

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Toldot, Genesis, Chapters 25-28 | November 18, 2023

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Chagall, Isaac, and the IDF

Marc Chagall's relationship with his upbringing was complex, but his Jewishness unquestionably achieved intricate artistic expression in his depictions of biblical stories. The most celebrated of these grew out of his work as an illustrator for the French publisher Ambroise Vollard, who in 1931 suggested that Chagall create a series of etchings for a Bible featuring modern illustrations. Chagall threw himself into the project, traveling in order to study the biblically inspired art of Rembrandt and others, and completed over 100 etchings.

It is one of these scenes that we study today: the deception of the blind Isaac by Rebecca, and Isaac's bestowal of a blessing on Jacob that was intended for Esau.

To the reverent Jew, the tale of Isaac, Rebecca, Esau, and Jacob is one of the most troubling of tales. Isaac and Rebecca are clearly lauded as exemplary spiritual personalities in the Torah; yet nowhere does the text explicitly inform us why they act as they do. At the outset of our reading, Rebecca is prophetically informed that she will have twins, and that the younger ought to emerge as covenantal leader:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from within you; the one people shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:23)

This is, at least, the more obvious translation of the ambiguous Hebrew. The children make manifest their differences in adulthood, with Esau reflecting a capacity for physicality, and Jacob adopting a monastic existence:

And Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field, and Jacob a quiet man, dwelling in tents. (Genesis 25:27)

Esau further reveals himself to be unready for the task of covenantal perpetuation. He gladly sells, for a mess of pottage, his right as firstborn to lead familial cultic rituals, and he does exactly what Abraham warned against: he marries Canaanite women. Isaac and Rebecca are enormously displeased by Esau's choice of wife; yet despite all this Isaac seems prepared to bestow a blessing upon Esau, one which at least at first blush appears to involve the very perpetuation of the Abrahamic covenant.

All this reflects how this patriarch's personality is at least initially an enigma; Isaac admires his headstrong hunter of a son, and experiences the world through him.



And Isaac loved Esau, as he ate of his hunt . . . (Genesis 25:28)

But as the text makes clear, Isaac himself seems to show little initiative within the physical world.

Isaac dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham; and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. (Genesis 26:18)

All physical engagement by Isaac is rote repetition of Abraham's original actions, without any new creativity on his own part.

If Isaac is difficult to comprehend, his wife is perhaps even more so. She never shares her prophecy with her husband, and, foreseeing disaster in Isaac's choice of blessing recipient, she does not confront him. Instead, she orders Jacob to disguise himself, come to his aged blind father claiming to be Esau, and thereby receive the blessing.

All this is mystifying. We are told by the Bible of the love between Isaac and Rebecca. Why then does beloved wife not speak to her husband, rather than resorting to deception?

We are told by the Bible of the love between Isaac and Rebecca. Why then does beloved wife not speak to her husband, rather than resorting to deception?

Whether or not he intended it, I believe this intricate etching by Chagall captures the entirety of the Isaac-Rebecca-Jacob story, allowing us to explain it better. Let us study what Chagall produced:



The artist Richard McBee succinctly summarizes what we see:

Rebecca is peeping out from behind the kitchen table watching her plan unfold while in the distance she is seen again perched atop a camel, echoing back to her first romantic encounter with Isaac, the very same husband she now conspires to deceive.

Let us further analyze the image. The kitchen table is a symbol of domesticity, but here it is converted into a barrier, signifying that in the midst of the love, between Isaac and Rebecca there was nevertheless division and distance within the home, resulting in lack of true communication. In this etching, Rebecca cowers behind the table not because she does not wish to be seen but because her attitude toward Isaac is one of awe, or even fear.

Why should Rebecca find herself in a state of awe regarding Isaac? Chagall gives us the answer: the camel that looms in the distance. As McBee notes, the humped creature harks back to the original marital meeting of Isaac and Rebecca from last week's reading. Rebecca's first action upon seeing Isaac is described in a fascinating manner:

And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebecca lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she fell off her camel. (Genesis 24:64–65)

Most medieval commentators take this to mean that she intentionally alighted from her mount, but Rabbi Naf-tali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin reads the phrase literally. Isaac had gone out to engage in profound spiritual meditation, and Rebecca, startled by the sublime mystical power that radiated from the man she had seen, fell off her camel.

Chagall's placing a camel in an etching depicting Rebecca's awe at Isaac highlights the original awe she experienced at their first encounter. It reminds us, as Rabbi Ezra Bick put it, that this romantic rendezvous was so spiritually overwhelming that it marked their future relationship; Rebecca "could never overcome the feeling of trepidation and awe in his presence, even when she knew intellectually that she was right concerning a particular matter."

Chagall's image thus hints to us of the awe, reticence, and therefore lack of communication featured in Rebecca's relationship with Isaac. This is why she did not attempt to dissuade her husband when he announced his intention to bless Esau, or even inform him of the prophecy she had herself been told.

But what about Isaac made him so ethereal, so awe-inspiring? The answer begins and ends with the fact he was the only patriarch who had been brought as an offering atop Mount Moriah, the holiest spot on earth. Isaac, though saved from the sacrificial knife, was nevertheless entirely transformed by the experience.

In understanding this, Chagall is again of use to us. In his biography of Chagall, Jonathan Wilson reflects on one of the signature features of Chagall's art, which is the floating—or soaring—of individuals. This was first famously captured in the painting "Soaring over Vitebsk:"



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Wilson notes that the painting is a pun. Today, we see the word *luftmensch* as an insult, describing someone who has no real idea what is happening in his world. But literally it can be understood as someone who walks on air, who is not bound by this world, and Chagall attempts to turn the word into a compliment, to use it to denote a spiritual experience. It reflects, we might suggest, the Jewish capacity to seek heavenly sanctity when all existence on earth was persecution and pain.

Isaac, the man once bound to an altar on the most sacred site in the world, who was placed and poised at the gateway between heaven and earth, is just such a man of the air. Isaac loves Esau's engagement with the world because it reflects just what he, Isaac, cannot bring himself to do. As Rabbi Bick writes, Isaac:

was so overwhelmed by spirituality as to be relatively detached from mundane concerns. He was a dreamer, a visionary, contemplative, inward, detached—a *luftmensch*. . . . His mind is directed upward and inward; his field is depth of experience rather than practical living. . . . Isaac, in our experience, does nothing in the material world other than dig the very same wells that his father once did. He reflects a single-minded dedication to the holy.

Isaac's resplendent spirituality explains why Rebecca might have had difficulty discussing her own point of view with her husband. But how could a man who had soared heavenward think to bestow the blessings of Abraham's covenant upon Esau, his unworthy elder son?

We return to the biblical etching by Chagall in teasing out the answer. Let us study it once more.





Rebecca's crouching concealment reflects the awe that was between her and her husband ever since her fall from the camel. In the image, Jacob, as described in the text, has placed goat hair on his arms, in order to mimic the physical form of his brother, inspiring Isaac to utter a fascinating phrase in the midst of his blindness:

The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. (Genesis 27:22)

In the etching Isaac is depicted as a hasidic *rebbe*, a mystical master. With one hand he is bestowing a blessing, placing it directly on the head of his son, whom he believes to be Esau but is actually Jacob. But what about his other hand? It seems to be hovering, as if, aside from the blessing being given, Isaac also has another blessing to bestow.

Perhaps he does. Isaac, according to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, never intended for the spiritual covenant of Abraham to be perpetuated through Esau. Indeed, as Jacob receives the blessing intended for Esau, what is spoken of by Isaac is material success, and power:

May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fat places of the earth. . . . Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. (Genesis 27:28)

No mention is made of the covenant of Abraham. The emphasis is on abundance in the field and success in the political realm; this is the blessing intended by Isaac for Esau, the “hunter, man of the field.”

Jacob, at Rebecca's direction, receives that blessing through deception; and Esau, enraged, declares his dedication to killing Jacob. Before Jacob flees, Isaac bestows upon him another blessing, a spiritual one:



May God Almighty bless you, . . . and may He give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants. (Genesis 28:3-4)

The spiritual component of the Abrahamic inheritance was always intended for Jacob, who like Isaac, had not ventured out to the world, who remained a “man who dwelled in the tents.”

Chagall, intentionally or not, separates Isaac’s two hands and captures the fact that Isaac had thought to split his inheritance between his two sons. Isaac, the heavenly man who admired Esau’s physical engagement, sought to give material blessing to his older child. To Jacob, the monastic man, was to be given the blessing of Abraham, of perpetuating the monotheistic mission. Isaac, the mystically inclined sage whom Chagall gives us, thought to keep the encounter with the world of the spirit exactly as it was for him: pure, unencumbered by real life. And so he decided to split his blessings: to give physical bounty to Esau, and to leave spiritual encounter with Jacob.

Because of Rebecca, Judaism is not merely for meditating monastics. Judaism is unafraid of the world, and it engages and sanctifies the world.

Blessed by God with two children, he intuited that their gifts were entirely different. Esau was a man of the outdoors. Why, he thought, encumber Jacob, the spiritual personality, with material matters? Why not, with two children, give the material blessing to the child less religiously inclined, and allow Jacob to devote himself to the world of the spirit?

This was a mistake, and it is Rebecca who emerges as a hero who refuses to rend material and spiritual asunder. Because of Rebecca, Judaism is not merely for meditating monastics. Judaism is unafraid of the world, and it engages and sanctifies the world. The Jew prays for Jewish wellbeing, but must also work to ensure it, and even, when necessary, fight for it. The Jew must be prepared to work in the field and, when necessary, in the battlefield. Endowing physical engagement with the world with spiritual and moral vision merges the themes of the two blessings of Isaac, and gives a new meaning to Isaac’s exclamation:

The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. (Genesis 27:22)

Thus does Chagall’s seemingly simple etching actually embody in one small scene the entire tale of Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau. The camel reminds us of the awe, and lack of candor, that existed between patriarch and matriarch. Isaac’s hands bespeak his attempt to split the blessings between physical and spiritual; but both, thanks to Rebecca, were bequeathed to Jacob, and the continuation of his story will depict the challenge of uniting the spiritual and the physical in his own life. Jacob, the monastic man who dwelled inside the tent, must learn to become a man of the world, without losing his moral and spiritual perspective.

Jonathan Wilson’s biography notes that today, Chagall’s many images of the floating *luftmensch*, with the rest of his artistic memories of the shtetl past, are made more emotionally resonant after that world was lost. This is indeed the case. Yet we must marvel at the miraculous Jewish world that exists today, especially in Israel. These past weeks have featured Jews physically fighting for their security, for the wellbe-



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ing of their families. Yet we have also seen the love of Judaism, and deep sense of identity, reflected by these Israeli soldiers.

Perhaps most meaningful to me was the recent video of soldiers serving inside a tank as the sun set on Friday evening, a makeshift Sabbath meal unfolding among them. They sang songs about the Sabbath peace even as they sat and served in this weapon of war, highlighting how their heroic service was guided by the vision and voice of Jacob. The songs were those of Jewish homes throughout the centuries, reflecting a perspective that harked back to the tents of the patriarchs, but the uniforms they wore bespoke a Jewish people engaged with the world, preserving a polity, and a miraculous one at that.

The soldiers served, and they sang; the worlds of the physical and spiritual merged as the tank became a tent and a tent a tank. The blessings of political engagement and religious reverence became one, and the vision of Rebecca was made magnificently manifest.

It is impossible not to be inspired by soldiers such as these; and looking to the week ahead, let us pray that the further flourishing of Judaic identity, of radiant religious engagement, is joined with an ensured Israeli security—and military victory.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

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Additional Resources

Richard McBee on Chagall's The Blessing of Jacob by Isaac, "Mystical Storytelling at MOBIA: Chagall and the Russian Jewish Theater at Jewish Museum," December 22, 2008. [Click here to read.](#)

