

Lesson

3


JACOB AND ESAU

The epic struggle between the most famous twins in the Bible assumes many forms: the contest between sword and word, between matter and spirit, between self-realization and self-transcendence. We learn that Creation itself comes in two formats: a powerful yet unstable “World of Chaos,” and a moderated and focused “World of Correction.” In every area of life, we straddle both realms, and can look to the Jacob-Esau story for guidance in navigating this duality.



*The Reunion of Jacob and Esau (detail),
Virgil Solis. c. mid-1500s.*

TEXT 1

GENESIS 25:22-28 

THE STRUGGLE IN THE WOMB (25:22)

- 1 The children struggled within her
- 2 and she said, "If so, why am I thus?";
- 3 and she went to inquire of G-d.

THE PROPHECY (25:23)

- 4 G-d said to her:
- 5 "Two nations are in your womb
- 6 and two kingdoms from your insides will diverge;
- 7 kingdom will overpower kingdom
- 8 and the elder will serve the younger."

THE TWINS' BIRTH (25:24-26)

- 9 Her days to give birth were fulfilled
- 10 and behold, there were twins in her womb.
- 11 The first one came out ruddy
- 12 his entirety as a hairy mantle
- 13 and they called his name "Esau."
- 14 After that his brother came out
- 15 and his hand was grasping Esau's heel
- 16 and he called his name "Jacob." . . .

*The World of Chaos
Under Repair
A kabbalistic view of
the Jacob-Esau saga
Rabbi Laibl Wolf:*



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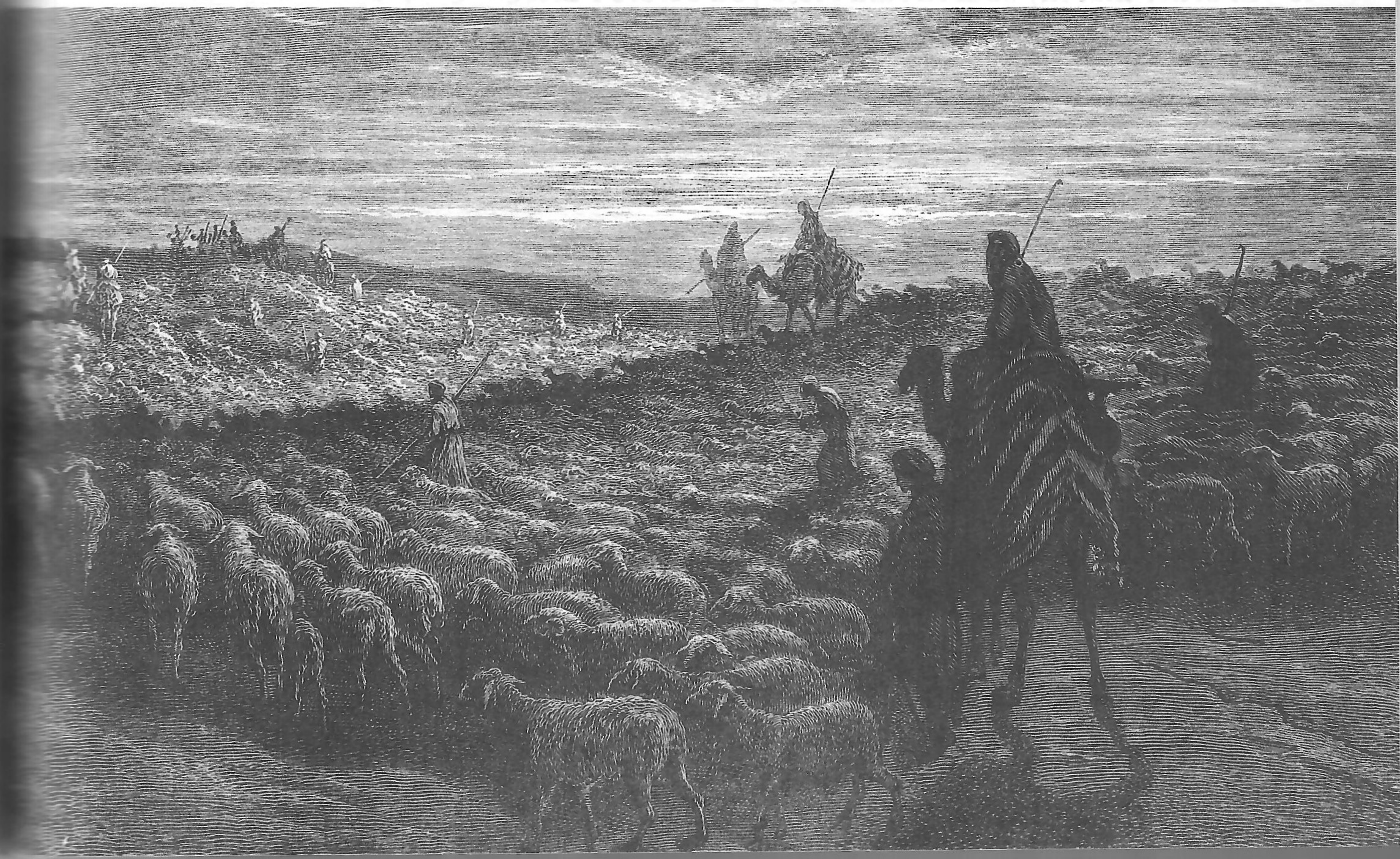
DIFFERENT NATURES (25:27)

The lads grew up;
Esau was a man who knows game
a man of the field
and Jacob was a wholesome man
a dweller of tents.


HOW THEIR PARENTS SAW THEM (25:28)

Isaac loved Esau for the game in his mouth
and Rebecca loved Jacob.

Illustration by Gustave Doré for
La Grande Bible de Tours, 1866.



TEXT 2

GENESIS 27:1-29 

ISAAC DESIRES TO BLESS ESAU (27:1-4)

- 1 It came to pass when Isaac was old
- 2 and his eyes were dimmed of sight;
- 3 and he called his elder son Esau
- 4 and he said to him . . .
- 5 “Here, please, I have grown old;
- 6 I do not know the day of my death.
- 7 Now, please pick up your implement
- 8 your sword and your bow;
- 9 and go out to the field and trap game for me.
- 10 Make for me delicious food such as I love
- 11 and bring it to me, and I will eat;
- 12 in order that my soul should bless you before I die.”

REBECCA INSTRUCTS JACOB TO STEAL THE BLESSINGS (27:5-13)

- 13 Rebecca was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. . . .
- 14 And Rebecca said to her son Jacob:
- 15 “. . . Listen to my voice
- 16 to that which I am commanding you.
- 17 Go now to the flock and take for me from there
- 18 two goodly goat-kids;
- 19 and I will prepare them as delicious food
- 20 for your father, such as he loves.
- 21 You will bring to your father and he will eat;

22 in order that he should bless you before his death.”

23 Jacob said to his mother Rebecca:

24 “Here, my brother Esau is a hairy man
25 and I am a smooth man.

26 Perhaps my father will feel me
27 and I will be in his eyes as a trickster;
28 and I will bring upon myself a curse
29 and not a blessing.”

30 And his mother said to him:

31 “Your curse is upon me, my son;
32 only listen to my voice and go take for me.” . . .

JACOB’S DISGUISE (27:15–23)

33 Rebecca took the desirable garments of her elder son Esau. . .

34 and she dressed her younger son Jacob;

35 and she dressed the goat-kid skins on his hands

36 and upon the smoothness of his neck. . . .

37 He came to his father. . .

38 and he said . . . , “Who are you, my son?”

39 And Jacob said to his father:

40 “I am Esau your firstborn.” . . .

41 Isaac said to Jacob:

42 “Please approach and I will feel you, my son;
43 are you this, my son Esau, or not?”

44 Jacob approached his father Isaac, and he felt him;
 45 and he said: "The voice is the voice of Jacob
 46 and the hands are the hands of Esau."
 47 He did not recognize him
 48 for his hands were
 49 as the hands of his brother Esau, hairy;
 50 and he blessed him. . . .

THE BLESSING (27:28–29)

51 "G-d shall give to you of the dew of the heavens
 52 and the fat of the earth
 53 and an abundance of grain and wine.
 54 Nations will serve you, and kingdoms will bow to you;
 55 you shall be a master over your brothers
 56 and your mother's sons shall bow to you.
 57 Those who curse you shall be cursed
 58 and those who bless you shall be blessed."

Isaac and Jacob (detail), François-Robert Ingouf (engraver), Manuel de la Cruz Vasquez (draftsman), etching and engraving on wove paper, 1791. (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid)

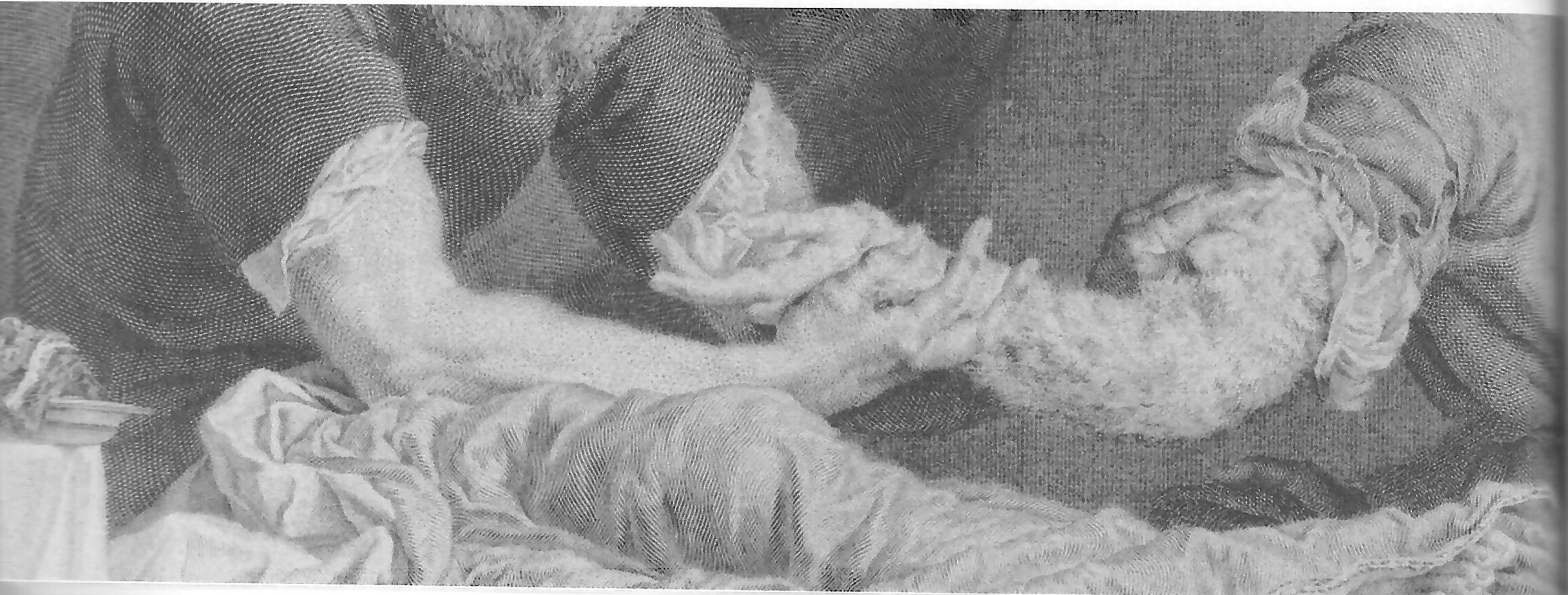


Figure 3.1

The Esau-Jacob Duality

	ESAU	JACOB
History	Rome	Judea
Daily Life	materialism	spirituality
Internal Self	self-realization	self-transcendence
Cosmic	<i>Tohu</i>	<i>Tikun</i>

TEXT 3

MIDRASH, SHEMOT RABAH 21:1

שְׁתֵּי יְרֵשׁוֹת הִנְחִיל יִצְחָק לְשְׁנֵי בָנָיו. הִנְחִיל לְיַעֲקֹב הַקּוֹל, וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר
(בְּרֵאשִׁית כז, כב): "הַקּוֹל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב". וְהִנְחִיל לְעֵשָׂו הַיָּדִים, שְׁנֵאָמַר
(שם): "וְהַיָּדִים יְדֵי עֵשָׂו".



SHEMOT RABAH

An early rabbinic commentary on the Book of Exodus. "Midrash" is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Shemot Rabah*, written mostly in Hebrew, provides textual exegeses, expounds upon the biblical narrative, and develops and illustrates moral principles. It was first printed in Constantinople in 1512 together with 4 other Midrashic works on the other 4 books of the Pentateuch.

Two legacies did Isaac bequeath to his two sons. To Jacob he gave the voice, as it is written, "the voice is the voice of Jacob" (GENESIS 27:22). And to Esau he gave the hands, as it is written, "and the hands are the hands of Esau" (IBID.).

TEXT 4

RABBI DOVBER OF LUBAVITCH, *TORAT CHAYIM*, BEREISHIT, P. 9A (11)

לְהַבִּין בְּשׂוֹרֵשׁ עֲגִינַן הַהֶפְרָשׁ שְׂבִין בְּחִינַת הַתּוֹהוּ לְבַחֲנִינַת הַתִּיקוֹן לְמַעַלָּה
וְאִיךְ שְׂבִחִינַת הַתִּיקוֹן בָּא לְתִקּוֹן וּלְבִרְרָה לְבַחֲנִינַת הַתּוֹהוּ . . . שֶׁהוּא כְּמוֹ
הַצּוּרָה לַחֹמֶר . . .

דְּהֵנָּה יָדוּעַ . . . שְׂבִחִינַת הָאוֹרוֹת דְּתוֹהוּ הִיוּ . . . אוֹרוֹת תְּקִיפִים וְחֲזָקִים
מְאֹד, לְהִיּוֹת שְׂהָיָה הָאוֹר בְּרִיבּוּי וְהַפְלִי בְּמִיעוּט . . . לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא יִכָּלוּ
הַפְּלִים לְסִבּוֹל אֶת הָאוֹר, עַל כֵּן נִפְּלוּ וְנִשְׁבְּרוּ . . .

וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ נַעֲשֶׂה בְּחִינַת הַתִּיקוֹן . . . עַל יְדֵי בְּחִינַת מִיעוּט הָאוֹר וְרִיבּוּי
הַפְּלִים, שֶׁעַל יְדֵי זֶה נִתְקַיִּים הָאוֹרוֹת בַּפְּלִים.

To understand the root of the difference between *Tohu* and *Tikun*, and how *Tikun* comes to rectify and refine *Tohu* . . . , serving as form to its substance. . . .

As is known . . . , the “lights” of *Tohu* were . . . extremely powerful and intense, as there prevailed a state of “abundant light and scant vessels.” . . . Because the vessels were unable to contain the light, they shattered and fell. . . .

Following that, the *Tikun* reality was made . . . with “scant light and abundant vessels,” with the result that the lights are sustained within the vessels.



RABBI DOVBER OF LUBAVITCH
(MITELER REBBE), 1773–1827

Rabbi Dovber was the eldest son of and successor to Rabbi Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi and greatly expanded upon and developed his father's groundbreaking teachings. He was the first Chabad rebbe to live in the village of Lubavitch. Dedicated to the welfare of Russian Jewry, at that time confined to the Pale of Settlement, he established Jewish agricultural colonies. His most notable works on Chasidic thought include *Shaar Hayichud*, *Torat Chayim*, and *Imrei Binah*.

The Great Kaboom!
A KabbalaToon
Tzvi Freeman and
Pilar Newton:



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Figure 3.2

Light and Vessel

	LIGHT	VESSEL
Book	ideas	words
Melody	emotions	musical notes
Business	vision and objectives	business strategy
Relationship	love	mutually supportive actions
Religion	beliefs and values	rituals and customs

Exercise 3.1

What are the *Tohu* elements in our lives?

What are the *Tikun* elements in our lives?



QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Which are the more powerful forces in our lives—the *Tohu* elements or the *Tikun* elements?

TEXT 5

GENESIS 27:30–28:4 (11)

THE DECEPTION IS DISCOVERED (27:30–33)

- 1 And it was . . .
- 2 just as Jacob was going out from the presence of his father;
- 3 that his brother Esau came from his hunt. . . .
- 4 And he said to his father:
- 5 “My father should get up
- 6 and eat of the game of his son
- 7 in order that your soul should bless me.”
- 8 And his father Isaac said to him:
- 9 “Who are you?”
- 10 And he said:
- 11 “I am your firstborn son Esau.”
- 12 Isaac trembled an exceedingly great trembling
- 13 and he said:
- 14 “Who, then, is the one who trapped game
- 15 and brought it to me and I ate of it all
- 16 before you had come
- 17 and I blessed him?
- 18 Also blessed shall he be!”

ESAU BEGS TO ALSO BE BLESSED (27:34–40)

- 19 As Esau heard the words of his father
- 20 he cried an exceedingly great and bitter cry;
- 21 and he said to his father:

22 “Bless me too, my father!”

23 And he said:

24 “Your brother came with cunning and took your blessing.”

25 And he said:

26 “Is this why his name was called Jacob?

27 Twice he has deceived me:

28 he took my birthright

29 and here now he has taken my blessing!”

30 And he said:

31 “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

32 Isaac answered and said to Esau

33 “Here I have placed him master to you

34 and all his brothers I have given to him as servants

35 and with grain and wine I have supported him;

36 and for you, then, what shall I do, my son?”

37 And Esau said to his father:

38 “Have you only one blessing, my father?

39 Bless me, also me, my father!”;

40 and Esau raised his voice and he wept.

41 And his father Isaac answered and he said to him:

42 “Here, the fat of the land will be your settlement

43 and of the dew of the heavens above.

44 By your sword you will live

45 and your brother you will serve;

46 and it will be that when you are aggrieved
 47 you will cast off his yoke from upon your neck.”

JACOB RECEIVES ABRAHAM'S BLESSING (28:1-4)

48 Isaac called Jacob and he blessed him;
 49 and he instructed him, and he said to him . . .
 50 “Arise and go to Padan-Aram. . . .
 51 and take yourself a wife from there
 52 from the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.
 53 And the Almighty G-d will bless you
 54 and make you fruitful and multiply you
 55 and you will become a community of peoples.
 56 And He will grant you the blessing of Abraham
 57 to you and to your seed with you
 58 to inherit you the land of your dwelling
 59 which G-d has given to Abraham.”

TEXT 6

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI, *TORAH OR*, TOLEDOT, 20D-21B (11)

יַעֲקֹב הוּא בְּחִינָה קְדוּשָׁה, וּבְלֹא הָכִי נִמְשָׁכִים בּוֹ כָּל הָאוֹרוֹת
עֲלִיּוֹנִים. . . אַךְ הַבְּרָכָה הִיא בְּתוֹסֶסֶת וְרַבּוּי הַמְשָׁכָה מְלַמֶּעֱלָה מִסְדֵּר
הַשְׁתַּלְשְׁלוֹת. . . כִּדִּי לִהְיוֹת וְרַב דָּגָן וְתִירוֹשׁ אֵלּוּ הַלְכוֹת וְאַגְדוֹת
שֶׁנִּתְלַבְּשׁוּ בְּלְבוּשִׁים גְּשָׁמִיִּים. . . [ו] מַעֲשֵׂה הַמִּצְוֹת. . . מֵה שְׁאִין כֵּן
אֵלּוּ לֹא קִבֵּל יַעֲקֹב הַבְּרָכּוֹת, הָיָה נִמְשָׁךְ מִן הַתּוֹרָה רַק בְּרוּחָנִיּוֹת לְבָד.



RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI
(ALTER REBBE), 1745-1812

Chasidic rebbe, halachic authority, and founder of the Chabad movement. The Alter Rebbe was born in Liozna, Belarus, and was among the principal students of the Magid of Mezeritch. His numerous works include the *Tanya*, an early classic containing the fundamentals of Chabad Chasidism; and *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, an expanded and reworked code of Jewish law.

Jacob is the realm of holiness; without all this, he still would have received all the supernal energies. . . . But the [first set of] blessings granted him an increase of powers from the highest levels to obtain “much grain and wine,” referring to the laws and stories of the Torah that become embodied in material garments . . . and in the actions of the *mitzvot*. . . . However, had Jacob not received these blessings, the power of Torah would have extended only to the spiritual realm.

Ayin Beis, Chapter 263
Text-based learning of a
Chasidic discourse
Rabbi Simon Jacobson:



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TEXT 7

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI, *TORAH OR*, TOLEDOT, 21B (11)

וְהָיָה צָרִיךְ לָזֶה לְתַקֵּן חֲטָא עֵץ הַדַּעַת, שֶׁהָיָה גַם כֵּן בְּמַרְמָה וּפְתוּי שֶׁל
נָחֶשׁ, שֶׁעַל יָדוֹ נִתְגַּשְׁמוּ הָעוֹלָמוֹת וְנַעֲשָׂה עִירוּב גִּשְׁמִיּוֹת בְּרוּחָנִיּוֹת.
וּלְתַקֵּן זֶה עָשָׂה מִהַפּוֹךְ אֶל הַפּוֹךְ, וְהִמְשִׁיךְ רוּחָנִיּוֹת וְאוֹרוֹת הָעֲלִיּוֹנִים
שֶׁהָיָה נִמְשָׁךְ גַּם לְגִשְׁמִיּוֹת.

*Why Does Jacob Resort to
Trickery in His Dealings with
Esau, Isaac, and Laban?*
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks:



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[Jacob's cunning] was necessary in order to correct the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, which also came about through the cunning and enticement of the serpent, and which caused the coarsening of all the worlds and the intermingling of materialism and spirituality. To rectify this, [Jacob] turned the tables, drawing down spirituality and supernal power into materialism.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Should we care about material success?
- 2 Is it possible to succeed in business—or in any endeavor requiring material resources—if one does not care?