



Table Talk: Blessings

Jacob as Receiver and Giver of Blessings

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In Parshat Toldot (Genesis 25:19-28:9), we see that both of Isaac's sons – the twins Jacob and Esau– are desperate to receive “the blessing of the first born” from their father; in the Bible, the blessing given to the oldest son is usually considered to be the most meaningful. While Isaac seemingly intends to bestow this first-born blessing upon Esau, Jacob tricks his father and receives it instead. Esau is devastated to learn that the blessing has been stolen from him. He begs his father for another blessing. “Isn't there something you can bless me with?” Esau cries.

- What is the power in a blessing?
- Why do you think this is so important to Jacob and Esau? Look at the blessing below that Isaac gives Jacob when Isaac thinks that Jacob is actually Esau. What hopes does Isaac have for Esau?
- Was Isaac's blessing specific for Esau or for the first born, whoever he would be? How does the personality of a child affect the blessing he or she receives?

Here is the blessing that Isaac unwittingly gives to Jacob (Genesis 27:26-29):

Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come close and kiss me, my son”; and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and blessed him, saying, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed. May God give you of the dew of the heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you; be master over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you.”

- Have you ever received a blessing from a parent? When and for what? Why did it mean so much to you?
- What does it mean to want to steal a blessing? Can you seek divine favor while doing something wrong? Even assuming that the blessing “belongs” to you, do the ends justify the means?

A Parent's Final Blessing:

At the end of Jacob's life – on his deathbed -- we see him return to blessings. Just as Isaac, his father, had blessed him, Jacob now blesses his sons and two of his grandsons (Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe). While we usually think of a blessing as a good or happy wish for the future, here we see something else entirely! Jacob gives some of his children more conventional blessings, but he can also be very critical of others, even as he blesses them.

Of his sons Simeon and Levi, Jacob says (Genesis 49:5-7):

Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel.

- What kind of blessing is that?
- How can you understand that as a parent's dying blessing?
- Do you agree that pointing out someone's weakness or failure is a blessing? Does it wound them forever or does it give them the chance to work on that weakness or use that trait for good? Can you think of what you might tell a friend or family member as that kind of “blessing” or what someone might say to you? How do you think it would be received?

It is clear that a blessing holds great power. Jacob dupes his brother in order to get the blessing of the first born from his father, Isaac. At the end of his life, Jacob uses blessings over his own sons to express pride and disappointment, hope and dreams that he has for the future of his family. Jacob can be seen as both the receiver of and the giver of blessings.