

Another View



IN THIS TORAH PORTION, our foremother Rebekah takes matters into her own hands in order to secure Isaac's blessing for her favorite son, Jacob. She is encouraged to do so by the prophecy she receives when she inquires of God during her pregnancy (25:23). God answers Rebekah's inquiry about her pregnancy with the ambiguity inherent in every oracle. The oracle specifies that Rebekah is carrying twins and that each child will develop into a nation. Their future relationships, however, remain ambiguous (see at v. 23). Which of the two peoples shall overcome the other? Who will serve whom?

What if Rebekah misinterprets the prophecy? What if its ambiguity is part of the divine purpose? What if, by eliminating the ambiguity—by urging Jacob to steal the blessing meant for his brother—Rebekah is not acting in harmony with the will of God?

In that case we would expect the text to show dire consequences. Indeed, such consequences ensue. First, the fruits of the stolen blessing do not come easily to Jacob. The blessing that he gains by guile refers to material benefits (27:28–29). He later secures his

wealth—the promise in this stolen blessing—in an environment of stealth (Genesis 29–31). Second, he soon loses something far more precious than material abundance: his beloved wife dies in childbirth (35:19). Third, there is consequently Rebekah's pain. She sends

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Jacob away for his protection (27:43–44) and dies without seeing him again. Rebekah must have suffered deeply in separating from her beloved son Jacob. She pays a very high price for her determination to ignore the ambiguity of God's word.

The outcome of Rebekah's story may, perhaps, teach us to allow the divine process to unfold for a while, before we decide to take action on God's behalf. Perhaps the gift from our biblical mother Rebekah in this parashah is her prompting us to sense ambiguity, to appreciate nuance—and to have the wisdom and patience to let divine intention blossom in its own time.

—Diane M. Sharon

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WHEN GOD TELLS MOSES to command the people to sanctify themselves, wash their clothes, and be ready for the divine revelation, God emphasizes that the people should be instructed not to go up or touch the mountain (19:10–13). Moses begins by faithfully repeating God's commands, yet he concludes, not by reiterating God's warning not to touch the mountain, but instead by admonishing the Israelites not to go near a woman (19:15). Feminists have wrestled with this disturbing verse and its implications. Does this formulation mean that Moses was only speaking to the men? Moses seems to have subverted God's command to all the people by speaking only to half the Israelites.

Moses' striking deviation from God's command is troubling well beyond the feminist focus. Moses' alteration of God's command raises the central question of who is the final authority on what God really says. Which version of the command is authoritative? Is Moses faithfully transmitting God's words? Is the text accurately presenting God's instructions? And, ultimately, what gives Moses or the text the right to report God's words differently from the way in which they were originally delivered?

A clue can be found in the genre of this passage.

Exodus 19:9–15 fits the ancient literary form of the Command/Performance formula, in which a divine command is expected to be transmitted by the messenger in identical language. According to this convention, any deviation from the initial command in the transmission draws attention to itself and is highly significant. What is the significance of Moses' alteration of the divine word here?

This text, with its deviation from the expected Command/Performance convention, cries out “*darsheini*” (“Interpret me!”) and so invites readers—ancient as

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well as modern—to grapple with revelation. The entire history of interpretation of our sacred texts, from the Mishnah to modern feminist midrash, is empowered by Moses' audacious transformation of God's words. Exodus 19:9–15 subverts omniscient external authority and hands authority to the reader. This troubling passage empowers all of us to read, interpret, and find meaning in this parashah and its contradictions.

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PARASHAT SH'MINI CHALLENGES the notion of a rational religion, yet we still seek a logical basis for the food laws in Leviticus 11. Mary Douglas, who examines the food prohibitions in Leviticus from an anthropological perspective, looks for the underlying rationale. In her influential work *Purity and Danger* (1966), she concludes that the distinctions between pure and impure animals are based on the principle that pure animals are those that stay well within the bounds of their habitat. The qualities of impure animals are seen as unsuitable for their habitat, thereby threatening to blur the boundaries established by pure animals, who possess qualities seen as suitable for that habitat. Douglas's categories rely largely on the means of locomotion appropriate to each sphere: wings for air, cleft hooves for earth, fins and scales for water. Everything that blurs these boundaries is segregated and put into a category of defilement.

Less well known is a brilliant and complex later essay, "Self Evidence" (in her book *Implicit Meanings*, 1975), in which Douglas suggests how biblical food prohibitions fit into the wider historical and sociological realities of the Israelites and later of the Jews, throughout their history. This preoccupation with distinguishing what is inside bounds from what is

outside bounds is a reflection, according to Douglas, of Israelite history and sociology. Inside Israel's frail boundaries is a small political unit surrounded by powerful enemies. Douglas concludes that here is a people who cherish their boundaries and want nothing better than to keep them strong and high; any attempt to cross them is seen as a hostile intrusion.

The mysteries of the parashah and the rational connection between religion and culture come together here. For biblical Israel, being holy means being set

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apart. Food prohibitions reflect Israel's preoccupation with clearly defined categories. This preoccupation continues to be expressed when Jews differentiate between the holy and profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and other nations, between Shabbat and the rest of the week. What Douglas illustrates, in both her earlier and later works, is how such religious practices and systems are shaped by sociopolitical circumstances, and, in turn, shape the norms of the community.

—Diane M. Sharon