



### Rivka - Liberating Vision

#### Background

Avraham's trusted servant, Eliezer, seeks a bride for Yitzchak, the promised child whom Sara had borne with Avraham in their old age. On account of her familial connection, her sprite enthusiasm and generous spirit, Eliezer invites Rivka to marry Yitzchak. Rivka freely chooses to leave her home and family and journey to an unknown land and life - not unlike Avraham a generation before who was called by God to leave his home and kin. Rivka and Yitzchak experience difficulty conceiving; God responds to the couple's desire for children. During the tumult of her pregnancy, Rivka requests from God an explanation of what she is experiencing in her body. God reveals the destiny of the twins she is carrying. Each child will bear a nation; Esav, the older one, will be subordinate to Yakov.

This predetermined fate finds expression in friction between the two young people; Yakov is anxious to wrest the firstborn privileges from Esav. The contest culminates in a dramatic scene that Rivka orchestrates in order to secure the father's preferred blessing for Yakov, the child she favors.

#### Biblical Source

א ויהי כִּי-יָקַן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶין עֵינָיו מֵרָאִת; וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-עֵשָׂו בְּנֹו הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲנִי. ב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה-נָא זָקְנָתִי; לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי. ג וַעֲתָה שָׂא-נָא כְּלִיךְ תְּלִיךְ וְקִשְׁתְּךָ; וְצֵא הֲשָׁדָה וְצוּדָה לִי צִידָה (צִיד). ד וַעֲשֵׂה-לִי מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְהִבִּיאָה לִי--וְאָכְלָהּ: בְּעֶבֶר תִּבְרַכְךָ וְנִפְשִׁי בְּטָרֶם אָמוֹת. ה וְרִבְקָה שָׁמַעַת--בְּדַבֵּר יִצְחָק אֶל-עֵשָׂו בְּנֹו; וַיֵּלֶךְ עֹשֶׂו הֲשָׁדָה לְצוּד צִיד לְהִבְיָא. ו וְרִבְקָה אָמְרָה אֶל-יַעֲקֹב בְּנָה לֵאמֹר: הִנֵּה שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת-אָבִיךְ מְדַבֵּר אֶל-עֵשָׂו אַחִיךְ לֵאמֹר. ז הִבִּיאָה לִי צִיד וַעֲשֵׂה-לִי מִטְעָמִים וְאָכְלָהּ; וְאַבְרַכְכָּה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי. ח וַעֲתָה בְּנִי שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי--לְאֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְצוּה אֹתָךְ. ט לֶךְ-נָא אֶל-הַצֹּאֵן וְקַח-לִי מִשָּׁם שְׁנֵי גְדִי עֲדִים טָבִים; וְאַעֲשֵׂה אֹתָם מִטְעָמִים לְאָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּ. י וְהִבֵּאתָ לְאָבִיךָ וְאָכַל בְּעֶבֶר אֲשֶׁר בְּרַכְךָ לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ. יא וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-רִבְקָה אִמּוֹ: הֵן עֹשֶׂו אַחִי אִישׁ שָׁעֵר וְאָנֹכִי אִישׁ חָלָק. יב אִוִּילִי מִשְׁנֵי אָבִי וְהִיִּיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כַּמְתַּעֲתֵעַ; וְהִבֵּאתִי עָלַי קִלְלָה וְלֹא בְרָכָה. יג וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִמּוֹ עָלַי קִלְלַתְךָ בְּנִי; אֲךָ שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְלֶךְ-נָא. יד וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֵּא לְאִמּוֹ; וַתַּעַשׂ אִמּוֹ מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּ אָבִיו. טו וַתִּקַּח רִבְקָה אֶת-בְּגָדֵי עֹשֶׂו בְּנָה הַגָּדֹל הַסְּמֹדֵת אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה בְּבֵית; וַתַּלְבֵּשׂ אֶת-יַעֲקֹב בְּנָה הַקָּטָן. טז וְאֵת עֶרְת גְּדִי הַעֲדִים הַלְּבִישָׂה עַל-יָדָיו--וְעַל חִלְקֵת צֹאנָיו. יז וַתִּתֵּן אֶת-הַמִּטְעָמִים וְאֶת-הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂתָה בְּיַד יַעֲקֹב בְּנָה. (בראשית כז)

1 When Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am." 2 And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. 3 Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. 4 Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die."

5 Rivka had been listening as Yitzchak spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home, 6 Rivka said to her son Yakov, "I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, 7 'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you,

with God's approval, before I die.' 8 Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. 9 Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. 10 Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies." 11 Yakov answered his mother Rivka, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. 12 If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing." 13 But his mother said to him, "Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me." 14 He got them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared a dish such as his father liked. 15 Rivka then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in the house, and had her younger son Yakov put them on; 16 and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. 17 Then she put in the hands of her son Yakov the dish and the bread that she had prepared. (Genesis 27)

Rivka acts unilaterally, decisively, and deceptively. What are the grounds for her behavior and under what conditions, if any, are they acceptable or desirable?

## Midrash

[*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* is a collection of elaborations on the Torah, *midrashim*, reputed to have been authored by Eliezer the Great. Rabbi Eliezer was one of the five main disciples of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, among the great sages during the period of the Jerusalem Temple and its destruction in 70 C.E.]

הגיע ליל הפסח וקרא יצחק לעשו בנו הגדול ואמר לו, "בני, זה הלילה כל העולם כולו אומרים בו הלל, ואוצרות הטללים נפתחים בזה הלילה. עשה לי מטעמים עד שאני בעודי אברכך." ורוח הקדש משיבה ואומרת, "לא תלחם את לחם רע עין (משלי כג:ו). הלך להביא ונתעכב שם.

אמרה הרקה ליעקב, "בני, הלילה הזה אוצרות טללים נפתחים בו, העליונים אומרים שירה, הלילה הזה עתידים בניך להגאל מיד שעיבוד, הלילה הזה עתידים לומר שירה. עשה מטעמים לאביך עד שהוא בעודו יברכך."

והבאתי עלי קללה ולא ברכה. יעקב היה בקי בתורה, פחד לבו על קללת אביו. אמרה לו אמו, "בני, ברכות עליך ועל זרעך. ואם קללות, עלי ועל נפשי", שנאמר, "עלי קללתך בני." (פרקי דרבי אליעזר פ' לג)

The eve of Passover arrived, and Yitzchak called to his eldest son Esav and said to him: "My son, this is the night that the whole world is singing Hallel, and the treasure chests of dew open up this night. Prepare me special foods so that I will bless you while I am still alive." And the Holy Spirit answered saying: "Do not eat the bread of one who has an evil eye" (Proverbs 23.6). He went to bring it, and was delayed there.

Rivka said to Ya'akov: "My son, on this night, the treasure chests of dew open up, the heavenly ones are singing Hallel. On this night, your future children are destined to be redeemed from slavery; on this night, they are destined to sing the song (Hallel/the Song at the Sea). Prepare special foods for your father so that he will bless you while he is still alive."

AND I SHALL BRING UPON MYSELF A CURSE AND NOT A BLESSING (Genesis 27.12) Ya'akov was knowledgeable about the Torah and he feared in his heart the curse of his father. His mother said to him: "My son, blessings will be for you and for your seed; and if there are curses, they are upon me and upon my soul." As it says, UPON ME YOUR CURSE MY SON (Genesis 27.13).

(My translation/rendering of *Pirkei de'Rebbe Eliezer* 33.)

### Questions for Discussion

Concerning the blessing of the next generation, compare and contrast the acts attributed to Yitzchak and those attributed to Rivka, in the text and according to the midrash. Why does Rivka use deception to perform her will? To what extent is Rivka's use of deception related to gender-determined roles and power? Explain.

In the Torah, the firstborn son is privileged to inherit more. In Genesis, *Bereishit*, the struggle to determine the main hereditary line of the early Jewish families occupies the consciousness of all of the protagonists. In terms of personal destiny, how is birth order determinate of life experience in the Torah and according to your life insights?

In comparison with the biblical text, what innovations does the midrash propose about Rivka's actions? What is the significance of these innovations?

The foremothers are particularly assertive in the process of choosing the principle heir. In each generation, the result is that the text overturns the birthright norm of primogenitor, the firstborn inheritor. What is the significance of the fact that the Torah and this midrash affirm Rivka's action of subverting the institution of inheritance in relation to the spiritual destiny of the nascent Jewish People?

One of the features of biblical Judaism is that it is riveted to cycles of the earth and nature in Israel. The Passover festival corresponds with the barley harvest and the onset of the period when dew sustains the land during the rainless season. At the time that spring flowers blossom forth from the darkness, Passover celebrates the release of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. According to the chronology of the Torah, this event transpires in the Book of Exodus, long after the night of Yitzchak's blessings. Nonetheless, the midrash emphasizes Rivka's vision of the future enslavement and redemption of the Jewish People - she enacts the ritual of the night of the Passover *seder*, preparing special foods, and explaining to her child about the bondage of the Israelites and their liberation. Explore the implications of setting this blessing scene anachronistically on the eve of Passover, where Rivka institutes the Passover experience in her family in the context of the blessing of her children.

In the biblical text, Rivka takes full responsibility for her action - she will accept a curse if that undesirable outcome transpires. How does the midrash relate to Rivka's willingness to offload the risk from her child? How much risk is it appropriate to take in order to fulfill our visions?

## Links for Inquiry

Tikva Frymer-Kensky devotes a chapter in *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002) to Rivka, "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle: The Rivka Stories". For a review of F-K's methodology, [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/300/journal\\_hebrew/reviews/2004/04-07/review097.htm](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/300/journal_hebrew/reviews/2004/04-07/review097.htm)

Concerning Rivka's attitude toward Esav,  
<http://www.hir.org/torah/rabbi/5761/toldot61.htm>

Rivka's action has implications beyond her family, for national identities. Consider this feminist analysis of the construction of identity, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" by Sally Haslanger (*Nous* 34:1 (March 2000): 31-55), <http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/work.html>

See also a view on the reconciliation between Yakov and Esav in national terms, <http://www-english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/vayishlah.html>

## Summary of Issues

Relationships among family members shape personal and even national character. Familial modes of interaction respect, conflict with, or subvert the norms of society. The blessing that one generation passes to the next, or with-holds, influences future life significantly. In terms of taking responsibility for shaping the destiny of her progeny, Rivka is an exemplary parent. Her model raises challenges about what means are appropriate to fulfill one's vision, the level of personal responsibility required, and how to enable every child to experience blessing.

The institution of prayer and ritual is a complex process. Sages attribute the daily services to the model of the Temple and to the patriarchs. According to an ancient midrash, Rivka foresees the bondage and envisions the exodus from Egypt. At a bold moment, she instructs her child about one of the central tenets of the Jewish narrative - the aspiration to and possibility of liberation from oppression, and the singing of praise in thanksgiving for freedom. Together with the special foods, these are the principle elements of the Passover seder. By implication, one ancient midrashic tradition accredits the institution of one of the central observances of the Jewish People to the matriarch, Rivka.

## **Methodology Matters**

A midrash usually comes to explain and elaborate about a gap, an apparent contradiction, or fill in information missing from the text. What prompts this midrash? How can the midrash justify these innovations - what "hooks" are there in the text and beyond the text that might support the midrash?

## **Contact**

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