

Blindness, one of the worst infirmities that can befall any creature, features in a number of our Biblical narratives. In our parashah Isaac's blindness determines the trajectories of the lives of his two sons. Because of his advanced age "his eyes dimmed from seeing," (27:1). His son Jacob suffers from the same malady at the end of his life and similarly blesses the younger son before the older: "Now Israel's eyes had become heavy with age, so he could not see." (48:10). However, while Jacob's old age seems to truly be a factor, our sages find a host of other explanations for Isaac's blindness, which also give insight into his apparent apathy. Midrash Genesis Rabbah 65:10 offers three possibilities: "His eyes dimmed from seeing the evil of the wicked one. The Holy One of Blessing said, 'Isaac will walk out to the marketplace and the people will say: This is the father of the wicked one. Instead, I will dim his eyes and he will remain inside his house.' From there they said that anyone who produces a wicked son or a wicked student, ultimately his eyes will dim. ... When Abraham bound his son atop the altar, the ministering angels wept. ... Tears fell from their eyes into his eyes and they had an effect inside his eyes. ... On the altar Isaac directed his eyes heavenward and looked at the Divine Presence. The Holy One of Blessing said, 'If I kill him, I will now cause my friend Abraham to collapse. Instead, I decree that his eyes will dim.'" But the implausibility of the deception engineered by Rebekah and carried out by Jacob has motivated many of today's scholars to suggest other explanations for its success. In his article "The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27" [*Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39 (2011): 46–58], Rabbi David J. Zucker proposes that far from being the naïve, nearly blind dotard he appeared to be, Isaac actually colludes with Rebecca to deceive both sons for the common good. "Even though they know they are correct in their decision, Isaac and Rebekah cannot bring themselves to tell Esau that he is not the right one to pass on the family traditions. It is too painful a task for them to deal with directly. ... Since they cannot act on the issue in a straightforward manner, they resort to their deception. ... *Further, an integral part of this plan is to cast Jacob as the villain.* Esau has mixed feelings about his role as the first-born and its attendant responsibilities as bearer of the patriarchal traditions. He willingly sold the "birthright" to Jacob ... He married local girls, much to the consternation of his parents. On the other hand ... it is also clear that he was not without some feelings in the matter. ... Then there was a problem with Jacob. ... Life is easy for Jacob, too easy. ... Jacob has to through some difficult tasks ... Consequently, an additional purpose of the ruse is to have Jacob think he is "stealing" the blessing, that he is capable of worldly behavior and its consequences." Others conjecture that Isaac has some sort of cognitive weakness, citing his willingness to go through with the *Akedah* as well as his being the only patriarch who does not find his own wife. And still others see him as a poor schlemiel who deals with life as best he can. However we choose to view him, Isaac is indeed a curious anomaly amongst all the other far more active personalities of Genesis. It is noteworthy that of the three patriarchs, Isaac is the only one who never leaves the Promised Land, and he is also the only one whose name is not changed. Like his father, he is forced to leave his home because of famine, but HaShem orders him not to go to Egypt. He settles in Avimelech's territory of Gerar, and like his father, he introduces Rebekah as his sister to save his own life. Is he a schlemiel for forgetting this and fondling her in public? The truth is discovered due to this indiscretion, and he ends up reaping a bountiful harvest. Prospering and excelling in the midst of poverty and mediocrity have often fomented jealousy and led to tragedy, as we know all too well. Isaac reopens his father's old wells, giving them names like the ones Abraham had given them. Our sages teach that this is not only to honor Abraham, but also to show the inhabitants that he is simply reclaiming his own inheritance. Two additional wells are dug and there is contention with the local shepherds, but with the third, there is no strife. Isaac names this well *Rechoboth*, (רחב – wide/broad), declaring, "For now, the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land." (26:22) A prophetic and provocative statement that still reverberates. His move to Be'er Sheva is a far-sighted gesture. It was here that Abraham and Avimelech made their pact of mutual non-aggression centered on water rights. And it is here that Avimelech returns, again with his general Phichol, to reaffirm this covenant and extend it from three generations of their immediate families to the entire population. Both of these covenants are instigated by Avimelech, who rules the land, but is obviously still fearful of these foreigners and their omnipotent, invisible God. Isaac responds much like his father, but from a far better position. He was born and raised on this land, and unlike the other patriarchs, he actively farms it. Like his favored son Esau, he is an outdoorsman, deeply rooted in the land and happiest walking in its abundance and freedom. Perhaps it is his advancing blindness following the trauma of the *Akedah* as described by the midrashim that opens his other senses to the beauty of nature as well as to the increasingly diverging paths of his twin sons. Outwardly he seems blind to Rebekah's ruse, but all his senses lead him to bless the son best suited to perpetuating Abraham's vision. And Jacob, physically blind in old age, is naïve enough in his youth to have the proverbial wool pulled over his eyes as he slowly and painfully gains the experience he needs to find and walk the path intended for him. He will be deceived time and again, gradually blinded by his own lack of insight and his emotional inadequacies. In some ways, we all have our blind spots. That's part of what makes us human. It's up to us to seek the light we need to live our lives in honor and dignity.

Shabbat shalom!