A complicated family

When, after a difficult pregnancy, Rebekah gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25), a fraternal feud is also born. 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). This part of the biblical story closes with Jacob fleeing for his life in the face of Esau's wrath.

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).

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?

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 he 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 Jewish tradition we find the sages discussing Isaac's 'dim eyes.' *"Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see"* (27:1). 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."[1] 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 passage?

The midrash links Isaac's 'dim eyes' with that terrifying event on Mt Moriah where Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son:

"For when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac, the ministering angels wept... Tears dropped from their eyes into Isaac's, and left their mark upon them, and so when he became old his eyes dimmed..." (Gen. R. LXV. 10).

Note how Isaac's near-death experience continues to haunt the characters as the book of Genesis unfolds.

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

1. Abravanel: 15th c. Spanish-Jewish scholar. Quoted by Leibowitz, 275.

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.