



Carnegie Shul Chatter

November 4, 2021



Toldot in a Nutshell

Genesis 25:19–28:9

Isaac and Rebecca endure twenty childless years, until their prayers are answered and Rebecca conceives.

She experiences a difficult pregnancy as the “children struggle inside her”; G-d tells her that “there are two nations in your womb,” and that the younger will prevail over the elder.

Esau emerges first; Jacob is born clutching Esau’s heel. Esau grows up to be “a cunning hunter, a man of the field”; Jacob is “a wholesome man,” a dweller in the tents of learning. Isaac favors Esau; Rebecca loves Jacob. Returning exhausted and hungry from the hunt one day, Esau sells his birthright (his rights as the firstborn) to Jacob for a pot of red lentil stew.

Brotherly Love — Not

If there is one thing definitely lacking in the Book of Genesis it is brotherly love. First, Cain kills his brother Abel. Then Isaac and Ishmael are so different that Sarah has Abraham banish Ishmael from the family. And now, in this week’s parshah, it is Jacob and Esau who are at odds with one another and Jacob actually cons Esau out of his father, Jacob’s, blessing. And, in a few weeks, we will read about Joseph’s brothers selling Joseph into slavery.

As we see many times in the Torah, our ancestors do not always do good things. There is, of course, the building of the Golden Calf. Can anything be much worse? And the deceit of the spies. And Korach’s rebellion against Moses. No one is perfect, not even Moses.

Yes, people do bad things. They did bad things in Biblical times and they do bad things today. Has there ever been a time when there were no wars in the world? Probably not.

But man has the capacity to do great things. Man has the capacity to improve himself and the world in which he lives. We are all given free choice. We can choose to love our brothers or to hate our brothers. Why not choose love?

In Gerar, in the land of the Philistines, Isaac presents Rebecca as his sister, out of fear that he will be killed by someone coveting her beauty. He farms the land, reopens the wells dug by his father Abraham, and digs a series of his own wells: over the first two there is strife with the Philistines, but the waters of the third well are enjoyed in tranquility.

Esau marries two Hittite women. Isaac grows old and blind, and expresses his desire to bless Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father's favorite food, Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father. Jacob receives his father's blessings for "the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land" and mastery over his brother. When Esau returns and the deception is revealed, all Isaac can do for his weeping son is to predict that he will live by his sword, and that when Jacob falters, the younger brother will forfeit his supremacy over the elder.

Jacob leaves home for Charan to flee Esau's wrath and to find a wife in the family of his mother's brother, Laban. Esau marries a third wife—Machalath, the daughter of Ishmael.

And the Blessing Goes to...

I have always been troubled by Jacob's taking of his father's blessing from Esau. Should he have done it? Here is Rabbi Jonathon Sack's commentary on the question:

Was Jacob Right to Take the Blessings? (Toldot)



Was Jacob right to take Esau's blessing in disguise? Was he right to deceive his father and to take from his brother the blessing Isaac sought to give him? Was Rebecca right in conceiving the plan in the first place and encouraging Jacob to carry it out? These are fundamental questions. What is at stake is not just biblical interpretation but the moral life itself. How we read a text shapes the kind of person we become.

Here is one way of interpreting the narrative. Rebecca was right to propose what she did and Jacob was right to do it. Rebecca knew that it would be Jacob,

not Esau, who would continue the covenant and carry the mission of Abraham into the future. She knew this on two separate grounds. First, she had heard it from God Himself, in the oracle she received before the twins were born:

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

Esau was the elder, Jacob the younger. Therefore it was Jacob who would emerge with greater strength, Jacob who was chosen by God.



Second, she had watched the twins grow up. She knew that Esau was a hunter, a man of violence. She had seen that he was impetuous, mercurial, a man of impulse, not calm reflection. She had seen him sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. She had watched while he “ate, drank, rose and left. So Esau despised his birthright” (Gen. 25:34). No one who despises his birthright can be the trusted guardian of a covenant intended for eternity.

Third, just before the episode of the blessing we read: “When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and also Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca.” (Gen. 26:34) This, too, was evidence of Esau’s failure to understand what the covenant requires. By marrying Hittite women he proved himself indifferent both to the feelings of his parents and to the self-restraint in the choice of marriage partner that was essential to being Abraham’s heir.

The blessing had to go to Jacob. If you had two sons, one indifferent to art, the other an art-lover and aesthete, to whom would you leave the Rembrandt that has been part of the family heritage for generations? And if Isaac did not understand the true nature of his sons, if he was “blind” not only physically but also psychologically, might it not be necessary to deceive him? He was by now old, and if Rebecca had failed in the early years to get him to see the true nature of their children, was it likely that she could do so now?

This was, after all, not just a matter of relationships within the family. It was about God and destiny and spiritual vocation. It was about the future of an entire people since God had repeatedly told Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a great nation who would be a blessing to humanity as a whole. And if Rebecca was right, then Jacob was right to follow her instructions.

This was the woman whom Abraham’s servant had chosen to be the wife of his master’s son, because she was kind, because at the well she had given water to a stranger and to his camels also. Rebecca was not Lady Macbeth, acting out of favouritism or ambition. She was the embodiment of loving-kindness. And if she had no other way of ensuring that the blessing went to one who would cherish it and live it, then in this case the end justified the means. This is one way of reading the story and it is taken by many of the commentators.

However it is not the only way. Consider, for example, the scene that transpired immediately after Jacob left his father. Esau returned from hunting and brought Isaac the food he had requested. We then read this:

Isaac trembled violently and said, ‘Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!’

When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, ‘Bless me – me too, my father!’

But he said, ‘Your brother came deceitfully [be-mirma] and took your blessing.’

Esau said, ‘Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: he took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!’ Then he asked, ‘Haven’t you reserved any blessing for me?’ (Gen. 27:33-36)



It is impossible to read Genesis 27 – the text as it stands without commentary – and not to feel sympathy for Isaac and Esau rather than Rebecca and Jacob. The Torah is sparing in its use of emotion. It is completely silent, for example, on the feelings of Abraham and Isaac as they journeyed together toward the trial of the Binding. Phrases like “trembled violently” and “burst out with a loud and bitter cry” cannot but affect us deeply. Here is an old man who has been deceived by his younger son, and a young man, Esau, who feels cheated out of what was rightfully his. The emotions triggered by this scene will long stay with us.

Then consider the consequences. Jacob had to stay away from home for more than twenty years, fearing of his life. He then suffered an almost identical deceit practised against him by Laban when he substituted Leah for Rachel. When Jacob cried out “Why did you deceive me [rimitani]” Laban replied: “It is not done in our place to place the younger before the elder” (Gen. 29:25-26). Not only the act but even the words imply a punishment, measure for measure. “Deceit,” of which Jacob accuses Laban, is the very word Isaac used about Jacob. Laban’s reply sounds like a virtually explicit reference to what Jacob had done, as if to say, “We do not do in our place what you have just done in yours.”



The result of Laban’s deception brought grief to the rest of Jacob’s life. There was tension between Leah and Rachel. There was hatred between their children. Jacob was deceived yet again, this time by his sons, when they brought him Joseph’s bloodstained robe: another deception of a father by his children involving the use of clothes. The result was that Jacob was deprived of the company of his most beloved son for twenty-two years just as Isaac was of Jacob.

Asked by Pharaoh how old he was, Jacob replied, “Few and evil have been the years of my life” (Gen. 47:9). He is the only figure in the Torah to make a remark like this. It is hard not to read the text as a precise statement of the principle of measure for measure: as you have done to others, so will others do to you.

The deception brought all concerned great grief, and this persisted into the next generation.

My reading of the text is therefore this. The phrase in Rebecca's oracle, *Ve-rav ya'avod tsair* (Gen. 25:23), is in fact ambiguous. It may mean, "The elder will serve the younger," but it may also mean, "The younger will serve the elder." It was what the Torah calls a *chiddah* (Numbers 12:8), that is, an opaque, deliberately ambiguous communication. It suggested an ongoing conflict between the two sons and their descendants, but not who would win.

Isaac fully understood the nature of his two sons. He loved Esau but this did not blind him to the fact that Jacob would be the heir of the covenant. Therefore Isaac prepared two sets of blessings, one for Esau, the other for Jacob. He blessed Esau (Gen. 27:28-29) with the gifts he felt he would appreciate: "May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness – an abundance of grain and new wine" – that is, wealth. "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you" – that is, power. These are not the covenantal blessings.

The covenantal blessings that God had given Abraham and Isaac were completely different. They were about children and a land. It is this blessing that Isaac later gave Jacob before he left home (Gen. 28:3-4): "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – that is, children. "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham" – that is, land. This was the blessing Isaac had intended for Jacob all along. There was no need for deceit and disguise.

Jacob eventually came to understand all this, perhaps during his wrestling match with the angel during the night before his meeting with Esau after their long estrangement. What happened at that meeting is incomprehensible unless we understand that Jacob was giving back to Esau the blessings he had wrongly taken from him. The massive gift of sheep, cattle and other livestock represented "heaven's dew and earth's richness," that is, wealth. The fact that Jacob bowed down seven times to Esau was his way of fulfilling the words, "May the sons of your mother bow down to you," that is, power.

Jacob gave the blessing back. Indeed he said so explicitly. He said to Esau: "Please accept the blessing [*birkati*] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." (Gen. 33:11) On this reading of the story, Rebecca and Jacob made a mistake, a



forgivable one, an understandable one, but a mistake nonetheless. The blessing Isaac was about to give Esau was not the blessing of Abraham. He intended to give Esau a blessing appropriate to him. In so doing, he was acting on the basis of precedent. God had blessed Ishmael, with the words "I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 21:18) This was the fulfilment of a promise God had given Abraham many years before

when He told him that it would be Isaac, not Ishmael, who would continue the covenant:

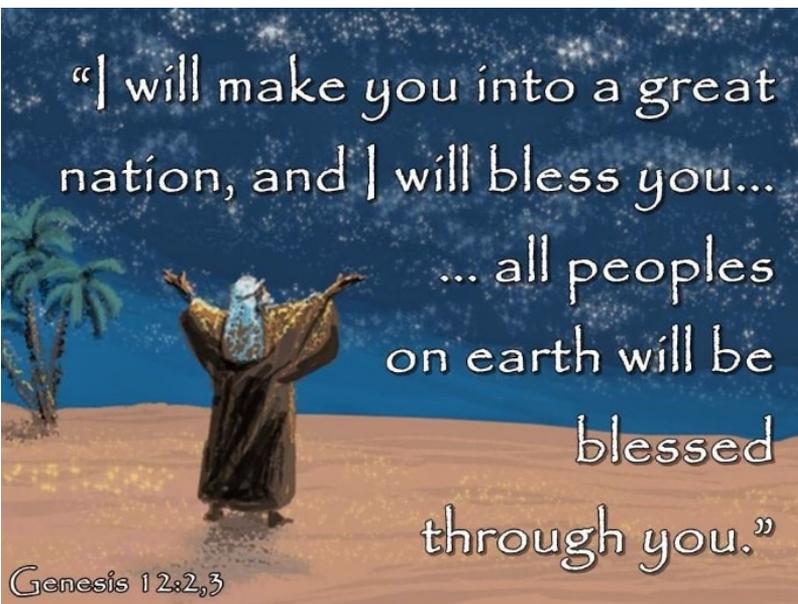
Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 17:18-21)

Isaac surely knew this because, according to midrashic tradition, he and Ishmael were reconciled later in life. We see them standing together at Abraham's grave (Gen. 25:9). It may be that this was a fact that Rebecca did not know. She associated blessing with covenant. She may have been unaware that Abraham wanted Ishmael blessed even though he would not inherit the covenant, and that God had acceded to the request.

If so, then it is possible all four people acted rightly as they understood the situation, yet still tragedy occurred. Isaac was right to wish Esau blessed as Abraham sought for Ishmael. Esau acted honourably toward his father. Rebecca sought to safeguard the future of the covenant. Jacob felt qualms but did what his mother said, knowing she would not have proposed deceit without a strong moral reason for doing so.

Do we have here one story with two possible interpretations? Perhaps, but that is not the best way of describing it. What we have here, and there are other examples in Genesis, is a story we understand one way the first time we hear it, and a different way once we have discovered and reflected on all that happened later. It is only after we have read about the fate of Jacob in Laban's house, the tension between Leah and Rachel, and the animosity between Joseph and his brothers that we can go back and read Genesis 27, the chapter of the blessing, in a new light and with greater depth.

There is such a thing as an honest mistake, and it is a mark of Jacob's greatness that he recognised it and made amends to Esau. In the great encounter twenty-two years later the estranged brothers meet, embrace, part as friends and go their separate ways. But first, Jacob had to wrestle with an angel.



That is how the moral life is. We learn by making mistakes. We live life forward, but we understand it only looking back. Only then do we see the wrong turns we inadvertently made. This discovery is sometimes our greatest moment of moral truth.

For each of us there is a blessing that is ours. That was true not just of Isaac but also Ishmael, not just Jacob but also Esau. The moral could not be more powerful. Never seek your brother's blessing. Be content with your own.

You Can Come Home Again

Carnegie Shul members Sondra and Tom Greer visited Carnegie from their home in Florida last week. Prior to leaving our region, they attended our High Holiday services every year. Sondra took the opportunity to look at her family yahrzeit plaques and reminisce. Shown here, Sondra holds the plaque recognizing the couple's planting of our new tree outside the building in memory of their loved ones.



Yahrzeits

This week the Carnegie Shul acknowledge the yahrzeits of:

Anna Osgood York
Constance Sara Sherman

Minnie Sherman Kaliski
Cilli Moskovitz
George Raskin

Dr. Zayne Wilk
Golda Shenderovich

May their memories be for a blessing.

Donations

The Carnegie Shul is most grateful for the following recent donations:

In Memory

Rick D'Loss

In memory of Sally Kreisberg Olszewski

Lois Ash Metlika and Jodi Herb

In memory of Sandie Ash the 26 of Tishrie

Roger Wilk

In memory of Dr. Zayne Wilk

Special

Sondra and Thomas Greer
Plaque and Tree

Robert M Mandelkorn
High Holiday Donation

Joel and Micki Roteman
High Holiday Donation

Kristallnacht Commemorations

On November 9–10, 1938, Nazi leaders unleashed a series of pogroms against the Jewish population in Germany and recently incorporated territories. This event came to be called Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) because of the shattered glass that littered the streets after the state-sanctioned vandalism and destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes. Kristallnacht marks the first instance in which the Nazi regime incarcerated Jews on a massive scale on the basis of their ethnicity, and is considered an essential turning point in the Nazi persecution of Jews.

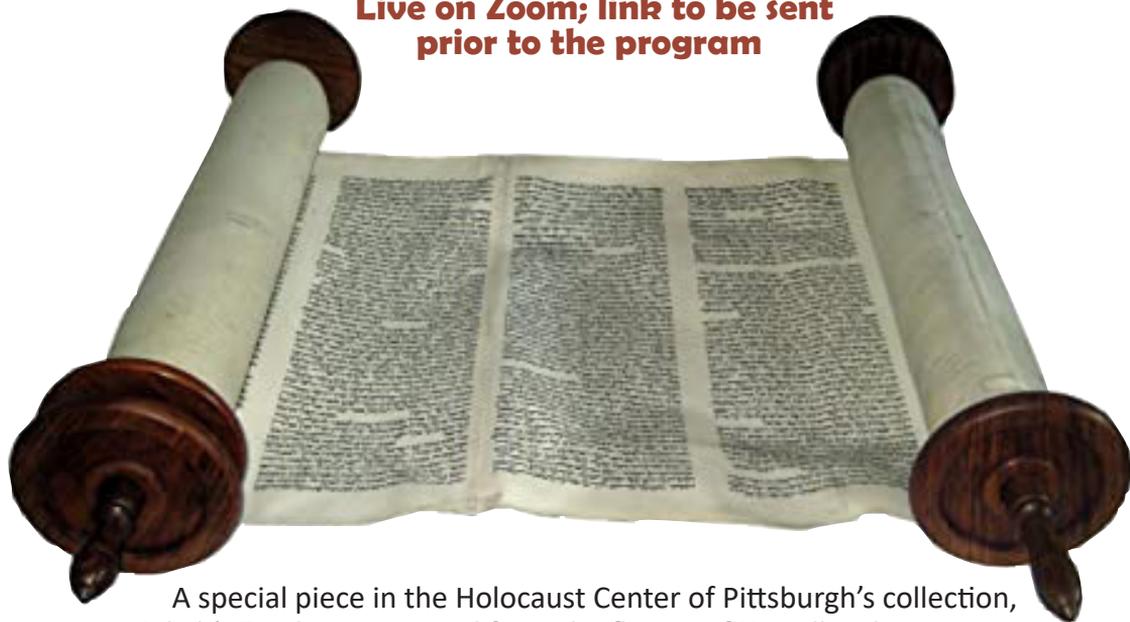
See following pages for information about two programs commemorating Kristallnacht.

The Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh Presents

Jakob's Torah: A Kristallnacht Commemoration

Tuesday, November 9, 2021, 7pm

**Live on Zoom; link to be sent
prior to the program**



A special piece in the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh's collection, Jakob's Torah was rescued from the flames of Kristallnacht in

Germany and travelled the world accompanying its rescuer, Jakob Weinblum, as he and his family spent 8 years as refugees in Shanghai, then 30 years in New York City. Considered too damaged to be used as a ritual scroll, the Torah finally found a permanent home in Pittsburgh, where its extraordinary story could be shared with the world.

Register at:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/jakobs-torah-a-kristallnacht-commemoration-tickets-185102876687>

Participants will receive free access to the PBS documentary **Harbor From the Holocaust** on November 8 and 9, as well as a new virtual exhibit from the Holocaust Center exploring the history of Jakob's Torah. During the commemoration program, there will be a community screening of the local short documentary **An Unlikely Refuge** and interviews with Marilyn Weinblum, Jakob's daughter-in-law, and Iris Samson, who produced both *Harbor* and *Refuge*.

**Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh's annual Kristallnacht program is
generously supported by Edgar Snyder.**

ANNUAL COMMEMORATION OF KRISTALLNACHT

STORIES OF RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

MARTHA LEIGH AND AMY COLIN

RETELL THE INCREDIBLE STORIES OF THEIR PARENTS AND
RELATIVES DURING WORLD WAR II

9 NOVEMBER 2021

4:00 – 5:15 PM (EST, PITTSBURGH)

ZOOM LINK: [HTTPS://PITT.ZOOM.US/J/91000414859](https://pitt.zoom.us/j/91000414859)

Meeting-ID: 910 0041 4859

Event organized by the Department of German and the Jewish Studies
Program in cooperation with the City for the Cultures of Peace

Martha Leigh grew up in Cambridge, UK. Having first gained a degree in English Literature, she later studied medicine and trained as a physician, working as a General Practitioner in the East End of London for 30 years. Her first book, *Couldn't afford the eels. Memories of Wapping 1900 – 1960* was published in 2008. Her book *Invisible Ink* (published in 2021) vivifies the fascinating story of her mother who escaped the Holocaust and her uncle and aunt who fought in the French resistance. Martha lives in London with her husband.



Amy Colin (PhD, Yale), President of the international research organization City for the Cultures of Peace, holds a tenured professorship in German at the University of Pittsburgh since 1989. She held teaching and/or research appointments at Yale, Univ. of Washington (Seattle), Cornell, Harvard, Cambridge, Tübingen, FU-Berlin, and Paris 7- Denis Diderot. Her publications include: *Paul Celan Holograms of Darkness* (1991), the co-authored and co-edited volumes *Paul Celan - Edith Silbermann* (2010) and *Edith Silbermann: Czernowitz – Stadt der Dichter* (2015).

