

TORAH SPARKS

VOICE AND BODY

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Dvar Parashah

“הקל קול יַעֲקֹב וְהַיָּדִים יֵי עֵשָׂו” The voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau.” Isaac speaks these words as he touches his son, the son he thinks might be his favored one. He’s blind, he’s been deceived, and in this moment of confusion, he names something that haunts all of Genesis: voice and body have been torn apart.

Jacob’s voice tells the truth. It IS Jacob speaking. But the voice can’t be trusted because it’s been severed from his hands, his skin, his smell, his identity. Isaac blesses the hands and misses the voice. He cannot hear truly anymore. Voice has become radically dissociated from embodied presence.

How did we get here? How did voice, the thing that should reveal identity, that should be listened to, become the site of such profound rupture?

The answer lies in a phrase that echoes through Genesis 27 like a ritual command: שִׁמַּע בְּקוֹלִי, listen to my voice.”

Rebecca speaks these words to Jacob three times. First, **commanding** him to deceive his father: “And now my son, listen to my voice, to that which I am commanding you. Go now to the flock...” When Jacob protests that Isaac might discover the deception and curse him instead of blessing him, Rebecca **responds**: “Let the curse be upon me, my son. Just listen to my voice and go.” And later, when Esau plans revenge, Rebecca **sends** Jacob away to safety: “And now my son, listen to my voice and get up, flee to Laban, my brother in Haran.”

Three times: listen to my voice. Each time with absolute authority. Each time driving the story forward toward Jacob’s blessing and Esau’s dispossession.

But Rebecca isn’t inventing this phrase. She’s echoing it. And to understand the weight of her command - why Jacob obeys, why the deception works, why voice and body end up severed - we need to trace where “listen to my voice” comes from in Genesis.

The phrase “listen to my voice” first appears in catastrophe. After Adam and Eve eat from the tree, after they hear God’s voice walking in the garden and hide, God **confronts** Adam: “Because you listened to the voice of your woman and ate from the tree which I commanded

you not to eat... cursed is the ground because of you.” Listening to voice, to Eve’s voice specifically, becomes the mechanism of humanity’s first rupture. Ground cursed, toil introduced, expulsion from Eden.

The phrase appears again in the mouth of Lemech, descendant of Cain, **speaking** to his wives: “Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice, wives of Lemech, give ear to my saying: For I have killed a man for wounding me, and a child for bruising me. If Cain was avenged seven times, Lemech will be seventy-seven.” Here “listen to my voice” is weaponized, a command preceding violence, escalating vengeance, the corruption of speech itself.

But then something shifts. The phrase enters the covenant family.

When Sarah cannot conceive, she **tells** Abraham: “Come to my handmaiden, perhaps I will be built from her.” And the text says simply: “And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” Later, when Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, Abraham resists until God **intervenes**: “All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac will seed be called for you.”

God Himself commands Abraham to listen to Sarah’s voice. The phrase that began with Eden’s catastrophe and Lemech’s violence becomes, in God’s mouth, a covenantal directive.

And God uses this language of himself. When blessing Isaac at the beginning of our parashah, God **explains**: “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven and give to your seed all these lands, and through your seed will be blessed all the nations of the earth - because Abraham listened to my voice...” Abraham listened to God’s voice. And Abraham listened to Sarah’s voice because God commanded it. Then, through this listening, covenant continues from generation to generation.

So when Rebecca commands Jacob “listen to my voice,” she speaks with tremendous authority. She echoes Sarah, whose voice God explicitly validated. She echoes Abraham’s obedience to divine command. She receives a **divine oracle** about her sons: “the elder will serve the younger.” She knows something Isaac either doesn’t know or cannot accept. She knows which son carries covenant forward.

Rebecca isn’t a scheming spouse undermining her husband. She’s a matriarch acting with Sarah-like authority to ensure covenant transmission. When she says “listen to my voice,” she’s invoking the full weight of covenantal lineage.

But that full weight carries with it difficult choices. Sarah’s voice, which God commanded Abraham to heed, led to devastating consequences. When Abraham listened to Sarah and sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, Hagar sat at a distance from her dying child, unable to **watch**: “And she raised her voice and cried.” A mother’s voice raised in isolated grief. In that story, God hears the voice of her son and responds. An angel **calls** from heaven: “Do not fear, because God has heard the voice of the lad.” Not Hagar’s lifted crying, but Ishmael’s voice. You cannot get from Abraham to Isaac without Ishmael crying in the wilderness. But at least God hears.

Rebecca’s voice, echoing Sarah’s covenant authority, leads to parallel devastation. When Esau discovers what has happened - that his brother has stolen the blessing through voice severed from body, through deception Rebecca orchestrated - he **pleads** with Isaac: “Do you have a single blessing left for me, my father? Bless me, also me, my father.” And then: “And Esau lifted his voice and cried.”

The same phrase. Lifted voice, crying. Esau’s voice becomes pure voice, disembodied grief expressing loss that cannot be clothed in blessing, cannot be enacted through hands that will not inherit. After Isaac had declared “the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau,” after the voice was severed from the body, all Esau has left is his voice. And it cries out into the void.

Because unlike Ishmael’s story, no angel calls from heaven. Isaac responds and gives Esau a blessing of sorts, words about living by the sword and breaking free from his brother’s yoke. It’s a blessing that assumes the rupture, that builds from dispossession rather than repairing it. The damage is done. Rebecca’s plan has worked. Jacob flees for his life. Esau plans murder. The family shatters. We never see Isaac and Rebecca speak to each other again.

The text never suggests she misunderstood God’s oracle or acted against divine will. God appears to Jacob at Bethel and confirms the blessing. Jacob IS the covenant bearer. Rebecca, like Sarah, acts to ensure the right son receives inheritance, and God validates the choice, just as God validated Sarah’s. But God’s validation doesn’t make the cost less real.

Covenant transmission, it turns out, inherently involves trauma. Just as we cannot get from Abraham to Isaac without Ishmael, we cannot get from Isaac to Jacob without Esau lifting his voice in grief that receives no heavenly answer. The phrase “listen to my voice” doesn’t track a simple movement from the corruption of Eden and Lemech to the redemption of Abraham, Sarah, Rebecca. It tracks the terrible cost of covenantal continuity, of how choosing one line means devastating another, of how the voice that must be listened to for covenant to continue is also the voice that leaves others weeping.

The difference between Ishmael and Esau is stark. Ishmael is genuinely innocent - a child who chose nothing, victim only of Sarah’s need to protect Isaac’s inheritance. And God hears his voice. Esau sold his birthright, despised it, married women who embittered his parents. And when he lifts his voice crying, heaven is silent.

Does Esau’s compromised choices mean his voice doesn’t deserve to be heard? Or does the silence suggest something more devastating: that covenant progression has become so fractured, voice so dissociated from body, that even lifting voice and crying no longer guarantees divine response?

The text refuses to let us have clean covenant. And it refuses easy resolution.

Years pass. Jacob prospers in Haran, marries, has children, accumulates wealth. And then he must return home. He sends messengers ahead to Esau, and they return with terrifying news: Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob is certain he’s about to be killed. He divides his camp, sends elaborate gifts ahead, spends the night wrestling with a divine being who wounds him and renames him Israel.

And then Esau **arrives**: “And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they cried.”

They cried. Together. Plural weeping.

This is the answer to voice torn from body. Not God answering from heaven. Not covenant being revised or corrected. Embodied reunion.

Esau runs, his body moves toward Jacob. He embraces, the hands that were “the hands of Esau” severed from Jacob’s voice now hold Jacob truly. He falls on his neck, complete bodily presence. He kisses him. And they cry together.

Voice reunited with body. Voice heard not by God but by the one who caused the wound. The crying that was isolated - Esau alone, like Hagar alone - becomes shared.

This is not divine rescue. God doesn’t appear to tell them everything will be fine, that covenant can include both brothers equally, that the past can be undone. The wound is too deep for that. Jacob remains Israel, covenant bearer. Esau remains dispossessed. Rebecca was right to echo Sarah. Jacob was the right choice. God confirmed it. And Esau lifted his voice and cried.

The Torah never mends the tear it shows us in Toldot. Isaac reaching out for a son he cannot see. Jacob speaking in one register and reaching out in another. Esau crying a cry that rises and receives no echo. The covenant moves forward anyway, through a voice that blesses, a voice that wounds, a voice that leaves someone standing outside the tent with nothing but breath and saltwater. Rebecca says listen to my voice and Jacob does, and the cost rolls out across the generations like a shadow we keep stepping into.

Much later, at Sinai, the people answer a bodiless God with something like instinct or hope: נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע, “we will do and we will listen.” We will do first. We will put our hands into the world before we try to understand what the voice is asking of us. As though the only way to survive a command that arrives without a face is to meet it with movement, something warm, something weight-bearing, something that can hold us up when hearing alone cannot. We take back the body before we can begin to embrace the voice.

And then, in Deuteronomy, the Torah folds this back into itself. We get the Shema. It begins with hearing, שִׁמַּע, but it does not stay there. It insists on heart and breath and muscle. Teach these words to your children. Speak them along the road. Lie down with them. Rise up with them. Bind them to your arm. Set them between your eyes. Nail them into the frame of the place you call home. The voice that once hovered above the garden and frightened us into hiding now asks to be carried in the body that once trembled beneath it.

Genesis presents the break, the voice of Jacob, the hands of Esau, and does not pretend it can be repaired. The *Shema* offers a way to keep living with that break: hear, yes, but then hold, walk, bind, write. Let the voice have weight again. Let it rest somewhere. Not to solve the old sorrow. Only to keep moving within it, held together for a moment by whatever the body can carry.