

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

Weekly Talmud Learning with Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, director of admissions,
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שבת דף קנ, א
משנה לא ישכור אדם פועלים בשבת ולא יאמר אדם לחבירו לשכור לו פועלים...
גמרא <פשיטא> מ"ש הוא ומ"ש חבירו
אמר רב פפא חבר נכרי
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הא קמ"ל לא יאמר אדם לחבירו שכור לי פועלים אבל אומר אדם לחבירו הנראה שתעמוד עמי
לערב

B. Shabbat 150a

Mishnah. A man must not hire laborers on Shabbat, nor instruct his neighbor to hire laborers on his behalf . . .

Talmud. Why should he differ from his neighbor?

—said R. Papa: a gentile neighbor [is meant]. R. Ashi objected: [surely] an order to a gentile is [forbidden as] a *shevut*? Rather said R. Ashi: one may even say [that] a Jewish neighbor [is meant]. The Mishnah informs us that one may not say to his neighbor, 'hire laborers for me,' but one may say to his neighbor, 'well, we shall see whether you join me in the evening!'

In the above passage we move beyond the thirty-nine primary forbidden categories of labor. Each of those labors, now quite familiar to you from Mishnah Shabbat 7:2, was termed *melakhah* and is considered by our Sages to be prohibited by Torah. Here we introduce a new category: *shevut*. This is labor permitted by Torah but prohibited by Rabbinic tradition.

A bit of background first: it is remarkable what is not included on the list of thirty-nine primary forbidden categories of labor. Exchanges of money for goods or services, hard physical toil, measuring and weighing out produce are all omitted from the Mishnah's list of labors prohibited by Torah. What would Shabbat look like if only *melakhah* and nothing else were prohibited? Workers could be hired to do menial tasks, so long as they fell outside the definition of prohibited labors. All sorts of conversations about business could be freely conducted. Stores would stay open and transact business. Shabbat would quickly be reduced to a day like any other. The Rabbinic tradition was the inheritor of a range of prohibitions, some going at least back to the late Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These prohibitions grew out of a pious desire to protect the spirit of the Sabbath day.

In the above passage, the Mishnah states that one may not hire workers on Shabbat, even if the work will not be performed on Shabbat. This prohibition is a *shevut*, prohibited by Rabbinic tradition rather than by Torah. The Mishnah further states that one may not have a neighbor do so on his behalf. The Talmud asks what the purpose is of this additional law? Why should it be any more permitted to his neighbor than to him? R. Papa answers that a non-Jewish neighbor is meant, to whom the prohibitions of Shabbat don't apply. R. Ashi disagrees, stating that having work performed by a non-Jew is also a *shevut*. R. Ashi explains that by mentioning the *neighbor*, the Mishnah permits one to schedule a business meeting with another Jew for after Shabbat, so long as the discussion remains implicit and the purpose of the meeting is not explicitly stated. Why should such a conversation be permitted? Because we do not prohibit thoughts. Our Sages were not thought police. Our physical acts (including speech) are subject to Shabbat, but our mental states are our own to work on.

Questions

1. What are some contemporary behaviors we should forgo to preserve the spirit of Shabbat?
2. Though no thoughts are prohibited on Shabbat, how can we use the demands that Shabbat places on our speech to hone our mental states?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Tol'dot
Genesis 25:19–28:9
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick
Dean of The Rabbinical School, JTS.

What do you make of our matriarch Rebecca? Certainly she is the boldest and most independent of the mothers. When as a girl she sees a stranger at the well, she rushes to water his caravan of thirsty camels, and then invites him to stay at her house. When offered the chance to travel with this man back to a distant land and a mysterious husband, she volunteers without hesitation. When her pregnancy becomes difficult, she seeks out God and challenges Him with the bold question, "Why do I need this?" When her husband seems ready to bless the wrong son, she quickly conspires to rearrange the action so that Jacob will receive the primary blessing. In all of these actions, Rebecca is seen as a woman of strength and decisiveness.

Yet Rebecca's strength has dreadful consequences. In deceiving her blind husband, she humiliates him and causes him to shudder in fear. In depriving Esau of his blessing, she causes him to explode in anger and to plot his brother's murder. And in securing for Jacob both blessings, she causes him to flee for his life, alone into the lonely night of exile. Is Rebecca strong and righteous, or is Rebecca headstrong and wrong?

Presumably, the way to answer this question is to look at the prophecy received by Rebecca when she sought out God. Here is Robert Alter's translation of the oracle found at the beginning of our parashah (Gen. 25:23):

Two nations—in your womb,
Two peoples from your loins shall issue.
People over people shall prevail,
The elder, the younger's slave.

The problem is that this prophecy is ambiguous, especially in its final clause, *v'ra'v ya'avod tza'ir*. Richard Elliott Friedman suggests that this could mean either, "the elder shall serve the younger," or, "the elder, the younger shall serve."

Rebecca, together with most readers, interprets the prophecy in the first fashion, understanding that her elder son Esau must be subjected to Jacob. This interpretation sets the course for their family and perhaps for the history of their descendants. But perhaps Rebecca got it wrong? Perhaps the oracle truly meant that the younger boy, Jacob, was to serve his older brother, Esau? Perhaps Isaac got it right in trying to bless Esau with physical dominion (27:29), while reserving for Jacob the covenantal blessing (28:3–4). Perhaps this family could have been spared the fraternal anger, hatred and division if Rebecca had only understood her prophecy differently. But perhaps all of this

tension was ordained by God, and was a necessary stage in the emergence of Jacob as Israel, patriarch to twelve tribes.

Rebecca's prophecy is not the only ambiguous utterance found in the Bible. JTS professor Stephen A. Geller studies this phenomenon in his 1996 book, *Sacred Enigmas*. In a 2007 volume of essays in honor of Dr. Geller, JTS professor Benjamin Sommer continues this path with a chapter entitled, "Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy." Sommer examines, among other texts, an incident described in 1 Kings 22. There the evil northern king Ahab gets 400 prophets to support him in his desire to invade the neighboring country Aram. Yet the southern king Yehoshafat asks him to seek one more opinion from the prophet Micaihu ben Yimlah. This prophet repeats his colleagues' words, "Go up, so that the Lord will deliver into the hands of the king," but interprets the prophecy in the opposite fashion. Rather than predicting that the enemy will be delivered into "the hand of the king," it is the king who will be delivered into the hand of the enemy. Ahab ignores Micaihu's interpretation, invades Aram, is taken captive, and killed.

Dr. Sommer shows that the 400 prophets erred not in their hearing of the message, but in its interpretation. Perhaps they were cowed by the king into delivering the message that he desired. Perhaps they simply lacked the courage and the zeal to speak truth to power. But perhaps the message itself was intentionally ambiguous, and the responsibility of interpretation was invested in the prophet by God. Indeed, Sommer points to Numbers, chapter 12, to show that God intentionally obfuscates His word to all prophets save Moses. The prophet must be attuned to the divine message, but must also interpret with integrity, guided by a sense of justice and righteousness.

The Rabbis also discern this phenomenon of obscure prophecy. In the Talmud (Yevamot 49b) they say, "all of the prophets saw through a cloudy speculum (*aspeklirya she'eina me'ira*); but our Master Moses, saw through a clear speculum." Maimonides builds on this theme, differentiating the prophecy of Moses from that of other prophets. Moses can prophesy at will; Moses can see the matter clearly; Moses can stand and speak with God without fainting; Moses alone is unable to return to ordinary life because his prophetic commission is clear and continuous (Yesodei HaTorah 7:6).

For most prophets, then, interpretation is as important as the prophecy itself. Indeed, interpretation is part of the prophecy. This is reminiscent of what the Rabbis say about dreams. In the Talmud (Berakhot 55a), Rav Hisda claims that a dream without interpretation is like an unread letter. Indeed, the dreamer has an opportunity to seek a better interpretation and to transform an evil omen into a blessing.

What should guide interpretation? Prophecy is not magic. The role of the prophet is not to force the hand of God, but to be guided by God's will. What are these? Justice and righteousness, kindness and peace. Perhaps Rebecca understood correctly, and her boys were destined to battle. Perhaps she was justified in deceiving Isaac and depriving Esau of his blessing. But it seems to me that an interpretation that ensures enmity is of necessity flawed.

We can't know how the story might have developed had Rebecca allowed Isaac to bless his older son. But we can work in our own capacity to interpret our sacred tradition in ways that create just and compassionate communities. As our families gather in thanksgiving for the earth's bounty, may we also be blessed in appreciation for one another, so that we become not like Jacob and Esau but like brothers and sisters who dwell together in peace.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn his birthright (Gen. 25:34).

Ramban

'Spurn his birthright,' 'One who despises the word will suffer thereby' (Prov. 13:13). But Torah has already explained the reason that Esau acquiesced to the sale. This was because he was already in mortal danger from his profession (hunting animals), and it was likely that he would die while his father was alive, and the birthright carried no meaning until the passing of the father. So of what benefit was the birthright to him? After having eaten and drunk, he returned to his hunting in the field which was the reason he despised his birthright. 'For there is no desire in fools' (Eccles. 5:3) except to eat and drink and to fulfill their momentary desire, not caring about tomorrow.

Parashat Tol'dot opens in life and closes with the threat of death. Having wrestled with infertility, Rebecca and Isaac finally give birth to Jacob and Esau. Rebecca's pregnancy, however, is far from uneventful. She becomes troubled by a feeling of "struggle" in her womb and goes to inquire of God. God tells Rebecca that two nations are in her womb and that one of those nations will serve the other (note, the Hebrew, *rav ya'avod tzair* is ambiguous, meaning either "the older (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob)" or "the older (Esau)—the younger (Jacob) will serve"). Once the two are born, we fast forward to a fateful episode in which Jacob is in the midst of a "Martha Stewart" moment, cooking lentil stew, when his famished older brother comes in from the field. Esau demands to be given some of the lentil stew; Jacob drives a hard bargain in return, demanding that Esau give him the birthright. Esau agrees and fills his stomach; Jacob is content in his manipulative ways and leads himself further down a path of alienation. Still, Torah concludes this episode with a curious statement—namely, "thus did Esau spurn his birthright." How are we to understand this editorial comment?

Ramban, in his great wisdom, suggests that it was not simply a spontaneous act on the part of Esau. The picture he paints of Esau is of both a deliberate and reckless character. On the one hand, according to Ramban, Esau is resigned to his fate as a hunter. Given his profession, he believes that at some point he will die while his father is still alive—and so the birthright, which will come only after his father passes away, is meaningless to him. Because he has chosen a dangerous vocation and seems to live recklessly, he has no reverence for the future.

Consciously or unconsciously, many of us engage in dangerous lifestyles—living wantonly and selfishly without regard for the future. We spurn "birthrights" every day—as we continue to smoke, overeat, abuse others, overwork, and so on. The challenge in each of our lives is to recognize and value tomorrow's blessing. We cannot simply live our lives in the moment. Ephemeral pleasures often give way to long-term suffering. Unlike Esau, we must come to recognize that some things are far more valuable than physical satisfaction.

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