

ON BLESSINGS, APPEARANCES AND COMMUNICATION

Parashat Toledot: [Genesis 25:19-28:9](#)

Haftarah: [I Samuel 20:18-42](#)

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Some years ago I was teaching the Ten Commandments in the Midwest. During the break, a man approached me, told me how much he enjoyed my presentation, and then added, "What a shame that you became the Chosen People through deception!"

His comment was especially powerful because Abraham was chosen to teach "the Way of God, which is to do what is fair and just" (Gen. 18:19). How does that square with our ancestor tricking his father for the blessing?

Many homilies and apologetics have been said about this. Focusing on the *peshat*, the best explanation I have seen is by R. Ovadiah Seforno (Italy, 16th century). In his commentary to 27:28, he points out that Isaac gives two distinct blessings. The first he intends for Esau and is about prosperity and leadership: "the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine. May peoples serve you and tribes bow down to you..." (27:28-29).

This blessing is radically different from "the blessing of Abraham" that Isaac gives Jacob as he leaves home (28:3-4). This "blessing of Abraham" includes, as Rabbi Abraham son of Maimonides writes, the spiritual calling of continuing Abraham's sacred work.

What this means is that even though Isaac favors Esau (25:28), he acts equitably in blessing his children. Esau has better leadership qualities: he provides for himself as a hunter (25:27), is married, and is quite assertive when need be (27:34-40). Jacob is still "sitting in the tents", single, and very much a "mama's boy" who obeys her commands even when it is to act unethically (27:6-19).

On the other hand, Jacob is clearly the more spiritual of the two. Even his failures (shaking down his famished brother for the birthright, deceiving his father about the blessing) come from a desire to pursue the spiritual calling.

So Isaac gives each son the most appropriate blessing. He envisions a partnership between the two brothers, with Esau the economic and political leader and Jacob the spiritual guide.

Are we chosen because of deception? No. From the outset Isaac intends to give the spiritual blessing to Jacob. And, I might add, that is the only blessing that Jacob really got. For most of our history we were serving other nations, not vice versa. But the blessing to teach God's word to the world, the one Jacob received honestly, is indeed the one that history shows we have. Blessings cannot be stolen.

Now, here is a question: with Isaac acting so equitably, why do things go so wrong?

This has to do with communication. A classic fallacy is, "If you loved me you would know what I am thinking/feeling/wanting/needing." This is simply not true. We need to communicate in order to prevent misunderstandings.

Isaac does not consult with Rebecca or even share with her what he has in mind, so she has no idea that he plans to bless each son. This allows for the impression that Isaac will bless Esau, his favored son, and leave Jacob with nothing. Rebecca, in turn, also does not confront Isaac with her concerns. Neither party is communicating.

It is not enough to do the right thing. We need to be concerned with how things appear. In the words of the Mishnah (Shekalim 3:2), we need to act transparently so that we "find grace and good favor in the eyes of God and people" (Proverbs 3:4). It is not enough to be right with God. We need to make our intentions clear and in that way find good favor in the eyes of people, as well.

Rabbi Uzi Weingarten created Communicating with Compassion. He is a certified Advanced Trainer of Effective Communication Strategies; teaches skills of interpersonal communication on-site and in phone conference courses; and does individual coaching/consulting. More information on his offerings: www.cwcseminars.com.