TOLDOT

There are four aspects to this parshah that strike me.

First, the action entails separations. Most obviously, tracing back to the earlier brothers Isaac and Ishmael, they are to be driven apart by the jealousy of Sarah. More importantly, whatever the reason, the brothers have to be separated. So, all the generations of Abraham’s principal sons will experience separation as the fundamental action marking their lives, from abraham himself, to isaac and his brother, to jacob and esau, to joseph and his brothers.

More broadly, the action that precipitated Jacob’s theft of his brother’s blessing, which had been foreshadowed by his manipulative extraction of Esau’s birthright, was preceded by the episode with Abimelech, which I will come back to in a moment.

The second aspect involves the blessing. Although it is not described as such, the actions of God in response to Isaac’s pleading for a solution to Rebekka’s barrenness, is to enable her to conceive, doubly. Isaac asked, and God responded. Then Rebekka asks God why her two children in the womb are struggling, and God responds again, assuring her that she was bearing two nations. When they are grown, in fulfillment of the prophecy of God, one becomes mightier than the other, that is, one receives his father’s innermost blessing, and the other doesn’t. The central issue of this parshah is what to make of Jacob and Rebekka’s action of tricking the blind patriarch out of his blessing, conniving so as to obtain what he could not take back. He consoles Esau, but cannot retrieve the blessing once given. In chapter 27, when this trickery takes place, the term bless or blessing is repeated many times, with its finality joined to Isaac’s notion that he is giving this blessing on his deathbed, that it is with the Lord’s approval (27:7), that it will following the giving of a meat dish to Isaac. If a curse comes, should the trick be discovered, Rebekka says she will take the curse on herself. But when Jacob goes to his father, and asks for his innermost blessing, stating that he was so quick because God gave him good fortune, Isaac is fooled by the hairy pelt Jacob puts on, and gives him his blessing. He still doubts, and asks again if Jacob is really his son Esau, and when Jacob lies, Isaac says, serve me that I might give you my innermost blessing. He still doubts, smells Jacob, whose clothing Rebekka has filched from Esau’s wardrobe, and says the smell is like the smell of the fields that the Lord his blessed. Then he speaks the words that can’t be taken back, “Let the peoples serve you. And nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers. And let your mother’s sons bow to you. Cursed by they who curse you, Blessed they who bless you (28-29).

Jacob takes off, Esau comes and asks for the blessing, and gets the bad news. Eight times bless or blessing is mentioned, until the scene ends with Esau weeping, and being told he will serve his brother.

The third aspect is precisely that service. When God responds to Rebekka, it is to tell her that one of her sons will serve the other, one people will be mightier. Serve, servant, slave, same thing in Hebrew. Abd. If one is to serve, the other is to be master, and Jacob defeats Esau, masters him, by his stronger will and intelligence, if not his stronger determination. When Esau is described as spurning his birthright, it is because he was too weak to bear the hunger and thus could be exploited by his brother. Jacob exploited that weakness in order to prevail over his older brother, and the lapidary conclusion, Thus did Esau spurn his birthright tells us that he did not merit the superior rank afforded him by his birth, or by his father’s favoritism. When he learns that he has lost the blessing, he learns further, specifically, what it means in Isaac’s terms, when he says, “But I have made him master over you: I have given him all his brothers for servants.” Thus can we say Jacob precedes and models what his own son Joseph will do in Egypt. There is a pattern, a model, that suggests that he who should be master, and he who should be slave, will ultimately come to occupy that position as God’s order, working through these various human machinations, will prevail. But it is tragic nonetheless as we hear Esau’s desperate cry, “Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!” And Esau wept aloud (38). When Isaac answers again, it is in the tones of a prophecy which again includes these lines, “And you shall serve your brother.” In harsher, but accurate language, it could be translated, you shall be your brother’s slave.

Fourthly, this story is framed by the parents, and especially Rebekka’s concern, over the spouses her sons will take.

After the episode of the selling of the birthright, and the interlude with Abimelech, we learn that when Esau was forty years old, he takes two Hittite women for wives, and the consequence was, “they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekka” 26:34). That statement is followed immediately by the episode in which Rebekka maneuvers Jacob to wrest Isaac’s blessing from Esau. Immediately following that success, Rebekka learns that Esau is angry enough to kill Jacob after his father dies, and she tells him to flee and stay with Laban. When Isaac next sees Jacob he also tells him to go to Laban, not because he is afraid of what Esau will do, but because he doesn’t want Jacob to take a Caananite wife, failing in that regard as Esau had done in taking his two wives. Twice the word blessing his used to describe Isaac’s sending of Jacob off to Paddan-Aram, to Laban, while accompanying the blessing with the words, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women.” Esau learns of this, and decides to take as a third wife Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael. The parshah ends without comment on that choice.

What struck me was how much the intercalated episode of Abimelech contains these four themes, which means that it functions as a comment on the principal action. The Abimelech episode begins with God telling Isaac not to go down to Egypt with the famine, but to stay: “Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you”(3). Isaac stays, and is blessed, reaping a hundred fold. When later there are quarrels over the wells, Abimelech and his men return to Isaac affirming that they have seen that the Lord is with Isaac, that he is blessed: “From now on be you blessed of the Lord!” (29). When Isaac goes up to Beersheba, following God’s commandment, he is told, “Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you.”

The statement, over and over, is stating, be my servant, my slave, and I will bless you. Thus the theme of master-slave recurs. When God tells Isaac he will receive the blessing of his father Abraham it was because Abraham “obeyed me and kept my charge: My commandments, etc” (5). Thus Isaac becomes like his father, God’s servant, his slave. When Isaac enters into Abimelech’s domain, he is afraid of being killed because his wife is beautiful, and he lies abjectly, fooling Abimelech, just as he will be fooled later by his son and wife. When Abimelech learns Rebekka is Isaac’s wife, he is afraid that he will be punished by incurring guilt by desiring her. Guilt and punishment, blessing and mastery, these are the central motivators of their action. The action that drives their relationship turns again on the appropriate mate or spouse of each man: an error in judgment could cost Abimelech dearly, as it cost Esau the affection of his mother. And finally, separation. When Isaac comes into Abimelech’s lands and prospers, Abimelech finds that his wells are being overused, and he tries to drive Isaac away by blocking up Abraham’s old wells. Abimelech says, “Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us” (16). Their herdsmen subsequently quarrel over the wells, and they “content” over a well named Esek meaning contention. When that didn’t resolve things, Isaac moved again, dug another well, where finally “they did not quarrel over it,” and again gave it a name indicating separation: “Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space.” (22)

To put it all together, finding ample space, being blessed with the Master’s blessing, choosing the right spouse so as to have the children who will continue to receive the blessing, all this seems to be so intimately tied to the figure who is not described as master or slave, the woman. At the outset she needs to have children, and is barren. Then she favors her one son over the other. Then she is seen to tempt the powerful warlord, until there is ample space placed between them. Then she appears in the spouses of her sons, the present and future spouses. They are present in the women her brother will have created as daughters; they are present in her husband’s uncle’s daughter. They frame the basic story, and the intercalated story, and we learn from Abimelech that guilt and punishment will result from a violation of the wife of another, especially when the other is blessed by god, and that the blessing of the lord, the blessing of the master, will take the form of children whom the woman will give birth to. So we begin with God’s words, “Two nations are in your womb,” and end with Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, “May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples” (28:3). Fertile, numerous, blessed, these are the fruits we see Isaac enjoying when he obeyed god and stayed on the land: “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundred fol the same year. The lord blessed him, and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household.” Despite the struggles that follow, his servants end this episode with the discovery of a well. They tell him, “We have found water!” He named it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

We could talk about another theme, the naming of people and places, but that is for another time.