

Toldot: The Theft of the Blessing Within the Story of Esau's Marriages
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The *Theft of the Blessing* is one of the most dramatic stories in the book of Genesis. We typically begin recounting the story at Gen. 27:1 with the report of Isaac's age and blindness:

וַיְהִי כִּי זָקַן יִצְחָק וַתְּכַהֵן עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת עֶשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנְנִי.
 Now when Isaac was old and his eyes had become too dim for seeing, he called Esau, his elder son, and said to him: My son! He said to him: Here I am.

But a compelling case can be made for the story beginning with the account of Esau's marriages in the

preceding verses (see below). If we start there, the *Theft of the Blessing* displays a rather intriguing symmetry.

- A. Esau marries** women from the daughters of Het. (26:34-35)
- B. Isaac and his son Esau:** Isaac sends Esau to the field and wants to bless him. (27:1-4).
- C. Rebekah and Jacob:** Rebekah hears Isaac's intention, and orders Jacob to act. (27:5-17). *So now, my son, listen to my voice, to what I command you:* (v. 8)
- D. Isaac and his son Jacob (disguised as Esau):** the disguised Esau comes to his father to receive the blessing (*I am Esau, your firstborn.* v. 19) and is blessed. (27:18-29).
- D1. Isaac and his son Esau:** Esau comes to his father to receive the blessing (*I am your son, your firstborn, Esav.* v.32) and is blessed. (27:30-41).
- C1. Rebekah and Jacob:** Rebekah hears the intention of Esau to kill Jacob and orders Jacob to act (*So now, my son, listen to my voice:* v. 43) (27:42-46).
- B1. Isaac and his son Jacob:** Isaac sends Jacob to Haran and blesses him (28:1-5).
- A1. Esau marries** the daughter of Ishmael (28:6-9).¹

If we place the *Theft* within the context of Esau's marriages, a whole new set of interpretations emerges. It appears that

וַיְהִי עֶשָׂו בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה אֶת יְהוּדִית בַּת בְּעֻרֵי הַחִתִּי וְאֶת בְּשֵׁמֶת בַּת אֵילֹן הַחִתִּי. וַתְּהִינָן מֵרַת רוּחַ לְיִצְחָק וּלְרֵבְקָה.
 [When] Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Yehudit daughter of B'eri the Hittite and Ba'semat daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and Rebekah. (Gen. 26:34-35).

Esau's marriage comes out of the blue, right after the episode of Isaac in Gerar. We learn a couple of things here. Esau is 40. Why is that significant? It's significant because that's the age his father was when he got married.

וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בִּקְחָתוֹ אֶת רִבְקָה
 Yitzhak was forty years old when he took Rivka daughter of Betuel the Aramean, (25:20).

The midrash picks up on this similarity and with characteristic denigration of Esau, imagines that for the previous decades of his life, Esau was a womanizer (to put it lightly).

...וְכִינּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה דָּמָה עֲצָמוֹ לְאָבִיו אָמַר מָה אָבִיא נִשְׂאָ אִשָּׁה בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה אִף אֲנִי נוֹשֵׂא אִשָּׁה בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה הֲדָא הוּא דְכַתִּיב: וַיְהִי עֶשָׂו בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה.

When he reached the age of 40 he likened himself to his father. He said: 'Just as Father took a wife at 40 years of age I too will take a wife at 40 years of age.' That is what is written: "Esau was 40 years old." (Bereishit Rabbah 60:5)

In other words, by marrying, Esau was trying to emulate his father. In light of his father's passivity in every aspect of his marriage, Esau might be trying to show some initiative and demonstrate his own independence. He is taking matters into his own hands in the tradition of Sarah (regarding Hagar), or Abraham (in his descent to Egypt). He may have been trying to say: *Folks, I'm not going to wait around.* What would have made the Het-daughters appealing to him? He has a good reason: his very own grandfather, the legendary Abraham, has already had an interaction with the Het's when he bought the Cave of Machpelah. Marriages involve negotiations and since the Het's have proven to be willing partners in the past, why wouldn't they be willing partners now? One can imagine that having received an exorbitant amount of money for the burial cave from his grandfather, the Het's would probably have been very amenable to another deal involving their daughters. And why two women? Two speculations: perhaps because the Torah is faintly echoing of another impulsively aggressive character, the murderous Lemekh, (Gen. 4:23-24); or because later on, in Esau's genealogy, because having two wives fits another paradigm among certain men: one for progeny and one for pleasure. More importantly, in marrying these wives, Esau commits a three-fold violation:

BREAKS SOCIAL CONVENTION	He marries on his own initiative without parental agreement.
VIOLATES ENDOGAMY	He marries outside of his own kith and kin.
VIOLATES FAMILY HONOR	He marries the local population which is a violation of his own family's honor.²

For these reasons (and probably more!) both Isaac and Rebekah are displeased by the marriages. While they disagree about their sons, (Isaac loves Esau; Rebekah loves Jacob), here they agree about Esau's awful marriages. This causes them to have cast doubts in Isaac (Rebekah already had her doubts) about Esau's worthiness.

Why then, does Isaac choose to transfer his blessing to Esau at this precise moment? Let's look at a few other examples of blessing.

¹ This symmetry is discussed in Yonatan Grossman, *Jacob: The Story of a Family* (Hebrew) 2019, p. 125.

² Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 189.

Blessing to Adam and Eve	<i>God blessed them, and God said to them: Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth... (Gen. 1:28)</i>
Blessing to Noah and sons:	<i>God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Bear fruit and be many... (Gen. 9:1)</i>
God's call to Abraham:	<i>I will make a great nation of you and will give-you-blessing (Gen. 12:2)</i>
God blesses Isaac:	<i>And after the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac his son. (Gen. 25:11).</i>

All of these blessings have one thing in common: they occur before any of their recipients produce children. Now just before this story, God appeared to Isaac and said:

וּבְרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָרַבִּיתִי אֶת זְרַעָהּ בְּעֵבוֹר אֲבְרָהָם עַבְדִּי.

I will bless you and will make your seed

many, for the sake of Avraham my servant. (Gen. 26:24)

Following the pre-existing pattern, a divine blessing for progeny would be on the way to Esau. But it hasn't arrived yet! And Esau has turned 40! So, what does Esau do? He takes matters in his own hands and marries not one, but two women! While this distresses Isaac, it nevertheless, puts Isaac in a difficult situation. Isaac is old. And Isaac is blind. (Blind not only with regard to actual vision, but blind also to the character deficiencies in Esau and the rivalry between his two sons.) He reasons to himself: *I've been blessed by God and promised many children. But I only have these two sons. Only one of them will be able to succeed me in producing the nation that God promised my father Abraham. If I wait any longer, I might die. If God is not going to bless him, then I will have to bless him myself. Now that he is married, albeit to local pagans, (Feh!), on the verge of children, I have no choice but to transfer the blessing to him, lest God's blessing stop with me.* With Esau going ahead with his life, taking his marriage matters into his own hands, Isaac now has to do the same and transfer the divine blessing to his first-born, Esau. But in order to do that, he wants to do so in a way that makes sense for him. What is the key sacrificial moment of his life? The Akedah. What happened there? Abraham slaughters a ram (*a ram that had presumably left its flock, in other words, a wild one, that was caught in the thicket by its horns*), and sacrifices it as an *olah*, a completely burnt offering. Here, Isaac wants Esau to hunt a *wild* animal (perhaps like that ram) and have a pseudo-sacrificial meal at which he could then bless him. What happens instead? Rebekah tells Jacob to get regular goats from the *domesticated* flock, and she is the one who makes him Isaac a favorite pseudo-sacrificial meal. She also makes him some bread, which ought to have been a signal to Isaac because bread is an idiosyncratic food. (Any one of us can notice the difference between a bread baked by one person over a bread baked by another.) When Jacob appears disguised before Isaac, Isaac says, *The voice is Yaakov's voice, yet the hands are Esav's hands (27:22)* and in the very next moment he asks for the food: *Bring it close to me, and I will eat from the hunted-game of my son, in order that I may give you my own blessing. (27:25).* And then, *He put it close to him and he ate; he brought him wine and he drank.* To which he could have responded, *the meat is the meat of your mother, and the bread is hers as well!* He cannot see. He is confused by taste, touch, scent and

sound. And he's a little tipsy from all that wine. *וינגש וישק לו. He came close and kissed him.* Now he smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him.

וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ הָאֱלֹהִים מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְרֹב דָּגָן וְתִירֹשׁ. וַיַּעֲבֹדוּהָ עַמִּים [וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ] (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ) לָהּ לְאֻמִּים הָיָה גְבִיר לְאַחֶיהָ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהּ בְּנֵי אֲמָהּ אֲרָרָה אֲרֹר וּמְבָרָכָה בְרוּךְ.

So may God give you from the dew of the heavens, from the fat of the earth, [along with] much grain and new-wine! May peoples serve you, may tribes bow down to you; be master to your brothers, may your mother's sons bow down to you! Those who damn you, damned! Those who bless you, blessed! (Gen. 27:28-29)

Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's nothing really specific about this blessing. It is a blessing of food and power. At the very most, it echoes God's charge to Abraham in the last line, but there's nothing specific going on in it relating to either fertility or a special relationship with God. This is the exact center of the story, the climactic moment, but there is great confusion in it. And that's the point. The blessing is a "non-blessing" because at this moment, Isaac is genuinely confused. He wanted to transfer the Abrahamic blessing, but he ends up saying nothing particularly Abrahamic. Where does the story go from here? Esau comes in, with his cooked game, discovers that he has been cheated. Isaac acquiesces to give him a different blessing, but that subjugates him, and he consequently vows to kill his brother who usurped him. Rebekah tells Jacob to flee but orchestrates it so that Isaac instructs him to travel to Haran in order to find a wife from the family. It is precisely at that point, that the Abrahamic destiny is clarified. That's when Isaac transfers the blessing of Abraham to Jacob:

וְאֵל שְׁדַי יְבָרַךְ אֶתְךָ וַיַּכְרֶה וַיַּרְבֶּה וְהֵייתָ לְקַהֵל עַמִּים. וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ אֶת בְּרַכְתּוֹ אֲבְרָהָם לָהּ וּלְזַרְעָהּ אֶתְךָ. לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיהָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.

May God Shaddai bless you, may he make you bear fruit and make you many, so that you become a host of peoples. And may he give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your seed with you, for you to inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Avraham. (Gen. 28:3)

It is only now that Esau recognizes his marital mistep, from which all of the events unfolded. He seeks to rectify the situation by marrying a relative,

Ishmael's daughter Mahlat, as a way of appealing to Isaac for the blessing of Abraham. But it's too late. Isaac has already transferred Abraham's blessing to Jacob, and the nation will be formed from him. **Conclusion:** Rebekah understood from the very beginning that Esau did not have the right character to be the father of the people. Esau's marriage to the local Het women just added to that unworthiness. It also created a moment of great urgency. Isaac (who would yet live for another 80 years!) felt compelled to transfer the blessing now, while he still could, in order to remedy the situation and steer Esau back on the proper course. But Rebekah, who had always intended for Jacob to marry from within the family, had to act now. Instead of sending him off to Haran to get a wife first and then get the blessing, he had to get the blessing first, and then go to Haran to get a wife. By the *Theft* within the framing of Esau's marriages, we get a greater appreciation of what everyone's motivations were.

שבת שלום! עם ישראל חי!

