

Our parashah begins with the news that Isaac pleads with God on his wife's behalf, for she cannot conceive. Soon Rebekkah is pregnant, but the pregnancy is a difficult one. She is carrying two children in her womb, and they are struggling with each other in utero. This cannot be comfortable; she says "*im ken, lamah zeh anochi?*" – the Torah's way of saying "why is this happening to me?" Approaching God with her question, she receives the following answer:

“Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;
One people shall be mightier than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger.”

When the twins are born, the first one emerges red and hairy. This is Esau. His brother emerges next, holding on to Esau's heel as he is born, and so he is named Ya'akov – Jacob. We learn that Isaac loves Esau for the taste of the game that Esau hunts, and that Rebekah loves Jacob, but we are not told why. I would like to suggest that the reason why Rebekah loves Jacob is that she has understood God's words to mean that that Jacob will rule over his brother Esau, and that is reason enough for her.

Many claim that it is only men who have relationships with God in our tradition. This, however, is not the case. Torah, and the Tanakh, clearly describe relationships between God and Sarah, as well as God and Rebekah, and many other named and unnamed women. Both of these matriarchs receive direct communication from God regarding the birth of the sons that will be born to them, the sons who will be the heirs to the covenant with God. Indeed, a close reading of the previous parashah, Chayyei Sarah, is named for Sarah our Mother and describes at length the choosing of the woman who will succeed her in the line of Mothers. It is Rebekah that is sought and found in that parashah, and who now seeks to fulfill God's will that Jacob be the next heir to the covenant. It is Rebekah, not Isaac, who receives the word from God that Jacob is to be the heir, and she acts on that promise in our parashah this week.

In the parashah, we learn that Isaac has grown old, and his vision has dimmed. Often, seeing in the Torah is not literal, but figurative – seeing is understanding, and failure to see is failure to understand. We speak this way in English as well – we say, "I see," and it means "I understand." In this state of diminished seeing, or understanding, Isaac summons his favorite son, Esau, and instructs him to hunt and cook some of the game that he so loves to eat, and bring it to him, so that he can bless him. Rebekah overhears this conversation, and, knowing which son is to be heir to the covenant, sends Jacob to impersonate his brother and receive the blessing. She disguises Jacob in his brother's clothing, and places skins on his arms and neck, so that Jacob will smell like the fields and feel hairy, to his father, like Esau. Rebekah herself prepares the special meal. Jacob protests, worried that he will be cursed for his trickery (a somewhat ironic note), but Rebekah tells him that she will take any potential curse upon herself.

When Jacob appears before his father, Isaac has some questions: "who are you, my son?"

Jacob replies, “it is me, Esau [is] your firstborn.” Isaac asks: “how did you do this so quickly?” Jacob replies: “YHVH your God made it happen.” Isaac asks his son to come closer so that he can feel him, so that he can know if it really is Esau. Jacob obeys, and Isaac notes that the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. Isaac fails to recognize (see) that this is indeed his son Jacob, and so he blesses him. However, his doubt remains, and he asks, “are you my son Esau?” Jacob replies “I am.” Instructing his son to draw near and bring him the fine meal, Isaac eats and drinks and once again blesses him. He asks his son to draw near for a kiss, and notices that he smells like his son Esau, who carries the scent of the fields. He blesses him again.

As soon as Jacob leaves his father’s presence, Esau appears, bearing the meal that he had prepared for his father. Isaac asks: “who are you?” Esau replies “I am Esau your first-born.” Isaac is overcome with great trembling, and is distraught to realize that Jacob has tricked him into giving him Esau’s blessing. Or has he?

Did Isaac really not know? Is Rebekah’s clarity of vision counterbalanced by Isaac’s apparent blindness? Or did Isaac really not wish to know? Did he wish to believe that his favorite son is also God’s favorite? The number of times that Isaac questions his son’s identity strongly suggests that he knows, and yet he does not seem to claim or wish to know. He is blind or he blinds himself to the truth. Why? Perhaps to avoid hurting Esau’s feelings – so that he can say “it wasn’t me who cheated you, it was your brother.” Rebekah, to fulfill God’s will, is prepared to do anything. Rebekah is the agent of decision-making in her marriage with Isaac. It is Rebekah who is chosen and chooses to become Isaac’s wife, demonstrating the agency, the generosity and the kindness that together with her beauty, virginity, and kinship with Isaac fulfill the terms that Abraham’s servant sets out for the choosing of a wife for Isaac. For reasons we can only guess, Rebekah chooses not to tell Isaac what God has willed for their children, and what she will be doing about it. That is a topic for another day. www.rabbimollykarp.com