

*The Beginning
of Desire*

Reflections on Genesis

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TOLEDOT *Sincerity and Authenticity**Jacob takes Esau's blessings*

The dramatic and moral focus of this Parsha is the scene of deception, in which Jacob “takes”¹ from his blind father, Isaac, the blessing intended for his brother, Esau. Both the Torah text and the midrashic tradition have sharp criticism to level against Jacob for this act. Subtly, the narrative voice indicates the ironies of nemesis within Jacob’s personal destiny—for instance, in the parallel deception that he has to suffer on his own wedding night. His father-in-law, Laban, replaces his beloved bride, Rachel, with her “hated” sister, Leah, and then ingenuously defends himself with sardonic references to the rights of the firstborn: “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the elder [lit., the firstborn]” (Genesis 29:26). Outraged, Jacob confronts Leah in the morning. The midrash puts ironic words into her mouth: “He said to her, ‘Deceiver, daughter of a deceiver! Did I not call you Rachel and you answered me?!’ She replied, ‘Is there a master without students? Did your father not call you Esau and you answered him?!’”²

Similarly, on the larger scale of national history, the midrash registers the bitter cries of Esau realizing he is supplanted (“he burst into wild and bitter sobbing” [27:34]); these echo in the cries of the Jewish people on the verge of destruction in the time of Haman: “Mordecai went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly” (Esther 4:1): “Anyone who says that God overlooks misdoing will himself be overlooked. He is merely long-suffering, but ultimately collects His dues. Jacob made Esau break out into a cry just once, and where was he punished for it? In Shushan the capital, as it says, ‘And he cried out loudly and bitterly.’”³

There is a precise and painful attention paid to Jacob’s acts. Nothing is foregone or blurred. The cries of Esau cheated, deprived, resound through

history, till they issue in a new ferocious moment of impersonation, when Jacob cries in exact mimicry of the voice of the betrayed Esau.

Morally, then, Jacob’s deception is confronted without equivocation or apologetics, both in the narrative itself and in the midrashic tradition. And yet, there is a motif in the midrashic narrative in *Beresbit Rabbah*, which complicates the issue. This is the motif of legal ratification. Three times, the midrash returns to the same imagery, in an attempt to focus the dramatic essence of the “taken” blessing.

The first occasion is at the very moment when Isaac, deeply shaken, realizes he has been deceived: “Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. ‘Who was it then,’ he demanded, ‘that hunted game and brought it to me? And I ate of it all before you came and I blessed him; *indeed, he is blessed*’” (27:33). The strangeness of that coda strikes every reader. Instead of insisting on his unconsciousness at the time of blessing, instead of withdrawing words of blessing extorted from him under false pretenses, Isaac tells his beloved, deprived son, Esau, “indeed, he is blessed.”⁴ At this point, the midrash comments: “A divorce bill is ratified only when it is signed and sealed. So that you should not say, ‘if Jacob had not deceived his father, he would not have acquired the blessings,’ the text emphasizes, ‘Indeed, he is blessed.’”⁵

After the deception, Isaac himself unexpectedly ratifies the transaction. A dramatic event—the use of certain words called a “blessing”—has transpired. Regardless of moral judgments in the narrative itself or by generations of readers, that dramatic event is here ratified; it is given legal validity in the consciously written “signature” of the agent.

An almost sensuous dimension to this validation is suggested in the commentary of Seforno: “Who brought me venison *to deceive me, and nevertheless* is to be blessed?” Isaac felt, as he blessed Jacob, that the blessing had “taken” in the one blessed, as is told of R. Hanina, when he used to pray for the sick.”

R. Hanina, according to the Babylonian Talmud in Berakhot 34b, could tell if his prayer had been accepted, by its “fluency in his mouth.” The capacity to intuit whether a prayer or blessing has “worked” is not, then, a prophetic gift (R. Hanina explicitly denies this) but a sense of *how the words feel in the mouth*. There is a fluency, an organic, almost improvisational flow to the words of a prayer that is “accepted”; a prayer that is rejected (lit., torn apart) lacks this sensed rightness, this flow. On such a reading, Isaac is compelled, in spite of the emotional demands of the

situation, to tell the truth about the transaction that is called “blessing.” His signature ratifies words that, for many reasons, he may have wanted to gainsay.

The second occasion when the midrash uses the imagery of legal ratification is when Isaac, in full consciousness, calls Jacob and gives him the “blessing of Abraham”: “And Isaac called Jacob and he blessed him. . . . ‘May Almighty God bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham’” (28:1, 3–4). Isaac’s “call” signifies the ritual, legal transmission of blessing.⁶ The midrash identifies the essential heritage of the “blessing of Abraham” with the misappropriated blessings, “taken” by Jacob:

The blessings were dubious [*mefukpak*, weak, contested, loose, unraveled] in Jacob’s hand. Where were they confirmed [*nitoshashu*, given solid foundations] in his hand? Here—“And Isaac called Jacob. . . .” Said R. Eliezer, “A divorce bill is ratified only when it is signed and sealed. So that you should not say, ‘if Jacob had not deceived his father, he would not have taken the blessings,’ the narrative says, ‘And Isaac called Jacob and he blessed him.’”⁷

The imagery of ratification is reinforced here by the dual perspective on the blessings—at first, *weakly* held by Jacob, his grasp enervated—but then given secure foundations, grasped firmly. What is described is, apparently, a process of *increasing* reality, as the blessings *become* Jacob’s, and as all questioning of that reality is gradually blocked.

The third stage of the process is the point in the narrative when Jacob returns after twenty years’ absence and confronts his brother for the first time. Clearly apprehensive of the meeting, he lavishes presents on Esau, who replies, “My brother, let what is yours remain yours” (33:9). Here, again, the midrash detects a moment of ratification:

The blessings were tenuously held in Jacob’s hand. When were they confirmed? Here—Esau said, “My brother, let what is yours remain yours.” Said R. Eliezer, “A divorce bill is ratified only when it is signed and sealed. So you should not say, ‘if Jacob had not deceived his father, he would not have taken the blessings,’ the narrative says, ‘My brother, let what is yours remain yours.’”⁸

Here, in a dramatic climax to the midrashic treatment of Jacob’s gradual consolidation of his hold on the blessings, Esau himself cedes the reality of what is Jacob’s. Rashi marks a similar moment of retroactive acknowledgment, when, on the previous night, Jacob meets the mysterious “man,” who wrestles with him until dawn. “Then he said, ‘Let me go, for dawn is breaking.’ But he answered, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me’” (32:27). Rashi comments: “‘Acknowledge my right to the blessings that my father gave me.’ For Esau questioned his right to them.”⁹

Rashi is expressing Jacob’s need for a new retroactive understanding of the rightful resentments and angers of the past. When Esau “questions” his right to the blessings, the word used, *me’ar’er*, suggests a legally valid attempt to *undermine* Jacob’s claim. In Rashi’s reading, the “man,” who is midrashically identified with “Esau’s guardian angel,” “‘blessed him there’—against his will, he acknowledged Jacob’s right to the blessings” (32:30).

Rashi is indicating a basic tension between Esau’s valid grounds of complaint (Rashi even seems to suggest, by his use of the present tense, that this resentment, and the tension it induces, continues to the present day) and his yielding acknowledgment of Jacob’s claim to the blessings. Why, indeed, one must ask, does Esau withdraw from this legal contest? In the midrashic reading, what has changed, what is the process of confirmation, by which the blessings become Jacob’s, over a period of time, and are attested to even by those most involved in—and most injured by—the original deception?

“*As a trickster*”: *The problem of voice*

At this point, we can look more closely at the narrative itself. When Rebecca presses Jacob to go to his father, in place of Esau, it is striking that nowhere, at first formulation of the plan, does she refer to impersonation or deception. Jacob is simply to bring his father delicacies, “such as he loves . . . in order that he may bless you before he dies” (27:10). The plan follows her account of Isaac’s instructions to Esau. Jacob protests: “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).

The heart of his protest is the strange phrase, "I shall appear to him *as a trickster*." Jacob is afraid of *looking like a dissembler* to his father's blind eyes. The question of deception is thus introduced by Jacob as a question of his father's perception of him, rather than as an objective description of Jacob's behavior. The result of this perception will be a curse instead of a blessing. Rebecca counters, "Your curse, my son, be upon me!" and repeats her instructions in condensed form. He fulfills these to the letter: "And he went and he took and he brought" (27:14) and she prepares the food, exactly as she has told him she will: "And his mother prepared a dish such as his father loved." But then follows the description of how she takes Esau's clothes and the skins of the slaughtered kids and uses them to cover Jacob's body, to costume him for his role. Only then, after this act of deception, of which there had been no explicit talk beforehand, does she return to her original scenario, which focuses entirely on the preparation and serving of food to Isaac.

Jacob, it appears, shrinks from the plan, not on objective moral grounds but because his father will perceive—or misperceive—him as a certain kind of person, *ke-metateia*, as a trickster. It is possible that, as Nahum Sarna suggests,¹⁰ in the historical period of the narrative, the "successful application of shrewd opportunism was highly respected." Jacob, therefore, expresses revulsion at the idea that his father might see him as a kind of slick careerist, however unobjectionable such a role might be in contemporary terms.

What is most striking is that Jacob is the first person to bring up the question of deception, which enters as a physical part of the preparations only after he has spoken (27:15–16). Inevitably, if his father touches him, he will be unmasked; he, therefore, is not referring to any disguise of his smoothness when he fears that his father will see him "as a trickster." It is some other act of impersonation, inherent in the original scenario, that he fears will affect his father's vision of him.

To be "like a trickster" has, then, a very specific reference—not to the quasi-burlesque stage business of goatskins and costumes, but to the act of *imitating Esau's voice*. Ramban is troubled by the fact that Jacob never refers specifically to the problem of his voice. The voice is, after all, the central expression of identity, and the sensitivity to voices is a measure of human wisdom. Why, then, is Jacob not apprehensive that his father will simply recognize his voice? Ramban suggests two answers. Either the brothers had very similar voices—which would account for the Sages'

interpretation of Isaac's statement, "The voice is the voice of Jacob," as referring to the style and tone of Jacob's speech, rather than to the physical timbre of his voice. Or he changed his voice, to imitate his brother, "for there are people who know how to do that."¹¹

If we explore the implications of Ramban's second suggestion, we find, for instance, a statement in the Talmud that clearly understands the "trickster" character as a matter of voice imitation: "Anyone who changes his way of speaking is like one who worships idols—because in one place it is written, 'I shall be like a dissembler [*ke-metateia*] in his eyes,' and in another place, 'They [idols] are delusion, a work of mockery [*ta'atuum*]' " (Jeremiah 10:15).¹²

A startling equation is set up between vocal mimicry, the assumption of inauthentic speech patterns, and idolatry. The premise of the Talmud here is that *metateia*, "dissembler," refers specifically to such a change of voice: Jacob fears that his father will perceive him as manipulating his voice to assume Esau's identity. This the Talmud identifies, without elaboration, with idol worship. One must wonder what was the Sages' sensibility to the voice and its relation to personal identity. Jacob recoils from being perceived as a mimic: a curse is perceived by him as an inevitable consequence of offending against such a radical taboo. What are the implications of assuming the voice of another? Possibly, Rebecca's response—costuming Jacob in animal skins—is a way of partially allaying his anxiety: such a crass imitation of Esau's physical identity will distract his father from concentrating on the question of voice.

"To thine own self be true"

The concept of *metateia* invites further exploration. The word occurs again in II Chronicles 36:16: "They mocked the messengers of God." The meaning of "mockery," rather than "deception," is important, and is clearly supported by the Targums' translation of the word in our context. Targum Jonathan translates *ki-megabekb*—the same word he uses to translate the description of Lot: "he seemed to his sons-in-law as one who jests" (19:14). Implicitly, what Jacob dreads is not being found out, but being perceived by his father as "one who jests," as fundamentally unserious about his relation to his father and, essentially, to himself. To play with an assumed identity—by changing his voice—is to risk his father's *misperception*, for he feels himself to be merely *like* a mocker.

spires to this end we call good, and evil is whatever tends to lessen and annihilate our consciousness" (*The Tragic Sense of Life* [Princeton University Press: 1972], 269).

14. B. Erubin 13b.

15. "Everyone feels anxiety on reading this mysterious statement" (Maharsha on B. Makkoth 23b).

16. E.g., the question of evil and free will. The God-fearing person detests evil and desires its end, yet he values and requires it for the energetic life of his spirit. In Jung's imagery, confrontation with evil provides the gradient, which allows his energy to express itself in the world.

17. Neher, *Exile of the Word*, 68.

18. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 317-22.

19. Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, 66.

20. B. Yoma 76b.

21. *Va-yikra Rabbah* 20:2.

22. *Yalkut Tehillim* 89:16.

23. R. Hutner, *Paḥad Yitzḥak*, Rosh Hashanah, 7:11

24. "All the claims of Satan are strangled by the Shofar" — See *Torah Shelemah*, chap. 23, n. 17.

25. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 318.

26. *Tanḥuma*, Va-yera, 23.

27. *Tanḥuma*, 21.

28. *Beresbit Rabbah* 56:5

29. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 289.

30. *Ibid.*, 290.

31. See Rashi, 21:12.

32. *Beresbit Rabbah* 53:15.

33. This strange word occurs in Proverbs 26:18 and implies unintentional violence.

34. *Tanḥuma*, Hayyei Sarah, 4.

35. See Rashi, 4:3.

36. Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 125.

37. See Rashi; also Rashi and Seforno, 25:8-9.

38. See Rashi, 25:30.

39. *Beresbit Rabbah* 61:5.

40. See 6:6 with Rashi's comment on "God repented that He had made man."

41. *Midrash Ha-Gadol* 24:67.

42. See Rashi, 24:67: "to the tent—Sarah, his mother": lit, he brought her to the tent, and she became Sarah, his mother—that is, she became like Sarah, his mother. For as long as Sarah was alive, there was a lamp lit from

Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve, and there was blessing in the dough, and a cloud attached to the tent. When she died, they ceased; and when Rebecca came, they returned."

43. Compare verbs of *hastening* in both narratives.

44. This is the root of Jonah's anger at God's *hesed* to Nineveh. The effect of such *hesed* is mere unintelligibility. The world continues as though there were no justice, no judge. To Jonah, this is an outrage against *emet*, the Truth, that is so conspicuously missing from his list of divine attributes (4:2). Without Truth, *hesed* seems to him a deplorable, even self-destructive foible of God.

45. Cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuva, chap. 7, in which Rambam traces the complexities of sin, penitence, reward, and punishment. Rambam reiterates constantly that the transcendent truth is in no way derivable from experience. On the contrary, "Do not say. . . ." "Let the penitent not imagine that. . . ." "A person should always see himself as though. . . ."

46. See Rashi, 24:14.

47. *Beresbit Rabbah* 60:2.

48. See, for instance, the injunction, "*Azov ta'azov imo*—You shall indeed come to the aid of your enemy, whose donkey has collapsed under its burden" (Exodus 23:5). The ambiguities and rhetorical questions involved in this text are the subject of much rabbinic commentary. For an unequivocal example of *azav* as "reinforcement," see Nehemiah 3:8.

49. Neher, *Exile of the Word*, 285-86.

50. This is not a moment of joy; for doubt and suspense make awkward bedfellows with joy. The legacy of Sarah's death is her last cry. According to the *Midrash Ha-Gadol* (23:2), Kiryat Arba, the place of her death ("the city of four"), is called so because of her four death cries—expressing sadness on hearing her son's fate; wailing for her son; the bitterness of her death; and mourning for the fact that there is no perfect joy. These carefully differentiated modes culminate in the "reversibility of joy," as the *Midrash Or Afela* has it. Realization of the volatile nature of experience and consciousness is not easily neutralized.

51. *Beresbit Rabbah* 60:14.

52. See the commentary of *Ha'amek Davar* on this meeting.

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1. It is striking that even the cheated Esau in the heat of his bitterness has no stronger recrimination than "and now he has taken my blessing" (27:36).

2. *Beresbit Rabbah* 70:17.

3. Ibid., 67:4.
4. Ramban focuses on the unexpectedness of Isaac's reply. He mobilizes this to intensify the outrage of Isaac's question, which now covers the *involuntary* nature of the blessing: he trembles all the more violently for knowing that the blessing is a reality, *in spite* of his intention and present feeling.
5. *Bereshit Rabbah* 67:3.
6. Compare "And Jacob called his sons" (49:1), which introduces his deathbed blessings.
7. *Bereshit Rabbah* 67:10.
8. Ibid., 78:14.
9. Rashi is replying here to the past tense form of *berakhtani*. He translates literally, "till you admit my *having been blessed*, in the past."
10. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 188.
11. Ramban, 27:12
12. B. Sanhedrin 92a.
13. *Midrash Mishlei* 10:17.
14. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, iii, 78–80.
15. See R. Hutner, *Paḥad Yitzḥak*, Sukkot 21:8.
16. B. Baba Metzia 87a.
17. Ibid.
18. *Tanḥuma*, Toledot, 1.
19. The striking feature of this version of the midrash is that Abraham cannot come to his own just assessment of the facts, even *after* God has changed Isaac's appearance. It is because of the consensus of opinion of others, who can see both father and son, that Abraham's suspicions are allayed. The visual factor, the criterion of perspective and opinion, remains central, even after the miracle.
20. Lionel Trilling discusses this concept, and its relation to the "sentiments of art," in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press: 1971), chap. 3.
21. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:16.
22. *Matnot Kebunah*, Genesis 27:22.
23. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2.
24. B. Sanhedrin 92a.
25. See Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, chap. 2.
26. See *Mei Ha-Shiloah*, 10: "And indeed, whenever a person exposes himself to ambiguities, in his religious life — if he succeeds in dealing authentically with these ambiguities, then he is greater than a person who kept himself clear of ambiguities."
27. See Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 126–32.
28. *Tanḥuma*, Toledot, 8.

29. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:5.
30. Ibid.
31. See, for instance, *Tanḥuma*, Va-yera, 23 and Toledot, 7.
32. *Tanḥuma*, Toledot, 7.
33. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III, iv, 105–11.
34. Genesis 24:64–65. See the interpretation of the *Ha'amek Davar*, who discusses this meeting as the pivotal moment of the relationship of Isaac and Rebecca.
35. Note the vocabulary of "going," which marks Rebecca as kin to Abraham, whose motif-word is, of course, the verb "to go" — *lekh lekha* (12:1, 22:2).
36. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:16.
37. Rashi quotes the midrash (ibid.) describing Esau as "tired of murder": Esau takes life, to express his disappointment and despair of life.
38. Even the ordinary words for "wild animals and birds," *ḥayot ve-ofot*, used by Rashi, suggest life and movement, while Esau lies in ambush, focusing his energies on the point of his arrow.
39. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:15.
40. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, ii, 133–34.
41. Plato, *Protagoras*, 345D.
42. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 89.
43. Ibid., 90.
44. See Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and *Bereshit Rabbah* on 60:14.
45. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations* (Collins/Fontana Books: 1973), 174ff.
46. Ibid., 177.
47. Ibid., 178.
48. Ibid., 179.
49. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i, 62.
50. *Tanḥuma*, Toledot, 7.
51. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:16. The midrash refers specifically to betrothed women.
52. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i, 63.
53. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:14.
54. Ibid.
55. Since Rebecca will prepare the food, it is her skill that will arouse love and blessing (a libidinal energy that is now poignantly focused on food, but that, in some form, is essential to the act of blessing, see Ramban, Bahya). Jacob's role is minimal, but does involve the use of his hands and legs: "Go . . . take . . . bring . . ."
56. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Penguin: 1970), chap. 2.
57. Targum Jonathan, in fact, translates *sa'ir* as "a mature man."