The Beginning of Desire

Reflections on Genesis

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

nameless son that draws blessing from him. The fact is, moreover, that Jacob speaks an outright lie: in answer to his father's question, "Who are you, my son?" he says, "I am Esau your firstborn" (27:19).

In Hebrew, his self-identification is contained in three words: *anokhi eisav bekhorekha*. Traditional commentaries, clearly embarrassed by what looks like a succinct falsehood, have generally split off the first word *anokhi*—"I am"—from the other two—as though to protect Jacob's integrity from the world of Esau's reality. Rashi, for instance, reads: "*anokhi*—I am the one who is bringing you food; *eisav bekhorekha*—Esau is your firstborn."[73]

There is, however, another possible reading. This rather audaciously takes Jacob's statement as representing a kind of truth, a truth of authenticity, rather than of sincerity. The *Or Ha-ḥaim*, for instance, suggests that since Jacob has bought the birthright from Esau, he has acquired some essential virtue of Esau: "He has *become* Esau, in the birthright dimension."

Sefat Emet takes up the idea of impersonation as expressing the desire to expand the range of self. According to a famous rabbinic statement, it is sometimes possible to assume the "part," the "role" of another person in Paradise.[74] Jacob assumes the costume of Esau, takes on what had been Esau's role. This involves Jacob in a new, complex, and dangerous sense of himself. No longer merely simple, "sincere," he now carries all the explosive energies, symbolized by hair, by strong limbs. ("And he went in . . . and he brought . . . the hands are the hands of Esau," which skin animals and assume disguises.) Now, good and evil are intermingled in him; he will be forever involved with the ambiguities of the world of seeming. *Sefat Emet* concludes paradoxically: "Now that he is dressed in Esau's clothes, playing his role, it is written, 'And Isaac smelled his clothes (and blessed him).' And Jacob *spoke truth*, when he said, 'I am Esau your firstborn'—in the sense of inward selfhood and destiny."

Jacob, then, is *really* Esau, as he lays claim to the perceived energies of his twin brother. "Every profound spirit," says Nietzsche, "needs a mask."[75] Emerson, similarly, writes in his journal for 1841, "Many men can write better in a mask than for themselves." Trilling provocatively suggests, "The doctrine of masks proposes the intellectual value of the ironic posture."[76] He points out that the Greek derivation of the word "irony" means "a dissembler"; and defines the concept as "saying one

thing when another is meant . . . in order to establish a disconnection between the speaker and interlocutor, or between the speaker and that which is being spoken about, or even between the speaker and himself." Adopting this last phrase, we may say that Jacob achieves, in the conscious irony of "I am Esau your firstborn," the "kind of freedom which we call detachment. If 'existence' is responded to as if it were less than totally in earnest, Spirit is the less bound by it. It can then without sadness accept existence, and without resentment *transact such business with it as is necessary*. . . . The human relation to it need not be fixed and categorical; it can be mercurial and improvisational."[77]

Jacob can, then, be seen as speaking in conscious irony, so as to establish a disconnection, primarily, "between the speaker and himself." This gives him the kind of freedom that is based on detachment, on a salutary sense of *performance* that extends his possibilities of play. He thus enters the world that the Ishbitzer calls the world of *safek*, of doubt, where authenticity can perhaps only be traced retroactively.[78]

"All life," claims Nietzsche, "rests on appearance, art, illusion, optics, necessity of perspective and error."[79] Anathema to such a view, for instance, is Christian dogma, "which is *only* and will be only moral, and which, with its absolute standards, for instance, its truthfulness of God, relegates—that is, disowns, convicts, condemns—art, *all* art, to the realm of *falsehood*."

It is precisely such a perspective, I would suggest, that underlies those midrashic narratives about occasions when God Himself "changes," improvises on the truth, "for the sake of peace."

We looked earlier at the motif of God's changing Isaac's appearance, making him resemble Abraham, in order to convince the mocking world of a hidden truth.[80] This is a case of irony in action: God yields, as it were, to the world of optics, is prepared to "change," to prevaricate with the rigid forms of life, in order to validate improbable continuities. Existence is accepted in the mode of play, which, Schiller says, overcomes "the earnestness of duty and destiny." "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."[81] This position, Trilling proposes, is not a nihilistic one, but indeed is animated by a real moral earnestness. Within the midrashic tradition, God plays frequently, and with earnest intent; and man is most fully human when he imitates God, in work and at play.

Do we "imitate" our way to a real/better diff. self? Is it maybe the only way?

Crossing the threshold

In a similar vein, Jacob's fear of being misunderstood as *ki-metateia*, as a frivolous player with voices and roles, rises out of the moral earnestness of one who has entered the world of "appearance, art, illusion, optics, necessity of perspective and error." The midrash describes that moment of entry. Rebecca invests Jacob in Esau's clothes and skins, and then accompanies him to the *petaḥ*, the doorway of Isaac's room. There, she says, "Till now, I owed you my support—from now on, your Creator will stand by you."[82] She then puts the food into his hand, and he brings it across the threshold to his father.

The *petaḥ*, the threshold, is that liminal place where status changes, and new realities begin. In halakhic (legal) terms, the *petaḥ* belongs neither to the internal space nor to the external. It is a marginal, ambiguous area with powers and dangers of its own.[83]

The symbolism of the mother accompanying her son to the *petaḥ* evokes the powerful birth parable in the Jerusalem Talmud:[84] "'The devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth' (Genesis 8:21): Said R. Yudan, '"From his youth [*mine'urav*]" is spelt defectively. Therefore, read it, 'From the time that he *shakes himself* [punning on the root *na'er*, youth, energetic movement] and comes out into the world.'"'"

Evil begins in man from the moment of birth (and not, as some claim, from the moment of conception): this is the moment of exit, or of entrance into the world, depending on one's perspective. "*At the entrance*, sin lies in wait" [Genesis 4:7], the Talmud[85] quotes God, as he urges Cain to "accept existence and without resentment transact such business with it as is necessary."[86] To be born is to leave the simplicity, the "sincerity," of life-with-mother and to cross a threshold into a world ruled by "appearance, art, illusion, optics, necessity of perspective and error."

Such birth is empowered by the energies of evil; limbs are charged to play the roles of life. Jacob, interestingly, is described in the *Bereshit Rabbah* narrative as crossing that threshold, "compelled, bowed, and weeping."[87] He loses control of his muscles, his heart is as soft as wax, and God has to place two angels on either side of him to support him.[88] He is a novice in the world of the disintegrated consciousness: the passage of birth is palpably traumatic for him.

But by the time he has been touched by his father, he is able to answer Isaac's reiterated question, "Are you really my son Esau?" with the single

word, *Ani*—"I am" (27:24). This is the response of authentic being, clear of the strain of role playing. It is this *Ani* of inner freedom that the midrash compares to the *ani* of an angel in a very different narrative. This is the story of the birth of Samson, in the book of Judges. The angel announces the birth of a son (Samson) to Manoah's wife. Rather coarsely, Manoah interrogates the angel when he reappears: "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" (Judges 12:13). The angel replies, "I am (*Ani*)." And the midrash amplifies: "The angel said, 'You think of me as a man, but I am not a man—I am an angel.' Similarly, when Isaac asked Jacob, 'Are you my son Esau?' he replied, '*Ani*—I am—I am not Esau, but Jacob.' "[89]

The answer, *Ani*, essentially reserves the "sentiment of being" from all public influence. No social or even familial pressure will shape Jacob's sense of his identity. The authentic self disengages from the conceptions of others; the Jacob who can say *Ani* resists any attempt to pluck out the heart of his mystery.

If the entry into Isaac's room represents a kind of moral birth to full personhood, we can identify the climax of the scene as the moment where Isaac recognizes that the hybrid being in his arms carries his own blessedness within himself. Here the paradox of masked authenticity reaches its point of highest tension. Isaac asks his son yet again to "come close," this time not to be touched only, but to be kissed. "And he came close and he kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he blessed him, saying, 'See, the smell of my son is like the smell of the field that God has blessed. May God give you . . . '(27:27–28). The climax of the encounter is, of course, the blessing; but the blessing emerges seamlessly from the kiss and from Isaac's soliloquy (he is not talking *to* Jacob—"See, the smell of my son") about fragrance and fields already blessed by God.

The word *Re'eh*, with which Isaac begins his speech, means literally, "*Look*! the smell of my son. . . ." The effect of sense-confusion—called by the French symbolist poets *synaesthesia*—yields an impression of mystical transcendence. Limitations of the senses no longer define the knowledge Isaac has of the nameless son in his arms. He sees and smells Jacob's clothes (which include the foul-smelling goatskins), and attains a moment of enlightenment (the JPS translation of *Re'eh* is simply, "*Ah*! the smell of my son"). There is no discontinuity, no jolt, no conscious decision to bless his son. Instead, there is an intimation of a field and of blessedness, the "fragrance of Eden," according to the midrash,[90] so that