

Joyce's *Ulysses* is the only text that rivals the Babylonian Talmud in both its complexity and its stream-of-consciousness-style, jumping from topic to topic. In many ways, Joyce designed his masterpiece to be a Jewish book. Its main character, Leopold Bloom, was modeled on the assimilated Jews who were Joyce's companions in his exile from Dublin in Paris, Zurich, and Trieste. In the book, Joyce's characters quote the Bible frequently, sometimes even in Hebrew. In many ways the Jewish tradition is used in *Ulysses* as a foil, or counterbalance, for the main organizing principle of the work, a modern retelling of the journeys of Odysseus on his way home from Troy.

In this passage, we see Stephen Dedalus holed up in the National Library with more than a few drinks in him. He attempts to explain to various scholars his theory that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is based largely on the adultery of Shakespeare's own wife. His friend Buck Mulligan nudges Stephen to stop the banter and transition to an explanation of his novel theory.

But Stephen can't find his voice. He can't speak. And the metaphor he chooses comes directly from this week's Torah portion: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau" (Gen. 27:18–23). Stephen's voice is like the voice of Esau. It is absent.

## Parashat Toledot 5775

## פרשת תולדות תשע"ה



### Father, Have You No Blessing Left for Me?

By Rabbi Leonard A. Sharzer, MD, Associate Director for Bioethics of the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies, JTS

In Parashat Toledot, the saga of our somewhat dysfunctional ancestral family continues, and included within is one of the family's saddest and most poignant episodes. Yitzhak, scion of the family and heir to his father's covenant with God, has just married at the age of 40. He and his wife, Rivkah, remain childless for 20 years, when, in response to his entreaties to God, she conceives. Unlike her late mother-in-law's easy pregnancy at an advanced age, Rivkah's pregnancy is complicated. We are told right away that "the children, the 'sons' in fact, were struggling within her womb" (*Vayitrotzetzu habanim bekirbah*; Gen 25:22). However, she does not know the reason for her discomfort and distress.

According to midrash, she asks around and discovers that no one has ever had a pregnancy experience like this. In desperation, she cries out, "Why me?" (*Lamah zeh anokhi?*; *Ibid.*). She consults an oracle and is told, rather elliptically, that two nations are in her womb, and even more enigmatically, "And the greater the younger will serve." (*verav ya'avod tza'ir*; Gen. 22:23). The Hebrew is unclear: who is the subject and who is the object in the sentence? She gives birth to twin boys who could not be more different from each other. The elder, a hairy redhead, is an outdoorsman, a hunter. The younger, smooth-skinned, is a homebody. Their father, Yitzhak, we are told, loves the elder, while Rivkah, their mother, loves the younger, and we realize that we are being set up for an internecine conflict that will recapitulate that between the two half-brothers, Yitzhak and Ishmael. Although we do not know it yet, we might guess that Rivkah will play a significant role in this conflict, just as Sarah did in the earlier one.

The initial incident in the conflict occurs when Esav, the elder, returns famished from a hunting trip and is persuaded by his brother Ya'akov to sell him his birthright in exchange for a bowl of the stew he is preparing. Here we have the first inkling of the intent of the oracle given to Rivkah during her pregnancy.

After a period of famine in which the family travels to Gerar, Rivkah is asked,

as was Sarah, to say she was the sister of her husband rather than his wife for fear that he would be killed if his hosts realized they were married. It turns out the fear was baseless, but it demonstrates that Rivkah, like Sarah, has bought into the family enterprise, that of establishing the belief in the one true God on earth. Like Abraham and Sarah, she left her home, her birthplace, and her family, and has become a full partner with Yitzhak. But unlike Sarah and Abraham who remained equal partners, Rivkah is poised to take over as the managing partner. Unlike Abraham who had to make the difficult decisions in the expulsion of Ishmael and the episode of the Akedah, it is Rivkah who will make the difficult decision in her nuclear family.

After the sojourn in Gerar, we are told Yitzhak is old and blind. The midrash speculates that his blindness was the result of the incense offering of Esav's pagan Hittite wives. As the story unfolds, Yitzhak sends Esav out to hunt some game and bring him a meal so that Yitzhak might give him his blessing. Rivkah, overhearing the request, orders Ya'akov to impersonate Esav, covering him with goatskins and giving him food to bring to his father so that he might trick Yitzhak into giving him the blessing instead of his brother.

Yitzhak notes that the hairiness and smell are Esav's and that the voice and manner of speech are Ya'akov's. Despite these discrepancies, he allows himself to be persuaded by Ya'akov's declaration that he is in fact the elder son, Esav, and blesses him. It is reminiscent of the adage, "there are none so blind as those who would not see." In our modern idiom, it seems that what Yitzhak is looking for is plausible deniability so that when Esav eventually shows up, he can put the blame on Ya'akov for deceiving him. When Esav does come later with dinner, Yitzhak asks, rather disingenuously, "Who was it, then, that was just here to receive the blessing," when it is perfectly obvious who it was.

If Yitzhak is dissembling and knew all along whom he was blessing, it raises the question of why he did it, since we learned early on that he loved Esav. The midrashim try to explain it away by saying that he only loved Esav when he brought him game but he loved Ya'akov all the time, transactional as opposed to unconditional love. I believe the answer is simpler. Yitzhak knows better than anyone the pain of being the "chosen son." He is "responsible" for his big brother being sent off to the wilderness, perhaps to die, and he was the one bound on the altar on top of the mountain. It may have been a relief to him that his beloved Esav was not to inherit the covenantal mantle.

What about Rivkah? Is she the conniving wife and mother? Or is she the original Tiger Mom? Does she really love only Ya'akov? If so, when she hears that Esav plans to kill him once Yitzhak dies, why does she ask, "Why should I lose you both in a single day?" Isn't it as likely that when she made the decision to follow Eliezer back to Canaan (and it was her

decision—one of the few times a woman in the Bible is given decisional capacity), she demonstrated that she was part of the family and that she had unreservedly bought into the family enterprise, and this was her "test." She knows that the mantle of the covenant can fall to only one of her twins and she knows which one is more capable of advancing the cause. The difficulty during her pregnancy was a harbinger of the difficult decision she would face later and which would ultimately explain the esoteric response from the oracle.

There is no happy ending to this story. Rivkah loses her beloved Ya'akov, Yitzhak disinherits his beloved Esav, Ya'akov heads off alone to face a future of wrestling with his demons, and Esav remains in anguish, the pathos in his plea, "Have you no blessing left for me?" heartrending. What is most disturbing, however, is not the sadness of the story, it is rather that most of the commentaries on it are little more than apologetics for the actions of Ya'akov and Rivkah, and vilification of Esav. They go on at length about Esav's evil nature from the moment of conception, his idolatry, his violence—he is not only a hunter but a brigand, a rapist, and a serial adulterer who got what he deserved—all in order to justify an act of deceit and fraud. Therein lies the meaning we can draw from this story and the apologists. Denigrating the victim is not a strategy for reconciliation and harmony. By the time the brothers meet again some 21 years later, nothing is forgotten and perhaps nothing forgiven; but there is a reconciliation and it comes from a place of self-awareness and mutual respect.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

### The Voice of Esau

By Rabbi Noah Bickart, Adjunct Instructor of Talmud and principal, Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School, JTS

—Come, he said. Let us hear what you have to say of Richard and Edmund. You kept them for the last, didn't you?

—In asking you to remember those two noble kinsmen nuncle Richie and nuncle Edmund, Stephen answered, I feel I am asking too much perhaps. A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella. Lapwing.

Where is your brother? Apothecaries' hall. My whetstone. Him, then Cranly, Mulligan: now these. Speech, speech. But act. Act speech. They mock to try you. Act. Be acted on.

Lapwing.

I am tired of my voice, the voice of Esau. My kingdom for a drink. On.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*, episode 9, "Scylla and Charybdis"