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# FROM VEILS TO GOATSKINS: THE FEMALE RUSE IN GENESIS

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## Introduction

"Give [a man] a mask," Oscar Wilde once adjured, "and he will tell you the truth."<sup>1</sup> The truth the writer alludes to is an alternative truth, which the given identity of face and name cannot convey. In this paper, I explore two narratives of deception in the Hebrew Bible where, I believe, a deeper truth emerges: the story of Rebekah in finagling the blessing for Jacob from his father, and the story of Tamar's seduction of Judah. They are both paradigmatic of gendered tales of subterfuge, in which the female "trickster" gains the upper hand against her male counterpart, who otherwise seems to hold a position of greater power.<sup>2</sup> In the Hebrew Bible,

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic* (New York and London, 1970), accessed Dec. 30, 2010, <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/480/>.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to my position, Esther Fuchs contends that these tales of female subterfuge serve to reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy: "Women's deception on the other hand is condemned when it appears to be self-serving. Women retain a semblance of respectability when their deception assists a weaker male in a power" (Esther Fuchs, "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Y. Collins (Society for Biblical Literature 1985), 141.

these stories often entail what Wendy Doniger has called “the bedtrick”: sex with a partner whose identity is somehow obscured.<sup>3</sup> The pivotal scene takes place in the most private sphere of encounter, in the bedroom (or tent) where identities may shift in the dark. And in that night of deception, the “chosen seed” is planted. While our discussion is not restricted to sexual encounters, the crux of each story does hinge upon knowledge concealed in the recesses of the female body, the site of conception and pregnancy. In the womb, the identity of the father is only known, for certain, by the woman (and the omniscient deity). I suggest that this leads to an anxiety over paternity, spawning the “hermeneutic chromosome”<sup>4</sup>—an exclusive privilege of interpretation shared by the knowing God, the perspicacious reader, and the wily heroine.

The female ruse is really a subset of narratives of recognition, where the “drama of knowledge” is contingent upon the gap between the best laid plans of men and the divine will as forwarded by women.<sup>5</sup> In the stories of Rebekah and Tamar, a tension between the progression of lineage—*toledot* (“all those begets”)—and the process of selection that propels the plot forward. The simple genealogical passage from father to son in the patriarchal narratives is subject to disequilibrium, an obstruction to the process of establishing the rightful heir as a result of barrenness (ubiquitous among the matriarchs), and rivalry between wives or brothers.<sup>6</sup> Women are pivotal in these stories of thwarted genealogy

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Budick coined this term in response to Chanita Goodblatt’s paper, “Why Ruth? Interpretive Potential in the Biblical Text” at the conference, “The Biblical Literary,” Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jun 14, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The term “drama of knowledge” is borrowed from Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). I also adopt his strategy of reading the “gap” between the biblical character and the omniscient deity as critical to the literary construction of the narrative. Sternberg, however, ignored the gender aspect to this drama—and this is where I pick up the thread.

<sup>6</sup> I base these initial insights on the work of Naomi Steinberg, “The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis,” *Semeia* 46 (1989): 41-50.

and, in the end, determine the direction of selection. Drawing on the insights of classic midrash and modern literary readings, I will trace the unique role that women play in determining who should be the recipient of the patriarchal covenant, and who should be the progenitor of the messianic line. The overriding questions will be why these biblical heroines are compelled to choose the indirect route, and why God seems to endorse their ruse.

### What Rebekah Knows

Rebekah begins the chain of deceit, which forms a fault line in Jacob's family history. She is privy to a direct oracle about the "chosen son" but never tells her husband, Isaac. Instead, she acts in subterfuge to fulfill God's will. Their marriage is initially marked by a barren period of two decades,<sup>7</sup> after which the patriarch appeals to God and is immediately answered. But instead of the seamless, "And she conceived and bore [*va-tahar va-teled*]," which characterizes the birth scenarios in Genesis, complications in Rebekah's pregnancy arise, and she becomes "the first biblical character...to go in quest of God."<sup>8</sup>

The children struggled together within her womb [*be-kirbah*], And she said: If this is so, why do I exist [*lamah zeh anokhi*]? So she went to inquire of the YHWH (Gen. 25:23).<sup>9</sup>

The struggle in the womb foreshadows the events that ensue—the near mortal combat between brothers over birthright and blessing.<sup>10</sup> For Rebekah, it entails a keen sense of the discrepancy between the outward "smoothness" of her belly and the painful tumult within.

Yet she does not appeal to her husband, Isaac, before turning to God, as Sarah confronted Abraham with regard to Hagar (Gen. 16:5; 21:9-10) or

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<sup>7</sup> We are told that Isaac is sixty when the twins are born (Gen. 25:26).

<sup>8</sup> Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Rabbinic Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books 2008), 208.

<sup>9</sup> All translations of primary texts are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup> See Hos. 12:4, and the discussion in Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books 1972), 182-183.

as Rachel appealed to Jacob in distress over her own barrenness (Gen. 30:1). Avivah Zornberg, drawing on Ramban's reading, understands Rebekah's appeal as an existential question: "Why me?" Her *cris de coeur* is comparable to Job's lament: "Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth from the womb?" (Job 3:10, cf. Job 10:18-19). Rebekah expresses a death wish, even as she is in the throes of the intensity of her vital, pregnant self. Unlike Job, however, who wishes the womb had been his tomb, Rebekah "is the womb, the belly, the entrails. She not only questions her natal condition, but is the body in which human life uncannily originates."<sup>11</sup> In that state, she is keenly aware of the simultaneous "presence and absence of meaning," the will to undo it all in the very act of gestation. Does God's answer reassure her that there is significance to the pangs of her pregnancy and the angst it engenders?

In response to her plea, God tells her what he does not tell Isaac, and (perhaps more importantly) what *she* does not tell Isaac: the twins born to her—the older a ruddy, hairy man-of-the-hunt, the younger a smooth, heel-grasping, dweller-of-tents—will establish two separate nations, "and the older shall serve the younger [*ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir*]" (Gen. 25:23). What sets Rebekah apart, at this point, is her insight into the discrepancy between external social norms (the election of the first born) and the inner truth of the divine plan, manifested as the near-ubiquitous "overturn of primogeniture" in the Hebrew Bible where the right of the firstborn is displaced onto the younger son.<sup>12</sup> Yet the matriarch also exemplifies the

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<sup>11</sup> Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 215.

<sup>12</sup> The unequivocal right of the first born to a double inheritance is outlined in Deut. 21:15-17. God, however, seems to favor the younger son: Abel's sacrifice is accepted over Cain's (Gen. 4); Ishmael is displaced by Isaac (Gen. 21); Esau by Jacob (Gen. 25, 27); Reuben by Joseph (Gen. 48:5, 49:3, and 1 Chron. 5:1); Ephraim by Menasseh (Gen. 48); and David, the 8th son, is selected as king over his seven older brothers (1 Sam. 16). For a summary of the significance of birthright in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Mesopotamia sources see Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 184-187. An explanation of the difference between the status of birthright, *bekhorah* (lit. "first born" or primogeniture), and blessing, *berakhah*, is in order here. The former refers to the principle that the firstborn is favored in some way (Deut. 21:15-17). This is the privilege, presumably, that Esau "sells" to Jacob (Gen. 25:29-34). The obvious question is: how can one sell one's birthright? Surely the firstborn's status is decided by

difficulty in externalizing that inner, divine truth as embodied in her womb-bound (*be-kirbah*) knowledge (Gen. 25:22). As Zornberg observes, “Rivkah is an anagram of *kirbah* (her interior).”<sup>13</sup> She will bear the burden of *knowing* the inner workings of God’s plan while dressing it up in borrowed clothing. As the boys grow up, the narrator informs us that “Isaac loved Esau, for [he hunted] game for his mouth,”<sup>14</sup> while Rebekah “loved Jacob” (v. 28)—apparently unconditionally, as no explanation is given. But the reader, who is privileged along with the omniscient narrator, fills in the gap: the matriarch knows that Jacob must be the chosen son. She has insight, while Isaac, in favoring Esau, is ironically purblind.

The rift between Isaac and Rebekah begins from the moment that the divine oracle introduces a discrepancy between their perspectives. It widens when Isaac, as a blind old man, resolves to bless his son Esau (Gen.

nature! Yet, according to the Hebrew Bible, is seems to be “transferable” (see the list of examples above). The blessing, on the other hand, is *not* necessarily linked to firstborn status. Rather, it refers to the patriarchal blessing that God first granted to Abraham—the promise of land (*’eretz*, specifically the Land of Canaan) and the promise of descendants (*zer’ a*, lit. seed) (Gen. 12:7; 13:15, 15:18, 17:8, 22:17-18 [God to Abraham], 21:12 [Abraham indirectly to Isaac at God’s behest], 26:3-4 [God to Isaac], 28:3-4 [Isaac to Jacob], 28:13-14 and 35:11-12 [God to Jacob, cf. 48:4]). Menachem Leibtag claims that Isaac *never intended* to give the patriarchal blessing of “chosenness” (what he calls *bechira*) to Esau (Gen. 27:28-29), (M. Leibtag, “Parshat Toldot: Yitzchak’s Blessing of Yaakov and Esav,” <http://www.tanach.org/breishit/toldot/toldots1.htm>). Rather, Isaac intended to bless both children, the first blessing (intended for Esau) to do with prosperity and power, while Abraham’s blessing would be reserved for Jacob. However, it is clear that in Rebecca’s eyes (and according to the divine sanction she is granted, at the outset and retroactively), the birthright and the blessing are intertwined, based on the promise that “the elder shall serve the younger.” I argue that precisely because the blessing of the hybrid-heir (Jacob in the guise of Esau) holds and is not turned into a curse (27:33) justifies Isaac’s willingness to grant Jacob the patriarchal blessing of “chosenness” (*bechira*). It could also be that Esau has disqualified himself from “chosenness” through his marriage to Hittite women, in breaching the taboo of endogamy (27:46, cf. 26:34-35). See Michael A. Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books 1979), 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, 219.

<sup>14</sup> The Rabbis understand the possessive pronoun, “in *his* mouth [*ba-piv*]” to refer not to Isaac but to Esau, “who knew how to trap and to deceive his father with his mouth” (Rashi *loc. cit.*, *Tahuma Toledot 8, Gen. Rab.* 63:10, Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:693).

27:1-2).<sup>15</sup> Rebekah is sidelined from the process of blessing. She merely *overhears* Isaac asking Esau to hunt for game and to prepare savory food for him to eat so that he might bless the heir-apparent before he dies (v. 3). Accordingly, the question has perplexed many scholars as to why Rebekah, at that point, never tells her husband of the oracle that “the elder shall serve younger” (25:23). Instead, she resorts to stealth: Jacob will pose as his brother Esau, wearing goatskins as his hairy mantle, and Rebekah assures him that she will bear the consequences. When she is compelled to send him away, she becomes the recipient of a displaced curse.<sup>16</sup> She will never see Jacob again. Given the consequences that this sacrifice entails, why does she resort to deception? I’d like to suggest that the communication gap between Rebekah and Isaac can be traced back to their first meeting.

### The Veiling of Rebekah

Now Isaac was coming from the approach to Beer-lahai-roi [lit. Well-of-the-Living-One- Who-sees-Me] for he was living in the Negeb. And Isaac went out to meditate<sup>17</sup> in the field at the turn of the evening. (Gen. 24:62-63a)

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<sup>15</sup> According to the biblical account, Isaac lived until the age of one hundred and eighty (Gen. 35:27-28). Jacob was later reunited with his father after his long sojourn in Haran (22 years) and buried him in Kiriath-arba (Hebron). That is, despite Isaac’s consciousness of his immanent death, he lives several decades after the blessing of his sons. His lifespan extends even beyond the other patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob. According to classic rabbinic exegesis, Jacob was 63 when he stole the blessing, so Isaac must have been 123 (see Rashi on Gen. 28:9, b. Megillah 16b-17a).

<sup>16</sup> Her tragic end is associated with a displaced weeping that is linked to the burial of her nursemaid, Deborah, at *‘alon-bakhut* (lit. “oak of weeping,” or “weeping for the other” in the midrashic reading [Gen. 35:8, Rashi *loc.cit.*]). See Zornberg’s complex discussion of this passage in *The Murmuring Deep*, 228-231.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Alter and Everett Fox both render *la-suah be-sadeh* as “to stroll in the field” (Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1996], 122; Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* [New York: Schocken Books 1995], 107). This translation is based on the Arabic for “to take a stroll.” I have adopted the rabbinic understanding that Isaac was engaged in some kind of prayer, the verb *la-suah* based on the nominative for complaint, musing, or prayer (Ps. 102:1, 1 Kg. 18:27, Pr. 23:29, Job 23:2, B.D.B. entry 9421, p. 967). See

The passage opens with explicit geographical markers: Isaac's chosen desert-dwelling place, the Negeb, and the approach to Beer-lahai-roi. The latter recalls the scene of Hagar's first flight from the punitive hand of her mistress Sarah. There an angel appeared to her by a spring ('*ayin ha-mayim*, lit. "the eye of water"), urging her to return, and "she called YHWH who spoke to her, 'You Are El-roi,' [lit. God- Who-sees-me], by which she meant, 'Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!' Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi [Well-of-the-Living-One-Who-Sees-Me]" (Gen. 16:13-14a). As an etiological narrative, the naming of the well expresses Hagar's exultant sense of having survived the "hierophany," Eliade's term for "an irruption of the sacred" in space.<sup>18</sup> The sacred loci of hierophany are marked by images of opening. Here the scene takes place by a spring, an "eye of water" metonymic for the divine eye that sees her. The seeing God, *El-roi*, in her experience is identified as the One-Who-Sustains life, *El-hai*, in the naming of the well. This experience of asymmetry between the one *who sees and grants life* and the one *who is seen and survives* is repeated again in Isaac's life in the trauma of his binding at Mount Moriah, named also for divine sight (*YHWH-yir'eh* [Gen. 22:14], echoing Abraham's words, "God will see to [*yir'eh lo*] the sheep for the burnt offering," in v. 8).<sup>19</sup> Both Hagar and Isaac experience a direct revelation—one on the threshold between sky and earth, bound to the mountain altar, and the other on the threshold between water and earth, at a life-spring in the ground. They have both been seen and survived the sighting.

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also Rashi on Gen. 24:63 and *Gen. Rab.* 60:40. According to the sages, Isaac set the precedent for the evening prayer, *mincha* (b. *Berakhot* 26b, b. *Avodah Zara* 7b., y. *Berakhot* 4:1, and *Gen. Rab.* 68:9 Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:779).

<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1959), 26. Manoah (the father of Samson) also expressed this fear that he might die after his encounter with the angel of God (Judg. 13:20).

<sup>19</sup> Isaac's blindness is strangely associated with the trauma of the '*Aqedah*. See Rashi on 27:1, and the discussion in Avivah Zornberg, *Genesis, The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1995), 155-158.



When Isaac first sees Rebekah, he is returning from Beer-lahai-roi, perhaps a place he frequents for prayer or meditation.<sup>20</sup> This is the first time the patriarch has appeared center-stage since the traumatic scene of his binding (22:19). He has been talked of and for by Abraham and his servant in negotiating a match from Paddan-aram, but he has been conspicuously absent until now...this moment of first meeting:

He raised his eyes and saw, and, behold, camels were coming!  
Rebekah raised her eyes and saw Isaac, and she fell [*va-tipol*] from her camel.  
And she said to the servant, "Who is that there man [*mi ha'ish ha-lazeh*] walking through the field towards us?"  
The servant said, "That is my master."  
And so she took the veil and covered herself. (Gen. 24:63b-66)

This first meeting between Isaac and Rebekah reads like a comedy of errors. Melancholy, the patriarch is cast in the long shadows of early evening, in a meditative stroll, lost in his desert-dwelling mind. She is maudlin, the smell of camels in her nostrils and the grit of sand in her hair, fingers, and toes. There is no love-at-first-sight. Their eyes *do not meet*, for he, marked by early myopia, sees the camels in the distance while she sees *him* and falls from her camel. Most translations render the Hebrew *va-tipol* as the genteel "and she alighted," as if she were elegantly riding a horse side-saddle.<sup>21</sup> Yet how would a woman, unassisted, lightly descend from a camel, a height of ten feet from the ground, without ignominy? No, she falls. And brushing the desert sand off, she rises and asks the servant to identify "that there man" walking towards them. When she realizes he is the one she is destined to marry, she veils herself, sealing the asymmetry of their first sight with a piece of cloth.

What does she see in Isaac that so alarms her, sets her off balance? And why does she then veil herself?<sup>22</sup> The Netziv (R. Naftali Tzvi Berlin)

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<sup>20</sup> In the end, Isaac also settles there after the burial of his father Abraham (Gen. 25:11).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the KJV, RSV, and NJPS on Gen. 24:64.

<sup>22</sup> Most commentators commend Rebekah for her modesty in veiling herself. Even Leila Leah Bronner comments, "Thus the betrothed Rebecca covers herself upon first sight of her

suggests that, upon seeing this man deeply engaged in prayer “like a terrifying angel of God,”<sup>23</sup> she falls from her camel filled with fear and awe, though she does not yet know who he is. When she points to him, she refers to him with the unusual demonstrative pronoun *ha’ish ha-lazeh* (“that there man”).<sup>24</sup> In fear and trembling she gestures towards him as *wholly other*, shrouded in another world:<sup>25</sup>

“And so she took the veil and covered herself” (v. 66) out of a deep sense of shame and fear, as if she thought she was unworthy to be his wife. And from that moment onward, fear was imprinted in her heart... [This meeting] then serves as an introduction to the next story, in *Parashat Toledot*, where Isaac and Rebekah had a difference of opinion. Rebekah did not have the courage to present her thoughts to Isaac to discuss, though she knew the truth that Esau only had “the hunt in his mouth” (Gen. 25:18). And so, at the moment of [Isaac’s] blessing, God had intentions that the blessings would come precisely in this way to Jacob [i.e. through deception].

The Netziv suggests that this moment is prescient of the gap between husband and wife that would hold from that first meeting onward. Rebekah is shrouded in her own modesty, a mere pawn in the divine game

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intended husband” (“From Veil to Wig: Jewish Women’s Hair Coverings,” *Judaism* 42:4 [1993]: 466). She argues, however, that veiling was not necessarily a sign of the transition from maidenhood to the married state, though the Ancient Near Eastern sources suggest otherwise (as we shall discuss).

<sup>23</sup> Based on the image in *Midrash Tehilim* 90:18: “she saw that his hand was extended in prayer” (cf. Gen. Rab. 60:15 Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:654-55, *Yalqut Shimoni* Gen. 109).

<sup>24</sup> The sons of Jacob refer to Joseph with the same expression: “Here comes that there dream-master [*ba’al ha-halomot ha-lazeh!*]” (Gen. 37:18-19). Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 60:15 Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:655-56. According to this midrash, the expression, *ha-lazeh*, is an allusion to another (*pilsono*), an angel that walked by Joseph’s side.

<sup>25</sup> *The Yalqut Shimoni* (idem.) suggests that she sees him “returning from the Garden of Eden,” resurrected from the dead after the Binding of Isaac (cf. *Midrash Ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22:19). See also *Pirqe R. El.* 31, where it is said that proof for the quickening of the dead in the Torah derives from the revival of Isaac after the ‘*Aqedah*. In that passage, Issac is associated with the second benediction of the ‘*Amidah*. See the discussion in Shalom Spiegel’s *The Last Trial* (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 5 and 28-37.

where the main players—Isaac, Jacob, and Esau—wrangle over blessing and birthright.

Yet the veiling of the bride was *not* a symbol of modesty in the Ancient Near East, as a woman did not remain veiled after marriage. Rather, it is a sign of betrothal. The Ancient Near Eastern sources suggest that it was the groom or his family who veiled the bride, as in the *bedeken* ceremony today. In Akkadian, the woman on her wedding day is called *kallatu kutumtu*—“the veiled bride”—and the term for bride, *kallatu* (perhaps linguistically, related to the Hebrew *kalah*), is interchangeable with *pussumtu*, “the veiled one.” The Middle Assyrian laws suggest that she was presented to her husband already veiled.<sup>26</sup> Jack Sasson poses some provocative questions: “If so, what about the timing of the act? Why is Rebekah not veiled in Haran by the servant? Or if, as some commentators suggest, the act symbolizes the loss of virginity, why did Isaac not veil his bride in the fields of Beer-lahai-roi just before moving her into his mother’s tent?”<sup>27</sup> Instead, Rebekah veils *herself*. Ironically, rather than a symbol of the exclusive right of the groom to the bride, here the veiling signifies the murmurs of Rebekah’s independence. In drawing the scarf down over her face, she maintains the asymmetry of sight at their first meeting: he “raised his eyes and saw” camels coming; “Rebekah raised her eyes and saw Isaac” (Gen. 24:63-64). The scarf, perhaps made of a gauzy material, porous to light and air, allows her to *continue* seeing the other while her face is obscured to him. It anticipates the three acts in which Rebekah strikes out on her own, beyond the purview of her husband: in consulting God over the tumult in her belly, in disguising Jacob as Esau to be blessed by the blind patriarch, and in concocting a cover story as to why the

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<sup>26</sup> Nahum Sarna cites the following sources: Middle Assyrian laws A, pars. 40, 41 (ANET, 183) and M. Tsevat, “The Husband Veils a Wife,” *JCS* 27 (1975): 235-240. See the thorough discussion in Karel van der Toorn, “The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. David P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns 1995), 327-39.

<sup>27</sup> Jack M. Sasson, “The Servant’s Tale: How Rebekah Found a Spouse,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65 (2006): 264.

blessed son must now leave for Padan-aram.<sup>28</sup> Call it duplicitous. Call it subterfuge. Call it feminine wile. In any case, the veiling appropriates a ubiquitous symbol of patriarchal power—the groom’s unilateral *taking* of the bride as exclusively his—and transforms it into a symbol of Rebekah’s autonomy. The veil gives her the gift of privacy, the ability to know an inner world wholly her own, free from the roving eye of the outside world and free of social norms. It opens the interior eye. And through the gauze, the blurring of lines, a crack of light breaks through.

### The Bridge between Rebekah and Tamar

Rebekah’s veiling after first seeing Isaac sets in motion a chain of deceptions: Jacob dons goatskins as he steals Esau’s blessing (27:19); Laban then dupes Jacob on his wedding night where, presumably, Leah too wears a veil (29:26);<sup>29</sup> and the patriarch’s own sons deceive him as they present Jacob with Joseph’s coat dipped in goat’s blood (37:32). Judah, Jacob’s son, is then deceived by Tamar, his daughter-in-law, who offers her services as a harlot at the crossroads in exchange for a promised goat. In the next scene, the wife of Potiphar uses Joseph’s garment as her alibi, falsely accusing him of rape (39:14). Goats, masks, and clothing as betrayal (in Hebrew: *begged* as *biggud*) all serve the “semiotic ruse”<sup>30</sup> in the Jacob and Joseph saga. Yet it is the veiling of women that presents the most evocative parallel between the stories. The midrash draws out the resonances: “There were two women who covered themselves with veils and bore twins: Rebekah and Tamar: Rebekah—‘so she took her veil and

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<sup>28</sup> Rebekah urges Jacob to flee to Haran to escape his brother’s murderous wrath, whereas she tells Isaac that he should be sent way to find a wife from her brother’s family in order to avoid marriage to a Hittite woman (Gen. 27:43-46).

<sup>29</sup> Karel van der Toorn comments, “The Babylonian bride would normally be veiled before the wedding. As soon as she was betrothed, a girl was veiled. There is no reason, then, to disbelieve the description of the Babylonian virgin in Isa. 47:1-3, nor is there anything unusual in the fact that Rebekah and Leah were veiled when they met their husbands for the wedding night” (“The Significance of the Veil,” 336).

<sup>30</sup> See Joshua Levinson, “Dialogical Reading in the Rabbinic Exegetical Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 25:3 (2004):514-515. “Semiotic ruse” is Levinson’s term.

covered herself' (Gen. 24:65)—and Tamar —'[So she took off her widow's garb] and covered her face with a veil' (Gen. 38:24)" (*Gen. Rab.* 60:15).<sup>31</sup> It is as if the twins are born of the woman's duplicity.

## Judah and Tamar

The narratives of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) is bracketed by the stories of Joseph's sale into slavery (Gen. 37) and his escapades in the House of Potiphar (Gen. 39), where it seems to interrupt the flow of the Joseph saga. Literary and rabbinic readers, who assume the integrity of the text, suggest that Judah's descent "from the presence of his brothers" (38:2), his assimilation among the Canaanites,<sup>32</sup> and his eventual entanglement with Tamar are all significant incidents for the advancement of the plot. It tells us how the nefarious Judah, who initiated the scheme to sell his brother into slavery, became the hero who offered himself instead of Benjamin, as surety for his brother (Gen. 43:9; 44:32-34).<sup>33</sup> The veiled daughter-in-law, Tamar, is the agent of Judah's moral transformation. She does this by deploying the classic "bedtrick," ironically the means by which the Judah comes to acknowledge his responsibility and thus rise to become the progenitor of kings.

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<sup>31</sup> Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:656, cf. *Gen. Rab.* 85:7, Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:1040.

<sup>32</sup> He marries a Canaanite woman, a discredited choice for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Cf. Gen. 24:4, 26:34-35, 27:46 and 28:8.

<sup>33</sup> On the merits and problems with a literary reading of Gen. 38, see Benjamin Sommer and James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100.1 (2010): 158-161, and James Kugel's response: "Kugel in JQR" <http://www.jameskugel.com/kugel-jqr.pdf>, 9-13. See also Kugel's "Appendix 1: Apologetics and Biblical Criticism 'Lite,'" <http://www.jameskugel.com/apologetics.pdf>, 25-29. For a presentation of the literary reading of Gen. 38 within the context of the Joseph saga, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 6-10 and Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 157-62.

Initially, Judah treats her unconscionably. Blaming her as a femme fatal for the death of his two sons,<sup>34</sup> he sends her back to her father's house to live as a grass widow, with a false promise to marry her off to his third son, Shelah, when he gets older. Years pass, perhaps even a decade, until she notes that her father-in-law's neglect is deliberate. In the meantime, Judah's Canaanite wife dies, and Tamar is told that her father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheep shearing.<sup>35</sup>

So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim [*Petah 'Enaim*], which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife.

When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me come into you" – for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.

"What," she asked, "will you pay for coming into me?"

He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock."

But she said, "Only if you leave a pledge until you have sent it."

And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?"

She replied, "Your signet and cord, and the staff in your hand." So he gave them to her and came into her, and she conceived by him. Then she went on her way.

She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb. (Gen. 38: 14-19)

This scene takes place at the entrance to Enaim, perhaps at a crossroads<sup>36</sup> marked by a spring or well.<sup>37</sup> The Hebrew place name *Petah 'Enaim*, literally the "opening of the eyes," is fraught with irony, for this is the place where sight is veiled. Yet the name also connotes a double irony.

<sup>34</sup> A similar assumption is made with regard to the "oft widowed bride, Sarai" in the apocryphal *Book of Tobit* (Tob. 3:7-17, 6:9-8:21); the woman is held culpable for the repeated deaths of her husbands.

<sup>35</sup> A time renowned for its drunken revelry; cf. 1 Sam 25:2, 4, and 7 and 2 Sam. 12:23.

<sup>36</sup> The Aramaic Targum Neofiti and the Syriac Peshitta, in fact, omit the proper name of the place, designating it instead "at the crossroads" (*Pesh.* and *Tg. Neof.* on Gen. 38:24, 21, cf. the Latin Vulgate "*in bivio itineris*" McNamara 1992: 175, note 10).

<sup>37</sup> The term *'ayn* in Hebrew means spring "the eye of the earth", so literally *Petah 'Enaim* means "entrance to two springs/eyes."

Eventually there will be a *re-* cognition of what took place there as the mask allows a deeper truth to emerge. Emphasis is placed on Judah's *not knowing*: he "took her for a harlot for she had covered her face" (v. 15), and "he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law" (v. 16).

As Zvi Jagendorf points out, the irony is also palpable in the realm of sexual knowledge: "A man may know a woman (physically)" —as Adam knew his wife, Eve (Gen. 4:1)—"and [yet] be mistaken about her identity. He may even know her carnally without any awareness whatsoever." (Think of the drunken Lot with his daughters.) "On the other hand, a woman being possessed in sex, apparently the object, may yet be the subject; the only possessor of the volatile element of awareness. She may know the man that *mis-takes* her."<sup>38</sup> While Judah knows Tamar carnally, he does not *recognize* her. But she knows him, and the gap in their levels of awareness ultimately brings about a true moral recognition.

The pledge, of course, is pivotal to the plot. At Enaim, in lieu of payment, Tamar demands a guarantee —Judah's "signet, cord and staff" (v. 18)—all signifying his identity, comparable to handing over one's passport, credit card, and car keys. The promised payment—a kid [*gedi 'izim*] from the flock—evokes the goat [*se'ir 'izim*] slaughtered to stain Joseph's ornamented tunic (Gen. 37:31), and the goatskins [*'orot gedayei ha-'izim*] used to disguise Jacob as Esau (27:16). In the former two, the goats serve as "cover stories" in concealing the truth; in the third, the promised goat is the catalyst for the *uncover story*, since the payment is never made and the pledge never redeemed.

### The Act of Recognition—*Haker Na*

An attempt to pay the debt and reclaim the pledge is made as Judah's friend, Hirah, sets out to search for the harlot who sat at the entrance to Enaim, but she is not to be found. Then turning point arrives:

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<sup>38</sup> Zvi Jagendorf, "'In the Morning, Behold It Was Leah': Genesis and the Reversal of Sexual Knowledge," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 188.

About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” As she was being brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying: “I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong.” And then she said [*va-tomer*], “Please discern/recognize [*haker na*] these, whose signet and cord and staff are these?” Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I [*tzadkakh mimeni*], inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again (Gen. 38:24-26).

This scene marks the crisis in the drama, the moment of reversal where the tokens that *should have* been procured for payment instead serve to reveal the true identity of the protagonists. Tamar first *sends* the signet, cord, and staff—which are, presumably, presented to him in private—and thereby allows Judah to either deny the identity of the tokens or, conversely, to claim them as his own. In this way, she enables him to make the shift towards acknowledging his responsibility without shame. She then appeals [*va-tomer*] to Judah directly to discern/recognize [*haker na*], echoing the very words the brothers had addressed to their father Jacob. This phrase, according to the Midrash, is delivered *quid pro quo*: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Judah: you said ‘please recognize [*haker na*]’ to your father, by your life, Tamar will say ‘please recognize [*haker na*]’ to you” (*Gen. Rab.* 85:11).<sup>39</sup> The midrash implies a *double entendre* for Judah and a concomitant demand for a twofold *re-cognition*: to retrospectively acknowledge the bereavement of his own father at the presentation of the bloodied cloak, and to recognize his responsibility towards Tamar. He does so with respect to Tamar, in admitting that he had neglected her by not giving her to his son Shelah (Gen. 38:26). With respect to his father, he will enact a *reversal* of his previous role as the one who had initiated the sale of Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:26-27) by standing as surety on behalf of Benjamin (Gen. 43:9, 44:32).

Judah’s declaration “*tzadkakh mimeni*” evokes a *triple entendre*. At first glance, *mimemi* can be read as a comparative: “she is *more* in the right than

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<sup>39</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 85:11 (Theodor-Albeq, 1965 2:1031). Other midrashic sources point to this parallel as well: *Gen. Rab.* 85:1 (Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:1031); *b. Sotah* 10b and *b. Berakhot* 43b.



me." The question, then, is how can justification be compared? Either one is right or one is wrong! Alternatively, *mimēni* can be read as causative, as the Aramaic translation suggests: "tzadkah—she is right" and pregnant "mimēni—from me" (*Tg. Onq.* on Gen. 38:26).<sup>40</sup> In this second reading, she is vindicated, and Judah acknowledges his fatherhood. In a third reading, the rabbinic sages suggest that a divine voice intervened as a kind of *deus ex machina*. Judah affirms Tamar's innocence, and God affirms Judah's paternity—"from me [*mimēni*]," because of Me (with a capital M) she conceived; it was all part of the divine plot. "God said, 'You testify about what happened in public and I will testify to what happened in private'" (*Gen. Rab.* 85:12).<sup>41</sup> The Midrash makes the question of Judah's dubious knowledge of paternity explicit. God intercedes precisely where Judah's capacity for recognition is limited. As Zvi Jagendorf has pointed it, the reversal of carnal knowing—where "sensual knowledge" turns out to be the opposite of "true knowledge"—hinges upon the woman's initiative in Genesis.<sup>42</sup> The drama suggests that the hidden nature of conception evokes an anxiety over paternity, generating the "hermeneutic chromosome" where women, by biological necessity, are more "in the know" than men. The midrash, on the other hand, seems to shift the locus of "knowing" from the woman onto God in attributing knowledge to divine omniscience. It does so, however, not as a means of *undermining* female privilege but, rather, to imply a synergy between the two. The insight of maternity, engendered at conception and in pregnancy, lies at the core of the alliance between God and women. For the men, the

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<sup>40</sup> This splitting of the phrase is also found in the *Tg. Neof.* (on Gen. 38:25), as well as the *T. Judah* 12:6. Though the actual divine utterance is missing in the latter, it is paraphrased by Judah, who refrains from killing Tamar when he realizes that what has happened "was from the Lord." See Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutic* (Leiden: Brill 1997), 355.

<sup>41</sup> Kugel, in his essay "Judah and the Trial of Tamar," suggests that the Rabbis understood this to be a court scene, and God intervenes to issue the final edict. See the detailed discussion on the variant interpretations of "tzadkah mimēni" (James Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2006), 169-184).

<sup>42</sup> Jagendorf, "Genesis and the Reversal of Sexual Knowledge," 189-190.

significance of the deception only comes in hindsight. Isaac realizes that the true “blessed son,” chosen for the patriarchal covenant, must be Jacob *only after* he has been duped, and Judah only admits to his injustice to Tamar (and his father) after the seduction. So the best laid plans of man go astray, until woman intervenes in subterfuge.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, midrash has served not only as a literary tool to tease out the parallel plots, motifs, and key terms, but also as an answer to the theological question: why is God in cahoots with the women? Let us return to the relationship between veiling and the womb of “double sewing.” The births are oddly similar: both entail a breach, a hand emerging before the head.<sup>43</sup> At Rebekah’s parturition, “The first one came out ruddy, like a hairy mantle all over, so they called him: Esau/Rough-One;<sup>44</sup> After that his brother came out, his hand grasping Esau’s heel, so he called his name: Jacob/Heel-Holder” (Gen. 25:25-26).<sup>45</sup> As Tamar labored, the first put his hand out, to which the midwife tied a crimson thread (so he was called Zerah)<sup>46</sup> and the second came out, head and

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<sup>43</sup> Zakovitch argues that the description of the birth of Jacob and Esau, in their struggle for firstborn status, informs our reading of Zerah and Perez’s birth (Yair Zakovitch, *An Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, 13-15). This type of breach, however, is not a realistic description of birth, based, rather on the agricultural experience of men with domestic animals such as horses, camels, and donkeys, where the hooves emerge first, as Eran Viezel has pointed out in his article, “The Influence of Realia on Biblical Depictions of Childbirth” (forthcoming). In a human breech birth, the baby’s buttocks emerge first, whereas “in a birth in the ‘transverse lie’ position (0.3% incidence), the head of the baby curves away from the exit of the birth canal until its neck breaks. In these cases, one of the hands does emerge first, but the baby is no longer alive at that point” (Eran Viezel, “The Influence of Realia on Biblical Depictions of Childbirth” (forthcoming).

<sup>44</sup> One could read ‘*esav*’ as “completed [‘*asui*],” his hairy mantle on his infant form suggesting a bizarre manly appearance. According to Rashi: “They all called him ‘*Esav*’ because he was made and finished [covered as he was] by hair as though much older” (loc. cit. Gen. 25:25). Fox, on the other hand, suggests that Esau’s name derives from the Arabic ‘*athaya*, rough one (Fox, *The Five Books*, 115, n. 25).

<sup>45</sup> Based on the Everett Fox translation, *The Five Books*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Brown Driver Briggs entry 272 and 273, p. 280.

shoulders ahead, so the midwife named him Perez: “What a breach you have made for yourself [*mah paratzta peretz!*]” (Gen. 38:29).<sup>47</sup> Biologically, Zerah is born “breach” in opening the womb with his hand, though the break through [*pritzah*] is attributed to Perez, the first one fully born. Both Jacob and Perez, as infants, are imbued with intentionality in the “race for first place”: both try to supplant their brother.<sup>48</sup> On a metaphorical and literal level, Perez signifies the one who bursts forth from boundaries, from strict definitions of law and tradition. While the “will to break through” is attributed to the infants, on a deeper level it is the mothers who initiate the breach in the norm; they take the circuitous route and their veils, as masks, enable the ruse to ensue. God’s plan, in overriding the right of the firstborn is thus ensured. Jacob supplants Esau and Judah supplants Reuben as the progenitor of kings.<sup>49</sup>

As the midrash wryly comments on Judah’s descent: “While the tribes were occupied with the sale of Joseph, Jacob with sack cloth and fasting, Judah with taking a wife, the Holy One, blessed be He, was creating the light of the messianic kingship” (*Gen. Rab.* 85:1).<sup>50</sup> Of course, the Davidic kingship emerges from the union of Boaz and Ruth—the “bedtrick” that

<sup>47</sup> The term “breach”, *p.r.tz.*, connotes an outburst of water (cf. 2 Sam 5:20, 1 Chron. 14:11), or, as in this case, to “burst forth from water” (i.e. the womb). It also suggests the making of a breach in a wall (cf. Amos 4:3, 1 Kg. 11:27, Neh. 6:1, Ps. 144:14, Job 30:14); in the figurative sense, it implies the act of intercession – “to stand in the breach” (cf. Ezek. 13:5), but can also mean, conversely, an outburst of God’s wrath (1 Sam. 68, 1 Chron. 13:11, Job 16:14, Jud. 21:15). See B.D.B. entry 7877. Most telling, in terms of the role of leader, is the verse from Micah: “He who opens the breach [*ha-poretz*] will go up before them; they will break through [*partzu*] and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head” (Mic. 2: 13). Tamar and Judah, as progenitors of kings, figuratively “open the breach” and “break through”, so that “their king will pass on before” them (cf. *Gen. Rab.* 85: 29, Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:1049).

<sup>48</sup> As the verse in Hosea implies, “In the womb he [Jacob] tried to supplant [*aqav*] his brother” (Hos. 12:4). The original Hebrew reads: “*babaten ‘aqev et ahiv,*” lit. trans. “he took his brother by the heel” (RSV, KJV), a play on the aetiology of Jacob’s name, *Ya’aqov*. Hosea seems to imply a criticism of Jacob’s “clutching” at the heel in his attempt to supplant his brother. See Zakovitz *Inner Biblical Interpretation*, 13- 15.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Gen. 38:29, 49:10, Ruth 4:18-22 and I Chron. 2:3-15.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor-Albeck 1965 2:1080.

results in the lineage of Perez (Ruth 4:18-22)—as well as another “bedtrick,” the seduction of Lot by his daughters in the begetting of Moab (Gen. 19:30-38). In making the alliance between God and the duplicity of the women explicit, the midrash reads between the lines of the biblical text, *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, to find a subjective space *within* the line-of-law. Through the breach, Rebekah and Tamar, in cahoots with God, heal the break in continuity and enable the light of the next generation to shine through. I conclude with an adaptation of a line from a Leonard Cohen song: “There is a breach, a breach in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The original line reads from Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem” reads, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”