

Jacob and Joseph,
Judaism's Architects
and Birth of the Ego
Ideal

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To my wife, Yikun Wu and my three sons, Natti, Didi and Uri. And to my daughters, Sonia Aviva and Lily Rachel. To my father and all his family lost in the Shoah. To my mother, who hungered for knowledge and all those whom she lost in the Shoah. And to Dr. Bettelheim who began to teach me about psychoanalysis when I was seventeen at the University of Chicago.

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INTRODUCTION

JUDAISM'S ARCHITECTS AND BIRTH OF THE EGO IDEAL

There are three seminal father-son stories in Western civilization, each defining a culture, yet each powerful enough to transcend time and culture to endure in Western civilization (Borges, 2000).

Oedipus, the son who believed a prophecy that he would kill his father and bed his mother, a man who believed (and feared) a seer more than he believed in himself. This myth defined Antique Greek culture and threaded through Western civilization. Two thousand years later, Freud found this a central tale for a child's development: if not resolved, this son could not advance without destroying his father. This myth, for Freud, becomes a culture's "neurosis."

Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, halted by God's hand, set a standard for man's belief in God: a God who demands child sacrifice, comes to the brink, then abjures (at least by His proxy, an angel). Yet, this last-moment reprieve leaves the son with scars, inhibitions, a wordless man (Alter, 1983). For some, this story left them with fear and trembling, with great regard for Abraham (Kierkegaard, 2003).

The Christ tale begins with a man who believes he is God's son, and ends with a man who realizes plaintively that he is forgotten by his God/father ("Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani!") (Borges, 2000). This myth speaks of a son who tries to advance his father's true beliefs. Unlike Oedipus, the son is killed at Fate's crossroads, while the father survives; unlike Abraham, here is a God/father who will not stay His executioner's hand.

All three of the above myth stories are operatic in scale, and take up a large stage in cultures' mental lives.¹

In this book, we explore a fourth father-son story that suggests a different path in this relationship: the myth of Jacob and Joseph. This tale stands well apart from others: the son, chosen by his father, advances the father's wishes and religion. The son unites an unruly, even fractious, impulsive tribe of brothers to begin a nation. This myth story is colored in pastels, has subtleties, is sung in softer registers. Here, both father and son survive: the son furthers his father's dreams without either one being destroyed.

To explore this softer myth, we dissect, carefully listen to the Hebrew words and their permutations to understand the inner worlds of Jacob and Joseph and the characters surrounding, imbricating them. Like dream interpretation, we will listen to the exact terms and the relationships among terms used in the different forty-one chapters of this relatively lengthy tale. For associations, we need rely on the text also, relating one part to another as Freud initiated in his works on literary interpretation.

In the Hebrew, one word, transformed slightly, may link two characters, two experiences or indicate a *chiaroscuro* of shading between two characters: the light cast from one word will brighten the face of one while its shadows darken the other, as Caravaggio or Vermeer would visualize in their portraiture. Biblical Hebrew is a laconic tongue. Auerbach (1954) comments on the relatively prolix style of Homer, where for instance, when Odysseus has grabbed his former nursemaid by the throat, threatening to throttle her if she reveals his identity, the poet takes us into a multi-chapter flashback to how Odysseus got this thigh scar which his nursemaid spies as she washes his feet. Not Bible. Sparse, yet poetically powerful, its nouns and verbs often connect to the same root. Several words can be contracted into one. It is a desert language of a nomadic people. We will be challenged in this book to translate accurately the words, but this is a necessary challenge if we are to understand the meaning of the stories, the inner meanings of the characters.²

¹ Auerbach believed that the Christ story and Christianity helped define European civilization (1954).

² Professor Volney Gay notes that by aligning ourselves with the generations of historical and contemporary listeners who are attuned to the poetic nuances of this

Yet, *traduttore traditore*, the translator is a traitor. Walter Benjamin set a very high gate for the translator to clear: "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (Benjamin, 1968). Hyam Nachman Bialik said, perhaps more poetically, reading the Bible in translation "is like kissing the bride through a veil." For this book, I have used five translations of the Hebrew Bible, although for straightforward accuracy, I have found Robert Alter's most true to the Hebrew. Others, such as Fox's, have other advantages, such as hewing close to the poetic meter of the Hebrew. But accuracy of meaning will be critical for our work here.

I offer as an appetizer a few examples of the nuances that can both link and differentiate characters. I will return to some of these later. For instance, in Jacob's ladder dream, the Hebrew says that his ladder *mutzav*, "was poised" (note the passive voice), in the ground. Decades later, the young Joseph, about his father's age when his father dreamt his dream on the lam from deceiving his brother and father, dreamt that he was a sheaf of wheat that *nitzav*, "stands poised," as his brother sheaves bowed to him. Now, the readers, the listeners to these two tales (and possibly even Joseph's brothers and father) hear the two words tied to the same root, thereby connecting the father dreamer to the son dreamer. Yet there is a subtle shading of difference: whereas the father dreamt his ladder poised in passive voice, the son dreamt his sheaf actively poised for action. Joseph articulates a one-upmanship in this shift from passive to active voice.

One other example of how a single word can link myths and their underlying rich meanings to each other. Alter refers to the word, *Hineini!*, "Here I am!" as a pointing word in the Bible (Alter, 1983). It points to an upcoming momentous action. Listen to how the same word is used in episodes separated by three generations of time, but linked psychologically. In its perhaps more infamous or famous use, when God calls upon Abraham and before God tells him to sacrifice his son, Abraham answers simply, *Hineini!* Abraham is here and available to his God. What makes this *Hineini* so powerful is the *après coup*, both the command from God "Take your son, the one you love, your only son, Isaac" to sacrifice him *and* Abraham's actions to perform this sacrifice. Now we skip some genera-

text, we side-step the more literary claims that the text was written by several authors, or that some aspects of the stories may not be supported by the (meager) archeological evidence.

tions and hear Jacob call his son Joseph to send him on an important task, to oversee his older brothers' work. When Jacob calls, Joseph answers simply, understanding little of what he's being asked, *Hineini!* And for those who read this story or listen to it year after year, they know that here too the *après coup* will powerfully shade this simple one word response of obeisance.

Our responsibility — if we are to learn about the wisdom behind this text, what it tells us not only about the characters, but also about a different model of “father-son-ness”— is to listen carefully, think critically and see (*hit'bonen*, “see/understand”) what the text teaches us. I ask the reader's patience and forbearance for which I hope you will be rewarded with a sense of discovery.

Before turning to the structure of this book, let us ask about the purpose of paying such close and demanding attention to the Jacob-Joseph story, to its words, the characters' inner structures and the web of feelings that connect them. 1) The author believes that it is sufficient reason to study this story because it is compelling, interesting and imbued with meaning. But this may not be enough for all readers. 2) Let's consider Harold Bloom's suggestion that wisdom literature is composed of works that have endured for generations, even eons because they contain some wisdom about humankind that still speaks to us: the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bible*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *New Testament*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, *The Inferno*, much of Shakespeare and further. That is, by studying these texts, we learn not only about the characters within them, but also about the character of ourselves and those around us. 3) Let's add another consideration. By studying Jacob and Joseph from a psychoanalytic perspective, from the stance of what we have learned about inner lives and of parental relatedness and how matters are transmitted across generations, we can learn more about the inner characters of Jacob and Joseph and those surrounding them, and possibly about ourselves. 4) One final appeal that I will expand at the conclusion of this book. This father-son tale may give some glimpse of insight into why Judaism has so stubbornly endured, despite what the frustrated Spengler penned (and quite a few others who picked up more than a pen). If a father's near-sacrifice of his son — Abraham and Isaac — were the only or even the central enduring myth of Judaism, this would be a harsh beginning and questionable manner in which to transmit one's beliefs. But to the extent, as I hope to show, the Jacob-Joseph relationship is more infused with the capacity to transmit hopes without jeopardizing the lives of either father or son, then beliefs and hopes and dreams are more likely to be transmitted. Further, as I will try to

show, Joseph is far more successful in promoting his father's wishes for a people and a nation than was Jacob, without overt evidence of incurring envy or malice from his father: quite the contrary. This is a model for contemporary fathers and sons. I will argue in the conclusion, that what we learn from the Jacob Joseph myth explains much about Judaism's endurance and robustness.

Our basic plan is to read the stories in an overlapping manner. First to follow Jacob's development from youth through young manhood, fatherhood, the loss of his beloved Rachel, then his sons' deceit and Jacob's loss of his favored Joseph. We end when he reunites with Joseph, now vizier of Egypt, some seventeen years later. Jacob presents in old age as a man in despair. Our task in part is to understand the life path to this despair and his vacillating identities. He is one of the three forefathers of Judaism; as such learning about him teaches us about the origins of Judaism, and about models of personhood and particularly fatherhood. Jacob begins early life as one who contends with men closest to him, a driven fellow on the make, who cheats his brother, tricks his father and is on the lam. Two decades pass and Jacob returns home to his parents and his cheated, murderous brother. Jacob faces: the death of his favorite wife in childbirth (whom he unwittingly cursed), a son's incest, the rape of his only daughter and the (murderous) rebellion of his oldest sons. After battling an angel, he insists he be renamed and is called "Israel," or "God-fighter."³ Nevertheless, unlike previously renamed Biblical characters, Jacob ("Follower")/Israel ("God-fighter") continues to vacillate between the two identities depending on life's context. He arrives home in time to bury his father. When he hears about the (manufactured) "death" of his favorite son, Joseph, Jacob enters a grieving⁴ process that shifts into despair. We discuss this first ex-

³ This is the Fox's translation (1995). While I have relied predominately upon Alter's translation (see following footnote), in this case the usual English translation is cumbersome, such as "striven with beings divine and human" (JPS, 1999). "God-fighter" is shorter, and I suggest, more fitting to the man's character.

⁴ While the Hebrew word used, *avel*, is usually translated as "mourning," we will discuss in the Jacob chapter why psychoanalytically, his experience is a foreshortened form of grieving that transforms into melancholia or chronic despair, rather than the more self-limited working through of mourning.

tended Biblical portrayal of mourning-unto-despair, focusing on the developmental antecedents of impaired Superego, an absent Ego Ideal and subsequent oscillating identities, which predispose him to despair. We identify how Hebrew puns pivot the listener's attention.

In our next chapter, we turn to Joseph. Again a developmental study helps us understand how he becomes the man of adulthood, a man of certitude, a man of deep feeling, a man of high moral values and a man who apparently unambivalently fulfills his father's wishes by dedicating himself to the well-being of his brothers and their families. We also recognize from Joseph's adult actions and words that he has developed an Ego Ideal, the first such description of this psychic structure in the Bible. We know enough from this life story and from our knowledge of development to speculate about how Joseph achieved this inner structure. Biblical Joseph's life history intersects with a historical moment (Erikson, 1968). How do his intrapsychic existential conflicts intersect with his community — this fractious band of brothers — in *status-nascendu*, its needs, its anxieties, its prophesied growth? How does resolution of Joseph's dilemmas move his community to overcome its anxieties, move closer to becoming a Jewish *people*, not simply a nomadic clan. This people became intrapsychically integrated (the internalization or identification with a single God) and felt chosen, although perhaps at times with overweening pride (Freud, 1939) (like the teen-age Joseph; unlike the adult Joseph). We will show how Joseph's character develops, how he achieves a stable identity (unlike father Jacob/Israel) and how part of that includes the first Biblical evidence for an Ego Ideal and what developmental vicissitudes Joseph traverses in order to achieve this inner psychic structure. He must descend into the depths twice in his life, emerging a different, more mature man.

Then, we look at the relationship between Jacob and Joseph, how it differs from preceding father-son Biblical relationships and even from Jacob's relationship with his other sons. Our challenge is to understand how this relationship developed and how the father's hopes and expectations — specifically that God promised and even expected him to build a nation — are realized by Joseph.

In the penultimate chapter, we look at the other sons and their whip-sawing relationships with Jacob. We begin with Jacob/Israel's last words, in fact his prophecies or blessings/curses to his sons at his death bed. We trace backwards how these sons came to take up such deeply varied positions in Jacob's life. This helps us learn what makes Joseph different.

These chapters will sound like variations on a theme. As with Beethoven's "Variations of cello and piano in G major" on Handel's "See the conqu'ring Hero Comes," we learn more about the basic theme by listening to the variations.⁵ Psychoanalysts are accustomed to hearing themes not simply repeated but varied, enriching past understandings and bringing clarity to the present and future. If I perform my task reasonably well, this will not sound repetitive, but each iteration will enrich our understanding of the characters' inner lives.

Finally, we conclude with thinking about the meaning of this story, of this father-son relationship and of an Ego Ideal (counterbalancing the better-described Biblical Superego) that helps us understand this text, that helps us understand some aspects of Judaism as not only a religion, but also a cultural identity. And, we learn about the ingredients, particularly the Ego Ideal, for a more robust transmission of values and ideals in the family. Our intent overall is to read this story as part of what Harold Bloom (2005) calls "wisdom literature," to learn something about the human soul (*psyche*, in the Greek and in psychoanalysis) and its evolution. Doing so, we can learn something about what we can do in our contemporary lives as fathers, as sons to build a more robust, forward-looking life that also maintains the hopes and wishes of our forebears.

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⁵ I thank Volney Gay for this analogy.

CHAPTER ONE

JACOB'S DESPAIR, VACILLATING IDENTITIES AND EGO IDEAL DEFICIT: A PSYCHOANALYTIC PORTRAIT OF THE ANTI-LEAR

Near the end of his life, after long silence, elderly Jacob is introduced by his son Joseph, now vizier of Egypt, to the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh asks simply:

“How many are the years of your life?” (47:8)⁶

In this Egyptian land where 110 years is considered a long life, here are Jacob's first words to this ruler:

“Days and years of sojourn are 130; few and evil/bad were the days and years of my life; and I have not attained my fathers' in their days of sojourn.” (47:9).

Facing the ruler, employer of Joseph, his favorite son, Jacob pours out bile, bitterness and a sense of falling short of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. What is this despair?

Let us explore Jacob's life development to paint a portrait of his inner life. The better we understand Jacob's inner life, the more we can grasp his contribution to the development of Judaism and the Israelites, as well as an early literary example of the interactions of Superego, Ego Ideal and identity formation. We do this in the spirit of Freud's three “religion” books,

⁶ For translation, I have relied predominately on Robert Alter's translation, as it appears more literally accurate than several others. There are advantages to other translations: Fox's is said to capture the poetic cadence of the Hebrew, for instance. But, for the psychoanalytic reader, I have turned to textual accuracy. Format for Torah citations are; (paragraph: line).

particularly the last, *Moses and Monotheism* in which “he returns to study the sacred text of the Bible in a somewhat traditional Talmudic fashion ... as he seeks to find ... some answer to the question of the source and meaning of his own personal sense of Jewishness...” (Blass, 2004). Yet Erikson, in his studies of Martin Luther, Gandhi and Christ, expanded the idea that addressing a “personal” issue can also address some existential issue in society. Or as Robert Wallerstein summarized in his last paper, exploring Erikson’s issues of identity, “...great issues of a particular time and place, as experienced by sensitive and creative individuals who are working to resolve their inner conflicts within these contexts, could find solutions that transcend themselves and yield conceptualizations that transform the world” (Wallerstein, 2014). If Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939) were only an attempt to explore the sense of his Jewishness, it would be solipsistic: that the book endures suggests that Freud’s careful, textual, almost Talmudic explorations addressed issues that were consequential for society. Following this approach, we can extend the study of the text to learn about psychic structures and interpersonal relationships in pre-psychoanalytic literature that may cast light on our contemporary lives. That is, three matters are touched in wisdom literature like the Bible (Bloom, 2005): 1. an individual’s resolution of a life crisis; 2. how this resolution transcends themselves and addresses existential challenges of the time; and 3. how this resolution in great, that is enduring, literature also can “transform the world.” In this chapter, we explore Jacob’s despair. In later chapters on Jacob-Joseph as father and son, we explore a different model of father-son relatedness and evidence for the first Biblical description of an Ego Ideal structure in Joseph.

What is being weighed in elderly Jacob’s mind?

On one side, Jacob has received the birthright; his blind father’s blessing; marriage with Rachel, his love at first sight; twelve sons and a daughter; and wealth.

On the other side – internally -- he is weighed-down, he tips negatively:

1. He wrestles (with those closest to him) from the time he is in his mother’s womb, until later with an angel he attains his new name (and identity) “Israel,” a “prevailer over God and man,” but at the price of being maimed permanently;
2. He tricks his twin brother and deceives his father, unquestioningly following his mother’s urging and plans;

3. In exile for 20 years, he endures a deceitful uncle Laban;
4. Whom he deceives in turn to acquire flocks;
5. He escapes from Laban, returning to his father's house, Janus-faced --- fearing his pursuing uncle behind him, and his waiting brother ahead;
6. Nearing his home, his only daughter is raped;
7. His sons go on a deceitful murderous rampage of Dinah's rapist, the man's kin, then pillage the city;
8. En route home, his beloved Rachel dies in childbirth, after Jacob unwittingly condemns her to death;⁷
9. She is buried at the road side, and he realizes her theft;
10. His eldest son, Reuben, commits incest;⁸
11. He is deceived by his sons to think that Joseph, whom Jacob sent to oversee their work, was killed. In his most explicit statement of grief, he promises that his gray head will go to Sheol (Hell);
12. His son, Judah, "unwittingly" commits incest with his daughter-in-law;
13. When faced with starvation, he sends his sons to Egypt, only to have Simeon imprisoned; later the vizier (unrecognized Joseph) demands to have Benjamin, Jacob's youngest remaining son of Rachel, be delivered to Egypt to Jacob's horror.

Even when he sees his son Joseph alive, now a vizier, Jacob's response also captures a sense of dammed-up despair: as Joseph wordlessly embraces Jacob's neck, "weeping a long while" (46:29), Israel responds "I may die now, after seeing your face, for you are still alive" (46:30).

When we weigh psychologically Jacob's blessings and his travails, from his perspective -- from his comments to his son and to the Pharaoh -- Jacob enters the "ring" of old age, a heavyweight of despair. Erikson de-

⁷ Unaware that Rachel has stolen Laban's idols, Jacob proclaims that whomever stole Laban's idols would not remain among the living.

⁸ Upon Rachel's death, Reuben has sex with his father's concubine (and mother of several of his brothers). While technically, some might say this is not incest, in the David story, Absalom, his rebellious son, chases David from Jerusalem, then has sex with David's concubines on the roof of the castle, so all may see his humiliation of his father. As psychoanalysts, whatever the technical genetic issues might be, psychologically, Reuben performed an incestuous act, for which Jacob condemns Reuben when Jacob lies on his deathbed decades later.

scribed eight developmental stages in man's life.⁹ At each stage, we struggle with the tension between poles of psychological failure versus success. In late life we struggle between Integrity versus Despair.

Integrity is the sense of surveying one's life, integrating one's experiences and feeling that one's life has been meaningful. Despair is the polar opposite: life feels like an empty travail, filled with bitterness and gall. The bitterness is a fog enshrouding past, present and future. The word "despair" comes from Latin, *despare*, "down from hope," through Old French *desperer*, to our Middle English *despair*. The despairing man feels hopeless as he peers through the (self-generated) fog surrounding him. The future, without hope, is bleak. This is closer to Jacob's state of mind, apparently for the next decade and more. We will hear how he can recover to become Israel when his extended family is faced with famine, but this is a brief reprieve...until he sees the face of his Joseph. And, yet, we will hear, even then, he speaks in the voice of a melancholic man to the Pharaoh. A mantle of fog he carries around his shoulders. His text has the tone of the much later Ecclesiastes.

How do we interpret this? There is something about Biblical text that not only permits, but also demands interpretation. In fact, at least from Maimonides' time – the medieval Biblical commentator – to Freud, to Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1970), we have learned that there is something to be learned from interpretation and there may be something unique about the Bible that begs interpretation. Auerbach, the literary critic who wrote *Mimesis* (1957), explained that the Bible's spare speech (unlike the florid Homer) requires the listener to interpret, to fill-in the (inner) spaces. What does he mean?

Auerbach contrasted the almost contemporaneous Torah¹⁰ with the Greek's *Odyssey*. He emphasized that the Bible is spare of detail. Abraham and Isaac walk three days before the *Akeda* (Isaac's near-sacrifice),

⁹ In infancy, we struggle between Trust versus Mistrust of the world;

In toddler hood, between Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt;

In latency, between Industry vs. Inferiority;

In adolescence, between Identity vs. Identity Diffusion

In young adulthood, between Intimacy vs. Isolation;

In adulthood, between Generativity and Stagnation;

In late life, between Integrity vs. Despair. (Erikson, 1950).

¹⁰ I will use the Hebrew word, Torah, for the Five Books of Moses, known also as the Bible or Old Testament.

not a word spoken between them. Compare the *Akeda* (sixteen verses) with Ulysses' revelation of his scar (the "scar" flashback alone is some seventy verses). When Ulysses worries that his scar will reveal his identity to his enemies, Homer flashes back to Ulysses' youth: we learn – in painful detail, even as we wait tensely to learn if he will be recognized prematurely – that he was gored on a boar hunt (Auerbach, 2007).

There is another narrative difference with the Bible that calls on hermeneutic interpretation (Ricoeur, 1970). We are told that Ulysses' son Telemachus knows of his father's greatness, although absent some twenty years. In the Torah, we are not told that Jacob knows of his father's history -- such as Isaac's being chosen over Ishmael at Sarah's insistence; Abraham sending Hagar and Ishmael to possible death in the desert; of the *Akeda*, when his father, Isaac, was brought to be sacrificed by his grandfather, commanded by God, then halted by God's angel (not a father's internal restraint). We don't know if Jacob grows up knowing his family stories. Regardless, the listeners to these stories -- stories repeated yearly for eons -- know that Jacob is born into these family stories. And, psychoanalysts know that children are aware of such family histories, even when parents believe that the children are ignorant.

We know that in Jacob's family, sons struggle or are struggled over, and that a father will sacrifice his only son at God's command, or perhaps will come to knife's edge of sacrifice, believing that this God won't need child sacrifice.

We are not told why Jacob has the idea that he should have Esau's birthright. We are left to the spare text and our attempts to interpret. But, we need to interpret in a manner that respects the overall character development and the era of the subject (Booth, 1974).

Maimonides (1989) persuaded us that we are obligated to interpret the Torah, not take it literally. For instance, he reasoned, when Torah states that God made man in his image, we must interpret: surely, Maimonides insists, the Torah does not mean that God *looks* like a man.¹¹

Freud instructed us how to interpret a text or art to understand either the characters or the artist, or both, as in his works on Goethe, *Gradiva*,

¹¹ Ironically, Maimonides sets the intellectual stage for Spinoza, who was excommunicated for his critical reading of the Torah.

Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and of course, Moses (Freud, 1939a). Ricoeur carried this further, applying the concept of Biblical hermeneutics—that careful attention to text—to illuminate psychoanalysis itself (Ricoeur, 1970).

But as in psychoanalysis, we must interpret carefully, so that we do not use the text (or the analyst's words) to serve our speculations, our prejudices, our contemporary biases. Rather, we should sail close to the wind of meaning in the text, in order to arrive at our port: deeper, more accurate understanding a text, of the Torah; possibly even ourselves.

So, let us return to the text.

The Wrestler, the Hunter, the Simple

Jacob is born under family myths and named meaningfully. What are these myths? How do they affect him? His mother, after ten years' barrenness, cries to God about her struggle within. God tells her that her "inner conflict" is twins and one will prevail over the other.

And, like his mother, Jacob develops an identity of inner conflict, as I will discuss later.

Jacob, like his son Joseph, has a name that points to a brother. His identity does not sit in and of itself, but in relation to another. Jacob's mother names him as the one who follows (*Yakov*) his brother. Jacob's name carries his pursuit of his brother and need to overtake him. In contrast, Joseph's name, "He (God) will add a son," "points" to a brother he loves like his own son. In fact, decades later, Joseph, now the vizier of Egypt, calls his younger brother, "*b'ni*." In contrast, Jacob's name points competitively, enviously, to his own brother Esau.

As they grow, Esau is favored by his father, Jacob by his mother. Esau is described by his vocation, a hunter, a man of the fields. Jacob? He is "simple," (*tam*), a tent-dweller, (*yoshev ohalei*), a homebody, a mama's boy.

Jacob, we might say, is born under the "constellation," the family myths of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael: he is a wrestler, a follower, who strives

to prevail.¹² His identity points to another (the twin brother); he contends with those closest with him, his brother, his father, his father-in-law. His greatest gravitational pull is his mother. (Much as these forefathers were pulled by their women.)

Who does Jacob become, this young man, born a wrestler, a contender, a follower who yearns to prevail, a simple tent-dweller? Soon, he shows he cannot accept the passivity of tent dweller, that he is not simple. He is born under the “constellation” conflict and lives out the name in the first part of his life. As we will see, even when he leaves and returns to his homeland, he “hits”¹³ the place or is hit by an angel.

From “Simple” to Trickster: Jacob transformed

In this birthright-tricking episode, Jacob is not “simple” (*tam*), but shrewd; his identity seems to shift diametrically. He greets his famished brother with a stark offer: Esau's birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup.

After Jacob shows Esau the price of hunger, (and Esau tells us how his empty stomach of the moment is more important than some silly birthright), we hear that famine enters the land (as it does again, when the many-son-ed Jacob returns to Canaan decades later).

¹² Shakespeare's Bastard Edmund warns us not to ascribe our fates to the stars under which we are born:

This is excellent foppery.
 That when we are sick in fortune
 Often the surfeits of our own behavior,
 We make guilty of our disasters, the sun, the moon, the stars, As if they were
 villains of our necessity
 Fools by heavenly compulsion
An admirable evasion of whoremaster man
 To lay his goatish disposition
 On the charge of a star.
 I should have been that I am
 had the maidenshair star...
 twinkled on my bastardizing.” (Lear, I,ii)

Or, more succinctly, “Tis not our stars, Brutus, but in us.” (Julius Cesar: I, ii, 140-141)

¹³ “Hit” is the literal translation: it captures the power, the physicality of Jacob hitting the ground as he both leaves and returns home.

Rebecca's Beauty, Avimelech's Envy, Parents' Bitterness

Rebecca's Beauty. Listen to what happens to Jacob's beloved mother, Rebecca. She is described as very beautiful, a portentous phrase repeated and developed later about Rachel (*yafet to 'ar v'yifat mareh*); it is tragically used to describe Joseph enslaved in Egypt. In these stories, beauty is treacherous. Jacob's father, like his grandfather in Egypt, fearing for his neighbors' jealousy over Rebecca, tries to pass-off Rebecca as his sister, risking that the king would take her sexually. But, unlike her mother-in-law, Sarah, the local king does not take her as a concubine.

Envy

While Avimelech (an ironic name for this local king, "my father's king"), "saves" Rebecca from concubinage and Isaac from jealous murderers, he can't tolerate Isaac's prosperity and exiles him. And under envious eyes, he is moved again, until he can rest at his father's well, *Be'er sheva*, the well of oath.

Next, we are introduced to Jacob's next and more powerful deceit of his father.

One paragraph ends chapter 26: Esau takes two Hittite wives, embittering both of his parents.

Jacob, the Schemer

Just as the *Akeda* precedes Sarah's death, so Esau's "wife-taking" introduces (perhaps results in) Isaac's blindness, literally and figuratively: Isaac is blind-sided by his wife and youngest son. In the Torah, textual proximity suggests causality, as it does in the unconscious, child-thought or fairy tale.

What does this clever Jacob say when his mother sets him up to deceive his father? Jacob does not resist, question, lean upon principles, address the conflict between his mother versus father. Rather, he frets: "Esau is a hairy man, and I smooth-skinned... Perhaps I will be a trickster in his (father's) eyes" (27:10).

He worries he won't get away with it.

This young man shows pragmatism, obedience to his mother, but no evidence of Superego, nor filial regard. In Jacob's adulthood, this lack of respect and deceit will haunt him in the guise of his sons. The sins of this father not only rain down upon his sons, but also like a gale, blow back from the sons unto the father. (E.g. his own sons, Simeon and Levi's murders versus Jacob's pact; sons' disrespect of father over Dinah's rape; Reuben's incest with his father's concubine; vicious deceit about Joseph resulting in Jacob's despair.)

And sadly, Isaac does not trust Jacob: after Jacob lies "I am Esau" (27:18), Isaac asks to feel him "Whether you are really my son Esau or not" (27:21). There is tension between father and son -- a tension which will reappear between Jacob and Laban, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and his sons except Joseph. Jacob's identity is a wrestler with others, particularly those closest to him; tension becomes a part of this identity (as if he can not feel alive without this?).

In contrast, Joseph tries to diminish tension by naming his son Menashe to be free of his past; later, he interferes with Jacob's reversal of primogeniture.

Jacob's mother manipulates Isaac into saving Jacob's skin. Knowing that both she and Isaac were bitter over Esau's local marriage, she suggests that Isaac send away Jacob to marry among Laban's clan. Isaac sends him off, giving Jacob a temporary (two decade) reprieve from Esau's murderous rage.

Jacob the Dreamer

Jacob is the Torah's first Jewish dreamer. Laying his head on a rock, in the wilderness of the homeland he is about to leave, he dreams:

Here is a ladder/ramp set against (brought out of/coming out of) the ground and its head arriving in the sky/heavens and here, God's angels were going up and descending (28:10).¹⁴

¹⁴ We note a poetic parallel *and* divergence here. The first mention of a tower to heaven is the Babel story, in which the people wanted to be one *am*, people/folk, and have one language. They build a tower to heaven. For this, God punishes them by dispersing them through the world and babbling their languages. That is, he

For the first time, God talks directly to him. “I am the God of Abraham and God of Isaac, the land on which you lie, I will give you and to your seed...”

But this Jacob is a contentious negotiator as he was with famished Esau. He vows to God that if God: 1. remains with him, 2. protects him, 3. feeds and clothes and 4. returns him safely home, then and only then will “God be my God.” Only then does he put a stone as a pillar to God. This formerly simple, tent-dweller, appears transformed.

The dream is a challenge to interpret psychoanalytically, since we don’t have typical free associations. But, we can use the context of Jacob’s sociocultural situation and Erik Erikson’s expansion of Freud’s dream technique to get some interpretive leverage (1954).

This man on the lam, this homebody, now without protective mother, dreams of a ladder or ramp,¹⁵ Jacob, is sent allegedly to get a wife (and covertly by his mother to save his skin). Freud cautioned: we need be careful about dream symbolism interpretation when associations are lacking. But a ladder (or ramp) to the sky may represent a sexual assertion, a wish and salute by this young man, who may dream hopefully that angels ascend and descend his ladder, carrying him to heaven.¹⁶

The simplicity of this dream is found in child dreams or in dreams of those traumatized. Perhaps this dream is a hint of the inner danger Jacob feels on this journey of escape, bearing only the purloined blessing of his

appears to be offended by their hubris (by their wish for a common humanity and language and to reach to the heavens, as the scientists and artists later did in Antique Greece and the Renaissance). God treats the Babel people’s desire for unity as a form of hubris.

Here, Jacob “builds” a dream ladder, (*soolam*, which may translate as Ziggurat) to the heavens and rooted in the earth. For this, God has a double reaction: while he blesses him *explicitly* with future generativity, *implicitly*, in fact, God disperses Jacob to escape his homeland and feared murder by his brother. God treats Jacob’s hubris (taking his brothers’ blessing), followed by his dream of reaching heaven as both a sin and a prayer. It seems almost as if no good deed goes unpunished in this Bible.

¹⁵ Alter (op. cit.) suggests this is a ziggurat to the heavens.

¹⁶ Centuries later, Dante too attempted to ascend directly to Paradise and Beatrice, before the deadly sins cast him downwards into the dark wood, to enter the Inferno, just as Jacob begins an infernal and redemptive voyage.

father and a vision of a wife. We note that what Jacob values, his only “possession,” is his feeling blessed by his father. This is his “spoils.”

In fact, the next chapter, following this phallic ladder dream, begins with his falling in love, but also falling into being deceived.

Deceit of the Deceiver (Chapter 29)

Before meeting his uncle, Jacob sees the woman of his dreams, Rachel. But Jacob gets his comeuppance by his Uncle Laban. The Laban family are master deceivers—including Rebecca, Laban's sister, and Rachel his niece. Shortly before Jacob sees Rachel, we hear an allusion to his future favorite son's name (and shepherding vocation): *v'nosephu* (*Yoseph*), and he “collected/gathered” (the flocks at the well). As he sees Rachel, Jacob performs a Herculean task, rolling the stone from the well's mouth. This may be also a double allusion to: 1) his deflowering of Rachel and 2) more tragically, Judah's (his future son's) incest with Tamar at the junction of “open double wells.” Twinning and Doubling are recurrent themes since Jacob/Esau's birth. Here, one visual image alludes to the future, just as the one word (*nosephu*) announces the first son he will have with Rachel. This is typical of the laconic Bible, a poetic, even punning quality to the meaning-laden language, make it amenable to hermeneutic interpretation (Ricoeur, 1970).

Jacob kisses her and cries. In a portentous phrase later used to describe their son Joseph, Rachel is described as “beautiful and comely” (*yafet to'ar v'yifat mareh*) (29:17).

But after bargaining to work seven years for the younger Rachel's hand, Laban delivers the “weak-eyed” Leah to Jacob's wedding bed. In the morning, Jacob complains, whereupon Laban upbraids him: “in this land, the younger is not given before the older.”¹⁷

Generativity, with nary a word

In twenty-eight verses (29:31-30:21), Jacob sires twelve sons and a daughter among two wives and two concubines -- with nary a word. But

¹⁷ From this episode, Orthodox Jewish weddings precede the ceremony with the groom lifting the bride's veil before marching down the aisle -- to assure him that there was no last minute switch.

Jacob feels the jealous women's fury when he is caught between siblings Rachel and Leah. Rachel proclaims (30:2) "bring me sons, for if you don't I am dead!" her first words in over ten years of narrative.

Jacob's response?

Incensed he says: (30:3) "Below God am I, who has denied your womb's fruitfulness."

But the reader (and perhaps Jacob) hears Rachel's desperate statement of near death, echoing famished Esau's before he gulped down Jacob's "red stuff" (25:32). Rachel too is famished to gulp down some of Jacob's "stuff." We can only speculate that this echo of Jacob's cheating of Esau explains Jacob's sharp retort to his desperate, yet beloved barren wife.

For the sake of time, I scan over the women's naming of each son, although each name is pregnant with meaning, usually associated with their competitive yearning for a child, or in Leah's case, for her husband's love (Levi = attached to me).

Joseph's name and later Benjamin's leap out at us. "Joseph" ("and God will add another son") points to a sibling, just as "Jacob" points to his brother: always following his footsteps and yearning to overtake him. These names seem to embed themselves in the psyche of both Jacob and Joseph.

In any case, Jacob achieves literal generativity (albeit, not in Erikson's sense) denied to his father and grandfather. But not, we will see, the generativity Erikson describes: a sense of transmitting one's values, wisdom, hopes for the future.

In 30:25, we see a greater depth to Jacob's executive ego functioning, specifically his assertive qualities – he is "on the make," in Erikson's words, possibly a hypertrophied ego function (Erikson, 1950; Gitelson, 1958). He is a shrewd bargainer, a clever breeder, but continues to undermine himself by his need to deceive and to escape. The latter is a character trait that, like Achilles' heel, like a Greek hero's hubris, remains with and marks him even over twenty years of exile.

A second character trait (shared with his forebears and his son Joseph) is that his competence evokes jealousy. Here, we have a paradoxical ego function whose adaptive feature – competence – evokes apparently unwittingly, enmity from others. While some competence may be unconsciously