



Jacob's trial: an Illustration of אֲבוֹתָם עַל בָּנִים וְלִבְּבָנִים עַל אֲבוֹתָם (Malakhi 3, 24)

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Introduction¹

On the order/advice of his mother Rebecca, Jacob deceived his father Isaac and obtained the blessing intended for his brother Esau. In retaliation, Esau vowed to kill him, leading Jacob to flee to Padan Aram, to Lavan, Rebecca's brother. In the Faith Lectures: Jewish Identity: The Concept of a Chosen People², Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (ztz"l) states: "In every case where there is a chosen one - Isaac against Ishmael, Jacob against Esau, Rachel against Leah - God takes the side of the unchosen." He asserts, rightly I believe, that from God's point of view, "choosing" a child for something does not mean that the other should be rejected. He gives the example of Yishma'el and Esau in this regard. This paper explores a nuanced perspective: perhaps a son was indeed rejected – but not necessarily the one the reader might assume.

As well as being inspired by many aspects of his work, this study is an example of Rabbi Sacks' (ztz"l) biblical scholarship style, as he describes it in the introduction of his Covenant and Conversation on Leviticus: "There is an intricate literary device in the Torah, much used but rarely noticed, that I call the concealed counter-narrative. The text reads one way on the surface but another way when listened to closely and deeply. The Torah signals this by giving us clues, discrepancies in the text, not obvious enough to be noticed at first glance but sufficient to make the thoughtful reader go back and read the text again and discover that the real story the Torah is telling us is richer and more complex than we first thought". Contrary to a Christian accusation in the times of the medieval disputations, Jacob's story is not much about someone that deceives his father and successfully escapes unchallenged, but rather about the journey towards acknowledgment of guilt, redemption, and a return to one's roots.

1. A Textual Omission: The Absence of Isaac's Affection

Let us examine in the text Isaac's directive to Jacob:

וַיִּקְרָא יִצְחָק אֶל יַעֲקֹב וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתוֹ וַיִּצְוֶהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֹא תִקַּח אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת כְּנָעַן. כּוּם לְךָ פָּדְנָה אֶרֶם בֵּיתָהּ
בְּתוּאֵל אָבִי אִמְךָ וְקַח לְךָ מִשָּׁם אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת לְבִן אָחִי אִמְךָ. וְאַל שְׂדֵי יִבְרָךְ אֶתְּךָ וַיְבָרֶךְ וְהָיִיתָ לְקַהֲלָה
עַמִּים. וַיָּתֵן לָהּ אֶת בְּרַכְתּוֹ אֲבִרָהּ לָהּ וּלְזִרְעָהּ אֶתְּךָ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיד אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.
וַיִּשְׁלַח יִצְחָק אֶת יַעֲקֹב וַיִּלְךָ פָּדְנָה אֶרֶם אֶל לָבָן בֶּן בְּתוּאֵל הָעָרָמִי אָחִי רֵבֶקָה אִם יַעֲקֹב וְעֵשָׂו

Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and then admonished him, "Do not take a wife among the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to the land of Aram, to the dwelling place of Betuel, your mother's father; and

¹ My heartfelt thanks to my Sacks Fellows Elisheva Jeffay & Sharon Jason, to Rabbanit Dr. Myriam Ackermann-Sommer, and to Mrs. Vanessa Hanoka for the help they provided in proofreading and improving this article, as well as Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum for the final finetuning advice.

² See <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/faith-lectures-jewish-identity-the-concept-of-a-chosen-people/>

choose a wife from among the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother." Almighty God will bless you, and cause you to grow and multiply, and you will become a congregation of peoples. And he will give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, making you possessor of the land of your wanderings, which God gave to Abraham." So Isaac sent Jacob to the land of Aram, to Lavan, son of Betuel the Aramean, brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau. (Gn. 28:1-5)

Do you observe any notable features or elements within these verses? What is notable is the absence, what is missing. Before proceeding, one must ask: on what basis can it be claimed that the text is lacking in any respect? We can suggest this by showing that it is part of a certain dynamic and that this dynamic is broken. For this, we will refer to the previous chapter (chapter 27). Although in our current editions the passage we are studying appears in a different chapter than the chapter of the stolen blessing, it is in fact a direct continuation of it³.

עשו ויאמר אביו. (כח) ויאמר הגשש לי ואכלה מצידי **בני** למען תברכה נפשי ויגש לו ויאכל ויבא לו יין ובשת. (כט) ויאמר אליו יצחק **אביו** גשה נא ושקה לי **בני**. (ל) ויגש © וישק לו וירח את ריח בגדיו ויברכהו ויאמר ראה ריח **בני** קריח שדה אשר ברכו יהוה. (לא) ויחן לה האלהים משל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורב דגן ויתירש. (לב) ועבדוה עמים [וישמתו] (וישתחו) לה לאמים הנה גביר **לאחיה** וישמתו לה **בני** אמה ארריה ארור ומברכה ברוה. (לג) ויהי כאשר פלח יצחק לברה את יעקב ויהי אה יצא יעקב מאת פני יצחק **אביו** ועשו **אחיו** בא מצידו. (לד) ויש גם הוא מטעמים ויבא **לאביו** ויאמר **לאביו** יקם **אביו** ויאכל מצידי **בני** בעבר תברכני נפשה. (לה) ויאמר לו יצחק **אביו** מי אתה ויאמר אני **בנה** בברה עשו. (לו) ויחיד יצחק תרדנה גדולה עד מאד ויאמר מי אפוא הוא הגד ציד ויבא לי ואכל מפל בשרם תבוא ואברכהו גם ברוה יהוה. (לז) כשמע עשו את דברי **אביו** ויצעק צעקה גדלה ומרה עד קאד ויאמר **לאביו** ברכני גם אני **אביו**. ויאמר בא **אחיה** במרמה ויחש ברכתה. (לח) ויאמר הכי קרא שמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים את ברכתי לקח והנה עתה לקח ברכתי ויאמר הלא אפלת לי בברה. (לח) ויצו יצחק ויאמר לעשו הן גביר שמתי לה ואת כל **אחיו** נתתי לו לעבדים ודגן ויתירש סמכותי וילכה אפוא מה אעשה **בני**. (לח) ויאמר עשו אל **אביו** הברכה אחת הוא לה **אביו** ברכני גם אני **אביו** וישא עשו קלו ויבא. (לח) ויצו יצחק **אביו** ויאמר אליו הנה משמני הארץ יהיה מושבה ומשל השמים מעל. (לח) ועל תרקה תחנה ואת **אחיה** תעבד ויהי כאשר תרד וירקת עלו מעל בוארה. (לח) וישטם עשו את יעקב על הברכה אשר ברכו **אביו** ויאמר עשו קבלו תרבו ימי אבל **אביו** ואחרונה את יעקב **אחיו**. (לח) ויגד לברכה את דברי עשו **בנה** הגדיל ותשלח ותקרא ליעקב **בנה** הקטן ויאמר אליו הנה עשו **אחיה** מתנחם לה להרגה. (לח) ועתה **בני** שמע בקולי וקום ברח לה אל לבן **אחיו** תרנה. (לח) וישבת עמו ימים אחדים עד אשר תשוב חמת **אחיה**. (לח) עד שוב אה **אחיה** מקה ושכח את אשר עשית לו ושלחתי ולקחתיה משם לקה אשכל גם שניכם יום אחד. (לח) ויאמר רבקה אל יצחק קצתי כתיי מקני בגות **חתי** אם למח יעקב אשה מנגות **חתי** כאלה מנגות הארץ קמה לי חיים.

(כח) ויהי כי ימו יצחק ויבטחין עיניו מראת ויקרא את עשו **בני** הגדיל ויאמר אליו **בני** ויאמר אליו הנני. (כט) ויאמר הנה נא זמנתי יום מותי. (ל) ועתה שא נא כלית תלקה וקשמה וצא השדה וצונה לי [ציד] (עידה). (ל) וגשה לי מטעמים כאשר אהבתי ויהיאה לי ואכלה בעבור תברכה נפשי מטעם אמותי. (ל) ורבקה שמעת בדבר יצחק אל עשו **בני** וילק עשו השדה לצוד ציד להביא. (ל) ורבקה אקרה אל יעקב **בנה** לאמר הנה שמעתי את **אביו** מדבר אל עשו **אחיה** לאמר. (ל) הביאה לי ציד וגשה לי מטעמים ואכלה ואברכה לפני יהוה לפני מותי. (ל) ועתה **בני** שמע בקולי לאשר אני מצוה אתה. (ל) לה נא אל הצאן וקח לי משם שני גדיי עזים טובים ואעשה אתם מטעמים **לאביו** כאשר אהב. (ל) והבאת **לאביו** ואכל בעבר אשר וברכה לפני מותו. (ל) ויאמר יעקב אל רבקה אמו הן עשו **אחיו** איש שער ואנכי איש חלק. (ל) אוילי ימשיני **אביו** יהייתי בעיניו כמטעם ויבאיתי עלי קללה ולא ברכה. (ל) ויאמר לו אמו עלי קללתה **בני** אה שמע בקולי וזה קח לי. (ל) וילק ויקח ויבא לאמו ותעש אמו מטעמים כאשר אהב **אביו**. (ל) ותקח רבקה את בגדי עשו **בנה** הגדיל ותמדת אשר אהב בפת ותלבש את יעקב **בנה** הקטן. (ל) ואת ערת גדיי העזים הלבשים על ידיו ועל חלקת צוואריו. (ל) ותחן את המטעמים ואת הלחם אשר עשתה כיד יעקב **בנה**. (ל) ויבא אל **אביו** ויאמר **אביו** ויאמר הנני מי אתה **בני**. ויאמר יעקב אל **אביו** אנכי עשו בברה עשיתי כאשר דברת אלי קום נא שבה ואכלה מצידי בעבור תברכני נפשה. (ל) ויאמר יצחק אל **בני** מה זה מהרת למצא **בני** ויאמר כי הקרה יהוה אליה לפני. (ל) ויאמר יצחק אל יעקב גשה נא ואמשה **בני** האמה זה **בני** עשו אם לא. (ל) ויש יעקב אל יצחק **אביו** והמשהו ויאמר הקל מול יעקב והימים ודי עשו. (ל) ולא הפירו כי היו ידיו בדי עשו **אחיו** שערות ויברכהו. (ל) ויאמר אהב זה **בני** עשו ויאמר אביו. (ל) ויאמר הגשש לי ואכלה מצידי **בני** למען תברכה נפשי ויגש לו ויאכל ויבא לו יין ובשת. (ל) ויאמר אליו יצחק **אביו** גשה נא ושקה לי **בני**. (ל) ויגש © וישק לו וירח את ריח בגדיו ויברכהו ויאמר ראה ריח **בני** קריח שדה אשר ברכו יהוה. (ל) ויחן לה האלהים משל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורב דגן ויתירש. (לב) ועבדוה עמים [וישמתו] (וישתחו) לה לאמים הנה גביר **לאחיה** וישמתו לה **בני** אמה ארריה ארור ומברכה ברוה. (לג) ויהי כאשר פלח יצחק לברה את יעקב ויהי אה יצא יעקב מאת פני יצחק **אביו** ועשו **אחיו** בא מצידו. (לד) ויש גם הוא מטעמים ויבא **לאביו** ויאמר **לאביו** יקם **אביו** ויאכל מצידי **בני** בעבר תברכני נפשה. (לה) ויאמר לו יצחק **אביו** מי אתה ויאמר אני **בנה** בברה עשו. (לו) ויחיד יצחק תרדנה גדולה עד מאד ויאמר מי אפוא הוא הגד ציד ויבא לי ואכל מפל בשרם תבוא ואברכהו גם ברוה יהוה. (לז) כשמע עשו את דברי **אביו** ויצעק צעקה גדלה ומרה עד קאד ויאמר **לאביו** ברכני גם אני **אביו**. ויאמר בא **אחיה** במרמה ויחש ברכתה. (לח) ויאמר הכי קרא שמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים את ברכתי לקח והנה עתה לקח ברכתי ויאמר הלא אפלת לי בברה. (לח) ויצו יצחק ויאמר לעשו הן גביר שמתי לה ואת כל **אחיו** נתתי לו לעבדים ודגן ויתירש סמכותי וילכה אפוא מה אעשה **בני**. (לח) ויאמר עשו אל **אביו** הברכה אחת הוא לה **אביו** ברכני גם אני **אביו** וישא עשו קלו ויבא. (לח) ויצו יצחק **אביו** ויאמר אליו הנה משמני הארץ יהיה מושבה ומשל השמים מעל. (לח) ועל תרקה תחנה ואת **אחיה** תעבד ויהי כאשר תרד וירקת עלו מעל בוארה. (לח) וישטם עשו את יעקב על הברכה אשר ברכו **אביו** ויאמר עשו קבלו תרבו ימי אבל **אביו** ואחרונה את יעקב **אחיו**. (לח) ויגד לברכה את דברי עשו **בנה** הגדיל ותשלח ותקרא ליעקב **בנה** הקטן ויאמר אליו הנה עשו **אחיה** מתנחם לה להרגה. (לח) ועתה **בני** שמע בקולי וקום ברח לה אל לבן **אחיו** תרנה. (לח) וישבת עמו ימים אחדים עד אשר תשוב חמת **אחיה**. (לח) עד שוב אה **אחיה** מקה ושכח את אשר עשית לו ושלחתי ולקחתיה משם לקה אשכל גם שניכם יום אחד. (לח) ויאמר רבקה אל יצחק קצתי כתיי מקני בגות **חתי** אם למח יעקב אשה מנגות **חתי** כאלה מנגות הארץ קמה לי חיים.

A careful examination of this chapter allows us to take the measure of an emphasis placed on the relationships between father and son – not only between characters with their own names, but also, and above all, the links that unite them. There is a significant amount of “my son”, “my father”, sometimes repeated in an apparently superfluous way:

In the section we are observing, what is striking is precisely this absence in the bonds that unite Isaac and Jacob. Worse still, when Isaac mentions Abraham twice, he does not even mention the fact that it is his father! (we will come back to this). There is indeed a blessing, but it is cold, administrative.

³ Reminder: the division of the TaNaKh into chapters is very recent and attributed to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (c. 1150 – 9 July 1228). In addition, in the Torah scroll itself, while there can be occasionally some separation called either *Parasha Setouma* or *Parasha Petou'ba*, here there is no separation at all between the verses of chapter 27 and chapter 28, which are displayed continuously. My deepest thanks to Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum for pointing it out.

On the other hand, the only family elements that are mentioned are those related to *Rebekah, Jacob's mother: the house of Betuel, your mother's father, and choose a wife from among the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother - at Lavan, son of Betuel, the Aramean, brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau*. This contrast illustrates the rift that took place between Isaac and Jacob, through the deception that Jacob inflicted on his father, and on his brother as well. It may be noted that Isaac tells Esau that it is “his brother” who has carried out the deception, without pronouncing his name, and it is Esau who recalls the first name and the pejorative meaning it may contain⁴.

2. Echoes of Rejection and Estrangement

Further signs of rupture abound:

1. The absence of dialogue. Where previously there was a discussion, exchanges, between Rebecca and Jacob, Isaac and pseudo-Esau⁵ or Isaac and Esau, now there is no dialogue at all. Neither when Rebecca orders Jacob to leave, nor when she asks Isaac that Jacob not marry a daughter of the Hittites, nor here when Isaac gives his instructions to Jacob. The discussions are all one-sided.
2. The emphasis that is placed on Rebecca's family. Not only does the text not only mention family ties (as seen above) but it also insists heavily on this family. As a form of closure of the narrative arc of the story of Isaac, which begins in “Toledot” with the mention of both Betuel and Lavan, here there is again mention of these people, again hammering home the fact that they are “Arami” (Aramean), a term that is reminiscent of the idea of Mirra or Remia⁶, meaning “deceit”. Rebecca is in a way the ambassador of HER father's house within that of Isaac.
3. Isaac sends (away) Jacob, in a similar way to Abraham's dismissal of Yishma'el וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח לָהֶם וְחֶמֶת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל הָגָר שֵׁם עַל שְׁכָמָהּ וְאֵת הַיֶּלֶד וַיְשַׁלְחֶהָ וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְצֵעַ בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שָׁבַע Abraham got up early in the morning, took bread and a skin full of water, gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder, as well as the child, and sent her away. She went away and lost her way in the wilderness of Beersheva'.⁷⁸

⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר הָכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמִּים אֶת בְּכֹרְתִי לָקַח וְהִנֵּה עֵתָה לָקַח בְּרִכְתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶצְלָתָ לִי בְרִכָּה Esau then said [to himself], “Is it because he was named Jacob that he has supplanted me [waYa'qeveni – from the same root as Jacob] twice already? He has taken away my birthright, and now he is taking away my blessing!” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” (Gn. 27:36)

⁵ Refers to Jacob disguised as his brother Esau.

⁶ It is a great classic of the Midrash. See Bereshit Rabbah 70:19.

⁷ The attentive reader will have noticed that Abraham does not send Yishma'el away in the strict sense. He sends Hagar away, who carries Yishma'el. This point is discussed in the commentary “Abraham's Eleventh Trial” in my book *Puzzles Bibliques*.

⁸ Conversely, it should be noted that Esau will become aware of the wrong he has caused his father in terms of his choice of wives and try to repair it. To do this, he married Machalat, *daughter of Yishma'el son of Abraham*. It should also be noted that Esau does not seem to consider the impact this might have on his mother, whereas the verse Gn. 26:35 makes it clear that his previous marriages were a problem for her as well.

3. On the Legitimacy of Deception

Before moving on to the resolution of this rupture, let us pause on a point that seems fundamental to me: what legitimacy should be given to Jacob's actions?

First, let us remember that it is his mother Rebecca who is at the origin of the entire operation. Despite the strong reservations of her son Jacob, she orchestrates the deception from start to finish⁹. Why would she even be considering such thing? One element that may have led Rebecca to do this is her understanding of what Isaac said to Esau: she adds “before the Lord” to the words of Isaac that are reported to us¹⁰. Indeed, in Gen 27, 4, Isaac says *וַעֲשֵׂה לִי מִטְעָמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְהָבִיָּאָה לִי וְאָכְלָה בְּעֵבֹר תְּבָרְכֶךָ נַפְשִׁי בְּטָרֶם אָמוּת* And make delicacies for me, such that I like, and bring them to me that I may eat so that I may bless you before I die. whereas Rebecca claims in verse 7: *וְהָבִיָּאָה לִי צִיד וַעֲשֵׂה לִי מִטְעָמִים וְאָכְלָה וְאַבְרָכְכָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי* Bring me game and make me delicacies that I may eat, so that I may bless you **before Hashem** before my death.¹¹ In Future Tense, Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l) explains the use of this name of God to evoke the particular, intimate and personal aspect of the Tetragrammaton, in comparison with “Elohim” which is more distant. This can be seen in the almost exclusive appearance of the Tetragrammaton and (except for one occurrence, at the death of Abraham) from the moment when Abraham summons his servant to go and fetch a wife for his son Isaac until the latter's blessing in pseudo-Esau¹². There is fear on the part of Rebecca, who is present with her husband thanks to the Lord, that particularism will pass to Esau, thus excluding Jacob, the son who the text tells us that she loves. Where does this fear of exclusion come from? The text seems to tell us that we must find the source in the prophecy that was made to Rebecca when she was pregnant with her twins¹³, as it refers to one brother bettering the other.

Yet, as Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l) points out, and this may be Rebecca's mistake here, the prophecy in question is not so clear and can be interpreted in two radically opposite ways. Similarly to the way in which an observation will determine the quantum state of a particle; it is the interpretation made by the recipient of the prophecy that will determine - at least partially - its result¹³.

Next, let us carefully observe the blessing given to pseudo-Esau: it mentions God with his name Elohim. Therefore, it appears that in Isaac's eyes particularism was not ultimately intended

⁹ Rabbi David Fohrman tries to exonerate her in a series of videos (<https://www.alephbeta.org/video/deceit-of-isaac/a-defense-of-rebecca>) but the defense seems to me to have far too many weaknesses to hold.

¹⁰ This idea about adding “before the Lord” can be found for example here from Rav Yaacov Medan: <https://youtu.be/DII7B6MR1I4?si=CfvkmAj4OgkSD5o>.

¹¹ Four chapters, from Gen 24 to Gen 27.

¹² She was pregnant thanks to the Tetragrammaton, a prophecy obtained from the Tetragrammaton. See Gn. 25:21 – 23 *וַיִּצְחָק לַיהוָה לֵנֹכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עָקְרָהּ הוּא וַיַּעֲתֹר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתֵּהֵר רֵבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ. וַיִּתְלַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לִמָּה זֶה אֲנִי* Isaac cried out **to the Lord** about his wife because she was barren; **the Lord** accepted his prayer, and Rebekah, his wife, became pregnant. As the children pushed each other in her womb, she said, “If this is so, what am I destined for?” And she went to inquire **of the Lord**. **The Lord** said to him, “Two nations are in your bosom, and two peoples will come out of your womb; one people will be more powerful than the other, and the elder will obey / will be served by the younger.”

¹³ In the TV show « Game of Thrones », the Red Priestess Melisandre warns : “Prophecies are dangerous things ». She had indeed the occasion of gravely misinterpreting herself one prophecy.

for Esau, contrary to what Rebecca thought. Certainly, Isaac does say that “the smell of his son is like the smell of the field that the Lord (Tetragrammaton) has blessed”, but on the very content of the blessing, it is indeed the name “Elohim” that appears. Moreover, when Esau (the real one) asks Isaac to bless him, here is Isaac’s response: וַיֵּעַן יִצְחָק אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה מְשַׁמְנֵי הָאָרֶץ יִהְיֶה מִשְׁכָּבְךָ וּמִטְלֵ הַשָּׁמַיִם מֵעַל. וְעַל חֶרֶבְךָ תִּחְיֶה וְעַתָּה אֲחִיךָ תַעֲבֹד וְהָיָה כְּאִשֶּׁר תִּרְיֹד וּפְרִקְתָּ עָלָיו מֵעַל צִנּוֹרְךָ. *His father, Isaac, replied and said to him, “Behold, from the fat of the land will be your dwelling and from the dew of the heavens above. By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve. But when you cry in distress you will break his yoke from upon your neck.”* (Gn. 27, 39-40). Isaac tells him what will happen, but he does not “bless” him, the verb is absent from the text¹⁴. Thus, Esau lacks a blessing.

When Isaac gives his instructions to Jacob **in the knowledge that he is Jacob**, it is explicitly marked that he blesses him. And that he wishes him to have the blessing of Abraham that Elohim gave him. This, while Isaac knows that he is the one who deceived him beforehand. It shows that Isaac blessed Jacob with a blessing of his own¹⁵. The absence of mention of the Tetragrammaton can be explained precisely by the break that took place, which will be discussed further.

Jacob flees / leaves for Padan Aram, with the verse Gn. 28:7 saying that he “listened to his father and mother”. This may indicate that Jacob had not yet fully grasped the rupture caused during Isaac’s blessing¹⁶, nor the implications of his compliance with his mother’s instructions— an obedience that ultimately led to his departure.

4. God’s Reassurance: The Ladder Dream at Bethel

His task will be to repair the break with his father. How will he go about it? It starts with a divine nudge:

In the beginning of his journey, he encounters God in his famous dream of the ladder. The intimate, the particular, the Tetragrammaton. God is נִצָּב עָלָיו *standing over him* (Gn. 28:13), he “takes charge”, as Rashi proposes. Better still, in addition to the biblical narrator who describes him as

¹⁴ On this particular point, I diverge from the view of Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l), who asserts in *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible, Genesis, the Book of Beginnings* that “Esau does receive a blessing from Isaac” (p. 169). In my interpretation, this moment carries profound significance for all three figures—Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Isaac, having already conferred the primary blessing, has no comparable one left to bestow upon Esau—despite his genuine affection for him. Consequently, Esau is compelled to seek its recovery, suggesting that Jacob cannot truly appropriate the blessing as his own in a complete or uncontested manner. It may also be proposed that Esau’s trial in this narrative lies in his response to the injustice he suffers. Had he chosen to confront his twin brother Jacob through dialogue rather than resorting immediately to thoughts of violence, he might have found a path to reconciliation. Such a course of action could have demonstrated his moral maturity and potentially rendered him worthy not only of the blessing, but perhaps even of participation in the Covenant itself. Both brothers bear responsibility for evading direct confrontation and for failing to seek a constructive resolution to their conflict.

¹⁵ Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l) develops other, complementary elements to explain the idea that Jacob had a blessing of his own in *Not in God’s Name*.

¹⁶ Can we really speak of a trial for Jacob if he does not fully understand the content of the trial? While it is doubtful that Jacob understood the issues at the beginning of the trial, the elements of resolution show that in the end he had realized it, one way or another.

such, it is God Himself who says “I am the Lord”. That is a first helping hand. The second is found in a formulation that has caused a lot of ink to flow: “the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac”.¹⁷ In light of what we have seen previously, it is not so much the absence of “your father” after “Isaac” as the fact of saying “Abraham your father” when Isaac had omitted it that challenges us. Thus, the Lord’s implicit message to Jacob can be understood as follows: “I will be with you in your quest [to repair the father-son and grandfather-grandson relationship]. I take the first step by connecting you to Me and to Abraham. It is up to you to do what is necessary concerning [your father] Isaac.”

God also gives details to Jacob about the inheritance he will obtain: while Isaac’s words were vague or cryptic, God’s words confirm that the land he will obtain is the one where he is right now¹⁸.

When Jacob wakes up, he makes a promise (verse 20) if God will give him “bread to eat” and a “garment to clothe himself with”, then Hashem will be his god. This is reminiscent of the “bread” he himself gave for the two episodes mentioned by Esau: during the sale of the birthright, he gives him bread. During the blessing, he gives Isaac bread. Moreover, the “clothes for dressing” remind us of the clothes in which Rebecca had dressed Jacob to deceive his father. Finally, the “bread to eat” in the Bible can refer to the idea of getting a wife [to have offspring]¹⁹. If the clothes refer to Rebecca, it was Isaac who told Jacob to go in search of a wife. Therefore, this verse is in continuity with Gn. 28:7 which mentioned that Jacob was going to do what his father **and** mother told him. In the next verse, Jacob mentions returning “in peace to his father’s house.” But which father is it? Is it Isaac or Abraham, so called by God Himself? It is noted, moreover, that this return will mean that the Lord/Hashem will be the god of Jacob. The text appears to cultivate a certain ambiguity on this matter—an ambiguity that will persist in the subsequent narrative.

5. The Aramean Environment: A Mirror and a Trap

How does Jacob get out of his ordeal? It seems that Jacob is worsening his situation. He sees Rachel coming, who is described by the text as **בַּת לָבָן אֲחֵי אִמּוֹ וְאֵת צֹאן לָבָן אֲחֵי אִמּוֹ וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב וַיִּגְדֹּל אֶת** *daughter of Lavan, his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Lavan, his mother’s brother, he stepped forward, slid the stone from the edge of the well, and made the sheep of Lavan, his mother’s brother, drink* (Gn. 29:10). Everything revolves around his mother, precisely like Isaac said previously²⁰. During his meeting with Rachel and to introduce himself to her, he will indicate that he is **הָאֲחִי אֶבְרָהָם** *in connection with her father [Lavan]*, but above all that he is “son of Rebecca”! There is

¹⁷ See in particular Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch on Gn. 28:13.

¹⁸ In Isaac’s words, he speaks of **אֶרֶץ מִגְרִידָה** *land of your wanderings*, which could refer to Padan Aram since he will later say to Esau **עָם לָבָן גֵּרְתִּי** *I have wandered with Lavan*. That being said, the following mention **אֶשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם** *[the land] that God gave to Abraham* immediately excludes this hypothesis, as if Jacob ultimately had no choice but to succeed in his quest and return to the land promised to Abraham.

¹⁹ See Rashi on Ex. 2:20. I will produce a dedicated study on the subject in another text.

²⁰ Even more in here, for there is three repetitions of « his mother », whereas in Isaac’s word, we have that « only » two times in the same verse.

no mention of Isaac, contrary to what Abraham's servant had pointed out in Gn. 24. Then Lavan greets Jacob, his sister's son (Gn. 29:13), kisses him and hugs him (*ibid*), claiming he is his "bones and flesh". Lavan even offers us a play of words in the next verse אַתָּה הֵכִי אָחִי²¹ *Because you are my relative* with the word הֵכִי *because* appearing for the second and last time of the whole Torah ; the first was used by Esau when he realized his brother tricked him, thus linking the events together even more. When Jacob goes to work for seven years at Lavan's house to marry Rachel, seemingly in order to fulfil Isaac's request, it will be, to him, כְּיָמִים אָחָדִים like a **few days**. This is exactly the expression given by Rebecca in Gn. 27:44! We realize that Jacob is still not detached from his mother's influence. To the contrary, Jacob appears to be where he belongs.

When Lavan deceits Jacob by giving him the wrong wife, Jacob protests slightly but finally agrees to work for seven more years, thus accepting the deception of his mother's brother. Just as he had protested when Rebecca asked him to obtain his father's blessing, only to finally give in. Even when Lavan changes Jacob's salary several times, Jacob will use avoidance schemes - brilliant, especially for the time - to get around the problem without directly confronting Lavan.

This contrasts with the behavior of his predecessors Abraham and Isaac who, even if they used preventive stratagems – to make their wives say that she was their sister – they did not hesitate to confront their adversaries or even enemies head-on²².

Even in his relationship with his favorite wife, Rachel, he does not accept confrontation: Rachel, unable to have children, is jealous of her sister and says to אֲנִי מְתָה אֲנִי וְאֵם לִי בָנִים וְאֵם אֲנִי. "Make me a mother, otherwise I will die!". The latter replies harshly בָּטֹן אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר מָנַע מִמֶּךָּ פֶּרִי בָטֹן *Am I in the place of God, who has denied you fruitfulness?* Unlike Isaac, who intervened so that Rebecca, who was barren, had children, Jacob accepted instead Abram and Sarai's solution, proposed by Rachel : a surrogate mother. The profound difference between the two is found in the use of the intimate Tetragrammaton for Sarai יהוה נָא עֲצֹרֵנִי יְהוָה מִלֵּדֶת *Alas! the Lord refused me childbirth* in Gn. 16:2) vs the distant Elohim for Jacob אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר מָנַע מִמֶּךָּ פֶּרִי בָטֹן *"Am I in the place of God, who has denied you fruitfulness?"* in Gn. 30:2).

6. The Turning Point: Fleeing then Confrontation with Lavan

The change for Jacob begins when, in chapter 30, he "hears the words of the sons of Lavan" who will proceed to an accusatory reversal. They pretend that Jacob has appropriated their father's riches, when the exact opposite has actually happened: Jacob has certainly become richer, but not at the expense of Lavan, who has become richer thanks to Jacob (at least during the first fourteen years). It should be noted that these are the "sons of Lavan", thus excluding Jacob from the latter's

²¹ The two words are identical to those who pronounce the כ and ה alike, and א and ה alike.

²² The story of Abraham against Avimelekh on several occasions, war against the four kings, Isaac against Avimelekh and especially Abraham who will literally confront God before the destruction of Sodom, trying to negotiate, unsuccessfully, that the cities of the valley be saved. In this regard, Rabbi Sacks (ztz"l) considers Abraham to be the model to follow, unlike Noah, whose text is silent on any reservation he may have shown when God informed him that He would cause the Flood.

offspring, even though his own offsprings (from Leah and Rachel) are latter called by Lavan “my sons”. In addition, Lavan himself doesn’t behave towards Jacob the same as before.

Once again, God, in his Tetragrammaton form, gives him a helping hand by telling him that it is time for him to return home, to the “land of his fathers” (Gn. 31:3), and also to his “birthplace” (ibid), words that are reminiscent of that of Abraham when he gave his instructions to his servant to go and find a wife for his son Isaac (Gn. 24:4). However, there is no mention of the names of his fathers in question, so we remain unresolved as to the resolution of Jacob’s problem. Moreover, when Jacob goes to tell his wives about his dream, in order to convince them that they have to leave, he will mention his vision from God with the “place of his birth” (Gn. 31:13) but not his fathers’, although he does mention “the God of my father (but which one?) was with me” (Gn. 31:5)²³. Jacob’s wives will answer him that their father has “made them a stranger to him” (Gn. 31:15), signifying the break in the kinship of Lavan and his daughters, whereas Jacob emphasized on “your father” (four times, once per verse for four verses out of the five between Gn. 31:5-9). Jacob therefore flees with his whole family, reproducing the pattern of avoidance that has followed him since the beginning of his story.

By fleeing with her husband, the text takes the trouble to tell us that Rachel also steals the “terafim”, her father’s idols²⁴. Paradoxically, this will become a catalyst for Jacob to get triggered to fulfil his ordeal²⁵.

Lavan manages to catch up with Jacob and reproaches him for having left without warning, with his daughters, and especially for having “stolen his gods”. Jacob first explains to Lavan that he was afraid that the mafioso²⁶ would take away his wives - he will later say “the daughters are my daughters, the sons are my sons, the herd is my herd”. Jacob was right. He then suggests that he look for the idols in question by himself, in front of witnesses. An almost comical passage follows, during which Lavan frantically searches all the tents for his lost idols, without success. This relentlessness is the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Finally, Jacob confronts Lavan and gives him a piece of his mind. How can we understand this trigger? Beforehand, Jacob was systematically at fault, or at least subject to responsibility, in the setbacks that had befallen him previously, in what could be reproached to him.

- When he runs away from Esau, he is at fault for having taken his place. Moreover, his mother Rebecca tells him: “Let him forget what you have done to him”.
- After marrying Leah, Lavan explains to her that the local custom is to marry the eldest before the youngest; Jacob could have anticipated this, especially since he had been able to familiarize himself with the local customs for more than seven years in Padan Aram.

²³ It should also be noted that he mentions God as *הָאֵל בֵּית אֵל* *the God of Beth-El* (hence not the intimate form), perhaps because the bargain is not yet fully respected: “if I return in peace to my father’s house, then the Lord will be for me as God”

²⁴ The meaning of *תְּרָפִים* is discussed among the commentators. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and R. David Zvi Hoffmann on Gn. 31 :19.

²⁵ Thanks to Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet who, in the Judaism Demystified podcast, highlighted this element. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLHvHp59lxE>

²⁶ My deep thanks to Rabbi Julien Darmon for this spot-on description of Lavan.

- Regarding the change of wages according to the color of the cattle, Jacob himself used an epigenetic stratagem to improve his performance. From then on, the accusations of the sons of Lavan can find a foundation²⁷.

The difference with the episode of the idols is that this time, Jacob has absolutely nothing to do with it. The text tells us this several times and in different ways²⁸. On the contrary, Jacob explains how he was exemplary in his loyalty to his former employer. From then on, the injustice he experiences in face of Lavan's accusation is total.

Jacob finally faces Lavan and stands up to him. And for good reason: he obtained from the latter a fundamental element, the divine support which was acknowledged by his opponent at the time! It is indeed Lavan himself who indicates to Jacob that God - in his impersonal form - has appeared to him and forbidden him to do anything to Jacob. He thus obtains an external confirmation of the fulfilment of the divine promise. It should be noted, in this regard, that Lavan refers twice to Jacob's Father(s): once when he tells him that he thinks Jacob "longed for his father's house", and the other when he speaks of the "God of your father" who appeared to him. All in all, Lavan helped Jacob three times: one with the unfounded accusation, one with the mention of God and finally with the mention of the father(s). This allows Jacob to reconnect with them, at least partially. He then says *לֹלִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וּפְחַד יִצְחָק הָיָה לִי כִּי עָמָה רִיקָם שְׁלַחְתָּנִי אֶת עֲנָנִי וְאֵת יָגִיעַ* *If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had not come to my aid* (Gn. 31:42).

For the first time, Jacob reconnects with his Fathers, at least with Abraham. It is not the biblical narrator or God who speaks, it is Jacob, there is no longer any room for doubt! He mentions *יִצְחָק פְּחַד Isaac's "fear"* which, if it is understood by some commentators as a reference to Isaac's binding²⁹, can also be seen as a reference to the episode of the stolen blessing, the terms *הִרְדָּה* and *פְּחַד* being of similar meaning³⁰. However, he does not mention Isaac as his father, so his path is not yet over.

Lavan proposes to Jacob to seal/make a covenant, giving a new name to the place where they would enter into it. This is an opportunity to highlight that the distancing from Lavan is no longer solely geographical - Jacob had already distanced himself previously. Moreover, the object of the agreement is literally not to go beyond the said stone - but also ideologically, from Jacob to Lavan. This manifests itself in several ways:

²⁷ Naturally, none of these considerations serve to justify Esau's intent to kill Jacob, nor do they legitimize Lavan's deception regarding the marriage arrangement. As previously noted, Jacob's acquisition of wealth was conducted through legitimate means and not at Lavan's expense. Rather, the purpose here is to adopt a devil's advocate perspective in order to critically examine potential contributing factors—some of which require deeper investigation—that may shed light on Jacob's various misfortunes.

²⁸ So much so that I made a comment on the subject in *Puzzles Bibliques*.

²⁹ For example, Rashi, Ibn Ezra or Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch.

³⁰ See this verse from Jeremiah: *כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה קוֹל הִרְדָּה שְׁמַעְנֵנוּ פְּחַד וְאֵין שְׁלוֹם* *This is how the Lord expresses himself: We hear cries of fear; it is terror, it is not peace!* (Jer. 30:5). However, the mention remains difficult to explain, because it is not known how Jacob would have heard of the said fear, be it at the binding or at the blessing episode.

- The name of the place: Yegar Saadouta for Lavan, Gal'ed for Jacob. One in Aramaic, the other in Hebrew, the language that the Israelites used in the Promised Land until the fall of Jerusalem and the departure for Babylon. This tension between the holy language and Aramaic is also found during the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib and the dispatch of his emissary Rabshakeh (II Kings 18);
- The type of final agreement: while Lavan proposes a covenant, Jacob will only take an oath. Rabbi Amnon Bazak in a video “Chiddush mehaGush”³¹ shows that Avimelekh had proposed to Abraham to make an oath³². However, in the end, they will make a covenant. Isaac will do the opposite. Hence Jacob does as Isaac did. A subtlety of the text that shows us progress in his quest;
- The last point is a little more complex and goes back to the first time that the Lavan family is introduced to us. Let us remember: beyond the deception, the lack of dialogue and explanation of what Rebecca's intentions were, one of the other problems in the operation lies in the bypassing of Isaac's will, while he is the head of the family. Now, the text seems to show us a similar state of mind during the episode of Abraham's servant meeting Betuel's family:
 - o Rebecca introduces herself as “daughter of Betuel” (Gn. 24:24) but when she goes to announce the news of the coming of Abraham's servant, she does so at “her mother's house” (Gn. 24:28).
 - o Lavan is initially presented by the text not as the son of Betuel but as the brother of Rebecca (Gn. 24:29). In the same way, Rebecca asks Jacob to go to “Lavan, my brother” (Gn. 27:43). It will be noted that Isaac, in his instructions to Jacob, speaks first of “the house of Betuel” (Gn. 28:2) and then mentions “Lavan, your mother's brother”. It was not until verse 50 (25 verses later!) that Betuel intervened. However, how does he intervene? He is partially usurped by Lavan: וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוּאֵל *Lavan (and Betuel) answered and they said*³³. It is a singular that is used here for the word וַיַּעַן (he answered) for two people. This usually means that it is an action performed in concert, but the first person mentioned is dominant³⁴. Therefore, Abraham's servant will give gifts to Rebecca's brother and mother. No more mention of Betuel ever in the episode³⁵. Then we have his brother and his mother

³¹ <https://youtu.be/G-ed0O-oXkw?si=IfOEuXN2wjVa22kZ>

³² In the TaNaKh, there is a difference between an oath and a covenant. In the first case, it is one person who is obligated to another, without any necessary reciprocity. In the second case, there is this idea of reciprocity and also a stronger link with the obligation to provide assistance, an idea of mutuality. Example: In Gn. 14:13, at the time of the capture of Lot, Abram's nephew, the text tells us that the brothers ‘Aner, Eshkol and Mamre are “holders of the covenant of Abram”. Later, after rescuing his nephew, Abram will indicate that he does not wish to recover any booty for himself, but only that the latter, who have lent him a hand, can obtain their share (Gn. 14:24).

³³ Here « Betuel » is put in brackets to emphasize on the fact that Lavan is taking the lead.

³⁴ See *לָבָן וּבְתוּאֵל מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁיטָה אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁיטָה לָקַח* *Miriam and Aharon spoke ill of Moses, because of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had married an Ethiopian woman* (Num. 12:1). Here we could literally translate “She spoke, Miriam and Aharon ...”, which shows that it is Miriam who dominates the discussion.

³⁵ This is probably the source of the Midrash that says that they tried to poison the servant but an angel exchanged the dishes and Betuel died ultimately.

(in plural, so no real problem of dominance, yet) who try to delay and keep Rebecca with them. But in the blessings they bestow on Rebecca, what is she called? “Our sister”. Lavan has definitely taken control, even over his mother.

- o When Isaac summons Jacob to go and fetch a wife, he tells him to go *to the house of Betuel, your mother's father; and there choose a wife from among the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother*. Isaac does not bypass Betuel himself, but instead links Lavan to Rebecca. Even the biblical narrator in Gn. 28:5 indicates *Lavan, son of Betuel, the Aramean, brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau*. The fact that he is the son of Betuel seems to be anecdotal. Finally, when Jacob asks the people of Haran if they know Lavan, he calls him *Lavan son of Nabor*³⁶.

Lavan invokes “the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor” as the judges between Jacob and himself. In doing so, he continues to bypass his father and does the same with Jacob’s father! Nevertheless, how can one reproach him, given that Jacob appears to have done the same by: Jacob himself evoked “the God of my father, the God of Abraham”. It is therefore an opportunity for Lavan to bring Jacob back to his way of thinking, through a covenant. However, not only will there be no covenant - only an oath, but Jacob will also “swear on the fear of his father Isaac”, without mentioning Abraham³⁷. Lavan’s failure is therefore complete and Jacob’s return to his father seems to reach its conclusion. A closer reading shows that it may not be the case entirely at this point. *וַיִּשָּׁבַע יַעֲקֹב בְּפֶחַד אָבִיו יִצְחָק* *Jacob swore on the fear of his father Isaac* (Gn. 31:53). This is actually said by the biblical narrator, we do not have Jacob here explicitly saying “my father Isaac”. The text seems to offer us here a breathless suspense, as it remains vague on the fact that Jacob would have pronounced these words himself or not. When can we expect a **clear** and **definitive** outcome?

7. Reconciliation with Esau: A Redemption Arc

In rabbinic tradition, on Yom Kippur, we pray to God to forgive us our sins towards Him. However, when it comes to faults towards our neighbour, it is imperative to obtain the forgiveness of the wronged person, the victim. Concerning Jacob’s quest, we can see something similar. Who are the aggrieved people here? It is Isaac, but above all Esau³⁸! For Jacob, detaching himself from the “Aramean state of mind” is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for repairing his paternal relationship. He must face his fault towards his brother and assume his responsibilities³⁹.

³⁶ As a reminder, at this point, Jacob is at the beginning of his quest for a moral return to his father. Therefore, the fact that he squeezes Betuel (who is his grandfather, let’s remember!) is finally consistent with his state of mind at the time.

³⁷ It should be noted that Jacob suffered a squeeze from his own children: first in the negotiations with Shechem and Chamor, during the episode of Dinah, but especially at the hands of Shimon and Levi when the latter massacred the men of the city when they had promised a covenant by marriage to Shechem and Chamor on the condition that all men circumcise themselves

³⁸ And God too! Indeed, disguised as Esau, Jacob will evoke a pseudo “divine help” that would have allowed him to capture game faster than usual.

³⁹ Jacob approaches the encounter with Esau with a measure of panache. Notably, he initiates the meeting himself, despite having the option to avoid it altogether. Given that Esau is said to reside in Seir, located in the southwest of present-day Jordan, and Jacob is traveling from Paddan-Aram—generally identified with a region in modern-day Iraq—toward Beersheba, his route need not have traversed Esau’s territory. Nonetheless, Jacob deliberately dispatches

Jacob sends messengers to his brother Esau. Note the insistence of the verses on recalling that they are brothers: “Esau his brother” (Gn. 32:4), “to your brother, to Esau” (32:7), “of my brother, of Esau” (32:12), “for Esau his brother” (32:14).⁴⁰ This is reminiscent of the dramatic incident between Cain and Abel where the mention of “brother” is also recalled in an almost superfluous way⁴¹. The fundamental difference here is that the resolution of the conflict will be bloodless⁴². It can also be seen as a reminder of the events of the theft of Isaac’s blessing, during which there was also this insistence on their bonds of brotherhood; Let’s not forget that they shared a womb !

Jacob indicates the following to Esau: עַם לָבָן גִּרְתִּי I have sojourned with Lavan (Gn. 32:5). According to several commentators⁴³, it is a way of showing that he has “kept his soul” while living with Lavan. Was he really a stranger to Lavan? Can we find textual clues that show that, from the beginning, Jacob was not “in his place” with Lavan? Apart from the “sojourned” argument, which could be debatable, it is possible to answer in the affirmative by observing the following phenomenon: there is an **absence** of a **direct link between Jacob and Lavan** in the text. Nowhere do we find a חתן *in-law* or דוד *uncle* to qualify Lavan. Unlike Moses, whose brothers-in-law Yitro, ‘Hovav or Qeni will be referred to with the term חתן, Amram will marry his aunt Yocheved (דודתו, in Ex. 6:20), or Uziel who is called “Aharon’s uncle” (עוזיאל דוד אהרן) in Lev. 10:4). Unlike Moses, again, for the text tells us that מֹשֶׁה לְשָׁבַת אֶת הָאִשָּׁה וַיָּתֵן אֶת צִפּוֹרָה בִּתּוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה *Moses consented to remain with this man, who gave him in marriage Zipporah, his daughter*. Moses will move in with Reuel, his father-in-law, while Jacob will simply be passing through.⁴⁴ The only “exception” is found in Gn. 29:12 when Jacob will tell Rachel that he is an אָחִי אַבְיָה, literally *a brother of her father*. However, the term אָח mostly means that he comes in a friendly way, similar to אֲחֵי מֵאֵין אִתָּם “My brothers, where are you from?” said to the shepherds of ‘Haran in Gn. 29:4, who are in no way related to him. Moreover, we previously discussed that in Genesis 29:10, the repeated use—three times—of the phrase לָבָן אָחִי אִמִּי (“Laban, his mother’s brother”) places emphasis on Jacob’s connection to his mother rather than to his father. That being said, an additional layer of meaning may also be discerned: although the verse has three opportunities to refer to Laban simply as Jacob’s uncle, it conspicuously refrains from doing so each time.⁴⁵

messengers to his brother. In the absence of any geographical necessity, the most plausible explanation is that Jacob actively sought to reestablish relations with Esau—a reconciliation that, by implication, demanded reparative action for past wrongs.

⁴⁰ We can also add Gn. 32:18, 33:3.

⁴¹ See Gen 4:8-11

⁴² See *Puzzles Bibliques*, chapter “Cain and Abel, a motivated murder?”, in which I show the strong parallels between the two episodes and explain the idea that one would be the reparation of the other.

⁴³ Rashi or Gur Aryeh, among others.

⁴⁴ Moreover, his mother Rebecca had told him, וַיֵּשְׁבֶת עִמּוֹ יָמִים אָקְדִים *You will live with him for a while* (Gn. 27:44). With his words, Jacob makes yet another separation from his mother’s directives.

⁴⁵ The author trusts that the careful reader will have noticed the attention given to respecting these cues.

Esau receives the emissaries, and it so happens that he too advances to meet Jacob with a retinue of 400 men accompanying him⁴⁶. Jacob became frightened and began to pray. His prayer is flawless and full of emotion :

- **recognition of God via the Tetragrammaton** יהוה האמר אלי Lord, who told me ...,
- **humility** קטנתי מכל החסדים ומכל האמת אשר עשית את עבדך *I am unworthy of all the generosity and truth You did to Your servant, but above all*
- **אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק** *God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac.*

This time, there is no longer any ambiguity, the connection with his father is regained. In this moment of despair, Jacob turns to God through his filiation with his father Abraham and his father Isaac. The connection is restored. At least, it will be fully so once the relationship with Esau is rebuilt, which is Jacob's stated goal. While we can expect the encounter to take place, the biblical account brings us a new twist. Certainly, Jacob has a desire to set things straight with his brother Esau. However, he is deeply afraid, distressed, for himself and for his family. What if, despite his efforts, his brother does not forgive him and harms him, or his family? Therefore, Jacob attempts several avoidance tactics: diversifying risk to avoid permanent damage by creating two distinct camps and then crossing the Jabbok River during the night. It is at this moment that a mysterious "man", most likely an angel, will fight with him. From this struggle, without any real winner, came the change of name: he is no longer just Jacob, he also became Israel, because he "fought with/against God and with/against men, and he triumphed". It will be noted that in doing so, he combines the situations of his (grand)father Abraham and his father Isaac: Abraham changed his name completely: he went from Abram to Abraham definitively, without ever going back. Isaac did not change his name throughout his life. And for good reason: the origin of his name is already divine! For Jacob / Israel, both will endure, even beyond Jacob's death, since this duality will still be evoked, hundreds of years after his death⁴⁷. He also gets a (divine?) blessing for himself. Indeed, previously, Jacob was only a vector of blessing. In the divine promises during the dream of the ladder, God says וְנִבְרַכְנוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה וּבְנֵיכֶם *all the families of the land will be blessed through you and your offspring*. Then, Lavan obtains a blessing thanks to Jacob וְנִבְרַכְנִי יְהוָה בְּגִלְלֶךָ *I have divined that Hashem has blessed me because of you* (Gn. 30:27) and וְנִבְרַךְ יְהוָה אֶתְּךָ לְרַגְלִי *the Lord has blessed you with my every step* (Gn. 30:30).

Having obtained yet another blessing, Jacob should be able to stand up to his brother Esau. In a new twist, he once again divides his camp into several parts, the verse using the term נִיחָץ he divided, as before. This textual detail can be understood as signaling yet another instance of avoidance, particularly given that these constitute the only two occurrences of this specific verb form in the Pentateuch. And then—unexpectedly—a reversal within the reversal: Jacob steps out ahead of his family: *And he went before them and prostrated himself on the ground seven times until he came close to his brother*. It will be noted that the root נָגַשׁ *to come forth/approach* appears seven times during

⁴⁶ There is nothing to say that they were armed or belligerent. I will propose a complete study of the subject - "Jacob's Anguish" - in a future book.

⁴⁷ See in particular the prophecies of Bil'am, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Nahum or the Psalms.

the episode of the theft of the blessing and its immediate consequences⁴⁸. The text alludes to the episode which must be solved. By prostrating himself, Jacob shows an acceptance of his guilt⁴⁹.

We finally reach the moment long awaited by the reader and seemingly dreaded by Jacob. As you might expect, nothing goes as planned; the violent confrontation does not take place. On the contrary, Esau ran to meet Jacob, embraced him and kissed him⁵⁰.

The culmination of this meeting is in the dialogue between the two brothers. Without going into all the details of their discussions, we will focus on Jacob's words: *"Take my blessing that comes to you, for God has given me grace and I have everything."* He pressed him and he took. In *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Sacks (ztz"l) offers a bold reading of this verse, suggesting that Jacob literally "gave back" to Esau the blessing he "took" from him.

Can one "take" and "return" a blessing? Does that even make sense? The text of the Torah seems to answer this question in the affirmative. Note that the verse containing Jacob's phrase קח

⁴⁸ 6 times during the episode itself, a seventh during Jacob's meeting with Rachel at the well in Gen 29:10, an encounter that only takes place because Jacob seeks to join Lavan's family. This last occurrence seems to be superfluous, but ceases to be if we assess that it serves the purpose of joining the two « seven » prostrations.

⁴⁹ It is not imperative that in fact Jacob **actually prostrated** himself seven times, but the use of the number seven in the text allows the reader to grasp the above-mentioned reference. This is a possibility that Rabbeinu Ba'hya mentions, indicating that the number 7 allows us to make a connection (established by the midrash Bereshit Rabbah) with a verse of Proverbs (24:16). In the same vein, Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh's Em Lamiqra proposes to say that the 7 + 3 (handmaidens, Lea & Rachel) genuflections are a reference to Jacob's promise לך עשר אעשרנו I will surely tithe to you.

⁵⁰ Much has been written about the small dots on the "he kissed him" in Gen 33:4, coupled with the use of the same verbs and expressions as in verse 29:13 with Lavan going to meet Jacob, starting with the Sages of the Midrash (Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 78:10), who proposed the idea that Esau would then have tried not to kiss Jacob but to bite him on the neck. Jacob's neck would then have turned to marble, rendering Esau's attack ineffective. As a result, the pain of the attack will have made the two brothers weep. This explanation, taken from the verse of the Song of Solomon 7:5 וְשֵׁן צִנְאָרְךָ כְּמִגְדֵּל הַשֵּׁן *your neck is like a tower of ivory* comes from the fact that he "falls on his neck" before the "he kissed him" surmounted by dots. In addition, it should be noted that the "neck" is mentioned twice in the episode of the theft of the blessing וָעַל חִלְקַת צִנְאָרָיו *And she placed the skins of the kid goats on his arms and on the smooth of his neck* (Gn. 27:16) and וְעַל חֶרְבֶּךָ תִּחַיֶּה וְאֵת אֲחִידָה תַעֲבֹד וְהָיָה כְּאִשֹּׁר תִּרְיֵד וּפְרָקְתָּ עָלָיו מֵעַל צִנְאָרָךְ *By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve. But when you cry in distress you will break his yoke from upon your neck.*" (Gn. 27:40). One can understand the temptation of the Midrash to demonize Esau, especially through the comparison with Lavan, which is definitely indefensible. That being said, it would be appropriate to qualify the statement by observing a strong difference between the attitude of Lavan and that of Esau. A careful examination of the two verses shows us the following: on Lavan's side, it is written לוֹ וַיִּחַבֵּק לוֹ *he embraced him [for himself]*, then לוֹ וַיִּנָּשֶׁק לוֹ *he kissed him [for himself]*. Who is "him" here? The Sages in Bereshit Rabbah will suggest that Lavan literally searched Jacob in the hope of finding some wealth, to no avail. There is another passage of duplicity via a kiss from Yoav, the general of David's army, a rival of Amasa (a former general of Avshalom, who joined David after the defeat of his son), who will take advantage of this to eliminate him (see II Sam 20:9). Therefore, the "him" here would refer to Lavan rather than Jacob. On the other hand, in the episode between Jacob and his brother Esau, there is no "for him". Esau runs to meet Jacob, he (Esau or Jacob)? Although there is some logic that it is again Esau, it is also permissible to consider that it could be Jacob. The verse remains mysterious on the subject, possibly on purpose) the embrace, he (same remark as before) falls on him neck, he (ditto) kisses him and they cry. The very fact of choosing a different formulation from Lavan's, while keeping the same verbs, may be precisely a desire of the text to highlight the fundamental difference between the two: a dubious intention on Lavan's part, sincere on the part of Esau. Rabbi Sacks, in *Not in God's Name*, indicates that in his opinion, this demonization of Esau by the Sages probably has an educational purpose more than an exegesis as close as possible to the letter of the text. Let us end this long note with the following observation: we find the two verbs "חבק ל" and "נשק ל" together in only one other verse of the TaNaKh: the one where Jacob will embrace and kiss his (grand)children Ephraim and Menashe "for them". It allows us to "close" the debate, because here there is no longer any possible ambiguity: we know who hugs and kisses (Jacob), and who benefits from it (Ephraim and Menashe, since we say "for them")

נָא אֶת בְּרַכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הִכָּאת לָךְ כִּי חֲנַנִי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֵשׁ לִי כָל נִפְצָר בּוֹ וַיִּקַּח (Gn. 33:11) is an exact mirror of that of Esau when he realizes his brother's deception, with the double use of the verb לָקַח to take and בְּרַכְתִּי *my blessing*⁵¹. From then on, Esau “take” elements of his brother's gifts and thus recover the blessing that belongs to him^{52 53}.

Before moving on to the last part of the analysis, I would like to mention a more personal point about this particular teaching of Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l) - namely, that the blessing was given back to Esau. When I read him in his book *Not in God's Name*, I was first fascinated by the quality of exegesis/Parshanut that he demonstrated. This rigorous exegesis was put to use to the benefit of a message to be conveyed. I was overwhelmed by this teaching. My family used to recite the verse Gn. 28:27 וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ הָאֱלֹהִים מִטֵּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמֵנִי הָאָרֶץ וְרֹב דָּגָן וְתִירֹשׁ May God grant you from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the land, and much grain and wine during the Havdalah prayer. However, accepting the idea that this blessing was not intended for my ancestor Jacob and that he returned it definitively, I cannot bring myself to continue reciting it. From now on, my Havdalah prayers no longer contain this passage, to my great dismay because the blessing is particularly beautiful, and the song used is just as beautiful. However, I console myself with the fact that this suppression is due to an additional, finer understanding of the biblical text, thanks to the wise eye of Rabbi Sacks (ztz”l). Therefore, not a week goes by without me thinking about him.

8. Full Circle: Return to Isaac and his Legacy

Now that Jacob has repaired the wrong he caused to his brother Esau and taken over the continuity of his father Isaac, he will be able to return home to his side⁵⁴. Another sign of Jacob's fulfillment is found in God's new revelation to Jacob, telling him that he is the ‘El Shadai, a phrase used by Isaac when he sent him to find a wife. The text reminds us that Jacob goes to “Isaac his father” and the next verse tells us that Isaac dies “old and full in days”.⁵⁵ However, as will be shown below, the announcement of this death does not follow the chronological order of events. There is therefore a deliberate choice to juxtapose the announcement of his death with Jacob's return, probably to tell us that for Isaac also the reparation has taken place. It is Jacob and Esau who will bury Isaac. Jacob and Esau, his sons. This is reminiscent of the apparently superfluous mention⁵⁶

⁵¹ The fundamental difference is that in the case of Esau, he considers that there were two “thefts”: that of the birthright, which Jacob would have “taken” from him, and that of the blessing. However, only the part about the blessing is legitimate, since the birthright has been sold with all due legal process.

⁵² In order to be able to obtain or even “take” a blessing, from Esau's point of view, it seems that one needs a material, tangible “support”. This is perhaps why Isaac will ask him to prepare a meal for him to bless him, while for Jacob there is no need for such support.

⁵³ Jacob actually did far much better than just giving Esau some support to get back his blessing. By bowing to him and calling himself a “servant” of Esau, Jacob showed him that the very content of the blessing (containing bowing and servitude) was indeed for him.

⁵⁴ There is a lot to say about the verses between the end of the meeting with Esau and Jacob's return to his father. In particular, the episode of Dinah, which I dealt with in depth in *Puzzles Bibliques*. However, it does not seem to me to have a direct or immediate link with our subject, although there are clear textual links with the idea of children bypassing their father, like Simeon and Levi with Shechem and Reuven with his father's concubine Bilha.

⁵⁵ Isaac is the longest-lived patriarch: 180 years, compared to 175 for Abraham and “only” 147 for Jacob.

⁵⁶ Rashi himself comments, helplessly, “I don't know what this tells us”.

let my name be called, and the names of my fathers, Avraham and Isaac; and may they teem into multitudes in the midst of the earth.” (Gn. 48:15-16). The mention of his “fathers Abraham and Isaac” has a particular significance in view of the study made here.

Jacob asked his children that they bury him his fathers. This is the first time in the biblical text that a person gives burial instructions to his or her loved ones and it is done to signal the link between the ancestors and the new generation.⁶² Jacob passed his test, which is perhaps why his descendants will be called “Bnei Yisrael/ Sons of Israel”. He managed to overcome a form of (deserved) rejection on the part of his father, correcting his shortcomings to be worthy of perpetuating the Covenant with God. This idea of transmission to children, grandchildren and future generations is found as early as the time of Joseph, whose text tells us that “even the children of Machir son of Menashe were born on the knees of Joseph” (Gn. 50:23). Subsequently, even before the Exodus from Egypt, God will indicate to Moses וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפֹּר בְּאָזְנִי בְנֵךְ וּבֵן בְּנֵךְ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלָתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת אֲתַתִּי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי בָם וַיִּדְעֻם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה *and so that you shall recount to your son and your son's son how I toyed with Egypt and the signs that I set among them, and you shall know that I am Hashem.* (Ex. 10:2).

⁶² This request was not made without heavy concessions on the part of Joseph. See in particular my comment “Joseph’s (long) journey” in *Puzzles Bibliques*.

Conclusion:

In Will we have Jewish Grandchildren, Rabbi Sacks (ztz"l) writes the following : “The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity. The focal point of Jewish life is the transmission of a heritage across the generations. Time and again in the Torah we are drawn to dramas of the next generation. Judaism’s focus is its children”. As we have seen, this continuity occurs in reciprocity: when parents invest in their children’s future, but also when children agree to carry on their inheritance.

Appendix 1

Other textual clues as to Jacob’s moral return can be found in him following his father’s footsteps. Let’s go back to the moment when Jacob is ordered to leave: on the one hand, his mother tells him to flee in the direction of Haran (Gn. 27:43). On the other hand, his father tells him to go in the direction of Padan Aram (Gn. 28:2), and verse 5 claims that וישלח יצחק את יעקב ויילך פדנה ארם Isaac sent Jacob off and he went to Paddan Aram, to Lavan the son of Betuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, the mother of Jacob and Esau. Then Jacob listens to his father and mother, he goes towards Padan Aram (verse 7). But further on, in verse 10, ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע ויילך הרנה Jacob departed from Be’er Sheva and went to Charan. There is a clear conflict between the two denominations, the one of Jacob’s father and the one of his mother. Ultimately, which one does Jacob choose? He chooses Isaac’s denomination : not only does the name “Charan” no longer appears in the Chumash - as a reminder, Charan is the very place where Terach left off, it was from there that Abraham resumed his journey to Canaan; we must extricate ourselves from it – but also thereafter, the text systematically used the name “Padan Aram”. The climax appears when Jacob tells his son Joseph “when I came from Padan”. There is no longer Aram, for Jacob, he got definitively rid of it.

On a related note, Jacob employs the same language as his father Isaac when expressing concern that Laban might take his wives from him:

וישאלו אנשי המקום לאשתו ויאמר אחתי הוא כי ירא לאמר אשתי פן יהרגני אנשי המקום על רבקה כי טובת מראה הוא. ויהי כי ארכו לו שם הימים וישקף אבימלך מלך פלשתים בעד החלון וירא והנה יצחק מצחק את רבקה אשתו. ויקרא אבימלך ליצחק ויאמר אך הנה אשתך הוא ואיך אמרת אחתי הוא ויאמר אליו יצחק כי אמרתי פן אמות עליה.

*When the inhabitants of the place inquired about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for **he dared not** say my wife, “the people of the place could kill me for Rebekah’s sake, for she is of great beauty.” Now he had been living there for a long time when Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looked out of the window and saw Isaac caressing Rebekah his wife. Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, “Assuredly, she is your wife; how could you say, ‘She is my sister!’” Isaac replied, “Because **I said to myself, I might perish for her sake.**” (Gn. 26:7-9)*

ויען יעקב ויאמר ללכו כי יראתי כי אמרתי פן תגזל את בנותיך מעמי

Jacob replied to Lavan, “I was afraid, because I thought that you might take your daughters from me by force. (Gn. 31:31)

The three words כִּי אָמַרְתִּי פֶן because *I thought/said to myself it might* appear only one other time in the TaNaKh (Psalm 38:17), a strong clue to the specificity of the bond between Jacob and Isaac.

Appendix 2

Why does Jacob decline Esau’s proposal to travel together in Genesis 33:12? Esau chose not to remain within the familial sphere of Isaac or Jacob, opting instead for permanent separation. He had the opportunity to stay—particularly during Jacob’s absence—and was free to act according to his own will. Yet, he ultimately departed for Seir without any explicit justification. From that point forward, Esau’s voluntary separation from the Covenant effectively precluded Jacob from accompanying him.

Appendix 3

There is much to say also in terms of structure of the text itself, which appears to be chiasmic, from the moment when Jacob **flees** his brother until he **flees** Lavan, with Rebecca and Lavan both **being told** something about one of the twins, and two places that are called Beth-El appearing in the text on both ends of the journey.