# Genesis 26: The adventures of Yitzchak

## The Book of Jubilees revisits Genesis 26

translated by R.H. Charles

BOOK OF JUBILEES is a pseudepigraphic work dating from the middle of the Second Temple period. It purports to be the secret revelation of the angel of the “Divine Presence” to Moses, upon his second ascent to Mount Sinai and it offers a somewhat altered view of the Genesis stories (which are retold according to Jubilee cycles—meaning 50-year increments—which is how the book got its name. Although the original language of the book was Hebrew, all the existing versions (Latin, Ethiopic) are translations from the Greek. Several fragments, apparently in the original Hebrew, have been found in the Qumran caves. Isaac in Genesis 26 is passive and unflappable. A different picture emerges here.

20. And they dug a second well, and they strove for that also, and he called its name “Enmity.”  And he arose from thence and they dug another well, and for that they strove not, and he called the name of it “Room,” and Isaac said: “Now the Lord hath made room for us, and we have increased in the land.”

21. And he went up from thence to the Well of the Oath in the first year of the first week in the forty-fourth jubilee.

22. And the Lord appeared to him that night, on the new moon of the first month, and said unto him: “I am the God of Abraham thy father; fear not, for I am with thee, and shall bless thee and shall surely multiply thy seed as the sand of the earth, for the sake of Abraham my servant.”

23. And he built an altar there, which Abraham his father had first built, and he called upon the name of the Lord, and he offered sacrifice to the God of Abraham his father.

24. And they dug a well and they found living water.

25. And the servants of Isaac dug another well and did not find water, and they went and told Isaac that they had not found water, and Isaac said: “I have sworn this day to the Philistines and this thing hath been announced to us.”

26. And he called the name of that place the “Well of the Oath”; for there he had sworn to Abimelech and Ahuzzath his friend and Phicol the prefect of his host.

27. And Isaac knew that day that under constraint he had sworn to them to make peace with them.

28. And Isaac on that day cursed the Philistines and said: “Cursed be the Philistines unto the day of wrath and indignation from the midst of all nations; may God make them a derision and a curse and an object of wrath and indignation in the hands of the sinners the Gentiles and in the hands of the Kittim [Cypriots, probably from Larnaca—Shammai].  29. And whoever escapeth the sword of the enemy and the Kittim, may the righteous nation root out in judgment from under heaven; for they will be the enemies and foes of my children throughout their generations upon the earth.

30. And no remnant will be left to them,

Nor one that will be saved on the day of the wrath of judgment;

For for destruction and rooting out and expulsion from the earth is the whole seed of the Philistines (reserved),

And there will no longer be left for these Caphtorim[[1]](#footnote-1) a name or a seed on the earth.

31. For though he ascend unto heaven,

Thence will he be brought down,

And though he make himself strong on earth,

Thence will he be dragged forth,

And though he hide himself amongst the nations,

Even from thence will he be rooted out;

And though he descend into Sheol,

There also will his condemnation be great,

And there also he will have no peace.

32. And if he go into captivity,

By the hands of those that seek his life will they slay him on the way,

And neither name nor seed will be left to him on all the earth;

For into eternal malediction will he depart.”

33. And thus is it written and engraved concerning him on the heavenly tables, to do unto him on the day of judgment, so that he may be rooted out of the earth.

Does this curse of Isaac’s reflect the Philistines we see in Gerar?
If not, why would this have found its way into the Jubilee’s version?

## The Book of Yashar revisits Genesis 26

Mistakenly titled “Book of Jasher” when the Mormons first printed it in 1887, this book purportedly is the lost “Book of Yashar” mentioned in Joshua and Second Samuel. Most likely, it was written in the 13th century in Spain. The Hebrew text was translated by a Jewish scholar in England and published in the United States by M.M. Noah, who also took credit for the translation. An edition published by the Mormon printing company J.H. Parry & Co. of Salt Lake City in 1887. The book’s version of Genesis 26 attempts to fill in some of the blanks in the story and to answer some of the questions raised by the Genesis text (such as where Yitzchak was headed when God called to him; why Avimelech never attempted to take Rivkah into his harem; why Yitzchak and Rivkah chose that courtyard for their sexual play; and where Yaakov and Esav were during this period). It also puts events in the extended Shemite family into context of the patriarchal narrative.

1. And in those days, after the death of Abraham, in that year the Lord brought a heavy famine in the land, and whilst the famine was raging in the land of Canaan, Isaac rose up to go down to Egypt on account of the famine, as his father Abraham had done.

2. And the Lord appeared that night to Isaac and he said to him, Do not go down to Egypt but rise and go to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines, and remain there till the famine shall cease.

3. And Isaac rose up and went to Gerar, as the Lord commanded him, and he remained there a full year.

4. And when Isaac came to Gerar, the people of the land saw that Rebecca his wife was of a beautiful appearance, and the people of Gerar asked Isaac concerning his wife, and he said, She is my sister, for he was afraid to say she was his wife lest the people of the land should slay him on account of her.

5. And the princes of Abimelech went and praised the woman to the king, but he answered them not, neither did he attend to their words.

6. But he heard them say that Isaac declared her to be his sister, so the king reserved this within himself.

7. And when Isaac had remained three months in the land, Abimelech looked out at the window, and he saw, and behold Isaac was sporting with Rebecca his wife, for Isaac dwelt in the outer house belonging to the king, so that the house of Isaac was opposite the house of the king.

8. And the king said unto Isaac, What is this thou hast done to us in saying of thy wife, She is my sister? how easily might one of the great men of the people have lain with her, and thou wouldst then have brought guilt upon us.

9. And Isaac said unto Abimelech, Because I was afraid lest I die on account of my wife, therefore I said, She is my sister.

10. At that time Abimelech gave orders to all his princes and great men, and they took Isaac and Rebecca his wife and brought them before the king.

11. And the king commanded that they should dress them in princely garments, and make them ride through the streets of the city, and proclaim before them throughout the land, saying, This is the man and this is his wife; whoever toucheth this man or his wife shall surely die. And Isaac returned with his wife to the king’s house, and the Lord was with Isaac and he continued to wax great and lacked nothing.

12. And the Lord caused Isaac to find favor in the sight of Abimelech, and in the sight of all his subjects, and Abimelech acted well with Isaac, for Abimelech remembered the oath and the covenant that existed between his father and Abraham.

13. And Abimelech said unto Isaac, Behold the whole earth is before thee; dwell wherever it may seem good in thy sight until thou shalt return to thy land; and Abimelech gave Isaac fields and vineyards and the best part of the land of Gerar, to sow and reap and eat the fruits of the ground until the days of the famine should have passed by.

14. And Isaac sowed in that land, and received a hundred-fold in the same year, and the Lord blessed him.

15. And the man waxed great, and he had possession of flocks and possession of herds and great store of servants.

16. And when the days of the famine had passed away the Lord appeared to Isaac and said unto him, Rise up, go forth from this place and return to thy land, to the land of Canaan; and Isaac rose up and returned to Hebron which is in the land of Canaan, he and all belonging to him as the Lord commanded him.

17. And after this Shelach the son at Arpachshad died in that year, which is the eighteenth year of the lives of Jacob and Esau; and all the days that Shelach lived were four hundred and thirty-three years and he died.

18. At that time Isaac sent his younger son Jacob to the house of Shem and Eber, and he learned the instructions of the Lord, and Jacob remained in the house of Shem and Eber for thirty-two years, and Esau his brother did not go, for he was not willing to go, and he remained in his father’s house in the land of Canaan.

19. And Esau was continually hunting in the fields to bring home what he could get, so did Esau all the days.

20. And Esau was a designing and deceitful man, one who hunted after the hearts of men and inveigled them, and Esau was a valiant man in the field, and in the course of time went as usual to hunt; and he came as far as the field of Seir, the same is Edom.

21. And he remained in the land of Seir hunting in the field a year and four months.

22. And Esau there saw in the land of Seir the daughter of a man of Canaan, and her name was Jehudith, the daughter of Beeri, son of Epher, from the families of Heth the son of Canaan.

23. And Esau took her for a wife, and he came unto her; forty years old was Esau when he took her, and he brought her to Hebron, the land of his father’s dwelling place, and he dwelt there.

24. And it came to pass in those days, in the hundred and tenth year of the life of Isaac, that is in the fiftieth year of the life of Jacob, in that year died Shem the son of Noah; Shem was six hundred years old at his death.

25. And when Shem died Jacob returned to his father to Hebron which is in the land of Canaan.

26. And in the fifty-sixth year of the life of Jacob, people came from Haran, and Rebecca was told concerning her brother Laban the son of Bethuel.

27. For the wife of Laban was barren in those days, and bare no children, and also all his handmaids bare none to him.

28. And the Lord afterward remembered Adinah the wife of Laban, and she conceived and bare twin daughters, and Laban called the names of his daughters, the name of the elder Leah, and the name of the younger Rachel.

29. And those people came and told these things to Rebecca, and Rebecca rejoiced greatly that the Lord had visited her brother and that he had got children.

## Legends of the Bible: Isaac with the Philistines

Louis Ginzberg

The late talmudist and JTS scholar Rabbi Louis Ginzberg collected many of the midrashim relating to the biblical tales and threaded them together into a continuous narrative. This section deals with Genesis 26, as seen through the eyes of the Sages of 2,000 years ago, and reworked by Ginzberg. Midrash has many purposes. Some midrashim attempt to fill in the blanks of a biblical story. Others seek to extract lessons from a text. One can see here, by the way, where the “Book of Yashar” got its notion of the events.

THE LIFE of Isaac was a faithful reflex of the life of his father. Abraham had to leave his birthplace; so also Isaac. Abraham was exposed to the risk of losing his wife; so also Isaac. The Philistines were envious of Abraham; so also of Isaac. Abraham long remained childless; so also Isaac. Abraham begot one pious son and one wicked son; so also Isaac. And, finally, as in the time of Abraham, so also in the time of Isaac, a famine came upon the land.

At first Isaac intended to follow the example of his father and remove to Egypt, but God appeared unto him, and spake: “Thou art a perfect sacrifice, without a blemish, and as a burnt offering is made unfit if it is taken outside of the sanctuary, so thou wouldst be profaned if thou shouldst happen outside of the Holy Land. Remain in the land, and endeavor to cultivate it.
In this land dwells the Shekinah, and in days to come I will give unto thy children the realms possessed by mighty rulers, first a part thereof, and the whole in the Messianic time.”

Isaac obeyed the command of God, and he settled in Gerar. When he noticed that the inhabitants of the place began to have designs upon his wife, he followed the example of Abraham, and pretended she was his sister. The report of Rebekah’s beauty reached the king himself, but he was mindful of the great danger to which he had once exposed himself on a similar occasion, and he left Isaac and his wife unmolested.

After they had been in Gerar for three months, Abimelech noticed that the manner of Isaac, who lived in the outer court of the royal palace, was that of a husband toward Rebekah. He called him to account, saying, “It might have happened to the king himself to take the woman thou didst call thy sister.” Indeed, Isaac lay under the suspicion of having illicit intercourse with Rebekah, for at first the people of the place would not believe that she was his wife. When Isaac persisted in his statement, Abimelech sent his grandees for them, ordered them to be arrayed in royal vestments, and had it proclaimed before them, as they rode through the city: “These two are man and wife. He that toucheth this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.”

Thereafter the king invited Isaac to settle in his domains, and he assigned fields and vineyards to him for cultivation, the best the land afforded. But Isaac was not self-interested. The tithe of all he possessed he gave to the poor of Gerar. Thus he was the first to introduce the law of tithing for the poor, as his father Abraham had been the first to separate the priests’ portion from his fortune. Isaac was rewarded by abundant harvests; the land yielded a hundred times more than was expected, though the soil was barren and the year unfruitful. He grew so rich that people wished to have “the dung from Isaac’s she-mules rather than Abimelech’s gold and silver.” But his wealth called forth the envy of the Philistines, for it is characteristic of the wicked that they begrudge their fellow-men the good, and rejoice when they see evil descend upon them, and envy brings hatred in its wake, and so the Philistines first envied Isaac, and then hated him. In their enmity toward him, they stopped the wells which Abraham had had his servants dig. Thus they broke their covenant with Abraham and were faithless, and they have only themselves to blame if they were exterminated later on by the Israelites.

Isaac departed from Gerar, and began to dig again the wells of water which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father, and which the Philistines had stopped. His reverence for his father was so great that he even restored the names by which Abraham had called the wells.

To reward him for his filial respect, the Lord left the name of Isaac unchanged, while his father and his son had to submit to new names. After four attempts to secure water, Isaac was successful; he found the well of water that followed the Patriarchs. Abraham had obtained it after three diggings. Hence the name of the well, Beer-sheba, “the well of seven diggings,” the same well that will supply water to Jerusalem and its environs in the Messianic time.

Isaac’s success with his wells but served to increase the envy of the Philistines, for he had come upon water in a most unlikely spot and, besides, in a year of drought. But “the Lord fulfils the desire of them that fear Him.” As Isaac executed the will of his Creator, so God accomplished his desire. And Abimelech, the king of Gerar, speedily came to see that God was on the side of Isaac, for, to chastise him for having instigated Isaac’s removal from Gerar, his house was ravaged by robbers in the night, and he himself was stricken with leprosy. The wells of the Philistines ran dry as soon as Isaac left Gerar, and also the trees failed to yield their fruit. None could be in doubt but that these things were the castigation for their unkindness.

Now Abimelech entreated his friends, especially the administrator of his kingdom, to accompany him to Isaac and help him win back his friendship. Abimelech and the Philistines spake thus to Isaac: “We have convinced ourselves that the Shekinah is with thee, and therefore we desire thee to renew the covenant which thy father made with us, that thou wilt do us no hurt, as we also did not touch thee.” Isaac consented. It illustrates the character of the Philistines strikingly that they took credit unto themselves for having done him no hurt. It shows that they would have been glad to inflict harm upon him, for “the soul of the wicked desireth evil.”

The place in which the covenant was made between Isaac and the Philistines was called Shib’ah, for two reasons, because an oath [shevuah] was “sworn” there, and as a memorial of the fact that even the heathen are bound to observe the “seven” [shivah] Noachian laws.

For all the wonders executed by God for Isaac, and all the good he enjoyed throughout his life, he is indebted to the merits of his father. For his own merits he will be rewarded in future. On the great day of judgment it will be Isaac who will redeem his descendants from Gehenna. On that day the Lord will speak to Abraham, “Thy children have sinned,” and Abraham will make reply, “Then let them be wiped out, that Thy Name be sanctified.” The Lord will turn to Jacob, thinking that he who had suffered so much in bringing his sons to manhood’s estate would display more love for his posterity. But Jacob will give the same answer as Abraham. Then God will say: “The old have no understanding and the young no counsel. I will now go to Isaac. Isaac,” God will address him, “thy children have sinned,” and Isaac will reply: “O Lord of the world, sayest Thou my children, and not Thine? When they stood at Mount Sinai and declared themselves ready to execute all Thy bidding before even they heard it, Thou didst call Israel ‘My firstborn,’ and now they are my children, and not Thine! Let us consider. The years of a man are seventy. From these twenty are to be deducted, for Thou inflictest no punishment upon those under twenty. Of the fifty years that are left, one-half are to be deducted for the nights passed in sleep. There remain only twenty-five years, and these are to be diminished by twelve and a half, the time spent in praying, eating, and attending to other needs in life, during which men commit no sins. That leaves only twelve years and a half. If Thou wilt take these upon Thyself, well and good. If not, do Thou take one-half thereof, and I will take the other half.” The descendants of Isaac will then say, “Verily, thou art our true father!” But he will point to God, and admonish them, “Nay, give not your praises to me, but to God alone,” and Israel, with eyes directed heavenward, will say, “Thou, O Lord, art our Father; our Redeemer from everlasting is Thy name.”

It was Isaac, or, as he is sometimes called, Elihu the son of Barachel, who revealed the wonderful mysteries of nature in his arguments with Job. At the end of the years of famine, God appeared unto Isaac, and bade him return to Canaan. Isaac did as he was commanded, and he settled in Hebron. At this time he sent his younger son Jacob to the Bet ha-Midrash of Shem and Eber, to study the law of the Lord. Jacob remained there thirty-two years. As for Esau, he refused to learn, and he remained in the house of his father. The chase was his only occupation, and as he pursued beasts, so he pursued men, seeking to capture them with cunning and deceit.

On one of his hunting expeditions, Esau came to Mount Seir, where he became acquainted with Judith, of the family of Ham, and he took her unto himself as his wife, and brought her to his father at Hebron. Ten years later, when Shem his teacher died, Jacob returned home, at the age of fifty. Another six years passed, and Rebekah received the joyful news that her sister-in-law Adinah, the wife of Laban, who, like all the women of his house, had been childless until then, had given birth to twin daughters, Leah and Rachel.

Rebekah, weary of her life on account of the woman chosen by her older son, exhorted Jacob not to marry one of the daughters of Canaan, but a maiden of the family of Abraham. He assured his mother that the words of Abraham, bidding him to marry no woman of the Canaanites, were graven upon his memory, and for this reason he was still unmarried, though he had attained the age of sixty-two, and Esau had been urging him for twenty-two years past to follow his example and wed a daughter of the people of the land in which they lived. He had heard that his uncle Laban had daughters, and he was resolved to choose one of them as his wife.

Deeply moved by the words of her son, Rebekah thanked him and gave praise unto God with the words: “Blessed be the Lord God, and may His Holy Name be blessed forever and ever, who hath given me Jacob as a pure son and a holy seed; for he is Thine, and Thine shall his seed be continually and throughout all the generations for evermore. Bless him, O Lord, and place in my mouth the blessing of righteousness, that I may bless him.” And when the spirit of the Lord came over her, she laid her hands upon the head of Jacob and gave him her maternal blessing. It ended with the words, “May the Lord of the world love thee, as the heart of thy affectionate mother rejoices in thee, and may He bless thee.”

## The Beginning of Wisdom: Isaac in the World

Leon R. Kass

Kass, as usual, sees things through a different lens than do the biblical scholars and exegetes. Here, he paints a rosier-than-usual picture of Avimelech and a not altogether positive picture of Yitzchak as patriarch (although he does seem to be an excellent businessman). Fear not; this has been edited down and without most of those cumbersome footnotes we have become used to with Kass.

Having introduced the problem within Isaac’s household, the text leaves it simmering and moves to Isaac’s career on the world stage. His exploits, which are all described in but one chapter (Genesis 26), present echoes of the life of his father: there is a famine; there is a visit to his father’s friend Abimelech, with whom Isaac repeats his father’s wife-sister subterfuge and with whom he also estab­lishes a covenant at Beer-sheba; there is a redigging of his father’s wells. But there are no great adventures: no trip to Egypt, no war of the kings, no conversation with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. The world stage of Isaac’s adventures is, in fact, geographically limited; he spends his entire life in Canaan, in the Promised Land. And even in the episodes in which he imitates the deeds of his father, Isaac shows he is no Abraham. At the same time, however, his achievements are not negligible. In worldly terms, he not only survives but flourishes—with a little help from the Lord.

From the start, the story of Isaac’s worldly career invites us to compare it with that of his father: “And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went unto Abimelech, king of the Philistines, unto Gerar” (26:1; emphasis added). With the recurrence of famine, Isaac, like Abraham before him, heads for the southwest, toward Egypt, stopping on the way to visit with his father’s friend Abimelech. It is here where Isaac will make his mark; it is here where he can best be compared to his father. In order to arrange for Isaac’s proper venue, the Lord appears to him in Gerar and addresses him for the first time.

When God spoke first to Abraham, He bade him to go; when He speaks first to Isaac, God bids him to stay put. He commands Isaac not to go down into Egypt but to remain in Gerar, where He promises to be with him and to bless him. Isaac is not a man fit for an encounter in Egypt; he can succeed only in less hostile territory, and then only with God’s promised help. Reiterating many parts of His initial promise to Abraham—the gift of land and countless seed, the source of blessing to all the nations of the earth[[2]](#footnote-2)—God now transfers His promises to Isaac simply because of his father’s obedience. Isaac makes no verbal reply, but simply conforms to God’s request: “And Isaac remained [or dwelt] in Gerar” (26:6).

Isaac immediately encounters a problem with the Gerarites on account of his wife. Showing interest in Rebekah, “the men of the place asked about his woman” (26:7). Isaac, alarmed by their inquiry, passes Rebekah off as his sister, fearing to admit that she is his wife lest they should kill him in order to possess her. When this episode is compared with Abraham’s use of a similar stratagem a generation earlier ...., important differences between father and son appear. Equally important, we discover that a single virtuous leader—such as Abimelech—cannot by himself establish decent ways for a whole people Abimelech, king of Gerar, is a naturally noble fellow, as .... his earlier dealings with Sarah and Abraham made clear. But as we learn in this episode and also in their later struggles with Isaac over the wells, Abimelech’s people do not inherit his gentlemanly virtues. Indeed, this might be the text’s main purpose in showing us two Israelite generations (Abraham and Isaac) dealing with the same Abimelech and his men: a naturally inferior man (Isaac) may succeed as an inheritor and perpetuator of righteousness because he lives under God’s covenant, whereas a naturally superior man (Abimelech) may fail because he and his people know not the Lord.

When Abraham went abroad, he had prudently anticipated the danger to himself; well in advance, he told Sarah .... to say, wherever they went, that she was his sister. Isaac, less sophisticated or farsighted, responds only when the risk is right upon him. Moreover, in Isaac’s hands, the deception does not succeed. Whether because he is innocent or reckless, whether loving or lustful, Isaac imprudently exposes his own deception. He gets caught in broad daylight—by the king himself, looking out a window (!)—engaging in sexual play with his wife. Fortunately, Abimelech remains honorable.

In the earlier episode with Abraham and Sarah, the wife was taken by the king himself, and God had to intervene to keep Abimelech from touching her. When asked to explain his wife-sister subterfuge, Abraham answered that he believed the place lacking in the fear of God. Here, the danger comes not from the king but from his subjects. In explaining his deception, Isaac stammers out only something about his own fear of death and says nothing about the people’s fear of God. But Abimelech knows his subjects. Acting swiftly, this time without any need for divine prompting, he himself takes the place of God and puts them in fear of their king, a substitute for the fear of God: he charges his people, on penalty of death, to keep away from Isaac and Rebekah. Thanks to Abimelech’s nobility and firmness, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, crucial for the perpetuation of the new way and put at risk by Isaac, is restored and protected.

Isaac, under kingly protection in Gerar, now begins to prosper, thanks both to his own efforts and to God’s providence.

Isaac is the first and only successful farmer in Genesis; he becomes wealthy also in livestock. But although he becomes someone to be reckoned with, he has as yet no firm possession in the land. The wells that Abraham had dug during his sojourn there the Philistines had filled in with earth, not only blocking their Iife­giving water but also effacing Abraham’s tacit claim to the land. Now, envying Isaac’s spectacular prosperity, the Philistines ask him to leave their land. Isaac departs quietly and camps in the nearby dry riverbed ....; there he digs again the stopped-up wells of his father, calling them by the names his father had called them. His servants succeed twice in digging a new well of flowing water, but the herdsmen of Gerar lay claim to them. In each case Isaac retreats, avoiding confrontation, but he and his men continue to dig for water. On a third try, a well is dug for which the men of Gerar do not contest. Grateful and relieved, Isaac names the place Rehoboth (“broad place,” “room”), saying, “For now the Lord hath made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land” (26:22).

When Isaac returns to Beer-sheba, the Lord appears to him for the second time:

And the Lord appeared unto him the same night and said, “I am the God of Abraham, thy father. Fear not, for I am with thee and I will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for My servant Abraham’s sake.” (26:24)

Isaac in response builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord. It is his first explicit act of recognition of the divine. At this point Abimelech and his henchmen come from Gerar to pay Isaac a visit of state. Acknowledging that “the Lord was with thee,” they propose a covenant of peace with Isaac in order that “thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace: thou art now the blessed of the Lord” (26:29). Isaac makes a feast for his guests and the following day they swear an oath and enact a covenant. Isaac, acknowledged by the Philistines to be “now the blessed of the Lord,” is now explicitly recognized as a national entity. The same day water appears for the first time in the newest well—Isaac called it Shiv’ah—recently dug at Beer-sheba. As a man living among other men, Isaac is now established in the promised land.

Like any man living among other men, Isaac must make his own way in the world. He must dig again the wells his father had dug, he must make again the treaties that his father had made, he even has to name the same city Beer-sheva, but for a reason of his own.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the world, Isaac—like each member of any new generation—must fend for himself. But Isaac is not just an ordinary man living only in relation to the world, to the earth and his fellow creatures. He is also a link in the covenantal chain, living in relation to God, His promise and His charge. In this respect, Isaac is not simply on his own. Rather he may—nay, he must—rely on the foundations laid by his father, Abraham, and seek to transmit them to his sons. It is this inherited God-revering way of life that Isaac must hand down if it is to exist in the next generation. It is this activity that should be the central focus of his patriarchal life. There is no guarantee that the wells fathers dig will be there for their sons. But if fathers maintain their relationship with God and teach their sons the ways of the covenant, these can survive intact into the next generation, serving as a wellspring of moral and spiritual guidance to elevate and dignify human life.”

Although he has succeeded in providing necessary food and life-giving water, although he has grown prosperous and gained recognition and a place in the land, Isaac has not succeeded as a patriarch of the new way. True, he has made it on his own as a man in the world. True, he has reopened the life-preserving channels begun by his father. But he has fallen short as a transmitter of his father’s way of life. He not only prefers the wrong son and for a wrong reason; unlike his own father, he makes no provision for the marriage even of his favorite son, Esau. To call the reader’s attention back to this deficiency, the last verses of the chapter that reports Isaac’s worldly successes starkly point to the crucial area of Isaac’s failure. Esau, at the revelatory age of forty, quite on his own takes two Canaanite wives, wives who “were a bitterness of spirit unto both Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35; emphasis added). Isaac, though materially blessed and prospering, has averted his gaze from both the future and the past. He has lived with apparently little awareness of what he and he alone can transmit. But when Esau, his favorite, takes foreign wives, even Isaac is dismayed. The covenant with Abraham is in grave danger. Isaac seems impotent to save it.

## Heavenly Torah As Refracted Through the Generations

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Does the Torah Lack Chronological Order? A favorite theme needs exploring at this point. If, as so many contend, Yaakov and Esav had not yet been born when Genesis 26 takes place, how come their births are announced in Genesis 25 and we even get to see them as teenagers presumably? For this purpose, I thought that no less an authority than Heschel would do to make the case that “there is no first and no last in the Torah.”

RABBI ISHMAEL’S DISCIPLES were very concerned with the characteristics of language. Their interpretations often address the literal meaning of words and rules of grammar.

“There is no chronological order in the Torah”![[4]](#footnote-4) was a generally accepted axiom of the school of Rabbi Ishmael. It was fundamental for their determination of the peshat, the surface or plain-sense meaning of the text. This was for them nothing more than the fruit of examination and analysis: from a close reading of the content, one can see that there were chapters and verses not arranged in the order in which the words were spoken or in which the events occurred. For this reason, Rabbi Ishmael rejected the exegetical technique used by some Sages of finding special meanings in contiguous passages. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch was of the same opinion when he said: “There are many passages linked to each other in the text but in actuality they are as far apart as east from west.” Rabbi Akiva, however, stated bluntly, “Every passage that adjoins another has to be learned in conjunction with it.”

While Rabbi Ishmael’s view was received favorably by many of the Sages, it was found objectionable by those who loved to search for hidden meanings in Scripture.

Whoever regarded the Torah from a transcendental perspective, “the precious vessel by which the world was created” (to use Rabbi Akiva’s description), recoiled from such critical and analytical statements as “there is no chronological order in the Torah,” or “we have a misplacement of passages here,” or “this verse was not placed in its proper order.” He would argue, “The Torah of the Lord is perfect and you say there is no order in the Torah?! Who gave a mere mortal the authority to put the Torah to the test and to declare, ‘This passage was not written in its proper place’? How could it even enter one’s mind that the Torah, which is the quintessence of perfection, was not arranged in chronological order?!”

The source of Rabbi Ishmael’s principle is to be found in the Mekhilta. We read in the Song at the Sea of Reeds, “The foe said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil’ (Exodus 15:19). Clearly, this belongs at the beginning of the Song. Why was it placed here? Because there is no chronological order in the Torah.” Also the opening verse in Leviticus 9, which deals with the assumption of duties by Aaron and his priests, properly belongs at the very beginning of the Book of Leviticus. However, because there is no order in the Torah, it was placed here. Similarly, we read in Deuteronomy 29:9, “You all stand this day before the Lord your God.” Since this is the start of Moses’ farewell orations to the people, it should have been placed at the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy. Again, since there was no attempt at chronological order, it found its place here.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As we have noted, the Sages who rejected this principle of Rabbi Ishmael applied their exegesis to interpreting contiguous scriptural passages, a method known as semikhut (thematic juxtaposition). Support for this method was based on the verses “All His precepts are reliable; they are adjoining[[6]](#footnote-6) for all eternity, they are wrought of truth and equity” (Psalm 111:7-8). Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat interpreted this to mean that we must not doubt the validity of teachings derived from adjoining passages. If you examine them carefully you will find that they are always in order, teaching truth and equity.

Rabbi Aha made this interesting observation: The fact that there is no chronological order in the Torah testifies that the sacred texts were uttered by the Holy and Blessed One. Otherwise, people would say, “They are merely fiction, written by someone who used his imagination, in the manner of a person who relates what happened in his lifetime.” He concludes, therefore, that because they lack any chronological order, they must be the product of the Holy Spirit. Moses wrote them down in the order in which they were communicated to him through prophecy.”

Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides, in his commentary on Exodus 18:1 declares that both viewpoints .... have validity, despite the apparent contradiction. He points out that there are passages in the Torah that appear to be out of order, belonging earlier or later, but a careful examination of the text justifies the order in which they appear. That is, what appears to be chronologically earlier must in fact be later, if one attends to the context. However, there are other passages that, upon examination of the context, clearly reveal that they are not in chronological order.

Nahmanides seems to share this viewpoint. In his commentary [to Numbers 16:1] he states, “The entire Torah follows a chronological order, except where it provides a specific explanation for placing a text earlier or later, depending on the demands of the subject or for other reasons.

## The Torah: A modern commentary: Isaac’s Personality

Edited by W. Gunther Plaut

Of the three patriarchs, Isaac’s personality is the least clearly defined. Much in his life is a repetition of Abraham’s experience, and some critics have even suggested that Isaac never existed at all—that he was the creation of later legendary amplifications of the Abraham cycle. But it is rather unlikely for any people to invent a tradition with an ancestor of such obvious weaknesses. The biblical record makes Isaac a very real product of realistic circumstances.

He was the child of his parents’ old age and was probably overprotected in his youth. Sarah was a woman of strong will, Abraham a man of deep conviction and great status who must have appeared as a towering giant to his son. It is not surprising that when Isaac was being offered as a sacrifice at Moriah he could not even raise his voice in protest. By coincidence (or, as the text seems to suggest, by divine design), the wife who was obtained for him turned out to be aggressive and resourceful, a “manager.” The text is at pains to point out that Rebekah brought Isaac comfort after his mother’s death (Gen. 24:67), which in contemporary terms may be said to indicate that he saw in Rebekah a mother substitute. Further, he repeated his father’s experience with Abimelech, and the wells he dug were the old wells of Abraham.

Bad experiences marked his life: he was nearly sacrificed by his father; he was caught in the crossfire of Sarah’s and Hagar’s conflict; his children struggled with each other; and in old age, when he was stricken with blindness, his wife and son deceived him, so that the one thing he truly owned, his paternal blessing, was bestowed equivocally on the son he did not prefer.

Still, Isaac had real strengths. He endured Mount Moriah, and the faith of Abraham became a vibrant force in his life. He remained in Canaan, even in times of hardship. He tried his hand at agriculture—a venture his father had not attempted—and became enormously successful at it. He was evidently a man of peace, and he gained the respect of a king who covenanted with him. We know little about his feelings, but we may assume that precisely because of suffering and difficulties, and because he was surrounded by strong and active people, Isaac became a reflective, perhaps even an introverted, person (hinted at in Gen. 24:63).

He thus represents an important stage in the patriarchal drama. After the revolutionary and often stormy experiences of his father, the son’s life becomes the halting place where new religious insights are absorbed and incorporated into patterns of thought and deed. Isaac is the bridge between Abraham and Jacob, the essential link in the chain of greatness.

## Was Isaac Deceived?

Joseph Rackman

The story of Isaac blessing his twin sons, Jacob and Esau, is replete with problems. Isaac intends to bless his eldest son, Esau, but Jacob (the younger of the two) engages in a successful deception and obtains the blessing intended for Esau.

Jacob suffered for his deception and himself was the victim of deceptions—a just retribution. However, the story of the blessing of Jacob and Esau is troublesome. The biggest question is whether a blessing can be stolen. If Jacob had stolen his father's sheep, by law the sheep would not have belonged to Jacob. Therefore, it must be asked whether a father's blessing, especially a spiritual/moral one, can be stolen. Additionally, Isaac's wife, Rebecca, favors her younger child, Jacob, and encourages him into undertaking the deception. What was the underlying cause of the dispute between the spouses? Why did Isaac favor Esau and Rebecca favor Jacob? The answers to these questions are in the text.

In this story Isaac gives three blessings. First, he blesses Jacob, though he thinks that it is Esau in front of him. (Genesis 27:28-29) The second blessing is after Jacob has left the tent and Esau comes in with the meal for his father. (Genesis 27:39-40) Both Isaac and Esau are upset that Jacob has obtained a blessing by deceit and Esau demands a blessing from his father, which is given. Afterwards, Esau announces that he will kill Jacob after Isaac dies. Rebecca goes to Isaac and tells him that she wishes Jacob to return to the home country of Babylon (where she had been born and where Isaac's father had been born) and for Jacob to find a wife from there. Out of consideration for Isaac's feelings, she does not tell him of Esau's deadly intentions towards his brother.) Isaac asks for Jacob to come to him in order to give Jacob another blessing before he leaves. (Genesis 28:3-4) This will be the first time that Isaac has Jacob in front of him with Isaac knowing that it is Jacob in front of him .

We must question what appears to be the attitude of the text towards the stealing of the blessings by Jacob. There seems to have a strictly formalistic conception of law in which a deception is sanctioned. It is difficult to believe that the deception by Jacob can affect who will receive Isaac's blessing. It does not seem right that a blessing obtained by Jacob through deceit should be upheld. This is especially true when one considers what is at stake. The blessing at issue is the right to be God's representative on earth. Who will bear God's banner? Can it really be that this moral right can be obtained by stealth?

Philo tries to offer a justification for the deception, by commenting on the fact that (as noted in verse 15) Rebecca took Esau's best clothing and gave them to Jacob. He asks why Rebecca did this? Here is his answer:

The literal meaning is clear and conspicuous: it seemed that through the robe he who was not there was present. But as for the deeper meaning, the wicked man has another robe and many garments by which he conceals and covers himself, inasmuch as he cunningly contrives many matters of wrongdoing.

Philo often allegorizes biblical texts and he portrays the robe of Esau as symbolic of Esau's concealment of his wickedness, implying that Jacob and Rebecca had the right to do what they did.

Philo also deals with the quandary of how Jacob can be rewarded for an act of deceitfulness:

Now if he received [the blessing] through deceit, perhaps some may say that he is not praiseworthy; how, then, can [Isaac] also say "The blessing will remain his" [27:33], thereby affirming the blessing attained by deceit? But he seems to indicate by this statement that not every deceit is blameworthy. Thus it is that night-watchers are unable to seize and overcome robbers without deceit, and army commanders to defeat the enemy in war; but by ambushing them they seem to achieve their end. And those acts which are called stratagems have a similar principle and so do the contests of athletes for in these deceit and trickery are considered honorable, and those who by trickery overcome their adversaries are thought worthy of prizes and wreathes. So that no falsehood and blame attach to "with deceit" [27:35] but rather praise, as it is equivalent to "with art" for the virtuous man does nothing without art.

Philo has expressed a classical view of the story. Sometimes, for the good to triumph, deception must be used, the way a night-watchman overcomes robbers. In other words, the ends justify the means. Nonetheless, we are still left with our original questions. The blessing is Isaac's to give. It does not seem fit that the blessing can be obtained other than with the consent of the giver, namely, Isaac. If ownership to property cannot be obtained by stealth, how much more so should a blessing to be God's representative on earth which is obtained by deceit be void?

The answer is discernible after a close review of the three blessings that were given. The first blessing is given when Isaac believes he has Esau in front of him, although it is really Jacob. The blessing that is given is a materialistic one: "May God grant you the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, much grain and wine. Nations will serve you and governments will bow down to you." (Genesis 27:28- 29)

The second blessing is given by Isaac to Esau, with Isaac knowing that it is truly Esau in front of him and again the blessing is one of materialism: "The fat places of the earth can still be your dwelling and [you can still have] the dew of heaven." (The problem that Esau will face, however, is that he will "live by the sword and you [Esau] will have to serve your brother.") (Genesis 27:39- 40)

Both blessings deal with wealth.

It is the third blessing which reveals that Isaac truly understood the difference between his two sons and that Jacob is to be his spiritual heir. Knowing his son is heading for a long journey, Isaac summons Jacob to bless him. And in the opening of Chapter 28, for the first time, Jacob appears before Isaac with Isaac knowing that it is Jacob before him and Isaac's blessing is for him to "become an assembly of peoples. He [God] will grant Abraham's blessing to you and your descendants, so that you will take over the land which God gave to Abraham." (Genesis 28:3-4)

.... It is only in the third encounter, when Isaac knows that he has Jacob before him, that the spiritual blessing, "Abraham's blessing," is given-the mantle of Abraham and of his special relationship with God. Jacob receives this blessing not because of any deception .

It appears that the entire scene involving the three blessings plays itself out over a very brief period of time, as little as only one morning. Perhaps, before the deception by Jacob, Isaac's plan was to give Esau the materialistic blessing and a few days later to give Jacob the spiritual blessing. While Isaac was old, he did not believe that he was on his death bed for he tells Esau, "I am old and I have no idea when I will die." (Genesis 27:2) These are not the words of a man who feels deathly ill. Isaac presumes that he has some time left before his death so that he will later be able to bless Jacob also. However, events transpired so that, with Jacob leaving for Mesopotamia in order to find a wife, Jacob is forced to hurry up his game plan and to bless Jacob immediately.

It is not hard to imagine that Isaac's hope was to give Esau his blessing with a big fanfare, a feast preceding the blessing, and to permit Esau a period of time to enjoy the status conferred by this blessing. ln order to preserve the relationship between the two brothers, it would not be surprising if Isaac intended to play down the importance of the spiritual blessing. After all, it is hard for a parent to tell one child that he or she is second to another. In order to compensate for this hurt, Isaac is trying to make up for the slight by pumping up the importance of the blessing that is being given to Esau with the fanfare of the feast that Esau is to prepare .

If it is correct, that all along Isaac had intended to give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob, then what was the dispute between Isaac and his wife, Rebecca? Why was Rebecca so intent on having her son deceive her husband?

There are two possibilities-either Rebecca knew what her husband intended or she did not know. The evidence of the text is clear that Isaac intended to and did give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob. Perhaps, Rebecca did not know this and wanted to make sure that the more worthy child received this blessing. (Evidence for this approach is the fact that, excepting the end of the story of the blessings, not once do Rebecca and Isaac talk directly to one another (until Genesis 27:46).)

But if that is the case, then we must wonder why Rebecca believes that a spiritual blessing will be valid if obtained by stealth. Additionally, most spouses, even when they disagree, know what the other one is thinking. This leads to the second possibility, that Rebecca knew that Isaac intended to give the spiritual blessing to Jacob. If this is so, then what was the disagreement between Rebecca and Isaac? What did Rebecca consider wrong in what Isaac was about to do?

Perhaps the dispute related to their conceptions of the world. As a father who loved both of his sons, Isaac was intending to split the material and spiritual blessings between his two children. Esau would receive the former and Jacob the latter. Rebecca disagreed. She felt that the material blessing had to go to the spiritual heir. Without the substance to sustain a family, Rebecca believed that it would be impossible to attain a high spiritual level. Isaac thought otherwise .

There is a reason why Isaac wishes to divide the blessings between his sons. While the ultimate trauma of Isaac's life had to have come when his father offered him up for a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-18), the first shock Isaac suffers in his life is the expulsion of his half-brother, Ishmael. Perhaps Isaac empathized with his half-brother's fate and subconsciously feared a similar fate, one that would almost become a reality when Abraham offered him as a sacrifice to God. When giving his blessings, Isaac did not want to choose between his sons, as had his father. Therefore, Isaac had initially intended to provide for both of his sons .

Isaac's sympathy for his half-brother is not mere conjecture. The two were close enough so that they buried their father, Abraham, together. (Genesis 25:9) Furthermore, after the trauma of having his father binding him and offer him as a sacrifice, where does Isaac go? To the place where Ishmael's mother, Hagar, had a vision from God. (Genesis 16:14) This is the way the Bible tells us that Isaac went to see his brother and the two commiserated and empathized with each other .

[B]oth in the desire to include Esau in his blessings and in the perception that Jacob is his true spiritual heir, Isaac shows himself worthy of respect. Isaac, passive personage that he is, deserves more admiration than many are willing to give him. By the end of this episode, he emerges as more than merely the son of Abraham, but a patriarch worthy of his burdens.

It appears that Esau understood this motivation of Isaac-his counter-reaction to the expulsion of Ishmael. We know that Esau first married a local Canaanite and this vexed both his parents. (Genesis 26:34-5). After the episode of the blessing, with Jacob back in Charan seeking a wife, it is no accident that Esau (still seeking the favor of his father) marries a daughter of Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael. (Genesis 28:9) Esau, by this act, is trying to unite the two branches of the family, even as Isaac tried to do this in his attempt to grant blessings to each of the twin brothers .

The [stolen blessing] story bears close examination at the point right after Jacob successfully carries off the ruse. When Esau comes in to give his father the meal which he has prepared, Isaac "was seized with a violent fit of trembling." (Genesis 27:33) He still has the right to take away the materialistic blessing he had given to Jacob, but he chooses not to do so. Isaac resigns himself to the fact that Esau will have to serve his younger brother. Isaac has been shocked into realizing that his wife has been right all along and that the spiritual blessing (which he has intended all along to give to Jacob) must be coupled with the materialistic blessing. More profoundly, Isaac trembles as he realizes that he cannot escape his father's destiny. Abraham had failed and so has Isaac-neither will have all his children going forward in concert to do God's will .

## Yitzchak, the Flawed Forefather

Shammai Engelmayer

What's in a name? In patriarchal times, Hebrew and non-Hebrew alike often named children as a memorial for an event (Yitzchak, Yaakov), or as a prayer (Y’chiel, Yonatan).

These people believed that names had power. It is not unusual for people to assume new names as a way of memorializing an enhanced status (and, sometimes, a diminished one). Thus, Abram's name is expanded; Yaakov's name is changed.

But are these as significant in the Torah as we are led to believe? Yitzchak would suggest that the answer is, "probably not." Yitzchak's name implies laughter, light-heartedness, joy—inappropriate for someone whose life seems to have been one long tragedy. He grows up being taunted by an older brother; his father tries to kill him; his mother—the only person he can truly trust and fully love—dies too soon; his twin sons are enemies of each other; one son is a neer-do-well boor and the other a con man and a thief. About the only good thing that happens to him is that he goes blind, so he cannot see what a mess exists all around him.

His name gave Yitzchak no protection against his fate. It merely memorialized an event—in this case, the laughter that ensued when it was suggested that 90-year-old Sarah would have a baby in 12 months' time.

There are even suggestions in the text that there was nothing laughable about Yitzchaks character. From the text, we see that:

Yitzchak is influenced by material things and his love can be bought with sensory pleasures: "Yitzchak favored Esav because he [Yitzchak] had a taste for game" (Genesis 25:28);

He was willing to profit by the misery of others. When famine strikes the land, he travels to G’rar, where he is so successful at agriculture that he builds a small fortune within a single year and angers the local natives. There is only one way he could have done so—he made his fortune by selling the local population the food they desperately needed (Genesis 26). While making a profit is not evil in and of itself, there is no evidence in the text that Yitzchak showed any concern for the welfare of the community around him (the midrashim we read earlier to the contrary notwithstanding). This is significant, as well, for what it shows about his care for pacts of friendship:

Yitzchak views friendship pacts as one‑sided in his favor alone.

He went to G’rar because he felt he could be safe there. After all, his father and Avimelech had made a pact. When he prospered while everyone else starved, the existence of that pact alone should have made him want to share the wealth with the native population that had befriended his father (especially since he expected them to honor the pact by protecting him). Contrast this to the way Avraham treats strangers, laying out a big feast for the weary traveler and expecting nothing in return.

Like Esav, Yitzchak views such matters as birthrights and blessings as commodities to be traded. Thus, he says to Esav, "Go out into the field and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me as I like it .... that I may give you my innermost blessing. " (Genesis 27:3)

The blessing, of course, was not really his to give so freely, for it was tied in with God's promise and he must have known God's intentions for his wife surely would have told him what God had told her. It also is inconceivable that Yitzchak did not know that Esav had been willing to trade his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew.

Finally, we know for a certainty that Yitzchak was disgusted with Esav's choices of wives (Genesis 26:35). There is at least the suggestion, then, that:

Yitzchak was arrogant enough to attempt to thwart God's will.

We learn things about Yitzchak's intellectual capacities, as well as his moral sense:

Yitzchak is not an original thinker. Why else would he resort to the same ploy that twice put his mother in jeopardy, namely claiming that Rivkah was his sister? The way his ruse was discovered also points up two other traits:

Yitzchak was crude and immodest in his behavior (much as his son Esav appears to be); and,

Yitzchak was not too bright.

How else can we explain that he was seen fondling his "sister" in public in a manner that made it plain that she was really his wife?

That he was not too bright also is evident from the success of Rivkah's plan (which we get to study after we have mined this chapter). Yaakov wore the skin of kids on his arms and neck. This made him hairier than his brother possibly could have been, but could not provide him with the kind of muscular arms one associates with "a hunter, an outdoorsman" (Genesis 25:27). Yet, despite the fact that he is obviously suspicious, Yitzchak falls for the ruse and blesses Yaakov in Esav's place.

We also cannot ignore the fact that, not until he was alone with his father on Mt. Moriah, did it occur to Yitzchak that there was no sacrificial animal to be seen.

This leaves us with a new question: If Yitzchak is as I have portrayed him, why, as Avimelech believed, was God still with him and his family?

For one thing, He couldn't abandon Yitzchak because Yaakov would become Yisrael and, through him, God's covenant would be on its way to fulfillment. So he needed Yitzchak. For another, He is very likely responsible for many of Yitzchak's flaws; after all, it was He who had Yitzchak put on the altar in the first place, an unsettling experience in any circumstance.

Finally, there is the fact that God, as the God of history, will not be denied. Yitzchak was one of His chosen. Yet Yitzchak, if my reading of the text is correct, chose to run away from his responsibilities. Whether in revenge for the Akedah or for whatever reason, Yitzchak would appear to have wanted nothing to do with any mission from God. God, however, would not let Yitzchak escape.

This is important for us to emphasize. Knowing that God will not be denied means knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Regardless of how terrible things get for Jews over the millennia, regardless of how poorly we represent God's will, God's promise will be fulfilled. We have a reason to go on. We will survive. We will be redeemed.

The rabbis of old, of course, sought to make Yitzchak into a great man, just as they tried to defend Yaakov's actions. They would not—or could not—accept the Torah at its word. They would not—or could not—accept that their forebears, having been God's chosen, could have been flawed in any way, because this suggested to them that God is less than perfect (something which God Himself admits).

In so doing, however, they ignored one of the essential beauties of the Torah: It tells it like it is, warts and all. People are people, not gods and not saints. They operate on the same level as we all do. They make mistakes; they do rotten things. And, like us, they have the capacity to change; to do t’shuvah. That is what happens to Yaakov at the Yabbok.

By denying the character flaws, we also lose an important message the Torah is trying to give us. There is a price to pay for trying to thwart God's will, even if it is not immediately apparent.

Both Yitzchak and Yaakov prosper and, through them, God's promise is fulfilled. And yet, for turning a blind eye to God's will, Yitzchak goes blind (although not totally, perhaps; the text is unclear). For deceiving Esav, Yaakov is deceived by Laban; for deceiving his father, Yaakov is deceived by his sons; for seeking to drive a wedge between Yitzchak and his beloved son, Yaakov's sons take his beloved son away from him; for taking Esav's birthright by cunning and deception, Yaakov sees his son Reuven attempt to seize the birthright by sleeping with one of Yaakov's wives; for treating Leah with such disdain, he loses Rachel much too soon.

Recognizing that our forebears were just people and that they had flaws does not diminish the Torah or Judaism. It enhances them because it imbues them with reality. The Torah is the book of life in the real world, not in utopia. Judaism is not a system of blind faith and instant salvation, but of living in the real world.

As for God, He emerges as the God of real people living in a real world, and He makes allowances for that. He doesn't expect perfection; He only expects that we try.

## The Land of the Philistines

Nahum Sarna

Abimelech is previously identified as “king of Gerar.” Gerar [was earlier] characterized as “the land of the Philistines.” In [this] parallel story about Isaac, Abimelech is entitled “king of the Philistines,” and he resides in Gerar. His subjects are also called Philistines.

These passages have occasioned considerable controversy. The Philistines are never listed in the various biblical registers of pre-Israelite peoples who inhabited the land. They are not a factor in Joshua’s campaigns. They do not appear in the Tel el-Amarna letters of the 14th century B.C.E. In fact, the earliest historical reference to them so far discovered comes from the time of Ramses III. The prst (= peleset) are among a group of peoples referred to by ancient Egyptian sources as the “sea peoples,” who invaded the Levant from the Cretan-Mycenaean area at the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E. They tried to attack Egypt, as well, but were repulsed by Ramses III. Groups of the peleset settled at points along the coast of Canaan, and Ramses III and his successors employed them as mercenaries in the service of Egypt. Over time, the peleset, or Philistines, took over the various Canaanite cities in the Shephelah, the coastal plain, namely, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. Organized into a five-city confederation, a “pentapolis,” under the rule of seranim, “lords,” they consolidated their hold on the region and became a formidable military force.

In light of what is known of the history of the Philistines, the references to them in the Abraham and Isaac narratives are generally regarded as anachronistic. Yet this conclusion itself raises serious difficulties. An anachronism is a chronological misplacing of events, institutions, concepts, objects, proper names, or place-names.

That which is put in the wrong historical time frame must accurately reflect the time from which it is retrojected or into which it is projected. However, the picture of the Philistines in Genesis does not correspond to the realities of the later period. Unlike the depiction of the Philistines in Judges and Kings, these of the patriarchal period do not inhabit the Shephelah, but are situated inland in the south. There is no pentapolis with seranim but a king of a single city who acts alone. The king has a Semitic name. Relationships between this people and the patriarchs are governed by formal treaties of friendship, whereas the later Philistines are inveterate enemies of Israel.

Unless the Narrator had some particular reason for consciously falsifying history—and no such is forthcoming, especially since the ethnic identity of Abimelech and his subjects is of no significance for the understanding of the story—the references to the Philistines in the patriarchal narratives cannot be anachronisms. No later Israelite writer could possibly be so ignorant of the elementary facts of the history of his people as to perpetrate such a series of blunders, and to no purpose whatsoever.

Accordingly, the “Philistines” of patriarchal times may have belonged to a much earlier, minor wave of Aegean invaders who founded a small city-state in Gerar long before the large-scale invasions of the Levant, which led to the occupation of the Canaanite coast. The Narrator may be using a generic term for the sea peoples. At any rate, the Philistines of patriarchal times adopted Canaanite culture and lost their separate identity.

1. Caphtor is supposedly the place from which the Philistines hail. Exactly where that is is not known, although Crete has the most votes among the biblical scholars. — Shammai [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nothing is said to Isaac about his or his seed’s possessing the gates of Isaac’s enemies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech, he named the place Beer-sheva (“the well of seven” or “the well of swearing,” in relation to the oath they swore and to the seven ewe lambs Abraham had set aside as a witness that he had dug the well (21:28-32). Isaac names the place Shiv’ah, meaning “good fortune,” and the well and the city Beer-sheva, “well of fortune” (26:32-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Literally: “There is no early-and-late in the Torah”; that is, what comes first in the order of narration may have occurred later in actuality, and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Additional examples: Rabbi Hezekiah thought that Numbers 9: 1 should have started the book of Numbers (because it describes events that took place a month earlier than those described in chapter 1); Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Hama ben Haninah said that Leviticus 14:34 should have started the section on leprous afflictions (because it deals with another affliction, and it should have come before any discussion of the purification from the afflictions); Deuteronomy 31:14 was thought to be the logical start of that chapter (because it is where God tells Moses that his last day has arrived, the logical precursor to the entire chapter). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Hebrew word is *semukhim*. NJV translates: “well-founded.” The root *smkh* means “to lean, support.” Adjoining verses are contiguous, as if leaning the one on the other. The precepts in the verse are reliable; one can lean on them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)