

Genesis Chapter 25, Parashat Tol'dot

19. And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham begot Isaac.

20. And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebecca the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to himself for a wife.

21. And Isaac prayed to the Eternal on behalf of his wife because she was barren, and the Eternal accepted his prayer, and Rebecca his wife conceived.

22. And the children struggled within her, and she said, "If this is so, why am I alive?" And she went to inquire of the Eternal.

23. And the Eternal said to her, "Two nations are in your belly, and two kingdoms will branch off from your womb. One nation will become mightier than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.

24. And her days to give birth were completed, and behold, there were twins in her womb.

25. And the first one emerged reddish all over, as though covered with a coat of hair, and they named him Esau.

26. And afterwards, his brother emerged, and his hand was grasping Esau's heel, and he was named Jacob. Now Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

27. And the youths grew up, and Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was a homespun man, dwelling in tents.

28. Isaac loved Esau because he [Esau] put game in his mouth, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

Robin Cohn; "Biblical Women" Parashat Tol'dot, 2010

Rebecca's Pregnancy & the Birth of the Twins

Once married, twenty years passed and Isaac and Rebecca had no children. She didn't seem upset by her barrenness. It was Isaac who prayed to God that Rebecca would have a child (25:21). Rebecca herself though "indulges in no schemes to have children...she gives no evidence of desperation or frustration...She does not pray about her childless condition, though we learn later (25:22) that she shows no timidity in approaching YHWH when she feels the need to. The text gives no indication that mothering is the center of Rebekah's self-worth or her reason to be" (Fewell/Gunn, p.73). In answer to Isaac's prayer, Rebecca became pregnant and then sought God's guidance when the children struggled in her womb. In frustration she asked of God, "If so, why do I exist?" a phrase that should not be taken as a suicidal comment. It is simply a Hebrew idiom for distress.

God then answered her in a rhymed oracle. "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). Many have speculated that she never told Isaac of this revelation and therefore he did not know that it was God's will that Jacob should hold the birthright instead of Esau. However, this adds an added dimension of deceit on Rebecca's part which is not warranted by the text.

Once Rebecca gave birth she participated in a naming ceremony with the midwives. "When her time had come, there were indeed twins in her womb. The first came out red, hairy all over like a hair-cloak, and they named him Esau. Immediately afterwards his brother was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel, and *they* called him Jacob." "The 'they' in this passage is the assembly of women surrounding Rebekah after she gives birth" (Caspi/Havrelock, p.9). Just like the story of Ruth when she gave birth to a son, the women of the community surrounded Rebecca in a uniquely female assembly. Together they described the mother's experience and determined an appropriate name for the children.

Thrice Told Tale

Abruptly in Genesis 26 the twin sons disappear and we meet the third telling of the wife-sister stories. Due to a famine, Isaac and Rebecca travel to Gerar and meet up with Abimelech, the same king Abraham had tried to dupe by convincing him that Sarah was his sister. This third retelling of the "Endangered Ancestress" story insists that we remember the prior tellings by noting "besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham" (26.1). "No less directive for reading are the more implicit connections, as when Yahweh says to Isaac, 'Do not go down to Egypt' (26.2), when Isaac has not shown the slightest indication that he was thinking of going to Egypt" (Clines, p.78). This time, however, as readers we know for sure that Isaac and Rebecca are not siblings. Abimelech too discovers quickly that the two are husband and wife when he catches Isaac "isaacing" (*metsaheq*) Rebecca, that is sexually fondling her. This word was also used in the earlier story about Ishmael and was the reason Sarah demanded that Hagar and her son be expelled into the wilderness.

Exum in her psychoanalytic-literary analysis of the Isaac/Rebecca version of the story calls this a "latent incest fantasy" of Oedipal desire wherein the "sister is a stand-in for the mother as an object of desire... In the end, his relationship to his mother-substitute is legitimized by the father. This is the significance of the fact that Abimelech *sees* Isaac and Rebekah engaged in sexual play [*metsaheq*, a pun on Isaac's name]: it represents the father's acknowledgement that this woman rightfully belongs to the 'son' and the

father's permission for him to have sex with her" (p.167-8). Exum explains that at their most elemental level the wife-sister stories exhibit a male fear and desire of female sexuality. The story had to be repeated with variations until the internal conflict was finally resolved in the final retelling.

Exum notes that with each successive retelling of the sister-wife tale, the wife's sexual peril was reduced. In the first instance Sarah was taken into the harem of Pharaoh. In the second, Sarah was again inducted into the king's household but the narrator assured us that Abimelech did not have sexual intercourse with her. Finally, in Rebecca's version, she didn't come close to being intimate with Abimelech. "It can hardly be fortuitous that once the story ceases to entertain the fantasy of another man having the woman, the patriarch is pictured enjoying the woman sexually, and the other man witnesses it...Having Abimelech, the rival, witness his sexual activity with the matriarch is the patriarch's ultimate turn-on, his incontestable victory over rival desire" (p.163-4). You will note that even within one scholar's exegesis, several explanations of the wife-sister deception are explored. Although I find no one explanation satisfactory as to why the tale had to be told three times, the variety of explanations are certainly interesting.

Rebecca's Deception

We meet up with Rebecca again when Esau's marriages are announced at the end of Genesis 26 where we learn that "they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca." At a later date I will discuss Esau's wives but for now I want to focus on why these marriages infuriated his parents and Rebecca in particular. "The inclusion of Rebekah's distress regarding Esau's marriage to pagan women reveals that Rebekah was just as concerned about the covenant line as was Isaac" (Davidson, p.232). Esau's marriages seemed to be the catalysis that propelled Rebecca to procure the covenantal blessing for Jacob instead. In her mind, Esau's decision to marry Hittite women disqualified him as worthy of the role of future family leader.

Boldly, Rebecca instructed Jacob to pretend that he was Esau so that he could obtain from his father the blessing intended for his brother. "Can it be that God asked this particular deceit of her?...Had not Abraham been asked to sacrifice Isaac? Could she not be asked to sacrifice her marriage trust?" (Allen, p.183). What was it about the blessing that was so important to Rebecca that she went to great lengths to obtain it for Jacob? The "fact that Esau had already sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup already ensured Jacob's position as head of the family and a double share of the inheritance. The question then arises as to why the Blessing had to be secured at all" (Allen, p.195). The blessing itself gives us a clue: "Be master of your brothers" Isaac pronounces over Jacob. In other words, the blessing places the younger in authority over the older brother. Based on the divine revelation Rebecca received, she had a mandate to procure the Abrahamic covenantal blessing for Jacob, apparently by any means possible.

Though deceitful, Rebecca courageously took responsibility for her actions by telling Jacob that if there were any negative repercussions, she would shoulder the consequences. "Rivka knows that once uttered, a curse cannot be easily removed, but it can be deflected, and Rivka offers to take the consequences of the curse upon herself...Women who ask men to do something need to allay the fears of those men; both Abigail and the Wise Woman of Tekoa will offer to take upon themselves the consequences of the acts that they ask David to do. This is a very persuasive technique" (Frymer-Kensky, p.18). The implication is that by offering to take the blame, Rebecca was using a time-honored technique employed by ancient wise women.

Recent commentators have come to the conclusion that since Israel has historically been the weaker entity in a world where it was surrounded by superpowers, Israelites had an affinity for tales about underdogs and their successes through deceit. The "biblical world valued cunning in the underdog. Only the powerful value honesty at all costs. The powerless know that trickery may save their lives" (Frymer-Kensky, p.19). Furthermore, in "biblical narrative lying is not considered a moral issue of absolutes. Rather, deception is considered an acceptable and generally praiseworthy means for a weaker party to succeed against a stronger power..." (Prouser, p.15). Typically commentators point to Rebecca as a good example of how ancient women resorted to deceit because they had no other means to obtain their aims. Women "were justified in lying when they did it to preserve the covenant community. This supports the actions of Lot's daughters, Ruth, Michal, Esther, Rebecca, Tamar, the midwives, Rahab, Jael, the Tekoite woman, and Judith" (Prouser, p.17). The theory is that deception was justifiable if the biblical character acted in the service of the greater good of the community (Craven, p.48). Since it was one of their only tools for affecting change, women were seen as particularly inclined towards lying.

However, I disagree with this assessment and Rebecca's story will help me explain why. In the Hebrew Bible, she is known as a very strong female character. In particular she is considered even more powerful than her husband Isaac. So if lying is suppose to be a tool only used by the weak, surely Rebecca wouldn't need to use deceptive techniques. So too in war, spying and deceptive tactical maneuvers are not the providence of only the disadvantaged. In fact, during war, lying is called "good strategy." It's disingenuous to assume that ancient Israelite women were untrustworthy when most of the main characters, male and female, prevaricated both on and off the battlefield. "While it is clear that many biblical women engage in deceptive acts, it is not legitimate to label deception a female strategy...That a woman should lie is no more a characteristic of women than one of men, or of the deity" (Prouser, p.26-7). In addition, it is a fallacy to assume that lying was considered a negative trait. "The ancient Israelite audience would cheer Rebecca's quick thinking and clever antics than condemn them" (Prouser, p.17). The concept in the ten commandments of not bearing false witness refers to a legal setting wherein it is forbidden to condemn another person through mendaciousness. However, in every day contexts Israelites found deception to be a useful and acceptable social tool (Neyrey, pp. 38-42).

Several scholars have suggested that God did not reveal the plan directly to Isaac because it was impossible for him to "see" the will of God (Allen, p.205). Since Rebecca understood the divine plan, she became the one to determine the next recipient of the Abrahamic blessing. Allen argues that Rebecca, more than Isaac, was the link between Abraham and Jacob.

It should also be noted that several commentators have argued that Isaac knew all along that Rebecca had switched Jacob for Esau and therefore her actions were pathetically unnecessary. For more information about this contention, Aschkenasy spells out this view in her book Women at the Window, pp. 103-106. However, I respectfully disagree. Whether or not Isaac knew that Rebecca had schemed to obtain the blessing for Jacob rather than Esau, her motivations, mandates and morality remained identical. We can't vilify her for Isaac's knowledge or lack thereof.

Rebecca Sent Jacob Away

Rebecca knew that after Jacob received the blessing intended for Esau, she had to send her beloved son away. However, she had in mind more than just Jacob's protection from Esau's wrath. By sending him back to her family in the old country, she set in motion her plan to provide Jacob with wives of her choosing. Surprisingly her intentions have been hidden by the traditional translation of her words in

Genesis 27:46. Here's the JPS version: "I am disgusted (*kazti*) with my life (*chai*) because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life (*chai*) be to me?" Again we are dealing here with an idiom and any speculation that Rebecca considered suicide should be avoided (Jeansonne, *The Women*, p.63). Bakan points out the Hebrew word for life, *chai*, can also mean "kinsfolk." For example, in 1 Samuel 18:18 the RSV translates the word "Who am I, and who are my kinsfolk (*chai*)...?" And the word typically translated as disgusted or weary, *kazti*, can also mean "I am cut off" such as in Deut 25:12 where a form of the word, *v'kazotah*, designates punishment: "Then you shall cut off (*v'kazotah*) her hand..." Using these nuances, Bakan's translation of Rebecca's words would be as follows: "I will be cut off from my kinsfolk because of the Hittite daughters. If Jacob take a wife from the Hittite daughters such as these, of the daughters of the land, why do I have kinsfolk?" "Thus Rebekah's motive for her son to seek a wife from the house from which she came might well be that she should not be cut off from her matrilineal line" (Bakan, p.85-86).

However, even though Rebecca played the role of power broker her task was complicated. She had to figure out "how to get Jacob to act the hero, how to get Isaac to confirm Jacob's status in his capacity of male, father, and patriarch of the clan, how to deal with the inevitable anger on the part of Esau, and how to protect Jacob as the carrier of Abraham's vision (Fass, p.373). Rebecca spoke to Isaac and explained that Esau's two Hittite wives were an offence to her, nudging him to send Jacob to her family in the old country. "Though the initiator, Rebekah once again managed to allow her frail husband and son to feel that they were in control of their own destinies" (Fass, p.375). Isaac then "deliberately sends Jacob to the house of Bethuel, his mother's father, to find a wife among Laban's daughters. Isaac no longer defines the relationship through his father Abraham...but instead through the line of Rebecca" (Fischer, p.63). Many feminists find this type of indirect behavior offensive and an indication of the powerlessness women felt. However, it is not fair to maintain that only women used indirect communication techniques. Furthermore, even in our supposedly "liberated" American culture, the art of providing opportunities for others to take ownership of a project is considered a good management practice and is called "consensus building." I think we have to reassess the assumption that the only kind of legitimate power in any society is direct confrontation.

Conclusion

Allen posits that throughout her life Rebecca acted in accordance to the decrees of God including leaving her homeland, allowing Isaac to pass her off as his sister so that his life was saved, and securing the blessing for Jacob, God's chosen one. She is depicted as a godly woman interested in doing what she thought was right. Unlike many of the women in the Bible who were nothing more than birthing vessels for the perpetuation of the male line, Rebecca's actions indicate that it was possible for women in Israel to be viewed as capable of making "crucial decisions about their futures, whose prayers were acknowledged, who might know better than men what God designed, and who could appropriately take the steps necessary to support God's plans for the community" (Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 69).

In contrast, Isaac is not depicted as a strong spiritual model in the family. Isaac is merely the vessel through which Abraham's blessing is passed from one generation to the next. "We are told twice that Isaac is granted God's protection because of *Abraham's* obedience...There is no pattern of a direct call, test, and eventual works of merit in Isaac's life" (Allen, p.191). If the story of Isaac was truly patriarchal, it would have narrated the exploits of his life. Instead, we have been given a woman's story where everything depended on Rebecca.

For Further Reading

Allen, Christine Garside - "Who Was Rebekah? 'One Me Be the Curse, My Son!'" Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion, Rita M. Gross, ed.

Aschkenasy, Nehama - Women at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape

Bakan, David - And They Took Themselves Wives: The Emergence of Patriarchy in Western Civilization

Berquist, Jon L. - Reclaiming her Story: The Witness of Women in the Old Testament

Caspi, Mishael Maswari and Rachel S. Havrelock - Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the Female Journey

Clines, David J.A. - What Does Eve Do To Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament

Craven, Toni - "Women Who Lied for the Faith" in Justice and the Holy, ed. By Douglas A. Knight

Davidson, Richard M. - Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament

Davies, Eryl W. - The Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible

Exum, J. Cheryl - Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives

Fass, D.E. - "Unbinding Mother Rebekah," Judaism 41 (1992), 361-76.

Fewell, Danna Nolan and David M. Gunn - Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story

Fischer, Irmtraud - Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginnings

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva S. - Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories

Fuchs, Esther - Sexual Politics in Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman

Fuchs, Esther - "Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes" in Women in the Hebrew Bible, Alice Bach, ed.

Jeansonne, Sharon Pace - The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife

Meyers, Carol - "'To Her Mother's House': Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *Bet ab'* in The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald, David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard

Neyrey, Jerome - "Deception," in Biblical Social Values and Their Meanings, ed. By J.J. Pilch and B.J. Malina

Prouser, O. Horn - "The Truth about Women and Lying," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 61 (1994) 15-28

Reis, Pamela Tamarkin - "Take My Wife, Please: On the Utility of the Wife/Sister Motif," Judaism 41 (1992), 306-15.

Steinberg, Naomi - in Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, Carol Meyers, et al., eds.

Stanton, Cady - The (Original) Feminist Attack of the Bible www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/wb/