. It is completely silent, for example, on the feelings of Abraham and Isaac as they journeyed together toward the trial of the Binding. Phrases like "trembled violently" and "burst out with a loud and bitter cry" cannot but affect us deeply. Here is an old man who has been deceived by his younger son, and a young man, Esau, who feels cheated out of what was rightfully his. The emotions triggered by this scene will long stay with us.

Then consider the consequences. Jacob had to stay away from home for more than twenty years, fearing of his life. He then suffered an almost identical deceit practised against him by Laban when he substituted Leah for Rachel. When Jacob cried out "Why did you deceive me [rimitani]" Laban replied: "It is not done in our place to place the younger before the elder" (Gen. 29:25-26). Not only the act but even the words imply a punishment, measure for measure. "Deceit," of which Jacob accuses Laban, is the very word Isaac used about Jacob. Laban's reply sounds like a virtually explicit reference to what Jacob had done, as if to say, "We do not do in our place what you have just done in yours."

The result of Laban's deception brought grief to the rest of Jacob's life. There was tension between Leah and Rachel. There was hatred between their children. Jacob was deceived yet again, this time by his sons, when they brought him Joseph's bloodstained robe: another deception of a father by his children involving the use of clothes. The result was that

Jacob was deprived of the company of his most beloved son for twenty-two years just as Isaac was of Jacob.

Asked by Pharaoh how old he was, Jacob replied, "Few and evil have been the years of my life" (Gen. 47:9). He is the only figure in the Torah to make a remark like this. It is hard not to read the text as a precise statement of the principle of measure for measure: as you have done to others, so will others do to you. The deception brought all concerned great grief, and this persisted into the next generation.

My reading of the text is therefore this.[2] The phrase in Rebecca's oracle, *Ve-rav ya'avod tsair* (Gen. 25:23), is in fact ambiguous. It may mean, "The elder will serve the younger," but it may also mean, "The younger will serve the elder." It was what the Torah calls a *chiddah* (Numbers 12:8), that is, an opaque, deliberately ambiguous communication. It suggested an ongoing conflict between the two sons and their descendants, but not who would win.

Isaac fully understood the nature of his two sons. He loved Esau but this did not blind him to the fact that Jacob would be the heir of the covenant. Therefore Isaac prepared two sets of blessings, one for Esau, the other for Jacob. He blessed Esau (Gen. 27:28-29) with the gifts he felt he would appreciate: "May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness – an abundance of grain and new wine" – that is, wealth. "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you" – that is, power. These are not the covenantal blessings.

The covenantal blessings that God had given Abraham and Isaac were completely different. They were about children and a land. It is this blessing that Isaac later gave Jacob before he left home (Gen. 28:3-4): "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – that is, children. "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham" – that is, land. This was the blessing Isaac had intended for Jacob all along. There was no need for deceit and disguise.

Jacob eventually came to understand all this, perhaps during his wrestling match with the angel during the night before his meeting with Esau after their long estrangement. What happened at that meeting is incomprehensible unless we understand that Jacob was giving back to Esau the blessings he had wrongly taken from him. The massive gift of sheep, cattle and other livestock represented "heaven's dew and earth's richness," that is, wealth. The fact that Jacob bowed

down seven times to Esau was his way of fulfilling the words, "May the sons of your mother bow down to you," that is, power.

Jacob gave the blessing back. Indeed he said so explicitly. He said to Esau: "Please accept the blessing [birkati] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." (Gen. 33:11) On this reading of the story, Rebecca and Jacob made a mistake, a forgivable one, an understandable one, but a mistake nonetheless. The blessing Isaac was about to give Esau was not the blessing of Abraham. He intended to give Esau a blessing appropriate to him. In so doing, he was acting on the basis of precedent. God had blessed Ishmael, with the words "I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 21:18) This was the fulfilment of a promise God had given Abraham many years before when He told him that it would be Isaac, not Ishmael, who would continue the covenant:

Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 17:18-21)

Isaac surely knew this because, according to midrashic tradition, he and Ishmael were reconciled later in life. We see them standing together at Abraham's grave (Gen. 25:9). It may be that this was a fact that Rebecca did not know. She associated blessing with covenant. She may have been unaware that Abraham wanted Ishmael blessed even though he would not inherit the covenant, and that God had acceded to the request.

If so, then it is possible all four people acted rightly as they understood the situation, yet still tragedy occurred. Isaac was right to wish Esau blessed as Abraham sought for Ishmael. Esau acted honourably toward his father. Rebecca sought to safeguard the future of the covenant. Jacob felt qualms but did what his mother said, knowing she would not have proposed deceit without a strong moral reason for doing so. Do we have here one story with two possible interpretations? Perhaps, but that is not the best way of describing it. What we have here, and there are other examples in Genesis, is a story we understand one way the first time we hear it, and a different way once we have discovered and reflected on all that happened later. It is only after we have read about the fate of Jacob in Laban's house, the tension between Leah and

Rachel, and the animosity between Joseph and his brothers that we can go back and read Genesis 27, the chapter of the blessing, in a new light and with greater depth.

There is such a thing as an honest mistake, and it is a mark of Jacob's greatness that he recognised it and made amends to Esau. In the great encounter twenty-two years later the estranged brothers meet, embrace, part as friends and go their separate ways. But first, Jacob had to wrestle with an angel.

That is how the moral life is. We learn by making mistakes. We live life forward, but we understand it only looking back. Only then do we see the wrong turns we inadvertently made. This discovery is sometimes our greatest moment of moral truth.

For each of us there is a blessing that is ours. That was true not just of Isaac but also Ishmael, not just Jacob but also Esau. The moral could not be more powerful. Never seek your brother's blessing. Be content with your own.[3] [1] Critical readings of Rebecca's or Jacob's conduct appear in several midrashic works: Bereishit Rabbah, Tanhuma (Buber), Yalkut Reuveni, Midrash ha-Neelam and Midrash Socher Tov (to Psalm 80:6). Among critical commentators are R. Eliezer Ashkenzi, Tzeda le-Derech, and R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg, Ha-Ktav vеха-Kabbalah. All these interpretations are based on the textual clues cited in what follows. [2] For a more detailed explanation, see Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation Genesis: The Book of Beginnings, Maggid Books, 2009, 153-158, 219-228. [3] This later became the tenth of the Ten Commandments.

[May We Be Known by the Work of Our Hands by Ariella Rosen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/may-we-be-known-by-the-work-of-our-hands/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/may-we-be-known-by-the-work-of-our-hands/>

How does deception begin? In the telling of Jacob's acquisition of nearly all of the first-born advantages granted his brother Esau, the moment is perhaps not what it seems. After hearing Isaac instruct Esau to hunt fresh game to prepare for a meal during which Isaac would offer him a cherished blessing, Rebekah speaks to Jacob:

"I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord's approval, before I die.' Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies." (Gen. 27:6-10)

Scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg notes that when reading the text closely, it seems that "nowhere, at first formulation of the plan, does

she refer to impersonation or deception” (The Beginning of Desire, 147). She simply suggests that Jacob pre-empt his older twin with a meal of his own. In other words, Rebekah is asking her favored son to simply get there first, which is unfair, but perhaps not as completely immoral as deceit. It is Jacob who assumes from her suggestion that impersonation is the only way to receive his father’s blessing, as he responds, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing” (27:11–12). Afraid to be seen as a deceiver, yet assuming that is the only way, he then somewhat reluctantly goes along with the plan. Rebekah takes charge and responds to his concerns by draping his arms with goatskin, to better impersonate Esau’s hairy arms.

Jacob’s turn to deception is puzzling for another subtle reason: we already know that Jacob himself is a very skilled cook! In this very same parashah, Jacob serves his famished twin a dish of “red stuff” so enticing, that Esau is willing to give up his birthright to eat it (25: 29–34).

Jacob assumes that impersonation is the only way to fulfill his destiny. Perhaps he forgets that he possesses the prowess to prepare a feast of his own, that his hands are certainly capable of the task. Jacob is not alone in this conclusion. How many throughout history and in our own time have turned to deception (from embezzlement to performance enhancing drugs) to advance in ways that their own abilities could have achieved if they had only trusted them?

For whatever reason, Jacob, with trepidation, resorts to impersonation, and in his encounter with his father, another truth emerges regarding his skilled but now concealed hands.

As Isaac lies in bed, weak, but perhaps underestimated in his cognitive awareness, he calls his son to approach, and feels his arms. Thinking out loud as he tries to determine who is before him, he muses: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau” (27:22). He seems to know that an attempted deception is taking place: either Esau is pretending to be Jacob, or Jacob is pretending to be Esau. Of course, given that he asked for Esau to come to him, he surely knows it is the latter. Yet, incredibly, he still allows the ruse to play out, eating the meal his wife prepared, and conferring his first-born blessing upon Jacob. The Keli Yakar (Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz 1550–1619), as part of a longer comment on this verse, suggests a reason for Isaac to reject any other option: “In the end, Isaac used common sense and judged that hands determine more than the voice.”

The hands determine more than the voice. While Isaac seemingly chose incorrectly (though some commentators believe he knew exactly what he was doing), the statement reveals a deeper truth: one's character is shaped far more by one's actions than one's speech. Jacob's hands do tell us so much about who he is, not just in this moment, but throughout his life.

Unlike other patriarchs and matriarchs, who regularly conversed, argued, and negotiated with God, Jacob occasionally received divine messages, but was truly a patriarch who used his hands. And despite being the "simple tent dweller" in contrast to his active hunter brother, Jacob too has a physicality to his character. He was born grasping the heel of Esau. He traded a stew that he cooked for a birthright. He deceived his father by concealing his hands. He toiled for 14 years to marry Leah and his beloved Rachel. He wrestled with an angel. He embraced his brother, Esau, and son Joseph in two very emotional reunions. And finally, in one of the final acts of his life, he crossed his arms to bless his grandsons, so that the hand meant to bless the older child blessed the younger. Jacob's hands held blessing, manipulation, and aspiration throughout his life, and the work of those hands helps us to deeply understand the complexity of his character.

The deeds of our hands can determine our identity. Far more than what we say, we become known by what we do. Midrash Tanhuma Vayak-hel states, each person is known by three names: one that was given by their parents, one that others call them, and one that they acquire for themselves. Perhaps we can learn from Isaac that we become known far better by what comes from our deeds than from our mouths. And perhaps we can learn from Jacob's quick assumption that he needed to deceive to achieve that our own hands are not inadequate, but rather capable of earning and conferring countless blessings. *(Ariella Rosen is the Former Director of Admissions, JTS Rabbinical School and H.L. Miller Cantorial School)*

The Greatest Threat to Civilization, as Taught by Torah by Rabbi Michael Dolgin

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/greatest-threat-civilization-taught-torah>

When reading Parashat Tol'dot each year, I am amazed how relevant these ancient stories remain today, including the last significant moment in Isaac's life.

There are not many stories that feature Isaac, and yet many of us know of the traumatic moment when he gives his blessing. Visually impaired and laying on his deathbed, he offers to bless his son Esau once he

brings him game to eat, but with cueing from his mother Rebecca, Jacob stands before his father wearing his brother's clothes and animal skins on his arms, imitating his hairier sibling. While Jacob is aware that he is assuming a dishonest role, he participates as if he can pass the guilt of his own morally corrupt actions on to his mother.

As Jacob approaches, Isaac asks him who he is. When Jacob claims to be Esau, Isaac comments, "The hands belong Esau but the voice belongs to Jacob." It is abundantly clear that Isaac knows this cannot be Esau. He even asks Jacob to reconfirm his false identity in Genesis 27:18, 20, 21, 22, and 24. His physical inability to see becomes a willful blindness to the dishonesty that surrounds him. Isaac can no longer look away when, having given Esau's blessing to Jacob, Esau comes in with game hoping to receive that blessing as well. Isaac is unable to cope with the truth that is revealed before him.

Esau asserts his place as the firstborn and his right to the blessing, unaware of the trickery of his mother and brother and complicity of his father. In verse 33, we read that Isaac "was seized with very violent trembling." This is far from surprising; his family's dysfunction and animosity would be enough to make anyone tremble. However, the commentators clarify that there is a deeper dis-ease being expressed in this scene.

The midrash asserts that Isaac trembled twice in his life: when his father Abraham tied him to the altar and prepared to sacrifice him, and at the moment we discuss here. Which trembling is more profound?

Unanimously and surprisingly, the answer is that the story of the blessings is more traumatic. This emotional wave of fear causes him to tremble "ad m'od." These Hebrew words are translated as "exceedingly," but "m'od," the Hebrew word for "very," refers specifically to our core humanity.

Humans can be "tov m'od," "very good," and we are called to love God "b'chol m'odecha," "with all of our being." Our most famous commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki of Worms, or Rashi, evokes an even more powerful image. Rashi quotes (without citing) the midrash Tanchuma, saying that Isaac saw hell (Geihinom) opening beneath him. Both of these descriptions are shocking: How could Isaac find this moment even more painful than being bound on the altar by his own father? Judaism rarely invokes the image of hell, so why here? Perhaps the answers are found in the symbolism of Esau. In rabbinic literature, Esau represents Rome: the empire that conquered the Jewish people, desecrated our holy places, and destroyed the Temple. In this passage,

we can discern the roots of our conflict with the civilization that surrounded and dominated us.

The issue is fundamentally the lack of honesty in this biblical family. Esau and Jacob (who represents Israel) maneuver and deceive rather than interact truthfully. Their game offers a lesson for today: The greatest threat to our civilization is a failure to communicate in an open way, combined with an unwillingness to listen to one another.

In his commentary *Pardes Yosef*, Yosef Patzanovski takes it even further. He says, "Fear and trembling took hold of Isaac when, in a spirit of prophecy, he saw the results of hatred." Patzanovski knew this lesson all too well; he was murdered by the Nazis on the 2nd of Sivan in the Lodz Ghetto, four days after the death of his wife, leaving his Torah commentary uncompleted.

To this day, hatred continues to run rampant in our world, and we dare not grow accustomed to it. Perhaps, like Isaac, we should tremble a bit more at the possible outcomes of what is happening today in our world. We should recommit ourselves to truth, openness, and communication, and we must find the courage to stand against those who choose evil.

Willful blindness is not a curiosity. It presents a profound danger to all we hold dear. (*Rabbi Michael Dolgin has served Temple Sinai Congregation of Toronto since 1992.*)

[Facing Our Blessings Part 1: Being Seen for Who We Are by R. Aviva Richman](https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/facing-our-blessings-part-1)

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In Parashat Toldot, Ya'akov pretends to be someone else in order to get a blessing. Oen, his character becomes the focal point as we try to sort out whether this was a strategic act of courage or cruel trickery. But the experience resonates beyond the specific contours of his character.

When Yitzhak blesses Ya'akov, disguised as Esav, it introduces a gap between being seen for who we are and finding blessing. It leaves us yearning for the kind of blessing that comes not from hiding ourselves but from being fully recognized. We'll explore different aspects of the relationship between recognition and blessing over this week and next. Next week we'll explore the deeper meanings of "recognition." This week, our focus will be the significance of faces and being seen. When Ya'akov comes before Yitzhak, Yitzhak does not recognize him,

(Genesis 27:23). He is not “seen” by his father. Through midrash, we get a sense of how much Ya’akov desperately wanted to be fully seen, even as he remains physically disguised. He drops subtle hints. When Yitzhak asks how he prepared the meat so quickly, Ya’akov responds that God made an animal happen to appear before him (27:20). Midrash points to a dimension beneath the surface in this statement: 1 Ya’akov wants to remind Yitzhak of times that animals suddenly appeared at significant moments in his own life. When he was about to be sacrificed by his father, a ram miraculously appeared (22:13). 2 When it was time for him to marry, camels suddenly appeared, ushering in his meeting Rivkah (24:63). 3 Midrash ties these moments together, not only by the sudden appearance of an animal, but because they share the phrase, “He lifted his eyes and he saw” These were moments of seeing what could not be seen before, and they propelled Yitzhak towards the legacy of blessing. Therefore, in saying that God made an animal appear, Ya’akov may really mean to say something like this to his father:

When it seemed like you had no pathway towards blessing, God made an animal appear that altered the course of your life. I too want this moment to be a turning point. I want you to “lift your eyes and see” me in a way you never have. I want to be included in this legacy of blessing.

Yitzhak fails to “see” Ya’akov or hear this message. He will only bless Esav. This un-seenness stings. Ya’akov walks away with the blessing, but it is a blessing born of evasiveness and alienation.

Yet, in this profoundly evasive scene the Torah oddly draws attention to Yitzhak’s face. When Ya’akov leaves, it does not just say he left Yitzhak, but that he left “from before Yitzhak’s face” (Genesis 27:30) Why use this uncommon phrasing 4 that stresses Yitzhak’s face when Yitzhak could not actually see Ya’akov, and the entire encounter involved avoiding Yitzhak’s gaze?

A passage in the Talmud highlights the mention of Yitzhak’s face in this verse, and puts it into conversation with other verses about faces, as part of an extended discussion trying to determine the dimension of a “face.” This is important for measuring the ark cover (kaporet) and the faces of the two cherubim upon it. 5 The Talmud contrasts the verse where Ya’akov departs from his father’s “face” after taking the blessing, with a later verse where Ya’akov encounters Esav’s face upon his return from Lavan’s house (33:10). There, Ya’akov says “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God”. The Talmud wonders: does the word “face” suggest a human face with measurable dimensions? Or does it indicate God’s face that is of another scale entirely? The Talmud then brings up a third kind of face, that of a cherub. The discussion ends with the

conclusion that cherubs have two different sized faces: one large, like an adult, and one small, like a child.

If we move beyond the technical argument of this passage and focus on what images it weaves together, the cherubim on the cover of the ark become a symbolic intertext for the story of Ya'akov and his quest to be seen. In its discussion of the ark and cherubim, it brings together verses at the bookends of a critical chapter in Ya'akov's life, focusing on the word "face" in each. When Ya'akov departs from his father's face, he is evasive—trying to avoid direct encounter with Yitzhak and also, obviously, Esav. In the later scene, after years far away as a fugitive, Ya'akov returns and encounters Esav's face directly. In this encounter, Ya'akov tries to undo what went wrong in the earlier scene when he took Esav's blessing. Looking Esav in the face, he says "Please take my blessing" (Genesis 33:11).

What has happened to enable Ya'akov to go from his evasiveness to direct encounter? These two scenes of faces bring our attention to a third scene between the two. Just before encountering Esav, Ya'akov wrestles with an angel and names that place "the face of God."

Genesis 32:31: *So Jacob named the place Peniel meaning, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."*

Ya'akov relates that he saw God face to face, suggesting that not only did he see God, but God also saw him. While the plain meaning of his statement is that he is grateful to have been saved from the danger of encountering God so directly, in light of the history of not being seen by his own father, these words could take on a different meaning.

Perhaps this first moment of being fully seen—not by his earthly father, but by his divine Father—actually has a powerfully healing effect, "my life has been preserved." After being seen by God, he was ready to encounter Esav directly.

The Talmud's seemingly arbitrary collection of verses about faces encapsulates Ya'akov's journey. The evasiveness, anxiety, and ultimately direct encounter he experienced are embedded in the concrete image of the cherubim facing each other atop the ark. These faces hold the dynamic flow between alienation and recognition, and they represent a blurriness and overlap between encountering human faces and God's face. The alienation we may feel from others, and the alienation we may feel from God become intertwined. The possibility of seeing others and "seeing" God are also intertwined. In the posture of being face to face, there is the possibility of nothing less than the revelation of God's presence, just as God's voice emerged from between the two cherubim atop the ark.

These two faces in the holiest place—father and son, two brothers, or God and human—reflect the hopes we, like Ya'akov, have for relationships where we see the other and are fully seen. May we all find our way to these face to face relationships, and may they be a source of true revelation and blessing. ¹ בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת תולדות פרשה ¹

סה:יט: "ויאמר כי הקרה י"י אלהיך לפני ר' יוחנן ור' שמעון בן לקיש חד מינהון אמר אם לקורבן המציא לך דכת' וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל (בראשית כב:יג) למאכלך על אחת כמה וכמה, וחרנה אמר אם לזיווגך המציא לך דכת' וישא עיניו וירא והנה גמלים באים (שם כד) מאכלך על אחת כמה וכמה."

² Note that this *midrash* relies on another midrashic interpretation, where the ram was not always there but was miraculously created in that very moment.

³ The verse at the well uses the language הקרה, but also the *midrash* refers specifically to Yitzhak lifting his eyes to see the camel arriving upon Rivkah and the servant's return.

⁴ The phrase מאת פני occurs only six times in Tanakh.

⁵ Sukkah 5b: אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: רב הונא "פני" "פני" גמר. כתיב הכא: "אל פני הכפורת", וכתיב התם: "מאת פני יצחק אביו". ונילף מפנים של מעלה, דכתיב: "כראות פני אלהים ותרצני!" תפשת מרובה לא תפשת מועט תפשת. ונילף מכרוב, דכתיב: "אל הכפורת יהיו פני הכרובים!" אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: גמירי אין פני כרובים פחותין מטפת, ורב הונא נמי מהכא גמיר. ומאי כרוב? אמר רבי אבהו: כרביא, שכן בבבל קורין לינוקא רביא. אמר ליה אביי: אלא מעתה, דכתיב: "פני האחד פני הכרוב ופני השני פני אדם", היינו כרוב היינו אדם! אפי רברבי ואפי זוטרי

YAHRTZEITS

Len Grossman remembers his father Harry Grossman on Monday November 8 (Kislev 4)

Burt Solomon remembers his father Jack Solomon on Tuesday November 9 (Kislev 5)

Perry Fine remembers his mother Rosette Fine (Reizel bat Lazar v'Sarah) on Wednesday November 10 (Kislev 6)

Nancy Isaacson remembers her mother Ruth Isaacson on Wednesday November 10 (Kislev 6)

Coming up at Kol Rina (Open to all)

[Dr. Ruth Calderon lecture series](#)

Holiness Seen and Unseen: Three Talmudic Tales

Dr. Ruth Calderon, Israel's foremost secular scholar of Talmudic narrative, and a passionate educator, will speak via Zoom from Israel on three Sundays at 1:30 PM. She will introduce Talmud tales, the culture that created them, and what they might teach us about our life today. Dates and topics are as follows:

- Sunday, November 21: Women as Home: Stories about women, men, and the walls around them.
- Sunday, December 12: Politics: How the president Rabban Gamliel was removed from office.
- Sunday, December 19: Holiness: What the high priest saw in the holy of holies.

This lecture series is an outstanding opportunity to hear a strikingly original thinker, provided free of charge and open to all. For Zoom link, please register on Eventbrite with the following link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/holiness-seen-and-unseen-3-talmudic-tales-dr-ruth-calderon-3-part-series-tickets-199398896467>

This program is sponsored by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation Beth Shalom of Bloomington, Indiana and Temple Beth Shalom of Livingston, New Jersey. We hope you will join us!

About our lecturer: Dr. Ruth Calderon is an educator and Talmud scholar working to promote Hebrew, Israeli, and Jewish culture, to cultivate the study of Torah in the secular world, and to create a liberal, humanistic public space. Dr. Calderon founded Beit Midrash Elul in Jerusalem and Alma – Home for Hebrew Culture in Tel Aviv. She also served as the head of the culture and education department of the National Library of Israel. In recognition of her work, Dr. Calderon was awarded the AVI CHAI Prize for Jewish Education, the Samuel Rothberg Prize for Jewish Education, and honorary doctorates from Brandeis University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and Hebrew College in Boston. Dr. Calderon is the author of *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales* and *A Talmudic Alpha Beta*, which present personal readings of Talmudic stories. Her children's books, *The Princess and the Rock* and *A Rainy Day Story*, present adaptations of Talmudic and Chassidic stories for children. Dr. Calderon holds a master's degree and doctorate in Talmud from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is a graduate of the Mandel School for Educational Leadership.