



## 5 Ways

to explore the Esau-Jacob conflict

The relational explosion in Isaac and Rebekah's household is triggered by the Jacob-Rebekah conspiracy to have the blessing of the firstborn transferred to Jacob by means of deception. Our Torah discussion leaves us with many questions... Continue to probe the text with reference to the following:

**1. Only one blessing?** The Torah never explains why the questionable blessing cannot be revoked or why Esau cannot also be blessed. This only deepens our suspicion that perhaps Isaac is colluding with Rebekah. Do you agree?

**2. Esau sold his birthright.** In Jacob's defence one could argue that Esau, in Gen. 25:29-34, had already displayed casual disregard for his birthright and forfeited his special status as the firstborn. Is Esau trying to have things both ways?

**3. Esau's unsuitability.** The Torah drops a number of hints as to why Esau is undeserving of Jacob's blessing. Did you pick them?

**4. Actions have consequences.** Still, the Torah remains troubled by Jacob's deceit. As Genesis proceeds we will see that this event casts a shadow over Jacob's life and he himself becomes the victim of deceit.

**5. Esau's merits.** Nor does the tradition overlook Esau's merits [TB Berachot]. When the brothers finally meet again after twenty years (Gen.32:8) the sages speculate that Jacob is intimidated by the fact that Esau has remained close to his ageing parents and to the God-given land all that time, whereas Jacob has been absent and distant.

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Just as rain comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the Torah; one studies a bit today and some more tomorrow, until in time one becomes like a flowing stream."*

Song of Songs Rabbah I. 2 §3

For many Catholics regular exposure to the bible is by way of the readings proclaimed at church on Sundays. Lectionary-based bible reading is a wonderful way to experience God's Word, in the presence of a worshipping community and in the context of the rhythms of the liturgical season.

Lectionary-based bible reading also has its limitations: there are large sections of the bible that we never hear at church simply because they are not included in our lectionary. Here is where *Light of Torah* makes a contribution to a parishioner's biblical formation. Because *Light of Torah* follows the Jewish lectionary, we read the first five books of the bible over the course of a year. We discover passages in our own bible which we never knew were there! Being immersed in Torah, in conversation with the Jewish sages, we sharpen our listening and interpretative skills. We begin to hear afresh the Sunday readings too...



Genesis 25:19—28:9

*Toledot:*  
'generations'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 25:19–28:9

Our Torah portion opens with the story of a difficult pregnancy. Eventually Rebekah gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. The tensions between the brothers are exacerbated by a strong-minded (manipulative?) mother and a passive (weak?) father. From chapter 27 tensions climax as Jacob and his mother conspire to ensure that Jacob receives the blessing which would ordinarily go to the firstborn (Esau). The Torah portion closes with Jacob fleeing for his life in the wake of Esau's wrath.

## Tasting Torah

In our Torah portion you will notice that Jacob is blessed by his father not once but twice; the first time under the pretext of being Esau, and the second with his true identity in full view. After reading the story of Esau and Jacob (chapters 25 and 27), return to the text for a closer look at the two blessings:

1. Blessing intended for Esau: *“May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine...”* (See Gen.27:27-29).
2. Blessing for Jacob: *“May God Almighty bless you and make your fruitful... May he give to you the blessing of Abraham... so that you may take possession of the land”* (See Gen.28:3-4).

Share your observations with a friend.

## Touching Torah

The contrast between the blessings is striking. The first (meant for Esau) promises material prosperity. But it does not mention the divine promises made to Abraham, including election of a chosen people and the gift of a special land. These are part of the second blessing, clearly meant for Jacob. It would appear that even if Esau *hadn't* been denied the blessing he sought, he still would not have received the Abrahamic mission. The covenant God made with Abraham, the Torah seems to suggest, is to pass through Jacob, not Esau. Which raises the question: is this what their parents understood all along? Continue to discuss in havrutah.

## Depthing Torah

Of course the intentions of Rebekah are explicit. In her engineering of the sequence of events she boldly expresses her view that Jacob *must* be the one to carry the Abrahamic promise.

But what about Isaac? Is he really as blind as he makes out? (Recall the drawn-out sequence in 27:19-26 where repeatedly questions his son's identity.) Does he, like Rebekah, understand Jacob to be the chosen one, but can't bring himself to admit it? Is it a case of going along with the charade, reluctantly giving a muted blessing, followed by the fuller blessing only when denial is no longer tenable?

In the tradition we find the sages discussing Isaac's 'dim eyes.' One opinion is that his vision is *spiritually* impaired. Favoring his first-born, and wanting to comply with the conventions of natural birthright, Isaac 'turns a blind eye' to the unexpected choices of God. Says Abravanel: *“His affection for Esau blinded him to his faults... His powers of judgment grew dim and he was not able to see reality.”*<sup>1</sup> Do you agree?

Of course, Esau's unsuitability is a whole topic of discussion in itself, but for now, let's stay with the question of parental insight and intentions. What do you make of the family and spiritual dynamics in this Torah portion?

## Doing Torah

Think of a time in your life when God's plan didn't seem to follow the expected ways of family/parish/community life. Does today's Torah reading speak to that experience? How?



## From the Midrash

*“Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see”* (27:1). Commenting on this verse, the midrash refers to that fateful event on Mt Moriah:

*For when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac, the ministering angels wept... Tears dropped from their eyes into his, and left their mark upon them, and so when he became old his eyes dimmed...*

(Gen. R. LXV. 10).

Once again we note how Isaac's near-death experience continues to haunt the characters as the book of Genesis unfolds.

1. Abravanel: 15<sup>th</sup> c. Spanish-Jewish scholar. Quoted by Leibowitz, p.275.

Bibliography: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: *NRSV*.