

Rebecca: Woman of Faith, Part 5

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The Disturbing Story

A dear friend of mine used to often say (quoting her Rabbi's words): always look for the "Menorah pattern". That means we will have to finish this series next time, with Rebecca (7) – not today with Rebecca (6) – and the "menorah pattern" certainly presents a good explanation of number 7. Besides, we really need to thoroughly understand what is going on in this fascinating story—being undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of biblical narrative, Genesis 27 also presents one of the most difficult stories of this book.

We all know the story, many refer to it as the story of the stolen blessing. There is no doubt that this narrative raises a lot of disturbing moral questions and that each person is presented in a somewhat negative light here. First of all, of course, Jacob doesn't come off very well: not only does he act behind his brother's back, but worse yet, he actively deceives his innocent and unsuspecting father. The father, Isaac, on the other hand, is often called blind not only physically, but also spiritually, not able to recognize the will of God. As for Rebecca—our primary object here—at this point, almost everybody remembers that she is a sister of Laban, who is a cunning and greedy deceiver and liar: like brother like sister, say some, or 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree'. We all also understand that God's way can never be paved by the human cunning and devices.

But having said all of that, let us enter this story remembering that, after all, God is still calling himself the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob; that after all, Rebecca is one of the Matriarchs of Israel; and if God saw their hearts – and we know He did, of course,- and even with all their weaknesses and mistakes, and even sins, He has still found them worthy to be called by their names—so let us try to see it as a story of people who meant well, who tried to do God's will in their lives. Let us try to see the best in each one of them, beginning with Rebecca – as God always sees the best in each one of us.

How Old Were the Brothers?

When we think of this story, we always imagine young men contending for the father's blessing. Scripture doesn't provide their age at the time of blessing, nor does it say how old Isaac was when he felt he was about to die (by the way, he lived for many years afterwards). However, we do have a way to calculate the brothers' age, and even though it is Rebecca we are concerned with here, it's still important for us to understand how long she had been holding this promise in her heart, waiting for it to be fulfilled. We need to know that in order to understand what was going on within Rebecca when she was making her quick and crucial decision.

Let's get engaged in some calculations based on the Scripture. We are told that Jacob was 130 years old when he came to Egypt.^[1] How old was Joseph at this time? The Torah says that Joseph was 30 years old "when he stood before Pharaoh"^[2] and that there were 5 years of famine left (7 years of abundance had passed) when Joseph called Jacob into Egypt^[3]. So, Joseph was about $30+7+(7-5) = 39$ years old when Jacob came to Egypt at 130. That means Jacob was about 91 years old when Joseph was born—a "son of his old age"^[4] indeed. In Padan Aram, after Joseph was born, Jacob asked Laban to allow him to leave.^[5] However, Laban did not let him go, and Jacob ended up spending 20 years with Laban: 14 years for his wives and 6 for his sheep and cattle.^[6] The time when Jacob asked Laban to let him go, had to be after the first 14 years. This would imply that Jacob came to Padan Aram when he was $91-14 = 77$ years old.

This means that **"the boys" were 77 years old at the time of this story**, and even though their 77 years probably felt very differently from how it feels now, still, they were not exactly young men. It also means that Isaac was 137 at that time and that he would live 43 more years – he died when he was 180^[7] (at some point, when we have a series about Isaac, I'll share with you why he thought about death at that particular time). This also means that for a very long time—for 77 years—Rebecca had been faithfully waiting for the fulfillment of the prophecy that she received during her pregnancy.

Rebecca's Predicament

We read that Rebecca overheard the conversation between her husband and her son Esau. In English translations, it's usually translated as "*Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to Esau his son.*"^[8] However, in Hebrew it's clear that she was not a part of this conversation and just happened to hear it – she overheard it.

We don't know whether Rebecca shared God's message with her husband – but even if she did, it was probably a long time ago, maybe 77 years ago. On the other hand, she is the one who knows for sure that Jacob is destined to be the spiritual heir of Isaac, and it looks like their relationship with Isaac, and their communication are not at their best at this point—something has definitely changed in their relationship over these long years. We spoke previously about Isaac and Rebecca being a very loving and tender couple, and indeed they were.

But it seems to be very different now: this one small detail about Rebecca overhearing their conversation, speaks volumes. Isaac was planning to bless their firstborn son and he “forgot” to tell Rebecca about it! She just “happened to hear it”— or did she overhear it on purpose? It's a very big deal, this blessing, and it should be a family event; the fact that he didn't tell her, unfortunately, means a lot.

This couple, who used to have such a tender and close relationship, now seem to barely communicate at all. Is it because of their parental favoritism, because each one of them prefers a different son? Or because of chapter 26 – another sister/wife story? We are not told, but the fact is, they don't seem to talk anymore and Rebecca is on her own in her decision-making. She had probably long been apprehensive of some such event, maybe even on the lookout for it. And here it comes: in a few hours, the blessing might be lost for Jacob forever—or so she thought. What will she decide?

Questions:

Why do you think the age of Esau and Jacob could impact the direction of this story? Do you have any habitual character flaws that become worse over time?

What happened to the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca? How could they grow so far apart? What elements keep a marriage solid and growing?

Why do you think Isaac failed to tell Rebecca about the blessing? Why is honesty important in a relationship?