Esau and Jacob (1640s), Matthias Stom

But what if Jacob's deceptions were necessary? This depiction of Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau imagines the key moment when Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup. The most striking personality in this depiction is Rebecca. Standing with her two sons in this crucial moment, her expression is at once one of eagerness and exasperation. Despite his claims, it seems that Esau is less at risk of starvation and more unwilling to wait for his captured prey to cook. Indeed, he sells the legacy of generations for the sake of his immediate comfort. Perhaps Rebecca knew all along the trouble that would come if Esau took up the mantle of leadership. Here she seems to wait eagerly as Jacob secures both the birthright of his father, and the hope of generations to come.

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תולדות תשפ"א

Esau's Primal Scream

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Sometimes words fail us. When they do, depending on the cause and our own propensities, we resort to song, dance, or other forms of wordless expression. And sometimes we scream. Primal screams that communicate an agony beyond verbal expression resound throughout the Torah.

The first belongs to murdered Abel, whose blood cries out from the ground for justice (Gen. 4:10). Another belongs to Hagar as she watches her son wither to his death (Gen. 21:16). Israel screams in servitude in Egypt (Exod. 2:23) and later during their trials in the wilderness (Num. 14:1).

Perhaps the most piercing scream of all occurs in Parashat Toledot when first-born Esau realizes that his younger brother, Jacob, had tricked him out of receiving his father Isaac's blessing. Esau approaches his father to receive the blessing only to learn that just moments before, Jacob had stolen his identity and his blessing. When Isaac informs him of this, Esau releases a great and bitter primal scream (Gen. 27:34).

Esau screams. He screams for the loss he feels and for the deception he experienced. At their core, Esau's screams communicate his frustration at a world that does not conform to communal norms nor to his personal expectations. His father's blessing belonged to him as the eldest son. In ancient Israel, first-borns had a unique status (Exod. 13:2) and received double the family inheritance (Deut. 21:17). For Esau, Isaac's blessing Jacob defied all his assumptions of the way the world *should* work and how his life *should* unfold.

I have always felt for Esau, whose brother and mother betray him. But in the last years of political turmoil, natural disasters, rising antisemitism, and

COVID-19, Esau's screams resonate with me more. Like Esau, I feel as if I live in a world that does not conform to my expectations.

For the first time in my life, my basic assumptions about how I live and work, how my children are educated, how my family and friends gather, how we live Jewishly are challenged. Nothing feels certain. What seemed to me to be fundamental truths about the way the world *should* work have been upended. Often, I want to scream like Esau.

Blessedly for me, the Torah reflects this topsy-turvy world. It tells a story of individuals that defy norms and expectations to become a people that defy norms and expectations. Abraham abandons his father's house. Younger sons Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all rise to prominence. Against norms and odds, God chooses Israel, Jacob's descendants and not Esau's, to become God's first-born (Exod. 4:22).

Like our own, the Torah's topsy-turvy world is difficult to inhabit, but I firmly believe that it offers deep religious insights and reflects the world I prefer to live in personally and religiously. I do not want to live in a determined world.

A determined world—a world in which norms are fixed and expectations met—does not allow for change, growth, and surprise. It does not allow for miracles that interrupt and defy the natural world, showcasing divine power and changing the course of human history.

A determined world does not make room for God, but it also does not make room for humanity. A world in which paths and futures are fixed disempowers humans and does not allow them to make change and set their own course. Even more unappealing to me is that a determined world does not allow for intimate relationships among human beings or between humans and God. Intimacy thrives in a world that allows for change, growth, and surprise.

In the Torah's undetermined world, God can disrupt nature, part seas, and choose a humble unworthy people to love (Deut. 7:7–8). Human beings also have the power and freedom in this world to set their course, to defy norms, and even to choose God. Jacob makes this clear in next week's parashah when he vows to be in relationship with God *only if* God protects and provides for him (Gen. 28:20–22).

In the Torah's undetermined world, God can have an intimate relationship with Israel—a relationship that erupts in a moment, is founded on desire and choice, and that develops over time. This relationship is not fixed and cannot be manifest in a determined world. It changes. God and Israel can love and reject each other only to come together again in love (Isa. 54:7).

I do not want to live in a determined world. I do not want to live in the world described by the biblical outlier Kohelet in which the earth remains the same forever. I do not want to inhabit religiously a world in which nothing is new under the sun—where assumptions are never challenged—or where my relationship with God cannot develop and deepen.

Rather, I want to live in a world that sometimes makes me want to scream, but that allows for change and repair—a world in which an intimate relationship with God is possible—a world in which Esau's primal screams and my own, in time, become joyful cries of reconciliation (Gen. 33:4).

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

A Sibling Rivalry for the Generations

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Do the Jewish people exist because of a bowl of lentil soup? Toledot presents the story of Jacob and Esau, a sibling rivalry with cosmic implications. The twin brothers who would come to father their own nations struggled even within the womb. Different as they were, they both prized the birthright that the already elderly Isaac would bestow upon his first born.

The word *toledot* here denotes the genealogies with which the portion opens (Gen. 25:19-21) but the word, fittingly, also means *history*. Why would the Torah establish the birthright of the ancestor whose name our people bear through acts of guile? Unsurprisingly, Rashi too was bothered by this, even going so far as to speculate on the relative order of conception versus birth for twins and concluding that Jacob was indeed the rightful heir.