

Finding Our Way (and God's) in the World

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What do you make of our matriarch Rebecca? Certainly she is the boldest and most independent of the mothers. When as a girl she sees a stranger at the well, she rushes to water his caravan of thirsty camels and then invites him to stay at her house. When offered the chance to travel with this man back to a distant land and a mysterious husband, she volunteers without hesitation. When her pregnancy becomes difficult, she seeks out God and challenges God with the bold question, “Why do I need this?” When her husband seems ready to bless the wrong son, she quickly conspires to rearrange the action so that Jacob will receive the primary blessing. In all of these actions, Rebecca is seen as a woman of strength and decisiveness.

Yet Rebecca's strength has dreadful consequences. In deceiving her blind husband, she humiliates him and causes him to shudder in fear. In depriving her eldest son Esau of his blessing, she causes him to explode in anger and to plot his brother's murder. And in securing for Jacob both blessings, she causes him to flee for his life, alone into the lonely night of exile. Is Rebecca strong and righteous, or is Rebecca headstrong and wrong?

Presumably, the way to answer this question is to look at the prophecy received by Rebecca when she sought out God. Here is U.C., Berkeley Professor Robert Alter's translation of the oracle found at the beginning of our parashah ([Gen. 25:23](#)):

Two nations—in your womb,
Two peoples from your loins shall issue.
People over people shall prevail,
The elder, the younger's slave.

The problem is that this prophecy is ambiguous, especially in its final clause, “*v'ra'v ya'avod tza'ir*.” Biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman suggests that this could mean either “the elder shall serve the younger” or “the elder, the younger shall serve.”

Rebecca, together with most readers, interprets the prophecy in the first fashion, understanding that Esau must be subjugated to Jacob. This interpretation sets the course for their family and perhaps for the history of their descendants. But perhaps Rebecca got it wrong? Perhaps the oracle truly meant that the younger boy, Jacob, was to serve his older brother, Esau? Perhaps Isaac got it right in trying to bless Esau with physical dominion ([27:29](#)), while reserving for Jacob the covenantal blessing ([28:3–4](#)). Perhaps this family could have been spared the fraternal anger, hatred, and division if Rebecca had only understood her prophecy differently. But perhaps all of this tension was ordained by God and was a necessary stage in the emergence of Jacob as Israel, patriarch to 12 tribes.

Rebecca's prophecy is not the only ambiguous utterance found in the Bible. JTS Professor Stephen A. Geller studies this phenomenon in his 1996 book, *Sacred Enigmas*. In a 2007 volume of essays in honor of Dr. Geller, JTS Professor Benjamin D. Sommer continues this path with a chapter titled, “Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy.” Dr. Sommer examines, among other texts, an incident described in [1 Kings 22](#). There, the evil northern king Ahab gets 400 prophets to support him in his desire to invade the neighboring country, Aram. Yet the southern king Yehoshafat asks him to seek one more opinion from the prophet Micaihu ben Yimlah. This prophet repeats his

colleagues' words, "Go up, so that the Lord will deliver into the hands of the king," but interprets the prophecy in the opposite fashion. Rather than predicting that the enemy will be delivered into "the hands of the king," it is the king who will be delivered into the hands of the enemy. Ahab ignores Micaihu's interpretation, invades Aram, is taken captive, and killed.

Dr. Sommer shows that the 400 prophets erred not in their hearing of the message, but in its interpretation. Perhaps they were cowed by the king into delivering the message that he desired. Perhaps they simply lacked the courage and the zeal to speak truth to power. But perhaps the message itself was intentionally ambiguous, and the responsibility of interpretation was invested in the prophet by God. Indeed, Dr. Sommer points to [Numbers, chapter 12](#), to show that God intentionally obfuscates to all prophets save Moses. The prophet must be attuned to the divine message, but must also interpret with integrity, guided by a sense of justice and righteousness.

The Rabbis also discern this phenomenon of obscure prophecy. In the [Talmud \(Yevamot 49b\)](#) they say, "all of the prophets saw through a cloudy speculum (*aspekliya she'eina me'ira*); but our Master Moses, saw through a clear speculum." Maimonides builds on this theme, differentiating the prophecy of Moses from that of other prophets. Moses can prophesy at will; Moses can see the matter clearly; Moses can stand and speak with God without fainting; Moses alone is unable to return to ordinary life because his prophetic commission is clear and continuous (Yesodei HaTorah 7:6).

For most prophets, then, interpretation is as important as the prophecy itself. Indeed, interpretation is part of the prophecy. This is reminiscent of what the Rabbis say about dreams. In the [Talmud \(Berakhot 55a\)](#), Rav Hisda claims that a dream without interpretation is like an unread letter. Indeed, the dreamer has an opportunity to seek a better interpretation and to transform an evil omen into a blessing.

What should guide interpretation? Prophecy is not magic. The role of the prophet is not to force the hand of God, but to be guided by God's way. What is God's way? Justice and

righteousness, kindness and peace. Perhaps Rebecca understood correctly, and her boys were destined to battle. Perhaps she was justified in deceiving Isaac and depriving Esau of his blessing. But it seems to me that an interpretation that ensures enmity is of necessity flawed.

We can't know how the story might have developed had Rebecca allowed Isaac to bless his older son. But we can work in our own capacity to interpret our sacred tradition in ways that create just and compassionate communities. As our families gather in thanksgiving for the earth's bounty, may we also be blessed in appreciation for one another, so that we become not like Jacob and Esau, but like brothers and sisters who dwell together in peace.

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